

Chapter Three

PLACE: INDEFINITE DETENTION AND FORMS OF RESISTANCE IN ANGEL ISLAND POETRY

THIS CHAPTER COMBINES medieval literary analysis and ecocriticism to consider the poetic corpus (hundreds of lyrics) that Chinese detainees carved into the wooden walls of detention barracks of the Angel Island Immigration Station, a site in San Francisco Bay currently registered by the United States as a National Historic Landmark due to its cultural significance. Located in waters a boat ride away from the city of San Francisco, CA, this so-called “Ellis Island of the West” was where many newcomers from Asia were processed as they sought entry into the US and it also operated as an immigration detention center from 1910–1940. The majority of the detainees were Chinese with some staying as long as months or years before being deported or “landed” (granted entry into the US). Thick with literary allusions and references to imprisonment and injustice in Chinese myths and literary classics, the mostly anonymous and untitled



Figure 6: Two-story wooden barracks at the former US Immigration Station at Angel Island in the San Francisco Bay. It operated as a detention center primarily for Chinese migrants from 1910–1940, and the restored site is now a National Historic Landmark. July 2019. Photo by the author.

poems that the detainees composed while on Angel Island adapted medieval lyric forms (conventionalized in the Tang Dynasty) for a new geopolitical environment.

Crafting new poetic terms not used in medieval lyrics themselves, the detainee-poets repeatedly invoked the modern “wooden house” (木屋) or “wooden building” (木樓) as a prison and an uncanny home. The barracks of Angel Island, situated within a garden landscape inaccessible to the detainees themselves, were a site of frustration, humiliation, longing, and anger. In this chapter, I explore how detainees drew upon a rich tradition of medieval Chinese lyrics to testify to their own lived experiences of incarceration, and I conclude by reflecting on the importance of this “wooden building” as a site of cultural memory and activism today.

Previous chapters in this book have examined how elite Chinese Americans (or Chinese immigrants seeking US citizenship) used medieval imagery or genres to address urgent issues of racism, discrimination, and cultural belonging. During the earlier part of the twentieth century, Chinese immigrants who were scholars or merchants were not subjected to restrictions as harsh as those for incoming laborers, and my discussion of Angel Island poetry focuses on experiences of incarcerated migrants who were often less privileged and hailed from humble village origins.

This chapter has three main strands. First, I provide historical context and sociopolitical background for the composition of Angel Island poetry itself. Second, I discuss major stylistic features of Tang-era regulated verse forms, as well as some of their original medieval literary and cultural contexts. Third, I consider how Angel Island poetry adapts and reshapes the meanings of the physical environment to enact sustained forms of resistance to racial injustice. Not only has the adaptation of Chinese medieval poetry at Angel Island enabled new kinds of community and cultural memory even generations after the immigration station closed, but the Angel Island barracks themselves have become an important archive attesting to collective experiences of racial discrimination and forced incarceration. Most importantly, the site has set key foundations for activist solidarities across ethnic groups that carry over into the present.

Sociopolitical Landscape of Angel Island

I begin with some social and environmental context for Angel Island itself. In contrast to Ellis Island on the East Coast (where immigrants seeking entry into the US primarily from Europe were processed within hours), the Angel Island Immigration Station “was built in 1910 to better enforce the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which barred Chinese laborers from the country,” and most of the arrivals at this location came from Asia with over 70 percent of the detainees at any given time being Chinese,¹ and the vast majority of these were young men between 14 and 18 years of age.² After the 1906 San Francisco earthquake destroyed public birth records, many incoming Chinese circumvented restrictive racist exclusion laws by purchasing paperwork presenting themselves as blood relatives of US citizens; such newcomers were “landed” only if immigration offi-

1 Yung, “Poetry and Politics.”

2 Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation, “Chinese Poetry of the Detention Barracks.”

cials were satisfied they proved their cases. Upon their arrival Chinese migrants were segregated by gender, separated from their children, endured painstakingly grueling interrogations and invasive medical exams, and were held in crowded wooden barracks.

Even white observers deplored the poor living conditions of the detainees in the barracks; this space was a dark, cramped fire hazard,³ and medical authorities associated the detained Chinese themselves with stench and vermin.⁴ As social historian Nayan Shah has observed: "From the turn of the century until 1940, the ordeal of immigration for Chinese and other Asian migrants to San Francisco began with medical inspection at Angel Island," and an invasive "military-style" protocol that "required submission to nude physical exams and the inspection of body parts" formed "part of an emerging worldwide network of quarantine and health inspection" serving as "the 'imperial defence' against the potential invasion of epidemic diseases into metropolitan ports in North America and Europe."⁵ Although white employees and their families could experience Angel Island's landscape as a cultivated space of enjoyment and leisure (including a tree-lined garden walk known as the Tar Path or the Natural Way),⁶ Chinese detainees primarily experienced the island as a shameful prison and a dehumanizing space of confinement.

Chinese poetry brushed upon and carved into the walls of the "wooden building" attests to the power of anonymity as a strategy to critique racial injustice when no other options are available. Immigration Commissioner Hart Hyatt North, who initially supervised the station, ordered the "graffiti" on walls to be filled with putty and painted over within months after the station opened—but the detainees continued to write upon and carve into the walls anyway, with the shrinking putty revealing layers of poetry as the paint cracked over time.⁷ Much of this poetry was documented and brought to public attention decades after the immigration station was closed, and I will discuss later in this chapter the story of the "rediscovery" of the poetry and activist efforts to preserve Angel Island as a site of cultural memory. During the decades over which these poems were composed, the detainees looked to the distant past to express their current feelings, with their acts of writing and inscribing as collaborative forms of resistance.

In composing their lyric inscriptions, the detainee-poets drew primarily upon literary conventions that had been established in the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE), which scholars of Chinese literary history such as Manling Luo identify as China's "late medi-

3 Lai, Lim, and Yung, *Island*; on "Yellow Peril" discourses, 5; on crowded conditions, 24.

4 Lee and Yung, *Immigrant Gateway*; on Angel Island being deemed "unfit for habitation by reason of vermin and stench," 60. M. W. Glover, Assistant Surgeon, stated: "The walls and ceilings are sheathed with soft wood, unpainted ... This covering absorbs and retains the odorous emanations of the aliens; it affords a safe hiding place for the vermin also common among Asiatics and it lends itself to drawings and writings. The character of the latter I know not, but the obscenity of the former is apparent" (November 21, 1910) ("Detention Barracks" informational signpost, US Immigration Station, Angel Island State Park, San Francisco, CA).

5 Shah, *Contagious Divides*, 179.

6 Davison and Meier, et al., *Cultural Landscape Report*, 46–47 and n111.

7 Lai, Lim, and Yung, *Island*, 37.

eval" period with the formative conventions of literati poetry and its storytelling contexts extending into the Song Dynasty (960–1279 CE), a timeframe coinciding with Europe's medieval past.⁸ Tang-era poetry is most familiar to Chinese diaspora audiences for recounting the experiences of dispersed and homesick literati (scholar-officials) in exile, and as Xiaofei Tian has observed, the language such poets use is classified linguistically as Middle Chinese (an era in the history of the language from the sixth through the twelfth century CE) to mark a transition from ancient or "classical" Chinese to a form of verse relying upon "balancing the tones of Middle Chinese prosody" which were "honored and perfected by Tang dynasty poets" to become the basis of what is often called "regulated verse."⁹ Tsung-Cheng Lin has shown how Tang literati poets dispatched far from home often cast themselves as weary "knights-errant" (遊俠) or heroic figures in transit,¹⁰ and modern Chinese migrants incarcerated in the barracks had some basic familiarity with Tang-era forms and conventions from their hometown educations.¹¹ These Chinese detainee-poets repurposed literary conventions from what was originally a far-flung medieval Chinese network of literati poets to suit a newly shared physical and sociopolitical environment.

Queer theorist and medievalist Carolyn Dinshaw has richly explored her own racial positioning as an Asian American and the process of "making affective connections ... across time," making "histories manifest by juxtaposition, [and] by making entities past and present touch."¹² The wooden building which once had decades of inscriptions covering almost every surface of its walls renders disparate voices of detainees (and later, prisoners of war) tangible in physical form. Expanding on Dinshaw's tactile metaphors of time and space, queer medievalist Wan-Chuan Kao reflects on his own relationship to medieval texts as a scholar of Chinese ancestry and considers how thinking beyond "modernity's linear temporality" can create a "more intimate and queer understanding of the interconnections among objects, persons, and events."¹³ Medieval lyrics produced by bodies in close proximity in physical space and written upon surfaces of the surrounding walls convey the lived experiences of Chinese detainees: their emplacement, collective memory, and conditions of their social and political environment. Metaphors of touch, and attention to intimate connections among persons and objects, are appropriate for exploring both the architectural and environmental grounds of detention poetry.

⁸ Luo, *Literati Storytelling*, 4–5.

⁹ Tian, "Pentasyllabic *Shi* Poetry," 141.

¹⁰ Lin, "Knight-Errantry."

¹¹ So crucial is the Tang Dynasty in diasporic Chinese culture that the term for "Chinatown" used in San Francisco and early Chinatowns elsewhere is 唐人街 ("Tang People Street").

¹² Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 12. See also Dinshaw, "Pale Faces," 20.

¹³ Kao, "#palefacesmatter?"

Fixed Forms and Ecopoetics

In terms of their poetic structure, the vast majority of the Angel Island inscriptions are composed in “regulated verse forms” with fixed patterns of character-based line length, tonal patterns, and rhyme schemes established in the Tang era, as Steven G. Yao and many others have noted.¹⁴ Yunte Huang further characterizes such poetry in its material form as *tibishi* (題壁詩 or literally “poetry inscribed on the wall”), a subgenre of Chinese travel poetry written on walls as a public outlet for anonymous travelers.¹⁵ My analysis of these lyrics inscribed in the wooden building of the men’s barracks contextualizes these poems as imaginative reinventions of Tang-era representations of the Chinese knight errant or literati scholar in exile. Tsung-Cheng Lin extends an established analytical framework of “knight-errantry” within Chinese literary scholarship to contextualize Tang “frontier poems” and the pervasive themes of injustice and homesickness exemplified in the poetry of prominent male literati poets,¹⁶ and Ao Wang has attended to the deep intimacies of homosocial “literati friendship” in Tang-era poetry expressed by dispersed civil servants, who often communicated with one another via inscriptions on the walls of post houses.¹⁷ In a marked contrast to medieval European chivalric genres, Chinese medieval poetry about men traveling far from home tends not to emphasize valiant deeds, adventure, and conquest so much as the protagonists’ feelings of war weariness, anger at injustice, and empathy with fellow sufferers. During their time incarcerated on Angel Island, Chinese detainees adapted longstanding gendered literary expressions of thwarted mobility and powerlessness to suit the shared space of the men’s barracks.

One of the most iconic poems of displacement and homesickness in Chinese literary tradition is a work by famous Tang literati poet Li Bai (李白). Commonly known as “Quiet Night Thoughts” (靜夜思), Li Bai’s poem is anthologized in the famous later anthology *The Three Hundred Tang Poems* (唐詩三百首) and it remains familiar today to schoolchildren across the Chinese diaspora. This well-known pentasyllabic regulated verse form uses a strict structure of rhyme and total patterning and the text of the poem remains very faintly inscribed on a wall of Room 105 of the former men’s barracks on Angel Island:

床前明月光
疑是地上霜
舉頭望明月
低頭思故鄉

Before [my] bed [the] moonlight [is] bright
[I] misbelieve [it] is frost on ground
Raise [my] head [and] look [at the] bright moon
Lower [my] head [and] think [of] hometown

¹⁴ Yao, “Transplantation and Modernity,” 311–14; Lee and Yung, *Immigrant Gateway*, 103–4; Lai, Lim, and Yung, *Island*, 37; Liu, “Analysis of Poems Inscribed”; Leong, *Wild Geese Sorrow*, xxi-xxiv and 164.

¹⁵ Huang, *Transpacific Imaginations*, 105.

¹⁶ Lin, “Knight-Errantry.”

¹⁷ Wang, “Literati Friendship,” 250–51.

Even though the poems carved into the walls of the Angel Island barracks are read in the traditional Chinese manner of columns of text reading from right to left, I present the Chinese poems in left-to-right horizontal lines in order to make the parallels to the English translations more evident. My unpoetic literal translation supplies first-person pronouns (“I” and “my”) not used in traditional Chinese poetry but grammatically required when translating such poetry into English. Punctuation is not present in the original Chinese poems, but it is usually supplied by later textual editors. In this work, the poetic speaker is displaced or in exile; moonlight coming through a window is ambiguously mistaken for ground frost, troubling distinctions between a built interior space (a bed chamber) and an external environment (natural landscape). The speaker gazes at the moon—an implicit allusion to the annual Mid-Autumn Festival when family reunions occur—which reminds the poet of home.

One moving modern transformation of Li Bai’s poem among the lyrics written at Angel Island is the rare occurrence of a poem bearing a title: “Mid-Autumn Festival” (中秋偶感). I quote the opening of this poem in Chinese with modernized punctuation, followed by an English translation by Chinese American poet Jeffrey Thomas Leong:

夜涼僵臥鐵床中，
窗前月姊透照儂。
悶來起立寒窗下 [...]

Cool nights lying on the steel bunk.
Through a window, the moon goddess shines down on me.
Bored, I rise and stand beneath cold glass. [...] ¹⁸

Marking the temporal and natural cycles of Li Bai’s medieval poem with its new title, this modern anonymous poem transfers moonlight of Li Bai’s dwelling into the space of a wooden barrack with a cold glass window and a steel bed (床 which Leong translates as “bunk”). Another anonymous modern poem begins with the two characters for “wooden house” (木屋) followed by a reference to an open window, the moon, and homesickness:

木屋閒來把窗開，
曉風明月共徘徊。
故鄉遠憶雲山斷，
小島微聞寒雁哀。
失路英雄空說劍，
窮途騷士且登台。
應知國弱人心死，
何事囚困此處來？

Bored in the wood house I held open a window,
Dawn breezes, the day-bright moon, linger together.
In distant memory, an old village, hills obscured by clouds,
On this small island, tiny cries of wild geese sorrow.

18 Leong, *Wild Geese Sorrow*, Poem 29, pp. 62–63.

The mighty hero who's lost his way speaks emptily of the sword,
 A troubled scholar on a poor road writes only high poems.
 You should know when a country is weak,
 the people's spirit dies.
 How else have we come to be trapped here as prisoners?¹⁹

One line in this poem has a strong localizing effect: 小島微聞寒雁哀 (“On this small island, tiny cries of wild geese sorrow”).²⁰ This image touchingly evokes the environment of Angel Island: the experience of looking out a window to see “migratory waterfowl” flying over San Francisco Bay.²¹ In this poem, the image of freely moving migratory birds marks a contrast to the incarcerated detainees or “prisoners,” who are either positioned as thwarted knights-errant whose lives are now deprived of meaning (“The mighty hero ... speaks emptily of the sword”), or as literati or civil servants (the “troubled scholar on a poor road”) who are dispatched to bleak environments far from community or opportunities for social advancement.

A modern poem entitled 深夜偶感 (“Deep Night”) makes yet another nod to Li Bai through its title, and the anonymous poet who signs the work as 台山余題 (“Yee of Toishan”) recreates Angel Island’s soundscape and atmosphere even more vividly: through the sound of the wind, feeling of fog, and surrounding inhuman noise (crickets).²²

夜靜微聞風嘯聲，
 形影傷情見景詠。
 雲霧潺潺也暗天，
 蟲聲唧唧月微明。
 悲苦相連天相遣，
 愁人獨坐倚窗邊。

In the still of night, small sounds are a howling wind.
 Shadows, an ache of old wounds, so I recite verse:

Fog and mist drift, a gloomy sky,
 Insects rub crick-crack beneath the moon’s faint light.
 My sad and bitter face matches these heavens.
 A worried man sits alone, leans at the window’s sill.²³

The surrounding environment shapes this poem’s composition, with “the natural landscape ... represent[ing] inner terrain, with natural scenes both reflecting and expressing the poet’s affective state.”²⁴ I would emphasize in this context how both built structures and natural metaphors interact to produce the poet’s affective states. A similar poem 感景拙詠 (“Perceiving the Landscape, I Compose This Worthless Verse”) enmeshes the built environment with its beyond-human surroundings: 滄海圓孤峰， / 崎嶇困牢籠。

¹⁹ Ibid., Poem 10, pp. 22–23.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 160.

²² Ibid., “Deep Night,” Poem 20, pp. 44–45; Lai, Lim, and Yung, *Island*, Poem 24, pp. 66–67.

²³ Leong, *Wild Geese Sorrow*, Poem 20, pp. 44–45.

²⁴ Bashford, et al., “Geographies of Commemoration,” 20.

[...] 鴻使莫尋蹤 (“Blue-green ocean encircles a solitary peak, / Rugged hills edge this prison cage. [...] Wild geese make no trace”).²⁵

I have chosen to present these poems along with modern English translations by Jeffrey Thomas Leong, a Chinese American poet whose father was a “paper son” who entered the US via Angel Island. Leong preserves the line length and imagery of the Chinese poems and at times uses the term “detained/detainee” rather than a more poetic “prisoner” or “captive.”²⁶ Leong aims for English equivalents that avoid being “wooden or bizarrely 19th century and incomprehensible.”²⁷ A “wooden” metaphor is often used by translators to describe unpoetic, word-for-word renditions of texts, but I suggest that the materiality of the wood metaphor warrants careful attention in the context of the barracks as a “wooden building.” Tang poetry proved useful for Chinese detainees to express affective longing and environmental displacement while also physically transforming their living space through acts of inscription. The fixed structures of “regulated verse” convey a strategy of working within constraints, demonstrating how detainees bore witness to, and resisted, their own restricted mobility. One poem even embeds a political statement through an acrostic, with the first character of each column of text reading in sequence as 埃崙待剷 or “Island awaits leveling” (i.e., raze or abolish Angel Island).²⁸

A number of the poems evoke both the interior and environmental space of the barracks through allusions to medieval narratives. One untitled poem alludes to the *Ballad of Mulan* (木蘭辭), the famous oral legend, possibly composed as early as the sixth century CE,²⁹ about a woman who dons masculine armor and acquires weapons to fight on her father’s behalf. Through its oblique references to the story of Mulan, this lyric subtly transforms the gendered dimensions of the medieval Chinese knight-errant motif.³⁰ The original text opens with the sounds of the female protagonist who sighs as she is weaving in front of the door,³¹ but the modern Angel Island poem adapting this scene opens with the Chinese characters for “four walls” (四壁) and the sound of outdoor crickets (蟲唧唧 or “the insects chirp”) and then constructs the barracks as a space crowded with many sighing inhabitants (居人多歎息 “The inmates often sigh”).³² In contrast to the exceptional woman warrior Mulan—who honorably fights in battles in far-off lands on her father’s behalf, and who also returns home to reunite with family—these incarcerated men collectively languish and sigh in inglorious frustration.

²⁵ Leong, *Wild Geese Sorrow*, Poem 62, pp. 134–35.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, Poem 23, pp. 50–51; Poem 68, pp. 148–49.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, xxi.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 170, note 57, about Poem 57. A number of poems suggest anger and revenge; e.g., a poet abandons the brush (vocation as a scholar) and closes by evoking a warrior awaiting vengeance against “barbarians” (Lai, Lim, and Yung, *Island*, Poem 66, pp. 100–101).

²⁹ Lai, Lim, and Yung, *Island*, Poem 26, pp. 68–69.

³⁰ On the female warrior motif in medieval Chinese literati poetry, see Luo, “Woman Avenger.”

³¹ Feng, “Ballad of Mulan.” See also Chin, “Ye Asian American Writers,” 4–6.

³² Lai, Lim, and Yung, *Island*, Poem 26, pp. 68–69.

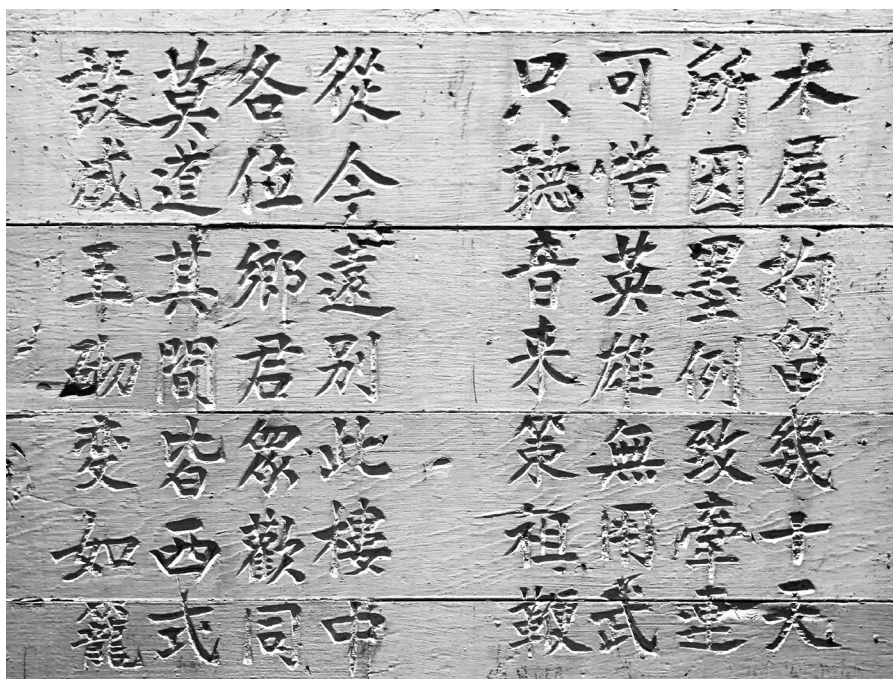


Figure 7: Chinese poetry based on Tang-era lyric forms, composed by an anonymous Mexican migrant, carved into a wooden wall of the former men's barracks of the US Immigration Station at Angel Island in the San Francisco Bay. The first two characters (reading top down from the rightmost column) are 木屋, "wooden house." July 2019. Photo by the author.

One Angel Island poem that transforms a medieval Chinese social environment by drawing attention to the physical conditions of incarceration derives from a lyric originally entitled 陋室銘 (often translated as "Inscription on a Crude Dwelling") by Tang literati poet Liu Yuxi (劉禹錫).³³ The modern anonymous Angel Island counterpart bears the title 木屋銘 or in Leong's rendition "Muhk Nguk Ming (Inscribed Upon the Wood House)," the first two characters "Muhk Nguk" (木屋) materializing the "Wood House," and the second stanza of the poem transforms the Tang poet's secluded abode with its green moss-covered steps into a bleak modern wooden building of four walls (四壁) that are painted green (油漆綠) on the inside, and enclosed by the green grass (草色青) of the island itself.³⁴ Transplanting poetic conventions into a new geospatial environ-

³³ Leong, *Wild Geese Sorrow*, Poem 31, entitled here "Lou Shi Ming (Inscription About a Crude Dwelling)," 66–67.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, Poem 32, pp. 68–69; Lai, Lim, and Yung, *Island*, Poem 44, pp. 82–83. The spatial coordinates are disorienting given the location of this poem carved into the barracks building. The barracks run in an east-west direction, making the poet's reference to seeing a hospital by gazing south impossible (the hospital and other buildings could be seen from the north window, but not the south). Lai, Lim, and Yung, *Island*, 82n31.

ment, the detainee-poets turn medieval Chinese solitary dwellings into confining modern barracks.

One visually striking poem found on a lavatory room wall originally covered with dark green paint was composed by a Chinese refugee from Mexico who had fled due to the Mexican Expulsion Order of 1931, and it ends with the vivid image of a cage (籠) made of jade (玉):

木屋拘留幾十天，
所囚墨例致牽連。
可惜英雄無用武，
只聽音來策祖鞭。

從今遠別此樓中，
各位鄉君眾歡同。
莫道其間皆西式，
設成玉砌變如籠。

Detained in the wood house several weeks,
It's because of Mexico's exclusion law which implicates me.
It's a pity heroes don't use weapons.
I await word to snap Zu's whip.

From here on, I'll travel far from this two-story building.
Each and every villager will share a happiness.
Don't idolize everything that's Western-style.
Even if cut from jade, these walls are
nothing but a cage.³⁵

This poem not only attests to Chinese immigration beyond transpacific trajectories (i.e., transit via Mexico);³⁶ it also marks a noteworthy survival of skilled calligraphy by a talented author or scribe. The lofty reference to Zu Di (祖逖), a Chinese hero from the Western Jin Dynasty (265–316 CE) and a fierce and ambitious warrior, sets up what Yao calls “the bitterness of having one’s dreams snuffed out by the cold reality of a racist national immigration policy that sanction[s] imprisonment of a select group of people” on the basis of their country of origin.³⁷ In lieu of taking arms and seeking justice, the detainee-poet carves into the “jade” walls. Within the Angel Island barracks today, a full-scale reproduction of this poem, covered with dark-green paint recreating the original hue of the painted wall, allows a visitor to literally touch the past.

By exploring how detention poetry transforms the meanings of a physical environment, I seek to understand the symbiotic relationship of built environment and organic matter. The repeated use of phrases such as “wooden house” (木屋) or “wooden building” (木樓)—epithets collectively invented by the detainees inhabiting a shared space—

35 Leong, *Wild Geese Sorrow*, Poem 23, pp. 50–51. The Chinese in this quotation follows Lai, Lim, and Yung, *Island*, Poem 135, pp. 162–63.

36 For an Angel Island poem by a migrant en route to Cuba, see Lai, Lim, and Yung, *Island*, Poem 131, pp. 158–59.

37 Yao, “Transplantation and Modernity,” 303.

make the wooden inscriptions a resilient human counter-history to bleak systems of border policing and incarceration. Carving into the bare California redwood walls alters the building's organic matter, monumentalizing Chinese labor in the space of the detention barracks. Inscription was a recursive act of resistance as the "graffiti" was repeatedly filled and painted over, with freshly made poems accruing additional meanings through emplacement. The painted green walls become poetically transmuted from the Tang scholar's dwelling or home into an uncanny jade cage, and the physicality of writing surfaces richly layer the cross-historical resonance of the inscriptions.

In a thickly nuanced formal analysis of what Leong numbers Poem 10, Sheng-mei Ma considers how the modern detainee adapts "the imageries" of a medieval Chinese "literati tradition" into an "elegant poetic form," including a pictographic "word game" or set of visual puns through the literary phrase 囹圄, which literally translates as "prisoner incarcerated."³⁸ The first character depicts a person (人) in a box (口), and the second uses the Chinese radical or component symbol for wood (木) in a box (口), and the "graffitist accrues power" by playfully transforming "the detainee's physical condition" of being "trapped inside the square" of the wooden two-storied detention center now converted into a two-storied "wooden tower" (木樓).³⁹

Medieval literary scholars such as Marisa Galvez have developed robust critical modes for assessing the "whole book" of European lyric anthologies including "multiauthor and anonymous" anthologies "contained in a manuscript codex or volume of parchment leaves bound together in book form."⁴⁰ The "multiauthor and anonymous" poetic anthology that Chinese detainees constructed at Angel Island becomes discernable not as a "whole book" nor "manuscript codex" but as a set of inscriptions in three-dimensional space, and as an architectural miscellany the entire wooden building forms a poetic ecosystem. The Angel Island barracks, in codicological terms, can be understood as a mostly anonymous and collaboratively authored architectural miscellany.

As Carissa M. Harris states in a different context, anthologies of medieval lyrics can create "a transhistorical affective space" that builds empathy between readers across time,⁴¹ and just as lyrics "[share] textual space in a manuscript," so too can "bodies occupying physical space with one another" create an "affective space of identification between real and fictional subjects across time, crackling irresistibly between past and present like electricity."⁴² It is both the close quarters of the barracks, as well as the crowded placement of poetry on its walls, that energize circuits of affect between the past and present.

The placement of poems on the walls, especially in the case of paired poems directly echoing or revising one another, suggest a collaborating community of poets while also attesting to the lived presence of bodies sharing a physical space. The acrostic "abolish

38 Ma, *Asia in Flight*, 80.

39 Ibid., 80–81.

40 Galvez, *Songbook*, 2.

41 Harris, *Obscene Pedagogies*, 191.

42 Ibid., 193.



Figure 8: Faint sketch of an ancestral shrine (with multiple family surnames) carved into a wall on the second floor of the former barracks of the US Immigration Station at Angel Island in the San Francisco Bay. July 2019. Photo by the author.

Angel Island” poem cited previously is accompanied by a poem that primarily uses identical Chinese characters as its end-rhymes. The response poem begins: 同病相憐如一身 [...] (“I sympathize, the same illness, as if we shared a body...”), and the use of shared rhymes across the two poems formally embodies somatic empathy.⁴³ A simple drawing of a shrine on the second floor of the barracks creates a “surrogate space” of community with family names sharing an ancestral connection, and elsewhere sketches of ships and houses evoke previous journeys and hometown villages. Crowded writing all over the barracks evokes the immediate context of interrogations as well. Crammed with tiny text, ephemeral “coaching books” helped paper sons and daughters prepare for interro-

⁴³ Leong, *Wild Geese Sorrow*, Poem 58, pp. 126–27.

gations by providing a detailed alternate backstory or mental map of a village they most often did not inhabit prior to their departures (and oral histories suggest a process for converting dense “coaching books” into song for memory).⁴⁴ In this broader context, the “wooden building” not only brings bodies together into a shared living space; the barracks themselves become a layered palimpsest and a polyvocal florilegium, a linguistic ecology as well as a cultural repository.⁴⁵

Solidarity, Oral Histories, and Literary Legacies

The poetry of Angel Island has become an important cultural archive attesting to lived experiences of incarceration and a reminder of the injustices of racial discrimination, and the site of Angel Island itself, now designated as a National Historic Landmark and functioning as a museum and site of reflection, continues to create new forms of solidarity and community. The history of how Angel Island poetry has survived to this day is a story of collective struggle. Tet Yee (aka Yee Tet Ming) and Smiley Jann copied hundreds of poems by hand into notebooks while they were detained at Angel Island in the 1930s, which is how many of the poems survive to this day. In one oral history, Yee states that “the injustices that I witnessed on Angel Island motivated me to later become a political activist and labor organizer,”⁴⁶ and his experience informed his decision to fight in World War II “because we had to defeat fascism.”⁴⁷ Revisiting Angel Island many years later, he found the former “prison” had become “now like a paradise,” and he composed a new poem to mark the occasion.⁴⁸

It is fitting to note that it was an immigrant—and a former child refugee—who helped instigate efforts to preserve the Angel Island poetry that had long been dismissed as mere graffiti. Alexander Weiss, a Jewish American who was originally born in Austria and later naturalized as a US citizen, fled the Nazis at the age of four and he was employed as a park ranger at Angel Island in May 1970 when plans to demolish the building were underway. Weiss was surprised to come across “entire walls ... covered with calligraphy,” and without even knowing Chinese he grasped the site’s significance.⁴⁹ Weiss contacted George Araki (whose mother came into the US via Angel Island as a Japanese picture bride) and photographer Mak Takahaski to document the surviving poetry, and Asian American activists Christopher Chow, Paul Chow, Connie Young Yu, and Philip Choy among others lobbied to preserve the poetry and to establish the Angel

⁴⁴ Ruth Chan Jang recalls her illiterate mother “had another woman read [the coaching paper] to her, and she would sing it to herself like she would Chinese opera” (Lai, Lim, and Yung, *Island*, 17). For images of coaching papers, see Lai, Lim, and Yung, *Island*, 18–19; Goldman, “Coaching Citizenship.”

⁴⁵ For a different sense of “language ecology,” see Hsy, “Language Ecologies.”

⁴⁶ Lai, Lim, and Yung, *Island*, 289.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 290.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Lee and Yung, *Immigrant Gateway*, 302.

Island Immigration Station as a National Historic Landmark and commemorative site.⁵⁰ During his lifetime, Weiss maintained that he “didn’t discover the poems. They had been there for years and other people knew they were there.”⁵¹ His words published before his death in 2014 remain prescient today: “We don’t have exclusion laws anymore, but we could have them in an instant tomorrow. It could happen to some other group of people. That’s why we need memorials like concentration camps and Angel Island, so that we will learn from our past and not repeat the same mistakes.”⁵²

The quotations I have cited draw from interviews and oral histories, and a rich and robust orature (a communal body of oral literature and shared stories) lends the Angel Island poetry an elevated status in collective memory. In their authoritative edition of Angel Island poetry supplemented with “oral history interviews with former detainees and employees,” Him Mark Lai, Genny Lim, and Judy Yung describe “a personal quest to reclaim our history as Chinese Americans.”⁵³ These oral histories attest to unwritten poems preserved in memory;⁵⁴ lost poems commemorating acts of suicide in the building itself;⁵⁵ interviews soliciting oral histories of the poetic space eerily repurposing social scenes of interrogation;⁵⁶ and self-described “miracles” of surviving the humiliating Angel Island experience.⁵⁷

Chinese detention poetry claims a literary legacy beyond the site of Angel Island itself. One Chinese poem found in a building of the Ellis Island Immigration Station ends with a laughing reference to the medieval Chinese travel narrative *Journey to the West* (西遊),⁵⁸ and a Chinese detention poem from the now-demolished Federal Immigration Detention Hospital in Victoria (British Columbia, Canada), suggests that both white and black government employees were sources of Chinese humiliation.⁵⁹ Ethnocentric Chinese terms for Western “barbarians” appear throughout such poetry composed across dispersed detention centers, but in the Angel Island context specifically a term such as 鬼佬 (“ghost person” or “foreign devil”) subverts white anglophone perceptions of “Angel Island” as a pastoral island paradise.⁶⁰

Postcolonial approaches have the potential to situate Angel Island within a broader comparative framework of incarceration systems beyond North America as well, reveal-

50 Ibid., 303 and 305.

51 Ibid., 303.

52 Ibid., 304.

53 Lai, Lim, and Yung, *Island*, ix.

54 Ibid., 290 (Tet Yee), 333 (Lee Puey You).

55 Ibid., 282 (Xie Chuang); see also Poem 111 and Poem 112 (pp. 140–41).

56 Ibid., 197–202, esp. 201–2.

57 Ibid., 251–53 (Soto Shee).

58 Ibid., Ellis Island, Poem 1, pp. 180–81.

59 Ibid., Victoria, BC, Poem 2, pp. 186–87, refers to “foreign slaves” (番奴) or white Westerners; Poem 3, pp. 186–87, refers to a “black ghost” (黑鬼) or African Canadian.

60 On the mythologizing of Angel Island along such lines in a prose novel, see Kingston, *China Men*, 53–60.

ing how island prisons or what Su Fang Ng calls “detention islands” operate in global mechanisms of social control.⁶¹ Ato Quayson theorizes Robben Island off the coast of Cape Town, South Africa, as one such “repeating island” of displacement, settler colonialism, quarantine, imprisonment, and trauma.⁶² Angel Island itself was converted after its closure (due to a fire in 1940) into a “prisoner of war processing center” as well as space for the forced internment of hundreds of immigrants of Japanese ancestry during World War II.⁶³

Detention poetry such as the Angel Island lyric adapting the *Ballad of Mulan* for the space of the men’s barracks, and a Chinese work dating from around 1911 entitled 妻囑情 or “My Wife’s Admonishment” (recovered from a wall of a concrete cell in the immigration and detention center in Victoria, BC), can invite reassessments of the relationship between poetic anonymity and gendered authorship in both medieval Chinese and modern Chinese American contexts.⁶⁴ Grace S. Fong has examined the complexity of female-voiced medieval Chinese lyrics, interrogating the “non-gender-specific” or “universal” status ascribed to male Tang literati poets,⁶⁵ and she reveals how poetic anonymity forces readers to question their own assumptions about gendered authorship and the “manipulation of the female persona and its implications for role-playing, masking, and self-revelation” at play even in works attributed to male poets.⁶⁶ Contemporary poet Jennifer Chang interweaves locodescriptive and pastoral themes into her collections *The History of Anonymity* (2008) and *Some Say the Lark* (2017) while inscribing her own Chinese American name into modern English lyric forms.⁶⁷ Chinese American poet Brandon Som incorporates the story of his own grandfather’s arrival as a paper son at Angel Island into *The Tribute Horse* (2014), a poetic anthology that features a series of English homophonic translations of Li Bai’s “Quiet Night Thoughts” that perpetually reconfigures the relationship between lyric speaker and audience (the first lines of these iterations invoke grammatical subjects as varied as “me and you,” “we,” “a nun,” or a “monk.”).⁶⁸

The poetry of incarceration as a sustained response to racist government policies in particular is a practice that extends beyond the particular experience of Chinese people in North America to additional communities of color. Toyo Suyemoto, a Japanese American whose family was forcibly relocated and interned during World War II along with thousands more in the US and Canada solely due to their Japanese ancestry, wrote lyric

61 Ng, “Detention Islands.”

62 Quayson, *Aesthetic Nervousness*, 174–204.

63 Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation, “History of Angel Island.” See also Lei, “Japanese Internment.”

64 Lai, Lim, and Yung, *Island*, Poem 4, pp. 188–89.

65 Fong, “Engendering the Lyric,” 114. On the rich life and works of prominent Tang women poets, see Samei, “Tang Women.”

66 Ibid., 118.

67 Chang, *Lark*, “Dorothy Wordsworth,” 54; Chang, *Anonymity*; see also Chang, “Asian American Lyric”; Chang, “Pastoral.”

68 Som, *Tribute Horse*, 75–80 (at 75, 76, 77, and 79) and 95; see also 58–61 (in “Bows & Resonators”).

poems in English during her years of incarceration in the pine plank barracks of the Topaz Relocation Center in Delta, UT, and she collected these poems about her experiences into her posthumous first-person memoir.⁶⁹ Suyemoto composed in poetic forms associated with European literary traditions (such as ballads and sonnets) as well as traditional Japanese forms (haiku and tanka), and Josephine Nock-Hee Park has observed that Suyemoto's "lyrics work through the experience of living in a space that cancels life," with poetry itself enduring as a "self-reflexive art whose powers of consolation and exposure resound within spaces of detention."⁷⁰ The medieval lyric forms reinvented and repurposed by Chinese detainees on Angel Island suggest just one localized collective strategy of resistance to racist exclusion and repeating systems of incarceration.

Archival Activism and Collective Action

Asian American literary and cultural studies is increasingly attentive (via oral history and archival recovery) to how Angel Island poems gain resonance through their physical locations of inscription around the "wooden building" and the divergent afterlives of medieval lyric forms today. A medieval literary, cultural, and ecocritical analysis opens up new geographies of commemoration and creates a broader appreciation for Angel Island as a thickly layered site of interethnic solidarity, resilience, and resistance to injustice.

Collective repurposing of medieval literature and orature at Angel Island not only testifies to the longstanding injustices of indefinite detention and racist exclusion. These enduring works also affirm the transformative powers of anonymity to speak to power, and they build a potent affective community across time and space that continues to motivate efforts to combat discrimination and create a more just society. As new coalitions of Asian Americans, including Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans, as well as Jewish Americans, act in solidarity with communities who are subjected to racist and xenophobic travel restrictions, forced incarceration, and indefinite detention today, there is hope that the lessons of Angel Island will be learned and not lost on future generations.⁷¹

69 Suyemoto, *Years of Internment*.

70 Park, "American Incarceration," 578–79.

71 Lee and Yung, *Immigrant Gateway*, "Epilogue," 315–25. See also Asian Americans Advancing Justice, "Testimony on Immigration Detention Centers"; Hayoun, "Japanese and Muslim Americans Join Forces"; Kandil, "Muslim-American Manzanar Pilgrimage"; Nodelman, "Jewish Activists on Front Lines Against ICE" [Immigration and Customs Enforcement].