

Preface

This book is as much a rethinking of how poetry is critically discussed today by critics—in the academy mainly but also, to a lesser extent, in the wider poetry-reading public—as it is a focused study of five contemporary Asian American poets. *Thinking Its Presence: Form, Race, and Subjectivity in Contemporary Asian American Poetry* adds a voice to the long and ongoing conversation about poetry and poetics, even as it will be read more topically as a study of Asian American literature, minority American poetry, and diasporic literature. I see no contradiction in claiming that a “minor” literature, not only minor but also secondary among American minority literatures,¹ provides a crucial lens through which to view fundamental questions concerning what is, arguably, still *the* major genre in the English literary tradition, even as critics bemoan the fact that no one reads it: poetry. Indeed, Asian American poetry—which occupies a unique place in both the American national body and the American literary imaginary as the nexus of constitutively and immutably “alien” racialized subjects and the vaunted English-language poetic tradition²—puts to the test many of our widest held beliefs, not only about minority literature but also about English literature, poetry and poetics, American literature and society, and the value of the literary.

This claim that minority poetry can contribute importantly to American (and English-language) poetry and poetics flies in the face of the reception of ethnic poetry in English literary and poetry stud-

ies, among critics of both “mainstream” lyric and avant-garde poetry. Poetry by racialized persons, no matter the aesthetic style, is almost always read as secondary to the larger (and more “primary”) fields and forms of English-language poetry and poetics—whether the lyric, prosody, rhetorical tropes, the notion of the “avant-garde”—categories all too often presumed to be universal, overarching, and implicitly “racially unmarked.” Within colleges and universities, poetry is almost always studied in classes and departments that are nationally based, monolingual,³ and internally organized by periods or eras, each studded with a few “stars”: for example, a Modernist poetry survey would feature Eliot, Stevens, and Pound certainly, and then, give or take a few other white poets, perhaps Williams or Crane or Marianne Moore.⁴ Langston Hughes might be included as the token black—or what amounts to the same thing, the exceptional exception—but surely no other Harlem Renaissance poet (not to mention an Asian American poet such as Jose Garcia Villa). Hughes is much less likely to be linked to Modernism—never “High” Modernism—than to the category of African American poetry or African American literature.

Because of our investment in such schemata, it might be difficult to imagine that studying the poetry of, say, Asian American poet John Yau, the author of more than a dozen volumes of poetry, can teach us as much, though differently, about “poetic voice” and the poetic “I” as does reading the works of John Ashbery. The question here is not “Who is the greater poet?”—one could substitute e. e. cummings for Ashbery in the example—but why there exists a double standard in discussing the work of poets of color and those who are supposedly racially “unmarked.” Critics look at the work of Ashbery as contributing to “universal”⁵ questions of subjectivity and poetics while Yau, with rare exception,⁶ is seen as occupying a narrower historical or partisan niche—as one of the post–New York School poets or, more recently, as “merely” an Asian American poet.

The double standard extends to how we read works of poetry. Critics are more likely to think about formal questions—say, poetic tone and syntax—when speaking about Ashbery’s poems but almost certainly to focus on political or black “content” when examining the work of Amiri Baraka, a poet who has pushed the limits of for-

mal invention for more than half a century—certainly as long as Ashbery has. How likely would a critic be to approach Li-Young Lee’s poems by studying his use of anaphora? How likely would a critic be to examine Louise Glück’s poems by turning to her autobiographical background—for example, her having grown up Jewish on Long Island—in the same way that critics often invoke the “Chinese” background of Marilyn Chin when speaking of her poems? Glück’s having been born to a Jewish-Hungarian immigrant father (who helped invent the X-Acto knife), having been exposed (or not) to non-English languages as a child, having suffered from anorexia, and having attended Sarah Lawrence College and Columbia University should not be irrelevant to a reading of her poetry. Where she grew up, her racial ethnicity, her class, her knowing other languages—these factors, among many, have influenced her writing; likewise, her knowledge of the English literary tradition, her grappling with poetic precursors, and her knowledge of languages should not be irrelevant to a reading of her poetry.

There is, as Edward Said reminds us in *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, a “connection between texts and the existential actualities of human life, politics, societies, and events”⁷ (these actualities also include, of course, literary and aesthetic engagements). I am not arguing for reading biographically in a simplistic manner but, rather, for taking into account all the factors and contexts—literary and extraliterary—that undergird and help to determine poetic subjectivity and that, consciously or unconsciously, manifest themselves in the language of poems. All sorts of linguistic and sociopolitical considerations (race and class, among others) influence the formation of a person and her relationship to the English language and the poetic tradition; these factors are at one and the same time embodied in the person of the poet but are also inseparable from institutional, ideological, social, and other structures that function in realms beyond the personal world of the individual poet. There are, as Raymond Williams puts it, “profound connections between formations and forms.”⁸ We should, I argue, be reading both minority poets and canonical poets with attention to formal concerns *and* the social, cultural, historical, and literary contexts that have shaped the work.

Whereas critics of more “mainstream” minority lyric poetry—such as that by Elizabeth Alexander and Li-Young Lee—tend to read for “content,” critics working on the other end of the aesthetic spectrum, the “avant-garde,” do a similar disservice to experimental minority writing when they completely ignore references to race or ethnic identity, even when the poets themselves (for example, Mei-mei Berssenbrugge or Will Alexander) speak about the importance of issues of race and of ethnic and racial identity formation to their work. It is not that critics of avant-garde poetry are unable to speak about other social concerns—for example, scholars writing on Language poetry are attuned to formal structures that implicitly critique the structures of capitalist market economies; others write trenchantly about how gender differences manifest themselves in the form of writing by poets such as Lyn Hejinian. It is that race alone seems unspeakable.

Although the situation among literary critics I have just delineated may be changing slightly with the rise of Internet culture and the increasing numbers of younger critics of color who have been trained in the wake of “multiculturalism,” I still contend that, in the main, poetry critics both inside and outside the academy—including some younger minority critics—continue to misread minority poetry along these lines.⁹ Even if some critics may be willing to acknowledge formal experimentation in an Asian American poet’s work, what is lacking are sustained critical analyses that pay serious attention to both the literary and social properties of Asian American writing.

Thinking Its Presence: Form, Race, and Subjectivity in Contemporary Asian American Poetry is, I hope, the first of many such studies. In this book, I argue for a capacious and complex mode of reading Asian American, minority American poetry, and poetry in general by making the case that a poem’s use of form is inseparable from the larger social, historical, and political contexts that produced the poet’s subjectivity. Just as all human lives are complex, layered, multidimensional, and sometimes contradictory, so are poems—and the subjectivities that produce them—and to have insight into their workings, one must pay careful attention to the *particularities* of the persons and the writing, by means of close reading, in historical time and place. All writing is situated in both aesthetic and social realms.

Critics should accord the same degree of complexity and respect to the whole stylistic range of minority poetry as they do to “racially unmarked” poetry—to pay the same serious attention to language (its literary, linguistic, and rhetorical aspects) so as to understand the nuanced and complex interplay between “form” and “content” and to avoid the sorts of reductive binary categories that oppose form and content, the cultural/social/political and the literary, and so on. A poem manifests formally—whether in its linguistic structures or in its literary and rhetorical presentation—the impress of external forces and contexts.¹⁰ This relationship pertains as much in an abstract avant-garde poem as in an overtly “political” poem. And it holds as much for a poem by Li-Young Lee as it does for a poem by Mark Strand; likewise, the poetic language of a Strand poem bears the impress, explicit or unconscious, of the ethos and effects of social and political contexts no less than does the language of an “ethnic” poem.

In other words, what is true for white poets is true for minority poets. And vice versa.

If my arguments in *Thinking Its Presence: Form, Race, and Subjectivity in Contemporary Asian American Poetry* seem to highlight the role of racial interpellation and racialized subjectivity on these poets’ work, the reason is not that I think that race is the only—or necessarily the primary—factor at work in the poetries of these Asian American poets or other minority poets but that the overwhelming body of critical discourse has occluded this significant issue. One must never overlook the political (institutional, intellectual) and aesthetic stakes at work in the academy and in the work literary critics do. One must never forget what one is fighting *against*.

In other words, an exhortation to not forget that politics and aesthetic concerns are intimately intertwined, even in the most abstract and racially “unmarked” poetry, flies in the face of powerful institutional and humanistic discourses that dictate literary value and the terms of literary discussion. Culture has, says Said,

the power . . . by virtue of its elevated or superior position to authorize, to dominate, to legitimate, demote, interdict, and validate: in short, the power of culture to be an agent of, and perhaps

the main agency for, powerful differentiation within its domain and beyond it too. (*WTC*, 9)

What is more important in culture is that it is a system of values *saturating* downward almost everything within its purview. (original emphasis; 9)

Criticism in short is always situated. (26)

We as literary critics might ask ourselves these questions: “Why is it so difficult for poetry critics to talk about race?” “Why is race so often occluded in discussions of American poetry, or, if the issue is raised at all, why is it so often discussed in reductive terms?” “Who has the power to decide who gets to sit at the table of ‘real’ poetry, and what kind of table it will be?”

“For as long as social relations are skewed,” reminds poet-critic Charles Bernstein, “who speaks in poetry can never be a neutral matter.”¹¹

Introduction

Aesthetics Contra “Identity” in Contemporary Poetry Studies

A Few Snapshots of the Current State of Poetry Reception

In the January 2008 issue of *PMLA*—the official publication of the Modern Language Association (MLA) sent to more than thirty thousand members in one hundred countries¹—a cluster of essays by eight distinguished literary critics appeared under the title “The New Lyric Studies.”² The pieces took as their jumping-off point the eminent poetry critic Marjorie Perloff’s MLA presidential address, “It Must Change,” given in December 2006 at the annual convention in Philadelphia and later reprinted in the May 2007 issue of *PMLA*. In that talk, Perloff asks, “Why *is* the ‘merely’ literary so suspect today?” (original emphasis), contending that “the governing paradigm for so-called literary study is now taken from anthropology and history.”³

Because lyric has in our time become conflated with the more generic category of poetry,⁴ the *PMLA* forum serves to address not only the state of lyric studies but, more broadly, the state of poetry studies today. Nine critics may seem a small number—hardly representative of the larger numbers of academic poetry critics in the country—but because of the influential reputations of the critics involved (Perloff and Jonathan Culler in particular);⁵ because the MLA, despite the ridicule to which it is sometimes subjected, is the largest, most powerful and influential professional organization for professors and academic critics of literature; and because the *PMLA*

reaches a wider and broader audience than any other literary-critical journal,⁶ the views of these particular critics are highly visible and influential and cannot be easily discounted or dismissed. The MLA is one of what Edward Said calls the “authoritative and authorizing agencies” of culture in the Arnoldian sense (*WTC*, 8). Individual articles in *PMLA* may be overlooked, but statements by high-profile members about the state of the field of literary criticism—especially when marked by an adjective such as “New”—are often noticed and by a not insignificant number of readers.

In quite a few respects, the arguments made in “The New Lyric Studies” were varied: from Culler’s making the case for the specialness of lyric—with its “memorable language” and its being “characteristically extravagant”⁷—to Rei Terada’s calling that we “[be] release[d] from lyric ideology” and “let ‘lyric’ dissolve into literature and ‘literature’ into culture”⁸ (Robert Kaufman, the requisite Marxist contributor, splits the difference by claiming, via Adorno and Benjamin, that lyric is special precisely because it operates ideologically by the same “version of aura or semblance” that the commodity form does⁹); from Stathis Gourgouris’s and Brent Edwards’s urging that lyric scholars engage with truer and more incisive forms of interdisciplinarity;¹⁰ to Oren Izenberg’s assertion that “it makes good sense to bring literary study into closer proximity with the disciplines that give accounts of how the mind works,” such as “the philosophy of mind, philosophical psychology, and metaphysics that deal with the nature of mental phenomena and their relation not so much to the determinations of culture as to the causal structure of reality.”¹¹ Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins both argue for more and better historicization: Jackson—pushing against the tendency to make poetry and lyric abstract, idealized, and transhistorical—urges that we “trace . . . the history of lyricization”; Prins, that we examine “the cultural specificity of poetic genres” and the history of poetics and prosody.¹²

Yet despite the various methodological, disciplinary, and aesthetic inclinations of the respondents, there are moments of agreement, some expected and others less so, sometimes cutting across the familiar “literary versus cultural” divide within literary studies. Not surprisingly among scholars committed to the “literary,” Culler, like

Perloff, makes the familiar validating move of tracing the history of lyric back to the Greeks. Gourgouris, too, bolsters his arguments by appealing to the authority of ancient Greece (not so unexpected given that he works on Greek literature), taking Perloff slightly to task for too narrowly conceiving of *poietike*, which she translates as “the discipline of poetics.” But Gourgouris—who makes the point that Perloff “does not inquire if ‘poetics’ can be conducted nowadays in a fresh language”—does agree with her claim that literary studies has taken a wrong turn, though for him the reasons are internal to the field and not, as Perloff suggests, because interdisciplinarity, in the form of anthropological and historical paradigms, has been a bad influence. Gourgouris writes in “*Poiein*—Political Infinitive,”

For a decade or more since 1990, the microidentitarian shift in theory precipitated a failure of self-interrogation, especially regarding the paradoxes of the new disciplinary parameters that emerged out of the practice of interdisciplinarity. As a result, literary studies (and other disciplines) suffered, not so much a defanging, as Perloff implies, but rather carelessness, perhaps even arrogance—one is a symptom of the other—which led the discipline to abandon self-interrogation and instead hop on the high horse of identity politics. In other words, if Perloff’s scenario for the relegation of literary studies to a secondary practice is legitimate, the devaluation is not external but self-induced. (224)

This moment is surprising in that Gourgouris, who strongly advocates for, in effect, a “truer” form of interdisciplinarity—one that “requires, by definition, the double work of mastering the canonical and the modes of interrogating it” (225)—and who emphatically states that “[p]oetry cannot be understood except in relation to life” (227), places the blame for the fall of literary studies so firmly and unquestioningly on “the high horse of identity politics”—presumably not “relat[ed] to life”—the end result of “carelessness” and the abandoning of “self-interrogation.” Indeed, “identity” has already been referenced as a dirty word earlier in the quote when Gourgouris speaks of the “microidentitarian shift in theory” and its having “precipitated a failure of self-interrogation.” Let me delay my discussion of this critique of “identity politics” for now and turn to another moment of agreement in *PMLA*.

On page two of his essay “Poems Out of Our Heads,” Oren Izenberg—before asserting that literary studies be brought in closer proximity with more scientific “disciplines that give accounts of how the mind works”—makes common cause with Perloff, quoting her:

I share much of Perloff’s resistance to viewing poetry as “symptoms of cultural desires, drives, anxieties, or prejudices” and to the sometimes haphazard forms of interdisciplinarity that this view fosters.
(217)

This move is also somewhat surprising, for aesthetic and methodological rather than disciplinary reasons: not only has Izenberg been harshly critical in print of the Language poets, of whom Perloff has been a pioneering and fierce champion, but his privileging of analytic philosophy’s methods do not align with Perloff’s more Continental proclivities and her more literary historical approaches to poetry.¹³

Thus, whatever other aesthetic, methodological, and disciplinary differences may separate them, Gourgouris, Izenberg, and Perloff do converge when thinking about one of the reasons—if not the major reason—for the fallen state of literary studies: forms of sloppy (careless, haphazard) thinking, slightly differentiated but fundamentally linked, that privilege, variously, the sociological over the literary (Perloff); identity politics over rigorous self-interrogation (Gourgouris); the cultural over the literary or philosophical or something called “reality” and its “causal structure” (Izenberg). In other words, scholarly overconcern with the cultural, including the political—dismissed as unspecified “anxieties” and “prejudices”—has seduced serious literary scholars away from the proper study of the literary, specifically poetry. Perloff posits this binary quite starkly in her presidential address:

Still, I wonder how many of us, no matter how culturally and politically oriented our own particular research may be, would be satisfied with the elimination of literary study from the curriculum. (656)

Despite her use of the first-person plural pronoun, Perloff suggests that such “culturally and politically oriented” research is precisely the research that “use[s] literary texts” instrumentally, as “windows

through which we see the world beyond the text, symptoms of cultural drives, anxieties, or prejudices” (654). She ends her address by forcefully exhorting,

It is time to trust the literary instinct that brought us to this field in the first place and to recognize that, instead of lusting after those other disciplines that seem so exotic primarily because we don't really practice them, what we need is more theoretical, historical, and critical training in our own discipline. (662)

More rigorous training in the discipline of literary studies—though oddly, a discipline rooted in an “instinct” that brought “us” into the field in the first place (who is included in this “us” and “we”?)—is posited as the antidote to the deleterious cultural and political turn, seen as a “lusting after” the “exotic.”

For Perloff, this either-or choice obtains not only with literary methods and disciplines but also with individual authors and texts themselves. In her spring 2006 “President’s Column” written for the *MLA Newsletter*, she writes more explicitly and directly of what choices are at stake:

Under the rubrics of African American, other minorities, and post-colonial, a lot of important and exciting novels and poems are surely studied. But what about what is not studied? Suppose a student (undergraduate or graduate) wants to study James Joyce or Gertrude Stein? Virginia Woolf or T.E. Lawrence or George Orwell? William Faulkner or Frank O’Hara? the literature of World Wars I and II? the Great Depression? the impact of technology on poetry and fiction? modernism vis-à-vis fascism? existentialism? the history of modern satire or pastoral? Or, to put it in the most everyday terms, what of the student who has a passionate interest in her or his literary world—a world that encompasses the digital as well as print culture but does not necessarily differentiate between the writings of one subculture or one theoretical orientation and another? Where do such prospective students turn?¹⁴

What is one to make of this suggestion that Joyce and Woolf and Faulkner or any of the other canonical authors listed are not being studied because curricula are crammed full with the works of, say,

Chinua Achebe and Gwendolyn Brooks?¹⁵ (Since Perloff does not mention the names of minority or postcolonial writers—only that “a lot” of their work is “surely” being studied—one can only guess which writers she is referring to.)¹⁶ What is most noteworthy in this passage is not that Perloff opposes the “important and exciting novels and poems” of “African American, other minorities, and postcolonial” writers against the great works of Joyce et al. (Joyce himself a postcolonial writer) but that, rather, she explicitly sets up an opposition, “in the most everyday terms,” between the “literary” and the writings of these racialized¹⁷ and postcolonial subjects who are members of “subculture[s].”¹⁸

For Perloff, the problem is not the death of literary print culture at the hands of the digital, as some critics lament—she is forward-thinking in championing new technologies and rightly sees no contradiction between the literary/poetic and the digital, or even between the literary and the cultural (there is no problem in studying a topic as sociological as “the Great Depression”)—but that the works of “African American, other minorities, and postcolonial” writers leave no room in the curricula for those works that satisfy “the student who has a passionate interest in her or his literary world.”¹⁹ Perloff explicitly frames the choice as one between “passionate” and “literary” writing by famous named authors, all white, and an undifferentiated mass of unliterary writing by nameless minority authors.²⁰ Perhaps because she is writing in the more informal context of an organizational newsletter, Perloff feels freer to be more explicit about what exactly threatens the “literary” than in her MLA presidential address “It Must Change,” where she uses more generic terms such as “culturally and politically oriented” research—though we can fairly accurately guess what the indefinite pronoun “It” in the title refers to.

My critique here is directed not at Perloff’s views as an individual scholar but at an ideological position that she articulates in her MLA presidential address and the newsletter—one widely held in the academy but not usually so straightforwardly stated. Indeed, I admire the forthrightness with which Perloff expresses what many literary scholars think and feel but do not say except, perhaps, between the enclosed walls of hiring meetings: the frightening specter that,

because of “politically correct” cultural-studies-ish pressures in the academy, presumably the detrimental legacy of both 1960s activism and the culture wars of the 1980s, worthy, major, and beloved works of literature—whose merits are “purely literary”—are being squeezed out of the curriculum by inferior works penned by minority writers, whose representation in the curriculum is solely the result of affirmative action or racial quotas or because their writings have passed an ideological litmus test, not literary merit. This sentiment is usually expressed in a manner much more coded though, nonetheless, clearly understood.

What makes it particularly disappointing that Perloff is the one using the powerful forum of the MLA presidency to express these conventional (and literary-establishment) views on minority writing and race is that for decades, she has fought hard to open the academy to unconventional modes and forms of poetry, which were often not considered poetry or even literature, at a time when there was no institutional reward for doing so. She was one of the first, and certainly the most prominent and vocal academic literary critic, to champion the Language poets and is almost single-handedly responsible for their now having become officially canonized and holding appointments at various prestigious English departments across the nation, such as the University of California, Berkeley, and the University of Pennsylvania. Anyone who works on avant-garde poetic writing in this country owes a debt to her—including myself.²¹

In the particular 2008 issue of the *PMLA* in question, it is left to Brent Edwards—the only critic in the group of eight respondents who writes on ethnic literature (and is himself African American)—the task of explicitly making the argument for the social in his response, “The Specter of Interdisciplinarity,” to Perloff’s “It Must Change” address and her posited binary of the “cultural” and the “political” versus the “literary”:²²

Perloff uses “merely” [in her rhetorical question “Why *is* the ‘merely’ literary so suspect today?”] to suggest that the literary, even if threatened or “suspect,” can nevertheless be considered in isolation, as the core of a disciplinary practice. (189)

In whatever form, literary criticism must not relinquish its unique point of articulation with the social. (191)

To reinforce this latter point, Edwards turns to the work of the black Martinican poet Monchoachi—“a pseudonym . . . the name of an infamous Maroon who led a violent insurrection against French slavery in Martinique” (191)—active in the *creolité* movement in the Francophone Caribbean:

It is suggestive to read Monchoachi’s speech [made in 2003 on accepting the Prix Max Jacob] in juxtaposition to Perloff’s, at once for his “social interpretation” of the role of poetry, his different call for a “return,” and his implicit departure from some of her framing gestures, perhaps above all her turn to Greek sources as foundations for the discipline of poetics. (191)

On the previous page, Edwards spoke of “the unique experimental character of postcolonial poetics,” adding that “[s]till, only a handful of scholars have begun to theorize the relation between postcoloniality and poetics in a broader sense.” That Edwards turns to a Francophone postcolonial poet, rather than an African American one, and speaks of the “comparative literature of the African diaspora,” rather than US ethnic literature, is understandable, given the minefield that awaits anyone, especially a minority scholar, who dares to invoke the term “identity” (much less “race or “identity politics”) in a US context. This treacherous terrain is a synecdoche of the fraught nature of any discussion about race in the larger national context—even, or especially, in this “post-race” era.

As it turns out, of the nine or so poets discussed with more than passing reference by Perloff and the eight respondents, Monchoachi is the only nonwhite writer and the one with the least name recognition among American academics.²³ In other words, even as the nine literary critics here evince a variety of aesthetic proclivities and allegiances (traditional versus avant-garde, major versus minor, and so on), methodological approaches (literary criticism, analytic philosophy, Frankfurt School), disciplinary stances (intra- versus inter-), and ideological commitments (classical, Marxist, postmodern, among others), the poets they choose to speak about constitute a much more

homogeneous and narrow group. This is not an insignificant observation: the selection of which authors critics consider worth devoting time and energy to study speaks volumes about whom they consider truly literarily important. And, despite what we would like to believe, the occlusion of minority poets here is not unrepresentative of aporias in the field of poetry studies at large, even with the work of those (nonminority) critics of modern and contemporary poetry who have sought to link aesthetics and politics—Rachel Blau duPlessis, Michael Davidson, Alan Golding, David Lloyd, Cary Nelson, Aldon Nielsen, Jerome McGann, Susan Schultz, Donald Wesling, and Shira Wolosky, to name a few.²⁴

Here, I must confess that, even as I tallied the list of poets in the previous paragraph, I felt guilty—or was it pre-accused?—of having taken precisely the sort of instrumental approach opponents of “identity politics” decry: of having come down on the side of the political and the social and the cultural against the “literary.” I felt and feel this indictment even though I am someone who has spent my life, academic and otherwise, devoted to poetry; someone who is the daughter of two English professors—a Romanticist and a Victorianist—and someone who feels that there is indeed something distinctive and valuable about literature and literary criticism and that literary critics make a mistake when they become would-be analytic philosophers or scientists or legal scholars or economists.²⁵ I, too, feel wonder at “how and why the art called poetry exert[s] such a magic spell”²⁶ and believe that what literary and poetry critics have to contribute to the field of knowledge is an attunement to and understanding of language and the various literary forms it takes. I, too, agree that we must have “theoretical, historical, and critical training in our own discipline” (including prosody and poetics—knowing what an ode or a terza rima is—and, in Gourgouris’s words, “mastering the canonical and the modes of interrogating it” [225]).

But—and this is a big but—I do not at all see why we must make an either-or choice between reading Beckett *or* reading Aimé Césaire, between calling out and into question “cultural desires, drives, anxieties, or prejudices”—the supposed realm of the cultural, the social, and the political, cordoned off from the pure realm of the literary—*or*

analyzing metonymy, chiasmus, sprung rhythm, lineation, anaphora, parataxis, trochees, and so forth. The posited choices are false ones.

As Shira Wolosky, a scholar of nineteenth-century American poetry (and of Paul Celan), writes, “The notion of poetry as a self-enclosed aesthetic realm; as a formal object to be approached through more or less exclusively specified categories of formal analysis; as metahistorically transcendent; and as a text deploying a distinct and poetically ‘pure’ language: these notions seem only to begin to emerge at the end of the nineteenth century, in a process that is itself peculiarly shaped in response to social and historical no less than aesthetic trends.”²⁷

That critics of avant-garde writing fall into these traps is perhaps even more perplexing given that they have long had to fight off the same sorts of dismissive arguments about “literary value” and “literariness” that are now made about minority writing. But being marginalized in one arena, as avant-garde poets and critics have been, does not guarantee that one understands forms of marginalizations in other arenas—here, specifically racial.

What seems to me so drearily familiar in this exchange in *PMLA* is how much the readers both intuit and are expected to intuit, in a myriad of ways, spoken and unspoken, precisely what the terms invoked “really” mean and what is at stake here, at stake not just in the debates about the state of the profession but in the very conditions—the framework and terminologies—of the forum itself. In other words, what is even more operative here than what is explicitly stated is what is *not* stated, what does not *need* to be stated, or what needs to be stated only by shorthand: “identitarian,” “identity politics,” “cultural,” “social,” “political,” “anxieties,” “prejudices,” “exotic,” “carelessness,” “haphazard” versus “literary,” “classic,” “classical,” “discipline,” among other terms. These terms (as does the term “avant-garde”) act as placeholders for larger assumptions and beliefs, many of which have largely become normative in shoring up the supposed opposition between the cultural against the literary.

For, even as we have entered the twenty-first century—with a black man in the White House for two terms, avant-garde Language poets now holding major posts at our most prestigious universities, a

globalized world with non-Western countries “on the rise,” new forms of technology and media cropping up faster than we can assimilate them (including new forms of digital poetics and archives and forums of literary criticism)—many members of our profession continue to rely upon assumptions, beliefs, categories, and norms that operate unquestioningly in English departments across the country.²⁸ So it is that critics who might diverge quite strongly in their poetic allegiances, or who might disagree about how disciplinarity has or has not played itself out, can easily come to agreement across the aesthetic and institutional divides about what threatens the literary and the poetic. (Yes, the MLA and *PMLA* represent a certain “official” or perhaps institutionalized segment of poetry critics, but their influence has no close rival in the field.)

And I do not think that the views expressed in “The New Lyric Studies” are idiosyncratic or marginal to literary studies, despite, as noted earlier, the important work of a dozen or so poetry critics who do attend to the inseparability of the aesthetic and the sociopolitical. The conceptions and reception of minority poetry are concerns that are not quirky and individual matters of, say, “taste” but deeply ideological, institutional, and structural ones—framed and reflected by the curricula of departments of English, disciplines and units within colleges and universities, (in)visibility within the pages of *PMLA*, and decisions made by the NEH, and so on.

The framing of the state of decline of poetry studies as an opposition between social context and the literary is, of course, not new. Debates about poetry’s role and relevance in society, “form” versus “content,” and so on, extend back through the history of poetry—to the Greeks, surely, but more significantly and urgently for those of us in the modern era, to the Romantics (German and especially British, who witnessed firsthand capitalism’s brutal triumph and the concomitant splitting off from the sullied market-driven world a realm of “pure” artistic sensibility). To understand how little we have traveled, imagine how William Blake and Percy Shelley might feel about their poetry’s being discussed in purely “literary” terms. As Raymond Williams reminds us:

What were seen at the end of the nineteenth century as disparate interests, between which a man must choose and in the act of choice

declare himself poet or sociologist, were, normally, at the beginning of the century, seen as interlocking interests. . . . [A]s some sort of security against the vestiges of the dissociation, we may usefully remind ourselves that Wordsworth wrote political pamphlets, that Blake was a friend of Tom Paine and was tried for sedition, that Coleridge wrote political journalism and social philosophy, that Shelley, in addition to this, distributed pamphlets in the streets, that Southey was a constant political commentator, that Byron spoke on the frame-riots and died as a volunteer in a political war; and further, as must surely be obvious from the poetry of all the men named, that these activities were neither marginal nor incidental, but were essentially related to a large part of the experience from which the poetry itself was made.²⁹

Since the revolutionary and world-changing period we now call Romantic, urgent grappings with the question of the aesthetic's relation to the social and the political have made themselves felt in distinct and vibrant poetic movements and groupings: various Modernist movements (Italian and Russian Futurism, Dada, Surrealism, Harlem Renaissance, among others), the Frankfurt School, Négritude, Black Arts, Language poetry, to name the most noteworthy. In the English literary tradition alone, poet-artists and poet-critics such as William Blake, Percy Shelley, Ezra Pound, Allen Ginsberg, Amiri Baraka, Adrienne Rich, and Harryette Mullen, to name but a few, have thoughtfully and incisively interrogated the intersection of the aesthetic and the social.³⁰

But what *is* new in the discussions of the last two decades or so—in the aftermath of the various political movements of the 1960s and 1970s, which inevitably led to furious “culture wars” about the literary canon in the 1980s—has been the firm clicking into place of the terms “identity,” “identitarian,” and, most overtly, “identity politics” as the antithesis of (opposite to and opposing) literary value and critical rigor. So it is that one can group the terms “identitarian,” “identity politics,” “cultural,” “social,” “political,” “anxieties,” “prejudices,” “exotic,” “carelessness,” and “haphazard” together and know exactly what is being invoked (that is, demonized).

In the US academy and society at large, the words “identity,” “identitarian,” and “identity politics” are often automatically conflated. Used

synonymously, all three function as a reductive shorthand to refer to an essentializing and unthinking “identity politics”—almost always regarded, explicitly or not, as the provenance of minorities with grievances. “Identity politics” is a straw-man term. This is what I meant earlier when I called many of the words used by half of the *PMLA* critics “placeholders”: they index something understood by readers as troubling but whose precise contours are amorphous and indistinct—and, I would argue, ultimately incoherent and indefensible. Indeed, if one were to put pressure on Gourgouris’s singling out of the “high horse of identity politics,” one might ask him, “Who exactly are the practitioners of this ‘identity politics’ in the academy? What specifically do they believe? Is ‘identity politics’ really the demon that has overtaken the study of literature and wrecked the disciplines of poetry studies and theory?”

This negative reaction to the term “identity” finds consensus across ideological and aesthetic differences, though for reasons varying in degree of nuance. And here we come to my second snapshot: While Gourgouris teaches in the Classics Department at Columbia and has translated the fairly mainstream poetry of Carolyn Forché into Greek, another scholar, Steve Evans, a major critic of more formally “radical” poetry (and of capitalism), has noted a not-dissimilar reaction among young avant-garde poets toward “identity,” but for more complex and radical reasons than are evident in Gourgouris’s *PMLA* piece. In “Introduction to *Writing from the New Coast*,” an essay originally written in 1993 to introduce a collection of new experimental writing (and later reprinted in a 2002 anthology of essays on avant-garde poetics of the 1990s), Evans takes up Yeats’s declaration that “the only movements on which literature can found itself . . . hate great and lasting things”:

It is my contention that such a hatred as Yeats speaks of does animate the present generation [of post-Language avant-garde writers] although it is a hatred so thoroughgoing, so pervasive, and so unremitting as to make the articulation of it seem gratuitous, even falsifying. It is the hatred of Identity. . . . It is the hatred of those who have learned that, given current conditions, there exists not a single socially recognized “difference” worth the having.³¹

Evans is specifically talking about the conditions under capitalism in which everyone and everything are done violence to and flat-

tened—what he describes as “capital’s need to manufacture and mark ‘difference’ (commodification) while preserving and intensifying domination (its own systemic identity)” (14):

As social space is forced to yield more and more of its autonomy to “the market”—where the mundane logic of the commodity dictates that nothing appear except under the aspect of identity—even progressive demands for the recognition of ethnic, linguistic, and sexual difference are converted into identity claims and sold back to the communities in which they originated at a markup. (14–15)

This sentence is a forceful rejoinder to critics, like Gourgouris, who indict those—one assumes members of various minorities—who supposedly make “identity” claims. Evans perceptively points out that, under late capitalism with its commodity logic, genuine claims of difference are “sold back” to the communities in which they originated “at a markup”: for example, repackaged either as the illegitimate accusations of “identity politics” or in the form of an “inclusive” “multiculturalism” that exacts its own hidden high price.³²

Yet, while I agree with Evans that no one and nothing escape Capital’s maws, I cannot help feeling a lingering disquiet about the broad sweep of his claim that, under capitalism, “only one meaningful distinction remains—the distinction between identities-in-abeyance (markets awaiting ‘penetration’) and Identity as such (penetrant capital)” (15)—and for these reasons:

First, despite the fact that under capitalism “there exists not a single socially recognized ‘difference’ worth the having,” the reality is (and I do not think Evans would disagree) that there are those who must unequally bear the burden of the material and psychic marks of these differences’ continuing to be enforced and perpetrated, even if these differences are illusory.

Second, even within the airless and closed system of capitalism, there do exist varying ethical and political responses, specific ways to acknowledge and respond to the ongoing reality and effects of “socially recognized differences,” even if they are produced under

capitalism's corrupt aegis and are ultimately illusory—both the differences and the responses.

Third, such broad economically based analyses such as Evans's have the unfortunate outcome of producing their own flattening of differences and identities, even as Evans explains that "this generation's hatred of Identity"

does not mean that all traces of the abstract idiom of "otherness" and "difference" developed in the poststructuralist and multiculturalist discourses have been, at a single stroke, erased from this emergent discourse [avant-garde poetics of the 1990s]. (15)

While Evans surely understands that those who find themselves on the wrong side of otherness and difference know that there is more at work and at stake than abstract idioms, he somehow fails to acknowledge the privilege that allows him—someone who is not an ethnic, linguistic, and/or sexual minority—to make such sweeping pronouncements with ease.

In this regard, Evans is not atypical of many smart and hip white male theorists and practitioners of avant-garde poetry who make cogent critiques about institutionalized forms of knowledge, power, and class (and poetry's relation to them) but do not seem to take into account their own (racial) privilege. Kenneth Goldsmith, the most famous of the Conceptual poets and a Perloff favorite, writing two decades later in *Uncreative Writing*,³³ evinces an even more myopic cluelessness about the privileges of his own subject position, as he lobbies for "uncreative writing":

Uncreative writing is a postidentity literature. (85)

If my identity is really up for grabs and changeable by the minute—as I believe it is—it's important that my writing reflect this state of ever-shifting identity and subjectivity. (84)

Goldsmith's token acknowledgment that "[t]he rise of identity politics of the past have [*sic*] given voice to many that have been denied. And there is still so much work to be done: many voices are still marginalized and ignored"³⁴ does not negate the raced, gendered, and

classed tone-deafness and thoughtlessness of his somewhat glib claim that identity is “up for grabs and changeable by the minute.”

As with Goldsmith’s espousal of “postidentity literature,” so with Evans’s “hatred of Identity,” there is the danger that, despite Evans’s clarification about “multiculturalist discourses,” such a broad use of the term “Identity” inevitably conjures for readers the specter of race and, especially for less discerning ones, an essentializing and unthinking racial “identity politics”—not the least because, as I have said, in the US context, “identity” and “identity politics” are often automatically conflated and associated with the aggrieved and “unearned” demands of racial minorities.

The reality is that we currently live in a system in which socially recognized differences operate. If they exist at all, conversations on race in this country suffer from, variously, inhibition, defensiveness, a paucity of signifiers, a narrow range of possible preordained positions, caricatures of thought on all sides—in short, a spectacular failure of memory and imagination. Thus, in invoking “Identity,” even with his multiculturalist caveat, Evans puts into play in the mind of readers the bugaboos of “identity politics” and racial essentialism and all the knee-jerk, unexamined responses, assumptions, expectations, categories, and beliefs about race that swirl around the terms “identity” and “identity politics.” Even used neutrally or “benignly”—as in discourses of “multiculturalism” and “diversity”—these terms are viewed as code words, and woe to the minority critic who foolishly invokes the term “identity”—or worse, “race.” In polite company, some things are better left unsaid.

At the same time, we academics, whatever our political affiliations, understand that one black critic should be included at the party—in this case, a soiree of *PMLA* respondents. Brent Edwards, whether he wants to or not, serves a preordained role in the system: as the exceptional exception, hailing from an Ivy League institution, of course, but also the representative, in both senses of the term, of the social in the realm of the literary, the one who is given the unspoken (and unenviable) distinction of speaking for and about minority critics and poets.

Charles Bernstein is correct in seeing links between multiculturalism's so-called inclusiveness and a barely concealed (neo)liberal politics:

I see too great a continuum from “diversity” back to New Critical and liberal-democratic concepts of a common readership that often—certainly not always—have the effect of transforming unresolved ideological divisions and antagonisms into packaged tours of the local color of gender, race, sexuality, ethnicity, region, nation, class, even historical period: where each group or community or period is expected to come up with—or have appointed for them—representative figures we can all know about.³⁵

That Edwards chooses to discuss a Francophone black Caribbean rather than an African American poet makes, as I mentioned earlier, perfect sense—and one does not need to ascribe a personal motive to Edwards to see that. As the token black critic in the *PMLA* forum, why should he also have to take on the burden of having to convince other critics that a particular American black poet is really as “literary” and “rigorous” and worthy of study as, say, Robert Frost (or Susan Howe)? This is the Catch-22 situation in which minority literary scholars all too often find themselves trapped.

While “hard-core” or “real” literary and poetry critics talk about questions of etymology, prosody, and form, minority poets and poetry are too often left out of the conversation about the literary (or simply left out). How is it possible that among nine poetry critics, speaking about poets across centuries and “The New Lyric Studies,” not a single poet of color writing in English is cited? How is this possible when and especially when—if we are to take such claims as Perloff's seriously—hordes of minority and postcolonial writers are taking over our literature courses? This occlusion is, as we have seen, as true of critics emphasizing literary issues, whether traditional or avant-garde, as those interested in history (and historicizing) and ideology.

My third snapshot of the current reception of minority poetry is a more experimental counterpart, if you will, to “The New Lyric Studies”: The “Rethinking Poetics” conference, held in June 2010 at Columbia University, was a three-day gathering, convened by the

Penn-Columbia Poetics Initiative and organized by Bob Perelman, one of Language poetry's major figures and a University of Pennsylvania professor, and Michael Golston, who teaches avant-garde poetry and poetics at Columbia University and wrote his dissertation under Perloff. Like the *PMLA* forum and as its title indicates, "Rethinking Poetics" was conceived of as a "rethinking" of poetry and poetics, though more specifically by way of contemporary avant-garde writing (a.k.a. non-official-verse-culture poetry) rather than through a specific category of poetry such as lyric.³⁶ Prominent figures from Language and post-Language poetics participated or were in attendance: Susan Howe, Charles Bernstein, Bruce Andrews, Joan Retallack, Craig Dworkin, Juliana Spahr, Lisa Robertson, among others. "Rethinking Poetics" did include minority American poets and critics, though predominantly African American ones: of forty-one speakers—poets and/or academics—four were African American (including Brent Edwards), one Native American, and two Latino/a.³⁷ There was not a single self-identified Asian American included, despite the fact that New York City is the home to several prominent and established avant-garde Asian American poets, most notably John Yau and Meimei Berssenbrugge.

The minority invitees were tastefully dispersed across such panels as "Ecologies of Poetry" (the Native American poet was slotted here), "Globalism and Hybridity," and "Social Location/Ethics," though not in the crucial "Poetics as a Category" panel, which, not surprisingly, was all-white. Again, as in *PMLA*, the minority poets and critics served a certain preordained function: as representative tokens of the gathering's inclusiveness and open-mindedness, but their presence did not give rise to either a serious grappling of issues of race in American poetics and poetry—eco-poetics, by contrast, got its own panel—or an acknowledgment that minority poets and critics have something to say about avant-garde poetics "as a category."

In other words, neither "The New Lyric Studies" nor the "Rethinking Poetics" conference actually did a rethinking of the fundamental category of American poetry, including the intrinsic role of race in that category's formation³⁸ (that is, the inseparability of minority poetry and American poetry). This oversight is especially indefensible

in the US context, given how crucial—indeed, fundamental—the question of race has been to the formation of the US nation-state and to the very notion of what is “American”: our history, ideologies, myths, psyches, and, of course, our art forms, especially our literature.³⁹ The primacy of race in the US imaginary and reality is not simply a question of sociological “content” but has been, and continues to be, determinant of the forms of our textual productions—including our sacred foundational documents, the Declaration of Independence and the US Constitution.⁴⁰

Poems are never divorced from contexts and from history, even as they are, among other things, modes of thinking philosophically through an engagement with formal constraints.⁴¹ Likewise, what constitutes the social, the cultural, and the political must be analyzed for their linguistic and structural forms. Poetry works by conscious and unconscious means and arises from the complex interplay between the poetic imagination and the larger world. To be an American poet or poetry critic and *not* think about this larger world and its history seems like an incredible act of repression. “[W]hatever is said / in the world, or forgotten, / or not said, makes a form,” reminds Robert Creeley.⁴²

Race and American Poetry

That well into the second decade of the twenty-first century, we as literary critics are still perpetuating the either-or binary of the social versus the literary in the pages of our most prominent professional organization’s journal says as much about the state of American poetry studies as it does about the larger US inability to face its history and the consequences of that history, especially in relation to issues of race. Race seems to me the most salient, contested, and painfully charged social difference in the American context,⁴³ and one that imbues—and must be disguised by—the more generic terms “cultural” and “political” when they are raised in opposition to the “literary.” That said, I understand clearly that issues of race are inseparably intertwined with issues of class, and that class, too, produces painful differences. But in the minds of those who decry “identity” and “identity politics,” it is race, not class, that drives the engine

of “identity” and “identity politics,” though this belief will not likely be explicitly articulated for fear of seeming to appear “racist.”

To discuss American poetry and not discuss a single American minority poet—or include only the token one or two—speaks volumes about both a delusive blindness and a double standard in poetry studies. Because minority subjects and cultures are viewed in the American imaginary as occupying the realm of the bodily, the material, the social, they are often overlooked when considering questions of the literary and the cultural (in the sense of cultural value and high culture).⁴⁴ Form, whether that of traditional lyric or avant-garde poems, is assumed to be the provenance of a literary acumen and culture that is unmarked but assumed to be white.⁴⁵

And if minority writers are acknowledged as producing literature at all, it is a literature that functions mimetically and sociologically as an ethnographic window into another “subculture”—or, in Founder Thomas Jefferson’s words, a poetry of the “senses only, not the imagination.”⁴⁶ Elaine Showalter, a major critic of women’s writing who taught for two decades at Princeton University, expresses a not atypical view of minority literature’s character:

During the 1960s and 1970s, teaching literature became an explicitly political act for radical and minority groups in the university. English departments were the places where feminist and African-American critics first began to initiate courses and put pressure on the curriculum to include black and women writers. Their efforts heralded a paradigm shift in canon formation and literary studies generally, and a repudiation of formalism in favor of a more engaged and partisan reading that saw the goal of literary study as the formation of personal identity and political struggle. . . .

But the theory revolution of the 1970s quickly shifted attention away from the mimetic use of literature.⁴⁷

Note Showalter’s smooth elision of “radical” and “minority.” And while her facts are not quite accurate about English departments’ being the first sites of struggle—they were arguably the sites of the most bitter struggles, given how resistant English departments in general were (and in too many instances, still are) to the inclusion of

minority writers into the curricula⁴⁸—she expresses the not uncommon view among English professors that minority literature “repudiates formalism,” is “partisan” (in contrast to racially “unmarked” canonical literature, which presumably is unpartisan) and mimetic, and emphasizes the “formation of personal identity” as a “goal” of literary studies.⁴⁹

In assuming the interchangeability of “minority” and “mimetic” forms, Showalter may not know her American literary history very well. Modernist writers such as Jean Toomer and Langston Hughes and the Filipino poet Jose Garcia Villa were experimenting with form well before the 1960s and 1970s. The mixed-race poet Sadakichi Hartmann, whose mother was Japanese, was writing Symbolist poetry at the end of the nineteenth century (he also served as a secretary to Walt Whitman).⁵⁰ Even during the “radical” 1960s and 1970s, Black Arts writers, such as Amiri Baraka, and Asian American writers, such as Mei-mei Berssenbrugge,⁵¹ were acutely interested in pushing the limits of the English language—a project that did not contradict (indeed, helped to further) the struggle to attain the full equality that had been promised all Americans, not just white men of property, since the eighteenth century. (Baraka, as LeRoi Jones, was, of course, centrally involved with downtown avant-garde culture in New York City in the 1950s, and close to poets in various avant-garde and countercultural movements.)

Baraka is a perfect example of a formally innovative and politically engaged poet who almost always gets typecast as a “radical” minority writer and is marginalized by both mainstream and avant-garde poetry groupings. As a key figure in the New York City literary scene in the 1950s and 1960s, Baraka has incorporated all sorts of formal and political concerns in his poetry and in his work in various communities. His writing has had crucial links to American Surrealism, Black Mountain, the New York School, the Beats, Black Arts (which he largely founded), jazz poetry,⁵² jazz criticism, leftist poetry, avant-garde poetry, minority poetry, and minority and avant-garde fiction. He is perhaps the most polyvalent American poet and critic of the twentieth century. Baraka’s work has been endlessly inventive over the decades, never standing still, yet he is for the most part largely

categorized as an “angry,” “radical” black poet stuck in the 1960s and Black Nationalist and Marxist thinking.

The problematic nature of the rhetoric and forms of how minority poetry gets discussed is a function of several factors—of which the endemic American inability to deal head-on with the legacy and reality of racial oppression and disparities is one. First, there remains a lingering tendency within literary studies and in the wider reading public to view prose as the bearer of social analysis, and poetry, especially the lyric, as the genre addressing more personal, private, and “purely” literary concerns. Even as illustrious a critic as Bakhtin, despite some later revising of his ideas, held this bias (as I discuss more fully in Chapter 6).⁵³

Second, since the racialized poet, subject, and person is often apprehended in terms of the bodily,⁵⁴ the material, and the political, her poetry is inevitably, though often not consciously, posited in opposition to the abstract, the intellectual, the literary. Minority writing, including poetry, is inevitably read as mimetic, autobiographical, “representative,” and ethnographic, with the poet as native informant (for example, Chinatown tour guide), providing a glimpse into her supposed ethnic culture. Since poetry remains, even in the twenty-first century, the epitome of high literary culture, minority poetic production is often treated as a dispensable add-on to this long tradition—the recent inclusion of minority poets in poetry anthologies such as the *Norton Anthology of Poetry* functions largely as a concessionary bone (market-driven) in this so-called multicultural age.

Third, since the terms “minority” and “poetry” are conceived of in the academy as intrinsically opposed—content versus form, sociological versus literary, and so on—minority poetry is often seen as belonging more properly to the provenance of cultural studies or ethnic studies. As we can see in the *PMLA* presentation of “The New Lyric Studies,” the place at the table for minority poetry in discussions about, say, meter or poetic form, is barely there, if it exists at all—and this holds true, again, for critics of both mainstream lyric poetry and avant-garde work. When critics read “real poets” such as Jorie Graham or John Ashbery, they almost always examine the “poems

themselves,” paying attention, for example, to their use of tone or parataxis. When they read a literary work, fiction or poetry, by an Asian American writer, they almost inevitably assume that the work functions as a transparent window into the ethnographic “truth” of a hyphenated identity and an exotic “home” culture—in other words, as if there were no such thing as the mediatedness of language.

On the other side of the aesthetic spectrum, critics of avant-garde Asian American poetry (such as that by Tan Lin or Mei-mei Berssenbrugge) tend, in their analysis of the poems, to completely ignore the ethnicity of the poet,⁵⁵ even when the poet makes clear that racialized/ethnic identity is not a trivial concern in the work. Ironically (and self-contradictorily), critics of avant-garde poetry, who privilege a focus on form and who usually excoriate thematic readings of poems, will dismiss the relevance of race in the work of, say, Berssenbrugge, by recourse to the very sorts of thematic rationales they abhor: in this case, by citing the lack of racial themes or markers. But a perceptive reader, especially an experienced reader of formally innovative writing, would know to look closely at what the poem’s form, and not simply its content, tells us.⁵⁶

Asian American Poetry and the American Body Politic

I turn now from the broader category of “minority poetry” to the particular case of Asian American poetry, which, like Latina/o and Native American writing, is seen as marginal to the category “minority literature”—and is thus doubly marginalized within the academy (triply, if one takes genre into account). Most critics use the term “minority” to mean “African American,” as typified by the previous Showalter quote and demonstrated by the demographic representation of the *PMLA* and the “Rethinking Poetics” groupings. If discussed at all, Asian American writing is treated as ancillary in the current academy and viewed as being of interest mainly to Asian American students; unlike African American literature, Asian American literature is almost wholly studied by specialists of Asian American literature, who are almost all of Asian descent. If Asian American literature is

included in American literature courses at all, it is represented by the token inclusion of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* or, perhaps, Jhumpa Lahiri's and Chang-rae Lee's fiction (both having been anointed in the pages of the *New Yorker*). The poetry is almost never taught—except perhaps in specialized Asian American literature courses, but even then not so much.

Indeed, most critics of American literature or poetry can hardly name one Asian American poet, or at most one or two, and view the work as being tertiary to the American literary canon. This is the case even though Asian American poetry has been written for more than a century by an array of authors whose ethnic origins, genres, and styles are widely varied. In terms of its breadth of aesthetic styles and time span, Asian American literature as a category is certainly more variegated and wide ranging than, say, Modernist writing. All too often in English departments Asian American literature seems to be taught not so much as a body of work with literary merit but as texts that Asian American undergraduates can “relate to.”⁵⁷

So why focus on such a “narrow” stratum of American poetic writing? My answer: because of Asian Americans' unique form of racial interpellation—inextricably linked to the view of them as culturally and linguistically unassimilable—Asian American writing offers a particularly illuminating “limit case,” for thinking not only about the relationship between a poet's interpellation (including racialization) in American society and her relationship to the English language but also, more broadly, about the assumptions and preconceptions undergirding our notions of poetry, English-language poetry, American literature, “Americanness,” the English language, and questions of literary value, among others.⁵⁸

To explain what I mean requires a knowledge of history.

Like all groups of minority Americans, Asian Americans have experienced unique forms of racial interpellation within the United States, but unlike other minority groups, “Orientals,” “Asiatics,” and “Asians” in particular came to exemplify a racialized form of *constitutive and immutable* alienness from what it means to be “American.”

A little over thirty years after the arrival of Chinese immigrants to this country in the mid-nineteenth century, this perception of utter

foreignness, nonassimilability, and un-Americanness—which, to a greater or lesser degree, has persisted to this day, albeit in slightly variant guises—had already hardened into pernicious, and legalized, form. The Chinese Exclusion Act, passed in 1882 and not repealed until 1943, was the first and only immigration exclusion law in American history to exclude a specific named group on the basis of race.⁵⁹

In fact, the Chinese were seen as more unassimilable than even ex-chattel slaves. As Supreme Court Justice Harlan wrote in 1896 in his oft-lauded dissent in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, arguing against the logic of the majority opinion upholding “separate but equal,” “There is a race so different from our own that we do not permit those belonging to it to become citizens of the United States. Persons belonging to it are, with few exceptions, absolutely excluded from our country. I allude to the Chinese race.”⁶⁰

Yet, as US history has unfolded, this interpellation of Asians and Asian Americans as perpetually and constitutively foreign, alien, and threatening to the very idea of “Americanness” itself has also become intermixed with or, some may think, supplanted by what is mistakenly viewed as more benign or even “positive” images of as “model minorities”⁶¹ and “honorary whites.” In reality, these hollow honorifics (stereotypes) “reward” Asian Americans precisely for their compliance, docility, submissiveness—and function to generate more (nameless, faceless, and interchangeable) workers in our capitalist economy and ensure their invisibility and voicelessness within the American national and political body.⁶² “Honorary whites” are, of course, not “real” whites and are granted none of the benefits of white privilege; at the same time, Asian Americans also experience the drawbacks of not being perceived as “real” or “true” minorities either.⁶³

For all minority groups in this country, two facts obtain: First, the processes of racialization have entailed the pressure to assimilate, the struggle to prove one’s true “Americanness,” and have been enforced by forms of violence and domination. Second, proving one’s “Americanness” has always been inextricably tied to the imperative to master English⁶⁴ and to erase any foreign tongues and accents.⁶⁵ But, Asian Americans in particular have been singled out in US history as *constitutively* and immutably foreign and “nonnative” to Ameri-

can culture and the body politic⁶⁶—threatening to the very idea of “Americanness”⁶⁷—a pernicious and unwavering ideological characterization that has been inseparable from the belief that “Orientals” are also *constitutively* nonnative speakers of English and thus can never overcome, no matter how hard they try, this deficit to the English language because it is foundational.⁶⁸ Even Asian Americans who are fourth-generation American, with a perfect command of English, are often asked if English is their native tongue.⁶⁹

One might ask, “What is the link between the perception that Asian Americans are not ‘real’ Americans and are nonnative speakers of English, and the belief, largely unconscious, that Asian American poets are not ‘real’ poets?” It is clear that this perception of Asian Americans as utterly alien to Americanness and to the English language—a view that persists even in this “post-racial” era—cannot *not* be a factor in the reception of Asian American poets.

Given these assumptions and stereotypes, an Asian American poet, whether knowingly or not, often faces a particularly vexed and compensatory relation to the English that is always already not hers, and to an English literary tradition in which poetry continues to be seen as the genre most tied to high culture, literary tradition, formal mastery, and “native tongue”—a literary tradition from which minority writers were largely excluded for centuries and into which they were granted entry only recently, after the furious canon wars of the 1980s, and only begrudgingly—in limited and policed fashion—allowed to occupy circumscribed academic and aesthetic Bantustans because of the generosity of enlightened liberals. While many writers feel an “anxiety of influence” in relation to a dominant literary tradition, for Asian American writers, the usual questions of literary culture, tradition, and reception confronting an individual writer take on an added, if not more intense (and intensely painful), urgency and burden for all the reasons detailed.

How then does an Asian American poet situate herself in an Anglo-American poetic tradition when she is marked as constitutively alien and unassimilable and excluded from the category of “native speaker” of English? How does an Asian American poet labor under

and contend with the foregone conclusion that her English will never be “good enough”?

It is my contention that the answers surface as much in the formal structures as in the thematic content of Asian American poetry.

Many of the poets in this study focus obsessively on the question of language and writing, even as their poems deal with a wide range of concerns. Of course, to some extent all poets are hyperaware of the act of writing itself, but for Asian American poets, this relation to the writing—and wished-for mastery—of English takes on a heightened sense of self-consciousness because of their constitutive exclusion from the category of native speaker. When Li-Young Lee says, “Everything is language,”⁷⁰ he may be speaking primarily as a poet, but one has the strong sense that his poems’ obsessive concern with getting names and naming right is more than just a function of his simply being interested in words.

Since Asian American poetry occupies a unique place in the American national body and literary imaginary—as a body of American writing that inextricably ties the racial group seen as having the most alien/alienated relationship to the English language and the most exalted and elite English literary genre⁷¹—it can be argued that Asian American poetry is not only not marginal to thinking about American poetry and poetics but is *especially* resonant for thinking about such literary and literary historical concerns.

There is also a strong case to be made for studying a sizable but largely neglected body of American writing: Asian American poetry. While Asian American fiction has had some visibility with the reading public, primarily through the popularity of two works—Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* and Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*—few Americans, including literary scholars of American literature, are familiar with Asian American poetry.

While I am highly aware of the many contradictions of and tensions within the category “Asian American,” I also understand the practical realities and strategic necessity of such a term. Just as in the 1960s and 1970s, various Americans who (or whose ancestors) emigrated from China, Japan, the Philippines, Korea, Vietnam, and other Asian countries shared an experience of racism and discrimination

in American society—of being seen as “gooks”⁷² and “all looking alike”—and, thus, found political power in coming together as “Asian American,” so in the twenty-first century, the presence of the categories “Asian American studies” and “Asian American literature” in the academy enables Asian American literature to be taught at all. Indeed, one could make a strong case that without these institutional slots, even *The Woman Warrior* would rarely be taught, whether in classes on American literature or contemporary fiction. The same was the case with the categories “women’s studies” and “African American studies”: the institutional existence of these disciplines was necessary so as to get writing by women and blacks into the door and onto curricula. These writings did not just magically appear in universities—their presence was the result of hard-fought battles and struggles taking place over many years, and still being fought today, with professional and personal costs to minority professors and students.⁷³ In other words, in order to interrogate the category “Asian American,” one needs the category to begin with.

Asian American literature occupies the paradoxical position of being both emergent—many English departments across the country are just now filling their first positions in Asian American literature long after they have hired specialists in African American literature and women’s literature—and disappearing at the same time: not a few English departments at prestigious institutions across the country are now turning toward “transnational” or “global” or “diasporic” conceptualizations and contextualizations of Asian American writing, moving away from having to deal with issues of US racial politics—and racism.

When confronted with how little college and graduate students and faculty colleagues know about either Asian American history or literature, I often have to remind them that in the last century the United States fought four wars with Asian countries (the Philippines, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam,⁷⁴ with many millions killed), that an Asian country was the only one in history to have had a nuclear bomb (two, in fact) dropped on it, that the only group of potential immigrants to the United States to have been specifically identified and systematically excluded on the basis of race was Chinese (government

enforcement of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 necessitated the creation of the precursor—and foundation—of our current US Citizenship and Immigration Services, an agency within the Department of Homeland Security),⁷⁵ and that the only group of American citizens ever interned in concentration camps on the basis of their ethnicity was Japanese Americans. One is almost surprised at how consistent and continuous the yellow-peril rhetoric has been over the past century and a half, from Chinese exclusion to, now in the twenty-first century, the “rise of China.”

I am not saying that there is an easy one-to-one correlation between how Asians and Asian Americans have been apprehended in American history, society, and in the public imaginary and how their writers have been received in the literary realms, but I am confident that the common (mis)perception that Asian Americans are perpetual foreigners bearing a constitutively nonnative relationship to the English language cannot have *not* influenced the ways in which Asian American writing has been read—or rather, misread.

For example, in 1982, when Cathy Song became the first Asian American poet to win the Yale Younger Poets Prize for her first book, *Picture Bride*, the selecting judge, poet Richard Hugo, described the Honolulu-born, Wellesley-educated poet as one who “accommodates experiential extremes with a sensibility strengthened by patience that is centuries old, ancestral, tribal, a gift passed down.”⁷⁶ One wonders if Hugo would have invoked the “ancestral, tribal” and “centuries-old” patience and sensibility of a white American Yale Younger winner or focused on the poet’s “accommodating” nature and the “experiential.”

One would think that things are different now, in the wake of multiculturalism and the changes wrought by the canon wars. Yet almost thirty years later, when Ken Chen won the same prize in 2009, reviewers’ responses to his work split into two distinct and opposed categories. As Chen puts it in an e-mail, “My book confuses them [reviewers] bc [because] they either think it’s all Asian all the time and ignore the rest or they only focus on the avant-garde formal stuff and ignore the content.”⁷⁷ As an example of the former, the reviewer on the Poetry Foundation’s Harriet blog reads Chen’s volume *Juvenilia* almost wholly thematically:

The speaker's upbringing is marked by his parent's [*sic*] disaffected marriage ("faces that would not kiss in life") and eventual separation. The inability to communicate, an affliction that spans across generations for this Chinese American family, manifests itself as a mysterious illness on [*sic*] the young speaker who sees his relatives succumb to the ills of unhappiness bottled up within.⁷⁸

This sort of reception is not atypical. Reviewers and scholars, when writing about Asian American poetry, almost never pay attention to linguistic, literary, and rhetorical form (perhaps because of their ingrained perception of Asian Americans' generations-old "inability to communicate"?)—an oversight that is all the more puzzling when the object of attention is a poem, whose very being depends on figures of speech, meter, rhythm, and other formal properties. This seems to be the tendency, though less pronounced, even when the critic works within the field of minority literature or is a minority person himself (as is the case here).

Anyone who has written even a few lines of poetry knows how crucial a decision it is that someone chooses to write a poem—and not, say, a journalistic essay or political manifesto—and how essential are the myriad formal decisions made at every turn in a poem: where to break the line, what rhythmic or metrical pattern (or none) will govern, what will constitute the unit of the stanza, how the poem will look on the page, and so on. It is not only a matter of conscious authorial choice but no less of the submerged or unconscious structures of language that make themselves felt in the particular language of individual poems.

Certainly in the United States, where race has been absolutely fundamental to the formation of national identity and national history and to the texture of everyday life, one's racial identity—or presumed universality in being racially "unmarked"—must play a role, consciously or unconsciously, in the formation of the American poet, black or yellow or white. Racial interpellation is absolutely inescapable in the formation of American subjectivity, not just the subjectivity of "visible minorities."

Thus, the occlusion or ignoring of race by critics and poets at the avant-garde end of the critical spectrum is equally as disturbing as the fetishization of racial and ethnic content and identity

by more mainstream poetry critics. Critics of avant-garde writing, despite their openness to radical new poetic forms, often fall into the same traps as more formally conservative critics when thinking (or, more accurately, not thinking) the link between poetry and the subjectivity—which includes the racialized subjectivity—of the poet. They overwhelmingly tend to ignore race by focusing exclusively on formal properties or other themes in the writing (for example, emotion or science in Berssenbrugge’s poetry); to explicitly oppose political and social “content” (including racial identity) against formal literary concerns; or to distinguish between “bad” ethnic poetry (autobiographical, identity-based) and “good” poetry (formally experimental) that just happens to be written by a person of color.⁷⁹

An example of the third route appears in the review of Chen’s *Juvenilia* in *Publishers Weekly*. While not writing for an avant-garde publication, the anonymous reviewer nonetheless privileges certain kinds of formal experiment and expresses a firm view of what constitutes bad ethnic writing:

The latest Yale Younger Poet writes about his Chinese-American heritage; he draws on classic Chinese poets, such as Wang Wei and Li Yu. Yet his verse and prose stand at the farthest possible remove from the memoirlike poems, and the poems of first-person “identity,” that have characterized so much recent verse about U.S. immigrant life. Instead, Chen is “experimental” in the best and broadest sense of the term: each new page brings an experiment in self-presentation, in sentence, syntax, or (long) line.⁸⁰

Here, good minority poetry is set against bad minority poetry, which focuses on “identity” (that hated concept, again), and to be experimental in the “best and broadest sense of the term” is, implicitly, not to discuss race or ethnic identity.

One could make the case that the categories “experimental,” “innovative,” and “avant-garde” are often implicitly coded as “white”—as Harryette Mullen and a few other experimental minority poets and scholars have argued—and that not only do the few minority writers included in experimental anthologies and conferences tend to function as tokens (Mullen describes the situation as “aesthetic

apartheid”)⁸¹ but also, as we see in the case of Baraka’s poetry, certain modes of experimentality, such as jazz poetics, are excluded from definitions of the avant-garde and “experimental.” The criteria of what counts as avant-garde, even in the twenty-first century, is judged according to High Modernism’s purely formalist repertoire: disruption of syntax, fragmentation of the line, and so on.⁸²

We should interrogate this monolithic view of what constitutes the avant-garde and what criteria of linguistic experimentation passes the test. In “Language and the Avant-Garde,” a chapter of his book *The Politics of Modernism*, Raymond Williams writes,

Thus what we have really to investigate is not some single position of language in the avant-garde or language in Modernism. On the contrary, we need to identify a range of distinct and in many cases actually opposed formations, as these have materialized in language. This requires us, obviously, to move beyond such conventional definitions as “avant-garde practice” or “the Modernist text.”⁸³

We can see that, just as much as the term “identity politics,” the term “avant-garde” comes with its own set of (racialized) assumptions and implications.

Experimental minority poets are often included in the avant-garde fold either because their work and stylistic choices are universalized as part of an avant-garde movement (“she’s just like us, but, oh, isn’t it great that she also happens to be black?”) or because they are seen as “exceptions” to the general tendency of minority poets to write badly and to focus mistakenly on identity politics (or is it that they write badly *because* they focus on issues of race and identity?). As I have demonstrated, racial identity often becomes conflated with the straw-man term “identity politics.”

In the last section of *Thinking Its Presence: Form, Race, and Subjectivity in Contemporary Asian American Poetry*, I examine the work of Mei-mei Berssenbrugge and Pamela Lu, whose poetry manifests virtually no ethnic themes or markers at all. By looking at this avant-garde writing, I put to a more strenuous test my argument that it is in the formal and rhetorical manifestations, particularly the linguistic structures, of the poems that one sees evidence of the impress of social

and historical influences. For instance, Berssenbrugge's having been born in Beijing to a Dutch American father and a Chinese mother, with Chinese as her first language, but then raised in New England, have made her acutely aware of the contingency and relationality of not only human identity but also language and natural phenomena. This awareness deeply informs her poetic lines, which are rife with a syntax of contingency and conditionality (frequently marked by use of the subjunctive mood and/or the conditional mode). One example: "She wonders what the body would reveal, if the cloud were transparent" (from "Honeymoon," published in *Empathy*).⁸⁴

In making a claim for the link between a minority avant-garde poet's work and her racialized ethnic subjectivity, I make a critical intervention in current discussions about avant-garde writing. Whether critics focus solely on ethnic content in more mainstream Asian American poetry or whether critics ignore issues of race in avant-garde Asian American poetry and privilege the "purely" literary or formal (against the ethnic), the full complexity of Asian American poetry—and minority American poetry—has not been acknowledged. These critical approaches profoundly impoverish our understanding of the complex multidimensionality and contradictions of American and English-language poetry.

Thinking Its Presence

In *Thinking Its Presence: Form, Race, and Subjectivity in Contemporary Asian American Poetry*, I argue against such reductive modes of reading Asian American poetry. The book builds its case by focusing with great particularity on the writings of five contemporary Asian American poets who range in age from their early forties to late sixties⁸⁵—Li-Young Lee, Marilyn Chin, John Yau, Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, and Pamela Lu—and whose poems represent a spectrum of literary styles, from expressive lyric to less transparently representational and more formally experimental. For each poet's body of work, I consider, through detailed readings, a formal crux or mode (metaphor, irony, parody, a syntax of contingency, the subjunctive mood) whose deploy-

ment is central to his or her poetic project and whose structure articulates and enacts in language the poet's working out of a larger political (in the broadest sense of that term) and/or poetic concern or question.

These specific formal aspects of the poems simultaneously reflect and manifest aesthetic influences⁸⁶—compositional decisions, structures of language (conscious and unconscious), the shadow of literary precursors, and so on—but also, importantly, the influence of socio-political forces and historical context, such as geographical location, current events, and his or her socialization in the world as a person of a particular, race, gender, sex, class, and educational level.⁸⁷ This is as true for “mainstream” lyric poets as it is for “avant-garde” poets. And it is as true for white poets as for minority ones.

Even supposedly as “hermetic” and “enigmatic” a poet as Paul Celan—who certainly knew firsthand what it meant to be a minority (and racialized) poet in a hegemonic European language—understood that “the poem does not stand outside time. True, it claims the infinite and tries to reach across time—but across, not above.” This from a speech he gave in 1958, thirteen years after the end of the Nazi death camps.⁸⁸

By doing intensive and serious readings of these particular Asian American poets' use of language and linguistic forms—what Susan Wolfson calls “theory in action”⁸⁹—I aim to show how erroneous we have been to view Asian American poetry through a simplistic, reductive, and essentializing lens: as a homogeneous lump of “nonliterary” writing by “Asians.” As with white poets' work, each Asian American poet's practice is different from another's, and how language is deployed in his or her work is particular to that writer.

Thinking Its Presence: Form, Race, and Subjectivity in Contemporary Asian American Poetry joins in its analytical framework methods and areas of study usually considered disparate, if not mutually exclusive: formal analysis, literary history, reader reception, race studies, avant-garde writing. By juxtaposing form, sociohistorical context, and poetic subjectivity, it questions customary methodological, literary-historical, and disciplinary practices and assumptions—such as the supposed dichotomy between cultural-studies approaches and formal literary analysis. Must a poetry or cultural critic be forced to

choose between an interest in form (with its implied anti-cultural-studies stance) and the desire to understand the historical conditions, social and aesthetic, of the production of a poem? In the twenty-first century, is it not time to rethink these ingrained poetic and literary-critical categories and assumptions?

The phrase “thinking its presence” in my book’s title comes from Mei-mei Berssenbrugge’s poem “Chinese Space” (from her 1989 volume, *Empathy*) and evokes both the ineffability of certain phenomena and their very real materiality and presence. Being able to cognitively grasp (“think”) these phenomena—in this case, politics, history, race, and their effects on subjectivity and language—does not in any way reify or essentialize or make reductive the not always definite (note the indefinite pronoun “its”⁹⁰), often mysterious, but very real relation between and among the social (racial), subjective, and poetic. As Boris Eichenbaum writes in “Literary Environment,” “The relations between the facts of the literary order and facts extrinsic to it cannot simply be causal relations but can only be the relations of correspondence, interaction, dependency, or conditionality” (61).

Paying close attention to what poems tell us—not so much in their stated content but in their formal manifestations—is itself a praxis-based methodology of theorizing. As poems in their linguistic specificity are powerful means of philosophically thinking about the world through language, so my close readings are, in their detailed unfolding, a theoretical engagement with the poem and the social world.⁹¹ For example, in the poetry of Li-Young Lee, the structure of metaphor, with its almost-but-not-quite equivalences, isomorphically captures both the poet’s Romantic struggles to have an unmediated connection to his authoritarian, Chinese, Presbyterian-minister father; to God; to his Chinese ancestry and language; and to the felt pressure to assimilate to American culture in rural Pennsylvania and to the English language.

Let me make clear that I am not positing a simplistic causal or reductive link between the world—in this case, being “Asian American”—and the poem (Eichenbaum again: “The relations between the facts of the literary order and facts extrinsic to it cannot simply be causal relations” [61]). Nor am I arguing that Li-Young Lee is deploy-

ing an “Asian American” (or even Chinese American) way of using metaphor, that there is an “Asian American” way of writing poetry, that there is a reifiable Asian American “essence” that can be found in various formal elements and structures, or that there is one “Asian American” or “Chinese American” essence or link joining the work of Asian American poets (or even the half dozen Chinese American poets in my study). In other words, as a category, “Asian American literature” encompasses texts that are as heterogeneous and varied as those in other conventional literary categories, such as “women’s literature” or “African American literature” or “American literature” or “Victorian literature.”⁹²

Thus, the use of participial phrases in the poetry of Mei-mei Bersenbrugge works differently and springs from different sources than the use of such phrases in the work of Myung Mi Kim (or Robert Lowell). The lived experiences of all three poets as poets of particular social and historical formations are as much a part of their poetic subjectivities as are their readings in the poetic tradition, and these influences emerge in the form of language in the poem. Each poet’s life history is particular to her—as is her poetic practice—but that is not to say that certain shared general experiences do not obtain (for example, the Great Depression) and make an impact on one’s subjectivity and work, even though that impact will be expressed in ways specific to each poet. For the racialized poet, a significant part of her lived and psychic experience is the fact of having moved in the world and been apprehended as a racialized subject. Given the importance of race and racialization in the formation and history of these United States, one could argue that for *American* poets, white or minority, to ignore such fundamental sociopolitical issues consistently and broadly over time constitutes serious acts of omission.

While the precise nature of the link between the world and a poetic text can never be fully explicated, what is clear is that the path to understanding that relation can come only through close readings of particular poems themselves—and an understanding of the poet’s and text’s place, both temporal and spatial, in historical context. Whether reading the poems of Li-Young Lee or Gerald Stern, Mei-mei Bersenbrugge or Leslie Scalapino, one must pay careful atten-

tion to the nuances and specificities of the poet's particular use of language and the sociopolitical environment, whose particular residues (some different, some shared) have suffused each poet's subjectivity and influenced the production and reception of poems.

I cannot emphasize this point enough. For in bringing race into the critical conversation about avant-garde writing—in particular, by positing a link between racial subjectivity and the forms of poetry—one runs the risk of being accused of conjuring up a link that is not there (or artificially “imposing” the issue of race onto “racially unmarked” writing, usually by smuggling in some reductive essentialist version of racial identity).

A typical objection might run: “If John Yau and T. S. Eliot in their poetry both question a stable and transparent subjectivity, then why is what Yau is doing specifically ‘Asian American’ or ‘Chinese American’”? The fallacious assumption here is that because Yau and Eliot both seem to be making similar poetic (and metaphysical) moves, these moves are formally and substantively identical. But Eliot and Yau are *not* actually doing the same thing in their poetries. Given how radically different their persons, subjectivities, histories, contexts, and so on are, there is no way that their projects of destabilizing subjectivity are the same. Nor can the resulting poems be the same.

Poetic subjectivities and poetic practices are not interchangeable. It would be just as wrong to claim that Eliot's and Yau's are interchangeable as it would be to claim that Yau's and Tan Lin's are interchangeable. Sadly, though, our idea of ethnic Americans is often to (unconsciously) render them as abstract, one-dimensional, homogeneous, and interchangeable.

While it may initially appear that Yau and Eliot are doing the same thing with the subject, their reasons for doing so stem from different contexts and are specific to, and part of, their own histories, subjectivities, and poetic projects.⁹³ Thus, it would be misguided to claim that Yau's emphasis on destabilized identities itself is specifically “ethnic” or “Chinese American” or is necessarily limited to Chinese American subjects.

The variegated and complex particularities of Yau's experiences as a racialized person cannot be reified into some practice or thing

called “Chinese American.” There is no one stable Asian American or Chinese American identity or subjectivity or point of view or poetic practice. The subjectivity of an ethnic American is not a thing or a content. Of course other poets who are not Chinese American—such as T. S. Eliot—destabilize the subject, too. Eliot’s reasons, conscious or unconscious, for his poetic choices will be different from Yau’s.

To underscore how the element of race skews these discussions about poetry; how it elicits reductive, contradictory, conflationary thinking; how it throws the burden of proof over and over again back onto the critic who raises the issue of race, one need only do two thought experiments.

The first would be to continue with the comparison of Yau’s and Eliot’s poetry, but to switch the burden of proof from Yau’s minority poetry to Eliot’s canonical poetry and to change the extratextual feature from race to some nonracialized experience or feature—for example, Eliot’s experiences in Europe in World War I. How likely would a critic of Modernist poetry be given a hard time for claiming that these experiences influenced the fractured subjectivities and the broken lines in *The Wasteland*? How likely would this appeal to the extratextual be shot down for being extratextual? How likely would this critic be rebutted with the argument that, because no unproblematic correlation between Eliot’s extratextual experiences and his poetry can be proven, then the fractured lines and subjectivities in *The Wasteland* were not influenced at all by Eliot’s wartime experiences in Europe?

And, to push the point further, how likely would it be that someone would then say to that critic, “Well, John Yau also fractures subjectivity and breaks lines in his ‘Genghis Chan’ poems, and because Yau does the same thing as Eliot, but Yau never lived in Europe during the war, then Eliot’s having lived in Europe was not a necessary influence on *The Wasteland*. And not only was it not necessary but it was not an influence at all”?

The second thought experiment: remove race from the equation completely and compare not a white and a minority poet but two white poets—say, Eliot and Stein—using the same scenario of a critic’s claiming that Eliot’s experiences in wartime Europe had

influenced the form of *The Wasteland*. How likely would this critic of Modernist poetry be rebutted by the counterargument that since Stein also fractured poetic subjectivities and lines, but did not have the same experiences as Eliot in Europe, then Eliot's particular wartime experiences were not a "necessary" influence on the lines in *The Wasteland*—again, not only were not necessary but were not a factor at all?

The arguments in *Thinking Its Presence: Form, Race, and Subjectivity in Contemporary Asian American Poetry* about the interplay between racial subjectivity and poetic writing depend crucially upon paying close attention to the language and structures of the individual poems of particular poets, including—or especially—minority poets. This praxis-based critical argumentation, in which the poems themselves suggest theoretical orientations, resists abstract generalizations that can easily oversimplify (and render reductive and one-dimensional) arguments about racial subjectivity and minority poetry. Let us pay nuanced attention to what the language and forms of poems—all poems in the American body—tell us.

Chapter Summaries

Thinking Its Presence: Form, Race, and Subjectivity in Contemporary Asian American Poetry builds its arguments by moving between focused attention on the linguistic, literary, and rhetorical workings of specific Asian American poems and a larger meditation on how we think about form in American poetry and poetics.

In Chapter 2, I examine the work of arguably the most well-known Asian American poet writing today, Li-Young Lee. This chapter considers what makes Lee's poetry so desirable to mainstream non-Asian American audiences by examining the rhetorical trope of metaphor, whose nature instantiates the Romantic sensibility that permeates his four books of poetry. The structure of metaphor, which is often called the trope of desire, isomorphically expresses the structure of the poet-narrators' yearnings to merge with, variously, an "authentic" cultural past (represented by his for-

midable Chinese Presbyterian-minister father), the Absolute Text, a pure language, the beloved, an Old Testament God—and the simultaneous recognition that this fulfillment is impossible.

In Lee's poem "The Cleaving," the central metaphor of cleaving captures the structural logic of metaphor and assimilation's imperatives, marked by a gap—spatial, temporal, linguistic—that signifies both a permanent separation and an asymptotic coming together. At the same time, unlike the use of metaphor in his first book, Lee's more nuanced and overarching metaphoric practice in "The Cleaving," one that does not inhere in discrete countable metaphors, deconstructs a simplistic binary model of metaphor by demonstrating how metaphor can hold both likeness and difference in tension without making its two terms identical, as the logic of assimilation demands. This more open and less regulative model of metaphor offers the possibility of rethinking binary ways of thinking about both metaphor and the interpellation of Americans in the political and literary critical spheres.

That said, the chapter leaves open two questions: first, whether both the tendency of metaphors to reify abstract ideas and feelings into concrete images and the Romantic transcendental tendencies of Lee's poetry encourage readers to reify Lee's metaphors and his poetry itself, as "poetic" nuggets of ethnic immigrant experience,⁹⁴ without having to grapple with more specific, material, and difficult immigrant and racial histories and realities; and second, whether critics' and readers' own tendencies and desires to read in such depoliticized ways limit the more interventionary potential of Lee's poetic form, specifically his use of metaphor.

The next chapter deals directly with the question of reception of an Asian American poet very different from Li-Young Lee: Marilyn Chin, one of the few Asian American poets who openly declares her poetry as "political" and herself a feminist, and the author of three books of poetry. Though also written in the same first-person lyric mode as Lee's, Chin's poetry is markedly different from his in its voice, a mix of female sass and melancholy (the latter emotion Lee also shares), and in its overt, though often ironic, political critique.

In Chapter 3, I examine the vitriolic battle between Chin and three white men affiliated with Copper Canyon Press that broke out in the pages of *Poetry* magazine in 2008. At issue was Chin's translation of a poem by an eighteenth-century Vietnamese woman poet and Chin's response to a letter by Copper Canyon's sales and marketing director, who unfavorably compared Chin's translation to one done by a Copper Canyon translator. Chin called out what she saw as the veiled sexist, racist, and imperialist assumptions in his letter. In subsequent issues of *Poetry*, Chin was skewered by various white male letter writers for "playing the race card" and for being a Chinese imperialist, among other accusations.

I use this incident as a springboard to discuss several larger issues that arise from the incident and that frame the question of the place and reception of Asian American poets in the academy and in the poetry world at large. For example, who has the right to translate and who has the right to write English-language poetry? Why do skeletons from earlier cultural and military wars continue to reemerge in the newly multicultural and prosperous pages of *Poetry* magazine and, more broadly, in the "post-race" era? Why does the "American" keep dropping out of the term "Asian American poet" in the popular and critical imaginary? What is the place of an Asian American woman poet in the poetry world, especially one who is outspokenly political and who refuses to conform to the model minority stereotype?

I conclude the chapter by asking why Chin's straightforward calling out of racism in *Poetry* elicited such rage, whereas her poems—which are often as bitingly critical of racism, sexism, and imperialism—are met with much more critical approval. I argue that because the use of irony always entails the possibility of misreading by readers, irony's multiple voices in Chin's poems allow some readers to miss her sharper critiques. How well does irony "translate" between poets and readers who come from different contexts (political, racial, aesthetic, and so on), and does this potential for mistranslation limit irony's political efficaciousness? The relationship between irony, audience, and translation is crucial in poems and in everyday life, where minority subjects are themselves read literally (phenotypically) and whose

societally acceptable range of interpretation of racism's multiple guises is often limited to literal readings of overt manifestations.

In Chapter 4, I examine Chin's use of irony in her poems in greater detail. As a woman writing at the nexus of two patriarchal traditions and as an avowedly political poet, Chin uses the trope of irony to engage and parry the demands of Chinese and American cultural purists, both of whom view her as "barbarian," and to make sharp critiques of racism and sexism in both American and Chinese cultures. This ironic voice is gendered and, variously, sassy, melancholic, sexy, and sober, but always fierce. Using a multivoiced irony allows her to mimic, express, and confront conflicting states of self-hatred, self-colonization, and erotic desire for white male domination, even as she hits hard at forms of colonialism.

The female speakers of Chin's poems often occupy more than one ideological position and tonal register; their ironic voices thus cannot be analyzed according to the general view of irony as "saying something other than what is understood"⁹⁵ (or a simple binary between a stated "false" meaning and an unstated "true" message). Following the work on irony by such scholars as Paul de Man, Kenneth Burke, Linda Hutcheon, and Claire Colebrook, I argue that irony operates in Chin's poems across multiple registers that interpenetrate each other and that irony always has a social function as well as a figurative one. Likewise, the psyche of Chin's female poetic narrators cannot be characterized by any either-or "Chinese or American" formulation. They have often internalized both resistance to and desire for assimilation, epitomized by their desire for the white male body and what it represents—colonial, national, linguistic, and sexual power and domination. Again one might question how interventionary and efficacious Chin's use of irony is, given the marginalization of Asian Americans and Asian American writers in the American political and literary arenas.

In Chapters 5 and 6, I focus on the work of John Yau, who occupies a unique position in the contemporary poetry world as an Asian American poet who has published more than fifty books—poetry (well over a dozen since 1976), art criticism, fiction, collaborations with artists (such as Thomas Nozkowski and Archie Rand), monographs on artists, gallery

catalogues (not to mention essay contributions to various other books)—and who has also achieved prominence as a critic in the art world. In its eschewing of the classical lyric form and in its aggressive linguistic wordplay, Yau’s poetry differs significantly from that of Lee’s and Chin’s first-person lyrics. His work can be situated in the more avant-garde tradition of poetry—both American (à la Pound and New York School) and European Surrealist—though his poetry generally has not been considered formally experimental “enough” by the Language poets.

Chapter 5 begins with the analysis of another critical controversy: this time a heated debate in 1994 in the pages of *American Poetry Review* between the critic Eliot Weinberger and Yau, a confrontation that was as vitriolic as, or even more than, the one between Marilyn Chin and the Copper Canyon men in *Poetry*. In reviewing Weinberger’s anthology, *American Poetry Since 1950: Innovators and Outsiders*, Yau strongly criticized him for the paucity of poets of color represented in the volume, which included only Langston Hughes and Amiri Baraka. Not unlike the response by the *Poetry* letter writers against Chin fourteen years later, Weinberger responds by charging Yau with “race-mongering” and “race-baiting” and implies that after years of writing and publishing poetry, Yau has become interested in playing the “race card” only when it is expedient and profitable.

Yet a quick review of Yau’s career reveals that, even from the very beginning, his subject position as a Chinese American poet and its attendant concerns and anxieties clearly permeated his work. The second half of this chapter examines the arc of Yau’s early to mid-career, before his canonical inclusion as an “Asian American poet” in various anthologies in the 1990s. I argue, contra Weinberger, that Yau, far from shying away from the topic of race and racial identity throughout his career, has dealt with these concerns by more oblique, often nonthematic, means. Because critics such as Weinberger tend to look only for thematic manifestations of “Asianness,” they have missed Yau’s more subtle, non-content-based grappling with issues of racial identity, including racial self-hatred, and his critiques of racist representations and discourses.

In Chapter 6, I look specifically at Yau’s use of parody—both defensively and offensively, as rhetorical strategy and as weapon—

to critique and undermine dominant racial discourses (for example, Hollywood's stereotypes, narratives of assimilation) and, in particular, representations of Asian American men. Parody allows Yau to occupy multiple subject positions to express conflicting feelings of racial self-hatred, feelings of racial emasculation, anger at American society's treatment of Asian Americans, and a vexed yet productive and playful relationship to the English language. I begin by examining the history and nuances of parody as a genre, with a particular focus on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, before turning my attention to Yau's series of "Genghis Chan: Private Eye" poems, which manifest most forcefully Yau's biting use of parody. Parodic language mimics and exposes the discourse of yellowface movies—with its chop-suey Chinglish and depictions of inhuman "Orientals" (servile or barbaric), among other demonizations (and dehumanizations) of Asian Americans—while also submitting, in the very act of ventriloquizing, to the truth of racial self-hatred and of minority internalization of these dominant representations.

While my discussion of parody is indebted to Bakhtin's work, I disagree strongly with his view that parody belongs most properly to what he considers the more social and heterogeneous realm of fiction rather than poetry, which he considers more "private" and purely literary. Bakhtin's narrow conception of poetry can no longer account for the diverse poetics of twentieth- and twenty-first-century American society—with its multiple cultures, languages, and discourses—of which Asian American poetry is a vibrant part. Yau's poetry, like that of the other poets studied in this book, contributes to a more complex, nuanced, and multifaceted view of English-language poetry and, hence, of poetry in general.

In the final two chapters, I turn to two even more formally experimental Asian American poets, one a veteran of the multicultural struggles of the 1960s and 1970s and the other a Bay Area writer in her early forties. Like Yau's work, the writing of Mei-mei Berssenbrugge and Pamela Lu brings into relief the relationship between race, writing, and the avant-garde: the ways in which Asian American avant-garde writing is almost always read as de-raced and the ways in which avant-garde writing is almost always implicitly coded as "white."

Thus, I put to a hard test my hypothesis that writing by Asian Americans formally manifests the effects of social and historical forces on the poets' subjectivity and language, not only in what is consciously and explicitly stated but also in what is unstated or said obliquely and—crucially—in *how* something is said (for example, syntax, tone, word choice). If the tendency is to consider the connection of formation and form in poetry by racial minorities only at the level of recognizable “ethnic” content, then how does one apprehend a poem, written by a minority American poet, in which racialized subjectivity is not overtly realized, whether by means of an autobiographical “I” and/or markers of ethnic culture and whose poetry is viewed as abstract and “difficult”?

Mei-mei Berssenbrugge's poetry has recently been embraced by those in avant-garde circles. A few critics have written on her poetry's links to, say, nature and affect and mothering, but few mention Berssenbrugge's Chinese American identity, the fact that Chinese was her first language, or that she was an early participant in the fight for the recognition of minority literature. Berssenbrugge tends to get read as one of the successful experimental minority poets who has avoided the trap of identity politics and “bad” identity writing.

In Chapter 7, I argue that, while Berssenbrugge is indeed interested in amorphous, seemingly immaterial states, such as emotions and natural phenomena, which are difficult to quantify and touch yet are very real—such as a horizon, color, fragrance, fog—she is equally interested in the issue of ethnic identity and “mother tongue,” as she herself has explicitly stated. It is in her use of a syntax of conditionality that this Beijing-born, Massachusetts-raised, mixed-race poet reveals her own contingent relationship to language, both English and Chinese, and her sense of the contingency and relationality of natural phenomena *and* identity. There is no contradiction here. Berssenbrugge's poems, while appearing abstract and largely devoid of racial markers, nonetheless strongly bear the impress of social and historical contexts, including processes of racialization and the influence of her first language—Chinese—which shaped and continue to shape her subjectivity as both an Asian American and a poet. To ignore

these contexts and their formative influence on her poetry is, to a large extent, to misread her body of work.

In Chapter 8, I examine Pamela Lu's *Pamela: A Novel*, a text that refuses easy categorization by almost any criteria. Though its title makes knowing reference to one of the founding texts of the English novelistic canon and its syntax often takes the form of "well-written," somewhat formal, sentences, this *Pamela* is nonnarrative, filtered solely through the consciousness of a twenty-something Chinese American Californian ("I" or "P"), eschewing plot and dialogue, lacking in fully fleshed-out characters and character development, and almost completely devoid of any ethnic or racial markers. Even more so than Yau and Berssenbrugge, Lu, who works in the tech industry in Silicon Valley, completely refuses genre-based, literary classificatory, and formal categories to such an extent that one does not know whether to call *Pamela: A Novel* a novel, prose poetry, or memoir, "Asian American," "American," traditional, or avant-garde.

Markers of race are almost completely erased or nonexistent in the text, yet, I argue, this is not a "post-race" novel, as some have averred. While *Pamela: A Novel* displays almost no thematic references to race, the consciousness of the narrator—who, it is obliquely suggested, is, like Lu, a Chinese American from Southern California—cannot be separated from the tale the book tells, if it could be said to tell any tale at all, nor from the very form of its poetic sentences. Indeed, the text is so fully infused with the consciousness of this doubly minoritized narrator that it need not mark its speaker's identity overtly or thematically.

Subjunctivity is crucial to *Pamela: A Novel*. Not only is it a topic of philosophical speculation but it is inseparable from the subjectivity evinced in the text and from the language of the text itself. The "as though" and "as ifs" bring out the constructedness, indeterminacy, and imagined dimensions of identity, memory, history—to a great extent raising many of the same questions that come to light with the terms "diasporic" and "Asian American": questions of identification with a larger ethnic group, shared cultural memory, racial interpellation, and so on. I argue that the subjunctive mood captures the postmodern diasporic subject's relationship to a "home" country and

the English language. Lu forces us to ask, “What is ‘relative’ (in both senses of the term)?” What makes “I,” “P,” and “Pamela” and diasporic subjects relative(s) is not blood but their being yoked—brought into being—through and in the shared English language.

Thinking Its Presence: Form, Race, and Subjectivity in Contemporary Asian American Poetry ends with a brief epilogue in which I argue that exciting new forms of experimental minority poetry; the emergence of scholars who have been trained to see no contradiction between ethnic studies and poetics, prosody and postcolonialism; and new digital technologies and possibilities may be catalyzing forces for the reframing and reconceptualizing—the genuine *rethinking*—of American poetry, down to its very historical and conceptual foundations.