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Cartographies of Migrants: Reading Ouyang Yu through Fredric Jameson's Cognitive Mappings

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Abstract in English

This article examines the poetry of Ouyang Yu through the theoretical framework of Fredric Jameson's concept of cognitive mapping. It discusses how Yu's work renders visible the structural conditions of migrant exile, displacement, and linguistic alienation in multicultural Australia. By analyzing five key poems, the study explores how Ouyang Yu transforms personal experiences of dislocation into symbolic mapmaking that illuminates the hidden totality of global capitalism. His bilingual experimentation and persistent focus on economic advancement reveal how language functions simultaneously as an instrument of marginalization and a site of resistance. Applying Jameson's notion of cognitive mapping highlights how Ouyang's poetics express the contradictions of living across intersecting cultural and economic systems, producing imaginative strategies to make unrepresentable social complexities noticeable. Ultimately, the study argues that Ouyang Yu's work exemplifies the critical potential of migrant poetics to map the lived realities of late capitalism, offering alternative modes of orientation and understanding.

Paper Info

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1. Introduction

In an era marked by global flows of capital, labor, and culture, migrants' experiences are often marginalized within the abstract systems of late capitalism. Fredric Jameson develops the concept of *cognitive mapping* as an aesthetic and political strategy to address the disorientation produced when individuals are unable to grasp the totality of global capitalism (Jameson, 1988). Jameson opens the chapter with the following reflection:

Without a conception of the social totality (and the possibility of transforming a whole social system), no properly socialist politics is possible. It involves trying to imagine how a society without hierarchy, a society that has also repudiated the economic mechanisms of the market, can possibly cohere. (Jameson, 1988, p. 347)

Adam Roberts highlights that Jameson's notion of cognitive mapping is influenced by Kevin Lynch's urban studies and suggests that urban spaces under late capitalism are experienced as mentally unmappable. Adam Roberts (2000) highlights that Jameson draws on Lynch to show how people are frequently unable to map their positions in the modern city.

In his essay "Cognitive Mapping," Jameson explores how postmodern fragmentation and the saturation of space produce mental disorientation, arguing that the "disorientation of the saturated space ... will be the most useful guiding thread" for cultural criticism (Jameson, 1988, p. 351). More broadly, Jameson situates cognitive mapping amid his critique of postmodern culture and reification, identifying cultural forms that either obscure or reveal the systemic relations of power (Jameson, 1979; Jameson, 1991). Cognitive mapping, in this account, is an aesthetic attempt to reconnect subjective experience with the hidden structures of global capitalism.

For migrants, cognitive mapping becomes a vital practice that helps locate fragmented lived experiences of displacement and labor within larger structural forces, "their street life, crime experience, bilingualism and the nostalgia to their motherland, their ancestors and their land" (Al-Sammarraie, 2022, p. 39). Ouyang Yu—one of the most prominent contemporary Chinese poets, who has presents dual cultural identity as being born in China in 1955 and having migrated to Australia in the early 1990s. - Australian poets—consistently explores migration, displacement, and the experience of living between languages and cultures. His bilingual practice and his focus on economic precarity position his poetry as a productive field for applying Jameson's cognitive mapping (Dreyzis, 2020; Asha, 2022). Critics have observed that Yu's work stages a double or multiple subjectivity that resists easy assimilation and thereby offers a site to trace the relation between personal experience and structural forces (Ommundsen, 1998; Dreyzis, 2020).

Jameson frames cognitive mapping as a response to postmodern fragmentation and the inability to situate oneself within the totality (Jameson, 1988). For him, cultural texts can provide partial maps that mediate between lived experience and abstract social relations; such mappings are necessary for any politics that hopes to transform social totality (Jameson, 1988). Jameson also discusses reification and utopia in mass culture, arguing that commodity logic tends to transform human practices into consumable images and objects (Jameson, 1979). In *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, he further elaborates on how cultural production under late capitalism

produces saturated, decentered spaces that complicate orientation and political agency (Jameson, 1991).

2. Whales, Words, and Work: Migrant Imaginaries and Cognitive Mapping in Ouyang Yu:

Ouyang Yu's work often performs a bilingual, bicultural tension in English and Chinese that stages cultural estrangement and friction (Dreyzis, 2020; Asha, 2022). Critics have emphasized Yu's "caustic" engagement with multicultural Australia, focusing on anger, exile, and linguistic identity (Asha, 2022; Ommundsen, 1998). His poetry enacts strategies that work as partial cognitive maps: they do not claim to represent the whole system but illuminate ways migrants locate themselves within economic hierarchies and racialized social arrangements.

In his poem "Addicted to Writing," Ouyang Yu presents the figure of the poet as consumed by the act of writing, portraying it as a force, a necessity, and an exile. The poem foregrounds the repetitive labor of writing as a form of survival in a world marked by alienation. It reflects on a group of people who have become entirely consumed by writing, to the extent that it replaces their spoken language, bodily presence, and lived experience. Their identity is reduced to textual production, scholarly conventions, and the superiority they claim through language mastery. It portrays language as mechanized, standardized, and commodified, where human beings are reduced to textual forms, detached from their lived reality. The poem starts with the lines:

addicted to writing
they have gradually lost their tongue
and become a writing race (Yu, 1997, p. 61)

This metaphor of addiction establishes writing as an obsessive and destructive force rather than a creative one. The phrase "lost their tongue" functions as metonymy: tongue stands for voice, agency, and cultural speech, now replaced by mechanical inscription. The irony lies in the fact that writing, often seen as preservation of voice, here erases it. The lines go on:

their fingers
a ten-digit brain
when you ask them questions
they stare at you
and give you a piece of paper
with worthy words (Yu, 1997, p. 61)

This striking metaphor reduces the human body to an instrument of writing. The brain is displaced onto the fingers, which is a synecdoche that signifies intellectual life being channeled entirely into mechanical production. It suggests dehumanization. That is, people think only through typing, not through lived experience. This stanza demonstrates irony and hyperbole. The human response, speech, has been replaced by a piece of paper, an absurd literalization of communication.

Then, Yu continues his idea by employing satire and parody. He writes:

they superiorize themselves
with an A4 size MLA style works cited
they are tough 'cause they've got the better language (Yu, 1997, p. 61)

It becomes obvious that the reference to “MLA style works cited” mocks academic formalism; it reduces intellectual superiority to conformity with citation rules. There is also an allusion to bureaucratic and institutionalized forms of writing which exposes the hollowness of such authority. The phrase uses colloquial irony since toughness here is not physical but symbolic, and it is rooted in linguistic dominance. This mirrors postcolonial hierarchies in which English, as the “better language,” becomes a weapon of superiority.

The closing metaphor is both grotesque and tragic:

their life so much part of a writing process
their faces are literal words
printed and published
on easily burnable pages (Yu, 1997, p. 61)

In this stanza, faces become text, identities reduced to pages, vulnerable to erasure. It is hyperbolic imagery that communicates the fragility of identity when reduced to textual commodification. It also recalls imagery of censorship, exile, and the destruction of culture.

Such harsh criticism and portrayal of postmodern life can be linked to Jameson's theory of postmodern cultural production under late capitalism, where writing becomes commodified and detached from authentic human experience. In other words, the poem conveys the message that language is produced obsessively but lacks emotional depth. The reduction of people to "A4 size MLA style works cited" exemplifies what Jameson calls 'reification', in which cultural practices are standardized and commodified within bureaucratic and academic systems, and it "transforms the transparent flow of language as much as possible into material images and objects we can consume" (Jameson, 1979, p. 13).

Accordingly, writing becomes a symbolic mapping of survival, locating the poet within the margins of Australia's cultural and economic systems. By dramatizing writing as addiction, Ouyang Yu exposes the contradictions of cultural production under capitalism. In a sense, creative work is vital and sustaining, but it is rendered economically precarious and socially invisible. By framing writing as addiction, Ouyang Yu produces a poetic figure for the alienated subject of late capitalism, symbolically orienting both poet and reader to the structural contradictions that define migrant cultural production.

Yu enlarges the representation of the migrants to a vaster image. He goes far with his imagination and compares the migrants' situation to whales which are massive and displaced beings navigating vast oceans, estranged from stable ground. In “We Are Whales,” he evokes such metaphor of the whale that captures both resilience and vulnerability. Whales travel great distances but are often endangered, hunted, or stranded. By aligning the migrant condition with the whale's risky journeys, Yu dramatizes the collective dislocation of migrants who drift between cultures, languages, and nations. The poem starts with the lines:

we are whales who are beaching themselves on the western shore
we are whales who seek another world
we are whales who can't grow out of their enormous ugliness (Yu, 1997, p. 68)

Here, the poet compares the immigrant self with those creatures that do not fully belong in any territory but must keep moving in order to survive. Such a metaphor serves as a powerful symbol of immigrant existence under late capitalism. Whales themselves are precarious though they are monumental. He compares whales to the immigrants who despite their cultural presence, are often perceived as outsiders and exploited within the system of labour and identity politics. He continues:

we are whales with an empty hall within
we are whales being driven back to sea
we are whales born with a collective unconscious of euthanasia
we are whales (Yu, 1997, p. 68)

With these lines, the poet offers readers a way to "locate" the disoriented migrant self within global capitalism. Whales break oceans without stable grounding, and this image is connected with the status of migrants who navigate hostile terrains of belonging and rejection. It is a criticism of national and cultural boundaries that function like oceans that keep migrants at a distance, and force them into perpetual movement. As such, cognitive mapping can be tracked here as the poem attempts to locate the immigrant subject within the vast disorienting landscape of globalization. The imagery of whales which are drifted across unbounded seas functions as an allegory for the migrants search for orientation in a world system that resists comprehension.

In "When All Is Sang," Ouyang Yu meditates on the aftermath of expression; as if to say that what remains once all words, songs, and utterances have been exhausted. The poem reflects a tone of weariness and estrangement, as though speech itself cannot bridge the gap between the migrant and their surroundings. The title's distortion as in the word "sang" instead of "said" or "sung" highlights the instability of language, suggesting both a completion and a breakdown of communication. Through this, the poem captures the silence of displacement which the sense that even when everything has been expressed, communication with the dominant culture may still fail. The misspelling "sang" is not accidental: it embodies the migrant's accented, fractured engagement with English, as though the migrant voice is always-already marked as error within a normative linguistic system. Thematically, the poem dramatizes the futility of attempting to fully articulate the migrant experience in a language that simultaneously enables and excludes.

At the same time, the poem sheds light upon a space beyond speech. By imagining the moment "when all is sang," Yu gestures toward a silence that resists marginalization within dominant discourse. In this sense, the poem is both melancholic and defiant; it recognizes the limitations of language while asserting the persistence of migrant subjectivity even beyond articulation. The opening lines start:

when all is sung and said
this poet is not yet dead
when the media turns us into a freakshow
the poet has nothing to say
he has to write his bloody poem (Yu, 1997, p. 70)

The poem may be read as a cognitive map of the limits of expression under late capitalism. Migrants are compelled to adopt the dominant language, yet their utterances remain marked as deficient. The distorted word “sang” allegorizes this condition: the migrant’s attempt at communication is both present and erased, audible yet unrecognized. This produces a symbolic orientation that reveals the structural alienation of migrants in multicultural Australia, where inclusion is mediated through linguistic conformity.

they'll come around our way
signs are already too many

for us even to see
ourselves held as heroes (Yu, 1997, p. 71)

By dramatizing the exhaustion of speech, the poem maps the crisis of representation itself; the same crisis Jameson identifies in postmodern culture. Here, the migrant subject’s inability to fully articulate their position mirrors the difficulty of representing the global system. Yu thus transforms linguistic fracture into a poetic cartography of dislocation, orienting readers to the systemic silencing of migrants while leaving open the possibility of resistance through alternative forms of expression.

The alienation that Yu describes is not connected directly with the language challenge for the immigrants; it extends to the physical estrangement. This becomes clear with Yu's collection *Till Covid-Infinite* which is a short, topical suite of poems he has produced in 2020 in direct response to the COVID-19 pandemic, its social effects, and the surge of anti-Asian sentiment and geopolitical friction that accompanied it. During the lockdown, "many emerging and critically acclaimed poets have gone beyond the traditional way of publishing poetry, or reading it face to face in literary occasions or gatherings" (Furaih, 2022, p. 38). Yu in this suite moves quickly between list-like fragments, satirical aphorisms, personal confession, and fractured lyrical stanzas.

In the poem “Cing”, the poet foregrounds the tensions of bilingualism and linguistic dislocation, and then connect them with the physical social distancing. He starts the poem by hinting at the situation of the world in general during the pandemic referring to the fact that he, as an immigrant, has long practiced a kind of distancing:

I have been practicing social distancing ever
since I came to this country 29 years ago
In fact, I now think, Australia is the best
country for that type of cing, I mean thing (Yu, 2020)

By deliberately misspelling and destabilizing the word “thing” into “cing,” the poet dramatizes how the migrant subject’s voice is fractured when crossing between languages. The poem reveals both the creative potential and the alienating consequences of writing in a second language. It gestures toward song as expression and belonging, but the distortion of spelling suggests miscommunication, exclusion, and the migrant’s estranged position within English-language culture. Yu’s manipulation of English exposes the power dynamics of language in migrant experience.

From Jameson's perspective, in "Cing", language is not a neutral medium but a structure that positions the migrant subject in relation to power. The poem allegorizes the migrant's fractured subjectivity through the distortion of spelling: the inability to "sing" freely becomes a symbolic map of the migrant's dislocated place in a world where language determines social access and economic opportunity. He writes:

the years came rushing back, faces of colour, black, brown, dark and daunting as well as those of no colour that they say is white a facial distancing accompanied by heart distancing and mind distancing, two varieties that are so well practiced in Australia that all these cings are here to stay for longer periods of time than you and me till Covid-infinite (Yu, *Till Covid-Infinite*, 2020)

By reworking English, Ouyang Yu provides a partial orientation within the global system: migrants are situated at the margins of linguistic capital, excluded from full participation, yet capable of reshaping language to articulate their own position. The poem thus produces a symbolic map of resistance and estrangement, dramatizing the cultural contradictions of living between languages. In Jamesonian terms, "Cing" represents how the migrant poet translates systemic disorientation into an imaginative cartography of language, making visible the hidden relations between subjectivity, power, and global capitalism.

In the same way, the poem, "Ban to Australia", is presented in a minimalist list-like. Each line portrays the process of stripping away trade, human exchange, and mobility between both China and Australia during the Covid.19 period. Through this, the poet tries to foreground the fragility of global interdependence under late capitalism. The poem starts with the litany:

No barley
no beef
no coal
no iron ore
no travel
no students
no more relation ship (Yu, *Till Covid-Infinite: A Suite of Poems*, 2020)

This litany shows the reduction of the relationship between Australia and China; it turns into commodity. These raw material and exports form the nodes; the structural base of bilateral ties between the two countries. It shows that cultural and political relations are mediated by capitalist exchange.

What next?
Refer back to history
and read that poem:
'Those bad Chinese! Those bad Chinese.
Foul scatterers of strange disease.' (Yu, 2020)

These lines show that the poet uncovers the persistence of racist discourse; the trope of Chinese as carriers of disease, echoing yellow pearl rhetoric that dated back to colonial and while Australian policy era.

By dramatizing commodified language, collective displacement, exhausted expression, and the intersection of geopolitical economy and racialization, Yu's poems

provide partial but powerful orientations to the lived conditions of migrants in multicultural Australia.

3. Conclusion

Ouyang Yu's poetry offers rich examples of how migrant poetics can function as cognitive maps under late capitalism. Applying Jameson's concept of cognitive mapping clarifies how these poetic acts mediate between subjective experience and global structural forces. Taken together, the poems discussed, "Addicted to Writing," "We Are Whales," "When All Is Sang," "Cing," and "Ban to Australia", form a set of partial cognitive maps. Each poem foregrounds distinct aspects of migrant life; cultural labor, displacement, linguistic fracture, pandemic racialization, and the commodity basis of international relations, while collectively pointing to the structural constraints of late capitalism. These maps are necessarily partial because they offer imaginative, affective orientations that render visible previously obscured relations—exactly the kind of cultural practice Jameson identifies as crucial for political consciousness (Jameson, 1988; Jameson, 1991). With this, Yu's work affirms literature's capacity to reveal hidden social totalities and to produce imaginative resources for orientation and resistance.

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Abstract in Arabic

خرائط المهاجرين: قراءة أويانغ يو من خلال الخرائط الإدراكية لفريدريك جيمسون

المستخلص

تتناول هذه المقالة شعر أويانغ يو من خلال الإطار النظري لمفهوم "الرسم الإدراكي" لدى فريدريك جيمسون، مستكشفة الكيفية التي يُظهر بها عمله الشروط البنوية لعمل المهاجرين، والاعتراب اللغوي، وحالات النزوح في أستراليا متعددة الثقافات. ومن خلال تحليل خمسة نصوص شعرية محورية، يوضح البحث كيف يُحوّل أويانغ يو التجارب الشخصية للاعتراب إلى خرائط رمزية تكشف الكلية الخفية للرأسمالية العالمية. إن تجاربه الثنائية اللغة وتركيزه المستمر على الحراك الاقتصادي يكشفان الكيفية التي تصبح فيها اللغة في آن واحد أداة للتمهيش ومجالاً للمقاومة. ويُظهر تطبيق مفهوم جيمسون عن "الرسم الإدراكي" كيف يعبر شعر أويانغ عن التناقضات الكامنة في العيش عبر أنظمة ثقافية واقتصادية متداخلة، منتجاً استراتيجيات تخيلية لتوجيه التعقيدات الاجتماعية غير القابلة للتمثيل. وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن أعمال أويانغ يو تجسد الإمكانيات النقدية لشعر المهاجرين في رسم خرائط للواقع المعيش في ظل الرأسمالية المتأخرة، مقدّمة أنماطاً بديلة للتوجه والفهم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الرسم الإدراكي، فريدريك جيمسون، أويانغ يو، شعر المهاجرين، الرأسمالية المتأخرة.
