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Asian American Poetry in the First Decade of the 2000s

At the start of the twenty-first century, Asian American poetry finds itself in a curious position. From one perspective, it is a mature and well-established literature that has produced several generations' worth of major writers since the 1970s, from Lawson Fusao Inada to Li-Young Lee, from Janice Mirikitani to Myung Mi Kim. Over the past two decades, Asian American poets have been widely anthologized, published by small and mainstream presses alike, and recognized with major awards. Younger Asian American writers continue to thrive, form new communities, and push the boundaries set by their predecessors. But from another perspective, Asian American poetry continues to be marginal. Even among readers and critics of Asian American literature, poetry still receives far less attention than novels or prose memoirs. The first book-length studies of the field are only now beginning to be published. Journals, presses, and institutions devoted to Asian American poetry—with a few notable exceptions—have been ephemeral. Even as the ranks of Asian American poets become more numerous and more diverse, there seems to be increasingly less agreement about what the category of "Asian American poetry" might mean (any poetry by an Asian American? poetry with recognizably Asian American content?), with some readers suggesting that the label may be growing less coherent and relevant as time goes on. My goal in this essay will be to confront these questions about the place of Asian American poetry by surveying its development in the first decade of the

twenty-first century. While an exhaustive account of Asian American poetic production in the past ten years is not possible here (the sheer quantity of material is itself a sign of Asian American poetry's vitality), I do hope to identify some major authors and trends that situate twenty-first-century Asian American poetry with regard to its history and its literary and social context, and that may provide some guide to where it may go in the future.

I begin by examining the ongoing careers of four major poets who established their reputations in the 1980s and 1990s: Li-Young Lee, John Yau, Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, and Myung Mi Kim. All have continued to publish actively and even reach new heights of prominence in the first decade of the 2000s, and each represents a particular tendency or strain within Asian American poetry at the turn of the century. It is Kim's work, however, that may have been the most influential in setting the direction of Asian American poetry of the past decade. That direction, I suggest, combines the engagement with history and politics that has traditionally characterized Asian American poetry with a burrowing into language, exploring both its limits and its creative potential in poetic styles influenced by experimental modes within American poetry. The result is a poetry that is not always explicitly marked by Asian American sites or subjects, but that clearly emerges from the context of race and ethnicity within which the Asian American author is situated. I move to a discussion of three distinctive Asian American poets who have emerged in the last decade: Linh Dinh, Barbara Jane Reyes, and Cathy Park Hong. These writers' multilingual and multicultural sensibilities problematize the position of the Asian American writer but also create reading positions that can be seen as analogies of Asian American subjectivity. This work is part of several larger trends within Asian American poetry—trends that echo and vary larger trends within contemporary American poetry: language-centered experimentation; formalism and postconfessional lyric; and the sampling and remixing of popular culture. These aesthetic trends unfold against a backdrop of rapid demographic change in the Asian American population, with a particular emergence of South and Southeast Asian American poets;

the growth of new genres of Asian American poetry; and a changing institutional context for Asian American writers. Finally, I will examine the long-delayed emergence of a significant critical discourse around Asian American poetry in the past decade, with the publication of the first book-length studies of Asian American poetry and increased academic attention to the topic.

To understand where Asian American poetry found itself at the close of the twentieth century, it's helpful to review the development of Asian American poetry over the preceding three decades.¹ The Asian American movement of the late 1960s and 1970s brought to prominence poets like Lawson Fusao Inada and Janice Mirikitani, whose direct engagement with politics and history resonated with the era's political activism. The 1980s saw a turn away from political polemic toward autobiographical lyrics and more introspective, skeptical modes, marked by the mainstream successes of poets like Cathy Song, Marilyn Chin, David Mura, and Li-Young Lee and culminating in Garrett Hongo's 1993 anthology *The Open Boat: Poems from Asian America*. Existing alongside this lyric tendency, but receiving relatively little attention from readers until the 1990s, was a more experimental strain focused on fragmentation, linguistic exploration, and cultural hybridity, epitomized by the work of writers like Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, John Yau, Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, and Myung Mi Kim. By the end of the 1990s, these latter writers appeared to be in ascendance, particularly among academic readers, who found their poems amenable to current theoretical and critical models. The claim by Brian Kim Stefans in his 2002 essay "Remote Parsee: An Alternative Grammar of Asian North American Poetry" that Yau and Berssenbrugge were "[t]he two most visible writers of Asian descent in the States" (45) might have sounded a bit grand at the time, but his sense of their centrality has been confirmed by their increasing prominence over the course of the past decade.

1. This narrative of Asian American poetry since the 1970s is developed in more detail in my *Race and the Avant-Garde: Experimental and Asian American Poetry since 1965*.

This trend toward a greater mainstreaming of more “experimental” modes reflects larger developments within American poetry during the 1990s. In the wake of the debates around the rise of Language poetry in the 1980s, “experimental” became a term applied to an increasingly wide range of poetic practices that diverged from the first-person, postconfessional lyric by foregrounding, to varying degrees, poetic form. This shift away from the first-person lyric mode posed a particularly complex challenge for Asian American poetics, which had moved from using politics and history as its ground in the 1970s to using the autobiographical speaker as the locus of Asian American identification. If experimental writing techniques disrupted the unity or centrality of that subject position, what then would remain to mark the work as Asian American?

That last question might well be asked of some of the recent poetry of Li-Young Lee, who came to prominence with his 1986 book *Rose* and his 1990 collection *The City in Which I Love You*, and who has continued to be one of the most widely read, discussed, and anthologized Asian American poets. Lee’s work would seem to fall squarely into the paradigm of the autobiographical lyric mode; his writing dwells consistently, even obsessively, on his own experience and family history, particularly on the figure of his father. In Lee’s most powerful poems, personal experience resonates deeply with issues of race and history, as in “Persimmons,” from *Rose*, when a remembered corrective from a white teacher about pronunciation opens up into memories of the speaker’s father and into an erotically charged scene of teaching between the speaker and his wife. In “The Cleaving,” from *The City in Which I Love You*, a visit to a Chinatown butcher shop sparks a wide-ranging meditation on race, immigration, sexuality, and mortality.

The decade that elapsed between *The City in Which I Love You* and Lee’s next collection, *Book of My Nights* (2001), saw a shift in Lee’s work toward greater abstraction, linked to a deepening engagement with spiritual and existential themes. There are still many poems of the father, but the details of personal history that marked Lee’s earlier collection are sparser, the tone of introspection and prayerful meditation stronger, the theme of mortality

more prominent. In "Night Mirror," the poet addresses himself, seeking to soothe existential fears:

Li-Young, don't feel lonely
 when you look up
 into great night . . .

 And don't be afraid
 when, eyes closed, you look inside you
 and find night . . .

(19)

The poem's sensuousness is not that of remembered fruit or the lover's skin, but the metaphorical "unequaled perfume of your dying" (20).

The title of Lee's most recent book, *Behind My Eyes* (2008), would seem to reinforce this introspective turn in his work. But *Behind My Eyes* also marks a striking departure for Lee; instead of focusing on fathers and sons, many of these poems place the speaker in dialogue with a female interlocutor. There's a renewed emphasis on the speaker's relationship with his wife, as in the wryly titled "Virtues of the Boring Husband," although there is less of the eroticism that characterizes Lee's earlier work. Although explicitly Asian American themes had largely disappeared from *Book of My Nights*, they return here in two poems, "Self-Help for Fellow Refugees" and "Immigrant Blues," that display a combination of tender humor and sharp irony reminiscent of Marilyn Chin's work. "Self-Help" suggests that "it's probably best to dress in plain clothes / when you arrive in the United States, / and try not to talk too loud" (16), while "Immigrant Blues" satirizes scholarship by imagining an "old story" called "Survival Strategies / and the Melancholy of Racial Assimilation" (28).

But the overall thrust of *Behind My Eyes* is toward a broader spirituality. The book contains more detailed biblical imagery than any of Lee's previous collections, extending Lee's engagement with the Judeo-Christian God. At times Lee achieves a minimalism that echoes the work of a poet like Robert Creeley: "She opens her eyes / and I see. . . . *Do you love me?* she asks / *I love you,* / she answers" (101). Perhaps it is premature to talk of a

“late” phase in Lee’s career, but *Behind My Eyes* has precisely such an elegiac, even ascetic tone, as if it were pulling away from the earthy and worldly preoccupations with body, race, and history of Lee’s earlier work toward a more austere realm.

Austerity of a vastly different kind is evident in the ongoing oeuvre of Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, who seems less a minimalist than a maximalist, known for her long lines requiring landscape-style printing to accommodate them. But Berssenbrugge’s long lines are not the sprawling catalogs of a Whitman or a Ginsberg. Instead, her diction tends toward philosophical abstraction, creating a self-reflexive discourse that explores the workings of description, metaphor, and consciousness itself. Berssenbrugge’s interest in abstraction can be linked to her deep engagement with the visual arts, most evident in her collaborations with artists such as Kiki Smith and Richard Tuttle.

Berssenbrugge’s abstraction might make her seem remote from the political and historical concerns of much Asian American writing, but in fact Berssenbrugge was closely associated with the Asian American movement of the 1970s. Through the 1980s and 1990s, Berssenbrugge maintained a small but devoted critical following, particularly for her exploration of emotion and her formal experimentation. Although poems like “Tan Tien” and “Chinese Space” approached Chineseness through architectural metaphors, critics more frequently engaged with poems like “Empathy” and “The Four Year Old Girl,” with their meticulous examinations of the language of thought and affect (“This state of confusion is never made comprehensible by being given a plot” [49] or of science and medicine (“She’s inspired to change the genotype, because the cell’s memory outlives the cell” [83]). Perhaps for this reason, Berssenbrugge was read more frequently as an experimental writer than an Asian American one, and she did not receive significant attention from Asian Americanist critics until the later 1990s.

In 2006, the publication of a volume of selected poems, the wittily titled *I Love Artists*, provided an opportunity for a reevaluation of Berssenbrugge’s career. Her poems of the past decade make up the last third of the volume, and they mark a notable change in her style—a shift from a poetry of lines to one of sen-

tences. In these recent poems, sentences do not spill over lines but are separated from one another by a break, making the poem feel less dense, its tone more casual. The voice of the poems seems more personal, with a more liberal use of the first person and more conversational diction: "I'm so pleased to be friends with Maryanne, though I don't understand how she has time for me, with her many friends" (110). Perhaps as a result, we see a reassertion of the ethnically marked themes of some of her earlier work, particularly in a poem like "Nest," which reflects on the speaker's "mother tongue, Chinese" (112). Language learning, and the loss of the "mother tongue," is a frequent theme in Asian American poetry, but in her typical style, Berssenbrugge turns the mother tongue into a physical space, as her speaker describes being "inserted into it" and "filling it with intentions" (112), then leaving it as one would move from one house to another: "Change of mother tongue between us activates an immunity, margin where dwelling and travel are not distinct" (113). And over the past decade, Asian Americanist critics have taken up Berssenbrugge's work, becoming the dominant voices in discussions of her poetry.

A third major poet who has continued to publish actively over the past decade is John Yau, who published his first collection in 1976 and has enjoyed a prolific career as a poet and art critic. Through much of his early career, Yau was read primarily in avant-garde circles, as a protégé of John Ashbery, but by the 1990s had become widely read and discussed by Asian Americanist critics, who were compelled by his remixes of Hollywood clichés and Asian stereotypes, his skepticism toward autobiography, and the surprising lyricism within his surrealist verve. Since 2000, Yau has published no fewer than five collections; the folding of his longtime publisher, Black Sparrow Press, may ironically have led to even greater prominence for Yau, as his work was picked up by Penguin Poets, which published *Borrowed Love Poems* (2002) and *Paradiso Diaspora* (2006). Yau's most significant point of contact with younger writers may be his facility with the materials of popular culture, particularly in its most apparently degraded or commodified forms (the monster movie, the Charlie Chan film); the recombinatory power of these mass-

culture tropes serves as a model for Yau's formal experiments with collage, repetition and variation, and hybridization.

The very title *Borrowed Love Poems* suggests that the derivative status of popular culture is also characteristic of lyric poetry itself. After all, the love poems of Petrarch and Shakespeare treat the tropes of love poetry as inherited clichés; centuries later, Yau suggests, any poem's material can only be "borrowed," as the poet-lover follows "the claw marks of those / who preceded us across this burning floor" (131). But the fact that *Borrowed Love Poems* contains some of the most compelling lyrics of Yau's career suggests that this skepticism toward originality is no barrier to creativity, subjectivity, or expression—indeed, repetition may be the ground from which subjectivity emerges.

The ability of Hollywood continually to reanimate seemingly dead tropes is Yau's model here—and no genre shows that ability more vividly than the monster movie, which figures centrally in *Borrowed Love Poems*. "I was a poet in the house of Frankenstein," Yau declares in the title of one poem; assembled out of reclaimed parts to be given life, the Frankensteinian monster provides an ideal image for Yau's poetic method. And here, remarkably enough, Yau is able to claim a place for the Asian American that is not marginal, but culturally central. Yau's interest in actors like Peter Lorre and Boris Karloff—who played both monstrous figures (Lorre as a serial killer in *M*, Karloff as Frankenstein's monster) and Asians (Lorre as the Charlie Chan-like detective Mr. Moto, Karloff as Fu Manchu and as the detective Mr. Wong)—taps into the way the figure of the Asian possesses a distinctive cultural mutability, capable of being inhabited by white actors like Lorre and Karloff and perilously (but powerfully) close to the hybrid figure of the monster.

The poems in *Borrowed Love Poems* that focus on Karloff and Lorre (an extension of the Lorre poems found in Yau's 1996 collection *Forbidden Entries*) do not speak for a subjectivity that lurks "behind" these actors' roles. Instead, Yau's poems blur the line between actor and role; movies, in the title of another one of Yau's poems, become "a form of reincarnation," in which an actor like Karloff experiences "being Chinese on more than one occasion" (31). By giving these personae substance—as Karloff

remarks, "I tried to tell them that my real name was Mr. Wong" (34)—Yau diverges from traditional critiques of yellowface acting, which call attention to the gap between the white actor and a "real" Asian body. Instead, Yau uses the Asian on film as a figure for the constructedness of *all* subjectivity, echoing a line from his early poem "Toy Trucks and Fried Rice": "His father also told him that Indians were the only true Americans and everyone else was a fake" (*Radiant Silhouette* 69). Yau is thus skeptical of claims for Asian American identity that are grounded in autobiography; but rather than transcending race, Yau's work places it front and center, remixing Asian signifiers as a means of creating new speaking positions.

Although the career of Myung Mi Kim has been the shortest of the poets I have discussed thus far—her first book, *Under Flag*, appeared in 1991—she has had perhaps the most significant influence on the work of younger Asian American writers, blending techniques drawn from Language writing with Asian American writing's historical concerns with migration, imperialism, war, and politics. Kim's body of work is grounded in her experience as a Korean immigrant, but her writing is not conventionally autobiographical; instead, Kim follows the example of another Korean American writer, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, in making language itself the site of her poetry's drama. Early poems such as "Into Such Assembly" approach migration and citizenship through scenes of language learning, asking, "Who is mother tongue, who is father country?" (*Under Flag* 29). Kim's emphasis on the materiality of language resonates with the concerns of the Language writers, with whom she has been loosely identified; her use of the fragment and the page as a visual space is reminiscent of the work of Susan Howe, and Kim now teaches in the Poetics Program at SUNY-Buffalo, as Howe once did.

In her work of the past decade, collected in *Commons* (2002) and *Penury* (2009), Kim has sharpened and broadened her political critiques in response to an evolving landscape of global capitalism, disaster, terror, and violence. We might imagine that the title *Commons* evokes the possibility of a shared space represented by language, but the text portrays language as a site of constant struggle for domination and survival. Images of dissec-

tion—of pigs, dogs, human bodies—recur throughout the book and are horrifically echoed in an account of a young girl at Hiroshima whose “insides had imploded” (50). The desire to know and describe the “insides” of things may well be an instrumental and destructive one, part of the “organizing myth of comprehensive knowledge” (44) that can be turned to the ends of power: “The fundamental tenet of all military geography is that every feature of the visible world possesses actual or potential military significance” (32).

Against such instrumentalist views of language, Kim seeks an alternate mapping that dwells on the materiality and opacity of words and objects, following idiosyncratic rather than systematic links: “Those which are of foreign origin. Those which are of forgotten sources” (4). In contrast to the invasive language of dissection, Kim offers the language of agriculture and building, seeking to “Gently, gently level the ground” (7). The aim is not simply offering an alternative narrative or analysis, but “Speaking and placing the speaking,” remaining attentive to the location and context of any act of speech. It’s because of this awareness of location that Kim’s writing does not ascend into pure abstraction or lose its moorings in Asian American discourse. Korean characters and phonemes appear throughout the book, and the poem “Siege Document” offers two competing transliterations of a Korean text—all disruptions of the unquestioned monolingualism of American literature that register the location of Kim’s poetic critique.

Penury, Kim’s most recent book, is even more pointed in its critique of a post-9/11 world, aimed with a new directness at a world constructed “for the good of the very few and the suffering of a great many” (46). In this new work, Kim seems increasingly willing to speak in a broader, more public idiom, placing her poetry in a present-day context of “increased chatter,” filled with phrases like “border security operation,” “scorched earth tactics,” and “bunker buster bomb.” Kim takes this bureaucratized language of violence head-on, declaring that a “sameness of language” produces a “sameness of sentiment and thought” (27). The central section of the book, a poem “*for six multilingual voices*,” suggests the possibility of breaking up this sameness

through an interplay of different voices and languages, a structure that allows historical experiences to be heard without forcing them into a predetermined narrative or framework. The “level ground” imagined in *Commons* reappears in the later sections of *Penury*, which use nature imagery, “tastes of granite and the rapids” (91), to suggest the creative possibilities of linguistic border-crossing. The collection’s final poem imagines a “recitation of acacias,” as if poetry could call nature into being; Kim’s scrupulous placing of speaking leads to a speaking of place, a new terrain emerging from a fractured language.

The ongoing work of poets like Lee, Berssenbrugge, Yau, and Kim brings a number of major themes within Asian American poetry forward into the twenty-first century. In Lee (and, to a lesser degree, Berssenbrugge), we can see the continuing influence of the postconfessional autobiographical mode, but we also see a desire to make the first person speak within a broader context—of spirituality, philosophy, or politics. Yau provides a counterweight to the autobiographical mode, adopting personae that highlight the constructed nature of subjectivity; his work also reminds us that popular culture continues to be a major terrain of cultural and political struggle for Asian Americans. Finally, Kim’s incisive investigations of language are framed by efforts to place those investigations within political, social, and cultural contexts.

How, if at all, have newer Asian American poets followed these trends? This question brings me to the work of Asian American writers who have emerged since 2000. Many continue to engage with issues and themes similar to those of their predecessors, but they also bring distinctive new voices and perspectives that reflect both the changing demographics of Asian America and shifting aesthetic trends within American poetry more broadly.

One of the most distinctive voices to emerge over the past decade is that of Linh Dinh, a Vietnamese American writer whose prolific output has included five books of poetry and two books of short stories since 2000. Linh Dinh came to the U.S. from Vietnam in 1975 (“Linh Dinh”). His first book of poems, *All*

Around What Empties Out (2003), registers the experiences of war and migration, but in oblique and unexpected ways: a speaker apostrophizes his bed as “the leaky boat on the South China Sea fleeing / Ho Chi Minh City” (2), and the poem “O Hanoi” narrates the speaker’s history through a series of implausible locations: “We lived in the old quarters, on Potato Street, / Then Coffin Street, then Clown Street, / Then Teleprompter Street” (6). But traumatic experience is much more likely to erupt in decontextualized images of violence:

“Oh great,” she yells, “a fox hole!” and jumps right in. And just in time, too, because a shell immediately explodes a few feet away. . . . She is bunched up like a mummy, but not too uncomfortable, a woman in the flush of youth squatting in a ready-made fox hole.

(“The Fox Hole” 16)

I think “vesicle” is the most beautiful word in the English language. He was lying face down, his shirt burnt off, back steaming. I myself was bleeding. There was a harvest of vesicles on his back. His body wept. “Yaw” may be the ugliest. Don’t say, “The bullet yawed inside the body.” Say, “The bullet danced inside the body.”

(“The Most Beautiful Word” 17)

But perhaps the most distinctive element of Linh Dinh’s work is his Rabelaisian obsession with the grotesque human body, its organs, orifices, and emissions. The cover of *All Around What Empties Out* features the outline of a toilet seat; a speaker addresses a bed as “sentimental sponge” and “Witness to all my horrors, my Valdez spills” (2); the poem “All Around What Empties Out” is an ode to the speaker’s perineum (10); and “Motate” begins with a “General emission from all orifices” (5). Linh Dinh’s visceral, discomfiting diction gives his work a shocking immediacy even as it courts disgust.

It’s not just Linh Dinh’s content but his tone that seizes the reader’s attention, from the phatic expressions in *All Around What Empties Out* (“Whoaaaa!!! Get away from me!!!”; “Arrrrghhh!!!”; “Waaa!!!!!!!”; “Ha ha ha!!!!” [21]) to the Internet-sourced language of his most recent book, *Some Kind of Cheese Orgy* (“SEAN AVERY IS / NOW AN EVEN BIGGER DICK. Who’s got the bigger / Dick? Chris Brown or Neyo? My senator is a bigger

/ Dick than your senator. How can I get a bigger dick / (Naturally)?" [35]). Linh Dinh's sampling of materials from popular culture may echo Yau, but his collages of online material and his harnessing of crude, offensive, in-your-face discourse make his work even more strongly reminiscent of Flarf, a movement with which he has sometimes been loosely associated. Flarf, which has gained significant attention and notoriety over the past decade, collages language generated from Google searches to create poems that consciously court "bad taste" or use degraded, offensive, or unpoetic language.² Linh Dinh's work is not Flarf in the strictest sense—he often seems to be imitating rather than actually quoting online discourse, and such poems make up only part of his oeuvre—but he very much partakes of the irreverent, provocative sensibility of Flarf.

If Linh Dinh's work engages Asian American politics, it does so in ways that poets of earlier generations might well not recognize. There are no political polemics or pieties in his work; indeed, it's difficult to identify any stable political position within Linh Dinh's work at all. He is instead a satirist, at times possessed by a gleeful misanthropy:

Because of the chemical phthalate in plastic, dicks
Are shrinking—tell me all about it—sperm counts
Are way down, but not low enough, unfortunately,
To slow down this full-throttle-ahead fuck boat,
About to burn, capsize and sink.

(Jam Alerts 57)

At the same time, Linh Dinh is not a borrower of personae like Yau; the plain diction and visceral immediacy of his voice are consistent and immediately recognizable throughout his work. Rather than arranging and mixing cultural references in controlled fashion, as Yau does, Linh Dinh seems (in the spirit of Flarf) to amplify them, drawing on their raw power.

2. A full discussion of Flarf is beyond the scope of this essay; its best-known practitioners include K. Silem Mohammad, Michael Magee, Katie Degentesh, Gary Sullivan, Drew Gardner, and Nada Gordon. For an account of the history of the movement, see Sullivan.

Perhaps what marks Linh Dinh most of all as a twenty-first-century American poet is that his deepest obsession is not with the body, or with popular culture, but with language itself, as evidenced in *Some Kind of Cheese Orgy*. In a surprising echo of Myung Mi Kim's engagements with Korean, Linh Dinh includes several poems in the later part of the book that "translate" or "explain" various Vietnamese words and concepts—with withering irony:

Cứt means shit. Vietnamese already see turds often, so they don't need to be reminded, no voided victual after every other word. *Ngu như cứt* means Stupid as shit. *Mày chẳng biết cái đéo gì* means You don't know fuck, as opposed to You don't know shit.

(95)

These "[t]ranslations" hover uneasily between patient explanation and an assault on the reader. Linh Dinh, like Berssenbrugge and Kim, registers the violently fractured and unequal terrain crossed by any act of translation, even as translation is an explosively creative act:

Translation, like jazz, is a form of revenge.

Translation, like jazz, is a tool of imperialism.

Translation, like jazz, is an improvised explosive device.

(98)

The linking of translation to jazz offers a surprising resonance with another pioneer of Asian American poetry, Lawson Fusao Inada, whose love of jazz has long shaped the forms of his poetry, marking a point of contact with American culture through an African American vernacular form. But the effect of these acts of translation differs sharply from that seen in the work of a writer like Kim. If Kim's use of language is centripetal, trying to pull back commodified and bureaucratized uses of languages into a local, human context, Linh Dinh's language is centrifugal, exploding outward to implicate the reader wherever that reader might be: "That's no mirror, dude, that's a translation" (97).

If twenty-first-century Asian American writing like Linh Dinh's seems to explode the idea of any fixed location for Asian

American poetry, that may be because the context of Asian American writing has become increasingly multicultural and multiethnic. If it was ever possible to think of Asian American identity as monolithic or indivisible, existing in isolation from other groups, the new century, with its new migration patterns, shifting coalitions, and global cities, has made such essentialist thinking about Asian Americanness unimaginable. These complex contexts are hardly new—the Asian American movement of the 1970s took place against the backdrop of a multiracial struggle for civil rights and global critiques of imperialism—but twenty-first-century Asian American poets increasingly recognize a multicultural America as the new normal, even as they map the fissures, conflicts, and inequalities that characterize this diverse social landscape.

The urban spaces of California, long seen as epicenters of the Asian American community, provide a window into the multi-racial America of the twenty-first century; recent poetry suggests to us what those spaces look like when viewed from an Asian American perspective and navigated by an Asian American body. Barbara Jane Reyes's *Poeta en San Francisco*, winner of the 2005 James Laughlin Award from the Academy of American Poets and one of the more widely discussed books of the past decade, provides a kaleidoscopic, multilingual portrait of urban life in San Francisco, shot through with the sharp critical perspective of a Filipina American writer. The collection's title, echoing Federico García Lorca's *Poeta en Nueva York*, places it in a transnational tradition of urban portraiture and critique while calling attention to the very different context that lies behind Reyes's work: the history of Spanish colonization that links the Americas and Asia, and the history of American imperialism that conditions the Filipina poet's presence in San Francisco.

The first section of *Poeta en San Francisco* is a vivid and visceral evocation of the experience of walking through San Francisco's streets—but this *flâneuse* is all too aware of the charged terrain she traverses. The section's title, "orient," ironically "orients" us to the city by showing how San Francisco is haunted by "the Orient"—at least from the perspective of the "oriental" body that traverses it:

en esta ciudad, where homeless 'nam vets
 wave old glory and pots for spare change;
 she grows weary of the daily routine:

fuckinjapgobacktochina!
 allthemfuckingooknamessoundthesame!

and especially:
 iwasstationedatsubicbay.

(21)

The Filipina American walking through the streets of San Francisco experiences racist language as a physical assault, each shouted line becoming a single, attacking object. But the final line, with its reference to the Subic Bay U.S. naval base in the Philippines, opens up this racist encounter to reveal its historical, global context: this white-Asian confrontation does not take place in a vacuum, but in a history of war and imperialism that implicates both the white Vietnam veteran and the Filipina American passerby.

The colonial history that structures daily encounters on the streets of San Francisco is embedded in language itself, Reyes suggests in the book's second section, "dis • orient." Reyes widens the critical frame around such urban encounters in part by challenging the centrality of English. *Poeta en San Francisco*, of course, already signals a bilingual space of Spanish and English; the opening poems of "dis • orient" add Tagalog to this mix, represented through the precolonial Baybayin script. By evoking this terrain of linguistic difference, Reyes links the colonial impulse to linguistic and literary projects of "exploration," ironically quoting the slogan of Ezra Pound: "(nū, nyū) / adj. // as in, make it" (43). Throughout the twentieth century, where writers found the "new" was often through appropriations of other cultures: "what pound appropriation of the ancient oriental" (43). Reyes's inclusion of Baybayin both alludes to this appropriation and disrupts it, thematizing the white, male writer-explorer's desire for the "foreign" while refusing to translate the Tagalog script, making it a site of resistance to the monolingual Anglophone reader. Reyes's assertion of the interface between lan-

guage, race, and the body—"what avant garde experiment carves her lover's flesh" (43)—resonates with the twenty-first-century Asian American writing of Myung Mi Kim and Linh Dinh, positing language itself as a possible site of intervention into the physical violence of racism and imperialism.

The book's final section, "re • orient," returns to a newly opened-up urban space, in which the female speaker seems newly capable of replying to the binaries that define her: "today i am through with your surface acts of / contrition, i am through witnessing your mimicry / of prescribed other, your fervor for the part" (83). Reyes turns the tables on the white "explorer" by sardonically diagnosing the "Asiaphile," from the "non-Asian male who prefers Asian women" to the "white western male with a pathological, sexual obsession with Asians and their cultures" (84). And Tagalog retains a central place, with entire poems offered in untranslated Tagalog and English-language poems given Tagalog titles. This is a reimagined urban and linguistic landscape, reclaimed and reconstructed by the female poet: "one day she will build a temple from detritus, dust of your crumbling empires' edicts; . . . she will melt down your weapons, forge her own gods, and adorn her own body. . . . it is for no glory, no father, no doctrine" (94).

Part of the power of *Poeta en San Francisco* comes from its insistence on the integrity of the different languages that underlie Filipina/o American history. Cathy Park Hong's *Dance Dance Revolution*, in contrast, uses linguistic hybridization as a metaphor for Asian American experience. Much of the book is written in an invented dialect that is the lingua franca of "the Desert," a Las Vegas-like city-state filled with "state-of-the-art hotels modeled after the world's greatest cities" (20). This dialect is described as "an amalgam of some three hundred languages" that still employs "the inner structures of English grammar" (19); the result is a creole that draws from Caribbean and Shakespearean English, echoing the dialect poems of Claude McKay, John Berryman's *Dream Songs*, and Hawaiian pidgin, with a little Spanish and Latin thrown in:

. . . I's born en first day o unrest . . .
Huzza de students who fightim plisboi patos!

En gangrene smoke, youngins t'rew butane Colas,
 chanted poor ole cantanka Rhee to step down . . . he did!
 Chased out en a perma holiday,
 Hawaii him Elba . . .

(41; ellipses in orig.)

The book's main speaker is a Desert tour guide, a woman from South Korea who is described as a leader of the 1980 Kwangju uprising against the rule of Chun Doo-hwan. The poems written in the guide's voice are framed by commentary in Standard English by "the Historian," a young Korean American woman researching the Kwangju revolt.

Hong's alternate-reality premise (the events of the book are said to take place in 2016) provides an ingenious means of exploring Asian Americans' complexly mediated relationship with their history. The text provides a compact narration of the events of the Kwangju uprising and the context of Korean history that surrounds it, but it provides access to those events only at a remove, through the filter of a hybridized language. In contrast to Reyes, whose use of Tagalog suggests the possibility of a more direct access to Filipino culture, Hong's invented dialect dramatizes the many layers through which the Korean American narrator must struggle to grasp Korean history. The guide is a "double migrant" who is "Ceded from Koryo, ceded from / 'Merikka" (26), occupying a liminal space. She comes from a collaborationist family (her grandfather is described as having collaborated with the Japanese, while her father ensures his own survival by becoming a tool of the U.S. army), and the Desert itself is a space riven by economic and political conflict.

But the brilliance of Hong's conceit emerges in the power and creativity of the guide's language. While the Historian's narration appears in a restrained Standard English that struggles for self-awareness, the guide's lively, freewheeling speech forces our attention to the texture of language, refuting any conception of linguistic transparency. Without engaging an Asian language directly, Hong creates a sense of linguistic foreignness that powerfully allegorizes the Asian American perspective on language, from the accented speech of the immigrant to the alienated rela-

tionship of American-born Asians to their parents' language.³ We might say that the invented dialect of *Dance Dance Revolution* forces the reader into an Asian American reading position, in which the reader approaches her "native" language from an angle, guided by a distinctive history.

Reyes's and Hong's foregrounding of language as the terrain of Asian American identity points toward a strain of language-centered experimentation within Asian American poetry, one whose prominence has only increased over the past decade. Again, Myung Mi Kim, strongly influenced by Language writing, is perhaps the most prominent exponent of this experimental mode, but she is certainly not alone.

The poet Tan Lin has produced some of the boldest, and at times most enigmatic, innovative work within Asian American writing. His first collection, *Lotion Bullwhip Giraffe*, was published by the avant-garde Sun & Moon Press in 1996. Since 2000, he has published *BlipSoak01* (2003) and *Seven Controlled Vocabularies and Obituary 2004*, *The Joy of Cooking* (2010), among other works. As Brian Kim Stefans notes in "Streaming Poetry," over the past decade, Lin has eschewed the "linguistic difficulty" of the avant-garde in favor of an aesthetic of "boredom" or "relaxation," establishing in his work "a tone of disinterest while never failing to follow the course of his own mind." "The beautiful book," Lin writes in the preface to *BlipSoak01*, "should not be read but merely looked at. . . . Poems should be uninteresting and non-metaphorical enough to be listened to in passing or while 'thinking of something else'" (11, 13). This pursuit of the uninteresting has led Lin, like a number of other writers, to the use of found language, from instruction manuals to indexes to cookbooks—"ambient" language that surrounds us constantly but that we take in only at a glance or in passing. In an interview

3. Hong's invented dialect might be seen as a form of what Evelyn Nien-Ming Ch'ien calls "weird English," a rule-bending use of language that "revives the aesthetic experimental potential of English" by "see[ing] through the eyes of foreign speakers and hear[ing] through their transcriptions of English a different way of reproducing meaning" (6-7).

with the Poetry Foundation's *Harriet* blog, Lin describes *Seven Controlled Vocabularies* as a "bibliographic 'collection' whose general subject is reading and its objects," in which text and image are "captured/reproduced in numerous ways, with . . . scanning, digital photography of printed book pages, retyping of printed matter, reading and re-reading, bibliographic citation, footnoting, indexing, and self-plagiarism of earlier sources." But rather than the jagged collages characteristic of Linh Dinh's work, Lin's work obscures sources to create an apparently seamless surface, presenting its images and text as objects to be looked at.

Lin's work makes contact with Asian American writing in its awareness of the ways seemingly neutral systems of classification can structure and be structured by race, nation, and culture. The cover of the Wesleyan edition of *Seven Controlled Vocabularies* contains what appears to be a Library of Congress classification for the book—text that is usually hidden in small print alongside a book's copyright information and rarely noticed by readers. The first subject heading given for the book is "China—poetry." In what sense should *Seven Controlled Vocabularies* be classified under "China—poetry"? Lin doesn't answer that question but does include an anecdote in which the narrator describes buying "his first Chinese cookbook" (perhaps *How to Eat and Cook in Chinese*, cited a few pages later) but never using it because "the recipes did not seem at all Chinese. . . . The language was arch, old-fashioned, colonial and depressing. . . . The language of true Chinese is very spare and very very thin, just like a recipe or a very fine novel" (114). When the narrator repeats a piece of wisdom from the cookbook—"cornstarch is the glue that holds all Chinese food together"—to his mother,

she just laughed and laughed and said:

That is very true

OR:

That is a load of nonsense (hoo sha ba dao)

(114)

In an interview with *BOMB* magazine, Lin remarks on the “extreme relevance” of the cookbook—in particular, *The Joy of Cooking*—to him as he “grew up Chinese American in SE Ohio.” *The Joy of Cooking* “was a culinary Bible of things that are eaten in America,” but it was also a system of classification in which “The noun ‘Chinese’ is followed by seven adjectives: celery, chestnuts, dressing, egg rolls, meatballs, rice (fried), and sauce (sweet-sour).” If the cookbook is a model for Lin’s work, then a book like *Seven Controlled Vocabularies* creates a system within which the Asian American can be placed and located, or within which the Asian American reader can locate himself, vis-à-vis the other seemingly arbitrary categories that make up culture.

Repetition and recombination, techniques used throughout Lin’s work, are also put to powerful use by the Filipino American poet Paolo Javier, author of several poetry collections and the current poet laureate of Queens, New York (following the Korean American poet Ishle Yi Park, who held the position from 2004 to 2007). Javier’s *60 lv bo(e)mbs* (2005) has its roots in a series of homophonic translations from the work of Pablo Neruda. As Javier remarks in an interview with Eileen Tabios, he “fished out discrete words & phrases from Neruda’s Spanish in ‘Veinte Poemas De Amor,’ then re-combined/configured these.” The result is a framework that provides recurring phrases, patterns, and characters (“Alma,” “Paolo,” “Villa”—an evocation of the Filipino poet José Garcia Villa) but that remains open to an unconstrained and unexpected range of language. Like Reyes, Javier juxtaposes English, Spanish, and Tagalog, in order to, as he puts it in the Tabios interview, “confront my Pilipino past of Spanish & American imperialism” and “complicate my lingual reality of living & writing as an immigrant poet in the U.S.” Like Yau’s *Borrowed Love Poems*, *60 lv bo(e)mbs* retains from Neruda the structure of the love poem but fills it with fragments that evoke Hollywood culture, U.S. imperialism, and Asian American history, placing the political at the core of the erotic:

Crescendo Subic Destitute Alma

Il Duce in the highest hassle warp speed sever my Alma

Hosannas sickest the tone of gearing up against the Taliban into Alma
 Abeyance bilang zoom bus inebriated emailing my Alma

(27)

Far from letting linguistic experimentation draw him away from the Asian American literary tradition, Javier signals his deep engagement with that tradition through an imagined dialogue with José Garcia Villa. Javier's linguistic pyrotechnics are at times reminiscent of Villa's, but he responds to Villa's haughty aesthetic purity ("Bah! They're all centaurs. . . . Why does the East continue to mingle?" [72–73]) with a fierce argument for engagement: "I will vent against the lynching horde with an initial canto" (72).

While poets like Lin and Javier have pursued Asian American poetics in this more experimental vein, formalist and postconfessional tendencies are also strongly present in Asian American writing. Perhaps the most accomplished of Asian American formalists is the Kashmiri American poet Agha Shahid Ali, who died in 2001; his collected poems, *The Veiled Suite*, appeared in 2009. Ali may be best known as a master of the ghazal, a form that, as Ali notes, "can be traced back to seventh-century Arabia" and reached its canonical form in Persian poetry of the eleventh century (325); the opening couplet sets out a rhyme scheme and refrain that are then repeated in the second line of each subsequent couplet, as in these lines from the opening of "For You":

Did we run out of things or just a name for you?
 Above us the sun doubles its acclaim for you.

Negative sun or negative shade pulled from the ground . . .
 and the image brought in one ornate frame for you.

At my every word they cry, "Who the hell are you?"
 What would you reply if they thus sent Fame to you?

(327; ellipsis in orig.)

Ali's work is richly and complexly allusive. The ghazal "Of It All" includes references to T. S. Eliot, James Wright, Danilo Kis, mathematics, and cosmology, framed through the phrase "[the] Arabic of it all" (329). "Tonight," one of Ali's best-known gha-

zals, quotes Emily Dickinson's mention of "Fabrics of Cashmere"—a layered allusion to Ali's own Kashmiri heritage—while also referencing Laurence Hope's "Kashmiri Song" and the biblical confrontation between Elijah and Jezebel (374).⁴ But a particular feature of the ghazal—the poet's reference to himself in the final couplet ("Poetic Form: Ghazal")—gives Ali's tissues of citation a charged intimacy: "And I, Shahid, only am escaped to tell thee— / God sobs in my arms. Call me Ishmael tonight" (375). Ali's layering of allusion within an Arabic form adapted to English generates powerful Asian American lyrics that are both culturally grounded and exhilaratingly capacious.

Like Ali, Srikanth Reddy uses literary allusion and traditional form to structure his work, but Reddy eschews mere reverence for tradition in favor of a flexibility and a playfulness that open up a self-conscious, critical space. *Facts for Visitors* (2004), Reddy's debut collection, is partly structured around Dante's *Inferno*, employing a loose terza rima in poems named for the various circles of hell. But the circles are presented out of order (the ninth circle followed by the third), and the poems' contents display only a tenuous connection to Dante's theology. Reddy employs an equally free hand with two poetic forms, the villanelle and the sonnet; his villanelles are reminiscent of Elizabeth Bishop's, varying the repeated lines to push the poem's narrative forward, while his "sonnet" has fourteen lines but strips the form down to its bare bones: "I was cold. / You wove me a mantle of smoke. / I was thirsty. / You sent me a cloud in a crate" (55). Reddy's inventive, cryptic imagery allows him to construct a shifting series of personae, loosely linked through an insistent intensity of language. Some poems touch lightly on Reddy's Indian heritage—the "lorries," "bullock carts," and "untouchable girl" of "Thieves' Market" (23), the "blue-skinned Rama" of "Monsoon Eclogue" (37)—but they do so at a stylized, even ironic distance (the speaker of "Thieves' Market" is a man in a bear suit). Reddy evokes instead a subject wandering through language and tradition, engaging with the literary past of the

4. For a fuller discussion of these references, see the annotated version of "Tonight" on the website of the Poetry Foundation.

West but at a critical remove from it. That subject is most wittily evoked in "Fundamentals of Esperanto," in which the speaker shares the dream of a universal language represented by Esperanto but sees that dream "corrupted / by upstart languages such as Interlingua, / Klingon, Java & various cryptophasic tongues" (45). The speaker's only hope is "to write / the Esperanto epic" in an effort to "freeze the mutating patois" (45). This quixotic task is, ironically, characterized by a mutability in which "Every line of the work / is a first & a last line" (45), and the epic ultimately becomes a solitary journey in which the hero "sits on a rock & watches his friends / fly one by one out of the song, / then turns back to the journey they all began" (46).

Kimiko Hahn, like Ali, uses a non-Western form to structure her 2006 collection *The Narrow Road to the Interior*, borrowing the Japanese form of the *zuihitsu*, a fragmentary, diaristic style epitomized by *The Pillow Book* of Sei Shonagon. While Ali's use of the ghazal imposes a strict discipline on his work, Hahn's use of the more open-ended *zuihitsu* allows her to work in an accessible postconfessional mode. She catalogs "things that make me cry instantly" and "things that are full of pleasure" (125-26), muses on being "a mother separated from two daughters three nights a week," imagines an Asian American literature final ("Cock-sucker, motherfucker. Thief. Wetback. Colonial pig. Explain" [90]), and depicts the aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Center.

A witty riff on the Asian American postconfessional mode can be found in Ken Chen's *Juvenilia* (2010), the first book by an Asian American author to win the Yale Younger Poets Prize since Cathy Song's *Picture Bride* in 1983. The opening poem of the collection depicts the speaker's father and mother debating his future but adds an unexpected character, the Chinese poet Wang Wei, "restrained beside me by backseat-belt and streetlight / world" (3). Chinese poetry is referenced throughout the text as a lens through which the Chinese American speaker's life can be seen; the book's final section intersperses allusions to the life and work of the poet Li Yu throughout an account of a visit between the speaker and his mother. The result is an Asian American family history that is held at an ironic distance, as in

“Dramatic Monologue against the Self”: “We find ourselves bored by creative nonfiction, autobiography, and memoir, which forsake the personality of thought for the impersonality of narrative. We sit in the essay as in a room of normal talk, free from aesthetics, until we are only selves, struggling to unhide the strangeness of our souls!” (19).

A final tendency evident in recent Asian American poetry—and, indeed, in contemporary American poetry more broadly—is an ongoing sampling and remixing of the materials of popular culture. Both Yau and Linh Dinh, in rather different ways, have mapped out how such engagements with popular culture might unfold within Asian American poetry—Yau with a pointed focus on Hollywood images of Asians, Linh Dinh with a much more freewheeling sampling using methods reminiscent of Flarf. Nick Carbó’s *Secret Asian Man* (2000) expands beyond and critiques American popular culture by taking as his protagonist Ang Tunay na Lalaki, a “bare-chested muscled Filipino male character” from Filipino TV commercials whom Carbó reimagines in New York, relegated to sidekick roles and studying poetry with a writer named Nick Carbó. Sueyeun Juliette Lee’s *That Gorgeous Feeling* (2009) is a riotous challenge to the perceived absence of Asian American icons in popular culture, featuring odes to unexpected “heroes” like Margaret Cho, Daniel Dae Kim, Congressman Mike Honda, and even a U.S. senator: “Daniel Inouye, oh no you don’t!” (43). Monica Youn’s *Ignatz*, a finalist for the 2010 National Book Award, takes Krazy Kat and Ignatz Mouse, the main characters of George Herriman’s *Krazy Kat* comics, as the subjects of a fractured sequence of love lyrics.

Beyond the complex aesthetic currents swirling through Asian American poetry of the 2000s, another major force that has changed the terrain of twenty-first-century Asian American poetics is the ongoing demographic change within Asian America. Since the 1970s, when “Asian American literature” referred primarily to the writing of Chinese and Japanese Americans, the scope of Asian American writing has expanded to incorporate the work of newer immigrant groups that have grown rapidly

in the wake of post-1965 changes in U.S. immigration policies and patterns.

South Asian American poets have achieved particular prominence over the past decade. While poets such as Vijay Seshadri, Meena Alexander, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni achieved prominence in the 1990s, the first decade of the 2000s saw an explosion of South Asian American poets writing in a dizzying array of styles. *Indivisible*, the first anthology of South Asian American poetry, appeared in 2010; edited by Neelanjana Banerjee, Summi Kaipa, and Pireeni Sundaralingam, the volume demonstrates the diversity of this new poetic community with selections from forty-nine poets. In addition to Ali and Reddy, significant South Asian American poets who have emerged in the past decade include Bhanu Kapil, a cross-genre writer whose 2009 book *Humanimal: A Project for Future Children* is a work of experimental prose based on the story of two girls found living with wolves in India in 1920. Prageeta Sharma's wry, self-deprecating speaker in *Infamous Landscapes* (2007) characterizes herself as "a juvenile high on Marxism, / a false and reconstructed / humanist" (1), a rebel who "punched out breakfast teachers with lunch money" (4), and a "fool" who wants to be "informing and alluring and adaptable," as well as "a tropical / American for you to hold back" (13). Aimee Nezhukumatathil's three collections develop a lively, attentive, sensuous voice that ranges across her Indian and Filipino heritage, the travails of childhood and motherhood, and the curiosities of the natural world.

Filipino American poets such as Al Robles and Luis Cabalquinto came to prominence during the Asian American movement, but the past decade has seen Filipino American writers take leading roles in Asian American poetry. In addition to Reyes, Javier, Carbó, and Nezhukumatathil, other significant figures include Eugene Gloria, whose first collection, *Drivers at the Short-Time Motel* (2000), was selected for the National Poetry Series and won an Asian American Literary Award, and whose second collection, *Hoodlum Birds* (2006), is suffused with a reflective lyricism; Patrick Rosal, whose two collections feature powerful rhythms, masculine swagger, and sensual diction; and the prolific poet, editor, publisher, and blogger Eileen Tabios, whose

more than twenty collections range over a vast aesthetic and cultural terrain.

As Southeast Asian American communities have become an increasingly central part of Asian America, poets from those communities are gaining new attention. Linh Dinh may be the best-known Vietnamese American poet; other notable authors include Truong Tran, whose unpunctuated prose poems in *Dust and Conscience* (2002) self-consciously navigate autobiography and politics; Hoa Nguyen, whose *Hecate Lochia* (2009) adapts the everydayness of New York school poet Bernadette Mayer to the scene of contemporary politics and Asian cultural influences; and Mộng-Lan, whose staggering of lines across the page and archetypal imagery is reminiscent of the early work of Janice Mirikitani.

Hmong and Laotian American writers are among the newest poetic communities to emerge on the literary scene. *Bamboo among the Oaks* (2002), edited by Mai Neng Moua, is the first anthology of Hmong American writing in English, featuring numerous poets. Hmong American poet Pos Moua's chapbook *Where the Torches Are Burning* (2002) shows the striking influence of his teacher, Gary Snyder, in poems of history and cultural adaptation. Bryan Thao Worra, a Laotian American writer, has published several collections of poetry, establishing a powerful voice that ranges authoritatively from the history of Laos to contemporary science fiction.

The Tibetan American poet Tsering Wangmo Dhompa has published two collections, *Rules of the House* (2002) and *In the Absent Everyday* (2005). Her even-toned poems are at times reminiscent of Berssenbrugge's in their abstraction and objectivity. Her first collection emphasizes family and cultural history, while her second explores perception and affect in the present.

Many of the writers already discussed are of mixed race, or hapa, including Yau (three-quarters Chinese and one-quarter white), Berssenbrugge (of Chinese and Dutch descent), Hahn (of Japanese and German descent), and Nezhukumathil (of Indian and Filipino descent). Other mixed-race Asian American poets include Jenny Boully, who is part Thai, and whose book *The Body: An Essay* (2002) consists of a series of footnotes to an absent text,

and Ronaldo V. Wilson, an African American and Filipino American writer whose *Poems of the Black Object* (2009) moves from intensely focused verse to lively prose to encompass racial objectification, family history, and queer sexuality.

Pacific Islanders are often overlooked in discussions of Asian American culture; the poetry of Craig Santos Perez, a native Chamorro from Guam now living in California, has given Pacific Islander writing a new voice within Asian American literary discourse. Perez's two collections, installments of a larger work titled *from unincorporated territory* (2008, 2010), form a magisterial collage of Chamorro, Pacific, and American history and culture, employing multiple languages, excerpted and crossed-out historical text, and graphical variation to map a Pacific terrain marked by U.S. imperialism but also resistant to it.

While this article has focused on poetry published in conventional print collections, Asian American poets have also worked actively in genres that go beyond the printed page. Asian American poets have been a vital part of the spoken word scene since the 1990s, and over the past decade spoken word artists such as Beau Sia, Ishle Yi Park, Bao Phi, and Kelly Zen-Yie Tsai have reached Asian American audiences and large national audiences alike. A full discussion of Asian American spoken word is beyond the scope of this essay, but Bao Phi's article "A Decade of Asian Am Spoken Word" provides a useful overview of some of the major artists and recordings of the 2000s. In the burgeoning field of digital and electronic poetry, Brian Kim Stefans has emerged as a major creator and critic, a pioneer in the use of Flash animation in online poetic texts. His poem "The Dreamlife of Letters," an animated indexing of a text by Rachel Blau DuPlessis, has been highly influential.

One of the biggest challenges to the flourishing of Asian American poetry has been the relative paucity of institutions designed to support Asian American writers. Although the 1970s saw an upwelling of Asian American magazines and journals, most were ephemeral and few survived the decade. In the 1980s and 1990s, acceptance by mainstream poetry institutions, in the form of prizes and publication by trade and academic presses, seemed

vital to many authors precisely because an infrastructure for Asian American poetry did not exist.

The most robust Asian American literary institution has been the Asian American Writers' Workshop (AAWW), founded in 1991 in New York City. In addition to literary programs and workshops for Asian American writers, AAWW, beginning in 1992, published *The Asian Pacific American Journal*, which for a time was the only Asian American literary journal, but issues have ceased appearing in recent years.⁵ Kaya Press, founded in 1994, has published a number of works of innovative poetry, including Walter K. Lew's 1995 anthology *Premonitions* and, more recently, Shailja Patel's *Migritude* (2010) and Lisa Chen's *Mouth* (2007). Tinfish Books, a Hawaii-based press founded by the poet Susan M. Schultz, has published a number of Asian American and Pacific Islander writers, including Perez, Reyes, Linh Dinh, and Yunte Huang. *Interlope*, a journal of innovative Asian American writing edited by Summi Kaipa, appeared in 1998 but ended publication in 2003.

Several new Asian American literary journals have emerged in the past few years. *Kartika Review*, founded in 2007, is an online journal of Asian American literature, while *Lantern Review*, founded in 2010, is an online journal devoted to Asian American poetry. *The Asian American Literary Review*, a print journal that first appeared in 2010, includes a range of poetry, fiction, and criticism. Other kinds of literary spaces have also begun to open up for Asian American poets. Kundiman, an organization dedicated to supporting Asian American poetry, has since 2004 organized an annual summer retreat for Asian American poets, allowing younger poets to work with more established Asian American writers. Modeled on Cave Canem, an African American poets' community, Kundiman is led by the poets Sarah Gambito, Joseph O. Legaspi, Vikas Menon, Jennifer Chang, and Oliver de la Paz and is now based at Fordham University in New York.

5. In a comment on Facebook, AAWW executive director Ken Chen reports that the AAWW plans to revive *The Asian Pacific American Journal* as an online publication in the near future.

From the perspective of the academy, perhaps the most significant development in the critical discourse around Asian American poetry is that such a discourse has finally come into being. For most of the history of Asian American literary studies, the field has been dominated by discussion of narrative memoir and fiction. The first monograph on Asian American poetry did not appear until 2006. Before that time, only a few articles had attempted to give a comprehensive view of the field, including Shirley Lim's "Reconstructing Asian-American Poetry: A Case for Ethnopoetics" (1987), George Uba's "Versions of Identity in Post-Activist Asian American Poetry" (1992), and Juliana Chang's "Reading Asian American Poetry" (1996). The 2001 *Resource Guide to Asian American Literature* published by the Modern Language Association included two articles, by Uba and Sunn Shelley Wong, on Asian American poetry, but no poet received the single-author treatment given to works of fiction and drama in the rest of the collection.

The monographs on Asian American poetry that have finally begun to appear in the past five years have often sought to locate Asian American poetry within the larger context of modern American literature. Josephine Nock-Hee Park's *Apparitions of Asia: Modernist Form and Asian American Poetics* (2008) argues that Asian American poets such as Lawson Fusao Inada, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, and Myung Mi Kim are "heirs to an avant-garde shot through with Orientalism" (95), extending the modernist poetics of Ezra Pound and Gary Snyder but also critiquing those writers' appropriations of Asian sources. Steven G. Yao's *Foreign Accents: Chinese American Verse from Exclusion to Postethnicity* (2010), which focuses exclusively on Chinese American poets, also sees Pound as a crucial forerunner for Asian American writing, arguing that Pound's *Cathay* establishes "a veritable grammar for the very idea of Chinese emotion in English" (55). Yao offers a taxonomy of the varied ways poets such as Li-Young Lee, Marilyn Chin, and John Yau re-stage encounters between Chinese and American culture, from "mimicry" to "mutation."

Yunte Huang's *Transpacific Imaginations: History, Literature, Counterpoetics* (2008) widens the modernist context for Asian

American poetry by reaching back into the nineteenth century, seeing the work of the Angel Island poets, Inada, and Cha as part of an American literature of transpacific exchange that extends back to Herman Melville and Henry Adams. Finally, my own *Race and the Avant-Garde: Experimental and Asian American Poetry since 1965* (2009) focuses on the contemporary context, reading Asian American poetry as an avant-garde that emerges alongside, and at times in tension with, other contemporary poetic avant-gardes such as Language writing.

Asian American poetry of the first decade of the century displays a dizzying diversity, and this essay only scratches its surface, seeking to describe an object that is still very much in the process of formation. I have argued that Asian American poetry of the past decade can be characterized by its incisive investigations of contemporary language, through techniques ranging from postconfessional skepticism about the autobiographical “I” to the challenging of the centrality of English through multilingual writing. Yet Asian American poetry also maintains a deep continuity with the Asian American literary tradition, not merely through its treatment of Asian American themes but likewise through its attempts to imagine an Asian American reading position through linguistic estrangement, political and historical contextualization, and critique of the narratives of imperialism and mass culture. The need to imagine an Asian American reading position is in part a response to the ever-increasing diversity of Asian America, giving Asian American poetry a crucial role to play in articulating the perspectives and angles of critique that Asian Americans might share. The long-awaited emergence of a critical discourse about Asian American poetry suggests that far from fading into incoherence or irrelevance, the conversation sparked by Asian American poetry is just beginning.

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