

Fuping Drifting Home

Yang, Liu 杨柳

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Supervisory Committee: Dr. Christopher Knaus, Chair

Dr. Rachel Endo

Dr. Chanira Reang Sperry

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Abstract

During one of my seminars, Dr. Ivan Harrell, president of Tacoma Community College noted that “you do not belong to an institution; you belong to someone, to the relationships you create” (personal communication, 2025). His words serve as a perfect overarching theme for my dissertation, which I consider an ode to New Construction women, the women who represent the community I was raised and nurtured within. New Construction women, those to whom I used to belong and whose legacies anchor me in my ever-drifting status, represent what I define as fuping, a Chinese term that means floating duckweed, to serve as the foundation for this dissertation. My recalling and re-searching (Dillard, 2022) the stories and feelings that rendered these women extraordinary is a ceremony and celebration, not only for me to be reminded of the beautiful lives of these women, but also a tribute to my Mama, whose story-telling throughout my writing process has guided me through some of the darkest days of my life.

The search for Homeplace is replete with stories and a deeper connection with Mama, and spiritual enlightening by the New Construction women as well as my ancestors. These stories and inspirations shine brightly like the moon, lighting up the entire dark sky, casting its long warm gaze on me in my long journey ahead.

Keywords: Homeplace; relational belonging; cultural memory; autoethnography; intergenerational knowledge

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Preface

Writing Is Ceremony

The last few months have likely been the most challenging of my life, managing a new restaurant while balancing work, parenting, and writing. At times, I became so despondent that I was ready to give up. Yet, the writing and the memories of these women, who prevailed through so many hardships in life, kept me going. My ancestors, who became ever more present in my life during the lengthy writing process, were a major source of inspiration. Their wisdom, embedded in the glowing moonlight, illuminated my path home.

I am also extremely grateful for my chair, Dr. K., whose tough love and faith in me were a major source of motivation, despite his impossible schedules and responsibilities of chairing seventeen people's dissertations, hiring new faculty, recruiting a new cohort for the EdD program, while teaching. He never forgot to check in with me (and others) and put all his love into the consistent, continuous feedback he gave me. Embedded in the feedback was always an affirmation and encouragement that I can write, which helped silence the voices in my head telling me that I was a horrible writer. I also owe my gratitude to my committee members, Dr. Chanira and Dr. Endo, who checked in on me and cried with me during our first committee meeting. They made me feel seen and validated. Despite each having incredibly busy schedules, both women spent many hours, often on the weekends or late at night, when they were supposed to be resting. Dr. E. R. 's writing served as a model for me, and their inspirational quotes and writing prompts were a constant reminder of what is possible. Dr. E. R. 's office hours have provided a continual sense of safety. I lost count of how many times I cried in their Zoom space. Their quiet listening, yet warm words of

encouragement have served as a light during the darkest hours of overwork and immense stress.

My writing companions included Gabby and Tracy, and those who wrote with me in person or in spirit, Dennis, Sara, and JD. We shared many moments of joy and anxiety. Years later, I may not remember what I wrote, or even the painful agony of writing, milling over words. Yet, the feeling of deep connections and that someone gets you may linger in my memory for a long time. The words of encouragement, intended as a gift of generosity, of time and undivided attention to the other person, perhaps also filled a void in the heart of whoever uttered those words.

Like brown (2017) beautifully said:

the broken heart can cover more territory

perhaps love can only be as large as grief demands

grief is the growing-up of the heart that bursts boundaries like an old skin or a finished life

water seeks scale--even your tears seek the recognition of the community

The heart is the front line, and the fight is to feel in a world of distraction (p. 46).

My family, Mama, Baba, and my two children are my biggest motivation. All the missed baseball games, gymnastic competitions, pickups, drop-offs, movie times, bedtime stories, all of which formed a flood of memories of my absenteeism as a parent. Mama's quiet encouragement and all the stories she told, always at the perfect time when I was about to give up or thought I could not continue. I realized that those stories were more than the sources for my dissertation; they were intended as lessons for life.

My mentor, Ha, and our check-ins made me feel seen, and I always walk away with renewed conviction in the writing process and wisdom for practiced leadership. Ha shared

her journey with her family of surviving the sea travel as refugees, and women who inspired her. “Women before me survived the impossible,” she told me, “we carry them with us” (personal communication, 2026). It is in this context that I wish to share my dissertation and my ode to women in New Construction, beginning with my letter to them in Chinese, intended only for these women, which I hope to hand deliver to them or their descendants when I return in the near future. Writing in Chinese and incorporating Chinese in my professional life have formed decolonizing praxis that I carry with me since the beginning of my doctoral journey, they are healing and liberating.

新工地的阿姨们,

还记得我吗? 那个爱哭, 常常跌倒的小女孩。笨拙, 丑小鸭一般的存在--所谓的姥姥不疼, 舅舅不爱。三十几年弹指一挥间, 转眼我也到了记忆中你们的年龄。上有老, 下有小。像当年的你们一样, 我也无时无刻不为生活奔波。在平凡且充满坎坷的生活中, 你们是否也憧憬过, 怀念过, 盼望着? 是什么让你们坚定, 又是什么让你们在黑暗中寻找光明?

无论何处, 不管何时, 你们永远是我心里的一道光, 指引我前行。只望我的记忆, 我笔下的你们无愧于心, 也希望你们有朝一日可以读到这封信, 听到我的心声。我对你们永远心存感激!

杨柳

Section 1

Introducing The Recipe

“少小离家老大回，乡音无改鬓毛衰。儿童相见不相识，笑问客从何处来” (He, 744 CE)

Leaving home at a young age, I returned many years later. My dialect still remained yet the side of my hair turned gray. Not recognizing me, children came to greet me with a smile, asking where I came from¹.

The metaphor of the Home 家 can be both intimate and distant, depending on how a person can locate one's home—physically and metaphorically. The concept of home can be quite simple, like the Chinese character illustrates—raising a pig under the roof can constitute a home for an individual. To an expat, home can arouse complex feelings. Where is home? Is home the land that saw my origins, the neighborhood where I grew up and where I was surrounded by love, the city where I spent the first 18 years of my life, the province that shaped the distinct dialect I speak, the country where I call my ancestral nation (祖国), or does home denote something much deeper?

My dissertation and research journey explore the concept of the figurative home through the concept of homeplace. Co-writing with my 妈妈,² I draw on autoethnography as a method by recalling

¹ Translation by author.

² 妈妈 is Chinese for mom.

some of my earliest memories of home, a place called 新工地, whose Chinese name means New Construction, where I spend the first ten plus years of my life, where both of my parents grew up, met, and got married. To honor my cultural traditions and whose I am³

(Dillard, 2022), I unfold my journey of reconnecting with my roots and homeplace through the traditional dumpling-making process—the food that my generation and many generations before mine enjoy, especially as a part of celebrations and festivals. I demarcate my research journey into the following sections. The first section is Recipe, where I introduce my research goal and my experiences that shaped it. The second is Who is Making, in which I discuss my positionality in who I am and whose I am (Dillard, 2022). The one following is My Inheritance—a section for literature review and my ancestral wisdom, both of which are critical in my ways of knowing. Then comes Making the Dough, which illuminates my theoretical framework and lays the foundation for my research. Next is the Mixing the Filling section, which discusses my research methods. Making the Dumplings is where I flesh out my purposeful sampling. The last section is Who Gets to Enjoy the Dumplings, my reciprocity statements of how I hope the work will preserve the legacies of the Chinese women in New Construction and inspire other women of color to recall and recreate their homeplace.

Guest in someone else's house 梦里不知身是客 一晌贪欢

“寒蝉凄切，对长亭晚，骤雨初歇。都门帐饮无绪，留恋处，兰舟催发。执手相看泪眼，竟无语凝噎。念去去，千里烟波，暮霭沉沉楚天阔。

³ Who you are and whose you are are central concepts in Dillard (2022), where the Black teacher group who studied abroad in Ghana recalled their ancestors in the context of honoring the rich cultural traditions.

多情自古伤离别，更那堪，冷落清秋节！今宵酒醒何处？杨柳岸，晓风残月。此去经年，应是良辰好景虚设。便纵有千种风情，更与何人说”(Liu, n.d., collected in Xu, 2019).

Cold cicadas chirp mournfully. Facing the pavilion at dusk, a sudden downpour has just ceased. At the city gate, we share a farewell feast, but I have no heart to drink. In this moment of lingering reluctance, the orchid boat urges us to depart. Holding hands, we gaze at each other through tear-filled eyes, choking back sobs, unable to utter a single word. I think of my long, distant journey ahead—thousands of miles of misty, rippling waters beneath deep, dark evening clouds and the boundless southern sky.

Since ancient times, affectionate people have always grieved over parting; how much more so in this desolate, chilly autumn season! Where will I wake up from my wine tonight? On a riverbank shaded by weeping willows, with the morning breeze and a waning moon. From now on, as the years go by, all beautiful mornings and lovely scenes will be wasted on me. Even if I possess a thousand tender feelings, to whom can I possibly pour them out” (CN Poetry, Trans.).

I arrived in the US in 2007, right after completing my bachelor’s degree at Beijing International Studies University. Up until that point, my hometown Qiqihar had been where my life revolved. Being uprooted to the capital represented a massive culture shock. Little did I know that a bigger and more intimidating adjustment was awaiting me after my time in Beijing. The perpetual irony is that I explored coming to the US to pursue graduate school as an escape from the destiny of returning home to Qiqihar, and worse, the life my parents carved out for me—teaching at a local university during the day, helping at the restaurant at night and eventually taking over, and marrying a person through

family/friend connections. This is when my life as a fuping 浮萍⁴ began.

I chose to pursue freedom in a foreign land, the US, which is known for its liberty. Little did I know the price to pay is a lifelong disentanglement from the feeling of the other. The moment I set foot in the US, I had chosen my own destiny feeling as a guest in someone else's house. I found myself engaging in constant code-switching between my language and English. The percentage of how much of each I speak daily is reflective of my journey of evolution and alienation. Within the first year of my study in the US, I switched from speaking mostly Mandarin to speaking both languages in almost equal amounts and eventually speaking English more than Mandarin. Behind the superficial language usage was my conscious decision to improve my English by speaking Mandarin less. To achieve that, I cut off ties with my friends in China, many of whom were so much a part of my life. I also spoke with my parents less. Instead of spending a lot of time with Mandarin-speaking friends at the university, I branched out to American students. My second year in the US witnessed a smoother transition and more advanced English conversational skills. Yet, my heart felt empty. I traded English proficiency for many relationships that defined who I was and the first 20+ years of my life—like a brutal force pulling out my brain and completely wiping off my memories. I became estranged from my family, my friends, and myself.

With the language barrier being peeled away, I was forced to face the reality of living in America—the persistent and penetrating racism, sexism, and xenophobia, all of which, when combined, made me feel like having the air sucked out of my lungs. Racism, in particular, shaped my educational experiences and professional trajectories in significant ways. Brock (2005) calls racism “an intense, dehumanizing mind-funk” (p. 65). Collins (2000) argued that “racism is more than just physical pain; racism robs dark people of their

⁴ 浮萍, fuping, denotes a state of perpetual drifting and is often used in Chinese literature to refer to those who move around.

humanity and dignity and leaves personal, psychological, and spiritual injuries” (p. 38).

Collins (2000) was depicting the experience of Black folks in the epidemics of racism.

Although my experience diverges due to the lighter color of my skin and my origin stories that are devoid of ancestral experiences with enslavement, my identity as an immigrant who speaks a different language, combined with the model minority myth⁵ (Poon et. al., 2016), contributed to how I am often rendered invisible, made to feel little, and that my truths do not matter. Like the opening poem depicted, sometimes parts of my experience in the US felt like a dream, or a nightmare. When I woke up, I was left with the morning breeze and the fading moon (Liu, 1024). The ending of the poem perfectly captured my stories of being silenced in multiple stages of my journey as a student and as a working professional. The poem goes, “even with a thousand kinds of charm, to whom can I speak of them” (Liu, 1024, n.p.).

Life as a “Problem” Student–Graduate School

Olson (2009) writes, “Students are taught to believe that they are not smart, that they do not have what it takes to succeed in school (and by implication, life); ...that they are somehow deficient, dysfunctional...” (p. 12). I experienced many of the wounds that Olson enumerated. Sitting in the history classroom, learning Westward Expansion as an international student for the first time in my life, all I heard were stories of white men courageously and heroically conquering unknown territories and subduing the “savages” (Patel, 2015). The experience of speaking someone else’s language, reading a glorious portrait of, in-reality, a violent history of massacre and cultural genocide, and learning a history that is filled with lies, rendered me a prisoner of the hidden curriculum, which is

⁵ The model minority myth refers to the racialized ideology that Asians are successful because of their culture and work ethics, which make them more “desired” compared to Black , Indigenous and Latinx folks (Chou & Feagin, 2015, p. 2018).

described by Au, Brown, and Calderón (2016) as a systematic and an institutional approach to enforce white, colonial, and American values by eradicating the ways of knowing and being of Indigenous, Mexican, African, Chinese and Japanese Americans. Underneath the admiration for the white men (people's) culture, a sense of shame slowly crept into my subconsciousness. Not only did I stop speaking in Chinese, but I also began to disassociate myself from Chinese traditional values that formed the foundation of my identity.

One weapon of the hidden curriculum is the visibility narrative (Au, Brown, & Calderón, 2016). Thousands of years of ingenuity, inventions, poetry, art, traditional medicine, oral stories, and generations of ancestral wisdom were reduced to an episode in US history: the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882). More locally to the Tacoma area, the Tacoma Method (Gomez, 2018) brutalized and sowed fear among the local Chinese community—chased out of their homes, and their houses and businesses burned down. That night, what collapsed was more than the buildings; so did their American dreams and belief in human decency. The diverse Chinese people, consisting of 56 ethnicities, were essentialized by simplistic historical lessons, such as the one recalled by a Chinese student in 1925, as featured in Au, Brown and Calderón (2016), “I remembered one particularly terrible ancient history lesson; it told in awful detail about ‘queer⁶ little Chinamen, with pigtailed and slanting eyes’ — and went on to describe the people as though they were inhuman, and at best, uncivilized” (p. 58). Racial stereotyping is far from a distant past. In August 2025, the Swiss watch brand Swatch circulated an ad with a model pulling the corners of his eyes, reactivating the racist gesture mocking Chinese people as slanted-eyed (Ewe, 2025). It brought back memories of learning about Fu Manchu and the Yellow Peril, and of the hostile

⁶ Rather than referring to one's sexuality, queer was used as a derogatory term for someone who was immensely different.

gaze—when strangers glare at me in such a way that reminds me of my place in the racial pecking order. All of these microaggressions serve as a constant reminder that I do not belong to the environment and ecosystem defined by Whiteness.

The way in which the Eurocentric and colonial curricula were shoved down my throat did not aid my learning. Freire (2000) defined the way in which I was taught the banking model of education. This whitewashed history and education would characterize the next three years of my experience in graduate school. History classes, which were part of my major, told single stories (Adichie, 2009) of Black and Indigenous folks of criminality and pathology. Stories and voices of immigrants like mine were treated as if they did not exist. If they were ever mentioned, they were used to perpetuate the model minority myth—quietly working, perfectly comfortable with the status quo (Wilkerson, 2023).

My values and qualities seemed mismatched with the American (white) ideals of individualism and competitiveness. These values manifested in behaviors, such as assertiveness, speaking over others, and critiquing ideas from people who came before me and my peers. These values were often used to rank a person's worth and success. When I hesitated or showed signs of struggle as a person deeply rooted in a collective culture, I was labeled by some of my professors as lacking confidence and deficient in academic skills. Pulling oneself up by their bootstraps⁷ was constantly emphasized through my academics and in my daily life, so that I could outperform others, and become yet another shiny example of the model minority myth.

⁷ This concept was emphasized throughout my graduate school experience to highlight the need for self-sufficiency. To an international student who was still trying to gain a basic understanding of American culture, this concept struck me as augmenting American exceptionalism.

Iftikar and Museus (2018) enumerated the ways systematic racism manifest in Asian (American) students' lives in the US, including both academic and social marginalization, racial hostility and violence, which according to authors, coerces the Asian (American) students into racial segregation in search of safe space. My social circle consisting almost exclusively of Chinese students represented my desperate pursuit of safe space in an overall hostile academic environment where I was deemed as problematic and at risk.

The Toxic Ivory Tower--Professional Life

“Being a person of color is a civic project because your relationship to America, sadly, is a fight in order to matter, to survive, and one day thrive” (Love, 2020, p. 7–8). Like the quote depicted, America is a hostile terrain for people of color and immigrants like me. Where I experience the most alienation and become susceptible to the oppressive system is at the workplace. When I was a student, there was still a protective layer from a few loving faculty, including the international student advisor, who found me a place to live for over a month when I did not realize that I needed to reserve a dormitory space before arrival; and my faculty advisor, who took me in when I was having a difficult time adjusting to the American educational system. Little did I realize that my survival, thanks to relationships like these, was only a temporary relief from the human-eating system⁸.

My symbolic societal status as a perpetual foreigner (Iftikar & Museus, 2018) was sealed since day one of my professional life and I was constantly reminded of my place, from being micromanaged to a suffocating level by many white women supervisors to needing approval for all my email communications like how the colonized constantly were required

⁸ Lu Xun vehemently denounced the old Chinese feudal system as human-eating. I use the word here to deliberately name the racist colonial system that grinds many minoritized folks to the bones.

to seek permission from their white overlord, as if their (our) basic humanity was questioned. The most egregious indignity was when I was reduced to pumping in the bathroom after my youngest was born, with the white management team hiding the fact that there was a nursing room in the building next to where I was working to prevent me from taking the extra few minutes, which the white manager perceived as belonging to the college (in other words, me as a person is owned by the college during my work hours). The white system was so keen on grinding me to the bones that I was only offered a three-week maternity leave, compelled to return to work when my baby was merely two weeks old. Iftikar & Museus (2018) defines experience like mine as Asianization, in which Asians (Asian Americans) are racialized as “perpetual foreigners, threatening yellow perils, model and deviant minorities, and sexually deviant emasculated men and hypersexualized women (p. 940). My white supervisor’s maternalism over me, in its most revealing details of speech-monitoring and communication-surveillance, attests to her labeling of me as a foreigner and a perpetual alien. My supervisor and the college where I used to work forcing my return in such a short period (compared to the twelve weeks protected by the Washington State Law⁹) and depriving me of the dignity of a sanitary pumping environment represent efforts in reducing me to a product body, which is the only value a model minority person demonstrates.

While profit over people and productivity over humanity were characteristics of the white capitalistic culture, women of color and immigrants like me often experience its sharpest blades due to the double whammy of racism and misogyny. Benjamin (2017) argues that ableism, racism, sexism, classism and colonialism, all work to eliminate¹⁰ unwanted

⁹ N.n (n.d.), [*Pregnancy and Parental Leave*](#).

¹⁰ My understanding of Benjamin’s work is that elimination means both physically and figuratively, through systems of domination.

people. The indignities I suffered were often symptoms of a much deeper and more prevailing system of dehumanization and racialized elimination. Iftikar and Museus (2018) further paint a picture of intersectionality where White supremacy gets reinforced by sexism and xenophobia, which forms the system in which Asians (Asian Americans) exist and shapes the everyday experience of Asians (Asian Americans)

Reflecting on my experience with most of my white supervisors, I do not recall compliments, let alone any signs of seeing my humanity. Instead of believing in my potential, I was constantly told by these white people to pace myself and not to feel too ambitious, as if a person of color should not dream about advancement and instead should be content with where they are and be grateful for the half loaf of bread given at the mercy of the overlord¹¹. I also have plenty of memories of being micromanaged—having to send my email to my supervisor for approval before sending it to students; my supervisor eavesdropping on my conversation with an intern about my anxiety over transporting a group of students in a large van and telling me to not complain in front of students. There was also subtle racism when I was told by a white hiring manager that I was hired because I was a nice person. The fact that my perceived model minority status was perhaps the primary (sole) reason I was offered the position exposed the social hierarchy where Asians were below whites and were trained to crave Whiteness and, in turn, reinforce white supremacy (Iftikar & Museus 2018). Looking back, I do not know if I should have been grateful or resentful—all my triumphs and tribulations, and skills that I worked so hard to acquire did not matter. After all, I think they just wanted a nice Asian who craves white adjacency and worships Whiteness¹².

¹¹ Inspired by King (1964), in which he alleges that half of a loaf of bread is not freedom.

¹² Wilkerson (2023) illuminates white-adjacency by painting a caste image where those placed in the middle (Asian Americans) strive to move closer to the top (i.e., white status and privilege).

I thought my hardships would dissipate after transitioning to a self-claimed antiracist institution and under a woman of color supervisor (for the first time in my decade-long professional life). While I was no longer plagued by micromanaging and passive aggressiveness, I quickly discovered that the institutional structure was the solid core that is much harder to crack. I witnessed job descriptions that were intentionally crafted to be vague to filter out those who do not have the luxury of following a conventional path in their career. I also observed search committees that were haphazardly put together based on availability and convenience for meeting organizing, rather than whose voices are most critical, meaning who is most directly impacted by this work (brown, 2017). Diversity advocates, the role created to promote equity in hiring practices, often either tokenizes the same individual of color, or worse still, favors those who perpetuate white standards by enforcing equality through fairness and objectivity. The search committee process tends to promote harmony and consensus at the expense of non-conforming voices. The result is generally a very whitewashed performative hiring that often advances internal candidates who are white-presenting to maintain the status quo. The few people of color who are hired happen to be Asian American, and internal, which reinforces the model minority myth and pits Asian Americans against Black and Indigenous candidates, who are often external, and therefore bring hopes for change.

Many people experienced othering and silencing. As a person of color, my silencing feels more persistent and overpowering than white people's. My experience serving the search committee illustrated profound levels of silencing that robbed me of my dignity and humanity. I was not included in the deliberation meeting where the committee talked about each candidate's qualifications due to a scheduling error. Rather than choosing to pause the

meeting when I had to leave for another work obligation, the chair and the entire committee chose to proceed without me as if I was invisible and irrelevant. When the promised meeting finally took place between me and the chair, I was informed that the list of invited candidates for a second-round interview had already been decided. When I approached the Human Resources department based on my concern that I, as a committee member, was not allowed to share my feedback on each candidate, the HR representative brought out my defensiveness by starting the meeting with accusations that I am biased and therefore unfit to continue on the committee. My feeling of an internalized other was only intensified and magnified through the search committee process, where, again, I felt that my voice did not matter, my perspective was not listened to, and my truth was completely ignored. My experience offered a glimpse of the larger trend of individuals (of color) finding themselves fighting against the system, which is designed to exclude not only candidates who are usually black and brown and do not have institutional connections, but also search committee members who believe and practice truth-telling.

The whole bias accusation made me feel very uncomfortable and even angry towards the double standard. They had no issues with one white-adjacent person on the committee strongly advocating for one candidate, who, in my opinion, is unsuitable to lead. Furthermore, by accusing me of bias, they were discrediting all my experience and other people's experiences—just because they were not invited to the table does not mean their voices do not count. The pretense of objectivity is very hypocritical. I was reminded of the quote in Hampton (1995), “when we try to cut ourselves off at the neck and pretend an objectivity that does not exist in the human world, we become dangerous, to ourselves first, and then to the people around us” (p. 52). The quote was about research objectivity, but

equally true for any form of claimed objectivity that does not exist in the human world. What an irony that the institution carries a slogan of striving towards an antiracist institution, yet in practice, enforces conformity, dismisses truth, and is afraid of anger as a source and an impetus for change. Like Lorde (1984) stated:

I have a duty to speak the truth as I see it and share not just my triumphs, not just the things that felt good, but the pain. The intense, often unmitigated pain. It is important to share how I know survival is survival and not just a walk through the rain (p. 100–116).

The whole premise that my future involvement in search committee work is dependent on whether I can remain objective adds insult to injury. Not only does the institution completely dismiss my treatment of being excluded through no fault of my own, but it attempts to silence me: “it was not restraint I had to learn, but ways to use my rage to fuel actions, actions that could alter the very circumstances of oppression feeding my rage” (Lorde, 1988, p. 58). My experience of being silenced represented a continuation of my voicelessness throughout my graduate school years—completely invisible in curriculum and all academic interactions.

The search committee process is only one example of the many stories where I felt alienated, othered, and excluded. It is comical that the college has a slogan of belonging (Pierce College, n.d.) for its employees and students, and yet, I do not feel a sense of belonging at all to the cold, alienating structure or the dehumanizing systems. This un-belongingness percolates into my everyday interactions. I am often told by a white colleague that my food is too offensive when they tried to weaponize their fat status (citing fat liberation and sensitivity to food/celebrations) to silence my food and my culture and

suffocate the dwindling joy I have as a woman of color and an immigrant working at an institution that treats me as a working body. Of course, they have the last word, because they are white and the whole system is built to promote them—they own the system! I am also told my words are too strong; my emotions are too rough; my truths are too divisive, and my actions are too radical. How can I ever belong to this toxic ivory tower that is so hostile to who I am and tries to eliminate my existence in so many ways?

My Journey Towards Healing: Tracing My Roots

Poem written by Taylor Mangan (n.d., n.p.)¹³

Roots of Memory

Beneath the surface, our roots still breathe.

The ache of their echo can be heard through the soil of time.

Carried through the distance, their songs reverberate beneath our feet.

Every hum, every beat of the drum, a living pulse that refuses to forget.

Even as the soil broke, and treaties were torn.

Languages taken from our tongue.

children removed and forced to forget.

The roots still remember.

I have not walked the lands of my ancestors.

Yet, their stories flow through me.

¹³ Taylor is a friend who began the journey of tracing his roots through enrollment and completion of an Indigenous sovereignty program. He generously gifted me this poem to remind me that I am rooted.

Now, in this land of the Coast Salish people, I walk.

Where the cedar and rain greet me, I plant my seed.

In this borrowed land, new roots stretch outwards.

These New roots braid and greet kinship.

Not to replace, but to remember.

No matter where we travel.

The roots remember.

If you listen, you will too.

My quest for homeplace (Boylorn, 2016; Dillard, 2022; hooks, 1989; hooks, 1990; Sankofa Waters & Temple Rhodes, 2024) represents the search for a sense of familiarity and my hope that one day I no longer need to ask for permission and do not feel pressured to perform and conform. Homeplace is where I can be myself and be full, knowing that I matter and I belong.

“寻寻觅觅，冷冷清清，凄凄惨惨戚戚，乍暖还寒时候，最难将息。”In Li’s (1118) description, one searches for home again and again, feeling alone and miserable. When hooks (1990) thinks of home, she is reminded of “the feeling of safety; the warmth and comfort of home; the feeding of bodies; the nurture of souls” (p. 383). Homeplace is a place in one’s heart that offers a shelter from alienation and pathology and grounds one through the feelings of comfort and nurturing. I center my homeplace at an institution and in a political environment where “being a person of color is a civic project because your relationship to America, sadly, is a fight to matter, to survive, and one day thrive” (Love, 2020, p. 7-8).

This research journey embodies hope and what I want to build in a political climate where higher education is under constant assault (Feingold et al., n.d.). The current strategic war of elimination occurs on multiple fronts, including the dismantling of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) efforts, the vilifying of DEI languages, lawsuits, termination of grants and funding opportunities, arrests of student activists and presumed-to-be immigrants, and the many other public and private spaces of assault leveraged by the current US federal administration. There is a growing widespread fear among faculty, staff, and students amidst US Department of Justice investigations, anti-semitism accusations (Tracking Trump's Higher-Ed Agenda, 2025) and cancellation of several funded projects that primarily supports underserved student populations (Alonso, 2025), which exacerbates the existing stress of navigating higher education institutions that were already exclusionary of communities of color by design (Strayhorn, 2019). Those who survive at the margins, especially folks of color (brown, 2017), may find daily survival more difficult when many of the programs and policies that aim to address opportunity gaps (Ladson-Billings, 2021) are rendered obsolete by those who now control education, healthcare, economic, housing, and other social services.

On a societal level, outside of higher education, being an immigrant is becoming increasingly precarious. Walls have been built to perform the hero narrative of preventing the so-called invasion of "illegal aliens;" humans are thrust onto planes (in an interesting parallel to the slave ships), sent to random and unfamiliar destinations as a political game of one party trying to blame and shift responsibility to the other; people did not look white (American) or speak the right version of English are encircled/ambushed, and forced to be separated from their families; many are brutalized, confined to small cells and made to

endure inhumane conditions; those who dared to intervene were murdered in cold-blood, such as Renee Good and Alex Pretti. Watching all these in disbelief, I secretly mourn the denial of my father's immigration petition, which was a long, agonizing four-year process with a hefty price to pay—the forced separation of Mama and Baba. Mourning surreptitiously is a torture in and of itself. On the one hand, I continued to hide the fact from Mama when the denial letter came on Mother's Day that year. On the other hand, I try to avoid talking with Baba at all costs—so that I did not need to face the guilt of forcing the immigration process onto my parents. Had I known that they would have been separated, which only happened during Baba's prison period, I would not have chosen to inflict this pain. The denial and complete rejection of his opportunity to even visit us feels like a prison, if not a death sentence. All I can do at the moment is to lie to Mama saying the case is stalled, which was indeed the case for the first three years of his immigration petition, which was shrouded in confusion, demands for more paperwork, including the paperwork that has already been submitted, and paying more application fees (hundreds of dollars just for the US center for immigration services to just look at his documents, and eventually to deny his/our petition).

To some extent, the re-search (Dillard, 2022) process weaved resistance by naming some of the forces that tried to extinguish my sense of belonging. Many of these forces represent arsenals of the human-eating (Lu, 1918) white colonial system. The most potent blades working for the system were actually the people—white-presenting folks desperately protecting their Whiteness as property rights (Bell, 1998) and people of color caving in in exchange for half of a loaf (King, 1964). Resistance is important to me personally and in my relationships in a time when being an immigrant feels particularly precarious.

My insistence on remembering my homeplace, to center my humanity, and to engage in my own imagination is essential in my healing. I hope the stories and feelings of homeplace that I aim to cultivate in the proposed research project can help other women of color identify their way of resistance and hope. I use the term women of color here to refer to women like me, who are from one or more races and ethnicities, who often live on the margins of the dominant system characterized by white-centric racism and patriarchy (hooks, 1990).

New Construction is My Homeplace

The place that shaped the earliest memory of my homeplace was called New Construction (新工地), whose name was an irony considering the crumbling buildings, broken windows, and generational poverty. Despite what others may describe as deplorable living conditions or perhaps because of that, love and interdependence became the hope that folks around me, especially women, held on to. Regardless of whose place my friends and I played at, there was always a hot meal prepared. Letting children go home on an empty stomach was looked down upon in the community. Those meals filled my heart. They also made love a tangible reality of life—in the sweet aroma and in the warm touch of steam emanating from the dishes—the soft tofu, which often came directly from the mill, and glutinous rice balls, steaming hot, with black sesame filling gushing out with each bite.

Behind the meals were women, the invisible labor they engaged in daily in preparing meals and taking care of each other's children in New Construction. These women have endured many hardships, yet remain steadfast in the pursuit of their happiness. Runaway husbands, forced prostitution, arranged

marriages, or like 妈妈 Mama, who had to raise me as a single mom during the first five years of my life when 爸爸¹⁴ Baba served in the state prison for aggravated assault. Despite these tragedies in their lives, the women in New Construction extended love through home-cooked meals, generous attention to children, and stories they told about their lives and daily encounters. Holidays were special occasions where meat was served, and dumplings were made. Recipes for dumplings were passed down for generations. These women were so good at stretching the limited ingredients they had that in my memories there were more than enough dumplings to feed all the neighborhood kids.

New Construction, as my homeplace, essentializes the conditions that made me feel a sense of mattering and belonging. Food, warmth, laughter, friendship, and being cared for were all necessary conditions for homeplace. More importantly, homeplace is where one feels seen, not as “the other” or an object who exists as a subhuman; rather, a subject whose humanity manifests in all the relationships they build and sustain. In what comes next, I clarify my positionality (who I am and whose I am), and illuminate stories of my childhood, which offer a context of my homeplace. I also highlight literature and ancestral wisdom that deeply influence my framing, situate this work within endarkened feminist epistemology as my guiding framework, and propose methods to center me and my Mama’s experiences living in New Construction.

Many years have passed; New Construction continues to beckon me in my dreams and subconsciousness. My homeplace. Both of my parents grew up in New Construction. It was like a mini

¹⁴ 爸爸 means dad in Chinese.

kingdom, says 爸爸 Baba, equipped with its own schools, shops, and most importantly, people who are all connected to the lumber factory. Generations have worked there. Many folks grew up together, went to the same schools (classes), got married to someone from New Construction, and raised kids together. My parents met in such a context. With the level of acquaintance, New Construction never runs out of gossip. Everybody

knows everybody's business. Folks also genuinely care about each other. Kids were brought up communally—the so-called 吃百家饭, eating hundreds of families' food.

New Construction was not without its problems, such as overwhelming poverty and overpowering tragedies. Like Qian Zhongshu 钱钟书 (1947) depicted about living in a closed community, people looking from outside crave to get in while those living within are desperate to get out. Having lived in New Construction for two or more generations, many families simply did not know of such an option as leaving, not when one's livelihood, education, and relationships all revolved around one place. Physical immobility mirrored economic stagnation, which was further exacerbated by single-mother households, multigenerational spaces (not by choice, but for survival), and a general lack of opportunities. The hustling culture arose out of folks' resourcefulness. In Chinese, this tenacity and resilience are aptly depicted as 咬碎牙往肚子里咽, biting your teeth into pieces and swallowing them. This taking-all-in attitude runs deep in the bones of many folks who were trying to survive in New Construction.

Laolao ¹⁵姥姥 was a master of the survival art. As matriarch of the family, she kept my cousin and me fed and clothed, which was nothing short of a miracle considering how impoverished her (my) household was. Laolao has a reputation for borrowing for the future because the rationed food she received was never enough to sustain the whole family. In the age of overall struggle for food, Laolao had the magic of squeezing food out of the tight ration others had. She always paid them back (with food), which probably contributed to the deficit for the following month and the vicious cycle of having less and less. To be fair, the ration was hardly enough for anybody. When one's food is under tight control, stretching the ingredients one has becomes a daily necessity. For Laolao, it evolved into an art. She had stone mason buckets, as tall as an average adult person's waist. Those were often filled with fermented cabbages or sweet red bean paste for the Lunar New Year. As soon as I became tall enough (perhaps at six or seven), I started getting my hands into the red bean buckets. Savoring the sticky and sweet taste, little did I know that I almost always left a trace. “小馋猫, little greedy cat,” Laolao would always scold me with her usual tone of doting.

I dream about those red bean pastes these days, weeping aloud and sometimes laughing so hard in my dreams. Bitter cravings or sweet memories, I almost always felt a sense of emptiness when I was awoken by my hysteria. Laolao's face was often very blurry in my dream, which frequently involved me chasing Laolao, telling her

¹⁵ 姥姥, pronounced Laolao is Chinese for maternal grandmother.

that I miss her and I love her. She has returned to heaven 归天 since 2008. Not having been able to see her one last time when she transitioned remained one of the biggest regrets in my life. Her red bean paste, her stories, and how she cultivated in me a strong spirit continue to shape my life in significant ways.

Section 2

Who is Making: Positionality

Who I am

I am from red beans stewing in a huge pot, emanating a sweet aroma.

From Mama hustling on the street and the smell of fruits in my sleep

I am from Manchuria, China, black soil, love loudly and hate with passion;

I am from Aspen tree and Willow tree, protected by thousands of years of ancestral wisdom.

I am from stories, stories told by Laolao (maternal grandmother) in her wrinkles, each of which unfolds her wisdom;

I am the treasure hunter of those stories, many of which glistened with the spirit of the land and resilience of a people who refused to give in under decades of Japanese occupation.

I'm from centuries of ancestral worship, talking to my grandmothers and big Mama, all of whom are my ancestors, in my sleep.

I'm from black soil, sorghum and rice that sustained generations of geniuses,

I am the hood hustler, holding hands with my young friends, strolling the frozen lake and playing hide and seek in the huge concrete rolls—never lost, always emboldened to do more.

I am 杨柳 Yang Liu, my ancestors' wildest dreams.

In this section, I honor my ancestors—Laolao and Big Mama and my Mama, who is still such a powerful presence in my life, grounding my search for Homeplace in who I am and whose I am also reminds me of my Chineseness. Boylorn (2017) coined the word Blackgirl, conveying that the identity of being Black and a female combines the challenges and opportunities of both race and gender. My Chinese womanness incorporates race, gender, and more importantly, the beautiful journey of an immigrant, whose language and culture are

the primary lenses through which she interprets the world. Like Lorde (2017) stated, “when I say I am a woman of color, I mean I recognize common cause with American Indian, Chicana, Latina, and Asian American sisters of North America” (p. 64). My Chinese womanness gives me language for what many of my fellow Indigenous, Chicana, Latina, and Black sisters of North America went through. My Chinese womanness also helps me write fire (Lorde, 1988, p. 131) and feel affirmed in letting my Chinese womanness write myself into being (Lorde, 1988). Lorde (1984) expressed my sentiment in her writing:

But for every real word spoken, for every attempt I had ever made to speak those truths for which I am still seeking, I had made contact with other women while we examined the words to fit a world in which we all believed, bridging our differences. And it was the concern and caring of all those women which gave me strength and enabled me to scrutinize the essentials of my living (p. 43).

Deep down, homeplace has been beckoning me since the day I arrived in the US. As the excitement wore off, I sat in the busy airport, all my energy drained from the 15-hour-plus plane ride. I realized that I did not know how to get to the city where my university was located, which was two hours from the airport. The taxi driver I talked with (through my broken English) cited a whopping \$200 charge, which was an amount that I could not even fathom. After politely declining the taxi ride, which would have caused what was equivalent to more than half of the monthly wage of the average working-class person in my city, I resorted to spending the night at the airport and catching the earliest shuttle to the university campus. It was the first time I remember feeling so alone among the crowds—the language spoken, the signs displayed, the strange looks of passersby—hair colors, eye colors, skin colors, and the smell...Suddenly, in that moment, I started to miss home. I miss Mama,

big Mama, and Laolao. In the land of strangers, I began to crave home, and that strong desire reminded me of who I was and whose I was (Dillard, 2012).

I came from the Yang family. The character of my last name means the Aspen 杨 tree. My father named me Liu 柳, which is the soft willow. Aspen is strong, and yang (as in yin-yang of the Chinese philosophy) and Liu is malleable and yin. "A girl, how deplorable," my paternal grandmother sneered. My dad walked away after quickly glancing at me. He would end up missing the next five years of my life as he served his prison sentence for aggravated assault. Raising me in a harsh economic environment, living in the ghetto, Mama would spend her days working at the lumber factory and evenings pedaling fruits. One weekend each month, we took the train to visit my father in the state prison. Mama said that she still vividly recalled how hard I was trying to keep up with her as a five-year-old after we got off the train during one of our last visits to my father. As the earliest memories attest, homeplace is not without heartbreaks and sorrows. Yet, love is often present, manifested through stories and food, both of which nurtured me in my childhood.

Laolao's stories were my cradle, accompanying me to dream every night and form cocoons around me, from which centuries of Chinese values and resilience emerged. Many of

the stories explained the origins of the Chinese people. Nvwa¹⁶ fixing the sky, the creation of the Chinese (Han) race, Yu taming the flood and Houyi shooting down the eight suns. Laolao also told stories that taught Chinese values, including filial piety, collectivity, harmony, and humility. Laolao's stories often accompanied dumpling-making and cooking of other traditional recipes Mama inherited. Mama makes dumplings with such dexterity and fluency, as if her ancestors were aiding her. Mama tells stories as she kneads the dough, breaks it into small pieces, rolls them into individual dumpling wrappers, and adds fillings to make beautiful dumplings. Learning dumpling making as I listen to Mama's stories reminds me of homeplace, where the aroma of dumplings fills the entire house. The familiarity of the smell, the texture, and the hot liquid within each bite have healed me from many illnesses and have provided psychological comfort in times of stress and distress.

My land is called the Middle Kingdom in Chinese. It boasts five thousand years of continued civilization, characterized by innovations, traditions, and resilience against colonialism and aggression. My ancestors refused to cave in when the British used opium to poison people's minds out of greed and colonialists' global competition. My grandparents from both sides survived the Japanese occupation under Manchukuo and, despite the brutal enforcement of the Japanese military against Chinese-speaking and practicing Chinese traditions, maintained and passed on our language and culture. Homeplace honors the stories of land and how they shape one's notion of home and place. The stories of place constitute the spirit of homeplace, as Place is storied, relational, and intimate. In this way we are in place as much as it is in us-every experience and expression of place is replete with multiple layers of memories, each informing the other in diverse and entangled ways" (Styres, in Smith et al., 2019, p. 27).

¹⁶ 女娲 in Chinese, creation goddess in Chinese mythology.

Stories reflect my social identity as a multilingual migrant coming from China. While I recognize my Chineseness / foreignness as a source of othering and my journey learning English contributing to my double-consciousness (Du Bois, 1903), where I constantly measure my success using standardized English, my positionality also includes strengths and cultural pride that beautifully embody my voice and my ancestral wisdom. Healing my otherness and reclaiming my humanity liberates me from the constant alienation and dispossession institutional racism hurls at me. Brock (2010) offers hope for Black womyn's positive imagery of womanhood by accepting oneself as othered, which also speaks to me as a perpetual other who often feels a level of dis-ease outside of my home, where I have to code-switch by speaking standardized English and forcing myself out of my introvert shell. Reclaiming my otherness as a so-called foreigner (and often in much more violent terms like "alien") allows me to embrace my language and culture, and makes it possible for me to engage in my imagination and to break free (Lorde, 2007) from my double-consciousness (Du Bois, 1903), and from the abject "other."

This "otherness" has an official name in Chinese—*fuping* 浮萍. *fuping*, with an original meaning of duckweed, has a long history of depicting rootless people, like duckweed, drifts around. Additionally, *fu*, partly composed of water, describes a perpetual state of floating. Nalan Xingde (1682) illustrates the deplorable state of feeling like *fuping*. 浮萍漂泊本无根, 天涯游子君莫问—Like a drifting duckweed with no roots, a wanderer on the horizon, do not ask¹⁷. While otherness names my reality of being a woman of color and an

¹⁷ Translated by the author of this dissertation.

immigrant in the US, fuping accurately captures my feeling of a foreigner whose root is severed from her own land of origin, and therefore drifts along.

My re-search (Dillard, 2022) of homeplace is about finding a voice despite my fuping status. Smith (1999) names the insider-driven research as finding a voice, or a way of voicing concerns, fears, desires, aspirations, needs, and questions as they relate to research.

According to Smith, “when indigenous peoples become the researchers and not merely the researched, the activity of research is transformed. Questions are framed differently, priorities are ranked differently, problems are defined differently, and people participate on different terms” (p. 193). As someone indigenous to the land I came from, I am a subject of my research, rather than letting others dictate the terms on which I exist in popular narratives. As a researcher myself whose life is now far removed from the realities of New Construction (the constantly hustling culture), my recollection of my childhood is tainted by my lived experience, especially my decade-long acclimation to the dominant white way of thinking and being. I, too, have become an outsider to New Construction.

Another layer of my identity resides in settler colonialism. My people of Han ethnicity expanded into minority regions with the help of the Chinese government. Nowadays, many Han people occupy the majority of land that belonged to minority ethnicities in China’s long dynastic history. The harm of settler colonialism exceeds the physical realm. A key trope of settler colonialism is to “train people to see each other, the land, and knowledge as property, to be in constant insatiable competition for limited resources” (Patel, 2015, p. 72). My ethnicity and language are used to assimilate minority ethnicities, such as Manchus, many of whom have either married into Han families or been integrated into government-sponsored schools that use Mandarin Chinese and Han culture as

weapons to eliminate minority identities (Kallio, 2019). In a larger context, the settler colonial culture breeds a culture of scarcity, which reduces humans to a workforce, nature to resources, and an endless cycle of competition for the limited resources. The recognition of how I participate in and perpetuate settler colonialism is combined with the awareness of how I have internalized settler colonial values, which harms myself and inflicts pain on those who face constant realities of “erase and replace” (Patel, 2015, p. 25). Homeplace reminds me of my ancestors’ ways of mutuality and reciprocity beyond the political agenda waged by the government that causes harm in my name and my ethnicity.

Whose I am

Whose I am is so much a part of who I am, which is beautifully captured by the Chinese tradition of last name first. My family’s name takes precedence over mine. Even with marriage, my last name remains as if nothing would obliterate the fact that I am a daughter of the Yang family. The inner search of whose I am (Dillard, 2022) electrifies my body; the circuit of warmth flows through my veins. My elders, many of whom are my ancestors, continue to reside in my heart and heal my spirit. Laolao and Big Mama are my constant inspiration. My ancestors also include those who are not related to me by blood, such as Auntie Liu, whose food nourished me as a small child and whose warmth and kindness made me feel so loved.

Who I am also has some deep wounds that I was trying to heal. Being born a girl in a culture of rich traditions and at the height of the One-Child Policy meant I had completely taken away Mama’s chance of having a son—a son Baba and nainai (paternal grandmother) always coveted to preserve the family name. Mama still recalls those moments of humiliation and deep sorrow.

“你奶奶看到你第一眼就嫌弃--怎么是女孩？！”“‘A girl, how deplorable!’ Your Nainai sneered.” “你爸看都没看你就走了。” “Your dad walked away after barely a glance at you.” Mama said that he had since gradually warmed up to me, as a result of his prison time and the monthly visits Mama and I made. Mama emphasized how much of an effort I had made in keeping up with her as she was carrying food to help sustain Baba inside those cold prison walls. “你那时候也就五岁。” “You were barely 5 years old.” “有一次，我坐火车去看你爸爸，结果睡着了。坐过站了。” “One time, on a train to see your father, I fell asleep and, as a result, passed the station where you and I were supposed to disembark.” “等醒过来的时候，已经多坐了好几个站。” “When I finally woke up, I found myself several miles past the station.” “一位开火车头的大哥看到我们母女的难处，开着火车头把咱俩送了回去。” “A kind train driver who was on break at that time offered to take the two of us back and let us ride in the cab.” “这是改革开放以前的中国。人与人的感情很质朴。” “This was China before the economic progress, which sadly sowed distrust amongst people.”

Mama’s gaze suddenly turned towards the window, as if trying to look through to the past. She then slowly began to tell the story of her love with Baba.

“我和你爸初中就开始谈恋爱了” “Your dad and I started dating in Middle School.” “我们的家庭条件非常不同。” “We came from very different families, almost to an extreme.” “我妈妈（你姥姥 Laolao）常常借钱。” “Your Laolao had a reputation for borrowing (which was often seen as a sign of a badly managed household).” “相比之下，你奶奶持家有道。” “In comparison, nainai maintained a neat home—not rich, yet she never worried about running out of daily necessities when

many households were scrambling for food and everyday supplies under the planned economy, marred by scarcity among ordinary families and overproduction and waste at the industrial level (Qian, 2017). “我家很乱，你爸家却永远都那么整齐。” “My home was known in the neighborhood as messy and disorganized, whereas your Dad’s was always meticulously clean.” “我们俩家是天和地的差距，所以遇到了各自家庭的阻力。” “The most unlikely people to be attracted to each other, our love did not receive either family’s blessings.”

On Baba’s end, the resistance was less subtle. Nainai made it known that she disapproved of Mama moving in with Baba at such a young age—shortly after middle school graduation. Little did Mama know that this disdain would last almost half a century, or nainai’s lifetime. Nainai’s hostility towards Mama only intensified after my birth, when she realized that her dream of a grandson was completely shattered by Mama and me. “在医院生完孩子就给你缝上了。” “They [the government] seal you immediately after you have given birth at the hospital.”¹⁸ Mama told the story in such an unbelievable ease that it made me wonder how often she had witnessed or heard from others about these campaigns. Perhaps rivaling the Cultural Revolution at some scale, many women experienced the horror of being dragged out of their home, their newborn being taken away, and/or being fired from work, if they dared to have a second child (that is, if they were not “sealed” immediately after their first labor—which is also supposed to be their last. If somehow miraculously survived violence, indignities, and forced separations, their second-born risked a lifetime of stigma and illegitimacy, which may prevent them from getting a birth certificate or attending a

¹⁸ By seal, Mama meant sterilization, which was widely implemented across counties and cities as part of the family planning campaign.

school, and other grave consequences that represented a safety net for the government against people who were born a crime (Noah, 2017).

Mama's sterilization meant that she did not need to worry about committing such a crime or any of the violent enforcement beyond the initial violence of robbing her a chance of becoming a mother again. Yet that sterilization would prove to be a lifelong curse, the one that doomed her marriage. “都是命啊” “It's destiny,” she commented as if trying to dismiss the whole episode of her life, rubbing a corner of her eye. “你爸和你奶如愿以偿，终于有了一个男孩。” “Your Baba and nainai got their wish granted for a son.” Mana paused, in deep thought.

I remember that difficult period for Mama and for me. It almost felt like Baba and Nainai no longer saw me or, even worse, they pretended that I did not exist. It was like being stuck in a nightmare, and regardless of how hard I fought, I just couldn't wake up. Mama, sharing her struggles, unleashed the pain in me. This is my first time confronting the impact of the coveted-son episode on me. As I recounted, memories flooded back and overwhelmed me. When I used to visit my uncle's house, where nainai was taking care of my boy cousin, I almost always ended up running home feeling angry and hurt. I remembered feeling vindictive as nainai would always blame me even when my cousin was the one who acted up. Her words hurt the most, so much so that decades later, I am still trying to heal from them—“boys are roots, and girls are grass.”

Mama's pain, however, felt raw, like deep cuts, which still leave gross scars. As Mama recalled this painful episode, her wounds were like an infection, revealed by revisiting, and started festering underneath the healed surface. The culprit was Baba, the man

whom she loved all her life, with her life; who promised to redeem himself and make it up to both Mama and me in his remaining life after the hardships Mama endured in his absence.

“为了有一个儿子，他不惜背叛家庭。对方是饭店服务员，和我情同姐妹”He cheated on me to produce a son, with a restaurant employee whom I treated like a younger sister.” “等那个孩子被带回来的时候，你爸和你奶都骗我说这个孩子是收养来的。” “When the boy was brought home, both your nainai and your Baba tried to conceal the fact and hoaxed me into believing that he was adopted from another family.” “结果穿帮了，孩子他妈上门要孩子。” “Then the truth burst when the birth mother showed up in front of our door, begging to have her son back.”

Mama lowered her head, as if the betrayal and its aftermath still stung. She stopped. I did not press on. I patted her on her shoulder. She did not need to continue. I witnessed her drastic change in the aftermath—untrollable sobbing, threatening of suicide, excessive drinking—all except divorce. I wondered what it felt like when feeling betrayed by the person you loved deeply for many years and having to face the evidence of disloyalty every day after choosing to bring up the child from your husband’s affair. Mama cited karma on the rare occasions when she talked about my didi (younger brother)-- “他是来讨债的。” “he’s here to collect debt—I owed him in my previous life.” I am not sure if I believe in karma, but deep down it might be the only way Mama could make sense of that period of her life. Perhaps, destiny felt a little easier to swallow than intentional betrayal.

Nainai’s neglect and Baba’s lukewarm feeling towards me were compensated by the unconditional love Laolao and Big Mama gave. They dotingly called me a rugrat, in Manchurian Mandarin, 小兔崽子. Big Mama’s laughter greeted me before I even entered the door. I

loved hanging out at her little convenience store, which she operated in the neighborhood. It has noncoincidentally become a gathering place for neighbors, especially women, who loved spending evenings gossiping about all things in New Construction. They talked like having their fingers on the pulse of the neighborhood, so that not even a fly could escape their knowledge of its whereabouts. Mama recounted some of the scandals that spread like wildfire among the women. The stories, which were often experienced by one person or a few people outside of the gossip circle, were breathed into life each time a New Construction woman told them. Having gone around so many times, it became harder and harder to disentangle truth from fiction—if there was any truth remaining at all. One such story was possession by a coyote. Mama told the story several times with ever-growing conviction. Similar to Indigenous stories that often involved unexplainable forces of nature, many Chinese folklore stories told of the supernatural, especially among animals. Coyotes were often believed to carry evil power. The New Construction story went that one day one of the women exploded with incessant cursing and threatening of violence. While neither was uncommon among New Construction women, it was rare that random assaults were hurled unprovoked. The elders recommended exorcism. Hence, the woman's family hired the first exorcist, yet that person was subdued by the power of the coyote and chased away. The second one was a lot more powerful; she pinched the

underarm of the possessed woman, sending the coyote screaming this time. The coyote, in the woman's voice, disclosed its hiding place. The exorcist and witnesses swarmed to the storage shed, finding a coyote inside. The coyote was chased away this time, and the woman recovered from her hysteria shortly thereafter.

Big Mama's store became an incubator of these stories and, more importantly, a greenhouse of the seeds each woman was holding in their heart. Gossiping or story-creating, the store was a sanctuary for the New Construction women to temporarily be shielded from the tedious routines of their lives—cooking, cleaning, working, caring for their child, hustling so hard yet still scrambling to make ends meet. They rarely purchased at the store, yet they never felt they had to. Big Mama's place was as inviting to them as to me as a child. Perhaps Big Mama found herself in the women's stories. She met Big Baba (my uncle) when she was sent to the farm as part of the “up to the hill, down to the village” movement, which sent young people in the city to villages to reform their bourgeois ideas. Being completely uprooted to a strange place, she found her roots in love. Mama painted a picture of those harsh labor reform days for Big Mama, which were not uncommon for Big Mama's generation and many older and younger people who were caught in the currents of the Cultural Revolution. Laboring in the field from dawn to dusk, seven days a week broke Big Mama's body and spirit. She pretended to fall ill, which allowed her a brief respite from the tedious routine of toiling away. When it came time for her to return, she obliged. By that time, she had already spent 10 years of her precious life on the farm. The harsh living conditions probably made the 10 years feel like 100. Mama recalled that when visiting Big Mama, she saw a small room packed with bunker beds. Next to the beds were basins with which the women released themselves—often in front of others, in close vicinity. These harsh

conditions were believed to be the most ideal for re-educating the city dwellers, who were believed to have abandoned the hardworking spirit.

Mama's second-oldest brother exhausted all his means to escape the fate of Big Mama and many others in their generation. He pretended to be bedridden for a month. To rule out cheating, officials from the re-education committee visited him multiple times. Mama said that faking illness was a common strategy deployed by young people who needed a way out. The month of immobility rendered him unable to walk for a long time afterwards. Yet, he deemed the physical discomfort worthwhile in exchange for ten years of his life back instead of toiling away at a distant farm, away from his family and enduring harsh conditions, and essentially forgetting who he is.

While her brother escaped the fate of hard labor, Big Mama was greeted with intense physical work at the farm she was deployed to. While she was paid a wage, the amount of effort she had to engage in felt extremely disproportionate. Mama said harvest time was especially overwhelming with all the work involved and the pressure to complete the harvesting tasks manually in a short timeframe. For a city youth, even from a humble family, farm labor was a foreign skill. Doing it for ten-plus years does not enhance one's knowledge or grow their skills; to the contrary, it exacerbates the grievances, especially combined with homesickness and the monotony of life on a communist farm where every moment of your life is strictly regulated. In my now privileged vantage point of privacy influenced by my Western education, I cannot weigh the two harms—hard labor, which represented physical torture, and the indignities of relieving oneself in front of other people, which felt like a mental torment.

Big Mama had to learn to accept both the physical and mental hardships for over ten years. I pictured her spending ten years, three thousand six hundred and fifty days, tens of thousands of hours and countless minutes, spending most of her waking hours laboring in the field. Big Mama still managed to find joy and love in the desolate environment. She learned to sing in Shanghainese from her roommates, and they found themselves singing the banned song—Moscow Nights (Solovyov-Sedoy & Matusovsky, 1955). The song was labeled sexually explicit and counterrevolutionary. In addition to her glimmer of joy through subtle resistance, she also found the love of her life in the young tractor driver. The man ended up relocating to New Construction, where the two of them got married and started a family. Big Mama ended up spending the rest of her life with her husband and her son in New Construction, even after the new development, which offered folks new apartment units in exchange for their mud flat houses. Laolao, Mama, and Big Mama have all played significant roles in my childhood and in my life. I inherited stories, skills, and significant knowledge from these courageous, resourceful, and charismatic women. It took me years of academic and personal journeys and living across the ocean to realize that most of my knowledge was acquired in those years living in New Construction. My years in grade school and even in college were mostly focused on test preparation. The theories I became acquainted with only reinforced my learning from the three women in my life and gave that early knowledge a fancier (academic) name. My positionality is shaped by thousands of years of ancestral wisdom, manifested in the values and mythology, which were often passed down for generations as stories and poems, which I learned to memorize since early childhood. In the following section, I position my inheritance within endarkened feminist and Chinese poetic literary traditions.

Section 3

Mixing the Filling: Methods

风掠浮萍水面来，翠绡成段接还开。 无情却似多情物，不到诗中不肯回。

张镒 (Zhang, 1185 CE)

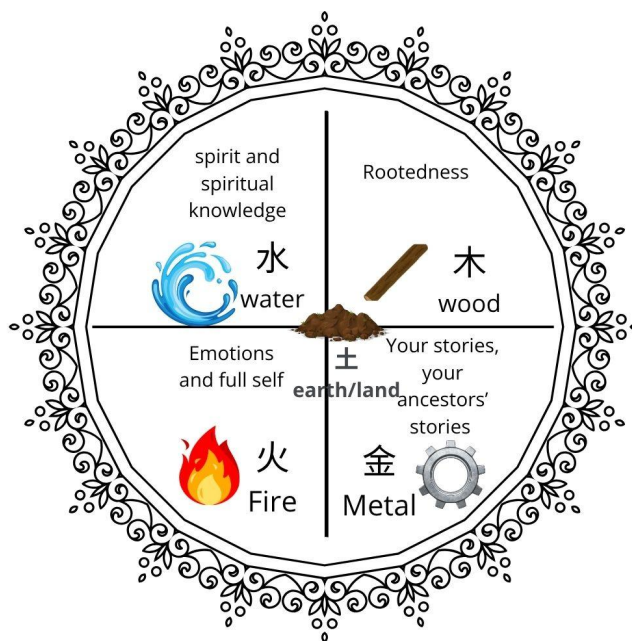
Wind stirs the duckweed on the water,
Like strips of emerald silk, joining and breaking apart.
Seemingly soulless, yet possessed of great tender feeling,
They refuse to rest until they are immortalized in poems.

Medicine Wheel of Homeplace as a Commencement of the Quest for Homeplace

Inspired by the Indigenous medicine wheel introduced by Hardison-Stevens (2014), I embedded the five Chinese elements into the traditional Indigenous medicine wheel, the result of which forms the foundation of my fuping ethnography and my cultural heritage that allow me to stand upright and walk with immense pride. The four sections respectively represent four of the five fundamentals of Chinese philosophy. They are also believed to form the basics of the physical world. Earth, as the fifth, and what I assert as the foundation of everything else, is placed in the center of this wheel. It also grounds me and anchors me in place. My roots are deeply planted on Earth.

Figure 1

[Medicine Wheel of Homeplace]



The Medicine Wheel consists of five elements, which are distributed into the four sections. With the foundational element, earth, in the middle, signifying its crucial status.

Fuping autoethnography

As its name indicates, Fuping 浮萍 has its origins in water; 浮 describes the action of floating. 萍 was initially referring to watergrass, but because of its floating and unrooted nature, which allows it to flow with the wind, it was later adapted to describe people who wander about without settling down. Zhang's poem above, however, disrupts the narrative of fuping being unattached. Instead of being accused of being the soulless plants found in popular imagination, fuping in Zhang's depiction is tender and can feel many emotions. In other words, the condition of rootlessness should only elicit more empathy towards the plant.

As a fuping myself, I found myself drifting thousands of miles away from my homeplace; I, too, am not devoid of feelings of love and sorrow. Fuping autoethnography captures the context of my exile and the complexities of a shifting identity ever present in Nepantla¹⁹ (Anzaldúa, 2015). As a method, fuping derives from critical ethnography to address the moral responsibility of research. Instead of claiming objectivity, which does not exist in the human world (Hampton, 1995), critical ethnography centers positionality to “resist domestication²⁰,” and “contributes to emancipatory knowledge and discourses of social justice” (Madison, 2005, p. 5). I center Mama’s way of knowing as knowledge, and use “resources, skills, and privileges available to me to make accessible, to penetrate the borders and break through the confines in defense of—the voices and experiences of subjects whose stories are otherwise restrained and out of reach” (Madison, 2005, p. 5).

Fuping autoethnography also models after the “mojado ethnography” (Murrillo, Jr., 1999, p. 11), which argues that “the increased sensitivity to, and tension in the politics of ethnography have opened new occupiable spaces and possibilities, where other bodies of work can increasingly be drawn upon” (Madison, 2005, p. 11). Autoethnography involves the “turning of the ethnographic gaze inward on the self (auto), while maintaining the outward gaze of ethnography, looking at the larger context wherein self-experiences occur” (Denzin, 1997, p. 227). In addition to the self (auto), autoethnography draws together critical reflection, multiculturalism, and narrative writing within a multifaceted interconnected world (Chang, 2008). This connectedness is further accentuated in Indigenous autoethnography,

¹⁹ Nepantla is a Nahuatl word meaning between the spaces.

²⁰ Domestication refers to the institutional practice of adopting racial/social justice programs in name, while neutralizing those programs to take away the most impactful elements of those programs—essentially performative adoption (Bhattacharyya&Winter, 2019)

which distills the connectedness to “space, place, time, and culture as a way of (re)claiming, (re)storing, (re)writing, and (re)patriating our own lived realities” (Whitinui, 2014, p. 467).

Fuping autoethnography connects me with my land, my childhood, neighborhood, and more importantly, the Chinese women who made New Construction my homeplace. My inquiries into my childhood and my attempt to piece together the conditions and feelings that necessitate homeplace become the roots that anchor me. Fuping autoethnography thus engages in the (re)visioning (Dillard, 2022) of rootlessness through “narrating and articulating an expanded version...of our cultural and heritage knowledges beyond the people, places, and things we have seen in our current life experiences” (p. 53), and serves as a counter-narrative (Zamudio et al., 2011).

Fuping autoethnography in its essence is about uncovering my voice—the voice that has not been tainted by White colonial norms with its package of smallness and shame. My voice traces my origin to New Construction, where I first learned to sing, to recite poems that are centuries old, and where stories filled my imagination. Smith (2012) asserts that when Indigenous peoples become the researchers and not merely the researched, the activity of research is transformed. Although I am not indigenous to the land where I currently reside, I claim indigeneity in my place of origin. When I turn the gaze to myself and Mama, whose experiences and memories are deeply intertwined with New Construction, the research transcends an academic exercise. It becomes deeply personal and spiritual—like the land

(which is the last character of New Construction in Chinese—地) is beckoning me.

Since the inception of this re-search (2012), I began to feel New Construction every day, especially in moments of crisis. Every night, when I get off work at 10 pm, feeling exhausted physically and mentally, the moon follows me and shines bright on me on the short drive home. When tears are in my eyes, the moon casts its light on me, like a gentle gaze from Laolao and Big Mama. When my daily responsibilities become too heavy to carry, when I am on the verge of collapsing, the moon, through its presence, reminds me of the resourcefulness of the New Construction women. I, too, can prevail. Their blood of dogged persistence runs in my veins. Fuping autoethnography also encompasses a process of self-discovery. Richardson (2003) urges writers to “write as a way of learning more about yourself and your topic and as a method of discovery and analysis” (p. 499-541). I highlight my “connectedness to space, place, time, and culture as a way of (re)claiming, (re)storing, (re)writing, and (re) patriating our own lived realities as indigenous peoples” (Whitinui, 2013, p. 467). This deeper and spiritual discovery undulates with what Dillard (2022) termed (re)membering, which, according to her, is not for someone else’s purposes, but for our own.

One key component of fuping autoethnography is storywork (Whitinui, 2013) through storytelling and storylistening, which underscore the importance of counterstories and outline a concrete path to cultivating counterstories (Iftikar & Museus, 2018). According to AsianCrit, counterstories center “Asian American experiences to offer an alternative epistemology that is represented through stories and can inform theories and praxis in meaningful ways.”(Iftikar & Museus, 2018, p.941). By centering New Construction, my place of origin, as a starting point of my storywork, I paint a picture of homeplace as

rootedness and connectedness, and more importantly, as something I buried deep in my memory. More importantly, New Construction constitutes a counterstory against poverty and dispossessed other while the stories of the women in New Construction represent an alternative way of knowing that lay the foundation of what it means to hold knowledge and be a knower. Archibald (2008) describes two types of storytelling—myth and history in the Annesnabe traditions. Similarly, in Chinese storytelling, there are myth and folk narratives (Bender, 2003). Myth, which Laolao excelled at telling, explains my cultural origin and is among my most cherished inheritances. Folk narratives encapsulate New Construction women's life stories and daily survivals, which often came to Mama (who later told the stories to me) as gossip. Both myth and folk narratives are like trees, growing a new branch with each telling. They also travel fast within New Construction, like dandelions, taking roots with a breath of wind.

As Indigenous storytelling goes in circles, fuping ethnography also drifts around. It begins its floating journey in New Construction, nourished by my early years of memory—of love and care through food. It revolves around the women whose lives and stories were deeply intertwined with New Construction, so much so that generations were born and took their last breath there. The stories told by these women and about these women form the root of fuping ethnography. No matter how far fuping (I) drift(s) away, it (I) always end(s) up returning to the stories and memories of these women, which serve as an anchoring point for fuping ethnography. hooks (1990) referred to memory as a site of resistance. Fuping ethnography is about re-membering (Dillard, 2012), in opposition to the erasure, not only of these women and their lives and legacies, but also of their recollections. hooks (2009) further extrapolates, summarizing the power of critical autoethnography:

We are born and have our being in a place of memory. We chart our lives by everything we remember from the mundane moment to the majestic. We know ourselves through the art and act of remembering. Memories offer us a world where there is no death, where we are sustained by rituals of regard and recollection (p. 5).

According to Whitiwhiri (2013), storytelling is more than a formality or an action; it is a sacred practice. Morality and reciprocity are embedded throughout the storytelling process, in which “the storyteller demonstrated respect and responsible care for their stories” (p.110). Caring for the stories is essentially caring for those placed at the center of the stories. I care deeply about the New Construction women, and I cherish their stories as memories, knowledge, and daily affirmation of the rich cultural traditions that I walk in. Additionally, Indigenous values of respect, reverence, responsibility and reciprocity (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 2001) guide the storytelling process. Respect manifests the roles New Construction women play in my life—they are all my ancestors. Reverence adds a layer of feeling inspired by these women and their daily survivance (Vizenor, 2008). Responsibility has been previously explained through answerability, and in the caretaking of the stories New Construction women have gifted me with. Reciprocity is something I am practicing, yet never seem to master. Detached from financial incentives or material rewards, I have a unique opportunity to model authentic reciprocity that is genuine and not tainted by the capitalist curse of instant gratification. My current practice is honoring these incredibly strong women in every public speech, every written piece (public or private), and sharing their stories embedded in recipes and engrossed in every corner of my memory. Citing them and quoting them in my teaching and workshops at my institution is one of the most impactful ways of reciprocity—not only to validate their knowledge and affirm their status as

knowers but also to disrupt the white colonial narrative of degree-and-status-affiliated knowledge hierarchy.

In addition to storywork that centers different ways of knowing and being, fusing autoethnography elevates my stories from the margins. Noblit et al. (2004) speak of the power and disruption “when the other becomes the researcher, narrated becomes narrator” (p. 166). Storywork, which blends Indigenous and endarkened feminist traditions, embodies my identity and my way of healing. Million (2011) reminds us that “Story has always been practical, strategic and restorative” (p. 322). This aligns with the endarkened feminist traditions of storytelling as an academic and a spiritual pursuit. According to Dillard (2022), (re)membering is an important step towards telling full stories and stories that emanate strengths. (Re)membering begins with a different kind of search, not for someone else’s purposes, but in her recent writings, for the Black women in her Ghana Study Abroad program. (Re)membering demands wholeness and wellness, where those women embrace spiritual knowing and being. Through the process of (re)membering, the women in the program became open to the possibilities of healing and creation.

Dillard’s (2022) work serves as a spiritual reckoning of my journey in reconnection with my ancestral wisdom. I, too, have forgotten about my past after learning “the truncated tales of our origin” (Armah, 2000, p. 1). The Chinese origin stories are often reduced to the unwelcome other despite our beautiful histories/herstories of thousands of years. Where I reside has a dark past of alienating, persecuting, and packing Chinese folks like pigs, sent away to be exterminated. No name, no face, sheer numbers to satisfy the imaginations of white people of an enemy group. Deceased or alive, those people are my ancestors and their stories invigorate me every day.

Despite being rooted in ancestral knowledge anchored by New Construction as its place of origin, fuping ethnography is not without limitations. Ryan and Sackrey (1984) remind readers that “the academic work process is essentially antagonistic to the working class, and academics for the most part live in a different world of culture, different ways that make it, too, antagonistic to working class life” (p. 113). While I gravitate towards co-writing with Mama and prominently featuring her stories and the stories she told about women in New Construction, I pay attention to the potential risk of appropriation and putting words in Mama/the women’s mouths. According to Smith (2001),

The role of an ‘official insider voice’ is also problematic...One of the difficult tasks insider researchers take is to ‘test’ their own taken-for-granted views about their community. It is a risk because it can unsettle beliefs, values, relationships and the knowledge of different histories” (p. 139).

My work feels even more risky (and exploitative) in the sense that many of the women whose stories I feature cannot confirm or deny the validity of these stories. Not to mention, I never had a chance (due to loss of contact) to ask for their permission before centering their life-long and lived wisdom in my dissertation.

In addition to the risk of my taking-for-granted views and squeezing the vast and deep lived knowledge of New Construction women into the restrictive academic research process, Mama’s account also adds a layer of interpretation. Her experience after New Construction removes her further from the past that is only stored in her memories. Her becoming a successful entrepreneur and immigrating to the US, where she picked up language and norms that threatened to eliminate her old set of values, could significantly reshape her view on New Construction and her life there. Approaching everyday life from the endarkened

feminist lens and other theoretical frameworks could further alienate New Construction and its residents for me, even though I spent the early part of my life there.

All these limitations acknowledged, I hope that this exercise will offer me a path to healing my otherness—the ever-present feeling of a guest in someone else’s house. Through conversations with Mama, my hope was for her to reconnect with her past brilliance (and present), which has been eclipsed by the process of speaking English and assimilating to a culture that rewards individualism, competitiveness, and independence, most of which contradicts how she and other women in New Construction survived through collectivity, mutual aid, and interdependence. The reality of interdependence is still sustaining Mama and me, and hundreds of others in the South Sound region, actualized in the restaurant Mama, my legal partner, and I operate together. Mama and I often cook together, feeding folks traditional Chinese food, which contains many of the dishes prepared by New Construction women. Cooking is becoming a ceremony for Mama and for me to honor our origin and the women with whom we once broke bread.

Data is Story

My dissertation data-collection coincided with the opening of Mama’s and my restaurant. With both of us literally working around the clock—me working three jobs, full-time at the college, teaching online (up to a full course load), and spending almost all my free time outside of the two jobs at the restaurant; Mama trying to squeeze in all kids’ activities outside of her twelve-hour plus at the restaurant, it has been incredibly challenging to find time together. I try to catch Mama during our shared cooking time. Working side by side, I constantly ask her about stories of her past, her memories of Big Mama, Laolao and the women in New Construction. Mama’s storytelling naturally occurs at the restaurant,

where she is most comfortable, often accompanied by the cacophony of banging of the spoon against the wok, and the sizzling of food in the fryer. The data-collection process commenced as soon as my proposal was approved in February, and culminated in early March. To honor Mama as a co-writer and a knowledge holder, I incorporated member-checking in the data collection process. Each time I wrote a section capturing Mama's stories, I would report back to her, checking for accuracy.

Inheriting Mama's Stories

Mama's stories were incredibly rich—encompassing decades of achievements and lived experiences, and glistening with generations of ancestral wisdom. Coding and analysis embodied a delicate process, where I strove to preserve as many details as possible, not only as a way of reciprocity towards Mama, but also to practice mutuality with the women in New Construction, whose stories were integral to Mama's stories of her past and my childhood. One consistent challenge was the colloquial nature of Mama's (my) dialect which is difficult to capture with written Chinese, let alone English translation and the attempt to embed the stories into this dissertation, which embodied an academic writing process. I tried to maintain the emotions and write with those, which I learned from Anzaldua (2015), helps mitigate the stiffness of one's language from writing solely with their intellect. To preserve the spirit and spiritual knowledge embedded in Mama's stories, and elevate the ancestral wisdom Mama's stories entailed, I coded those stories using 水 (water), and 金 (metal), two elements in the Daoism philosophy, and two pillars in fuping ethnography.²¹ All the stories that Mama told about Big Mama, Laolao, and Nainai were analyzed using 金, which also means gold in

²¹ See page 44 for the fuping ethnography medicine wheel.

Chinese, which is a perfect metaphor for the precious ancestral wisdom her (my) ancestors embodied. 水, captured the flowing of Mama's spirit and the spiritual knowing the women in New Construction represented. Mama's past was also included in this category.

Section 4

My Inheritance: Reviewing Seminal Texts/Ancestral Knowledges

红豆生南国 春来发几枝， 愿君多采撷， 此物最相思
王维 (Wei, 750 AD)

Red beans grow in the southern land,
How many branches sprout in spring?
I hope you gather many of them,
For they represent the deepest longing.
(Translation by Qin, 2010)

Wang's poem was composed during the Anshi rebellion during the Tang period (mid-eighth century), which shattered many people's illusion of peace and tranquility. I chose this poem to begin my inheritance section as Chinese poems are among my most cherished possessions. These poems often trace their origins to thousands of years ago, and are lived knowledge, encapsulating the poets' experiences navigating what was often among the most tumultuous times in history. Chinese poems often have inferred meanings beyond the literal stories they tell. Additionally, they have enhanced meanings based on individual interpretations.

This poem's superficial meaning was love and experiencing sorrow due to missing the love of one's life. Underneath the love story, however, is the poet's longing for the peace and tranquility before the rebellion. I, too, miss New Construction a great deal and often travel back there in my dreams. The urge to write New Construction has been deep in my consciousness since I left in sixth grade. It often appeared in my earliest journals about my Homeplace and Laolao. Despite the physical separation, I continued to return to New Construction up until graduate school years, after Laolao had transitioned. My most recent

return was in 2019, my last trip to China, with my children, when I was lucky to see Big Mama one last time before her passing in 2023. The telling of New Construction and the women who made it an anchoring place for me began with my dissertation research journey.

Patel (2015) inspired me with her questions about the deep driving force for one's research. She proposes decolonizing methodologies as a way to counteract damage-based frames, which denotes the problem-centered approach, which uses the white lens to identify issues with non-dominant groups (often people of color) that are common in social science. Citing Kaomea, she urges researchers who have inside knowledge about the community they are researching to approach their research with knowledge and humility. According to Patel (2015), the question "why me" should engender a much deeper answer than one's academic qualifications and institutional affiliations. She believes "research is fundamentally relational, cultural, and political practice" (p. 58). As a result, researchers should assume great answerability to the community of one's research. Her question of "why now and why here" confronts coloniality, which, according to Tuck and MacKenzie (2015), whose work Patel cites, "with its universal truth, values placelessness" (p. xiii). Patel (2015) argues that learning and knowledge are both place-based. My learning is shaped by New Construction as my homeplace and continues to unfold in the relations I had with the women in New Construction.

Reflecting on my identities, the determination to tell about New Construction and to recreate my Homeplace has been shaped by some of the most alienating experiences that I had since my arrival in the US. Though I name these conditions in the next section below, I am not a victim of mistreatment and invisibility. My agency and power lie in the writing of New Construction. Murillo's (1999) ethnographic inquiry informs the way I recall New

Construction. According to Murillo, ethnographic inquiry “places events and people in the social, cultural, and political history and contexts in which they are constituted” (p. 7). As the “bodily instrument, text-maker, and inventor of cultures” (Murillo, 1999, p. 8), I inherit the stories and cultures of New Construction, and I weave (new) meanings and (new) cultures through the continuous quest for New Construction in my consciousness and my being.

Anzaldua (2015) argues that border crossings lead to transformations of identities. Many immigrants and refugees like me exist in what she describes as *nepantla*, the in-between land—neither here nor there, but unique to the creation of one’s new identities that challenge the notion of one fixed identity, especially in the racialized and gendered realities that many women immigrants of color are stuck in. Anzaldua names interactions of race, gender, class, etc. as the source of identity creation. Her work catalyzed my identity-awakening that is rooted in my place both here and there (in the US and in New Construction) and my status of constantly crossing between *nosotras* (us and them). Being Chicana to Anzaldua is insufficient in describing her identity; neither are other categories, which Anzaldua argues are framed in binaries: “Identities are not fixed, they are ever shifting. Identity is always in process. It is relational—who and what we are depends on those around us” (p. 75). She also believes that one discovers, uncovers, and creates one’s identities as they interact with others. Part of my identity was formed and rooted in New Construction shaped by the women there. New identities are emerging through new relationships developed in the US and revisiting New Construction as the origin of my identities.

Anzaldua (2015) also elevates spiritual knowledge, which deeply resonates with me. She paints a tree image with its roots signifying ancestral/racial origins/biological attributes,

branches symbolizing communities or cultures that adopted the person, and trunk conveying the new tribalism one develops after embracing “identity is an ongoing story, one that changes with each telling” (p. 75).

hooks’ (2008) framework of homeplace lays a strong literature foundation for my understanding of women’s home-building work in New Construction. hooks (2008) elevates the concept of rootedness. Furthermore, she highlights the feelings of safety and nurturing connected with homeplace. She draws inspiration from generations of Black mothers creating a home, a sanctuary from the hostile gaze, the danger, racist oppression, and sexist domination. According to hooks (2008), another component of homeplace is connectedness, “our connection to the places where we come from—the earth, the land, the people—helps us understand who we are, why we are, and what we are meant to be” (p. 34). Homeplace for hooks is also a space for liberation, allowing a person to “freely confront the issue of humanization, where one could resist” (p. 42).

Boylorn’s (2017) homeplace involves an internal searching process in which she becomes comfortable living in her skin and is proud of who she is. Boylorn (2016) spoke about the feeling of home, where she was no longer a guest at someone else’s place, under their rule, but was truly free to be herself and be full. Home also allows one to be flawed and vulnerable without fearing for one’s safety. Boylorn (2016) expands the work of hooks by engaging in blackgirl ethnography “as a way to talk about embodied, critical, and culturally situated research that begins and/or ends at home, girl ethnography” (p. 46). Blackgirl ethnography constitutes Boylorn’s praxis for counterstories and “(re)visioning” that allows women to “break free” from “someone else’s imagination” (brown, 2017, p. 18). Blackgirl ethnography resonated with me, especially in Boylorn’s (2016) full cycle of escaping,

returning, and realization that home lives in oneself and “can be theorized, politicized, and actualized through praxis” (p. 55).

Boylorn (2017) painted a picture of homeplace through the lives of Black women, who were subjects in her stories; “decaying buildings, weed-overgrown homes, and unkempt yards with wood and trash piles in the back” (p. 31) and lives deprived of material adequacy, inflicted with violence and disloyalty from their husbands/partners, these women were portrayed with agency and often waged resistance on their own terms. The homeplace they created was fraught with resilience and hope for everyday survival. Boylorn’s work inspires me to tell the stories of my homeplace from both-and perspectives. My homeplace is both a place of poverty and tangible economic hardships, and a place of love. The material deprivation was compensated by the emotional abundance. Both hooks and Boylorn alluded to the effects of leaving and returning home. hooks recorded that Kentucky entered her consciousness upon leaving home. Boylorn searched for and wrote about Sweetwater after moving away. My reconnection with New Construction represents my effort in reclaiming a sense of belonging and safety against the alienating work and social environments I have been navigating.

Naming the Reality

While hooks and Boylorn depicted homeplace as a place of belonging, scholars like Du Bois (1903), Brock (2010), Au, Brown, and Calderón (2016) captured the effects of double-consciousness, alienation, and hidden curriculum that necessitate a person’s search for homeplace. Du Bois (1903) depicted the “peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (p. 8). When one is

removed from their homeplace, where they might be nourished and protected, they become exposed to external standards and values that do not represent and may even contradict who they were. These standards are often violently imposed, like the capitalistic white maleness, silencing and suffocating while erasing a person's whole being. According to Du Bois, the feeling of an alienated other becomes an ever-present reality, which encroaches on one's sense of self. Madrid (1988) went further to describe the impact of feeling othered:

If one is the other, one will inevitably be perceived unidimensionally: will be seen stereotypically; will be defined and delimited by mental sets that may not bear much relation to existing realities. There is a darker side to otherness as well. The other disturbs, disquiets, discomforts. It provokes distrust and suspicion. The other makes people feel anxious, apprehensive, even fearful. The other frightens, scares (p. 120).

If double-consciousness and the warring spirit represent socialization by white norms, which have become the standard against which behaviors and actions are measured, like how I have been dehumanized and constantly face the fear of elimination unless I assimilate, then the hidden curriculum represents a systematic approach to brainwash and to instill a sense of smallness and shame (Muhammad, 2020). According to Au, Brown and Calderón (2016), the “hidden curriculum” is accomplished through two methods: one is the invisibility narrative, which “has to do with the glaring absence of many of the ideas, histories, and theories that were relevant to the construction of curriculum history in the United States (p. 4). The invisibility narrative ignores the glorious and the powerful aspects of a culture or history as if they never existed. The visibility narrative refers to “the process by which select narratives are included” (Au, Brown, & Calderón, 2016, p. 4). Portrayed as pain (Muhammed, 2020)

and pathology (Tuck & Yang, 2018), histories of minoritized groups became drenched in shame as if shame was something these groups own (Sankofa Waters, 2023). The combined effects are the justification of treating these groups as less than and as the perpetual other.

The hidden curriculum is quite pronounced when it comes to Chinese history. Thousands of years of ingenuity, inventions, poetry, art, traditional medicine, oral stories, and generations of ancestral wisdom were reduced to an episode in US history: the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882). The diverse culturally rich Chinese people, consisting of 56 ethnicities, were essentialized by simplistic historical lessons, such as the one recalled by a Chinese student recorded in 1925, “I remembered one particularly terrible ancient history lesson; it told in awful detail about ‘queer little Chinamen, with pigtails and slanting eyes’ — and went on to describe the people as though they were inhuman, and at best, uncivilized” (Au, Brown & Calderón, 2016, p. 58). Racial stereotyping is far from a distant past. In August 2025, the Swiss watch brand Swatch circulated an advertisement with a model pulling the corners of his eyes, reactivating the racist gesture mocking Chinese people as slanted-eyed (Ewe, 2025).

My quest for Homeplace through recalling New Construction represents my rage against the white norm and systems that continuously diminish me and render me invisible. This rage originates in love, self-consciousness, and a deep passion for creating my own belonging when external environments and factors prove to be extremely hostile to my being. Homeplace also allows me to exist and immerse myself in my rage, which Lorde (1988) believes can “fuel actions, actions that could alter the very circumstances of oppression feeding my rage” (p. 133). The quest also embodies my acceptance of a shifting identity and the fluidity the shift brings. In Anzaldúa (2022)’s words, “identity, like a river, is always

changing, always in transition, always in *nepantla*²²”(p. 575). In her river analogy, Anzaldua (2015) compared the identity awakening process to the upstream-downstream shift, “you're not the same person you were upstream. You begin to define yourself in terms of who you are becoming, not who you have been” (p. 60).

This process of identity reflection and recognition, negotiation, and creation has been reinvigorated by my recalling of New Construction. While I recognize myself as an insider who came from the community and who genuinely wants to honor the community and its women, my outsider position needs to be further examined. Smith (2001) writes about the tension between insider and outsider. According to Smith, insider knowledge comes from the lived experience within the community of which we are storytelling. Outsider, looking within, refers to one's experience being removed from the community they are writing about, especially after new knowledge and new identities are gained. Mama's and my time in the US has shaken the very core of many of our beliefs and practices. Privacy, space, and individualism, only to name a few, have challenged our fundamental community orientation. Western (white) norms also made us question many of the practices that were deeply ingrained in us. These norms brainwash us into looking at behaviors and choices of the New Construction women with contempt, which is a part of a larger theme of internalized smallness that constantly battles the deeply ingrained home and cultural inheritance, bringing about a constant reality of double consciousness (Du Bois, 1903).

Anzaldua's (2015) advice on navigating the cracks and transcending the binaries helps me shatter the white norm of “either...or” and recognize the power of simultaneously being an insider and an outsider. Anzaldua summarizes the in-between identity as *nosotras* (us), which contains both them and us, representing negotiating the cracks between the two

²² Nahuatl word meaning between the spaces.

worlds and connecting us with others, blurring the boundaries between the two. Applying nosotras to New Construction, Mama and I are the women, and the women are us. New Construction is our past, our present, and our future. It is our bloodline, our ancestry, and our inherited knowing and being. The resourcefulness, unmitigated rage, courageous truth-telling, and most importantly, the stubbornness that we bring to our graves are all imprints of the place of origin we come from, permanently tattooed to our bodies and our spirit. **We in Chinese is pronounced as “wo-men” 我们. How apt that it distinctly spells out the word women! We are the women in New Construction. Mama and I will continue to carry their (our) names and legacies and pass them on to my daughter and other women (and men and non-binary folks—all the we).**

Ancestral wisdom

Besides the Homeplace the Chinese women in New Construction have modeled for me, Chinese language and values formed a beautiful container for my emotions when I recall Homeplace. Many Chinese poems described the feelings and told the stories of exile, which resonated with me at a deeper level because of my partially self-inflicted exile²³. Some of these poems were written by women. Due to a lack of written records, many of these women's names are lost to history, yet their stories remain. The poem *Mang* was supposedly sung by women thousands of years ago, and it may have been composed by women, but were collected and written down by court officials decades or centuries later (Xu, 2019). The poem depicts a sense of sorrow from abandonment. The tragic ending of departure forms a stark

²³ Partially self-inflicted because I followed my parents' prescribed path of leaving China to study abroad in the US. Upon graduation, I chose to stay in the US as it was once deemed a stigma for those who went abroad to return home.

contrast to the happy beginning where the hero was courted by Mang, her future husband. She bravely broke traditions of dowry and married him for love. He abandoned her after years of her taking care of the family. Despite the outcome of her marriage and love, she waged her resistance against societal norms by choosing who she marries and how she marries.

The woman in Mang modeled a way for me to create conditions for homeplace in the hostile environment of Whiteness, which threatens my existence as a woman of color and an immigrant. I am constantly reminded that I am a guest in someone else's home—where I am constantly tiptoeing and speaking in hushed tones. Feelings like these form my daily reality—when I am often cut by a white person as I am patiently waiting in line, rendering me utterly invisible; when I am often talked down to as if to question my intelligence and my personhood; when I am constantly reminded to speak English and when I am told that my culture needs to be “accommodated” as if it's some type of disease; and lastly, food and my celebration are offensive to those who are sensitive towards food as if my celebration is a show for the white “masters” to spectate. When I feel discouraged, small and insufficient, I read Mang aloud—the unnamed woman in the poem. Hearing how she prevailed in a hostile time that did not tolerate who she was reinvigorates me to continue my own liberation.

Part of my liberation involves recalling Homeplace. I remember one night when Auntie Liu kept me for dinner, during the Lantern Festival, when she fried the glutinous rice balls. The whole room was filled with aroma. After I complimented the sweetness of the rice balls, she packed me some to take home—the oil-soaked newspaper that she used to wrap those rice balls still appears in my dreams sometimes, which puts a smile on my face. Later that year, around the Mid-Autumn Festival, Auntie Liu was killed in a traffic accident while

riding her bicycle to work. She left behind two girls, ages ten and four. Auntie has transitioned²⁴ but the memories of her through food and through the warm demeanor remain and continue to remind me of Homeplace.

Homeplace was also filled with memories of Laolao and big Mama, who kept me safe while Mama worked around the clock. As long as I can remember, Laolao had an arched back; later Mama would share that Laolao used to carry me around on her back when I was a toddler, which made her back even more deformed. Yet, Laolao never complained. To her, I was never a burden. She nourished me with home-cooked meals and handmade clothing. Because of the scarcity of cloth (in reality, the overwhelming poverty), she used cloth from old clothes Mama and big Mama wore when they were young. The result was a quilt of beautifully colored cloth. Those quilts linger in my memory like a kaleidoscope, casting my childhood in hues of wonder and love.

Remembering and recalling homeplace may seem like a simple act to many, especially those who are served by the white/Euro-centric/settler colonial cultures and whose Whiteness/maleness/heterosexuality/able-bodiedness/neuro-typicalness are in service to the dominant system. Yet, for multicultural immigrants like me, memories of Homeplace have been eroded by capitalistic pursuit of productivity, and faded in the daily reality of objectification that threatens to erase any signs of who I am and whose I am (Dillard, 2022). If some of the literature I was reviewing named my reality of not feeling at home and consequently desperately searching for home, then Endarkened Feminist Epistemology (Dillard, 2010) enables me to see a path to reconnecting with homeplace, which represents my hope for liberation.

²⁴ brown (2017) referred to the deceased as having transitioned.

Section 5

Making the Dough: Theoretical Framework

Endarkened Feminist Epistemology (Dillard, 2010) helped me peel through the realities of my oppression. Dillard (2010) used the term Endarkened Feminist Epistemology to “articulate how reality is known when based in the historical roots of Black feminist thought (p. 662). Dillard (2010) further clarified how Endarkened Feminism embodies “a distinguishable difference in cultural standpoint, located in the intersection/overlap of the culturally structured socializations of race, gender, and other identities and the historical and contemporary contexts of oppressions and resistance for African-American women” (p. 662). One key tenet of Endarkened Feminist Epistemology is self-definition, as opposed to being defined by white knowledge, white institutions, and/or Whiteness. The ability to self-define makes it possible for a Black woman (and similarly, a woman of color) to name both race and gender as sources of oppression and disenfranchisement, thus enabling them to “embrace both a culturally centered worldview and a feminist sensibility” (p. 673). Lorde (2020) illustrated the power of self-definition: “I learned that if I didn’t define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people’s fantasies for me and eaten alive” (p. 138).

Writing about, reconnecting with, and recreating New Construction through remembering the legacies of its women represents my effort in defining myself. This redefining spanned my entire academic journey in the US. After going through a period of losing my sense of self due to deliberate estrangement from my origin, language, and culture, I began a desperate quest of who I

was and what it meant to be an immigrant studying, working, and eventually living in the US. This quest took many years, in 屈原 (Qu Yuan)'s poetic words, 路漫漫其修远兮, 我将上下而求索 (Qu, 313 BCE). Like Qu, I searched up and down, feeling ever increasingly lonely. The spark of reconnection was ignited on the first day of my doctoral class, when I was encouraged to write a letter to myself in my own language and when I went on an ancestral walk, while being completely silent. Silence opened my heart to ancestral presence and allowed me to feel my ancestors in the wind, in the plants, and in the air, smelling like tulips. What ensued was deepened connections with my past. My most potent self-defining moment came in the “I am from” poem, in which I re-envisioned my identity rooted in Chineseness and wisdom inherited from New Construction's women²⁵.

This searching of ancestral wisdom coincided with my efforts in naming the world. Endarkened feminism offered new vocabulary and unique insights. It made me realize the rage and pain that have been accumulating in my body were not emotions that I should feel ashamed of. hooks (1994) described the pain she was feeling and her frantic search for relief:

I came to theory because I was hurting—the pain within me was so intense that I could not go on living. I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend—to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most

²⁵ See page 21 for the poem.

importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw in theory then a location for healing (p. 59).

Endarkened Feminist Epistemology's healing power manifested in the validation and comforts it offered for me to give name to some of the complex feelings that I could not pin down and refused to acknowledge. I realized all the stress that was stored in my body as a result of the daily interactions, academic and professional learning environment and how the microaggressions²⁶ and not-so-subtle discriminations were slowly killing me from inside. According to hooks (1994), “when our lived experience of theorizing is fundamentally linked to processes of self-recovery, of collective liberation, no gap exists between theory and practice” (p. 29). When I was able to name the world, the endeavor to change it started to take place, first internally, through self-recovery. Endarkened Feminist Epistemology as a location of healing also shaped my approach towards New Construction and the women there. Dillard (2010) urged the reframing of one’s research “as an ideological undertaking, one deeply embedded within the traditions, perspectives, viewpoints, cultural understandings, and discourse style of the researcher (Dillard, 1995; James & Farmer, 1993; Lather, 1986; Packwood & Sikes, 1996; Scheurich & Young, 1997; Stanfield, 1993). My telling of New Construction is deeply personal, emotional, and steeped in cultural nuances and traditions.

To honor New Construction as a knowledge source, and the women there as knowers, I utilized one of the most potent research instruments of Endarkened Feminism—life notes (Bell-Scott, 1994). According to Dillard (2010), life notes “refer broadly to constructed personal narratives such as letters, stories, journal entries, reflections, poetry, music, and

²⁶ According to Sue, et al. (2007), racial microaggressions are brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color.

other artful forms” (p. 664). As the notes of one’s life, these accounts encapsulate one’s life-long wisdom and embody lived knowledges that have been largely dismissed in academia as “unedited, uncensored, woman talk” (Bell-Scott, 1994, p. 13). New Construction women did not write poetry, nor did they create art—many of them were illiterate, and even if they could read and write, their daily struggle for survival afforded them little time or attention for luxury pursuits like those. Their life notes were embedded in the lullabies they sang for their children, the stories they told when their life had one brief moment of calmness, and the food they cooked, many of which originated from generations of recipes, carefully passed on from mothers to daughters. One lullaby Mama continued to sing for me containing lyrics of “I want to find my dad, wherever I go, I will find him. My great dad I can’t find. If you see him, please tell him to come home.” Looking back, the song probably represented Mama’s eagerness for Baba to return home from his long prison sentence. One popular food (item) made by a neighborhood woman was the pound cakes. It started as one woman’s extraordinary talent in baking, and it quickly became the favorite of many New Construction women. Pound cakes were considered a luxury due to the amount of eggs they required. Most of the eggs were used for the cake-making, with a few extras taken by the baker as her commission. I could smell the eggs when I went to pick up the pound cakes. I remember the joy and anticipation I experienced as I carried the cakes home. I do not recall the taste other than the delicious memories, as I probably devoured the whole thing as soon as I got my hands on one.

Lorde’s (2020) *Endarkened Feminist Epistemology* of identity also shapes my work and quest for who I am. She speaks about hyphenated people as living in other people’s imaginations. While she was referring to African Americans, I can attest to the limiting

feeling of the label Asian American. More importantly, the transition from someone from an ordinary household in New Construction to the sweeping identity of Asian American, which covers multiple continents, dozens of countries, and a vast array of cultures, languages, histories, and identities. The erasure of transnational histories completes the trope of Asianization, which lumps all Asians and Asian Americans into one broad category to satisfy the white imagination and need for an inferior other (Iftikar & Museus, 2018) By examining what homeplace authentically means to my mom and me, I open an opportunity for self-definition against what many women of color internalize as part of the ongoing dehumanization by the white-centric system. To self-define is a way to heal one's alienated self by "look[ing] at something so broken and see [ing] the possibility and wholeness in it" (brown, 2017, p. 19). Homeplace thus becomes one foundational way I embrace the process of rediscovery and recovery of who I am in relation to land, safety, and love.

Endarkened feminism also adds meaning to my re-search (Dillard, 2022). According to endarkened feminist epistemology, research is both an intellectual and a spiritual pursuit, a pursuit of purpose. The intellectual process has been fulfilled by my reconnection with wisdom and knowledge shared by the women in New Construction. The spirituality aspect manifests in me seeing and feeling my ancestors throughout the journey and in the daily realities of my life. In that sense, my project transcends the meaning of research that often represents a scholarly pursuit; instead, a shift inward to reconnect with my roots. The reconnection is two-fold. The first layer is what Sankofa Waters and Temple Rhodes (2024) define as Radical Identity Praxis, as a way of "disrupting institutional anti-Black racism by prioritizing home (roots)"(p. 5). As I continually acknowledge that my lived experiences depart from Black lived realities, Asian (Americans) are often placed in a triangular

relationship between Whiteness and Blackness, resulting in the creation of the model minority myth and what Wilkerson (2023) refers to as the golden middle-child. According to Wilkerson, “Thus those straddling the middle may succumb to the angst and uncertainty as they aspire to a higher rung” (p. 269). I wish to pursue my freedom dream (Kelley, 2018)—to explore my own culture and invoke my history, worldviews, and Indigenous knowledge systems to theorize and imagine other possibilities (Poka Laenui, 2000). I also want to name the Caste System (Wilkerson, 2023) and Racial Triangulation (Kim, 1999) in these re-searchings.

The second layer of healing is (re)searching for non-truncated stories of origins (Dillard, 2022). Through this project, I have hoped to revisit my childhood and earliest memories when my own stories are not tainted by the single story (Adichie, 2009) of pathologization (Patel, 2015) and internalized smallness (Muhammad, 2020). The two layers of healing shape each other. The deeper I engage in Radical Identity Praxis, the more frequently I recall my homeplace. The longer I linger in my early stories of love and feeling seen, the more fluid my identities become.

Lastly, endarkened feminist epistemology highlights writing as a powerful tool. Like Anzaldua (1981) stated when portraying writing as a healing source:

Why am I compelled to write?... Because the world I create in the writing compensates for what the real world does not give me. By writing I put order in the world, give it a handle so I can grasp it. I write because life does not appease my appetites and anger... To become more intimate with myself and you. To discover myself, to preserve myself, to make myself, to achieve self-autonomy. To dispel the myths that I am a mad prophet or a poor suffering soul. To convince myself that I am

worthy and that what I have to say is not a pile of shit... Finally, I write because I'm scared of writing, but I'm more scared of not writing (p. 169)

Writing connects me with New Construction, and has allowed me to preserve the knowledge and memories of the women there who should be celebrated eternally, yet whose stories and names are absent from any written form (not even a local newspaper, let alone the history books, etc.). Writing is my reciprocity to these women. Writing is my validation—away from all the internalized messages that I am a terrible writer (in one of my professors' words, I “write like an elementary school student”). Despite or because of this silencing (of my writing, of New Construction), writing is my salvation, which allows me to heal my fragmented self and feel whole through the writing process, by being in touch with all my feelings and by feeling my ancestors in me and around me.

Section 6

Making the Dumplings: Listening to Mama

愿得一心人，白头不相离。

竹竿何袅袅，鱼尾何簌簌！

卓文君 白头吟 Zhuo (2nd century BCE)

All I wish for is one person's heart (love), till death do us part.

Like the fishing rod lightly moving with the wind and fish tail wiggling joyfully in the water.²⁷

Mama's account

Mama is a master hustler, and she hustles with a purpose. When Baba was in jail, she was working multiple jobs, peddling fruit on the street so that she could afford to visit Baba once a month, carrying loads of food and supplies for him. Despite hustling for a living, Mama never allowed even a moment of scarcity to enter my life or consciousness. In my memory, food was plenty, love overflowing. I remember devouring BBQ pork, yet Mama never took a bite. I was too young to realize that she was saving those precious foods for me. Mama says I was eating the freshest fruit in the whole basket when she was selling fruits on the street. I was also conveniently sleeping in the basket, the sweet aroma filling my dream. Mama and Big Mama took turns riding the three-wheeled cart, loaded with fruits, which they purchased from a factory miles away. They then transported the baskets full of fruits to the train station, equipped only with strong legs and determination. According to Mama, the profit margin was so small that she and Big Mama were making less than a Chinese yuan per kilo of fruit, yet money can stretch pretty far back then.

²⁷ Translated by the author of this dissertation.

Peddling fruits can be a precarious profession, especially when, as a peddler, you encounter city control (in Chinese 城管). She recalled one scary encounter with these people. “他们专门欺负小商贩” (they are notorious for preying on street merchants), said Mama. She then continued, “我们这些小商贩没有钱付城管申请费, 更没钱贿赂城管” (We found licensing fees a significant financial barrier, nor did we have the extra cash to bribe the officials). “我和你大妈刚到车。水果还没都拿出来, 就听见好多人喊 ‘城管, 城管, 快跑!’” (Big Mama and I just got to the train station, when we were about to put our fruits out for sale, we heard some commotion, then people yelling “city control, city control, run!”) “我们开始满街跑, 逃命似的, 让他们抓到就完了。他们不光没收你所有卖的货, 还随手乱砸你的车, 最后还得罚钱。一旦抓到, 基本就没法再卖了。” (Street merchants like me and your Big Mama started to scatter, fleeing in all directions—into corners of streets, anywhere we may have a chance to escape the ill fate of capture, which means confiscation of all their merchandise, destruction of carts/means of transporting the goods and possible fines that can bankrupt the seller.) “我到现在还记得城管追着喊的那种感觉。但是我和你大妈那天比较幸运。城管抓了别人就没抓到我们。被抓到的就惨了, 以后基本就没戏了。” (I still remember the yelling of city control behind us. We were one of the lucky few who escaped unscathed that day, shielded by other

merchants' ill fate of being caught, which may well be the death sentence to their selling career.)

Mama and Big Mama had a few more narrow escapes from the city control afterwards. Never were they caught. As challenging as these experiences sounded, Mama prevailed through her toughness and stubbornness. These qualities were not uncommon during her time and in her environment. Growing up as one of the six children in a declining family financially, Mama learned to be resourceful and tenacious—some of the basic survival strategies in a large family. The larger environment also demanded great adaptability. Mama graduated from middle school and felt beckoned by opportunities working for a government-owned factory, which was considered the best option during her time. The main evaluation system was to endure the year-long intensive labor and demonstrate diligence and excellence. Mama shared that she rose at 5 am, while it was still pitch dark in the Manchurian winter. Despite the long and exhausting work, she made sure that she finished her tasks by going above and beyond. When feeding pigs, she intentionally left some food in the corners so that the pigs were trained to lick the food container clean. Mama turned pig-raising into an art. Not only were the pigs big and clean, but

they were also magically trained to release themselves outside of their enclosure. The result was that the enclosure became spotless, requiring minimal intervention from Mama. Mama said “只要功夫深，铁杵磨成针。” (Time and effort can turn an iron rod into a needle)²⁸. Mama often encourages me with stories of her persistence. If she can train the pigs to maintain a clean enclosure, then I can accomplish my goals by being persistent.

Mama's efforts were seen by many of her peers, most importantly by the factory president. She shared, “等到评国营那天，厂长替我说话了。” (When it came to the final evaluation time for job opportunities for the factory, the factory president spoke on my behalf). “小毕 我来说两句哈。每天天不亮就起床，第一个出来干活。把猪圈打扫地干干净净。” (She got up every day at 3 am and made the pig enclosure meticulously clean). Having the advocacy of the president was Mama's ticket to the nationally-operated factory. To the envy of many, Mama entered her dream factory. Working for the nationally-operated factory included perks, such as a predictable schedule from 8 am to 3 pm. Mama often came home to have a late lunch after work, then pedaled her 3-wheeler with Big Mama for her fruit-selling hustle. She sold fruits for a few years, in conjunction with her daytime work. Then there came the

²⁸ This is a popular Chinese idiom denoting the efforts matter.

transition in her life—she was laid off from her daytime job. The disappointment and distress were palpable in her voice as she told the story. “木材场国营那是铁饭碗²⁹，下岗是谁都想不到的事情。” (Positions at the nation-owned factory were considered iron rice bowls that one can hold for life, so layoffs are unfathomable). She did not learn until years later that the factory had been struggling with financial insolvency for years before the layoff and the closure shortly afterwards, primarily due to embezzlement and corruption, which was an unfortunate yet not surprising outcome of the extreme concentration of power into a few people.

Mama being laid off meant fruit-pedaling at night was no longer sufficient to support herself and me. This transition also coincided with Dad's early release from prison. According to Mama, “最犯愁的事就是怎么养家。” (How to feed the family became [my] foremost concern in life). “我东拼西凑，到处借钱。最后从你奶那里凑到了摆摊摊的钱。” (I tried to squeeze money everywhere I went, and finally, with nainai's help, I borrowed enough money to purchase a cigarette stand.) Unlike fruit pedaling, which only exposed Mama to the elements of nature for a couple of hours after work, cigarette selling demanded a rigid schedule in very harsh weather

²⁹ 铁饭碗, iron rice bowl, means extremely durable and secure.

conditions. During winter months, Mama found herself braving the -30 Celsius temperature for 10+ hours, with no shelter. Her thick coat and boots, primary defense against the piercing wind and penetrating cold air, proved to be fairly useless when she found herself standing outside from morning to night. There was no shelter, and no break from the merciless low temperature. In conditions like those, when one was the most vulnerable, in pure survival, a single gesture of kindness meant eternal warmth in one's heart. Out of desperation, Mama sought sanctuary in the nearby restaurant. She would go in, yet unable to afford to buy food. Upon learning that the restaurant changes its hot water that is used to boil dumplings every few hours, she asked if she could take some of the dirty dumpling water before they dumped it. This water-recycling ended up sustaining her through the coldest winter days.

Baba's release from the prison was a timely relief to Mama. He was released early due to his heroic act of saving lives. One day he was working in the field near the train track. He saw a car stalled on the tracks. The driver was desperately yelling for help. He immediately gathered two other inmates, with whom he pushed the car off the train track. Moments later, the train rushed by. Had Baba and his fellow inmates not acted in time, the driver of the car and those on the train may all face grave danger. As a reward, he received a one-and-half-year commutation. **Mama said, “你好长一段时间才接受你爸。” (You took a while to accept your dad and his presence).** I had not had a male figure in my life for five years, and have only interacted with him once a month or a few months as part of the prison visits **Mama and I made (in the months when Nainai went, I did not go).** With Mama working around the clock, he became the stabilizing force of our home. As if redeeming

himself for the years of absences, he made his presence felt in major ways. He insisted on cooking for me, doing my hair, and taking care of me with any available opportunities. He put his love in the mundane details of taking care of Mama. No matter how late Mama got home, there was always a warm meal on the table. Baba put rice in the bowl, sat there, and watched her eat. He also prepared hot water for her, in a basin, for her to soak her feet, which endured a long day of cold weather outside.

Like many women from New Construction, Mama's stubbornness turned many of the major hurdles into opportunities. Parallel to the pig-feeding skills, she carried cigarette selling to a whole new level. She remembered a customer and their favorite brand of cigarette by the third time of their visit. Her business acumen dazzled a lot of people, which led to her thriving entrepreneurship. Mama said that fate brought the restaurant career to her when the restaurant from which she routinely borrowed hot water was put up for sale. She turned to Nainai again, who, despite her grudges against Mama, had the financial ability and knew other business people who could lend Mama her starting fund. Mama borrowed seventy-two thousand dollars with Nainai's help, which purchased her dream restaurant. She kept the initial employees and maintained the original recipes. Motivated by the will to succeed and to pay off her debt quickly, she devoted herself to the restaurant as if it were her second home. The restaurant endeavor was hugely successful, and she ended up expanding the business and introducing new recipes.

Unlike her peers at New Construction, Mama had the opportunity to disentangle herself from New Construction and later moved us away as a result. Many of the women whom I call aunties at New Construction were compelled to stay or found themselves stuck, unable to escape. Tao, who found prostitution the only viable option in her prime, convinced

Sanya (whose name means third girl in the family) to chase her wealth in the South, which was rumored to be a code language for prostitution. Mama said that the rationale was that these women chose to sell their bodies away from home (so much so that they were at the opposite end of the country, which was considered a lot more affluent); their chances of being discovered and bringing shame to their families were extremely slim. The fact that both Tao and Sanya were married only intensified the hardship I understood them to be in.

Tao was adopted because her parents tried many years to conceive, to no avail. Yet, not long after Tao's adoption, her mom found out that she was pregnant, and soon after, she gave birth to Tao's brother. Under traditional Chinese values, a girl was deemed a lot less worthy than a boy, not to mention that the girl was not the biological child. Mama said that Tao had to mature quickly growing up in a family devoid of love. She would often disappear (work) for a year, under the excuse of going South, which had captured many Northerners' imagination as the gold mine. Nobody knows how she actually made a living there or the details of her hustle. She told everyone in the neighborhood, including her parents, that she was a singer at a bar, which many interpret as a coded language for prostitution. If she indeed engaged in such hustle, then she may have chosen prostitution or prostitution chose her to offer her a path to survival.

She did more than that. Whenever she came home after her work episodes, she appeared affluent, with fancy apparel, nice jewelry, and money for her family, which attracted envy from the neighborhood women. Her parents' attitudes abruptly shifted with her financial support to the family. They bragged about the daughter all the time—no longer the adopted child who was

unwanted due to the perceived lack of value to the family. Sadly, her financial success occurred at the price of her marriage. Her husband filed for a divorce after her continued absence from the family and from her daughter, who was then a toddler. According to Mama, the divorce did not seem to affect Tao in visible ways, and she continued to cultivate her career success. With that, Tao's periods of absence became more prolonged. With her ex-husband having disappeared from her life and their daughter's life ever since the divorce, and her intensifying absenteeism, her daughter Li was left to the mercy of grandparents, who, despite being satisfied by the financial support Tao provided, routinely hurled verbal and physical assaults at what they call "abandoned" child. Frequently, they would refer to Li, their own granddaughter, as "赔钱货" (the money-sucking business).

Growing up in normalized violence and abuse, Li was known as a bully among girls in my neighborhood. I remember her pulling my hair, calling me names, and threatening that if I dared to tell adults at home, she would 给我点颜色 (show me some color, which is often used to scare the other person into submission). Her tactics worked each time, except once when I cried all the way home, and Baba saw it. When I finally told him, he told me that if next time Li pulls my hair again, I should find a rock on

the ground and smash it on her head. I was probably seven or eight years old then, enough to know that a rock could inflict serious injuries. Baba said if the bully got hurt, he would pay her medical bills, and if she died, he would pay with his life. I never dared to use a rock to hit Li's head. But I was emboldened to fight back, and that surprisingly changed our relationship for the better. It looked like I might have earned her trust when I embraced violence as a solution to all problems. This trait would follow me and haunt me throughout my grade school year, during which I was constantly caught fighting. With the glorified image of violence, fighting became a way of life and a reality of my grade school experience.

Sanya's path to prostitution had a tragic origin story. She was Mama's best friend in school. When Mama was dating Baba, she was also developing a romance with dad's best friend, Daguo (meaning big country; names like his were a way to show patriotism, common for parents who work in publicly owned factories). Sanya and Daguo were a couple that could attract envy by simply walking down the street holding hands. Both tall and good-looking, their love captured the neighborhood's attention. Sanya was all enamored with Daguo, who also happened to come from a somewhat privileged background, which was an important factor when a girl's family considers marrying their daughter into the other family. Daguo's father, who was then the head of a nation-owned factory, did not believe Sanya was a good fit for Daguo due to her humble background. Then, it came to the selection process for nation-owned jobs. Baba made it to the list, yet Daguo got accepted to the community-owned, which was deemed inferior to Baba's nation-owned. Comparing herself to Mama, her best friend, Sanya felt she had lost face in the inferior placement of her future husband. She made a rash decision to break up with Daguo—a decision she would end up regretting for the rest of her life. Mama said she broke Daguo's heart. Shortly after, she

quickly settled for someone and gave birth to a little girl. With her husband underemployed, hustling among some temporary and part-time arrangements, Sanya was compelled to find a sustainable livelihood that could feed the whole family. Prostitution became her salvation.

Tao and Sanya epitomized the fighting spirit and the iron determination to prevail, which are deeply ingrained in the bones of women in New Construction. They boldly made their life choices—good or bad- and did not let remorse or self-pity prevent them from further pursuits. They might be hustling in dark corners of streets or dimmed rooms of karaoke bars, engaging in a profession that was perceived as shameful by others. Yet, they put rice and food on the table for their children. Their extended absences created deep voids in their children's lives, which were filled in by other women, who were able to be present. Mama offered her breast milk to the twins in my neighborhood, whose Mama couldn't keep up with feeding both babies.

Auntie Liu, the mother of my friend Yu, opened her home to other neighborhood children and me. Her home was nothing more than a tiny space donated by the senior center, grossly unfit for living. The dark, unlit corridor and smelly underground space were rites of passage to Auntie Liu's place. Any hesitation to enter was compensated by the anticipation of the delicious food Auntie Liu often prepared for us kids. And if we were lucky enough to catch her cooking, the whole dark corridor would be overflowed with the aroma of home cooking. I often came home so stuffed after playing at her place that Laolao was complaining that I no longer liked her cooking. **Having an intact family and a Mama like Auntie Liu, Yu became the source of neighborhood kids' jealousy. Mama said that even the heaven developed a red eye (红眼)³⁰ for Yu's**

³⁰ In Manchurian dialect, red eye is used to describe jealousy.

happiness that one day, Auntie Liu was taken away, by a horrific traffic accident when she was riding her bicycle to work. Yu became a typical New Construction kid-broken family, with intensive abuses from her maternal grandmother, who combined her strong preference for boys with her bitterness of being a default caretaker for Yu and her young sister when their dad took off with another woman and soon started a new family. Mama said these all transpired when Auntie Liu's body was still warm (尸骨未寒)³¹.

The stories of women who looked after the kids and girls with whom I grew up were only the tips of an iceberg when it comes to the vast terrain of New Construction and the deep memories New Construction creates. “Ichi timini tiicham iwa nami”--this land is a part of me. New Construction is in me, and I embody and enact the spirit of New Construction everywhere I go. I found myself repeatedly honoring the women as my ancestors. They show up in the workshops I facilitate, in the newsletter I create for my restaurant, and in my online teaching spaces--whether it's Chinese language or world history. Their wisdom shines upon me often in the darkest and most desolate points in my life. The thoughts and feelings of women in New Construction save me from hopelessness. Their adamant persistence models a way forward for me, even if it's a treacherous path. Styre's (2019) work eloquently summarizes New Construction's power: “Place is storied, relational, and intimate. In this way we are in place as much as it is in us--every experience and expression of place is replete with multiple layers of memories, each informing the other in diverse and entangled ways” (p.

³¹ An idiom that traces its origin to the Ming period (14th to 17th century CE) that denotes that someone's corpse is still warm, meaning not having been dead for long.

27). I remain entangled with New Construction—the memories it creates and the knowledge it imparts. It is this very entanglement that anchors me, forms my roots on a strange land, and becomes my homeplace.

Section 7

Who Gets to Enjoy the Dumplings: Reciprocity

明月几时有，把酒问青天。

不知天上宫阙，今夕是何年？

我欲乘风归去，又恐琼楼玉宇，高处不胜寒。

起舞弄清影，何似在人间！

转朱阁，低绮户，照无眠。

不应有恨，何事长向别时圆？

人有悲欢离合，月有阴晴圆缺，此事古难全。

但愿人长久，千里共婵娟。

苏轼，水调歌头 明月几时有 Su (1076 CE)

When was the Moon ever so bright?

With a cup in hand filled with wine,

I ask the vast, black-blue Empyrean.

What year is it in Heaven tonight?

Could I be taken there on a wind ride?

But I fear it must be cold up so high.

in the riches of the Moon's jade palace.

I'd rather dance a satire to the rhymes,

along with the lonely shadow of mine

for some earthly vibes of humankind.

The Moon drifts past the red pavilion side,
 Lowers her cozy gaze across my chamber,
 Keeping me awake. Oh Brother, such is life!
 It's been seven years since our last reunion.
 And when we're apart, she's full and bright!

It's a spell beyond Heaven and Mankind.
 The moon waxes and wanes, dims and shines.
 We have ups and downs, welcomes and goodbyes.
 May we, now and always, be blissful at heart,
 and join under the one Goddess when apart.
 (Min, 2025, n.p.)

I am so fortunate that Mama currently lives with me, which makes the storytelling so much more accessible. Yet, this storytelling project is made possible by her sacrifice to immigrate to the US and leave my father behind. I cannot imagine starting fresh at 60 years old, in a completely strange environment, whose language and customs are so different. Not to mention having to endure the human-made hardship of living separately from one's spouse.

This is when I dedicate some storytelling to my father's disappointing immigration experience, which is soon to surpass the man-made separation of my parents by the Chinese prison system over four decades ago. Even that system allowed room for clemency, which

led to my father's early release. Yet, the wall of immigration feels impenetrable. After all, its primary goal was and is to shut people who are deemed unworthy out (Haney López, 2006).

Immigration

At the culmination of this ode to New Construction and the beginning of my re-search (Dillard, 2022) journey, Mama has lived across the oceans from Baba for four years. Not a day goes by without my parents videochatting, often for hours at a time. I feel a deep sense of guilt for putting them in this misfortune, exacerbated by the American immigration system, which often separates families, shatters hearts and hopes in the name of law and justice. This is part of the white “human-eating” system that grinds many immigrants and people of color, leaving not even a bone³².

My father's immigration journey began in 2022, when both of my parents offered to help me with my children, then aged ten and six, so that I could balance my two jobs (full-time work during the day and full-time online teaching at night and on the weekend), and supporting both kids in their extracurricular pursuits (my older one in travel baseball and younger one entering the competing gymnastic arena). I had been wanting to apply to the doctoral program at the University of Washington Tacoma, which was scheduled to begin its next cohort in the summer of 2023. I applied for both Mama and Baba, providing the excruciatingly long list of paperwork required by USCIS (US Citizenship and Immigration Services) and paid a little over one thousand dollars for both of them. The review process took a few months, then it came to the face-to-face interview at a US consular office in Beijing, which kicked off another round of paperwork preparation frenzy.

³² There is a Chinese saying, 吃人不吐骨头, eating humans without spitting the bones, which is used to describe the cruelty (of people and systems).

According to Mama's account later, her interview went quite smoothly, with a few questions related to her relationship with me (the petitioner) and the purpose of her immigration. When it came to Baba, he did not get any questions—simply a note asking him to go to a Chinese staff member. The staff told Baba that he had to ask for forgiveness from the US government, without any detail about the process and what paperwork he had to file. After both my parents left the interview, feeling disappointed and at a loss, I resorted to internet searches to identify the correct form to file for Baba. Without proper guidance, it was like searching for a needle in the vast ocean (Chinese: 大海捞针). I thought I found the correct paperwork and mailed it to the USCIS³³, only to be told by an immigration attorney, when I consulted him about Baba's case, that I filed it incorrectly. The refiling took me until June 2023, when Mama had to depart for the US due to the deadline given on her immigration visa. Behind the impossible choice she was forced to make is the cruelty of the immigration system—it denies Baba the prospect of reuniting with the rest of my family while pushing Mama to leave Baba or else her visa will be rescinded. Mama said she sobbed uncontrollably as she parted with Baba at the airport,

³³ U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services

despite him saying that he would see her soon. Neither of them knew this would turn out to be the longest separation in life (soon to surpass the prison sentence of five years that Baba served decades ago).

After the paperwork filing for waiver of inadmissibility, it was a long waiting game. After paying another thousand dollars or so, there was a request for evidence, which almost included the entire life history of Baba. It was another agonizing eighteen months after all the required paperwork was submitted. There came another letter asking for more evidence a few days before the Christmas holiday of 2024, and many of the documents in the letter had already been submitted in the initial request for evidence stage. I quickly gathered everything as if racing with time. A few months went by. Then another letter quietly arrived right before Mother's Day. Denial. That was all I saw. The reason given was that there was no waiver for so-called violent crimes. It didn't matter that my dad's offense occurred more than forty years ago, during a volatile time in China, for which he already served his time. Why put me through the ordeal of all the paperwork if his case was not going to be considered? Why offer me hope then completely crush it—leaving only traces of broken heart and desperation?

What was even more painful was trying to hide the truth from Mama. I will not allow her hope to shatter, regardless of how much effort it takes (the lies I continue to tell to conceal the truth of my father's denial of status). Her time in the US so far has been characterized by friendly people and kind strangers who often help us navigate the difficult language transition in times of need. How can she reconcile the contradiction between the kind daily acts and the cruel legal (immigration) system that only protects Whiteness (Bell, 1998)? She learned in her English as a Second Language class about America being a

welcoming country, which she often talked about. How hypocritical that the immigration system in actuality turns away more folks of color and tears apart families? I also found myself speechless whenever Baba asked about his immigration update. He was eager to reunite with Mama and make up all the precious time that had been lost with him living apart from my kids. It was really difficult to hear him planning for the future when he finally arrived in the US. He had an entire work/care plan lined up—cleaning up my garage, cooking my favorite childhood food, going to every single baseball game of my older child, cheering for my younger one in all her gymnastic competitions, and more importantly, being there for Mama and me when we both needed a shoulder to cry on.

At the center of this re-search (Dillard, 2022) journey is honoring Mama's memories and life trajectory filled with triumphs and tribulations, and more importantly, Mama's persistence and perseverance and the glimmer of hope she always holds on to. Mama's stories and recollections also serve as a way to pay tribute to other women in New Construction.

Women in New Construction

My honoring and practice of respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility begin with the New Construction women, who are not related to me by blood. None of these women had any familial obligation to take care of me. Yet, many of them did. Through care, love, and shared motherwork (Collins, 2000), they essentialized belonging for me and for each other. For most of the women, I want to honor them by using their names—due to the challenges with getting their consent due to displacement (both myself, Mama, and many of the women, who are either relocated or, like Big Mama and Laolao, have become ancestors).

As a compromise, I used some neighborhood names (how folks in New Construction addressed some of these women). For those who didn't have neighborhood names, I resorted to using a character of their first name, which makes it less distinguishable compared to using their entire first name (most of these women have two-character first names, which can be unique due to the abundance of Chinese characters). Based on my relationships with these women, it did not feel right to hide their names, which is a form of silencing and violence that many ordinary women, women of color, and immigrant women are familiar with. This form of erasure is often aided by higher education research policies in the name of protecting the identities of research participants.

Wilson (2008) names the incongruity between most university ethical research policies and the Indigenous research paradigm, especially when it comes to respect and reciprocity. Wilson (2008) urged researchers to critically reflect on the implications of anonymity: "How can I be held accountable to the relationships I have with these people if I do not name them" (Wilson, p. 63)? The relationship also applies to the researcher and the reader, as well as the reader and the people whose stories are told in the research journey. Wilson defines researchers as intermediaries, through whose eyes those who are honored in the research can be seen and understood. I hope my research offers a glimpse of the women's lives through my experience and my relationships with them.

I respect the women in New Construction by sharing their roles in my life. Reciprocity is achieved through spreading their stories, which renders them immortal. As Boylorn (2017) shared in her autoethnography *Sweet Water*, "telling was murder, and I anxiously became a coconspirator, killing the silence with the story. Killing the absence with my presence." Having lost touch with all these women due to land development, which

displaced many of the original families—families that had been in New Construction for generations- I worry that the way I represent the women, whom I respect and love deeply, may not be the way they might have wanted to be portrayed. Honoring reciprocity while staying centered on one's own experience seemed a challenging task for anyone telling others' stories. "The impulse, simply put, is to tell the story... to tell one's own story... as one has known it, and lived it, and even died it." (Angelo in Hurston, 2006, p. xx). My urge to tell these women's stories is driven by recovering their voices, or at least what I felt their voices could have sounded like, and offering ways in which Homeplace and belonging are actualized.

As someone who lived most of her life in New Construction, Mama's stories of the women, at least with herself in it, hopefully get close to how some of the women may see themselves. The complexities of New Construction women do not only lie in the women's individual trajectories, the neighborhood, and the boom and bust of the nation-owned factory, but also the unique hood culture and the Chinese traditions, all of which have nuanced meanings that often elude the Western audience. Chinese women (Mama and I) writing about Chinese women creates room for additional care for the nuances and complexities that honor the humanity of each woman. Giovanni (1968) put the danger of writing from an outsider's perspective bluntly:

and I really hope no white person ever has cause

to write about me, because they never understand

Black love is Black wealth and they'll

probably talk about my hard childhood

and never understand that

all the while I was quite happy. (p. xx)

Relational reciprocity is what I aspire to practice throughout my re-memembering and re-visioning for my Homeplace. While I feel and remain animated in my spirit by recalling to whom, where, and how I belonged, saying the women's names and telling their stories filled with tenacity and strengths represent my way of practicing answerability (Patel, 2015) to these women and my place of origin—New Construction. Patel proposed the concept of answerability as a direct challenge to coloniality, and for researchers to actively engage in reflexivity about “how our actions, our research agendas, the knowledge we contribute, can undo coloniality and create spaces for ways of being in relation that are not about individualism, ranking and status” (Patel, 2015, p. 73). My answerability spreads the lived knowledge the women in New Construction embody and, in doing so, fundamentally disrupts the white colonial construct of what knowledge is.

Telling their stories also helps me reconnect with the past and my place of origin that have been in me and often manifest in very subtle ways and at unexpected times. hooks (1994) elaborated on the divide between academia and working-class in her teaching communities book, in which she exposed the former's tendency to discredit the latter. I, too, used to adopt a lens of dismissiveness and even outright contempt about my humble origins. I tried to bury the memories of my childhood deep, afraid of any commotion that may trigger the avalanche of these long-forgotten episodes. I was brainwashed by my years of education to cast a doubtful glance at anything that seemed incompatible with the meritocratic way of success or the white norms that dominate the educational institutions and are also used to define terms like happiness, joy, etc. Reclaiming the narratives from poverty and scarcity to

abundance and love represents a long overdue healing process. Recognizing the power and agency I have in writing myself into being and in letting the writing write me (Anzaldua, 2015). Trust the writing process when I engage my heart, my senses, and my emotions, which creates storytelling in respectful and reciprocal ways.

The other group of women is those whose connections with me were initiated through bloodlines, yet whose influence on me transcends those bloodlines. Stories of Big Mama and Laolao are among my most cherished memories. When I invoke their memories, I feel their presence through the wind, the rain, and the sun. One time, I saw that they were in the small green bug that hung on to the trunk of my car, whose relentless strength helped brave the wind on the highway. Oftentimes, they visited me in my dreams, especially Laolao, whose touch opened the floodgates of my tears. I sobbed and wept until I became completely awake, feeling a sense of emptiness.

Whenever I feel that I am experiencing insurmountable challenges in life, I pray to my ancestors like Big Mama and Laolao, whose spirits and strength often guided me through those difficult situations. Every morning, I visit the trail in my neighborhood, in complete silence. Embracing quietness in my presence offers me an opportunity to listen to the birds, feel the cool air touching my skin, and watch in awe the ducks and geese swimming/flying in formation. I stand in the middle of these daily miracles, eyes closed, arms lifted, and palms open, receiving the gift of nature and my ancestors with deep gratitude. This feeling was aptly summarized by brown (2017):

Measure our success not just by what we stop, but by how many of us feel, and can say:

I am living a life I do not regret

A life that will resonate with my ancestors,

And with as many generations forward as I can imagine.

I am attending to the crises of my time with my best self.

I am of communities that are doing our collective best

To honor our ancestors and all humans to come (p. 55)

Another group I wish to pay tribute to are the girls with whom I grew up. They were the descendants of the New Construction women, on whose legacies I stand. Although not all of them (us) stayed in New Construction, our lives were all inextricably intertwined with the past, the present, and the future of New Construction.

Girls I Grew up with

Mutuality also applies to the girls with whom I grew up. Many of them also lived through what the outside world defined as traumatic experiences. According to SAMHSA (2014), “trauma is an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life-threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being” (p.7). Yu, Auntie Liu’s daughter, whose home I frequented as a child, was still in elementary school when her mom was killed by the horrific traffic accident. Not only was she subjected to the daily verbal (and often physical) abuse by her grandmother, who turned all her anger towards Yu’s absent father into disciplining Yu, but she became the

de facto guardian for her little sister, who was five or six years younger. The impact on her life was that she had to grow up quickly. Mama told me that she never finished school, despite being a stellar student. She entered the workforce prematurely and got married almost immediately after reaching adulthood.

Li, a bright girl who never enjoyed school, dropped out of middle school and was matched by her mom to a man who was older than her dad, who supposedly had the financial means to support her and her mom. I reunited with Jing during the summer when I graduated college. She was seven months pregnant, at barely twenty years of age. Not having seen each other for many years, we talked about life plans. She seemed happy and content married to the man whose father is the president of the factory she worked at, yet she constantly talked about the pressure of producing a son.

I constantly think of these girls and a few others whose life trajectories neither Mama nor I have any direct knowledge of after our time in New Construction, aside from hearsay of very rough sketches. Were they able to escape the curse of New Construction—poverty, abusive relationships, and alcoholism/smoking that cut one's life short, like what happened to Big Mama? Could they have been saved from the fate of repeating what many have experienced in their mom's generation—coerced prostitution? While I may loathe the fate of some of these girls who had to marry early and were rushed into motherhood, they may find my hustling (like my Mama), driven by a desire for success, a reason for pity. Had I not left New Construction, would I also have a fair share of its curse on women?

Fate aside, the generations of girls (and myself) were spared the adversity of the planned economy and its daily wrath of rationing, and the heinous One-Child Policy and all the tragedies it unleashed— in Mama's case, betrayal and lifelong heartbrokenness. Our living

conditions, regardless of where we are, reflect the transformations experienced by China—life choices, no longer marred by scarcity and the scarcity mindset; instead, abundance in materials and in opportunities.

Living a continent away from the girls, I still hold them in my heart. They represent so much of who I am and where I come from. On the surface, I may look like an immigrant who has navigated the system with success through language fluency and great educational opportunities. Deep down, I am still the product of New Construction, in how I speak at home with Mama and my children, in the food I eat, and in the stubbornness many women in New Construction developed through harsh living conditions.

Section 8

Spreading the recipe

三月七日，沙湖道中遇雨，雨具先去，同行皆狼狈，余独不觉。已而遂晴，故作此(词)。

莫听穿林打叶声，何妨吟啸且徐行。竹杖芒鞋轻胜马，谁怕？一蓑烟雨任平生。

料峭春风吹酒醒，微冷，山头斜照却相迎。回首向来萧瑟处，归去，也无风雨也无

晴。苏轼， Su-Shi, 定风波 莫听穿林打叶声, Ignore the Storms: Do not

Listen to the Rain penetrating the leaves (1082 CE)³⁴

Looking back over the bleak passage, I survived. The return in time. Shall not be affected by windswept rain or shine.

My sharing is intended for women of color/immigrants like me. I intentionally left policy discussions out of my re-search (Dillard, 2022) and journey, as I do not wish to let any institutions appropriate my work while in reality they have not offered me any support and instead, continue to other me, dehumanize me and debilitate me by making me feel fragmented and insufficient every day.

The re-search (Dillard, 2022) journey has filled me with emotions and helped me feel full. From the alienating, debilitating, and ever-present feeling of a visitor who doesn't belong anywhere to realizing that I create my own belonging. Dillard (2022) affirmed my feeling towards New Construction and my belonging when she claimed that Black women

³⁴ This poem was composed during the low of Su-Shi's life, when he was implicated politically in a cheating scandal for the Civil Exam and as a result was demoted and sent on exile. When he and a few of his friends encountered a rain storm, others immediately sought shelter, and felt despondent by their misery. In comparison, the poet expressed dismissal of the soaking rain and hope for better weather. This was often deemed as a metaphor for his life.

carry Africa in their hearts, spirits, their being, and their being in community. According to Dillard (2007), “belonging is not determined by physical proximity; you may move out of the state or old neighborhood to escape your family or people, but you carry your family, the neighborhood with you. You determine not where you belong, but the nature of the relationship and the meaning of belonging.” (p. 36) I, too, carry New Construction with me. New Construction is in my glance, breath, in my subconscious, and my ancestors are rooted in how I respond, react, my feelings, and my full being.

With New Construction forming the foundation of love and a sense of mattering in my heart, my spirit, and my memories, my belonging is sealed in the relationships that I continue to cherish today. Although many of the relationships were written in the past tense due to the physical separation from the women of New Construction and the girls who I grew up with who would have entered womanhood while we were away from each other, they still shape who I am and are an integral part of whose I am. First of all, these relationships constitute my knowledge—the fundamental way of knowing that is gifted with thousands of years of ancestral wisdom.

The journey has taught me to hold my truth and to stand firmly in the wisdom (Dillard, 2022) inherited from my ancestors and my relationships with the women in New Construction. The visit back to New Construction is my ceremony. Although having lost contact with all these women (more of them have become or are closer to becoming ancestors), I hope my writing of the incredible women and the conditions they created for Homeplace for me can serve as one of the many ways these women’s legacies are preserved—through people reading about them and through their lives being discovered and

discussed, not as a case study of poverty or the consequence of Adverse Childhood Experiences (CDC, 2026), but as a source of comfort, love, and belonging.

I also wish to challenge the appropriation of belonging at many higher education institutions. Steeped in Whiteness, these institutions remove the people and relationships that are at the center of one's feeling of rootedness. These institutions tend to comprise and represent the colonial structure that severs people's connections with land, place, and each other. They use concrete to imprison their employees and students, erect barriers for people of color and other minoritized groups to thrive, and tokenize certain individuals to sow friction. The tragic part is, many dispossessed people who were given half a loaf of bread (King, 1964) subscribed to this false sense of belonging and used it as a weapon against their fellow oppressed. Belonging, when performed, is narrowly defined as salary packages and benefits, which puts employees in competition with each other for higher pay and for advancement, at the expense of each other and the relationships they build collectively. Belonging can only be actualized in authentic relationships that are rooted in who we are and whose we are (Dillard, 2022).

I hope Mama's storytelling awakens "spirit and spiritual knowledge" (Dillard, 2022, p. 53) for both of us. As Boylorn (2017) stated, "and what does it mean for me to tell our story? My secrets are someone else's secrets. My pain unlocks someone else's pain. My memory is not the same as someone else's memory. I leave room for discrepancy" (p.xxx). I also hope our stories of Homeplace encourage other women of color to search for their own in an often-overwhelming environment of alienation and pathology. In addition, invite more Asian American and other minoritized folks to pursue and create Homeplace in

overpowering white and colonial structures. More importantly, I aspire to ground my success in human connections and deeper relationship-building, which reminds me of my humanity.

Emboldened by the spiritual knowledge (Dillard, 2022) I inherited from Mama and my ancestors, I transform all my stories – those I tell and those I enact by making the choices of living my life that honor my ancestors and elevate the conditions and feelings of Homeplace – into counterstories³⁵ (Gonzalez, 2017). I am no longer deficient, no longer broken, and instead, filled with joy. Even when I recount the sorrow and sadness of past events, I choose to recover the fullness of these moments—not pathologized, not told in a pitiful tone; rather, I honor those whose lives were impacted by these events by centering their humanity.

This ongoing journey also taught me to honor my covenants with my ancestors, values, and traditions (Dillard, 2022). One concrete way to do so is to feel and show a deep conviction to the practiced knowledge I learned from the women in New Construction. If my doctoral degree is to reconnect with the ways of knowing those women embodied, then the culminating project, which also marks the beginning of a new ceremony, is about reclaiming these women’s knowledge and spreading this wisdom to benefit others. Knowledge is not individual; it is highly relational. New Construction women are carriers of deep knowledge, and they have entrusted me to hold the knowledge and to share it with others.

Sharing has already begun before I conclude writing about my journal of recalling and re-visioning (Dillard, 2022). In May 2025, with the encouragement of Mama, I embarked on the adventure of opening a restaurant. The goal was to share Mama’s dumplings with more people beyond the Chinese community in the South Sound Region. While the

³⁵ Counterstories are stories seldom heard that challenge detrimental and inaccurate dominant stories about marginalized and often misrepresented communities and people of color (Gonzalez, 2017, p.9).

restaurant path has been fraught with long working hours (12-plus-hour days, six days a week, and weekdays are divided between my daytime job and the restaurant at night) and physical as well as mental exhaustion, feeding people a lot of the food I ate growing up has been deeply gratifying. I found myself telling stories and receiving others' stories with love and care. The stories are embedded in the food prepared at the restaurant, and they trace their origins to New Construction, to many of the women's homes where I tasted the original recipe. Some of the most memorable have been the stories with chili and Chinese sponge cake. Mama used to rub chili peppers on my earlobes when they had succumbed to frostbite. The burning sensation offered instant relief to the numbness and itchiness. I can smell the intense egg aroma of the Chinese sponge cake. The trips to the neighbor's house where one of the women operated an at-home bakery were always filled with anticipation. Equipped with a few eggs, a container of sugar, and a bucket of flour, I came home with freshly made cakes. The tastes were so divine that to date I still have not been able to replicate them. Beyond stories revolving around food, I also told stories of my family, Mama, Baba, Laolao, Big Mama, and the New Construction women. It has been deeply gratifying to hear that customers enjoyed reading these stories. I find solace that all these people who are my teachers and who form the foundation of my Homeplace are memorialized by those who are touched by our (their) food and their stories.

Recipes and stories represent the actions of remembrance. I cite and celebrate the women in New Construction in my academic life—whether in teaching, by imparting the knowledge I inherited from these women, or in the workshops I facilitate, where they constantly offer inspiration and beautiful emotions that disrupt the white, colonial, patriarchal, and heterosexual system. Most importantly, what the women have instilled in me

is seeing everyone and seeking knowledge from those who practice and live the reality of knowing every day.

The journey has just begun—to love, to feel, to pursue truths and knowledge by elevating those who live at the margins (brown, 2017), and to infuse Homeplace of belonging and mattering to many others who are re-rooted through shared humanness and collectiveness. brown (2017) summed up my ongoing mission perfectly: “the heart is the front line, and the fight is to feel in a world of distractions” (p. 40). Ever since this journey of quest through writing, I feel rooted every day regardless of my physical location. The women of New Construction and the spiritual knowledge they imparted to me are like fuping in water, growing, expanding, and taking roots wherever and whenever I share the knowledge with others.

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