

KIMBERLY LAMM

The Question of Race
in the American Avant-Garde

Timothy Yu, *Race and the Avant-Garde: Experimental and Asian American Poetry since 1965*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009. Asian American ser. 208 pp. \$45.00.

In his study *Race and the Avant-Garde: Experimental and Asian American Poetry since 1965*, Timothy Yu analyzes how the American definition of the literary avant-garde was transformed in the sixties and seventies when social justice movements began to undo white dominance by demanding political equality and calling attention to the fact that cultural productions such as literature could justify and reinforce racial inequalities. Yu's particular focus is on the emergence of Language and Asian American poetry, as both reflected in and engaged with the political upheaval of the sixties and seventies, albeit in different ways. *Race and the Avant-Garde* centers upon the following claim: both Language and Asian American poetry qualify as avant-gardes, as they "see poetry as a revolutionary practice," but they also have expanded the definitions and contours of the category (2). The change hinges on race, and in particular on the avant-garde's historical exclusion of those deemed to embody racial difference by Euro-American culture. Yu shows how Asian American poets expanded the avant-garde to include the antiracist critique at the core of Asian American political movements. In turn, the Language poets responded to what many perceived as a fracturing of the left through identity politics by constituting themselves in racialized

terms. As Yu writes, "central to both is a surprisingly acute sense of how race can inflect aesthetics, and of the relations of power that racial difference creates among contemporaneous avant-gardes" (2).

Yu draws on Renato Poggioli's theorizations of the avant-garde as a sociological construct rather than an aesthetic movement to make the argument that race became a key factor in the construction of both Language and Asian American poetry. In *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Poggioli detaches the avant-garde from aesthetics and describes it instead as a small society congealed through dissatisfaction with popular culture and therefore detached from society at large.¹ For Yu, Poggioli's idea that the avant-garde is a particular and socially constructed group aligns with the fabrication of an Asian racial identity from an array of distinct cultures: "The Asian American artist, like the avant-gardist, puts forward a tendentious argument for cultural particularity—invents a culture—both as a means of organizing a specific artistic community and as a means of critiquing the larger culture" (6). This argument sidesteps the role American racism has played in the construction of Asian American identity and the force it wields in economic, psychic, and cultural life. In other words, *Race and the Avant-Garde* does not acknowledge the real differences between having an "acute sense of how race can inflect aesthetics" because one has been interpellated as "Asian" by American culture and confronting the fact that the implicit whiteness of American literary culture and left politics has come under serious scrutiny. At the same time, by placing Language and Asian American poetries in conversation with each other, Yu's study greatly expands established understandings of both literary movements and performs crucial work recasting the categories through which we read and understand contemporary American poetry.

The first chapter of *Race and the Avant-Garde* is devoted to the work of Allen Ginsberg, as it raises important issues about politics, community, and poetic form that became central to the formation of Language poetry. It is well-known that the political claims Ginsberg made for poetry unleashed it from New Critical orthodoxy so that it could engage with and reflect the counterculture movement.

1. Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Gerald Fitzgerald (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1968).

Yu brings nuance to this truism by analyzing the distinction between "Howl" (1956) and "Wichita Vortex Sutra" (1966), which present very different understandings of poetry's relationship to political particularities and universals. From a particular location and community, "Howl" suggests universality and utopian vision. By contrast, "Wichita Vortex Sutra" seeks to directly—and polemically—transmit its message to a universal audience. As Yu writes, "'Howl' depends for its effect on its portrayal of an inclusive coterie, rendered in a form that allegorizes—but does not delineate—the alternative social order that coterie might embody" (36). The formal qualities of "Howl" and its implications—"the wild juxtapositions that cross cultural and moral boundaries, the anaphoric structure that rejects hierarchy, the collage created with a faith in an organic, rather than artificial, order" (20)—help create a distance between imaginary and actual social life. This distance allows Ginsberg to evoke rather than dictate alternative communities, an argument that complicates standard understandings of the poem's biographical dimensions and its particular renderings of location. "Wichita Vortex Sutra," which attempts to undo the manipulations of language during the Vietnam War through citation and reenactment, cannot serve "as a model for a much wider reorganization of social life" (29). The poem addresses a national audience but does so through the poet's individual subjectivity. According to Yu, the huge gap between the power of hegemonic language and the individual poet's desire to legislate a new political reality through poetry ultimately creates a collapse between them, leaving the poet of "Wichita Vortex Sutra" both everywhere and nowhere. Yu develops his endorsement of "Howl" as a poem that, unlike "Wichita Vortex Sutra," suggests rather than forces community as a way to assess how Language and Asian American artists represent racial identity. Do they insist on representing the reality of race through forms polished into transparency, or do they render racial identity as a question by calling attention to poetic form and language itself as sites of mediation?

Yu makes the work of Ron Silliman representative of Language poetry because it most explicitly registers the school's uncomfortable relationship to the increased visibility of poets who reflected the emergence of identity politics. Silliman responds to "a political

landscape increasingly aware of divisions of race, class, and gender" by "put[ting] forth the tendentious argument that Language writing is the form of avant-garde practice particular to politically progressive white men" (39). Yu characterizes this move as the "ethnicization" of Language poetry, but it seems more like a white artist's appropriation of ethnic identities to defend against the political unraveling of white hegemony. The chapter on Silliman doesn't foreclose this assessment but turns to the formal innovations of his poetry, and the "new sentence" in particular, to argue that Language poetry's developing aesthetics undermine Silliman's own precarious contention that this body of work represents and expresses a white male identity. Often used in prose pieces, the "new sentence" makes sense on its own but becomes strange through its paratactical relationship to other sentences that are radically dissimilar in theme or style. In *Ketjak*, a book of prose poems Silliman composed in 1974, the new sentence simultaneously encourages awareness of the artist's mediated position and expands into representations of collective experience. Making poetry into a recording device for daily life, Silliman uses the defamiliarization of the new sentence to move between public and private spaces, both of which, according to Yu, prevent his consciousness from "coher[ing] into a single voice or narrative" (68). Yu continues, "It is Silliman's hope that the method of the new sentence deployed in *Ketjak* will provide a realistic and documentary language that manages to escape the boundaries of his own (straight white male) perspective" (70). While the reading of *Ketjak* and its political implications is impressive, it would have been interesting to place the poetry of Lyn Hejinian, Erica Hunt, or Rachel Blau Duplessis in the context of this analysis to show that many different artists associated with Language poetry—not just the white men themselves—worked to undo the centrality of the straight white male perspective.

What may stand out most in readers' minds after reading this chapter are the two epistolary conversations that are crucial to understanding the questions that race raised in the early formation of Language poetry. The first takes place among Silliman, Charles Bernstein, and Bruce Andrews regarding the founding of the journal *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*. At issue was the tension between political inclusion and aesthetic standards. Yu shows that Bernstein's and

Andrews's desire to include the work of women and people of color stems from their guilty consciences and indirectly expresses the assumption "that much of what is presented under the categories of women's or Third World writing is simply bad" (56). Surprisingly, it was Silliman who highlighted the fact that the standards Bernstein and Andrews wanted to enforce "are themselves ethnocentric, particular, and not universal" (57). Yet another, far more heated—and disturbing—exchange is central to Language poetry and Silliman's troubled place there. In 1986, Douglas Messerli sought permission to include Silliman's work in an anthology entitled "*Language*" *Poetries*. Silliman reacted to being identified as a Language poet as if Messerli had thrown a racist or sexist epithet at him. Yu describes Silliman's "equation" as "absurd" and cites the "enraged responses" of both Bernstein and Hejinian, but he also sees Silliman's inflammatory reaction as a logical outgrowth of comments Silliman had made earlier about Language poetry's particularity:

If language-centered writing is, as Silliman argues in his earlier letters, a form of poetry just as "underdeveloped" as the writing of women or Third World writers, and if its social origin ("progressive" white male writers of the "industrialized" tradition) is just as particular and marginalized, why should a caricature of such writing not be as offensive as racist or sexist caricature, since both rely on the same logic of social marginalization?

(59)

This rhetorical question seems to erroneously substitute "a logic of social marginalization" for the histories of race and gender oppression. That Language poets, women writers, and writers of color were struggling for recognition in the American literary landscape does not mean that their work emerges from analogous conditions of oppression. Yu has crafted a detached stance in *Race and the Avant-Garde* and refuses to judge Silliman's poetry and statements on political or ethical grounds, reading them instead as symptomatic of an uncomfortably shifting cultural landscape in which race should always be in question.

The difficult project of setting up the book's interpretive framework by reading Ginsberg's and Silliman's work through the lens of race pays off when Yu analyzes the emergence of Asian American

poetry in the 1970s, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée* (1982), and the poetry of John Yau. The third chapter, "Inventing a Culture: Asian American Poetry in the 1970s" is a treasure, as it traces the debates about Asian American politics and literature that took place in Bay Area journals, newspapers, and anthologies and are probably not well-known to many scholars of contemporary poetry. Yu contends that American culture's primary image of Asian American poetry is from the 1980s, when poets such as Li-Young Lee, Cathy Song, David Mura, and Marilyn Chin created a recognizably polished MFA style that emphasizes "personal voice, epiphanic insight, and loose verse form" (73). By contrast, the poetry published in journals such as *Gidra* (1969-74) and *Aion* (1970) and in early issues of *Bridge* (1971-85) not only represents a vital connection to the Asian American student movement but enacts questions about Asian American identity through poetic form. Highlighting its use of jazz improvisation, allusions to Beat poetry, conflicted relationships to national origins, and borrowings from African American literary and political formations, Yu wants to make clear that while the poetry published in these journals has a "documentary impulse," it is not "a poetry of pure content, one that transparently represents Asian American subjectivities and communities" (75). In *Race and the Avant-Garde*, "transparency" is often quite close to, if not a substitute for, "political rhetoric," a label that seems to simplify literature's engagement with politics. However, when Yu performs an extended reading of this poetry from the 1970s, it becomes clear why he wants to emphasize the invention at play in this work.

The analysis of Francis Naohiko Oka's "Reagan Poem" (1970), which appeared in *Aion*, brings together many elements of Yu's argument against the transparent poetics of political rhetoric. "Reagan Poem" is anaphoric; each line begins with the phrase "Ronald is," and Oka's characterizations of Reagan's "ontology" are funny, outlandish, and crude: "Ronald is finger nail polish on a dyke / Ronald is long hair on girls pubes ... Ronald's cunt grows mildew" (qtd. in Yu 82). Yu rightly characterizes "Reagan Poem" as "centrifugal": "Rather than coming together into a condemnation or demonization of Ronald Reagan, Oka's caricatures turn 'Ronald' into a free-floating signifier," an expansion that "opens up the possibility of a cultural response" (82) as well as a poetic unsettling of sig-

nifiers for Asian identity: "Ronald is psychedelic fried Won Ton with pineapple sauce" (qtd. in Yu 82). Yu values work such as "Reagan Poem" because "the self is 'refracted,'" not "confirmed or shored up" (92).

The move to Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée* in the next chapter is smart. Not only is *Dictée* relentlessly experimental, and therefore resistant to the confirmation or shoring up of identity, but the history of the book's reception perfectly substantiates Yu's argument that the avant-gardism of Asian American poetry from the seventies went underground in the eighties. (*Dictée* was published in 1982 and was for the most part ignored by scholars of Asian American literature until the nineties.) As *Race and the Avant-Garde* meticulously demonstrates, *Dictée's* critical reception reflects changing understandings of what constitutes Asian identity in Asian American literary and cultural criticism as well as in traditionally white scholarship on the avant-garde. Yu argues that both strains of scholarship essentialize Cha's Korean origins. Euro-American critics treated *Dictée* as a direct expression of Cha's foreignness or ignored the historical and racial contexts that the text emerged from and Cha represents with great complexity. He also contends that scholars of Asian American literature are willfully blind to aspects of the text that do not conform to their interpretive frameworks.

Though Asian American literary critics did not write on *Dictée* in the eighties, scholarship on the book flourished in nineties. The anthology *Writing Self, Writing Nation* (1994) testifies to this shift, as it features prominent Asian American literary critics such as Elaine Kim and L. Hyun Yi Kang discussing their initial difficulties squaring Cha's radical experimentation with the need to find and assert a coherent and politically engaged Asian identity.² *Writing Self, Writing Nation* also includes Lisa Lowe's analysis of *Dictée* as a "heterogeneous" text, a formulation that "opens up Asian American identity, exposing its multiple and shifting forms" (114-15) and therefore marks a new and important direction in scholarship on Cha and Asian American literature more generally. Yu argues that for the most part, the early critical paradigm, which sees literary

2. Elaine H. Kim and Norma Alarcón, eds., *Writing Self, Writing Nation: A Collection of Essays on "Dictée" by Theresa Hak Kyung Cha* (Berkeley, CA: Third Woman, 1994).

experimentation and racial politics as mutually exclusive, nonetheless remains intact. The evidence for this claim is the fact that many critics focus on only the first half of *Dictée*, which explicitly thematizes race, history, identity, and narrative in ways that mirror the early concerns of Asian American literary critics. It is certainly true that the second part of Cha's text has not been examined as thoroughly as the first, but it is an unfair stretch to argue that *Dictée* splits along a historical/abstract divide and then to make that reading reflect the supposed inadequacies and impasses of Asian American literary criticism.

The last chapter in *Race and the Avant-Garde* is devoted to the work of John Yau and represents the book's most compelling contribution. Rather than seeing Yau's work as a "new synthesis" of Asian American and experimental writing, Yu reads it as a continuation of the Asian American avant-garde of the 1970s (138). It is Yau's particular representation of biography, history, and memory, and the way race unpredictably refracts through all three, that is most important to Yu. Setting the pop sensibility and parodic citations of ethnic signifiers within Yau's work against poems from Garrett Hongo's anthology *The Open Boat: Poems from Asian America* (1993), which features autobiographical lyrics that thematize racial authenticity, Yu demonstrates how vibrant poetry can become if it engages with the possibility that "we do not know what it means to be 'Chinese' anymore, even as we are constantly reminded of its centrality" (150). It is in his discussion of Yau's poem "Peter Lorre Improvises Mr. Moto's Monologue" (1996) that the book's anti-identitarian argument becomes most clear. In this poem, the Austrian actor and the Japanese detective he played in yellowface become each other's uncanny doubles, and Yu analyzes how the poem becomes a politically trenchant deconstruction of racial identity.

Yu's *Race and the Avant-Garde: Experimental and Asian American Poetry since 1965* is a sometimes frustrating, sometimes delightful, but always provocative text that scholars of contemporary poetry and Asian American literature will be citing, discussing, and arguing over for many years to come. I think that one of Yu's primary arguments—"after 1970 the question of race became central to the constitution of *any* American avant-garde" (1)—can help foster more nuanced discussions of race in the field of contemporary

American poetry. I would still contend, however, that *Race and the Avant-Garde* is a postracial argument that glosses over the ways in which the histories of American racism, which continue to forge racial categories and identities, make race a painful, costly, and circumscribed fact for poets and people of color. If "the fact of racism"—to borrow and expand one of Frantz Fanon's key phrases—is forgotten when race is put into question, literary critics risk simplifying the various ways poets of color seek to contest and undo that fact. This simplification slides easily into blaming poets of color for their participation in racial constructions and, in turn, impedes the necessary work of recognizing the constitutive and insidious power of racial categories.

Duke University