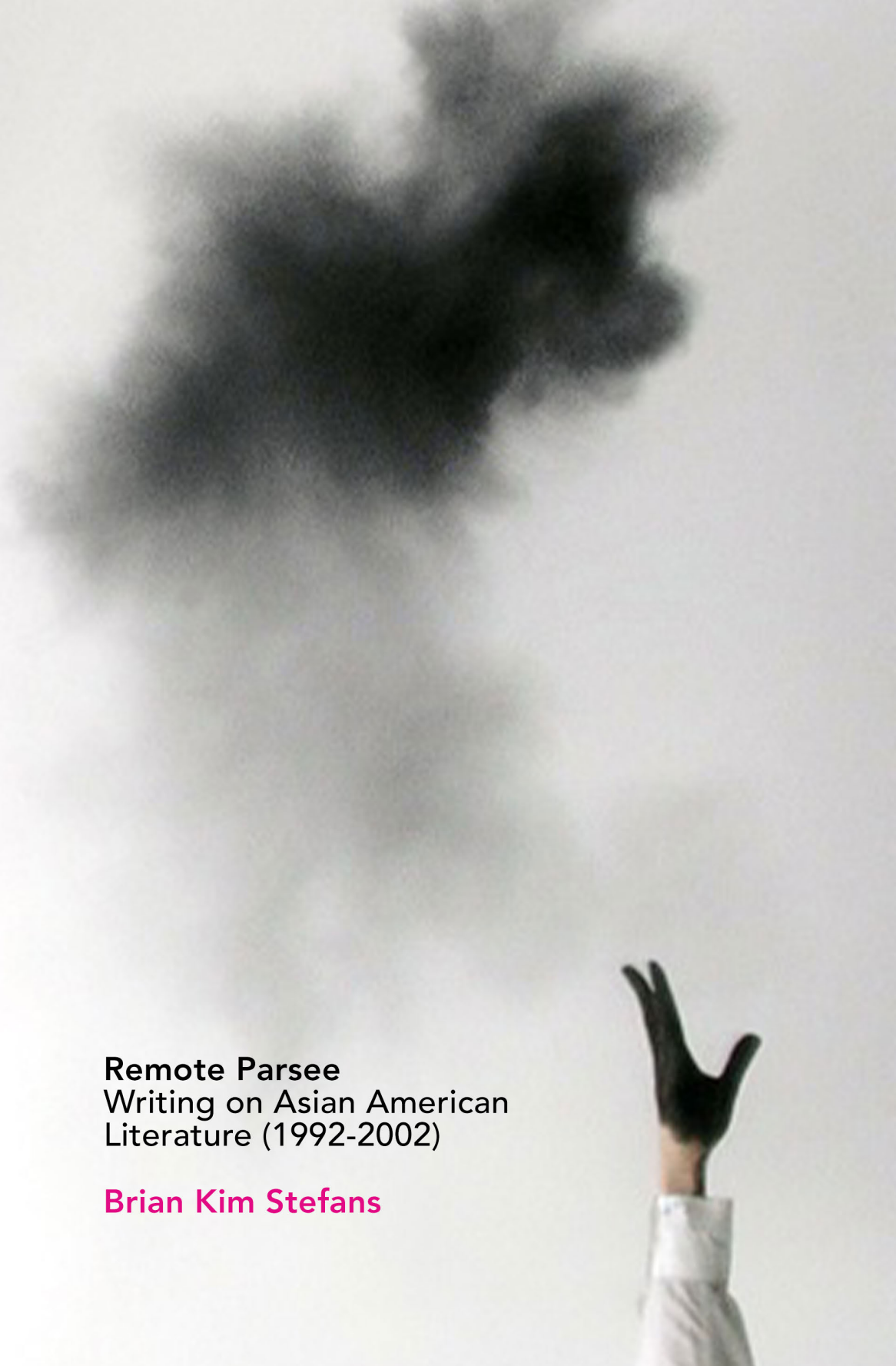

Remote Parsee
Writing on Asian American Literature (1992-2002)

Brian Kim Stefans

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Brian Kim Stefans

June 7, 2026

(draft)

Contents

Introduction

There is a peculiar condition that attaches to criticism written on the move — written, that is, by someone who is also in the process of becoming. The essays and reviews collected in *Remote Parsee: Writing on Asian American Literature (1992–2002)* were composed during one of the more restless and consequential decades in the history of American poetry, by a poet who was himself arriving at his own aesthetic at the same time he was attempting to map someone else's. To read them now is to encounter a mind in productive argument with a field that had not yet finished forming.

The decade in question was a charged one for Asian American letters. The early 1990s saw the publication of several landmark anthologies — Garrett Hongo's *The Open Boat* (1993), Walter K. Lew's *Premonitions* (1995), Jessica Hagedorn's *Charlie Chan Is Dead* (1993) — each one a different wager about what Asian American literature was for and who it was speaking to. These were not merely publishing events; they were interventions in an ongoing argument about aesthetic value, political obligation, and the relationship between artistic form and communal identity. That argument had deep roots. It stretched back at least to the combative manifestoes of the *Aiiieeeee!* anthologies in the 1970s, which established a canon organized around themes of cultural reclamation and masculine assertion, and forward to the growing presence of writers — John Yau, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Myung Mi Kim, Mei-mei Berssenbrugge — whose work could not be easily assimilated to that model.

Into this argument the essays here intervene from an unusual angle. The author is a poet steeped in the New American Poetry, in Language poetics, in the avant-garde traditions running from Gertrude Stein through Charles Olson through the New York School — and he brings that formation to bear on a body of literature that had often been evaluated by different, more sociologically oriented criteria. The central tension in these pages is not between Asian American writing and some external "mainstream," but between two competing theories of what literature can do within Asian American culture itself: one that sees poetry and fiction as instruments of collective representation, and another that sees formal innovation — opacity, fragmentation, the derangement of ordinary syntax — as itself a political act, perhaps the most powerful one available to a writer working within a language that has historically been used to contain and diminish them.

This is not an abstract debate in these pages. It runs through every review, animating the praise and the occasional impatience in equal measure. The earliest pieces, written for small journals in 1992 and 1993, find the critic testing his bearings against a rapidly shifting literary landscape. The opening essay — published in the short-lived *2nd Generation* — reviews four books at once: Lawson Fusao Inada's *Legends from Camp*, Jessica Hagedorn's *Danger and Beauty*, John Yau's *Edificio Sayonara*, and the Hongo anthology. The range of the books sets the terms for everything that follows. Of Inada — often cited as

the first Asian American poet published in a complete collection by a major press — the essays return again and again, finding in his minimalist "legends" of the Japanese American internment a model for how formal restraint can carry historical weight without collapsing into documentary. "In creating his mythology of the internment camps," the review notes, "rather than construct an epic narrative centered around himself, he creates a sense of grandeur out of short 'legends.'" Inada's haiku-like elegies for jazz musicians — "Hold a microphone / Close to the moon," he writes of Billie Holiday — suggest what a genuinely hybrid poetics, rooted simultaneously in the Japanese tradition and the Black American avant-garde, might look like. He is, as the title essay later puts it, the "Langston Hughes-meets-Guillaume Apollinaire of Asian American poetry."

The reviews of Hagedorn and Yau are equally revealing for what they disclose about the critic's own aesthetic commitments. Hagedorn gets credit for a poetry "immune from the bland political dogmatism that can mar poems attempting to convey the anger of minority experience" — immune because her humor and her acceptance of contradiction short-circuit the moralizing impulse. Yau is praised for something more technically specific: his capacity to "construct monologues which control paradox as much as they surrender themselves to confusion," poems in which "personality" seems to reside in the poem itself rather than behind it, as if language were behaving according to its own nature with the poet merely present as a kind of medium. The early review of Yau's *Edificio Sayonara* already contains the seed of the long analysis in the title essay: the idea that Yau's surrealism is not decorative but structural, a way of staging the split between the racialized body and the literary tradition that claims to transcend it.

The review of Hagedorn's anthology *Charlie Chan Is Dead* cuts in a different direction, finding much of the collected fiction too smoothly comfortable, its "cool irony" too easily achieved — a "thoughtless listing of detail, colorless mechanical dialogue." The sharpness here, uncharacteristic of the reviewing-as-boosterism that often marks minority literary culture, reflects a conviction that runs through all these essays: that literary quality and political necessity are not the same thing, and that confusing them does a disservice to both. An unpublished essay on Hongo's introduction to *The Open Boat* develops this point at length, taking issue with Hongo's tendency to measure the health of Asian American poetry by its absorption into institutional prestige — prizes, textbooks, appearances in the *New York Times Magazine*. "Recognition in it often signals the end, or the late middle-age, of a vital artistic movement," the essay argues, and suggests that what Hongo fails to account for is the difference between "the white reaction against the bourgeois" and "the minority reaction against the bourgeois," which the essay identifies as possessing a "true vitality" Hongo's framework cannot accommodate.

The section on Korean American poetry — first published in *Seoro Bulletin* in 1993 — is in some ways the most polemical piece in the collection,

challenging an earlier critic's sweeping claim that Korean American writers had "yet to dare the assumptions of language." Against this, the essay invokes Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee* and Younghill Kang's *East Goes West*, both then out of print, as evidence of an existing tradition of formal daring the critic had simply failed to read. The argument is less about any particular writer than about the critical paradigm itself — the sociological reading that evaluates literature primarily as testimony, and mistakes unfamiliarity with absence. The "only through a writer's association with these near-invisible properties in language," the essay insists, can the lived experience of racism and cultural dislocation be genuinely confronted — not through the surface politics of who the subject is, but through the deeper politics of how language itself is inhabited and troubled.

The epistolary exchange with the Canadian poet Fred Wah — published under the title "Philly Talk 7" — is the most intimate and theoretically sustained piece in the book, a long back-and-forth conducted by email in the lead-up to a joint reading in Philadelphia in 1998. Wah, who studied at Buffalo with Olson and Creeley and whose work the title essay later describes as finding a "nexus where a Mallarméan poetics of the sign-as-mind meets the proprioceptive poetics of an Olson," poses a set of questions about form, racialization, and the lyric that the letters turn over from every angle. The discussion touches on bpNichol, Steve McCaffery, Marjorie Perloff, Ron Silliman, and the differences between American and Canadian responses to Language poetry, with Wah suggesting that Canadian poets never felt the same imperative to "clean house" — to sacrifice the bodily, speech-based dimensions of poetry to the demands of linguistic self-critique — in part because the landscape and the "local" continued to provide syntactic grounding for the argument. The letters are full of the kind of thinking that doesn't survive polishing, and their unfinished, speculative quality is precisely their value.

The short reviews collected in the middle section of the book — published mainly in the *St. Mark's Poetry Project Newsletter* through the late 1990s — cover a remarkable range. Tan Lin's *Lotion Bullwhip Giraffe* is described as "completely postmodern — indebted to contemporaries, but not relying on distancing ironizations to declare its latecoming," a writing devoted "very much to fun, but which is learned and malleable." Pamela Lu's *Pamela: A Novel* is read as reducing its characters "to a series of gestures," its "impossibly long sentences" piling observation upon observation in a mathematical rigor that amounts to something like an anthropology of late-capitalist subjectivity. Myung Mi Kim's *Dura* is praised for synthesizing "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" — its list poems ("Swag drum / Inland filth / Surmise commodity / Anemic shed") offering the particulars of experience before any totalizing structure arrives to explain them. Sianne Ngai's *Criteria*, Frances Chung's posthumous *Crazy Melon*, Jose Garcia Villa's *The Anchored Angel*, Dominic Cheung's *Drifting*, and Hung Tu's

Verisimilitude all receive sustained attention — each review asking not what the work represents but what it makes possible.

The title essay — "Remote Parsee: A Grammar of Alternative Asian North American Poetry," originally published in the University of Alabama Press collection *Telling It Slant: Avant-Garde Poetics of the 1990s* (2001) — is the intellectual culmination of the collection, gathering a decade's worth of reading into an argument about the formal and political dimensions of experimental writing by Asian and Asian North American poets. It moves across a wide field: from the pioneering and half-forgotten Ronald Tanaka, whose late-1970s essays for the *Journal of Ethnic Studies* on "communication stress" as resistance anticipate Language poetics without having read it; to John Yau's migration from a "self-decimating Orientalism" toward a lyric subjectivity that treats the Self and the Other as "parallel agents"; to Mei-mei Berssenbrugge's long-lined phenomenological investigations in which the perceiving mind reduces its own agency to that of a camera lens; to the work of the Canadian writers — the visionary Roy Kiyooka, who assembled out of "an extremely wide range of writing styles" a hybrid idiom that confronted state power with the opacities of ellipsis, and Fred Wah, whose "alienethnic" poetics, as Jeff Derksen describes it, is "oppositional in the sense of engaging an avant-garde position" while "differential in the sense that it recognizes difference without integrating it grammatically into a larger unit such as national identity."

Central to the essay's argument is Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee*, which serves here as something like the vanishing point toward which many of the other writers converge without knowing it. Cha's book — flipping, in the essay's description, "from photographs of a Korean martyr to Mallarméan writings in both French and English, from diagrams of the inner workings of the throat to images of scribbled-over earlier versions" of the text itself — is read not as an experimental curiosity but as the fullest realization of what the essay calls the poetics of the "unreliable witness": a writing in which languages themselves, French as both the colonial tongue of Vietnam and the arbiter of Western knowledge, become a kind of content. The essay traces Cha's belated discovery by the Asian American critical establishment, quoting Elaine Kim's own retrospective confession that she had once sought in these literatures "unifying thematic threads and tidy resolutions," heedless of what was being excluded from that "homogenizing approach." Walter K. Lew, who recognized early the fecundity of Cha's techniques and whose editorial vision shaped *Premonitions* as something like a counteranthology — organized around "a wide range of rapidly juxtaposed languages, media, historical frameworks, motifs and rhetorical moods" — is given his due here as perhaps the single most important enabling figure for the alternative tradition the essay traces.

The title comes from the Vancouver poet Jam Ismail: "descended on all sides from the Idiosyncrasy, the kid disdained grammar class, refused to parse, opted to be remote parsee." It is a characteristically compressed image — the refusal to parse (to submit to grammatical authority, to be analyzed and cate-

gorized) expressed through the pun on *Parsee*, the Zoroastrian diaspora. The remote parsee is the one who cannot be parsed by the dominant system, who exists at an angle to every available identity. It is an apt emblem for the writers this book attends to most closely, and for the critical stance it embodies: engaged but eccentric, passionate but resistant to the settling of accounts that official criticism requires.

These are occasional pieces — reviews for small magazines, essays for literary journals, published between 1992 and 2002 — and they carry the virtues of that form: the pressure of a deadline, the sharpness that comes from having to make a case in a limited space, the intimacy of a writer addressing a presumed community of readers. They were written by someone who was simultaneously publishing his own poetry, translating Rimbaud, and absorbing the debates of the New York poetry world while remaining attentive to the specifically West Coast and pan-Pacific dimensions of Asian American literary production. They do not pretend to comprehensiveness. They are a record of sustained attention, over a decade, to a literature that was in the process of discovering what it could do — and, in the best moments, so is the criticism itself.

—Claude (Sonnet 4.6: High)
June 7, 2026, 3:11 pm
Los Angeles

Early Writing

An Open Invitation: Four New Books of Poetry

2nd Generation, 1992

At the heart of any discussion about Asian American culture will have to be some consideration about the state of Asian American art and literature. As it is, most considerations of Asian American literature have been made within sociological parameters, in which the work is subsumed under a broader theme, regardless of the strong individual accomplishments of the various authors. These past months have been good ones for Asian American poets, with new books by John Yau (*Edificio Sayonara*, Black Sparrow Press) Jessica Hagedorn (*Danger and Beauty*, Penguin Books), Lawson Fusao Inada (*Legends from Camp*, Coffee House Press) and the publication of the anthology *The Open Boat: Poems from Asian America* (Anchor Books), edited by Garrett Hongo. Each book, including the anthology, represents a distinct perspective on what one might call the· "way" Asian American poetry can or should be written. If a poet that has achieved a consistent, confident style can be said to be offering an option to the present vocabulary of how poems can be written, each of the poets mentioned above is doing that; the anthology, by being somewhat homogenous in content, also resounds with a single, unified and consistent voice (generally down-playing the contributions of the avant-garde) which is what the editor seems to have intended. The diversity of Asian American poetry—what it has to offer—is apparent in these books, and therefore deserves to be applauded.

*

Lawson Inada published his first book in 1971. *Before the War* was (you will hear this again) the first book of the work of a single Asian American poet published by a major firm. He has since then been an editor of the seminal anthologies *Aiiieeeee!* (1976), and of *The Big Aiiieeeee!* (1991). His voice is without a doubt one of the most distinctive, subtle and expressive of American poets today; he has not, consequently, been given his share of attention for it. The themes in his second book range from the Japanese internment camps of World War II, where he spent some of his childhood, to his life in jazz—getting Billie Holiday's signature, collaborating with Mal Waldron, his own work as a performer, and acquiring a "Blue Monk." His style is elliptical and sophisticated, and though it may seem to fall within the parameters of the standard narrative style of much contemporary poetry, his humor and sense of balance, of concision, lift his poems above it. In creating his mythology of the internment camps, for instance, rather than construct an epic narrative centered around himself, he creates a sense of grandeur out of short (mostly) "legends." The poem "The Legend of Lost Boy" begins:

Lost Boy was not his name.

He had another name, a given name—
at another, given time and place—
but those were taken away.

"The Legend of the Humane Society" runs in its entirety:

This is as
simple
as it gets:

In a pinch,
dispose
of your pets.

This mild tone, the innocent voice of a child, permits a subtle irony to play upon his words, and the disparate parts of the section contribute to a ritualistic atmosphere (like Yeats with his "Crazy Jane" poems) for the whole. Later, in the "Jazz" section, this fragmentation explodes in "Blue Monk (percussive)," which he explains that, to write it, he had to "jump right into the tune and the piano, and blow something from the inside out—percussive—particularly building around and repeating 'ricochet.'" This "ricochet" is made manifest in a sixty word series all beginning with the prefix "re-," culminating in the word "Repeating." Inada is a poet that often makes you ask "What is he doing?," but one who is never intimidating, who always extends the invitation that you come along.

*

Jessica Hagedorn's *Danger and Beauty* was published by Penguin this month following the success of her novel *Dogeaters*. As the title of her novel suggests, her humor is often sharp enough to be controversial, her attitude often bold enough that one can only wonder at how she manages to convey such a complexity of intense emotions through a poem. Many of these poems are, in fact, meant to be performed; Hagedorn, besides being the leader and lyricist for the Gangster Choir Band, is well-known as a playwright and a performance artist. Without making too many **dee 1 a rat i ans** about "what she writes about," her poems are generally confrontational, anti-establishment (of poets who "brag about the cultural impact of their role as arts administrators"), aggressive sexually, and sympathetic to the disenfranchised (epitomized in her character Bongong), to the abused and the furious who can "no longer tolerate contradiction":

hey girl, how long you been here? did you come with yr daddy in
1959 on a second-hand boat cryin' all the while cuz you didn't want
to leave the barrio the girls back there who wore their hair loose lotsa
orange lipstick and movies on sundays quiaop market in the morning,
yr grandma chewin' red tobacco roast pig? ... yeah, and it tasted good
—from "Motown\Smokey Robinson"

i mean when you're crazy
it seems like you should sing about it
all the time! but
sometimes i lose my voice
i get a sore throat
i get laryngitis of the soul
n nothing happens
who can stay crazy
with all this pressure?
—from "Easter Sunday"

The music, the rhythmic effect and the control of language in these poems, is obvious. She is by no means a "meditative" poet: she doesn't write pastorals from her twentieth story window about her childhood and nature. She may meditate, but often her expression is punctuated by a humor and energy (she resembles Ishmael Reed in this way) that brings her back into the harsh physics of the active world. One reads her poems knowing that the author has truly witnessed something, not the least of which is the recognition of her powers as a poet enough to drive one mad. She is therefore immune from the **b 1** and political dogmatism that can mar poems attempting to convey the anger of minority experience. Her acceptance of contradiction and the humor that she derives from this contradiction is present in most all of her work, and her personality is unique among poets today.

*

Another poet dealing with contradiction, often as if it were the status quo, is John Yau. He seems to have done the near impossible with his poetry: to pick up the tradition of surrealism where it left off (or where it was left off) and make it something vital and unique. A poet who found recognition within Asian American literary circles relatively later in his career, despite his reputation (which for some overshadows that of his poetry) as an art critic, Yau is an author who might seem distant because of the lack of standard Asian American themes in his work, but who is in fact a sensitive and inviting poet upon

closer reading. One of his great skills is in conveying sounds and sights which seem to accost the eye and ear as if directly from "reality."

> I was floating through a cross-section
> with my dusty wine glass, when she entered,
> a shivering bundle of shredded starlight.
> —from "Ghengis Chan: Private Eye I"

> Your words (are they yours or are they what I heard after
> you stopped speaking?) continue to ring inside the well,
> the column of cold air we sank into the earth.
> —from the series "Angel Atrapado"

The poem, one might say, substitutes the experience being expressed with the experience of its own language. Yau, in a similar way, has the ability to construct monologues which control paradox as much as they surrender themselves to confusion. His poems seem to represent personality as if the personality were that of the poem, rather than the poet—as if it were the nature of language to behave that way, and the poet were simply the voicebox, present at readings. His alliance with the dramatist is, therefore, specific—his poems actively construct the author as much as they deconstruct:

> You were crying and saying my name, but you weren't crying and what you were saying only resembled my name, a structure of echoing sound reverberating in the room shimmering above the harbor. We breathe this water, always the slipping away is here to accompany us to separate places w·i thin the room, on the bed, by the window. Someone inside said jump or fly, that voice again, a lulling music sweeping up toward the sky's hot blue walls. ·you were telling a story to me and to yourself, words directed toward the time when you were small and fit into the hands of others …
> —from the series "Each Other"

Apparent contradictions dissolve the poet's presence moment after moment. He is a bold voice in Asian American poetry, one that doesn't run against the grain, but rather informs it, and gives it a scope which is often avoided.

*

The Open Boat is a big book, and, like the complete title states, it is filled with poems from another place. One could never do justice to the diversity and ac-

complishment of the various poets in this book in a brief review such as this. It appears somewhat unfinished, however, as it seems not to have decided which poets should really be given much attention and which are merely active, good and consistent; the book seems too democratic. It is fairly complete survey, however, with most major Asian American poets represented (there are some notable exceptions), and the selections are primarily good. As well, it is a must-have for any writer interested in Asian American poetry; most of these poets, even those writing since the time of the *Breaking Silence* anthology of ten years ago, are still unknown outside of Asian American literary circles. There are many gems to be found in it. The complex of a heritage that is distant and yet immediate (Li-Young Lee's "The Cleaving,") the frustrations and paradoxes of being Asian in America (Hongo's "The Legend"), and the often inconclusiveness of Asian American experience is represented in a variety of voices mystical, political, adventurous. Eric Chock, in the anecdotal "Working Construction," con ludes near the end with lines that metamorphosize the machinery of the construction site to express a "poetic truth," conveyed with a fine languid music:

> We were like boys gathering our Tinkertoys,
> counting up how many we had of each piece,
> although, in reality, we didn't care
> cause we never got to construct our own fantasies.

The story of the construction site is lifted to a universal level, and this by reducing the machinery. Marylin Chin, in "Repulse Bay," makes an interesting visual pun that also alludes to the denial of creation, but in this case it is of speech:

> I saw a mussel hang
> On a shell's hinge: the sun
> Turned its left side brown
> What remained tarried
> Around the lips
> Like a human tongue
> Unfit for speech

Delaina Thomas' imagery of her native Hawaii in the long, beautiful poem "The Turning of the Year" is exquisite, contributing to what is a truly visionary trend in Asian American poetry. She comments early in the poem:

> summarily I live
> taking the surfaces of things as causes
> whereas it is in the depths and depthless that purposes begin
> where flower names hang like banners in space

and wolves' teeth are strung like chimes
as were mine by the skeleton dentist in childhood dreams

The themes of this anthology are unique to each to each poet. Whether one could claim that these poems rise from a sense of "community" is arguable, as these poets are from all over the country, from different persoanal and literary backgrounds. In any case, if these poets are of of a community, The Open Boat has opened its doors and let everybody come in to take a look, and poetry, Asian American and English as a whole, is the better for it.

Legends From Camp, Lawson Fusao Inada

Unpublished

If one were to say that poetry is a science demanding an exactness of 'observation and expression, as Pound or Eliot would, and if one were to say that, consequently, there are many problems in Asian American poetry that need to be solved, Lawson Fusao Inada, with Legends from Camp, is that innovative, necessary scientist. Of course, it is ridiculous to reduce poetry to these co 1 d terms, to the exc 1 us ion of emotion;· however, it is Inada's sensitivity to emotion, its many nuances and implications beyond an immediate present, and beyond the documented facts of Japanese American history, that has led him to his many i:nventions: in form, tone and content.

The book is divided into sections, each with a title relating to ;ts dominant theme, or a location in which the poet once lived. The first section, "Camp," is composed primarily of short "legends," many no longer than five or six lines, the title often being the first. Inada doesn't waste time with superfluous ornament; hi~ is a minimalist style, but without a sacrifice of subtlety. For instance, in "The Legend of Talks-With-Hands," about a family "way over there at the edge/ of our Arkansas camp" he writes "Their name? I don't know," concluding:

> ... back in those days,
> a smile could go a long way
> toward saying something.
> And we were all ears.
> Tatking, and during prayers.

The effect of these lines is mild, understated; also, it is characteristtc of Inada not to include many concrete visuals in his poems. It is this tone that is his achievement; in the context of the setting, or "reality, .. that Inada creates with these many legends, these simplicities are gems, and their cumulative effect launches the entire series into a mythic dimension, consequently taking a difficult chapter of Japanese American history with it. These poems, like the words Inada might have whispered to himself as a boy prisoner in those camps, allure with their innocence, their generosity.

Inada doesn't confront history's vacancies with selfcentered autobiography and packages of fact; this is his innovation in form. The "story" of the camp is not linear or narrative; he seems to give a new respectability to fragmentation of expression. Legends 'from Camp, also, is filled with a variety of unusual lyrical forms, for instance, the playfully selfreflexive, experimental poems of later sections, and the poems deriving fro• his experiences as a jazz poet. Innovation in "content" has to do with his large-scale addressing ·of history in the "Camp" section, and with his syntheses of literary modes: a poem may seem a "true story" one moment, a parable the next, teasing the reader to derive new mean-

ings. Plain old beauty is present, too, . as in his brief homage, from "Listening Images," to Billie Holid~y:

Hold a microphone
Close to the moon.

The book is, .finally, impressive in scope; it contains the poems of two decades of an active life, and Inada possesses the appetite for poetry to sustain it. His politics are a faith in music; his poems contain a wisdom (that rare thing) that is only subtly apparent.

Bone, by Faye Ng

Asian American Arts Dialogue, Spring 1993

Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone* is an ambitious attempt to portray the struggles and disappoint ments of a Chinese American family living in San Francisco's Chinatown. Not hinged to any single plot / the narrative involves a wide array of char-acters, moving backwards in time as it seeks to resolve the enigma of the Leong family's progressively more fragmented condition. Though the narrator, Lei Leong, the first born of three daughters, is something of a homebody, the father Leo has a habit of signing up for long voyages at sea working unskilled jobs; and Nina, the third born, is a flight attendant, always away in New York or China. Ona, the "mid-child," committed suicide when she was very young, and is therefore absent for the first half of the book until the narrative moves back, step by step, to illustrate scenes in her life.

Though the novel seems loyal as an account of a real desperation peculiar to Chinatown, describing the effects of a cloistered existence characterized by gossip and bad tempers, Ng fails to provide any great insight into her characters, including the narrator. It would be easy enough to say that her characters are "two dimensional," but the problem runs deeper than that, as Ng's narrator is often too comfortable tracing difficulties in her present life to traumatic events that happened previously, without really examining what the nature of these traumas were. For instance, when Lei tries to understand her mother, to find a reason why she is so frustrated, she generally concludes with "It was Ona," or something to that effect, meaning that the daughter's suicide has remained to haunt in her her mother's life. Of course, one can assume that a daughter's suicide will affect a mother in many powerful, unknowable ways, but Ng does not even pursue the matter beyond what is essentially a soap opera cliche, devoid of true drama: "It was Ona."

The expectation that something will be learned about Ona by the end of the novel, thus giving weight to these references, is never fulfilled. Ona is generally left to be a "deep" character because of her suicide. The novel often avoids pursuing the very difficult questions and opts instead for an acceptable humanist stance that says "I will never know." *Bone*'s style, promising in its ambiguity and in the brevity of its sentences and paragraphs, ironically never rises above the level of the gossip in which the sewing ladies mentioned frequently in the novel, indulge. *Bone* is too often content with simply presenting the skeletons of its characters' actions.

John Yau, *Edificio Sayonara*

Asian American Arts Dialogue, Spring 1993

John Yau is a poet who deals with subversion on its fundamental level: language. He performs this function through two tactics: by using tools of Surrealism in concocting images that dwell on their "shock" value, and by writing a poetry in order that "understanding/ May begin, and in doing so be undone," as propagandized in John Ashbery's "And Ut Pictora Poesis Is Her Name." His subject is often that of memory: the subversion of our standard sense of it, and its reformation. Yau understands all reading to be an act of recollection, of measuring the distance between what happened and how it is recalled in solitude; his poetry is the "surrealist" reconstruction, or contamination of this space. For instance, "Library," from his previous book of poetry *Big City Primer*, a collaboration with the photographer Bill Barrett, runs in its entirety:

> Born in Louisville, Baltimore, or New York City, he was adopted in 1914 or '18 and, according to different records, grew to the height of 5'3", 5'7", or 5'10". His parents included a Methodist minister and his wife, an obese woman relative, mother, and grandmother. De Witt Clinton High School, New York University, Harvard. Countee L. Porter. Countee P. Cullen. Countee Cullen.

This homage is especially touching juxtaposed (as it is in the book) with Bill Barrett's photograph of the Countee Cullen branch of the New York Public Library. How many other parents were "included" that aren't named here? One could call the poem a brief biography, but it is even more the enactment of a migration, the playing-out of an individual containing so many disparate parts and having to "pull it together" to become a poet. Yau makes us realize that each of us are so many different levels of "being," that we are only what we decide, and are able to perceive, at one time.

The poems of *Edificio Sayonara*, many of them love poems, continue this exploration, but on a personal level. Listening to the voice of these poems as if they were dramatic soliloquies leads to an exceptionally fine experience. From the series "Each Other":

> You were crying and saying my name, but you weren't crying and. what you were saying only resembled my name, a structure of echoing sound reverberating in the room shimmering above the harbor. We breathe this water, always the slipping away is here to accompany us to separate places within this room, on the bed, by the window. Someone said jump or fly, that voice again, a lulling music sweeping up toward the sky's hot blue walls. You were telling a story to me and

to yourself, words directed toward the time when you were small and fit into the hands of others…

There is a note of hysteria in these lines, the hysteria of departure. And who has ever fallen in love without experiencing the fear of ultimate departure? The words spiral around his very confidence in "self," shuffling through its many manifestations and occasionally flipping a card to expose a dualism: me/you, past/present, signified/signifier. *Edificio Sayonara* contains some of Yau's most beautiful, confident and questioning work to date.

Charlie Chan Is Dead, edited by Jessica Hagedorn

Asian American Arts Dialogue, Winter 1993

As with the rnany anthologies of Asian American writing, especially those published by the major houses, Charlie Chan Is Dead awkwardly maneuvers amongt he many political potholes that plague Asian American fiction and poetry. Few editors feel comfortable with collecting only that writing that pleases him or her directly and instead promote writings that have been strained through the complex, intangible web of pc-ness that is disproportionately promoted by the universities. One would think that Jessica Hagedorn, the author of *Dogeaters*, a novel that is so brutal, eloquent and subversive that it goes far beyond (or never approaches) the criteria of the academy, and of the poem "Yolanda Meets the Wild Boys," which is indebted to her apprenticeship with the Beats, would have felt compelled to collect only that writing that is as forward and generously imaginative as her own. Of course, that would have been a slender book, but it would have been preferable over the present collection which does not offer the life to sustain its size.

The better pieces that Hagedorn does collect do not necessarily seem like her own, except in that they are tightly constructed, mature, and are infused with the life of experience.The general problem seems to lie in those pieces where the writers try to be "profound yet light, philosophical yet entertaining," but lack the power of genuine *angst* to fulfill this ambition. One need only compare Bulosan's "I Would Remember," a little antique in its lack of irony, but which is so full of intense memory, to many of the other pieces to understand this contrast. The original wotk in this book is like nothing else in the collection (or elsewhere); the unoriginal is often characterizec by a "cooi" irony: a thoughtless listing of detail, colorless mechanical dialogue and a strange ambivalence to the actual, intangible psychic lives of the characters. The edges are often too clear-cut, and lack the necessary moral ambiguity that makes one believe that the story is being written in exploration, rather than to make a good impression. It should be remembered that great writers can be complete failures as people, so long as they are able to portray their strugglesin animate, imaginative ways.

Kimiko Hahn's "Afterbirth" is truly interesting, as it seems to develop within its succession of disjointed paragraphs a new, however minor, symbolism for its own use. Jose Garcia Villa's "Untitled Story" is a real delight, imbued with an expansives entiment that is a contrast to its minimalist construction; each of its sevent- four numbered paragraphs, or chapters, is no longer than a few sentences. Also included is an excerpt fromTheresa Hak **Kung** Cha's *DICTEE*, as well as from Maxine Hong Kingston's Tripmaster Monkey, the former a work excptionally unknown, the latter exceptionlly known, but both "crossovers" in the best senset. Fae Myenne Ng's "A Red Sweater" seems (to the present reviewer) better than her novel *Bone*, and sustains its promise, and premise, throughout its eleven pages, rather than losing momentum after

its first. (A story which does not sustain its premise would be Han Ong's excerptt from hsi *The Stranded in the World*, which is "about" male prostitution, but which never gets more-dangerous—or interesting—than the plain fact of its subject matter.) Alex Kuo's "The Connoisseur of Chaos" is hard to resolve, but it's good because of that. Walter Lew's "Black Korea" is something of a puzzle, but it is so pared down to its elements that one is compelled to reread it. "Four-score and Seven Years Ago," by Darrel Lum, is written in the pigdin of the Hawaiian islands, and the conflict of language and society is deftly explored through an interesting story. Lum's language lives, and the story points to a rich, new genre of American fiction. There are,of course, a number of other gems in this collection (great writing by Bulosan and Hagedorn herself, for instance) and to characterize or judge them hastily would signal doom for any reviewer. Though *Charlie Chan Is Dead* may often be harping at ghosts that are long gone to the worms, as a map of some of what's going on and some of what has—though not all (Younghill Kang and FrankChin are notably absent), it is a valuable collection.

Voicebox

Seoro Bulletin, Spring 1993

Discard Every moment. Of
Even before they could.
Surge themselves. Forgotten so, easily,
not even as associations,
signatures in passage. Pull by the very root, the very
possible vagueness they may evoke.
Colors faintly dust against your vision.
Erase them.
—Theresa Cha, from DICTEE

An even spark contains us.
We are only fabulous beasts, after all.
—John Ashbery, "Never to Get It Just Right"

One's desire to approach a formulation of the "idea" of Korean American literature should be grounded in the nature of its vitality rather than in the fact of its necessity. Or: it seems less interesting to approach the idea of a "literature," Korean-American literature in this case, from the outside, where it may appear to be something of a negative presence, than from the inside where the players in the tradition (or maybe of the "past") have already made worthy contributions. Eunju Lee's "On Korean-American Literature," a review of the anthology of Korean-American writers published by the Asian American Writers Workshop, is marred, unfortunately, by an unfamiliarity with what has already been done, and what is being done, that can be called "Korean-American literature," or at least by the neglect of using these works (which are few and difficult to find, admittedly) as anchoring for her ideas as something against which to gauge her observations. For instance, even a minor consideration of Theresa Hakhyung Cha's DICTEE, or Younghill Kang's East Goes West, both out of print though somewhat well-known, would have been insurance against such global indictments as the following: "At the present... Korean-American writers have yet to dare the assumptions of language. They have yet to take seriously the task of maneuvering English... to experiment, to play, to create a language vital and fitting for voicing their unique experiences." The mistake is in thinking that the anthology and reading actually represent the "best," or the "most," or a significant portion of the writing being done by Korean-Americans now (which was never the proposition, so far as I know, of the Workshop), or, worse, that it represents a collection of the first pioneers in Korean-American literature, the only Korean-Americans who have dared to stitch together a line of verse or prose. This lack of context, and of consideration of the relative

youth of the writers and the variety of their individual efforts, detracts fmm the legitimacy of what is actually quite valuable in her criticism.

In fact, much of what is contained in Lee's article approaches a significant aspect of what might be called the "experiment" of Korean-American literature, for an attention to the possibilities of language, indescribable as they are, rather than to the simple matter of "expressing" something, or of replacing signifiers and references so that the piece of writing is easily recognizable as the work of an Korean-American, would be more fortuitous for a young writer, for it would enable the writer to read more variously (to find more things useful) and to perceive, consequently, more confidently, unhindered by what may be an incomplete or nascent political sense (i.e., a regard, often oppressive, for the impression one's words make on society). Such experience with language will also provide the writer with a more refined attention to the nature of fact, the possibility and impossibility for the presentation of facts, inevitably leading the writer to avenues of expression more effective than those previously explored. Everyone seems to agree that the future of a Korean-Amen-can literature depends upon the construcnon of a "new language": what better way to construct a new language than to destroy the old as it has been taught: what better way to do this than to deny repeatedly the popular or pedestrian constructs, to challenge syntax and to modify it to conform to a sensitive, complex, and historically conscious Korean-American sensibility? It is only when the writer is left with the fragmented remains of language that he or she can begin to attach them, in a way that is unquestionably unique, again to what they are meant to represent in the "real" world. This is not to imply that one must forget about literary influences; on the contrary, it means drown in them: leam how that writer saw that (no matter what it is), emulate those writers who have come to touch upon a particularly attractive nuance of sentiment, and partake as well in the standard window-shopping rituals, towards the development of technique: the many different cadences available to be learned (and imitated) until new ones can be created, the fruits of various syntactical experiments, the implications and consequences of linearity and/or fragmentation of narrative, etc. The following knes by Robert Lowell:

I was five and a half.
My formal pearl gray shorts
had been wom for three minutes.
My perfection was the Olympian
poise of my models in the imperishable autumn
display windows
of Roger Peet's boys' store below the State House
in Boston. Distorting drops of water
pinpricked my face in the basin's mirror.
I was a stuffed toucan
with a bibulous, multicolored beak.

may seem perfectly uninteresting to many, but one can't deny that the poet is seeing something, and that he has developed a way to pcrmit the concretes, and the definitive abstractions, of his experiences to dominate his language, and perhaps himself. For instance, notice how his remarks on his dress sends him on a tour of associations, ending below the "State House! in Boston," and how he, rather than being like, is a toucan. Why does he have the drops of water actually "pinprick" his face before, rather than after, we discover that it is a mirror image? How can one be "five and a half' and be wearing a pair of shorts for "three minutes"? What is his feeling towards the models (and why doesn't he just say so)? Finally, what if, when writing this, he couldn't remember the name of the store?

I mention, and quote, Lowell because one poem in Voices Stirring, Sung Rno's "The Mounds," has some similarities in style and tone, and a similar take on narrative. Rno's poem, furthermore, seems to me entirely successful in this mode (it is not an imitation, however!), as a number of writers in the anthology seem to have achieved what it was they set out to do. One can't criticize a writer for not adopting a particular attitude towards the "motherland"; if a poet is overly-senomental, academic, naive, militantly anti-imperialist or just plain silly is besides the point. That would be a failure on the critic's part to supersede that nascent political sense mentioned earlier: an exaggerated confidence in scientific tools which, nevertheless, one must use to trust. Consequently, "romantic" is too general (or too specific) a term to describe whatever tone it is that Lee found objectionable in the anthology, as it rooted (when it is understood) in a particular period of history, in a particular place; "sentimental" or "heightened" seems more what she meant. Rno's poem seems consciously to avoid both traps:

Their white taekwon do uniforms became brown with dirt, and when they laughed

they had strange expressions. Either too much teeth, or the way their eyes told me things I didn't want to know.

I had to guess at what my relatives were saying, and I stared at the mound

of earth which spoke of nothing but silence. One uncle didn't like me. "He's a foreigner," he said and spat, his eyes sharp on me. I stared at his hands, veined and brown from working in the fields. I wanted to talk to him. Or at

least hit him.

Initially, one could comment on the length, weight, and pacing of the lines, which lift the poem to an elegiac or near-epic scale, hence lending it complex histonical implications. The poet's humor and occasional flashes of observation ("too much teeth", the "ashes lengthening patiently" later in the poem) counter what could be a blind subservience to the tone of the ceremony (or the poem) that could lead to less precise statements. Nearly symbolic of the

poet's attempt to see further, beyond the overwhelming sentiment, the white uniforms become "brown with dirt," and the cousins are characterized as being secretive, ominous and a little out of control, rather than docile, conformed. The line "his eyes sharp on me" is rich as a parallel construction to the isolated (coming off an enjambment) "didn't like me" of the previous line. ('Working in the fields" is, for me, troubling: there Rno enters into a perception not quite qualified by insight: it threatens to be boring, a "cliche.") Finally, after this brief excursion into the difficulties of the "language gap," that it isolates him and leaves him only with silent images, which this passage seems most about, he concludes with how his uncle was simply getting on his nerves. This is an observation in a poem that is preoccupied with some truly "philosophic" matters, thus challenging that standard notion of the incompatibility of the ideal and corporeal, the "becoming" and "being". Sung Rno's poem, in fact, is something of a balancing act between these two, and is an impressive achievement because of that.

Whether one learns anything about Korea in that poem is not really important. Every work of imagination of any quality can be subject to a number of different "readings" (therefore, whatever tools one wishes to apply in criticism can be applied to this poem, too: sociological, structuralist, etc.); however, if one is too concerned with fact (in its blandest sense), or with propriety of sentiment (again, fact: the manifest presence of a specific piece of writing and its role in society), and therefore is unwilling or unable to look closely at the writer's language and its less tangible implications, one should probably steer clear of both the writing and criticizing of poems and fiction. Lee's article, sensitive to this last point, itself failed to fully sever its ties with the sociological criteria predominantly used by many Asian American critics of literature; and the effects of such criticism, from within or outside the creative writer, when used unscrupulously, incompletely, and with no responsibility to those qualities existing beyond the dominant paradigm, lead to neurosis and impotence, rather than an incitement to write. It is not the responsibility of literature to create a Korean-American identity; if anything, it is the responsibility of this identity to create a literature to insure its own survival, a task that takes time. Only through a writer's association with these near-invisible properties in language can: the living stigma of racism (ranging from mere bigotry to the comfortable ignorance of the Koreans' role in the riots), the existential spell of a being Korean in America, and the overwhelming obligation to provide American literature with an Asian tradition that exists as a gravity polar to its mostly European foundations: be confronted and concluded in a competent, noble, and (as momentarily possible) thorough manner.

On The Introduction to *The Open Boat*

Unpublished, 1993

One prominent characteristic of Garrett Hongo's introduction to *The Open Boat* is the stress that it places upon the publishing of poetry (and the degrees and awards for it, consequently) above and regardless of the nature and quality of the poetry itself. For anyone that has read this introduction, such a point need not be belabored. There is an entire paragraph on page thirty-three that lists the major awards that either led to or were won by such books as Cathy Song's Picture Bride and John Yau's Corpse and Mirror; there is no similar overview of what Hongo thinks about these books, nor does he attempt to highlight the various aesthetic qualities of them. It is, in fact, in this paragraph alone that the names of a number of the poets appear; others, like Russell Leong, Mei-mei Bersenbrugge and Jessica Hagedorn, for instance, are not mentioned at all in the introduction, and one wonders if it is because they have not won the right awards. This point is far more serious than that of the mere acknowledgement of certain poets; the essay could have been written without mention of anyone appearing in the book, and that could have been fine. The real difficulty is in the fact that twenty—six pages of prose have been expended in saying practically nothing specific about any issue or individual—and they are not the same, though they could be—that he does decide to mention.

Hongo seams to have adopted the Whitman-at-any-cost technique, which, to him, means "embracing" every particular that can be tied in to Asian American literature—including Maxine Hong Kingston, Amiri Baraka, Elaine Kim, the Chinese Exclusion Act, Sadakichi Hartmann and Willem De Kooning—without, I suppose, denying the sovereignty of any individual element. It is the method of the gorgeous appetite: the ability to be one with everything, but that permits it all to just "be"—a true sort of democratic leveling. This is a problematic method, and Hongo runs into a number of difficulties trying to maintain it. Because he has chosen the motif of speaking in the royal "we" for most of the essay, for instance, he is often forced to make compromises that foreground the looseness of his distinction between an objective and subjective treatment of his themes; that is, one is unsure, at certain moments, if he is talking about himself (autobiographically) or of "us.'" His failed attempt to manage this in-between space (perhaps an attempt at Keats's "negative capability") often leaves hanging a plethora of detail and creates a variety of word-puzzles that do not seem self-conscious enough to be considered postmodern "play":

> Being doctrinaire is not a requirement for inclusion in this anthology. Publication can itself be an avenue toward liberation . it is thus that writers reach out from our inner lives of agonistic contemplation to the lives of a charitable, sympathetic spirit wished for by our readers. (pg. xxxvii)

If Hongo had written "their inner lives" the sentiment would not have been so unsettling; the way it is phrased here, it sounds as if there is a Hongo-poet inside everyone: his way, it seems to be spokesman and spoken for at the same time. One is almost afraid that Hongo is embarrassed about some of the writers he has selected; otherwise, why hide them under such a cloud of pronouns and loose particulars? (I am not sure what a "charitable, sympathetic spirit wished for by our readers" means; in any case, he seems to describe here not only a representative "our" and "us," meaning the poets, but also a somewhat homogenous audience with, apparently, consistent, perhaps "timeless" demands.

This is not to say that Hongo is a poor writer or that he doesn't mean well; quote the contrary, I want to emphasize that some of the choices he made seem not to have been proper to the project he undertook. What he is trying to do in this introduction is establish an Asian American tradition in poetry, and in general this is a laudable goal. He mentions often the "fractured" and "fissured" pasts of Asian Americans, and one can say that Asian American literature, as a tradition, is equally fractured and fissured. No poetry of any real consequence can exist without a living tradition to which to subscribe, or a dead one against which to rebel—this sounds prescriptive, and to some entirely derivative, but it is worth a thought. If Asian American poets refuse or have no interest in reading the writing of their predecessors (provided that they believe these writers are their predecessors) then a strong Asian American tradition in poetry cannot be established. The problem with Hongo's notion and presentation of this tradition is that it is too unspecific, with no real contours—horizontal in association rather than vertical in time—and that it is primarily conveyed in the manner of a pep talk. He simply doesn't present a sense of a tradition solid enough to be improved, added upon or altered, or to which one can appeal in order to be led to one's better predecessors. It is diffuse—it lacks a subject.

This flaw in method has fundamentally to do with Hongo's hang-up with the "mainstream," which he characterizes as "predominantly white" and "uninterested in its margins." He writes of the "authority, power, and joy" that he sensed at the meeting of the Modern Language Association in Chicago on 1990, but his confirmation of the "momentous" nature of the occasion seems to rely, uneasily, on its write—up in the New York Times Magazine. He fails to acknowledge that some people do not really like the New York Times Magazine, and that recognition in it often signal the end, or the late middle—age, of a vital artistic movement rather than its birth (think of Abstract Expressionism and punk rock). His brief summary of the career of Maxine Hong Kingston resolves itself in a similar way, "on the best seller lists, the television talk shows, and, eventually, her work collected in high school and college textbooks and assigned as part of standard curricula." This is all valuable—one can't deny that Kingston's inclusion in text books has made a permanent impact on the way

people teach, and read, American literature—but I think Hongo fails to see the sides of this type of recognition that are really either boring or insidious. (Consequently, her poems should not have been included in The Open Boat; there are certainly a number of better Asian American poets—cyn. zarco and Kimiko Hahn, for example—that could have been put in her place.) The New York Times is itself a greet leveler, an institution that by nature simplifies rather than complicates, and this aspect deserves consideration.

There is one moment in the essay when Hongo does write with a honed sense of purpose, describing the "vocal and influential few... [who] are chained to the traits of bitterness and anger in the previous model of the Asian American writer." It would be nice to discard this whole notion of the "model" altogether, but keeping to Hongo's point:

> They have alleged that recognition is itself a sign of a given writer's personal assimilation of an insidious bourgeois culture and a corruption of that which is the "authentic" literary culture of Asian America—something which stands defiantly and belligerently apart from the world of mainstream American letters. They have engaged in the ideological practice of judging the cultural pertinence of a given literary work by employing a litmus test of ethnic authenticity. The test works in this way—if a work is adjudged meritorious by any American institution that can be characterized as "mainstream," then that work must necessarily be "inauthentic" in terms of Asian American culture and, therefore, is due for condemnation by loyalists and exclusion from the reading lists of Asian American or Ethnic Studies courses. (pp. xxxv-xxxvi)

Ha concludes by writing that, 'This practice, to me, is nothing more than fascism, intellectual bigotry, and ethnic fundamentalism of the worst kind", and that: "It is entirely a shame that few Asian American Studies scholars have been willing to publicly condemn and seriously critique this arch and ingenious twisting of cultural interpretation."

As much as I disagree with most of what he writes here, I think he is correct on one point: any "litmus test" is to be avoided in critical inquiry (and especially in reading for leisure) and it would be worthwhile for a scholar of some standing to dismantle this notion of ethnic authenticity altogether. My own way to do it would be centered around ideas of poetic authority, which, for me, cannot rely on one's socia1 status—race, salary, degrees, or awards—but must rely on, well, something else. (A few candidates for this "something else" would be: talent, sincerity, independence, precision, an "ear," arid most rare: an awareness of when a poem of a 100 lines should be a poem of four!) What weakens Hongo's point is his own type of dependence, which, I believe, he thinks is the dependence of all poets—Asian American at least. That is, Hongo feels that all Asian American poets want to be included in Asian American

and Ethnic Studies classes, as if all Asian American poets felt their books are as easily classifiable as sociology of come nature as well as poetry. He is correct in stating that Asian American literature has suffered by its exclusion of a number of talented, unusual and enlightening poets in the "canon," but one wonders if the poets themselves were, or are, that concerned, especially considering the types of stifling interpretations of their poetry that often occur once included.

Hongo would have strengthened his thesis far more (arid the essay as a whole, I believe) had he focused his comments from the start on this theme of "mainstream American letters," since it really needs some defending. ("Mainstream American letters" is hardly to be criticized only because it is white; there are plenty of white poets just as discouraged, for a variety of reasons, by it, and who attack it.) He would know the insides and out of this culture, and an adequate defense would, for this very reason, be valuable; his entire essay, as does much of the poetry of The Open Boat, rests on this defense as it is. Acknowledgement could have been made that some Asian Americans have a real reason to dislike mainstream American culture, especially as it is represented in institutions, where it tends to decompose into the innocuous, anonymous, and stable, and creates a mistaken sense of cultural authority in its disseminators; beyond issues of race, this basic cultural phenomenon can be observed in the absorption of everyone from the Dada poets to William Burroughs by these universities—not necessarily a bad thing, just problematic as the very manner of this art opposes the sort of scientific sense of rationale that supports and justifies these institutions. For Asian American poets, it is even more difficult: "Orientalism" (Edward Said's study), "colonialism," and "tokenism," three ugly words that didn't appear in Hongo's "word-cloud" (earlier in the essay) are probably of more concern to Asian American poets today than most of the words that did appear there. Simply, Hongo fails to distinguish between the white reaction against the bourgeois—the bourgeois against the bourgeois—and the minority reaction against the bourgeois, and he fails to see the true vitality of the latter. ("Bourgeois is an dated and basically sociological term, but it has been introduced into, and is so relevant in general to, the present issue, that it is difficult not to use it). That Hongo only save passing notice to the work of Amiri Baraka in his introduction is especially unfortunate, since it is in Baraka's writing that one finds the most compelling, and certainly most extreme, perspective on this paradigm.

The making of an anthology is an act of concrete criticism, and all comments leveled at the introduction to The Open Boat, in the present essay, are focused upon it as a critical work. I have not written about the selection of poems, nor the poems or poets themselves, for that is matter for a different essay altogether. There are many fine points to Hongo's introduction: its lack of scholarly jargon, its attempt to move the discussion of Asian American poetry clearly beyond the realm of the exclusively socio—political, its attempt to widen the scope of the nature of Asian American poetry's cultural and histori-

cal parameters, and its approach toward notions of artistic tradition, for instance. He does demonstrate that Asian American poets are free to traverse all arenas of culture and be observers of all facets of society, and his inclusion of certain poets in the anthology that have for long not been considered "Asian American" may be considered innovative. However, the introduction could have bean much shorter, it could have been more comfortable with its authorial "I" or its denial of one, it could have elaborated upon, rather than just named, the variety of particulars (painters, writers, themes, etc.) introduced, and it could have accented the artistic achievements of the poets in the anthology, hence preparing the reader for a richer encounter with the poems that might not have occurred without an introduction. Finally, it could have been more defiant against the many strictures that are natural to a commercial publishing venture.

John Yau's Private Eye

A. Magazine, 1993

William S. Burroughs, in his 1959 word salad Naked Lunch, describes an oracular method that one of the new ambitious prophets in the novel is planning on using, thus: "The word cannot be expressed direct .... It can perhaps be indicated by a mosaic of juxtaposition like articles abandoned in a hotel drawer, defined by negatives and absence." John Yau seems to have gotten a peak at this hotel drawer. His poems abound in things and the 1 "negatives" and absences among them; the music of his poetry is the fine, often tenuous, energy that keeps the poem together. These "things" could be those of the waterfall of Manhattan anecdotes in Big City Primer's "Permanent and Temporary," from which the following is an excerpt: Countee Cullen studied at NYU and wrote his undergraduate thesis on Edna St. Vincent Millay. The area between Twenty-fourth and Fortieth Streets and Fifth and Seventh Avenues was once known as Satan's Circus. The comedian Ah Hoon and the tragic actor Hom Ling sailed from Canton to San Francisco and New York, where they performed in what is now the New York Rescue Society. · Jacob Adler wrote and acted in Jewish King Lear. His children Luther and Stella helped found the Group The~tre, and later Stella became a drama teacher and had Marlon Brando as a student. A friend mentioned :~ .. The interest here is in the variety of events that happened on the island, and in the randomness of their appearance in the poem. The scope is grand, but authorial comment, beyond the duality presented in the title, is nil. This is enough to frighten some readers, because no idea is given as to what to think, what opinions are to be held, about the various pieces of evidence -- evidence of what? -- presented to them. Is "Jewish King Lear" supposed to be a little funny? Is Yau, in our times of standardized PC-ness, proposing that it's significant that Cullen studied Edna St. Vincent Millay? What does Yau feel about the little known "tragic actor" Hom Ling, and what does he mean by putting him in close quarters with the near-mythic, the "method," actor of the Godfather? Should we know who Hom Ling is? Yau, in a similar fashion, can create poems that use words themselves as events, and in this he resembles the surrealists in their drive to find "convulsive beauty." The variety of actions as presented in "Permanent and Temporary" become a variety of word-events or, in their concision, word-objects. His now-signature use of this method appears in Radiant Silhouette, the book preceding Primer, with such lines as the following from the first "Genghis Chan: Private Eye" poem: I was floating through a cross section with my dusty wine glass, when she entered, a shivering bundle of shredded starlight ... His use of alliteration in this last line -- mischievous and subversive -- lets the image make a deeper impression; and in this way, that lin~ is distinguished from the previous two. In this first Genghis Chan poem he also introduces the "I" that is, one assumes, the hero detective-conquerer himself. In the "Genghis Chan" poems that appear in his 1 a test book, Edificio Sayonara, Yau further suppresses any

trace of standard narrative, and permits his word-events to blossom anarchically and claim their own ground, thus creating a poem that seems more an ungoverned sequence of enigmatic equations: The apology corpses watch little matchsticks of wit illuminate the park Slender ~talks are goosed from their tripods mounted on chubby dinner plates I am outside of the helium conference hopping 'from grunt to grunt A battered jabberer launches his coffee streams ,out his arms - whispers I received my certificate to practice being humus I too am a yellow lamp bolted to the elephant sky Genghis Chan: Private Eye XII There seems to be ,a story being told here, though only a close attention to the words being used -- isolated and "out of context" -- can reveal it. IIWit", "dinner plates", "conference" and "jabberer" he1p form the scene of some sort of open table discussion. It i~ no doubt one that Yau (or Genghis) found a worthy of a few jibes. It is a "helium conference," one full of hot air, at which there is a "battered jabberer," some badmouthing, and some mild onlookers who are a little "dead," who don't know what to do ("apology corpses"). Genghis Chan is "outside ... hopping from grunt to grunt" though in the end he "received my certificate/ to practice being humus." His final resolution, almost a parody of catharsis, is modest: "I too am a yellow lamp/ bolted to the elephant sky." Having gotten this far, however (and having discovered that it is a funny poem), one still asks: what is going on? One of the k~y words in the "Genghis Chan: Private Eye" poems is "ye 11 ow. ·· "We surfed out of the alley, / the stories our parents told us/ trailing behind, like angry yellow toads" he writes in the third of the series. There is yellow moonlight, a "yellow/ leaf of lassitude" and "my new yellow name" elsewhere, and the thirteenth poem runs in its entirety: It's hard to keep pretending you're a dusty chink in a hall of yellow linen You begin believing you're just another handkerchief wiping away the laundresses' tears Yau' s approach ; to language in the "Genghis Chan" poems is grappling with words as they are used, as well as with how they can be used. "Chink," meaning a crack or crevice, places the "you" as a break in the "hall of linen," and yet the word followed by "yellow" flips the definition, like in gestalt psychiatry, to mean something else -- all Asians' favorite derogative. Taking "yellow" back into the twelfth poem, about the "matchsticks of wit," it makes one wonder -- is this a conference on Asian American literature? This is only speculation, of course, and in the end it is not important. Yau's idea is not the story itself, so much as it is how the story is being told. A story ie told with words, and every word has many meanings. Ev~ryone has had experiences of looking someone in the eye, and having something said to you, and only "getting it" sometime later. Was I being made a fool of? Did I get that joke, or was it a joke at all? What did he mean by "yellow"?

Review Essays for Korean Culture

"A Search for Lost Time: Walter K. Lew's from Aikth/DIKTE for DICTEE (1982)"

Korean Culture, Spring 1994

Walter K. Lew's "critical collage" titled Excerpts From DIKTE for DICTEE (1982)1 may not be a step toward gaining Theresa Cha a popular audience, for its attention to, and adoption of, Cha's methods in DICTEE and in her own theoretical writing lead it into avenues of expression that often seem just as "uncanny"2 and revolutionary as DICTEE itself. Lew, an artist who has worked in many fields, including film and poetry, a scholar of Asian and Asian American literature, and a translator of Korean poetry (his extraordinary translations of Yi Sang appeared in the Winter, 1992 issue of Korean Culture), is one of the few Asian American critics to have been actively attentive to Cha's work for the entire decade since her death in 1982. He dedicated his brief anthology of Asian American poems for the journal Bridge (Winter, 1982) to Cha, and in the last line of his introduction, "A New Decade of Singular Poetry," writes "We never met, but her brilliant book of texts and graphics, DICTEE, points to possibilities that any serious Korean American artist should contemplate as we enter a future that threatens essential continuities."3 Lew's interest in "continuities" has survived into Excerpts (observe the year, 1982, in his title), and he seems to be saying in this dedication that Cha's complex, experimental, uncanny and ultimately sincere DICTEE is a good place to start.

It is difficult to describe Excerpts: it operates on so many principles at once, and takes such advantage of collage techniques of image/ text juxtaposition, that it is certainly a book that has to be "seen to be believed." As in DICTEE, the text exists somewhere between languages, with passages in English, Korean, and French, exhibiting the polyglot sensibility of the cultural exile which is emblematic of Cha's work. The images reproduced in Excerpts, all provocatively reproduced by photocopying, are equally heterogeneous and eclectic. These images include an old hand-drawn map of Korea (calligraphic and highly "subjective"), the table of contents from a French book Coreenes (placed near its beginning, a parallel to Cha's forged invocation of Sappho), several photographs of tombs from the book Necropoli dell' Italia Antica, reproductions from a children's picture book about the Korean nationalist Yu Kwan-sun (with significant captions added from another text, Claude Berard's "Apocalypse Eleusiniennes"), and pages from Lew's own notebook written while watching Carl Dreyer's Le Passion de Jean D'Arc. The sources of many of these texts and images are found in Excerpts' twenty-eight endnotes.

Excerpts measures 9 by 9 inches, a reference to the mystical significance Cha placed on the number 9. "Ninth, Unending series of nines, or nine points linked together,"4 Cha writes, and she individually invokes the Nine Muses of classical Greek mythology to head each of DICTEE's sections. One of the first legible sentence fragments in Excerpts is from a reproduction of a corrupted

back cover of Marguerite Yourcenar's Fires, and it states: "...consists of some nine monologues and narratives based on classical Greek stories. Interspersed are highly personal...." The back cover of Fires seems to be in an advanced state of decay, yet it is clear that someone willfully erased, or "whited out" (this sort of ambiguity is possible in "photocopy art") certain key words or dates, otherwise, it appears as if the rain, or other force of nature, got to it. On the facing page is another reproduction of that same back cover, but with different erasures and erosions.

This sort of attention to the book, to its status as physical artifice with expressive qualities independent of language, is characteristic of Excerpts. The reproductions of the back covers point toward an articulation of the very metaphysic of decay, on the attempt at reproducing and resurrecting a decayed text, and of the life a text may have in an altered, alternative state. The reproductions provide, indeed, a visual metaphor for reading, as the entire process of reading may be said to rely on a degree of "misprision," to borrow Harold Bloom's term, for its effects.

Reading, memory, and the unusual injunction to "void," and thereby purge and empower, the materials necessary for communication, whether physical or semantic, are all themes in DICTÉE. "Bite the tongue. Beneath the teeth. Swallow/deep. Deeper. Swallow. Again, even more. / Until there would be no more organ,"5 (and later, in a phrase evoking vomiting (supported by a diagram of an esophagus and larynx): "Void the words."6 The theme adopts an elegiac tone in the following lines from "Aller":

> Discard. Every memory. Of
> Even before they could
> Surge themselves. Forgotten so, easily
> not even as associations
> signatures in passage. Pull by the very root, the very
> possible vagueness they may evoke.
> Colors faintly dust against your vision.
> Erase them.
> Make them again white.7

This theme in DICTÉE is evoked by the reproductions, as the gashes of erasure, irrational yet perversely determined, are violent in their potency. These pages also refer to a book that Cha, as Lew suggests here and elsewhere, knew well, and which was a necessary spur to write DICTÉE. Themes merge with a similar intensity on each page of Excerpts, and yet these two early graphics are an adequate preparation for Lew's concentrated exploration.

Radical Continuities

Lew's attention to the expression of the physical, akin to a sculpture's, demands that Excerpts be considered beyond the confines of a normally defined "book."

Excerpts, and by extension DICTEE, can therefore be thought of as not only books but as something quite different: films. In Excerpts and in films the images run completely to the edge of the medium, whether paper page or celluloid frame (i.e. the "silver screen"). This may seem an elaboration on something only partly realized in DICTEE (in which the text is less visual, and many of the images have a "standard" white border), but it is in fact a technique that Cha explores in her visual essay "Commentaire," which appears in the anthology of writings about film that she edited, Apparatus.8

The images of "Commentaire" also occupy the entire page, whether the "image" be of the word "noir" (in cursive,9 white on a black background), of total blackness or whiteness, of a white page/field with a thick black border along the perimeter of two facing pages, or a photo of a brick wall (The entire vocabulary of the sixty-three page "Commentaire" is not more than a handful of English and French words; yet, there it is among essays by Roland Barthes, Maya Deren, and Dziga Vertov!). "Commentaire" only becomes cinematic, however, when the reader/viewer is willing to sacrifice the comfortable determinacy of a machine that presents, at so many frames a second, the "projected" film. In "Commentaire" the rhythms are determined by the reader's own caprices or disciplines at the time, turning the pages at will: not an aleatory exercise as in much of Cage, but merely the sacrificing of the machine. This makes it, indeed, a difficult text to appreciate, for the reader cannot merely concentrate on the text but must participate in it.10 Excerpts operates like "Commentaire" on a similar principal of book-as-film, and both works must be understood within the traditions of filmic creation11 by extension, Excerpts can be seen not as a commentary on DICTEE alone, but on Cha's entire oeuvre.

Excerpts, with its unique expressiveness through collage/montage techniques, also borrows from the tradition of the haiku, the Japanese form of poetry that involves the presentation, within the length of three lines, of one or two images (traditionally derived from nature) along with little, or no, authorial comment. The form has been of interest to such writers as the American poet Ezra Pound12 and the French semiotician Roland Barthes, who relied on a definition of haiku in essays about, for instance, the Russian filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein. The Asian American filmmaker and theorist Trinh T. Minh-Ha, who has written about Cha, quotes Barthes on haiku in the following way in "The Plural Void: Barthes and Asia":

> Because of its brevity, haiku is often referred to as a "silence," a heavy, deep, mystical silence, and is attributed to a "sign of a full language." As a "vision lacking commentary," haiku will nevertheless not allow commentary. Ku cannot be explicated, merely repeated; nor can it be deciphered, analyzed, or developed without subjection to the processes of metaphor or syllogism. In fact, "It is not a rich thought reduced to a brief form, but a brief event which assumes immediately its adequate form." Its rightness is owing to a merging of signifier and signified, a

suppression of border-lines, leaks of significance or interstices which ordinarily exceed or open up the semantic relationship."13

Trinh Minh-Ha's comments are an extension of her own interest in creating a form of documentary film that does not "subject" the filmed object to some sort of master discourse,14 an interest as aesthetic as it is anti-colonialist. Lew's project in Excerpts, his attempt to invite DICTEE into critical discourse without the engagement of the "processes of metaphor or syllogism," is similar in that he is pursuing the "rightness" that Trinh describes: his purposeful mime of Cha's techniques are, perhaps, the "repeating" that is the limit to defining haiku. It can be said, therefore, that Lew observes DICTEE as something of a haiku itself, or at least treats it with the sort of sensitivity that Barthes and Trinh would have when treating their object, whether a work of literature or a source for the camera eye.

Excerpts accentuates the "mystical silences" and elliptical presences of DICTEE in what may be discouragingly direct fashion, so much that one may not be able to observe Excerpts as more than a derivative work, hence of a necessarily lesser order. Such a misperception occludes the virtue of Excerpts, which is that it does not reduce Cha's work to a series of themes which then can be digested, "understood," utilized (for political purposes), and therefore confined. One would fail to understand, also, the adaptability of the collage technique to any number of critical enterprises. Excerpts lives with, animates, and engages DICTEE; another configuration might be that Cha's book becomes within the many quotations, images, and techniques that Excerpts exhibits. The two books can therefore be seen as conversant twins or mirrors of each other, communicating over the long decade since Cha's death.

Blood and the Vortex

A recurring image in both DICTEE and Excerpts is that of blood. In a rich collation of images and phrases (pp. 24 to 35) Lew creates an air of resonances with DICTEE that, again, does not delimit the work, but that in no way sacrifices precision of analysis. Pages twenty-four and twenty-five contain a single word each, the mysterious neologism "sangencre," a combination of the French words for blood, "sang," and ink, "encre," both of which appear in DICTEE On page twenty-four "sangencre" is printed in black with a white background, and on the next page, white with a black background. This is an allusion to, and adoption of, Cha's technique in "Commentaire," mentioned earlier, but also to video works of hers centered around repetitions of individual words and phrases, or involving static images that change only slowly before one's eyes. Page twenty-six of Excerpts is entirely white, an absence elaborated by the erasures from Fires, but also by such paradoxical phrases as the following from DICTEE (included in this sequence): "Stain begins to absorb the material spilled on."15 The five other pages of this "movement" (for Excerpts can also be described in musical terms, like Proust's A La Recherche du temps perdu)

include two other quotes from DICTEE, a translation of a passage from Dante's Divine Comedy, in which the poet breaks a branch from a tree to discover that the trees are transformed souls: ". . so forth from the broken splinter came words and blood together, and a quote from Yourcenar's Memoires d'Hadrien, the first sentence of which reads: "The sorcerer who pricks his thumb before he evokes the shades knows well that they will heed his call only because they can lap his blood."

The longest excerpt tells the story of a p'ansori singer, Song Hung-nok, who was acclaimed throughout the land for his precocity and skills. In the story, however, there was one person, the renowned kisaeng Maeng-nyol, who was so unimpressed with his singing that she "hadn't once parted her lips to comment. Her indifference and injunction to make the "three rounds of blood" leads Song to practice behind a thundering waterfall:

> Three months of fierce effort later, he was struggling to keep singing when there suddenly heaved up from his throat three thick gobs of blood that he spat out like dark pebbles. From then on, Song's scarred larynx began to clear and his voice rang out beyond the roar of the waterfall; people say it could even be heard miles away.
> Not long afterwards, Song was performing again in T'aegu, at the Sonwha Hall. His voice was so wondrous that Maeng-nyol almost went mad listening.16

This passage evokes Cha's injunction to "void the words" because (as she writes later) "they are nor physical enough."17 The story can be understood as metaphor, precedent, commentary, and influence: few possibilities are excluded, and yet each offers a compelling argument. Later, in the section "CLIO HISTORY" Cha includes many documents that describe the atrocities of the Japanese occupation of Korea, inclusions that are similarly potent and indeterminate. "Petition from the Koreans of Hawaii to President Roosevelt," drafted by P.K. Yoon and Syngman Rhee, composes part of this section, and Cha writes, perhaps remarking on their failure:

> Japan has become the sign. The alphabet. The vocabulary. To this enemy people. The meaning is the instrument, memory that pricks the skin, stabs the flesh, the volume of blood, the physical substance blood as measure, that rests as record, as document. Of this enemy people.
> To the other nations who are not witnesses, who are not subject to the same oppressions, they cannot know. Unfathomable the words, the terminology: enemy, atrocities, conquest, betrayal, invasion, destruction. They exist only in the larger perception of History's recording, that affirmed, admittedly and unmistakably, one enemy nation

has disregarded the humanity of another. Not physical enough. Not to the very flesh and bone, to the core…. 18

The "vocabulary," that of the Japanese language, provides "the measure of their victory. It is not only, however, that the words draw blood, like knives, but also that their forced presence invokes an absence: the memory that can only be in one's native language. Cha writes: "The tongue that is forbidden is your own mother tongue. You speak in the dark. In the secret,"19 the "you" referring to her own mother, who was a teacher during the Japanese occupation of Korea. A universality beyond the particulars of history is attained when one understands that her mother's loss of the Korean language is, in a sense, a duplicate of Cha's own loss, which is that of her mother: what is sacrificed with the forfeited native tongue is the very matriarchal lineage of creative/creating speech.

The tragedy of Korea is, therefore, the tragedy of language; as language also fails to convey to "other nations who are not witnesses" the terror and atrocity of the occupation, this tragedy adopts an almost Chomskian critique of the semantics of reportage. Indeed, "enemy," "atrocity" and other once potent words are rendered impotent by their very repetition; Cha is, consequently, mesmerized by these words, like a child with a once-blue sky. The "game" of language is, finally, not a game at all; Cha's obsession with language is not academic, an aesthetic eccentricity or adopted theme. Her faith in it, despite its failures, empowers her.

Excerpts, which boldly situates itself among a number of languages, often in eliminating contrast, and among a number of decayed texts and half-ruined (by photocopying) images, places itself in the bleak terrain of this lineage-in-exile, its secrets and failures. As it is a critical study with the advantage of distance and rime, Excerpts proceeds a step further; its meanings expand to include commentary on the philosophy of art, the peculiar strengths of Cha's art, and the nature and rigorous ethic (which Lew believes necessary) of the poet/creator. The blood of the singer Song Hung-nok, for instance, is not simply the "blood of the poet," a cliché symbol of Song's dedication to perfection, but also the hard-earned trophy of a necessary revolutionary undertaking (he is, after all, trying to change someone's mind): words cannot fail. The blood of Dante's infernal trees is not just the blood of the damned (the blood that proves to the poet that the trees are, indeed, souls) but is also Cha's blood; as Excerpts suggests within this sequence, Cha's early, violent death denied her an essential, "novelist's"20 experience: she was "robbed of her death." Finally, one of Yourcenar's sorcerers who will "heed his call only because they can lap his blood" may be the reverent scholar himself, the one who rescues the absent artist/Persephone from the inferno of critical subjugation, manipulation, indifference and ignorance. Lew's collage/homage is thrilling in this sense as it is the vortex through which the radical continuity from DICTEE, and perhaps Cha's life's

enterprise, runs. It comments upon itself as contribution to DICTEE's artistic, and now critical, lineage.

A smeared dab of blood, like a signature, marks the last page of each copy of Excerpts. This highly gestural relic, like an ideograph of a forgotten language, is, in fact, the point of highest concentration for this vortex: it is the text come into physical being (beyond paper, ink and press), and it, consequently, complicates the line between the signifier "blood" and the special diction of Excerpts. It is the dark void through which the continuity of DICTEE rushes.

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[1] Page citations from *Excerpts* (which uses Chinese numerals in the text. Arabic in the endnotes) will he made selectively. All references in *DICTEE* are from the first printing of the work (New York: Tanam Press, 1982).

2 From "Falling Into the Korean Uncanny" by Robert Wilson (Korean Culture, Fall 1991). Wilson borrows the term from Freud in approach a unique understanding of the "polyphony of voices" in DICTEE, which can he situated within a desiccated landscape of the sublime... especially as her writing gets displaced into unconscious sites... [in a] process of repression-and-return (p. 35).

[3] *Bridge* (Winter 1983), p. 12.

[4] *DICTEE* p. 173.

[5] *DICTEE,* p.71.

[6] *DICTEE,* p. 73.

[7] *DICTEE* p. 128.

[8] (New York: Tanam, 1980). This excellent anthology is worth considering in relation to *DICTEE* and *Excerpts* as their methods derive from what one might call an "anthologist's ethic," a mastery of communication through a precise orchestration of assembled texts.

9 Funk and Wagnall's New International Dictionary, Comprehensive Edition (Newark: Publishers International Press, 1984) defines cursive as 'Running; flowing; said of writing in which the letters are joined." One wonders if Cha, who was probably not introduced to this word in her early youth, ever came upon such a suggestive definition.

10 Aspects of this complication of the reader-to-text relationship can he found in the ideas of the dominant, more consciously 'theoretical," avant-garde poets of America today, those of the "Language" School. "[S]uch writing serves as a performance in which the reader is both audience and performer... in which meaning... is inseparable from the language in process." "Language" Poetries: An Anthology (New York: New Directions, 1987), introduction, p. 3.

11 The indeterminacy of this exercise is no doubt a post-modern tactic (for film); the variation of filmic rhythms beyond the constraints of "real-time" sound in a film is not. Gertrude Stein writes an account in Everybody's Autobiography (cited in Sitney P. Adams, Modernist Montage, [New York: Columbia University Press, 1990] p. 160) of a conversation she had with Charlie Chaplin, an individual who was much respected in avant-garde, especially Cubist, circles of that day. She writes:

He said naturally it was disappointing, he had known the silent films and in that they could do something that the theatre had not done they could change the rhythm but if you had a voice accompanying naturally after that you could never change the rhythm you were always held by the rhythm that the voice gave them. We talked a little about the Four Saints [a play of Stein's] and what my idea had been, I said that what was most exciting was when nothing was happening, I said that saints could naturally do nothing if you were a saint that was enough and a saint existing was everything, if you made them do anything then there was nothing to it they are just like anyone so I wanted to write a drama where no one did anything....

This passage also points to similarities between Stein's and Cha's language: a consciously limited vocabulary, resonant repetition of phrases and words (to create an air of stasis), and a heavy emphasis on rhythm. Their mutual interest in saints, though obviously diverging in many ways, are linked in that Cha, too, has rendered her saints "silent," doing nothing [observe the still, so powerfully isolated, from Dreyer's Le Passion De Jean D'Arc, in DICTEE. Lew remarks upon "Yu Kwan-sun, presented close-up and alone within the book, taking her place 'again' in the class photograph deliberately cropped down to nine students…." in his prose "August 1986. Paris" toward the end of Excerpts (p. 111).

12 In "I gather the Limbs of Osiris" (1911-12) Pound describes the "Luminous Detail" method of scholarship (as opposed to that of "multitudinous detail" or the "method of sentiment and generalization") in which significant facts are contrasted rather than expounded upon, an initial insight he carries through a number of essays and anthologies, his theories of Imagism and Vorticism, and many poems including the famous "In a Station of the Metro" and The Cantos.

13 As reprinted in Truth Minh-Ha's When The Moon Waxes Red (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 213. Quotes from Barthes are from L'Empire des signes (Geneva: Skira, 1970), pp. 92, 96, 98 and 99 respectively.

14 "When speaking about the Master, I am necessarily speaking about both Him and the West. Patriarchy and hegemony.... Hegemony is established to the extent that the world view of the rulers is the world view of the ruled." (Trinh T. Minh-Ha, "Questions of Images and Politics," When the Moon, p. 148). Thomas Kuhn's description in The Structure of Scientific Revolutions of the "paradigms" of "normal science," which render invisible the "anomaly" until a period of crisis is reached (at which point the paradigm shifts) is relevant here: a focusing upon the believed "objective," thereby universal, methods and machinery of analysis and synthesis. (Cha, of course, was an anomaly herself.)

15 In DICTEE, p. 65. Cha's passage describes the experience of having blood taken: "She pushes hard the cotton square against the mark." Excerpts contains other parts from this section.

16 Excerpts, p. 31, from a translation by Lew of P'ansori sosa by Pak Hwang.

17 DICTEE p.32.

18 *DICTEE,* p. 32.

19 DICTEE, p. 45.

20 The quote from Yourcenar in Excerpts (from which this word is taken) alludes to the idea of this "experience" being dependent upon a total, "novelist's" conception of one's life. Cha, who was no doubt involved in such a totality, was, as Excerpts suggests, denied even the "heroism" of using [her] own demise" (Excerpts, p. 89).

Korean American Poetry

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At present, Korean American poetry is a rather small subset of Asian American literature; there has not been a large number of book-length texts published by Korean Americans, and representation by Korean Americans in such important anthologies as Breaking Silence (1983) and The Open Boat (1993) has been minimal, with the inclusion of only two Korean Americans in the former, and one in the latter. Nonetheless, there are a number of Korean American writers who could be considered significant, well-rounded artists with involving, rich oeuvres and unique aesthetic and political philosophies, and who have made their distinctive mark on the American literary landscape. The irony is that most of them—Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Walter K. Lew and Myung Mi Kim (the exception is Cathy Song)—would be considered "experimental" or "avant-garde" in their technique, as their writing has chosen to pursue avenues of expression that are at odds with mainstream notions of what poetry and literature is or can be. Cha, author of the book-length DICTEE, who has been written about twice previously in Korean Culture1, was absent from both anthologies mentioned above due to her very attention to the possibilities of text presented using avant-garde film and literary techniques. Her work only first found a significant place in the most recent major anthology of Asian American poetry, Premonitions (1995), in which, consequently, Korean American poets such as Willyce Kim, Myung Mi Kim, and Sung Rno, along with several others, are also represented.

One could speculate that this high percentage of Korean American poets tending toward experiment is an accident, and that, were there to be more Korean American poets with book-length works, the proportion would appear to even out. Many of the younger Korean American poets writing today, like Jean Yoon and Ann Choi (both represented in Premonitions) are not tending toward experiment in their work, and write in expository, descriptive modes that are perfectly acceptable to mainstream publications such as Parnassus or The Paris Review. However, while the group of accomplished poets is yet small, it is interesting to see that many of the more distinctive voices tend toward techniques of fragmentation, multi-linguism, pastiche, and a sort of multi-media presentation of texts, and that almost all of them were inspired, to some degree, by the writings and works of Cha herself, who died in 1982.

DICTEE2 had been dismissed for almost a decade by the Asian American critical establishment, and was labeled as "white" and not concerned with community or feminist issues. Lately, the work has been given much wider exposure and has been seen, ironically, as one of the most precise and far ranging expressions not only of the immigrant experience in the United States, but also the Korean s experience under Japanese colonialism and Korean women s experience in Korea and the U.S. These "representational" elements are all very apparent now, but their meshing with semiotic theory and filmic techniques in

the book—a sophistication absent from Asian American literature to that point—blinded a number of critics. As Elaine Kim writes in "Poised on the In-between," her contribution to the book of essays about Cha, Writing Self Writing Nation, that she edited with Norma Alarcón:

> What Dictée suggested, with its seemingly incongruous juxtapositions, its references to Greek mythology, and its French grammar exercises, seemed far afield from the identity I was after: a congealed essence defined by exclusionary attributes, closed, ready-made, and easy to quantify. I was given to pondering how "Korean" I was as I strove to become "more Korean than thou." Accustomed to thinking in polarities, influenced by a rather economistic understanding of Marxist ideas as elaborated on in community work, familiar with sociopolitical narratives on Korean American identity, and appreciative of realist readings of Asian American novels and poetry, I was totally unprepared for this layered and intensely personal, emotional, and individual text.3

The history and theoretical make-up of DICTEE's reception by the academy is a long and revealing tale, and will not be gone into here. Nonetheless, it is clear that Cha's brief, startling book of texts and images, long dismissed as having little to do with the experiences Korean Americans are supposed to feel, is now, with its satires on French language textbooks and photographs of revolutionary figures such as Yu Guan Soon, understood as a balanced, various and expressive literary production.4

Theresa Cha's work ranged from minimalist video to performance pieces to such lesser explored mediums as rubber-stamp mail art (a piece called "Markings"). "Commentaire,"5 which she published in a selection of film essays she edited called Apparatus, used only a handful of words repeated in several different fonts and sizes over the course of several pages, and which included photographs by Reese Williams and Richard Barnes, and stills from a film by Carl Dryer, Vampyr. Most of her video, performance, and literary works were concerned with language, an example being "Commentaire" itself, with its elements suggestive of placards from silent films. A performance piece called "Aveugle Voix" involved Cha covering her eyes and mouth with bandanas printed with the French words for "blind" and "voice"—suggesting, in a sort of Homeric turn, the equation of the two. DICTEE, published the year she died, employs a multiplicity of techniques and voices combined with many literary and historical references, creating a nearly biblical realm of overlapping types and motifs. The book was the culmination of her work thus far.

Though the experience of a Cha video-work could never be imitated in book form—many of the videos involve the tracing of ideas over disconcertingly long stretches of time—any one of the chapters, and even parts of the

chapters, of DICTEE could form the conceptual basis of one of her pieces. The juxtaposition of a diagram of an esophagus with the section that describes an attempt at attaining certain speech patterns (an abstract of the process of learning English) is one example, playing on the image/placard technique of "Commentaire." Another section records her mother's life under the Japanese occupation, a narrative section that contains significant insight into Cha's politicized attitudes toward language:

> Mother you are a child still. At eighteen. More of a child since you are always ill. They have sheltered you from life. Still, you speak the tongue the mandatory language like the others. It is not your own. Even if it is not you know you must. You are Bi-lingual. You are Tri-lingual. The tongue that is forbidden is your own mother tongue. You speak in the dark. In the secret.6

This "speaking in the dark," which had very real repercussions for a woman in the occupation, also plays into Cha's preoccupation with the sign, which tends to be an emblem of emptiness in postmodern theory, but is the site of political identity in DICTEE. The "tri-lingual," of course, plays a large role in the book, in which languages vie with each other in the centerless space of the text authored by the cultural exile, hence tracing a formal aspect of Cha's aesthetics to the survivalist modes and instincts of a Korean in the 1930s .

The section entitled "ERATO LOVE POETRY" is something of a shooting script itself, though it is also highly reminiscent of the French "new novel" that was in vogue at the time. It appears to tell the story of St. Therese of Lisieux and her passionate, mystical marriage with Jesus Christ. It reminds the reader, consequently, of the introduction of Western metaphysics into Korean philosophy, not to mention the concept of martyrdom; it is, in fact, the linking of the animist and Buddhist traditions of Korean thought with a meditative, hermetic Christianity that contributes to the book's distinctive feeling. The pages do not read across, but each side, the left page and the right page, carry over from the previous left and right pages, so that one is reading two columns of text. The effect is dramatic as texts of vaguer, evocative qualities give way to others that are more determinate, so that the minimalist passage: "Mouth moving. Incessant. Precise. Forms the words heard. Moves from the mouth to the ear. With the hand placed across on the other s lips moving, forming the words... At the same time. to the time. twice. At the same hour. Same time" (sic), gives away to: "One expects her to be beautiful. The title which carries her name is not one that would make her anonymous or plain. 'The portrait of... One seems to be able to see her... With the music on the sound track you are prepared for her entrance."7 The first quote evokes other parts of DICTEE in which Cha describes learning languages, which she does partially by "reading" lips (taken as signs), and it also describes a mental drama,

though it is unclear whether it is an interior monologue, like in the novels of Virginia Woolf, or if it is a depiction of the author herself engaged in contemplation of her figures. The latter section, however, has a very definite perspective: it is a shooting script, or the notes one takes when watching a film. Later in the "ERATO LOVE POETRY" section is a still from another film of Dreyer s, La passion de Jeanne d'Arc, a close-up of Renée Falconetti as the saint expressing both sorrow and passion while being sentenced to death for her love of Christ. Cha effectively takes this still and makes it part of her own film, thus layering one more archetype upon her multi-plex of martyr symbols.

The reception of Cha's work by the establishment is somewhat important in the discussion of Korean American poetry, not only because of Cha's importance as a poet, but because many of the main figures in this chronicle are Korean Americans. Elaine Kim, the critic quoted above, is the author of the first book-length work on Asian American literature, Asian American Literature: An Introduction8. Cha is not mentioned in this very influential book, a fact not initially remarkable since Cha was being published in small press editions that received more attention in the art communities of Manhattan than elsewhere (though, indeed, most Asian American literature had limited printings). One prominent Korean American writer, however, Walter K. Lew, recognized Cha's value early, as is apparent from the introduction to a 1982 short anthology of Asian American poets that he edited for Bridge magazine, in which he dedicates the selection to Cha. He has, since that time, been one of Cha's most careful critics and observers, as is testified in his "critical collage" Excerpts from ____DIKTE/for DICTEE (1982),9 a complex visual study that seeks to expand DICTEE's meanings via the presentation of various elements such as source material, suggestive meta-narratives from a Korean children's book (captioned in French), photographs from the war, or citations of DICTEE's themes as they reverberate in such works as Marguerite Yourcenar's Memoirs d'Hadrien. Most importantly, the book challenges the reader to experience it phenomenologically—as a "thing in itself," as a brief film, as a concrete, complex intervention—thus taking Cha's work with reader response a step further. Excerpts was a major contribution to the understanding of Cha in the Asian American community, and a significant development in the possibilities for criticism in the use of juxtaposed citations and visual imagery, with no authorial commentary—a mosaic of quotation, as had been imagined by Walter Benjamin.

Lew was aware, even in the 1982 introduction, of the relevance of the multi-media for Asian American literature, as is apparent in the part of the essay in which he describes the "five basic genres of Asian American poetry," which is worth quoting, as they give some insight into what was available to Asian Americans at the time:

> Using for now mainly conventional terms, these often overlapping genres... are: DOCUMENTARY; LYRIC; SATIRE; CROSS-

> CULTURAL ODES; MATRICES... [T]he last one may be unfamiliar ... An incipient form, it employs a wide range of rapidly juxtaposed languages, media, historical frameworks, motifs and rhetorical moods. It is almost demanded by the normally multi-cultural situation of Asian Americans and the accelerated information flow and collisions of contemporary society in general.10

Though the term "matrices" did not catch on in the world of literary argot—unlike "projective verse" or "Bakhtinian polyphony"—Lew is describing something that was occurring in Asian American poetry even before the influence of Cha. The poem that he gives as an example of a matrix is Ho Hon Leung's "A Symphonic Poem 'Unfinished' for Rose Li Kin Hong," a playful piece that employs musical measures, Chinese, and unusual word spacializaton. The Canadian poet Roy Kiyôoka, whose work has only found major distribution in the States through Lew's Premonitions, is a master of the matrix poem, such as "an April Fool's Divertimento," in which he links together a variety of prose and poetry forms to create a rush of resonant, literary flirtations. Ronald Tanaka, in his bizarre work "The Mount Eden Poems," employs photographs of, for example, a woman posing as a kindergarten teacher, each photo coupled with a poems dedicated to a different wine11. Though it is not widely used by Asian Americans, the poem as "matrix" is, in general, a very useful form for the poet of the "interstitial"—to borrow Homi Bhabha's term from The Location of Culture—as it allows the organization of disparate elements without surrendering them to closed narrative forms.

Lew, who is not a prolific writer, has been active as a video and performance artist, critic, editor, translator and teacher, and was the editor of Kaya Production, a new American publisher of Asian/Asian diasporic literature. His contribution to the literary annual, MUAE, which he edited, was several translations of the poetry of the Korean modernist Yi Sang and a long essay comparing homoerotic themes in that author's mirror poems to the writing of Jean Cocteau, such as the controversial White Book. Brine, Lew's first book of poems, collects the work of over 20 years, and the styles and themes range not only across wide aesthetic and philosophical grounds but also through different biographical phases (though they are not arranged chronologically). The early section of the book contains a somewhat Proustian evocation of an ideal, somewhat charmed youth with wise, humorous elders and celebrations of the freshness of sense impression. Though these themes are not developed in an orderly fashion, there is clearly a preoccupation with Korean tradition—the introductory poem is called "33 Generations at Ssang-Ryong" and the following poem, "Seoul: 1953," ends with the lines:

> It is only decades
> Later that, tapping the wide glowing jars
> I find they contain all that has made

The father have dominion over hers.12

This section also includes a translation from a fascinating Buddhist text that informs and advises: "THE GREAT PATH IS BOUNDLESS / not something a narrow practice can seek," thus making the first section suggestive of an Asian American bildungsroman, or portrait of the young artist. The Buddhist text almost seems to echo Lew s concerns in such writings as the intro to the Bridge selection, in which he states that Asian American criticism has lacked a framework to "lead a writer to a clear conception of a life-long quest for mastery."13

One of the longer poems in the book is a section from "The Movieteller," based on a performance piece that Lew created in which he reads a narrative over a silent, re-edited Korean film. The poem is a poeticized, textual version of what a Korean pyônsa would do at silent movies in the 1920s and 1930s, which is to create dialogue—often subversive in content—for the films, almost all of which were imported. The poem is accompanied by wonderful photographs from Korean silent films, and is concerned with the ramblings of an old retired pyônsa himself—ironic, as no such movie had been made then (though one has been made recently in Korea).

I began before leaving technical school,
Telling the Max Fleischer cartoons and Chushingura they showed
Saturday afternoons, top floor
Of the Hwashin department store.
Then the big offers from
Cinemas downtown...
I could not resist—Ciao!
I said to my chemistry comrades
And splurged at Mitsukoshi's
On a herring bone oba
And some Roman pomade.
The first days, I must admit,
I barely managed:
I sometimes didn't know the movies any better
Than the audience did.

The poem is effective as not only as chronicle of a lost chapter in Korean culture, but, in the context of its placement in the early section of Brine, it offers another look at the development of the artist and his or her role in the political act of countering, redirecting or animating meanings—"The people soon liking a void between / themselves and the screen," as a refrain in the poem states.

In Brine, these early themes eventually give way to the chaos of adolescence and young adulthood—the embracing of American culture, experiments

with alternative sexualities, avant-garde art and radical Korean politics, etc.—and consequently to investigations of different modes of poetry, such as jazz-inspired work, language-centered writing, and even confessional modes. The long poem "1983" is a parody of T.S. Eliot's "Waste Land," and conveys the paranoia and corruption of the United States in its period of greatest covert meddling in foreign governments. The poem's tone is very different from Eliot's, and Lew's version doesn't have the same epigrammatic quality— the satire, for instance, isn't nearly as biting—and yet it has a feel to it peculiar to much of Lew's poetry, especially in its openness to non-canonical information, and in the indeterminate or clipped quality of its meanings. The poem "The Stars and Stripes" evokes something of the confessional poetry of the American 50s, with its detached, alienated observer remarking with irony on the not-so-commonplaces of life:

> Saturday night: in beat-up cars, the art school
> Gay begin to cruise. Or maybe
> They re lowlifes from downtown and Johnston
> Thinking I m from the School of Design.
> (I attend the university even further up the Hill.)
> One load screams out, "Needa ride?
> Wanna slide?" [...]

The poem deftly veers into an entirely different meter to express the suddenness of the refusal, thus utilizing something of the "matrix" aesthetic and creating a more complex aural experience for the reader. The poem "Two Handful of Waka for Thelonious Sphere Monk" is a cross-cultural ode to the great pianist and composer, and is a jazz homage worthy of Lawson Fusao Nada, though with a denser syntax. The "Ga-Guhm Poems," which is the final section of Brine, is a lengthy pseudo-treatise which concerns several posthumous poems by two individuals who had taken part in an experiment to discover the roots of the "amatory... the biochemical substrate of romantic love." The collection of poems, written by individuals known only as S1, and S2, and some of which were also supposed to have been written by the scientist himself, are funny and cryptic, learned and strangely knowing. The piece, which is itself an anthology, with plenty of Nabokovian fake commentary running concurrent, is also supported by images, some of which are shocking, and it falls in a line as a humorous cousin to Lew's other literary/visual works, such as the critical collage itself, Excerpts.

Myung Mi Kim has gained a lot of attention lately for her spare, evocative but very precise poems, many of which are long or book-length. She presently has two collections available, Under Flag (Kelsey St. Press, 1991) and The Bounty (Chax, 1996), and a third volume, Dura, is forthcoming from Sun & Moon Press. For followers of Asian American literature, she is often seen as a descendent of Cha, and there are moments in Under Flag that owe much to

her, especially the opening of the poem "Into Such Assembly," with its questionnaire asking:

> Can you read and write English? Yes____. No____.
> Write down the following sentences in English as I dictate them.
> There is a dog in the road.
> It is raining.

Kim's writing, however, is infused with a political urgency that is reminiscent of the activist tradition that Cha is usually set against, and there is none of the preoccupation with Christian martyrdom or mysticism—the "dictator," for example, being more specific in this excerpt. These opening lines, which deal with the experience of a government exam, engage in power issues that are concerned more directly with legalities and society than the centerless tri-logism of Cha's work. Kim uses language much more concretely, harnessing the power of single words to jar rather than lull, and she has a sense of the dissonance that the single odd syllable can play in a line:

> Cable car rides over swan flecked ponds
> Red lacquer chests in our slateblue house
> Chrysanthemums trailing bloom after bloom
> Ivory, russet, pale yellow petals crushed
> Between fingers, that green smell, if jade would smell
> So-Sah s thatched roofs shading miso hung to dry—
> Sweet potatoes grow on the rock choked side of the mountain
> The other, the pine wet green side of the mountain
> Hides a lush clearing where we picnic and sing:
> Sung-Bul-Sah, geep eun bahm ae
>
> Neither, neither
>
> Who is mother tongue, who is father country?14

Rereading this passage, one begins to feel that Kim is creating a parody, or bitter imitation, of revery, rather than being carried away by an emotional nexus of associations. Kim has mastered a very unique, somewhat awkward, but always fascinating sense of prosody, as this excerpt from "Into Such Assembly" demonstrates. Some lines are composed almost entirely of trochees (a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed), for example "Ivory, russet... yellow petals...," thus rendering the reading experience unsettling. The phrase "rock choked" seems to jump out of the line after the easy movement of "Sweet potatoes grow on the.." This harsh poetics takes on a new dimension later in the poem, which in Kim adopts a voice that is angry and unsettling:

> Over there, ass is cheap—those girls live to make you happy
>
> Over there, we had a slateblue house with a flat roof where I made many snowmen, over there
>
> No, "th", "th", put your tongue against the roof of your mouth, lean slightly against the back of the top teeth, then bring your bottom teeth up to barely touch your tongue and breathe out , and you should feel the tongue vibrating, "th", "th", look in the mirror, that s better.15

The bluntness of the first line and the stubborn "No" that begins the last illustrate that Kim s politics are those of radical presence in the face of the invisibility, a contrast to Cha who engaged in the creation of personal archetypes, and in the tracing of the self in several predecessor spirits.

Another strong presence in Kim's work is the poet Susan Howe, whose books The Europe of Trusts and The Nonconformist's Memorial have given Kim a useful example upon which to base her own work. Howe's work is known for its ability to include everything from ballads to seventeenth century prose styles to an all-overedness page layout that is reminiscent of projective verse or certain parts of Paterson, and her attention to the sound of the syllable has lead her to break lines off in odd places, sometimes in the middle of words. More importantly, she is also known for her investigations, in her poems, into the nature of historical investigation itself, as she records the presence of her subjectivity while uncovering, as in the case of "Melville s Marginalia," such finds as the origins of the character "Bartelby the Scrivener." Kim matches Howe in her ability to hear and weigh the syllables of American speech, something worth noting as there have been numerous imitators of Howe's poetics who don't do this, and she has used the openness of lyrical historical investigation to expand on many Korea-based themes. This has enabled Kim to explore an equally wide range of styles, so that shorter works, such as the first part of the Bounty, called "Primer," are in fact mini-primers of postmodern poetic form.

The structure of "Primer" is based on that of the Korean written language, hangul, though the whole phonetic alphabet is not represented. Each section is dedicated to a vowel sound or to a consonant, but only in the first, [g], do we see direct correspondence between the consonant and the English words in her text: "g is for girl," "g is for glove," "g is for golden," etc. Kim is clearly, as in earlier works, playing on the conventions of learning a different language, but also those of romantic poetry, as her choice of words are invariably suggestive of innocence, the fetish object, or something beautiful. One is reminded of Kamau Brathwaite's description, in "The History of the Voice," of Caribbean poets, weaned on Palgrave's Golden Treasury, writing about the "snow falling over the cane fields." These sort of obvious associations between the vowel

sound and the text disappear in the later sections, and each poem—again, employing the "matrix" form—presents the reader with its own contexts for understanding. The second poem, [n], runs:

In the morning. Called as witness

Privately and publicly.If you have.

The counter cry. Rubric, direction.

I did not rate at the value of a mulberry.
Became.

I made.16

There is something of the Cartesian cogito in the last two lines, but with a distinctive feminist and post-colonial spin. One also thinks, consequently, of the defiance of the "Caliban" figure in Caribbean theory—of the colonized individual using the language that "became" (transitive, "created") one to curse (the "counter cry"). The private and public mesh in "Primer" right at the level of language, perhaps at the level of the consonant, making this a difficult work to discuss.

Cathy Song is one of the most visible Asian American poets, and also one of the most accomplished. Her first book, Picture Bride, won the Yale Younger Poets award—famously, one might add, as all awards that are won within the Asian American community tend to be recorded over and over, as they are seen as markers for success. She has released two books since then, and though her style, often simple and revealing, has not changed much, she has shown a determination to break new ground in her writing. She has, in several early interviews, distanced herself from being linked to an "Asian American way" of writing, and chose to emphasize, early in her career, that the poet must pay attention to aesthetics over mere proselyting. Nonetheless, as a perceptive early critique of Picture Bride states, Song has had a more unsure relationship with her status as Asian:

In her desire to present an Asian American culture, Song understandably reaches for the sensations, the tastes, smells, sounds, colors, particular to that ethnic experience; some of her most forceful, because original, images come from this reaching out to Asian American particulars. For example, "The children are the dumplings / set afloat... Wrap the children / in wonton skins, bright quilted bundles..." But in this stylistic venture Song sometimes becomes too dependent on linguistic conventions which appear like a nervous tic throughout the poems: jade, sour plums, Mah-Jongg... One almost sees the creative writing instructor breathing over the poet's shoulder, urging her to write concretely about the particulars of her ethnic background...17

While this criticism may be harsh, its themes are not entirely alien to Asian American discourse, whether it be concerning Amy Tan or Miss Saigon, and it points out the relevance of the concerns with language that infuse Cha's and Kim's work. These conventions of Song's fall away, and, as will become apparent, she finds a way to respond to these readers "over [her] shoulder."

As the problematic introduction to Picture Bride by Richard Hugo states, "In Cathy Song's quietude lies her strength. In her receptivity, passive as it seems, lies passion, a passion that is expressed in deceptive quiet and even tone... Her senses are lucky to have remained childlike and reception appears to have been a complete act."18 Song's poems are, indeed, highly sensual, even erotic, but what Hugo may have missed is the sexuality that Song obviously feels for the female body as seen through art. Two longer poems in her first book are dedicated to the highly suggestive paintings of Georgia O'Keeffe, which often mimic the forms of female sexual parts, hence offering, on their large swaths of canvas, monumental odes to the solitary. As Song writes in "Blue And White Lines After O'Keeffe," in the final section called "The White Trumpet Flower" (the poem's five sections mirror the five sections of Picture Bride19):

> The hems of your white dresses,
> sprigged with cloves and lavender,
> fenced my playground. You were happy then,
> happiest when I played
> with the doll family.
> They bored me;
> I disliked their fragile bodies
> and waxy yellow hair
> and none of them looked like my father.
> But I played with them,
> tossing their useless bodies into the air,
> because you were pleased and smiling.
> But soon, smiles were not enough.
> I discovered my own autonomy then,
> crawling out from your wide skirts
> and into your flowerbeds,
> where I proceeded to crucify the dolls,
> decapitating your crocuses.
> You scowled (and I clapped),
> saying, "Georgia,
> you are like the dogwood...
> a homely name for a goofy flower.
> There's just no potential...."

Dear Mother,
you would not like it out here;
in Abiquiu there are no flowers,
not your kind of weather.
I have lived without mirrors and without men—
but I can feel my own skin,
how it is parched and crinkled like a lizard's.20

Using O'Keeffe as a mask, Song traces the paths of sexual independence, one that is radical enough to not include men, or even the freshness of the "young bloom" of womanhood, in its parameters. This is unusual to experience in a book that contains so many poems about birth, the family, and even her own infancy (the poem "Tribe"). Song uses the life and works of a sexual renegade to explore her own difference, and one sees a parallel here with a series of poems from David Mura's first collection, After We Lost Our Way, concerned with the life and art of Italian filmmaker/poet Piero Pasolini. Images of skin abound in Song's poetry; in the poem "A Mehinaku Girl In Seclusion," from Song's second collection Frameless Windows, Squares of Light, she writes "They say my skin / will be as delicate as the light / that touches the spider's web."21 In "Sunworshippers," from her latest collection School Figures, she writes:

There was folly and irreverence to such exposure,
something only people with dirty feet did.
Who will marry you
if your skin is sunbaked and dried up like beef jerky?22

While Hugo might praise Song's "passivity" and "receptivity" in her early poems, it is clear that Song finds independence in the revelation of one's own physical presence. For Song, commitment to the sense of body and the sensual texture of the work—which seems to run counter to an activist feminist poetics that drums its slogans—are fused, so that all gestures toward the beautiful are also toward the liberatory. She deserves credit for this commitment, for the turn against plain social chronicling in the time of Picture Bride's publication was somewhat daring, though perhaps less so with the imprimatur of the Yale Younger Poets backing her. While many other themes are considered in Song's work—family relationships, birth, homages to lost souls—it is probably this fusing of aesthetics, sexuality and liberation that is most distinctive, though it constitutes something of a quiet fire.

Song's first two books tended to contain carefully constructed poems that didn't use internal rhyme or very baroque linguistic structures or similes. In School Figures, however, she attempts new subject matters and techniques in her writing. The opening poem, "The Story of Madeline," for example, is filled with internal rhyme, deft alliteration and rich similes and associations. It is

highly reminiscent of the best of Elizabeth Bishop, though looser in construction, and prone to nearly Anglo Saxon degrees of alliteration. In its use of a storybook for a subject, it is a poem that resembles some of the ecphrastic pieces from Picture Bride, but with a linguistic intensity that the first book rarely achieves:

> Drawn as if with quick brush strokes,
> wide-brimmed hat and coat,
> Madeline is a flash of arms and legs
> the day she splashes into the Seine.
> Three cheers for the dog Mlle Genevieve that drags her to shore,
> river water pouring from her limp body
> fish and nasty debris.
> Plucked into the cook's kitchen by a clucking Miss Clavel,
> she is stripped, toweled and sternly scolded.
> No howl of complaint for the gruff treatment,
> but a dash for a mouth to indicate a certain achievement.23

The alliteration in these lines is startling, occurring with a skill that is rare in poetry, though dense soundplay—via puns and dissonance/assonance—has made its way into new literature through a certain theoretical vogue (one thinks of William Gass's alliteration in his novel The Tunnel, which is merely stifling). The play in these lines permits one to see how a word like "dog" splits apart to become "drags" and "shore" in the fifth line excerpted here; similarly, the word "Clavel" offers a sort of release after a line that contains heavy rhyming such as "plucked," "cook's", and "clucking." Most of Song's poems in School Figures are not like this, but this sort of "figure" (does the title suggest her turning back toward some previous models, an idealized apprenticeship?) demonstrates what Song can do when she permits language room to play, and to court the unusual.

Some younger Korean American poets include Sung Rno, who has turned to playwriting mostly but whose poems demonstrate a very great talent, and E Kim, who is also a video maker, and whose poems tend toward the avant-garde while embracing, at the same time, a deliberate tact of self-exposure. Rno's poem "The Mounds," which was stand-out in the Asian Pacific American Journal's 1993 anthology of Korean American literature, called Voices Stirring, contains a breadth and command of line that perfectly mimics the subject matter, the large burial mounds that are, in their geometric simplicity, suggestive of an almost existential barrenness:

> You can see them from the highway, studding the hills
> as if they were swollen and ready to burst. We buried her
> in one of these pregnant graves. I never thought it sad

to give her back to these hills. Better this rolling ground than the concrete
of Ohio, or the white formality of any church...24

Color in Rno's poem takes on a symbolic resonance, as dirt and soil mix with whiteness in a way that challenges the purity of the funereal moment. The long, sometimes endless-seeming lines suggest the monumental presence of the mounds, which are themselves so simple but overwhelming to experience:

We ate lunch next to the mounds,
the grass getting more brittle and losing color now that fall was coming.
The harvest would be soon, and my uncles who ran the farm
were dressed in cool whites, preparing for the work. We prayed together
and blessed her, patting her soil. My young cousins started to fight.
Their white tae kwon do uniforms became brown with dirt, and when they laughed
they had strange expressions. Either too much teeth, or the way
their eyes told me things I didn't want to know.

E Kim's poems have appeared in several smaller journals in the past years, though she hasn't herself been prolific. In "The Chance of Rain is Medium," a poem divided into four sections, each headed by a different time and temperature, she adopts something of an indeterminate diary-form (reminiscent of Lyn Hejinian's "new sentence" work, My Life), examining, with a hyper-intellectuality, the various minutiae of her day:

Repeated redactions clean the desk up...

Trashed. Settled by landscape, an adjacent time zone enters from the left. Pollen available only in this light. Turning a page like swiveling a chair does not make a pan. The shaded man in the car leaned out to smell something green and colorful. Perhaps the day had changed without a record to break the rested division.

I imagine myself getting on, unendangered by sophomorics. I pretend to outgrow astonishment, ignore the words in a sidelong head. Alack makes the loss laughable. Better left as someone else, these cuts of wood resemble another chair. Getting on or getting on with, one season accounts another. Simulation and a place at any table.25

There is, as in DICTEE, a nouveau roman quality to this writing, though for Kim there is a domesticity and a humor that is alien to Cha's more hierat-

ic, mystical leanings. Underlying even such a simple poem as "Things to do post-op"26 is a poetics of rapid juxtaposition, as this list-poem includes such things as "vote for Nader," "follow the rhythms of an unassumed past," "wonder if masturbation will quicken or impede recovery" and "try to hear the difference between lawnmowers and helicopters." Some of her poems are almost pure sound, as in "Technical Translations After Robinson After Wang Wei," translations by a spell-checker of poems by Wang Wei which corrupt the avenues of tired orientalism:

Wooly Law Gnome

law gnome sits arrears emote whiskey
—lilts swallow ginned emboss—sit do
eruptive and in ere evil lay how Dixie?
aerobe ere saw that mix of yen every to
(Meng Wall Hollow)

Other young poets included in the Premonitions anthology are Janet M. Choi and Jean Hyung Yul Chu, both of whom write tense, powerful poems, and video-maker/wig sculptress (among other things) Gloria Toyun Park, who employs a great deal of text in such works of hers as "Red Lolita." Also worth mentioning is a Korean-born poet named Ko Won, who came to the United States during the Park era. While his English-language poetry is not widely available, it is considered important by many critics seeking to understand the complexities, sacrifices and risks of the Korean political exile.

One thing that is clear in this brief survey of Korean American poets, both major and minor, is that most of the poets are women. Elaine Kim's explanation for this phenomenon in her essay "Korean American Literature" (1997) is a little unconvincing; she writes that there is greater interest in writing by women, and that, as opposed to the turn of the century, "now more women are immigrating to the United States from Korea than men."27 She doesn't explain how a "balance" in the immigration quotas after 1965 created the obvious imbalance of writing by women in the Korean American community. What she also fails to mention, but which is almost equally as obvious, is that many of the major writers in Korean American literature—those who, for example, embrace the entire range of subject matters from the repercussions of Japanese colonization, the gendered hierarchy in Korean society, the semiotics of language education, etc—tend to be experimental, a tendency which cannot be considered only the responsibility of Cha s influence. The link of experimentation and feminism is clear if one considers the highly theorized positions that have complicated feminism in the 80s and 90s, the crossings of feminist and Marxist thought, and the many feminist (or quasi-feminist) authors who are also experimental writers, such as Yourcenar, Monique Wittig, and Nathalie

Sarraute, not to mention filmmakers such as Maya Deren (Cha includes a section of her journals in Apparatus). The individualism that is expected of an American female artist, a contrast to a Korean woman artist's limited role in pre-modern Korean society, may also contribute a desire or necessity to innovate in the face of a different, more liberal, social order. Beyond issues of feminism, Korean and Korean American "experience" can be considered one of fragments, but also one that involves the trauma of a highly conservative, traditional country being wrenched into a pluralist, relativistic society by the colonization of a Westernized neighboring country, by the total decimation of its physical landscape by a war that was fueled by American military technologies, and by the successive leaderships of several ideologues who have sought to impose schematic political systems on their people.

An interesting contrast to the three writers concerned here, Cha, Kim and Lew, is the Korean artist Nam Jun Paik, known now for his monumental television works that seek both to illustrate and to parody the "information age." In terms of world culture, Paik seems the ultimate global citizen—the "interstitial" artist who has maximalized his marginality—and he has taken that very citizenship as his subject matter. It is, however, no accident that he is Korean; there is, for example, a whole nexus of energies that exist between the Fluxus philosophy that nurtured him and his tradition-bound, somewhat Buddhist upbringing. The seriousness with which Paik paints a long sheet of rice paper with his tie, for example, in one early Fluxus performance, betrays the intensity of his commitment to occupy and discourse with tradition, rather than merely "break" with it. What is obvious, though, is that Paik has erased any sort of transition between his Korean past and his electrified presence, an absence that is typified in the first paragraph of a recent autobiographical statement of his:

Now that I am nearly 60, it's time for me to practice a bit of dying. People of my age in olden times in Korean were out in the mountains accompanied by a geomancer in search of a propitious site for a grave. However, I've no money for that and land prices became so steep, let's live on and die by ersatz.28

One can credit this great "however" to Paik's natural flippancy toward tradition, but his cool approach toward death seems peculiarly Korean, as does his focusing on the age of 60.29 He doesn't gloat on it, nor wax prophetic, like the Anglican Eliot, about his terminus. This sort of irreverence, like the irreverence in his work, is key to his relationship to tradition, but the absence of a middle-ground—a falling out with his past, or a serious meditation on his transition from, for example, an "eastern" artist to a "western"—is equally apparent, which is why one invariably considers some aspect of Paik's work to be "superficial."

It is this middle ground that the Korean American poets discussed here have attempted to fill, to reconstruct, though it may never have been there in the first place. Ironically, though Korean art itself is very conservative, much of it stuck in such old schools as Abstract Expressionism, or even Modernist

modes such as Fauvism, the most prominent Asian artist in the world is a Korean working with electronics; in the same light, three of the most radical poets in the United States—Cha, Kim, and Lew—are also Korean, and while none of them have embraced the ecstasy of pure information like Paik (or like the Chinese American poet Tan Lin, or the "language" poet Bruce Andrews) they all share a similar concern, which is with something that could be considered a "middle passage" for Korean American literature. As Henry Louis Gates writes in The Signifying Monkey about the process of cultural erasure in the African American Middle Passage:

Common sense, in retrospect, argues that these retained elements of culture should have survived, that their complete annihilation would have been far more remarkable than their preservation. The African, after all, was a traveler, albeit an abrupt, ironic traveler, through space and time; and like every traveler, the African "read" a new environment within a received framework of meaning and belief. The notion that the Middle Passage was so traumatic that it functioned to create in the African a tabula rasa of consciousness is as odd as it is a fiction, a fiction that has served several economic orders and their attendant ideologies.30

There is an absence that is needing to be recovered in Korean American literature, a big whah? that lies somewhere between its places of occurrence in the United States—San Francisco, New York, Chicago—the solidly tradition-bound philosophical space that is in the hearts of all Koreans born in Korea, and the trauma of having that country's geography and architecture completely decimated. The waves on the cover of Lew's Excerpts, the tracing of Kim's feminist concerns through the centuries back to when hangul was a language used primarily by women and her refusal to embrace English on the "level" of standard syntax and expression, and Cha's rediscovery of her maternal past through figures such as Joan of Arc, all suggest an attempt to occupy the space between the "east" and "west," to narrativize this passage, and, perhaps, to create protagonists where there were victims. That is, these three writers, all of whom are incredibly learned in "western" modes of art, create out of the timeless transitions that exist between multicultural reference—in the human, sweaty spaces between information—something that never existed for Koreans, which is a transitional phase. The concern with time in the work of Cha, whose video works expanded infinitesimal occurrences into stretches of time, and Lew—whose book Excerpts contains the date "1982" and was published in 1992, clearly pointing to the decade-long "silence" on Cha's work as the locus of his own—could also be seen as an attempt to counter history's tendency to steal, to pilfer, from the vulnerable their cultural achievements.

For the Korean American artist, there is the distinctive situation of belonging to a culture that has waged war with itself, much of it a "cold war" characterized by extraordinary attempts at misinformation, and fueled by the most hard-edged ideological differences. As the historian Bruce Cumings emphasizes in his new history, Korea's Place in the Sun, the debates that have

existed in both the north and south have been fueled by splits in Korean political culture that are centuries old. He is concerned with reminding all Americans that communism in North Korea is not just a fancy drawn from thin air, but the embodiment of many strands of Korean culture that have, in fact, been more preserved in the North than the South. Indeed, North Korea may be the Korean peninsula's greatest work of modern art at the moment—a half-century attempt at a quasi-Confucian Utopia—as it is a synthesis of the traditional and the modern, and it is so economically impractical and uncompromising as to be understandable only once its realities have completely disappeared—i.e. once it is part of history, and can be seen from all sides31. Similar dogmatic strains and ideological splits are also present in Korean American literature, and have kept it somewhat closed and dysfunctional, so that it only grows in bursts, fueled by mavericks, and is yet uncomfortable with its heterogeneous heritage. Nonetheless, the fact that the Korean identity at present is so fissured helps explain why the aforesaid "matrix"—the work of information conveyed through heterogenous channels—has been popular for Korean American, not so much because of its ability to "represent" a Korean American psychological type, but because of its ability to defuse ideological difference, and thus get at the specific indeterminacies of art itself, where feeling and beauty reside.

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1 See Rob Wilson, "Falling Into the Korean Uncanny: On Reading Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's Dictee" (Fall 1991), 33-37; and Brian Kim Stefans, "A Search for Lost Time: A Review of Walter K. Lew's Excerpts from _____/ DIKTE for DICTEE (1982)" (Spring 1994), 18-25.

2 There has been a debate about how the title of the book should appear in print. Lew's claim is that the word only appears as DICTEE in the volume and thus should always be depicted so, whereas many critics use Dictee or Dictée. When the title appears in a quote, its form is unchanged from that of the author cited; otherwise, the title appears as DICTEE.

3 Writing Self Writing Nation, ed. Elaine H. Kim and Norma Alarcón (Berkeley: Third Woman Press, 1994), 4.

[4] In another essay from this book, called "Unnaming the Same," Shelley Sunn Wong writes that the "silence" regarding *Dictée* is not to be explained in simple terms of "a critical orthodoxy resisting challenges to its authority, or of tradition bound (and largely realist) forms resisting avant-garde experimentation. Instead, that silence needs to be understood in the context of changing frameworks of reception within the Asian American community, changes that are the result not of transitory literary fashions but, rather, the conjunction of several historical developments in the 1970s and 1980s: major demographic changes within the Asian American community from 1965-1985; the growing strength and influence of the women's movement; the postmodernist concern with fragmentation and multiple personalities; and the emergence of new social movements that necessitated the rethinking of oppositional strategies." (104) Wong's essay is the best one in the selection, a significant contribution to Cha studies, and the only one in the book that considers the role of the cinema in *DICTEE*. However, this assessment of why *DICTEE* was excluded from Asian American criticism is inadequate, for such issues as "the postmodern concern with fragmentation and multiple personalities" and the "rethinking of oppositional strategies" were all in circulation since the 60s, and that "major demographic changes within the Asian American movement" (meaning, one supposes, the influx of Koreans) should not have been a significant factor, as Cha, who (as Wong notes) eschewed being "representative," had found admirers in many non-Asians, and presumably could have found them in non-Koreans.

[5] *Apparatus*, ed. Theresa Hak Kyung Cha (New York: Tanam Press, 1981), 260-327.

[6] Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *DICTEE* (New York: Tanam Press, 1982), 45.

[7] *DICTEE*, 97-98.

[8] Elaine H. Kim, *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982).

[9] Walter K. Lew, *Excerpts from _____DIKTE for DICTEE (1982)* (Seoul: Yeul Eum Publishing, 1992). See article on this book by Stefans, footnoted earlier.

[10] *Bridge* (Winter 1983), 11.

[11] Both of these appear, entire or partially, in *Premonitions*.

[12] Walter K. Lew, *Brine* (forthcoming from Hard Press), unpaginated. This and the following quotes are taken from the same manuscript.

[13] *Bridge*, 12.

[14] Myung Mi Kim, *Under Flag* (Berkeley: Kelsey St. Press, 1991), 29.

[15] *Under Flag*, 30.

[16] Myung Mi Kim, *The Bounty* (Minneapolis: Chax Press, 1996), 16.

[17] *Melus* (Fall 1983), 98.

[18] Cathy Song, *Picture Bride* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), ix.

[19] It is also worth noting that Song's original title for the book was *From the White Place*, after a painting by O'Keeffe.

[20] *Picture Bride*, 47.

[21]Cathy Song, *Frameless Windows, Squares of Light* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1988), 32.

[22] Cathy Song, *School Figures* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995), 26.

[23] *School Figures*, pg. 3.

[24] *Premonitions: The Kaya Anthology of New North Asian American Poetry,* ed. Walter K. Lew (New York: Kaya Production, 1995),. 514.

[25] *Arras 3* (May/June 1996), 85.

[26] This and the following poem discussed are unpublished.

[27] *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature*, ed. King-Kok Cheung (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 174.

[28] *Fluxus: Today and Yesterday*, a special issue of *Art and Design* (1993), 53.

[29] See *Ancestor Worship and Korean Society*, by Roger L. Janelli and Dawnhee Yim Janelli (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1982). "According to the traditional system of time reckoning prevalent throughout East Asia, 60 years is the length of one complete cycle. Thus, a parent's sixtieth birthday is marked by a major celebration, traditionally held to denote the completion of an active life." (44) "Neither folk beliefs nor Confucian ideology, therefore, allow death to terminate parents' interaction with their offspring. Perhaps this is why Twisôngdwi elders face death with such composure. More than once we were struck by their matter-of-fact comments about the topic." (85) There is also a connection to be made between the interconnectivity of Paik's theories and this easy communication with the dead in Korean traditional society, as in, for example, Paik's works which seek to resurrect—often successfully—the image, mind and spirit John Cage, whom he revered in a peculiarly Korean fashion—generously, and somewhat self-effacingly.

[30] Henry Louis Gates, Jr, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 4.

[31] This statement, which is to be taken with a grain of salt, is partially inspired by Benjamin's statements on Fascism as the introduction of aesthetics into politics at the end of his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), though with, of course, a very different "aesthetics" and "introduction" involved.

“Philly Talk 7”
with Fred Wah

Date: September 3, 1998

Hi Fred,

Form is good, and certainly not a completely distinct discourse from that of hybridity -- I'm sure we'll wend around both ways at some point. Did you receive my package in the mail yet? I sent it last week, so it should have been there by now, though I did go book rate -- it'll be there for you when you get back from "the bush".

I think one thing we could talk about, in terms of form, is landscape and environment -- I've been reading your work along with that of Daphne Marlatt (the selected with your intro which I found in the NYU library), and in some ways it took me a little while to "get into" this work as my own relationship to trees (it's sort of like "trees" to me) and the stuff of an historically charged landscape whose history is not just in the buildings and streets (and in modern myths, or in the discourse of "junk") is somewhat distant -- I think this has something to do with being from New Jersey (from Williams' town Rutherford, but I think it's a very different town than it was, and I'm not a naturalist by bent) as well as with my relationship to computers -- your mentioning the absence of computers on your trip touched this off. I've just disconnected the internet from my computer at home, in fact, because I felt (after reading this scary article in the Herald Tribune about a Carnegie Mellon study that seemed to show that web browsing caused depression -- yikes) that it made my apartment something of a conduit for the ephemeral and "virtual" which kept me off my feet, or out of my senses, when I was at home, and though I didn't spend much time browsing at home I feel that being in that forum of constant intercommunication kept me at a distance from tending to the stuff of the material world, whether it be the books on my shelves (another form of conduit, of course, and I've thought about getting rid of some of those, too) to the people I might happen to have over (also conduits but unless you are extremely asocial not likely to cause depression or a sense of being "out of touch"). Anyway, I'd like to go someplace without computers for a little while myself -- get away from that electric buzz -- and your and Marlatt's writing -- both of which contain a note of "futurity" despite all I write about (especially in graphemic placement, absence of "revisions" of traditional literatures, and in the modification of the "Bardic" tone of Olson), and despite their focus on "the voice" which, with my interest in word systems and random expression, might seem "primal" or "organic" -- gives me some sense of an alternative to what I am doing, and my manner of experiencing, now.

Sincerely,
Brian

Date: September 8, 1998

Brian, just back from long weekend in the Kootenays (SE British Columbia, we have a home there on Kootenay Lake) and ready to go. Uncanny, leafing through yr package and I'm stopped immediately by looking at Walter's poem in Arras 2 and his line "some mebbed hellicx bestreets it all?" where I wanted to read "mebbled" because I was hearing a Roy Kiyooka language; then reading yr essay in _Korean Culture_ and mention of Roy vis-a-vis "matrix." So I'm taken in right away with questions I've been running through on "race" writing, particularly the "lyric." Do you get _West Coast Line_? I've a piece in a recent issue, called "Racing the Lyric Poetic" that addresses some of what yr up to in yr essay. I could send it along. Anyway, I'm just getting into yr essay, which I'll finish today and get back to you more tonight. Concisely, I'm interested in the clarity of attention to a certain inherited (degrees of foreignicity) language that an interstitial poet (like Walter or Roy) has access to (that and including inherited form? so much "shakespearian" we are as the lord language lords).

later, Fred

Date: September 9, 1998

Hi Brian, a bit more on yr essay in _Korean Culture_. By the way, I think it's a wonderfully negotiated essay and useful for our "talk" since it exposes yr preference for "matrix" poetics within some context of hybridity. So I feel quite sympathetic to the problem of considering the varied "aesthetics" within "race" writing. I learned a lot about Walter's poetry from your essay since I've not seen a copy of _Brine_ (has it been released?). Your reference to his poetry being open to "non-canonical information" strikes me as characteristic of the more exploratory non-white poets. But, as well, this interest in the non-canonical can work in an obverse way, in poets like Evelyn Lau (who's poetry, by the way, I contrasted to your own in my essay "Racing the Lyric Poetic"), as a resistance to the radical as it's been situated, particularly of late, within the institution and within recent foregrounding of a resistant cultural activism (multiculti, in different ways, in our two countries). That is, some writers, and this seems to include Lew, or even Song's more recent work as you suggest, choose, or find themselves trapped in, that "middle passage" not only between cultures but in the conflictual dynamics of language (English) itself. I'm only trying to suggest that the "experimental" for an Asian-North American poet might include the position that plays it both ways (both innovative and conventional). As you say, "there is an absence that is needing to be recovered...a big _whah_..." This might also have something to do with Kim's "very unique, somewhat awkward, but always fascinating sense of prosody..." This is part of something I've called a "trans-" poetics in which yr looking both ways, as one of my former students discovered, not for trains but for trans. Look

both ways before crossing I had to remind myself in Japan after almost being run over at the curb. I quite like your discussion of Kim; it made me go back and look at _The Bounty_ with more attention. How playful she is in "Primer." I think it's her most expansive work of the three texts in the book.

Fred

———————

Date: September 10, 1998

Hi Fred,

Yes, unfortunately Walter's book hasn't been published yet, but I got a pretty good gander at the contents. I'd tell you more about it but he probably wouldn't appreciate it at this stage, but it deals with a lot of the issues that would be interesting to this correspondence, particularly the "matrix" and the hybrid. I don't have a copy of your essay nor do I get West Coast Line, unfortunately, but I should get Roy Miki's e-mail address and see if he'll send one to me (if you happen to have it).

I'm interested in what you write in your e-mail of the "radical as its been situated in the institution" and the "foregrounding" that you call "multicult" -- the latter is much clearer to me, but I am not so sure what you mean by the former, possibly because we have different institutions between us, but also because I might have idiosyncratic ideas about institutional "radicalism", usually the product of my disappointment with the appropriation of terms from non-institutional experimental or avant-garde poetries of the seventies and eighties (and even the fifties, to some degree, and maybe back to modernism), but also with the manner in which some of the poets -- both young and old -- have not quite adjusted to this change in affairs, either by analyizing the situation and reconsidering their strategies, methods and vocabularies, or by fruitfully ignoring the entire process and making way for the "new" -- not so much in an effort to view the "future" but simply the "present." Of course the present could not possibly be "viewed" if there is general agreement that the old way of looking at things is outmoded -- indeed, a sort of evasion of the panoptic gaze (of theory or mythologized "lifestyle" discourse or creaky modernist paradigms or whatever) might be an overwhelming characterstic of this generation of poets -- it certainly is hard to determine the "retro" and the "beyond" (to parse a phrase from the Village Voice) when there are so many valorized sub-traditions wending their ways. But I think it's an exciting time for poetry specifically because of these dynamics.

You wrote previously: "Concisely, I'm interested in the clarity of attention to a certain inherited (degrees of foreignicity) language that an interstitial poet (like Walter or Roy) has access to (that and including inherited form? so much "shakespearian" we are as the lord language lords)." One might also want to say "Chaucerian" in this context considering the manner he injected into the language

so many words (and a few formal elements) of European origin due primarily to the fact of the Norman conquests. I'm not sure if any of us are "big" enough to do that to the English language at the moment even if we'd wanted to, especially as our literary culture has valorized, to some degree, the neologism as some sort of permission of the poet which we are free to ignore, but also because, as you note, the generative site of this activity is "the interstitial" and the primary motive is to destabilize -- or rather to inject the process or virus of destabilization into -- the language, so though we feel our words are most suited (or maybe most ill-suited, but in any case "most") to the situation at hand, they are defiantly (or coyly) un-utilitarian. I tend, of course, to think that this paradigm could apply to any poet working in investigative ways in the English language -- one needn't have strong ties to "foreignicity" or be "interstitial" in post-colonial terms -- but on the other hand there is a degree of difference in the way a poet like Hopkins or the American Abraham Lincoln Gillespie created neologisms and "foreignicity" in their work and the way Roy Kiyooka or Harryette Mullen do. Could we say that Hopkins was an "interstitial" poet in that he was somewhere between the Anglo-Saxon, Welsh and late-nineteenth century traditions? In any case, he didn't feel obliged, necessarily, to create channels between two (or many more -- no binaries!) living cultures in the way we can consider the latter two poets doing. Where would a writer like Bernstein fit in here?

Of course, all of this ties in with what you write of Walter and Cathy Song (by the way, I got the big "Whah?" from a Thomas Pynchon novel -- he attributes it to Nixon. I wasn't thinking of you at the moment). "Both innovative and conventional" is a good way of putting some of the issues involved in an avant-garde Asian American (I know both of these term just aren't very useful but heck...) poetics, especially in terms of the issue of community. I just wrote a review of Close Listening, edited by Charles Bernstein, and the issue of community -- whether they be the "ephemeral" communities created by sound poetry performances of the Four Horsemen in Toronto (in which, as McCaffery writes, a scream is not a social contract, but "a scream escapes from pain. Out of this accident a poem is made, with an explanation round about it. In this context, a scream acquires a role, a function.") or the communities of Hawai'i in which pidgin is the dominant speech, in opposition to the mainland imposition of normative grammar -- in both cases you have communities that are shored up against normalization, but the former is almost entirely the province of educated, conscientious adults while the latter includes everyone who happened to be born and raised in the vicinity. How would a pidgin writer wanting to preserve or foreground that language's contours and contents be able to utilize a processual strategy -- such as one by Jackson MacLow, for example -- without consequently relativizing and digitizing the original pidgin, so it just seems some sort of language game? For the writer with tendencies -- whether political or social or otherwise -- for the radical, is pidgin enough (assuming the writer is able to write "well)?

Anyway, these are my thoughts for the moment (writing from work) -- I'm looking forward to getting your stuff.

Take care,
Brian

Date: September 11, 1998

Brian, Glad the books arrived. Thanks for yr full response - you must have a pretty good job where you can do this at work.

I should have said the "radical as it's been appropriated (and contained) in the institution" but, I'd guess we have a similar sense of that. Partly I'm referring to the rather tidal (thus consistent) academicization of the poetry and poetics of each generation. So out of a poetics of resistance I find myself now working in a university that democratizes my anger, say. It certainly is quick to adopt the strategies of making writing that the "radical" generates into a discursive milieu that sustains its own existence. Eg. the (so-called) Language poets channeling a poetics of social formation in that context; or the institutionalization of "race writing" into a coterie of critical centres (Harryette, Walter, Roy Miki etc.) such that we all teach Cha in our graduate seminars alongside the Elaine Kim and others critical book (wch politically excludes any mention of Walter's Excerpts. Is pidgin enough enough indeed. Well, as you say, it's an exciting time for poetry because of these dynamics. I have white colleagues and friends who have been empowered enough by the discourse of "colour" to now apply it to "whiteness." Roy Miki finds this particularly abhorent. I don't, particularly, though I get his point. Your question "Where would a writer like Bernstein fit in here?" sent me to his essay "Pounding Fascism" because it's one of many places I've seen his observant Jewishness articulating that particular interstitial. Charles's last paragraph seems to be asking some of the questions we are. Perhaps, as he suggests, we might pay more attention to Williams's "We all like to believe we are master minds. But what men seldomg learn is that the end of poetry is the poem; I don't know a thing about the value of a poem as such or a hunk of gold as such or of a man himself as such but I do know that."

This thinking about the containmentof the radical also reminded me of Sianne Ngai's essay on disgust in Jeff's issue of Open Letter."We bear witness to the fact that most forms of cultural subversiveness are ultimately contained. Not just by being re-integrated into the discursive logics they would seem to undermine, but by being shown to sustain them..." Is, for example, your piece "Stake" a "stake in subversiveness"? I had certainly read that piece in the context of the "Disgust and Overdetermination" notion Jeff was trying to foreground but then I see it in a different context in FSC. I was interested, first, in the poem's "Derksenian" situation, both for and imitative of him (stylistically). Except then I saw the text generate itself past the bullets into phraseology and even that ending

pirouette of lines. So the piece engages as it moves past its own origin yet maintains levels of irony (maybe even parody). I'd be interested in your own sense, now, of the two occasions for that poem, the book and the mag. How do you think it fits with Jeff's thematic intention? with Ngai's essay. Both you and she figure Bruce as central to your production.

ps: curious about Charles work Close Listening and yr review of it. I take it that it's a new book of his?

Fred

Date: September 15, 1998
Subject: Landscape

Hi Brian, just a quick response to an old note of yours re "form, landscape and environment - and the voice." Partly Daphne too, because of Vancouver/West Coast, but certainly myself, been very "place" oriented in my poetry. I jumped the landscape track a bit with _Music at the Heart of Thinking_ which I've intended as a foil to such a place-oriented poetics (in that MHT is essentially critical response to text and visual art. But growing up in the mountains of SE B.C., small town, and then getting into poetry w/ a bunch of other people from likewise small towns/rural etc. I've always felt strong inclination to trees, creeks, mountains, etc. but also I think that informed a very powerful sense of the "local," partly in that Olsonian sense but, literally, here in Canada, a political condition of the tangible (community, size, the person, etc.) And, of course, I'm from that generation whose excitement about poetry was the voice. We had all been schooled on a poetry of inner silence and meditative meaning so in the late fifties it was quite exciting to actually "hear" live poets. Well, that's historical. Voice became for me a way to tie in my sense of the musical body and gave me a place from which to disassemble the given language. I think I sent you a copy of _So Far_; work in that such as the Utanikis continues that track of the concrete for me. Jeff did an interesting piece on my early work trying to situate the basis for a racial address; he properly nailed _Breathin' My Name with a Sigh_ as a site where place, language, and person meet.

best, Fred

Date: September 16, 1998

Hey Fred,

I really appreciated the term "democratizes my anger" as it seems to get at one element of this academicization -- is it a radical democracy that we're talking of,

in which the individual players have the right and/or obligation to be parties of one, with singular languages, a degree of asocialibility, spontaneous agency, idiocy (I think being downright stupid is a significant tactic at moments) etc., or is it the democracy of agreement, even agreements about the various ranges non-meaning such that all particulars of "ethnicity" or "idiocy" or whatever it is that composes singularity in the former model are rendered symptoms or constructs, absorbable elements in a libidinal, infinite economy? This is, I suppose, the key element to much of Jeff's writing on the "multicultural mosaic" (nationalist) models of ethnic identity in Canada vs. the "alienethnic" models of multiculturalism, which I take to be a very willful counter-paradigmatic version of ethnicity that, indeed, runs the risk of rendering itself invisible (a switch from motives of the "Breaking Silence" days of multicult writing). The only solution to this impasse, however, for the poet seems to be in the poem itself (yes, I love Williams) as opposed to discursive solutions, since it is discursivity that finds a way to level or ameliorate these multiple oppositions. But these are hasty thoughts. Is that sort of what you meant by "democratize"? (I just picked this line out of your essay "Speak My Language" almost by chance and discover you nail many of these issues quite easily: "The polarization of a poetics of resistance and a poetics of accomodation that I have been familiar with, isn't a delineation necessarily attractive, it seems, for some younger writers. Social and cultural production has, in recent years, appropriated the figure of the racialized writer as a measure of containment and control. Thus, the praxis of a lyric poet within the polarization I'm accustomed to has become somewhat reconfigured as "cultural" practice [and] has been discoursed into notions of production and conscumption." Maybe it's the practice of delineation -- since one can't consume what has not been limned -- itself that is most harmful?)

I can't find an easy way to think through the idea of the discourse on color being used to describe "whiteness" -- certainly this activity operates as a critique of the discourse on color, but if "whiteness" invariably finds its roots in the nations of Europe or in, say, the subterranean Protestant ethos of most American discourses including the one on color, then it's hard to see how valorizing "whiteness" could serve to critique the social hierarchies in quite they same way as the former. The entire thought gives me that creepy Iron John feeling, since the general perception on the discourse on color is that "ethnic" writers are engaging in the "culture of complaint", or are painting themselves as victimized, so that the idea of "whiteness" being valorized on that (Robert Bly) level appears an attempt to parody this self-victimization in an attempt to find the spotlight, but as you and I know, that is not what the discourse on color is all about -- in fact, it is often about the opposite: about how agency is created from this site of subjectivization, which is of course a very useful paradigm for anyone. I think that essay you mentioned of Charles' is very key in this context -- in a weird way, for the duration of that essay (and for a time afterwards) I begain to think of Charles' entire poetics as being created by Pound (and by extension the cult of Faustian knowledge and Enlightenment "clarity" as it is manifest in much of the

European tradition), as he finds so much anti-content in the content (or content in the anti-content) of pounding Pound (while, as that interestingly rhetorical later paragraph of the essay displays, having to love him). I was always intrigued by the fact that Charles has never written a very long poem -- a book length work, for example -- choosing always (via his variations on the Verfremdumdum effekt, as he called it) to wipe away the clouds of impressive scholasticism, of objective clarity, of epic charmisma, etc., hence avoiding the largesse of authority. Anyway, it seems that Charles has probably found a way to be an "ethnic" poet without anyone really noticing, and in this way letting some humanist content get into his work.

Do you really teach Elaine Kim in your graduate seminars? I have never taught Asian American literature myself, but I am sure it's a challenge -- there really is a limited range of popular critical approaches, but that probably leaves a fair amount of room for you to improvise. There are a few good essays in that book on Cha, of course, and Dictee is certainly turning out to be an influential text, but even the history of that text and its relation to the academy shows how swiftly things are moving, and how soon these paradigms come to their ends (not being, in the Kuhnian sense, true paradigms). Again, it's an interesting time in terms of these discourses, since no one knows where it's going. I wonder sometimes if there's enough work worth studying over the years. Do you and Roy Miki get taught in the States? Has the Asian American (meaning Stateside) establishment paid much attention to Tisch, West Coast Line or any of the work you're doing in Canada?

To tell you the truth, the title "Stake" just came from the fact that I put those vertical lines around the text, with that weird spilled section toward the bottom, I figured it kind of looked like a stake in the ground. To say it's a "stake in subversiveness" probably renders the poem "ultimately contained" -- on the other hand, though many of the lines in the poem were written with a sort of Derksonian final product in mind, they moved much too quickly for anything he would have written, and weren't (in my opinion) nearly so thoughtful or deliberate as any of the poems in Dwell (so my poem is a failure in this sense), but once the bits were all crammed together like that, with their own weird inner-syntax created out of the use of dots as site demarkers, I felt that it worked as an ambient (rather than paced and structured) piece -- it got away from me, and in many ways got away from the Derksonian situation at the same time (and from the Raworth situation, too -- I'm thinking of his works of linked short poems which I like so much). Since it got away from these various models and containers, and from myself as well, it does have a "stake in subversiveness." I actually prefer it's inclusion in the Open Letter issue rather than in my book, since I think it's more challenged there in that discursive realm -- is forced to choke up its content -- even if it seems to fit almost too nicely with Sianne's essay, of which I hadn't read a word of when writing the poem (which is from 1995/96) -- indeed, she hit the mark too well, almost.

I read this in an essay by bpNichol this afternoon:

> "To grasp the given we have to stand still long enough to receive it. You just never grasp at the first thing that's held out to you. That was a lesson my Maw taught me when I was five and I tried to grab all the presents off my friends as they came thru the door to my birthday party. 'Don't grab at the present,' said Maw, 'wait till it's given to you.'"

I thought of this in relation to your last e-mail about the local and "voice" and so forth, but oddly this quote from nichol plays, I think, right into our discourse on race and language, as he seems to "ethnicize" his situation by the use of key words and tropes ("Maw" and the whole anecdotal tone give it a hokey feeling) but also because of the weird pun (based on a grammatical ambiguity or slip) that he is able to draw from this very staging -- something like the puns that Yau draws in his poems, which I've seen you do with your last name, and which I do on occasion, particularly in "Stake" (you mentioned Miki in this context, too, but I don't know his work as well). But the real reason it stuck out was because of the way he feels that he has to work -- by means of slowing down -- past the "first thing held out" to get to the "present," which is strangely in contradiction to something he writes earlier in this essay about the long poem: "At some point you decide to start with what's in front of you," continuing on to say that one needn't a "great subject" to write a long poem. (Another model of knowledge, it seems, to go up against both Pound and the European tradition, and against Bernstein.) This reminds me of your tie to voice and "tracking the concrete" which you say is, in a way, a historical disposition -- a stand against the meditative (and monadological/monologic) poem of the New Critical mode. You write that "Voice became for me a way to tie in my sense of the musical body and gave me a place from which to disassemble the given language," the voice being "concrete" as I read it, not to mention (in the Olsonian sense again) the very output from that material (or traceable) transference from the ears by way of the... etc. (I can't remember his schematic at the moment). Do you find that you are having a different relationship to this poetry of "tracking the concrete" as the discourses have changed around you? What do you think of this question of speed and of "waiting until the present is given"? As a diabetic, I have had a very altering, in some ways self-alienating relationsip to my body over the years, and so notions of the "musical body" are both fascinating and strange to me, realizing as I do how unorganic the body really is, even those that don't depend on blood meters for their maintenance. With the rise of neo-MacLuhanismsus amidst the discourse on cyborgs and the web, do you feel your sense of body, not to mention place, is more complicated (especially with the fall of New Critical theories of reading)? This all relates to my earliest questions about the computer.

Yours,
Brian

Date: September 21, 1998

Brian, I've been at the poems you sent trying somehow to read the interstitial at work in them. The interlacing (the arabesque) of "Trouble on Triton" seems to operate on several levels and what I find myself looking for and at is the particular "inter stiching" of form. Beyond device as contrivance (stanza, etc.) I pick up some "thematic" resonances like TV/movie, transport/stasis. Syntax, tone-leading, punning, work in a more minute and compositionally generative sense. Descriptive prophetic so dominant that the "me" of "Drag me to the movies" becomes almost (maybe) biotext, helped by the "we" and "they" of out (up) there on the screen. Of course "Wallets: abject objects of our disgust" feeds me right into Ngai's essay and I find I start looking for hints of that critical context within the crypticness of the poem. Too imposing to put together, so I pick up, again, only on particulars (the split line, the play with stanza form - visual- the diction). Yes, the diction, paradigmaticcaly, like the closeness (buzz) of "cigarette" and "stoke" and the diagonal pull in #6 like "wrack\reek," or "chive\prune" - simply cuz I'm slowed down (almost totally stopped) in so many places - yet feel a frustration with the "setup" of title and subtitle vis-a-vis a "content." I don't know if you get this but cld you talk a little about that (ie notions of a "content"), how shaped reference plays out for you in this piece. Speaking of "tritons" and "tricksters," here's a short piece I did recently:

ArtKnot Sixty Eight

left Loki looking
(at the lake)

minus the barking
an innocent “fake”

words to relieve
(the millstone of purpose)

slight vacuum
sudden blossom

dancing shoulders
smuggled porpoise

(seeing dead
for three days

Titans and their burning wheel
deep and sacred ways

read, reading
dog, dying

dried
up the creek

Sorry I've had such a slow weekend, family stuff myself. I'll try to get back to your long post from last week and send you a few more poems. I teach today so that'll probably be tomorrow morning.

best, Fred

———————

Date: September 22, 1998
Subject: Re: poems

Brian, your note that maybe it's "the practice of delineation" (vis-a-vis my "The polarization of a poetics of resistance and a poetics of accomodation...isn't a delineation necessarily attractive...for some younger writers."), "itself that is most harmful." has me thinking, again, about the problem of choice (agency) for a non-aligned writer. By non-aligned I mean someone who finds themselves outside both the traditional/conventional and radical/innovative "streams." I'm kind of interested in the movements such writers make _between_ the two. You may be right that "since one can't consume what has not been limned" one would be harmed in making such choices. But since public reception seems previously instituted, I don't see a lot of room to work out something other, something, perhaps, more local (but there I go reaffirming my own strategy of accomodation).

I didn't so much teach Elaine Kim in my grad seminar as simply put that book of essays alongside our reading of _Dictee_. I don't know that that text is necessarily part of, as you say, a paradigm that will come to an end because it isn't part of a true paradigm. Any more than, say, _Kora_ will eventually (again) not be read. Seems tidal to me, though the tides are about seventy years wide. I don't know if Roy and I get taught in the States. Certainly, for myself, it would primarily be in the context of race writing. Roy has had more attention in that academic arena of Asian-American. Walter's attention to some of us Asian-Canadians in _Premonitions_ was unusual and refreshing. But part of that is that the constituencies of writing in your country seem so varied and spread out. Though a racialized address has become available to me only since the early 80's most of my writing practice comes out of Black Mountain-San Francisco-Vancouver of the early 60's. I was part of an earlier Buffalo poetics programme, and so forth. So to see my work read primarily in the context of race writing is a little wierd,

though gratifying. And I want to trouble that, too, with the "hyphen." That betweenness you touch on with your use of the term "interstitial" interests me as a site in need greater clarity along with signal resistance to the bipoles.

Wow, yr stuff on the body and the unorganic throws me. The one thing that's complicated my sense of the musical body, as I used that term earlier, is not so much the neo-MacLuhanisms but the yakking around the "subject," in that the body could be considered a "paged" (hailed) body. But so what? I think. As Olson said, "So, like, play!" That is, in both senses, or in any sense. "Tracking the concrete" seems just like an exercise, also for the reason of "disassembling" an inherited lingo (those other voices).

Well, I'm fading here. So much to TALK about. And I guess we really should get to the poems for Philly Talks. I'm attaching a batch, a mix, of stuff from this past year. I don't think you should feel compelled to comment on all of it. Whatever. And I'll be back to you w/ more on yr own work. I'll try to make another post tomorrow but then I'll be away for five days in Vancouver at a conference on bpNichol (10 years this month he died).

chow, Fred

Date: September 30, 1998

Hi Brian, just back from a long weekend in Vancouver at the bpNichol conference (organized by Roy Miki and his _West Coast Line_ magazine). a good group of people there including Jeff. not as much of a generational difference in reading of Nichol as I'd have thought - though us older folk trying to recuperate out of our own "humanistic" complicity w/ Nichol of the early days; now trying to fold in the visible (and historical) changing awarenesses re things like "the body." McCaffery calls it that "proprioceptive garbage." I did a piece for a panel that responds (i.e. as a "Music at the Heart of Thinking") to Nichol's last notebook. I include a section here, for what it's worth, vis-a-vis our earlier rap on the body:

10.
look out for ritualistic cop-
out warns Steve body
parts lining warning poem
paranoia "pair o'" Roy K's
trees @ David B 843-

That should be "vitalistic," not "ritualistic" (I think I was picking up on a resonsance with the previous line, "middle initial art," for what that's worth). I wonder how long he argued with the body as a simulacra of code? The "bp:if" series ("body paranoia: initial fugue"), the floaters of Gifts, runs August 30th to Sep-

tember 10. Having a body doesn't struggle with being a body. His fear of the disappearing body framed photographically as itself (his body as the performer) and a textural self saying: "say/cheese...say n't/n't ready/ n't ready to die." Could be the absence of the "3000 B.C. quote" is an intentional one.

I realize I'm implicated in much the same "proprioceptive" track beep is. I'd guess we, including McCaffery, should look at how the performative has been inofrmed over the past thirty years.

But I should get to some notes I made reading yr stuff. Re "tritons" again, I've got this note wondering if the "convention" of form (thinking, let's say, of yr 3-line stanzas in sect.# 11) doesn't buffer the particular and momentary in how it might prevent a more illuminated dwelling of the Sillimanesque "torquing" that goes in your writing. Eg. "marathon slam-dance. Fixed rabbits tame..." where the quick juxtaposition of "dance" and "fixed" might get run over in the disguise of form as a freighter of comprehension (i.e. I must be understanding this cuz it sure looks the understandable). So I'm wondering what you think of this possibility that "form" (in this case the surety of the three-line stanza, regular line-length) maintains the conventional priveleges of sentence/line juxtaposition, end-of-line, rhyme, syntax, etc). I guess I'm coming at just what you get at in yr review of _Close List_ vis-a-vis Perloff. I'm not sure I understand the "distinction" and "difference" you allude to in yr review "between a conservative Poundian dictum...and the younger poets...using historical methods...in their counter-canonizing work." Are you saying yr use of the 3-line stanza in "Tritons" is a gesture at counter-canonizing? Is McCaffery's "an experience in language rather than a representation by it" (Perloff quote) different from Olosn's "language as the act of the instant rather than language as the act of thought about the instant"?

best, Fred

Date: September 30, 1998

Hi Fred,

Wow! well there's a lot to build on in your last two e-mails. I came to Nichols work through McCaffery, actually, reading much of the Rational Geomancy book only about three or so months ago, and only parts of the Martyrology since, so I don't really know all that much about him. When did McCaffery use that phrase "proprioceptive garbage" -- I assume he was joking on some level, but what comes across so beautifully in RG is that their friendship was so strong despite their immense differences in methods of poetic research, poetics and processes, etc., which suggests to me a solution to an issue I've thought of in your work,

Jeff's and other Canadian writers, which is this synthesis of "language" type poetics and that of, in general, the "proprioceptive" and the speech-based -- not so much a synthesis as a lack of a split. It seems that in the States there was a entire sacrificing of the proprioceptive (linked perhaps with the lyric, or on a larger level the Bardic ego) in language poetics starting with, probably (don't want to get in some sort of LangPo historical debate) the infamous "I Hate Speech" essay/remark, but extending back to writers like Mac Low and Cage, a move that was very fruitful in my mind but which left little room for consideration of, say, the linked hybrid lyric forms that you explore or the "paragrammatic" epic-scale style of nichols. I wonder if some of this also had to do with the fact that "we" (the States) had poets like Eigner and, earlier, Oppen and the other "objectivists" who were building something that could be called "language" poetics out of a lyric state, hence perhaps creating the sense by language writers that any sort of synthesis was something already past, hence "retro." (Something pops into my head: Picasso not going abstract, yet exploring the vocabularies that became components of abstract expressionism -- other instances, too.) It's not that Canadians couldn't, or didn't, read Eigner or Oppen, but that there wasn't an imperative to "clean house," so to speak, when it came time to reconsider New American poetics -- on top of this I would add the continuing vitality of the discourse on the "local" and notions of the landscape (with which one views the social, as in Atwood) which Jeff writes about so eloquently. My own interest in, say, Olson's poetics stops, sort of, when I realize that his Gloucester is something of an elaborate, scholarly, ego-centered dream, made LARGE because Olson is large -- it continues to be a fiction, though, like Blake's London, though the tools used to construct the fiction still be useful to a degree. Likewise, I don't think Williams made Paterson much more than a metaphor for his own poetics and ideas, nothing really compelling in a social sense. However, in your writing and Jeff's I see the landscape become an issue of communal concern, less the assembling of poetic themes but the site on which you explore the differences/debates etc. surfaced by oppositional poetics -- ie. perhaps the fall into "language" wasn't so great or extreme as we had here as the landscape, itself, continued to provide the syntax with which to continue the argument. The field -- and by this I mean the entire "proprioceptive" field -- continues outside of the parameters of your individual poetics to be the ground or stage on which the macro/microgestural acts of language (and language creation) perform. Does this make sense?

What you do with the ArtKnots, for example, strikes me as exploring this very border between the proprioceptive and the "language-centered," most obviously in "Fifty Eight", starting "I miss / mind you", as if you couldn't get past that initial lyric urge without getting under the skin of your activity right there, approaching it through pun and assonance to achieve "mind" (my guess is that the next step would be "write you", but then you might never get to Indiana! -- though maybe to "Indiana grammar," whatever that is!). In this way perception moving "instanter" on to the next becomes the perception of language also, and the "musical body" finds, through language, a whole series of platforms or levels

to work on that are way beyond New American poetics, but also liberated, in a sense, from the procedural underlining of much language-centered poetries, the surfaces of which are often unbroken by the accidents of the writer-as-perceiver. The ArtKnots and poems from the "Music at the Heart of Thinking" seem to move in and out of these language modes in a way that flaunts a certain freedom (indeed, in the back of my head when thinking of myself as a Korean American writer, I know that one priority when I started as a lad was that I should be free to go anywhere with and within my writing regardless of societal constraints, since it just isn't worth being a writer otherwise -- I wonder if this is a general component of "racialized" writing). I see this as one way of injecting the political content of the personal into these poems which language-centered poetry might, as an aspect of program, be said to lack, since part of the dismissing of "speech" and the "proprioceptive" was also the dismissing of poetic form being constructed (or improvised) during the moment of writing, hence creating near-ephemeral shapes and maps of purposes that may never appear again -- ie. the accidental, the stupid, the opaque, the beautiful as it only happened once in history, and that as the product of the singular "human" (I appreciated your comment about the "humanistic" in the "early days", not that I'm a "humanist" but that I've often used the term to answer a few questions I've posed myself). When I get to phrases like "upper lip / topple uh / still one / past plural" I hear a great amount of intellectation between the lines -- the total gists of which are unrecoverable -- but I am also appreciating the aural qualities of the words, the fluid syntax, not to mention the phonemic pleasures of letters like "h" coming after all the "p"s. But again the poem remains pointed/poignant -- ending "psm ing / of you" (Dan Farrell's "Thimking of You" comes to mind), hence being something of a "personism" piece at base, it seems -- again creating unrecoverable meanings. I kind of think this unrecoverable meaning -- or "trace" -- lies somewhere buried in that "lake" of ArtKnot Sixty Eight, where you "left Loki" (pun on locus/i, again meaning below the surfaces, but also a mythological element that doesn't ever aspire to system, in opposition to say a Duncan-like poetics). "Slight vacuum / suddent blossom" seems to get at this also, as does the "smuggled porpoise." The poems in this sequence seem to always veer toward closure, such as this one where I hear the voice drop toward the last phrase "dried / up the creek" -- yet of course it doesn't close, again suggesting a trace of intention. "Nose Hill 1" reminds me a bit of Yau's writing -- "noon pond knot / having omph look / clused node broom" etc. -- do you see it in that light? Of course, I have my ideas on how John is a racialized writer -- I think you pick up on it with this poem. The solidity of the concrete and "humanist" contents, along with the centrail aural motif of the jazz improvisation, keeps these poems, I feel, at a cool distance from the controversial "French abstract lyric" -- though I suppose much of the language used above to describe the "ArtKnots" suggests the mode. Do you feel that your poetics have a component that riffs off of the "French lyric"?

Regarding a few questions you asked about Triton: the poem is a bit "cryptic" though I think it conveys a field of meanings in each of its parts so that, yes,

the "inter stiching" of form becomes an issue. I think the movements from domestic to public spaces, or from discursively impossible solitudes to overly discursive crowds and communities, are the main movements there. I wonder if part of the problem with the poem -- I have problems with it, too -- is that there is a "contract with the reader" set up early on which is constantly broken, a staging of terms for intercourse, so to speak, which are denied later. I ask this in the context of a series like ArtKnots, in which I sense a wide variety of forms being utilized, and I yet I feel that you allow the reader to trust you and your performance, I guess via the motif of the "musical body" -- the body being the constant. (This we can certainly talk about in Philly.) It's a bit scary for me that the word "disgust" suggested to you that Sianne's essay was linked to (or influenced or whatever) the poem -- it's what a bunch of us, including Sianne, were afraid would happen when the essay appeared. Yikes! The poem is actually about two years older than her essay, and I think much of my other work has more to do with the essay than this one -- as you point out, the three-line stanzas have certain historical resonances that "buffer" some of the semantic content, but they operate against "disgust". ("Trouble on Triton" is the title of a Samuel Delaney novel about a radically innovative moon society, and I think it's an "arabesque" because of the design elements, but also because of this classicist -- Persian? orientalist? -- sense of form.) I don't think it's a very "counter-canonizing" work except that it attempts to valorize somewhat un-canonical forms within the very stable context of an 11-part poem that begins with three-line stanzas. On the other hand, in terms of or against the "Sillimanesque" in my writing, I would say that part of my criticism of Silliman's writing itself is that often this "torqued" aspect is missing, and that the "new sentence" doesn't often find it's engines -- rhythmic and/or syntactic -- and tends to, say, stop in mid-sentence. Some of the sections of the Alphabet find wonderful solutions to this problem, but in other sections I am left wondering if the formula had a few bugs that needed patching (to use computer terms here) -- an "elegant solution." I started using stanzas again once I began creating poems with computer-programs -- stanzas in the shapes of tears, or in imitation of Mandelbrot sets, or made to look like "The Faerie Queen" -- but they usually came about because the poem needed an engine to keep the text moving. So, as you suggest, the three-line stanzas actually did begin as something like prose, but I thought they needed drive -- yet, at the same time, regularity (the line lengths were determined by resetting the margins on my computer). The younger poets I was alluding to were folk like Lisa Robertson, Jennifer Moxley, Stacy Doris, Harryette Mullen to some extent, and even myself in poems like "Terms of the Anglo-Saxon Ritual" (and also to some of what was implicit in Bernstein's work of Rough Trades, and maybe even in Ashbery). (Your line about "I must understand this because it looks understandable" probably alludes to the "contract" thing I mentioned earlier -- I used to read people like Berryman and Lowell quite a bit, so I guess, yes, I have a weird delight in throwing out something that looks like a bit of Dante or Shelley but which is generally opaque.)

>Is McCaffery's "an experience in language rather than a representation by it" (Perloff quote) different from Olson's "language as the act of the instant rather than language as the act of thought about the instant"?

I would suggest that the former could be achieved with a computer-program of some sort (or, as in the case of "Lastworda", through some sort of process) or in a group performance poetics while the latter would necessitate the poet working in "real-time" through his/her language, whether the end be lyric or "collage" (which often is an expression of thought). That's one way to approach it, I guess -- but we can talk about this in Philly, also.

Take care,
Brian

Date: October 3, 1998

Dear Brian, lovely long collation yv sent. I guess yr right, we should make this the last one. So, a few responses to yr post and a few more comments on the poems.

Though your distinction between recent American and Canadian poetics vis-à-vis LangPo is useful as an explanation of where the proprio went, on either side of the border, particularly your sense of "cleaning house," I think a lot of the critical posturing around LangPo in the States after the mid-70's reads, quite simply, as part of the poetry wars, power grabs, etc. Why is Creeley recuperated, for instance by Perloff in yr review of Close Listening, out of the "line" and into the "word as such"? If any poet's spent their life on the line it's Creeley. But I think yr right re Oppen and Eigner and the synthesis of the lyric and the morphological (which is what I'd guess you mean by "language type poetics"). And I think yr right on re the local (landscape) as a communal concern (though, again, see Tom Clark's Creeley and the Genius of the American Common Place) for some Canadian writers. Place has been a negotiable site for both the "proprioceptive" and for, as you say, "the macro-microgestural acts of language" –at least that's the sense I'm making of your statement. Seeing this vis-à-vis the social has, for myself, concocted a sometimes awkward grasping at race and class, thus via a simply larger poetics of resistance where the troublemaking for the lyric occurs as both a structural and, if I read Silliman right in his "Wild Form," formal complication. Well. this post-interpretative musing is interesting but seems dribs and drabs compared to what we might actually get yakking.

Your comment re ArtKnots and what you say about the "musical body… liberated…from the procedural underlining of much language-centered poetries" interests me. I'm unsure what you mean by "procedural" – since I've been labeled

(as part of that 60's poetics) a "process" poet, like the others. And that "flaunting" of freedom in the "moving in and out of language modes" as being "a general component of racialized writing is, I think, what I'm trying to get at in that paper "Speak My Language: Racing the Lyric Poetic." That is, the anarchism that accompanies self-censorship and interpellation seems, at times, the only path available. Your comments re John Yau and the French lyric (eg Ashberry?) I don't quite see. We can talk about it. I've followed a bit of John Yau's writing but only in the last couple of years (since Promonitions) and I'm not sure about "riffs" off the French lyric. Those poems riff, if anything, off their own diction and that "Nose Hill 1" is probably a good example of what yr observing re the local, the landscape, musical body, synthesis etc.

I didn't mean that yr use of "disgust" suggested that her essay and yr poem were linked in either of your intentions. I was simply suggesting that as a reader of both of those texts I felt a resonance for the word within the reading.

Your comments about "Triton" and "the contract with the reader" is, perhaps, where I see the interstitial most at work; ie in the structural invitation for flow, logic, narrative (I see the phonic/morphemic iteration) in that a visual engagement is possible – even, say, that "glyph" of arrows in "Comix."

Re Preparatory Meditation I: this, what Kiyooka calls the "midden," use of archaic diction. Again, visually, on the page, the structure recalls Eigner or a 60's Americanization of the page. Could the "interstitial" here be an intervention into that "form" (with all its predictability) just as the form itself operated earlier as an intervention into the stanza? At the same time the attention to detail (is it attention, or program) in the tone leading (eg "intimately (matted)") allows pun and syllable to operate as generative devices.

And then in "Terms of the Anglo-Saxon Ritual" I like the particularity of sound and word that offsets and cuts into the "archaic" play/diction. The rhyme and repetition is nice for me because it marks some sense of agency (control, intention, etc. – but you'd have a problem with that I think, EH?, as we say here.)

Brian, this has been wonderful for me to run off and around our talk. Of course we didn't get anywhere near the notions I thought we might muck around in. I've learned some good stuff from your takes and look I'm looking forward to meeting you and revisiting this stuff in Philly.

What happens now, do you know? Are we supposed to do something with our material? Let me know. I think Louis said we shld get stuff to him by mid-October.

best, Fred

Short Reviews

***Premonitions: The Kaya Anthology of New Asian North American Poetry*, edited by Walter K. Lew.**

Poetry Project Newsletter, 1996

Unlike many anthologies that the multicultural movement has produced, Premonitions: The Kaya Anthology of New Asian North American Poetry focuses on diversity of poetic style and approach over superficial "ethnic" diversity that is the focus of other anthologies. This is something of a breakthrough; for once, the editor of an anthology of poetry by minority Americans has understood the poem as a document that does more than "get the record straight," or tell new stories but in the same old ways. Walter K. Lew, the editor of *Premonitions*, who is an experimental poet (as the blurb on the back of the book states) writes in his afterword that he has chosen to include poetry "in which language is drastically reshaped into fresh articulations" beyond the confines of "conventional verse." Indeed, this is probably the first anthology of Asian American poetry in which John Yau doesn't appear to be the only poet included who writes in alienating, strange ways, as he does in Garret Hongo's *Open Boat* anthology of two years ago, or in the little-known *Chinese American Poetry: An Anthology*, published in 1991.

Premonitions opens with pages from Theresa Cha's graphic essay "Commentaire." By beginning the anthology with Cha, an avant-garde filmmaker and video artist and the author of the often forbidding Dictee, Lew provides a brilliant grounding for a radical new identity for Asian American poets. Some pages of "Commentaire" contain no more than a handful of words, often written in script, or in white on a black background (like the placards in a silent film); others include a photograph of a brick wall, total whiteness framed by a black border (an empty movie screen), or a still from Carl Dryer's Vampyr. The piece seems to be about the way a movie, understood deconstructively, draws one into its enclosed emptiness, "hushing" (a word from the piece) the viewer while at the same time providing − this is a silent film, like a silent page − a separate "commentary" to fill the space. The Canadian poet Roy Kiyôoka, who died in 1994, follows Cha with a poem that is itself a short anthology. It is eighteen sections long, and each of its sections explores the theme, roughly about or around Hieronymous Bosch "and Hier" (as its title states), in a ways that run from lyrical description to a spare "language" poetry. Section 6, a sub-poem entitled "Meditations inside a Zealot's Hell," contains the lines:

> The Landscape I'm most compelled by consists of a
> Seething Crustaceous Mass a riddled Plenum
>
> I pluck the Garden-of-Delight & a Season-in-Hell
> Out of my abdomen. Nightmare becomes me.

There is something unsettling about Kiyôoka's use of stock phrases like "Garden-of-Delight" and "Season-in-Hell," and the writing seems strangely self-absorbed, while other parts of the poem, and the fractured structure of the whole, argue against this over- romanticized "I." Section 16 runs in its entirety:

child

of
syntactical
leaps
I stammer
after
your unbespoke
smile
your
simian grief
reeks
an ancient

havoc

The concise language and staccato rhythms are a clear contrast to Section 6, and yet one can still see the drama of Hieronymous Bosch's metamorphosis-run-wild in this brief, thoroughly indeterminate, section.

The structure of Premonitions is similar to Cha's "Commentaire," in that it includes fragments of poems printed on a black page to head each of its sections. It also resembles Kiyôoka's poem, in that it contains poems that run that gamut from the lyrical to experimental, and from narrative/confessional to collage/oblique "word-centered" modes. Lew compares, in the afterword, his idea of the anthology to Poe's concept of the long poem as a series of linked shorter ones, to "East Asian forms of multi-authored verse, or (in the oldest example) the Avatamsuka's sutra's metaphors of mutual interpenetration and inclusion." He maintains the tensions that results in such a heterogeneous grouping by including the best of the various types of writing; in this way, he takes advantage of the peculiar situation of an anthology centered around ethnic difference to cross the various boundaries that exist in the United States and Canada between stylistic − often, but not always, as politicized − difference.

Arthur Sze's long poem, "Archipelago," for example, is not nearly as experimental as Kiyôoka's or Cha's work (or Myung Mi Kim's or John Yau's), and yet there is a richness to its language that permits it to exists peacefully, not in an ironized state, beside his contemporaries' more self-deconstructing work:

Men dressed in cottonwood leaves dance
in the curving motion of a green rattlesnake.

I feel I am walking along a sandstone trail
and stop in a field of shards: here is a teal zigzag
and there is a blood-red deer's breath arrow.
Women dancers offer melons to the six directions
then throw them to the ground...

The Buddhist undercurrents of Sze's poem become more manifest in the last section of Premonitions, devoted to Buddhist work − by Russell Leong, Andrew Tang, and Patricia Y. Ikeda; indeed, Lew notes in his afterword that Beneath a Single Moon, the anthology of American Buddhist poetry, didn't contain a single Asian American poet among its forty-five. While Premonitions includes some uninspired work by well-known writers such as Jessica Hagedorn and David Mura, other poets, such as Al Robles, Marilyn Chin, Stephen Shu-ning Lui and Traise Yamamoto, provide a pleasant surprise for readers not familiar with Asian American poetry. Barry Masuda (born in 1972, one of the many good younger poets included) flicks through his cyber-speculative remote-control in his "Local Cyborg":

words distend homicides
Cindy Sherman hosts 24 blowfly pupa
nestle in my decomposing eyes
cannot see how passion's
corpse preserved cryogenic culture
wanders aimlessly through Ala Moana

Marilyn Chin provides a less hectic but no less irreverent panoramic vision of a cross-continental Romeo and Juliet in "Composed Near the Bay Bridge":

Amerigo has his finger on the pulse of China.
He, Amerigo, is dressed profoundly punk:
Mohawk-pate, spiked dog collar, black leather thighs.
She, China, freshly hennaed and boaed, is intrigued
with the new diaspora and the sexual freedom
called bondage. "Isn't bondage, therefore,
a kind of freedom?" she asks, wanly.

While the informed reader might be nagged by the question "Where's Meimei?" Premonitions manages to include everyone from the neglected Japanese American poet Lawson Inada (the Langston Hughs-meets-Guillaume Apollinaire of Asian American poetry) to the experimental upstart (Hejinian-meets-Yau?) Tan Lin. It also includes entire sections devoted to gay and lesbian poetry, often providing representation to much writing − for instance by Willyce Kim, who hasn't published a book of poetry since 1976 − that has been neglected in the conservative trend of the past two decades. Rather than getting shipwrecked on

identity politics, Lew and Premonitions maneuver skillfully through the many booby-traps and bureaucratic Sirens that mark the course of the editing of an anthology, and provide the reader with what is perhaps a milestone in American minority literature.

Tan Lin, Lotion Bullwhip Giraffe

Poetry Project Newsletter, 1996

On page 31 of Lotion Bullwhip Giraffe a question is asked: "Where is happiness (pause) / but a place to start?," and if there is any book of poetry that has found an originary state in language—one not indebted to arcane archeological studies of previous civilizations, but is rather confined to a hyper-immediated one of our own—it is this one. Tan Lin's poetry is difficult to describe, since he cannot be claimed either in the surrealist, language, Gnostic, campy "New York" or any other school or movement, but it is, at the same time, clearly attentive to the possibilities opened up by these tendencies and by other writers—Michael Palmer and John Yau first come to mind—who have conceived their own aesthetic amalgams. Lin departs from Palmer, however, with his complete lack of the lyrical subtlety and occasional eye-wink cleverness that remind the reader, in Palmer's poetry, that the poet is a member of Culture and of the "tradition," and hence of a more distant order; Lin's language is brass, his rhythms loose and often awkward, and his imagery, if it is baroque in its abundance, is straight neon-to-video rather than French impressionist, which is to say colorful, uncloistered and contemporary at all costs. He departs from Yau in that he is not engaged in any of the identity games that hide and expose an "I" in its machinations, but rather permits language to override and proliferate on its own undaunted by fears of psychological superficiality—and often with the force of a tsunami (not present in Yau). In fact, Lin seems to thrive on the "superficial," and never, in the poetry itself, engages in a pluming of depths or in epistemological investigations, though the poem itself, in its relationship to both author and reader, often leaps from type to type of reader-author engagement—one thinks of Arakawa—sustaining a high interplay with its providence of puzzles, so that many of these experiential reconfigurations become the substance of the work. "100 Second Chances" begins:

> Being the only elements that vary from panel to panel
>
> and the attention distracted by three soft knocks on the door of his box
>
> (absurd brevity)
>
> (morning chill)

Open: having no enclosing or confining barrier: accessible on all or nearly all sides

cattle grazing on an open range. To move, to make available for entry or passage in a regular function, to commence action in a card game by making (a first bid), putting the first bid (in the pot), or playing (a card or suit) as first lead

It is impossible to speak of beauty. We shall therefore star the text

open air, to open and shut. The case was open and shut.

He heard the knocking. He opened the box

and the vertically scripted words—"exile," "refugees," etc. that connect two halves of the globes.

All the time, helicopters

Suddenly a small boy dropped to the ground next to me. I realized then that the police were not firing warning shots. They were shooting into the crowd. More children fell.

A framed text displayed on a wall.

Reader expectations become main activity of this poem, since he sets and the resets the parameters of this engagement with such a nervous, frenetic energy that one senses the jarring shifts more than the infrequent rests. The poem, attentive to a wide vocabulary of postmodern techniques (and which in some ways is a parody of—or a leaping-over-and-above—the solemnities of these practices), from those of the nouveau roman and other deconstructive poetics to the hermeneutic hermeticists and "Notes for Echo Lake," is at once a collage but also creates its own language that is indebted to no other, its debts repaid so quickly that the artifice of pastiche is absent, steamrolled (or digitized) by Lin's special syntax—his own "-speak."

Lin has, in fact, made something of a breakthrough, for he has invented a type of writing that is completely postmodern—indebted to contemporaries, but not relying on distancing ironizations to declare its latecoming; the book is full of forms developed in the late 20th century, and is in many ways an anthem for contemporeinty for it's own sake, a long ode to the ecstasy of communications. Lin's surrender to the speeds and demands of the present day is complete—the book seems almost fit for slacker culture—and his innovation pervasive, a "Skeltonics" for the media age, in that it is a language devoted very much to fun, but yet which is learned and malleable. The following is from "Five Acts Gone Up in Chalk":

Chalk stymies on the destitute stage. Floodlights shrivel to stage hands. They or their Fools gone busy: a die is rolled and a tot hammers a hand. Three directions enter a kingdom. In the kingdom of the kingdom of Actresses, seven-

teen bluffs in the places for lines. Soft tickers: where is her lover who climbs on her roses? Burned hands peel off the TV. Air is fine, spoons melancholy. Vistas: they look out windows today and windows tomorrow. Across the stage, they locate the foggy in cabbage. The king's 1.5 acres are murderous. Seventeen knives enter and incise.

The abundance of phrases, all of which have a junk quality but which can be lyrically expansive, create a sense of elation in the reader, and even optimism. "Talc Bull Dogface" is a sonic experience that more diffident poets might not have wanted or dared to offer, and shows off its confidence from the start; there is something of Hopkins in the energy that drives one syllable into the next, though with nothing of his reverence for nature and God, or even the word—Lin is secular and beyond the pale of fresh air, and his use of the word is, well, exploitative:

> Ship carp do doped pressure bag go famous pure-fuck your shrag
> lozenge movie geisha whittle drip drop.
> Unfold again wrap to pool-shaped hair
> no shirtee mandible say altar tire.
> Okiniwa aisle to stand. Jello wink slant, dew drop carport, pounds
> tea rhombus K-mart pencil I'm ear. Gone flying pan. Chopstick blob.

If there is a "multcult" element to this writing, it is in the various puns on words and word-combinations that could be Chinese transliterations—one poem is called "More Fun Cow," for John Yau—but he uses this as a starting point to expose new spaces beneath the words once they are smashed together, such as "pounds / tea rhombus K-mart pencil I'm ear," which will never surrender itself to generative grammar (or to multicultural rubrics).

Some poems in Lotion Bullwhip Giraffe do not live up to this sort of intensity, and occasionally one experiences some frustration at Lin's complete dedication to imagery rather than what it signifies, as if his whole poetic were about the one-dimensional realities of movies, TV and video games, and never touched down in the body-in-nature (after a good night's sleep), or in the speech one uses in arguments (or even politics)—his project is to not give in to that, but to keep language's motion at the forefront, so that it is an education in the new "tribal" realities that MacLuhan described. Some poems, like "Love, Stripped Wrench, Facsimiles" looks (it is in long, even quatrains) and feels (in its shifting imagery and syntax) a bit like Rimbaud's "Le Bateau Ivre," but the poem requires more points of entry, gaps in the flow, either on a narrative, rhythmic or aural level (it is teeming with alliterations) to be more than just a concept, but a good reading experience throughout. One becomes a little dizzy flipping through the book, even when reading the poems that have short lines (which move just as quickly) and a sigh of relief escapes when the action slows a bit, as in "After A Women's Table" (dedicated to "Mei-mei").

"Insomnia" is one of the rare poems in the book that contains meters that are recognizably "poetic," and which leads for more than a few lines into an ordered consideration of a "subject," and demonstrates, consequently, Lin's ability to write very different types of poems. It begins:

to take heroin as a sleeping pill to follow a crack
hit with a snort of smack to bring one's heartbeat back

to normal pending reversal of all known
convictions as determined by the nature

of charges leveled against one by
removing all doubt concerning the truthfulness of letting

a guilty man go free endangering the public
good promoting the cause of a free and just

democratic nation while acting on a series of implicit
directives concerning while carrying out one's duty within

an accepted timeframe after determining
acceptable levels of misconduct...

A single sentence that runs for three pages, "Insomnia" seems to be an expression not only of the pressures and paranoias that are both hidden and exploited in other parts of Lotion Bullwhip Giraffe, but also a somewhat desperate complaint and momentary surrender to time, Lin finding a voice in the jangle of linguistic short-circuiting that characterize his poetics. Whether or not it is "biographical" is irrelevant; it is remarkable enough that the poem has narrative qualities at all, for it serves (along with other poems from the "Facsimile" section, from which "Insomnia" is taken, such as "The Nightly News" and "The End of Tragedy") as a touch-down, providing a frame of sorts for the "out-thereness" of Lin's liberated speech. Lotion Bullwhip Giraffe, while being at once being a joy ride through the hyper-realities of the present day, also returns—this is the "originary" aspect of the book—the white page to its pre-linguistic purity in its devotion to surfaces, returning at the same time the reader to the mode of possibility, to a willingness to make something of the new (primarily suburban?) realities that are unique to this century, perhaps even year. It provides no "transcendental" vision that can be voiced beyond its own terms, which are often immaterial—lifted, with roots dangling, from the media—and hence sustaining only the most difficult relationship with anything that could be called immanence, which is unusual in American poetry.

Pamela Lu Pamela: A Novel (1998)

[lost citation]

More than any other recent work of poetic prose, Pamela: A Novel reduces—or elevates—its protagonists to a series of gestures, taking the implications of a world-view highly informed by structuralist analysis (not to mention mathematical theory) to sort of comic maximum, unwinding as it does through impossibly long sentences that pile observation upon observation until it appears that nothing is left but a landscape of gestures, not peopled by "characters" or driven by "plot" but by the exchange of variables. One could class this "novel" as yet another expression of "Gen-X" or postmodern ennui, a clattering of ironies that take our suburban videodromes and show them for the shallow panaceas, or maybe an exercise in Ashberian ambient excess in the nurturing of higher and higher peaks of aesthetic sensibility, but the extreme, nearly anthropological nature of its investigations suggest otherwise, not to mention the direct response it seems to pose to essentializing discourses about "minority"—whether ethnic or sexual—literatures and the people that produce them ("'living' post-structuralism, with an all-encompassing personal irony," as Lu herself phrases it [19]).

The central character is "P," later revealed to be "Pamela" herself, part of a complex triad that includes the author (unnamed, but we know her by the cover). P has several friends, named L, R, YJ, etc., who appear and disappear with shocking irregularity, as if human experience, in the Lu worldview, resembled more the mechanical system explained by quantum physics (in which matter and energy are indistinguishable, matter seeming to disappear from the Cartesian plane upon reaching certain velocities and reappearing intact elsewhere) than by Newtonian (or, in this case, the conventionally crafted novel). These characters are almost all engaged in the process of trying to know themselves, and they do any number of things—partake in "steady supplies of lovers," browse the internet, engage in secret pacts, etc.—in a last-ditch effort to gain some degree of ontological certainty. TV supplies its own epiphanies: "A heart-to-heart interview with an MTF police officer was followed by a speculative discussion about the relation between transsexuality and homosexuality, and capped with the final bold conclusion that 'transsexuals and gays are just like the rest of us.' For R and me, this meant that we were just like ourselves, or more accurately, we were just like the 'rest of us,' which naturally led to the question of how the 'us' had gotten split in the first place." (35)

But unlike novels, like those of Burroughs or Pynchon, that seem to thrive on the high that a schizophrenic conviction of the interconnectedness of things, Lu's sense of panic is only subtly apparent. For the most part, what she offers is a cool ride through these philosophical conundrums, and is most likely able to because she is not alone for the ride—she creates an entire culture of such searchers, and part of the pleasure of this novel is to think there are hundreds of such "mathletes" as Lu herself puzzling through the vacancies of late-twentieth

century post-adolescence. "I would have liked to have been a minor character, introduced for the sake of comic relief and free to survey the drama from the sidelines, or I would have liked to have been the setting, the mood, even the hidden inspiration for the plot, but was instead fated to stand at the centre of my story as its primary protagonist. And in spite of my inability to live up to my own narrative expectations, I was expected to introduce myself into the story, and to identity with myself as a sympathetic subject, although I had deep-rooted difficulties with the notion of subjectivity to begin with. If I was at risk of suddenly becoming P in the midst of a plausible situation, then P was similarly at risk of becoming not me but Pamela, a project I had invented to include both P and me, and that was expanding, day by day, into a larger persona than either of us could handle." (59) P desires to paint a vacant landscape, but can't get over the conviction that the trace the brush leaves—with its team of experts guiding it communally across the canvas—is mark enough of the presence of "P," hence her landscape gets peopled not by waterfalls and awesome mountains, but by littering teenagers in backpacks. P, who never seems to know where she is on a map ("...and if you are pointing at 'Here,' where, as the sign says, you are, aren't you really over 'there'?" [22]) or what time, historically or even during the day, it is ("A" possesses a "non-teleological forgetfulness [which] we cited as material evidence of his existence as a fully-formed yet hypothetical being" [45], a quality shared by P), relies instead on the fluid web of her friends and associates, a tenuous structure suspended or floating above the rigorous certainties of the day-to-day populace, or what might here be figured as the "adults."

What is remarkable about the novel, entering as it does on a tradition of deconstructive investigations of fiction and autobiographical forms (such as in the writing of Leslie Scalapino, Lyn Hejinian and, more remotely, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha) is that Lu chooses to work in a high belle-lettristic style, one that doesn't tarry too long with issues of "indeterminacy" or Steinian repetition, nor with imploding, self-eating parataxis. The writing of Pamela suggest an "epistemological crisis," but Lu's approach is so much more relaxed, controlled (nearly ascetic in its rigor), and self-amused that, instead of shouting "crisis" at the end of an era of metaphysical certainties, she calmly exposes the mores and manners of an entirely new type of creature: the "stand-up theorist," the one whose "personal ironies," sense of community with others equally implicated, and comical preoccupations with mathematical systems ("Such, perhaps, was the instinct that inspired us, in the cramped parking lot of R's theological school, to execute a new driving maneuver known as the 'n-point turn'" [67]) provide enough ballast to support one, at least until a far-off but not to be feared death. But such an activity requires sentences, not fragments; the great movement toward the word as revealed knowledge or atom betraying the storm at the heart of metaphysical certainty is sacrificed for the life-raft of a decent, water-tight sentence: "Such was the promise of a manicured lawn, a two-car garage, and a swastika on every corner, and life there paralleled the experience of a badly written sentence, whose construction consisted of numerous phrases, each of which amounted to a com-

plete sentence in itself, but whose sum total was less than its parts, an idea amputated in mid-thought, a non-sequitur. [So] we were fortunate, for the most part, to get through life holding onto a complete sentence, a luckier still if we could salvage an entire paragraph, rescued from the wreckage that was the great historical-cultural narrative." (42) It is only the sentence, Lu suggests, that provides the necessary feedback in life's continuum to maintain the possibility of an "other," when the social "other"—that utopian language community that the Language poets would loft their disarming, conspiring fragments—seems not to exist anymore. It's the sentence, and the paragraph, that makes the radical pragmatist's dream of exchanging cultural and personal values possible, such that the project of making new meanings as one goes along can be carried out: redescription, the periodic changes in the paradigm, can only occur with some sense of what the paradigm was or is available—a mere scattering of values will not suffice.

However, though Lu seems convinced that this life-raft will hold, there is a noticeable change in tone at the end of Pamela, as if Lu, like all novelists, had to succumb to the teleological pull of the "end of the story," the need to either kill of her characters or point them in the right direction toward their death (of course, it occurs on an airplane): "Nothing horrible had befallen me; nothing even remotely urgent had happened or was about the happen around me, except that I was suddenly flooded with the distinct sensation of being overlapped—as if all my thoughts, actions, feelings, preoccupations, and regrets were being compressed into one another at a rate of several hundred miles per hour in preparation for a new, mysterious replacement. The transcendence took the form of a vertical ratio, and I, as the lower half of an undefined term, ducked beneath the dividing line that rushed forth to meet me. For some time I remained sunk in my seat, fingers clenched around the plastic armrests, until the sensation passed through me, leaving me afloat once again in the perpetual pre-dawn light and more than willing to let the whole subject drop, in the midst of a moment that technically never existed." All of her rational assurances—which are themselves a form of spirituality, a series of disciplines like Loyola's Spiritual Exercises—can't keep her from that medieval moment that is the end of the novel, though she tries to the last to keep herself suspended there, a "screaming coming across the sky" (Pynchon), in the suspended animation of a book and text that, had she had her way, shouldn't have existed. Like Luoma's Works & Days, Pamela is a wonderful testament to the sorts of weird, nearly Martian, intelligence that prospers in a culture with few clear goals, and no apparent need to have them.

Myung Mi Kim, *Dura* (1998)

Publishers Weekly

Kim's third collection - Under Flag (1992) and The Bounty (1996) are her previous two—continues her passionate, formally investigative cataloguing of the pervasive effects of colonialism, war, and rampant capital in the domestic and public spheres. While foregoing the genres of fiction and journalism to record this morally arid landscape, she engages the reader in the act of re-witnessing these chains of insights that render one without a narrative of rebellion, but which create a forum in which meaning, being reformed by the reader him- or herself, empowers and doesn't—like television or the newspaper—distract. The long middle section, "Thirty and Five Books," composed of short paragraphs of no longer than a few sentences each, is the most forceful in this engagement: gleanings of horror ("And the unremarkable become the stuff of dust."), of theorized imaginings of the interconnectivity of politics and economy ("Deployments to the assigned parallel. Sheer volume of river traffic. Ascension, declination and distance of the measured body"), of subverted pastoral lyricism ("When we stayed together working the fields and went home at dusk and ate together. Mangy birds sing ornate songs"), even extending its reach to a brief liturgy based on a death in the Los Angeles riots of 1993 ("Percussive / In the _LA Times_ the picture was in color / Body moving in circle be fire / What looked like black in the Korean newspaper was my son's blood / Body moving in circle be fire"). Each sentence resonates with a story: "Unrecognized she went about the city", a complete paragraph, suggests the alienation themes of early modernism, and it is revised for postcolonial content in the later "_____ arrived in America. Bare to trouble and foresworn. Aliens aboard three ships off the coast. _____ and _____ clash. Police move in." Like Whitman, Kim has a panoptic generosity, so that she finds a way to extend her very personal relationship to issues of immigration and cultural severing to include all who have correlative experiences. As she writes in a later section of the book, inspecting the canvas on which she works: "Call ancestry lost / Collapse and valence / Brevity and gesture / House with rooms cut of various sizes / An America as big it is."

Sianne Ngai, *Criteria* (1998)

Publishers Weekly

"An epigram delays / its form of destination" writes Ngai in "chrono/paradise," and the poems of Criteria, most of which are linked sequences of elliptical, highly alluring philosophical junkets, maintain an aura of millennial catastrophe amidst the suspended silence of unnegotiated guilt. Through such fractured glances at both the totality of a world view and the totality of the sentence, Ngai creates something of a survival guide in the twentieth century's panoptic technological gaze, and doesn't fail to amuse with her dry-witted narrativizations of our need to be fragments amidst the observation: "Safety abounds here / blue cars are parked here / optimism still abounds / in chunks / of the globe [the first / year in a year / of testing // whiff then / waft // your mother's maiden / name is the code." Her plays on the commonplaces of literary discourse are emboldened by a sharp sense of enjambment: "Meaning collapses on the other side of the all / terrain vehicle...," she writes, veering from the preciousness that such a linguistically investigative poetics can lead to. Sometimes she seems to turn the lens back on her role as writer attempting to subvert meanings while in the role of determining them, casting herself as the tyrant of dreams: "Lazy large world-compeller / whose prosperity was likely to develop a red crease / in imitation of the superseded / telling children of the dangers of being trapped in anything that closes." If Ngai sees politics and society as largely a fractured spectacle of clanking existential comedies, the final prose section "My Novel," with its looping recurring images from Wilkie Collins, turns the "epigrammatic" nature of the first parts into an interior experience, demonstrating by contrast the very meanings that are contained in the prose form even when the sentences are torqued beyond easy assimilation. Liberated discursivity gives her an almost Stevensian feel when describing the nuances of experience: "A flow can be the object of one or several axioms. To prove a poem: a trajectory of the bird's flight through the yellow forest. Crumbs marking the coordinates at which the name would descend from under a wing." Criteria contains all the excitement of a first utopaic reading of theory and philosophy while maintaining a level of fun that gives it a youthful, almost pop edge despite the weight of its learning, and is extraordinary in its restraint, its subtle tonal shifts and its devotion to a fairly extreme mode of poetry.

Jose Garcia Villa, *The Anchored Angel: Selected Writings* (1999)

Publishers Weekly (long edit)

Kaya Production continues its innovative line of Asian American poetry with this selected edition of the writing of Filipino American Jose Garcia Villa. As the famous 1948 photograph from the Gotham Book Mart reception of Dame Edith Sitwell suggests—in which he appeared with the likes of Elizabeth Bishop, Delmore Schwartz, Gore Vidal, W. H. Auden and other luminaries—Villa was something of an anomaly, in that he was a writer coming from a colonial property of the United States who was created a poetics that was as unquestioning of the premises of high modernism as he himself was unquestioning of his abilities and preternatural calling as a poet. The excellent essays appended to this collection by important writers such as Nick Joaquin, E. San Juan, Jr., and Luis H. Francia, along with the introduction by novelist/poet Jessica Hagedorn, present the man in a variety of guises, from the imposing, learned, often didactic, never passive literary mentor that he was to several Filipino writers in New York, to the provocateur in the Philippines who never failed to cause a scandal with his tart tongue and demanding aesthetic tastes (he was, nonetheless, put on the government's payroll, and had a troubled but intimate relationship to the Marcos). As if testament to his chosen tradition of late symbolist poetics, Villa—like Valery, Rilke and Rimbaud—reached a points in his life when he felt that he had "said all he had to say" and let silence reign—he gave up writing poems after the early sixties, though he often spoke of an enormous work on aesthetics which he had been preparing.

The poems that he did leave behind foreground a set of values that might strike one today as antique, and yet they are surprisingly fresh, and when focused, very powerful. The echoes one hears are from writers as diverse as Hopkins, Dickinson, Blake and Cummings, and his various innovations—his idea of "Reverse Consonance" and the later idea of putting commas between every word (which he linked to "Seurat's architectonic and measured pointillism," and which, dismissed for many years as a laughable eccentricity, has resurfaced in practices by poets such as P. Inman)—seem trivial in retrospect compared to those of Williams or Pound, but attest to the care for the small event in poems that only surfaces upon a very close reading of the language. The purity of his approach leaves one nostalgic for a time before deconstruction and the politics of the referent had converted the aporias of language into the ironizing of essences and the critique of public values (which is to say, "before Auschwitz"): "Silence is Thought converging / Unprecipitate, like / Dancer on tight wire balancing, / Transitive, budlike, / Till—her act finished—in / One lovely jump skips / She to the floor, bending / To make her bows, dips / Herself in bright applause—/ Then silence is / No more. Not it is the rose / Called Speech." (15) The comma poems challenge the reader to break apart and reform meanings, as if to dissuade the imposition of final interpretation that eventually weigh on many poems:

"As,much,as,I,perceive,the,Future, / Lo: the,Future,perceives,me: / A,Mutuality,of,Eyes." (This suggests Karl Kraus's famous assertion, as cited in Benjamin: "The more you stare at language, the more it stares back.") His later syllabic approach to the stanza resembles, mostly, that of Marianne Moore's, but unlike Moore, he attempted poems that were not merely assemblages of "found texts" but which were based on a single sentence of a single text, hence testing the integrities of syntax. One based on a sentence from Andre Gide, for instance, permits him to escape the more fiery, messianic tones of his earlier poems and yet access the integrity of his personality which he cherished so much: "Night and sleep alone / Permit metamorphoses. Without / Oblivion in the / Chrysalis the caterpillar / Could not / Become a butterfly: The / Hope of awaking someone else / Urges me to let / The man I am to sink in- / to sleep."

As some of the essays in the end argue, Villa stands at the crossroads of many discourses, specifically those of postcolonialism and the transition from modernism to a postmodernism informed by the West's imposition of values on non-Western peoples. But Villa seems an unlikely candidate for this position—he seems to ignore these issues all together. However, by his unflinching devotion to his notions of craft and calling, he becomes a diamond in the rough—the diamond he hoped his syntax would find in language—and it is this diamond that serves, by its aspirations to integrity and wholeness, to aggravate and permit growth to a number of concepts that swirl around the political/aesthetic nexus, each end of the axis threatening the other. Besides all that, this book, excellently edited by Eileen Tabios (who also edited the excellent Black Lightning published by the Asian American Writers Workshop), is a study in how a relatively small contribution to two nations' literatures could serve to transform an entire discourse, once the discourse if forced open by the contradictions of poetry, and a poet's life.

Dominic Cheung, *Drifting* (2000)

Publishers Weekly (long edit)

As Cheung writes in the Forward to his first American collection, these poems ring with notes of "a sense of the diaspora, a misplacement of time and space, and a feeling of helplessness regarding fleeting life and love." (i) Living in the United States since 1967, the Taiwanese-born Cheung had already published two volumes of poetry and one volume of prose in his early twenties. He proves himself, in translating his own work into English (all from a 1986 collection called Drifters), to have a subtle and pleasant ear for off-rhymes and the effect of simple vocabulary and syntax, no doubt informed by the Western tradition of translations from Asian languages, but not anxious or ironic about it. The opening poem, "Fragrant Herbs by the Mountain Stream," effectively builds up the mythological tone centered around the history of a Tibetan knife he received as a gift, a history resonant of death and, perhaps, of cultural revenge against colonial China: "But the Han Chinese brough in liberation and suppression, / Modernization and pollution, / Recovery and hatred, / Tearing out the heart of the green, green plain. // Vaguely I hold this Tibetan knife in my palm, / No one knows of my martial skill." (16-17) "Love Poem of Tea"—a short poem that flirts with ballad meters while never straying from the softer tones of "Oriental" free verse—begins a series of poems centered around the tea ritual: "Let your dryness inside me / Softly uncoil and stretch; / Let me dissolve / Imperceptibly, your tension," (18) he writes, the masculine ending "stretch" and feminine "tension" creating a deft half-rhyme that suggests, as well, the subtle workings of gender in a poem in which the male protagonist imagines himself as a bowl of tea. Spring and autumn seem, for Cheung, the seasons of the melancholic wanderer, as his most resonant moments come in describing them: "In the fiction and reality of flower seasons / To search for a good friend / Transcending language and age / Remains an heroic quest, and an illusion." (41) Cheung seems to resemble, in this way, the Eliot of "Journey of the Magi" more than the wintry, "Anglo-Saxon" Pound of Cathay, and at times Cheung's taste in abstractions also suggest Eliot, though his subtle ear is sometimes unable to completely salvage a pile-up of loose sentiments: "Though the same season and weather prevail / The country never ceases changing / There are themes of passion, and of indifference; / Though the same person and personality remain / Stars and events keep mutating / There are plots of joy, and of sadness. / Since departure and reunion remain unpredictable / Loneliness is conspicuous." (44) But Cheung is less a philosopher than a social and political exile, a wanderer on American shores who is unsure not only of his own identity but that of his home country, stuck in its own limbo. His melencholy, passion, and the complexity of his situation are finely expressed in this group of poems: "Endless drifting, wandering among time, / As it thickens with the midnight dew/ [...] Self, the self, to be identified! / Nation, the nation,

to be recognized! / Life, a life to be realized! / Country, a country, to become strong!" (59)

Frances Chung, *Crazy Melon* (2000)

Publishers Weekly (long edit)

Chung died in 1 990 at the age of forty, leaving behind several different plans for collections of her work—manuscripts titled "Crazy Melon" and "Chinese Apple," with several poems repeated between them—along with collections assembled for fellowship and book submissions and poems that were published but didn't appear in either. In "Crazy Melon," the earlier manuscript, Chung captures something of the crepuscular underside of Chinatown culture in the seventies and eighties; as Lew mentions in the Afterword, she is like the flaneur figure, composing poetic "miniatures" that at once participate in and conflict with the acquisitiveness of souvenirs shoppers and amateur Orientalists: "the gypsy men with pocket full of holes / count their slippery fistful of coins / five six times to pass the time / living day to day by the grace of god / walking nowhere seeing no one thing / but eliot images of youth forsaken in bar mirrors / watching boxing matches on glary black and white screen / deus ex machina" ("bread", 1 6) At other times, these poems hone some of their anxiety and alienation on the objectification of being "Chinese" in Chinatown, and those poems that convey this anger with complexity, the poems ring with rich, expressive, and in many ways communal, ironies: "Neon lights that warm no one. How long / ago have we stopped reading the words / and the colors? On Saturday night, / the streets are so crowded with people / that to walk freely I have to walk in / the gutter. The visitors do not hear / you when you say excuse me. They are / so busy taking in the wonders of Chinatown." (untitled, 9) While Chung's poems do not display a great virtuosity of technique, the carefulness she pays to rhythms and effects recalls some of the intensity of early Williams as he developed his own techniques from scratch. The first version of Chung's poem beginning "do you remember when it seemed the whole world / was closed," for example, is unlike any other in the book as it explores some counter-intuitive linebreaks and rhetorical juxtapositions, suggesting a deep engagement with the words that is parrallel to the carefulness she takes in recording Chinatown life (including her own: "Where is the cockroach who left / its footprint on my bowl). In contrast, some of the later, more "accomplished" poems in "Chinese Apple" seem to succumb not only to some of the Orientalist tonalities the younger Chung would have dismissed or scolded, but to more normative poetics; consequently, as she was travelling in Mexico and elsewhere at the time, the poems are less documentarian than lyrical. Lew's afterword is sure to set the tone for Chung scholarship in the future, with deep readings of the complexes of marketplace objectification of minority cultures and the intensity of being in the subject, or observer-observed, position; this is coupled with a description of the manuscripts and editing process that helps readers along as they enjoy the honest, generous and often very beautiful work of this under-recognized poet.

Hung Tu, *Verisimilitude* (2000)

Publishers Weekly (long edit)

"Like omelets / nations fold" writes Tu at the opening of the series "Short Subject," and in this spare and careful book not only nations but discourses of all sorts—the personal, the ideological, the lyrical, the global, the funny and the earnest—collapse into themselves revealing both their intercontextuality and competing degrees of relevance. The opening sequence, "It's Just Your Basic CYA (The Streets of San Francisco)" demonstrates the many virtues of Tu's style: his precise readings public symbols enmeshed in human interactions ("Mutual Taunt Theater / a squad car rolls by / the masses: "You got any donuts" / the cops: "You got any crack" [23]), his assured sense of place in California contrasted with global corporatism ("over the table—mergers / across the mesa—maquilas" [25]), and his always poignant, yet ironic, reading of history: "in 1855, Mt. Diablo served as the summit / from which northern California and Nevada / were surveyed by army engineers / 150 years later, pickets reinforce their imagination" (23). Each of the seven medium length sequences of this book display different facets of Tu's project, such as in "Verisimiltude," in which he matches the public spectacle of capital with the private, responsible, somewhat damaged spectacle of a disaffected misfit: "with the installation of cameras / epistemology is really moot / the patron saint of / the illuminated porch / vintage Balzac of nineteen / '97 democratic straw men [...]/ this push cart your kingdom / this counter your moat / the action-hero genre / and juice bar explosion / power is frost and tasty / no one forgot 19 whatever / but everyone tried" (41) "Uneven Development, Uneven Poetics (Simon & Simon)" takes the local, class based concerns of "It's Just Your Basic" to an international scale, wrapping several complex strands of thought in democratic, almost haiku-like simplicities: "China Embraces Liberalism! / consequences live in neighborhoods / but since this is literature / I'm interested in the term FOB" (50) "Dated" links several smaller fragments together into a stream of subversive aura ("There's a little American / imperialist in every / Australian trying to / get out of its coral box" [67]), while "Short Subject"and the "Birth of Cool (Cash)" return to the fragment, and "Market Psychology" straddles both modes: "o the rally cap / Noah's Ark school of diversity applied to Noah's Bagel / two women a focal point over coffee and danish / her decision making process applied to tattoos" (105) Tu seems to have mastered the very short political poem, somewhat following in the line of writers like Bruce Andrews and Jeff Derksen who have made their poems lyrical channels of crushed and compressed social codes. But Tu has a facility with the lyric that these writers either lack or choose to ignore; as he takes the field of values as his subject over ideological manhandling, the tone is one of disaffection and responsibility, and of an imagination that is thoroughly disgusted with it all but able, however bitterly, to be amused. This is a remarkable book coming at a time when many

younger writers are retreating to a humble, apolitical bohemianism in their effort to be conversational; Tu shows that you can have it both

Remote Parsee:
A Grammar of Alternative
Asian North American Poetry

Remote Parsee: A Grammar of Alternative Asian North American Poetry (2001)

Telling It Slant: Avant-Garde Poetics of the 1990s (University of Alabama Press, 2001)

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

There's 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 deduced from readings of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's Dictee or from the cogent, overtly activist valorizing of Deleuzian "deterritorialization" by Canadian poet Roy Miki, would not suggest 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 recently been considered part of the historical phenomenon of minority literature as a result of more sophisticated critical paradigms. Such new paradigms acknowledge, for example, that a language that doubles its meanings 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 languages that spit back, in defiantly infantile yet damnably material forms, the range of racially motivated languages from the ethnic slur to the exoticizing compliment. 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 that 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 subcultures. 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 soci-

eties "have a literature" in spite of what appears to be empirical evidence to the contrary.1

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 was not widely disseminated. What becomes clear in reading this nonlinear history of Asian American poetics 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 the projective verse through the aegis of Black Mountain, the Language poets, the Umbra poets and poets 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 the publication of Walter K. Lew's anthology Premonitions in 1995 that poets like Cha, Tanaka, Yau, 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. Although an anthology hardly constitutes 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 is out of the question, for reasons stated above but also because certain works, like Tanaka's essays and poems for JES in the late seventies and early eighties, and Cha's writings and films of the eighties, have suffered from an obscurity that places them outside of any cause-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 into its aesthetics (he was a friend of Whitman and

Stuart Merrill, and the young Kenneth Rexroth2) right up to the time of World War II, during which he was hounded by FBI agents while he was living in a shack on the border of an Indian reservation. Although grouping tendencies is probably not the best method—we've been wary of clasping 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 moved 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 bifurcating meanings of a pun or in the procedural splintering of the literary "I." Berssenbrugge moved 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")3 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, 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."4 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..."5 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."6 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 inten-

tions 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 an unexpected end. The suggestion of Johnson's remark on the metaphysical poets, who "yoked by violence" 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 postmarxist semiotics7. The first poem of the "Genghis Chan: Private Eye" 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 looking for a body
> to cling to. I'm nothing more
> than riffraff splendor drifting past the runway.
> I always keep a supply of lamprey lipstick around,
> just in case.8

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."9 By his use of often uncomplicated syntax—a unique tone of sounding like a child stating the obvious, although in a room of mirrors—jarring imagery and sound qualities, obscured yet manifest narrative instincts, and 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. Her early books were published by the Greenfield Review Press and I. Reed Books, and an early play of hers was produced by the playwright and novelist Frank Chin. She has lived in New Mexico for most of her literary career, and as the excerpt above suggests, her early poetry, like in the work of another poet living in that state, Arthur Sze, was very much informed by the landscape and the Native American history and mythology that inhabits it. Like Yau's, 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 basements where late-night TV provides the only solace, Berssenbrugge's, in The Heat Bird, are more geographically located:

> 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 Dripping 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 10

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."11 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."12 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 has written in "A Future for the Novel," "Even the least conditioned observer is unable to see the world around him through entirely unprejudiced eyes." 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."13 Berssenbrugge's protagonist in much of Empathy is one such eye/I, though one both gendered and—as if refusing to sacrifice 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. 14

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 an interview in Black Lightning.15 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?" "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 endpoint, all would like to continue indefinitely. All reverse themselves as conclusion. All are essentially non-linear, as they approach their opposite, truth. They resemble clouds and empty gas tanks. A lie and a poem lack a punch-line. A joke is a metrical delusion. Gussied fragments fly? Mope thaw16

Later, in an analysis of Palmer's poem "Sun," Lin writes "a straightforward march into linearity... is abandoned for circularity, perpetual return, non-linearity, iteration, re-writing, and repetition with minute variations," and on the final page of the essay, in the context of fractal geometry, he 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, although unlike Palmer he approaches his tasks with the hyperkinetic mindset of a coked-up speedskater, 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, Echos and distance suggest that he is approaching some sort of poetic or narrative topography, a topography that 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 a 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.17

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 postmodern gestures, tweaking the voids of meaning with a trickster-like facility. This scale suggests Lin's primary concern, which is a quasi-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, or an attempt to render material the digital presence of words, more than anything else. Although 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,"18 a poem that continues to run the gamut of sounds in a way that suggests a convulsive impersonation of a Chinese temper tantrum, 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 poets centers around the work of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, a video artist, performer and writer who died in 1982. Cha's work had gotten only limited exposure in Asian American literary communities because of its deconstructionist and hybrid formal characteristics which seemed to make it unassimilable to the social-realist paradigms then ascendant. It wasn't until the early nineties, when many young Korean American artists began to take an interest in her work, that she began to exert an influence, and thenceforth her work began to appear in anthologies and critical essays. Indeed, judging by the change-of-face that the most stalwart of social-realists 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, especially the book Dictee, was the most instrumental force in overturning the dominant sociological paradigms in Asian American literary criticism. 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.19

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."20 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, "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."21 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 agonic 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, although 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 Cha 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." 22 Although 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 subversions of tradition, 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 23 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 (an event still historically shadowed), is included in its entirety, which links not just with the autobiographical passages about Cha's brother participating in anticolonial marches, but with the map of Korea foregrounding its national entity, and the face of Renée Falconetti playing the martyr St. Joan in Carl Dryer's iconic film. A passage addressing her mother and her plight under the Japanese occupation, during 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 Bi-lingual. You are Tri-lingual. The tongue that is forbidden is your own mother tongue. You speak in the dark."24), 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. This section 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.25

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 Dictee, 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."26 The passage seems 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 in Apparatus, "Every Revolution is a Throw of the Dice," describes a filmed performance of Mallarmé's graphic poem "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 recognized early 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 Leung27, suggesting the hybrid ethos that an editor in Asian American studies must possess. In his introduction to the selection, he describes a form of poetry that he believes 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 multi-cultural situation of Asian Americans and the accelerated information flow and collisions of contemporary society in general."28 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 work since that introduction—which ranges from film and video, poetry, performance and editing—fulfills this call for intermedia. His critical book on Dictee, for example, Excerpts from Dikte/for Dictee (1982) directly

adopts many of Cha's formal methods, creating a sort of stabilizing double for the earlier book, and at the same time destabilizing politically encoded reductive readings. The series of Korean cartoons that depict images of a colonized Korea—cartoons that have been 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 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. The girl was later rescued by the Dragon King, and, after discovering her mother was ill, she "went great distances to the Western sky and brought back healing water that saved her from death." 29 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 anthology 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-and-white pages, it mimics the structure of Cha's "Commentaire"—not to mention its rejection of 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, with 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.30 Lew has also translated the work of the primary Korean avant-garde figure, Yi Sang, who died young under the Occupation but who was, perhaps alone, attempting to transform modernist Western poetics into a Korean idiom. Lew has also published important poems such as "The Movieteller,"31 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 his reputation 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, even though 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 their 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 Dictee can be heard in the idiom—spare, notational, but often circling 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.32

As this excerpt suggests, Kim's poetics involves an ontological questioning of political or "Movement" poetry, a quality that keeps her writing far from that of the ritualistic Cha and another big influence, Susan Howe, mostly because her attitude toward reality is pointillist (accumulative) at first, and narrative (paradigmatic) only afterward. 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."33 This list poem alludes to the various discourses Kim is involved in, but never abstracts 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.34

As Dura suggests, the march of technological innovation is not "progress," especially in transportation—the work abounds with allusions to ships bearing commerce and the seeds of cultural domination—but also in such scientific exercises as making the tomatoes at one end different from those at the other, is such that the "unremarkable"—in a vision of 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—although the "lily" could be the "lily of the fields," its "acute" state suggests that its imagistic quality should thwart such readings—than with epistemological ones. 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 time35.

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 is particularly comfortable in mainstream contexts such as those shaped by American Poetry Review, 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 preservative Japanese poetics and "New American" poetry forms suggests they deserve an important place in this lineage. As the excerpt from Tanaka's essay quoted earlier states, the forfeiting of cultural 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 artists36. In another series of essays published in JES from 1979 to 1981 titled On the Metaphysical Foundations of a Sansei Poetics: Ethnicity and Social Science, he considers the issue of Sansei—third generation Japanese—"personhood" amid 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,"37 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 John Yau (whose inaugural writings were inspired by Oulipo, Surrealist and Ashberian poetics, can be seen as a poseur for wearing sunglasses in his author photograph38). 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 this: "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."39 Tanaka's stated 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 enter the territory of the "New Sentence," but with a peculiar comedic punchiness reminiscent of Jeff Derksen:

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.40

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.'" Although he published a few more "essays" in JES over the next two years, he has since devoted his at-

tentions 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 writings 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. Slootweg 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 interethnic relations (the role of the "White American woman," for example), yet its 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 phase41, and yet their easy flow suggests a countering weight of Buddhist quietude, and include an 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 twenty-two years after the first one) centers on his youth in the detention camps during 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,"42 for example, is a series of haiku 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 characterize the genre in America. The one titled "Ben Webster," for instance, runs in its entirely "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 in their attempt to eulogize a passing moment, although each of these fabled moments is 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. 43

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 future generations of Japanese Americans 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, hyperinterested young boy. It is so unpretentious that it might be said to slip beneath the radar of one looking for grand theoretical gestures and displays of knowledge, blinding imagery and revelatory 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 Premonitions44 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. Like Cha in the United States, he is the most generative writer of Asian descent in his country's tradition and like her also sought to utilize visual elements in no secondary way in his work. Pacific Windows, his collected poems published in 1997 and edited by Miki, traces a compelling yet mostly hidden literary career (he self-published most of his later sequences in editions of less-than-fifty) 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 both boldly stated and void of determinates. With an ego comparable to Whitman's in its breadth, generosity, and libidinous capacity to incorporate and innovate new forms, he drew from a wide range of influences. At times he seems a footloose, rather Shakespearian Basho (most notably in parts of "Wheels: A Trip thru Honshu's Backcountry"); at other times he is the grand magister of ontological play in the manner of Stevens ("The Pear Tree Pomes," which starts with an address to "Credences of Summer"). In "Fontainebleau"—which includes several Ernst-like collages by Kiyooka along with stanza-length captions—he is a writer/artist with all the agonic countersystemic 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 response of conceptual continuity, since the special effects of kinesic realism rely upon periodic lapses of attention at a constant speed of movement."45 Eva-Marie Kröller, in a compelling interpretation of the visual historical overlays of the sequence, writes in an aside that it contributes to an "exploring of the surrealist and dadaist intertexts in English-Canadian literature, an area which has, unlike its Québec counterpart, remained largely unexplored so far,"46 suggesting that Kiyooka had, in his plunge into the depths of con-

sciousness, 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 final interpretations. 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 moon-light 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 Napoleon47

Language is a ruin/rune, a rebus of sorts, that resonates with the ecstasy of an all-encompassing truth, an "Algebra-of-Awe," perhaps the hermetic vision of eternal interrelations, but that, 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 is 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 anglocentric norm,"48 Miki writes. Kiyooka's life was completely uprooted during the Canadian internment of the Japanese in 1941: "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, finger-print, 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 signifies dream perspective and 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. Im-

portant 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 "French" (Canadian) 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") 49 but that, nonetheless, never gave ground to what he considered empty in the historical context of the millennia, the "dung hill mind."50 Kiyooka's work, not unlike Blake's, bedevils the grammarian's mind with its confident transgressions and trickster challenges to enact conformity.

One quality of the generation of Asian Canadian poets who follow Kiyooka is that they have found ways to theorize issues of agency in minority discourses without 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 at Buffalo in the sixties, incorporates 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 Nicaraguan poet Margaret Randall and Québécois 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.51

In the past, Asian American poets have not led the discussion of linguistically innovative poetries among or for ethnic writers52, for reasons too deep to go into here, but that 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. These mechanisms occluded formal concerns and 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 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."53 For Wah all forms of excess and incorporation have political content, and his statements on the exercising of linguistic "choice" are borne

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 [...]").54 More formally 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,"55 the "ArtKnots" (short lyric poems inspired by art exhibits) and the series of "Utaniki," based on a Japanese form in which he combines lyric, dated prose entries and page spatialization to create fields of paratactic meaning, convey, or rather trace, the thematically nomadic, unbounded I as it moves among the cultures and geographies of Canada. For Wah meaning is "something that is strangely familiar, not quite what we expect, but familiar.... 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."56 His poem "Scree-Sure 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

writing asthe tableaus
anamorphous=of voyage
river cliffsforgetting

She danced the strict linguistic sense.
        babbled bavardage   finger-painted thick
memo-clouds in the darkening sky

home

That's the secret
ticket
to silence
na (frame) na's notation57

Not unlike Kiyooka (and the influential Canadian poet bpNichol), Wah's poetry suggests the nexus where a Mallareméan poetics of the sign-as-mind meets the proprioceptive poetics of an Olson, in which language is 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 "Utaniki." In this way, Wah's statements on the lyric expand to include the different degrees of opacity that language could be said to possess, traversing not just a vertical axis of the lyric-then and the lyric-now, but the vertical axis of the borderless language-centered lyric and emphatic subjectivity.

Space precludes a more detailed investigation of the Canadian poets, but two important figures are Roy Miki and Gerry Shikatani. Miki, 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 "Asiancy: Making Space for Asian Canadian Writing," are radical statement of policy for those writers who (as he states in "Asiancy") 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."58 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." 59 Miki's poems collected in Random Access File, with its paragrammic 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"60 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 heft, a single statement on memory, not just of one man's trip to Europe, but in terms of its nostalgia for the mystique of the "European sojourn," which used to be seen, in the days of James, as a necessary step in one's cultural 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."61 As with Cha, the concern with time and the ephemeral nature of consciousness lead to inevitable crisis of meaning in which writing itself is but a trace of ungiving 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"62) to the hot discourse 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 yeahs, but hard fo' get job at UH if you no leave UH, 'ah?" he writes in "Holoholo Style."63 As issues of "non-normative" language and languages previously viewed as "dialects" are viewed as subversions and critiques of centrality64, writers like Masuda—who in particular seems to be aware of the global repercussions of the gestures of writing in 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 Mei-Mei 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.'," she writes in "Fill,"65 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 Microsoft spell-checker, a process that critiques not just the local of "Wang Wei" but the local of the translatorese which purports to convey it. "Law gnome sits arrears emote whiskey /—lilts swallow ginned emboss—sit do / 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 an alienating 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 [...]"66 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,"67 each line—like that final, taking Baudrillard, Vietnam and the Presidential elections in a turn—hanging on the hypermediated irreality of the historical moment.

A writer who is not so "young," but who mostly self-publishes and 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; indeed, in a development of Joycean stream-of-consciousness narrative, it 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 dehisced: 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."68 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 world order:

> :"didi" meant big sister (bengali), little brother (cantonese), DDT (english). to begin with, inglish 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, pakistan), '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, spooken for, pun-ish.69

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,"70 such that this text is a negotiation of lyric subjectivity and disruptive grammar. Ismail, 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 firsthand cultural knowledge, sitting in on the Senates of linguistic negotiation, aware yet wary of the call of academic discourse (perversely leveling while attempting to be inclusive) and 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 genealogy, and tomato with the externally racialized body. A Kim suggests, even a "tomato" is open for interpretation, and the scientific paradigms determine its final content perhaps more than its singular features. As the variety of writing considered in this essay demonstrates, no single thread of discourse exists to which an Asian American writer feels obliged to confirm or argue, as there may have been in the early seventies when Tanaka was writing his "Metaphysical Foundations" series, but rather a system of discourses that only becomes 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. She writes early in the essay that "postmodernity... and pluralism are virtually synonymous," and moves on to offer another critical and reading model that, 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.71

This line of reasoning 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 characterized as—because it doesn't represent hybrid subjectivities in a manner that is assimilable by multicultural discourse."72 The range of Asian American writing, which also includes an oppositional strand—feminist, lesbian, working class, ethnocentric—most strongly represented in the 1982 anthology Breaking Silence (but that 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 that, on the other hand, must engage in a state of covert action because of 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 nonethnic 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 often than not —whether they are "up" on postmodern theory, or are simply going on their nerve—are forced into a consideration of the Western literary tradition, especially the "avant-garde," in a peculiar way because of 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 psychic subjectivity and the "play of language." In this sense neutralization of the past, of the history of forms, through the freeing of the sign is a 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."73 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-seventies Asian American writers collected in Quiet Fire74. In this sense both the monistic romantic tradition and the desubjectifying strands of the postmodern tradition find a sort of dissenting tomato in the Asian American arena.

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1 Ronald Tanaka, "Towards a Systems Analysis of Ethnic Minority Literature," *Journal of Ethnic Studies* [hereafter *JES*] 6:1 (1978): 49.

[2] "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." From Rexroth's introduction to the posthumous collection of Hartmann's writing, *White Chrysanthemums* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971).

[3] Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, "Ghosts," in *Summits Move With the Tide* (New York: Greenfield Review Press, 1974), p. 21.

[4] See Jeff Nunokawa, "Oscar Wilde in Japan: Aestheticism, Orientalism, and the Derealization of the Homosexual," in *Privileging Positions: The Sites of Asian American Studies* (Pullman, Wash.: Washingon State University Press, 1995), 289.

[5] John Yau, *Corpse and Mirror* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), 57.

[6] Ibid., 119.

[7] 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* (Minneapolis: Walker Arts Center, 1990), 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 invisibllity while permanently preserving it against the passage of time. In doing so, he 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)

[8] John Yau, *Radiant Silhouette* (Santa Rosa, Calif.: Black Sparrow Press, 1989), 189.

[9] John Yau, "Who Was Wilfredo Lam?," reprinted in *Talisman* 5 (fall, 1990): 146.

[10] Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, *The Heat Bird* (Providence: Burning Deck, 1983), 29.

[11] Ibid., 38.

[12] Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, *Empathy* (New York: Station Hill Press, 1989), 33.

[13] Alain Robbe-Grillet, *For a New Novel* (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 21.

[14] Bersenbrugge, *Empathy*, 21.

[15] Mei-mei Bersenbrugge, interview by Eileen Tabios, *Black Lightning* (New York: Asian American Writer's Workshop, 1998), 135. This 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, 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.

[16] Tan Lin, "Michael Palmer Prints Out a Kingdom," in *A Poetics of Criticism,* Juliana Spahr, Mark Wallace, Kristin Prevallet, and Pam Rehm (New York: Leave Books, 1994), 237-48.

[17] Tan Lin, *Lotion Bullwhip Giraffe* (Los Angeles: Sun and Moon Press, 1996), 116.

[18] Ibid., p. 89.

[19] Elaine Kim, "Beyond Railroads and Internment: Comments on the Past, Present, and Future of Asian American Studies," published in *Privileging Positions*, p. 12.

[20] Ibid., 13.

[21] Frederic James, quoted in "Postmodernism, Readers, and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee*," *College Literature* (1997): 24.

[22] Shelley Sun Wong, "Unnaming the Same: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's Dictee, in *Writing Self Writing Nation* (Berkeley: Third Woman Press, 1994), 106.

[23] Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Dictee* (New York: Tanam Press, 1982).

[24] Ibid., 45.

[25] Ibid. 118.

[26] Dziga Vertov, "The Vertov Papers," in *Apparatus* (New York: Tanam, 1981), 9.

[27] 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*.

[28] Walter K. Lew, introduction to *Bridge* (winter, 1983): 11.

[29] Walter K. Lew, *Excerpts from Dikte/for Dictee (1982)* (Seoul: Yeul Eum Press, 1992), 14. See my analysis of this book in *Korean Culture* 15: 1 (spring, 1994), a publication of the Korean Cultural Center in Los Angeles.

[30] As Lew writes 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 [Al] 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*, (New York: Kaya Production, 1995), 582-83.

[31] This poem can be found in *Chain* 3:2 (fall 1996): 90-97.

[32] Myung Mi Kim, interview in *Tripwire* 1: 1 (spring 1998): 79.

[33] Myung Mi Kim, *Dura* (Los Angeles: Sun and Moon, 1998), 43.

[34] Ibid., 55.

[35] A more detailed consideration of Cha, Lew and Kim along with Cathy Song appears in my essay "Korean American Poetry" in the *Korean Culture* (winter 1997): 4-16.

[36] 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. 61-82. This statement by a white poet of the "avant garde" is troubling not only because its 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 from by a poet who is demonstrably invested in uncovering formally radical sub-traditions 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 sub-system 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 analysis wrong.

[37] *JES* 7:2 (1979): 1.

[38] 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 of an early 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 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 unusual 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 crticism, and since Ashbery isn't Chinese American, she implies that Yau could not have been engaged in anything like issues of idenity 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 academic could be so aware of the "complex ways" of the "unsophisticated" 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.)

[39] *JES* 7:2: 7.

[40] *JES* 14:4: 56.

[41] A complex interaction exists between 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.

[42] Lawson Fusao Inada, "Listening Images," *Legends from Camp* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Books, 1992), 69.

[43] Ibid., 9.

[44] 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: University of Washington Press, 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.

[45] Christian Bök, "Oneiromechanics: Notes on the Dream Machine of Roy Kiyooka," published in *West Coast Line* (1995): 25.

[46] Eva-Marie Kröller, "Roy Kiyooka's The Fountainebleu Dream Machine: A Reading," in *Canadian Literature*, no. 113-14 (summer 1987), 48.

[47] Roy Kiyooka, *Pacific Windows* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1997), 117.

[48] Ibid., 304.

[49] From "Gotenyama," as printed in *Pacific Windows* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1979), 229.

[50] From "Struck from the Heat of a Cold December Sun," as printed in *Pacific Windows* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1979), 179.

[51] Fred Wah, "Speak My Language: Racing the Lyric Poetic," in *West Coast Line* (1995).

[52] John Yau's long review of Eliot Weinberger's anthology *American Poetry Since 1950: Innovators & Outsiders* (Marsilio Publishers, 1993), published in the *American Poetry Review* (March/April 1994): 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 in *Outside the Teaching Machine* 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 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

[53] Ibid.

[54] Fred Wah, *Selected Poems* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1980), 28.

[55] Fred Wah, *Music at the Heart of Thinking* (Alberta: Red Deer College Press, 1987), preface.

[56] Fred Wah, *Alley Alley Home Free* (Alberta: Red Deer College Press, 1992), 5.

[57] Fred Wah, *So Far* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1991), 10.

[58] "Asiancy: Making a Case for Asian Canadian Writing," in *Privileging Positions*, cited above, 135-151. "Can I See Your ID: Writing the 'Race' Codes that Bind," in *West Coast Line* (1998).

[59] "Asiancy," p. 145.

[60] As reprinted in *Premonitions*, pp. 263-265.

[61] Gerry Shikatani, *Aqueduct*, a joint publication of Mercury Press, Underwhich Editions, and Wolsak and Wynn Publishers Ltd. (Toronto, 1996), 47. Shikatani has also published *Selected Poems and Texts 1973-1988* (Aya Press, 1989) among other books, and co-edited an anthology of Japanese Canadian poetry, *Paper Doors* (Coach House Press, 1981).

[62] *Premonitions*, 179.

[63] *Tinfish* 1 (Honolulu, 1995): 29.

[64] These themes are developed most interestingly in Charles Bernstein's, "Poetries of the Americas," published in *Modernism/Modernity* 3:3 (1996): 1-23. "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 ideolects, not National Tongues; localities and habitations, not States." This essay can also be downloaded at the journal's website.

[65] Sianne Ngai, *Criteria* (Oakland: O Books, 1998), 33.

[66] *Mike and Dale's Younger Poets* 8 (Winter, 1998), 75.

[67] *West Coast Line* (Vancouver, 1998), 121.

[68] *Many-Mouthed Birds* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1991), pp. 124.

[69] From "from the Diction Air," as cited in Fred Wah's "Speak My Language." The original text, like most of Ismail's work, is self-published.

[70] "Speak My Language." Manuscript copy.

[71] Sianne Ngai, "Raw Matter: A Poetics of Disgust," as published in *Open Letter* 10:1 (Winter, 1998), p. 102.

[72] Jeff Derksen, "Making Race Opaque: Fred Wah's Poetics of Opposition and Differentiation," published in *West Coast Line* (1996), pp. 76. Derksen's essays on the multicultural situation in Canada are invaluable in terms of providing an image of the meshing of classic "avant garde" and "minority/community" concerns, easily stepping over monolithic sense of a "white European" that has hindered such discourse in the States. 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 that it is a poetics that recognizes difference without integrating it grammatically into a larger unit such as national identity." (p. 72).

[73] Tan Lin, "Interview for an Ambient Stylistics," *Tripwire* 1 (1998): 40.

[74] *Quiet Fire*, edited by Juliana Chang (New York: Asian American Writers Workshop, 1997).