

T I M O T H Y Y U

Form and Identity in Language Poetry and Asian American Poetry

In a 1978 essay, Rae Armantrout took up a question posed by Charles Bernstein: "Why don't women do language-oriented writing?" Armantrout's initial response is that "women need to describe the conditions of their lives. This entails representation. Often they feel too much anger to participate in the analytical tendencies of modernist or 'post-modernist' art" (544). Ron Silliman expands this argument in his 1988 essay "Poetry and the Politics of the Subject":

Progressive poets who identify as members of groups that have been the subject of history—many white male heterosexuals, for example—are apt to challenge all that is supposedly "natural" about the formation of their own subjectivity. That their writing today is apt to call into question, if not actually explode, such conventions as narrative, persona and even reference can hardly be surprising. At the other end of this spectrum are poets who do *not* identify as members of groups that have been the subject of history, for they instead have been its objects. . . . These writers and readers—women, people of color, sexual minorities, the entire spectrum of the "marginal"—have a manifest political need to *have their stories told*. That their writing should often appear much more conventional, with the notable difference as to who is the subject of these conventions, illuminates the relationship between form and audience.

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Armantrout's and Silliman's arguments suggest that the formally radical project represented by Language poetry is not for everyone. They place Language poetry as a gender- and class-specific writing distinct from the writing undertaken by women or "minority" writers. In doing so, they map the collision between two of the most powerful trends in American poetry since 1970—the project of radical modernist-postmodernist formal innovation represented by Language poetry, and the feminist and multicultural poetics that emerged in the wake of the 1960s.

The above formulations suggest that the two trends are incompatible. One can map out innumerable dichotomies: the Language poet's critique of the personal, lyric voice versus the minority writer's desire to lay claim to a voice; the Language poet's refusal of conventional poetic "content" versus the minority writer's attempt to portray history and personal experience; the Language poet's challenge to the lyric "I" versus the minority writer's assertion of identity and authority. Though these distinctions are crude, Armantrout and Silliman seem to endorse them, outlining a kind of poetic segregation in which delineations of race and gender correspond to formal choices; indeed, Silliman argues that such a segregation has political value, given the different historical positions of the writers he describes.

As Bob Perelman notes in *The Marginalization of Poetry*, Silliman's argument did not go unchallenged among Language poets. In a response in *Poetics Journal*, Leslie Scalapino charged that Silliman's "authoritarian" account was "defining innovation as the repository of white men who are supposedly free of connection" (qtd. in Perelman 172–73).¹ And in a 1992 essay in *Sagetrieb*, Armantrout herself revised her earlier statement, noting that although representing the position of women remained the primary project of a feminist poetics, "The question of how best to represent women's social position remained open. . . . I wonder . . . whether the nature of women's oppression *can* be best expressed in the poem which . . . 'looks conventional'" (7–8). The work of writers such as Lyn Hejinian and Susan Howe suggests the directions such a poetics might take, and Armantrout's question in-

1. Nathaniel Mackey makes a similar point in his discussion of Silliman's argument, suggesting, "Failures or refusals to acknowledge complexity among writers from socially marginalized groups, no matter how 'well-intentioned,' condescend to the work and to the writers and thus . . . are a part of the problem" (18).

dicates that the impulses of Language poetry and of minority writing might not be mutually exclusive, but rather complementary.

I would like to explore this nexus of poetic and political concerns through an examination of recent Asian American poetry and a comparison of its methods to those of Language writing.² Language poetry and Asian American poetry, read against each other in their development through the 1970s and 1980s, each show the limits of the other's poetic and political project. While reading Asian American poetry exposes some of the strains and limits in the political project of Language poetry, particularly around the issues of race and identity, Language poetry's critique of mainstream poetry may also map the limits of the Asian American poetic project, insofar as it relies upon a commodifiable "ethnic" individuality. I read the poetry of John Yau as representative of a movement beyond these deadlocks in some recent work; Yau's playful, puzzling use of identity and ethnic signifiers complicates the straightforward presentation of an Asian American self and indicates ways in which the projects of Language and minority writing, as Armantrout suggests, may be complementary.

The American poetic mainstream of the 1970s and 1980s, against which Language poetry and Asian American poetry emerged, has

2. Although I will be focusing here on Asian American poetry, these same issues have been crucial to much feminist criticism of poetry in the past two decades. In their introduction to *Feminist Measures*, Lynn Keller and Cristanne Miller note that French feminist theory of the late 1970s and early 1980s facilitated a new focus on the "gendered character of language itself and the problematics of female identity formation or subjectivity" (6). My particular focus comes, in part, from a sense that such issues are undertheorized in current criticism of Asian American poetry.

Opposing "Asian American poetry" and "Language writing" in this way runs the risk of suggesting that they are rigid and monolithic categories, when in fact each represents a broad and highly diverse body of work. I am attempting to sketch out what I see as some of the major tendencies of each category of writing, and I have necessarily relied upon certain "representative" figures and moments. (As Charles Bernstein writes in *Content's Dream*, "there isn't any escape from some degree of characterization," although every characterization is "always a partial view" [432].) This essay should be read as a broad comparative framework for approaching questions of form and identity in these poetries rather than as an exhaustive treatment of either category, and as such it leans heavily on schematic notions of each. But I can further justify my focus in two ways. First, my interest is in a particular historical moment, that of the early 1970s to the early 1990s, and in the development and institutionalization of the categories of "Asian American poetry" and

been famously described by Charles Altieri in his catalogue of the elements of the “scenic mode”:

Craft must be made unobtrusive so that the work appears spoken in a natural voice; there must be a sense of urgency and immediacy to this “affected naturalness” so as to make it appear that one is reexperiencing the original event; there must be a “studied artlessness” that gives a sense of spontaneous personal sincerity; and there must be a strong movement toward emphatic closure, a movement carried on primarily by the poet’s manipulation of narrative structure.

(*Self and Sensibility* 10)

Vernon Shetley and others have emphasized this style’s attachment to the central institutions of American poetry by labeling it the “MFA mainstream” (Shetley 20), while Language poet Charles Bernstein has referred to it, in *Content’s Dream*, as “official verse culture” (246). We can understand both Language poetry and Asian American poetry as responses to, and disruptions of, this mainstream, and as unveilings of its politics. Language poetry, through its radical forms, critiqued the “naturalness” of narrative and voice that some of its theorists saw as complicit with capitalist ideology; Asian American poetry, through its injection of explicitly Asian American themes and voices into poetry, exposed the mainstream voice as a white voice.

In his early critical writings, collected in *Content’s Dream*, Bernstein argues that the language of mainstream poetry, in its idealization of clarity, transparency, and direct communication, is ideological in its operation, complicit with mass culture. “Regardless of *what* is being said,” Bernstein writes, “use of standard patterns of syntax and exposition effectively rebroadcast, often at a subliminal level, the basic constitutive elements of the social structure” (59–60). Here Bernstein echoes Theodor Adorno’s “On Lyric Poetry and Society,” which argues that the language of the poem is always in danger of “succumb[ing] to

“Language poetry” during that period. I am interested in the way these categories functioned *as categories*, including certain kinds of work, excluding others, intersecting very little and even working in apparent opposition. Only over the past decade has there been a growing sense of how the categories might be combined; again, this is not to say that there were no individual poets who could be considered part of both camps. Second, and perhaps more important, keeping these categories in play as relatively separate objects is crucial to understanding the recent work of John Yau and other poets, insofar as these poets themselves play off of and even thematize the expectations generated by each category.

reification, as it does in communicative discourse" (44). Poetry, much as in Adorno's account, has retreated into a realm of exalted subjectivity, only to find that even the language of the subjective sphere has been contaminated in the late twentieth century. "Experience dutifully translated into these 'most accessible' codes," Bernstein argues, "loses its aura and is reduced to the digestible contents which these rules [of grammar] alone can generate. . . . What purports to be an experience is transformed into the blank stare of the commodity" (59). Individuality is reduced to "mere idiosyncrasy" (27), much as Adorno and Max Horkheimer argued three decades earlier in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.³

Just as Adorno found a response to the modern erosion of subjectivity in the modernist innovations of Arnold Schoenberg, Bernstein and other Language poets propose a response that is classically Adornian in the sense that it is formal rather than content-based.⁴ In advocating a "[p]oetry . . . centered on the condition of its wordness" (29–30), Bernstein argues that Language poetry "explicitly acknowledges these conditions of poetry, language, by explicitly intending vocabulary, syntax, shape, etc.; an acknowledgment which is the actual prerequisite of authenticity, of good faith" (49). Works like Lyn Hejinian's *My Life* and Ron Silliman's *Tjanting* employ elaborate and seemingly arbitrary structures that force the reader into a radical awareness of the operations of poetic form and language, serving as a critique of the "natural" lyric conventions of clear language, unadorned subjectivity, and direct speech, and seeking alternative models of subjectivity.⁵

Bernstein's poem "Standing Target," from his 1980 book *Controlling Interests*, provides a particularly pointed example of this kind of cri-

3. "The way in which a girl accepts and keeps the obligatory date, the inflection on the telephone or in the most intimate situation, the choice of words in conversation, and the whole inner life . . . bear witness to man's attempt to make himself a proficient apparatus, similar (even in emotions) to the model served up by the culture industry. The most intimate reactions of human beings have been so thoroughly reified that the idea of anything specific to themselves now persists only as an utterly abstract notion: personality scarcely signifies anything more than shining white teeth and freedom from body odor and emotions" (Horkheimer and Adorno 167).

4. I am not suggesting that Language poetry shares Adorno's elitism, but rather that within the tradition of Marxist aesthetics with which it sometimes associates itself, it follows Adorno rather than Georg Lukács in its interest in the politics of form rather than of content.

5. See Perloff, *Radical Artifice*, for another account of contemporary poetry as critique of mass culture.

tique, showing the operation of different “official” discourses in the construction and limitation of the individual. In juxtaposing and fragmenting these discourses, Bernstein hopes to create a “music of contrasting characterizations . . . so that the whole sounding of the various characterizations gets heard and made palpable” (*Content’s Dream* 446). The poem’s single-spaced passages are examples of such characterizations, quoted from corporate bios and psychiatric reports, zeroing in on the poet himself with a camp counselor’s report on young “Charlie.” Bernstein frames these quoted sections with double-spaced lines that are much more fragmentary and grammatically unconventional:

Deserted all sudden a all
Or gloves of notion, seriously
Foil sightings, polite society
Verge at just about characterized

(39)

This disruption of the “naturalness” of the lyric voice, forcing us to read closely and perhaps skeptically, forces us also to read closely the single-spaced passages such lines surround. Such reading reveals the way in which characterizations produce and package the individual: the three corporate bios equate profession and identity, marginalizing all other activities and relationships as “free” (unproductive) time (42–43), while the camp counselor’s fatuous diagnosis of Charlie’s “mixed dominance” allows him to insert the child into “our routines” and “organized games” as a “frisky little boy” rather than a “reserved . . . watcher” (44–45).

But Bernstein’s appropriation and alteration of phrases from these official discourses shows that his double-spaced lines are also an attempt to construct an alternative to such discourses, to create the “music” that never settles on any one characterization. For example, the poem’s first line, “Deserted all sudden a all” (39), permutes a later quoted line, “*All of a sudden all deserted*” (41); the rearrangement and grammatical violation frees up new semantic possibilities, making exile active, self-imposed (“Deserted all”) rather than imposed from without (“all deserted”), transmuting the totality of “all” into the partiality of “a all.” The most radical fragmentation, found in the penultimate section, ends in words of building: “days that / made,” “shaped / am,” “houses, beginnings” (46). The final section, though

promising a new “Fluency in gain” (46), does not signal a return to voice, to Bernstein finally speaking for himself; instead, the poet will “Hold himself back by doing,” misusing the materials of official discourse in the hope that “Benefiting errors” will protect subjectivity in ways that transparent expression no longer can (47).

Bernstein is thus not attacking subjectivity itself but critiquing the means by which subjectivity is currently produced in language, understanding lyric poetry as an integral part of that system. By bringing the discourse of the corporate bio and the psychiatric report into the poem, “Standing Target” suggests that such language is continuous with the contemporary language of poetry, with its celebration of voice, personality, and sincerity; Bernstein’s radical formal strategies demonstrate the lengths to which the poet must go to distance him- or herself from such categories. Yet just as Language poets were questioning these values, Asian American poets were laying claim to them, demanding to be heard by the very mainstream that Language poetry was rejecting.

It seems fair to say that Asian American literature emerged as an object of study only in the early 1970s, with the appearance of the first anthologies of Asian American writing. One of the first of these was *Roots: An Asian American Reader*, published by the UCLA Asian American Studies Center in 1971—the same year that Robert Grenier’s declaration “I HATE SPEECH” was announcing the beginning of Language poetry.⁶ In the preface to the collection, Franklin Odo writes:

There is . . . emphasis on the contemporary expression of the Asian American condition by the people themselves. . . . These are critical times for Asian Americans and it is imperative that their voices be heard in all their anger, anguish, resolve and inspiration. Many selections have not been edited at all. . . . We have felt it important to preserve something of the person who wrote the piece.

(vii)

6. Grenier’s statement appeared in the first issue of *This* in 1971. Ron Silliman opens his introduction to *In the American Tree*, a key Language-writing anthology, with Grenier’s statement, which he says “announced a breach—and a new moment in American writing” (xv). Perelman suggests that in retrospect “the ‘breach’ . . . seems too dramatic” (40), placing the statement in context and distinguishing Silliman’s invocation of the phrase from Grenier’s larger project (40–44).

In contrast to Language poets' skepticism about the category of "voice," we see here an emphasis on the voice of the individual Asian American. Spontaneity and immediacy is preserved by the refusal of editing, so that the selections become synecdochic representations of their authors, "something of the person who wrote the piece." And identity is tied up closely with history: "[W]ith whom are we to identify? That turn forces increasing numbers to look to their 'roots'" (viii). The division of the anthology also replicates these concerns: "Identity" and "History" form the first two sections of the book, which are fused in the third section, "Community" and political activism. The poems in the collection take a tone of bold self-assertion:

I am Shin'ya
and Asian,
who in the film Vietnam
cannot help
seeing
his own face
in the faces of the Vietnamese.

(119)

Such lines do diverge in crucial ways from the mainstream of 1970s poetry as described by Altieri. The speaker's directness in establishing his Asianness could hardly be called "unobtrusive," and the racializing of the voice disrupts its "naturalness." But the poem still draws its power from some of the key values that Altieri catalogues: the sincere, personal voice, its immediacy, its artlessness. This is a transparent voice, preserving, as Odo has it, the person who speaks it.

How do we explain the divergence between these practices and those of Language poetry—practices emerging at the same historical moment, with a similar desire for political engagement? The theories advanced by Armantrout and Silliman offer an answer: the differing historical positions and political needs of the authors. In their argument, Asian American writers, who have been "objects" rather than "subjects" of American history, find the need to make their voices heard imperative, for these "stories" have not yet been told, while for those "white male heterosexuals" with whom Silliman identifies himself and other Language poets, the crucial project is to undermine their own speaking, to fragment and reconstruct a discourse that has

become oppressive even to its own subjects. But as we will see, the subsequent “mainstreaming” of ethnic poetry in the 1990s casts doubt on whether this argument can continue to be—or ever was—tenable.

Silliman’s argument, with its explicit treatment of race and gender, is itself symptomatic of a later moment of Language poetry; the discourse of racial (and, to some extent, gender) identity is largely absent from early Language writing. Bernstein’s essays of the period show little direct awareness of the emergence of ethnic poetry. If the discourse of race is present in the writing, it is present—as with politics itself—only as allegory. In one of the only allusions to racial politics in *Content’s Dream*, Bernstein suggests that the elaborate formal structures of Silliman’s work “can be read as political allegory for a society that is nonauthoritarian (playful and provisional structures) and multicultural (the absolute right of difference)” (314). The independent sections of a work like Silliman’s *NOX*, Bernstein argues, are allowed their autonomy, as different cultures within a society might maintain their autonomy. But the work, of course, never states such an equivalence: “Not that this is ever made explicit in *NOX*” (314).

In turning from Bernstein’s early essays in *Content’s Dream* (published in 1986) to the later essays in *A Poetics* (published in 1992), it is striking to note the way the discourse of ethnic identity has seemingly infiltrated the text. While the rhetoric of *Content’s Dream* was broadly oppositional, setting Language poetry against the practices of official verse culture and, by extension, mass culture, *A Poetics* seems concerned with coalition-building in a landscape that is increasingly fractured—largely, if not solely, by the divisions of race. The preface to *Content’s Dream* is a showpiece, playful in rhetoric and form; *A Poetics*, in contrast, opens with a clear, expository statement of the “State of the Art” that both celebrates and registers anxieties about the “sharp ideological disagreements that lacerate our communal field of action” (1). Bernstein remarks on “this culture’s insatiable desire for, yet hatred of, assimilation” (1)—suggesting that new poetic forms may help us break out of a cycle figured in terms of the immigrant’s dilemma. And a few pages later, Bernstein points to the crucial fact of today’s poetry landscape: “in the last twenty years a number of self-subsistent poetry communities have emerged that have different readers and different writers . . . even, increasingly, separate hierarchies and new canons” (4). Although it becomes clear that Bernstein is referring to the emer-

gence of ethnic poetries, his use of the neutral terminology “poetry communities” allows him to categorize Language poetry itself as one of these communities. Taking off from Silliman’s suggestion that formal choices are markers of alternative social formations, Bernstein attempts to inject Language poetry into the discourse of multiculturalism, appropriating the rhetoric of ethnic identity to serve, rather than undercut, the Language project. “What represents a Jew or a white Protestant American or an African American, a male or a female?” Bernstein asks. “In poetry, it’s less a matter of thematic content than the form and content understood as an interlocking figure. . . . Formal dynamics in a poem create content through the shapes, feelings, attitudes, and structures that compose the poem” (7–8). By refiguring these cultural divisions as formal ones, Bernstein places the project of Language poetry not at the margins of the emerging discourse of identity politics but at its center.⁷

It’s not immediately clear, however, that the devices of Language poetry are sufficient to support such an endeavor. Bernstein writes, for example, that “as long as social relations are skewed, who speaks in poetry can never be a neutral matter” (5). This would seem to align him with ethnic writers who wish to make their voices heard in a lyric medium that has been a white, male, Eurocentric domain. But—as indicated by Grenier’s seminal remark—Language poetry is founded on a critique of the notion of “speaking” itself; the experience of reading a Language poem is most likely, in fact, to make “Who is speaking?” seem a naive question. Looking to such a poetic to address the question of who speaks seems somewhat misguided. Similarly, Bernstein speaks of the importance of “particularizing, historicizing, and ideologizing the interpretation of poetry” (221). Again, this would seem to be a point of contact between Language and minority writing. But again, it seems dubious whether Language poetry is up to the task. For in *Content’s Dream*, Bernstein writes that Language poetry’s formal devices are to be “self-interpreting, proactive” (370). Here, it seems, Bernstein is trying to hedge the ways in which Language po-

7. Bernstein’s most recent collection of essays, *My Way*, continues this positioning but seems to take an even clearer stand against identity politics; see especially “Stein’s Identity” (141–44) and “Solidarity Is the Name We Give to What We Cannot Hold” (33–35).

etry is an empowerment of the reader, retaining the text as the generator of meaning.⁸

The intervention of minority writing thus highlights two key tensions in Language theory, centering on the individual and on interpretation. At bottom, these issues are manifestations of the question of how to write a poetry of political commitment. Although Bernstein feels that “[i]t’s a mistake . . . to posit the self as the primary organizing feature of writing” (*Content’s Dream* 408) and that the notion of “voice” is inevitably tied up with such psychological readings of the poem, he is unwilling to embrace the “death of the author,” for a Barthesian notion of text detached from authorship brackets the question of “who speaks” and of the author’s responsibility for the text. “[The] poem is as much a resistance as a product,” Bernstein says, “and for the moment at least the individual is the most salient concept with which to describe the site of this resistance” (*Content’s Dream* 408–9). Bernstein’s pragmatic desire to hang on to individuality can be seen as well in Language poetry’s incessant self-theorization.⁹ Although the devices of Language poetry are meant to be “self-interpreting,” Language poets have generated an enormous amount of critical writing (Bernstein’s three collections of essays amount to nearly a thousand pages of prose) that seeks to guide and control the interpretation of their work. Bernstein characterizes this project as one of “critical excess”—a production of “surplus explanation” that is a strategic intervention into an ideologized realm of interpretation (*Poetics* 168). The upshot, however, is the production of critical prose that—at least in comparison to Language poems themselves—is often expository, polemical, and relatively clear.

8. It might be argued that Bernstein can be read as an “ethnic” writer just as easily as any Asian American poet. Bernstein’s “Autobiographical Interview” in *My Way* foregrounds his Jewishness but also displays Bernstein’s ambivalence toward this reading of his work, noting, “Jewishness . . . [is] a crucial, if implicit, reference point for me” (233; emphasis added). I read this as a pointed contrast to the explicit “ethnic” content of much minority writing, as well as a contrast to the playful deployment of ethnic signifiers I will describe later in John Yau’s work. While Bernstein’s poetry can obviously be read as “ethnic,” his poetry does not generally (playfully or otherwise) thematize ethnicity in the way that I claim is crucial to Yau’s work. (For example, compare Bernstein’s “Standing Target” to Yau’s “Toy Trucks and Fried Rice,” both written in 1980.)

9. For Bernstein’s notion of the pragmatic “strategy of tactics” that characterizes his critical project, see “Optimism and Critical Excess (Process)” in *A Poetics* (150–78).

In short, while Language writers are willing to disrupt notions of voice, self, and content in their poems, they reserve the right to step back into identity, into the realm of political, individual speech; indeed, the volume of their critical writing is a testament to how tempted—or pressured—they feel to make such a move. And the moment from which Language poetry emerges, as well as the way the language of minority discourse creeps into Bernstein's later work, suggests that the anxiety of engagement Language poets feel may be brought on by the presence of a powerful example: the rhetoric and politics of ethnic identity. Bernstein's call at the end of *A Poetics* for "reading all writing . . . as in part 'minority' discourse" (227) might be read, then, as an attempt to regain some of the political authority Language poetry has lost to the poetry of ethnic identity.

While the emergence of ethnic literature reveals some of the tensions in the politics of Language poetry, reading Language poetry against recent Asian American poetry also exposes some of the limitations in the latter's poetic and political project. Two decades after the emergence of Asian American writing, the rhetoric of subjectivity and history continued to structure the poetic practices of an anthology like *The Open Boat: Poems from Asian America*. Edited by Garrett Hongo and published in 1993, it was only the second anthology to focus solely on Asian American poetry.¹⁰ Hongo's anthology has already been subjected to a great deal of critique; for Juliana Chang, it displays the danger of "appropriation of Asian American poetry into hegemonic narratives of immigration and assimilation" (87).¹¹ And Walter K. Lew's *Premonitions: The Kaya Anthology of New Asian North American Poetry*, published two years after *The Open Boat*, contains some work that is much closer to Language practice. I return to Hongo's anthology because it represents the culmination and institutionalization of

10. The first such anthology was Joseph Bruchac's *Breaking Silence*, which appeared in 1983. *The Open Boat* was the first anthology of Asian American poetry edited by an Asian American.

11. Other critiques include those of Catalina Cariaga, who suggests, "a reader of *The Open Boat* anthology may come away . . . thinking that Asian American literature springs from one homogeneous American 'Asianicity' reduced to variations on the 'immigrant trope'" (1), and Victor Bascara, who takes Hongo to task for separating poetry from the social.

certain trends in Asian American poetry, marking and furthering the acceptance of Asian American poetry into official verse culture. Lew's anthology can be seen as a response to, and critique of, these trends, much as I will later argue that the work of John Yau can be.¹² *The Open Boat* thus remains a key case study in the mainstreaming of Asian American poetry, a process whose dynamics are crucial to understanding Language poetry's interventions.

In his introduction, Hongo in part follows Franklin Odo's anthologizing strategies of two decades earlier, highlighting the continuing importance of the individual voice to Asian American poetic practice: "It is perhaps difficult to make a poetry from that emotional catch in the throat, that which compels us to speak when so much passion swells that, out of pride, the act of speaking is what we might fear the most. But our poets speak anyway" (xl). The preoccupation with history is still visible in a focus on the thematic content of the poem, though figured much more personally and broadly: "We write about violence to women, about the paintings of Utamaro and Willem de Kooning, about plantation workers and picture brides, about factory work and the pleasures/dangers of sex. We write about our Eurasian children" (xix).

Missing, though, is the third term in the equation, the fusion of subjectivity and history that leads to a politically charged "community." Rejecting the "older, culturally biased model of the Asian American writer," viewed as a remnant of "a political and ethnic consciousness raised in the late sixties," Hongo criticizes the "vulgar few" who would still demand that Asian American literature be representative on the basis of "professed community loyalties" (xxx-i-xxx-ii). Instead, Hongo embraces an ideal of diversity, seeking to "widen the interpretive field of whatever might be called 'Asian American literature,' to oppose canonical orthodoxies . . . and to encourage diversity, intellectual passion, and an appreciation of verbal beauty" (xxxvii). "Community" is refigured in institutional and academic terms, as Hongo

12. In his afterword, Lew notes: "The work in this anthology is not limited to conventional models of verse. . . . Previous anthologies have been either too small or conservative to convey the astonishing diversity and eloquence of new poetries spread out among numerous networks and poetics" (575). Fred Muratori's review in *Library Journal* follows this positioning, naming Language poetry among the "unconventional means of expression" seen in the anthology and contrasting it to earlier anthologies that present "mainstream poetry wrapped in rice paper" (85).

opens his introduction with an account of the meeting of the Asian American Literature Study Group at the 1990 MLA conference—a meeting at which “a new community was in the process of bringing itself together” (xvii).

The move from politics to “verbal beauty,” from the people to the MLA, highlights the differences between Asian American writing of the 1970s and the recent work collected in *The Open Boat*. The colloquial and politicized rhetoric and the didactic tone is largely absent, having given way to what Hongo calls “intellectual passion,” to a greater awareness of poetry as art. But by appealing to a naturalized conception of poetic art (“We lift our voices, bodies from the sand, and call” [xlii]), these contemporary Asian American poets risk simple absorption in the mainstream aesthetic, just as Hongo’s introduction suggests that they have been accepted into the institutional mainstream. Indeed, the poems in *The Open Boat* have less in common with their politicized forebears of the late sixties and seventies than with the “MFA mainstream” of the seventies and eighties. Again, Hongo marks this mainstreaming institutionally, cataloguing Asian American writers’ ascent into the elite realms of academia, publishing, and government: “These days, some of us even serve on foundation and NEA panels, sit on national awards juries, teach in and direct academic creative writing programs, and edit literary magazines. . . . We are included in the textbook and annual anthologies published by Norton, Heath, McGraw-Hill, Little Brown, Morrow, Godine, St. Martin’s, Pushcart, and Scribner’s” (xxxiii). In Bernstein’s suggestion that this culture of poetry is a “celebration of middle-class, middle-brow lifestyle” (*Content’s Dream* 247) we hear an echo of the “mainstream”—from *Father Knows Best* to *Western Civ*—from which the college-aged Hongo feared rejection: “white, middle-class, and uninterested in us. . . . Whatever America was, it would be uninterested in its own margins” (xxiii). While Chang and others have suggested that the anthology’s poems simply reenact immigrant tropes, Bernstein’s critique of official verse culture recasts Hongo’s triumphal introduction as itself a narrative of assimilation, as Asian American poets are absorbed into the very mainstream institutions that had once rendered Asians invisible.

The Open Boat shows that the political division of poetic labor espoused by Silliman fails to anticipate how easily the politicized emphasis on subjectivity and personal history characteristic of ethnic po-

etry of the 1970s can be absorbed into the practices of the culture industry.¹³ The project of “speaking out” may appear, from the inside of an ethnic-consciousness movement, to be a liberating and historically necessary one, as Silliman would argue. But when that speaking moves beyond its specific community and into the marketplace of the wider culture, it finds itself in a sphere in which individual speech has been so heavily commodified that it has lost its potential for social critique, in which the ethnic differences displayed by minority writers become marketable commodities, name-brand variations on a uniform product. *The Open Boat* shows that when Asian American writers in the 1990s attempt to carry on the political project of subjectivity and history, the personal rumination that is the hallmark of such work emerges to be absorbed and commodified by a culture that has already prepared a place for it.

To better understand the possibilities and limits of the project represented by *The Open Boat*, I would like to look at two poems from the anthology: David Mura’s “Gardens We Have Left” and Li-Young Lee’s “This Room and Everything in It.” Both poems grapple with and thematize memory; Mura’s poem is explicitly historical and ethnically “marked” in its content but finds its project of reclaiming the past beyond its resources. Lee’s work locates the limits that frustrate Mura in the limits of poetry and poetic form to articulate what needs to be said but in the end is still thrown back upon those resources as the only ones available to the writer.

Mura’s “Gardens We Have Left” follows the conventions of ethnic writing of the 1970s in its focus on subjectivity; the poem is transparently and insistently autobiographical, with references to the poet’s

13. Reviews of the book provide evidence of this kind of reception. *Publishers Weekly* praises the book for “display[ing] surprisingly little anger or bitterness” while providing “insights into the Asian-American experience,” suggesting that Asian American poetry has been neglected by multiculturalists because of its politically incorrect, though aesthetically laudable, “poems in which ethnicity plays a minor role” (69). Ruth Melvin’s *School Library Journal* review is perhaps most telling, asserting that the anthology brackets Asian American subject matter in favor of “the human experience” and noting that the collection “should comfortably blend in with the works of Giovanni, Shapiro, Angelou, Rich, and Wilbur in most libraries” (208). *The Open Boat* was reviewed in four major trade publications and in *Ploughshares*, while *Premonitions* was reviewed only in *Library Journal*.

childhood, the “Pilgrim face” of his white wife, and their daughter, Samantha. But the public, representative “I” of seventies ethnic writing gives way to a private “I” performing on a domestic stage; the project of history is personalized, so that the poet’s family drama, along with his personal frailties, becomes the grounding for the poem. Such intensely personal details are made to bear the weight of representation, serving as microcosms of larger social issues of race. The domestic opening of the poem provides an example:

As Sam crumbles lumps of tofu on her tray,
I sizzle onions in oil, shoyu, rice wine,
add noodles, ginger, sugar, *shiitake*;

shoots of bamboo and chrysanthemum leaves.
Before the beef, veined with fat, thin as gauze,
I stir what for years I could not love.

(As a child, I shunned *mochi*, *futomaki*,
loved hot dogs, baseball, the GI John Wayne.
Now my *hashi* hauls up steaming *sukiyaki*.)

Later I take Sam out back, dressed in her *happi*,
and humming like my grandfather *sakura*,
think of a trip to Ise, her learning Japanese.

(212)

The catalogue that opens the poem creates a familiar, sentimental domestic scene: a young daughter (clumsily) helping her father cook, the listed ingredients providing a mouth-watering realism and immediacy. But ginger, shiitake, and bamboo also serve as ethnic markers, helping to give the scene its “Asian” aura. This function of the ingredients is emphasized by Mura, who exoticizes and reifies the food: the simple beef is made strange (gauzy and fat-lined), while the catalogue of ingredients becomes a stand-in for his rejected Japanese identity, “what . . . I could not love.” Mura’s italicization of the words is not an attempt to disrupt the Anglophone voice of the poem; rather, he emphasizes their foreignness as such, using them solely as markers of difference, even italicizing words (*sukiyaki*, *shiitake*) that are commonplace on American menus. (Imagine, as an analogy, a poet of Italian descent italicizing the words *gnocchi* or *linguine*.)

The use of the ingredients as markers of identity becomes even

more questionable in the third stanza, when Mura describes his childhood desire to identify as “American.” The “American” identity Mura presents—hot dogs, baseball, John Wayne—is a tour-guide, Hollywood America, constructed solely through the crudest mass-culture categories. Are we to be convinced, then, by Mura’s reversal: “Now my *hashi* hauls up steaming *sukiyaki*”? What the juxtaposition demonstrates is Mura’s own tourist attitude toward Asian Americanness: if eating hot dogs makes one American, then eating *sukiyaki* must make one Japanese. Mura’s strategy here brings to mind Jorge Luis Borges’s objection to attempts to generate an authentic Argentinian literature through “a profusion of local color”; Borges notes that the Koran never mentions the camel, a commonplace of the Middle Eastern tourist brochure, but that Mohammed apparently felt quite able to “be an Arab without camels” (181). Borges’s insight shows how easily the self-conscious “ethnic” writer can enter into complicity with the expectations of mainstream, white readers, and, by extension, with the categories of the culture industry. In Mura’s poem, indeed—to borrow Horkheimer and Adorno’s phrase (166)—words have become trademarks, identifying the “ethnic” in comfortably exotic terms (whatever white Americans’ attitudes toward Asian American cultures, certainly they love Asian food) and presenting cultural identity as a consumable commodity.

This positioning of Asian American identity seems linked to the failures of history and memory in the body of Mura’s poem. Mura’s vision of history, circumscribed within the personal, becomes a vision of the past, both family and individual, as radically inaccessible:

I know so little even of father’s fatigue
 at his dim-lit desk at INS, as he rested on
 his typewriter, deadline approaching, the keys
 leaving little circles of letters on his brow.

Neither he nor my mother talk of the past;
 my childhood myths are Saturday’s cartoons.

(213–14)

As in the poem’s opening, memory is completely structured by the categories of mass culture. This structuring is so profound that it reflects back onto any attempt to move beyond it into an authentic, ancestral

past: the father's experience, inaccessible and willfully withheld, is reduced to a single image—vivid and striking, but itself a kind of cartoon, empty of content.¹⁴ The threat that this could be anybody's father, anybody's history is constantly present. Mura's own anxieties about justifying his Asian American project reflect the threat of assimilation, of simple absorption into a homogenized domesticity:

Of course, it's an old tune—people migrating
 across a river, a mountain, an ocean;
 embarking, disembarking, leaving luggage,
 customs, finding homes, lovers, children . . .
 Who cares about past gardens, relocations, or race?
 You and Sam take a bath; I wash dishes.

(215)

Ostensibly, it should be Mura's project to resist the flattening and forgetting of that final line. But the poem's own terms lead inexorably to such a flattening—its grounding in the purely personal and in the sphere of the nuclear family, its reductive approach to identity, and, finally, its allegiance to the homogenizing conventions of the MFA mainstream. In reaching for a transcendent conclusion, Mura presents what is almost a parody of Bernstein's "well-wrought epiphany of predictable measure" (*Poetics* 2):

When you hold a great sorrow, it lasts
 almost too long. And then it lasts some more.
 But the same is true also of a great joy.
 In the island of light we make with our bodies,
 in the lullabies where our daughter sleeps,
 we open a picture book, and the images are
 for the first time. Once I lost something
 of great value. And then I sought it.
 Everything changed then. Everything changed.

(222)

14. Stan Yogi suggests a different reading of such failures of memory in Sansei poets, seeing them instead as products of a previous generation's silence on the experience of internment and the subsequent Sansei need to "creat[e] memories for their parents" (247). It seems to me, however, that Mura fails to account for the limits of the materials with which he must create memory; Li-Young Lee, as I will argue later, is much more conscious of the difficulties of this process.

In the vaguenesses of “something” and “everything,” there is no answer to the question “Who cares about past gardens, relocations, or race?” In reaching for the universal human statement, Mura achieves only a flattening of the complex issues he has raised, the poetic equivalent of “You and Sam take a bath; I wash dishes.” The attempt to find an “island of light,” a pure and innocent image “seen for the first time,” succeeds only in finding a place indistinguishable from that any other poem could reach. The repetitions (“lasts . . . too long / last some more”; “Everything changed then. Everything changed”) show the strains of the form, the attempt to squeeze a transcendent meaning out of a generic, commodified language. Juxtaposed to the catalogues of the opening, this conclusion presents Asian American identity as modular, capable of being inserted into predetermined slots in a poem that moves toward a seamless, American epiphany.

Against this example, Li-Young Lee’s “This Room and Everything in It” can be read as moving beyond Mura’s limits, relocating the dilemma of identity as a problem of poetic language and form. Lee’s work does not thematize the category of the Asian American as explicitly; when it does, its elaboration of that identity is multifaceted, heavily figurative, as in his portrait of a Chinese butcher in “The Cleaving”:

the sorrow of his Shang
dynasty face,
African face with slit eyes. He is
my sister, this
beautiful Bedouin, this Shulamite,
keeper of sabbaths, diviner
of holy texts, this dark
dancer, this Jew, this Asian, this one
with the Cambodian face, Vietnamese face, this Chinese
I daily face,
this immigrant,
this man with my own face.

(156–57)

Lee’s refusal to thematize, as Mura does, the categories of “Asian” and “American” and his insistent exploration of his own subjectivity may paradoxically make his work more effective as a comment on the position of the Asian American. As Adorno argues in “On Lyric Poetry,”

“The less the work thematizes the relationship of ‘I’ and society, the more spontaneously it crystallizes of its own accord in the poem, the more complete this process of precipitation”—the indicator of the subject’s relation to society—“will be” (42). The conscious adoption of rigid racial categories can itself become ideological (visible in Mura’s culinary commodification of ethnicity), blocking access to the writer’s actual historical moment.

As in Mura’s work, memory and history are crucial to Lee, as shown by his obsessive writing and rewriting of his relationship with his father. But Lee’s more fluid sense of identity, as well as the greater self-consciousness of his writing, allows him to move beyond the limits of memory we encounter in Mura. Lee—to borrow the title of a work from his collection *The City in Which I Love You*—presents his poems as so many “furious versions” of a past, none definitive; at the same time, he is in a dynamic relationship with that past, which writes him just as he writes it: “Memory revises me” (*City* 14).

Lee’s “This Room and Everything in It” is a meditation on memory and its limits. The poem’s opening describes memory as a necessary foundation for future action:

Lie still now
while I prepare for my future,
certain hard days ahead,
when I’ll need what I know so clearly this moment.
I am making use
of the one thing I learned
of all the things my father tried to teach me:
the art of memory.

(158)

While memory, as in Mura, is portrayed as an ancestral inheritance, that inheritance is described not in terms of substance but in terms of form: memory as art. This notion of memory serves as a framework for the poem’s project: choosing objects from “this room / and everything in it”—a room in which the speaker and a woman have been making love—the speaker attempts to create an entire symbolic system to “stand for my ideas about love / and its difficulties.”

The discipline required for the art of memory is reflected in the form of the first half of the poem, which is tightly organized into qua-

trains, each quatrain presenting a single metaphor. The tension between this rigorous organization and the colloquial, even awkward quality of the speaker's voice reflects the strain of memory's discipline, the effort necessary to force the subjective into the objectivity of the aesthetic form that is memory. By halfway through the poem, the struggle with form has been lost: the seventh quatrain, the first not to end with a period, is a turning point, as the attempt to create a complex image, to grapple with God and the self, leads to a disintegration into irregular stanzas:

The sun on the face
of the wall
is God, the face
I can't see, my soul,
and so on . . .

(158–59)

Crucially, it is the attempt to conceptualize the "face"—which, in its spiritual form, becomes the essentialized self of the soul—that derails the project of memory, as if the speaker's identity is the single unstable variable. The entire structure of memory crumbles, and when the speaker attempts to recall the system he has just constructed, it is lost: "Now I've forgotten my / idea. The book / on the windowsill, riffled by wind . . ." (159). The action of the outside world disrupts the writerly project of memory, and in the final stanza the speaker grasps desperately at the fragments:

useless, useless . . .
your cries are song, my body's not me . . .
no good . . . my idea
has evaporated . . . your hair is time, your thighs are song . . .
it had something to do
with death . . . it had something
to do with love.

The failure of memory staged here becomes a moving admission of the failure of poetry and poetic form: the speaker losing a hold on memory becomes a figure for the writer losing control over his poetic materials, as metaphors come unmoored from their referents. Oddly enough, in the vagueness of the last three lines, in the repeated "some-

thing," we are left in much the same place Mura left us, unsure what, if any, epiphany has been reached—although here, there is much greater doubt about what has been achieved, and a much greater sense that the limits of the project are in part the limits of poetic form itself.

Lee's move toward the consideration of poetic form—toward, in Adornian terms, the objectivity of poetic material—raises another risk: the bracketing of subjectivity, of "who speaks." What allows us to read "This Room and Everything in It" as an "Asian American" poem? How did Garrett Hongo know to include this poem in an anthology of poems "from Asian America," since at no time in the poem is ethnicity thematized or even mentioned? Certainly, one can point to other works of Lee's that do thematize ethnicity. But ultimately, what holds all these works together, if not the author-function of the ethnically marked name "Li-Young Lee"—the notion that we "know" a Chinese American subjectivity is behind these poems?

Such considerations apply as well to the project of Language writing. How do we know—to return to Bernstein's formulation—that a Language poem, devoid of conventional "content," "represents" a Jew or a white Protestant or an African American, if not through a reliance on our knowledge of the author's biography? And doesn't such a formulation again prioritize the biographical self over the self in writing, thus undercutting the Language project of exposing the self's construction?

The work of a poet like John Yau, which I will consider below, helps to foreground these questions.¹⁵ In Yau's work, ethnicity is marked by the presence of obvious, even clichéd signifiers—fried rice, dim sum, Chinatown, Charlie Chan—and by the injection of biographical elements into the work. But while Yau's use of such elements acknowledges the way in which we read his work (or any work) as already "marked" by the ethnicity of its author, his playful emptying-out of them cautions us that such markers are unreliable. While we do still wish to ask "Who speaks?" Yau shows us that we should never be comfortable with our answer.

15. While I have chosen Yau as one figure representing the possible complementarity of Asian American and Language poetics, he is one of a number of Asian American poets whose work might be read in this way. Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Myung Mi Kim, Mei-mei

In the field described by *The Open Boat*, Mura and Lee occupy locations within a broad center, in which subjective experience is balanced with a consciousness of poetic form (as seen both in Lee's quatrains and in Mura's loose terza rima). These two terms define the spectrum that Hongo attempts to capture in his introduction:

One of us can write out of strongly held Christian religious convictions instilled by a refugee, theologian father who preached in a small town church in Western Pennsylvania, and another from a grounding in French semiotic theory, poststructuralist cultural critique, and American postmodernist art criticism. One voice could have the feeling and flavor of Hawaiian pidgin . . . [another the] smoothness of Mallarmé's French or . . . the *bric-a-brac* of Frank O'Hara's pop art lunch poems.

(xx)

The biographical, or viscerally subjective, is here opposed to the theoretical or intellectual; the former is vernacular and provincial, while the latter is polished, cosmopolitan, European. Representing the latter position, the extreme end-point, is John Yau, who quite literally closes the spectrum as the final poet in the anthology. Yau is referred to twice in Hongo's introduction, first as "the Chinese American poet who is a postmodernist art critic and had been a student of John Ashbery's" (xxx), then again as "East Village postmodernist John Yau" (xxxiv). Who is this curious figure, who seems to represent everything opposed to the personal and subjective, who seems more readily identified by his New-York-intellectual allegiances (art critic, postmodern, East Villager, Ashberyite) than by his membership in an ethnic community, whose work presents not Mura-esque scenes of domesticity but abstract, surreal, playful images? Hongo's use of Yau as an end-point and his unease with Yau's characterization (the "East Village postmodernist" seems as exotic a creature as any) reflects the curious relationship Yau's work has had with the category of Asian American literature—a relationship so ambivalent that Marjorie Perloff, in a review of Yau's *Forbidden Entries*, could remark of Yau's early work, "there was no indication, at this stage of Yau's ca-

Berssenbrugge, and Tan Lin are only a few of these; Cha and Kim have received the most recent critical attention. On Kim's work, see Altieri, "Images." On Cha, see Lowe and Wong.

reer, that the poet is in fact Chinese-American" (39), while citing a book-jacket description of him as "the most important Chinese-American poet of our time" (40).

Much is often made of Yau's association with John Ashbery; Yau studied with Ashbery at Brooklyn College, and Ashbery chose Yau's *Corpse and Mirror* to be published in the National Poetry Series in 1983. In a 1990 interview in *Talisman*, Yau lists a number of influences on his work: the procedural experiments of Harry Mathews and Raymond Roussel, the work of Ashbery, Ron Padgett, Clark Coolidge, Michael Palmer, Barbara Guest, Jack Spicer. But it's not clear that Yau has allegiances to any of the avant-garde "movements" of recent American poetry. Although Yau is of the same generation as most Language poets and cites many of the same influences, his work is not generally associated with theirs. Nor does Yau identify with what he calls in the *Talisman* interview the "gabby" and "social" poetics of the New York school: "I didn't find my day-to-day life all that interesting. I didn't want to either celebrate or lament my own life in any particular fashion" (45).

What about Yau as Asian American poet? Perloff's remark would suggest that ethnic identity was not part of Yau's self-positioning early in his career; in the past decade, however, Yau has become increasingly prominent in Asian American literary circles.¹⁶ Yau's ethnic identity does not figure heavily in his self-presentation in his interview, which is mostly a discussion of Yau's art criticism and his poetic influences. The only Chinese or Chinese-American influence Yau cites is Pound's *Cathay*, and even here Yau is suspicious of seeking an authentic "China": "For me, [Pound's poems] were about being Chinese, about some kind of identity; they were something I could get ahold of, or at least had the illusion I could get ahold of" (43).

Yau does give a brief sketch of his family history—his mother was from a wealthy Shanghai family, while his father was half Chinese and half English, and the family settled in working-class Lynn, Massachu-

16. In his introduction, Hongo notes Yau's presence at an Asian American writers' conference at Berkeley in 1991. In 1994, a version of Yau's essay "Between the Forest and Its Trees" appeared in an issue of *Amerasia Journal* on Asian American poetry—an issue that opened with a version of Hongo's introduction to *The Open Boat*. In the 1997 issue of the *Boston Review* in which Perloff reviews *Forbidden Entries*, Yau joins four other Asian American scholars in writing a response to an earlier essay of Perloff's.

setts, after fleeing China. Even in this capsule story, though, we see the same inaccessibility of the past that Mura and Lee grapple with: "My father has never talked about it, won't" (39). And there is even some doubt about the veracity of the story—"At least this is the version I have heard most often in my life"—suggesting the presence of alternative versions. When Yau is questioned about his own background, the same evasiveness and instability is apparent, sometimes to comic effect:

E[dward]F[oster]: You grew up in Lynn?

J[ohn]Y[au]: No, in Brookline. We only lived in Lynn for a short time.

EF: So then you grew up in Brookline?

JY: No, actually, we lived on Beacon Hill in Boston until the sixth grade. . . .

EF: And then you went to Bard?

JY: No, I went to Boston University for two years. . . .

(40)

Yau's response to this crisis of history and memory is not like that of Mura, who proposes a return to his "lost" cultural identity through the consumption of a commodified Asianness; the title of Mura's memoir of his trip to Japan, *Turning Japanese*, suggests that such a move is possible. Yau rejects this idea: "In my case, my parents left China. They could never go back to live there, so the notion of return seems to me both an impossibility and a repressive illusion" (39). Repressive, perhaps, because it is a kind of false consciousness, deflecting the Asian American identity into a reified "Asianness." Nor does Yau turn to the kind of obsession with his past that led to Lee's extensively researched memoir of his family, *The Winged Seed*. In opposition to Lee's engagement, Yau chooses distance and understatement, setting his work consciously against the confessionalism of Robert Lowell:

You know, who you are is simply an accident of birth. . . . A Boston Brahmin or a first-generation child of an immigrant. You can make a bigger case about that, or you can try to use it. . . . It just simply is what happened. And I don't want to deal with the accident of my birth as a right or entitlement. But I don't want to ignore it either, and so it becomes to me an interesting dilemma: how do I deal with it? How do I write about it?

(48-49)

History and memory are not the impetus to write; rather, they become materials to be incorporated, along with others, into writing. "How do I deal with it?" becomes "How do I write about it?"

Here Yau pushes beyond the awareness of poetic form that characterizes Lee's work. For Lee, while poetic form is the necessary art of memory, the experience of the self (grounded in the erotic body) is still primary;¹⁷ the struggle of memory is the attempt to find lasting forms for experience, to find metaphors for "my ideas about love." By continuing to ground his work in a coherent, physical self, Lee continues to run up against the limits of what both Adorno and Language poets would recognize as a contaminated language of subjectivity. Yau, in contrast, is willing to let go of the self, in part because of his reaction against confessionalism and the personalized poetics of the New York school, in part because of his reading of proto-Language poets such as Coolidge. But letting go of the self can also be read as a tactical response both to the inaccessibility of the past and to the commodification of subjective language. If, for earlier Asian American poetry, history and subjectivity were fused in the representative "I," and if recent Asian American poetry's retreat into a private, commodified "I" shows the limits of that project, Yau's work suggests that a different site must be found for Asian American poetry:

To write about one's life in terms of a subjective "I" is to accept an academicized, historical legacy—it is to fulfill the terms of the oppressor. I suppose I don't know who this "I" would or could speak for. Myself, what for? Maybe because I don't think what's autobiographical is necessarily interesting because it happens to one but because it might happen to more than one. Maybe I'm trying to figure out a way to get beyond the location of simply my life and see if something can happen out there instead of saying this is what happened here. So I try to find ways to find out there, in words.

(49)

The "I," Yau suggests, has lost its ability to be representative. To move into the realm of action, "out there," one must move away from the subjective and into writing, into words. As Yau writes in "Between the Forest and Its Trees (Second Version)": "Where the I begins is in a sentence" (43).

Yau's critique of subjectivity has much in common with that of Charles Bernstein and other Language poets. Yet it's clear that Yau's

17. In the work of Mura, Lee, and a number of other male Asian American poets, the coherence of the self is grounded in an erotic body that is emphatically male; the female body is frequently fragmented and figured.

shift of focus from the self to writing is not as radical as the Language poets' interest in "language itself"; Yau's work does not seem to break the back of syntax and "sense" quite as relentlessly, nor does there seem to be a corresponding interest in the individual signifier as material. Narrative—rejected in almost all Language writing—figures heavily in Yau's work, though certainly not in terms of straightforward autobiography. One might say that the "I," broken down into component discourses by Language poetry, is retained in Yau's work as an unstable but storytelling "I," one that is constantly in revision. And the need for such an "I" may be explained by the pressure of the inaccessible yet necessary past, as Yau suggests in his *Talisman* interview:

I think history is something constantly changing, and one's sense of it is changing, too, and one is constantly writing it, trying to write it, and it's fluid even though it is past. History is how one—we—ground ourselves. The past is as fluid as the present. And that kind of rewriting is what interests me. The writing of it is an attempt to have access to it, to understand, to discover connections, echoes. . . . the connections are both real and part of the writing.

(36)

If Yau's work can, indeed, be read as an extension of the project of Asian American poetry, hanging on to history is crucial if the project of ethnic writing is to remain coherent. And I would argue that Yau's work forces this kind of reading through its explicit deployment of Asian American signifiers. But it often reduces "Chinese" or "Chinese American" to a mere marker with an ambiguous relationship to the materials of the text, an identity constantly in revision. Yau's work can thus be read as a critique of the Foucauldian author-function in Asian American writing: for what marks a piece of Asian American writing if not its explicitly ethnic signifiers, beginning with the Asian name of the author—a marker that is all too easily essentialized into some notion of Asian American identity or consciousness? Perloff's doubt about Yau's Chinese Americanness can thus be seen as a crucial effect of Yau's work: the nagging sense that we do not know what it means to be "Chinese" anymore, even as we are constantly reminded of its centrality.

“Toy Trucks and Fried Rice,” a work in *Radiant Silhouette* from 1980, is an extended meditation on memory, reflecting the turn toward prose and narrative that dominates much of Yau’s later work. The narrator, looking back upon himself as a child, experiences “Chinese” identity as something defamiliarized:

His parents brought him to the party. He had been told ever since he could remember that he was Chinese. He never lived in Chinatown and he didn’t speak a word of Chinese. It was more complicated than that, however. His mother was from Shanghai and spoke the dialect common to that area. The people at the party . . . spoke another dialect, Cantonese, and were, according to his mother, only farmers anyway. . . .

The differences were more than just those of language and economics, urban and rural. His mother reminded him that his grandfather was taller than anyone in this room, as were most people from Shanghai. His mother, however, was only a shade above five feet tall, and was thus indistinguishable from the rest of the women in the room.

(68–69)

The narrator first experiences Chinese identity not as something interior but as something imposed from the outside, something “he had been told.” Neither geography (Chinatown) nor language, both conventional locations of Chinese American “culture,” are available to the speaker. This double bind—of being regarded as “Chinese” while having no essentially “Chinese” experiences to draw upon—is the classic dilemma of the late-generation Asian American. While a writer like Mura goes in search of an “authentic” Japan to remedy the situation, Yau, by probing the dilemma further, finds that the double bind, far from being the unique property of the American-born Asian, opens up into the situation of his immigrant mother. How can one attempt to become “Chinese” when being Chinese is itself complicated by internal divisions of language and class? And lest anyone think that the axes of culture and class exhaust the complexities of identity, the narrator’s mother pushes difference to its absurd extreme by noting that Shanghainese are taller than (and hence superior to) other Chinese.

But it is here that the insistence on difference collapses under its own weight. The mother, a paragon of difference, demanding distinction to the finest degree, becomes herself “indistinguishable” from the others at the party. In one sense, the child’s eye is here aligned with that of

white America, which will view the self-differentiating mother as simply “Chinese” or, even more broadly, “Asian.” But it is also a testament to Yau’s insight that all identities are suspect—an insight echoed in the father’s subsequent statement that “the Indians were the only true Americans and everyone else was a fake” (69). While the positing of Native Americans as authentic Americans may be read as complicit with the ideology of white America, the power of this position is that it allows the reading of all other Americans as “fake” and white Americanness itself as a construction.¹⁸ If the identity of white America is as “fake” as that of the son who is told by his parents that he is Chinese, then the political project of Asian American poetry shifts from a negotiation between two “authentic” cultures (Asian and American) to a use of Asian American identity to show that all identities, all selves are “fake” in some way.¹⁹

What differentiates Yau’s insight from the argument against the metaphysical “I” mounted by Language poetry is that, for Yau, the presence of the Chinese American “I” is paradoxically necessary to the insight that all identity is fake. Just as the father’s argument requires the dubious positing of the “authentic” Indian, Yau uses the emptied-out category of the Chinese American as the foundation of his assault on identity. The personal experience of the Chinese American is still crucial as content; what the content shows, however, is not “what it’s really like” to be Chinese American, but that no single set of terms, no single narrative, can capture this experience, or the experience of any identity.

“Toy Trucks” also helps explain why simply bracketing “history” or “content,” as much Language poetry does, is not an option for Yau. The speaker’s mother does not usually read her lost life of privilege in China as “an ironic commentary on the present” (69). But at certain

18. Priscilla Wald argues that the father’s statement is itself an Americanizing strategy that “transforms the heroic Indian fighters into representatives of the culture they opposed” (144).

19. Yau’s use of the “fake” here brings to mind the well-known debate between Frank Chin and Maxine Hong Kingston over Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*. Chin has argued that Kingston, by rewriting the myth of Fa Mu Lan, has presented a “fake” image of China for the consumption of a white audience. Kingston’s subsequent novel *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* appropriates Chin’s accusation as a figure for writing itself. Kingston sees the “fake” as an empowering license for fiction; Yau, I would argue, is proceeding from a similar premise.

moments—as at the party—such a rigid separation of past and present is not possible, and the mother is “thrown irretrievably into the past.” History is inescapable, but the mother tries to cope with it through a proud individuality: “She tried to convey to her son the belief that isolation, whether social or spiritual, was the inevitable result of being better than what was around you” (69–70). While the son recognizes this as a fiction, he also realizes that it is a necessary fiction, a version of history that makes it possible to go on with life: “It was one of the ways she comforted herself.” Yau’s turn to narrative can be read as a search for this comfort, always coupled with an awareness that such comfort is provisional, even fake. The conclusion of the poem suggests that the pull of history, despite its hazards, is irresistible, figuring memory in erotic terms: earlier in the poem, the speaker stares at “a young woman in a turquoise satin dress” who in the end becomes a symbol of the entire experience: “All around them was bright embroidered satin, a kind of tinsel he will be attracted to for years” (71). In a striking metonymic shift, the speaker’s attraction is focused not on the woman but on her clothing, on a surface image that becomes an erotic marker of memory. It is with such markers, rather than with human essences, that Yau fashions his poems.

The complication of identity in “Toy Trucks” exposes the essentialism of Silliman’s division of poetic labor along lines of race, class, and gender. Silliman’s argument rests on a dichotomy between those who “identify” as (white, male, heterosexual) subjects of history and those who identify as (nonwhite, female, gay) objects of history. Yau’s mixed heritage and his ambivalent relationship to his “Chinese” identity disrupt this dichotomy by showing that how one “identifies” is never a simple question; indeed, such a complication of identity ought to follow from the premises of Language poetry itself. That it does not—that one must read Yau against Silliman to understand this—reveals the degree to which Language poetry, while exploding the depiction of the self in writing, resists the decomposition of the self (with its racial, gender, and class attributes) in reality. The split between poetry and theory in Language writing further demonstrates the retention of the unified self, as the author reserves the right to speak as a (white male) subject of history. But if even the self grounded in race and class is a fiction, as Yau demonstrates, this dual strategy of Language poetry is exposed as essentializing and questioned.

Yau's use of narrative and his play with ethnic markers can be seen as a response to this problem. Such strategies keep the racialized, storytelling "I" in view, while complicating it by presenting multiple versions of a given story or by filling the emptied-out ethnic self with a range of new materials. Yau's method, which makes him, as he notes in "Between the Forest and Its Trees (Second Version)," "the poet who is too postmodern for the modernists and too modern for the post-modernists" (45), allows us to read his work not only as a project of formal innovation but also as an extension of the project of Asian American poetry. By thematizing history, storytelling, and ethnicity, while emptying them of static content, Yau both engages with the terms of Asian American poetic practice and avoids the pitfalls of work like Mura's and Lee's.

"Childhood," a sequence of four poems dating from 1984, demonstrates Yau's use of his formal strategies to approach the writing of childhood. Yau's title places the sequence squarely within the generic conventions of the Asian American memoir—witness the centrality of childhood to the writing of a poet like Li-Young Lee. The first poem in the sequence, "Cenotaph," refers even more specifically to these conventions, taking as its subject a family photo album—a clichéd occasion for reminiscence and the topic of innumerable poems by Asian American writers.²⁰ But for Yau the photograph is not presence but rather an empty tomb whose referent is absent. Thus the photographs bear an ambiguous relationship to the past: "The clues to what they remembered had been pasted into an album" (151).

Curiously, the speaker's attention is caught not by the photos in the album but by the album's second half, where "someone (most likely her [his mother]) had carefully removed the snapshots. It was here I always slowed down and inspected the pages." The lost pictures are yet another figure for the inaccessibility of the past, a past whose traces outside forces have sought to eliminate: "I understood someone had tried to erase this history of excerpts" (152). But the captions remain and become more compelling than the pictures themselves

20. At least 10 of the 104 poems in *The Open Boat* take the contemplation of photographs or photo albums as their explicit occasions.

would have been, as attested by the speaker's failure to mention the pictures in the album's first half: "The words continued echoing long after I returned the album to its place on the shelf."

Why are these cryptic captions—such as *Mound of Heads, Shanghai, 1946*—more compelling than images? The answer can be found in the spaces left behind: "Those black rectangles surrounded by faded black almost blue frames." These spaces, black and unfaded against the faded page, are framed and aestheticized, becoming blank canvases to be filled. In contrast to photographs, which present a static image and generate what Yau views as the repressive illusion of a return to the past, these empty spaces provide a field for the play of the speaker's imagination: "I tried imagining the pictures the black rectangles once held. . . . Movies showed me everything but this." Yau's link of the visual to the totalizing experience of film will become crucial in his later work; here it suggests the way in which the visual experience of the past is appropriated and commodified by the culture industry and, specifically, by a film industry that has stereotyped or erased Asians.

The move from the visual to the written is experienced as a loss, but also as liberating. The space that writing gives to the imagination is enacted in the poem, as Yau juxtaposes descriptions of the album with fragments of the speaker's personal memory. Writing, Yau suggests, answers the need to position oneself actively in relation to the past rather than remaining a passive spectator; mediated through the objectivity of language, it acknowledges both the individual's role in constructing the past and the past's role in constructing the individual. In the poem's final two sections, words themselves become the objects through which the speaker constructs history:

At the beach I saw the words transformed by the sun. Saw them become hills of bleached skulls. Now they were smooth and round, white as the words describing them.

Lying beside the sagging castles, watching the sand trickle through my fingers. Tiny examples of what I read. All afternoon I played beneath the sun with the skulls, molding them into little mountains.

(152–53)

The magical transformation of the caption into its referents, and the speaker's subsequent use of those referents as macabre building blocks, suggests Yau's crucial divergence from the practice of Lan-

guage poetry. By describing the compulsion under which a phrase from an album puts him, Yau demonstrates that the received discourses of history that shape the individual cannot be easily discarded or challenged through fragmentation. Unlike a poem such as Bernstein's "Standing Target," which displays various discourses acting upon the individual from the outside, "Cenotaph" demonstrates how those discourses get inside, how irresistibly attractive they are. And those discourses are taken quite literally: "heads" become actual heads. The poet's linguistic field of action is limited by the few words that he has received. But by refiguring words as objects of play and building, Yau emphasizes memory as a constructive and productive process, one that makes things rather than looking backward into an inaccessible past.

"Cenotaph" erases the photograph in favor of writing, a move that Yau views as a necessary first step to the process of constructing history. But the poem's mention of the movies also acknowledges its presence in a culture that is relentlessly visual. Yau's increasing use of film motifs in his recent work shows writing pressured by two different visual discourses: the (repressive) discourse of memory, represented by the photograph, and the (racist) discourse of mass culture, represented by film.

Many Asian American writers and critics have cited film as the most powerful agent in perpetuating racist stereotypes of Asians in American culture. Indeed, one of the goals of Asian American poetry's project of presenting history and identity is to combat such stereotypes and to present a different image of Asian Americans; this impulse is epitomized in a recent anthology entitled *Charlie Chan Is Dead*. But in Yau's work, the Asian on film is very much alive, as in the curious figure of "Genghis Chan: Private Eye," the title of a long sequence begun in the late 1980s. Rather than rejecting such figures, Yau chooses to appropriate and deform them, creating bizarre hybrids who both draw upon the rhetoric of popular narrative and undermine it.

The interaction between the title of "Genghis Chan: Private Eye" and its content is a case study in Yau's deployment and emptying out of overdetermined ethnic signifiers. "Genghis Chan" is an absurd play on the film character Charlie Chan, a classic example of Asian stereotyping. But the first name "Genghis" refigures the effeminate, deferential Chan as Mongol warrior, while the title "Private Eye" al-

ludes to the conventions of film noir, suggesting Chan as hard-bitten gumshoe. Yau's title presents an outrageous hybrid, one constructed out of stereotypes and mass-culture clichés; although this creates an ethnically marked character who can "speak" and who occupies a certain space within popular discourse, the identity of the character is unstable.

In the first few poems of the sequence in *Radiant Silhouette*, Yau's diction operates on the border between film noir and the surreal, with phrases that sound familiar in their rhetoric but nonsensical in content: "I was floating through a cross section / with my dusty wine glass, when she entered" (189). "Genghis Chan" becomes a kind of linguistic junkyard where Asian signifiers and clichés are collected, dissected, and stitched together; this process is made most explicit in the sequence's final poems, collected in *Forbidden Entries*:

Dump fun
Dim sum

Slum rubble
Gong sob

Strong song
Oolong

(103)

Asian food, which for Mura is the essence of authentic Asian culture, is transformed through a perverse literalness into something grotesque: "*Moo goo / Milk mush // Guy pan / Piss pot*" (105).

What holds this play together and marks it as a specifically Asian American project is only the figure of Genghis Chan himself, the overdetermined/empty hybrid. The figure of Chan makes the question "Who speaks?"—which Bernstein would like to make central to Language poetry—meaningful, but it also shows the danger of accepting any answer. The location of the poem is marked as "Asian," but "Asianness" itself is a kind of mask.

Yau further thematizes the speaker's indeterminate identity in another film-based poem, "Peter Lorre Improvises Mr. Moto's Monologue." Lorre, an Austrian-born actor, starred in Fritz Lang's *M* and gave classic film noir performances in such movies as *The Maltese Falcon* and *Casablanca*. One of the most curious phases in Lorre's career

was his portrayal, in a series of films in the late 1930s, of Mr. Moto, a Japanese detective based on Charlie Chan. Chan, like Moto, was always played by a white actor, a fact often seen as a racist slight to Asian American actors. Such a criticism relies on the apparently commonsensical idea that an Asian role ought to be played by an Asian actor. Yau's poem, however, asks us to think more deeply about the problem and reworks it as a situation of poetic potential. The title complicates the question of "who speaks": the speaker is an Austrian actor, but he is delivering a monologue that is "Mr. Moto's," the property of a Japanese character; the speech is not scripted but improvised, making the monologue both spontaneous and artificial; and the poem is written by a poet who is neither Austrian nor Japanese but Chinese American. The speaking "I" is not, as in Language poetry, dismantled, but its identity is constantly shifting, pressuring the reading of the poem.

The speaker's self-characterization is as a kind of pieced-together mechanical monster: "My mechanized eyes are spherical rooms bisected by new dancing knives. . . . Upgraded teeth pressed closed together. Matching black eyebrows and hair. I'm better than a laboratory frog because I don't need batteries to send my electricity. . . . Hoist a little red switch . . . and I begin to twist and bend like tall grass on a spring day" (77). Asian eyebrows and hair are part of the actor's makeup, of course, but the costume seems to penetrate so that even the eyes are mechanical. The male Asian body—the source of self in Mura and Lee—has been fragmented and mechanized. Lorre-Moto seems a puppet who will "Twitch and quiver on hidden command," but at the same time the character has a menacing relationship toward the "you" that is ostensibly in control: "I float outside your windows on rainy nights, a blanket of gray mist you can't peel from the glass. . . . I'm a rug of glistening grit settling on the shelves of atomized fat lodged beneath your epidermal layers. . . . I'm a high-end pastoral inmate, an ingratiating drip of diseased music scratching against your fidelity." If "you" is read as the white movie audience, then the monster that is Lorre-Moto has been disturbingly interiorized, fundamental to perception (the film on the glass), part of the flesh. As such, the character is a source of pleasure—"pastoral" and "ingratiating"—but also of irritation. This is a monster that has not only turned against its creator but has, to some degree, contaminated its creator's very being—a

move duplicated in the fusion of the white Lorre and the Japanese Moto.

In the poem's third paragraph, Lorre and Moto are even more closely linked through memory, "a black hole or tunnel sucking me back toward birth." Memory first leads to Lorre's own youth in "the cobbled alleyways of Berlin," where his career began. But Lorre's foreign origins become conflated with Moto's: "Hollywood didn't mold me into what I am, a diminutive silk hurricane approaching America's crafty shores, dapper neon silhouette slipping behind a foil moon, draped bones in a metallic black suit" (77–78). The foreign Other, arriving in America, becomes a dashing trickster, emptied of human essence; but the character's disembodiment paradoxically allows him to become ubiquitous, a cliché at large in the culture: "It is my voice that seeps through windows, under doormats. I rise through floorboards, leak out of phones, all warm pomade and smooth walking topped by a blazing boutonniere" (78).

Lorre-Moto is constantly faced with forces that wish to limit him to a single role and hence kill him: "Morticians wanted to get their boiled forceps on me, shove me into an economy box" (78). The character's origin as a movie commodity is inescapable and threatens to end the dapper detective's career. But the power of improvisation and role-playing transformation allows the character to stay one step ahead: "I was a snotty snot rag, a juicy hobbler, a meal ticket delivered in three languages" (79). Lorre-Moto's very lack of essential identity—his existence across the linguistic spaces of German, Japanese, English—is what keeps him mobile, immortal. At the same time, his position as commodity, his pandering study of "Americanness," allows him to get inside the American identity, to know it and become a part of it: "I learned to embroider your name perfectly . . . I swallowed the elongated syllables of dusty, broken pills with gusto. A celluloid renegade in possession of all his neurons, a radar dish picking up telepathic wavelengths curdling in the rumpled checkerboards of America's dairy farms." Lorre-Moto as "radar dish" is reminiscent of Adorno's description of the lyric subjectivity as a "precipitate," registering the pressure of society on the individual; as the outsider who has perfectly learned Americanness, Lorre-Moto is able to diagnose its fakeness, the "curdling" of the clichéd heartland.

The character's full potential as a weapon against American mass

culture is realized in the final paragraph, where Lorre-Moto is transformed from insinuating voice to receiver and interpreter of the voices of America: "I hear your voices clamoring. . . . demanding the silos be full and straight as the arrows entering General Custer's eyes" (79). The insatiable desire of the mass-culture audience for the commodified image of the Asian, here figured in terms of the myth of American plenty, contains the seeds of its own destruction and can be turned against mass culture by the commodity himself: "I'm one of those arrows. I fly again and again, spin through the wind. My yellow scarf hanging like spit from my chin. You can't disown me because you've never worn out my cashmere coat. I'm an engine of rebuilt fur. I'm what slips through your purified crave."

The costume of Asianness that Lorre dons exposes American identity itself as a costume. The consumable, fake Asian is ingested by the "purified crave" of the mass-culture audience, the commodifying, essentializing desire; it is only by riding the clichés, the markers of Asian ethnicity, that the monster that is Lorre-Moto can penetrate into the interior of America. Once there, however, the emptied-out character, composed only of shifting costumes, can become an "engine of rebuilt fur," a dynamic entity built from exterior scraps, reanimated like the child's mound of heads. Retaining the shell of identity, Yau suggests, is necessary to slip past the gatekeepers while defending a space for identity's reconstruction.

Yau uses strategies characteristic of both Asian American poetry and Language poetry. But his work should be seen not so much as a happy convergence of the two as a use of each against the other. Yau's use of ethnic signifiers, his retention of narrative and history, allows his work to be positioned within the discourse of Asian American writing and as an extension of its project; this self-positioning is simply an acknowledgment of the way the ultimate marker of the work, the authorial name "John Yau," positions the writer as Asian American. The "fact" of Asian Americanness, seen from the outside, is hence inescapable; from the inside, the pull of memory and history is irresistible and erotic. To move beyond the boundaries of Asian Americanness as "fact"—boundaries that limit his mainstream peers—Yau adopts the Language poets' conception of a self constructed in writing, conceiving of the poem as a site of linguistic play and building. But in hanging on to the emptied-out structures of eth-

nic identity and history, Yau gains a foothold from which to critique Language poetry's attempt to incorporate the "marginal." Yau's staging of the emptying-out of identity within the poem exposes the essentializing impulse that lies behind not only Silliman's class/race/gender division of poetic labor but behind Language poetry's split between poetry and theory. The Language poet who reserves the right to speak in communicative language, who is willing to step out from behind the poem to speak as a subject of history, shows himself willing to accept the fragmented self in writing but not in reality. Yau shows that the poet stepping out from behind his poem, like Peter Lorre removing the mask of Mr. Moto, is an illusion, for the self that is then revealed is just as unstable. One can, and must, ask of a Yau poem, "Who speaks?"—as long as one is willing to accept an endless regress in the answer.

In "Feminist Poetics and the Meaning of Clarity," Rae Armantrout asks, "Might experimental writing and feminism be natural allies?" (16). Yau's work, like that of Armantrout, Lyn Hejinian, Susan Howe, and others, shows that such intersections are always complex, rarely "natural." If we acknowledge, following Adorno, that the pressures of the poet's situation must be read as "imprinted in reverse" (39) upon the work, then it is only by reading Yau against the discourses in whose interstices his writing exists—those of mass culture, ethnic writing, and Language poetry—that we can understand that writing's particular achievement, and understand how the poetry itself replies.

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