

*Written by a US migrant  
daughter of a Chinese migrant, currently  
located in the UK and looking for sense of  
stability beyond the hostility of borders.*

## **Precarity as a Migrant Family Tradition**

**Alex Fitzpatrick**

*In 1967, the Lee family makes the journey from Hong Kong, still a British colony, to the occupied territories known as the United States of America. Like many immigrants to the country, they were on the search for the fabled “better life” that is still sometimes associated with the US, despite all odds.*



*Photo courtesy of the author*

Growing up mixed race, it is hard to ignore the stark differences between the maternal and paternal sides of the family. The migrants of my dad’s side of the family, journeying from places such as Norway and Ireland, settled down in New York and remained close to each other. As a child, most of my paternal family members lived less than 30 minutes away, with my paternal grandparents living on the ground floor of my childhood home. In contrast, my maternal side of the family scattered once migrated from China – with our closest family members on the West Coast of the United States, and others located in the settler-occupied territories known as Canada and Australia. Their locations were constantly shifting and moving – to the extent that it took nearly three decades for me to finally meet all of my maternal family members. It did not take long for me to understand that putting down “permanent roots” was not a Lee family trait.

*In 1990, Yuen Mei “Amy” Lee gets married to Jamie Fitzpatrick and moves to the predominately white suburban neighbourhoods of Long Island. They end up having four children in total, with 12 years between their youngest and eldest child. Both parents end up going through many jobs to keep the family afloat, including a particularly dire year entirely spent unemployed. My mother moves from the fashion industry to working in education. My father leaves a promising career as a federal level engineer and ends up moving around the tech industry for years, taking occasional positions in retail to make ends meet. Lesson learned: your “permanent career” is not always “permanent”.*

“Precarious” is probably the best word to describe my life, although it could be argued that it is an inherently negative way to do so. As one of the very few Asian people in my hometown, I was constantly negotiating between staying true to my culture and becoming “Americanised”. My family tried to maintain strong bonds to our Chinese heritage – my mom would visit my elementary school every year for Chinese New Year, and we would still attend festivals with other members of the diaspora in New York. But this would eventually die down as we got older and negotiating these two cultures became more of a burden. It was one of many concessions we would make to our precariousness in order to survive. Personally, I found myself giving in to precarity much faster, letting myself be subsumed into whiteness and becoming the “token minority” for white teenagers to use as a means of negating their complicity in racism. Precarity was my teenage years of self-loathing, of identity struggles with my sexuality and heritage, and of my eventual decline into severe depression that would persist untreated and undiagnosed until my mid-twenties. Better to submit to nothingness than attempt to put down roots in anything.

*After years of financial and personal hardships, the Fitzpatrick family decides to move from New York to North Carolina in 2017, first to a temporary, rented property, before finally purchasing a farmhouse of their own. Not many members of the family remain to live permanently in this new home – I have moved to the United Kingdom, the eldest brother has balanced his life between Florida and California, and the youngest brother is planning to follow suit. We all continue to migrate away, to wherever our jobs and lifestyles take us.*

In 2020, I am finishing my PhD studies in the United Kingdom. My new life as a migrant is...complicated. Although I find purpose here in my professional pursuits and cultivate a community of loving and supportive friends and colleagues that I could only dream of having before, I also find myself facing increased hostility: not only just from the occasional racists that I come across in my day-to-day life, but also from a government who literally imposed a “Hostile Environment” for non-EU migrants. I have lived in England for nearly five years at this point, and my visa is set to expire at the start of 2021. Once again, I find myself at the crossroads of a precarity, but not by my own volition. At this point, I have every intention of remaining in the United Kingdom – but as a migrant academic, precarity is still very much ingrained in every part of my life. After a decade of hard work in higher education, I am faced with a rapidly dwindling job market in academia, where most positions are purposely made precarious as part of an overworked and underpaid culture. As a migrant, I am not guaranteed anything – not my right to remain in the country that I now call “home”, nor my right to remain with the person I love, whose citizenship is different from mine. The future has never felt less solid or tangible – even more so, at the time of this writing, with the current pandemic. With my family moving from our childhood home in New York, I no longer have roots anywhere else...to be deported from this country would be to fling myself into the unknown, to once again submit to precariousness and linger into what can only be described as the nothingness once more. But this was always the life of the migrant, the life of my family’s migrants...it is what I should have expected all along.

*Although she never said it to me, it was difficult to ignore the subtext of the life lessons my mom taught me: to not root yourself to anything. That in order to survive, we must be flexible and adaptable, able to pick up and move to where we can best thrive. That there were always cracks in the cis-heteronormative, patriarchal, ableist, and white supremacist world in which a queer, disabled woman of colour can find temporary solace – but to never get too comfortable. That our luck was always fleeting, always changing, and never reliable. That to be part of the Lee-Fitzpatrick family was to be precarious by nature – and it was how we survived.*