

Object Permanence by Hossannah Asuncion

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Object Permanence, Poems by Hossannah Asuncion

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There are many ghosts that haunt the pages of Hossannah Asuncion's *Object Permanence*, which takes us from New York City to Los Angeles. From one lonely city to another, Asuncion does away with the gloss and glamour of these spaces, and instead, conjures spectral subjects that tell a different narrative of such haunted geographies. In the cities of Asuncion's depiction, these ghosts are activated by touch. We learn quickly that these ghosts appear when human intimacy fails.

In one iteration of the series within the book titled, "Narrated by Other," Asuncion writes: "Later in the mirror you will trace all the/ new marks this city has made on your/ face." It is unclear whether the speaker here is tracing her reflection or her physical face, but both gestures seem to be part of a solo performance. At the absence of another body in the room, the speaker touches her own body and reflection, and becomes "Other" through this enactment. In moments like this, Asuncion reveals how such gestures towards intimacy create estrangement from oneself. It would become a formula for ghost-making throughout the collection.

This yearning for intimacy is juxtaposed against a city that impresses itself upon the body. The titles of the poems in *Object Permanence* largely feature local street names, addresses, sites, and intersections from "Stillwell and Neptune" to "Ditmas Park," "1580 Carroll Street, #2" to "125 Oak Street." With such site specific titles, a reader is compelled to identify objects particular to each geographical location, but in their place lies instead a series of unfulfilled relationships and a persisting sense of emotional distance.



By foregrounding the location in which the poem occurs instead of the incident or its ensuing consequences, Asuncion declares, “But naming isn’t the same as intimacy.” What this suggests is that these poems are a perpetual and unfulfilled gesture towards a want. It is a persistent desire to be seen, not as a specter but one of flesh and bones. In the poem, “125 Oak Street,” for example, the speaker implores of her mother, “*Could you take a moment to see me?*” In this moment of vulnerability, the speaker exposes her ghostly form, of struggling to be seen or witnessed. This desire is not only a physical one but an existential need.

This desire to be seen and known exhibits itself as a hyper-aware form of *object permanence* for the speaker, a concept that shares its name with the title of Asuncion’s book. It refers to a stage in one’s phenomenological life when it becomes understood that objects continue to exist even when they are not in contact with it in a physical or sensory way. Taken to its literal extreme, Asuncion’s speaker’s embodiment of object permanence in adulthood gives her the ability to see and move beyond an object’s immediate appearance as only a ghost can do. She weaves in and out of moments with a heightened awareness of her surroundings, the relations that inhabit the space, and the loneliness within them.

The speaker’s ghostly form gives her the ability of insight in such poems as “Bainbridge and Howard,” a triptych that follows the speaker’s sexual encounter with a man and a woman. In the third poem of this triptych, Asuncion notes the culminating moments of this encounter, which proved to be largely disappointing as the speaker was gradually relegated to a facilitator from a participant:

Make us something you want, he says so softly and direct, and I feel like the only way to answer is to leave. So then I’m above all of us and I’m watching my body melt, as if I know to be sultry and it’s better to keep drifting above, waiting for the heat to rise to reach me, as it is the science of heat to do so.

The speaker’s disappearance, marked literally and figuratively here, suggests that such failures in intimacy provoke transformation. If the logic of group sex is to increase the desire that fills each body in a room, Asuncion points us to another occurrence. The speaker’s performance as a subject that people would want and desire is not enough. She invents herself as a ghost who can come and go in between other people’s desires for each other. In a way, this is to save herself.

Perhaps the failed moments of intimacy within *Object Permanence* are largely characteristic of life in cities that tend so much towards erasure. In New York City, as it is in Los Angeles, buildings are torn down as soon as they are constructed. There is little room to memorialize, to create impressions that linger long after the death of a space. Asuncion's response is to design a slow intimacy that is sorely missing in these cities as exemplified throughout this stunning debut collection. Although time and people move in a space with such rapidity, Asuncion forces the reader to do the very thing that New Yorkers and Angelenos are often dissuaded from doing—to pause and feel that absence which itself can never be permanent.