

was anything but coercion or rape effaces decades of black womanist theoretical work and centuries of empirical reality. As theorists like Angela Davis and Saidiya Hartman have pointed out, under the unequivocally racialized environment of slavery, there can be no consensual interracial sex act because consensus requires choice, something that is obviously precluded by slavery's enforcement of bondage.

While these are powerful arguments about multiracialism's bend towards revisionist history, I was left wondering how these astute assessments translate into contemporary interracial sexual relationships. The fact that Sexton seemingly categorizes the interracial sex act as always implicitly a product of violence or sexualized racism is troubling. One sharp criticism of this book is that if one is not a careful reader, one might misinterpret Sexton's strong critique of multiracial *politics* as advocating bigotry towards multiracial *individuals* or interracial couples. This is perhaps due to the occasional opacity of Sexton's language or the difficulty of the theoretical quandaries themselves. I was left with many questions after reading Sexton's work, most notably, are all mixed race individuals and all interracial couples, according to Sexton's argument, always already implicated in a racist multiracial politics even against their wills or knowledge? Sexton suggests that all "healthy" (i.e., socially recognized) interracial relationships feel the need to define themselves in opposition to pathological constructions of interracial sexuality (175). Is this a fair assessment?

*Amalgamation Schemes* is constructed upon a series of shrewd observations, and is an admirable project because it introduces a timely criticism, but ultimately this work is more concerned with deconstructing the conservative tenants of multiracialism than it is with structuring a new empowered politics. To wit, Sexton ends his work advocating a "creative destruction" (258) of both multiracial politics and concepts of biological racialization in favor of a racialization rearticulated in discourses of power. He does not, however, articulate how such a politics could be structured and practiced. Rich, strong, and provocative, *Amalgamation Schemes* does a thorough job of critiquing the advocates of multiracialism and its discursive framework, but ultimately leaves the reader with more questions about *how* to disarticulate racialization from a biological, psychological, pathological, or multiracial politics than perhaps its author is prepared to concretely engage with.

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Yu, Timothy. *Race and the Avant-Garde: Experimental and Asian-American Poetry Since 1965*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2009.

"Race and the avant-garde have been linked since the dawn of the twentieth century" commences Timothy Yu's ingenious *Race and the Avant-Garde: Experimental and Asian-American Poetry since 1965* (1). In his exhaustive study, Yu delineates the political and social upheaval that defined the 1960s American climate to probe two social groups, Asian Americans and Experimentalists, that emerged from the turmoil to create synchronous aesthetic movements that redefined the avant-garde and American poetry. Since their inception four decades ago, both groups have altered and reformed their *sui generis*

methods while emending who warrants inclusion into their poetic schools. Specifically, Yu demonstrates the modus in which Asian American poets and Experimentalists egressed as indeterminate poetic groups that adhered to avant-gardist standards by elucidating their social demarcation.

One of the most turbulent debates of the 1960s was the anti-Vietnam War movement, which served as a major catalyst in the Language poetry revolution. Chapter 1 of Yu's study examines Allen Ginsberg, an original pioneer of the avant-garde style, and his poem "Howl," which politicized the usually aesthetic genre. By focusing principally on a point in history and crafting the work from a nonconformist perspective, "Howl" defies traditional poetics by suggesting that vision cannot truly embody universalities. Yu's inspection of "Howl" reveals that the poem's platform relies on the cognizance of the protesters who evolved as social "outsiders" who challenged the supererogatory conflict. The idiosyncrasies of discontent are imparted mainly in Ginsberg's phraseology. In the spirit of Language poetry, Ginsberg applies fractured language and imagery to actively involve the "conscious" reader "who jumped off the Brooklyn Bridge that actually happened and walked / away unknown and forgotten into the ghostly daze of Chinatown / soup alleyways & firetrucks, not even on free beer" (30). Yu informs the reader that although Ginsberg subsumes individualist constructions, he recognizes that inspiration is derived from the situation of the group in which one is a member. Ginsberg's apperception, according to this study, establishes the foundation for the Experimental poetry movement.

Yu continues *Race and the Avant-Garde* by investigating the work of a divergent Language innovator, Ron Silliman, who was sonorously influenced by Allen Ginsberg's style of literary recording. Conversely, Silliman's employment of formalistic modus operandi transformed the Language intendment from person in relation to his outside influences, as was the case with Ginsberg, to the collective experiences as the subject of the poetics. Yu exposes that this catalyst forced Silliman into a "much greater awareness of the location and the limits of his own perspective" (38). But the avant-garde is a movement outside of the mainstream, so the repositioning of Language poetry brought a characterization of the social grouping of its artists as well as the consciousness of other social dimensions within the environment in which the poetry originated. Whereas Ginsberg's focus lay in the anti-Vietnam movement, social revolutions, including the Women's Rights Movements and the African American Civil Rights Movements, were concurrently stirring. Yu divulges that Silliman exploited those happening to differentiate his writing. His embrace and utilization of the distinctiveness of "others" to influence his poetry served as a means of denoting Language poets just as there existed women and gay/lesbian poets.

In the opening chapter of *Race and the Avant-Garde*, Yu asserts that race and the avant-garde are incontrovertibly linked, yet Language poets, who subscribed to the aesthetic and social requirements of the avant-garde, appeared racially and sexually exclusive. Silliman argues that the "social codes" that barred women, homosexual, and ethnic minority writers also dictated Language poets as they aesthetically diverged from other social groups. Yu comments: "This formulation . . . can be and has been interpreted in at least two ways: as an honest, descriptive assessment of the historical and personal forces that seem to have given rise to Language writing . . . or as an exclusionary, prescriptive formula that suggests women and minorities do not or cannot engage in experimental writing" (49). While recognizing that the molding and defining of Language poetry inadvertently

aligns itself with mainstream writing by excluding minorities and women, Yu appreciates race as a necessary component of the avant-garde. He contends that Silliman's particular and universal tension ethnicized Language poetry and created a cohesiveness that made Language poetry a true avant-garde movement.

Throughout his study, Yu frequently exploits elements of comparison to provide the reader with a conception of the recitation of experimental movements, comparing the Beat Movement to Ginsberg's brand of poetic showcasing. He does the same with his consideration of African American avant-garde movements, including the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movements. He notes that both the African American and Asian American poetry revolutions birthed from socially exigent circumstances. However, the similarities end as the African American experience is bound by common threads. The social fabric of Asian Americans is sundry and includes Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, and other descendants from inhabitants of the continent. That inorganic grouping required a pertinacious definition of Asian Americans not only as a social group but also as an avant-garde collective. That is the *raison d'être* for Yu's juxtaposing the work of Language and Asian American poets—both are untried subgenres that stemmed from the desire to define oneself within a group during an historical period that was driven largely by sociological factors.

Chapter 3 of Yu's inspection is aptly titled, "Inventing a Culture." Asian Americans simultaneously sought to discover their artistic voices while defining their sociological association, which Yu attests is the key reason that Asian American poetry, like Language poetry, was experimental in its forms. The poetic movement was as much a cultural revolution as it was a social one. Because there was no existing form for which either group could build upon, they were able to amalgamate existing styles of art. Like jazz, which Yu credits as a greater influence to the Asian American poetry movement than the Black Arts Movement, Asian American poets sought to develop other methods of artistic expression. Janice Mirikitani exemplified that consort with the publication of her poem, "Broken," which accompanied her photo essay documenting the conditions of San Francisco's Chinatown, featured in the Asian American literary journal, *Aion*.

In examining the "invention" of Asian American culture, Yu reiterates the importance of Asian Americans defining their culture. While experimenting with various forms was commonplace, predictable forms were often rejected in a search for that culture. Yu quotes Mirikitani: "I feel that haikus written in English [are] a prostitution of the form, since it's a form specifically meant to be used in the Japanese language. But the feeling of the haiku—the cleanliness, the simplicity of the feeling, is something I can incorporate into MY language and MY style" (88). Other Asian American poets, including Frank Chin and Frances Naohiko Oka, shared an analogous sentiment. As Yu outlines, as the exploratory form reached its adolescence, it suffered from the affliction that plagues the avant-garde. Asian American poetry received mainstream attention and thus, a slight yet significant level of incorporation into conventional poetry studies.

"Audience Distant Relative," the fourth chapter, chronicles the movement of Asian American poetry from the communal, vanguard to the private individual. Here Yu redefines avant-garde: "A group of like-minded artists devising their own channels for the creation and distribution of unconventional work, with an audience largely limited to other members of the group, sympathetic peers, and a few mainstream readers whose

sensibilities the work is in part designed to shock” (101). Yu notes how, as conformist forms took precedent within the works of Asian American poets, including Cathy Song and Garrett Hongo, who found individual achievement, Asian American poetry appeared less experimental in composition and matter and began receiving mainstream designations. Astoundingly, however, it was the mainstream consideration and recognition of an Asian American artist, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, by the Language School that caused Asian American poetry to reexamine and return to its avant-garde roots.

Cha’s collection, *Dictee* (1982), was originally an obscure text appreciated solely by her white peers as “a central document in the Asian-American canon” (102). The reason, Yu explains, is largely due to the less than Asian American “style” than Cha employs. She opts for a more stylistic language-based technique that aligns her with white experimental poets. Her works speak of an inimitability that segregated her from her cultural peers; L. Hyun Yi Kang referred to *Dictee* as “elusive” (qtd. in Yu 106). Contrarily, Yu unveils that it is her Asian American heritage that made her “other” as defined by the white literary authority.

The acceptance of *Dictee* by Asian American poets occurred in response to the remote designation of their work. The question of what constitutes Asian American poetry reverberated in the academy. Although Cha’s style is more like the Language poets, she is still a part of the Asian American poetry movement even if *Dictee* does not particularly grant a voice for the collective Asian American experience. Yu argues that Cha’s ability to fit into both and neither of the experimental movements forced members to reevaluate their classifications of schools. Most significantly, *Dictee’s* recognition exposed the parallel and overlapping yet productive tensions of experimental and Asian American poetry.

Cha’s multifariousness opened the gates for fellow Asian American artist John Yau to commingle the contemporaneous avant-garde movements. Like his predecessor, Yau originally identified with experimentalists but later emerged as Asian American avant-gardist. Yau’s Asian American poetic membership lies solely in his heritage, which he openly discusses in interviews. His art, contrarily, appears to reject fundamentally Asian American themes, but Yu demonstrates that this refutation is avant-garde. Yau affirms: “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” (149).

Cha’s contradictory forms coupled with Yau’s incongruous denunciation of the mainstream repossess and reconfigures the state of the Asian American avant-garde. By making Yau a point of comparison for latter members of the Asian American poetic movement, Yu exhibits the continued strategies that began with the movement.

In *Race and the Avant-Garde*, Timothy Yu auspiciously explores two analogous experimental poetic styles that emerged as peripheral social and aesthetic poetic revolutions that cannot be divisible by form or content as the “race” of its members materializes through and from the literary work. Both Language and Asian American poets are either understudied or misinterpreted, yet Yu’s analysis highlights the explorations and the optimistic outlook that each provides with regard to avant-gardist movements and the future of American poetry.

—Ashanti L. White