

“REMOTE PARSEE”: AN ALTERNATIVE GRAMMAR OF ASIAN NORTH AMERICAN POETRY

“descended on all sides from the Idiosyncrasy, the kid disdained grammar class, refused to parse, opted to be remote parsee.” —Jam. Ismail

HERE IS CERTAINLY NO COMPREHENSIVE WAY TO account for the wide range of what is here being called “alternative” poetry written by people of Asian descent on the North American continent, and in general the more radical theories of Asian American poetry, whether those deduced from readings of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictee* to the cogent, overtly activist valorizing of “deterritorialization” by the Canadian poet Roy Miki, would not recommend that such a suturing, politically mollifying project be pursued. Issues of “community,” for example, which have served mainstream theories of Asian American literature well in attempts to circumscribe a visible “Movement” are rendered problematic by the presence of writers like John Yau, who has only been considered part of the historical phenomenon of minority literature recently as a result of more sophisticated critical paradigms. Such new paradigms acknowledge, for example, that a language that doubles its meanings contains a content that relates to central themes of ethnic literature, such as the imposition of Orientalist codes on the perceived outsider, and the consequential interiorization of these codes, an interiorization that finds its expression, in Yau’s work, through often opaque language that spits back, in defiantly infantile yet damnably material forms, the range of racially motivated speech acts from the ethnic slur to the exoticizing complement. Indeed, as will become clear in the following essay, such tactics have been on the table for Asian American poets for quite some time, but have simply not been embraced in a large way, a testament, perhaps, to their efficacy. The poet Ronald Tanaka, for example, in his 1978 essay for the *Journal of Ethnic Studies (JES)*, “Towards a Systems Analysis of Ethnic Minority Literature,” writes that “ethnic literature can be seen as the attempt by a majority culture to deal with the hermeneutic problems created by the

necessity of cross-cultural communication,” an open window which he perceives as only strengthening power relations. He continues:

This interpretation is opposed to the more popular view that the various ethnic literatures are the independent products of their respective sub-cultures. Our claim is that ethnic systems have a very specific function to perform within the majority literary system and the result is a constrained and distorted output. This means that ultimately ethnic groups do not “have a literature” in the same way that majority societies “have a literature” in spite of what appears to be empirical evidence to the contrary. (Tanaka 49)

This theme of “empirical evidence to the contrary,” of eyeing the crux of identity only to find it is a plant by enemy spies, will show up in many different guises throughout the following essay. Tanaka goes on to consider the concept of “communication stress,” which he says can be created via the tactics of the “anomaly” and the “opaque,” viable means of resistance for him from the days when Language poetics were not widely disseminated. What becomes clear in reading this nonlinear history of Asian American poetry is that many of the writers appear to have reached this element of their poetics without having had much communication with each other, at least not in the manner that many poetry movements — whether it be projective verse through the aegis of Black Mountain, the Language poets, the Umbra poets and others who convened around issues of Black Nationalism or even those Asian American poets who eventually found support in such important works as Elaine Kim’s *Asian American Literature* — have in the past. In fact, it was not until 1996 that poets like Cha, Tanaka, Yau, Walter Lew, Myung Mi Kim, Tan Lin, Miki and his fellow Canadians Roy Kiyooka, Fred Wah and Gerry Shikatani could even be considered a constellation of experimental ethnic poets when they were included in Lew’s anthology *Premonitions* (which didn’t, unfortunately, include Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge). Though an anthology hardly constitutes a community, at least as a lived and malleable social space, it does give face to a series of disparate tendencies in a way that, finally, should create the atmosphere of exploration into literary difference that Asian American “ethnic” literature — at least in the way Tanaka proposes — could be said to have been lacking. As a ripped and torn sourcebook for the uncanny, *Premonitions* provides a basis for a poetics of the unreliable witness specific to the Asian American context, while, in its hybrid, rhizomic structure, not advocating — with its inclusion of radical feminist writing and Hawaiian poetry that is decidedly “transparent” — that this is the only way.

A chronological history of Asian American poetry, for reasons stated above, is out of the question, partially because certain works, like Tanaka's essays and poems for *JES* in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and Cha's writings and films of the 1980s, have both suffered from an obscurity that places them outside of any cause-and-effect nomenclature necessary to comfortable narrative. How, for example, to account for the "role" of the first Asian American poet, Sadakichi Hartmann (1867-1944), who didn't in fact write good poems but who, through his art theory and the example of his creative writing — the shameless Orientalism of his Symbolist aesthetics, for example, or the hybrid nature of his three plays *Buddha*, *Confucius*, and *Christ*, or even the clownish, partially Zen-inspired bohemian *bon mots* of his late years which contains something of the tone of a writer like Yuki Hartman (no relation) — somehow anticipated what was to come? Indeed, Hartmann's long and varied life — which Pound famously admired in the *Guide to Kulchur* — spanned the time of the West's first integration of Asian mores in their aesthetics (he was a friend of Whitman and Stuart Merrill, and the young Kenneth Rexroth*) right up to the time of World War II, during which he was hounded by FBI agents while living in a shack on the border of an Indian reservation. Though grouping by tendencies is probably not the best method — we've been wary of claspings divisive titles to the inchoate wilds of American poetry since the first edition of Donald Allen's *New American Poetry* — it might serve to use temporary frameworks here, at least as a way to organize the paragraphs.

The two most visible writers of Asian descent in the States are probably John Yau and Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge, and they each share something with Hartmann, which is a strong tie to the visual arts, each finding some sort of semiotic grounding in the way visual form is created and interpreted. They also, consequently, both made singular shifts at some point in their writing careers, Yau going from the early somewhat "magical realist" quasi-narrative lyrics of his first major book, *Corpse and Mirror*, to his recent explorations of literary doubling, whether in the pun or the procedural subversions of the literary "I," and Berssenbrugge from the unobscured spirituality of her early poems written with short lines ("When the Indian stops / across old rock / and his spirit sheds form / and cleaves the earth / an instant / and he settles his dry hand / across our valley / his terror is decayed with age [. . .], from "Ghost" [*Summits* 21]) to the long lines and the *nouveau roman*-like absent spectator, based partially on a collage poetics, for which she is best known. A third writer, Tan Lin, only seven years younger than Yau but whose first collection, *Lotion Bullwhip Giraffe*, was published in 1996 (and who is the brother of the artist Maya Lin),

*"There are rumors that Sadakichi discovered Ezra Pound. In fact, Pound said so once to me, but he was then in St. Elizabeth's, pretty addled and liable to say anything. However, I for one think it's true." (Rexroth)

seems to fit in this group for his innovative attention to high postmodern aesthetics.

In Yau, the shift in style may be seen as a move away from self-decimating Orientalism, in which all emotion and expression is understood as consumable artifice and rarefied effect, to an interest in lyric subjectivity conveyed with the lumpy presence of finger painting, one which combines the Self and "Other" as parallel agents. Oscar Wilde has written, "[T]he Japanese people are, as I have said, simply a mode of style, an exquisite fancy of art. And so, if you desire to see a Japanese effect, you will not behave like a tourist and go to Tokio. On the contrary, you will stay at home, and steep yourself in the work of certain Japanese artists. . . ." (Nunokawa 289). The early Yau — too mischievous to not notice how Wilde's paradigm could be used to great fun and oblique horror — plays this up at times, as in the short "Shanghai Shenanigans": "The moon empties its cigarette over a row of clouds / whose windows tremble in the breeze / The breeze pushed my boat through a series / of telephone conversations started by perfume. . . ." (*Corpse* 57) However, most of the poems in *Corpse and Mirror* inhabit a surrealist range of images and techniques, such as "Persons in the Presence of a Metamorphosis": "The porcelain bayonet of noon scrapes the face / of a man who has forgotten why he started / to spit. A uniformed girl, / tiny and tireless, memorizes words / she believes make accurate mirrors. / A nun felt damp and gray, / like the windows of a plumber" (*Corpse* 119). High aestheticism creates the author figure in the shape of a tour guide, of sorts, exhibiting the presence of, at most, the possessor of fine sentiments, however sadistic he or she may be in intention under the surface. "Persons" shows, however, that Yau was already working on his later style, in which each enjambment provides something like the space between a film's edit, a portal through which narrative proceeds to unexpected ends. The suggestion of Johnson's remark on the Metaphysical poets, who "violently yoked" their imagery together to create shock, is not lost on Yau, who is more a folk metaphysician of language, even in his later stages, than a student of post-Marxist semiotics.* The first poem of the "Genghis Chan: Private Eye"

*This quality of Yau's poetry carries over to his writing on art, in which he reads the metaphysical qualities of the materials and processes of artistic creation. For instance, writing on Jasper Johns' use of encaustic in *Jasper Johns: Printed Symbols*, he observes:

By using encaustic to depict the target, Johns was able to integrate an anonymously produced bodily material with an anonymous image. The target (which usually represents a surrogate body one aims at) is familiar to the point of invisibility: identity and anonymity become one. At the same time, he connected encaustic (a preservative) to his realization that one's own identity (even when it is invisible to others) must be defined in order to be seen by the self. By sealing the image of the absent body (a target) inside a bodily material (encaustic), Johns was able to give physical form to his invisibility while permanently preserving it against the passage of time. In doing so, her proposed another view of the artist: rather than being a hero and a person of action, he was a thing "which was seen and not looked at, not examined." (34)

series demonstrates most of the qualities of his later style:

I was floating through a cross section
with my dusty wine glass, when she entered,
a shivering bundle of shredded starlight.
You don't need words to tell a story,
a gesture will do. These days,
we're all parasites look for a body
to cling to. I'm nothing more
than riff-raff splendor drifting past the runway.
I always keep a supply of lamprey lipstick around,
just in case. (*Radiant* 189)

The sound qualities are heightened in this excerpt, and, indeed, some of the images, such as the "shredded starlight," are both made more vivid yet concealed by the tempered awkwardness of the aural quality. Most importantly, the "I" and "you" enter as well, bringing the absent narrator of *Corpse and Mirror* out into the open as a libidinous, and often androgynous, stalker of the imagination. As Yau writes at the end of his essay on Wilfredo Lam: "Lam's hybrid figures — their combinations of male and female anatomy — can be seen as a sign of his belief that the self had to give birth to the self, that the self is not a privileged place given to him by society, but something made up and discovered in the world" ("Lam" 146). By his use of often uncomplicated syntax — a unique tone of sounding like a child stating the obvious, though in a room of mirrors — jarring imagery and sound qualities, obscured yet manifest narrative instincts, and the performance of a lyric "I" and "you," Yau creates a singular presence for the author-figure while emphasizing the Steinian "everybody" quality of its singular absence.

Unlike Yau, Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge has worked frequently with individuals and organizations in the ethnic community, early books of hers being published by the Greenfield Review Press and I. Reed Books, and an early play of hers produced by the playwright Frank Chin. She has lived in New Mexico for most of her literary career, and like the work of another poet living in that state, Arthur Sze, her early poetry, as the excerpt above suggests, was very much informed by the landscape and the Native American history and mythology that inhabits it. Like Yau, though, some of her early poetry exhibits a taste for the macabre and the surreal, often achieving its effects via a quasi-cosmic or mythological sense of the interrelation of all things, accepting the pedestrian chores of

narrative as a task of sensing the possibility. However, whereas Yau's settings are suburban closets, Berssenbrugge's, in *The Heat Bird*, are more geographically specific: "A dog is amenable to dust under a different house / though he tells me by phone she still sniffs / the mud on tires from El Rito. The old lady / is mother of the boy who chopped up his friend / and scattered parts all on the road to Dry Springs / That's why he thinks I shouldn't go there, because / they haven't found all the pieces, but / pretty soon they'll begin to smell and I won't get surprised / Then I won't get surprised" (*Heat Bird* 29). Surprise, however, is very much her instinct in many of these poems: "I demeaned myself in front of a / blind man, because I'm afraid of myself at night. If / he lights my cigarette when I complain how it goes out, the / flame goes out" (*Heat Bird* 38). The "I" in Berssenbrugge soon becomes the site of all her narrative negotiations, however, as the lines grow to those monumental lengths — suggestive of her engagement with the art of Georgia O'Keefe and Agnes Martin — for which she is known: "Attention was commanded through a simple, unadorned, unexplained, often decentered presence, / up to now, a margin of empty space like water, its surface contracting, then melting / along buried pipelines, where gulls gather in euphoric buoyancy" (*Empathy* 33). The presence of New Mexico is still apparent in such lines, but the previous mythologies and narrative determinacies are replaced by the perceiving mind. As Robbe-Grillet writes in "A Future for the Novel," "Even the least conditioned observer is unable to see the world around him through entirely unprejudiced eyes," but he later suggests that literary narrative can be attained through a filmic use of objects such that the eye, like the camera, is nothing more than a constant: "In this future universe of the novel, gestures and objects will be there before being something; and they will still be there afterwards, hard, unalterable, eternally present, mocking their own 'meaning,' that meaning which vainly tries to reduce them to the role of precarious tools . . ." (Robbe-Grillet 21). Berssenbrugge's protagonist in much of *Empathy* is one such eye/I, though one both gendered and — as if defiantly not sacrificing agency for the objects that challenge it — acknowledging yet concealing psychological content from the gaze:

She considers these the unconscious lessons of a dominant force
that is being born, and as it becomes, its being is received structure.
First ice crystals, then heavier glass obscures the light,
so she walks back and forth talking to herself in a white soundless
sphere past the trash of the village. (*Empathy* 21).

That “so,” coming after the line break, defiantly conceals all the decision-making (or lack thereof) that is normally the sinews of narrative. “My process is so cerebral that I try to get things in front of me that hold an emotional element — that’s where the family pictures come in,” Berssenbrugge says in *Black Lightning* (Tabios 135).^{*} She is explaining the detailed construction of her poem “Four Year Old Girl,” which involves a painstaking assembling and editing of “found” texts, and it is clear that, in her new poems, Berssenbrugge is as observant of language as an “othered” entity as she is of the light, further reducing her author-role to that of a spectator.

Tan Lin’s long essay “Language Poetry, Language Technology, and the Fractal Dimension: Michael Palmer Prints Out a Kingdom,” is a manifesto of sorts disguised as an analysis of the poetry of Michael Palmer, by whom he is undoubtedly influenced. It contains, for example, a fake interview with the poet in which he is asked, “What is the relation between a joke, a lie, and a poem?,” to which “Palmer” purportedly offers the answer:

They constitute systems of self-deceptions (i.e. they can be read two ways or in both directions). Although all have an end-point, all would like to continue indefinitely. All reverse themselves as conclusion. All are essentially nonlinear, as they approach their opposite, truth. They resemble clouds and empty gas tanks. A lie and a poem lack a punchline. A joke is a metrical delusion. Gussied fragments fly? Mope thaw. (Lin, “Palmer”)

Later, in an analysis of Palmer’s poem “Sun,” Lin writes “a straight-forward march into linearity . . . is abandoned for circularity, perpetual return, nonlinearity, iteration, rewriting, and repetition with minute variations,” and on the final page of the essay, in the context of fractal geometry, writes that “a Palmer poem creates the illusion that it is the most complex orderly object.” All of these statements aptly describe what Lin is doing in much of *Lotion Bullwhip Giraffe*, though unlike Palmer he approaches his tasks with the hyper-kinetic mindset of a coked-up speed-skater, slinging words as if he is too impatient to bear out their often microsecond-long duration, as in this excerpt, in which words like “ambiance,”

^{*}Eileen Tabios’ *Black Lightning*, in which this passage appears, is a unique and versatile study of the writing practices of several Asian American poets, including John Yau, Jessica Hagedorn, Kimiko Hahn, Arthur Sze and Garrett Hongo. It demonstrates the openness to formal difference that a close study of Asian American poetry must make to be inclusive, not to mention the grab bag of analytical approaches one must adopt.

“Echos” and “distance” suggest that he is approaching some sort of poetic or narrative topography, but one which is clipped beyond recognition:

Ruckus stone, ambiance undone and cramped echos.
To rock like mahogany Nazis, exempt
from a late date. The starling flattens hah hah.
All vices are distant and strung pastel rejection.

Cramped Echos: seven lined leaflets trouble
the clay pots. I guess blessed hairy amplifier. Come and expend
a loud distance, my floral beckoning. A sound
ticks out like a fire. Here a spree

of fragments. Solid predictions like a sweating bat. (*Lotion* 116)

Many of the poems of *Lotion Bullwhip Giraffe* challenge the idea of poetic content not just on the level of the word or sentence, but on the level of scale, as many of the longer prose poems never even threaten to descend into narrative, lyrical subjectivity, or “humanistic” political content, but rumble on in a sort of intoxicated way through a variety of post-modern gestures, tweaking the voids of meaning with a trickster-like facility. This scale suggests Lin’s primary concern, which is an almost clinical interest in the fractal possibilities of a self-determining language, such that language is left to operate almost as if a computer were producing it, but always with an attention that highlights its capacity as fetish-object, such that the poetry resembles a pornography of the word more than anything else. While Lin is clearly attentive to the project of Yau, especially in his use of language in a way that suggests the meta-slur (“Ship carp do doped pressure bag go famous pure-fuck your shrag / lozenge movie geisha whittle drip drop,” begins “Talc Bull Dogface” (*Lotion* 89), a poem which continues to run the gamut of English sounds in a way that suggests a temper tantrum conveyed in an epileptic’s Cantonese, his surrealism, and his questioning of narrative conventions, Lin’s poetics are clearly more unhinged — “liberated” in the Futurist sense — consequently free to roam at will in a counter-eschatological eternity.

Another grouping of writers centers around the work of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, a video artist, performer and writer who died in 1982. Cha’s work had only gotten limited exposure in Asian American literary communities due to its deconstructionist and hybrid

formal characteristics which seemed to make it unassimilable to the social realist paradigms then in the ascendant. It wasn't until the early 1990s, when many young Korean American artists began to take an interest in her work, that she began to exert an influence, and thenceforth began to appear in anthologies and critical essays. Indeed, judging by the change-of-face that the most stalwart of social realist literary critics have made in the past five years, including many apologies for a previous emphasis on totalizing and reductive views of what it means to be "Korean American," one would almost think that Cha's work, most importantly the book *Dictee*, was the most instrumental force in critiquing the dominant sociological paradigms in Asian American literary analysis. As Elaine Kim, author of the first attempt at a comprehensive approach to the literature, writes in a recent essay:

For the most part, I read Asian American literature as a literature of protest and exile, a literature about place and displacement, a literature concerned with psychic and physical "home," — searching for and claiming a "home" or longing for a final "homecoming." I looked for unifying thematic threads and tidy resolutions that might ease the pain of displacement and heal the exile, heedless of what might be missing from this homogenizing approach and oblivious to the parallels between what I was doing and dominant cultural attempts to reduce Asian American experience to developmental narratives about a movement from "primitive" "Eastern," and foreign immigrant to "civilized," Western, and "Americanized" loyal citizen. (Kim 12)

Ironically, with the exception of the phrases "unifying themes" and "tidy resolutions," she is very much describing the writing of Cha here, especially in her culminating book-length work *Dictee*, which had been largely ignored by the Asian American literary establishment for a decade until such events as the retrospective at the Whitney Museum in 1992 pulled her into prominence. Later in this essay, Kim writes: "Dealing with subtleties, hybridities, paradoxes, and layers seemed almost out of the question when so much effort had to be expended simply justifying Asian Americans as discursive subjects" (Kim 13). This is not to say that Cha was the only writer conscious of the limitations of these paradigms — Ronald Tanaka, for example, went at great lengths to outline the inadequacies of the "Movement" approach, only to throw up his hands at the linear, limning requirements of the critical project. Two very different writers, Walter K. Lew and Myung Mi Kim, by no accident Korean American, have each in their different ways partially taken up Cha's project, in

Lew's case utilizing the techniques of *Dictee* in his critical collage *Excerpts from Dikte/for Dictee* (1982), also instrumental in reviving interest in Cha.

Dictee has been written about quite frequently since its rediscovery, both by critics working within the Asian American tradition and not. A recent essay by Juliana Spahr titled "Postmodernism, Readers, and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee*," uses Cha's work for the basis of a far-ranging critique of postmodern reading practices, especially Jameson's contention that postmodernism signaled "the emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense" (Spahr 24). *Dictee* seems to play a similar role as the final excerpt (prior to the three "Postludes" poems) in the *Poems for the Millennium* anthology edited by Jerome Rothenberg and Pierre Joris, an anthology that, in general, is critical of the high formalist modes of much of twentieth century art and seeks to reify the lyric-epic traditions inaugurated by Pound, or agonistic literature in general. Why Cha's work stands at this unique position in so many different late-twentieth century discourses — both as the prescient "avant-garde" work in Asian American discourses (and, one might argue, feminist discourses, though feminism has a richer tradition of experimental writing), but consequently as a window onto a "Shamanist" conception of art in the central European traditions of experimental writing — has ultimately to do with the incredible freedoms that she exploited in its construction. As Shelley Sun Wong writes in her exceptional essay "Unnaming the Same: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee*":

In *Dictee*, the different genres, or modes of literary (and I might add, cinematic) production, do not coexist harmoniously but, rather, undermine each other through a process of reciprocal critique. Cha works with the representation that genres are not innocent or neutral aesthetic conventions or idea types but are, instead, formal constructs which are implicated in the very processes of ideological production. (Wong 106)

Though the second sentence from Wong might suggest Cha as something of a player in the tradition of the Language poets — indeed, Steve McCaffery's *Panopticon* may resemble *Dictee* more than any other work — Cha was not approaching literature from the angle of one invested in its various traditions, but rather as a filmmaker, and hence she takes a more anthropological view of writing genres, remaining free of literary ideological battles. Flipping through the pages of *Dictee* takes one from photographs of a Korean martyr to Mallarméan writings in both French and English by Cha, from diagrams of the inner

workings of the throat (linked to intense passages describing the both demeaning and empowering effects of having to learn English) to images of the scribbled-over earlier versions of passages from *Dictee*. The “Petition from the Koreans of Hawaii to President Roosevelt,” a failed attempt by Korean exiles including Syngman Rhee to have the United States intercede on the Japanese occupation of Korea (still historically shadowed), is included in its entirety, which links not just with the autobiographical passages about Cha’s brother participating in anti-colonial marches, but with the map of Korea foregrounding its national entity, and the face of Renee Falconetti playing the martyr St. Joan in Dryer’s film. A passage addressing her mother and her plight under the Japanese occupation in which she wasn’t permitted to speak English (“They have sheltered you from life. Still, you speak the tongue of the mandatory language like the others. It is not your own. Even if it is not you know you must. You are Bilingual. You are Trilingual. The tongue that is forbidden is your own mother tongue. You speak in the dark” [*Dictee* 45]) runs up against passages describing the ethical and emotional challenges of historical witness, not inconsequentially cinematic witness, as in the important “Memory” passages of the “Thalia / Comedy” section, and this section which contains something of a specifically filmic — it seems peculiarly about the edit, and the blank white screen — mourning over lost time:

It had been snowing. During the while.

Interval. Recess. Pause.

It snowed. The name. The term. The noun.

It had snowed. The verb. The predicate. The act of.

Fell.

Luminescent substance more so in black night.

Inwardly luscent. More. So much so that its entry closes the eyes.

Interim. Briefly.

In the enclosed darkness memory is fugitive.

Of white. Mist offers to snow self

In the weightless slow all the time it takes long ages precedes time pronounces it alone on its own while. In the whiteness

no distinction between her body invariable no dissonance

synonymous her body all the time de composes

eclipses to be come yours. (*Dictee* 118)

Cha edited a unique anthology of film criticism in 1980 called *Apparatus*, and indeed many of the included writings seem to relate almost directly to the formal qualities of her book, published two years later. As Vertov writes, “The movie camera is present at the supreme battle between the world of capitalists, speculators, factory owners, and landlords and the world of workers, peasants and colonial slaves” (Vertov 9). The passage seems obviously relevant considering the visual collage aspects of *Dictee*; on the literary front, Cha’s writing resembles the “objects being what they are” aspect of the *nouveau roman*, perhaps escalating the maxim so that languages themselves — French as both the colonial language of Vietnam, for example, and the arbiter of Western knowledge — are a type of content. Another inclusion, “Every Revolution is a Throw of the Dice,” describes a filmed performance of Mallarme’s graphic poem “A Throw of the Dice,” a project which ties in not only with *Dictee* but Cha’s performance pieces such as “Aveugle Voix,” which involved Cha covering her eyes and mouth with bandannas printed with the French words “blind” and “voice.” Maya Deren’s emphasis on the “ritual” in film’s capacity to “manipulate Time and Space,” Gregory Woods’ “Work Journal on the Straub/Huillet Film ‘Moses and Aaron,’” replete with photographs, diagrams, diary entries, and much technical detail, and Cha’s own “Commentaire,” an experimental visual essay which plays off dark and light, all contribute to a wider understanding of the hybrid nature of Cha’s seminal work.

Undoubtedly the most important figure in bringing attention to the formally radical possibilities of Asian American writing has been Walter K. Lew, who early recognized the fecundity of Cha’s techniques in *Dictee*, as his dedication of his brief selection of poetry for the journal *Bridge* in 1983, “A New Decade of Singular Poetry” to her suggests. This selection includes writing by a wide range of people such as Eric Chock, Marilyn Chin, the “Movement” poet Nellie Wong, John Yau, Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge, Arthur Sze and Ho Hon Leung*, suggesting the hybridic ethos even an editor in Asian American studies must possess. He describes, in his introduction to the selection, a form of poetry which he feels would be of peculiar use to Asian American writing, the “Matrix,” which “employs a wide range of rapidly juxtaposed languages, media, historical frameworks, motifs and rhetorical moods. It is almost demanded by the normally multicultural situation of Asian Americans and the accelerated information flow and collisions of contemporary society in general” (*Bridge* 11). This statement, which contains something of a nod to the art of Nam Jun Paik, also anticipates the recent vogue among critical circles for hypertext poetics, and Lew’s own

*Two notable poems by Leung, “After the ‘Three Characters’” and “A Symphonic Poem ‘Unfinished,’” are reprinted in *Premonitions*. He seems to have vanished after the publication of his poems in *Bridge*.

work since that introduction — which ranges through film and video, poetry, performance and editing — fulfills this call for intermedia. His critical book on *Dictée*, for example, *Excerpts from Dikte/for Dictée* (1982) directly adopts many of the formal methods of Cha's work, creating a sort of stabilizing double for the former work, while at the same time destabilizing politically encoded reductive readings. The series of Korean cartoons depicting images of a colonized Korea, but which are recaptioned with French tags, for example, provides a diagrammatic parallel to the many strands of narrative existing in Cha's work, pointing to its reassessed meanings — to the space between edits — and yet also to the nationally specific contexts. Cha's emphasis on female martyrdom — from the revolutionary Yu Guan Soon to Joan of Arc — finds a source in Korean mythology, as Lew includes a section from a book on Shamanist rituals that tells the story of a daughter shut up in a coffin by her father and cast into a pond, but who was rescued by the Dragon King, and who, after discovering her mother was ill, "went great distances to the Western sky and brought back healing water that saved her from death" (*Excerpts* 14).^{*} The split significance of the "Western sky" points to what many see as the rift in Cha's work between a turn toward high modernist (some critics just call it "white") poetics to uncover the allusive truths of colonialism. Lew's hybridic poetics come into play in the important anthology he edited, *Premonitions*, which was the first in a long line of anthologies to embrace the entire spectrum of writing in both the United States and Canada by writers of Asian descent. Again, it seems to allude to Cha's work in its form — with its contrasting black & white pages, it mimics the structure of Cha's "Commentaire" — but also in its inadherence to overly-stabilized binaries in the literary world — "experimental" vs. "mainstream," "Language" vs. "New American," or "Movement" vs. "white avant-gardist" — in a sense adopting Cha's stance as a cinematographer to collide, with a sort of Kino-eye aesthetic, the disparate range of Asian American writing being done today. This aesthetic clearly comes into play with his inclusion of Buddhist work and poetry by Asians about atrocities such as the Vietnam and Korean Wars.[†] Lew has also translated the work of the primary Korean avant-garde figure, Yi Sang, who died young under the Occupation but

^{*}An analysis of Lew's book by the present author appears in *Korean Culture* 15.1 (Spring 1994), published by the Korean Cultural Center in Los Angeles.

[†]As Lew writes in his afterword regarding *Beneath a Single Moon*, an anthology of Buddhist poetry edited by Kent Johnson and Craig Paulenich: "Not that poets of such strength as [Lawson] Inada and [AI] Robles feel a need to be included in a Caucasian Zen circle. But when [Gary] Snyder's introduction deliberates the question — 'Poetry is democratic, Zen is elite. No! Zen is democratic, poetry is elite. Which is it?' — perhaps he should have also asked whether Zen and poetry, as reconfigured in American Orientalism, are racist, and whether race relations should be a focus of meditation" (*Premonitions* 582-3).

who was, perhaps alone, attempting to transform Modernist Western poetics into a Korean idiom. He has also published important poems such as "The Movieteller" based on his own performances of the text along with reedited Korean film footage. The piece concerns the Korean phenomenon of the *pyonsa* — a "movieteller" who would speak an often politically encoded monologue over silent or untranslated Western film imports — and, indeed, the ethos of the *pyonsa* may give insight into the cumulative content of Lew's various work, which is that he redirects and unencodes stable meanings in previously monolithic cultural products or formations. Lew's reputation as a poet has yet to catch up to that as a critic and editor, a situation that is the product of his intense, singular attention to a variety of writers — from Cha to late New York poet Francis Chung — who were or are in danger of disappearing from the Asian American canon, as much as Lew's work would suggest that such a canon is anathema to the particular contours of the Asian American literary situation. Consequently, Lew has taken the genre-crossing implications of the "matrix" to the extreme, rendering the standard text-based lyric (which he has widely explored, as his unpublished collection of poetry, *Brine*, demonstrates) perhaps a little too stable for his collage-activated mature poetics.

Like Tan Lin, Myung Mi Kim belongs to a group of slightly younger poets who have already begun to reap the benefits of radical predecessors in the experimental Asian American tradition, in Kim's case the predecessor being Theresa Cha. Even in her first book, *Under Flag*, published in 1991 around the time of Cha's "rediscovery," echoes of *Dictée* can be heard in the idiom — spare, notational, but often circling around a refrain or variation of a phrase — and in the emphatic synthesis of personal and public concerns, as in issues of nationhood and language acquisition. However, Kim's writing is more politically pointed, as her quest for witness is not tied to a haunted conversation with the "homeland" but is involved in the urgency of contemporary life, even if that, in the end, is elusive. As she states in an interview for *Tripwire*:

How long can one sit and be attentive when the world is blowing up? These are questions to be answered as they come up; there is no *a priori* answer because then it would in effect be a summation rather than an answer. Those uncertain and undecidable spaces of — am I making a difference? — will this contribute? — how can I know? — those undecidable locations are part of the work. It doesn't feel great, it's not an exhilarated state, or at least not for very extended periods of time, but it is a lived state, and a true one. (*Tripwire* 79)

As this excerpt suggests, Kim's poetics involves an ontological questioning of political or "Movement" poetry, a quality which keeps her writing far from that of the ritualistic Cha and another big influence, Susan Howe, mostly because her attitude toward reality is pointillist at first (accumulative), and narrative (paradigmatic) only afterwards. Her new book, *Dura*, opens with three sections of mostly fragmented text, none of which, however, boldly challenges the felt linkages of the sign with the signified so much as offers the particulars of experience prior to any totalizing structure (she resembles, curiously, Larry Eigner in this way). She writes in "Chart": "Swag drum / Inland filth / Surmise commodity / Anemic shed / Corollary held / Second stock / Force lack / Acute lily" (*Dura* 43) a list poem that alludes to the various discourses that Kim is involved in, but never abstracting truths from its particulars (even if the particulars arrive through a process of deduction). A later section, "Thirty and Five Books," contains many of the themes of the earlier sections but in brief prose paragraphs, slowing the rhythm of the montage for a more stable persistence of vision:

Heat the gaping sound constrains. Remind the herders and poison growth. Cover distances deemed impossible to cover.

Great highways indicated by means of stones.

Invention where the tomatoes dangling from one end are not the tomatoes hanging from the other end.

And the unremarkable become the stuff of dust.

Where is the start. Dress of blue chiffon and a white straw hat in its own hat box.

Heat the gaping ground constrains. Turbulence. Ridicule.

The desktops tilt up and you may place inside them several books and a lunch.

Various kinds of rice in the manner of living in that country. (*Dura* 55)

As *Dura* suggests, the march of technological innovation is not "progress," especially in transportation — the work abounds with allusions to ships bearing commerce and cultural

domination — but also in such scientific exercises as making the tomatoes at one end different from those at the other, such that the "unremarkable" — in a vision that mates Pavlovian excesses with the final solution — "become the stuff of dust." But even with this global perspective, she asks "Where to start," and finds the answer somewhere in a "dress of blue chiffon," which, like the "acute lily" from the earlier passage, is an image that resonates less with symbolic meanings — though the "lily" could be the "lily of the fields," its "acute" state suggests that its imagistic quality should thwart such readings — than with phenomenological crisis. Despite its opaque nature, Kim's poetry manages to synthesize some of the fruits of a linguistically radical poetics with the emotive, emphatic gestures and tones of an activist poetics, attentive to the particulars of group, place, and time.*

Two writers who are not obviously part of the experimental strand of Asian American poetry are Ronald Tanaka and Lawson Fusao Inada. Their outsider status — neither are particularly comfortable in mainstream contexts such as those shaped by *APR*, *Paris Review* or *The Best American Poetry* series, and yet both are highly critical of the social realist expectations of the Asian American literary community — along with their radical synthesis of conservative Japanese poetics and "New American" poetry forms, suggests an important placement in this lineage. As the excerpt from Tanaka's essay quoted earlier states, the surrendering of information on the terms of the dominant class plays an insidious role in confirming existent power relations, contrary to the oft-cited maxim that minority writers are obliged to "tell their stories" first in order to achieve the basic plateaus of legitimacy as artists.† In another series of essays published in *JES* from 1979 to 1981 titled "On the

*A more detailed consideration of Cha, Lew and Kim along with Cathy Song appears in the essay "Korean American Poetry" in the *Korean Culture* (Winter 1997), pp. 416.

† As the poet Ron Silliman has infamously written in an introduction to a selection of Bay Area poets for the *Socialist Review*: "The narrative of history has not led to their [marginalized groups] self-actualization, but to their exclusion and domination. These writers and readers — women, people of color, sexual minorities, the entire spectrum of the "marginal" — have a manifest need to have *their stories told*. That their writing should often appear much more conventional, with the notable difference as to whom is the subject of these conventions, illuminates the relationship between form and audience." (88/3, 1988), pp. 6182. This statement by a white poet of the "avant-garde" is troubling not only because it's faulty logic — that a "marginalized" people who are not "self-actualized" would by nature gravitate toward convention in their writing, or that writing by non-minorities doesn't "often appear" conventional — but it also demonstrates a synchronization with the oppositional but nonetheless institutionalized forms of Asian American literary and cultural criticism by a poet who is demonstrably invested in uncovering formally radical subtraditions in American and European literature from Stein to Alan Davies. One could, in fact, argue that the opposite is true: that writers from communities not "self-actualized" would most likely benefit from the politics and poetics of the fragment, the indeterminate, the neologistic, and the rearticulatory as it exists as a subsystem of modernism's Eurocentric project, while consequently avoiding the burden of having to address the Western tradition as an inheritance. In any case, writers from Blake and Kafka to Cha and Kiyooka prove the rule wrong.

Metaphysical Foundations of a Sansei Poetics: Ethnicity and Social Science,” he considers the issue of Sansei — third generation Japanese — “personhood” amidst the paradigms that social science has created. “Being by definition an ‘ethnic group’, we have from the very beginning been ‘given over to’ social scientists, as opposed to, say, philosophers, artists, or theologians. In turn, social science has affected our own thinking far more than any other academic thinking” (“Metaphysical” 1), he writes, sketching in broad strokes the critical arenas in which Asian American writers, whether conscious of it or not, are forced to work, such that even a writer like Yau, whose inaugural writings were inspired by Oulipo, Surrealist and Ashberian poetics, can be seen as a poseur for wearing sunglasses in his author photograph.* The clinical tenor of Tanaka’s approach replicates the overdetermination of the very sciences he critiques, motivated primarily by an analysis of Milton Gordon’s 1964 study, *Assimilation in American Life*, which reaches such conclusions as: “In virtually all instances of inter-ethnic conflict, no matter how great the initial differences between the groups, people sooner or later become integrated into a single unit and convinced of their descent from common ancestors” (“Metaphysical” 7). Tanaka’s stated

* In an unusually flawed review of Yau’s collection of poems *Forbidden Entries*, the critic Marjorie Perloff observes that Yau “has always cultivated the image of Angry Young Man,” attempting to hide, she states, not only his “middle class” background but also his ethnicity in his early years as a published poet. She draws this conclusion because of his slovenly dress, “long unkempt black hair,” cigarette, and “eyes hidden behind sunglasses” in the author photo to a 1979 book, *Sometimes*. This betrays an essentialist understanding of how an “Asian American” who wishes to be perceived as one should in fact present oneself, as if Asian Americans never had, or could have, a fixation on James Dean or Bob Dylan, or as if Asian Americans were never resembled “construction workers.” (The Chinese built the railroads, as Frank Chin, another “Angry Young Man,” would be quick to point out.) She writes that “there was no indication, at this stage of Yau’s career, that the poet is in fact Chinese-American,” as if 1) a book with the name “John Yau” on the cover doesn’t tip a reader off, and 2) poems with titles like “Chinese Villanelle,” by an author named “John Yau” (and with long unkempt hair, to boot) didn’t suggest to the reader — both Asian American and not — that different interpretive strategies were in order. She is perhaps blinded by what she sees as a very Ashberian strain in Yau’s early poetry and art criticism, and since Ashbery isn’t Chinese American, she implies that Yau could not have been engaged in anything like issues of identity in these early works. In fact, Yau’s later poetry resembles Ashbery’s poems (such as “A Blessing in Disguise”) more than his earlier work, which has a much flatter tone and is never very abstract, and Yau’s critical approach to art is entirely dissimilar to Ashbery’s. Though it is perhaps unfair to point only to those parts of this review that are problematic — when she gets into the writing it is much less so, and quite nuanced — one must wonder what stands behind the following statement: “My own unease with these silk-and-pagoda images, however, is that they don’t quite grapple with the poet’s own conflicted identity, his own relation to an Asian-American community that interacts, in complex ways, with the sophisticated, urban New York poetry/art world in which Yau came of age.” While she is certainly free to claim that this poetry is trivial or irrelevant, it is unclear how a West Coast writer could be so aware of the “complex ways” of the Asian American community in New York, nor how to justify erecting such scales of content in avant-garde writing, as if, for example, Steve McCaffery would have to reflect the conflicted “identity” of an Englishman living in Toronto. It is possible Yau had nothing to do with the Asian American community in New York — so what? (All quotations from this review, originally published in 1997 in the *Boston Review*, were obtained from the journal’s website.)

responses are too detailed to reproduce here; in general, he discovers that assimilation involves the preserving of only those characteristics of Sansei culture that can be linguistically substantiated in the dominant society, but that conceptualization in “White” terms is not adequate for a range of Sansei emotions that are not replaced or replaceable. The essays themselves — which, in their earlier sections, are straightforward logical critiques of terms and propositions, but which eventually leap genres to take in the Wittgensteinian philosophical maxim, the short lyric, and the parable — trace a retreat from the norms of Western science into what one might consider a Buddhist distrust of knowledge and logic. Parts of the third essay seem to second-guess and even improve upon the discoveries of the radical sentence-based poetics of the 1970s:

5.0 I take what’s given to me and try to make do.

5.1 I dress as best I can. And smile a lot. Perhaps excessively concerned with appearances. Manners.

5.2 (I got shoes! You got shoes!)

6.0 I’m not as worried about Sansei as I am about life.

6.1 Do you understand me when I say this?

6.2 When I go to Pt. Peyes, I have to remind myself that it is not a part of my own body.

6.3 So I call the rain different kinds of names.

6.4 I am immersed in the world. All that is and was and will be. Rocky Road.

7.0 My preoccupation with ethnicity is strictly logical.

7.1 It’s a product of my class interests. (*JES*, 14:4, p. 56.)

Tanaka explains in the introduction to the fourth and last of the essays, titled “Shido, or the Way of Poetry,” that he has lost his funding from the Heike Society, and that his “work has been labeled ‘solipsistic,’ and ‘unprofessional,’ and I have been branded an ‘academic quack.’” Though he published a few more “essays” in *JES* over the next two years, he has since devoted his attentions entirely to poetry and visual work, such as the photo/poetry sequence “The Mount Eden Poems” — two of which are included in *Premonitions* and are the only things he has in print — each of which is dedicated to a different vintage wine from the Mount Eden Vineyards and accompanied by a strange, faux fashion shot of Melanie A. Sloomweg dressed, not very obviously, as “the kindergarten teacher, Madeline Giboin.” This sequence runs the gamut from absurdity to romance, from ritual to nihilism, and can be tied in somewhat with his notions of Sansei personhood in

terms of inter-ethnic relations (the role of the “White American woman,” for example), and yet it’s deceptively calm surfaces eventually lead to damning voids of meaning, suggesting the struggling logician concealed beneath them.

Lawson Fusao Inada, often cited as the first Asian American poet to have a complete book of poems published (*Before the War* 1971), is equally distrustful yet mindful of the social realist paradigms proffered as the most suitable for portraying history and the Asian American experience. He is probably the most accomplished lyricist in the Asian American tradition. “Since When As Ever More,” a process poem, stands out in *Breaking Silence*, an early anthology of Asian American poetry, for its suggestion of discursive relevance despite its meandering around determinate meanings. His early jazz-inspired poems, such as “The Great Bassist,” dedicated to Charles Mingus, convey an anger suggestive of Amiri Baraka in his Black Nationalist phase*, and yet their easy flow suggests a countering weight of Buddhist quietude, and include a grounding irreverence not entirely alien to Tanaka, as when in “The Great Bassist” he observes, “I’m in Levi’s now — / that doesn’t matter.” *Legends from Camp*, his second book (published 22 years after the first one) centers around his youth in the detention camps during the World War II, and is almost as much a hybrid work as Cha’s, not just formally but in terms of its openness to themes and manifestations of cultural synthesis. “Listening Images” (Inada 69), for example, is a series of haiku-like two-line poems, each of which is dedicated to a jazz musician, and the poems, in their accessing of American cultural experiences rather than some exoticized “Asian” experience, are probably truer to the spirit of haiku than the many tepid attempts at Orientalist nature poetry that characterizes the genre in America. The one titled “Ben Webster,” for instance, runs in its entirety: “Such fragile moss / In a massive tree.” Billie Holiday’s is simpler: “Hold a microphone / Close to the moon.” The poems of the title sequence are reminiscent of Langston Hughes in their poignant simplicity and attempt to eulogize a passing historical moment, though each of these fabled moments are underscored by the determinations of the society at large, as in “Legend of the Humane Society”: “This is as / simple / as it gets: / In a pinch / dispose / of your pets” (Inada 9). Inada is also a noted educator, and the primary motivation of *Legends* may be seen as didactic, but not to the world-at-large so much as to the generations of Japanese Americans to come who will need to know what happened in the camps — not through statistics, cloying declarations of “identity” or liberal apologia, but through the eyes of an artistically inclined, hyper-interested young boy. It is so unpretentious that it might be said to slip beneath the radar

*There is a complex interaction of Black Power aesthetics and radical Asian American jazz aesthetics that is worth investigating in its own right. As Inada’s writing would suggest, it was a fecund interaction.

of one looking for grand theoretical gestures and displays of knowledge, blinding imagery and revelational rhetoric, but its tone, formal variety and accomplishment — not unlike that of another writer who markets in modesty on the fringes of the avant-garde, Ron Padgett — is convincing in portraying the mind of one who has found a sense of measure in a life of extremes.

The publication of Lew’s *Premonitions** brought to the attention of Americans the radically investigative writing of a number of Canadian writers, notably Roy Kiyooka, Fred Wah, Roy Miki and Gerry Shikatani. Kiyooka, who was primarily a visual artist until he published his first book of poems, “Kyoto Airs,” in his late-thirties, plays a similar role as Cha’s in the United States, being the most generative writer of the Asian Canadian tradition, and like her also sought to utilize visual elements in no secondary way in his work. *Pacific Windows*, his collected poem published in 1997 and edited by Miki, traces a compelling yet mostly hidden literary career (he self-published in editions of less-than-fifty most of his later sequences) from the relatively understated “Kyoto Airs,” through several literary-visual projects such as “StoneDGloves” and “The Fontainebleau Dream Machine” and on to his dynamic later poems, which collaged an extremely wide range of writing styles to create nexuses of meanings that are both boldly stated yet void of determinates. With an ego that can only be compared to Whitman’s in its breadth, generosity, and in its libidinous capacity to incorporate and innovate new forms, he drew from a wide range of influences, seeming at times to be a footloose, rather Shakespearian Basho (most notably in parts of “Wheels: A Trip thru Honshu’s Backcountry”), at others the grand magister of ontological play in the manner of Stevens (“The Pear Tree Pomes,” which starts with an address to “Credences of Summer”), and, in “Fontainebleau” — which includes several Ernst-like collages by Kiyooka along with stanza-length captions — a writer/artist with all the agonistic counter-systemic thrust of Blake but with an analytic and reifying view of the dream/death longings of the Surrealist project. Christian Bök likens the effect of this last work to the phenomenon of picnolepsy, “in which a perceptual discontinuity requires a sort of conceptual continuity, since the special effects of kinesic realism rely upon periodic lapses of attention at a constant speed of movement” (Bök 25). Eva-Marie Kröller, in a compelling interpretation of the visual historical overlays of the sequence, writes in an aside

*Not unlike much literature that was produced on the margins, the history of Asian American poetry is one marked by several important anthologies, but for reasons of space, their impacts, range of contents and situations of publication will not be considered here. A shortlist includes: *Breaking Silence* (New York: Greenfield Review Press, 1983), *Chinese American Poetry: An Anthology* (Washington: U of Washington P, 1991), and *The Open Boat: Poems from Asian America* (New York: Anchor Books, 1993), which, edited by Garrett Hongo, mostly focused on the prize-winners, big names (Maxine Hong Kingston, for example), and the most conservative strands of younger writing.

that it contributes to an “exploring of the surrealist and dadaist intertexts in English-Canadian literature, an area which has, unlike its Quebec counterpart, remained largely unexplored so far” (Kröller 48), suggesting that Kiyooka had, in his plunge into the depths of consciousness, hit upon certain aspects of Canadian nationhood that may have, for political reasons, remained largely hidden. Discourse is, unfortunately, forced to talk around the project when it comes to totalizing meanings. The following excerpt, which, like each poem, rests atop one of the collages as a sort of explanation, is replete with poignant, suggestive quick edits

sifting the Rune/s for

the Behemoth of Speech: the absolute truth of
 those huge white tusks curving in the moonlight marsh
 a million years ago, today. searching the Sahara
 for the Algebra-of-Awe Rimbaud wept when he stumbled
 on them in front of the pygmy king's palace. the impossible
 death of Chairman Mao on late night television. nuclear
 frisson. Hermann Goring & Separatism. on the
 tusk of a dream i beheld the Elephant on the promenade:
 his inflamed ear thrums the mammalian silences

the 8th frame hides

the real pigeon shit spattered on the back of a bronze Napoleon

(Kiyooka 117)

Language is a ruin/rune, a rebus of sorts, which resonates with the ecstasy of an all-encompassing truth, an “Algebra-of-Awe,” perhaps the hermetic vision of eternal interrelations, but which, in the end, points, even in its encapsulated and emasculated present — “Chairman Mao on late night television” — towards “a million years ago, today.” This excerpt aptly demonstrates the syntactic quality of Kiyooka’s writing — singular capitalization of certain nouns, never-capitalized “i”s and first words of sentences, for example — that, as Miki writes in his afterword to the collected edition, has both a transformative yet generative content. “It was in the intimacy of the bond between mother and child that RK would also come to inhabit the imagination of his ‘mother tongue’ which would shape the parameters of poetic language — the ‘inglish’ with the lowercase ‘i’

which he distinguished from ‘English,’ the dominant language of what was for him an anglo-centric norm” Kiyooka, 304). Kiyooka’s life was completely uprooted during the Canadian internment of Japanese in 1941, as Miki writes: “Overnight, the transparent signs of childhood became the opaque space of state control, a machinery that homogenized his ‘Kiyooka’ name in a system of codes in which the ‘i’ of his consciousness became a body ‘of the Japanese race’ — the nomenclature used to register, fingerprint, and revoke the rights of innocent people.” In a sense, Kiyooka’s paranoiac, individualistic method in his “Dream Machine” — whose major motif is the hot-air balloon, which paradoxically both signifies dream perspective as well as panoptic state observation, as Kröller notes — can be seen as an attempt to force the fissures in the monolith of governmental power, meeting the opacities of control with those of ellipsis. Importantly for Miki and Canadian Asian poetics in general, Kiyooka assembled out of the myriad arenas of language, a sort of hybrid idiom — more “Zen” and more “surreal” than O’Hara’s, to parse Ashbery’s famous comment — that on the one hand was “mastered” by a constraining, implacable ego (“that irresistible / raga-of-longing that droned through me / riddling my psyche . . . / had to be lanced before i could begin to sing,” as he wrote in “Gotenyama” [Kiyooka, 229]) but which, nonetheless, never gave ground to what he considered empty in the historical context of the millennia, the “dung hill mind,” as he called it in “Struck from the Heat of a Cold December Sun” (Kiyooka 179). Kiyooka’s work, not unlike Blake’s, bedevils the editorializing mind with its confident transgressions and trickster challenges to enact conformity.

One quality of the generation of Asian Canadian poets that follow Kiyooka is that they have found ways to theorize issues of agency in minority discourses while never sacrificing the technically innovative, resistant qualities of postmodern praxis. Fred Wah, whose early poetry stemmed from a deep engagement with the New American poetics of Olson and Creeley, with whom he studied in Buffalo in the 1960s, synthesizes in his essay “Speak My Language: Racing the Lyric Poetic,” issues of linguistic variance or “othering” with those of the racialized subject. Commenting on statements by the Nicaraguan poet Margaret Randall and the Quebecois poet Nicole Brossard, he writes:

Randall [says] that the revolution will succeed on the common tongue of the people and Brossard [says] there will be no revolution until that (male-based) common tongue is troubled into change. Since then the range of political possibility in poetic language has pretty much dwelled between those two poles. I know which one I opt for but I’m always a little bothered by those race writers

who go for the other, that seemingly solid lyric subject ground I can't trust. I can't trust it since, for my generation, racing the lyric entails racing against it; erasing it in order to subvert the restrictions of a dominating and centralising aesthetic. ("Speak")

With a few exceptions, Asian American poets have not been the leaders in discussing linguistically innovative poetics among or for ethnic writers*, for reasons that are too deep

* John Yau's long review of Eliot Weinberger's anthology *American Poetry Since 1959: Innovators & Outsiders* (Marsilio Publishers, 1993), published in the *American Poetry Review* (March/April 1994) pp. 45-54, represents what is probably the first attempt by an Asian American writer to address issues that have haunted poets attentive to the inheritance of literary modernism, hence suggesting a basis for a cross-cultural poetics that seeks to find the fissures in literary constructs centered around Orientalist perceptions of the "Other". Unfortunately, Yau's approach in the essay is seriously flawed, as he attempts to apply the methods that he uses so well in his poetry — great leaps of association, a certain vitriol, the flat statement of the obvious when it is not obvious, etc. — in the forum of a wide-ranging, pointed critique that relies on acts of close reading. Yau hangs much of the early part of the essay on an attack on Pound, but primarily through the prism of a statement by Eliot. As Yau writes, "According to T.S. Eliot, it was Pound who established 'Chinese poetry for our time.'" In the next sentence, Yau writes: "[W]hat helped Pound to invent Chinese poetry for the West..." The difference between "establish," which suggests permanence of approach, and "invent," which suggests that what Pound created was essentially false, are enormous; the same distinction can be made for "our time," which suggests relativity, and the "West," which suggests a sort of monolithic, unchanging whole. Eliot actually wrote, in his introduction to the *Selected Poems*, that Pound "invented Chinese poetry for our time," also writing that "each generation must translate for itself," leaving very much open the possibility that "translation" may take turns away from the sort of colonialist ethos that Yau reads into *Cathay*. (Spivak's translations and theories come to mind.) Eliot could just have easily said Pound "invented Anglo-Saxon poetry for our time," or that he "invented Anglo-Greek-Chinese poetry for our time," all of which he did. Yau's contention, because of similarities that he sees in two very short poem/translations that Pound made in 1913 and 1954, that "Pound's vision of the Chinese didn't change very much" is really quite unfounded, not only because of Pound's translations of complete Confucian works such as *The Unwobbling Pivot* and his use of Chinese philosophy in his political vision, but because most of Pound's translations that appear in the anthology resemble his early versions of Troubadour poetry more than *Cathay*, which was an experiment in a long-form imagism (compare "Clear as a stream her modesty / As neath dark boughs her secrecy / reed against reed / tall on slight / as the stream moves left and right" from his late *Confucian Odes* to the short poem "Alba" in *Personae*). This chain of observations leads Yau to claim, "To Pound, the Chinese were born losers. They knew how to maintain their heroic dignity amid a whirlwind of chaos and loss." Pound — as most readers of him know — thought the same thing about Wyndham Lewis, not to mention the Anglo-Saxons and Greeks. The entire review — which is accurate in many ways, especially concerning the exclusion of Gertrude Stein and her "instistence on difference," the limited view of African American poetry and twisted view of women's poetry conveyed in the book, the inclusion of writers centered around the magazine *Sulfur*, the politics of Robert Kelly's poem "Sleeping with Women," and his statement that "it's as if Weinberger's anthology stopped in 1979, rather than the early 1990s" — is based on this link between Pound and colonialism that is never clearly established. Yau might have fared better had he been attentive to the paradoxes of Pound's project, as Charles Bernstein was in his essay in *A Poetics*, "Pounding Fascism." Nonetheless, the review achieved what it set out to do, which was to be a *happening* in literature that more-or-less collapsed the view that twentieth century poetry is basically the story of white male European or American poets with a few hangers-on, presenting instead a tradition — or series of traditions — that includes a wide range of contexts and agendas, many of which

to go into here, but probably have to do with the institutionalization of Asian American writing through the mechanisms of the oppositional "Movement" literatures that took place in the States which occluded formal concerns, and which left those on the periphery with no real audience to address. As Wah writes later in his essay, "Social and cultural production has, in recent years, appropriated the figure of the racialized writer as a measure of containment and control," and he advocates a sort Janus-like looking-both-ways in his attitude toward the lyric, such that "a racialized lyric, caught in the hinges of inherited poetic forms, might adopt an ambiguous regard to both lyric interference and lyric convention in order to recuperate, even, the agency of linguistic choice" ("Speak"). For Wah, all forms of excess, incorporation, and general eclecticism have political content, and his statements on the exercising of linguistic "choice" are born out in his wide-ranging work. The poems of *Mountain* (1967) spill down the page as they mimetically place the self amidst the flux of nature as much as the lyric amidst language ("Hey our ice your ice / it hides / moves and slides [. . .]/ flower out in the lakes of my eyes shimmering Kootenai waters green [. . .]" [Wah, *Selected*, 28]) while formally more varied poems like "Cruise" and *Pictograms from the Interior of B.C.* speed through modes reminiscent of everything from Italian Futurism to Snyder-esque nature poetry, the latter sequence incorporating reproductions of actual prehistoric pictograms. Later ongoing sequences such as "Music at the Heart of Thinking," whose "method of composition is the practice of negative capability and estrangement I've recognized for many years, through playing jazz trumpet, looking at art, and writing poetry" (*Music*, preface), the "ArtKnots" (short lyric poems inspired by art exhibits) and the series of "Utinaki," based on a Japanese form in which he combines lyric, dated prose entries and page spacialization to create fields of paratactic meaning, convey, or rather trace, the thematically nomadic, unbounded "I" as it moves between the cultures and geographies of Canada. For Wah, meaning is "something that is strangely familiar, not quite what we expect, but familiar, is present. That quick little gasp in the daydream, a sudden sigh of recognition, a little sock of baby breath. Writing into meaning starts at the white page, nothing but intention" (*Alley* 5). His poem "ScreeSure Dancing," one of his most formally challenging works, is almost a manifesto for this poetics:

thoughts different
sky's all animals, all
paper, all chalk. Our

are informed or entirely shaped by the experience of being the "Other".

writing as the tableaux
 anamorphous = of voyage
 river cliffs forgetting

She danced the strict linguistic sense.
 babbled bavardage fingerpainted thick
 memoclouds in the darkening sky

h_{om}^{om}e

That's the secret
 ticket
 to silence
 na (frame) na's notation

(*So Far* 10)

Not unlike Kiyooka (and the influential Canadian poet bpNichol), Wah's poetry suggests the nexus where a Mallaremean poetics of the sign-as-mind meet the proprioceptive poetics of an Olson, in which language was a medium whose message was "projective" of the self. Because of his awareness of these myriad strands, and his dedication to a "negative capability," Wah's work has grown and transformed such that his later poetry, collected in *So Far*, even approaches the status of language-centered writing, but meets head-on transparent, formally fluid "Utanaki." In this way, Wah's statements on the lyric expand to include the different degrees of opacity that language could be said to possess, so that it is not just a vertical axis of the lyric-then and the lyric-now that is traversed, but the vertical axis of the borderless language-centered lyric and the emphatic lyric of a closed subjectivity.

Space precludes a more detailed investigation of the Canadian poets, but two important figures are Roy Miki and Gerry Shikatani. Miki, former editor of the journal *West Coast Line*, has written extensively on the poetics of Williams and bpNichol among others, and was a major figure in the Japanese Canadian redress settlement on September

22, 1988. His essays "May I See Your ID? Writing in the 'Race' Codes That Bind" (which contains a fuller exploration of Kiyooka's poetics) and "Asiarcy: Making Space for Asian Canadian Writing," are radical statements of policy for those writers who (as he states in "Asiarcy") choose to "escape the temptations of power relations that govern what gets to be judged of 'national significance' and of 'consequence' — reinforced as they are by an elaborate system of awards, rewards, media privileges, canonization, and ultimately, institutionalization." Unlike Tanaka, whose attitude toward "community" was always through the problematic prism of a "Movement" philosophy and a high concern for the social sciences, Miki operates from within the community, while being aware of the pressures for conformity from outside it. "The dominant values outside come to censure, repress, or otherwise propagandize the inside," he writes, emphasizing that race writing should use the "baffled textual screen" that Deleuze and Guattari describe and call "deterritorialization," which, in Miki's words, is "a disturbed use of language that foregrounds its surface as a conflicted space" ("Asiarcy" 145). Miki's poems collected in *Random Access File*, with its paragrammatic detonations of "inglish," fulfill this call. Shikatani, a very different poet than Miki (indeed, he is from the opposite coast), has explored every venue of experimental poetics, including sound collage (often influenced by the Japanese language) and concrete poetics (his beautiful "Our Nights in Perugia" avoids the obviousness of intention that plagues this type of poetry by actually being visually compelling). His recent book *Aqueduct: Poems and Texts from Europe 1979-1987*, a mammoth 406-page collection of sometimes ephemeral, sometimes grandiose writings, falls in a peculiar tradition of Poundian poetic projects by racially marginalized North American writers who travel in Europe, which includes Clarence Major's long work from his voyages in Venice, *Surfaces and Masks*. Probably *Aqueduct's* most salient characteristics are its size, the extraordinary formal variety and mastery, and the often transparent, open quality of the writing — that is, it becomes, by being transparent yet inabsorbable because of its size, a single statement on memory, not just of one man's trip to Europe, but of the idea of an approach to a European sojourn, which used to be seen (in the *Bildungsromanen* of Henry James) as a necessary step in one's maturity. Interestingly, one loses any sense of the racial in the author, Europe providing, perhaps, the ultimate escape hatch from the "race codes that bind" and paradigms of reading and writing "race." As Shikatani writes in "Flight: Geography": "continuous, a map / with these fingers / holding black pen / a period in flight, a / moment repeating out / & in / a design / in time, in / the flurry of wings."

* as reprinted in *Premonitions*, pp. 263-65

(Shikatani 47).^{*} As with Cha, the concern with time and the ephemeral nature of consciousness lead to inevitable critiques of meaning in which writing itself is but a trace of darkness on a white screen.

There are several younger poets who have already made impacts on the literary scene, having published either first books, important essays or selections of work in anthologies or journals. Barry Masuda's interest in the uprooting of language ranges from Language-like razing of normative speech and grammar ("Local Cyborg" begins "words distend homicides / Cindy Sherman hosts 24 blowfly pupa / nestle in my decomposing eyes / cannot see how passion's / corpse preserved in cryogenic culture / wanders aimlessly through Ala Manoa"[†]) to the hot discourse in Hawai'i over the "local" and pidgin writing that has wandered into the academic sphere: "Begin graduate school on the west coast to theorize 'da local,' leaving righ in da middle of da bes' 'oama run in four-five yehs, but hard fo' get job at UH if you no leave UH, 'ah?" he writes in "Holoholo Style" (Masuda 29) As issues of "non-normative" language and languages previously viewed as "dialects" are viewed as subversions and critiques of centrality[‡], writers like Masuda — who in particular seems to be aware of the global repercussions of the gestures of pidgin — will play a central role in synthesizing the "local," the "cyborgian," the language-centered and the lyric subject in their work.

The first book by Sianne Ngai, *Criteria*, was published in 1998, and is a cross between a guidebook in subversions of panoptic totalities, a primer on reading practices, along with (in the line of Berssenbrugge) a reduction of the act of perception to its component parts. "The project now breaks ground for / video monitoring density — consecrated by guardian angel's password / 'if the brick wants to enter the wall let it join'" (*Criteria* 33), she writes in "Fill," shifting effortlessly through frames of personal, political, economic and virtual realities.

E Kim's sequence, "Technical Translations After Robinson After Wang Wei," challenges normative modes of translation by running them through the grill of the

^{*}Shikatani has also published *Selected Poems and Texts 1973-1988* (Aya Press, 1989) among other books, and coedited an anthology of Japanese Canadian poetry, *Paper Doors* (Coach House Press, 1981).

[†]as reprinted in *Premonitions*, p. 179.

[‡]These themes are developed most interestingly in Charles Bernstein's, "Poetries of the Americas," published in *Modernism/Modernity* 3:3 (1996), pp. 123. "The cultural space of this impossible America is not carved up by national borders or language borders but transected by innumerable overlaying, contradictory or polydictory, traditions and proclivities and histories and regions and peoples and circumstances and identities and families and collectivities and dissolutions — dialects and idelects, not National Tongues; localities and habitations, not States." This essay can also be downloaded at the journal's website.

Microsoft spellchecker, a process that critiques not just the local of "Wang Wei" but the local of the translatores which purports to convey it. "Law gnome sits arrears emote whiskey / — lilt swallow ginned emboss — sit dó / eruptive and in ere evil lay down Dixie? / aerobe ere saw that mix of yen every to," runs one quatrain, razzing language and the tradition in a way reminiscent of Harryette Mullen's *Muse and Drudge*, but with a systemic wedge.

Hoa Nguyen, whose poems were included in the recent *An Anthology of New (American) Poets*, is part of a group of younger poets attempting to reconfirm the efficacy of pure lyricism through the emotive, free-associative speech of later Beat poetics, and has consequently done some interesting work in forms, such as the pantoum: "Look different suede eyes / flower eyes will not stay forever / O fragrant temper trying to control / the 10 thousand things (bugs, the sun / flowers, eyes) will not stay forever / Run in a field of fronds [. . .]" (Nguyen 75).

Hung Q. Tu, a Californian poet who has written much but published little, operates, in his suite "Quarto to Octano," through a series of permutations on an initial sequence of stanzas to uncover a concentricity of expanding meanings, moving from the site-specific occasion of the initial poem toward a global denunciation of the mechanisms of capital. The first line of the last stanza of each is "copies!copies!copies!," and the entire last stanza of the sixth poem runs: "copies!copies!copies! / sabotage — the finest art / *how the parentheses flourish* / feigning fainter still fink / the honesty between dog and master / read between lines the sex as sniffing / simulacrum carpet polling" (Tu 121), each line — like that final, taking Baudrillard, Vietnam and the Presidential elections in a turn — hanging on the hyper-mediated irreality of the historical moment.

A writer who is not so "young," who has yet to attain the attention she deserves, is the Canadian poet Jam Ismail, who spends half of each year in Hong Kong and half in Vancouver. Excerpts from her sequence "Scared Texts" (or, alternately, "Sacred Texts") were a standout in terms of literary exploration in the 1991 anthology of Canadian Chinese writing, *Many-Mouthed Birds*, edited by Bennett Lee and Jim Wong-Chu. Indeed, in a development of Joycean stream-of-consciousness narrative, "Sacred Texts" is a many-mouthed plethora of dialogue and narrative moments: "hibiscus mentioned that mushrooms are good for cholesterol / jaggery scoffed: what d'you mean, good for! / chestnut dehiscid: she means good against, good against cholesterol. / flame-o'-the-forest said to jaggery: we know you speak better english & that you know what we mean" (Ismail 124). A later sequence, "from the Diction Air," takes accumulation of a diasporic

experience deep into the language game to produce a multivalent, part-narrational and part-lyrical autobiographical riff — a sort of *Prelude* for the new order:

：“didi” meant big sister (bengali), little brother (cantonese), DDT (english). to begin with, english had been at home, with cantonese & hindustani. one of the indian languages, the kid felt in bombay, which british hongkong tried to colonize. descended on all sides from the Idiosyncrasy, the kid disdained grammar class, refused to parse, opted to be remote parsee.

:at school wrote her first poem, *DAMON NOMAD*, (damon nomad). & what mean while was writing her, what *nom de womb?* reverb with ‘47 (indian, pakistani), ‘48 (koreas), ‘49 (chinas, germanies), ‘54 (vietnams).

：“hey,” he bellowed, pants down in quebec, “bring in some english mags, i can’t shit in french!” claude nearly kicked him in the anglo. macauley’s minute & roosevelt’s second unearthed in canadian library digs, chattel feared english had him in its grip, spooked for, punish.*

As Fred Wah writes in “Speak My Language,” “the proximity of the autobiographical realism is still only deflected momentarily by a reading of syntactic and punctuative gestures,” such that this text is a negotiation of lyric subjectivity and disruptive grammar. Ismail, like Kiyooka, Cha and Masuda, are true “interstitial” poets of the “English” language — perhaps the heirs of the world citizenry attributed to Coleridge, and implicit in the later Joyce — as they are privy to a great deal of first-hand cultural knowledge, sitting in on the Senates of linguistic negotiation, while aware yet wary not only of the call of academic discourse (perversely leveling while attempting to be inclusive) but the entire Western poetic tradition, its scales of value and its hunger for conformity.

As Allen Ginsberg may have been wont to ask: “Does a tomato have an angel?” In postcolonial terms, “angel” might be exchanged for “nation” or “geneology,” and “tomato” with the externally racialized “body.” A Kim suggests, even a “tomato” is open for interpretation, and scientific paradigms determine its final content perhaps more than its singular features. As the variety of writing considered in this essay demonstrates, there is no single thread of discourse to which an Asian American writer feels obliged to confirm or

* as cited in Fred Wah’s “Speak My Language.” The original text, like most of Ismail’s work, is self-published.

argue, as there may have been in the early 1970s when Tanaka was writing his “Metaphysical Foundations” series, but rather a system of discourses which only become abhorrent to the racialized writer once the progressive liberalism of its purported content reduces to abstraction (or distraction) the singularity of the writing itself — a curious position, indeed. In this sense, it is probably not surprising that a recent controversial critique of the politics of desire, titled “Raw Matter: A Poetics of Disgust,” which doesn’t consider ethnic discourse in any way directly, was written by an Asian American writer, Sianne Ngai. As she writes early in the essay, “postmodernity . . . and pluralism are virtually synonymous,” and moves on to offer another critical and reading model which, she concludes, is only destined to self-destruct:

What makes disgust a viable theoretical approach to innovative writing is thus its negative potentiality as a figure of exclusion, the radical externalization it enacts in facilitating the subject’s turn away from the object. In this manner, the possibility of disgust as a poetics resides in its resistance to pluralism and its ideology of all-inclusiveness which allows it to recuperate and neutralize any critical discourse emphasizing conflict, dissent, or discontinuity. What makes disgust particularly strategic in organizing and informing a critical approach to contemporary writing is that *disgust thwarts seductive reasoning*. I will also argue that *disgust thwarts close reading*, the generally unquestioned, seemingly irrefutable practice criticism can’t seem to do without. Lastly, as an operation of exclusion or externalization, always turning away from its object, *disgust thwarts its own use as a critical paradigm*. (“Raw Matter” 102)

This echoes Canadian poet Jeff Derksen’s essay on Fred Wah’s “alienethnic” poetics called “Making Race Opaque,” a critique of Canadian state-sanctioned multiculturalism in which he observes: “Writing that focuses on a polyvalent sign, that utilizes this sign strategically, is *nonrepresentational* — but not culturally meaningless as it is sometimes described as — because it doesn’t represent hybrid subjectivities in a manner that is assimilable by multicultural discourse” (Derksen 76).⁸ The range of Asian American writing, which also

⁸ Derksen’s essays on the multicultural situation in Canada are invaluable in terms of providing an image of the meshing of classes “avant garde” and “minority/community” concerns, easily stepping over a monolithic sense of a “white European” that has hindered such discourse in the U.S. He writes of Wah’s “alienethnic” poetics

These poetics are both oppositional and differential: oppositional in the sense of engaging an avant-garde position of “an attack on the status of art in bourgeois society (Burger, 49) as a means to carve out a social function for writing and to articulate unofficial subjectivities, and differential in the sense

includes an activist-oppositional strand — feminist, lesbian, working class, ethno-centric — most strongly represented in the 1982 anthology *Breaking Silence* (but which wasn't nearly as formally exploratory as the writers discussed here), is full of instances in which the "subjective I" is site of negotiations that rely on no stable paradigm for its enactment, but which, on the other hand, must engage in a state of covert action due to the panoptic gaze of discourse that utilizes its terms for alternative ends. This isn't to say that Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge had reached her particular poetics via a process of eluding "presence" and hence assimilation, nor that non-ethnic writers do not also feel the brunt of mollifying interpretation — Ngai's essay, after all, was founded on a reading of writers as wide ranging as Deanna Ferguson, Bruce Andrews, Kevin Davies, and Dorothy Trujillo Lusk. However, Asian American writers, probably more than not — whether they are "up" on postmodern theory, or are simply going on their nerve — are often forced into a consideration of the Western literary tradition, especially the "avant-garde," in a peculiar way due to a vague sense of membership in a racially defined community that often is not loyal to the various binaries mentioned earlier in this essay, especially that one that sees no negotiation between subjectivity and the "play" of language. In this sense, "neutralization" of the past through the freeing of the sign is vexed operation for many Asian American poets, even one like Tan Lin who writes in a recent essay "Forgetting a word is among the most beautiful things that can happen to the human brain. The dumb poem is the most beautiful poem" (interview 40). However, as writers like Ismail, Masuda, Wah and Yau show, this loosening of the grip of the sign created an open space for dialogic cultural negotiation or "deterritorialization" that wasn't a clear option for, say, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, or for the pre-1970s writers collected in the anthology of early Asiann American poetry *Quiet Fire*. The idioms and methods of writing, not to mention the *art*, that will erupt from this space are what we're looking for.

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that it is a poetics that recognizes difference without integrating it grammatically into a larger unit such as national identity. (72)

*The author notes that the bibliography was constructed in 1999, and readers should check other sources for more recent publications.

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Brent Hayes Edwards

THE RACE FOR SPACE: SUN RA'S POETRY

"I'm dealing with equations." — Sun Ra

IN JULY 1969, WHEN THE UNITED STATES WAS EXCITEDLY AWAITING the flight of the spacecraft Apollo 11, ferrying Neil Armstrong to the moon, *Esquire* magazine published a half-whimsical survey. Writer William H. Honan, in a piece called "Le Mot Juste for the Moon," commented on the symbolic significance of the moon walk. Because space was the "final frontier" of human discovery, Honan concluded, Armstrong would require (like Archimedes, Vasco da Gama, Columbus, Stanley, and Alexander Graham Bell before him) an appropriate phrase to pronounce as he took the first lunar steps—and so *Esquire* had asked contemporary popular figures for "Helpful Hints," proposed proclamations for the astronaut to deliver.

Most of the talking heads offered predictably heady pronouncements about the universal human significance of the First Step. Hubert Humphrey, for example, suggested that Armstrong entreat: "May the moon be a symbol of peace and cooperation among the nations of earth." Some were pithy or glib; thus Muhammad Ali: "Bring me back a challenger, 'cause I've defeated everyone here on earth." Many could not resist the boast that the event marked the victory of America in the so-called "Space Race" between the superpowers: "Forgive the intrusion, Ma'am. Don't smile so bitter / At good Yanks tidying up your Sputnik litter" (Robert Graves). But there, amidst the jingoism and utopianism, among names like Nabokov, Anne Sexton, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, William O. Douglas, Ed Koch, Timothy Leary, Bob Hope, Isaac Asimov, William Safire, George McGovern, Tiny Tim, Truman Capote, John Kenneth Galbraith, Marshall McLuhan, appeared "the space age jazz poet," Sun Ra, with what John Szwed calls a "cheery poem inaugurating the new age" (Szwed 275):