

# The Poetry of Li-Young Lee and Timothy Bewes's Event of Postcolonial Shame

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French anthropologist Marc Augé writes: “analysts of modernity have effectively identified two opposing types of myths: myths of origin... and myths of the future, eschatological myths corresponding to the modern time which makes the future the principle of meaning”. These principles find a melancholy tension in the immigrant’s project, in which the sharpness of origins left behind comes up against the blurred anxieties of a future surrounded by a culture for whom one’s myths of origin are unknown, irrelevant or even despised. While “shame” might not seem an appropriate term for the immigrant writer’s response to this situation, for English cultural theorist Timothy Bewes “shame” is not simply a theme. For Bewes shame in postcolonial texts is a formal gap or lack which emblemizes the impossibility of writing past colonialism and its legacies, one of which is migration to the West. To write past colonialism and its legacies would imply that it has been understood, mastered and tidied away; that we can all move on.

This article explores the analytical traction provided by Bewes’s theorization of shame not as a theme but as a formal aspect of creative texts, in this case with respect to the poetry of acclaimed American poet Li-Young Lee. Bewes’s advocacy of shame as ethical response comes accordingly to seem relevant to much more than postcolonial writing, and in this case to Lee’s poetic practice, a practice in which Lee’s self-ascribed status as a “refugee of an illegible past” puts under notice the normative process of ascribing people to fixed cultural origins, in a poetry aware that the quality of its witness must emerge from its acquaintance with gaps, with the dismantled, and with tales told by others.

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**FIGURE 1**  
Poeta norteamericano de origem cultural chinês, Li-Young Lee.

