



Introduction

*The Aesthetic in Asian American
Literary Discourse*

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ASIAN AMERICAN LITERARY SCHOLARSHIP of the late twentieth century has struggled to negotiate a balance between the immanentist understanding of literature (as a symbolic embodiment that bears the historical and material forces of its production) and the countervailing attempt to argue that literature represents “something else”—that a literary text is more than the sum of its identifiable (sociological, economic, political, historical) parts. The “aesthetic” has been an indispensable banner in projects seeking to articulate the “something else” of the literary, and this volume contributes to that effort by demonstrating the vitality and the volatility of the “aesthetic” as it circulates in Asian American literary discourse. By positioning issues of literary aesthetics and formal analysis at the heart of Asian American literary studies, this volume seeks to counterbalance the prevailing dominance of sociological and cultural materialist approaches in Asian American literary criticism, to bring about a self-consciousness in the multidisciplinary uses of literary texts, and ultimately, to argue the complementary possibility of a historically and materially engaged analysis that *also* recognizes the aesthetic as a rich critical variable.

As with scholarship in many other minority literatures, the emergence and growth of Asian American literary criticism in the larger sphere of American literary studies has depended upon its ability to represent the material realities of its marginalized constituents. The parallel beginnings

of Asian American Studies in the academy and of Asian American political activism in the late-1960s have meant that, by and large, Asian American literary criticism has primarily sought to “speak” the material realities of hitherto “invisible,” “disenfranchised,” or “silent” subjects.¹ Particularly in the last two decades, amidst the powerful influences of new historicism, poststructuralism, cultural studies, and the growing trend toward interdisciplinarity, Asian American literary criticism has become almost indistinguishable from the reading of “culture,” a term most expansively understood as the material and discursive structures of organized life. In this mode of criticism, literary works have been readily examined as symbolic enactments of material forces; as exemplifications of a particular ideology, phenomenon, or a conflict; or as illustrations of the political, economic, and sociological concerns of the times.

The prevailing strength of late twentieth century Asian American literary discourse, then, lies in arguing the *constructed* nature of human organizations—the complex ways in which power operates in the formation of particularly racialized subjects called “Asian American.” Although Asian American literary criticism, like other minority literature scholarship, began with race as its pivotal lens of analysis, it has moved beyond the category of race to examine other social categorizations and institutions such as gender, class, sexuality, nation, capital, labor, and globalism. Perhaps one can discern the primacy of these sociological, economic, and political concerns most readily from the titles of monographs, anthologies, and edited essay collections in Asian American literary criticism of the last two decades. Concepts that recur as a title’s keyword, such as “cultural politics,” “nation,” “transnation,” “orientalism,” “resistance,” or “subversion,” bespeak the discipline’s particularly focused energy upon such concepts.² Certainly, materialist and political examinations of race, gender, sexuality, and nation need not preclude or exclude the possibility of treating texts as literary objects, but just such a balance, we contend, has not been successfully maintained in the Asian American literary criticism of the last two decades. That is, Asian American literary criticism at large has been slow to extend the analysis of the constructedness of human-made categories and institutions to include the examination of Asian American literary works as aesthetic objects—objects that are constituted by and through deliberate choices in form, genres, traditions, and conventions.³

The aesthetic, here, signifies the *constructed* dimension of the literary, the fact that literary objects are no less human-made—no less contrived—than ideological apparatus and social institutions. While the constructed nature of race, gender, nationality, sexuality, family, colonialism, among others, have

been featured in the spotlight of Asian American literary discourse, other equally constructed practices, such as formal conventions, literary devices, genre particularities, and figurative language are more likely to be left in the wings of the critical stage.

This de-emphasis of literary aesthetics is certainly not unique to the field of Asian American literary discourse. In a germinal expression against this lacuna, George Levine's introductory essay "Reclaiming the Aesthetic," in *Aesthetics and Ideology* (1994), argues the pressing necessity of keeping a critical eye on "what constitutes the 'literary'" in order to "rescue it [the literary] from its potential disappearance into culture and politics."⁴ Pointing to critic Walter Benn Michaels's oft-quoted assertion—that "the only relation literature as such has to culture as such is that it is part of it"—as exemplifying a critical environment that subsumes whatever particularity literature might have to the material forces of its production, Levine faults literary approaches that are indistinguishable from studies of sociopolitical, economic, or material forces or studies of ideological demystification.⁵ Reading literature as an immanent expression of material conditions and structures of power, Levine argues, denies the fact that "literature is a definable category of discourse," and an "exclusive study of it [literature] is [deemed to be] complicit with unattractive political and social positions," such as the buttressing of the patriarchal Western canon.⁶ Hence, *Aesthetics and Ideology*, a critical forerunner contesting the severely diminished presence of the aesthetic in late twentieth century literary analysis, argues the necessity of exploring the concept of the aesthetic as an entity more *complex* than simply reflective, immanentist, or complicitous with dominant structures of power and institutional discourse.⁷

Levine's call to breathe new life into the aesthetic by situating it as a central player in literary analysis has been answered in numerous ways. First, a number of recent essay collections recount the intellectual genealogy of the aesthetic, demonstrating the concept's long history of usage from classical philosophy to contemporary critical theory.⁸ While offering a useful overview of the aesthetic's long intellectual history, such collections also highlight the multiplicity of meaning found under the concept—how the aesthetic "stands for" numerous uses, meanings (such as beauty, pleasure, the sublime, ethics, or aestheticism) that emerged from different moments of Western literary history.

Another notable approach to the aesthetic explores the uses of the concept as the apolitical, ideologically neutral standard and determination of beauty, pleasure, ethics, or value. As Emory Elliott writes in his introduction to *Aesthetics in a Multicultural Age* (2002), a "widespread cultural

discrimination” functioning through the claim of aesthetic universality has operated throughout the Anglo-American academic judgment of cultural and artistic production.⁹ How does the assumption of universality affect and interact with discourses of diversity and locality, with differences of race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and other categories of identity and artistic production? Even if we disown the universality of literary excellence and values, obviously *some* criteria of evaluation are still in place, and articulating the terms of that evaluation is a project explored through the concept of the aesthetic.¹⁰

A renewed emphasis on formal analysis and close reading of literature is another significant strategy in revitalizing the aesthetic, and it is this approach to which our collection most closely adheres.¹¹ In the same way that the above projects seek to “recuperate” or “reclaim” a place for the aesthetic, this collection shares a keen awareness that any discussion of the aesthetic must take account of the “crucial insights provided by ideological criticism and contemporary theory.”¹² Far from being a call for a “return” to an uncritical appreciation of the aesthetic as the ahistorical, universal standard by which artistic production should be measured, this renewed interest is motivated by a desire to rediscover the critical power of the aesthetic in the contemporary theoretical and artistic landscape. The impressive number of scholarly projects that revolve around the aesthetic points to its revitalization in contemporary critical discourse—as a distinct mode of human expression that requires a particular analysis of its rules and traditions; as a conceptual entity that’s employed for multiple and sometimes conflicting uses; and as a discourse that cannot be divorced from political discourses while not being reduced to them.

As the following essays will demonstrate, however, the revitalization of the aesthetic has distinct political and historical implications for the field of Asian American literary discourse. Like many minority discourses in the academy, Asian American Studies has its beginnings in the political activism of the 1960s, as a multidisciplinary approach devoted to the examination of the material and discursive ramifications of being particularly interpellated as “Asian American.” Asian American literary criticism thus entered the academic discourse as a body of studies that attested to the public and cultural visibility of a heretofore marginalized population. The title of Elaine Kim’s groundbreaking work of Asian American literary criticism—*Asian American Literature: Introduction to the Writing and Its Social Context*—exemplifies the inextricable relationship between Asian American literature and the material contexts of its production.¹³ As the first comprehensive study of its kind, Kim’s study approaches Asian American literary production through the history of Asian American presence in the United States,

a scholarly exemplar that has deeply inflected Asian American literary discourse at large. The artistic and political modality of Asian American literary criticism demonstrates, in a meta-critical sense, what Raymond Williams calls the dual condition of “representation”: there is a “degree of possible overlap between representative and representation in their political and artistic senses.”¹⁴ That is, Asian American literary criticism serves as more than a second-level “representation” of the artistic endeavors of Asian American literary production: it fundamentally functions as a discursive “representative” of Asian American subject positions, and it uses Asian American literature to expound the material, historical, political, economic, and cultural visibility of Asian American presence, legitimacy, resistance, and call to power.

The interweaving of literary analysis and sociohistorical emphasis testifies to the fact that a truly useful and responsible intellectual inquiry into the artistic production of a marginalized people cannot be divorced from questions of the material and discursive contexts within which those expressions emerged. There cannot be something called a “literary question” that remains untouched by specific historical and institutional forces, by issues of legal, social, economic, national as well as transnational concerns, sexuality, gender, religion, popular culture, and more. Interdisciplinary approaches to literature, then, have been fundamental to the rich intellectual growth of Asian American literary discourse in the late twentieth century, and they hold the ability to enliven our understanding of literary texts and their imbrication within a larger material context and within other intellectual disciplines.

Our emphasis on the aesthetic as a missing category of analysis continues the argument that Levine began earlier. Too often in interdisciplinary approaches to literary analysis, or in ideological assessments of literary works, the aesthetic becomes a conscripted agent, a transparent medium that yields a particular disciplinary “content.” If the discursive “representative” strength of Asian American literary criticism emerged through its focus on historical and material specificities, it was a strength that rested on an inversely minimized role for the role of the aesthetic. Missing, then, is a consideration of how the constructed nature of the aesthetic, as a series of human-made gestures, functions as a critical variable in affecting the outcome of the analysis.

Addressing this imbalance in Asian American literary criticism is particularly urgent in order to counter the assumption in the larger academic discourse that “ethnic” interests are disparate from aesthetic interests. As Emory Elliott argues, such a demarcation was a principal part of the “culture wars” or “canon wars” of the 1980s and 1990s. Pointing to a continuation of “conservative politics” and “conservative aesthetics,” Elliott identifies “a

strong tendency in the arguments from the right to universalize beauty and art and to judge objects and artifacts on the basis of how they measure against the ideal. Of course, what is posited as universal and essential is nothing more than the classical Western canons of art and literature.”¹⁵ The conservative deployment of the aesthetic “implies that ‘artistic merit’ and ‘minority writers’ are mutually exclusive terms.”¹⁶ Likewise, the universal standard of aesthetic excellence enables what Abdul R. JanMohamed and David Lloyd identify as the dominant humanism’s practice of ascribing “a single model of historical development within which other cultures can only be envisaged as underdeveloped, imperfect, childlike.”¹⁷ Hence, for those who wish to deploy the concept of the aesthetic as the bastion of Anglo-American cultural primacy, a distinguishing mark of ethnic minority writing may be its seeming irrelevance to aesthetic concerns. Nathaniel Mackey, contesting precisely such an ethnic-aesthetic divide in the critical reception of African American experimental poetry, writes: “Failures or refusals to acknowledge complexity among writers from socially marginalized groups, no matter how ‘well-intentioned,’ condescend to the work and to the writers. . . . [A]llied with such simplistic readings is the tendency to overlook variance and divergent approaches in the writing from such groups, especially to overlook writing that defies canons of accessibility.”¹⁸ Ultimately, the practice of attributing an ethnographic transparency to ethnic minority works denies these works “[t]he ability to influence the course of the medium, to *move* the medium, [and] entails an order of animacy granted only to whites when it comes to writing.”¹⁹

Now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, scholars and students of Asian American literature should examine their own methodological approaches to literature, and question whether their own uses of Asian American literary production have adequately contested that conservative use of the aesthetic. In examining the field’s success as a discursive “representative” of “Asian America,” they should be alert to the dangers of using Asian American literary production as a field of evidence from which to argue the constructed nature of racial and ethnic formations, gender and sexuality constraints, nationalist and globalist pursuits, and more. Ultimately, those concerned with Asian American literary studies need to be keenly self-conscious of the *verbs* that they employ as the agents of the critical “representative,” and ask how their own use of Asian American literature as “attesting to,” “exemplifying,” “illustrating,” or “testifying to” material and historical constraints and veiled ideologies may not adequately contest ethnographic assessments of ethnic minority literature.

Scholars of Asian American literary discourse needs to envision a more multivalent critical vocabulary, one that pursues the drama of material and discursive constructedness with a *parallel focus* on the drama of aesthetic constructedness. Put another way: What would a materialist and formalist Asian American literary criticism look like? How would an analysis of material conditions and ideological values be affected by an analysis of the literary work's use of formal strategies or figurative language? How would a consideration of a work's manipulation of genre conventions affect the kinds of conclusions one may draw regarding its race/gender/sexuality ideologies? How would an analysis alert to the way a particular Asian American literary work "talks" to other works within that genre, within literary history, within the canon, affect the overall balance of analysis? How would an analysis attuned to the significance of literary genealogy interact with the discernment of material forces at work?²⁰

Consequently, our call for invigorating the place of literary aesthetics in Asian American literary studies is not a call for a disciplinary embargo, for building a conceptual fortress around literary analysis to protect it from other disciplinary incursions. Nor is our emphasis on formal analysis a return to New Criticism's valorization of a literary work's totality of design and organicity or a return to the Russian Formalists' pursuit of structural wholeness. It is a symptom of any intellectual inquiry that the subject of the inquiry tends to take on the definition that best suits the interests of that inquiry. For instance, the American New Critics or Russian Formalists did not necessarily believe that the literary had nothing to do with the historical; rather, they deemed the immanent press of the material reality to be outside the business of their study. Their particular conceptualization of the literary was then directly related to their critical practice of formalism. Similarly, cultural studies practitioners or sociological readers of literature would not deny that the literary work is an artificial construct—a set of contrivances whose strategies are traceable within the history of literary practices. Rather, it is more accurate to say that they would not deem the study of those artificial constructs to be the stuff of their immediate business. Our call for pursuing both kinds of constructedness—of human organizations and of literary practices that make up Asian American literary texts—is then a call for a complementary perspective between cultural materialist and formal modes of analysis. Ultimately, it is a call to expand the scope of our scholarly business, and in the same step, expand the subjects of our business.

This is a call that many Asian American literary artists have voiced, usually as a form of grievance, against the business of literary criticism. For instance,

poet Garrett Hongo in “Asian American Literature: Questions of Identity” warns:

[If Asian American literary critical discourse does not] produce new critical approaches and widen parochial perspectives regarding literary style, I fear there will continue to be three dominant, ideologically narrowing modes out of which critical thinking (and the construction of literary curriculum) will emerge: (1) the unconscious assumption that what is essentially Asian American is a given work’s overt political stance and conformity to sociological models of the Asian American experience, (2) the related notion that a writer writes from a primary loyalty to coherent communities, and (3) vehement castigation or rude, categorical dismissal for literary qualities deemed ‘assimilationist’ or ‘commercial.’²¹

From meta-critical scrutiny of how the aesthetic operates within Asian American literary criticism and Asian American Studies, to concentrated formal analysis of specific Asian American literary texts, the essays in this collection attempt to expand the subjects of our business by keeping critical focus upon the aesthetic. A notable characteristic of the essays collected here—in fact, a characteristic of *all* the interventions mentioned above, that seek to reinvigorate the aesthetic—is that despite their collective use of the term as the critical pivot, individual contributors do not employ the term toward the same end.

Indeed, the intellectual, not to mention the emotional, investment surrounding the term is made evident in “Is There an Asian American Aesthetic?” a transcript of a panel session called “Defining Our Culture(s), Our Selves” that took place at Hunter College in 1991.²² The various ways that the session participants understood the question represent the multiple perspectives and interests that converge on the concept of the aesthetic: Is there a conceptual, political, or artistic practice that Asian American artists share? Is there a body of writing that can be categorized as Asian American literature by virtue of some commonality in theme and subject matter? Is the concept of an Asian American aesthetic necessary as a framing ground of scholarship and basis of critical inquiry? Does such a question seek homogeneity as a criterion of Asian American art, and if so, does the question itself foster the disciplinary ghettoization of ethnic minority art? The multiple ways of understanding and of using the aesthetic exemplify the concept’s utility, but also a distrust of such a utility.²³

The eleven original essays in this volume likewise pursue the aesthetic through different perspectives, and in the process, recall the variegated

history of the word—as a criterion of taste, value, sensory judgments, beauty, pleasure, and ethics. In the process, they engage with the history of the aesthetic through diverse ways, such as the historical relationship between the aesthetic and literary canonicity, between the aesthetic and literary periodization, and between the aesthetic and genre conventions. Although the essays do not employ a single definition of the aesthetic, they do have a common meeting ground: they approach the aesthetic dimension of Asian American literary texts as a rich arena of constructedness, as a complicated maneuver of literary conventions, genres, forms, and strategies. Through concentrated literary analysis keenly attuned to the inextricability of formal issues to thematic or topical concerns, these essays contest the notion that literary texts can be read as transparent windows onto material reality. Ultimately, they argue the epistemological richness to be gained by complementing the question of “what”—what social, material, economic, historical topics the literary text addresses/examines—with the question of “how”—how the rumination of said topics are realized through a manipulation of form, convention, constraints, and literary history.

The section “Asian American Critical Discourse in Academia” includes essays demonstrating the centrality of the aesthetic in comprehending some of the major tensions in contemporary Asian American literary studies. As they reread the contested sites of Asian American literary categorization, evaluation, institutional operations, and academic relations to political activism, the essays uncover how the concept of the aesthetic is integral to the overall business of producing “knowledge” in regards to a body of literature called “Asian American” and to an institution called “Asian American Studies.” Mark Chiang’s “Autonomy and Representation: Aesthetics and the Crisis of Asian American Cultural Politics in the Controversy over *Blu’s Hanging*” shows that two very different notions of the aesthetic currently circulate in Asian American literary discourse. Chiang historicizes the competing roles of the aesthetic by returning to the beginning days of Asian American Studies. The aesthetic, which functioned as a concept firmly bound to a localized constituent called “Asian American” and accountable to the larger political aims of the Asian American “community” in the past, has now come to function as a concept of value-free, liberatory, autonomous space of artistic and intellectual freedom as the field has expanded its institutional and academic stature. When both notions of the aesthetic vie for legitimation, they inevitably collide. Chiang highlights an instance of this strife through a reading of the controversy that surrounds the Asian American Association’s 1998 Fiction Award to Lois-Ann Yamanaka’s novel, a novel whose depiction of Filipino American characters was deemed reprehensibly racist by those

who contested the award choice. Continuing the discussion of the aesthetic in current Asian North American scholarship, Iyko Day's "Intervening Innocence: Race, 'Resistance,' and the Asian North American Avant-Garde" argues that the field is limited in envisioning an aesthetic that best effects "resistance." Exploring the limitations of reading for ethnic minority resistance predominantly through the "social-realist" representational text, Day points to those Asian Canadian writers whose nonrepresentational, formally disjunctive works challenge the false binary between politically engaged works and formally engaged works. Day's analysis of Asian North American avant-garde examines the commodification and containment of ethnic minority literature, and critiques how Asian North American literature operates through "an economic consumer logic: the larger the reading public, the more social good."

The essays in "Aesthetics and Ethnicity" examine how the aesthetic operates in the larger environment of reception in which Asian American literary production is first and foremost an expression and an attestation of ethnic minority realities. The resulting bifurcation of "ethnic" interests from "aesthetic" interests, these essays suggest, leads to an oppressive topical paradigm as well as an oppressive formal paradigm by which Asian American literary artists are assessed. Through their analysis of specific Asian American literary texts, these essays trace a formal rebellion that literary artists stage against the constricting expectations of the ethnic/aesthetic divide. Mita Banerjee's "The Asian American in a Turtleneck: Fusing the Aesthetic and the Didactic in Maxine Hong Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey*" offers a comparative reading of *Tripmaster Monkey* and Gerald Vizenor's writings on Ishi, a Native American historical figure who, at the hands of mainstream ethnography, comes to stand for the iconic Indian—heroic, other-worldly, and always of the lost past. When the interpellation of an ethnic other's "difference" is always locked in place, the very structures of reading and reception present an almost insurmountable challenge to the ethnic minority writer. A certain corrective imperative enters the site of literary production, then, and Banerjee identifies an "open-ended didacticism" at work in *Tripmaster Monkey* that is distinguishable from the refusal of engagement represented by Vizenor's Ishi. Similarly, Christina Mar's "The Language of Ethnicity: John Yau's Poetry and the Ethnic/Aesthetic Divide" addresses the political implications of aesthetic acts, exploring the racialized implications by which "ethnicity" is formulated in the criticism of experimental poetry. Pointing to the peculiar position that John Yau occupies in the field of language poetry, Mar traces a critical paradigm wherein the discernment of "ethnic" performance is unrelated, sometimes even oppositional, to the discernment of "aesthetic"

performance. Such a paradigm continues, Mar argues, the “official diversity” strategy of multiculturalism, a conceptualization of diversity that does not threaten the myth of American national wholeness. Hence Mar’s formal analysis of John Yau’s poetry simultaneously highlights the poems’ political engagement with the logic of American national wholeness.

The following two essays in particular explore the affective power of the aesthetic to invoke concepts such as beauty, justice, and ethics. Their formally attuned analysis connects the aesthetic experience and the power of that experience to invoke a political engagement. Patricia Chu’s “A Flame against a Sleeping Lake of Petrol’: Form and the Sympathetic Witness in Selvadurai’s *Funny Boy* and Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost*” examines how two Sri Lankan Canadian novelists, Shyam Selvadurai and Michael Ondaatje, skillfully manipulate the bildungsroman convention, as well as well-known plot configurations and tensions, to elicit sympathy and identification and to heighten the individual text’s specific material concerns. Chu highlights the explicit invocation of the aesthetic in these texts as a function of truth and justice (in *Funny Boy*) and of empathy and compassionate witness (in *Anil’s Ghost*). Gita Rajan’s “Poignant Pleasures: Feminist Ethics as Aesthetics in Jhumpa Lahiri and Anita Rao Badami” continues to examine the relationship between aesthetics and ethics, particularly between aesthetics and feminist ethics. Tracing the formal strategies by which Anita Rao Badami’s novel *A Hero’s Walk* and Jhumpa Lahiri’s short story, “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine,” represent trauma and tragedy, Rajan argues that a strategy of “beguiling banality” prompts the reader to consider the ethical ramifications of the plot events. Such an aesthetic of “poignant pleasure,” Rajan argues, is suggestive of an “ethical realism” that implicates the reader in the consequences of failing to act ethically; furthermore, the ethical function of the aesthetic in these works highlights the inevitable limit of liberal generosity across “first world” and “third world” divide.

The contributions in “Intertexts: Asian American Writing and Literary Movements” examine the concept of aesthetics at the intersection of Asian American literature and literary periodization and canonicity. They examine how canonical periodization, categorization, and identification affects the reading, teaching, and criticism of ethnic minority literature. Josephine Nock-Hee Park’s “A Loose Horse’: Asian American Poetry and the Aesthetics of the Ideogram” situates contemporary Asian American poetry at the convergence of two competing paradigms—of the canonical influence of modernism and the discourse of orientalism. Park begins with a strong salvo: “Asian American poets have a singular plight: they write within the constraints of an American poetry indelibly marked by orientalism.”

Exploring the racial reductivism and essentialism of “the Chinese ideogram” in Anglo-American Imagism, Park asks: how do contemporary Asian American poets formally and topically engage with this history? In what ways may they write themselves within as well as against the tradition of Imagism? Park offers a formally attuned analysis of Ho Hon Leung’s poems to highlight a strategy of simultaneously addressing and interrogating the orientalist use of Chinese writing in Imagist poetry. Likewise, Donatella Izzo’s “A New Rule for the Imagination’: Rewriting Modernism in *Bone*” questions the hierarchical top-down operations of canonical influence. Crucial to dismantling the role of the Western literary canon as the measure of aesthetic standard, Izzo argues, is a heightened recognition and assessment of Asian American literary works as complex formal performances. Putting Fae Myenne Ng’s *Bone* in dialogue with key Anglo-American modernist texts such as *The Great Gatsby*, Izzo discerns a “self-aware rewriting of modernism” in *Bone*, a rewriting that consciously invokes and adapts modernist literary strategies and motifs. Izzo pursues an understanding of the canon as a flexible entity in living dialogue with Asian American literature.

The section “Rewriting Form, Reading for New Expression” highlights the formal innovations in contemporary Asian American literary works, while continuing to examine the larger concerns common to the essays—the aesthetic/ethnic divide, the politically charged environment of reception, various conceptualization of Asian American “resistance,” the link between Asian American literature and multiculturalism, the tension between ethnic minority writing and the primacy of the canon, and the function of the aesthetic as the definitive category of evaluation. Rocío Davis’s “Performing Dialogic Subjectivities: The Aesthetic Project of Autobiographical Collaboration in *Days and Nights in Calcutta*” engages the political implications of formally manipulating the conventions of autobiography. A collaborative autobiography like *Days and Nights in Calcutta*, Davis argues, presents a challenge to the literary tradition of autobiography; it also participates in the dismantling of the autonomous, monologic subjectivity that scholars of feminist, postcolonial, and ethnic minority studies problematize. By tracing the literary deviations in collaborative life telling, Davis connects formal innovations to political challenges to ideas of nation, national identity, and ethnic affiliation.

Celestine Woo’s “Bicultural World Creation: Laurence Yep, Cynthia Kadohata, and Asian American Fantasy” introduces the contributions of Asian American writers to the genre of fantasy. The literary tradition of fantasy has been dominated by, and identified with, Anglo-American practitioners (C. S. Lewis or J.R.R. Tolkien) almost exclusively, an identification

that results in an inhospitable environment for interventions by ethnic minority writers. Drawing a parallel between the formal conventions of world-creation in fantasy and the “bicultural world creations” that Laurence Yep and Cynthia Kadohata offer, Woo invites us to appreciate the formal innovations in their works as carefully inflected expressions of material concerns. Such “innovative synthesis of the wonder of world-creation and the allegorical representation of Asian American experience,” then, disrupts the identification of fantasy as a racially “white” aesthetic tradition. Kimberly Jew’s “Dismantling the Realist Character in Velina Hasu Houston’s *Tea* and David Henry Hwang’s *FOB*” identifies Asian American contributions in the field of experimental theater. While a realist aesthetic has dominated Asian American theater, Jew argues, the appeal to identification with the characters on stage has risked the reification of a fixed, knowable entity called “Asian American character.” Jew points to the plays of Hwang and Houston as Asian American exemplars of the non-realist dramaturgical tradition such as surrealism and expressionism. As models for an aesthetic of the “true unreal,” Jew argues, these playwrights suggest a reformulation of the process by which Asian American characters are performed.

As the essays centrally position the aesthetic in their analysis of Asian American literature, they highlight the particular tension points that recur in the larger conversation of the aesthetic. For instance, what is the relationship between the “aesthetic” and the “literary”? Just as the essays engage in particular dimensions of the aesthetic (as a criterion of taste, value, sensory judgments, beauty, pleasure, and ethics), they envision variable relationships between the two terms—the aesthetic and the literary as interchangeable notions, the aesthetic as a perennial constitution of the literary, or the literary as a particular instantiation of the aesthetic. Rather than announcing a single, fixed relationship between the two key terms, the essays demonstrate something more fruitful: the “aesthetic” and the “literary” are inextricable pursuits, and the two terms, whose meanings are in constant flux, must be understood in a relational manner informed by the specific context of the discussion. The various theoretical approaches represented by the essays invite another productive question: What is the particular strength of each critical approach in recentering the aesthetic? Not only does this volume rearticulate the advantages of the formal criticism, but it also reintroduces the possibilities of genre criticism, reader-response criticism, and psychoanalytic criticism. An ongoing speculation on the unique strengths and particular implications of each theoretical approach will no doubt enhance the centrality of the aesthetic in literary studies. Questions such as these point to the necessarily limited parameters of this volume: at the same time, they underscore

the collection's scholarly contribution as an open conversation on critical strategies.

As these contributions reevaluate contemporary Asian American literary discourse through the pivotal lens of the aesthetic, they dismantle the seemingly inverse and seemingly exclusive relationship between ethnic minority literary production and the concerns of the aesthetic. They enact the very fact that the study of the aesthetic is *not* a non-Asian American activity. At the same time, they reinforce the argument that the critical enterprise surrounding the aesthetic can never be divorced from the concerns of history, from the disparities of institutional and material power, and from the ramifications of ethnic minority literary production. In the process, they rescue the aesthetic from critical exile as a tired concept lacking any power of affect and save it from becoming a transparent tool wielded in the service of political directives, specific ideologies, or the machinations of capital.

Ultimately, the aesthetic in the recent critical environment may still seem a concept in need of perennial rescue: witness the critical titles on the aesthetic, mentioned above, such as "Return of the Aesthetic," "Reclaiming the Aesthetic," and "Revenge of the Aesthetic." Each act declaring the return of the aesthetic—in which we include the present volume—contests the appropriation of the aesthetic as an unwitting tool or as a subject of sinecure. By asserting an active role for the aesthetic, and by emphasizing the constructedness of the aesthetic, this volume hopes to animate Asian American literary discourse in a unique way—toward a critical venture that examines the constructed nature of literary forms, genres, and gestures as deliberately as it examines the constructed nature of human organizations.

Notes on Contributors

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