

Traveling Elegy:
Expansive Approaches to Loss in the Poetry of Agha Shahid Ali

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In the preface to his poetry collection *Rooms Are Never Finished*, Agha Shahid Ali crosses in prose writing between public and private grief, mourning at once Kashmir and the death of his mother. The first sentence – “To a home at war, my father, siblings, and I brought my mother’s body for burial” (16) – toggles between and unites “home” and “war” through the site of “[his] mother’s body,” melding national strife with personal loss. He then moves to describe the violence more specifically, including the number of dead (“70,000”) and the kind of armaments (“nuclear powers”) which constitute the “ongoing catastrophe.” Then, he shifts into a different kind of catastrophe: the last sentence moves back in time and in space to his mother’s death “in a hospital in Northampton, Massachusetts, on 27 April 1997—we were with her at my brother’s home in Amherst.” As an added temporal complication, his mother’s death in Amherst precedes the first shift to Kashmir in time, suggesting that Ali is returning in different ways to each place. This crossing and melding, admitting the two different spaces and two different times, exemplifies Ali’s poetic approach to memory as constituted by connections across boundaries, generating through loss a sense of richness. He accomplishes this dual elegy for mother and country by “traveling” between America and Kashmir, a technique that he also uses across his collections, many of which are heavily invested in capturing and complicating geographies. These hybrid crossings uniquely express a postcolonial poetics that mutually mourns and enriches across borders of identity.

Since Ali’s poetry, like the preface, draws together questions about loss and postcolonial identity, he is often read as a poet of trauma. Nida Sajid interprets the ghazal, the Urdu/Persian form which Ali is famed for having championed in American poetry, as mimetic of trauma, arguing that its “structure of longing and belonging,” the recurring refrain and rhyme interrupted by new lines, “replicates the diasporic desire for an imaginary homeland and complicates the

trauma of physical displacement and exile” (87). This interpretation of the form displaces a notion of home entirely, and suggests that the physical displacement across geographical borders mimics the trauma of exile. In this same vein, critics Hussain, Zahra, and Murtaza argue that the repetitive form of the ghazal “perpetuates the impression of frequency and recurrence of horrific events which...each falling night and rising day witnesses” (148), drawing attention to the political violence in Kashmir. They argue, too, that Ali wrestles with the traditional tropes of the ghazal, reckoning with political violence and mourning through the dynamic of separation between beloved and lover. Critics of trauma foreground not only the way Ali describes violence in Kashmir, but also the cultural trauma of postcolonialism. Malcolm Woodland, like Sajid, argues that the refrains of ghazals “seem to return like a traumatic memory of irrecoverable loss” (260). All these arguments for Ali as trauma poet focus on ghazals, but they suggest that the “traumatized ghazal” as a hermeneutic of reading all Ali’s poetry. In this way, the ghazal becomes a symbol for Ali’s poetry, snatched from a fraught homeland and translated, painfully, into English. In this sense, it is a form in exile, just as Ali is a poet of exile.

What do these critics mean when they use this word “trauma”? We are likely familiar with the phenomenon of psychological trauma, which usually occurs after an individual has a disruptive event occur in their lives that “repeats” itself in their minds, condensing two distinct moments of time together. In the *DSM-5*, the most recent standard classification for mental disorders, trauma is defined as “actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence” [Pai, Anushka et al.]. This psychiatric definition requires an in-person event. Historically, the word “trauma” has deep roots from ancient Greek, meaning “wound,” and was eventually pathologized in the 1690s, in which it meant “a Wound from an external Cause” [*OED*], but in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the definition shifted from the body to the psyche,

meaning, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* summarizes, “a psychic injury, esp. one caused by emotional shock the memory of which is repressed and remains unhealed; an internal injury, esp. to the brain....” When we use the word “trauma,” we are likely using it in the sense of this last definition, a capacious sense that includes both psychological and biological emphases.

When critics claim that Ali is a poet of trauma, they see his poetics as often responding to the cultural trauma of postcolonialism, the cultural and personal trauma of the widespread violence in Kashmir. Most consistently, though, critics home in on postcolonial trauma, a subcategory of social or cultural trauma. While we might initially understand trauma as a psycho-somatic event occurring in a distinct biological body—physical or psychological—it can be extended to an entire community, such that an entire community suffers a similar trauma. On some level, social or cultural trauma *is* physical insofar as it includes violence to or displacement of bodies across an identifiable group. This material violence across a group then becomes internalized into the group; as Jeffrey Alexander writes, it “occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (1). Postcolonialism as social or cultural trauma offers us ways of seeing patterns of cultural displacement and a sense of exile, which Ali works with poetically. For this reason, trauma offers itself as a potential interpretive frame not only because it attends to postcolonial physical and cultural violence, but also because it synthesizes loss and memory, other important concerns in Ali’s poetry.

While this approach to Ali as a poet of trauma is a way to bring these crucial elements of Ali together, it doesn’t fully articulate his approach to any of the elements sufficiently. More often than repeat the memory of the harm, Ali elaborates on loss by expanding his poetic reach.

In the preface, for example, Ali shifts sharply between “the ongoing catastrophe” in Kashmir and when “[his] mother came to the States for treatment of brain cancer” (16) pulling the reader across national borders and leaving us to question the relationship between the two losses. However, the two losses do not seem to be versions of one another; rather, while connected, they help mutually shape, in different cultural, spatial, and temporal directions, his simultaneous loss of mother and safe homeland. His poetry is not the site where harm inflicts itself repeatedly, but the place where he can, as he writes in “Leaving Sonora,” “Be faithful, / even to those who no longer exist” (*A Nostalgist’s Map of America* 29). Reading him only through the lens of trauma flattens Ali’s complex poetics into an overdetermined paradigm. While cultural loss and violence certainly resonate through and prompt Ali’s poetry, his mode is much often expansive and transcultural than it is repetitive and traumatized. When critics describe Ali as a poet of trauma, they often cite the refrain in his ghazals as evidence of a pain repeated in memory; however, I would argue that this refrain, and any repetition in his poems, evinces his poetic expansiveness. Not only in his tone, but also in his technique, Ali travels across land, time, culture, and form to elegize.

What, then, are the limits of trauma as a critical approach to Ali, and what can “traveling” provide in its stead? Certainly, Ali is a poet of memory, often a poet writing *in memoriam*. In the field of memory studies, trauma has in recent years become suspect as the dominant theory of memory. In its place, though, memory studies scholars have offered other modes. One such mode, and one that applies to Ali, is that of traveling memory. This concept, proposed by Astrid Erll, responds to Pierre Nora’s *Les lieux de mémoire*, Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*, and the subsequent twentieth-century movement in memory studies that focuses on the nation as the site of social memory. Rather than limit memory to the borders of a nation,

Erll's traveling memory is, as she writes, "a metaphorical shorthand, an abbreviation for the fact that in the production of cultural memory, people, media, mnemonic forms, contents, and practices are in constant, unceasing motion" (Erll). This traveling can happen within a nation, but Erll emphasizes its transnational movement as well. In coining this term, she takes inspiration from anthropologist James Clifford's notion of "traveling culture," who, as she quotes, said in *Writing Culture*, "Cultures do not hold still for their portraits." So, too, she argues, does memory insist on movement. She does not exclusively mean that memory travels between and among nations, but also individuals, minds, media, time, and space.

For Erll, traveling memory is not just a phenomenon of memory in a globalized world, but rather memory's "genesis and existence through movement." As a literary critic working with cultural memory as a sociological phenomenon, she casts memory as a thing continually made in dynamism, not only accessed but also made in group contexts. This phrase, coined by Erll in 2011, aligns with Jahan Ramazani's notion of "traveling poetry." Traveling poetry "leap[s] across national and cultural boundaries," a mode that originated in the modern context with Pound and becomes a way to "foreground how, through imaginative as well as literal mingling and merging, new coinages, new intergeographic spaces, even new compound identities come into being" (*Transnational Poetics* 60). Ramazani argues, like Erll, that the logic of poetry itself depends on "traveling" insofar as metaphors, similes, analogies, and even to some extent language itself requires that language "carry" ideas, sounds, forms, and tropes that are ostensibly unlike. In his book *The Hybrid Muse*, Ramazani argues that poetry is a particularly hybrid genre – perhaps opposed to the novel, which is described by critics as a particularly national genre. Because of poetry's condensed efficiency, we are likely to find in poetry such traveling, especially in the literary inheritance of modernism. These terms build past confined

national identities; rather, by emphasizing poetry as a dynamic articulation, poetry as “traveling” expresses how individuals in societies work both in between and across boundaries. This formulation admits that to some extent those boundaries do exist, but they are nevertheless permeable, and thus allow for an intersecting and interstitial method.

Ali’s poetry exhibits both Erll’s traveling memory and Ramazani’s traveling poetry, combining their emphases on dynamism in thought and articulation in his unique elegiac idiom. Ali “emigrates” his repository of cultural memory into an American context as well as crosses from his own “homeland” of culture into other idioms. By writing in an elegiac mode cross-culturally, Ali demonstrates a different mode of memorializing loss that operates by virtue of a wealth of resources. To focus on trauma is to lock him in a postcolonial dichotomy informed by trauma – either resenting the lost past or idealizing it. Malcolm Woodland describes this dichotomy as caught between “two stances toward that [postcolonial] thematics: one dominated by nostalgia and the desire for return, and one dominated by an anti-nostalgic acknowledgement of cultural hybridity” (Woodland 249). Many critics take up Ali in this vein, as a poet of fraught postcolonial nostalgia, caught fundamentally between two disappointing extremes.

However, while Ali does often compare two nodes of a postcolonial perspective, his poetry does more than admit defeat; instead, his traveling elegy enacts a new mode that builds across boundaries in order to refigure what has been lost, whether it be a person, place, or artifact. Antara Chatterjee sees travel as Ali’s governing trope “both as a thematic and woven into the form and structure of his poetry, and goes on to argue that

Poetic travel across geographic and literary terrains becomes, for Ali, an expression not only of uprootedness and homelessness, but also of what might be termed “homefulness,” not just of loss of home, but of finding home(s) in verse.

The lost “home” is thus remapped and resituated through the “re-homing” of the world. Enacting multiple journeys across different registers and polarities— spatial, cultural, temporal, linguistic, and formal—Ali’s poetry confounds and obscures their boundaries, revealing their interconnectedness.” (2)

Chatterjee argues that Ali’s poetics is not simply an admission of eternally deferred loss, but a complicated production of a new site of belonging in and through the poem. Here, Chatterjee sees this mode as producing a new home, or “re-homing the world”; my emphasis is more on traveling as a poetic approach to loss through elegy, not so much creating a locus of belonging as much as using traveling as a methodology through which loss can be represented and the experience of loss expressed.

For Ali, as well as other elegists, elegy responds to memory as well as to loss. It is memory that connects at least two different timeframes – the before and the after of the loss – and operates in the temporal space between. To write about loss itself tempts self-doubt, since it is an impossible task; perhaps this is the anxiety that Karen Weisman calls “the audacity of elegy, its inward-looking reflection on its own efficacy, procedures, or even right to exist in the realm of culture” (5). Undoubtedly poets use this framework as a creative tension to further their own thoughts, but the framework alone does not account for what elegy is trying to accomplish. Peter Sacks in *The English Elegy* critiques the “recent critics [that] have not only undermined assumptions about the presentational powers of language, [but] they have diminished the subjective pathos that attends those absences which the use of language may seek to address and appease” (xi). Elegy relies on the presentation of memory as well as the representation of loss, the perpetuating reality as well as the lost one, to justify and explore its linguistic and artistic

value. In this way, elegies necessarily travel in time; for Ali, they also travel through space, culture, and mode.

In my essay, I also aim to cross the text of the poem with two modes of criticism: one, crossing “beneath” the poem to a social and political context; and another, crossing “above” the text to something like an aesthetic contemplation of Ali’s poetry. These two modes of critique, however different, are also mutually informed by one another. Both the historical and aesthetic dimensions express how Ali intentionally blurs lines between decolonization and hybridity in complex ways, as Ramazani describes postcolonial poets doing in *The Hybrid Muse*. Even when mourning individuals he loves, such as his mother in “Lenox Hill” and an element of his culture in “The Dacca Gauzes,” Ali’s resources are myriad, and intentionally so. His subject matter of mourning, too, breaks out of his personal losses and offers poetic attention to the American continent. By addressing loss with images and language that crosses borders, Ali demonstrates not just traveling memory, but traveling elegy. This technique is not only informed by Ali’s own life, as a self-described “triple exile,” but also serves as an elegiac technique. The “genesis and existence” (Erl) of his elegy is its traveling. The result is his, perhaps paradoxically, expansive sense of loss. In this thesis, I will analyze traveling elegy in “The Dacca Gauzes,” an elegy about his culture; “Lenox Hill,” an elegy about his mother and “I See Chile in My Rearview Mirror,” an elegy about a culture that is not his, but that he pays witness to. Elegy asks questions of its writers and readers; I’ve selected three questions to ask of Ali’s elegiac poems. The first is, how and why does he address the loss of a cultural artifact? The second is, what is the relationship between elegy, form, and the process of mourning? The third is, how do you mourn something that not you, but somebody else has lost? For Ali, all his responses to these questions have to do with traveling.

1. Material and Poetic Memory in “The Dacca Gauzes”

In the criticism of the last thirty years at least, critics have renewed their interest in elegy. Both this renewal of elegy and inception of memory studies have taken shape in the wake of Holocaust studies, which questioned the possibility of poetry and art after something so horrific that Adorno concluded that “[t]o write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (34). Because critical discourse on elegy increased in the light of intense ethical questions, the terms that often surround elegy include “consolation,” “anti-consolation,” “empathy,” “witness,” and “success.” The last term carries a heavy weight, and is for many critics the way they put elegy “into question,” the question being: does an elegy succeed, and indeed, can it?

Different critics have different expectations for success, but in general, once a critic has asked whether elegy can “succeed,” they conclude that the genre must fail. Whether it fails for philosophical reasons, since death and loss cannot be “articulated” purely, or for ethical reasons, since the poems always end up being “for” the mourner and not for the dead, elegy has become suspect as a poetic approach. R. Clifton Spargo in *Ethics of Mourning* interrogates elegy for philosophical reasons, but especially for the intense ethical burden he believes it carries. Since elegy of course cannot bring back the past, he theorizes that the ethical impulse of elegy is a “psychological trick of time, treating its retrospective concern for the other as if it were anticipatory or potentially preventative of loss” (4), a task which of course is impossible. So, too, does the movement towards consolation fail, since, as he writes, “mourning is the state in which all that is possible has become impossible” (27). Other critics of elegy advocate for its ability to commemorate the beloved and simultaneously achieve consolation. For example, Diane Fuss argues in *Dying Modern*, that if “ethics, at its heart, begins in the ability to imagine another’s

suffering,” then, “elegy [is] one of the most necessary, if perilous, aesthetic forms” (5). In this sense, the ethical reach of elegy is risky, but not necessarily immoral.

But with such broad genre theory strokes, we may often forget that there is no “elegy,” there are only elegies. In this way, I am working with elegy much how Stephanie Burt deals with the lyric (“What Is This Thing Called Lyric?”). Each elegy takes up questions of loss and memory *from* an ethical place, rather than *for* an exclusively ethical purpose. After all, in the vein of Emmanuel Lévinas, it would be much more ethically productive to give to the needy than to write a poem—although Spargo argues that “[t]here is an ethical crux to all mourning according to which the injustice potentially perpetrated by the mourner against the dead as a failure of memory stands for the injustice that may be done to the living other at any given moment” (4). According to this argument, elegists do not so much try to bring back the death so much as articulate a present loss in such a way as to prevent future loss.

It would help us to see poems, though, not so much as packets of ethically pure speech acts, that try and either fail or succeed to improve a reader’s ethical life, but instead as, in the words of Paul Celan through Lévinas, “a handshake.” In *Theory of the Lyric*, Jonathan Culler argues that poetry offers a unique mode of expression that goes beyond what Spargo calls “ordinary ethical deliberations” (10), not “beyond” in a superior sense so much as “without direct reference to.” As Ramazani writes about elegy: “At its best, the modern elegy offers not a guide to ‘successful’ mourning but a spur to rethinking the vexed experience of grief in the modern world.... We need elegies, that, while imbued with grief, can hold up to the acid suspicions of our moment” (*Poetry of Mourning* ix-x). Ramazani’s approach releases elegy of a moral imperative to recreate a lost reality or prevent future loss; rather, elegy in his approach becomes a “spur to rethinking,” offering a beginning, and not an end. Poets like Ali may struggle

with the sense that they can never bring back something that has been lost, but to be a poet is to write something down, however fraught. Questions of success fall away to other questions, such as articulation and expression.

In his poem “The Dacca Gauzes,” ethical questions come to the fore in a postcolonial context: Ali mourns in this poem not a beloved dead person, but a lost cultural artifact. Because he is mourning gauzes from Dacca, located not just in his culture but in his family line, he prompts questions for the reader about postcolonial elegy, which brings with it a host of concerns about either complicity or provincialism. Critics tend to place postcolonial elegy into these two “camps,” either tinged with utopian nostalgia for a lost precolonial past or accused of seeing the past with the colonizer’s eye. Again, if we question the “success” of postcolonial elegy, we are implying there can be none. Instead, I propose here two more neutral essential questions to ask of elegy, postcolonial or otherwise, that do not bring in success: how do we write about loss, and why would we write about it? To begin with the “why,” critics often ask whom elegy is “for”—whether for the living or for the dead. Fuss offers that “what might be ethical for one (the dead) may be unethical for the other (the living),” but also that “[e]legies speak to both audiences, forced to negotiate the impossible ethical demands of a genre that strives neither to disrespect the memory of the dead nor to ignore the needs of the living” (5).

Instead of a dead person, though, Ali mourns the loss of “transparent Dacca gauzes” (15), which makes ethical questions more metaphorical than interpersonal. In a way, this deescalates the ethical question, since the stakes of acting on behalf of an artifact are lower than acting on behalf of a person—although this becomes complicated when Ali mentions that “[i]n history we learned: the hands / of the weavers were amputated” (15), a line that cruelly mimics the violence with enjambment. By mentioning the “weavers,” he makes explicit the material network of the

gauzes, a network of people and their bodies. Although the ethical stakes may be lowered in a sense, the question of who this is for becomes less clear. We can approach the question of *why* by first asking *how* Ali is approaching this elegy. How does one elegize a lost material artifact? As I've said, Ali draws attention to a specific gauze as well as, in and through it, the network of production. Vidyan Ravinthiran writes that "[T]he poem graduates from a local dispossession to a global theft" (650), tracking Ali's shift from a familiar heirloom to an instance of postcolonial violence. In a postcolonial context, loss is so systemic and irreversible that any attempts to "bring back" are already understood as vain by the poet and reader (which does not mean they should not be written, but merely understood as vain). The memory, then, is not "innocent," if we want to think in such terms. At the very least, there is a before and after, and the "post" of "postcolonial" situates us always in an "after." To be "after" the violence, and write about a "before," Ali must look through the "after" and decide what to do with it.

While sometimes Ali travels explicitly, as in the preface to *Rooms Are Never Finished*, in "The Dacca Gauzes" he travels almost underground, beneath the surface of the words, subliminally traveling between Britain and Bengal, between now and then. Ali introduces this frame of traveling in the space between the title and the epigraph: "The Dacca Gauzes" places us, obviously, in Dacca, and the epigraph introduces British postcolonial consciousness: "...for a whole year he sought to accumulate the most exquisite Dacca Gauzes. – Oscar Wilde/*The Picture of Dorian Gray*" (15). Already, we are traveling between Dacca and London, and traveling also between the nineteenth century and "now." As early as his epigraph, Ali refuses to accept one alternative versus another—for the dead or for the living, in the past or in the present—and travels among these dichotomies. We as readers are traveling places, times, and consciousnesses, all before the text of the poem begins. In the context of the epigraph, the gauzes

are an exotic art that Dorian wants to obtain. The gauzes are relegated to the status of, in a sense, evidence: they show how cultured and sophisticated Dorian is, divorced from the social function Ali goes on to elaborate in the poem. The mode of their production only matters insofar as it is foreign. However, Ali complicates the identity of the referent in the epigraph; while the literal antecedent to “he” is Dorian, the other figure searching “to accumulate” these gauzes is Ali himself. The verb “accumulate” is loaded in such a way that tips the scale towards a colonial mindset, since it implies that the gauzes are being hoarded – unless someone were collecting them as a spectacle, there is no need, presumably, to have so many that you would be “accumulating” them. But throughout the collection *The Half-Inch Himalayas*, which includes the poem, Ali toys with his own complicity as a colonial spectator, as in “Postcard from Kashmir,” another poem in which he questions whether he is traveling from Kashmir as an exile or traveling to Kashmir as a kind of tourist.

In his brilliant, archivally-informed analysis of this epigraph, Robert Stilling brings up two extratextual references that will help us tease out traveling as both complicit, innocent, and morally ambiguous. The first extratextual reference Stilling offers is the original title for the poem, which was “Reading *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in Kashmir.” This title mirrors another poem in *The Half-Inch Himalayas*, “After Seeing Kozintsev’s *King Lear* in Delhi.” Both titles evoke the uncanniness of a postcolonial cultural experience in which Ali, and subsequently the poem, exist in two modes in the same moment, making a demand on the subject to parcel themselves out to the two modes in various ways, while acknowledging it cannot be done. *King Lear* is less charged with nineteenth-century postcolonialism and aestheticism than *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, especially since the quotation from Wilde’s novel emphasizes the Eastern artifact as collector’s item. By changing the title to “The Dacca Gauzes,” Ali both foregrounds

the material object as symbol and admits his role in its linguistic creation not as spectator, as one in a crowd watching *King Lear*, but as a “hand” that survives to weave the ghazals.

Not only is the text of the novel directly quoted in the epigraph, but Stilling notes that Ali subliminally incorporates the text further into the poem. Ali’s first stanza reads, “Those transparent Dacca gauzes / known as woven air, running / water, evening dew” (15). As Stilling writes, “Ali borrows from Wilde, ‘woven air’, ‘running water’, and ‘evening dew’” which are “more than just poeticisms; they are the names by which specific varieties of muslin fabric were known and marketed in India, the West, and elsewhere” (38). It is clear why Wilde uses the language of marketing to describe Dorian’s insatiable desire for exotic consumption, but it is as surprising that Ali adopts this language, too, screened through Wilde. On one level, as Stilling notes, they are “poeticisms” with an aesthetic value. The words “air,” “water,” and “dew” suggest their delicacy as well as a closeness to nature, a closeness made more fascinating because they are distinctly artificial as decorative artifacts. But sourced as lines from Wilde’s novel, who sourced them from advertising, suggests that these descriptors, and to some extent the poem to follow, are not from “within” the culture that produced them, if not because of an outsider’s consciousness then at least because of an outsider’s timeframe. Stilling goes on to argue that the commercial market of the time, and in turn Wilde and Ali, all see these gauzes as always scarce or deteriorating; after all, he notes, why else would Gray search “for a whole year”? To this point, Stilling cites “[a] commentary on the 1886 Colonial and Indian Exhibition [that] further sums up the then commonplace notion that the making of Dacca muslins was a lost art” (45), mourning the decline in the quality of their industry, which Wilde also regretted. Perhaps, then, Ali is associating himself not with an exclusively colonial vision, but with a desire to find these gauzes in the face of their loss—which is the impulse of elegy.

What would it mean for Ali to seek, “for a whole year...to accumulate” the gauzes? Rather than physically accumulate them as objects, Ali “accumulates” their memory, naming them as words instead of possessing them as objects. Instead of replicating the industry of gauze-making, he focuses on his family history, and works out the memory from there. While, as Stilling argues, the material of the gauzes decreases, Ali works poetically outward from his family. His grandmother had one, “an heirloom sari from // her mother’s dowry,” which is later transformed into “many handkerchiefs...distributed among / the nieces and daughters-in-law,” handkerchiefs which eventually, too, disappear. The material of the gauzes, instead of “accumulating” in the poem, gradually dissipate. Because of this, the pressure on the linguistic network of the gauzes increases, a network in which colonial texts, such as *Dorian Gray*, also exist. The medium of the gauzes inversely shifts – the less material, the more linguistic. As it shifts, the question arises of what kind of language the gauzes demand. There is an element of self-referential wobble: the gauzes are both “known as” various commercial metaphors, but simultaneously, Ali quotes his grandmother in the second stanza, saying “No one now/ knows” them. In a sense, his inability to recreate them in the poetry re-mimics their loss; however, the work of much of the poem questions what “knowing” might look like, and how poetry can “know” what is not available in material.

Although the gauzes are materially absent, Ali presents the memory of the gauzes on a literal and aesthetic level. He moves past the commercial metaphors, which play with history and aesthetics to produce images of the gauzes, to mimic the material of the gauzes through form and assonance. This sense is present in the lines, “In history we learned... the looms of Bengal [were] silenced” (15). Literally, the abandoned or destroyed looms stopped making sound, but Ali also suggests that the gauzes are made through sound; the poem recaptures the process and

the artifact through its own linguistic sounds. In the middle of the poem, we are rooted in a real experience of a gauze: his grandmother's sari in her marriage dowry was "proved / genuine when it was pulled, all / six yards, through a ring" (15). The form, a long column of short, three-lined stanzas, mimics this shape, as if the poem is being pulled through. In the last stanza, he repeats the same motion of "pulling" and also mimics the softness of the gauzes through assonance, writing:

in autumn, should one wake up
at dawn to pray, can one
feel that same texture again.

One morning, she says, the air
was dew-starched: she pulled
it absently through her ring. (16)

The sounds of "autumn," "dawn," "pray," "air," "dew-starched," and "absently" mimic the beauty and delicacy of the gauzes both in their aural and semantic value. The metaphor of the air he first used of the woven air becomes for his grandmother a memory reified through language. The elegy for the gauzes does not reach its completion by successfully re-creating the gauzes, which it cannot do, but by presenting his grandmother's memory and his own memory of her memory. By the conclusion, the reader can see that this elegy does not even aspire to bring the gauzes back to reality. A crucial part of the genre of elegy, in practice and in criticism, is that such a bringing back cannot happen, that reversal of the loss is undoable. In this case, Ali is describing colonial violence that cannot be undone. Rather, Ali is balancing cultural loss with cultural memory. To apply Ann Rigney's theory of social memory to the poem, the "shared

memory and social imaginaries” between his grandmother and himself “are co-produced in an open-ended dynamic” (13) to extend the collective memory of the Dacca gauzes, which, in the framework of the elegy, can now only be a memory. Nonetheless, the creation and conveyance of that memory cannot then “fail” – it has presented a memory of a lost reality successfully, including in the framework both its memory and its lostness.

With just the text of the poem, Ali’s elegy mourns and recreates the cultural artifacts lost through the violence of colonialism. As he says in an interview with Christine Benvenuto, “I think of people who because of historical forces have lost so much.... I mean, these things are in my way of looking at the world.” If we cross “underneath” the poem, the historical force is clear, and his poem a way of paying respect to the violence, of articulating that it happened. However, he says in another interview that the subject matter intrigued him because it “was a horrific act, sure, but only as it was passed down to us, thus becoming legend, and it became tied up with a ravishing imagery and family history” (*The Verse Book of Interviews* 139). The elegy, then, is not only about the abyss of loss, but also about an opportunity for community. Once we see the gauzes as objects that are handled, in text and by hand, by a community of people, of which Ali is one, the elegy “travels” farther out. Ali calls our attention to the network of the gauzes, both material and linguistic. The gauzes are created and reacted to in various ways, traveling across precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial contexts. Both the material and linguistic networks pull in seemingly opposite directions, one a network of violence, and the other a network of, as he says, “family history.” In the epigraph, Ali immediately and wryly begins with the network of violence, but then works in and from it to recover a sense of familial identity.

Ali also admits too, by calling the gauzes “ravishing imagery,” his perhaps superficial aesthetic interest in it divorced from ethical concerns—simply put, the image of the gauzes is

“ravishing.” One can see in Ali’s poetry a quiet insistence on beauty’s victory over us, and over him. He interrupts the beauty of the poem with the word “amputated” in the seventh stanza—one can see how an alternate phrase such as “cut off” might romanticize the violence more than the word he chooses, which is harsh and clinical. Still, by choosing the gauzes, crafts legendary for their finery, associated with femininity – his grandmother passing down the story of the cloth, pulling it through a ring, “distributed among the nieces and daughters-in-law” – Ali makes a daring move in elegy that may capitalize on cultural trauma, but has not given way to it. Stilling argues that the poem “indicates that nineteenth-century aestheticism and postcolonial representations of colonial history are entangled in ways that complicate our understanding of both periods” (39). Not only by beginning the poem with a quote for Wilde, but also by choosing an aesthetic object as a lost cultural history, Ali inherits a perspective from aestheticism in his language, including his approach to poetry in “The Dacca Gauzes.” However, the gauzes are foreign to him not because of culture but because of time, because they are lost. Ali resists this move in the poem by grounding the perspective firmly in a family line, through his grandmother’s either direct or indirect words. The conceit of the poem is that, in a sense, Ali is refashioning his grandmother’s words into his, negotiating between a perspective that considers “History of little use” and his own perspective, fascinated with history as an agent and as a spectator.

This may be a mode of elegy that adopts the bereaved into its own medium. Ali continually complicates the “success” of his elegy by traveling between the gauzes of Wilde and the gauzes of his family, not insisting on a decision, but instead suggesting that no final decision can be made as to the safety and success of words versus material, that material has a memory which language can access and extend. This is because language “travels” as the gauzes do not.

Language, which contains history in syntax and semantics, carries history farther and wider than material, which dissipates. How does Ali's language travel here? For one, Ali wrote all his poetry, including "The Dacca Gauzes," in English, which Rasheda Parveen argues lends his poetry an immediate "hybridity of cultural differences." His language also travels, as we have seen, between colonial aestheticism and native culture, negotiating between the figures of Wilde and his grandmother, as well as visiting a lost past and visiting an imaginary fabric in the present—and potentially future, since the grandmother says that autumn air can imitate it. Ravinthiran draws this negotiation between the gauze as symbol and the gauze as specific family heirloom, writing that "[t]he poem's form suggests a refusal of grand narratives, but also the vigors of local resilience twinned with its own aesthetic 'texture'" (651). Ali's methodological approach, negotiating history and imagination, mimic the material and history of the gauze and all its complications.

Ultimately, Stilling argues that the fate of the gauze is deterioration, that "[T]he nondurable quality of the decorative arts provides a resource for figuring the potential for decay in the circulation of poetic forms as they are translated across languages and cultures, subject to the same historical processes as material artifacts" (40). However, I see the poem as reclaiming the gauze in all its complications, carrying forward a history both familial and fraught. While Stilling argues that the poem and especially the "prayer" are highly immaterial, and therefore more fragile than gauze, Ravinthiran claims that "[Virginia] Jackson's 'material referent' is both present (the atrocities of colonial trade) and absent (the sari itself)" and that "the immaterialities that close the poem—a spiritual-aesthetic metaphor for essences and experiences, which transcend received economies—might have us reconsider the trope of materiality essential to

historicism” (651-2). Rooted in history, the gauzes do not depend on it, and poems can extend the historical line through imaginative art.

As far as his choice to write in English, to speculate about his exact reason for doing so is likely not so productive. He was probably influenced by his Anglophone Irish Catholic education, which taught him the English language and an English literary tradition. Even in absence of a clear answer, readers can see he felt English was the idiom he needed for his poetry. Is this turn to English as a literary medium, though, a rejection of Eastern languages like Kashmiri or Urdu? Ali says in *The Verse Book of Interviews* that, “When I picked up the pen, everything happened in English (it was not a choice)” (134). Ananya Kabir argues that “Ali’s poems bring together the loss of language and the loss of script” to “suggest...an infinite displacement of primal loss of the mother tongue” (192), perhaps also implying that his participation in an imported language is mournfully complicit in this destruction. She quotes the lines in Ali’s “Ghazal” that read, “The only language of loss left in the world is Arabic / These words were said to me in a language not Arabic” (*The Country Without a Post Office* 74). Ali himself did not even know Arabic, but this couplet evokes the infinite displacement Kabir describes – a language of loss being lost, told to us in another language twice over, smothering over a lost language. I would argue, though, that Ali’s poetry operates more by traveling than by displacement. Instead of imagining the lines moving endlessly back in search of an unattainable desire, I envision them as visiting with a lighter foot past histories and present ones, all of them fraught with colonial influences and yet insisting on the imaginative ambiguity of a postcolonial successor.

Let us return to our questions about the elegy after this analysis. Does elegy want to bring back the beloved? Can it? Ali’s approach to elegy in “The Dacca Gauzes,” I would argue, does

not attempt to return the gauzes to the world or to the reader, to import a lost past to a new one, but to expand a linguistic network with reference to a lost material network, and to use words to travel among various interpretive options as he does so. Words as a medium can travel farther than saris and handkerchiefs; for example, the gauzes return to the grandmother through sense memory, but come to us through imagination. That is the value that poetry, not history, can offer, and how Ali can use the lacunae of history as poetic opportunities. Through the poem, too, the gauzes “travel” farther than the house of Dorian Gray, and, in a sense, more “accurately,” since the gauzes as Ali has written them cannot be misinterpreted as the material objects can. As Mallarmé wrote to Degas, “We do not write poems with ideas, but with words” (93). Ali’s poem is made of words, not gauze, and that approach is how his elegy does not punish itself into failure but offer a network of memory and language that mourns while it produces.

2. Forms of Mourning in “Lenox Hill”

In his introduction to *Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English*, Ali writes that, “if one writes in free verse—and one should—to subvert Western civilization, surely one should write in forms and save oneself *from* Western civilization?” (13). In an obvious sense, one of the forms he’s referring to is the ghazal, the subject of the rest of the introduction and the following anthology. However, Ali seems to mean form in general, including Western forms. Ravinthiran argues that, when Ali cannibalizes Dorian Gray in “The Dacca Gauzes,” he is engaging in an “act of counter-appropriation” (652); the same sense, too, applies to form. Interestingly, he seems to suggest that form in general can serve as a postcolonial subversion against Western colonialism, benefitting from certain Western literary traditions such as Proust and using them to benefit the poetic life of the author. Certainly, Ali’s experiments with form were not confined to

the ghazal; Chatterjee notes that he exhibits a “formal cosmopolitanism” (10), writing in, as he says, “[p]rose poems, canzones, sonnets, sestinas, envelope stanzas, quatrains, pantoums, ghazals, sapphics, Anglo-Saxon verse, terza rima, and more” (*Verse Book* 143). While Ali had ethical or subversive motivations for writing in this variety of forms, he also led with formal exploration and then followed with such motivations: as he says about Merrill, “[t]heorizing came later” (*Verse Book* 145). He states that the value of forms is inherent insofar as the poet needs to have “an encounter with immense turmoil through immense experimentation” (*Verse Book* 145). Ali sees form as an opportunity to struggle with difficult matters through difficult articulation, grabbing with how to fit the words into the form while trying to find the words in the first place. This is why, after his mother’s death, he wrote her elegy “Lenox Hill” in the form of an Italian canzone.

By choosing such a distinctive form, Ali foregrounds the canzone as an opportunity to capture in some way the grieving process. As Ramazani writes in his introduction to *Poetry of Mourning*, elegy underwent a shift in the twentieth century with writers such as Langston Hughes and W.H. Auden expanding the temperamental and formal horizons of what was before a tonally standardized and even overdetermined genre. Part of this shift, Ramazani argues, is the movement away from normative and into melancholic mourning. In *Poetry of Mourning*, Ramazani reconfigures the standard critical distinction between melancholia and mourning to a distinction between normative and melancholic elegy (xi): “normative” mourning searches for a conclusion of health and a return to peace, whereas “melancholic” mourning enacts “a fierce resistance to solace” (4). The dominant emotional move in “Lenox Hill” is one of a melancholic, intense sadness in the face of loss, which he makes by traveling both in form and in content. The

conspicuous form suggests that the intensely limiting and standardized form of repetition relates to the mourning Ali undergoes in, and even through, the poem.

We can then ask the question, what is the relationship between the elegy and mourning? Is the elegy meant to enact or mimic a sense of mourning, and if so, how does Ali accomplish that with this form? “Lenox Hill” offers a wealth of opportunities to think through traveling and elegy, both due to its form as a canzone and because Ali consciously crosses time, space, and even scale, from humans to elephants to the universe. Amitav Ghosh poses the strictness of the form in “Lenox Hill” in contrast to its wide-ranging scope, writing that, “within the immensity of this bounded space, every line throws open a window that beams a shaft of light across continents, from Amherst to Kashmir, from the hospital of Lenox Hill to the Pir Panjal Pass” (212). Ghosh draws our attention here to the epigraph to the poem, which exempts itself from the structure of the canzone, but provides context for the words he will be repeating— “[i]n Lenox Hill Hospital, after surgery, my mother said the sirens sounded like the elephants of Mihiragula when his men drove them off cliffs in the Pir Panjal Range” (17). In this brief epigraph, Ali frames the poem by placing us in two distinct places—“In Lenox Hill Hospital” and “in the Pir Panjal Range”—at two distinct times—“after surgery” and “when his men drove / them off cliffs”—linked through the sirens his mother hears. However, it becomes even stranger: his mother couldn’t have heard these elephants crying out. The first stanza reveals that his mother can only hear them “in her hospital dream of elephants,” which makes the cries even more distant, and their travel to arrive at the moment of the poem all the further. Across the strange space of travel, Ali connects the pain of his mother “after surgery” with the needless cruelty against the elephants, crossing scale, time, and place to express his anger and horror at his own loss of his mother. I want to explore how the structure of the canzone travels and with how Ali

mourns “across continents” and across time—not least because repetition, frequently a structuring principle of poetry, sets itself apart due to our experience of time.

Ali travels in this elegy by virtue of the form, which is both highly structured and of medieval Italian origin. In a poem that travels between New York and the Pir Panjal Range in only the preface, a medieval European form sets a reader up to anticipate and track various cultural influences. As he says in many interviews, Ali gladly travels across forms, not for mere experimentation, but to articulate the poem in a shape that helps it come to be. This choice of form is not, of course, without consideration of resonance and aesthetic. Ali’s predilection towards poetic form, which consistently enforces structure and repetition, suggests his attraction to the beauty and meaning that it can produce. Although it is a historically Western form, Ali expresses no concern that the canzone dilutes his identity; the equation between form and identity for him is not so much a question as the interaction between form and expression. Ramazani argues that this shift is happening not just in Ali’s work, but in postcolonial criticism in general, writing that “[c]ritics arguing for a more prominent place for race and ethnicity in poetry studies...have often sought to disrupt a problematic binary of form and identity, which consigns race to political, ethnographic, and sociological content in opposition to formal innovation” (“Poetry and Race: An Introduction” xi). By freeing up what form could mean to writers of any racial or ethnic background, poets and critics expand poetic horizons for these poets to mine for meaning.

Ali writes in culturally Western forms because he understands all forms are his to use—especially because he is, in a sense, Western, having been taught in an Irish Catholic school as a child, and eventually learning and teaching for most of his life in the United States. One could read his use of form, in “Lenox Hill” and elsewhere, as an example of Kwame Anthony Appiah’s

theory of cosmopolitan contamination, which would deemphasize boundaries and draw attention to a unique, transnational identity. In a certain sense, this freedom of form is a movement away from a nativist stance, but in another sense, it is preceded by Ali's hybrid cultural upbringing in Kashmir. Stephanie Burt writes that Kashmir "has a historical culture of Kashmiriyat, or Kashmir-ness, inseparable from religious pluralism and sometimes linked to political independence" (*Mad Heart Be Brave* 105), suggesting that to be Kashmiri for him is to be open to a variety of historical influences, and thus that form and identity *do* merge in the poem, and because they merge, expand. Pluralism for Ali applies not just to religion and culture, but also to form, idiom, and expression. Traveling occurs not just in his tropes, but also in the shape of his voice. Something so immediately personal as the death of his mother can be articulated in a variety of cultural forms, since to Ali, plurality can only enhance the opportunities of the poet.

On an initial reading, focusing on the form as such and generalizing the content, we see that his canzone yokes together labor and strong emotion, pitting utter lack of control in the face of mortality against the imposition of control through the role of poet. Samuel Johnson famously wrote of "Lycidas" that "Where there is leisure for fiction there is little grief," thus expressing a suspicion that carefully crafted elegy can truly be mourning its subject. However, such an approach misunderstands what a poem such as "Lycidas" or "Lenox Hill" tries to do, which is not so much repeat the poet's emotions, but articulate them through poetic resources such as scheme, trope, and form. Repetition, which could imply an element of "leisure for fiction" or control over the subject, applies less to an emotional power over material and more to artistic power over it. In the vein of Jonathan Culler, repetition, like apostrophe and other poetic devices, says more about the poem as poem than about the poem as reality. The repetition of the canzone offers other resonances, too, that tell us about Ali's grief. For one, it suggests an almost

incantatory effect, especially since one of the repeated words, “mother,” seems to be an attempt, already understood as in vain, to summon his mother back through insistent language. These observations coincide with Ali’s fascination with form as offering the poet “the alluring tension of a slave trying to master the master” (*Ravishing DisUnities* 3). This tension is not merely arbitrary, but productive and intentional for the poet. Also, most readers of “Lenox Hill” will likely not gain a sense of Ali’s “control” over the grief, but rather his anguished fight against it, showing how well he manages to use the strictness of a form to convey emotional, and even confessional, effect.

To examine repetition in a neutral light as a poetic tool, we can look to lyric theory. Although there is some variation in the form of the canzone in the number of stanzas, its method of repetition is fixed. In “Lenox Hill,” the first of the five stanzas uses the ending word scheme of *abaacaaddaee*; then, subsequent stanzas alternate each stanza with a different end word, rearranging in the second stanza the *a* to the *b* position, and so on. Finally, it resolves in a tornada of five lines that uses all the words at the end of each line once (Fucillia and Kleinhenz 290). Through its standardized mode of repetition, the stanzas become highly involved with themselves and with the other stanzas of the poem. Malcolm Woodland, analyzing repetition in Ali, condenses John Hollander’s theory of repetition in poetry, writing:

In his essay, "Breaking into Song: Some Notes on Refrain," John Hollander mentions, but does not elaborate, a hypothetical "referential scale" (77) of refrain..... At the other end of the scale, he posits an "optimum density of reference, in which each return accrue[s] new meaning" (Hollander 77).... It should be possible, then, to situate any given instance of refrain on a "referential scale" according to the degree of "new meaning" generated or the amount of

"original meaning" restored. And one could correlate minimal semantic variation with maximal *desire* for "total recurrence," and so on. (251-2)

While the repeated lines in a canzone do not constitute a refrain, Woodland's notes on the tension between "original meaning" and "new meaning" apply to the repeated words that end the lines in "Lenox Hill" and give us a theoretical vocabulary to apply to them. The "minimal semantic variation" he talks about—in this case, the same five words that end the lines—work to set up the readerly expectation for recurrence, if not "total recurrence." Still, Hollander and Woodland do allow for "new meaning" to be generated by the text around variation. Since the repeated words rearrange by virtue of the structure, Ali's repeated words necessarily shift and alter one another. This, at least, is one mode of traveling within a restricted pattern, through reconfiguring and redefining the relationships of the words to one another.

The five repeated words at the end of each line scale up and down in relation to their orders of importance in the first stanza: elephant, mother, Kashmir, universe, die. While we might expect some of these to be the foci of the poem, such as "mother" and "die"—and perhaps even "universe"—"Kashmir" and "elephant" catch the reader's attention, since "Kashmir" is a specific place, and places are not typically associated with elegy, and "elephant" is an animal, also not usually associated with elegy. Ali works these two into the same evocative plane as the other terms by gradually rearranging the words so that they associate with one another, implicitly and explicitly comparing himself to an elephant, his mother to Kashmir. The repeated words, too, have a kind of parallelism with one another: his mother is equal to the universe, a suggestion made explicit by his concluding lines, "and what (I close the ledger) are the griefs of the universe / when I remember you—beyond all accounting—O my mother?" (19). No matter how strict the form Ali chooses, his rhyme almost toys with the limits by repeating not

the word exactly, but the sound: “die” is rhymed with the “dia” of “diamonds” and “dye,” and, in an even greater subversion, “traverse” is used in place of “universe” and “Father” in place of “mother.” Ali’s tragic wittiness inflects the expectations of homogeneity, self-consciously exploring his constraints, but always with an eye to the meaning generated, repeating without repeating.

In a more pessimistic light, repetition could suggest regression or nostalgia insofar as it is a “reaching back” of the poem to itself. As I mentioned before, many critics take repetition in Ali, especially in the ghazal, as reified trauma. Ali, though, travels creatively within repetition, especially in this canzone, in a way that requires us to wrestle with what repetition can mean beyond a simple mnemonic tool or regressive sameness. In this way, repetition becomes a version of the elegy, which, as I wrote earlier, critics and philosophers blame for setting out on an impossible mission. In his essay “Mourning Modernity,” Thomas Pfau reworks Derrida’s sense of elegy as a failed mission to particularly condemn modern elegy due to our flattened sense of time in modernity, writing:

[the lyric is suspended] between mourning and melancholia, between a desire for possessing—if only in the belated expressive ritual of ‘mourning’—a once authentic past, and an encroaching recognition that such longing for a return qua memory can only unfold in aesthetic forms bound to expose the purely retroactive and illusory hope for a retreat from the flat-line temporal condition of modernity.

(562)

In Pfau’s reading, the critical elegiac distinction between mourning and melancholia—between a healthy sense of loss and a pathologized one—does not actually set certain elegies apart from others, since our modern consciousness of temporality wrongfully regresses into memory, a false

nostalgia, any time we elegize, and makes all mourning melancholic. If we accept that elegy “desires to possess,” then Pfau’s system of thought is damning: every elegy is an attempted and failed repetition of a lost time.

Pfau fails to incorporate into his system the fact that while poets may use the dynamic of a “doomed project” as fodder for their poems, they do not often aspire to recreate a lost reality in their writing. The drama that he and other critics capitalize on is the same that the poets are capitalizing on: a lover straining after a beloved lost forever. Both repetition and elegy are typified in overly simplified ways to then be condemned, and both, I argue, because they rest on simplified notions of time. One may wonder, after reading Pfau, if he would differentiate between elegy, the genre, and mourning, a necessary part of human life. Ali, though, travels through the difficult task of mourning through elegy, using repetition, perhaps surprisingly, to travel in time rather than simply “repeat” time. A reading of “Lenox Hill” that attends to its expansions instead of its regressions can break us out of a philosophical damnation of complex artistic expression. Once we allow the elegy to expand and contract, we can see the various dimensions Ali is working in in “Lenox Hill.” On the level of form, he repeats; on the level of space, he expands and crosses; and on the level of emotion, he contracts.

Throughout, all the images, disparate in place and time, accrue importance in and through his relationship to his mother. The elephants and the divine, in their various stories and relationships, become versions of Ali and his mother. In the fourth stanza, Ali implicitly compares himself to “one elephant’s / story: his return (in a country far from Kashmir) / to the jungle where each year, on the day his mother / died, he touches with his trunk the bones of his mother” (18). On a literal level, the elephant returns to a jungle to touch his mother’s bones. Once we appreciate the metaphor of Ali as the elephant, though, the reader’s imagination must

travel. Ali, who is both from Kashmir and in the now of the poem in a country far from Kashmir, enacts or desires to enact the same mourning pilgrimage. A pilgrimage, we might ask, to where? While the lines might suggest Kashmir on some level, Ali's return to his mother's bones is not a return to Kashmir except perhaps in memory, to the image of her as "a bride in Kashmir" (18). As we know, she is herself in Amherst, as is he, "in a country far from Kashmir." While the distance from Kashmir is important, the elephant that figures him does not return to Kashmir, but to a "jungle," suggesting that he can mourn her outside of Kashmir, even in a poem that returns, without fully returning, to their homeland. This draws us back to the preface to *Rooms Are Never Finished*, a preface which immediately precedes "Lenox Hill" in the collection. Ali's mother traveled to Lenox Hill for treatment, and they traveled with her body so she could be buried in Kashmir. Nonetheless, even though they are able to return her to her homeland, Ali mourns that she can never be returned to him.

However, despite Ali's ease of multi-spatial metaphor in vehicle, the tenor rings out the same. Their mother/son relationship organizes other relationships either by contrasting them to the mother/son dynamic or equating them to it. Ali quotes his mother as saying, "[Y]ou're just like my mother" (898), after which he refers to her as "my daughter" (898). In the following lines, he writes, "How helpless was God's mother!" (18) evoking Mary and Jesus. While he is shifting the roles of mother and child between him and his mother, the central relationship remains the organizing principle. All the other figures and relationships of the poem orbit around that maternal relationship, as the repeated words circle around one another, in relationship as well as in repetition. Chatterjee argues that "'Lenox Hill'...reveals the continuities between the loss of the mother and of Kashmir" (11), and while it is true that their shared origins in Kashmir fold into their relationship, Ali ultimately prioritizes his mother over the losses of Kashmir, a

striking and emotional move that admits its own absurdity as Ali articulates it: “For compared to my grief for you, what are those of Kashmir, / and what (I close the ledger) are the griefs of the universe / when I remember you—beyond all accounting—O my mother?” (19). Ali “scales up” from his mother to Kashmir to the entire universe in the line, but emotionally scales down. By figuring his relationship to Kashmir as a foil to his love for his mother, and finally prioritizing his mother over his home country, Ali ends on a note of self-aware melancholy. One could see how Kashmir would offer a kind of consolation for Ali after his mother has died, since she clearly found comfort in it (“she had longed for home throughout her illness,” he writes in the preface). However, Ali’s reaction is to reject the homeland, and indeed, the universe wholesale. For the mourner, pain has a habit of contracting one to oneself, closing the scope of one’s heart and mind to a wounded subjectivity. While Ali travels, all the places he goes are in reference to himself in his relationship with his mother.

What is the relationship between traveling, repetition, and elegy in “Lenox Hill?” Does repetition represent regress, and traveling expand? Neither is quite so simple. To begin with form, Ali’s creative use of rhyme pushes at philosophical assumptions of repetition, and therefore assumptions about elegy’s success in spite of time. The very form, without respect yet to content, is adopted and complicated by its relationship of repetition to rhyme. This complication inflects how the poem treats loss: does elegy “repeat” the loss? The form could, like mourning, have a totalizing effect over the world, which Ali’s lines suggest. It then behooves us to introduce questions about travel. What does it mean to “travel” while mourning? In one way, and as I discussed with “The Dacca Gauzes,” it means to travel in memory, between a time past when the beloved was near and a time present in which they are gone. But as Eliot intimates when he writes that “Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time

future, / And time future contained in time past” (3), Ali’s sense of time expands—his memories of his mother contain her memories, foregrounded in the introduction, memories of something she herself did not experience but heard of, which the reader in turn hears of through Ali. On another level, traveling in mourning poses options of traveling outside of oneself or inside of oneself, either taking the loss everywhere you go, or expanding one’s own psyche. Of the two potential options, “Lenox Hill” adopts, I think, the first stance, that the elegy redefines the world such that everywhere he travels, the mourning reworks the space. The travel repeats and the repetition mourns; the mourning travels and the travel repeats; the repetition travels and the mourning repeats. In a sense, too, Ali “travels” through the elegy to a place of consolation. He goes *to* and *through* the poem to find a consolation that Diana Fuss describes in *Dying Modern*, writing that the “endless and irresolvable mourning [of melancholia] has become the new consolation, relieving elegists of the burden of finding and providing emotional compensation, either for themselves or for their audience” (5). The logic of the poem does not ask questions of its own success but offers us a space of elegy that reaches out across boundaries as it retracts.

3. Forward Travel and Backward Elegy in “I See Chile in My Rearview Mirror”

In both “The Dacca Gauzes” and “Lenox Hill,” Ali uses traveling elegy to mourn losses immediate to his family and his culture. In other poems and collections, such as *The Nostalgist’s Map of America*, Ali also uses elegy to mourn for others and their cultures, which he relates to in complex ways. Ali attended the University of Srinagar for his undergraduate degree, after which he moved to America and attended various universities for his graduate study and, later, his teaching posts. After his initial move to America, much of his life was subsequently spent in travel, both physical and cultural: Stephanie Burt writes: “Ali’s later poems record trips back and

forth, for weddings and funerals among other reasons, and they look at his life as a traveler, or as an exile, or as a resident of more than one culture” (*Mad Heart Be Brave* 104). Burt offers a multitude of interesting paths, but I will focus on Ali “as a traveler,” especially as a traveler in America. Although critics and readers often approach Ali as a writer of place in Kashmir, his 1991 collection *A Nostalgist’s Map of America*, offers us his reactions to and interactions with America while he lived there, attending to it both as a kind of homeland and as a kind of visiting place.

The title of this collection prompts a few questions: for one, who is the nostalgist? Is it Ali? Secondly, if Ali is meant to be the nostalgist, is he nostalgic for America, his new residence, or for Kashmir, the homeland which he left? Can one be nostalgic for a place that one is not from, that one is currently inhabiting? The word “nostalgist,” too, evokes the threads of memory and mourning that Ali’s elegies often draw together; the poems of the collection are centered around loss, with titles such as “A Rehearsal of Loss” and “Leaving Sonora,” suggesting that his elegy travels not just through voice and trope but also by mourning cultures and peoples that he is visiting. In this collection, as in others, Ali mourns not a person, but a place. The poems more often meet America—not just the United States, but the continent of America, including Latin America—where it is, physically as well as historically. In her article on the collection, Xiwen Mai argues against a reading of the collection as focusing on nostalgia, melancholy, and loss as an exile promulgated by Lawrence Needham, Jannie Chiu, and Rajini Srikanth; instead, Mai focuses on how the poems fit into American travel poetry and demonstrates a cosmopolitanism “that foregrounds a sentiment of compassion across cultural boundaries and implies a critique of power” (1), an emphasis that I agree with. Of course, nostalgia is a major source for the collection, but the inspiration behind many of these poems is, as Mai identifies, not so much

nostalgia for what is familiar but compassion for what is not. For some of his poems, Ali imbues the American landscape with an interpersonal personal connection, such as the eponymous “A Nostalgist’s Map of America” which he dedicates to his friend Philip Paul Orlando, or extends the American landscape to with the geography of India, such as in “In Search of Evanescence.” Conversely, “I See Chile in My Rearview Mirror” captures Ali as an indirect witness, “seeing” and articulating lost pasts that are removed not only by time but also by his oblique participation in them.

I mentioned earlier Ramazani’s distinction between normative and melancholic mourning, and his claim that “modern elegists tend to enact the work not of normative but of ‘melancholic’ mourning,” melancholia as “a fierce resistance to solace” (*Poetry of Mourning* 4). While “Lenox Hill” resists solace, and to some extent “The Dacca Gauzes” does not necessarily accept solace, Ali’s poetry about America does not capitalize on the same personal immediacy. Through traveling elegy, he chooses to approach a culture different from his own, suggesting that it is not just a therapeutic mode for him, but an important poetic idiom. Does this cultural distance, then, mean that Ali in his American elegies is more normative than melancholic? How does traveling to a more distant object of mourning alter the emotional affect, and does Ali attempt to close this distance?

In “I See Chile in My Rearview Mirror,” Ali situates his elegy in a network of countries, moving in a dynamic tension between South American countries in political and environmental turmoil and the United States, where he is driving. Listed out, the South American countries are Argentina, Paraguay, Uruguay, Colombia, Brazil, Peru, and Chile (referenced metonymically through Santiago), and the states of the U.S. through which Ali is traveling are Utah and Arizona. As the title would suggest, the elegy is at a remove—Ali interacts with Chile and the

other South American countries via sight, and sight that looks backwards. He thus faces two ways—the one “driving toward Utah,” and the other looking back. Ramazani, writing about the poem as loco-descriptive poem, situates the poem specifically in Ali’s personal history, writing that “Nogales is on the US border with Mexico, with Tucson to its north, and to drive from Tucson, where Ali lived while teaching at the University of Arizona, is to take Interstate 10 north to Phoenix, changing there to Route 17 north to Sedona, with the Grand Canyon to the northwest” (*Poetry in a Global Age* 72). As Ramazani says, Ali describes a literal route that he took, which one can map out based on the cities he lists in the poem. However, the place names he describes work in the poem in much more complex ways than location; they also have political and emotional pain that Ali witnesses to, especially the eponymous country, Chile.

The quality of Ali’s witness is continually qualified through refraction in the poem. Ali associates tropes of water, dreams, reflection, mirrors, and glass, “sheer glass” (98), gathering together and dissociating versions of truth in sight, and suggesting that the rearview mirror acts as a scrying glass. Although one senses Ali’s shades of regret that “I’m driving // still north, always followed by that country” (98), as if he is in a cowardly retreat, he also implies that he is “keeping the entire hemisphere in view” (96) in a true way, that he can “see” these countries not physically (which is of course impossible) but see their souls. He begins by listing the colors of the countries, colors that begin as literal, such as the “black salt” of Uruguay,” and “Brazil blue tar,” but become more associative, such as “Columbia vermillion,” and “Peru // ... titanium white” (96). The stanza break that divides “Peru” from its color reflects his kaleidoscopic vision, taking in only fragments and impressions. These colors call back to Elizabeth Bishop’s poem “The Map,” in which she, another travel poet, describes countries in terms of colors associated literally as well as metaphorically. The black, blue, red, and white are important not only because

of their literal hues but also because they emphasize that Ali relates to these countries through vision.

In the concluding moments of the poem, Ali describes the horrific fate of an unnamed figure in Santiago, presumed to be in part based on Charles Horman, an American journalist killed in Chile with permission from the United States. While the poem is not mourning Horman per se, he uses the facts of his death to examine a figure who is at once an American, a writer, and a victim of the killing in Chile. Ali became familiar with Horman from the Costa-Gravas film *Missing*, made in 1982 about Horman's death in Chile and the subsequent search for him conducted by Horman's wife and father. Not only does Ali pick up on literal facts of Horman's death, such as that his body was stuffed "[i]n the lit stadium of Santiago," but also specific scenes from the movie, such as a scene in which Horman's wife watches, "from a blur / of tanks in Santiago, a white horse / gallops, riderless, chased by drunk soldiers // in a jeep; they're firing into the moon" (97). The movie inspired both Ali's compassion for Horman and for the citizens of Chile, all of whom suffered under the violence inflicted in an insidiously secret way by the United States. Horman, who is also a writer and traveler living in a country he is not native to, becomes an alter ego to Ali as well as one of the many victims of the general violence, which includes citizens as well as non-citizens. At the conclusion, the citizens "demand the republic // give up" only to find only corpses (98-99). This is not the last tragedy of the poem: the last loss is Ali's loss of sight, that "[t]he waters darken. The continent vanishes" (99). His access to the suffering countries is, despite his best efforts to "[tear] / the skin off the glass" (96), cannot see the darkened truth. This final move, in my reading, shifts it from traveling poetry in general to traveling elegy.

If the relationship between the speaker and Latin America is so fraught, we should ask more precisely who the speaker is, and how they relate to Chile they see “in [their] rearview mirror.” We can begin with a complication: in an interview, Ali says, “My ‘I’ always contains, well, at least some of the multitude.... The ‘I’ is not drawing attention simply to his own life but is interested in larger patterns” (*The Verse Book of Interviews* 143). This complication constrains and frees us; we don’t need to identify the “I” in “I See Chile” with a distinct historical person, including Ali, but can instead allow “larger patterns” of positionality to enter into the identity of the speaker, including the patterns of who he is not—Horman, Chilean, or Latin American. There is no need, though, to choose between whether the speaker is Ali or not-Ali; rather, the speaker seems to be an expanded Ali, since he uses the details of his biographical life to open the poem into a space the reader can inhabit. We can assume that the speaker is not a citizen of South America—even if just by the line “its citizens,” “it” being Chile—which is implicitly connected to all the other countries of South America—thus setting the speaker apart from the places he mourns.

We could then see the speaker, in the most conservative reading, as an inhabitant of America, if not a citizen of America. At the very least, the subject is traveling north as the elegy travels south, going in reverse from a point through America to several points in South America. Mai focuses on this subject as inhabiting an American stance, writing that the “pictures of the military coup in Peru and destruction of forest in Brazil in writing a journey through Utah...[force] questioning and thinking about the United States’s involvement in South American political and economic turmoil” (5). Although the speaker of this poem does not admit guilt directly, the elusive stance of the narrator might imply some degree of complicity, if not directly, then by the sheer absurdity of the difference between him “driving in the desert” while

“someone is running to catch the last bus” (97)—perhaps a reference to Horman’s wife in *Missing*, who misses a bus to the airport the day her husband is kidnapped. The indifference of the American landscape to the United States to the landscape of South America, an indifference fought meagerly by the speaker, who is putting distance between himself and it, calls attention not just to the freedom of the U.S. but also its unspoken incidents of violence. In this way, Ali admits the poem’s political stance against the imperialist violence of the United States. The element of travel implies a touristic movement away from a difficult political situation into some other place; the need for the speaker to flee from the turmoil is never stated and is assumed to be therefore weak. Because of its shade of tourism in traveling, and of ignorance in elegy, both “travel” and “elegy” taken on heavy burdens as terms in this poem.

I’ve argued that in “The Dacca Gauzes” and “Lenox Hill” Ali capitalizes on, but does not finally endorse, the inability of the elegy to be commensurate to what has been lost; in “I See Chile in My Rearview Mirror,” Ali takes seriously the fragility of memory, and suggests that while the trope of the poem may be particularly evocative for the traveling subject, it does little to help the sufferers. As I have argued the loss of the citizens is not the focus of the elegy, but the loss of the speaker’s ability to see, an ability that is necessarily and consciously mediated through reflections and dreams. In this poem, elegy becomes ethically suspect, not least because of its fraught political questions. Weisman’s description of elegy as particularly self-conscious comes to fore in this poem, foregrounding the suffering subject in the face of widespread political suffering, and thus placing the reader in the same place of sympathetic discomfort that the speaker himself feels. The speaker suffers from his otherness while also straining to articulate the horrors spread about him. When he mourns the loss of vision, then, is he mourning himself, or is he mourning the horrors he knows are happening but can no longer see? The reader, no

matter their own identity, occupies this unsure space, caught between complicity and compassion, sorrowing at the loss of vision, and yet feeling guilt about their freedom to escape. The tonal conclusion of this elegy does not end with a gesture out to the lost beloved, but with a retreat to the shadowed interior, enacting and even accepting a moral failure.

However, Ali tempers the moral horror of the ending, perhaps paradoxically, by expanding the reach of the losses he cannot solve. He complicates the traveling of this poem by mourning not just his lack of ability to close the elegiac distance in space but also his lack of ability to close the distance between himself and Indigenous Americans in time. While initially we could read this move as expanding his complicity to an impossibly wide net, so impossible as to induce despair, this move implies a kind of forgiveness for humans, carried on by large and inevitable forces beyond complete individual power such as time and the nation. In the same way that he is moving away from Latin America in space, he is also moving away from the ruins he sees in time, ceaselessly and perhaps inevitably:

.... I'm passing skeletal
 figures carved in 700 B.C.
 Whoever deciphers these canyon walls
 remains forsaken, alone with history,
 no harbor for his dream. (97-98)

There is again the tone of complicity in that he is “passing” these figures, that he sees them and then moves on. The solution he suggests is to provide a cultural space for “whoever deciphers” them, a figure who in the present “remains forsaken, alone with history.” This suggests that Indigenous culture is not just lost to time, but willfully abandoned by the white supremacist system of culture. At the time of the poem, the figures are abandoned to the past and in the

present. The lack of “harbor for his dream,” not Ali’s dream but the deciphering figure’s, indicates again the United States’ indifference, and therefore unspoken violence, to those it keeps without its sociopolitical purview. This deciphering figure is, like the person who misses the last bus, another traveler who does not escape; Ali’s traveling elegy does not just mourn loss but people that fail to travel away from their own destruction. This violence is not just passive, of course, but deliberate and menacingly quiet, even here. Still, Ali suggests that, however delayed this dream of recovery may be, the vessel of loss and memory is indeed in art objects, in their creation, conservation, and interpretation. His elegy is not the same dream as this figure, but does not pretend to decipher the markings, he does make a gesture to refuse them to be “alone in history” by creating a space for them in his poem.

How do these figures alter how we read these “skeletal / figures” in light of Latin America? The poem seems to be associating the figures in North America and the countries in Latin America as both lost to themselves and, the narrator fears, the world. As an added dimension, since the skeletal figures are described as particularly ancient, Ali also seems to be suggesting the inevitable passage of time, and our duty to ensure that “whoever deciphers [the] walls” of lost times may articulate their “dream.” A hope in elegy, then, emerges, as the harbor for lost cultures to land in so that they are not so lost. In “Leaving Sonora,” Ali writes, “The desert insists, always: Be faithful, / even to those who no longer exist” (29), suggesting that faith to what has been lost is our responsibility, as poets and readers. As Mai writes, this compassionate urge moves against Needham’s interpretation that “[Ali’s poetry] shatters the Self and its comforting illusions and subverts the historical understanding on which it depends” (Needham 124). Rather than shatter the self, Ali focuses on the positionality of the self, and how historical understandings are necessary for us to preserve and re-articulate such that nobody is

“alone with history,” even if certain historical understandings are not, like Ali’s, from within the culture.

With all this in mind, I return to the question I asked earlier: where does this poem land on a scale of normative versus melancholic mourning? With its tone of self-doubt and even despair, Ali adopts a melancholic stance towards his inability to protect suffering groups of people. Memory, too, is framed in reference to the land, thus implying that cultural memory is linked inextricably with the land, and thus that without being on the land where memory was made, it cannot be fully accessed or realized. When the poem is melancholic, it is melancholic so as to ask for forgiveness, to debase the speaker before their ignorance and helplessness, or, more wickedly, their complicity and cowardice. However, there is no need to choose between melancholy and compassion; like in “Lenox Hill,” the frustration Ali captures in his melancholic approach signals his deep compassion for those who suffer. Spargo argues that anti-consolation becomes a kind of consolation: “it is precisely because our cultural modes of memory so often neglect the other whom they would remember that unresolved mourning becomes a dissenting act, a sign of irremissible ethical meaning” (6). In this vein, I am inclined to read the poem as a double-elegy, mourning in one poem both the widespread political and cultural strife of Latin America specifically and, more generally, an individual’s political and imaginative constraints.

Perhaps the second mourning is symptomatic of globalization: a person can only be from a certain number of places, and nobody is really a citizen of everywhere. Appiah distinguishes between our moral obligations to a nation, which “matters...for the same reason that football and opera matter: as things desired by autonomous agents, whose autonomous desires we ought to acknowledge and take account of, even if we cannot always accede to them,” and our obligations to a state, which “matter morally, intrinsically...not because people care about them but because

they regulate our lives through forms of coercion that will always require moral justification” (624). The poem does not attend to national differences for the sake of the nation, but rather differences in state, both in the sense of a political state—either in the United States or Latin America—and in a state of existence—whether free or trapped. In this way, the poem becomes a sort of parable of the inverse relationship between ethical care, which is ideally expanded by globalization, and political power or personal responsibility, which cannot encompass the ethical concern. This poem runs up against cosmopolitan utopia that critics often recommend when reading Ali: Abin Shakraborty claims that “[m]emory becomes for [Ali] both a path to his own origins and a route beyond those originary narratives for a hundred different identities....” (68). However freely Ali often approaches cultural borders, he emphasizes most of all his three cultures and does not pretend to have “a hundred different identities.” Often his three most influential cultural origins can be mined for reach and expansive meanings, but they are constrained in number.

Nonetheless, memory, merging under these cultural constraints with imagination, can and should attempt to reach further than its grasp. In “Globalisation and the Transnation and Utopia,” Bill Ashcroft argues what we can read as a version of Shakraborty’s argument that can nonetheless be reworked into our understanding of Ali:

[m]emory is the smooth space that flows through and around the striated space of history, the space of the nation state and all structures of [identity]. Ironically, memory through the medium of literature becomes the vehicle of potentiality rather than stasis.... This space of transformation, this space of literature, is the smooth space of the transnation. (21-22)

While Ali performs this deftness of cultural fluency in “The Dacca Gauzes,” and especially in “Lenox Hill,” he here attends to the limits of the nation rather than treat the poetic space as “smooth.” “I See Chile in My Rearview Mirror” treats national divides as tragically rigid in terms of power, but not in terms of care. It is the tension between that he mourns, a combination of the potentiality and stasis that Ashcroft mentions. Again, both authors overemphasize the ease and availability of traveling. To travel through a shared family story is one thing, and to travel through form is another, but to travel to a land as a true visitor is another. This poem questions the ability of elegist to be commensurate to what has been lost, but Ali attempts poetic justice nevertheless, both straining and expanding to mediate multicultural responsibilities through art. As the speaker travels forward, his elegy travels back.

4. Coda

In an interview with Eric Gamalinda, Ali describes what he means when he calls himself an exile: “I’m not an exile technically, because I haven’t been kicked out of any place, but temperamentally I would say I’m an exile, because it has an emotional resonance.... The ability to inhabit several circumstances and several historical and national backgrounds simultaneously makes up the exilic....” Here, Ali, a secular Shi’a Muslim from Hindu-dominated Kashmir who spent much of his working life in America confesses that being an exile is a temperamental approach to the state of living “among” places. To call oneself an “exile” is to, in a sense, mourn some homeland that has been left behind and is impossible to return to, a negative but emotionally evocative state. After all, in an interview with Christine Benvenuto, Ali says, perhaps shockingly, “You constantly meet people who are immigrants and who say, oh, I feel like I’ve lost my culture and I’ve lost my roots, and I say please don’t be so fussy about it. The

airplanes work” (261). This rather glib response suggests that while Ali enjoys “exile” for its resonance, he sees “travel” as a practical solution to an otherwise emotionally exhausting issue. While one does not have to choose between “exile” or “traveler” at every turn, I want to emphasize in this paper Ali as traveler to explore what traveling in the face of loss can offer.

Ali often describes himself as a poet of temperament but does not always explicate what that temperament is. When I first read him, I thought I understood what that temperament was: melancholic, elegiac, mournful, always following in the spaces something left behind. However, after spending more time with him, I can see that Ali’s lushness of language, his natural curiosity, his humor, his wit, all contribute to him as a poet of travel: travel over exile, since travel is open, and exile is lost. Of course, he is both. But rather than accept Ali simply as a suffering poet, stuck in articulating personal or cultural trauma, I want to offer a vision of him as an open, compassionate poet seeing opportunity in his tri-cultural opportunities. In his article “Cosmopolitan Patriots,” a group to which Ali might belong, Appiah writes that

many [people] would move; and that would mean that cultural practices would travel also (as they have always travelled). The result would be a world in which each local form of human life was the result of long-term and persistent processes of cultural hybridization: a world, in that respect, much like the world we live in now. (619)

Here, Appiah describes both the increasing sense of cultural travel and sense that cultures have always traveled in some sense, that what it is to be a culture involves travel, much like how ErlI describes memory and Ramazani, poetry. Culture does not travel in a general way, Appiah suggests, but when it is motivated by ideals and needs, such as, in his argument, liberalism, and in mine, loss.

In these three poems, we have seen traveling elegy in methodology, time, and space. While “The Dacca Gauzes” represents the methodology, “Lenox Hill” the time, and “I See Chile in My Rearview Mirror” the space, each of these poems weaves in all the elements, questioning and arguing the ability of the poem to travel as the poet travels in the face of loss. To read elegy as traveling, instead of as trauma or exile, is to prevent elegy from dying in the face of death. Trauma and exile are nouns, grammatical stopping places that summarize and locate meaning. Traveling, though, necessitates motion, and thus becomes a process rather than a context. The key distinction between exile and traveling, though, is, at heart, the question of will, even of consent. The exile is torn from home; the traveler willingly departs, knowing they can return. Conceived of in this way, associating elegy with travel over exile may seem surprising, since all the losses these poems mourn were unwillingly taken. While Ali admits to and explores the discomfort of traveling, in “The Dacca Gauzes” and especially “I See Chile in My Rearview Mirror,” traveling becomes for him and the reader an opportunity to connect. Losses, cultural and personal, do not happen in a vacuum, but rather participate in a network of loss, which prompts a network of memory. Through Ali’s poems, we can travel to a place of consideration where we participate in that network of memory, which even if we leave at the end of the poem, we can travel back to and participate in.

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