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Form and History in Asian American Literary Studies

Colleen Lye

Narrating Nationalisms: Ideology and Form in Asian American Literature, Jinqi Ling. Oxford University Press, 1998.

In the current climate of a “new formalism” in literary studies, Jinqi Ling’s *Narrating Nationalisms: Ideology and Form in Asian American Literature* (1998) strikes today’s reader as both methodologically ahead of its time and politically reminiscent of a moment when our profession’s faith in the social relevance of literature was in greater evidence.¹ These combined qualities—its mixed stance in the current of the present—make Ling’s book inordinately useful to think with. Proposing to read literary form in its historical context, Ling’s monograph might still be considered the only genuine successor to Elaine Kim’s inaugural Asian American literary history, *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to Their Writings and Their Social Contexts* (1982), hereby providing a critical realist, nonsociological account of Asian American literary evolution that would seek to break once and for all with the reproduction of “Asian America’s social marginalization in the realm of aesthetics by denying Asian American literature not only its literariness but also its rich human potential” (37). Its interest in the specific properties of the literary text made it something of a sleeper when it appeared during the cultural studies ferment of the 1990s; for that reason, it now has a lot to say to a new generation of Asian Americanists who are turning their minds to the recovery of earlier Asian American literary texts. Because of the Sinocentric tilt of Ling’s canon, the book may appear dated, particularly to scholars working outside of the long 1970s (possibly the only period to which attributions of the existence of an “Asian American literary discourse” might still be believed). But this need not be viewed as a debilitating limit of Ling’s study. Its significant achievement is the modeling of a method of historical formalism that helps address the severe

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challenge of anachronism posed to the construction of Asian American literary history.

Let me briefly summarize the nature of Ling's formal and historical commitments, and of what they permit. Ling's subject matter, Asian American literary realism in the period 1957–80, provides him with the ground for a theoretical argument waged dually against Asian American cultural studies' neglect of formal considerations and of history. By the latter, Ling means the past as a complex object of knowledge that deserves its due, but also a way of seeing the connections between past and present. These two senses of history are related in that objects are inseparable from our perceptions and uses of them. Indeed, Ling sees the 1990s vogue for stylistically modernist Asian American works as bespeaking a kind of aesthetic formalism that is the flip side of a sociologically transparent reading of realism; the celebration of the avant-gardism of newer literary formations depends upon ceding the treatment of older literature by and large to sociologists (professional or not), whose naïve readings of realist narrative contemporary critics have mistaken for the naivete of the literature itself. In noting the gap between literature's mimetic claims and the actual results of its representation, Ling's insistence on treating Asian American realism as a "historically constituted aesthetic phenomenon" (23) sweeps aside, on the one hand, the content-based readings seen to be characteristic of the political valuation of earlier literature for its social function and, on the other hand, the formalism reflected in the celebration of contemporary literature for its anti-essentialist performativity.

For example, in reading John Okada's *No-No Boy* (1957) within the same frame as Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men* (1980)—the two texts serving to bookend his literary period—Ling argues on behalf of the foundational role played by the writers of the 1950s and 1960s in paving the way for the nationalist consciousness of the 1970s. In so doing, he makes better sense of the historical significance of Okada and Louis Chu to an emergent Asian American formation than critics from the 1980s and 1990s, who criticized their political limitations, or the *Aiiieeeee!* anthologists of the early 1970s, who had recovered them on the basis of a mystified notion of ethnic authenticity. As Ling eloquently writes, Okada's and Chu's novels may have been failures of a kind, since their texts went out of print, "but the social conditions that produced them did not disappear. On the contrary, these conditions were expanded both temporally and spatially as a result of the ideological exertion and then the marginalization of the texts" (30). Even as the postwar era of limited dissent is shown to be more continuous with the 1970s era of cultural nationalism

than is usually assumed—so that, as Ling puts it, the 1970s were long in the making—cultural nationalism is itself shown to be more complex than a post-nationalist perspective might be wont to acknowledge. Ling's readings of Frank Chin and Kingston reveal the risks of their respective ethnic authentication strategies, an awareness of the difficulty of becoming American even in the moment of imitating the voice of the dominant, and their unavoidable entanglement in diasporic and international perspectives. Ling's literary period ends in 1980, but he is arguably as interested in establishing the affiliations between nationalism and post-nationalism as between pre-nationalism and nationalism: "For historical transitions are always ambiguous, protracted, and unpredictable, constantly throwing up obstacles to development and frequently demanding re-contextualization of current problematics in light of the past and reexamination of the past in relation to its residual forms in the present" (29).

Thus, Ling's work shows the potential relevance of Asian American literature to rethinking transition in the customary narratives of Asian American history, a field that has heretofore largely depended for its periodizations upon a top-down legal historiography (of Asian exclusion by immigration and naturalization law). Asian American history rethought according to the agency and effectivity of Asian American literature may yield a different set of periodizations and historical questions. Following Ling's program for the post-1980 era, for example, would require going beyond the example set by his reading practice. A post-1980 literary history would have to take further account of the institutionality of Asian American literature than he was able to in studying the era before its significant curricular dissemination by the university.

Ling's insistence that we grasp realism as a literary form is linked to his injunction to historicize, which involves tracking a text's availability for recontextualization by subsequent horizons of expectation. Ling urges a "transformative understanding of textual signs," which entails "consciously activating submerged meanings and critically incorporating interventionary values" (18), and which, as exemplified by the evolving state of Asian American literary discourse itself, has shown itself capable of anticipating and instilling future sensibilities. On the basis of this view of the socially transformative power of Asian American writing, its ability to articulate new contexts through the endless possibility of its being reread, Ling proposes that contemporary Asian American cultural critique is more informed by discursive pasts than it realizes, and that its effective orientation depends upon the cultivation of a usable past: "The newness of recent

Asian American literary articulations lies not in their inherent power of being contemporary nor in their actual severance from previous sources of resistance, but in their fuller expression, under more enabling (or seemingly more enabling) social conditions, of the possibilities of liberation problematically or incompletely envisioned by earlier Asian American realist and/or nationalist literary voices. In this sense, Asian Americans cannot move easily beyond the limitations of their past simply on the basis of new social formations" (29).

Ling characterizes his call to think historically and to read formally as a *materialist* intervention into Asian American cultural studies, an effort to "contribute to a reconstitution of the material basis for investigating Asian American literary discourse of the post-1980 period" (vi). Ling argues that Asian American cultural studies' failure to distinguish between rhetorical claims and their performative effects has resulted in assigning undue power to the subjective will's capacity to duplicate the world despite varying contexts of differential social relations; it has neglected both the textual effects of aesthetic pleasure and the institutional dimension of literary production. For the most part, Ling's own contextualizing work remains within the horizon of political history, without moving outward (or downward) to the horizons of class struggle or modes of production. On the other hand, Ling's discursive materialism hardly leaves the conventional periodizations of Asian American history intact, and in this sense it exceeds a framing by "political history, in the narrow sense of punctual event and a chroniclelike sequence of happenings in time" (Jameson 75). While political historians might identify the 1969 San Francisco State Third World strike as earmarking the rise of a new social consciousness, and legal historians might consider the 1965 Immigration Act to inaugurate a new demographic era, Ling's periodization of Asian American literary realism (1957–80) purposefully straddles the usual rupture of the late 1960s.

At the time of its publication, Ling's effort may have struck its readers as a curmudgeonly rebuttal of the reigning critical paradigm in the field that had been inaugurated by the work of Lisa Lowe.² Wedding Antonio Gramsci and Homi Bhabha to theorize the counter-hegemonic potential of an anti-essentialist model of Asian American identity, Lowe's intervention had established a critical currency for Asian American studies, but—in Ling's view—at the expense of Asian American literary history. Lamenting the pervasiveness of "the conviction that we now occupy a temporality of immediacy and competing differences [such] that any attempt to think historically . . . is now deemed impossible because such an attempt . . . is seen as a theoretical

failure . . . to resist ‘contamination’ by master narratives” (4), Ling’s interest in revaluing realist narrative and cultural nationalism in some ways seemed merely to reverse Lowe’s privileged terms in a manner that pitted history against (deconstructive) theory. In light of today’s sobered view of Asian American cultural politics, however, Ling’s argument now looks more and more to be a promising dialectical extension of Lowe’s project, or a materialization of her thesis of Asian American cultural hybridity.

Starting in the mid-1990s, critical responses to Lowe generally proceeded along two political lines. One of them, associated with Sau-ling Wong, objected to Lowe’s wholesale dismissal of cultural nationalism and the class blindness reflected in the rhetoric of a celebratory transnationalism.³ The other line, represented by Susan Koshy, questioned the political romanticism of Lowe’s counter-hegemonic reading of Asian American culture, but endorsed the transnationalization of the field’s epistemology as a necessary counterpart to greater ethnic inclusivity.⁴ Ling’s position more closely aligns with Wong’s political appreciation of cultural nationalism and her historicist critique of transnational rhetorics. His extended readings of pre-1980s Asian American texts, for example, unearth their authors’ diasporic concerns and trouble a stagist view of Asian American transnationalism as a lately unfolding phenomenon.

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More deeply at stake for Ling than the question of the superiority of a national or transnational frame for theorizing Asian American literature, though, is the recovery of literature’s transformative power—inseparable, on his account, from a transformative practice of reading, insofar as “there are no inherently ‘oppositional’ or inherently ‘conservative’ texts but only texts that function in such ways in specific [reading] contexts” (18). It is here that Ling’s argument with Lowe is most unique and most significant: he decries the political essentialization of texts in favor of appreciating their fully contradictory political meanings and effects. For Ling, this requires making the kind of material and historical distinctions that Lowe’s cultural critique—idealist, as it turns out, despite itself—fails to make, distinctions between the rhetorical claims of texts and the conditions of their articulation; the social demographic changes in the community since 1965 and the delayed expansion of the political space commensurate with those changes; and the specific forms of social power that block Asian American access to equal expression or equal exchange. The result of this failure, he argues, is a stunning misdiagnosis of Asian America’s literary past, an inability to distinguish its variously motivated essentialist moves from its actual participation in any unified project of cultural nationalism, and therefore an

underestimation of its historical relevance to present-day cultural politics.

While critics of Lowe's subversion thesis have largely corrected for it by documenting Asian American complicity with US racial hegemony, Ling's emphasis is on recovering the transformative potential of literary acts set within a context of determinate political constraint.⁵ In this sense, both Lowe and Ling seek a liberatory account of Asian American literature. Preferring the concept of transformation to that of subversion, however, Ling transcends the trap of binary political assessments of texts and periods by insisting on their dialectical continuity. To this extent, Ling's mode of literary assessment, whose key terms—textual contradiction, historical delay, political anticipation—involve greater synchronic and diachronic depths of analysis, suggests a potential way out of our habit of oscillating between readings of subversion and a complicity whose deepest political limitation may not be its moralism so much as its arbitrariness. Paradoxically, to this extent Ling's salvaging of political agency for Asian American culture might also, therefore, be seen as a genuine advancement of the concept of Asian American hybridity instantiated through a revaluation of the nationalist moment of Asian American literary history, itself now shown to be more unstable, double, and, in the end, generative than previously presented in the abjecting discourse of postnationalist theory.

Key to this argument is Ling's contradictory reading of failure in each of his case studies. For example, Ling finds an internal awareness of the impossibility of the nativism adopted by the *Aiiieeeee!* project, which he depicts as an "incomplete" position. In another example, the absence of any textual or political solution to the predicament of Okada's protagonist indicates *No-No Boy's* realistic negotiation of the discursive constraints of its time; through its self-distancing from a limited discourse of liberal assimilationism voiced by some of its characters, the 1957 novel could become an "unstable, prefigurative cultural agent which later generations of Asian American readers could recognize and build upon" (52). Yet again, in *Eat a Bowl of Tea*, Mei Oi's insufficient characterization (the subject of much feminist critique of the novel) is less interestingly read as a reflection of Chu's personal patriarchal politics than as a formal embodiment of the material, gendered truncation of early Chinese immigration. If Chu's refusal to translate Cantonese idiom placed excessive demands upon readers who had to labor to understand his text's appropriation of native voices, this explains both the novel's failure to garner a contemporary readership as well as its subsequent eloquence to 1970s cultural nationalists. On Ling's

account, the novel confronts its readers with disturbing images of New York Chinatown while withholding their referents, thereby refusing to participate in the mystifications of Chinese American social life in Cold War US culture. Describing *Eat a Bowl of Tea* as a rare Anglophone continuation of a progressive Chinatown literary movement that had been quashed by McCarthyism, Ling provides us with a better explanation of the novel's value to the *Aiiieeeee!* anthologists than does their own ascription to it of a mysterious Asian American sensibility. Finally, as to postwar authors cast aside by the Asian American literary discourse of the 1970s, Ling observes the "surplus dimension" of Jade Snow Wong's work (143), which was to be realized in her belated recognition and dissemination by Asian American feminist critics of the 1980s and after.

Ling's discussions of, in particular, Okada, Chu, Chin, and Kingston will remain enduringly useful pieces of literary criticism, regardless of whether his theoretical intervention will ultimately find its acolytes. As textual as his apprehension of what constitutes a relevant historical context is, his belief in history's "minimal rationalities" (29) does commit him to thinking, if not teleologically, then progressively, if not linearly, then developmentally. These are commitments that are increasingly difficult to put together with the task of describing, as Susan Koshy has named it, "the fiction of Asian American literature." Nevertheless, in our broader academic context of a general redisciplinarization that is exerting quite ambivalent effects on the development of an Asian American literary studies characterized by increasing intellectual depth but weaker social mooring, Ling's attention to form and relentless historicization represents an attractively responsible *and* optimistic professional posture. It is a theoretical position that is not, for all its apparent Jamesonian conventionality, anything less than daring within a literary discursive field structured by profound obstacles to totalization, both strategic and intellectual.

Notes

1. I thank Chris Nealon and Gordon Hutner for helping me clarify my argument.
2. See Lisa Lowe, "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian American Differences," *Diaspora* 1.1 (1991): 22–44; and "Unfaithful to the Original: The Subject of Dictée," *Writing Self, Writing Nation*, ed. Elaine Kim and Norma Alarcón (1995).

3. See Sau-Ling Wong, "Denationalization Reconsidered: Asian American Cultural Criticism at a Theoretical Crossroads," *Amerasia* 21.1–2 (1995): 1–27.
4. See Susan Koshy, "Morphing Race Into Ethnicity: Asian Americans and Critical Transformations of Whiteness," *Boundary 2* 28.1 (2001): 153–94; and "The Fiction of Asian American Literature," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 9.2 (1996): 315–46.
5. I understand Ling's sense of determination to be close to that of Raymond Williams's: "a complex and interrelated process of limits and pressures" (87).

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