

**BREAKING FROM TRADITION:
EXPERIMENTAL POEMS BY FOUR CONTEMPORARY
ASIAN AMERICAN WOMEN POETS**

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the themes and technical strategies in the experimental poems by three 20th-Century Asian American women poets—Cathy Song, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Kimiko Hahn—through close reading. While challenging Bloom’s theory of “poetic influence” and Anglo-American feminist theories for constructing an alternative tradition of women writers, my analysis considers the importance of the subject positionalities of gender, race, and ethnicity in shaping the poetics of Asian American women poets.

In 1975 Harold Bloom declared that “the first true break with literary continuity will be brought about ... if the burgeoning religion of Liberated Woman spreads from its clusters of enthusiasts to dominate the West. Homer will cease to be the inevitable precursor, and the rhetoric and forms of our literature then may break at last from tradition” (*Map* 33). But the continuity of the Western literary tradition constructed on the male-dominant Oedipus Complex model of the “family romance” is doomed not only by the development of women’s literature, but also by the emergence of literature by people of color, who discover new linguistic possibilities and reinvent literary genres across different cultures. Contemporary Asian American women’s poetry is one realm in which historical forces and conditions have led to the breaking away of American poetic forms from the Western literary tradition that traces exclusively back to Homer.

While transforming conventional poetic forms, Asian American women’s poetry undermines Bloom’s theory of poetic influence, especially his notions about the enabling conditions for poetry. For Bloom, the poetic tradition is preserved and renewed

through “the life-cycle of the poet-as-poet.” “Poetic influence” he argues, “is necessarily the study” of this life-cycle embedded in “the relations between poets,” which are “akin to what Freud called the family romance” (*Influence* 7-8). He insists that “influence remains subject-centered, a person-to-person relationship, not to be reduced to the problematic of language” (*Map* 77). This “person-to-person” relationship is paralleled by a poem-to-poem intertextuality in Bloom’s theory. “Every poem is a misinterpretation of a parent poem,” Bloom contends. “A poem is not an overcoming of anxiety, but is that anxiety” (*Influence* 94).

Countering Bloom’s theory of poetic influence regarding the formation of the Western literary canon, feminist critics such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar construct an alternative tradition of women’s literature. In their introduction to a collection of feminist essays on women poets, Gilbert and Gubar argue that internalization of “patriarchal interdictions” have historically caused women poets anxiety and guilt about authorship. Therefore, they contend that

at its most painful the history of women’s poetry is a story of struggle against the sort of self-loathing ... , while at its most victorious this sort of history is a chronicle of the evolutionary processes through which “Judith Shakespeare” learned over and over again that, in [Sylvia] Plath’s words, “I / Have a self to recover, a queen.”¹ (xxiii)

Gilbert and Gubar further note that “the themes, structures, and images of their art may have been at least in part necessitated either by the special constrictions of their sexual role or by their uncertain relationship to an overwhelmingly ‘masculinist’ literary tradition ...” (xxiii). This construction of a women’s literary tradition, and examination of women poets’ thematic concerns and technical strategies solely in terms of women’s sexual difference, represses, among other things, the differences of race, class, and culture, which have been generative and shaping conditions for Asian American women’s poetry.

With female precursors in millenia-old Asian literary traditions, Asian American women poets do not share their Euro-American counterparts’ assumed anxiety and guilt over authorship. If there is any anxiety at all in their poems, it is more often than not the anxiety of dislocation and assimilation. Being historically positioned as the Other in mainstream American culture, and being connected to other histories and cultures, Asian American women poets have not been part of the “family.” Their poetry cannot be defined by Bloom’s notion that “Poetry (Romance) is Family Romance. Poetry is the enchantment of incest, disciplined by resistance to that enchantment” (*Influence* 95). Rather than a product of “the enchantment of incest,” Asian American women’s poetry is generated by the poets’ concerns with identities of race, class, gender, and culture. While negotiating racial, gender, and hybrid identities, Asian American women poets explore the possibilities of subversion and invention by drawing from both Asian and Western cultural and literary discourses.

The diversity of forces and conditions which generate Asian American women’s poems indicates that the making of their poetry is motivated by much more than “a person-to-person relationship” or a poem-to-poem intertextuality. The range of their themes and styles also challenges the feminist paradigm for a women’s literary tradi-

tion based on sexual difference alone. In examining the experimental poems of four Asian American poets, this essay seeks to enlarge the conceptual and cultural framework for analysis of American women's poetry. It also aims at raising questions about the assumptions and implications of Bloom's theory of poetic influence and Euro-American feminist critics' construction of a female literary tradition which excludes or marginalizes works by American women writers of color.

In "The End of a Beginning," the opening poem of her first volume of poetry, *Dwarf Bamboo*, Marilyn Chin's persona refers to herself as "the beginning of an end, the end of a beginning" in working-class Chinese American history (3). This positioning of the self/poet as part of a collective history and identity breaks away from the transcendental lyric "I" in traditional Western lyric poetry. While connecting the self to the history of Chinese Americans, Chin's persona finds her self at the frontier of Asian American poetry, a tradition that begins with her generation:

The beginning is always difficult.
 The immigrant worked his knuckles to the bone
 only to die under the wheels of the railroad.
 One thousand years before him, his ancestor fell
 building yet another annex to the Great Wall—
 and was entombed within his work. And I,
 the beginning of an end, the end of a beginning,
 sit here, drink unfermented green tea,
 scrawl there paltry lines for you. Grandfather,
 on your one-hundredth birthday, I have
 the answers to your last riddles:

This is why the baboon's ass is red.
 Why horses lie down only in moments of disaster.
 Why the hyena's back is forever scarred.
 Why, that one hare who was saved, splits his upper lip,
 in a fit of hysterical laughter. (*Bamboo* 3)

By evoking the immigrant grandfather's riddles, Chin shifts the focus of the poem from history to culture, from the past to the present, in which her persona is inscribing Chinese American history, and reclaiming her Chinese cultural inheritance in her poetry.

In an interview with Bill Moyers, Chin says that "As a poet I believe I need to work in both Eastern and Western paradigms; I need to know *both* traditions" (77). For Chin, the integration of both Eastern and Western traditions in her poems is a way of articulating her hybrid cultural identity as an Asian American in resistance to either assimilation or exclusion by mainstream Eurocentric American culture. A number of her poems deal with anxieties, fears, and creative possibilities in Asian Americans' experience of diaspora. The unconventional forms and heterogenous images of those poems reflect the cross-cultural experience of Asian Americans and Chin's search for a new poetics that absorbs both Eastern and Western traditions, yet breaks away from both.

In “Segments of a Bamboo Screen” Chin employs montage to shift narratives and descriptions between the present and the past through the speaker’s meditation and her observation of the segments of a bamboo screen. To enhance the shifts of temporal-spatial relationships in the poem and the speaker’s sense of being in-between worlds, Chin marks the sections about the Chinese landscape painting and the present moment in America with asterisks, which render these sections separate yet connected, like the segments of bamboo. The poem begins with the speaker expressing a sense of alienation from her white American partner, but asserting confidence about the promise of their future:

The light breaks your face in sections.
 Sometimes I do not know who you are.
 Your eyes and cheeks are hollow,
 Your hair, golden and limp. I am

A Taiwanese born behind a grove
 Of Japanese mangoes and persimmon—
 We have endured war, sacrificed children.

I see our future as bright, streaks
 Of dawn light shimmering on the ocean. (*Bamboo 17*)

In association to the “dawn light shimmering on the ocean,” the speaker begins to observe the moon in the landscape painting on one segment of a bamboo screen. In classical Chinese poetry, the moon is an evocative image which generates the poet’s meditation and emotional states. It is usually bright and full, signifying harmony and union, and providing intimate companionship to the poet. But the moon is “gibbous” in the landscape the speaker is observing, reminding her of her distance from China, to which her connection is still yet tangible:

* * * *
 The Moon is gibbous. Just say
 She shall no longer pay you her full attention.
 The moon’s a hook, but she has not let you go yet.
 Her absence is near and nearer the darkness.

The world is sad, wake
 And the landscape is pocked with war.
 Scythes, plows are silver in the daybreak,
 Abandoned by men, cherished by dew. (*Bamboo 17*)

* * * *

The darkness in the sky, with the disappearance of the moon, reminds the speaker of the aftermath of wars, which are a major historical condition for Asian Americans’ diaspora, but is hidden in the landscape painting.

In further association with the Chinese landscape painting on the bamboo screen, Chin turns the speaker's meditation to Chinese Americans' connection to China, and their diaspora. Rather than merely exploring this connection as a theme, Chin appropriates Daoist humour, paradoxes, and epigrammatic expressions in the poem to articulate Chinese Americans' connection to China:

You cannot clap with one hand
What you are is who I am

You cannot cut the bamboo in half
take three knots and drain the sap

You cannot hum with the mouth agape
Or whistle through your wounds and breaks

You cannot blame the mother node
The species, the height, the rooted home. (*Bamboo* 18)

Then the speaker shifts her observation again back to the paintings on the bamboo screen in the next segment of the poem, and engages in a dialogue with the great Chinese painter Yao Chien Shu about his painting. For the speaker, the conventional motifs of landscape in Yao's painting disguise the historic landscape of war, which directly connects to Chinese American diaspora. The connection between social history and art is one of Chin's major thematic concerns. She combines history with lyricism in this poem by using montage composition to disrupt the "here-and-now" temporal-spatial relationship of the lyric moment. As a result, Chin is able to relate personal experience to collective history. In fact, both the self and the golden-haired partner in this poem are more than individuals. Their relationship symbolizes that between Chinese immigrants and white America. As the speaker says:

Between me and him is an ocean
Of fear. My small boat tugs along
With forbidden cargo.

When do you want to reach the other side?
Tell me your history and your intentions,
Who your friends are. (*Bamboo* 18)

The metaphors of "an ocean of fear" and "forbidden cargo" allude to the exclusionary immigration laws targeted at the Chinese by the United States government.² With these allusions to the history of racial discrimination, the promise the speaker sees in the golden-haired partner at the beginning of the poem turns into menace.

The white young man in this poem, as in others, symbolizes several aspects of white America for Chin's persona. "[T]hroughout my work," Chin writes, he plays the roles of "lover/dominant culture/hegemonist..."³ The tension and ambivalence in Chinese Americans' relationship with white America result in part from the conflict be-

tween the “melting pot” assimilation ideology and numerous antimiscegenation laws in U.S. history. However, resistance to racial mixing is not restricted to white America. Chin says in an interview that “The Chinese want to keep the blood pure —my grandmother used to sit on the porch with a broom and try to sweep away the white boys from dating us— but assimilation is inescapable.” She adds “Just as I think it’s impossible to keep Chineseness pure, I think it’s also impossible to keep whiteness pure” (Moyers 73). In Chin’s poems such as “Exile’s Letter (Or: An Essay on Assimilation),” the “white boys” who are interested in the Chinese American girl pose a threat to the assumed racial purity of both the Chinese and whites (*Bamboo* 42-43).

For Chin, assimilation in Chinese Americans’ experience also raises questions of cultural survival. The materialistic American dream and the immigrants’ dislocation threaten to diminish Chinese Americans’ artistic ambitions. In “Art Wong Is Alive and Ill and Struggling in Oakland California,” Chin dramatizes the difficulties for working-class Chinese Americans in developing their artistic talents and pursuing creative ambitions. She employs collage to juxtapose three different perspectives on art. The poem begins with the speaker making disparaging remarks about the great Chinese painter Chi Pai Shih, and calling him “a bore.” Then it switches to Chi Pai Shih’s voice in the second stanza:

*Thirty, I painted landscapes;
forty, insects and flowers;
fifty, I turned lazy as mud,
never ventured beyond
West Borrowed Hill. (Bamboo 68)*

Chi Pai Shih’s life of leisure dedicated to the art of painting and his lack of adventurous spirit contrast with the situation of the Chinese American painter in Part II.

The painter in Part II is at once an individual and a symbol of a collective condition of Chinese Americans. For Chinese American artists, Chi Pai Shih’s artistic credo and practice are impossible, as the speaker’s response suggests:

Oh, Nonsense! Art
is a balding painter, humpbacked
as the dwarfed acacia
dying in his father’s chopsuey joint.

His palette is muddy; his thoughts are mud.
He sits crosslegged,
one eye open, the other shut,
a drunken Buddha. (*Bamboo* 68)

As in Part I, the speaking voice switches from that of Chin’s persona to that of the artist, which provides further information about the artist’s beliefs and condition:

*I laugh at the sun; I take in air;
I whistle in sleep, let cicadas within*

*murmur their filial rapture
 My father's dream is my dream:
 fast cars and California gold;
 the singles bar is my watering hole. (Bamboo 68)*

Just as hard work in his father's chopsuey joint has weakened his body, the artist's pursuit of the materialist American dream has eroded his artistic ambitions.

Yet, the speaker in Part III is "in love with" the dying, unfulfilled Chinese American painter. On one level, Chin skilfully creates the drama of a young woman's love for a lonely Chinese American painter who is dying with unfulfilled dream; on the other, she deftly merges the painter with art and diaspora. While this doubleness gives Chin's deceptively simple poem compression and abstraction, her simple diction and cadence enhance its emotional intensity. The two stanzas of Part III are a good example of Chin's mastery at developing the poem on both concrete and symbolic levels:

And I ... I am in love with him.
 Never ask why, for youth
 never begs the question.
 As long as boughs are green
 so is my love green and pure
 in this asphalt loneliness.

I let down my long hair;
 my hair falls over his shoulders:
 thus, we become one. Oh, Willow,
 Consummate this marriage between
 Art and me, between
 the diaspora and the yearning sea. (*Bamboo 69*)

By allowing the opening speech of each part to respond to the preceding one, Chin connects the three perspectives on art, while situating each in its specific context. Moreover, collage composition enables her to include multiple voices and multiple spatial-temporal dimensions without losing the compression and intensity of lyricism.

Chi Pai Shih's conservatism for the speaker and the speaker's love for the unfulfilled Chinese American "Art Wong" in this poem shed light on the speaker's remark that "The beginning is always difficult," in the opening poem of *Dwarf Bamboo*. However, the beginning of making a new poetry out of diaspora is also full of exciting creative possibilities. While dramatizing Asian Americans' experience, Chin invents new poetic forms and styles, which break away from both Eastern and Western traditions.

Like Chin, Cathy Song draws from both Asian and American cultures in exploring new possibilities for making poetry. Several of Cathy Song's poems in her first book of poetry, *Picture Bride*, the 1982 winner of the Yale Series of Younger Poets, are inspired by visual arts. Apart from the descriptive and narrative possibilities of visual details, what seems to interest Song most is the construction of gender identity

in works such as the woodblock prints by Kitagawa Utamaro, a famous nineteenth-century Japanese artist. In “Beauty and Sadness,” dedicated to Utamaro, Song recreates the female beauties in Utamaro’s prints of Japanese women, while exposing their artificiality:

They arranged themselves
before this quick, nimble man
whose invisible presence
one feels in these prints
is as delicate
as the skinlike paper
he used to transfer
and retain their fleeting loveliness. (*Bride* 37)

Song suggests that these women’s posing, like their loveliness, is a constructed appearance by the subtle yet perceptible gaze of the male artist, who naturalizes femininity through his art.

In another poem “Girl Powdering Her Neck,” Song at once recreates and comments on a print by Utamaro. While capturing the moment in which a young woman sitting in front of a mirror is about to paint herself, Song again reveals that her artificial beauty, is part of the marker of her gender identity:

The mouth parts
as if desiring to disturb
the placid plum face;
break the symmetry of silence.
But the berry-stained lips,
stenciled into the mask of beauty,
do not speak. (*Bride* 40)

By exposing the naturalized femininity as “the mask of beauty,” Song subverts essentialized stereotypes of sensuous, passive, quiet Oriental women.

In juxtaposition to these idealized female beauties, Song portrays the lives of real women in a sequence of five poems, “Blue and White Lines after O’Keeffe.” These poems negotiate a female identity through a woman artist’s creative subjectivity. While the subtitles of these five poems are based on five of Georgia O’Keeffe’s floral paintings, Song’s persona identifies with O’Keeffe the painter, who is searching for independence and autonomy as an artist, but eventually has come to terms with her connection to her mother and returns to her.⁴ As the speaker says to the mother: “I have come to rest at your feet, / to be near the familiar scent of talc ...” (*Bride* 48).

Song explores further the woman artist’s search for independence and for the unfamiliar in order to reinvent herself and her art in a poem dedicated to O’Keeffe, “From the White Place,” which breaks away from the conventional poetic form. At the same time, Song attempts to capture the subtlety in the gendered relationship between O’Keeffe and her husband, the photographer Alfred Stieglitz. She structures the poem in such a way so as to give O’Keeffe her own voice, which helps establish

and maintain O’Keeffe’s independence throughout the poem. O’Keeffe’s independence as an artist and a woman is a major theme of the poem; her independence as a creative subject in Song’s poem is also crucial to Song’s position as the poet who portrays O’Keeffe. This relationship between Song and the figure she represents differs from Utamaro’s subject-versus-object relation with the figures he portrays.

“From the White Place” consists of three parts, the first two portraying two different periods in O’Keeffe’s life, the third returning to that of the first part. Part 1 “Blue Bones: Ghost Ranch” begins with O’Keeffe’s voice speaking about her first impression of New Mexico, where she has chosen to live and paint by herself at Ghost Ranch. Song selects the images of the animal bones and landscape, which figure prominently in O’Keeffe’s paintings of the West, to give a characteristic picture of the environment of O’Keeffe’s new life. Words spoken in O’Keeffe’s voice are italicized so as to set them apart from Song’s voice:

*So dry. there are no flowers
to paint,
but this pelvic mountain
thrusting toward light and heat,
insistent: I hack slabs of it at breakfast,
lie prostrate against it at night;*

.....

When she came out west,
her frail fields
collapsed into tumbleweed.
She thought the wind had hollowed out her eyes;
she could find no relief, no color.
She arranged a still life,
removing the last wall of her house
to confront the lunar mountain,
jagged like a fistful of chamisas.
Certain of a simple equation:
how the ocean hurls itself
without hurting its own energy. (*Bride 72*)

Song’s voice provide additional specific information about O’Keeffe’s life and its impact on her art. Then O’Keeffe’s voice continues to reveal more details about her life and feelings in the unfamiliar landscape of New Mexico. Through O’Keeffe’s monologue, Song skilfully combines narrative details with spontaneity, compression, and intensity of lyricism to recreate O’Keeffe’s sense of the place, especially how she feels about the animal bones she paints.

Then Part 2, “Memories, Gallery 291” moves to Steiglitz’s gallery in New York, where O’Keeffe first met him. Song focuses this part on the moment when Steiglitz took nude photos of O’Keeffe at the Gallery. This moment reveals two sets of relationships —the gender relationship and the relationship between Steiglitz the artist and his object/ material. Again Song juxtaposes her voice with O’Keeffe’s to simulta-

neously portray two different perspectives, one from the exterior and the other from the interior:

He wanted to show her
the space between a man and a woman,
the oceans and plains in between:
she endured the inspections
of her bones and wrists.
The first touch surprised her;
his lens felt like a warm skull.

She sat waiting, unafraid,
trusting the shapes her body would make
as he plotted terrains and objects,
her face—
things not generally regarded as beautiful.

*This is how it must be
to feel the pull of the moon
lengthening your blood,
when it is you the moon seeks
and no ground nor trees to guide you. (Bride 73)*

Reiterating Steiglitz's intention to show O'Keeffe the difference between men and women, Song suggests that Steiglitz is using O'Keeffe as his model, turning her into the object of his gaze and art. But Song immediately shifts the descriptive-narrative voice from Steiglitz's perspective to O'Keeffe's, which undermines his intention. Rather than allowing herself to be reduced to an object of his gaze like the beautiful passive Japanese women in Utamaro's prints, O'Keeffe regards her own body the way an artist perceives his or her models. Song inserts words and phrases such as "bones," "shapes," and "things not generally regarded as beautiful" to strike a parallel between how Steiglitz views O'Keeffe's body, and how O'Keeffe regards her own body and the bones and landscapes she paints, thus portraying O'Keeffe as an artist rather than merely a male artist's object. The italicized lines in the voice of O'Keeffe further articulate her sensibility and spirit as an artist who is searching for something in the unknown.

Song's arrangement of the last six lines of this part again erases "the space between a man a woman" which Steiglitz intends to show O'Keeffe:

In the absence of color,
he assembled the dark curves,
seaming passages,
endless negatives,

*like this terrible wind,
this wonderful emptiness... (Bride 73)*

By juxtaposing and connecting the moment when Steiglitz is pursuing his art in his New York studio with the moment when O’Keeffe is in New Mexico searching for new inspirations and materials for her paintings, Song deftly closes the vast “space” between the two as a man and woman, which Steiglitz “wanted to show her.” Although the two are physically far apart now, the gendered “space” between them has disappeared. Being away from Steiglitz, O’Keeffe achieves independence from her husband’s male dominance.

Song allows O’Keeffe’s voice to articulate her sense of freedom in Part 3 “From the White Place,” which returns to New Mexico. In addition, she portrays the landscape through O’Keeffe’s eyes with allusions to the colors of her landscape paintings such as “Red and Orange Hills” and “Pedernal and Red Hills”:

*Out on pink mesa,
the soft sandstone glowed
like the belly of a salmon.
I began to breathing for the first time today,
knowing the first breath would hurt. (Bride 74)*

In accordance with O’Keeffe’s feelings of freedom for the first time, the title “From the White Place” echoes O’Keeffe’s “first memory of the brightness of light” and white color when she was only eight or nine months old.⁵ This “white place” implies the threshold of imagination and creation, a space where transformation begins.

Song’s remarks about the poems of her second volume, *Frameless Window, Squares of Light* (1988), illuminate her interest in the visual arts, as well as the themes and forms of her poems such as “From the White Place”:

These are poems about the window and the field, the passages of time that are marked there: your brief history, the time-line that spans the length of your room; the window you occupy day after day, looking at the view, the field beyond where snow falls “on both sides of the glass.” What frames the view is the mind by the imagination. Out of that depth, squares of light form, like windows you pass at night, like photographs developing in the dark.⁶

Song recreates “the passages of time” of O’Keeffe’s life as an artist through unconventional use of form and voices in “From the White Place.” Her innovative structure of interrupted yet interrelated narratives, descriptions, and monologues gradually reveal a brief history of O’Keeffe’s life, like “photographs developing in the dark.” This unfolding of narrative and its dramatic quality in Song’s poem seem to derive from Song’s study of prose fiction. Song says in an interview that she gets “inspiration from novels and stories” (Christensen D1). Drawing from story writers’ techniques, Song is able to recreate multiple voices and perspectives in one poem, enriching the visual details with narrative and dramatic details, without losing the emotional intensity and philosophical abstraction of lyricism.

Like Song, Trinh T. Minh-ha relies on visual images to create meaning and experience. But her methods of using visual images and her poetic forms are very differ-

ent from Song's. In fact, she employs cinematic techniques to incorporate photographs as part of a poem. For instance, the text of "It Went by Me" is juxtaposed with a montage of four different images. An incomplete Buddha's face posited at the center of the montage serves as a relatively stable sight to create a sense of movement in the other images. On the left of the Buddha's face are two sequential close-ups of a partial profile, with a focus on the eye and the eyebrow, moving toward the Buddha's face and disappearing behind it. A photo of a girl's face is superimposed on the other side of the Buddha. On the lower right corner of the girl's photo, Trinh superimposes a much smaller photo of what seems to be a woman's classical hair-do in the Vietnamese opera, with only the forehead visible. These fragmentary glimpses of beautiful sights perform the statement of the poem:

Something very beautiful
 just went by me
 something not to tell
 in words in feelings
 so fragile so wild
 something yet to tell
 is no longer
 why and when it left
 i can't tell (*Waves* 243)

The movement and narrative created by the montage of the images capture a sense of the fleeting moments and articulate the unutterable. Moreover, these images are not simply signifiers, but also cultural signs. The Asian features, the Buddha, the classical East and South-East Asian hair-do constitute an enunciative process of cultural difference, which intervenes in Eurocentric cultural dominance. Similarly, the structure and epigrammatic utterance of the poem itself and the lowercase "i" resist the conventional Western poetic form and the centrality of the lyric "I." Like haiku or a classical Chinese poem, Trinh's poem yields the self to the moment of experience and perception.

Trinh also refuses to employ the prosody of traditional blank verse in her longer, meditative poems such as "Monotone." In fact, she breaks away from all traditional structures of rhyme and meter, and organizes the lines in short syllabic units of phrases and single words. By structuring the whole poem into a succession of syllables on one unvaried tone, Trinh creates a "monotone" to capture the psychological and emotional state of the poem:

the day I thought
 I, she won
 sole retainer of
 what I so desired
 even momentarily,
 [...]
 that day perhaps
 I, she were already
 losing

hours then
 days go by
 the names of joy
 sub-side
 unwanted
 doubts settle in
 grow growing in-
 to certain-ties
 [...]

self
 inflicted agony a
 slave
 of hallucination
 losing
 sight of pro-
 portion
 [...]

as I now feel
 trampled
 exposed
 in all small feelings
 impatience
 pity, leniency
 anger, hatred
 shame
 and sense-less
 affliction

what
 [...]

wretched feeling
 led me
 to such curses
 ... (*Waves* 251)

The brevity of the line units creates a sense of rapid movement, enhancing the changes in the relationship between two people, which the speaker is exploring. At the same time, the brief line-breaks enable Trinh to give weight to single words and phrases by isolating them. This arrangement produces pauses and halts the movement of the poem, thus creating a contrapuntal movement to the general movement of the poem, which foregrounds the stages of change in the relationship.

Again, the meanings and feelings of the poem are visualized in the montage of images, juxtaposed with the text. While the two close-up faces in profile turning toward opposite directions signify alienation, their expressions speak a number of psychological and emotional states described in the text. The clearly non-European features and dark complexion of these faces are another of Trinh's representational strategies of

intervention. As the Japanese American poet David Mura says, “the world looked differently” when he withdrew his “attention, affection, curiosity from the white face ... and giving it to the black faces.” He adds that the dominance of white presence in films such as *Out of Africa* and others “was a form of cultural and political power, the almost unconscious and instantaneous granting of priority to faces of one skin color over another” (qtd. in Tabios 336). Trinh subverts the persistent privileging of white presence by representing faces of people of color in her poems. Her appropriation of cinematic techniques of visual montage narrative and simultaneity, like Cathy Song’s verbal montage, enlarges the signifying capacity of poetic forms for multiple perspectives.

In addition to visual arts, Asian American women poets explore linguistic possibilities as strategies of subversion and resistance to Eurocentric cultural dominance, and as a mode of expression.⁷ Kimiko Hahn, for instance, constantly incorporates fragments of Japanese language and literary texts in her poem not simply to intervene in Eurocentric culture, but to articulate her biracial and bicultural identity. In her poems such as “The Room,” “Revolutions,” and “Comp. Lit.” Hahn pays homage to Murasaki Shikibu, the female author of *The Tale of Genji*, a novel written in the eleventh century during the Heian period (794-1185), which was the “golden age” of Japanese women’s literature. While making allusions to the novel, Hahn investigates the formation of women’s gendered subjectivity and women’s relationships with one another, and with men in the context of power relations.⁸ At the same time, Hahn seeks inspiration and empowerment from classical Japanese women’s literary tradition as her persona in “Revolutions” asserts:

I want those words
that gave women de facto power,

.....
I connect to that century
as after breath is knocked out
we suck it back in. (*Earshot* 17)

Hahn’s feminist stance, however, does not reject the influence of male writers. In her intertextual poem, “The Izu Dancer,” Hahn incorporates words, sentences, and passages in Japanese from the story “The Dancing Girl of Izu” by Yasunari Kawabata, winner of the 1968 Nobel Prize for literature. She uses fragments from the story to recreate her baffling experience of learning the Japanese language by reading the story in Japanese:

Though not a difficult text
every few words I was stuck
flipping through water radicals
水 じ 水

so I could resume the journey inside words
I had begun as a child, as when Kawabata wrote
雨脚が杉の密林を白く染めながら
“while the shower bleached the cedars”

I did not know
 I did not want to know Japanese
 so much as a way back to, say, salt
 and to him in his heaven.
 [...]

Yet from the fragrance of his lines I struggled to raise:
 “I thought for a moment of running out barefoot to look for her.
 It was after two.”

裸足で湯屋を抜け出して行ってたって、どうにも
 出来ないのだったと思った。二時を過ぎている。

I needed the information locked in ink—
 each stroke, a signal; each kanji, a panorama.
 And barbed fence. (*Earshot* 87)

But the poem deals with much more than the experience of learning the Japanese language. It moves between fragments of Kawabata’s story and Hahn’s memories and meditations which are generated by the story. There is no sequential or logical development in the poem, which moves from one passage to another by free associations with the narrative of the story or its language. The collage of fragmentary narratives, memories, and meditations are bound by the overriding theme of the poem. According to Hahn, this composition method is largely shaped by William Carlos Williams’s influence on her, particularly the inclusive capacity of *Paterson*, and Williams’s motto: “no ideas but in things” (Hahn “Memory, Language and Desire” 66).

By breaking away from traditional poetic forms and combining narrative with lyricism, Hahn is able to incorporate her hybrid cultural inheritance in the poem, making language, sexuality, and gendered subjectivity the subject matter of the poem:

Though in some respects the characters are astonishingly
 simple:

tree 木

forest 森

woman 女

mischief; noisy; assault 女々

But the complex unfolding of a single sentence
 with whole sentences modifying a noun
 at the end of the line baffled, humiliated
 and toughened my spirit.
 I persevered in my search for the fragrance of words
 in this modest story—the only Kawabata story I could read.
 Where did he unearth

不自然なほど美しい黒髪が私の胸に触れそうになった。

(“Her hair, so rich it seemed unreal, almost brushed against my chest.”)
 Where did I find the hands on my shoulders, sliding down my arms

then up under my t-shirt, into my bra,
 (Earshot 89)

Like the material forms of the Japanese language, Kawabata's constrained, sensuous language and his subtle description of desire contrast Hahn's "confessional" mode of direct exposure of shocking private experience.

Hahn juxtaposes fragments of Kawabata's narrative with her autobiographical fragments not only to show the contrasts between their respective use of language, but also to illustrate the difference between the Japanese girl's sexuality and her own:

The story is so clear I can dream his lines:
stepping out of the waves
I noticed a rash spread over my legs,
the color of boiled lobster or genitals.
It embarrassed her. She turned and ran away
as if I had said something amiss.
To kiss me there.

If I saw a red Volkswagen my heart would roll like a tsunami
 toward a man smoking a cigarette, leaning against the chalkboard.
 Tall. Graying. In no time all lessons will be forgotten.
 But not a memory of no memory.
 Perhaps I did not want the language enough
 or wanted something else—
 —to leave a laundry-filled dormitory room
 and press my whole body against the professor's doorbell
 till he came downstairs and invited me inside.
 Cooked me dinner. Fucked in the guest room.
 Perhaps I didn't want any language. Any marriage. (Earshot 91)

Hahn's frank articulation of a woman's desire and sexuality is informed by French feminist theories about the connections between the woman's body and her writing.⁹ "My issues are predominantly female: women's sexuality, pregnancy, birth, motherhood ..." Hahn writes in her essay, "Memory, Language and Desire." She notes in the same essay that "there are relatively few works that present women's point of view. I rise to that need and challenge" (68). In articulating her desire and sexuality in the confessional mode of American poetry, Hahn is positioning her female persona as the subject of desire in contrast to the Japanese dancing girl who is portrayed as the object of male desire in Kawabata's story.

In juxtaposition to the anti-climatic closure of Kawabata's story, Hahn portrays an autobiographical experience with an anti-climatic ending. Moreover, her observation and use of language in this passage emulate the sensibility and nuance in Kawabata's writing, and yet, from a woman's point of view:

A waitress pours me a warmup and I look over
 to catch the back of a man's neck,

his heavy black hair in a severe razor-cut style.
 I imagine he is B.D. Wong
 the incredibly handsome actor in *M. Butterfly*.
 His moist white cotton shirt
 hangs a bit off his shoulders

.....
 I imagine he turns around to ask for—
 an ashtray
 and ends up at my table

.....
 But as the man gathers his belongs he turns
 and instead of the aristocratic profile and rakish glow
 it's an older Italian man, moustached and serious.
 But briefly that fragrance! (*Earshot* 92-93)

This brief moment in which Hahn enacts Kawabata's narrative strategy, captures his subtle sensuality through linguistic nuance, signifies Hahn's triumphant arrival at creating "that fragrance" with words in her difficult "journey inside words" which began in childhood, as she describes at the beginning of the poem. Like the other Asian American women poets' incorporation of Asian cultures and people in their poems, Hahn's appropriation of Kawabata, her inclusion of the Japanese language, and her allusion to *M. Butterfly* by David Henry Hwang, as well as her attraction, affection, and curiosity for the Chinese actor, subvert racial stereotypes of Asian males as ugly or threatening "aliens," and intervene in the privileging of whiteness and Eurocentric culture.

But Hahn's poetic hybridity, like that of Marilyn Chin, Cathy Song, and Trinh T. Minh-ha, aims at more than subversion and intervention. Her use of Japanese language and literary texts opens up more creative possibilities for her. Her bilingual poems illustrate that the English language is "not the *only* language of beautiful literature or its linguistic possibilities" (Hahn "Memory, Language and Desire" 66). Hahn acknowledges the influence of Hispanic American writers, who "combine English and Spanish in a single work." She is particularly interested in the way Ho Hon Leung, a Hong Kong-born Chinese poet, uses Chinese characters as the theme and subject matter of his poems, which sometimes include musical notations.¹⁰ For Hahn, Leung's "language" and hybrid collage "spoke to my linguistic and cultural experience in a broader and richer manner than many 'Mainstream' writers." Reclaiming ethnic cultures and literatures, Hahn contends, "is politically and aesthetically necessary" for minority American writers to "challenge and redefine 'Mainstream'" America, and to revitalize poetic forms and language ("Memory, Language and Desire" 65, 69).

The historical and cultural conditions which shape Asian American women's poetics and generate their creative impulses render Harold Bloom's paradigm for "poetic influence" inadequate. However, in his preface "The Analysis of Women Writers" to *Asian American Women Writers* (1997), Bloom still insists on the importance of poets' agonistic person-to-person relationships in shaping their aesthetics. He asks:

Do women poets have a less agonistic relationship to female precursor than male poets have to their forerunners? [...] Can it be true that, in the aesthetic

sphere, women do not beware women and do not suffer from the competitiveness and jealousy that alas do exist in the professional and sexual domains? Is there something in the area of literature, when practised by women, that changes and purifies mere human nature? (xi)

Bloom's assumption of a universal, stable "human nature" and his insistence on a totalizing Freudian psychological hypothesis as the paradigm for analyzing the poet's creative process regardless of historical changes, are bound to turn him and his theory into "dinosaurs" —to borrow his own word (xiii)— especially in the case of Asian American women's poetry.

Speaking of the complex conditions for women writers of color, Trinh T. Minh-ha emphasizes the importance of contextual specificity. "As focal point of cultural consciousness and social change," Trinh contends, "writing weaves into language the complex relations of a subject caught between the problems of race and gender and the practice of literature as the very place where social alienation is thwarted differently according to each specific context" (*Woman* 6). Asian American women's poetry and poetics also complicate feminist theories of language, authorship, and women's literary traditions based on sexual difference. While posing theoretical challenges to literary critics, Asian American poets' works open up new possibilities for poetry.

(I am grateful to Marilyn Chin for her graciousness in answering my questions about her poems.)

Notes

¹ Sylvia Plath, "Stings," *Ariel* (New York: Haper & Row, 1966) 62.

² Official and unofficial anti-Chinese sentiment developed in the U.S. soon after large numbers of Chinese arrived in California after 1840. In 1882, the U.S. Congress passed the first Chinese Exclusion Act, banning both skilled and unskilled Chinese laborers for ten years. The Great Act of 1892 extended the exclusion for another ten years before President Theodore Roosevelt finally made exclusion "permanent" in 1902.

³ Marilyn Chin, letter to the author, May 26, 1998.

⁴ For a discussion of Cathy Song's intertextual appropriation and revision of Kitagawa Utamaro's prints and her sequence poem "Blue and White Lines after O'Keefe," see Zhou Xiaojing, "Cross-cultural Strategies in Asian American Poetry," *Literary Studies East and West*, ed. Cynthia Franklin et al., vol. 16 (Honolulu: U of Hawaii P and the East-West Center, forthcoming).

⁵ See the first paragraph of O'Keefe's memories of her childhood and early drawings in the preface to *Georgia O'Keefe* (New York: Black Dog & Leventhal, 1976). Song incorporates other biographical materials from O'Keefe's memories in her sequence, "Blue and White Lines after O'Keefe."

⁶ Cathy Song, letter to John Benedict, July 31, 1987, quoted in "Cathy Song," *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, eds. Richard Ellmann and Robert O'Clair, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1988) 1732.

- ⁷ For a general discussion of Asian American women poets' strategies of language difference, see Zhou Xiaojing, "Reappropriating 'Otherness': Strategies of Language and Cultural Difference in Asian American Women's Poetry," *A New Asian American Studies Text*, ed. Esther Milyung Ghymn (New York: Peter Lang, forthcoming).
- ⁸ For a discussion of Kimiko Hahn's intertextual dialogues with fragments of *The Tale of Genji*, see Zhou Xiaojing, "Cross-cultural Strategies in Asian American Poetry," forthcoming.
- ⁹ According to Hahn, a group of her poems were "triggered" by the texts of feminist writers such as Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Catherine Clément, and Adrienne Rich. Her poem "Responding to Light" is written in response to Irigaray's essay, "Body against Body: In Relation to the Mother," collected in *Sexes and Genealogies* (1993). See Eileen Tabios, *Black Lightning: Poetry-in-Progress* (New York: The Asian American Writers Workshop, 1998) 24-68.
- ¹⁰ For Ho Hon Leung's collage poems, see Walter K. Lew, ed., *Premonitions: The Kaya Anthology of New Asian North American Poetry* (New York: Kaya, 1995) 243-48.

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