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UNDOING THE FORM/MATTER DIVIDE IN AVANT- GARDE AMERICAN POETICS

Mayumo Inoue

Thinking Its Presence: Form, Race, and Subjectivity in Contemporary Asian American Poetry by Dorothy J. Wang, (Stanford University Press, 2013). Pp. 416. \$50.00 cloth; \$27.95 paper.

The unresolved antagonisms of reality return in artworks as immanent problems of form.

—Theodor Adorno¹

Perhaps poetics can be broadly construed as an inscriptive technique for making and remaking the self and its relation to others within the social world in a manner that escapes the grasp of instrumental rationality. If so, what might happen when such an act of writing as making is actively theorized by poets and critics who have been demarcated as “minority” subjects, who, by definition, have been subjectivated and subjugated in modernity as the brute bodies that are unable to embody various allegedly universal “ideas”? Poetics, which often explores formal innovations in a given poem, emerges as a crucial site where we might question a hegemonic social “formation,” which itself is sustained by the hierarchical distribution of form and matter across the globe. As Pheng Cheah notes in his reading of feminist deconstructions of the instituted binary opposition between the masculinized intelligible “form” and the femininized passive “matter,” an act of political “trans-form-ation” not only implies an amelioration of oppressive social forms but calls for a discovery of “formative agency” among the bodies that have been denigrated as *merely* material.²

Dorothy J. Wang's *Thinking Its Presence: Form, Race, and Subjectivity in Contemporary Asian American Poetry* engages precisely in such a task by questioning the hegemonic formation of race(s) within American poetry and especially its avant-garde sector. As Wang passionately elucidates in the introductory chapter, many scholars of avant-garde writing in the U.S. have uncritically reproduced the form/matter binary and spatially mapped it onto the imperial nation-state's color-line. Wang thus discovers, disappointingly yet predictably, that influential journal special issues and conference forums reproduce the "'literary versus cultural' divide," exacerbating the imagined border between Anglo-American experimental formalism and minoritarian empirical confessionalism (1–19). These critics consequently hierarchize *and* racialize the two terms ("the literary" and "the cultural") while the poets who are thus racialized as "minority" are only admitted into their special fora insofar as their "literary" experimentations are seen as replicating various "cultural" characteristics they are expected to embody, e.g., "hybridity," "globalism," and "ecology" (18).

In contrast, Wang foregrounds poetic forms as formed matters that produce and proliferate both critical bodily feeling and political signification. Wang's attention to this nexus of the sensuous and the

significative in poetry comes strikingly close to Jean-Luc Nancy's definition of "sense," which appears for him most prominently perhaps in poetry: "[i]f we understand or . . . accede to a dawning of sense, we do so poetically."³ Or, as Wang theorizes it,

Poems are never divorced from contexts and from history, even as they are, among other things, modes of thinking philosophically through an engagement with formal constraints. Likewise, what constitutes the social, the cultural, and the political must be analyzed for their linguistic and structural forms. (19)

Thinking Its Presence is Wang's effort to think about and through poems' own form-based critiques of the society's unjust formal constraints. As Wang argues incisively, "[r]ace itself is . . . a political concept that takes particular forms" through and as "a fabric of laws, stereotypes, historical accretion, and popular culture," while she invokes Adorno's insistence that "[t]here is no material content, no formal category of artistic creation . . . which did not originate in the empirical reality from which it breaks free" (54). Poetic forms, then, are critical folds that could be stitched into the hegemonic and unjust social and racial formations. Wang's task in the book is to read such critical

forms intimately and critically, to engage in what she aptly calls “a praxis-based methodology of theorizing” which extends a kind of theorizing that is performed by poetic forms themselves (35, 39).

Each of the five Asian American poets Wang examines in the book invents “a formal crux or mode” in order to produce social relations that have been foreclosed by the current regime of racialization in the U.S. (33). Wang’s choice of these poets—Li-Young Lee, Marilyn Chin, John Yau, Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, and Pamela Lu—is refreshing, as it allows us to see formal experimentations in seemingly autobiographical poets such as Lee and Chin, and to be more attentive to the political critiques inherent in experimental poets such as Yau, Berssenbrugge, and Lu. Wang’s meticulous reading of Lee (Chapter 2) carefully elucidates the ways in which the latter’s metaphors often ideologically suture otherwise incommensurate experiences, e.g., exile and assimilation. Yet, as Wang shows quite beautifully, his metaphors sometimes also indicate “new ways of thinking about relation and identification” precisely through the metaphoric logic of “cleaving,” whereby disjoined bodies and memories can be articulated as “neither equivalent nor utterly different” (89, 90). In analyzing Marilyn Chin’s poetics (Chapter 4), Wang first examines how multiple voices in Chin’s

poems resort to the ironic “mode of the unsaid” in order to critique the racializing structure of recognition that implicates Asian American intellectuals, including Chin herself (126). As Wang’s sensitive reading indicates, in Chin’s works, irony’s negative indication of the utopic outside is at times tied to Chin’s interest in sexuality, intimacy, and the resulting promise of miscegenation in the midst of the prevailing racial economy that sustains itself by regulating the overlapping realm of sexual intimacy.

Wang’s analysis of Berssenbrugge’s description of amorphous forms and use of “shifters” that at once link together and equivocate the identities of these mutative forms seems crucial for the book’s argument (Chapter 7). While “[r]acial interpellation turns the other into a pronoun—‘them’”—that indexes a notion of particularity that is made to appear absolute, Berssenbrugge’s articulation of “she,” “it,” and “we” within a stanza, for instance, creates a peculiar form in which singularities—as opposed to particularities—emerge and appear *as relative* to one another (261, 255). Following up on the chapter’s focus upon amorphousness and contingency that might alter the hegemonic schema of racial forms, the book’s last chapter on Pamela Lu’s *Pamela: A Novel* reads Lu’s proliferation of “subjunctive yearnings”—i.e., a series of “as ifs”—as a crucial instance of *formal*

and *tonal* critiques of the multiple powers that interpellate the diasporic bodies: “Lu’s work brings to light the real yet hard-to-capture aspects of diasporic subjectivity—the ‘unplaceable essence of it’ and the psychic residue of . . . the affective (after)life of racism and the partially hidden or encoded traces of another culture or language” (299). Such an alternative “culture or language” cannot be posited as temporally prior to the experience of dislocation but is produced in its midst poetically, when the tonal mixture of alienation, suspicion, and hope illuminates its enunciators’ status not as “[t]he citizen subject[s],” but as the “subjunctive subjects” (297, 292).

Throughout the book, Wang’s close reading of the poems is not only meticulous and critical but also constantly surprising in its elucidation of the poetic forms’ indications of currently foreclosed utopias. Such an implicitly Adornesque practice of aesthetic materialism is quite rare in Asian American literary studies. It is also interesting that, while the earlier chapters on Chin and Yau focus on irony’s and parody’s negative indications of alternative relations, the later chapters’ analyses of amorphous forms and subjunctive moods somewhat more directly approach alternative relations and figurations in and against the structure of state racism in the U.S. At times, Wang’s deft close reading

as a “praxis-based theorizing” seems to exceed or overflow the critical frames she has set for the book. Her potentially substantializing invocations of “minority poets” (see 32, 305) sometimes overshadow her more nuanced phrasings such as “the racialized poet” and “the process of racialization” (22, 25). Wang’s reliance upon the term “interpellation” in explaining the racializing process in the U.S. could have been tied to another key term from Louis Althusser: “over-determination.” By doing so, more engagement with the nexus of race and sexuality—perhaps within the rubric suggested by Ann Laura Stoler’s Foucauldian work—within the structure that is also co-determined by capital might have been possible.⁴ Such paths, however, are already indicated in this enormously rich book so that other scholars may follow them.

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NOTES

1. Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1997), 6.
2. Pheng Cheah, “Mattering,” *Diacritics* 26, no. 1 (1996): 110. Cheah’s essay

respectfully critiques Butler's anthropocentric notion of performativity and moves in favor of Derrida's understanding of "gift" as a radical contingency that cuts across the nature/culture divide. It would be interesting, therefore, to gauge the proximity of Wang's notion of formal experiment to Butler's and Derrida's different understandings of formative force.

3. Jean-Luc Nancy, "Making Poetry," trans. Leslie Hill, in *Multiple Arts: The Muses II*, ed. Simon Sparks (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 3.
4. See, for example, Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham, Duke University Press, 1995).