
Race and the Avant-Garde: Experimental and Asian American Poetry Since 1965. Timothy Yu. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009. xi + 192 pages. \$45.00 cloth.

Timothy Yu's *Race and the Avant-Garde: Experimental and Asian American Poetry Since 1965* offers an argument that is profoundly startling in its originality yet quite obvious upon further reflection. In this comparative study, Yu reads Language poetry and Asian American poetry together to explore the ways in which they are avant-gardist in their self-positioning against mainstream American poetry. Both are deeply enmeshed in distinctive social groups that responded to political and aesthetic issues in the 1970s. Focusing on writers such as Ron Silliman for the Language poets and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and John Yau for Asian American poets, Yu reads their poems against the backdrop of the post-1965 protest culture, revealing strategies of formal experimentation yoked to social identity and community.

Scholars often align Language poetry with formal experimentation and Asian American poetry with racial politics. Yu, however, asserts that aesthetics and politics have always animated the work of both groups. He argues that both Language poets and Asian American poets created communities of artists defined by political and social relations. He also examines how Asian American poets actively constructed the community of Asian Americans by experimenting with poetic forms to create an understanding of social identity. Yu points out that despite these shared preoccupations, Language poets and Asian American poets seldom crossed paths or shared platforms, and developed their aesthetics and communities independently. Thus, he does not trace a shared genealogy for these two bodies of poetry but rather shows us the "vexed history of division" (16) between the two that has intensified over the decades despite their similarities as part of the contemporary American avant-garde.

A key component of Yu's analytical method is to read both Language and Asian American poetry through what he calls "a sociology of the avant-garde, which acknowledges the existence of multiple and even competing groups whose practices we might recognize as avant-garde and whose aesthetic programs are inflected by their differing social identifications" (3-4). Rather than simply identifying aesthetic traits that comprise a kind of poetry, he links such traits to the communities of poets that understand

poetics as a revolutionary practice. For Yu, an aspect of this sociological exploration is identifying the significant institutions of publication and distribution associated with both Language and Asian American poetry to gesture toward the kinds of writer-reader exchanges that grounded their communities.

Chapter One positions Allen Ginsberg as a figure whose formal, experimental concerns meshed with racial and social issues in the cultural moment just before the late 1960s and early 1970s. Yu writes, “To revisit Ginsberg . . . is to return to the concept of the political, seeking to grasp how the idea of a contemporary American political poetry emerges in Ginsberg’s work” (19). Reading Ginsberg’s “Howl” and his later “Wichita Vortex Sutra,” Yu suggests that the shift registered in these two poems is one from particularity to universality, from a sense of social rootedness to a universalist politics divorced from distinctions of race, class, and gender. Such a shift is unavailable to subsequent avant-gardists, to whom Yu next turns his attention. Chapter Two offers a reading of Silliman and his *Ketjak* to suggest that Language poetry, far from being just concerned with formal experimentation, is also strongly rooted in exploring working-class white male consciousness. Yu writes, “Silliman adapts to this new social landscape by ethnicizing the avant-garde, positing Language writing not simply as an aesthetic movement but as a social identity.” Yu’s analysis thus positions Language poetry as “a category equivalent to ‘black writing’ or ‘women’s writing’” (71), a position he argues Silliman has also acknowledged and struggled to reconcile with the distinctions often drawn between such categories.

The final three chapters of Yu’s book offer the most provocative material for scholars of Asian American poetry and of multi-ethnic American writing more broadly. Yu argues that poetry, though at times denigrated as being disconnected from political praxis, was in fact central to the Asian American Movement’s conception of activism. In Chapter Three, Yu turns his attention to three publications from the 1970s devoted to arts and literature—*Gidra*, *Aion*, and *Bridge*—that were at the center of Asian American activism and community-building but have since disappeared from the public scene. Yu reads 1970s experimental poetry by Francis Naohiko Oka, Lawson Fusao Inada, Janice Mirikitani, and Alan Chong Lau in these publications as instances of forging a new social identity for Asian Americans through language. Yu traces the nuances between the publications and the shifts that occur within them over the course of the decade, arguing that Asian American poets articulated racial and social identity through language in more open-ended and contested ways during those years. By the 1980s, an aesthetics associated with the personal, lyric

voice and ethnic-signifier-heavy language came to dominate mainstream understandings of Asian American poetry.

In Chapter Four, Yu examines Cha's *Dictée*, tracing the history of its reception in experimental poetic and art circles first and then in Asian American literary studies in a poststructuralist moment. Offering a rich archive and overview of critical discussions of Cha's book, Yu suggests a way to read the emergence of Cha into critical consciousness—it is recognized first as an experimental text and then as an Asian American one—but argues that it is more fruitful to recognize that the text offers “neither a means of choosing between experimental and Asian American methods of reading and writing nor a synthesis of the two. Rather, in its multiple and often clashing structures of organization—linguistic, poetic, mythical, historical, personal—*Dictée* shows us a way of keeping these two paradigms in productive tension, always visible but never resolved.” Echoing his larger argument in the book, Yu thus suggests that *Dictée* cannot be resolved in terms of its multiple avant-garde modes (experimental and Asian American) but must be read with a constant negotiation between “the strengths and weaknesses of different modes of literary and political affiliation” (122). Yu demonstrates in his reading of the text that such a negotiation is necessary in order to make sense of the entirety of *Dictée*, a task most critics do not attempt, focusing on one or the other section to forward the political and aesthetic agenda that is most in keeping with their own affinities.

Finally, Yu turns in Chapter Five to the poet Yau, whose work “shows us that Asian American avant-gardism is not a novelty of the late 1990s.” Yu claims that Yau has “provided the first opportunity for most readers to recognize the existence of an Asian American avant-garde, and to read the presence of that avant-garde back into the very origins of Asian American writing” (138). Yu reads Yau's challenging poetics against the aesthetics of mainstream Asian American poetry that emerged in the 1980s, as embodied in Garrett Hongo's anthology *The Open Boat* (1993). While mainstream Asian American poets mobilize ethnic signifiers to solidify authorial subjectivity, Yau's use of such signifiers veers toward critique of their clichéd registers to question the desire for a unified lyric speaker-subject. Engaging with popular culture manifestations of Asians such as Charlie Chan and Mr. Moto, Yau's poetry creates troubling figures like “Genghis Chan” (a mash-up of Earl Derr Biggers's detective Charlie Chan and the Mongol warrior Genghis Khan) and troubles the boundaries between the character Mr. Moto and Peter Lorre, the white actor who played him on screen.

In the past decade, scholars such as Juliana Chang, Dorothy Wang, Zhou Xiaojing, and Josephine Park have turned attention in Asian American literary studies toward poetry. Such a shift is long overdue, and Yu's book is an important contribution that foregrounds how Asian American poets engage with contemporary American poetics and culture. In particular, by focusing on the social identities constructed by these poets through their art, Yu maintains that poetry has social and political relevance that is deeply engaged with both form and content. Yu's work spurs other scholars to reorient their thinking about "experimental" versus "ethnic" poetry, and this book will certainly facilitate further work in the years to come.

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