

# Introduction

## *Toward a Sociology of the Contemporary Avant-Garde*

Race and the avant-garde have been linked since the dawn of the twentieth century, when avant-garde artists such as Picasso, Ezra Pound, and Gertrude Stein found inspiration in African masks, African American culture, and Asian literature. At midcentury, Jack Kerouac and other Beat writers drew energy from their identifications with blacks, Asians, and Latinos. And Charles Olson, founding figure of the Black Mountain school of poetry, famously likened his poetics to the jazz of Charlie Parker. For these white European and American avant-gardists, racial others offered an escape from Western aesthetics, serving as a source for the revolutionary breakthroughs that have characterized the twentieth-century avant-garde. But such non-Western sources remained largely in the realm of folk culture or ancient tradition. For much of the century, white avant-gardists rarely felt the need to acknowledge the presence of nonwhite artists as peers and contemporaries.

In the latter part of the twentieth century, however, the racial dynamics of the avant-garde shifted. Rather than being able to appropriate the cultural productions of nonwhites in the service of avant-gardism, contemporary white avant-gardists, particularly in the United States after 1970, found their positions in the forefront of revolutionary culture actively challenged by writers of color, as these latter writers were awarded increasing degrees of moral, political, and aesthetic authority by readers and critics. Although movements such as the Harlem Renaissance offered earlier examples of racialized avant-gardes, I argue that after 1970 the question of race became central to the constitution of *any* American avant-garde, as

writers and artists became increasingly aware of how their social locations inflected their aesthetics. My second claim is perhaps even more surprising: that the communities formed by contemporary American writers of color can themselves best be understood in the terms we have developed for the analysis of the avant-garde.

It might be objected that these claims confuse two different kinds of artistic groupings. Categories such as “Asian American poets” or “African American writers” are, after all, defined socially, by the race of their members, whereas avant-gardes are defined in aesthetic terms. But the analytic power of the concept of the avant-garde is that it reminds us that the aesthetic and the social are inseparable. An avant-garde is an aesthetic *and* a social grouping, defined as much by its formation of a distinctive kind of community as by its revolutionary aesthetics. As such, it can serve as a corrective to essentializing views of any kind of artistic community.

In examining two groups of contemporary poets—Asian American poets and the group known as the “Language” writers—I suggest that these groups share key traits that enable us to see them both as avant-gardes; at the same time, they display a distinctively contemporary concern with social identities that is most often centered around the discourse of race. Both groups identify themselves with the political left, seeing poetry as a revolutionary practice and issuing manifestos to justify their work; both emerge from and respond to the political and social upheavals of the late 1960s. Both dissent from the conventions of mainstream American poetry of the 1970s and 1980s, and both develop their own institutions of publication and distribution, from magazines to small presses to anthologies. But central to both is a surprisingly acute sense of how race can inflect aesthetics, and of the relations of power that racial difference creates among contemporaneous avant-gardes. Those relations of power are described in a provocative paragraph in Paul Mann’s *The Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde*, where Mann acknowledges—albeit with great skepticism—that the contemporary avant-garde may have ceded the mantle of radical art in the late 1960s to women and artists of color, using language that places various avant-gardes in a competitive relationship:

[T]he death of the avant-garde as a politics of aesthetic revolt is a means by which the same rhetoric of aesthetic opposition can be repeated just as vehemently in discourses that consider themselves radically different. The avant-garde is dismissed as white, male, etc.; now projects for the represen-

tation of gender, class, and race take its place, but perhaps without effectively restructuring their relations to the economy. (119)

Such arguments in the aesthetic sphere can be seen as corollaries of similar dynamics in the realm of politics and of ostensible divisions within the American left since the 1960s. The new left of that period has often been characterized as an alliance between the civil rights and antiwar movements—and thus, implicitly, between black activists and white student radicals. What is less often discussed, however, is the sense among many white radicals that the language of resistance and revolution truly belonged to oppressed minorities and that white activists could only hope to borrow it. In *The Sixties*, Todd Gitlin quotes white student leader Tom Hayden expressing his admiration for black civil rights activists: “Those Negroes are down there, digging in, and in more danger than nearly any student in this American generation has faced . . . we should speak their revolutionary language without mocking it” (128). Such accommodations were possible within the idea of a racially integrated new left but would become an increasing source of tension in the late 1960s with the rise of black nationalism and of what would come to be called “identity politics.” In his autobiographical work “Under *Albany*,” Language writer Ron Silliman recalls watching Black Panther drills with a friend in 1966 and feeling that “the Left was splintering” with “no room for us in that world, how then did our Left fit together with it?” (325). In such a political context, any avant-garde art that claimed to have revolutionary power would have to cope with the fact that the rhetoric of revolution seemed to have moved outside the province of white men.

As writers of color, from the members of the Black Arts movement to the radical Asian American poets published in journals like *Aion*, began to employ techniques and rhetoric inherited from earlier avant-gardes, white writers in the 1970s could no longer simply claim the mantle of “*the* avant-garde” that had previously been awarded to white male experimentalists. Instead, writers such as the Language poets had to acknowledge themselves as a socially as well as aesthetically delimited group, characterized by their own racial, gender, and class positions in a manner comparable to that of writers grouped together as Asian Americans, African Americans, or Latinos. In this context, what is needed is not an account that simply delineates the aesthetic traits of the avant-garde and then judges which works fall under that rubric, but what we might call a sociology of the avant-garde, which

acknowledges the existence of multiple and even competing groups whose practices we might recognize as avant-garde and whose aesthetic programs are inflected by their differing social identifications.

My characterization of such a project as sociological draws on Renato Poggioli's assertion in his classic *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* that the avant-garde must be understood "not so much as an aesthetic fact as a sociological one" (3). In Poggioli's account, what is distinctive about the avant-garde is not any particular style or method but its emergence as a "social fact," a "society in the strict sense" that positions itself against "society in the larger sense" (4). It is thus to be distinguished from the idea of an artistic "school," with its focus on "techniques, training, and apprenticeship"; the avant-garde, instead, follows the modern model of the "movement," whose primary characteristic is its interest in "passing beyond the limits of art" toward a wider worldview that "extends to all spheres of cultural and civil life" (18). Perhaps most relevant here is Poggioli's vision of the avant-garde as complete community, one whose principles are not only aesthetic but social, psychological, and ideological:

On the one hand, the anarchistic state of mind presupposes the individualistic revolt of the "unique" *against* society in the largest sense. On the other, it presupposes solidarity *within* a society in the restricted sense of that word—that is to say, solidarity within the community of rebels and libertarians. . . . The modern artist replaces that particular environment, determined by his family and social origins, with what the French call *milieu artiste*. There, sect and movement become a caste; hence a social fact in a primarily psychological way, motivated by vocation and election, not by blood or racial inheritance or by economic and class distinctions. (31)

Such an image of the "declassed" artist might seem radically at odds with the goal of accounting for the relative social positions of different avant-gardists. Writing in the early 1960s, Poggioli could hardly have anticipated the explosion of work by U.S. women and writers of color that would characterize the following decade. But other moments in Poggioli do suggest how his characterization of the avant-garde as social fact might help us link contemporary aesthetic and social identifications.

Poggioli argues that the avant-garde came to define itself against popular culture, though not against the same forms of popular culture idealized by the Romantics. What Poggioli calls "purely ethnic cultures," with their

“more deeply rooted traditional values” and “less self-conscious and more spontaneous traditions,” are, he says, “almost completely disappearing from Western soil” (121), to be supplanted by a culture that is “fabricated (indeed ‘prefabricated’) on the lowest intellectual level by the bourgeoisie itself” (123). It is the latter, bourgeois form of popular culture against which the avant-garde defines itself.

Although Poggioli’s critique of the culture industry is a familiar one, what is novel is his sense of a potential analogy between the position of “ethnic” cultures and that of the avant-garde. The unity of traditional culture is supplanted by the stylistic pluralism and eclecticism that characterize bourgeois culture, a culture that has “broken all the links between artisan and artist” in favor of a production of culture as a commodity for consumption (121). The avant-garde presents itself as a critique of this eclectic and presumptively universal culture by means of “stylistic dissent” (120), insisting on and agitating for the particularity and distinctiveness of its own style in order to achieve “the radical negation of a general culture by a specific one” (107). Although a restoration of “ethnic” culture is no longer possible, the avant-garde becomes an analogue of that culture through its artificial construction of a community whose social being and ideology can be directly expressed in aesthetics. The declassed avant-gardist can thus be seen not as a monad but as a participant in a kind of community no longer imaginable within bourgeois culture. Poggioli’s reference to such a community as a “minority culture” (108) or, more cryptically, as “an almost unforeseeable diaspora of isolated intelligences” (92), suggests that the avant-garde, so understood, might be organized in a fashion not so distant from that of the kinds of communities we now describe with the terms “minority” and “diaspora.”

In fact, our contemporary “ethnic” categories are every bit as constructed as the avant-garde formations Poggioli describes. The term “Asian American,” for instance, is an invention of the late 1960s, designed to tie together disparate ethnic groups (Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Filipino, and so on) under a single political and cultural umbrella. A category such as “Asian American culture” can thus claim no organic continuity with any particular ethnic culture; it must be understood not as a traditional racial category but as a modern rubric that yokes together different groups and individuals, regardless of ethnic or socioeconomic origin, for the purposes of political organization and dissent. Indeed, the process of forming an “Asian American” consciousness strongly resembles Poggioli’s description of the

formation of an audience for avant-garde art: “almost by spontaneous generation, by means of single and independent joinings of isolated individuals, a group emerges that is not easily determined geographically or socially, individuals who end up finding, in the object of their own enthusiasm, reasons for community as well as separation” (91). The Asian American artist, like the avant-gardist, puts forward a tendentious argument for cultural particularity—invents a culture—both as a means of organizing a specific artistic community and as a means of critiquing the larger culture.

Poggioli’s concept of the avant-garde, with its sense of a profound connection between the social and the aesthetic, can thus be applied to a wide range of contemporary literary communities. This insight may also give us a new perspective on perhaps the most influential theory of the avant-garde, that of Peter Bürger. Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde* argues that the avant-garde’s goal is to “reintegrate art into the praxis of life” (22), in contrast to bourgeois art, which insists on its autonomy from life. Bürger’s characterization of this avant-garde gesture as a *reintegration* acknowledges that in prebourgeois times—namely, in the periods of “sacral” and “courtly” art—art was still integrated into social life; even though Bürger’s typology does not precisely correspond to Poggioli’s notion of “ethnic” culture, both imagine a premodern culture in which the aesthetic and the social are inseparable. But if Bürger, like Poggioli, sees the avant-garde as in part a return to this unity, he also makes clear that the avant-garde’s strategy is not a reactionary or nostalgic one. In an era in which the links between art and society have been decisively severed, the avant-garde imagines not an art that grows organically out of society but rather the reverse: a social life that is itself grounded in art. This is not a mere attempt to integrate art into the “means-ends rationality of the bourgeois everyday” but the “attempt to organize a new life praxis from a basis in art” (49). The avant-garde is thus a kind of echo of socially grounded, collectively produced and received art in an era when such groundings are no longer possible—an attempt to create a community by aesthetic means.

The category of “avant-garde” should thus make us more aware both of the social elements of a grouping like Language poetry, whose coherence may seem largely aesthetic, and of the aesthetic elements at work in the constitution of an apparently social grouping like Asian American poetry. Although Language poetry is now identified primarily with a set of aesthetic principles, such as a critique of lyric subjectivity, a challenge to linguistic

reference, or the use of nonnarrative techniques to structure a text, an examination of Language writing's formation in the 1970s suggests that Language writers also understood themselves as sharing a social identification, a community. Reading series, publications, and anthologies were only the most visible manifestations of this community.

At the same time, Asian American poets of the 1970s, far from taking race as the unifying ground from which their work emerges, actually approach questions of Asian American identity through debates about poetic form. Conventional accounts of Asian American and other ethnic writings tend to proceed from the social to the aesthetic, positing an Asian American culture or experience that then finds expression in Asian American art. As noted previously, however, Asian American culture is itself a composite that attempts to include vastly different historical experiences. The prominent role literature has taken in Asian American discourse since the 1970s—from the poetry sections regularly featured in Asian American publications to groundbreaking anthologies such as *Aiiieeeee!*—suggests that it is, in fact, through literature that Asian Americans have sought to define Asian American experience. The work of writers such as Lawson Fusao Inada, Francis Oka, and Janice Mirikitani shows a willingness to experiment with different poetic forms—from haiku to protest poetry to jazz poetry to first-person lyrics—in an attempt to create a distinctively Asian American sensibility. In the work of these writers, the question of what it means to be Asian American is as much a formal as a social or political one. Asian American poetry of the 1970s represents a concerted attempt to perform precisely that task Bürger finds characteristic of the avant-garde: to organize a distinctively Asian American life praxis from a basis in Asian American art.

To describe Language poetry and Asian American poetry as avant-garde in their origins and impulses is not necessarily to claim that they have remained unstintingly avant-garde throughout their histories. For both groups, the 1970s represent their most strongly avant-garde moment—the period in which Language and Asian American writing dissent most radically from the dominant institutions of art. During this decade, both bodies of writing existed almost exclusively in small, fugitive publications, accompanied by aggressive rhetoric against what both groups of writers saw as a conventional art that served the needs of capitalism and imperialism. The poetry that appeared in Asian American publications like *Aion* and *Gidra* and in language-oriented journals like *This* bore little resemblance to the

writing appearing in mainstream publications like the *New Yorker* or the *Paris Review*. Writers and readers tended to be part of geographically delimited communities, often centered around reading series or activist organizations in San Francisco, New York, and Los Angeles, and displayed little interest in mainstream literary success.

Not until the later 1970s and 1980s did Asian American and Language writing gain some visibility outside their initial channels, changing not only the public profile of the work but each group's internal dynamics and avant-garde orientation. Among Asian American writers, this shift was evident early on in the professionalizing tendencies of a writer like Frank Chin, who, as I discuss in Chapter 3, touted mainstream success as a key goal for Asian American authors. Whereas Asian American publications of the early 1970s disdained and even ridiculed conventional lyricism or poetic subject matter, by the end of the decade Asian American journals began to make themselves over in the image of conventional literary organs, sponsoring contests and prizes and attracting a somewhat younger generation of poets who emphasized personal experience over politics. At the end of the 1970s, Language writing—whose membership and audience had seemed so constrained as to draw charges of insularity and exclusion from fellow poets—was also reaching a larger audience through the publication of the journal *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* (a title that also helped, of course, to cement the movement's name), whose emphasis on critical writings provided an abstract, theoretical foundation for what had previously been a largely local phenomenon.

In short, the categories of Asian American and Language writing were gradually unmoored from their original social contexts, allowing them to take their places within mainstream poetic discourse. The conjunction of the social and the aesthetic—which marked the avant-garde moment within each group's development—was replaced by the now-familiar divide between the two, with “Asian American poetry” becoming a primarily social category and “Language writing” becoming a largely aesthetic one. Such definitional shifts were necessary for these modes of writing to be comprehensible within the universalizing framework of mainstream literary discourse—for Asian American and Language writing to become categories that signified beyond a purely local community. Asian American writing, rather than being marked by a particular political orientation or a specific context of small-scale production, came simply to signify any work whose



author “happened to be” of Asian descent, a shift that tended to exclude work that did not conform to mainstream aesthetics. It is no accident that the understated, apolitical, first-person lyrics of Cathy Song, which stand in sharp contrast to Asian American writing of the 1970s, were the first poems by an Asian American to gain widespread critical attention.

In the case of Language writing, it was not until mainstream critics and readers came to be aware of something called “Language poetry” in the mid-1980s that it became imaginable for writers outside a small group to be read as doing “language writing.” As the term became a broadly stylistic rather than a more narrowly avant-garde one, writers such as Michael Palmer and Susan Howe, who did not identify themselves with the more specific project undertaken by Silliman and his colleagues in the 1970s, would come to be called “Language poets” as well, with the term coming to stand in for a whole spectrum of formally innovative poetics. That this represented a radical shift from the work of the 1970s is evident in some writers’ subsequent allergy to the term “Language poetry”; Silliman, who had frequently employed the term “language-oriented” in the 1970s to describe his project, was enraged by Douglas Messerli’s decision to name a mid-1980s anthology “*Language Poetries*” and declared in a letter, “I am not a language poet.” Language writing was not, in this vision, an aesthetic project in which just anyone could participate; rather, it was attached to a specific community at a specific moment in time and, for participants like Silliman, was emptied as soon as it was removed from that particular social context.

The current status of Asian American and Language writing as literary categories, then, cannot be read backward into those categories’ origins. In fact, perhaps the most crucial reason to examine the history of these categories—separating the avant-garde moment of the 1970s from the mainstreaming of the 1980s—is that our sense of the value of these categories, and of their political implications, still derives largely from the logic of the work of the 1970s, even though subsequent writers seem to have repudiated the cruder versions of that decade’s aesthetics and politics. It would be nearly impossible to make an argument for the political value of the poems of Li-Young Lee or David Mura without relying to some degree on the more pointed political engagement of the writers of the 1970s who established the need for a category of Asian American writing. Nor would it be easy to establish the political credentials of “experimental” styles in current poetry without returning to the arguments advanced by Silliman, Bernstein, and

other Language writers. If the product of these categories now seems to be a group of distinguished individual writers—Silliman, Hejinian, Howe, Lee, Cha, Yau—we must also remember that the profound shift in literary values that allows us to appreciate their work was an achievement of the avant-garde impulses of Language and Asian American writing in the 1970s.

Although I argue that Asian American and Language writing grew from a similar avant-garde impulse, it must also be said that there have been few organic points of connection between the two. Indeed, both Language and Asian American writing were emerging in the same politically charged Bay Area atmosphere in the 1970s, but there is little evidence that either group of writers was actively aware of the other.<sup>1</sup> The poets and institutions of Asian American poetry in the 1970s, which I discuss in Chapter 3, are all closely connected with the Asian American political movement that coalesced around the student strike at San Francisco State in 1968–9: poet Janice Mirikitani was a student there, and her magazine *Aion*, the first Asian American literary magazine, emerged from that context.<sup>2</sup> The major figures of Language writing, including Charles Bernstein, Bruce Andrews, Ron Silliman, Barrett Watten, and Lyn Hejinian, were educated at Harvard or at the University of California, Berkeley; their poetic affiliations did not, in general, emerge directly from university-based political commitments or social interactions.

Although they are not direct lines of influence, the connections that can be drawn between the two groups may nonetheless give us a clearer sense of their relative social and cultural positioning. The first link is the powerful role Asian cultural influences play not only in twentieth-century American poetry but in American culture of the 1960s more broadly. As Josephine Nock-Hee Park shows in her recent study *Apparitions of Asia*, the deep legacy of Ezra Pound's turn to Chinese models and materials in his poetry is extended into the mid-twentieth century by Beat writers' engagement with Buddhism. But the appeal of Asian cultural models is evident at all levels of American culture in the 1960s and 1970s—an appeal that gains a political edge from growing opposition to the war in Vietnam. In this rise of what I call “postmodern orientalism,” Asian culture becomes a site for identification and appropriation by American artists and activists, even as it remains other and foreign to American culture.

As I discuss in Chapter 2, composer Steve Reich, whose work *Drumming* was a major influence on poet Ron Silliman, has frequently cited the impact

of Asian music on him, noting his desire to “think Balinese” in his work. Silliman, in turn, named his long poem *Ketjak* after a Balinese chant. In his essay “The Turn to Language and the 1960s,” Barrett Watten cites Allen Ginsberg’s use of Buddhist chants and the Black Panthers’ use of Mao’s *Little Red Book* as politically charged moments of Asian identification. At the same time, Watten characterizes these Asian texts as empty signifiers, “incomprehensible” symbols whose primary function is to mark a position utterly outside any possible system.<sup>3</sup>

Even though such appropriations of Asia were undoubtedly productive for white writers and artists, postmodernist orientalism placed Asian American poets in a peculiar situation. In theory, the counterculture’s embrace of Asia could have offered writers of Asian descent a significant opportunity to find a wide audience for their work. There can be little doubt that Asian American writers and activists were themselves inspired by such importations from Asia, from Asian American activists’ own embrace of Mao’s philosophy to Mirikitani’s engagement with Japanese poetic forms. In practice, however, white Americans’ interest remained fixed on Asia itself, not Asians in America; the search for otherness led overseas (Ginsberg to India, Snyder to Japan) but not to the domestic productions of Asian Americans. Indeed, as Park argues in *Apparitions of Asia*, Asian American poets defined themselves by writing against what they saw as the appropriation and exoticism practiced by poets like Snyder. So while white experimental writers and artists like Ginsberg, Snyder, Reich, and Silliman gained critical and even popular recognition for their citations of Asian culture, Asian American poets struggled until well into the 1980s to gain a mainstream readership.

On those rare occasions when Asian Americans did gain recognition from white avant-gardists, the results were mixed. The reception of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictée*, which I discuss in Chapter 4, suggests that the category of Asian American writing was still unacknowledged by many white experimentalists as late as the mid-1980s. Through the lens of postmodern orientalism, Cha’s avant-gardism was understood as a sign of her essential foreignness. Not until the 1990s did Asian American critics begin to link her work to that of other Asian American writers.

We may also get a sense of the relative locations of Language and Asian American writing through their vexed relationship to a third body of work: African American writing. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, African American culture provided a powerful but ambiguous example for both

Asian American and white experimental writers. Nathaniel Mackey's and Aldon Lynn Nielsen's authoritative studies of experimental African American poetry suggest that black experimentalists formed an avant-garde in which social dissent and aesthetic dissidence were profoundly consonant; as Mackey puts it, such poetry displays an organic link "between ethnicity and formal innovation, social marginality and aesthetic marginality" (7–8). Most influential for Asian American writers in particular was the Black Arts movement, at its apex in the early 1970s; anchored by the politically charged work of Amiri Baraka, it advocated "a poetic diction rooted in black speech and black music" (Nielsen 9). But as Nielsen demonstrates, African American influences can be found throughout the history of the American poetic avant-garde, particularly in the influence of jazz, a model for the work of African American, Asian American, and white poets alike.

As Asian American activist and musician Fred Ho notes in his "Tribute to the Black Arts Movement," many Asian Americans "have admired the black American struggle and especially what we perceive to be the strength, rootedness, and communality of the black American cultural experience" (142). Ho's own jazz group, the Afro Asian Music Ensemble, is a tribute to such connections. Indeed, as Ho suggests, it was jazz that offered the best example of a politically resonant avant-garde: "Malcolm X represented the vanguard of revolutionary black nationalism. John Coltrane represented the musical and cultural vanguard . . . a dynamically dialectical interplay existed between both political and artistic energies" (145). Jazz, more than any direct influence of African American poetry, had a major impact on Asian American poets, most notably, as I discuss in Chapter 3, on the work of Lawson Fusao Inada.

But Ho acknowledges that Asian Americans never developed a true counterpart to the Black Arts movement. The closest equivalent, Ho writes, was "a very small bicoastal activist circle" of the 1970s that included Inada and a few others (150). Thus, black cultural nationalism could also serve as a reminder of what Asian Americans lacked; as Ho puts it, "Where is our Asian Malcolm X? Or Langston Hughes? Or John Coltrane?" (142). Although I argue that Asian American poets did function as an avant-garde in the 1970s, they never achieved the coherence and prominence of the Black Arts movement. Poets like Inada and Mirikitani did not exert a strong influence on non-Asian American writers. As a result, Asian American poetry would not gain wide recognition until the 1980s, when it would be defined not as

avant-garde but by the more mainstream aesthetic of Cathy Song, David Mura, and Li-Young Lee.

The relationship between African American and Language writing is also a complex one. Even though no Asian American poet was acknowledged as a peer by white experimental writers until quite recently, the avant-garde scene of the 1950s and 1960s did include Amiri Baraka, who (as LeRoi Jones) was the only black writer in Donald Allen's anthology *The New American Poetry*. As Mackey notes, Baraka was a "bridge figure" among the avant-gardes of the period, variously affiliated with Beat, Black Mountain, New York school, and African American writing (7). More important than the direct influence of Baraka, however, is the wide-ranging impact African American culture—especially music—has had on the American avant-garde in the twentieth century. Reminding us that Charles Olson and Robert Creeley, like many other white writers, were compelled by the rhythms of bebop, Mackey cites Olson's widely quoted remark on projectivist poetics: "[T]here was no poetic. It was Charlie Parker" (8). Nielsen even suggests a powerful jazz genealogy for Language writing, noting the strong influence of the music and poetry of Cecil Taylor on the work of Clark Coolidge, who in turn was a major model for Ron Silliman and other Language poets (258).

Identifying such connections, however, should not obscure the fact that Language writers counted no writers of color among their ranks, and very few among their allies. In the debates around the founding of the journal *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* that I discuss in Chapter 2, the only black writer named as a potential contributor is Lorenzo Thomas. In this respect, the canonization of Language writing simply follows a literary-critical tradition in which groups of white writers are seen as constituting "the avant-garde," with nonwhite artists and cultures relegated to the status of mere "context" or "inspiration." But the situation of Language writing, I argue, differed from that of earlier avant-gardes in a significant way. Like Asian American writers of the 1970s, Language writers emerged at a moment of heightened awareness of race; it was no longer possible, as it might have been in an earlier era, to simply remain ignorant of the rise of African American, Chicano/Chicana, or Native American political and artistic groupings.<sup>4</sup>

I suggest that Language writers responded to this shifting landscape in a two-pronged fashion. First, they developed an occasionally uncomfortable awareness of their own social particularity—becoming, in Silliman's work, an almost "ethnic" sense of his position as a progressive white male writer.

But they also reacted against what they saw as more doctrinaire forms of identity politics, hoping to create in their work an aesthetic that could integrate diverse materials within elaborate formal structures. It might be said, in effect, that Language writers sought to continue the politics of the 1960s by other means, steering away from the perceived perils of separatism and violence toward an analysis of language.

This last argument is one suggested by Barrett Watten in his 2002 article "The Turn to Language and the 1960s." Watten provocatively proposes analogies between the social movements of the 1960s, from the civil rights movement to the Berkeley Free Speech movement, and the "radically formalist poetics" of Language writing (139). What social movements shared with "language-centered" poetics, Watten argues, was the establishing of a position "outside" a given order, whether that of the liberal university, of institutionalized racism, or of language itself. Charles Bernstein's 2000 essay "Poetics of the Americas," although on a very different topic, makes an analogous argument: the techniques of Language writing can be allied with the dialect poetry of ethnic minority writers because both represent "non-standard language practices" (113).

But both Bernstein and Watten acknowledge that they are writing revisionist histories, testifying to the gaps between Language poetry and other modes of writing in the very act of seeking to bridge them. While Bernstein argues that it is now possible to see the "intimate formal and sociohistorical connection" between black and white modernisms, he also notes that "the fact of the color line" meant that "these developments often took place without reference to each other" (113). And although Watten asserts that it is possible to retrospectively construct a common political genealogy for Language poetry and the writing of poets of color, such connections were less than obvious at the time. "The textual politics of the Language school," Watten observes, "are commonly opposed to the expressivist poetics (Black Arts, Chicano, feminist, gay/lesbian) that emerged in the same decade, for good reason" (139). Watten categorizes his own account as a "thought experiment" rather than a history precisely because there were few organic links between Language writers and poets of color in the 1970s.

Indeed, there is some reason to think that forceful articulations of African American identity were a negative example for Language writers. Watten's extended critique of the "irrational" and "distorted" politics of the Black Panther Party suggests that black separatism forms a kind of limit case for

his argument, threatening to disrupt the emancipatory coalition of the left (172)—much as Ron Silliman, as described previously, wonders what the rise of the Black Panthers means for the future of the left. As I will suggest of Silliman, Watten offers language-centered writing as a response to the political fragmentation of the 1960s, a potential force for the reintegration of the left: “The language-centered poetics of the 1970s permitted the recovery of a totalized *outside* that was a casualty of the conflict between expression and representation in the 1960s” (183).

Language writing, like Asian American poetry, is therefore less a parallel development to the rise of the Black Arts movement than a response to it. But unlike Asian American poetry, which sought (with limited success) to model itself on Black Arts, Language writing’s focus on “language itself” can be read as an effort to move beyond more obviously identity-based categories. This has allowed critics to grant Language writing a kind of monopoly over the aesthetic—regarding its politics as purely formal—while relegating Asian American and African American poetry to the realm of identity politics. Whereas Language writing has reached a significant academic audience (although not without generating significant controversy), with several of its practitioners now university professors of poetics, Asian American poetry is still sufficiently overlooked that a panel was convened at the 2007 Modern Language Association convention to inquire into the neglect of poetry in Asian American studies.<sup>5</sup>

In studying Asian American and Language writing, my goal is not to produce a revisionist account that would erase the historical gaps between the two bodies of work. My argument that both groups can be understood as manifestations of the avant-garde should not occlude the very different goals of Language and Asian American writing or the very different paths they have taken. Indeed, I hope that understanding both as avant-garde formations may help us explain their complex and frequently misunderstood positioning in the contemporary American poetic landscape.

Understanding Language and Asian American poetics as divergent manifestations of the contemporary avant-garde distinguishes this project from the approaches adopted by Nathaniel Mackey and Aldon Lynn Nielsen, whose groundbreaking studies have conclusively established the existence of a vibrant tradition of experimental African American writing. My interest is less in outlining a history of experimental Asian American writing than in showing how Asian American and Language writing emerged as parallel

avant-garde formations. I also distinguish my framework from the one adopted by Ann Vickery's *Leaving Lines of Gender*, which persuasively argues for what Vickery calls a "feminist genealogy" of Language writing; my interest lies in the vexed history of division between the two bodies of work I study, rather than in any argument for their unification.

Several recent critics have sought more actively to bring Asian American poets into discussions of experimental writing. Juliana Spahr's *Everybody's Autonomy* holds up experimental texts such as Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée* as examples of works that "decolonize" reading through both their form and their content, and Brian Kim Stefans's essay "Remote Parsee: Asian American Poetry Since 1970" offers an alternative canon of innovative Asian American poets that includes John Yau and Mei-mei Berssenbrugge. Such projects, however, with their focus on formal categories, do not offer an argument for the distinctiveness of Asian American writing; they also do not offer an explanation as to why the work of most Asian American poets has not previously been recognized as experimental. Viewing the categories of the Asian American and experimental comparatively, through the lens of the avant-garde, can help us answer some of these questions, revealing the linked history of both bodies of work, the reasons for their divergence since the 1970s, and the conditions that seem now to be allowing a renewed sense of their connections.

My point of origin for these concerns is the work of Allen Ginsberg, not because Ginsberg should somehow be seen as the progenitor of either Asian American or Language poetry—though his influence is quite evident in both—but because one can see, coexisting in his work, those political and aesthetic issues that will ultimately give rise to Language poetry and Asian American poetry. Chapter 1 focuses on Ginsberg's poetry of the later 1960s, composed by dictation into a tape recorder and called "auto poesy." In these poems, Ginsberg hoped to combine the media's generalizing power with the humanity of the individual consciousness. But his original recordings reveal a subjectivity that is uncertain and self-revising, relying not on spontaneous thought but on will and assertion to create its desired effect. These aspects of Ginsberg's work are emblematic of the fragmentation of the new left in the late 1960s into the identity politics of the 1970s—a situation to which both Language poetry and Asian American poetry arise as responses.

The work of Language writer Ron Silliman, the subject of Chapter 2, extends Ginsberg's vision of a poetry that realistically portrays society; but



Silliman employs formal techniques, such as the parataxis of the “new sentence,” that attempt to guard against Ginsberg’s excesses of subjectivity. With the breakup of the left in the 1970s, Silliman’s project is threatened by the limits of both individual and group subjectivity—by boundaries of race, gender, and sexuality. In studying correspondence among Language writers, I show how Silliman and other Language writers adapt by redefining the avant-garde, positing Language writing not simply as an aesthetic movement but as a social identity, in a process that might be dubbed the “ethnicization” of the avant-garde.<sup>6</sup> Silliman’s first major work, *Ketjak*, is both a convincing map of the contemporary social landscape and an often uncomfortable exploration of white male consciousness—a sensibility awkwardly aware of its own “pervasive presence.”

Although one might assume that Asian American writing of the 1970s would be less prone to such anxieties, Chapter 3 shows Asian American poetry engaged in comparable struggles over identity and poetic form—a response, in part, to self-conscious comparisons to the strength of black nationalism. Poetry fulfills an avant-garde function in early Asian American publications, not by reporting on but by actively creating an Asian American culture. The work of such poets as Janice Mirikitani, Francis Oka, and Lawson Fusao Inada, in which the Asian American subject is visibly under construction, reflects a dynamic fusion of Beat, jazz, and populist influences.

During the 1980s, as Language writing and Asian American writing became visible to mainstream readers, their common avant-garde orientations were obscured, making their practices seem radically separate. I explore this process in Chapter 4 by documenting the reception of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s book *Dictée*. Although Cha was known in white avant-garde circles in the 1970s and 1980s, she was neglected by Asian American readers until the early 1990s. *Dictée*’s difficult career illustrates the avant-garde continuity of Language and Asian American writing but also cautions against any simple attempt to integrate the two. The multiple and often conflicting structures that organize *Dictée*—linguistic, poetic, mythical, historical, personal—make it a text in which the impulses of experimental and Asian American writing meet in mutually critical fashion.

By the 1990s, the term “experimental Asian American poetry” had emerged to describe work like Cha’s. Chapter 5 offers a critique of this concept through a survey of the work of John Yau. Yau’s use of ethnic signifiers allows his work to be positioned within the discourse of Asian American

writing; at the same time, he adopts the Language poets' conception of a self constructed in language. But in hanging on to the emptied-out structures of ethnic identity, Yau gains a foothold from which to critique Language poetry's attempt to incorporate the "marginal." Far from providing a synthesis, Yau's work stages the history of and conflict between these contemporary avant-garde modes.

A sociology of the contemporary poetic avant-garde is crucial if we are to understand the roles that categories such as Asian American and Language writing have played, and continue to play, on the contemporary American scene. At stake are the very terms of contemporary literary value, in which aesthetics are strongly linked with the social. Perhaps most important, this project seeks to provide the historical context necessary to understand the distinctive contributions of a wide range of poets, from Allen Ginsberg to John Yau, and to grasp the inescapably political ramifications of these poets' negotiations with poetic form.