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## Sensing Sounding: Close Listening To Experimental Asian American Poetry

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# Sensing Sounding: Close Listening To Experimental Asian American Poetry

## Abstract

This dissertation examines a selection of Asian American experimental poetries from the 1960's to the present day through the sensory paradigms of avant-garde aesthetic discourse. By approaching both the poem and racial formation in sonic terms, this dissertation project argues that rethinking the sensory as well as the political ramifications of sounding can help us recuperate Asian American poets' often overlooked experimentation with poetic form. Specifically, I read the works of Marilyn Chin, Theresa Cha, John Yau, Cathy Park Hong, Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, and Tan Lin. By tracing the historical conditions of Orientalist objectification and re-interrogating postmodern theories of sight, sound, and the body, I seek to show how these poets' invocation of sonic paradigms reworks those theories and to broaden our critical vocabulary for writing about sound in poetry.

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SENSING SOUNDING: CLOSE LISTENING TO EXPERIMENTAL ASIAN  
AMERICAN POETRY

Ashley Chang

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English

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in

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SENSING SOUNDING: CLOSE LISTENING TO EXPERIMENTAL ASIAN  
AMERICAN POETRY

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Finally, I dedicate this dissertation to my family. This project is always already informed by the love, sacrifices, and histories of my parents, who arrived in the U.S. thirty years ago as of this month, to whom I owe so much. To David – who left everything and moved to Philadelphia for me as I studied at Penn, who has shared in every moment of doubt, struggle, and small triumph – this is for you.

## ABSTRACT

### SENSING SOUNDING: CLOSE LISTENING TO EXPERIMENTAL ASIAN AMERICAN POETRY

By Ashley Chang

Charles Bernstein

Josephine Park

This dissertation examines a selection of Asian American experimental poetics from the 1960's to the present day through the sensory paradigms of avant-garde aesthetic discourse. By approaching both the poem and racial formation in sonic terms, this dissertation project argues that rethinking the sensory as well as the political ramifications of sounding can help us recuperate Asian American poets' often overlooked experimentation with poetic form. Specifically, I read the works of Marilyn Chin, Theresa Cha, John Yau, Cathy Park Hong, Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, and Tan Lin. By tracing the historical conditions of Orientalist objectification and re-interrogating postmodern theories of sight, sound, and the body, I seek to show how these poets' invocation of sonic paradigms reworks those theories and to broaden our critical vocabulary for writing about sound in poetry.

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## INTRODUCTION

This dissertation examines a selection of Asian American experimental poetics from the 1960's to the present day through the sensory paradigms of avant-garde aesthetic discourse. By approaching both the poem and racial formation in sonic terms, this dissertation argues that rethinking the sensory as well as the political ramifications of sounding can help us recuperate Asian American poets' often overlooked experimentation with poetic form. Specifically, I read the works of Marilyn Chin, Theresa Cha, John Yau, Cathy Park Hong, Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, and Tan Lin. By tracing the historical conditions of Orientalist objectification and re-interrogating postmodern theories of sight, sound, and the body, I seek to show how these poets' invocation of sonic paradigms reworks those theories and to broaden our critical vocabulary for writing about sound in poetry.

### **Historical Conditions of Orientalist Visuality**

In this section I show how ocularcentrism in modernist poetics influenced (and continues to be relevant to) ideas about transliterations and translations in order to trace the connections between the visual immediacy aspired to by 20th century theories of grammatology and racializing visual readings of race and otherness, particularly regarding the "Orient." Examining this interconnected history helps us better understand why the visual so dominated the landscape of American modernist poetry's aesthetic preoccupations (because it was linked to technological-grammatological fantasies) and how sensory theories of grammatology are - and continue to be - linked to the racialization of othered bodies. It is fundamental to this study of sound in poetry to talk



about the visual component of the grapheme of the written word and to (re)interrogate the postmodern figuring of theories of writing, because this has shaped how racialized bodies have been read, and also continues to inform modern practices of close listening because of the relationship between speech and writing.

In *Apparitions of Asia*, Josephine Park elucidates how American modernism shaped the emergence of Asian American poetry. In her introduction, Park outlines the “significant breach which divides American Orientalism from Asian American literature”:

[While] modernist Orientalism rendered the Asiatic sign as a silent figure, artists of the Asian American movement in the late 1960s forged an ethnic coalition to sound a new voice in American literature and culture. My inquiry attempts to bridge these long segregated discourses, and the task of the following pages is to illuminate the formal significance of modernism’s Orient in a century of United States expansion in the Pacific and the repercussions of this construction for Asian American artists. By considering the afterimage of American Orientalism in Asian American literature, *Apparitions of Asia* queries the costs of an Asiatic form cast as a peculiar figure of modernity. It is my contention that the American Orient of high modernism has significantly influenced Asian American poetry, both as an onerous burden and as an opportunity for literary experiment—whether through or against its forms. (3-4)

Park notes that the activist response of the 60’s to the “Asiatic sign as silent figure” has been “[sounding] a new voice in American literature culture” (3). In Chapters 1 & 2, I will elucidate the implications of this kind of “voice”. First, however, I wish to take up the sensory terms underwriting this breach in order to show that Asian American poetry in particular is an especially unique litmus case because both the racialization of Asiatic otherness and the fetishization of Chinese and Japanese languages and art were so predominantly rooted in the visual. This visual aspect of Orientalism is itself twofold –

both by visual readings of the body as well as by the attribution of particular visual qualities like transparency to an Asian aesthetic.

A close look at the history of modernist American poetry's engagement with the ideogram reveals a desire for a universally accessible and instantaneous means of communication and representation. This linguistic immediacy was routed through the visual, a conclusion that Ernest Fenollosa arrived at through his sensory theorizing of the differences between Chinese and English writing. Fenollosa, famous for his *Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*, makes the claim that Chinese sentences are able to take on the status of a 'time art' through pictorial representation, something for which phonetic languages rely on sound. Fenollosa wonders, In what sense can verse, written in terms of visible hieroglyphics, be reckoned true poetry? It might seem that poetry, which like music is a time art, weaving its unities out of successive impressions of sound, could with difficulty assimilate a verbal medium consisting largely of semipictorial appeals to the eye (79).

Fenollosa then proceeds to make a comparison between Thomas Gray's line "The curfew tolls the knell of parting day" with a sequence of five Chinese ideograms (translated underneath the characters as "Moon Rays Like Pure Snow") (44). Fenollosa asks, "Unless the sound of the latter be given, what have they in common? It is not enough to adduce that each contains a certain body of prosaic meaning; for the question is, how can the Chinese line imply, as form, the very element that distinguishes poetry from prose?" He answers his own question by suggesting that "the Chinese words, though visible, occur in just as necessary an order as the phonetic symbols of Gray. All that poetic form requires is a regular and flexible sequence, as plastic as thought itself"

(44). What Fenollosa implies here – particularly with the addition of “as form” – is that Chinese characters, “though visible,” have the potential to live up to English as a phonetic (and therefore necessarily superior poetic) language, because Fenollosa is concerned about distinguishing poetry from prose and perceives poetry’s sonic qualities (which, inferring from the Gray example he gives, would entail iambic pentameter). Furthermore, Fenollosa chooses examples that happen to support his reading of these linguistic characteristics: the Gray example describes a sound (bells tolling) while the Chinese line describes an image (moonlight on the snow).

Christopher Bush remarks of modernist poetics that “the Image’s ambition to be both an instant captured and an accurate index of that world is doomed from the outset.” Bush continues, “The Imagist solution is to try to have it both ways, and the result is an array of paradoxical if productive figures of motion-in-stasis” (36). This last remark also foregrounds another key quality of immediacy – that it’s not merely visual, but the lightning speed, the instantaneity of the visual (to also draw on Pound’s definition of the image as ‘that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time’) (Pound 200). In the following well-known example, Fenollosa claims there is a kind of movement enabled within ideograms:

Suppose that we look out of a window and watch a man. Suddenly he turns his head and actively fixes his attention upon something. We look ourselves and see that his vision has been focused upon a horse. We saw, first, the man before he acted; second, while he acted; third, the object toward which his action was directed. In speech we split up the rapid continuity of this action and of its picture into its three essential parts or joints in the right order, and say: Man sees horse. If we all knew what division of this mental horse-picture each of these signs stood for, we could communicate continuous thought to one another as easily by drawing them as by speaking words. (44)

This description of ‘rapid continuity’ is a curious oxymoron, since Fenollosa’s use of ‘rapid’ would seem to suggest ‘breaks’ which would be the antithesis of ‘continuity.’ Here turning to Bush’s theorizing of the camera may usefully frame this phrase: “The photographic gaze embodies neither objectivity in any conventional sense nor an absence of subjectivity, but rather a specific and very peculiar kind of subjectivity, one tied to and indeed synonymous with a specific location and moment” (60). If we rethink Fenollosa’s remark following this passage that “The group holds something of the quality of a continuous moving picture” through the lens of the photographic instant, as Bush suggests, we get more the flipping of images in the phenakistoscope or zoetrope rather than the perceived seamlessness of modern-day film (Fenollosa 45). This temporality of imagination is only possible because Fenollosa writes, “There is little or nothing in a phonetic word to exhibit the embryonic stages of its growth. It does not bear its metaphor on its face...In this, Chinese shows its advantage. Its etymology is constantly visible” (55).

Despite this ascribing of an instant-because-transparent nature to the ideogram, the gaze stops instantly at the difference displayed on the opaque face of the other (and Bush’s analysis does not deal with the visual close reading of the body). Percival Lowell begins his *Soul of the Far East* with a physiological close-reading of ‘Oriental eyes’: “For they seem to him to see everything topsy-turvy...The world stands reversed, and, taking for granted his own uprightness, the stranger unhesitatingly imputes to them an obliquity of vision, a state of mind outwardly typified by the cat-like obliqueness of their eyes” (2). Lowell further solidifies his reading of the face of the Asiatic other as an opaque medium which defines the self of the gazer: “Like us, indeed, and yet so unlike are they that we

seem, as we gaze at them, to be viewing our own humanity in some mirth-provoking mirror of the mind, - a mirror that shows us our own familiar thoughts, but all turned wrong side out” (3). The face of the Asiatic other is not a window like the ideogram is, out of which Fenollosa looks to see the man seeing a horse, but a mirror even as it is also a blank page or screen. It’s only a matter of pages before Lowell makes the leap from ‘obliquity,’ his visually-derived evidence of difference, to a self-confirmed diagnosis of ‘impersonality’ as the ‘racial character’ of the East:

We have seen how impressively impersonal the Far East is. Now if individuality be the natural measure of the height of civilization which a nation has reached, impersonality should betoken a relatively laggard position in the race. We ought, therefore, to find among these people certain other characteristics corroborative of a less advanced state of development... The Far Orientals ought to be a particularly unimaginative set of people. Such is precisely what they are. (213)<sup>1</sup>

Roland Barthes also performs an essentialist reading of the face of the Asiatic other as ‘blank’ in the name of a postmodern subjectivity, again with reference to the eye:

The Western eye is subject to a whole mythology of the soul, central and secret, whose fire, sheltered in the orbital cavity, radiates towards a fleshy, sensuous, passionate exterior; but the Japanese face is without moral hierarchy; it is entirely alive, even vivid (contrary to the legend of Oriental hieratism), because its morphology cannot be read ‘in depth,’ i.e. according to the axis of an inwardness; its model is not sculptural but scriptural. (Empire of Signs 102)

The blank opacity of the face, under Barthes’ deconstructive treatment, also threatens to render it illegible as a face, as the site of an encounter with an other.

Yet another instance can be found in the foreword to Sadakichi Hartmann’s *White Chrysanthemums*, in which Kenneth Rexroth notes, “He certainly made an indelible impression, and stands as clear now in memory as he did an hour after I saw him. It

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<sup>1</sup> In a way we can think of McLuhan’s ‘the medium is the message’ onto Bush’s analysis of this “impersonality” trope: “Such an indexical language does not eliminate subjectivity entirely, but reduces it to a space of unknowing that is as impersonal, inhuman, and unknowing as a camera—or a Chinaman” (Bush 63).

would take very little greasepaint and putty to turn his gaunt, faintly Oriental face into a reasonable facsimile of Doctor Fu Manchu” (Rexroth viii).

The hypermediated figure of the blank Asiatic face is consonant with the trope of the ‘inscrutable other’, which played into nineteenth-century fears about the “yellow peril” of Chinese immigration. The danger of the “heathen chinee” in Bret Harte’s parody “Plain Language from Truthful James”, which only fanned the flames of its period’s anti-Chinese sentiment, is that “Ah Sin”’s smile is “pensive and childlike,” “childlike and bland,” “yet he played it that day upon William/And me in a way I despise” (n.p.). In theorizing the coherence of Asian American studies as a field, Kandice Chuh notes that the term “connotes the violence, exclusion, dislocation, and disenfranchisement that has attended the codification of certain bodies as, variously, Oriental, yellow, sometimes brown, inscrutable, devious, always alien” (27). This is neither a singular nor a new observation; in *America’s Asia*, Colleen Lye observes that “The visuality of Asiatic racial form has a distinctive character insofar as the sense of its deceitfulness or mystery always points to the presence of something not shown” (Lye 7).

As these examples have demonstrated, visual close readings of the racialized body’s difference have historically been ascribed to writers of Asian descent, readings that have inflected the critical conversation around their work.

### **Asian American Poetry & Paradigms of Sound**

In order to further uncover some of the key issues around the reception of Asian American poets and questions of form and content, I turn to two key events of significance to the theorizing of Asian American poetry over roughly the last decade. The first is the acrimonious exchange between John Yau and Eliot Weinberger in the pages of

*American Poetry Review* over Weinberger's selection of poets for his anthology *American Poetry Since 1950: Innovators and Outsiders*. In the exchange, Yau takes Weinberger to task for his privileging of a particular poetic genealogy (Pound-Williams-H.D.) that uncritically "[honors] an aesthetic which promotes assimilationism and imperialism" (45). Yau names a litany of major women writers and writers of color that Weinberger omits, suggesting that perhaps they were excluded because their work does not "address and uphold male culture in an acceptable confluence of mythology, geography, history, and the exoticizing view of the Other" (48)<sup>2</sup>.

Additionally, Yau argues, Weinberger's selection of African American poets in particular is dictated by a particular "valorizing orality and performance in African-American poetry at the expense of all else", the exclusion of "other African-American poets...[who] don't conform to his view of what constitutes authenticity; they aren't black enough, because they don't scream, stamp, or shout the blues" (51). Yau goes on to note that

Thus, an African-American poet who prefers literacy to orality, singing (disparate things woven together) to speech (something which immediately communicates its message), is a person to be distrusted. And an African-American poet who subverts both the authenticity of orality and literacy must be mad.

There are two points I wish to draw from this exchange, the first being the way Weinberger's response to Yau speaks for itself. He fires back with the accusation that

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<sup>2</sup> I do agree that pointing to "who's left out" in the process of anthologizing is always going to yield something problematic (anthologizing in general, I think, is quite risky, because both exclusion and inclusion are risky, and because the things that lead one to include/exclude could also involve a whole host of factors in the publishing process beyond the subjective taste of one person). This point, however, does not detract from the deeply problematic nature of Weinberger's expectation that Yau's actions in some way "align with" or "reflect" back on his identity. Furthermore, Weinberger does not, as others like Dorothy Wang have pointed out, address the actual content of Yau's accusations (*Thinking Its Presence* 173).

Yau has “never, before this, written on any minority writers” and asserts that “I spent years studying Chinese – which John barely speaks and cannot read – and have written extensively on Chinese poetry...I will not dignify his scum-bag race baiting with a point-by-point response” (43). In touting his own expertise with Chinese as a form of credibility and using Yau’s previous lack of criticism on minority writers to de-legitimize his argument, Weinberger embodies the expectation that Asian American writers and their work are expected to have “revealed” themselves at an early stage in their careers and to address “identity” in a particular way that is legible to him (a notion that is also echoed in Perloff’s pointed “surprise” that Yau had not announced his Chinese-American status earlier in his career).

Additionally, as Yau’s critique makes clear, the stakes of how “authenticity” is signaled when it comes to minority poetries has fundamentally involved the figuring of the relationship between speech and writing, a relationship to which sound – as the materiality of language – is fundamental.<sup>3</sup> Asian American poetry has had to contend not only with racializing visual “close readings” of the body of the Asiatic other but also the modernist fascination with the supposed visual “transparency” of the ideogram. The visual bent of both of these paradigms, I suggest, has diverted critical attention away from the close listening and theorizing of sound in Asian American poetry, which for the poets I read in each chapter, plays a major sensory role in their recuperation of otherness.

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<sup>3</sup> This is not to say that racialization is not also enabled through theories of sound; for example, as Michael Golston has observed in *Rhythm and Race in Modernist Poetry and Science*, mid-20th century writings by Jacques Dalcroze made essentialist claims about different ethnicities having their own natural “rhythm,” claims which were often used to support primitivist stereotypes (33). While a certain kind of rhythmic and repetitive sound was used to racialize African and African American art as primitive, Asian poetry has been subject instead to a predominately visual discourse of racialization.



The second (and much more recent) event of significance involves the controversy around the inclusion of a poem titled “The Bees, the Flowers, Jesus, Ancient Tigers, Poseidon, Adam and Eve” by “Yi-Fen Chou” in the 2015 edition of *Best American Poetry*. After the poem was chosen for inclusion in the anthology by editors Sherman Alexie and David Lehman, “Yi-Fen Chou” was revealed to be a pseudonym used by a white poet named Michael Derrick Hudson, who had taken to submitting his poems under this name when submissions under his actual name were rejected. Hudson explains in the “Contributor’s Notes” that follow the poems:

There is a very short answer for my use of a nom de plume: after a poem of mine has been rejected a multitude of times under my real name, I put Yi-Fen’s name on it and send it out again. As a strategy for ‘placing’ poems this has been quite successful for me. The poem in question, ‘The Bees, the Flowers, Jesus, Ancient Tigers, Poseidon, Adam and Eve,’ was rejected under my real name forty (40) times before I sent it out as Yi-Fen Chou (I keep detailed submission records)<sup>4</sup>. As Yi-Fen the poem was rejected nine (9) times before *Prairie Schooner* took it. If indeed this is one of the best American poems of 2015, it took quite a bit of effort to get it into print, but I’m nothing if not persistent. I realize that this isn’t a very ‘artistic’ explanation for using a pseudonym. Years ago I did briefly consider trying to make Yi-Fen into a ‘persona’ or ‘heteronym’ à la Fernando Pessoa, but nothing ever came of it. (167)

A quick read of the poem itself makes its parodic intentions evident, and as a poem, it is interesting in some aspects.<sup>5</sup> The poem might even be read as a mockery of Poundian elements, with the opening lines vaguely reminiscent of a bad rendering of an Imagistic moment:

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<sup>5</sup> Whether Hudson had some notion of an “Asian American poem” in mind when he wrote this will forever remain unknown; he claims to have only submitted it under the pseudonym after submitting it unsuccessfully, though certain phrases like “not-quite-right English” would seem to suggest that Hudson wrote the poem with some non-native speaker in mind.

Huh! That bumblebee looks ridiculous staggering its way  
across those blue flowers, the ones I can never  
remember the name of. Do you know the old engineer's  
joke: that, theoretically, bees can't fly? But they look so  
perfect together, like Absolute Purpose incarnate: one bee  
plus one blue flower equals about a billion  
years of symbiosis. Which leads me to wonder what it is  
I'm doing here, peering through a lens at the thigh-pouches  
stuffed with pollen and the baffling intricacies  
of stamen and pistil. Am I supposed to say something, add  
a soundtrack and voiceover? My life's spent  
running an inept tour for my own sad swindle of a vacation  
until every goddamned thing's reduced to botched captions  
and dabs of misinformation in fractured,  
not-quite-right English: Here sir, that's the very place Jesus  
wept. The Colosseum sprouts and blooms with leftover seeds  
pooped by ancient tigers. Poseidon diddled  
Philomel in the warm slap of this ankle-deep surf to the dying  
stings of a thousand jellyfish. There, probably,  
atop yonder scraggly hillock, Adam should've said no to Eve. (25-26)

However obvious the poem seeks to make its parody, it nonetheless completely misses the terms of its own irony. In the "Contributor's Notes", Hudson attempts to guide the reader through the poem as it careens from one superficial (and sometimes fictitious) reference to another, noting the shallow, ubiquitous citing of "Jesus wept" as well as the debunked joke about bees' inability to fly. He explains his aesthetic aims:

The result I was hoping for with all this bungling (as much as poems have results) was to suggest Original Sin, or at least that echt-human feeling of being wrong

most of the time. And how getting things wrong goes back a long, long time for us. I wasn't trying to blame this mess on Eve. (168)

In that sense, perhaps, Hudson can be thought to be successful; the most original sin being that the joke Hudson is going for with this poem - an expose of a kind of affirmative action within the poetry world - backfires on him given that, as AAWW director Ken Chen points out, "Almost 70 percent of New Yorkers are people of color, but all but 5 percent of writers reviewed in The New York Times are white. Michael Hudson saw these crumbs and asked why they weren't his. Rather than being a savvy opportunist, he's another hysterical white man, envious of the few people of color who've breached their quarantine" ("Why A White Poet Posed As Asian To Get Published, And What's Wrong With That"). Hua Hsu captures the ludicrous logic behind such thinking when he writes in a piece for The New Yorker that

Maybe Hudson was right to believe that a Chinese name would distinguish his work in the world of American poetry journals, which are not generally filled with Chinese names. But, conservative paranoia of quotas aside, the marketplace spoils for someone named Yi-Fen Chou are fairly meagre. If a Chinese name were all it took, there would be far more authors with names like Yi-Fen Chou at the bookstore... Maybe Hudson, somewhere within his heart, actually felt less empowered than the imaginary rival he spun into reality, a fictional creation whose Chinese name would deliver him places his own could not. Within that possibility is the most perverse fantasy I have ever read. ("When White Poets Pretend to Be Asian")

Unsurprisingly, the poem has been met with outrage, generating several articles and responses from other writers that have articulated just how problematic such a move was. Asian American Writers' Workshop assembled a forum, in which several Asian American poets responded to Hudson's charade with poems of their own and critical reflections.

I draw special attention to Hsu's reflection on the particular nature of this faking for the way it emphasizes (as Yau's critique of Weinberger also does) the stakes of sound for identity and Asian American poetry:

When it comes to such hoaxes, it seems somehow easier to fake Asia, a land still distant and inscrutable to many Americans; while other hoaxes work because of their thoroughness and care, the Asian-themed sort often get by with only a few details, as long as those details seem just "Asian" enough. After all, imitating the sound of Asian languages is something of a national pastime, from Mark Twain and Bret Harte's "Ah Sin" to Wayne Campbell and Garth Algar's "Cream of Sum Yung Guy." In 2013, a Bay Area news report about an Asian Air crash listed the pilots' names as Ho Lee Fuk, Wi Tu Lo, Sum Ting Wong, and Bang Ding Ow, presumably because these names appeared sufficiently believable.

When Hudson asks in his poem, "Am I supposed to say something, add/a soundtrack and voiceover? My life's spent/running an inept tour for my own sad swindle of a vacation/until every goddamned thing's reduced to botched captions/and dabs of misinformation in fractured,/not-quite-right English:" and follows it up with an italicized litany of jumbled, faked proficiency with Western classical references, he exposes the sonic terms by which his "sad swindle" operates, at the expense of the racialized other of the Asiatic figure, rendered either silent or as speaking onomatopoeic non-sense that ridicules and dehumanizes (25). As I hope each of my chapters will show, the Asian American poets that I have chosen to focus on in this project resist such "voiceovers", recuperating the "fractured, not-quite-right English" that they experiment with from the privileged domain that Hudson speaks from.

These two examples chart the territory that Asian American poetry must contend with. At the earlier end of the decade that these examples bookend, Weinberger's response to Yau makes the point that not "revealing" oneself as an Asian American poet by signaling one's interest in issues of identity in a particular, preconceived manner (that

usually entails the explicit thematic treatment of ethnic tropes or experiences) dictated by white critics means that race is necessarily not significant to a poet's work, and that such a poet abdicates the right to assert anything to the contrary without being accused of playing "the race card" at his or her convenience. On the other end of the decade, what Michael Derrick Hudson's appropriation of the name "Yi-Fen Chou" tries to argue (regardless of his claim that there was "no reason" for his actions) is that the literary establishment is unfairly prioritizing a form of affirmative action in selecting for poets' backgrounds over the merits of their work. The (not-so) implicit mindset is this: if Asian American poets' work is no longer expected to deal with identity in a specific way, and if American poetic criticism has now accepted that identity can be expressed without reference to overt ethnic signifiers, then the poem may as well be by anybody, since Asian American poetry that doesn't explicitly talk about ethnic signifiers must not express identity in any distinctive way that cannot be aped by a white poet seeking to expose the "benefits" reaped by other minority poets, who has the convenient option of first trying to submit his poetry under his own, privileged name first before assuming the mantle of racial difference. As Hsu observes, "Proper, canonical, 'serious' literature is built upon [the] flexibility of perspective [that one's experiences can be received as universal], but the privilege of such perspective is rarely extended to those on the margins, whose work is often perceived as ethnographic—and for whom there is typically only one way to be "authentic".

These poems also illustrate the need for critical attention to paradigms of sound that will help us better attend to the nuances of formal experimentation in the works of Asian American poets, as they respond to but also reach beyond the legacy of a particular

racialization by an avant-garde that tends to split these poets' investments in form from their interests in alternate models of subjectivity. When speaking fractures from notions of wholeness or deviates from norms of correct or acceptable speaking, it opens up room for discourse on the transgressing of these norms and questions of linguistic mastery as a sign of belonging. Likewise, rethinking other issues around paradigms of sound, like the indexing of human sounds contra the figures of the animal and cyborg, the ecopoetic relationality of hearing, and ambient music as a model for the hyperreality of the racialized subject, can begin the important work of making space for Asian American identity in ways that free our readings of these poems from the limits of conventional signaling of "authenticity".<sup>6</sup>

## CHAPTER SUMMARIES

### **Chapter 1 - Phonotextual Voicings: Endophonic Reading and the Exophonic Writing of Marilyn Chin and Theresa Cha**

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<sup>6</sup> While there has yet to be a full-on study of Asian American poetry that is devoted primarily to examining paradigms of sound, Steven Yao's *Foreign Accents* does have some analysis of homophonic play and translation in Marilyn Chin's *Rhapsody in Yellow*. Most recently, Tara Fickle's essay "English before Engrish: Asian American Poetry's Unruly Tongue," provides a reading of Yao's poetry (as well as that of other experimental poetry by Asian Canadian poets like Fred Wah) and most closely models the kind of phonotextual reading that I hope to perform in my own project.

In this chapter, I model an endophonic approach towards the exophonic poems of Marilyn Chin and Theresa Cha. Practices of “close listening” to poetry often involve the analysis of poetry reading performances and tend to focus on the particular decisions made by each reader to modulate the text with vocal emphases or inflections. “Endophonic” criticism, on the other hand, involves the listening for the operations of vocality in the text without needing it to be actualized by the voice of a performer. It attends to the physical mechanisms of speaking while using its more fluid figuring of the relationship between grapheme and sound to frame moments of unspeakability or shibboleth-like challenges in Chin and Cha’s poems. For this reason, “endophonic” reading is uniquely suited to the nuances of Chin and Cha’s soundplay, both of whom can be considered “exophonic” writers, or writers who work outside their first language. “Endophonically” listening to Chin’s *Rhapsody in Plain Yellow* makes the text’s preoccupations with the linguistic signals of assimilation and belonging evident, while in Cha’s *Dictée* it highlights the difficulties of transpacific inter-lingual and inter-generational remembering. Both exophonic texts, I show, disassociate the lyric voice from its representative, autobiographical conventions of subjectivity by using paradigms of speech that can only be fully accounted for through endophonic reading and whose fragmented, physically laborious nature embodies the traumatic experiences of alienation for these poems’ female subjects.

**Chapter 2 – Sounding Animal and Cyborg Others: Race and Alternate Alterities in Cathy Park Hong's *Translating Mo'um* and John Yau's *Ing Grish*, My Symptoms and Borrowed Love Poems**

In this chapter I show how Yau and Hong Park's poetry used the category of the normalized human, silhouetted against tropes of the animal and cyborgian, to show the extent of exclusionary linguistic racism. In America's Asia, Colleen Lye points out that despite the "flatness" of subjectivity ascribed to racial otherness, Asiatic racial form nonetheless includes an element of un-visualized referentiality:

We easily recognize the presence of race in visual media because of its identification with a set of phenotypical traits and a relative absence of interiority. Yet the visuality of Asiatic racial form has a distinctive character insofar as the sense of its deceitfulness or mystery always points to the presence of something not shown. To put it another way, we recognize the Asiatic as a figure for the unrepresentable. Yet how is the unrepresentable to be visualized? Does it have a human body? If not, what shape, as a whole or in part, does it take? (7).

Lye's question "Does it have a human body?" is critical because it recognizes that the signification of humanness - or otherwise - is fundamental to the construction of racial alterity. It is this "otherwise" signified by voices which share qualities with - yet simultaneously extend outside - the paradigm of the linguistically-determined human that I wish to explore in this chapter. Additionally, Lye's question "How is the unrepresentable to be visualized?" not only emphasizes the privileging of sight as the primary medium through which difference is codified as stereotype but in turn raises another question: "How is the unrepresentable to be sounded?" Can listening to the way certain kinds of sounds index normative humanness and differentiate it from the otherwise lead to new readings of alterity?

### **Chapter 3 – Nancian Hearing, Touch, and Resonance in Mei-mei Berssenbrugge's Ec(h)opoetics of Self and Other**

This chapter investigates the paradigms of bodily subjectivity that Mei-mei Berssenbrugge and French deconstructive philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy critique via the



figuring of the relationship between hearing and touch in their respective work. Specifically, I argue that the subject's sensing of self as other through sound and touch refigures the boundary between subject and surroundings as one of generative possibility, enabling the subject to be in a resonant intimacy with the other of the non-human natural world without collapsing its unknowable alterity. Berssenbrugge's Nancian, deconstructive play with auto-affective sensory self-constitution through sound and touch, particularly her melding of the two through vibrations, frequencies, and resonance, actually upends the traditional Cartesian opposition between body and soul that serves as the underlying basis for a reductive humanism. Ultimately, I show how Berssenbrugge's poems uncover the similarities between the formal investments of an ecopoetry that does not rely on the thematization of the natural world and the formal investments of Asian American poetry that does not rely on the thematization of race, positing an ec(h)opoetic subjectivity as another possible form of alterity that resists the normativity of the human.

#### **Chapter 4 – Ambience and the Aunt: Muzak, Simulating Assimilation and Theorizing the TV in Tan Lin's *Insomnia and the Aunt***

In this chapter, I trace the history of Muzak and Brian Eno's body of work in order to set up a frame which I hope will eventually (if somewhat unexpectedly) help us uncover the stakes of Tan Lin's *Insomnia and the Aunt*. I am interested in how an understanding of the aims of ambient music and its ideal modes of reception – namely boredom, distraction, and relaxation – can help us elaborate on the TV in Lin's text as the vehicle for an ambient poetics, one that enables Lin to call essentialist constructs of “authentic” individualized experience into question. I attempt to show how these ideal modes of reception coincide with symptoms of racial melancholia within *Insomnia and*

the Aunt and mask (or are the converse effects) the profound affect of the characters' alienation. Finally, I read Lin's novel as an example of how these symptoms of racial melancholia, which are also ambient poetics' ideal modes of reception, serve as "coping mechanisms" by which the user/reader/consumer navigates the different media (specifically the meta-forms of the computer and the film) that are encoded into the interface of the text.

## CHAPTER 1 – PHONOTEXTUAL VOICINGS: ENDOPHONIC READING AND THE EXOPHONIC WRITING OF MARILYN CHIN AND THERESA CHA

*Derrida - "I only have one language; it is not mine."*

This chapter centers around two texts - Marilyn Chin's *Rhapsody in Plain Yellow* and Theresa Cha's *Dictée* – that illustrate the significance of endophonic criticism for minority aesthetics and for sound studies at large, particularly with regard to instances of exophonic writing. Through an endophonic reading of these texts, we can uncover the formal experimentation in these poems as they resist the fixity of the grapheme and hear how they perform the act of bearing witness to the forging of identities through racial trauma. These poems invite a silent evocalization as they engage alternately with the difficulties and facilities of navigating language within texts that interrogate the terms of linguistic belonging in the face of racial difference. In this chapter, I hope to show how the physical – yet internal and subdued – mechanics of speaking reading can offer us a useful way of reading such experimental Asian American poetry as Chin and Cha's. My study of two poetic texts in this chapter - Theresa Cha's *Dictée* and Marilyn Chin's *Rhapsody in Plain Yellow* - is animated by these questions: What is exophonic writing? What is the endophone, and why is it particularly useful for recuperating the sensory aspects of reading exophonic writing?

### **What is exophonic writing?**

Marjorie Perloff defines exophonic writing in her 2010 *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means* as poetry written in a “second” language, or a language that’s not “one’s own” (16).<sup>7</sup> Perloff writes, “The exophonic...has become much more common today, thanks to the current state of mobility and migration, in which the use of English (of French or German or Dutch) as a second language has become almost normative”

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<sup>7</sup> Tawada is also referenced by Perloff as an example of an exophonic writer, along with German-language Jewish poet Paul Celan [and Caroline Bergvall]. [<http://jacket2.org/feature/marjorie-perloff-celebration>]

(16). In her 2008 study of contemporary German literature, Chantal Wright defines exophony as “an emerging term which has largely, although not exclusively, been used to describe the phenomenon of African literatures written in European languages, particularly in French (cf. Heinrichs 1992: 19).7” (39). Noting that German and Japanese-language poet Yoko Tawada herself encountered the term at a conference on the subject and subsequently titled her 2003 collection of Japanese language essays *Exophonie*, Wright expands this definition more explicitly as the “phenomenon of a writer working in a language other than his or her mother tongue” (27).

Both Marilyn Chin and Theresa Cha can be read as exophonic writers in this sense. Neither Chin, a Chinese American poet who emigrated from Hong Kong to Seattle with her family at a young age, nor Theresa Cha, the Korean American poet and performance artist who left Busan, South Korea for Hawaii (and later California) spoke English as their “first” language, and the transpacific conditions of their immigrant status as linguistic “outsiders” – their “outside sound” – surface repeatedly in their poems. *Rhapsody in Plain Yellow* and *Dictée*, in particular, exemplify the kind of formal inventiveness these poets display in their works as they toggle between languages, interrogating the association of linguistic facility and mastery with belonging. At the same time, these texts offer poetics much more than simply a model for how to read works by poets writing in non-native languages. The category of the “exophonic,” as Wright and Perloff define it, depends on the demarcation of a “primary” or “mother” language in opposition to one or more “secondary” languages that is not “one’s own”. Yet this word’s own composition points us towards a broader set of possibilities, one

which leaves room for the poetic expression of other kinds of difference that accompany, but are not limited to, linguistic non-nativity.

In an article for Poetry Foundation called “How Words Fail,” Cathy Park Hong weaves personal experience and critical analysis together as she reflects on the linguistic “anxiety” of navigating between Korean and English as a child. Citing Nabokov’s comment that English is “an artificial, stiffish” thing, she specifies her interest in the sound of the marginalized,

who severed syntax out of a sense of cultural or political displacement rather than for the sake of experimentation. History and circumstance alienated these poets from their own language, placed them in the margins of their cultures, where they were witness to language’s limits in articulating a cohesive voice. Through deliberate inarticulation, they managed to strain out a charged music from syntactic chaff, a music borne out of negation. (n.p.)

For writers who Perloff and Wright would deem exophonic, whose work interrogates the concept of a facility or ease within “one’s own” or “primary” language particularly in poetry, showing that it is an “artificial, stiffish thing,” it’s not only that the act of writing in another language other than one’s own is necessarily itself traumatic. Exophonic writing often bears the mark of the traumatic conditions of the writer’s exophony, and more often than those traumatic conditions include the experience of racialization. For these writers, whose difference is doubly marked, “voice” in a text is often more complicated than can be expressed through an audible voice in an exophonic reading. It is the specific sonic manifestation of this linguistic non-nativity, their phonotextual recasting of the sensory experience of reading, that make the stakes of the endophone so significant for Asian American poetry at large.

Ironically, however, Hong invokes the exophonic in the sense of “outsider” in order to show why it is that actually the endophone, the “inside sound” whose freedom of unvoiced potential must be preserved, is able to express a “deliberate inarticulation”, a “charged music from syntactic chaff” in a way that the exophone cannot. Though Hong herself does not use the word “exophonic” in this essay, her description touches on the term’s politically-minded definition (as given by Perloff and Wright), while simultaneously raising the matter of the term’s sensory, and more literal, definition.

As the etymological deconstruction of “exophonic” suggests, the word literally indicates an “outside sound”. In theories of reading, it is used to refer to vocally performed readings, in which the voice travels “outside” the body. *cris cheek* offers a closer analysis of a reading by Caroline Bergvall, noting that

An exophonic reading, in which the sound voiced leaves the body, is also the subject of variables both on the part of the speaker and receiver. A reader reads with their sense of the sound, from their body with their particularities of pronunciation and their perception... The human voice is a site of extremely subtle embodiments of pitching, velocity and amplitude... Bergvall is making explicit points about standards of pronunciation and subversion of dominant meanings through articulatory slippage in particular in the context of colonialism. Her means are entirely appropriate to her intention, an extremely subtle yet fiercely achieved critique of colonial imposition. (“Reading and Writing: Sites of Performance”)

What *cris cheek* is calling “exophonic reading” then is live performance (whether experienced live or through a recording) that bears the individualized vocal signature of the performer. An analysis of an exophonic reading might account for things like a performer’s particular emphasis on a word, or spacing of phrases, that yields a sense of the performer’s interpretation of a poem.

Both vocalized and silent readings have their usefulness in understanding the sonic form of a poem, and it's not my intention to discard one for the other. However, as I have noted in the introduction, analyses of audible reading performances are not the only means of close listening. Indeed, while Bergvall's exophonic reading of the poem uses her voice to effect her critique of colonialism, pointing us to her inflected and explicit commentary running concurrently to the words of the poem, it also tends to close off other hearings of the poem in the moment of performance besides the particular one she has chosen to demonstrate.

### **Endophonically Reading Asian American Poetry**

In *Jackdaw Jiving*, Peter Middleton distinguishes the workings of an "inner voice" from the sounded voice of reading out loud, noting that:

Actual vocalizing, unless it is vitiated by histrionics, can nourish the inner ear's competence to pick up and assemble sequences. Yet the inner ear is capable of an auditory complexity which exceeds almost any audible vocalizing: the latter tends to be reductive, if not falsifying, also it may straighten out shocks and distortions which, to the inner ear, are part of the real thing that is the voice in the text and the delight of the text. (92)

Middleton coins the term "endophone" to describe this "inner voice," describing it as "an imaginary voice, a voice that was launched by [the author's], but one that has a life of its own in the contemporary air, while it retains his unmistakable, distinct imprint. That imaginary and unmistakable voice is a kind of *endophone*" (91). Middleton argues that the endophone, an "inner voice," issues sounds in the process of reading poetry that are assembled by an "inner ear" (91). This "inner voice", while rooted in the experience of vocality, is not actually sounded out.

Like Middleton, Garrett Stewart also differentiates between a reader's experience of hearing sounds produced by a voice and a different kind of hearing sound that bypasses the sounding of the voice altogether. Stewart takes a slightly different understanding of authorial voice; where Middleton leaves space for the "imprint of the author's voice", Stewart excises it. Nevertheless, like Middleton, Stewart also stresses that the reader's own silent voice lends itself to a kind of internal sounding through reading:

Script has so often been mystified as transcribed voice, as encoded speech, in part because it seems to meet a speaking voice halfway. I don't mean halfway between author and reader, the text as silent interface. The voice of the author has nothing to do with, or in, the textual circuit. Reading, rather, provides a tacit halving of the distance between someone else's text, that someone long gone, and *one's own* voice. (105)

The endophone, as a sonic paradigm *inflected by but other than* the actual voice – contributes another layer of sensory information that can run athwart the lexical track of the text. Stewart defines this extra layer as the *phonotext*, "that dimension of the phenotext which is so regularly ignored in discussions of the phenomenality of reading...that articulatory stream which the interruption of script at lexical borders never quite renders silent, at least within a single syntactic period broken by no full pauses" (28). Stewart is interested in this phonotext's "independence from the scriptive aspect of writing which allows for the kinetic wavering tensions of phonemic reading" (28). Noting that "[everything] here depends on silent pronunciation, on 'endophony,' even in the unspoken registration of a written text," Stewart lobbies for a criticism that orients itself towards the semantic possibilities made fluid by the phonotext, with a particular emphasis on the phenomenon within evocalization that he calls "transegmental drift"



(essentially, gaps between words or segments, lexical spacings that can be heard/misheard or arise on “accident”).

Given a history of Orientalist ocularcentrism and its application of theories of visual immediacy to both the face of the Asiatic other as well as East Asian art forms and systems of writing, it is not difficult to see why theorizing the relationship between the grapheme and the phonotext might be salient to the reading of Asian American poetry as it contends with, responds to, and reworks a surface-level, instantaneous visuality fetishized by the Imagists. Bernstein and others have emphasized the status of phonetic alphabets as sound technologies independent of any mechanical apparatus, a status which has not historically been conferred on Chinese (as the main language of the Imagists’ focus). In fact, as Christopher Bush has pointed out, Chinese has tended to be likened to visual technologies such as that of the camera, with its “instantaneous” way of capturing and conveying an image (*Ideographic Modernism* 60).

Josephine Park suggests in *Apparitions of Asia* that “Asian American poets faced a uniquely perplexing legacy: they were heirs to an avant-garde shot through with Orientalism. Though they could and did forcibly decry fantasies of the Orient, their avant-garde poetics were themselves a part of an American revolutionary lineage” (95). The very modernist, Orientalist linguistic ideal that Chinese was perceived to embody – namely, that of an instantaneous relationship between image and meaning – is one that Chin and Cha contend with by, and one which an endophonically attuned reading of their poems’ phonotextual aspects works against, particularly to the end of destabilizing the representation of visual exoticism that Asian American poetry has always had to contend with.

The vocabulary provided by Middleton and Stewart describes the intersection of the structural aspects of language and the sensory constraints of the body in concrete terms, terms which are necessary because sound, as the site of intersection between the textual and visceral, is fundamental to reading Chin and Cha's texts in this chapter. Certain texts which are marked with traces of the exophonic (in the first sense) contain elements in them which refuse to be completely contained by an exophonic reading (in the second sense). Endophonic reading helps to draw out instances in which formal experimentation that recuperates the role of sound (against the static visuality of modernist Orientalism) serves as a vehicle for the act of bearing witness to the cross-linguistic trauma of non-belonging, the trauma of being an exophonic writer. Both *Rhapsody in Plain Yellow* and *Dictée* use sensory conventions that cannot be voiced/spoken; for *Dictée*, the "un-say-ability" of multimedia genres embodies the trauma, for *Rhapsody in Plain Yellow*, the unpronounceability of particular typographic conventions in the text that one can see but cannot speak is analogous to the act of bearing witness to trauma. *Rhapsody in Yellow's* punctuation, and *Dictée's* incorporation of photographs and charts, for instance, are but a few examples of the formal and thematic choices that might only be accounted for through the capaciousness of an endophonically attuned criticism. Asian American poetry in particular is an especially unique litmus case from which to begin fleshing out a theory of exophonic writing and reading because both the racialization of Asiatic otherness and the fetishization of Chinese and Japanese languages and art were so predominantly rooted in the visual. Chin and Cha's sonic interventions in these texts vacillate between the unspeakability of certain formal conventions of genre/typography, as well as endophonic feats of aural

gestalt (trans-lingual homophonic puns, transegmental drift, etc), and shibboleth-like verbal challenges as a means of interrogating the terms of linguistic belonging (alliteration as means of proving assimilation). For this reason, my study attempts to model the application of a formally-oriented close listening to the particularities of a minority poetry that has had the constraints of particular sensory paradigms of criticism (in this case, visual ones).

### **Sounding Against the Ideogram: Challenging Voicings in *Rhapsody in Plain Yellow***

Reading Chin's poetry phonotextually helps us understand why theories of exophonic writing and endophonic reading, which can seem to have nothing to do with identity, have significant implications for the reformation of categories of minority poetry and conversations around identity politic, and to recuperate sound, the sensory medium which most registers shifts of exophonic difference. Additionally, it is especially crucial because of a critical tendency to situate Chin's work within a particular coterie of writers associated with the early stages of Asian American political activism because of her work's recurring allusions to particular autobiographical details that carry thematic significance: Chin's philandering father, who had given Chin her English name after Marilyn Monroe, symbols and legends from Chinese literature and folklore, forms of musical composition, etc.

Timothy Yu notes that "the image of Asian American poetry familiar to most readers is a product of the 1980's" and bears the particular mark of the poetry workshop, the "MFA mainstream'...with its emphasis on personal voice, epiphanic insight, and loose verse form" (73). Yu goes on to describe how the work of this group of poets - in

which he situates Chin along with Li-Young Lee, Cathy Song, and David Mura - came to be read as formally uncomplicated:

The understated, first-person lyrics of a poet like Cathy Song were consonant with the ‘workshop’ style coming to dominate American poetry, helping to secure an image of Asian American poetry as a body of work that diverged from mainstream writing only in its overt themes, not in its politics or style. (102)

This grouping - while in and of itself not without reason - has obscured some of her more formally innovative experimentation with sound by continuing to emphasize her association with the conventions of lyric poetry without unpacking the way her poems reclaim “voice” from its representative burden. Steven Yao points out that scholarship on [Chin] continues to await proper acknowledgment from a wider audience that comprehends both the range of formal invention and the technical sophistication, as well as the attendant literary historical significance, of her achievement in verse, particularly in relation to the tradition of efforts at establishing a counter poetics of specifically Chinese difference that I have been tracing in this study. (189)

Though Chin’s poetry may often be grouped together with these other autobiographical writers of her period, Yao sees her work as perhaps signalling some similar features, but expressly departing from lyric testimony: “the ways in which she consistently pushes against the established norms and expectations for lyric testimony (as exemplified in the work of Li-Young Lee), which has been the most sanctioned mode of Asian American verse under the current regime of liberal multiculturalism” (189).

Chin’s poems are infused with biographical narratives, and yet some quality of her verse prevents it from being neatly categorized as “lyric testimony.” John Yau’s comments on one of Chin’s more recent poems from her 2014 *Hard Love Province* could easily be

written of her approach towards the lyric in *Rhapsody in Plain Yellow*: “She doesn’t use the “I” as way to garner sympathy. For all their narrative drift, her poems are not anecdotes, little stories meant to call attention to the speaker’s suffering or privileged status” (“Marilyn Chin: Poet, Translator, Provocateur”). Though Yau does not explicitly say why this is, I argue that it is her formal experimentation with techniques of sonic representation which makes these poems not simply anecdotal narratives centered around the experience of the lyric “I” but sophisticated feats of exophonic writing which complicate conventional notions of “voice” as metaphor for either a recognizable, cohesive authorial style or a platform for raising political concerns of “visibility” or representation. What Chin does use the “I” towards, I argue, is towards a reconfiguring of the readers’ subjectivity through sound, a phonotextual counter to the silence of the ideogram. In *Rhapsody in Plain Yellow*, Chin recuperates the “voice” from its status as a stand-in for a reductive (and ultimately still visually determined) understanding of representation to a vehicle for engaging with a highly unstable, abstract lyric “I” – an “I” that I and others suggest exists more for the purposes of responding to, dialoguing with and perverting modernist poetry’s Orientalist visuality through sound than it does to convey autobiographical experience (though there are elements of that in her poem).

Her “Broken Chord” poems demonstrate an overt (though not strict) commitment to specific forms in the titles that evoke the disjointed (but rapidly succeeding) sequence of seeing. “Border Ghazals,” which consists of three sections of eight ghazals each, uses this form originating from Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Urdu poetic traditions, a “short lyric poem written in couplets using a single rhyme (aa, ba, ca, da, etc), sometimes mentioning the poet’s name in the last couplet” (Oxford Dictionary). Each couplet is to

be “structurally, thematically, and emotionally autonomous”. Her use of the ghazal form in “Horse Horse Hyphen” is not only evocative of her contemporary Adrienne Rich, known for experimenting with the particularities of the form in English, but also engages with Fenollosa’s zoetrope-like succession of images.

Chin’s most specific response to the modernist rendering of the ideogram, however, comes in the form of homophonic substitution and punning. In “That Half Is Almost Gone,” the lines “I had forgotten the character/ for ‘love.’ I remember vaguely/the radical ‘heart’” evoke the ideogram 愛, which is strikingly absent from the poem (17). The transliteration of ‘ai,’ which Chin informs the reader in the notes to the poem is an “exclamation homophonous with *ai*/love, punning love with pain,” shifts attention away from the ideogram’s visual properties to its potential exophonic resonances (105). Yao, referencing her work’s proximity to conventions of “lyric testimony,” observes that “Rhetorically and thematically, this work covers familiar territory...by employing the basic conceit of an individual minority subject giving affective voice to personal experience as a means for depicting the variety of losses that attend upon assimilation into dominant culture. At the level of formal technique, however, Chin explores new stylistic ground in “That Half Is Almost Gone,” successfully achieving greater expressive intensity by broadening the visual and sonic scope of her idiom. (217). Like Stalling’s *Yingelishi, Rhapsody in Plain Yellow* relies on aural gestalt as a mark of the exophonic; however, Chin uses homophonic sound as an interface that can establish a connection between different meanings in two languages, rather than as a way of highlighting the semantic gap between them. Irene Hsiao elaborates more

specifically on the ramifications of this aural gestalt of “I” and “ai” for Asian American poetic subjectivity:

While the difficulty of voicing the I is a problem fundamental to the lyric, the tension between ai and I is specific to the border between English and Chinese, an aural answer to the Imagist appropriation of the ideogram. . . . By staging an I and an ai specifically affiliated with writing, Marilyn Chin addresses what it means to be not only an Asian American speaker but also an Asian American writer, a problem particularly poignant in the writing of the lyric, the genre most marked for its predication on the individual. By insisting on the reincorporation of sound into an ideogram made silent both by modernists and Asian American activists, Chin stages another kind of recovery for the ideogram that refracts the Asian American into a specificity unacknowledged by conditions of the 1970s. Her reclamation develops another stance for the Chinese American poet that acknowledges and revises the interventions of the modernists and activates another relationship between the two languages. (189, 194-195)

In other poems in *Rhapsody in Plain Yellow*, Chin does present the reader with actual ideograms; however, in each of these instances, they present the reader with a critique of the privileging of the visual over the aural. In “To Pursue the Limitless,” the chiasmic repetition of “美言不信 信言不美” framed as a “Chinese paradox” is - with a tongue-and-cheek playfulness - translated for the reader as the Keatsian “*Beautiful words are not truthful/The truth is not beautiful*” (86). A few lines later the homophonic punning of the Chinese ideograms for two and five plays off Alexander Pope’s “*Essay on Criticism*”: “To (二) err is human/To (五) woo is woman” (86). Chin’s sly linking of ideograms with these well-known phrases mocks the modernist exoticist approach towards visually “translating” these characters by connecting them not to ancient Chinese proverbs but to Western canonical aphorisms. In *Thinking Its Presence: Form and Subjectivity in Asian American Literature*, Dorothy Wang’s close reading of form in Chin’s poetry reveals how irony codes Chin’s political interventions, making them more

“palatable” to a wider audience than her more obvious forms of critique – even as it is a “structure [that] captures the rivenness of subjectivity wrought by immigration, diaspora, the violence of assimilation”, “rhetorical means to contend with the trauma of history,” and method of grappling with racial melancholia, for those in the audience who “get” her irony (118).

In “Rhapsody in Plain Yellow,” the eponymous poem of the collection, however, Chin’s use of the ideogram not only acts as a response to modernist silencing, it becomes a pointed challenge to the reader’s ability to fulfill the demands of her poems. The ideogram “Say: 言” opens the poem, an imperative command that Chin’s intended reader, I argue, would not necessarily be able to fulfill in terms of knowing or being able to read the character.<sup>8</sup> And yet, Chin gives her readers a different way of fulfilling this command, as “言” is Chinese for “speech”. Where the “ai”/“I” homophony “hovers between English and Chinese, between writing and speaking,” Chin’s take on the ideogram here centers on the coincidence of naming the act of speech in writing even as the reader is being compelled to speak (Hsiao 189).

Such an opening conundrum is fitting for the rest of the poem that follows, loosely structured as a series of iterations of “Say:”, of which Dorothy Wang speculates: “Is the parodying here mimicry or slavish imitation, commanded by the imperative ‘Say’? Or is Chin rebelling against the English poetic tradition and its imperatives? ‘Say’ can also mean ‘for example’ or can be used in American slapstick to inject a tone of

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<sup>8</sup> I suggest this because Chin includes a “Notes” section at the end of the text translating incorporated Chinese characters and explaining her adaptation of Chinese poetic forms, as well as explaining various East Asian cultural references: Chinese folk poetry, Chinese geographic locations, Japanese greetings, American Hawaiian slang, and Hindu religious tenets. Clearly, Chin does not assume or expect that the reader of *Rhapsody in Plain Yellow* knows or is familiar with these references.



sarcasm (‘Say!’ – as in the Three Stooges routines). ‘Say’ also appears famously in the ‘The Star-Spangled Banner’: ‘Oh, say can you see...’ (154). On top of all the possibilities which Wang suggests, I’d add the reader’s inhabiting of “Say:” through subvocalization to the list. Indeed, the poem demands a vocal participation from the reader through its imperative form, even as at the same time it poses different kinds of difficulties for readers which stand in the way of this very process of subvocalization. In the following lines from the poem, “I am the sentence which shall at last elude her” is literalized two lines later in the form of a blank (and the symmetry of the “Oh”s seem to suggest that it’s not merely a delay of the second line, but that the first line is conspicuously absent). The unspeakability of the spacing-out of the “sentence which shall at last elude her” is taken to a new level a few lines later with the line “#####00000xxxxx!!!!”. The tension between the urgency and dynamic volume of expression which the “!!!!” confers on the symbols before it, which can only be named but not pronounced, frames the evocalizable lines here with an intensity of affect.

Say: I am the sentence which shall at last elude her.

Oh, the hell of heaven’s girth, a low mound from here ...

Say:

Oh, a mother’s vision of the emerald hills draws down her brows.

Say: a brush of jade, a jasper plow furrow.

Say: #####00000xxxxx!!!! (101)

This play with the phonotext continues in the poem as Chin’s use of alliterative sound patterns and punctuation embodies the racialized linguistic particularities and tonal inflections of the non-native immigrant speaker:

We’ve studied their cadence carefully –

Enrolled in a class to *improve our accent*.

Meanwhile, they hover over, waiting for us to stumble...  
to drop an article, mispronounce an R.

Say: softly, softly, the silent gunboats glide.

O onerous sibilants, O onomatopoetic glibness. (102)

Chin's pointed line about "[dropping] an article" and mispronouncing the 'r' (the consonant which presents difficulty to native speakers of Mandarin attempting to learn English because of its similarity to 'l'), conveyed in perfect diction – brings to mind the line immediately before this excerpt: "The language of the masters is the language of the aggressors" (101). The repeated 'r's in those two lines – "hover over," "drop," "article," "mispronounce" – serves as a kind of obstacle course to the mouth, a shibboleth issued as challenge to the non-native speaker. And indeed, Chin takes the reader through the paces of this linguistic mastery, responding to this "waiting" by reinventing this 'aggression' as the subversion of alliterative sibilants: "softly, softly, the silent gunboats glide" (and the 'r' in 'onerous' serves as an demonstration of the difference between 'l's and 'r's).

Al Filreis writes of Marjorie Perloff as exophonic refugee in *Vienna Paradox*: "She joins many immigrants for whom name change makes fresh identity, a turn back toward life, and a certain original forgetting enabled by a full shift in language" (n.p.). For the immigrants of *Rhapsody in Plain Yellow*, despite their ability to meet the challenges of these shibboleths, the visible fact of their racial difference is inescapable; such a "fresh identity," which linguistic assimilation would seem to offer a way into, remains impossible.

### **"But the Breath Falls Away": Exilic Difficulties of Voicing in *Dictée***

It seems odd to characterize Theresa Cha's *Dictée* as a perfect example of anything, given the text's multi-genre, fragmented aesthetic, as well as the wide range of materials it includes; and yet it is the perfect example of a poetic text for which exophonic writing and endophonic reading are inextricably linked. Though initially the prose text received little critical attention from scholars in Asian American studies

“because a text with so many ‘experimental’ features could not be understood as Asian American in its concerns,” it had become a staple of the Asian American literary canon by the 1990’s, a surprising turn which Timothy Yu argues “...reveals the limits of our dominant paradigms of reading and forces us to return to the wider avant-garde contexts from which both Asian American and experimental writing emerge” (103). In “Asian American Poetry in the First Decade of the 2000s,” Yu includes Cha’s work with that of John Yau, Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, and Myung Mi Kim, grouping them all as “a more experimental strain [of Asian American poetry] focused on fragmentation, linguistic exploration, and cultural hybridity” which became consonant with academic and theoretical models towards the end of the 1990’s and consequently enjoyed more traction then (802).

Whereas *Rhapsody in Plain Yellow* lends itself to the notion of body as musical instrument, versatile enough to bring together various musical forms: “Blues on Yellow (African American musical form), “Blues on Yellow #2”, Chinese folk songs (from the Yuefu), “Summer Sonatina,” “Broken Chord Sequence” set of poems, which contain other musical references “Hospital Interlude,” “Song of the Giant Calabash,” “Hong Kong Fathersong,” “Libations, Song 10”. “Blues on Yellow #3), *Dictée* explores the body as instrument of writing and sounding. Both texts, however, highlight the relationship between generative instrument and the versatility of the forms it produces (*Dictée*’s handwritten personal letters, dictations, historical documents), and like *Rhapsody in Yellow*, *Dictée* straddles several different modes that make categorizing Cha’s work generically a daunting task.

Certainly the fragmented and multimedia/multi-genre of the text, inflected by Cha's work as a performance artist and film maker, conveys a formal sense of difficulty, or "inaccessibility" and "slipperiness" as L. Hyun Yi Kang writes (76). Yet as Kang as herself acknowledges, this seeming "inaccessibility" stems from the text's concern with "the risks and possible pleasures of coming into an authorial voice," a "[tension of writing] between the demands of social comprehensibility in language (communication) and the desire for some adequate representation of the subjective (enunciation)". Though Kang builds her reading around the centrality of "voice" and "enunciation", her interest in these concepts ultimately remains directed more towards the way they factor into representation, rather than their part in a sensory paradigm; nevertheless, my aim in my reading of *Dictée* is not necessarily to achieve more "accessibility" - as I suspect Kang might also be wary of - but to uncover the stakes of the physical materiality of writing and reading speaking as the vehicle through which other difficulties of memory and origin are routed at the heart of this text.

Structurally, *Dictée* is broken down into nine sections, with each section named after one of the nine muses Cha names in a table at the beginning of the text. Though the section "THALIA COMEDY" comes much later in the text, in a way it offers the perfect preface to the text's preoccupations with the sensory mediation of (as well as the sensory mediation through) speech, with its illustration of a woman picking up a ringing telephone. This unnamed woman is presumably the figure of the disease, or female monologue speaker, who is introduced to the reader at the beginning of the text as the speaker of certain abstract passages. What Hsiao writes of the subjectivity in Chin's poems could easily be written of *Dictée* and the anonymous, universalized

figure of the disease who haunts its pages.<sup>9</sup> Here she is figured in the act of listening, which is depicted as a precondition to her (unactualized) speech:

She decides to take the call. Takes it at once. Her voice is as if she holds this receiver for the very first time. This foreign instrument that carries the very sounds to the words. The very words...From when the call is announced to her to the moment she picks up the receiver she does not think. She hears the ringing and the call is announced. She walks to it, picks it up but she has not had the time to think. All had been prepared. All had been rehearsed beforehand. To the pause, over and over in her mind. The brief pause in the beginning before she would say yes.

Cha's description of the would-be speaker who must always be a listener first perfectly embodies the interpellated relationship to the other Avital Ronell portrays in the opening to her *Telephone Book*: (more on this in the listening chapter):

.....And yet, you're saying yes, almost automatically, suddenly, sometimes irreversibly. Your picking it up means the call has come through. It means more: you're its beneficiary, rising to meet its demand, to pay a debt. You don't know who's calling or what you are going to be called upon to do, and still, you are lending your ear, giving something up, receiving an order. (1)

Ronell's use of the present participle reflects the incomplete, ongoing nature of this act; more importantly, it isolates the fact that "picking it up" means that the listener has always already "answered," despite not having said anything yet. The hypothetical "would" remains, reminding readers that the disease's imagining of her own voice remains an unspoken projection: "The voice would reach a crescendo, pause, begin again in a barely audible whisper with either coughing or choking at the throat. Rarely audible. Inaudible. Hardly audible at all. Reduced to a moan, a hum, staccato inhalation, and

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<sup>9</sup> Hsiao writes, "Overflowing and empty, the I is everything but the private self; it carries a "burden of history" that extends beyond personal memory, perhaps past memory itself, but its layers are disrupted by the depth charge of the universal. The act of naming becomes problematic; to universalize means to unname ("I tried to universalize her by not naming her" ["Interview," Bedient 8])—to reduce the particular and historical to pronouns that do not then have an antecedent. If "she" is unnamed, who or what am "I"? (202).

finally a wail” (*Dictée* 139). In “The Performing and the Performed: Performance Writing and Performative Reading”, Robert Sheppard writes of Levinas, “Saying is the call of, the call to, the other, and the fact of the need and obligation to respond to, and become responsible for, the other, in Levinas’ difficult thinking...It is the site and performance of ethics because of the obligation to respond. It is public, yet it doesn’t communicate anything but the desire to communicate...We cannot, as in his everyday example, but not reply (even with silence).” Sheppard applies this Levinasian ethics of “saying” towards a distinction between “the saying” and “the said,” one which in turn helps distinguish between externally voiced (exophonic) reading and endophonic reading while insisting on both kinds of reading as performance. In *Dictée*, the to and fro of address/interpellation, the “call of” and “call to” the other illustrated in the example of the telephone maps onto the reader-text relationship; in a sense to read endophonically is to “pick up,” and the voice which “would” show itself is the unrealized exophonic reading.

It has historically been more difficult to approach silence as a “mode of performative action”; particularly when it comes to political activism. The activism of the 1970’s was rooted in visibility and voice, projected assertions of presence by marginalized and minoritized groups. And yet reimagining the sensory manifestation of agency is central to Cha’s works; in her performance piece, *Aveugle Voix*, she ties a white cloth with “VOIX” stenciled on it around her eyes, wrapping another white cloth stenciled with “AVEUGLE” around her mouth. Though no video footage exists of the performance, Cha can be seen in the process of binding herself with these cloths, unrolling a scroll that reads either “WORDS FAIL ME SANS MOT SANS VOIX

AVEUGLE” or those same words in reverse order, depending on the direction of the scroll. The sensory reversal of aligning “voix” with the eyes and “aveugle” with the mouth is echoed in the inverted syntax of both this scroll and the title. Trinh T. Minh-ha points out the homophonic logic of *Aveugle Voix*, noting that “[it] is not so much the designation and combination of Blind and Voice as the resonance of these words when they are taken in reverse order: *Aveugle Voix*, rather than the usual, grammatically correct, *Voix Aveugle*... The play on *voix* (voice) and *voir* (to see) is all the more significant for without seeing the written letters, *Aveugle Voix* and *(l’) aveugle voit* (the blind sees) sound the same” (46). Cha’s homophonic and syntactical punning draws on the ambiguous, fluid materiality of hearing sound - is it “voice” or “seeing”? - as a way of subverting the authoritative lexical specificity of writing.

Kang writes:

The language of *Dictée* is multiple and ever-shifting - words and voices are decentered, recalled from the margins, exclusive, unclaimed, indecipherable and then viscerally clear. To reach towards that difficult but necessary and then again fleeting goal of a personally and collectively meaningful language, Cha has constructed her book as *a process* of mutually active collaboration. If language would always already be implicated, predetermined and expectant for both reader and writer, Cha’s strategy is to explicitly posit an active relationship between writer and reader as central to the challenging of the authorizing and alienating structures of language and literary transmission. (78)

What Kang stops just short of pointing out, however, and what my reading of Cha seeks to extend from her argument, is that this “active relationship” is routed specifically through the unactualized aural demands the text makes on the reader in the process of reading that undermine, complicate, and add to Cha’s writing in such a way that the phonotextual experience mirrors different facets of the experience of exophonic identity/the exile.

In her analysis of corporeality and signification in *Dictée*, Elisabeth Frost suggests that

...*Dictée* raises the possibility of a 'bothness' of word and flesh that might negotiate between the empirical body and the constructed body, transparency and opacity, original and translation. The tongue becomes a figure for such a border zone: forger of words, organ at the boundary of the body and the symbolic, the tongue retains a stubborn corporeality (more pronounced, for example, than that of eyes, figured as transcendent 'soul'). (189)

To Frost's list I would add the suggestion that in reading *Dictée* the subvocalizing tongue and internal ear is also operative as border zone at the most fundamental level between reader and writing. Stewart's concept of "transegmental drift", for instance, in which gaps between words or segments, lexical spacings can be heard/misheard such that new words or phrases arise on "accident", is exemplified by the fluidity of meaning that is *Dictée's* aural answer to the authority of the determinate grapheme. In the following passage, the diseuse's description of a husband-figure plays with this double sounding: "A stranger. Stranger to her. The one that she should espouse. Decided for her. Now she would be long to him" (*Dictée* 110). In addition to the twinned play of "stranger" the noun and "stranger" the adjective, the subtle but meaningful space breaking "be long" transforms this relation of intimacy and/or possession into a relation of distance and estrangement.

Similarly, if one were to convert the names of the punctuation in the text's opening dictation back, the text would look something like this: "It was the first day. She had come from a far. tonight at dinner, the families would ask, "How was the first day?" at least to say the least of it possible, the answer would be "there is but one thing. There is someone. From a far." (The capitalization is interesting because occasionally it lines up



with the punctuation's demarcation between sentences while at other points in the passage it doesn't.) Cha's splitting of "afar" - "She had come from a far period" and "There is someone period From a far period" - creates the expectation of naming of place or origin, an expectation that is deferred and disturbed by the inclusion of naming the punctuation meant to separate the words ("period").] What sutures epic and lyric together in *Dictée* is that language serves as the measure of distance from time and place: "Dear Mother, 4. 19. Four Nineteen, April 19th, eighteen years later. Nothing has changed, we are at a standstill. I speak in another tongue now, a second tongue a foreign tongue (80)." "I am here for the first time in eighteen years, Mother. We left here in this memory still fresh, still new. I speak another tongue, a second tongue. This is how distant I am. From then. From that time." (85) The phrase "A Far", then, takes on the quality of a place that is distant from everywhere and long-ago from any time, a vague foreignness that escapes the specifications of "What nationality/or what kindred and relation/what blood relation/what blood ties of blood/what ancestry/ what race generation/what house clan tribe stock strain/what lineage extraction/what breed sect gender denomination caste/what stray ejection misplaced" (20). It is precisely the mythic place and past of Epic that is this place of "a far" for the disease, in contrast to the historical specificity of the April Revolution and the fragmented narratives of personal memories.

Finally, in the section "ERATO LOVE POETRY," Cha's use of transegmental drift ("her body all the time de composes/eclipses to be come yours") sets up a dichotomy between death/the reversal or undoing of writing (de composes) and orgasm/possession (the homonym of "come"/"cum" as this erotic death interrupting the

romantic phrase “be yours”, one which depicts both dyads as incomplete processes (118).

This evokes a kind of generative eco-eroticism that for Cha is tied to writing:

“Composition of the body, taking into consideration from conception, the soil, seed, amount of light and water necessary, the genealogy” (58).

Cha’s phonotextual play on the theme of aural interruptions and disruptions of the written continues to unfold in the structure of the text. Appropriately enough for the title *Dictée*, the first numbered page of the text (after the first few pages, which contain a dedication “To my mother to my father,” a quote from Sappho, and a list of the Nine Muses that replaces Euterpe with Elitere<sup>10</sup>) is a record of the same dictation in both French and English. Rather than notating the punctuation of the dictation with their appropriate symbols, these dictations translate the names of the punctuation marks and include them written out alongside the text of the “actual” dictation, marking the “original” spoken medium of the phantom voice dictating, as if the one notating did not understand either the nature of a dictation or what the dictation was saying (If there is a kind of punctuation or lexical separation here it is instead in the extended spaces which bookend the names of punctuation marks.)

Not only does the act of dictation necessitate that the speaker and writer are not the same person, it also entails a particular power dynamic between them, as evidenced by the imperative moods of “open paragraph” and “close quotation marks”. (The hierarchical dynamic between between speech and writing becomes a way of embodying

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<sup>10</sup> In *Feminist Measures: Soundings in Poetry and Theory*, Shelley Sunn Wong speculates on the significance of Cha’s substitution. She writes, “The installation of Elite (an invented name deriving from neither Greek nor Latin) signals the text’s intention to disorganize the construction of notions of the common, constructions that make possible totalizing identifications on the basis of seemingly definitive categories such as *woman*, *American*, or *writer*... With its resonant play on *elite* and *literary*, Elite emerges to critique the privileged place of epic as high literature” (51).

and linking the trauma imposed by different authoritative dichotomies throughout the rest of the text: between Catholic nun as teacher and student, husband and wife, the state and civilians in revolt).

These dictations in particular deal with this question of translation, both in between the sonic medium of the voice/writing (for instance, the accidental “transliteration” of punctuation marks in the dictation) and in between languages. In fact, translation and dictation are inextricably intertwined in *Dictée*’s dictations. The instructions are in French: “Ecrivez en francais.” “Traduire e francais” “Completez les phrases suivantes:” The translation exercises in *Dictée* masquerade as utilitarian language (language meant to serve simply as material for the practice of translation), but the repeated iterations of “speak” in the guise of conjugating verb forms inevitably conveys a narrative that suggests some power dynamic: “I want you to speak.” “I wanted him to speak.” “I shall want you to speak.” “Are you afraid he will speak?” “Were you afraid they would speak?” Additionally, *Dictée*’s figuring of the relationship between English and French also manifests as homophonic punning across languages - for instance, the French “disease,” or female speaker, paired with the English “disuse” (“*Dead words. Dead tongue. From disuse. Buried in/Time’s memory. Unemployed. Unspoken. History./Past. Let the one who is disease, one who is mother/who waits nine days and nine nights be found*”) (133).

This pairing of French and English happens again halfway through the text as a poem in the “URANIA        ASTRONOMY” section. Park reads the poem alongside Baudelaire’s “Le Cygne” “as a recollection of Baudelaire’s meditation on exile, but in her hands the poem has remembered the swan’s cry for rain as rain itself” (139). Park points

out through the homophonic punning of “cygne” and “signe” in French and “pidgeon” ’s evoked but unnamed homonym “pidgin” in English that “...broken English creates a flexibility within the language which had previously been lost in the movement between French and English” (141). *Dictée* (sometimes seamlessly, sometimes with a violent abruptness) navigates between French, English and Korean/Chinese, evoking Perloff’s definition of exophonic writing as writing in a language other than one’s own - even as it calls the very idea of “one’s own language” into question in several ways. Is the “own” language of the disease French/English/Korean? Is one’s own language lexical, pictorial, sonic?

At the same time, *Dictée* is a spin on the exophonic and endophonic reading, in that it carries with the notion of sound becoming “outside” and voiced, but situates itself at the impossible threshold of sound-within attempting to become actualized-without, the saying about to become the said. Park notes that “...Cha complicates even the possibility of speech for the exile. Indeed, the whole of the text demonstrates that speaking is itself the most difficult aspect of the exilic condition” (139). Hsiao writes of the lost language of the emigre in Chin’s “How I Got That Name”: “The poet as seer and maker is only half the story: what loss or distance moves the self to compensatory utterance? For the writer as migrant, the self is defined by its distance from home, from the impossibility of returning intact or the same, perhaps even divided from the desire to return at all” (202). This notion of “compensatory utterance” in response to a condition of permanent displacement through immigration could easily also apply to the exile of *Dictée*. Passages such as the following demonstrate how the text takes the alienation of the exophonic even further by aligning the unactualized sound of endophonic reading with

the inexpressible trauma that is the absolute asymptote of exophonic writing, suggesting that perhaps one can be made a stranger to all language through trauma, that at times words fail to convey the “suffering” woven in the text’s haunting glimpses of personal and national memory:

*“Inside is the pain of speech the pain to say. Larger still. Greater than is the pain not to say. To not say. Says nothing against the pain to speak. Must break. Must void”* (3).

She mimicks the speaking. That might resemble speech. (Anything at all.) Bared noise, groan, bits torn from words. Since she hesitates to measure the accuracy, she resorts to mimicking gestures with the mouth. The entire lower lip would lift upwards then sink back to its original place. She would then gather both lips and protrude them in a pout taking in the breath that might utter some thing. (One thing. Just one.) But the breath falls away. (3)

The focus here is on the great difficulty of the physical act of speaking, not of thinking of what to say (“Anything at all.”). The difficulty (really, the impossibility) of actualizing speech for the disease evokes Hong’s observation that for poets like Celan and Taggart, “the disassociation of voice from language is not just a philosophical choice. It is also political. The voice is not always a freeing form of self-expression. It can prove to be a difficult transaction, a construction of fragments, as much conflicted demurral as actual communication, as much about what is unspeakable as about what is speakable” (n.p.). Despite the juxtaposition of the dictations’ fluid lack of punctuation and the extremely broken and choppy description of the disease’s attempts to speak, this is a resonance shared by both passages. Indeed, the messianic potentiality embodied by this “one thing” (similar) infuses the whole text with the anticipation of a completion, but the completion

is always deferred - always “the breath falls away” at the threshold of saying crossing into the said. Shelley Sunn Wong points out that Sappho frames the text as a potential tenth muse (52); the text toys throughout with the possibility of nine becoming ten (the Nine Muses, nine concentric circles of hell, nine days of Demeter waiting for Persephone to return from Hades, the nine days of the Eleusinian Mysteries, the Daoist chart of numerical and cosmological pairings) 154, 173, 175.) Indeed, the whole text is infused with the yearning for yet deferral of completion/arrival, the saying caught in the process of becoming the said.

Home, epic, and the arrival of the said is aligned with this mythic place of Epic.<sup>11</sup> And yet, as Kang observes, the fact that the possibility of a home for the disease in an epic history is aligned with a “said” that is never realized does not necessarily entail a failure of agency: “The impulse of expression and the efforts of representation need not be crippled by the alienating despair of repeated failures. Rather, these near misses can provoke creative and more effective strategies for counter-hegemonic enunciation” (97). Though I disagree that the text aims to actualize any kind of “counter-hegemonic enunciation,” I agree with Kang’s reading that the disease’s repeated efforts to speak need not be read as failure - only where Kang sees success as eventual enunciation and strategization, I argue that it is precisely the text’s hovering at the moment of the enunciation which is always about to arrive that makes the text’s figuring of the relationship between speech and text a way of “[awakening] a more responsive and

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<sup>11</sup> Park notes: “Further, if the cry is no longer distinguishable from the rain or a dream, I would like to suggest that this is a nuanced version of the ‘*désir sans trêve*’ of the exile: she realizes that the idea of home is a dream, a fantasy, and a running, constant sound like rain” (*Apparitions* 139).

responsible audience...[and making] the reader aware of our bodily and ideological presence and distance in relation to the text before us” (92).

## **Conclusion**

Reading Chin and Cha’s engagement with the physical mechanisms of speaking in their poems reveals nuances of meaning that would otherwise remain inaccessible. Where *Rhapsody in Plain Yellow* concerns itself more explicitly with the difference of the immigrant and with responding to the implications of modernist Orientalism for Asian American poetry, *Dictée* concerns itself more with the loss of the exile’s language and place. Nonetheless, both texts frustrate readers’ ability to perform exophonic readings of their texts in a straightforward fashion by drawing on phonotextual qualities that fall outside the realm of exophonic reading. For *Rhapsody in Plain Yellow*, these qualities manifest themselves in the form of transegmental drift, homophonic punning, transliteration, typographical spacing, use of unpronounceable punctuation, and written characters from other languages. *Dictée* draws on many of these techniques as well, particularly with regard to the potentiality of breath, transegmental drift, and incorporates multiple genres (for instance, how would one read the photographs of Yu Guan Soon or of the narrator’s mother out loud? or charts of the human body?) and partially through its incorporation of English, French, Korean, and Chinese characters (although its differentiation between Chinese characters (54, 55, 154) and Chinese pinyin (173) seems to place Chinese characters in the category of maps/charts etc) (24).

Both *Dictée* and *Rhapsody in Plain Yellow*, while loosely tied to autobiographical experience, also defy the constraints of the label “lyric poetry”. Their shared thematic preoccupations involve attempts to recuperate maternal histories, histories which bear the

weighty marks of political and gendered systems of oppression, and are poignantly infused with personal loss and the violent memories of trauma. Without a study of their formal commitments to sonic experimentation, their works might be simply read within the limits of preexisting generic constraints, in the case of Chin's frequent categorization within lyric testimony, or in Cha's case, without a sense of the way sound coheres the themes of her work.



CHAPTER 2 – SOUNDING ANIMAL AND CYBORG OTHERS: RACE AND ALTERNATE ALTERITIES IN CATHY PARK HONG’S *TRANSLATING MO’UM* AND JOHN YAU’S *ING GRISH, MY SYMPTOMS* AND *BORROWED LOVE POEMS*

This chapter traces how the poems of Cathy Park Hong and John Yau experiment with sound as a means of critiquing the humanness which is only conferred on the racialized other through the normative, dominant language of cultural assimilation. I demonstrate how voice - metaphorized as a means for political activism – gave the field of Asian American poetry its coalitional start even as its association with the cohesive identity of the lyric “I” fell out of consonance with postmodern theoretical models of subjectivity. For this reason, the recuperation of voice as more than metaphor continues to matter tremendously for Asian American poetry. This recuperation, however, is also particularly significant because the sonic conditions of voice’s manifestation within and apart from language also act as a limit case of the human. I argue that it is the question of humanness, as it is confirmed or negated through the way voice functions in relation to language, that underpins these poets’ depictions of racial alterity.

Reading Cathy Park Hong’s poems alongside those of John Yau reveals a great deal of shared ground in terms of their formal investments and political commitments. Hong, whose three collections of poetry – *Translating Mo’um*, *Dance Dance Revolution*, and *Engine Empire* – were all published in the last two decades, has not received nearly as much critical attention as John Yau has, who has been publishing since the 1970’s and is known for an extensive bibliography that includes *Paradiso Diaspora*, *Ing Grish*, *Borrowed Love Poems*, *Forbiddn Entries*, *Edificio Sayonara*, and most recently *Future Adventures in Monochrome*, in addition to his art criticism. Nonetheless, a careful reading of their work together – as I will show – draws out their shared interests in

experimenting with the literal, guttural sounding of voice in primitivist and Orientalist tropes, in keeping with their contention that the subject position of the cannot be occluded and their commitments to recuperating voice from being deployed metaphorically or autobiographically as a vehicle for representation.

Both poets have also contributed to the conversation around each others' work. Yau, who writes in a piece called "At Play in the Fields of Language" on Hong's body of poetry, analogizes Hong's unique deformative and transformative approach towards English to the figure of "an inflicted and vulnerable body undergoing rapid change...[parts of which] are blossoming while other parts are dying", a comparison invoking the Bahktinian grotesque that I will take up and explore further in my close reading of *Translating Mo'um*. Citing her interests in marginalized and alternative forms of language like pidgin and dialect, which span all three of her published works, Yau situates Hong's poems at the juncture of a rapidly deteriorating opposition between the voice of the "lyric self" and normative expectations of how that voice ought to register within the poem:

The argument between lyric poetry (that is poetry that arises from the poet's voice (the "I") or what Robert Grenier characterized as "SPEECH") and text (the primacy of the written or printed word) is becoming an increasingly obsolete opposition. Globalism and immigration (or migration) – in the form of pidgin, mispronunciation, graffiti, and encoded signs – have overrun the various geographical boundaries as well as upended the rules defining areas of fixed vocabulary, grammar and spelling.

Likewise, as Hong points out, Yau's poetry does not deal in simple stable oppositions, but situates itself at the ever-shifting delination between what appears to be a given and what is unexpected. Yau's use of sound responds to a history of American Orientalism, to a particular mode of visually representing the Asiatic other, one that plays off fears and

tropes of the other as alternately “inscrutable” menace or bumbling subservient. *The Genghis Chan: Private Eye* series, which take on Pound’s claims about the ideogram, as well as his Peter Lorre and Boris Karloff poems, are a few examples of the cutting wit of his parody in response to these representations.

In “Two Poems by John Yau,” Hong describes the work of Yau’s “Opinion Sonnet” poems as

... provocative and utterly disconcerting, satirizing racist typologies that we unconsciously absorb into our psyche. The voice in these sonnets opines that 'the Chinaman is indistinguishable, mute, a faceless assembler, 'a curious prop' in the 'silver screen.' But while the speaker is presented as some authoritative anthropologist, his English reads like badly translated Berlitz: the narration is absurdly flat-footed and the tone feels as bland as clip art, highlighting the horrifying banality of these stereotypes. These poems will get under your skin.

As Hong points out, Yau’s poems juxtapose the matter-of-fact specificity of quotidian language, which he aligns with conventions of the lyric voice, with these nonchalantly wild and evocative turns of familiar phrases and forms, which defamiliarize both normative understandings of voice as well as stereotypical presuppositions about identity.

Through a close listening of these poets’ work which spans several texts – Hong’s *Translating Mo’um* and her more recent *Dance Dance Revolution*, as well as Yau’s *Borrowed Love Poems* and *Ing Grish* - I explore the conditions of language under - or through - which a voice registers as exclusively human. On the one hand, these poems index a kind of primitivism wherein grotesque bodies and their screams, mutters, and the seemingly non-lexical soundings of other languages signal an animalistic abjectness aligned with the racialized immigrant’s failure to communicate within a normalized English. This animalistic manifestation of the grotesque is tied to fears within “yellow

peril” discourse about unbridled sexuality and savageness. On the other end of the spectrum, highly structured poetic forms suggest a different kind of mechanical relationship to language, an unreasoning utterance that is divorced from the expressions of an authorial self. These other machine-like poems, their meaning seemingly divested of authorial intent, evoke techno-Orientalist tropes of the cyborg/automaton/piece-meal body.

What can the kinds of formal interventions made by these contemporary Asian American experimental poets reveal about the sonic phenomenon of voice as it pushes at the edges of language and its historical relationship to bodily representations of Asian American alterity? In *America's Asia*, Colleen Lye asks, “How is the unrepresentable to be visualized?” (20). This question not only emphasizes the privileging of sight as the primary medium through which difference is reified, but in turn begs another question for my dissertation: “How is the unrepresentable to be sounded?” Can listening to the way certain kinds of sounds index normative humanness and differentiate it from the otherwise lead to new readings of alterity?

This question is one that Cathy Park Hong and John Yau explore in their poetry through the sonically attuned formal experimentation which accompanies their figuring of the grotesque body and its animal and cyborg-like manifestations. I argue that the unrepresentable figure of the Asiatic sounds itself in the grotesque and (only seemingly) contradictory Orientalist tropes of the animal and the cyborg, and that these tropes are co-opted by these Asian American poets as a means of critiquing the impossible fantasy of the postracial.

## Voice as Metaphor, Identity, and the Avant-Garde

One needs only to turn to the articles Yau and Hong have written addressing the precarious relation between poetry that talks about identity and the formal concerns of the literary avant-garde to see that these poets soundly reject the fantasy of post-racial formations within poetics. In his article for *Boston Review*, "'Purity' and the 'Avant-Garde'", Yau makes his contempt for these titularly-cited formations explicit:

I am sick of the term "avant-garde," a European invention that has been presided over and refined by white critics since the French banker, mathematician, and social reformer Olinde Rodrigues first used the term in 1825. Contemporary discussions about the artistic avant-garde seldom address race because the term has come to be a force for maintaining pedigree, establishing lineage and bloodlines—bloodlines largely presided over by supervisors and administrators: those individuals who control access to the descriptor "avant-garde," and determine the reception of poetic works through publication, reviewing, and public readings...Most recently, the ideal of avant-garde poetry has become tangled up with another term: post-identity writing.

Citing Conceptual poet Kenneth Goldsmith's remark that "'Uncreative writing is a postidentity literature,' Yau points out that this dismissal of race does not negate the struggles that writers of color have faced in their marginalization by a mostly white avant-garde, and in fact only further exemplifies the racism that enables this marginalization to take place.

Dorothy Wang puts pressure on the tendency to read the work of more explicitly experimental poets' work like Yau, who do not thematize or provide proof of ethnicity, as either playing "the race card" at the poet's convenience or somehow "post-race," "a retreat to the idea of a universal subject" which Wang rejects (*Thinking its Presence* 280). Indeed, for Wang, the questions of how linguistic mastery or credibility is signaled is intimately related to notions of aesthetic "difficulty," particularly as it intersects with

classifications of “mainstream” or “avant-garde.” Yau’s use of parody as well as the vexing of lyric subjectivity in his Genghis Chan poems makes, for Wang, the “erasure of the subject [register] as a generic postmodern move.” While I contend that it is not Yau’s erasure of the subject that registers as “postmodern” but his opting out of metaphorical, established conventions of the “lyric voice” (in fact, as I suggest through my readings, Yau does not erase the racialized subject at all), the alignment of his formal experimentation with an American and European avant-garde tradition, as Wang notes, often leaves little room for discussing how form relates to the politics of “ethnic self-identification” (181).

Cathy Park Hong has similarly critical words for this post-racial and post-identitarian approach which fails to acknowledge its problematic erasure of otherness. In an article for the poetry journal *Lana Turner* titled “Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant-Garde,” Hong points out that the seeming radicalness of “the specious belief that renouncing subject and voice is anti-authoritarian” is actually “clueless [to the fact] that the disenfranchised need such bourgeois niceties like voice to alter conditions forged in history”.

Hong’s description of voice as a “bourgeois nicety” accomplishes two things. It recuperates the precarious stakes of the concept of “voice,” pointing out that dismissing the “voice” of the subject itself is a privileged move that dismisses the need for strategies to contend with these “conditions [of racism] forged in history.” At the same time, however, Hong’s description also raises the problem of the terms of “voice” within poetry - that it is perceived as theoretically unfashionable because of its association with

autobiographical narrative in an individual's recognizable style – and points towards the possibility of rethinking it.

Within criticism, sonic processes like listening or speaking (and even musical and instrumental performance) become metaphorized and abstracted in relation to reading and writing all too easily.<sup>12</sup> A metaphorical sense of voice, conscripted for the purposes of political representation, underlines at least part of the problem of the “ethnic/aesthetic divide”.<sup>13</sup>

Notions of “voice” as a metaphorical vehicle for representing identity have consonances with the political appeal Joseph Jeon ascribes to visibility in *Racial Things*, *Racial Forms* when he notes that “In the wake of the civil rights movement, axiomatic in

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<sup>12</sup> Take, for instance, Lesley Wheeler's acknowledgements to *Voicing American Poetry*, in which she thanks several colleagues that “sang feminist back-up through years of composition” and another colleague “whose fine ear helped me regulate my pitch,” finally concluding, “I owe my whole orchestra and its first tuning to the wonderfully clashing accents” of other colleagues (viii-x). It's clear that Wheeler isn't referring to an actual orchestra, nor to any actual choral performance, and that she's using these paradigms of sounding as metaphors for the process of writing. This tendency also happens in criticism, particularly with regard to voice; Wheeler herself distinguishes between “textual voice,” which she uses to describe “voice as a metaphor employed by poets and critics in and about works in print,” and “voiced texts,” which include “poems recited, read aloud, performed by authors, actors, students, and others” (1-2). Wheeler is aware of the differences between the metaphorical and the literal, even as she leans towards the metaphorical in her writing. This is a clear (though minor) example of the kind of problems metaphorizing sound has raised for the study of poetry, and especially for the study of Asian American poetry.

<sup>13</sup> The phrase is coined by Christina Mar in an essay in *Literary Gestures: The Aesthetic in Asian American Writing* – and indeed the title of the collection attests to a need to point out where the “aesthetic” might be in “Asian American” writing and a sense that it needs to be “proved” that the two are compatible (. Joseph Jeon, Timothy Yu, and Dorothy Wang all engage with this problem (namely, the sense that less legibly experimental Asian American poetry is read for “content” – ethnic signifiers, narratives of experiences of racialization – while other kinds of poetry are read for “formal innovation” – though Wang is critical of the way “many white experimental poets and poetry critics, while embracing Yau's style, tend to ignore poems such as those in the Genghis Chan series” because of subject matter that deals with racialization (232)). Yu notes that “Asian American writers needed to draw on a wide range of artifices to construct a writing that was somehow distinctively Asian American” (*Race and the Avant-Garde* 80), while Wang's advocates for a reading of “the work of minority poets... with respect and full attention to its formal properties and when the work of ‘racially unmarked’ poets will be read with an eye to its social and ideological formations and contexts,” an inversion that she hopes will balance out the lopsided tendencies of both groups (305).

contemporary American racial politics was the belief that greater visibility yielded greater political power” (xxxix). This coalitional sense of voice comes through in Lawson Fusao Inada’s description in the section “Performance” from *Legends from Camp*: “The Sixties hit with a flash. Energy. Consciousness. Awareness. Empowerment and access. Groups grouped, movements moved. Flourished, nourished. Voices voiced.” (147).

The earlier work of Asian American poets, such as Li-Young Lee, in which “voice” emits from the self of a lyric “I,” fits into what Steven Yao calls “lyric testimony,” the “existing hegemonic mode in the production of Asian American verse” (*Foreign Accents* 14). In “lyric testimony,” according to Yao, “. . .the minority subject typically relates events from a personalized history that exemplify racial/ethnic identity as a traumatic condition of either problematic difference from mainstream society or debilitating cultural loss that necessitates an act of recuperation, usually undertaken by means of the poem itself” (14).

The straightforward nature of the narratives that these events are commonly conveyed through, as well as the simplistic autobiographical subjectivity that often underwrites these narratives, eventually spurred a poetic turn away towards more fragmented modes of expression that did not correlate so closely with first-person experiences of identity. Yet unlike their white counterparts, formally experimental Asian American poets like Yau and Hong are not able to eschew the position of a “self.” Hong muses that this inability to ignore the fact of race may be

...why historically the minority poets’ entrance into the avant-garde’s arcane little clubs has so often been occluded. We can never laugh it off, take it all in as one sick joke, and truly escape the taint of subjectivity and history. But even in their best efforts in erasure, in complete transcription, in total paratactic scrambling, there is always a subject—and beyond that, the specter of the author’s visage—and that specter is never, no matter how vigorous the erasure, raceless. (“Delusions of Whiteness”)



Yau describes the dilemma that a post-identitarian notion of self poses for the minoritized subject when he writes:

I do not believe in the lyric I – the single modulating voice that names itself and others in an easily consumable narrative – writing in a language that is transparent, a window overlooking a world we all have in common... At the same time, I do not subscribe to the death of the author, the postmodern belief that there is no self writing. That seems another way to silence the Other, to keep them from speaking and writing. I believe there is a self made up of many selves, incomplete and fragmented. None of them knows the whole story, not even the one who is speaking, the one who is in this sentence. I – the I writes – will not be spoken for.” (“Between the Forest and the Trees” 40)

Despite or because of their inability to deny the position of the subject, poets like Yau and Hong have in fact found inventive sonic ways of foregrounding the experience of being racialized subjects, particularly with regard to language, through their recuperation of “voice” from metaphor. I suggest that equating voice with literary style - or using it metaphorically in any other sense - dilutes the critical potential it has to shift practices of close reading to more formally attuned practices of close listening, a move which would afford a more balanced discussion of experimentation without occluding the significance of identity in the works of minority writers. Essentially, I argue, reading “voice” in this metaphorical sense as a strategy of political representation positions the work of Asian American poets on the “ethnic” side and can occlude the concurrent “aesthetic” innovative/experimental engagement with sound, often through formal techniques that have to do with the very mechanics of voice entering into language, particularly with regard to breath and enunciation. A return to the physical mechanics of voicing as a paradigm of sound, and to the physical experience of sounding and listening,

I hope, might recuperate other sonic aspects of voice that can be politically efficacious without bearing the burden of representation of “voice-as-metaphor.”

### **Racial Alterity and The Language-less Abjection of Animals**

In order to see how Hong and Yau’s poems do the work of recovering literal qualities of “voice” as a sonic phenomenon, it is necessary to explore the conditions under which a voice registers as “human”. The connections between the primitivist thinking of the 20th century, a history of gendered and racialized violence and the animalistic connotations of the voice divested of language, can be silhouetted by turning to two screams, one from Fred Moten’s *In the Break*, the other from an Orientalist cinematic tradition. The discourse on objectification and speech in the former, I suggest, will help us read the latter and hear it doubly as both the racist narrative resolution of the problem of the “yellow peril” and a cry that redoubles its own speechlessness as a mode of resistance and critique.

*In the Break*, a study of the relationship between the sounds of a black avant-garde aesthetic tradition and the politics of 1950’s black nationalism, begins with Moten’s inquiry into Frederick Douglass’s recounting of his enslaved Aunt Hester’s scream upon being beaten by her master. Moten points out a hole in Marx’s claim that “...the truth about the value of the commodity is tied precisely to the impossibility of its speaking, for if the commodity could speak it would have intrinsic value, it would be infused with a certain spirit...”, arguing that Marx’s theory of exchange-value is founded on his belief that the commodity does not and cannot speak, a condition which assumes the commodity to be an inanimate object (9). This oversight further emphasizes the treatment of objectified, enslaved black bodies as such objects without agency. Moten

reads Aunt Hester's scream as a critical moment in which the object does something an object is not supposed to do: the object objects.<sup>14</sup>

"Aiiieeee", on the other hand, was the common cry of Asian actors as their characters died in movies, a nonsensical screech that came to signify the inevitable riddance of the Asiatic figure in Hollywood (but also other cultural) narratives of the time. Kent Ono's reading of the 1899 cartoon "The Yellow Terror in All His Glory," which depicts a crazed Chinese man wearing a queue and straddling the body of a white woman he had just raped and killed, shows how the gendered threat of miscegenation ultimately necessitated the narrative death of the Asian American male.

Here, yellow peril, embodied in the figure of the Chinese man, who phallically wields a smoking gun and simultaneously sports a lengthy, curvy, fraying queue (which along with his apparel and distorted facial features demonstrates his absolute alterity, represents a mortal threat to white women, and thus to all she represents for the nation. Absent in the image is a figure of a white male, ostensibly the reader to whom the image is directed and from whom compensatory action is sought, and the Asian or Asian American woman, a character apparently not relevant to a narrative of an alien, masculine threat to the nation. To complete the reasoning of the image, in order to protect white women and the nation from further trespass and violation from animalistic and violent Chinese aggression, white men must act and potentially eliminate the lawless Chinese aggressor. (29-30)

In particular, "Aiiieeee!" coincides with the death of the Asiatic figure (particularly but not always a male one), a crucial element of film narratives which either sensorially

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<sup>14</sup> This is not to say that the scream cannot be generative; in fact, it is generative by the simple fact that it is an affective response to an unspeakable violence. Moten reads this scream as an integral part in the African American sonic avant-garde tradition that has been reappropriated through performance, linking it to the jazz scream of Abbey Lincoln. He argues that "The speaking commodity thus cuts Marx; but the shrieking commodity cuts Saussure, thereby cutting Marx doubly: this by way of an irruption of phonic substance that cuts and augments meaning with a phonographic, rematerializing inscription" (13-14).

amplified the dangerous sexuality of the Asiatic figure or reassured viewers by disposing of him or her altogether.

In attempt to reappropriate the expression, CARP adopted it as the title for their 1974 anthology of Asian American literature, one which indexed the various concerns and attendant problems of this emerging political activism.<sup>15</sup> Specifically because of these historical connotations carried by “Aiiieeeee!”, the group called the Combined Asian Resources Project (CARP) felt that it could be redeployed as a rallying cry for solidarity (albeit a solidarity that remained narrowly defined):

Chinese and Japanese Americans, American-born and -raised, who got their China and Japan from the radio, off the silver screen, from television, out of comic books, from the pushers of white American tulle that pictured the yellow man as something that when wounded, sad, or angry, or wondering, whined, shouted, or screamed, ‘Aiiieeeee!’ Asian America, so long ignored and forcibly excluded from creative participation in American culture, is wounded, sad, angry, swearing, and wondering, and this is his AIIIEEEEE!!!! It is more than a whine, shout, or scream. It is fifty years of our whole voice. (xi)

In reading Marilyn Chin’s poem “That Half is Already Gone,” Irene Hsiao ties this cry to the sounds of the Chinese characters for love and distress (“ai”) and the lyric “I” via Chin’s punning sonic homophony. Hsiao identifies a kind of sonic excess in the cry, noting that

“Aiiieeeee!” is overwritten: it is more vowels than can be sonically depicted; its line of increasing vowels makes up for the long silence of its contributing voices by being hypervisible but unreadable, alien, and wrong. “Aiiieeeee!” has no

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<sup>15</sup> The collection, curated by authors like Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong, had a lasting effect in defining the field for decades to come, both in rejecting particular stereotypes of the period but also in emphasizing their authors’ ideas of cultural “authenticity”. As the first of its kind, it was tasked with the challenge of being the first to respond through a selection of literature to the marginalization of Asian Americans, and as the following decades would show, such a response was not without its criticisms (particularly in objection to the editors’ critiquing of “real” or “fake” Asian American writing and their masculinist stance regarding the work of female authors like Maxine Hong Kingston). Despite the contentious wake of this anthology, however, the authors’ decision to title this text “Aiiieeeee!” I argue, still remains a generative one for my discussion here of the scream.

pretensions toward translatability; it is before and beyond its originating tongues, and its primitive and hyperbolic expressivity underscores its fulfillment of a specific market demand. (190)

Hsiao's reading of "Aiiieeeee" is not only an analysis of the cry's function within its specific historical moment it but an inquiry into the incommensurability between the cry and its modes of representation. Her reading implicitly analogizes the sound of "Aiiieeeee!" and racial difference, an analogy which reveals that there are politics to the way the relationship between speech and writing is figured, not least because of a history of modernist linguistic appropriation<sup>16</sup>.

There are some key differences between the scream of "Aiiieeeee!" and Aunt Hester's scream. The scream of "Aiiieeeee!" is a diegetic canned response, one whose pathos is not necessarily the cry itself but in its narrative predictability and its reinforcement of racial othering through performance, whereas Aunt Hester's scream is the record of a literal sounding of violent trauma.

What these screams have in common, however, is that they link a history of primitivist othering to the animalization of the voice in the pain of either subordination or elimination. What these screams also have in common is the way that they have been critically repurposed as a way of interrogating the exclusive conditions of language that qualify a voice as human. In both instances of the scream, the object fails to specify the terms of its objection in speech, remaining at the level of the primal scream. This failure

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<sup>16</sup> Hsiao gestures to the influence of Pound and his contemporaries on the reception of Asian American poets' works when she writes: "While the difficulty of voicing the I is a problem fundamental to the lyric, the tension between ai and I is specific to the border between English and Chinese, an aural answer to the Imagist appropriation of the ideogram. The displacement of metaphor to the border between Chinese and English, like the I existing on the border between Chinese and English, articulates and obscures the ghosted manifestation of the diasporic subject." (189)

to speak has been integral to a whole tradition of philosophical discourse that privileges the human over the animal.

Most famously, Aristotle and Descartes have both invoked the capacity for speech in their theories of the human. Mladen Dolar summarizes Aristotle's distinction between "mere voice" and "speech" as a distinction between a primal expression of feeling and an assertion that acts as the foundation of ethics:

To follow Aristotle, mere voice is what animals and men have in common, it is the animal part of man. It can only indicate pleasure and pain, experience shared by both animals and humans. But speech, *logos*, doesn't merely indicate, it manifests the advantageous (useful) and the harmful, and consequently the just and the unjust, the good and the evil. If one receives a blow, one may well scream, emit a voice to vent one's pain, and that is what a horse or a dog would also do. But at the same time one can say "I have been wronged" and thereby the speech introduces the measure of just and unjust. It doesn't just give outlet to feelings, it introduces a standard of judgement. ("His Master's Voice")

According to this formulation, Aunt Hester and the performing, diegetically-doomed Asiatic figure attain only to a kind of animality through the scream, which at once both attests to the historical brutalization of the other as well as the seemingly limited alterity conferred on language-less voices. Listening critically to these screams reveals how a sensory exploration of voice as the human expression of sonic material through breath - distinct from its more common understandings as metaphor for political agency or the particular literary style of an individual author - plays into discourses on race and humanism.

Pat Gehrke summarizes a whole history of Western philosophical thought when he writes simply that "Humanness itself, the capacity to be a person, was predicated on a prior imposition of language that would give one the capacity to think and to say 'I'"

(*The Ethics and Politics of Speech* 94). Within this discourse, animals and machines are compared on the basis of their inferiority as well as the way their radical dissimilarity to humans entails an otherness that comes with a different set of ethical obligations. Samuel Edger writes in his 1884 text *The Problem of Life Considered* that “When the French philosophers first announced to men their heartless theory, that the speechless animals had no conscious sensation, but were pieces of automatic machinery; the result upon the people was that, regarding the outcry of a tortured animal as having no more meaning than the grating of a door on rusty hinges, the little restraint upon innate cruelty that had existed gave way, and men sank some degrees in the scale of moral nobility” (395). Edger’s analysis links the erasure of a sense of ethical responsibility to an absolute otherness, critiquing the notion that only an identification of the other as human warranted humane treatment.

Like Aristotle, Edger also traces the question of human-identifying criteria, in particular, back to speech (or rather animals’ lack thereof). However, it is Descartes’ *Discourse on Method* that is most well-known for asserting speech as the basic minimum threshold of the human. Descartes, who takes great care to police the sonic proximity between human language and animal noises, notes that “We must not confuse speech with the natural movements which express passions and which can be imitated by machines as well as by animals.” This shared sonic materiality of expressive sounding suggests a kind of hybridity that threatens to radically undermine the privileging of the human by contaminating the language that defines it.

Descartes is quick to disavow the possibility that language exists beyond human comprehension with a kind of circular, anthropocentric logic: that “it [must not] be

thought...that the brutes speak, although we do not understand their language. For if such were the case, since they are endowed with many organs analogous to ours, they could as easily communicate their thoughts to us as to their fellows". The very matter of comparing animal abilities to human abilities, whether in speech or in some other "circumstance that they do better than we", is never one which opens up in his writing. In fact, it depends on the fundamental opposition of "Reason" and "Nature," and on "[proving] that they are destitute of Reason, and that it is Nature which acts in them according to the disposition of their organs."

R.W. Serjeantson reads the repudiation of this possibility as the result of

...[a] basic assumption about the nature of signification that informed discussions of animal expression and communication...that animals express themselves naturally and humans conventionally. This assumption helps explain the almost universal reluctance to attribute human-like language to animals, even speaking animals like parrots. (443)

For Descartes, the fact that animals have the organs for speech but do not instinctively communicate with people in terms of human language - merely sounds of grunts and cries - shows that they do not have "Reason," which functions interchangeably in his formulation with speech as the basic distinguishing trait of the human:

this proves not only that the brutes have less Reason than man, but that they have none at all: for we see that very little is required to enable a person to speak; and since a certain inequality of capacity is observable among animals of the same species, as well as among men, and since some are more capable of being instructed than others, it is incredible that the most perfect ape or parrot of its species, should not in this be equal to the most stupid infant of its kind, or at least to one that was crack-brained, unless the soul of brutes were of a nature wholly different from ours. (n.p.)



## **Techno-Orientalism and The Iteration of the Cyborg**

Where an animal otherness projected onto racialized others casts them as primitive and thereby less human, machinic otherness appears to turn them into a different kind of threatening figure, one which falls on the other end of the spectrum. However, the logic distancing these two seemingly oppositional poles of alterity from normative perceptions of the human remains largely the same. According to Descartes' formulation, as noted above, animals and machines are comparable in their lack of autonomy and reason. Rather than departing from earlier and more primitivist tropes of Orientalism, techno-Orientalism, as Stephen Sohn suggests, is merely another form in which the same dehumanization of the Asiatic other manifests itself:

In traditional Orientalism, the East often is configured as backwards, anti-progressive, and primitive. In this respect, techno-Orientalism might suggest a different conception of the East, except for the fact that the very inhuman qualities projected onto Asian bodies create a dissonance with these alternative temporalities. Even as these Alien/Asians conduct themselves with superb technological efficiency and capitalist expertise, their affectual absence resonates as an undeveloped or, worse still, a retrograde humanism. (8)

Margo Machida, who also traces the historical formulation of Orientalism, adds that “[All] such convictions, moreover, were accompanied by a nation that - unlike Westerners, who were multiform, differentiated and complex individuals - Asians were all of a piece, homogeneous, and therefore fundamentally alike, both in body and mind. (*Unsettled Visions* 59). While the “yellow terror” that characterized anti-Chinese sentiment in the 19th century was founded partially in the fear of a primitivist sexuality attributed to the Asiatic other, another dimension of it was linked to the economic fear

that immigration would undercut American labor.<sup>17</sup> This fear, consonant with descriptions of China and Japan in ethnographic writings on East Asia and buoyed by stories like Jack London's 1906 "The Unparalleled Invasion", led to the trope of being overpowered numerically by the multiplied sameness of Asiatic others en masse.

Colleen Lye describes this economic aspect of the fear of the "yellow peril":

The American identification of the Asiatic as the sign of globalization was not arbitrary; it was rooted in the material history of U.S. relations with East Asia. The antinomies of Asiatic racial form reflect the pattern of a modernizing China and Japan changing places as U.S. friend and enemy. At any given point in this history, their opposite status was necessary to the maintenance of U.S. security...the incipient 'yellow peril' refers to a particular combinatory kind of anticolonial nationalism, in which the union of Japanese technological advance and Chinese numerical mass confronts Western civilization with a potentially unbeatable force. (*America's Asia* 10)

David Morley and Kevin Robins also point out that

[Within] the political and cultural unconscious of the West, Japan has come to exist as the figure of empty and dehumanized technological power. It represents the alienated and dystopian image of capitalist progress. This provokes both resentment and envy. The Japanese are unfeeling aliens; they are cyborgs and replicants. (*Spaces of Identity* 170)

Not only does the lack of affect attributed to the Orient consonant with a depiction of Asiatic others as without morals or ethics (evident in the deceitfulness of Bret Harte's Ah Sin and in depictions of Sax Rohmer's Fu Manchu), I argue that it is also intimately connected to other claims about the aesthetics of the "Far East" that are ultimately about a lack of autonomy and ability to reason for oneself. These claims, which range from the lack of imagination (Percival Lowell's 1888 ethnographic study of China *The Soul of the Far East*) to the lack of authorial intent ascribed to the *I Ching* as a kind of compositional

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<sup>17</sup> As I argued earlier, presenting the Asiatic figure as duplicitous and a sexual threat in Hollywood narratives confirmed white American audiences' anxieties about both the economic and political advance of the "Far East" and fears of miscegenation; conversely, its termination with a single "Aiiieeeee!" within those narratives were a means of allaying those anxieties.

machine by John Cage<sup>18</sup>, redouble Descartes' privileging of the human over the animal onto a moral privileging of the human over the alien or the cyborg.

Eschewing intentionality in aesthetic production has also been a central tenet of other poetic groups in the twentieth century that did not route through the Orient in this way in order to surrender authorial agency, such as Oulipo and Surrealism. In particular, Yau's invocation of these movements recuperates this intent-less writing, and his very repurposing of these highly structured poetic forms evokes the cyborg, figure whose very alterity in its parallel to the racialized other makes its mechanicity of voice meaningful.

In *Voice: Vocal Aesthetics in Digital Arts and Media*, Brandon Labelle observes that

...for sound poetry, the sonic itself, not only language, carries an array of signifying substance according to the phonological features of voicing - that is to say, one does not leave behind signification simply by speaking nonsense, or by turning the mouth into a noise machine. (150)

I'd like to modify LaBelle's claim, suggesting that for the machine/cyborg, it's not that the voice signifies despite linguistic nonsense or "noise," it's that the very iterative form which limits its ability to make "sense" itself indicates its own mechanicity.

LaBelle's distinction between signification and language is crucial. As I have argued, Descartes' distinction between animal and human voices on the basis of speech

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<sup>18</sup> The approach Cage took towards the *I Ching* in composing works like *Music of Changes* involved a question-answer format, designed to engage this technology in a dialogic exchange with a traditional sense of the composer figure. Such an approach privileges the responses of that technology as equal to the level of authorial intent and able to produce a work of art for which the taint of the ego's intentions would be effaced. Cage spends three pages of intricate explanations detailing, first, the exact coin tossing procedures of the *I Ching* for foretelling the future and then the specific correspondences with sound and silence he adapted its results to *Imaginary Landscape No. 4* as well as *Music of Changes*, and yet at the end of the section Cage comments that "A 'mistake' is beside the point, for anything that happens, for once anything happens it authentically is." (*Silence* 59). Cage approaches the *I Ching* as a technology whose origins in an essence of otherness enable it to serve as a ventriloquists' mannequin, a technology whose masking of the intent of his artist-ego is predicated on its escape from his body by way of an Asiatic primitivism.

was so necessary to his categorization of the human because the human voice divested of language and the cries of animals share a fundamental sonic materiality, and the shared continuum of their voices is grotesque. Likewise, LaBelle also recognizes the potential sonic overlap between voices of sensible speech and other voices. Citing Roman Jakobson's work on the different significations of phonemes, LaBelle notes that "Sound poetry attempts to recuperate the embedded phonological sonorous matter inherent to voicing by unmarking from the coding of a social linguistics," a social linguistics in which, I argue, the inability to speak normatively entails an absolute alterity. LaBelle concludes by asking "Might sound poetry's obsession with the voice then signal a further iteration of the (technological) reworking of the body spanning modern history?" (152).

Where the abjectness of animals is related to their inability to speak, the threatening otherness of machines as it manifests in language is not so much an inability to speak, but an inability to control and know what they are saying. The speech of machines is programmable, but because it is programmable, it is restrained and ultimately repetitive. E.T.A. Hoffman's famous 1817 short story "The Sandman" is a cautionary tale that illustrates the consequences of not being able to distinguish between machine and human. The tale follows a university student named Nathaniel haunted by the connection between his father's death and a figure known as the Sandman. As he descends into madness, Nathaniel falls in love with a woman named Olimpia, rejecting his long-time love Clara who he calls a "lifeless automaton" in favor of his idealized love, who in reality is the actual "automaton", a wooden doll constructed by a scheming professor. Within this tale, as in Descartes' definition of the differences between human and animal, the distinguishing criteria that separates a real human from its mechanical imitation is the

ability to produce “original speech.” Olimpia’s speech is limited to “Oh! Oh! Oh!!”, a clue that alerts those around Nathaniel to her true nature but which Nathaniel misses in his self-absorption (*Horror Stories* 25).

Nathaniel’s description of Olimpia’s mechanical responses approximates the sublime, and yet it is the ironic oppositionality of his misreading that makes the story so horrifying: “she doesn’t engage in trivial chit-chat, like other banal minds. She utters few words, certainly; but these few words are true hieroglyphs, disclosing an inner world filled with love and lofty awareness of the spiritual life led in contemplation of the everlasting Beyond” (27). Upon the discovery that Olimpia is in fact an automaton, the story narrates that others began to authenticate the humanness of their lovers by insisting “above all” that they speak:

The story of the automaton had struck deep root into their souls and, in fact, a pernicious mistrust of human figures in general had begun to creep in. Many lovers, to be quite convinced that they were not enamoured of wooden dolls, would request their mistresses to sing and dance a little out of time, to embroider and knit, and play with their lapdogs, while listening to reading, etc., and, above all, not merely to listen, but also sometimes to talk, in such a manner as presupposed actual thought and feeling. (31)

This last phrase - “in such a manner as presupposed actual thought and feeling” - implicitly suggests Olimpia’s repetitive and limited speech is insufficiently indicative of a real subjectivity. In this example, it is only speech that represents the opposite of hers - varied, responsive, and non-repetitive - that instead indicates true personhood.

Originality, as expressed through language, is taken as a sign of agency and intention.

### **The Grotesqueness of Hybrid Animal-Cyborg Forms**

In *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin remarks that “The combination of human and animal traits, is, as we know, one of the most ancient grotesque forms” (316).

Following Bakhtin, I argue that within this schema animal sounds are not grotesque necessarily because they come from non-human bodies, but that they only become grotesque when the sonic material of their cries is heard on a continuum with the human voice in instances in which it is divested of language through trauma or other circumstance. Likewise, the sounds of the alien/cyborg/machine also become grotesque through their mechanical approximations of human language, which only demonstrate their lack of cognition and authorial intentionality. Far from being sublime, Olympia's "speech" is revealed to be grotesque because it imitates - and to the extent that Nathaniel is duped, successfully hybridizes with - the speech of real humans.

In Hong and Yau's works, these animalistic and cyborg-like soundings, aligned with the "grotesque" languages and bodies of racialized others attempting to assimilate - foreground the undeniable difference of the other. Invoking the animal and cyborg as oppositional but related poles of alterity forces readers to confront the "repulsiveness" that racialized others and their hybridized speech are associated with. Within Hong and Yau's poems, this undeniable cross-species otherness functions as a means of conveying the idea that even within the categorization of the human, there is a more exclusive categorization of humanness that is indexed by normative bodies and modes of speech. In the following close readings of selected poems from their work, I show that tropes of the animal-voice (the scream/guttural) and the cyborg-voice (repetitive and completely form-driven) are both different manifestations of the linguistic difficulties imposed upon the racialized subject.

### **Listening to Voice in Hong's *Translating Mo'um***

*Translating Mo'um*, Hong's first collection of poems, explores the grotesque body as a means of capturing the historical reality of the spectacle of "freak" bodies and presenting the reader with a paradigm of race in which race functions as another non-normative characteristic of the body, alongside other "abnormal" physical features. Hong begins the book by signalling her deliberate engagement with the grotesque; the book opens by situating itself between two epigraphs, one from Bakhtin's own description of the grotesque and one from Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's experimental short novel *Dictee*. Bakhtin's claim that "The grotesque body...is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body" emphasizes the fluidity of shifting life forms fundamental to his theories of the carnivalesque (*Rabelais* 317). In Bakhtin's well-known formulation, the grotesque body's exaggeration of corporeal reality, the body in the process of exceeding itself through natural processes, flies in the face of abstract metaphysical ideals of the aesthetic sublime. As a generative site of constant transmutation, the grotesque body functions in *Translating Mo'um* as the embodiment of what happens to language. "Mo'um," the transliterated Korean word for body, is properly Romanized as "Mom," as Hong informs the reader in the notes at the back of the book (74). The text overtly plays off a resonance made possible by the encounter between Korean and English, the blurring of "body" with "mother" as both female maternal figure and native tongue. Consequently, the task of "Translating Mo'um," then, issues the challenge of not only how to translate the difference of these bodies but the even more fundamental question of what sensory lexicon to translate these bodies into (if there is one at all). The grotesque body in Hong's poems literalizes the mutually deforming encounter between one's mother tongue and

one's language of assimilation, the cross contamination of each with the other in sonic resonances that proliferate possible meanings within the text.

The line from Cha ("She mimics the speaking. That might resemble speech.") captures the process of learning a new language by way of its sonic contours and not by way of semantic meaning, a process all too familiar to the non-native speaker. Hong's citation of Cha's distinction between language and the materiality of the voice itself opens up a new space for this question: What is the latter without the former, and who does it belong to if the former belongs to/indexes humanness? Who is excluded from normative expressions of language?

Indeed, Yau's description of Hong's poetry makes the link between the language of assimilation and Bakhtin's grotesque body even more explicit. In a three part essay on Hong's three books of poetry, Yau notes:

The English language – particularly in America — is a field in which decay and replenishment are ongoing, unpredictable ruptures. No one is sure what will happen next, what transformation some part of it will inevitably undergo. It is an inflicted and vulnerable body undergoing rapid change. Parts of it are blossoming while other parts are dying. It is this often volatile state of change and instability, slipperiness and unlikelihood, which Cathy Park Hong explores in her poetry. ("At Play in the Fields of Language")

In Hong's poetry, the animalistic primitiveness and the cyborg function as extremes which bound the grotesque human body, absolute asymptotes that it approaches but which it never fully becomes. Within the schema of *Translating Mo'um*, the most grotesque thing that can happen to the human body - the most extreme possible result of its deformance - is not a total transmutation into either an animal or cyborg altogether but its hybridity or shared qualities with these other forms.



A quick overview of *Translating Mo'um* reveals a catalogue of various grotesque figures: Chang and Eng, the conjoined Thai-American twins, the Hottentot Venus, Toto Maria, a body builder, and a hermaphrodite, among others. Hong explicitly frames these figures within the scientific language of nineteenth century essentialist and primitivist approaches towards the body while intertwining them with the narrative first-person experiences of an immigrant daughter figure.

This daughter figure - grounded throughout the text by a "Mother" and "Father" - alternately fulfills, navigates and defies different tropes of perceived Asian American female identity: hyper-sexualized, submissive, and a model minority in conforming to socioeconomically "virtuous" patterns (frugal, studious, part of a nuclear family, etc). In "Rite of Passage," for instance, the daughter's allusion to a failed marriage and her "indecisiveness" as a "chink" is what groups her in with "Fragments of freaks: the Hottentot's ass./the Siamese twins' toupee, the indecisive chink/who said I do. Later, no forget it, I do not." (18) The following passage from "On Splitting," which presents various adolescent interests of the daughter figure, also encapsulates the text's preoccupation with the parataxis of racial difference and the conventions of its signifiers: "Adolescent obsessions: Greek mythology, heavy metal rock stars, documentation of freaks (Mexican midget, triplets, albino sword swallowers), iron-on T-shirts, breasts, he who gave you your first bong hit and kiss" (41). A bourgeois familiarity with epic is juxtaposed with pop culture; the model minority daughter-figure is juxtaposed with illicit activities, a cultural incommensurability that mirrors the bodily difference of these (both racialized and sexualized) grotesque "freaks".

Throughout the text, the link between a primitivist sexual deviance, bodies that are physically grotesque (whether because of racial difference or other physical “freak” qualities), and a corporeally-rooted, animalistic inability to speak coherently becomes ever more clear. The sensational spectacle of the female body’s “shameful” sexuality and the shaming of the immigrant daughter who cannot (or refuses to) speak English is most explicitly intertwined in Hong’s poem “The Shameful Show of Tono Maria.” The poem is organized as a series of stanzas, each of which is presented as an exhibit ordered “a-p”, and switches between the experience of Tono Maria’s scarred body<sup>19</sup> and the first person narrative of this daughter figure.. The poem’s historical references to Tono Maria’s actual display in 1810 frame the daughter’s self-conscious recollections of her inability to speak correctly and link the racial and sexual “deviance” of these two figures together through the process of physically producing language. In “Exhibit c,” the broken speech of the daughter is analogized to the flailings of a goldfish: “My mouth opened and closed/like a guppy. Verbs were lost, ellipses trailed off like dregs”.

“Exhibit e” continues the narrative “I” position introduced in “Exhibit c” and situates the speaker with a group of others with disabilities and disorders, suggesting that her linguistic inadequacies place her in the same category: “Still mute, I was sent to Special Ed/with autistics, paraplegics, and a boy who only ate dirt.” A later stanza, “Exhibit j”, alludes to the shame of an act of oral sex; however, this allusion also doubles as a reference to the daughter’s shame-laden act of speaking: “I pinched my throat’s skin to remember/last night’s act. Guilt as throat as torso.” (33)

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<sup>19</sup> Tono Maria was the indigenous Brazilian woman exhibited in London for the many scars on her body (Atwater 17).

The poem which follows - "During Bath" - continues the association between sexual experience and (in)facility of language. The following stanzas presents readers with the physical mechanics of uttering a grunt or non-verbal sound:

The tongue to mid-palate. Coiled to the back of your teeth,  
tighten your throat muscle. Utter a low pitch, exhale.

There is no room to exhale.

My parents did not moan or even breathe for fear  
of waking their children. (35)

At first glance, the description of the first two stanzas presented here appears to be delineating an act of speaking. The following stanza, however, reveals it to be a suppressed vocalizing of orgasm, doubling the physicality of the mouth and the throat onto both language and sexual acts or expressions. The poem continues in this vein:

Palpitation, cyst, polyp: skin licked,  
tongue pioneers along topographic pulp. (35)

The alliterative voiced plosives of "p," produced by the fleshly pressing of lips together, is interwoven with the tongue-curling "l" in a sensuous oral evocation of bodily irregularities.

The pairing of language and sexuality Hong sets up throughout *Translating*

*Mo'um* also appears at the conclusion of "To Collage a Beginning":

No one could not remember my first word,  
it could have been *oma, appa, bap, uyu* or

*home, friend*, it could have been sex, the first  
English word I taught my immigrant cousin

which he repeated over and over like a child (45)

Hong notably does not italicize “sex” the way she italicizes the other words, which deemphasizes its status as the remembering of a specific word and gives weight to the meaning of sex itself. The cousin’s instinctive, child-like repetition of “sex,” reminiscent of Freud’s repetition compulsion, evokes a sense of helpless surrender to primal urges even as it also conveys a contrasting sense of mechanical and uncomprehending repetition as futile attempt to break through into another unfamiliar language.

Hong links the difficulty of speaking to a body whose mechanistic qualities mark it as grotesque, even as this portrayal of speech is also firmly rooted in “natural” human circulatory and respiratory processes:

A stutter inflated and reddened the face  
eyes bulged and lips gaped to form,

a fortune cookie cracked and a tongue rolled out.  
Wagged the Morse code but no one knew it.

While the abjection suggested by the tail-like “wagging” of the tongue, coupled with the gesture-based signification of Morse code, lends an animalistic sense of linguistic helplessness to the image, this corporeality figures speaking as a kind of bodily straining towards excretion, it paratactically invokes a Frankensteinian cyborg body ). (“I felt oddly collaged: elbow to nose, shin to eye, /neck to breast, brow to toe”). Additionally, the comparison of the mouth to the “fortune cookie” as inanimate object serves as flattened signifier of ethnic difference.

As the first poem in the book, “Zoo,” demonstrates, this transgressive blurring of the distinction between human and “other” mirrors the “contamination” of the assimilating immigrant’s language. Grouped together, the monophonic and monosyllabic

“Ga”, “Na” and “Da” evokes a sense of childlike (and potentially even animal-like) nonsense; the italicization signals this “nonsense” as a foreign language, one which would purportedly be translated by the phrases on the right. And yet these translations reveal nothing of these words’ meanings, remaining instead at the level of describing the words’ linguistic function and their attendant associations.

*Ga* The fishy consonant.

*Na* The monkey vowel.

*Da* The immigrant’s tongue

Words with an atavistic tail. History’s thorax considerably cracked. The Hottentot click called undeveloped.

The association of “cracking” with bodily organs necessary for speech reappears, and a sense of speech as the product of a machine or instrument emerges, as it also did “in “Rite of Passage”. “Cracking” evokes not the soft flesh of the mouth, tongue, or vocal cords, nor the breath of the voice, but a kind of violence done to an inanimate object, a hard breaking which can be figured as both the loss of a kind of functionality but also as an opening up, the space and sound of objection that Moten describes in his reading of Aunt Hester’s scream. Yet this invocation of the (broken) machine veers away once again in the next few stanzas back towards the primitive, grounding the phonemic contours of English in the soft fleshiness of the mouth:

Labial *bs* and palatal *ts*:

*La* the word

*Ma* speaks

*Ba* without you

The specific and authoritative singularity of “the word” highlights the exclusionary nature of a language that has wrested itself away from the speaker’s attempts to master it through this translation-like framing. In contrast with the syntactic coherence of “the word/speaks/without you,” which appears to formally retain the syntactic impartiality of individually translated words but delivers this pointed message instead, the poem’s monosyllabic gestures at Korean remain fragmented and primitive sounds of nonsense (“Overture of my voice like the flash of bats./The hyena babble and apish libretto”).

### **Listening to Voice in John Yau’s *Borrowed Love Poems*, *My Symptoms* and *Ing Grish***

Yau, like Hong, also draws upon the animalistic grotesque as a means of manifesting the extreme abjection of the racialized other in his poems. “In the Words of Sax Rohmer” captures the repulsive sexual threat associated with its titular actor’s most famous turn as Fu Manchu: “The repellant nails of a cultured tigress/the delicious nails of a long domination/The square nails of an unforgettable hand/The delicately repellant thumb” (*Ing Grish* 7). Yau’s linking of the opposable thumb, the trait which supposedly distinguishes the human from the ape, with the sexualized “nail” which is both “repellant” and “delicious,” references Orientalist fantasies and fears about the Asiatic other in animalistic terms.

However, while Yau’s use of the animalistic grotesque, like Hong’s, aligns with language insofar as it pertains to sexuality, Yau’s invocation of grotesque animalistic sounds specifically have more to do with the construction of an artificial lineage. Yau’s “Biography of an Amphibian” from *Ing Grish* echoes the autobiographical form of early

Asian American poetry but subverts its grounding in experiential narrative by placing the speaker's questionable account of genealogy in animalistic terms:

I was probably born yesterday  
shortly after a warthog managed to drop me

beneath the effigy of a photograph (16)

The qualification of "probably" introduces an element of uncertainty that contrasts with the temporal specificity of "yesterday" and "shortly after", which strengthens the passage's imitation of recollection. (Additionally, being "born yesterday" also plays off the phrase "I wasn't born yesterday," attributing a kind of naivete to the speaker.) This technique continues throughout the rest of the poem:

Recently most of my limbs have had to be recalibrated

I was invented in the mouth of a receding phantom

which is why my hair is the color of an extinguished wish (16)

Here, not only does the speaker's origin account echo the "invented 'i'" of Yau's "storied fibs piled high," it blurs the body of the speaker together with the suggestion of a made-up language, framing phenotypical traits as the result of this linguistic "birth".

Additionally, the language which the speaker both embodies and possesses, as the following passage shows, is a stunted one:

Harnessed moon enchanting nostalgic armadilloes  
Clipped tongue erased ornaments flooded sky (16).

Yau's 1998 "Eleven Things We Need to Know About Ourselves" also demonstrates this preoccupation with genealogical lineage, surnames, and grotesque animalistic sounds. Like "Biography of an Amphibian", the poem, broadened to first

person plural, also gestures towards the form of an autobiographical narrative while substituting the specifics of personal experience for an animalistic alterity grounded in the foreignness of unpronounceable last names.

5.

Since we have never been classified, and none of us have ever been informed as to how long we would have to inhabit this shifting purgatory, we have stayed strange, even to ourselves. (170)

The irony of this statement, which depicts the continued plight of a hybridized identity - one which is grotesque in its unfinished process of becoming - for Asian Americans, is that they *have* been classified, as some of the next stanzas show:

6.

We are the men who eat pigeons, turtles, ducks, dogs, and cats, whatever runs through the park at night. Squirrel is high on our list, as are the feet and ears of certain small animals.....

9.

No one knows how to address us because our names - single syllables strung together like pearls - sound like a cross between a puppy's growl and a cat's yelp. Maybe that's why we began sneaking into the park at night, a dozen nylon bags folded neatly in our freshly laundered knapsacks. We wanted to get closer to our ancestors, the ones who walk on all fours or fly short distances in the dark. *My Symptoms*, 170

The sixth stanza, framed by the ninth stanza, only serves to heighten this sense of primitive and grotesque bestiality. Not only is the difference of the racialized speakers accentuated by this trope of Chinese people consuming animals not typically eaten within a Western diet, it goes as far as to suggest a kind of cannibalism in that the speakers who eat these creatures are themselves figured as the descendants of animalistic "ancestors," "the ones who walk on all fours or fly short distances in the dark." Throughout the poem, Yau does not explicitly invoke Asianness; nevertheless, the tropes he invokes - "impassive" expressions, barbaric consumption of animals not included in a Western diet,



names consisting of “single syllables” - make the “We” of the poem unmistakably clear. The revulsion this juxtaposition evokes, coupled with the non-lexical framing of these “single syllable” names as the cries of animals, establishes the interchangeability of bestiality and racial otherness that Yau sets up in these poems in order to critique it.

Not only do Yau’s poems play off the grotesque, primitive sounds of East Asian surnames, they also invoke the mechanical constraints of the cyborg/automaton as both compositional practice and placeholder for the figure of the racialized other. Like *Translating Mo’um, Ing Grish* also begins with an epigraph that gestures towards the book’s engagement with the grotesque. Yau opens with a quote by Guy Davenport: “English is well advanced into its inevitable process of becoming pidgin. Inevitable, because when a speaker of English is unaware of the components of words he must speak by formula, rote, and custom, deaf to the historical nuance and blind to the structure of the word.” Davenport’s words capture a seeming paradox: that “[speaking] by formula, rote, and custom” actually makes the pidginization of English “inevitable”. However, in the case of Yau’s poetry, the figure of the cyborg/automaton actually operates as another complementary figure of alterity that also stands in for the immigrant other, learning and speaking a language by the handrails of its perceived rules precisely because such rules serve as a means of sonically navigating a syntax one does not fully understand.

Throughout his works of poetry, Yau exhibits a continued engagement with Oulipo and Surrealist writings. In Yau’s poems, as in Hong’s, both language and the body are presented as grotesque entities whose forms are permeable and are continually being renewed and/or exceeding themselves. The strain of Surrealism that runs throughout Yau’s work comes with a framework for understanding this very linking of

language and corporeality. The compositional practice of “exquisite corpse,” popular among Surrealist circles around the early 20th century, refers to a technique in which a group of collaborators all contributed to a piece of writing or art (initially with regard to drawing parts of a body) while having the previous collaborators’ work hidden from them, the end result being a non-cohesive and often nonsensical piece.

In terms of identifying and then critiquing perceptions of the physical appearance of the racialized other as grotesque, Yau does literally invoke an assembled, man-made corpse in *Borrowed Love Poems* using the figure of Frankenstein (31-16). In Section 9 of the poem, “Movies as a Form of Reincarnation: Boris Karloff Remembers Being Chinese on More Than One Occasion” (Boris Karloff being the actor famous for portraying Frankenstein), Yau writes:

In each life I lived, the mask I wore was my own face. It resembled your dreams of how such a face should look when peering through a torn curtain, a fogged-over windshield, a martini glass filled with blood. It was a face you knew because you knew the outcome. This was how I was able to become Chinese so often, more times than anyone else who set out from a town or village, toward the paved driveways and marble bathrooms of Pacific Palisades (34-35).

The composite and grotesque nature of Frankenstein’s body as a vehicle for analogizing the violent constructedness of the racialized body is further fictionalized and rendered performative by Yau’s foregrounding of the actor rather than the role. The poem’s subtitle – “Boris Karloff Remembers Being Chinese On More than One Occasion,” in conjunction with this explanation of “[becoming] Chinese so often,” implies a formulaic ability to “become” and then “not-become” Chinese that ironizes the lack of agency in being racialized through one’s physical appearance at the same time that it critiques biological or essentialist formations of race.

And if, for the next few hours, you sit before the flickering screen, waiting for my face to finally be uncovered, so that at last you can see my jutting jaw and sallow cheeks, my high, unforgettable forehead and large ears, all the while reveling in my thick-tongued speech bordering on a hideous lisp, it is so you can get up and walk away, open the refrigerator or look in the mirror, glad that you have been right all along. (35)

For the “you” who is the subject of Yau’s critique, to “look in the mirror” to confirm the fact that the self is indeed different than the sensationally grotesque face just presented on the screen is a process of racialization as everyday and ordinary as “[opening] the refrigerator”.

Hong writes that “The avant-garde’s “delusion of whiteness” is the luxurious opinion that anyone can be “post-identity” and can casually slip in and out of identities like a video game avatar, when there are those who are consistently harassed, surveilled, profiled, or deported for whom they are” (“Delusions of Whiteness”). It is precisely the non-option of switching identities, the inflexibility of being a racialized subject, that Yau enacts in his commitment to the use of restrictive forms. The compositional restraints or prescriptions of lipogrammatic writing associated with Oulipo become a vehicle for Yau’s description of the sense which manages to emerge despite the impositions of order of his chosen poetic form.

*Borrowed Love Poems*’ “Fourth Metabolic Isthmus Sestina” and “Fifth Metabolic Isthmus Sestina” are dedicated to the German Oulipo poet Oskar Pastior, whose 2011 work *Many Glove Compartments* Yau translated. Though not univocalic, these poems are lipogrammatic in both the sense that they adhere strictly to the original sestina, a form which by definition is highly restrictive.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> The entry for “sestina” given by the Academy of American Poets’ page specifies the following conditions of its form:

In his 2002 review of Pastior's *Many Glove Compartments* for *Jacket* magazine, Andrew Johnson observes that "[arbitrary] forms such as the anagram, lipogram, pantoum, and sestina, to mention a few favorite Oulipean exercises, tend to encourage mechanical utterances". Johnson's list of forms reads like a checklist of forms Yau has experimented with in his work; making Yau's interest in compositional constraints explicit. Johnson's comment additionally foregrounds the "mechanical" effect of such tightly controlled forms, one in which the repetition of words or phrases in a numerically determined order often results in nonsensical grammar or syntax and only sometimes results in comprehensible meaning. The logic of these forms, which quickly becomes evident after a few iterations, seems to have overthrown the privileging of a lexical system of signification. If the meaning-driven poem and a sense of authorial agency are inextricably linked, the structural determinacy of these poems would seem to suggest utterance without either intention, speech that is not able to listen to itself and comprehend its own proximity to ridiculousness.

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Sestina form consists of six stanzas of six lines each, followed by a three line envoi.

The sestina follows a strict pattern of the repetition of the initial six end-words of the first stanza through the remaining five six-line stanzas, culminating in a three-line envoi. The lines may be of any length, though in its initial incarnation, the sestina followed a syllabic restriction. The form is as follows, where each numeral indicates the stanza position and the letters represent end-words:

1. ABCDEF
2. FAEBDC
3. CFDABE
4. ECBFAD
5. DEACFB
6. BDFECA
7. (envoi) ECA or ACE

The envoi, sometimes known as the tornada, must also include the remaining three end-words, BDF, in the course of the three lines so that all six recurring words appear in the final three lines. In place of a rhyme scheme, the sestina relies on end-word repetition to effect a sort of rhyme. ("Sestina")

Yet Yau's use of these forms is perversely and precisely intentional in its embrace of lexical chaos. Johnson provides the following autobiographical reading in his review of Pastior:

We are told that, as a German-speaking Romanian, Pastior was summarily interred by occupying Soviet forces after the end of the Second World War. From this we might conclude that Pastior voluntarily imposes constraints on his work in order to find imaginative solutions to historical and personal circumstances. However, while this formative experience is said to have marked out the struggle between freedom and constraint as a predominant theme for the poet, his habit is to deny any overtly political or autobiographical material. One of the interludes dividing the five sections of the book, called 'Autobiographical Text,' undermines any attempt to find a substantial connection between the life and the poems: 'what I can say about myself will later (when scrutinized for meaning) turn out to be artificial, i.e. composed,' he writes.<sup>21</sup>

What Johnson perceives to be a "denial" turns out instead to be the very pretext for Yau's modelling of Asian American identity. Pastior's self-disclosure that apparent self-disclosure always reveals itself to be unfaithful to some "original" version, as well as his equation of "artificial" and "composed," finds re-expression in Yau's work, which makes particular use of iterative or serial structure as vehicle for an anti-essentialist approach to the search for identity. The titling of "Fourth Metabolic Isthmus Sestina" and "Fifth Metabolic Isthmus Sestina" misleadingly suggests that the poems belong to part of a series in which presumably the "First", "Second", and "Third Metabolic Isthmus Sestinas" precede this pair, an illusory framing of continuity which itself characterizes Yau's approach to iterative logic as a metaphor for origin narratives/narratives of personal history. The framing as a series also casts this titular string of words as

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<sup>21</sup> Johnson's narrative of Pastior's life does not mention – but must inevitably be framed by – the fact that Pastior was a police informant for seven years (during which he published his first collection of poems) (cite). While this knowledge may invalidate Johnson's claims about Pastior and necessarily complicates his reading, I invoke it nonetheless for its assertion of a relationship between constraint-based forms and autobiography, one which plays a part in Yau's retention of the subject outside the norms of lyric expression.

indicating an altogether new kind of form, a highly specific kind of sestina in whose constraints anyone might write. “Metabolic” suggests the bodily processes of decomposing food in order to create energy for life, an odd description for a poem which never deviates from its formal commitments (but an apt illustration for the degeneration of one kind of meaning that gives rise to another), while “isthmus,” the narrow strip of land between two larger bodies of land, evokes the tenuous liminality of Asian American identity in Yau’s work.

Yau’s “Vowel Sonatas,” inspired by Ernst Jandl, *are* univocalic poems (in which each word must contain the prescribed letter). The series goes through the vowels *a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, *u*, and *y* and are formatted as longer poems with no stanzas, no periods or commas, and relatively short lines. The resulting effect is that of a seeming “seamlessness,” in which syntax appears to supersede the form of a complete sentence or clause with beginning and end and flow on.

The poems are rife with fantastic imaginings and characters in a semi-narrative that - partially because of the aforementioned syntactical continuity and partially because of the absurdity of the narrative - seems totally nonsensical: “then several armed (some men) dangle celery before children/dressed like donkeys (possible sacrifice?)/then the donkeys (maybe they are children)/shed their purple capes/before fleeing their haunted parents” (101).

Yet to read these poems as merely constraint-based would be to miss the moments when meaning explicitly emerges. In fact, it is actually these moments’ framing by solely sonically driven material that sharpens the irony of its claims about language and race. It is no accident that the univocal poem based around “i” is so explicitly about identity;

while its logical progression in the sequence of English vowels casts it as merely one letter in a series, Yau singles “i” out in particular. The poem, in keeping with Yau’s (and Pastior’s) emphasis on the fabricated nature of self-disclosure, is aptly titled “storied fibs piled high.” It begins with a few flippant lines:

*omigosh*  
*tiny smidgin*  
*containing pidgin*  
*strained english*  
*stir fry* (110)

The comic irony of these lines lies in the trivial banality of “omigosh” (spelled with the abbreviation of a teenager’s slang), an exclamation of significance applied to lines whose simplistic sonic pairing of “smidgin” and “pidgin” evokes a childish nursery rhyme. “Stir fry” serves as an additional gratuitous ethnic signifier whose obvious non-relation to the other subject material (besides being a random token of “Asianness”) only enhances the silliness of these italicized lines. The seeming frivolity of these lines stands in sharp contrast to the subject material - that the English language is being pidginized or contaminated by small doses of foreign nonsense. And yet Yau follows this stanza up by reverting back to the nonsensical semi-narrative that characterizes most of the other “vowel sonatas”:

mistakenly  
interred in  
chicken pie  
while sixteen  
artificial lions  
(hairy pride)  
vanish into noise

Yau’s embedding of these moments within the poem acts almost as a kind of test for his readers. The poem gives off the appearance of meaninglessness in that the words

seem to be chosen solely for the purposes of fulfilling the vowel requirements of a univocalic poem, and this framing disguises Yau's comments on identity as more of the same happenstance diction, whose meaning need not be taken too seriously or read too closely. And yet a closer listening to this seemingly impartial selection of words which are strung together because they happen to contain the letter "I" reveals that these comments on identity are perhaps not so easily glossed over after all. The following lines explicitly suggest a "writing machine" whose mechanical generation of syntax and grammar winds up having affective valences after all, a figure consonant with the figure of the "cyborg" who chooses not what it speaks:

sufficient ink  
slivers  
remain in  
tantric potential  
while writing  
machine  
with grammatical fire  
with olive infected  
diction generating  
emotional swindles (110)

A few lines later, Yau's use of mechanic cyborg as a placeholder for the identity of the racialized other surfaces again:

Invented 'i' invents  
multiple resistance  
machine oiled  
identities against  
prophetic insects

The layering of an "Invented 'i'" "[inventing]" suggests an absolute fictionality of subjectivity, one which operates impartially according to the principles of its construction, as the technological sense of "invention" might suggest. "Machine oiled



identities” evokes a smooth ease to the performance of these multiple identities, which have no singular authorial beginning rooted in an “inventor” but which nonetheless are understood to be artificially generated at the same time.

The poem concludes as it began, with another seemingly silly play on words:

idiots  
in seville  
begin singing  
in idiolect  
while dieticians  
in nile city  
idaho  
memorize their river’s  
cosmetic dialect (114)

The false equation of “idiots” and “idiolect,” “dieticians” and “dialect” references the kind of humorous sonic logic which begins the poem - “pidgin” and “smidgin” - but also exposes its treachery, in that the kinds of semantic connections in English that sound suggests cannot be trusted. The individuality of “idiolect”, pointedly associated with “idiots,” mirrors the linguistic plight of the racialized other, on whom the joke is played, in contrast to the speech of group-based “dialect.”

### **Conclusion**

Reading the invocation of post human voices and non-normative bodies in the poems of Cathy Park Hong and John Yau reveals the ways in which works like *Translating Mo’um* make space for the identity of the racialized subject without resorting to the representative, metaphorical use of voice typically associated with the lyric. Not only does this practice show readers that posthuman categories of the animal and the cyborg align with grotesque tropes of primitivism and techno-Orientalism, tropes which

these authors repurpose in their poems in order to call them into question, it helps readers resist the oppressive fantasy of post-racial approaches towards minority poetries.

## CHAPTER 3 – NANCIAN HEARING, TOUCH, AND RESONANCE IN MEI-MEI BERSSENBRUGGE’S EC(H)OPOETICS OF SELF AND OTHER

In this chapter I suggest that Berssenbrugge states the significance of her experience as a racialized subject to her work, but she does not, for the most part, thematize it in her poems; instead, she directs her recuperation of alterity at the very sensory terms by which the subject distinguishes itself from its surroundings, the natural world as ultimate other. Berssenbrugge’s poems, in fact, take sound and touch as new sensory paradigms that converge in the paradigm of resonance, leading towards the possibility of what I call an “ec(h)opoetic subjectivity.” This ec(h)opoetic subjectivity engages with – and problematizes – distinctions between the self as the bodily-delimited, interiorized dwelling of the unconscious/conscious and an external environment.

### **What is Ec(h)opoetics?**

Matthew Cooperman broadly defines eco-poetics as the “theorizing [of] the relationship between poetry and the environment...[placing] the human in the context of the natural world such that binaries between nature /culture, civilized/wild, local/global, etc. become, if not irrelevant, highly questionable (189). Jonathan Skinner contemplates its multiple possible definitions more explicitly, asking

What is eco-poetics? The term is used more than it is discussed. For some readers, eco-poetics is the making and study of pastoral poetry, or poetry of wilderness and deep ecology. Or poetry that explores the human capacity for becoming animal, as well as humanity’s ethically challenged relation to other animals. For others, it is poetry that confronts disasters and environmental injustices, including the difficulties and opportunities of urban environments. For yet others, eco-poetics is not a matter of theme, but of how certain poetic methods model ecological processes like complexity, non-linearity, feedback loops, and recycling. (n.p)

In sketching such broad possibilities for the category of the “ecopoetic”, Cooperman and Skinner both attempt to move the term away from being simplistically reduced to merely “nature poetry”. While “nature poetry”, as evidenced by the first possible definition Skinner gives, can indeed fall under the umbrella of ecopoetics, “traditional Nature poetry, a la the human-subject meditating upon a natural object-landscape-animal as a doorway into meaning of the human subject’s life, is now highly problematic”, as Marcella Durand points out in her essay “The Ecology of Poetry” (59).

One of the implications of Cooperman and Skinner’s capacious definitions of ecopoetics is that an ecopoem can – and often does – attain its status as ecopoetic through formal experimentation in addition to the thematic treatment of issues or conceptions of the natural world. Christopher Arigo takes note of this tendency, observing that “...much of the ecopoetry being written seems to take place more in the realm of the innovative, as opposed to more mainstream poetries” (n.p.). For Arigo, this trend is not coincidental, and he proposes a few reasons why that is:

Perhaps this is because innovative poetries are loci of resistance to mainstream poetic practices (and values) which presumably reflect larger social paradigms. Thus innovative practices and ecological thinking/being/feeling combine to produce a site of resistance, of politics, of political resistance. Perhaps, given the postmodern world in which we live, a world in which we are fully aware of the interdependence of the body upon its world for its health, a world that is now inextricable from the body, an ecopoetics is an inevitable outcome or byproduct: perhaps poetry as a practice is the best means of directly addressing an environment in crisis. And perhaps this is why it is so difficult to pin down what makes a poem or poet “eco”—because the concern insinuates itself into so many elements of the writing...Or maybe it is because the poem itself is an ecology: a microcosmic ecosystem in which itself dwells.

The reasons Arigo offers are not mutually exclusive, and they compel us to a study of form as the means by which ecopoetry moves towards these objectives. Arigo’s

identification of the link between poetic form and the subversive aims of ecological thinking also help us understand the stakes of Berssenbrugge's poems for Asian American alterity.

### **Shared Formal Investments of Ecopoetry and Asian American Poetry**

A quick overview of Berssenbrugge's work, even by the casual reader, readily reveals her poems' thematic engagement with nature; Berssenbrugge herself has referenced her own investment in the landscape of New Mexico, where she lives (Hinton "Three Conversations with Mei-mei Berssenbrugge"). For Berssenbrugge, the environmental inflection of New Mexico acts as a theme, one which bridges her work to a tradition of Chinese poetry, which Berssenbrugge sees as offering a phenomenological way of accounting for non-oppositional difference.

In an interview with Michele Gerber Klein, Berssenbrugge asserts this connection:

MB: I fell in love with New Mexico when I was 18, and went there to live in my twenties. Then, it was about the mysticism and beauty of light on the land. I lived in a rural village. Georgia O'Keeffe lived nearby. There's a kind of phenomenology in my writing of that period. I used light to talk about philosophic issues or issues about relations with people and how a person is connected to the world. I find a correlation with themes in Chinese poetry.

MK: What is the correlation?

MB: Chinese poets also used personal observation of the landscape to reflect larger questions about life. After our daughter was born and we built our house on the mesa, I expanded into thinking about the world more holistically, in context. I began to explore how there could be traces of many things at the same time that are not oppositional. When we came to New York, I tried to keep that scale of the landscape.

However, while Berssenbrugge's poems are ecopoetic in this thematic sense, there is another way in which they are also ecopoetic in demonstrating "how certain poetic methods model ecological processes like complexity, non-linearity, feedback loops, and recycling", as Skinner describes. This ecopoetic formal quality, I suggest, could be better thought of as her "echopoetics".

Marthe Reed's reading of one of Berssenbrugge's earlier works, *Heat Bird* (1983), shows this particular relation between the "eco" and "echo" in her poetics:

Articulating experience and understanding through language and its imagery, Berssenbrugge creates associative links between ideas or moments that rest alongside one another, almost in the manner of words written first in Chinese and then translated into English: "An interval can be a place, that ricochets off water / or shines off the pink nickel barrel of your purse gun" (*Heat Bird* 48). "In another passage, we understand a hill, cloud, car, and forehead as equivalents, each and all signaling to us the muted tones of distance. The big hill is solid in dim light. A lit cloud rolls down behind it. She was standing in the dirt yard trying to decide between them. Even as a forehead the hill only glowed beige. It was the same color as the '54 Buick parked at the washed out bridge." (*Heat Bird* 49)... Such images are set in relation to one another as correlatives or correspondences. Each echoes within and extends the others. In this way, the speaker becomes no more or less than an element of place, one of many participants in a dialogue that constitutes a particular place-moment. (258)

"Echo," as Reed points out, acts as an associative paradigm, one which is analogized to the traversing of linguistic frameworks and which has the effect of relating the speaker to her surroundings contextually.

Within the context of the poem, Charles Bernstein defines "echopoetics" in *Pitch of Poetry* as "the nonlinear resonance of one motif bouncing off another within an aesthetics of constellation. Even more, it's the sensation of allusion in the absence of allusion. In other words, the echo I'm after is a blank: a shadow of an absent source" (x).

It is vital to begin my reading of the echo of resonance in Mei-mei Berssenbrugge's ec(h)opoetics by recuperating the often occluded fact that Berssenbrugge is an Asian American poet who experiments with paradigms of sound in her work. It is necessary to address this fact in order to see her contributions to an ecopoetics and an echopoetics that resonate with each other, an ec(h)opoetics, or as Charles Bernstein calls it, the "exploring [of] a reciprocal relation between the human and nonhuman, world and earth, as well as a practice of mimicry and repetition within and across human cultures and languages" (298).

My study of Berssenbrugge in this chapter presents me with a valuable opportunity precisely because her poems address racial difference the least explicitly – according to conventional signifying markers – of all the poets I canvas in these four chapters. As Dorothy Wang argues in her survey of Asian American poetry, *Thinking its Presence* (the title of which comes from a line in Berssenbrugge's poem "Nest"), critical reception of their work has embodied an example of "[the failure] to recognize how racial subjectivity can make itself felt *in* and *as* language and in what is not said or said obliquely" (248).

Berssenbrugge herself has asserted the centrality of being a racially marked subject to her work quite explicitly, a claim that a closer listening to the sonic paradigm of resonance in her poems bears out. The entry on Mei-mei Berssenbrugge in *Asian-American Poets: A Bio-bibliographical Critical Sourcebook* gives a cursory overview of her life: born in Beijing in 1947 to Chinese and Dutch parents, Berssenbrugge grew up in Massachusetts, and went on to study at Reed College and Columbia University. In 1974,

the year she began publishing the first of several collections of her poems, she also moved to New Mexico, where she now resides with Richard Tuttle and their daughter (45). Alongside these facts about her, the entry also states, “Mei-mei Berssenbrugge is known as an experimental or postmodern poet,” noting that “Unlike many Asian American writers, Berssenbrugge does not comment directly on issues such as ethnic identity, the American dream, and social and cultural conflict. Her poetry lacks overt social engagement, comment, or protest” (45).

It is true that Berssenbrugge is not commonly classified as one of the defining Asian American poets of the 1970s (though she was already writing prolifically then), though some of her early poems, such as “Chronicle,” “Tan Tien,” and “Chinese Space,” do explicitly reference her ties to China. As such, the ways in which her work is commonly situated is of especial significance to Wang’s argument that Asian American poems that deal with race and identity explicitly are often read as less formally sophisticated, while poems that make no mention of identity are more easily embraced as “experimental” by the avant-garde. Wang critiques the 2006 MLA convention - “the first to coalesce around a theme – in this case, poetry, particularly avant-garde poetry” – for not including any minority poets in their keynote sessions” (247). The idea, Wang argues, is that

...while it might initially seem that critics of avant-garde poetry offer a more ‘liberating’ approach to the experimental work of someone like Berssenbrugge – by choosing to focus on form and not solely autobiographical or ethnographic content, as some critics of more traditional lyric minority poetry are wont to do – these two groups of critics on opposite ends of the aesthetic spectrum, in fact, occupy two sides of the same problematic coin. (248)



Wang does not specify here that the MLA convention's theme that year was not merely on "avant-garde poetry" but more specifically Marjorie Perloff's proposed theme - "The Sound of Poetry, the Poetry of Sound." Her omission, however, only further underscores the stakes of listening more closely for and to paradigms of sound at work within Berssenbrugge's poems. As I have suggested in my first chapter (and discussed at more length with regard to readings of Marilyn Chin), the perception of an artificial opposition between ethnographic content and formal innovation is largely to do with the association between the lyric voice and an autobiographical, singularly cohesive representation of identity. The metaphorical conscription of the lyric voice in the name of political representation, I argue, pulls sonic paradigms away from their materiality and diverts critical attention from the ways in Asian American poets' very experimentation with sound *is* itself a form of wrestling with being racially marked subjects.

In her reading of Berssenbrugge's poetics, Wang attempts the difficult task of both reading Berssenbrugge's few poems that do explicitly thematize her Chinese-Americaness while making the case that Asian American poets need not write about identity in a particular way for their experiences as a racialized subject to be considered relevant to their work. It is necessary to attend to Berssenbrugge's fairly straightforward references to China (as Wang has already done), a China she finds echoed in the landscape of her New Mexico, and make space for the particularities of her experience borne through in her writing as a racialized subject. It is also equally necessary to recognize that in the instances of her other poems that may "...[appear] abstract and largely devoid of racial markers...[they] nonetheless strongly bear the impress of social

and historical contexts, including processes of racialization and the influence of her first language—Chinese—which shaped and continue to shape her subjectivity as both an Asian American and a poet” (45).

There is a clear parallel between the formal investments of an ecopoetry that does not thematize the natural world and the formal investments of Asian American poetry that does not thematize race. Both, I suggest, are interested in resisting dominant castings of subjectivity and alterity, particularly where ideas about the other intersect with the privileging of a humanistic framework.

Joan Retallack, meditating on the terms and conditions of an ecopoetic relation to the other of nature, suggests a kind of “reciprocal alterity” in her 2007 essay for *Jacket2* “What is Experimental Poetry and Why Do We Need it?”:

The human imagination has always done a brilliant job of occupying the “empty spaces” of alterity. When alterity has no opportunity to speak back how can there be anything but a monodirectional dynamic of voluble us and silent them. But what about a reciprocal alterity? Our shared peril on a degraded planet turns us all into potentially fatally estranged subjects—those whose lives most depend on forces least within their control. (n.p.)

Retallack asks, “What does a poetics of reciprocal alterity look like? Is it by necessity experimental?” Yet it is apparent that while the former remains an open question, the latter is one that her work and that of other ecopoetics scholars like Cooperman and Skinner have already answered affirmatively.

Retallack identifies a close-knit relationship between formal choices and an ecological sensibility (or sensitivity) that recuperates the alterity of the non-human surrounding world:

Looking through issues of *ecopoetics*, one can see that a good deal of the work coming out of the cluster of concerns and questions that pack the term “ecopoetics” with urgent meaning is enacting an experimental attitude. Perhaps, for instance, the previously inactive reciprocal alterity of metaphor-imbued nature poetry is approached through some of the visual poetics that appear frequently in the journal. If the aim is life-furthering interest and respect, correctives to “nature” narratives of segregation, dominance and nostalgia—failure to acknowledge “them” as inextricably intertwined with “us”—are imperative. The question is how can poetics do that.

The stakes of exploring how poetic form resists “narratives of segregation, dominance and nostalgia – failure to acknowledge ‘them’ as inextricably intertwined with ‘us’” matter not only to the aim of making room for a “reciprocal alterity” between the human and the natural world as non-human other but between the assumed subject within an experimental poem and the non-humanity of the racialized other, which I have touched upon in my second chapter on the animal and cyborg. It is for this reason that I turn to the intersection of sensory paradigms like hearing, touch, and resonance with a Nancian deconstructive modelling of bodily self within Berssenbrugge’s work.

### **Nancian Theory of the Body**

In *Corpus*, Nancy deconstructs different ontologies based in a soul-body dualism (Platonic, Christian and Cartesian – to name a few) by turning towards the role of the senses in defining self as other (rather than self and other). Nancy asserts that “The ontological body has yet to be thought” and that the *corpus* is “coming,” identifying two versions of this “coming,” which are also necessarily tied to two different manifestations of the body. Nancy defines one version of this “coming” as “incarnation,” aligned with a metaphysical-based notion of touch in which language presents the body as signifier (“*hoc est enim* displays the body *proper*, makes it present to the touch, serves it up as a

meal”) (64-65, 5). Language’s attempt to make the body “present” by conferring signification on the body (“*hoc est*”) as well as (“enim”), however, “only [expels] the thing we desired. The anxiety, the desire to see, touch, and eat the body of God, to *be* that body and *be nothing but that*, forms the principle of Western (un) reason. That’s why the body, bodily, *never happens, least of all when it’s named and convoked*” (5).

Nancy defines another version of the *corpus*, however, as the “plastic material of spacing” which is “neither before, nor after...[but] *is* the taking-place of sense, absolutely” (63, 64, 119). Nancy associates the “coming” of this *corpus* with not the aforementioned “presenting” through the signification of language but a “*coming to presence*” as an event whose finite conclusion is endlessly deferred: “What is coming happens *to* a presence that hasn’t taken place, and won’t take elsewhere, and is neither present, nor representable, outside of what is coming. Thus, the *coming* itself never ends” (64).

In *At the Limits of Presentation*, Martta Heikkilä asserts that for Nancy, “The exterior is nothing else but the exposition of the other to which one is exposed”, and that this exposure, which enables community with others,

doesn't mean that intimacy is extracted from its withdrawal, and carried outside, put on display. Because then the body would be an exposition of the "self," in the sense of a translation, an interpretation, or a staging. "Exposition," on the contrary, means that expression itself is an intimacy and a withdrawal...The body is this departure of self to self. (Heikkilä 165, Nancy *Corpus* 33)

Given that the always-happening temporality of the Nancian body’s “coming” is rooted in the “taking-place” of sense, it becomes clear that in his formulation, there is no

pre-existing self for the body to become aware of; rather, the physical auto-affection of a subject's body represents the very moment that the subject is comprised (69).

The following passage from *Corpus* articulates Nancy's theory of sensory self-constitution:

A body is sensing, but sensing such that there's no sensing that wouldn't be a 'sensing one's self'. To sense, we have to sense ourselves sensing...Body means very precisely the soul that feels it's a body. Or: the soul is the name of the sensing of the body...We could say it by using all the figures of the self's interiority facing exteriority: time, which is sensed as space; necessity, which is felt as contingency; sex, which is felt as another sex. The formula that sums up this thought would be: the inside, which senses it is outside. (*Corpus* 131)

This rejection of *a priori* notions of the body (prior to the act of sensing) finds expression in Berssenbrugge's poem "Matter", from *Hello, the Roses*: "We may seek a body prior to discord, to ground dependency, but bodies are founded on feeling, including depression, helplessness, futility in the face of another's aggression, who put her animus first and was overpowered, so we seem unconstructed now." (20) The doubled potential meaning of "feeling" as both a self-constituting physical "sensing" as well as subjective "emotion" performs Nancy's "inside [which] senses it is outside".

I return to Retallack here, borrowing her theorizing of binaries in *The Poethical Wager* order to illustrate the paradoxical corporeality that Nancy is positing here:

One way to think of them is in terms of Buckminster Fuller's elegantly minimalist definition of structure. Each term in these contesting binaries is the outside of the other's inside: each an alternative and/or complementary and/or argumentative and/or critical and/or destructive logic in relation to the other. The problem this poses for ordinary discourse is that we have the same kind of trouble seeing an inside and an outside simultaneously that we have seeing both vase and profiles in Edgar Rubin's famous ambiguous figure. This means we habitually feel we must rank or choose between the terms of a binary. (Which is figure, which ground? If both are figure, which is dominant?) But in fact, these terms (as terms) describe

only the most easily identifiable limits at either end of a sinuous, moving range of nuanced possibilities. (99)

The opening poem of Berssenbrugge's poetic sequence from *Heat Bird*, "Farolita," also asks the reader to contemplate such a paradoxical structuring of subjectivity by figuring a Mobius strip as paradigm for relationality:

Take a strip of white paper, turn  
the top of the strip in your right hand so  
it faces the floor, then glue the ends together  
If you go along on the outside, it seems  
I am not connected to you. I'm trying  
To think now if it has to be white paper  
Can it show some light through? (33)

The Mobius strip embodies a surface on which, as its famously associated illustration goes, an ant could begin traversing on either side and wind up on the opposite one without ever crossing an edge. What Berssenbrugge chooses to emphasize in this passage, however, is not the idea that this continuity gives access to the side of the other; rather, it is about that very disconnection ("If you go along on the outside, it seems I am not connected to you"). The Mobius strip, in this sense, has an artificial boundary (in the sense that it runs along two sides that are indistinct) and no orientation, which makes it uniquely suited as a conceptual model of subjectivity for Berssenbrugge's poetics. It is this blurring of an interiorized self who is always already located "here" and "inside" against an exterior other(ing) "over there"/"outside" that Berssenbrugge plays with in engaging with models of subjectivity.

In her "Honeymoon" from *Empathy*, Berssenbrugge offers another example of an ec(h)opoetic bodily paradigm twisted and inverted upon itself. The poem, like many of her other works, sinuously interlaces the specific language of causality and semiotic

theory in the form of long complete sentences, with irruptions of allusions to personal relationships, interspersed throughout:

Though relations with oneself and with other people seem negotiated in terms secretly confirmed by representation, her idea of the person's visibility was not susceptible representation. No matter how emphatically a person will control his demeanor, there will be perspectives she cannot foresee or direct, because there is no assignable end to the depth of us to which representation can reach, the way part of a circle can be just the memory of a depth. The surface inside its contour, like the inside of a body, emits more feeling than its surroundings, as if the volume or capacity of relations would only refer to something inside I can't see, that the other person and I keep getting in the way of, or things in the landscape while they are driving, instead of the capacity being *of* your person. (68)

Berssenbrugge's language here takes on the aura of scientific authority ("surface," "contour," "volume"), and its clauses tempts the reader towards deductive inferences that nonetheless somehow elude crystallization into any kind of conventional concrete logic. The poem gestures towards a kind of specific factual quantification – "more feeling than its surroundings," even as the reader becomes disoriented at the site of the body as boundary ("the surface inside its contour, like the inside of a body", emits more feeling than its surroundings").

Berssenbrugge takes this Nancian auto-affective touch of the skin as as a precondition to understanding the relationality between self and other and extrapolates from it an eco-poetic dissolution of the discrete boundary between self and environment as other: "And memory doesn't end where my skin ends, but diffuses into my surroundings, leaving fragments of itself I may notice as 'red rock', 'friable cliff,' reminding me" (*Hello the Roses* "Winter Whites" 27).

By making the status of bodily parameters as boundary between a "private" self and external world ambiguous, Berssenbrugge calls the alignment of interiority and

invisibility, exteriority and visibility into question. In a later section of “Honeymoon”, Berssenbrugge continues to engage with the attribution of “privacy,” “hiddenness,” and “secrecy” to the body’s supposed containment of the self:

Whenever or wherever it is possible to speak of recognition, there was a prior hiddenness or border of the circle...I call it color, if the way the texture of skin on his hand changes in moonlight were a color, instead of a fantasy, so that the physical idea of his privacy is not made clearer by the idea of his secrecy.  
(*Empathy* 61)

In an essay on *Empathy*, Charles Altieri suggests through his invocation of Lacan that Berssenbrugge is invested in how visibility/invisibility shapes the subject’s process of self-constitution and relationship to others:

Lacan offers for this critique of representation his mirror stage and his brilliant analysis of how and why we project imaginary versions of ourselves as subjects. Berssenbrugge adds to that mix an insistence that we examine how the ideal of visibility forms and deforms the logics of distribution shaping what we invest in as subjective identities. How we conceive visibility as emotionally charged will also shape how we characterize the invisible as well as how we establish links between the two...Like Lacan, Berssenbrugge wants to challenge the essentially visual, pictorial ways that we now take as central to imagining closeness with other people. For her the visual confines feelings to an essentially ‘mystical’ mode in which we are constantly drawing inferences from particulars (38). (58)

Altieri does not expound on the figuring of sound and touch in Berssenbrugge’s poems, which I suggest are the primary means through which she issues this challenge. However, in linking her work to Lacan, he actually does makes the opposition between a Cartesian and Nancian paradigm of bodily subjectivity more evident:

And suppose that our desires are severely distorted by the same visual imperatives because they project an outside and an inside, with the outside then somehow having to express or symbolize what cannot be seen but can apparently be given a definitive psychological space to inhabit. Ideals of representation foreclose what counts as depth and block possible perspectives that might give access to the traits most profoundly characterizing us as persons.



We want to be knowable in almost the same way that we feel we have confident grasps of what objects are and we understand using these objects to perform various tasks. Correlatively, we want this visibility supplemented by something invisible, something hidden that confers on us a depth and a mystery making us different from objects. Then our humanity consists largely in our efforts to bring this depth to the surface by making visible or expressing in a world of objects what makes us subjects. (58-59)

Berssenbrugge's poems expose the artificiality of this opposition, I suggest, by identifying conventional ideas of how the self is delineated in order to call them into question. Altieri notes that Berssenbrugge "[evades] the two obvious poles for gathering lyrical energy – the rendering of subjective need and the articulating of how the world rewards what language can make of our efforts to pay attention to objects," suggesting that she privileges instead "the need to identify with a condition of possibility between the ego and the world that I am going to call a distinctive 'imaginative site'...the articulation of dispositions toward the world which allows us to identify fully with the speaking presence of the text" (56).<sup>22</sup>

Observing that Berssenbrugge's poetry is interested in theorizing (in)visibility for the purposes of moving away from it, Altieri connects that imperative to a modelling of alterity (of which he is critical) in which psychological interiority distinguishes "subject" (meaning human) from "object" (meaning animal, thing, nature).

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<sup>22</sup> Retallack's "reciprocal alterity" comes to mind again here. In her theorizing of the "essay as wager," Retallack situates her critical writing "in the intermediate zone between self and world, in the distancing act of play. The distance engendered by a poethical recognition of reciprocal alterity stimulates curiosity and exploration" (*Poethical Wager* 7). I do not delve specifically into the term "poethical" here, as I have attempted to build it into my delineation of the "ecopoetic"; however, I see my aims in this chapter as fundamentally aligned with Retallack's sense of the "poethical".

If personal memory and the psyche are a few of the ways that “psychological space” is marked off as individual and interior, Berssenbrugge rejects their individualization and status as signifiers of an exclusive humanism, as the following examples from “Winter Whites” show:

“A collective unconscious of all experience underlies events along an electron’s path, because space is a psychological property” (*Hello the Roses* 30).

“I see light around a corner, combinations of others’ memories adjacent to mine and polyvalent” (30).

“My memory travels into the memory of another with increasing energy, and an event clarifies as ‘winter’ for example.” (31)

“Where dark sky fills with breezes, currents, moisture, dust particles and so forth, a parallel vault moves (as clouds merge and fuse) to form our psychological climate, a growth medium, like creativity in a dream rummaging through nights in the future for data.” (40)

While Berssenbrugge’s definition of “environment” is not necessarily limited to the natural world, her poems show a strong initiative towards recuperating relationality and community with non-human others (whether animal, plant, element/aspect of nature or man-made object) in a way that retains their absolute alterity. She does this by ascribing an independent agency conventionally associated only with human interiority to these others, as these lines from her poem “Turquoise Shade” show: “I try to set up an environment of objects: my return flight, ambition, an apple green Sung vase, poem about antelope; then these interact and give themselves to other situations.” (75)

Berssenbrugge comments in a dialogue with Bernstein that

A self encompassing or embodying what it interacts with was more articulate than trying to speak for myself. This is the literal situation of our bodies which are porous and continuous with the world. Tom White told me, after a few days in the Sierras one’s internal flora has more in common with the surrounding pine trees than with people back in Berkeley. (n.p.)

In “Pure Immanence”, Berssenbrugge opens the Cartesian subjectivity of the lyric “I” out onto such others: “I dream all plants and animals communicate. Energies of the environment and of inhabitants merge in a kind of horizon of one dream to another” (*Hello, the Roses* 23). The extension of “wishes”, a signifier of human desire, to the “environment”, attributes an emotional subjectivity to the “I”’s surroundings: “My wishes aren’t separate from the environment, which is a portion of connectivity, with new species emerging all the time. (25) The poem concludes with a depiction of the speaker’s oversoul-like communion with a natural world that exhibits the simultaneous sensory and emotional meanings of “feeling” normally reserved for the category of the human: “The tree exemplifies nature as it relates with humans, feeling around the edges of our concepts, sensing openings in our awareness and forming alliances./It enjoys contributing to our life, though there’s no individual consciousness, per se.” (26) Her poem “Glitter” also attempts to dismantle the Cartesian limitations around (and privileging of) human consciousness: “You could say our identities reach out to encompass the forest environment, like telepathy: a moment opens space by rendering it transparent in intensified consciousness.” (“Glitter,” *Hello the Roses*, 47). This consciousness, along with an intentionality of communication, allows the natural world to synthesize as a community: “Thoughts are sent out by one rock informing other rocks as to the nature of its changing environment, the angle of sun and temperatures cooling as night falls and even its (loosely called) emotional tone changes, the appearance of a person walking, who’s not appropriately empathic.”

## Berssenbrugge's Hearing & Nancian Listening

Skinner notes of Berssenbrugge's "Pollen", "If we are to speak of "ecopoetics" here, it is as a species of boundary work, rather than exploration of (communication about, imitation of) a given environment" ("Boundary Work"). To further contextualize what Skinner means by "boundary work," I turn to his citation of Andrew McMurry, Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela's work on autopoiesis:

McMurry works with cognitive scientists Maturana and Varela's notion of subjectivity as "the self-description of a closed unity structurally open to the environment," to redirect ecocritical focus from observations of "environments" to observations of the observations, from ontology to epistemology (163, 222). In Maturana and Varela's theory of autopoiesis, life is constituted by organizationally closed yet structurally open systems, defined by "their circular, self-referential organization, or *autonomy*; and their continual creation (*poesis*) of the components that structure and sustain that autonomy. (Skinner "Boundary Work" 74)

"Boundary work," as Skinner defines it in relation to Berssenbrugge's poetry, seems to be explicitly directed at this contradiction, destabilizing the demarcation between the "interior" of such a "closed unity" and its simultaneous "openness". In his analysis of "Pollen", Skinner notes that

... it is hard to say which is inner and which outer: conventionally, the book itself would be the rim, anchored in body and environment, the "small theatre" of poetic composition the innermost lamination. But the lack of symmetry in the mirroring frames, each line reflecting yet failing to recuperate the last, boggles any spatial illusion: "An orange cliff holds the light, concave / and convex from wind, as between alive and not alive, the boundary of a person touching you" (44). Just as Berssenbrugge's composition departs from a theatrical staging of "inner" drama, she confounds distinctions between "inner" engrossment and "outer" reality, between natural and social frames. "

Nancy's "listening" subject helps us read how poems like Berssenbrugge's "Hearing" – and Berssenbrugge's investments in sound throughout the rest of her work – confound

the distinctions between self and world. The poem, from her 2003 collection *Nest*, opens with the speaker's account of hearing another voice, one which does not issue from any lyric identity: "A voice with no one speaking, like the sea, merges with my listening, as if imagining her thinking about me makes me real" (53).

One might wonder why Berssenbrugge begins a poem called "Hearing" with an invocation of "listening", and I suggest that an investigation of the key difference between "écouter" and "entendre" in Nancy's *Listening* is key to answering that question, as well as to understanding how the difference between the two qualifies Berssenbrugge's work as ecopoetic.

Charles Bernstein has usefully traced the general thinking in cognitive linguistics on this distinction in *Close Listening*, and I draw from his summary of Reuven Tsur, whose argument in *What Makes Sound Patterns Expressive* asserts that "there is a marked cognitive difference in the way a listener hears a material sound –say a flapping flag or the pouring rain – and the way she or he hears human speech. Speech triggers a specific cognitive mode of interpretation in a way that material sound does not" (18). Barthes, whom Bernstein also references, distinguishes between the two on somewhat separate grounds; for Barthes, hearing is a more physiological act, whereas listening is a more psychological one (Bernstein 18).

I now examine Berssenbrugge and Nancy's respective distinctions between "listening" and "hearing". In her dialogue with Bernstein, Berssenbrugge shares her definition of the difference between hearing and listening: "Now I realize I think of hearing as encompassing and receptive, while listening which I didn't really address

would be a more focused, directed perception” (n.p.). Here I turn to Nancy’s figuring of the listening subject:

To listen is to enter that spatiality by which, *at the same time*, I am penetrated, for it opens up in me as well as around me, and from me as well as toward me: it opens me inside me as well as outside, and it is through such a double, quadruple, or sextuple opening that a ‘self’ can take place. To be listening is to be *at the same time* outside and inside, to be open *from* without and *from* within, hence from one to the other and from one in the other. (*Listening* 14)

Berssenbrugge’s invocation and extension of this listening subject through “hearing” allows for a subjectivity that doesn’t distinguish between human and environmental consciousness, even as it posits an aurally-inflected touch as a mode of relating to the other that doesn’t collapse its absolute alterity.

Nancy writes in *Listening of écouter* that “To listen is *tender l’oreille* – literally, to stretch the ear – an expression that evokes a singular mobility, among the sensory apparatuses, of the pinna of the ear – it is an intensification and a concern, a curiosity or an anxiety” (5). Nancy opposes *écouter* to another kind of listening, “hearing” that he aligns with *entendre*:

*Entendre*, ‘to hear,’ also means *comprendre*, ‘to understand,’ as if ‘hearing’ were above all ‘hearing say’ (rather than ‘hearing sound’), or rather, as if in all ‘hearing’ there had to be a ‘hearing say,’ regardless of whether the sound perceived was a word or not...If ‘to hear’ is to understand the sense (either in the so-called figurative sense, or in the so-called proper sense: to hear a siren, a bird, or a drum is already each time to understand at least the rough outline of a situation, a context if not a text), to listen is to be straining toward a possible meaning, and consequently one that is not immediately accessible. (6)

Technically speaking, Nancy’s distinction between *écouter* and *comprendre* mirrors Berssenbrugge’s description of the distinction between listening and hearing, in that Nancy similarly distinguishes between one as more intentionally selective and one as

more open-ended. However, I suggest that Nancy and Berssenbrugge's terminologies for these concepts are actually reversed, in that Nancy's "listening" as *ecouter*, I suggest, aligns with Berssenbrugge's encompassing/receptive "hearing", essentially an intentionality/straining towards the environment that doesn't need to slot it into human sense. I suggest here that Berssenbrugge's hearing is what Nancy's listening would look like manifested (is Nancy's listening but with a human oriented intentionality expanded open towards the natural non-human), and that this hearing in Berssenbrugge's poetics structures relationality – and even community – between subjects by assessing the untouchable alterity between them: "Hear hesitations between words as this space in a design's overall, natural workability." (9) "Between any experiences, memories, objects are silent rhythms and intervals." (29)

In a dialogue with Bernstein, Berssenbrugge characterizes hearing as inherently a fragmentary experience: "Hearing" moves to the wider arena of compassion, transcendent and particular giving expressed by hearing, as a source of power. There's a synapse between hearing a cry and understanding its meaning, a synapse where all fragments occur. This is explicitly a feminine, if not feminist power" ("A Dialogue"). This emphasis on a discontinuous hearing and suspension of coherent meaning resurfaces more explicitly in her poem "Hearing": "Hearing is the fractality of fragments occurring (as they disintegrate)" (*Nest* 56). Michael Gallope summarizes the difference between the two most clearly when he writes: "Where *entendre* implies the closure of understanding and truth, *ecouter* implies the openness of negotiation, uncertainty, and exposure" (158).

## Touch

Berssenbrugg's description of "hearing" as a "feminist power" because of its open, fragmentary nature dovetails with Nancy's paradigm of a self that is constituted through touch. Nancy emphasizes the significance of auto-affective touch in folding a sense of self as other into the subject's self-constitution: "'A body touches on the outside, but at the same time (and this is more than a correlation, it's a co-appurtenance), it touches itself as outside... The phenomenological analyses of 'self-touching' always return to a primary interiority. Which is impossible. To begin with, I have to be in exteriority in order to touch myself. And what I touch remains on the outside. I am exposed to myself touching myself" (*Corpus* 128-129).

Nancy is well aware how difficult it is to talk about skin without falling back into claims about the interiority of the subject, and takes care to clarify that "...we only gain access to ourselves from outside. I am an outside for myself... This is what skin is. It's through my skin that I touch myself. And I touch myself from outside, I don't touch myself from inside" (128).

Nancy subscribes to

...an ontology where the body = the place of existence, or local existence. (Here 'local' shouldn't be taken as a piece of ground, a province or a reservation. It should be taken, rather, in the pictorial sense of local color: the vibration and singular intensity – itself changing, mobile, multiple – of a skin-event or of skin as the place for an event of existence.)

Nancy's figuring of skin as both an exposing and an event frames skin as the auto-affective sensory experience through which the self is constituted, and which redoubles otherness back into the self. Nancy's response to his own question "what is a subject that



is thus constituted in listening...?” is to turn to the self-referral of “ex(peau)sition,” the outward orientation of skin folded back on itself. He writes:

The phenomenological analyses of ‘self-touching’ always return to a primary interiority. Which is impossible. To begin with, I have to be in exteriority in order to touch myself. And what I touch remains on the outside. I am exposed to myself touching myself.” (*Corpus* 128-129)

While sensory auto-affection – the touch of self – is necessary in Nancy’s formulation for one to understand relationality with others (because it confirms self *as* exterior), neither he nor Berssenbrugge are interested in an alterity experienced through directly touching others, for fear of a collapsing substitutive touch that Derrida and Nancy critique. To put it simply, in Derrida and Nancy’s schema of touching, one touches self as other but cannot touch other as self. In keeping with this axiom, Berssenbrugge’s touch is a contactless, phenomenological encounter between the subject’s thought/emotion and other, a touch inflected by the Nancian listening she calls “hearing”.

Here I turn to Laura Marks’ definition of the haptic, one which is implicitly founded on an opposition between touchable surface and untouchable depth, an opposition which underpins her figuring of self as shell-center, and which Berssenbrugge’s ecopoetic poems continually seek to undo. Indeed, Marks herself admits that in her outlining of the relationship between haptics and erotics “[she] fought against [theories of Lacanian psychoanalysis], which [are] ever anxious about a subject that it assumes to be a void, ever trying to break through its thin shell, but could not extricate [herself] from it,” and that upon reading Vivian Sobchack’s *The Address of the Eye* she

“began to believe in a subject that *does* have a center, even one that is constantly being transformed by its encounters with the world” (*Touch* xix).

This figuring of “shell” and “center” which Marks cannot seem to do away with suggests a contained sense of in-dwelling that Nancy resists when he writes, “Bodies aren't some kind of fullness or filled space (space is filled everywhere): they are *open* space, implying, in some sense, a space more properly *spacious* than spatial, what could also be called a *place*” (*Corpus* 15). This bodily paradigm of subjectivity, inflected by a Cartesian humanism, is underpinned by theories of touch, and it is one that Marks implies when she defines “haptic criticism” as:

...a kind of criticism that assumes a tactile relation to one's object – touching, more than looking. The notion of the haptic is sometimes used in art to refer to a lack of visual depth, so that the eye travels on the surface of an object rather than moves into illusionistic depth. I prefer to describe haptic visuality as a kind of seeing that uses the eye like an organ of touch. Pre-Socratic philosophers thought of perception in terms of a contact between the perceived object and the person perceiving. Hence the haptic: looking, we touch the object with our eyes. This image might be a rather painful one, calling up raw, bruised eyeballs scraping against the brute stuff of the world. But I mean it to call up a way of seeing that does not posit a violent distance between the seer and the object, and hence cause pain when the two are brought together. In haptic visuality the contact can be as gentle as a caress. (Laura Marks, “Haptic Visuality: Touching with the Eyes”)

However, for Marks, this immediate touch upon the object is predicated on an empathetic transubstantiation, which she defines as “a form of representation based on getting close enough to the other thing to become it”, in which touch enables one to “[press] up to the object and takes its shape.” Similarly, the purpose of her haptic criticism, Marks notes, is to achieve some transfer of embodied knowledge: “My writing will be successful if you, the reader, can reconstitute in your own body the experience I had” ( xiii).

Marks, who fails to see the problem with assuming some knowledge of the other based on one's own experience of touch, embraces this "immediate access to the other" when she writes:

I don't believe in the alterity or ultimate unknowability of other things, people, and times. We all live on the same surface, the same skin. If others are unfathomable, it is because it takes an infinite number of folds to really reach them. Part of materialism, then, is celebrating the uniqueness of the other, (xii)

The implication here is that it is the separation of not-touching entailed by "an infinitude number of folds" that renders the other "unfathomable"; were one to somehow traverse that infinite continuity of skin and make contact with or touch the other, the other's "unfathomability" would diminish as its difference (one may even conceivably substitute "distance") was collapsed in the moment of contact or comprehension.

Not only is this transfer of experience an impossibility, based in the simple fact that any attempted reconstitution of the bodily experience had by another is always-already different, it is presupposed on the same "intuitionism of immediate access to the other" for which Derrida critiques Merleau-Ponty in *On Touching Jean-Luc Nancy* (190).

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<sup>23</sup> Cathy Hong Park offers a useful illustration of the impossibility of accessing this alterity eloquently in an essay for *Poetry Magazine* titled "Against Witness". Park, who reflects on the work of remembering and witness in Paul Celan and Doris Salcedo's poems, notes:

The actual presence of I, the viewer, is required to truly apprehend the absence of you, the Other...I cannot sit in your chair, eat at your table. I cannot open your dresser and touch your shirts that will trigger eidetic memories of a dance or late night walk. The proximity between you and me is infinite. (And what kind of proximity do I need to write as witness? Should I have experienced the event myself? If I watched the video, can I write about it? Do I have to be related to the victim? And what do you mean by relation?) I can never metabolize what you went through yet I cannot escape your disquieting sadness, the burden of your solitude. How it unfolds even when I leave this space. What has become of you? What could have gone through your mind? ( ).

Derrida accuses Merleau-Ponty of misinterpreting Husserl when Merleau-Ponty writes, “The reason why I have evidence of the other man's being-there when I shake his hand is that his hand is substituted for my left hand as allowing one to infer the touch of the other from simply seeing” (Merleau-Ponty *Signs* 186, Derrida 190). Derrida, who sees Husserl as being particularly insistent on the un-knowability of the other, similarly stresses that “It is necessary to watch over the other's alterity: it will always remain inaccessible to an originally presentive intuition, an immediate and direct presentation of the *here*,” critiquing the substitutive touch that enables one to “know” the other’s experience which underpins Marks’ claims for haptic criticism as well as her formulation of skin (Derrida 191).

In “Animal Voices,” Berssenbrugge takes care to distinguish the Nancian hearing she models, associated with the resonance of “vibrations” and “frequencies”, from a literal – and potentially substitutive – “touching”: “Days begin to skew slightly; we open to accident, though touching an animal differs from feeling vibrations of its spirit or thinking of it” (*Hello, the Roses* 3). As the following excerpt shows, Berssenbrugge is interested in a kind of “contact” that nevertheless averts the substitutive touch directly on the skin of the other, the kind other-accessing touch that Berssenbrugge’s “Honeymoon” invokes in order to critique: “The touch of coyote skin would sufficiently turn him into a mangy coyote, whereas if an animal dies and decays, he would be present as a scavenger” (*Empathy* 71).

In “Naturalism”, Berssenbrugge’s speaker invokes the touch of the hand as a metaphor for the reconnoitering of the speaker’s surroundings, a move which once again

plays with the dual notions of “feeling” as externally oriented sensory intake and “feeling” as psychological, affective interiority. The physical extension of the hands outwards becomes a way of accounting for both the otherness of the environment even as it hearkens back towards “personal experience”:

A feeling moves like a hand across the blue and white mountain range in bright sun, after/a plain of little white clouds breaks up. The agitation of personal experience was thought to becloud its intellectual content, when the mode of an act could be taken care of simply by the demands of the feeling-at-hand’s effort to unify the meaning of discontinuous affections, formally allusive to plains for unity... (38)

Berssenbrugge sets up an interesting parallel between these two prepositions – feeling “*like* a hand” and “feeling-at-hand”. If “feeling” is “like a hand” even as it is simultaneously “at hand” then what the poem seeks to draw near to is a kind of imminent auto-affection, the hand within reach of itself. Here, the move “to unify the meaning of discontinuous affections” again evokes the “resonance” of relational disjunction between “the part in common” and “what you mean” in “Dressing Up Our Pets”.

Similarly, her poem “The Doll” begins: “Discourse on death contains a rhetoric of borders. Shape delimits your right of absolute property, existence, tracing your traits as the border of what belongs to you” (*I Love Artists* 88). These lines do not exhort the Cartesian limitation of the body as border so much as they present this limitation as predicament for the subject:

You don’t have to touch the border to know how it feels, whether a napkin or a rose petal feels softer, the border between you, or the end of her life. Compare these in your mind, without locating the border or experiencing death, using a subtler sense of contact, subtlety that’s part of a thing. (88)

The poem's call for a "subtler sense of contact" points towards a different mode of relating to the other, one that locates subjectivity at a temporal surface of simultaneity: "She fades to the origin of the senses, variations of a person who both inhabits a ghost and co-habits with it, temporarily." (91) In fact, it is the direct, other-accessing substitutive touch itself that reifies this "rhetoric of borders", as she writes later in the poem: "We're the other for this boundary. It occurs through physical contact, like a part detailed as the whole, as if a series of frames were the same as movement." (90)

In "Honeymoon", Berssenbrugge associates this "contact" with an encounter between "feeling" (as either "sensing" or "emotion") and "thought":

*She* is not the name of a person, nor *there* of a place, but they are connected with names. There is a way of traveling by rotating an orientation, while she remains within herself. He moves his hand across the shadow, and it tints delicate skin on the back of his hand. He has a doll in his mind on which he can predict what she will be feeling, as if he would not touch the doll, until her actual feeling would make contact with the object of his thought. (*Empathy* 61)

The significance of touch, thus situated by Berssenbrugge's movement between thought and "feeling", now becomes easier to identify throughout her poem "Hearing", particularly with respect to the way it defines places and spaces. The poem continues on from my earlier reading: "The loved one's face radiates a secret the lover touches and distributes to all the places of a stone, bruised foot, barrier for an insect, dirt occupied by its shadow, like a cut ornament." The "touch" of the lover – not on the "face" of of the "loved one" but upon the "secret" it radiates - is echoed in the stone's various touch-defined encounters and roles, which themselves are equated to "places" – "bruised foot," "barrier for an insect, dirt occupied by its shadow". This "touch" is "a condition of composition", a prerequisite for the proliferation and fluidity of "possible forms;" it is

also a way of extending the haptic experience of intimacy between lover and beloved to the relationality between other objects in the world. This kind of touch is invoked once more in her poem “Kisses from the Moon”: “My hearing touches limit on all sides, a community exposed...“Now, I know better; community’s not meant to protect me; it’s exposure to others, a window” (*I Love Artists* 111).

### **Resonance**

For both Nancy and Berssenbrugge, resonance recuperates both the auto-affective sensing of touch and sound as the self’s encountering of its own difference (an encountering always in the middle of happening and not a static moment of self-actualization). For Nancy, the following definition of resonance is actually essential to – and intimately intertwined with – his theorizing of skin in *Corpus*: “...skin stretched over its own sonorous cavity...is not a ‘figure’ for rhythmic timbre, but it is its very pace, it is my body beaten by its sense of body, what we used to call its soul” (44).

The “contained” hollowness which this description suggests at first read could easily be taken for the shell of the Cartesian subject, divested of its kernel of presence. While Nancy’s language of containment here (“skin stretched” and “cavity”) does appear to suggest a physical modelling which opposes the exterior of the skin to an interiorized self, a closer reading of this description, however, reveals that he invokes it in order to dispel that very modelling.

Resonance, then, for Nancy, is the epidermal as “skin-event,” the self-constitution through sensing that he perceives as fundamental to the participatory “spacing” out of community (15). Nancy re-thinks skin and resonance together – not as discrete enclosure

of self, a representative of the body in turn representing the soul's indwelling, but as temporal unfolding – gesturing towards the advent of a body that “opens up and closes at the same time”, “in which the noise of its sharing (with itself, with others) resounds,” whose absolute opening onto the world “arranges itself and exposes itself with others” (*Listening* 41).

The scientific definition of resonance in physics is “a sound or vibration produced in one object that is caused by the sound or vibration produced in another” (*Merriam-Webster*). Berssenbrugge's poems invoke – yet do not remain confined to – this scientific dimension of “resonance”, repurposing it as a mode capable of accounting for the quantification of sensory experience as well the “frequencies” of emotions towards the different “system” of the other.

David Wills explains that “...there exists in scientific terms a type of sensorial indistinction, at least between hearing and touch, once it comes down to the molecular level. Both are responses to types of force; both are quantifiable by means of the same physical parameter that measures force, namely the dyne” (75). While they do not specifically invoke the dyne, Berssenbrugge's poem demonstrate a similar concern with the shared scientific qualities of hearing and touch through their references to vibrations and frequencies, and which they synthesize into the figure of “resonance”.

In her interview with Klein, Berssenbrugge reflects:

I try to expand a field by dissolving polarities or dissolving the borders between one thing and another. Sometimes I think it's because I'm from one culture—I was born in Beijing—and grew up in another. I've tried to feminize scientific language, to make continua between emotion and thought, between the concrete and abstract. Lately, my interest is in quantum physics and in vibrational energy,



where matter can be seen as condensed light. Looking back, I see that all my poems are written with an intimate voice that's also an instrument for dissolving borders.

Berssenbrugge expands this figuring of resonance as a theoretically useful mode of accounting for the difference (disjunction) between self and other – even between self and non-human other or between the non-human others or environment of the natural world. In “Glitter”, for example, the incommensurability of “person” and “violet” causes “resonance”: “Person and violet with so little in common my voice reveals as a resonance of unmanifest identity” (*Hello, the Roses* 47). In “Green,” the difference is between two natural elements – “blue mountain” and “yellow air” – but also evokes “the resonance of disjunction”: “I’m interested in the resonance of disjunction, of one thing next to another, blue mountain at sunset and yellow air” (45).

This “resonance of disjunction” is associated with an auto-affective touching in “Dressing Up Our Pets,” In her poem “Dressing Up Our Pets”, in which the speaker analogizes relationality to the experience of self-touch: “So, you think his song caused your sad feeling, like your hand touching your hand” (104), and again, “If I stay here and you mean something, the part in common is disjunct from what you mean, like my hands touching.” (105) The “part in common”, presumably referring to some kind of overlap between the presence of the “I” and the communication meant by the “you,” is immediately contrasted to a “[disjunction]” between “the part in common” and “what you mean.”

In “Her Calendar,” Berssenbrugge echoes this association of emotional, intimate “feeling” and the physical act of sensing by way of resonance: “Here on the mesa, feeling

became a resonating frequency in my body waking me at night, as if through a series of vibrating lenses.” (65) “Glitter” continues to flesh out the role of “vibration” in structuring relationality: “What you call feeling, like connective tissue or vibrating lines between us, represents this vitality./And I prefer the term vitality to time.” (50) Her poem “Slow Down, Now” is even more explicit about the link between vibrations/frequencies and encounters with others: “When my fluctuating electromagnetic field touches that of another person, plant or entity, emotion is my perception of data encoded in that field”, and again, “High frequency animal noise is presence; discontinuity of hearing and future alternates across gaps as variations in cone purples formerly thought of as gradual from tadpole or imago” (54, 39). Resonance, in Berssenbrugge’s ec(h)opoetics, makes the “presence” of the world as other and “discontinuity” compatible.

## **Conclusion**

In my previous chapter, I suggested that Hong and Yau’s use of animal and robotic/cyborg voices indict the use of normative speech as an exclusive signifier of the human, particularly with regard to the racialization of the Asiatic body. This chapter extends and reconfigures the previous chapter’s interest in othering and the non-human by interrogating the alignment of surface with body as exterior, in which the body functions as a border containing the human “subject” as soul and separating it from an environment of others (which, Berssenbrugge’s poems insist, includes self and environment *as* other).

By rethinking touch and hearing as moments of resonant encounters in which the self is constituted, Berssenbrugge rejects the privileged perspective of the human,

opening the lyric “I” of her poems onto other and environment. I argue that Berssenbrugge’s performance of an ecopoetic subjectivity in her poems opens up the possibility of deconstructing a Cartesian bodily paradigm by manifesting an alterity that can account for – and preserve – radical otherness, human and otherwise. This irresolute aporia between a human interiority and an environmental exteriority has significant implications for theories of alterity when the body is understood as being precisely the “closed unity structurally open to the environment” that Skinner describes. My use of the term “ec(h)opoetics” to apply to Berssenbrugge’s work is meant to denote the way her poems vacillate between a thematic ecopoetics and a theoretical and formal echopoetics, embodying a resonance that de-interiorizes the subjects represented in their poems and delimits the body as boundary between human and nature, the ultimate other. This recuperation of the ultimate otherness of the natural world offers us a reworking of alterity, one that has significant stakes for and beyond the theorizing of racial difference.

## CHAPTER 4 – AMBIENCE AND THE AUNT: MUZAK, SIMULATING ASSIMILATION AND THEORIZING THE TV IN TAN LIN’S *INSOMNIA AND THE AUNT*

In this chapter I explore how an understanding of ambient music’s aims can help us read Lin’s *Insomnia and the Aunt*. I attempt to show how the mediating form of the TV screen brings the visual stakes of racial othering to the fore and reveals the characters’ assimilation into an “Americanness” as a kind of hyperreal simulation. Finally, I suggest that boredom, distraction, and relaxation are not only modes of encountering the reproduced links of identity and kinship through the TV but are themselves the very manifestations of an ambient racial melancholia, one which Lin’s poetics reworks not so much by grappling with “lost” ideals of whiteness but by feigning an “authenticity” that he tempts the reader towards even as he exposes it as overtly “fake”.

### **History and Definitions of Ambient Music**

In the early 1920’s, George Owen Squier found a way to transmit music over electrical lines. He received several patents for his discoveries in 1934 and officially founded the company Muzak, which provided background music to spaces in commercial business, such as waiting areas for doctor’s offices, various means of transit, factories, and retail stores,. Initially, Muzak sourced its offerings by commissioning original recordings from the top artists of the decade. With the company’s acquisition by Warner Brothers in 1937, however, came a different strategy. Under Warner Brothers, Muzak began implementing a technique called “Stimulus Progression” in its curation and modification of its music. “Stimulus Progression” took an overtly functional approach

towards structuring its music, recording with its own orchestra so as to control the instrumentation and rhythm and strategically alternating the music with silence in order to reduce listener fatigue. These manipulations were meant to achieve particular desired effects on its listeners, whether that was one of “relaxation” or “productivity”. However, these manipulations were not meant to draw attention to themselves. As an employee of Muzak noted, “If a song grabs your attention or in any way offends – for example ‘Jesus Christ Superstar’ – we are not doing our job. We want people to hear but not to listen” (Murphy 1). “A popular tune is selected – say the theme for ‘The Godfather’ – rewritten to Muzak’s specifications, filtering out highs and lows or anything that might catch people’s attention, and recorded in studios in Los Angeles, New York and Germany. The bland, middle of the road (M-O-R) music, which is jazzy but not jazz, and which tamely rocks but is not rock, is somewhere to the right of Andy Williams – the king of M-O-R” (1).

Muzak retained its popularity through the 1960’s, becoming so famous for its product that its company brand name, like others such as the “Band-Aid,” “Kleenex,” and “White-Out”, became the catch-all name that referred to all like products, such as “elevator music” (which, somewhat ironically, Muzak never produced). For a company whose music was meant to be as unobtrusive as possible, however, it certainly raised its fair share of public suspicion, particularly with regard to its claim of sending subconscious messages, which led to accusations of “brainwashing”. An 1974 newspaper article in the *Milwaukee Journal* titled “Muzak makers hope you don’t hear the manipulating” provides the following quote from Bob Willard, Muzak’s marketing vice

president: “So on Friday we play tunes to slow people down because they are wound up. On Mondays we want to pick them up because they are down. We are playing games with people. That’s really what we are doing. I hate to use the expression, but we are human engineers. Gee that wouldn’t look good in print” (Murphy 1).

Eventually, however, it could be argued that people found its canned, bland quality even more objectionable than any charges of brainwashing. Rocker Ted Nugent went so far as to make a public \$10 million bid in 1986 to purchase Muzak so he could shut it down. Beyond individual musicians’ disdain for Muzak, the company suffered a decline in the general popularity of its services over the course of the 1970’s, a decline that was reflected in its increasing debt and lagging sales, culminating in its filing for bankruptcy in 2009. (The company has since been acquired by Mood Media in 2011.) Even as Muzak had already ascended past popularity and was falling out of fashion, however, composer and theorist Brian Eno was repurposing its functionality in a different way. Eno, while not technically its pioneer, is arguably the most prominent ambient music visionary to date.<sup>24</sup> Eno first began exploring ambient music after an accident left him bedridden and unable to get out of bed to change the volume of a harp piece that was playing in his hospital room<sup>25</sup>. The following liner notes from Eno’s *Music for Airports*, which I have reproduced, show his attempts to distinguish his work from Muzak:

The concept of music designed specifically as a background feature in the environment was pioneered by Muzak Inc. in the fifties, and has since come to be known generically by the term Muzak. The connotations that this term carries are

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<sup>24</sup> While “ambient music” did not originate with Eno – he was preceded by other groups like Popol Vuh – his work on ambience is most widely known, quite likely as a result of the broad range of musical genres and pop groups he has had contact with as a producer. (cite)

<sup>25</sup> (<http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/11731-discreet-musicambient-1-music-for-airportsambient-2-the-plateaux-of-mirror-with-harold-buddambient-4-on-land/>)

those particularly associated with the kind of material that Muzak Inc. produces - familiar tunes arranged and orchestrated in a lightweight and derivative manner. Understandably, this has led most discerning listeners (and most composers) to dismiss entirely the concept of environmental music as an idea worthy of attention.

Over the past three years, I have become interested in the use of music as ambience, and have come to believe that it is possible to produce material that can be used thus without being in any way compromised. To create a distinction between my own experiments in this area and the products of the various purveyors of canned music, I have begun using the term Ambient Music. (n.p.)

Though Muzak was created with more commercial aspirations in mind while Eno took a more avant-garde approach to his experiments, both Muzak and Eno's definitions of "ambient music" are predicated on the same particular understanding of "ambience". As Thomas Rickert notes, *ambience* derives from the Latin *ambientem*, the present participle of the verb *ambire*, and in its most common usage, refers to "what is lying around, surrounding, encircling, encompassing, or environing" (5). Eno echoes this general definition of "ambience" when he writes:

An ambience is defined as an atmosphere, or a surrounding influence: a tint. My intention is to produce original pieces ostensibly (but not exclusively) for particular times and situations with a view to building up a small but versatile catalogue of environmental music suited to a wide variety of moods and atmospheres.

Whereas the extant canned music companies proceed from the basis of regularizing environments by blanketing their acoustic and atmospheric idiosyncracies, Ambient Music is intended to enhance these. Whereas conventional background music is produced by stripping away all sense of doubt and uncertainty (and thus all genuine interest) from the music, Ambient Music retains these qualities. And whereas their intention is to 'brighten' the environment by adding stimulus to it (thus supposedly alleviating the tedium of

routine tasks and levelling out the natural ups and downs of the body rhythms)  
Ambient Music is intended to induce calm and a space to think.

For all his efforts to distinguish his own work from Muzak, Eno's injunctions here place it quite firmly in the same camp: "Ambient Music must be able to accommodate many levels of listening attention without enforcing one in particular; it must be as ignorable as it is interesting."<sup>26</sup>

In this sense, "ambient music" fundamentally involves a mediation of the relationship between environment/space/architecture (one could say "background," or "context" per Morton's description) and some activity, text, or subject that might otherwise occupy a more conventional "foreground". Both "ambient music" and Lin's "ambient poetics" appear to share the term's first definition in that they both aim to efface perceptual distinctions between background and foreground. Like ambient music, Lin's poetics, constructed out of the elaboration of the relaxation formats like the TV,

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Even as Eno attempts to explain how his own work is distinct from Muzak, his work inadvertently nods to it via its own association with the work of Erik Satie, who experimented earlier with aurally mediating spaces of social activity. In a way, Muzak was the more overtly consumeristic manifestation of ideas about functional, regulatory music that the American and French avant-garde had already been exploring for a few decades. Satie's coining of the term "furniture music" (*musique d'ameublement*) predates Muzak by thirty or forty years. Satie composed five short pieces to which he applied this title, with each piece's title specifying a particular room, purpose, and occasion for its performance; Tapestry in forged iron - for the arrival of the guests (grand reception) - to be played in a vestibule - Movement: Very rich). The composer wrote of his ambitions to create

a music which is like furniture – a music, that is, which will be part of the noises of the environment, will take them into consideration. I think of it as melodious, softening the noises of the knives and forks at dinner, not dominating them, not imposing itself. It would fill up those heavy silences that sometimes fall between friends dining together. It would spare them the trouble of paying attention to their own banal remarks. And at the same time it would neutralize the street noises which so indiscreetly enter into the play of conversation. To make such music would be to respond to a need.

Given this description, Satie's work could very well be found guilty of Eno's charge against Muzak of "blanketing [environments'] acoustic and atmospheric idiosyncracies"; a charge which actually is not necessarily negative and that somewhat redoubles back onto Eno's own work. Like Muzak, Satie's "furniture music" does not seek to "dominate" or "impose" but seeks to be "[heard] but not [listened to]".



Internet, and book, creates an ambient reading environment, in which the foregrounded individual personhood of first person experience (the aunt) is dissolved by her equation to her surroundings (“a place called Concrete”).

In an interview with Chris Alexander, Kristen Gallagher, and Gordon Tapper, Lin outlines some of his ambitions for *HEATH/plagiarism/outsorce*, a text which recreates within itself some digital forms of the Web, as does *Insomnia and the Aunt*. Though these texts could certainly be classified as experimental in its play across multiple genres, Lin distances his work from an aesthetics of “shock” that characterizes another strain of the avant-garde:

Here I would say that the project is about a softer, ambient avant-garde that works against radical disjuncture or the montage/shock effect, and perhaps the most shocking effect is that of the author (in relation to his/her own or somebody else’s textual material). These effects seem dated to a specific period of the historical avant-garde or the neo avant-garde, and I wanted to question some of these assumptions with work that might be relaxing, boring, absorptive, sampled freely and without effort, easy, etc. This kind of textual material is appealing for reasons specific to particular text production and distribution formats. In other words, I didn’t want this to be avant-garde, I wanted YOU or me or her to read it like web surfing, or a mash up or something we do all day long, or like Pepys’ *Diary*. (n.p.)

Lin identifies a kind of intensity that acts as a formal convention/marker of a particular avant-garde in order to turn away from it and emphasizes instead the “relaxing, boring, absorptive, sampled freely and without effort, easy, etc.” Collectively, they suggest a kind of reading practice that embodies the antithesis of “difficulty”, one which would suit the reading of “a piece of low-level durational energy,” as Lin has characterized his *Seven Controlled Vocabularies (7CV)*. Lin’s grouping of these terms, which are not necessarily interchangeable with each other, explicitly suggests a relation between “relaxation” and “boredom” as characteristics of an ambient stylistics, one whose ability

to be “sampled freely and without effort” once again counters the notion of authenticity, here with regard to authorship in particular.

The search engine queries of *Insomnia and the Aunt*, which appear as footnotes in oblique relation to the musings on television in the “main” text, could be thought to model such a reading practice, exploring how Lin uses keywords, as well as linguistic lacunae like ellipses and elisions, to comment on the link between aura, affect, and the reproducibility of performance entailed by television. This second reading, aligned with Jerome McGann’s notion of texts as “autopoietic mechanisms operating as self-generating feedback systems that cannot be separated from those who manipulate and use them,” not only suggests a cyborgian reconceptualization of subjectivity (in which the human and the tool cease to be distinguished from one another) but raises the question of what changes in reader perception if/when television and its interface ceases to be thought exclusively as medium and becomes thought also as genre (15). What follows, then, is a reading of the interface of *Insomnia and the Aunt* as a televisual text whose ambience has the effect of inducing either boredom, the uneasy discomfort of a soporific “relaxation,” or a distracted conscription into the unquestioning acceptance of commercialized taste (as Adorno feared).

However, there is another, less well-known definition of ambience, one which I suggest is not incompatible with what Muzak and Eno take it to be:

*Audio.* The acoustic quality of a particular environment, as reproduced in a recording; *spec.* a sense of some specific or individual atmosphere, esp. an impression of live performance, created or enhanced by recording techniques (such as added reverberation), or by the presence of background noise. (*OED*)

The common ground between this more obscure definition of ambience and the former, more well-known one may not be immediately evident. However, considering this “impression” or “illusion” of liveness conveyed through sound raises the question: what is it about “background noise” that gives the “sense” of liveness? The “authenticity” which these sounds artificially lend to a recording come from these sounds’ unexpectedness, their ability to signal their seeming unintentionality. In other words, a recording sounds “live” if there are sounds in it that the listener does not categorize within the anticipated surroundings and that exceed the auditory parameters of the performed work.

Unlike Eno’s manifesto on “Ambient Music”, Lin’s essay titled “Ambient Stylistics” does not explicitly lay out a definition of what an “ambient stylistics” is, or what it hopes to accomplish; however, it recounts a narrative that I suggest can be understood as “ambient” in both the previously mentioned definitions, in that it both conveys a setting/mood and presents seemingly extraneous information that contributes to its sense of “liveness” or authenticity. The essay details the journey and personal musings of a narrator, who, like the narrator of *Insomnia and the Aunt*, goes out west to visit an aunt (half-Chinese in “Ambient Stylistics” and Chinese in *Insomnia*), who owns a motel. In the middle of describing the operations of the aunt’s motel, the narrator interjects an account of a romantic relationship with a woman who speaks multiple languages, but who “could lie best in English, because it was not her favorite language and was most free in it but when she was in bed with someone she preferred to make the sounds of endearment and physical longing in Chinese”. This account of the (ultimately

severed) relationship itself becomes interlaced with recollections of the narrator's father, and ultimately concludes with a return to the logistics of the aunt's motel ("Everybody needs to lie to someone. As I was saying, the rooms at the Big Bear Park rent for \$37 a night.").

Like John Yau and Marilyn Chin, Lin is interested in destabilizing this notion of "authenticity" and calling essentialist constructions of identity into question. In "Ambient Stylistics," Lin does this by overlaying the concept of "lying" onto itself, such that the reader is forced to contend with the question of whether lying about lying constitutes telling the truth, and whether lying about lying about lying is the real lie. "One night I remember she had told me she was a virgin. I knew she was not really lying because she was lying to me in my favorite language, which is English because it is the only one that I really possess as a language to imagine things in, and because I have always thought that she is probably one of those persons that can only lie well over the phone. I continue to believe to this day that she was a terrible liar in person, although I am probably lying to myself..." This constant switchback frames this personal narrative and its poignant depictions of an interlingual mediation of love and kinship, silhouetting a very real affect against the backdrop of a very likely made-up personal narrative.

In this other sense of "ambient", *Insomnia and the Aunt* gives off an illusion of "liveness," an illusion which is honest about its imitative qualities ("liveness" being, in Lin's aesthetics, the extraneous details that give a recounted story the quality of an authentic memory/actual experience having happened to the individual narrator).

This liveness – which I suggest parallels the notion of a narrative “original version” of events, in which present temporality authenticates individual experience – is called into question by Lin’s presentation of Asian American identity in *Insomnia and the Aunt* as a kind of “hyperreality”, one which elicits an unconventional racial melancholia from the narrator and his aunt.

### **Racial Melancholia in *Insomnia and the Aunt***

Freud’s well-known *Mourning and Melancholia* describes the origin-process of melancholia as the malfunctioning of a subject’s attachment to another person as object: An object-choice, an attachment of the libido to a particular person, had at one time existed; then, owing to a real slight or disappointment coming from this loved person, the object-relationship was shattered. The result was not the normal one of a withdrawal of the libido from this object and a displacement of it on to a new one, but something different, for whose coming-about various conditions seem to be necessary. (248-249)

In *The Melancholy of Race*, Anne Anlin Cheng maps this object-relationship onto the relationship between a white America and its racial others. Cheng writes:

On the one side, white American identity and its authority is secured through the melancholic introjection of racial others that it can neither fully relinquish nor accommodate and whose ghostly presence nonetheless guarantees its centrality. On the other side, the racial other (the so-called melancholic object) also suffers from racial melancholia whereby his or her racial identity is imaginatively reinforced through the introjection of a lost, never-possible perfection, an inarticulable loss that comes to inform the individual's sense of his or her own subjectivity. (xi)

Freud’s theorizing of the object-relationship, however, can also be mapped on to the relationship between the racial other and a particular ideal of self. In their study of Asian American identity and melancholia, David Eng and Shinhee Han write:

Melancholia describes an unresolved process...to describe the unstable immigration and suspended assimilation of Asian Americans into the national fabric. This suspended assimilation...suggests that, for Asian Americans, ideals of whiteness are continually estranged. They remain at an unattainable distance, at once compelling fantasy and a lost ideal. (*A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia* 345)

However, *Insomnia and the Aunt*, I suggest, takes a different estranged ideal as its object: a “hyperreal” signifying of Asian American identity that grapples with the incommensurability between the performance of a “false” or “borrowed” identity and a sense of “authenticity” that its performers know does not exist. Furthermore, the terms of this “loss” are complicated in *Insomnia and the Aunt* because the text destabilizes the “authenticity” in such a way that the loss of this performed fake “identity” appears to always be “not one’s own”.

Freud writes:

The distinguishing mental features of melancholia are a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment. (244)

While Freud defines general melancholia as a psychic state of intense grief with extreme symptoms, racial melancholia, as Cheng argues, “serves not as a description of the feeling of a group of people but as a theoretical model of identity that provides a critical framework for analyzing the constitutive role that grief plays in racial/ethnic subject-formation” (xi). In *Insomnia and the Aunt*, “boredom,” “relaxation”, and “distraction” are not symptomatic of a deeper racial melancholia; rather they are the very effects of routing racial difference through the ambient medium of the TV such that canned representations of that difference create a kind of “hyperreality”.

Here I turn to the following passage by Michael McKeon in *Theory of the Novel: A Historical Approach* on the transmission of storytelling to draw out several aspects of Lin's work. The text, though not by appearances aware of or addressing itself to *Insomnia and the Aunt*, can be read with a double meaning such that it is both a mostly straightforward accounting of memory's relation to storytelling even as it also perfectly captures the relationship between "storytelling" as the anti-essentialist "lying" of Lin's essay, "assimilation" as a cause of racial melancholia, and the Internet, the "web in which the gift of storytelling is cradled":

There is nothing that commends a story to memory more effectively than that chaste compactness which precludes psychological analysis. And the more natural the process by which the storyteller forgoes psychological shading, the greater becomes the story's claim to a place in the memory of the listener, the more completely is it integrated into his own experience, the greater will be his inclination to repeat it to someone else someday, sooner or later. This process of assimilation, which takes place in depth, requires a state of relaxation which is becoming rarer and rarer. If sleep is the apogee of physical relaxation, boredom is the apogee of mental relaxation . . . For storytelling is always the art of repeating stories, and this art is lost when the stories are no longer retained. It is lost because there is no more weaving and spinning to go on while they are being listened to. The more self-forgetful the listener is, the more deeply is what he listens to impressed upon his memory. When the rhythm of work has seized him, he listens to the tales in such a way that the gift of retelling them comes to him all by itself. This, then, is the nature of the web in which the gift of storytelling is cradled. This is how today it is becoming unraveled at all its ends after being woven thousands of years ago in the ambience of the oldest forms of craftsmanship. (82)

Both the actual content of McKeon's passage, as well as my willful double reading of it, are intrinsically relevant to *Insomnia and the Aunt*'s preoccupations with memory as the content of personal experience and the forms of the consumer's sensory relationship to media. At a fundamental level, McKeon's passage embodies the hyperreality of growing up Chinese-American in that it invokes the transmission of stories from one individual's

memory to another. When McKeon writes, “This process of assimilation, which takes place in depth, requires a state of relaxation which is becoming rarer and rarer. If sleep is the apogee of physical relaxation, boredom is the apogee of mental relaxation,” he means the psychological assimilation of a foreign story into one’s own “memory” such that it becomes “integrated into one’s own experience”, such that one could be inclined to “repeat” one’s own memory of a story that didn’t originate with oneself. This understanding of “assimilation” with regard to memory resonates with *Insomnia and the Aunt*’s gestures, however subtle, to the memory of a China and an immigration experience that the non-lyric narrator only has ties to through his parents, aunt and uncle’s recountings, if only to point out the persistent failure of this assimilation of memory to become part of the the narrator’s “own experience”.

It is, of course, also “assimilation” as the overcoming of both linguistic and cultural difference. As the following passage shows, Lin ties these understandings of “assimilation” together within the framework of a kinship characterized by an always-not-yet comprehension:

As any linguist can tell you, it is possible to read a thing without being able to speak it and it is possible to speak a thing without knowing what it is, and this is in fact how many people learn their second and third languages, which they suddenly hear, as if for the first time, when the meanings to words pronounced for hours in a classroom are delivered by a dictionary into an understanding. And this is how my aunt’s understanding of her life in America was arrived at, as a delay in the speed of an understanding. In my aunt’s case, this delay was a place called Concrete. In mine, it was an aunt. (n.p.)

Relaxation and boredom in *Insomnia and the Aunt*, as McKeon’s formulation helps articulate, signal a self-forgetting that is necessary for acquiring “the gift of storytelling”. This “gift of storytelling” entails the repetition of memories that may or



may not be “authentic” in that they do not originate with the narrator and may or may not be true. Furthermore, it is “cradled in [the web]” of digital and broadcast networks, meta-forms, which

...in other words, serve as a kind of informational survival strategy, a way of filtering or managing the ‘overload’ of images, sounds and data that make up contemporary media cultures. Through these forms, viewers and consumers attempt to maintain a sense of control over the burgeoning world of media and information culture”. (Rutsky 281)

In the section “Seventh Preface 2003” of *Seven Controlled Vocabularies and Obituary 2004*, Lin remarks,

Literature should be an elaboration of relaxation formats, sensory deprivation and disordered or arbitrary input that has been channeled or reduced to non-stimuli. Thus, after relaxation or sensory deprivation is induced the following forms might be hallucinated because they are utterly redundant. The brain is the great averager. It knows how to program its own boredom. (n.p.)

The immediate thing to note here is the word “should” and the freedom it leaves for Lin’s writing to either embody or eschew this post-medium (which is possibly more of a hyper-multi-medium) kind of non-signifying “input” and yet still make a gesture towards it. The second subtlety of Lin’s description where *Insomnia and the Aunt* is concerned is that “an elaboration of relaxation formats” ironically does not necessarily imply “relaxing to read”; on the contrary, there’s a way in which *Insomnia and the Aunt* could be read as adhering to the former without at all being relaxing.

In a *Jacket2* article on Lin’s *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, Kristen Gallagher remarks that

...the suggestive nature of the content not only plays on our habits of reading but consistently tempts us to lapse into those habits...The reader is invited to ‘read’ autobiography, to lapse into that comfortable pleasure, but is also given the opportunity to begin thinking about the triggers that evoke “autobiography” and

why even the most trained readers are so susceptible to its codes. (“Cooking a Book”)

In order to situate this “invitation towards autobiography”, I return again to Morton’s essay, in which he posits a redefinition of “personhood”:

One may pose differently the question of the distinction between person and environment: what if people were more like environments? If James Lovelock noted that the weather worked like a person (Lovelock 1-12), why not imagine a person as being like the weather? In other words, perhaps one might deconstruct personhood into ambience, atmosphere, surroundings, dwelling, environment. . . This would provide a more appropriate philosophical view (I am reluctant to say "ontological foundation") for a deep ecology, an ecology that could assume that a politics of the environment must be coterminous with a change in the view of those who exist in/as that environment. A poetry that articulated the person as environment would not invert anthropocentrism into "ecocentrism," it would thoroughly undo the notion of a center.

It is important here to recount Lin’s (auto)biographies not only because like Berssenbrugge, his identity as an Asian American writer is not as frequently discussed, but because in a way, these narratives of his life history are intimately tied to the hyperreality of a simulated assimilation in his work. Tan Lin was born in Seattle in 1957; his mother and father, who immigrated from China, were an English professor and a ceramist respectively, and his sister, Maya Lin, would eventually go on to design the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Lin’s work spans a wide array of genres and mediums, from Powerpoints like *Bibliographic Sound Track* to performance pieces like *Chalk Playground/LitTwitChalk*. His texts, in addition to embodying a genre-refusing plurality of forms, remain in flux and challenge normative conventions of authorship and reading, as his continual revisions of works like *Seven Controlled Vocabularies* and *HEATH* show.

Earlier this year, Lin published a piece in *The Brooklyn Rail* called “A False Accounting”, which functions as part autobiography, part family memoir of sorts. (In true keeping with Lin’s commitment to the idea of family as a “sort of an ongoing affair with blurry temporal markers”, the piece is categorized under “Fiction”.) The piece proceeds backwards in time from the narrator’s experience of sorting through his parents’ belongings after their deaths, recounting the way that their family relationships were constellated in particular by such interests of his father as used cars and wrestling. One passage notes:

To my father, wrestling was real. To my sister and me, in the 70’s, when we were both in our teens, the line between fact and fiction, between adolescence and adulthood, or between the real lives of the wrestlers in the ring and the law of kayfabe, which is the theatrical portrayal of things in the ring as “real” i.e. not of a “worked” nature, was similar to the line between a Chinese family in America that watched fake wrestling and a Chinese-American family that did not. In other words, the line between faked American wrestling and being Chinese in America was ambiguous, just as real adult life was delayed by something faked, which in the case of my sister and me was the large, mostly forgotten expanses of a quasi-Chinese childhood, most of which did not end till after our parents’ deaths. In other words, Maya and I had American childhoods that were mostly made up, with the help of various documents and photo albums, some of which were also made up.

Lin’s reflections call up Jean Baudrillard’s theorizing of simulacra and the hyperreal, in which Baudrillard observes that “The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth--it is the truth which conceals that there is none” (“Simulacra and Simulations”). Baudrillard’s claims that “Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal” is paralleled in Lin’s figuring of the kitschy theatricality of “kayfabe” as a faked production that generates something else “fake” - in this case,

“American childhoods” - something “made up” that generates another “made up” identity. Baudrillard describes the “hyperreality” that this chain of generative falsehoods produces:

The real is produced from miniaturized units, from matrices, memory banks and command models - and with these it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times. It no longer has to be rational, since it is no longer measured against some ideal or negative instance. It is nothing more than operational. In fact, since it is no longer enveloped by an imaginary, it is no longer real at all. It is a hyperreal: the product of an irradiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere.

Assimilation for the racialized subjects of *Insomnia and the Aunt*, I suggest, can be thought of as such a hyperreal experience, in which the incommensurability between the performance of a “false” or “borrowed” identity and a sense of “authenticity” that one knows does not exist leads to a kind of melancholia. At the same time, this melancholia in *Insomnia and the Aunt* manifests itself as boredom, relaxation, and distraction, all of which are the ideal effects of ambient music and TV. Peter Toohey points out in *Melancholy, Love and Time: Boundaries of the Self in Ancient Literature* that early Greek and Latin terminology for “boredom” is not consistent; however, as he notes, the most accurately representative term would be something like *alus*, or “being other to oneself,” “grief-stricken,” “distracted” (106).

Like McKeon’s pairing of “relaxation” and “boredom”, Toohey’s paratactic linking of these three drastically different definitions paints a particular kind racial melancholia that pervades the ambient stylistics of *Insomnia and the Aunt*. In a *New York Times* sampler of her writings, Sontag files the following thoughts under the heading “Art is Boring”:

People say “it’s boring” — as if that were a final standard of appeal, and no work of art had the right to bore us. But most of the interesting art of our time is boring. Jasper Johns is boring. Beckett is boring, Robbe-Grillet is boring. Etc. Etc. Maybe art has to be boring, now. (This doesn’t mean that boring art is necessarily good — obviously.) We should not expect art to entertain or divert anymore. At least, not high art. Boredom is a function of attention. We are learning new modes of attention — say, favoring the ear more than the eye— but so long as we work within the old attention-frame we find X boring ... e.g. listening for sense rather than sound (being too message-oriented). Possibly after repetition of the same single phrase or level of language or image for a long while — in a given written text or piece of music or film, if we become bored, we should ask if we are operating in the right frame of attention. Or — maybe we are operating in *one* right frame, where we should be operating in two simultaneously, thus halving the load on each (as sense *and* sound).

Sontag’s characterization of boredom as a mode of reception dovetails with other scholars’ characterizations of ambient music and ambient poetry’s effects. Morton delineates three aspects of ambient poetry: it minimizes signification, it involves the medium of communication becoming the message, and it involves contact as content (“Twinkle Twinkle Little Star”)<sup>27</sup>. In her move to recuperate “boredom” from its vilification, Sontag draws out a few distinctive traits of boredom as a mode of reception: it is a “function of attention,” it occurs often in instances of repetition over a long period of duration, and it is more prone to happen within one sensory frame of perception. It is a difficult move to make, however, and Sontag’s provocative opening claim that “most of the interesting art of our time is boring” fails to escape the centrifugal pull of perceiving “boredom” as a problem (one which can be solved by attending to multiple sensory dimensions) by the end of this short passage.

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<sup>27</sup> Morton arrives at these three qualities of ambient poetry via a reading of “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star” as Romantic lullaby, focusing on illocutionary statements, which as he points out, are context specific.

*Insomnia and the Aunt* recuperates boredom much more completely via its meta-forms of the TV, Internet, and book than Sontag's description here does. In an interview with Lin, David Foote has remarked of the text that

Technology serves as a tool for the integration and navigation of family relationships in *Insomnia and the Aunt*. It serves as a way of blocking out chunks of time or remembering each other's company, allowing family members to be bored in each other's company and thus coexist. ("Your Closest Relative is a TV Set")

I posit Erich Fromm's characterization of boredom from *The Pathology of Normalcy* alongside Foote's in order to suggest that while the technology of the TV and Internet serves as a means of enabling a kind of kinship through "boredom", that kinship of "boredom" is also tied to the melancholia of racial difference, the transmission of experiences of racialization:

I would say that boredom is perhaps the word for a more normal average experience, which in pathology would be called depression and melancholia. Boredom is the average state of melancholia, whereas melancholia is the pathological state of boredom that one finds in certain individuals. (60)

Boredom, as a byproduct of Lin routing the family relationships of *Insomnia and the Aunt* through the medium of the TV, is not only an effect of ambience, it's a condition of connectivity, one which may seem low-stakes, but in fact is the very form of the grief over being "other to oneself" that the racialized subject, who is always already made aware of its own difference, experiences. In Lin's aesthetics, boredom, along with the ambient effects of distraction and relaxation, undermines the "authenticity" of the emotional affect that one might attribute to narratives of the immigrant family, even as this affect remains compelling to readers despite its almost fictional nature. In an interview with Lin, Katherine Elaine Sanders asks regarding *SCV*, "While providing a

relaxing environment, it also deprives readers of traditional narrative structure, traditional form, and other comforts of familiarity, which, in some ways, is uncomfortable. How do you reconcile this?" Lin's response is very telling: "the book, as a modality of software, is not about gut-wrenching emotions but minor feelings or moods that are not quite our own. This is consonant with a culture of distraction today, but also with modes of cognitive or pre-cognitive processing and affective attunement."

In another of Lin's interviews with David Foote, Foote asks, "Does technology function to relieve us of the burden of emotion?", to which Lin replies "No. TV is by definition emotive. Anyone who watches TV knows this. We get most of our emotions from TV. And we get our families from TV too."

### **Theorizing TV and "Authenticity"**

In his address at the "Vision 65" conference in 1965, Marshall McLuhan remarked that

Since television, the movie form has been reprocessed. The form of movie that once was environmental and invisible has been reprocessed into an art form, and, indeed, a highly valued art form... The television form has remained quite invisible – and will only become visible at the moment that television itself becomes the content of a new medium. The next medium, whatever it is – it may be the extension of consciousness – will include television as its content, not as its environment, and will transform television into an art form. (221)

This remark might be understood in two ways, and it is an aporia between those two (non-competing, non-mutually exclusive) interpretations that the genre-refusing plurality of Tan Lin's *Insomnia and the Aunt* performs. One might read McLuhan's take on television's transformation of the movie more literally, as a transitively anticipatory prophecy pointing towards the next major technological reframing of these existing

mediums through the computer and the Internet. In its play with the mutability of Asian American identity, *Insomnia and the Aunt* engages with the move from one kind of screen to another, the move from one form of transmitted reproducibility to another, the shift between shifts in the relation of public-private. Exploring this change in the ocular paradigm of the screen, particularly as it mediates the “lying” with which the narrator gestures towards an “authenticity” of identity which never fully appears or verifies itself, might mean approaching the question of interface as the acts of negotiating with the boundary-between, the deceptively discrete separation between “reality” and “virtuality.”

In “The Face and the Public: Race, Secrecy, and Digital Art Practice,” Jennifer Gonzalez critiques approaches towards the anonymity of the digital/virtual as potentially enabling visions of a post-racial utopia: “If vision and visibility are central to the operative dynamics of race, as has been argued by not only Frantz Fanon but many others subsequently, then might it be possible to undo the power of race discourse as an oppressive regime by decoupling it from vision or the visible? Or, alternately, might it be that visual culture is the very place where contemporary race discourse might be most powerfully critiqued and transformed?” (38). Though there is a sense in which “decoupling [race] from vision or the visual” and making interventions in visual culture as a way of critiquing race discourse can actually be productively compatible, *Insomnia and the Aunt* engages the uncomfortable relation of racializing sight and power that Gonzalez raises even as it transposes the televisual medium into such a genre which performs an “elaboration of relaxation formats.” The double-figuring of eyes as both that which sees through at the same time that it is seen through (as screen or window or face)



is perhaps a useful way of illustrating the rubrics (or shibboleths, or questionnaires) of belonging that “lying” and “authenticity” construct in *Insomnia and the Aunt*.

The narrator’s observation that “It is impossible to lie to a computer that’s turned off. A blank computer screen can still remind us of a face,” not only evokes the Orientalist stereotype of the inscrutable other (problematizing the presumed immediacies of looking and knowing) but also Levinas’ hexis of (sur/inter)faces, an exterior-oriented ethical obligation structuring one’s relation to the racialized other. *Insomnia and the Aunt* links the affect of the genealogical/kinship ties which shape Asian immigrant identity (and which are thought to shape Asian American identity) to the work of the screen divested of the aura of live performance, using the aunt’s preference for the temporal disjuncture of the “canned” to problematize the immediacies of looking upon the face of (and thereby knowing) the other.

Indeed, the contrast between the screen as the frame through which faces encounter each other at a distance (or, when thought opaquely, which stands in as a metonym for the surface of the incomprehensible other, the surface of racialized difference which refuses to be understood and thus projected into) – and the screen as the locus of what appears to be a neutral, bored escape into a relaxing distraction comprised of name-brandism and an always-already of non-live performance (which is also in its temporal inauthenticity a kind of death) can be highly jarring for the way it engages questions of identity.

*Insomnia and the Aunt* opens with a gesture towards an “authenticity” of Americanness that is more like a pointing to an empty place whose emptiness is

predicated on the framing of its history of exclusions. The narrator notes “From a genealogical perspective, my aunt and uncle started their lives in America with a Chinese restaurant in Spokane and later in Seattle,” an observation which lays claims to being “about” genealogy or lines of descent, but which is more about an attempted migration away from an assimilation, initiated at the moment of commodifying one’s difference by offering it up for consumption (in the case of the aunt and uncle, literally with “Ming’s Garden”). The decision to close the restaurant and go “east, *into* the wilderness” is cast by the logic linking “but” and “so” (“but they got tired of serving people American Chinese food, so in the early 80s they decided to close the restaurant down and travel east, *into* the wilderness”) as a reversion of the pioneer impulse to go “west”, one whose “manifest destiny” takes the illusion of some pristine originary “authenticity” as its frontier (and which is perhaps ironized by “a place near North Cascades National Park” being called “Concrete”).

This ironic locating, this tension of something which doesn't "belong" in the frame silhouettes the face of the aunt "wearing a white cowboy hat and dark sunglasses that seem out of place in the wilderness" in the photograph that "[signals] the sort of disruption or lie that I associate with Asians in the movies or in Ohio where I grew up, or Asians in fast food restaurants." The narrator’s observation that “lying is the most sincere way of expressing oneself, and the best way anyone has of connecting one thing to another” parodically connects straightforward self-disclosure to the non-straightforward, non-obvious act of connecting itself, a misequation of the two via “lying” which is itself a kind of lie. The matter of fact way in which *Insomnia and the Aunt* announces a “Part II”

about halfway into *Insomnia and the Aunt* – without having announced a “Part I” – is this kind of satirizing which would take advantage of the reader’s failure to do a double-take, mocking the way in which the apparently normal/sensible is unquestioningly accepted in the very state of distraction represented by the TV (and which the text tempts the reader into).

In Section XV of “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,”

Walter Benjamin suggests that distraction is a mode of reception.

Distraction and concentration form polar opposites which may be stated as follows: A man who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it. He enters into this work of art the way legend tells of the Chinese painter when he viewed his finished painting. In contrast, the distracted mass absorbs the work of art....

Reception in a state of distraction, which is increasing noticeably in all fields of art and is symptomatic of profound changes in apperception, finds in the film its true means of exercise. The film with its shock effect meets this mode of reception halfway. The film makes the cult value recede into the background not only by putting the public in the position of the critic, but also by the fact that at the movies this position requires no attention. The public is an examiner, but an absent-minded one.

Benjamin’s claims about distraction as a mode of reception are founded on his notion that films have a kind of “shock effect” from the *zerstückelt*, or tearing apart, of cinematic images that the spectators might otherwise associate (285). Benjamin argues that the disjunctive, shocking visuality of the film is what actually distracts its viewers and allows them to absorb the film (instead of being absorbed by it they way the concentrated viewer of a painting might be).

Jennifer Scappettone remarks that Lin “translates many of “Dub’s” diffusing aims into a book form highly aware of its own material seam, even as it seeks to exceed its own status as static, temporally suspended inscription by marking off sporadically the

presumable period of time that each section would take to register” (72). While she bases her readings of Lin’s poetics mostly off texts like *BlipSoak01*, *Seven Controlled Vocabularies and Obituary* and more overtly multimedia works like “Dub Version .V01” and his “ambientreading.blogspot.com” project. However, her observations apply just as aptly to *Insomnia and the Aunt*. Scappetone notes that “[T]he surface of the ambient poem you are gazing towards is highly distracting, filled with imprecisions, typos and forms of the hypnotic, which function backwards, just as boredom itself does” (*Blipsoak 01* recto text 11) “The surface obliges reading to flicker, sending eyes skittishly back and forth, as if they were engaged as sweepers in search of refuse to eradicate” (73-74). In the same way, TV within *Insomnia and the Aunt* obliges viewing to flicker with a discontinuous, broken gaze, even as the finger flickers across the material book itself, turning its pages.

The unease is effected by contrasts and heightened by the interface of race (the TV screen made visible by the computer screen, the pages on which Lin’s search-framings create a textual window which is not only the glass window of the motel through which the aunt views but also Dubois’ veil of double consciousness); the all-American “white cowboy hat” contrasts sharply with the inscrutability of the “dark glasses,” the “blank” screen whose opacity – or absence of expressed affect – the narrator registers in the observation that “there was never the slightest bit of emotion on [the aunt’s] face when she told me this story.” This absence of expressed affect is also the refusal to let the seer see that the seen is also seeing the seer: “I have watched hundreds of movies with Asians and fake Asians in them, and the one thing that makes them all the

same (except the white Asians) is that the Asians never stare into your eyes through the glass of a TV screen and you are never allowed to look too deeply into theirs.” The reciprocity of gazing, then, is vexed here as the litmus test of “authenticity” whose only – but striking – critique of yellowface performances is that they don’t adhere to the reality of the stereotype because they pass too easily through the opaque screen, the barrier between the contact of gazes.

This reciprocity of gazing is also complicated by Lin’s blurring of the temporal disjuncture which supposedly distinguishes the present liveness of gazing – a kind of performance – from the “deadness” of the past, the pre-recorded and the re-played, the always-already quality of the TV material which the narrator and the aunt prefer. The narrator makes the association of “death” and the recorded explicit with the observation that “[for the aunt]...”running a motel was a ritual enhanced by television... In retrospect, I now realize it was the re-run of something inessential in a life, or a death inside a life” even as the same statement destabilizes that simple correlation by opening up space within the present temporality associated with “life” into which the “dead” time of the re-run can be brought.

The illusion of the screen as barrier which Lin sets up is the illusion that these temporalities’ appearing to blur into each other is merely a coincidental quality of the TV, when in fact the kind of “fake-time” that Lin creates by artificially opposing the live and the canned also acts as a clever means of complicating the ease of distinguishing between the family’s “authentic” and “fake” experiences of what is meant to be some kind of Asian American identity, “rehearsed once in real life and once on television, or,

in other words, once in somebody else's life and once in [theirs]." As the narrator observes,

Whenever I visit during the next decade, my aunt will perform the same actions, with the same deliberate energy I associate with following a recipe one knows very well or watching re-runs on TV. She will cry in exactly the same manner, in front of the neon NO VACANCY sign in the window, with the same uncontrollable wailing and tears and half-Chinese words I do not understand. None of this I can hear very well through the glass.<sup>28</sup>

The result of the "fake-time" temporality of watching TV that Lin constructs is that the aunt's performance of affect – her mourning of the gap between the experiences in "somebody else's life" and her own family's a supposedly uncontrollable exemplar of "liveness" – becomes reproducible and controllable with a mechanical exactitude that parallels the predictability of always already being othered by others' racializing gazes, the narrator's parents invited to tour apartments over phone calls and turned away "when [they]...got out of their car." The aunt's "deliberate" re-playing of her performance of mourning not only evokes the repetitive familiarizing with loss of Freud's "fort-da!" but

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○ <sup>28</sup> The narrator's seemingly offhand comment that "None of this I can hear very well through the glass" may seem a turn away from the very play with epistemologies of seeing, racialization, and identity which *Insomnia and the Aunt* performs. And yet it is crucial in a work like Lin's to open up space – however speculatively – for other registers of knowing, other kinds of orientation of identity besides the eye-determined "inter-face" and to take note of the narrator's awareness of only being able to see, and not being able to "hear very well through the glass," particularly given the sounds of incomprehensible difference – "uncontrollable wailing and tears and half-Chinese words which I do not understand" with which the aunt forgets the very "ideal of whiteness" she mourns. Might it be then that the glass of the TV screen or motel window also provides the false illusion of comprehending the other with auditory clarity on the other side, of transparently hearing the muffled sounds of canned difference? If this illusion – this "lying" which "is the most sincere way of expressing oneself" – is "best expressed with the eyes, whose motions are perceived to be distinct from the somaform and somatic expressions," it is perhaps also the irony that "no one really hears you when you talk on TV. That is why it is easy to lie on TV, because it is just like real life" which suspends the critical act of listening to *Insomnia and the Aunt's* register of televised noise at the level of discerning a faint but indistinct audibility of identity.

also the melancholic, permanent “delay in an understanding” that the narrator attributes to the aunt.

And yet the narrator noting later that “the repetition of my aunt’s tears meant something completely different ten years after it first happened” does not necessarily entail the resolution of this melancholia, nor the implication that the aunt has in some way gotten over the loss of this “ideal.” Rather, Lin ironizes the loss which the aunt’s repetitive mourning is meant to be in service of, emptying “ideals of whiteness” of its “compelling fantasy” with the narrator’s observation that

For an immigrant like my aunt, America is not the images on a TV, it basically is the TV...my aunt thinks all TV, even live TV, is canned...For my aunt, the live broadcast of the Vietnam War of my youth and her early middle ages resembled a re-run. My aunt accordingly has very few memories of violence or even racism in America. TV has made her forget all these things.

The irony of “accordingly” here is that the “violence or even racism” represented on TV is effaced from the aunt’s memory by its very representation and repetition through the medium; accordingly, one might also surmise the more the aunt re-runs her performance of mourning, the less the narrator who watches her through the screen recalls what it is that is being represented and repeated. The transformation of what the aunt’s repetition of tears to “[mean] something completely different ten years after it first happened” may not so much be one of cathartic resolution realized through mourning as one of desensitization and forgetting what exactly the unattainable ideal to be mourned was.

### **Links and Mediums**

McLuhan’s most well-known phrase “the medium is the message” is an attempt to undo the opposition between form and content by subsuming the latter under the former

(McLuhan argued that it didn't matter so much what was transmitted over the TV, simply that the TV was on) (8). In his next most well-known formulation –the distinction between “hot” and “cool” media – McLuhan frames the input/output flow particular to the TV as an interactive exchange between the sensory data provided by the interface of a medium and user perception:

There is a basic principle that distinguishes a hot medium like radio from a cool one like the telephone, or a hot medium like the movie from a cool one like TV. A hot medium is one that extends one single sense in "high definition." High definition is the state of being well filled with data...hot media do not leave so much to be filled in or completed by the audience. Hot media are, therefore, low in participation, and cool media are high in participation or completion by the audience. (22)

In this case, the participatory act that McLuhan identifies of the user “filling in” gaps in the data provided by the medium’s interface in his classifications of pre-digital media (some of which are arguably arbitrary, or implicitly take the criteria of “realism” as their standard: the photograph - hot, the cartoon – cool, radio – cool, television – cool) was a concept which actually structured the bodily hexes through which people navigated the internet; Alan Kay, one of the earliest designers of the computer infrastructure, drew on models from theories of constructivist learning and adapted several features of the user interface (overlapping windows, pointer, etc) to principles outlined in Charles Peirce’s writing on icon/symbol/index. Though McLuhan’s writing predates the web by almost thirty years, it wouldn’t be unreasonable to imagine that he might also have classified the Internet as a cool medium for its digital interface’s user-manipulated visual parataxis and user-directed search functions.



In rendering one “cool” medium visible through another, or indexing “the history of TV itself [migrating] to the internet,” *Insomnia and the Aunt* isn’t so much trying to literally imitate TV or the Internet (a text like that might have dials, or some structuring akin to a search bar) in the exact ways those mediums operate, but to *be* the same kind of medium by reproducing some of the principles of interface which mediate and enable visual exchanges to take place through those technologies. Ironically, the text uses its own content to convey the impression that it’s not so much the content transmitted but the form of the medium which shapes its users, though “the uses of TV are just as ambiguous as the people watching it.” Indeed, the narrator muses that “No TV I know is capable of ideological domination although it might be capable of clairvoyance or bringing back the dead,” a comment that seems to playfully sidestep Adorno’s concern in “How to Look at Television” that formulaic television show plots were psychologically conditioning in potentially totalitarian ways for a figuring of text as television reminiscent of Hannah Weiner’s work (213). Here I take a momentary aside: Michael Kerr spells out the connection between television as genre and Weiner’s work explicitly when he remarks in a blog post that “If Amiri Baraka’s poem AM/TRAK channels jazz, then Hannah Weiner’s Clairvoyant Journal is television. Clairvoyant Journal is a barrage of words and images that reminded me of channel surfing on cable—150 channels of nothing on. It is the commercials, reality TV programs, late night infomercials, and FOX news pundits run through a blender and splashed on the page” (“Clairvoyant Journal by Hannah Weiner and Tjanting by Ron Silliman”). This description could easily double for the narrator and the aunt’s “communal watching preferences,” which include everything

from “competing old westerns,” “Jackie Gleason re-runs,” Conan O’Brien, and “commercials during peak broadcast moments.” However, Kerr actually inverts the relation of TV to literature when he remarks of *Clairvoyant Journal*, “Obviously I had a hard time with this poem—and not just because it reminded me of TV (and I can barely stomach TV) or that it was particularly difficult in the way that some poems are difficult—it just didn’t allow me the one thing that I enjoy most about poetry—the opportunity to escape from reality. In fact, it did the opposite—it reminded me way too much of our hyper-consumerized, over-industrialized, super-sized culture”.

Ironically, for Kerr, poetry – and not TV – is “the opportunity to escape from reality”; TV actually grounds him in the reality of “our hyper-consumerized, over-industrialized, super-sized culture.” And yet maybe it’s not so ironic after all, if one sees Silliman’s description of *Clairvoyant Journals* and the detritus of cultural commodities and the diffused kitsch in *Insomnia and the Aunt* as representing two sides of the same coin, or getting at the same kind of knowledge – the meaning which is embodied through the form of the medium rather than through some notion of content transmitted by the medium. Though “[the] aunt thinks TV should be a relaxing, circular consumer activity that is continually on,” it is also “a TV set [that] made [the] aunt disappear into the black and white wilderness that is the truth,” a reality of racialization which is perhaps alluded to in the connection between Weiner’s clairvoyance and the attention TV draws to ways of seeing (and being seen by/as) the other. After all, the narrator notes that the aunt “was clairvoyant and an insomniac. She knew that TV lovers are basically ‘undetectable, overwhelmingly numerous, unknown and unscientific’. In short, they are hopeless.” The

quote within the quote, whose source is not identified in the text (despite the use of footnotes elsewhere in the text), comes from a distinction between “strong” and “weak” links in Peter Csermely’s *Weak Links: The Universal Key to the Stability of Networks and Complex Systems*. The outlining of the contrast between normative link behavior and an aberrant link behavior that mirrors the threat posed by the Asiatic racial other follows:

Science has grown used to examining strong links. Strong links are always there. Strong links are reproducible. Strong links are few in number and hence comprehensible. Strong links are already known. Strong links are scientific. Strong links are exciting. In short, strong links are like friends to us. In contrast, weak links are transient. Weak links are undetectable. Weak links are overwhelmingly numerous. Weak links are unknown. Weak links are hopeless. In short, weak links are like foes to us. (102)

The knowledge which the “clairvoyance” and “insomnia” of the aunt, who embodies and/or is embodied by the text, connects “weak/foe” to “TV lovers” – “lovers” for whom “America is not the images on a TV, it basically is the TV,” for whom the lived experience of identity “[has] been rehearsed once in real life and once on television, or in other words, once in somebody else’s life and once in ours.”

### **Conclusion**

By connecting something as non-individualized as the consumption of images on TV to personal encounters with racism, *Insomnia and the Aunt* recuperates and reconfigures the mode of autobiographical individualized lyric testimony even as it uses boredom, relaxation, and distraction to figure the memory of experiences of racialization as a re-run. In the first sense of ambience, Lin’s novel makes it impossible to distinguish between the foreground of the racialized subject navigating the uncertain and absurd terrain of assimilation and the general environment of 21<sup>st</sup> century American

consumerism, littered with the proliferation of various media forms. In the second sense of *ambience*, the novel serves as an example of how these effects of ambient music and television, are also symptoms of a racial melancholia in response to a “hyperreal” Asian American identity.

## EPILOGUE

In conclusion, I revisit Dorothy Wang's *Thinking Its Presence*, which attempts to engage with the continued opposition of the aesthetic and social within literary studies and to push back against what she sees as the exclusion of the sociohistorical and political contexts of race from broader conversations about classifications within American poetry studies. Wang invokes Marjorie Perloff's 2006 MLA address, in which Perloff exhorts scholars to return to more rigorous training within literary studies, "no matter how culturally and politically oriented [their] own particular research may be" (686). Wang's study, which traces the work and critical reception of Li-Young Lee, Marilyn Chin, John Yau, Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, and Pamela Lu, is not simply a reconsideration of poems by these authors but an interrogation of the very terms and conditions of the either-or manner in which these poems and poets have been read. In response to the dilemma Wang poses, I suggest that theorizing sound's potential for rethinking alterity contra the Asiatic racial form prescribed by an Orientalist modernism can help us better read the various, formally unique ways in which Asian American poets invoke but also supersede the generic constraints of a representative and metaphorical "lyric" subjectivity.

Even as I state the aims of my dissertation, however, I acknowledge its limitations. The reach of my dissertation only covers Asian American poets of the U.S. and not the whole scope of Asian North American literature; additionally, my selection of poets in this dissertation represents a heavily East Asian concentration of Asian American writers. This is partially due to my dissertation taking certain poets' sonic responses to

the visuality of modernism as a launching point; nonetheless, I recognize that the poets I cover in this study, however capacious and formally innovative their work may be, still represent only a narrow subset of Asian American poets who experiment with sound formally in innovative and important ways (Asian American Writers' Workshop does a much better job highlighting the range of writers who are doing this work). My dissertation also focuses temporally on Asian American poets within the range of the 1960's to the present, and I think it important to note that Asian American experimental poetry begins as early as the late 1800's, with the likes of Sadakichi Hartmann.

I also want to consider future directions for the kind of close listenings I have tried to model in this work. Part of why it's important to talk about sound in poetry is that it remains somewhat difficult to do – because on the one hand, as Reuven Tsur has pointed out, the interdisciplinary vocabulary necessary to discuss the production and reception of sound is often missing. A great deal of work has been done on visual semiotics (and it seems like this has been more easily integrated into literary studies) but comparatively speaking, there has not been as much done on sonic semiotics, in part perhaps because it borrows more from fields like cognitive linguistics, and the theoretical apparatus of these fields are harder to appropriate because of the technical background required to understand the language, and possibly also because of wariness about empiricist scientific approaches. As sound studies continues to develop traction as a field, poetic practices of close listening can only benefit from more interdisciplinary exposure to fields that theorize the aesthetics of sensory reception, like cognitive linguistics, haptology, and musicology (which is not necessarily to say that poetics must necessarily

adopt critical apparatuses from those fields, but is to encourage a broadening of perspectives on the materiality of sound).

Additionally, I want to emphasize the importance of attending to works that bridge Asian American poetry with new media forms, as they open up another dimension through which sound enters into and shapes our experience of language. Peter Cho's 2005 MFA project *Takeluma*, for instance, is a multimedia experiment in creating a "sound symbolic, phonetic alphabet" that probes the possibilities of aurally representing meaning. The work, which includes Cho's assigning of visual linear shapes that "match" the qualitative perceptions of individual consonants' and vowels' sounds, a series of art installations, and an accompanying written explanation, is an exercise in both theorizing and inventing systems of sonic representation. I have already covered some of the ways *Insomnia and the Aunt* interrogates the conditions and generic environment of reading via a particular notion of ambience; Lin's Powerpoint piece *The PhD Sound* (how fittingly titled for this conclusion), which is set to danceable songs like "Showroom Dummies" by Kraftwerk and "A Place We Both Belong" by Scritti Politti, creates the experience of a multimedia reading platform wherein the music of commodified pop runs alongside the visual unveiling of various citations. I want to end this my conclusion – and begin our conversation – by engaging in a call for critical attention, for more critical listening the relationship between paradigms of sound and structurings of subjectivity in the works of these experimental Asian American poets.

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