

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