

UCLA

UCLA Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Title

Skin Pulled Back: Race and Literary Abstractions in the 21st Century

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8b2202kq>

Author

Meng, Dandi

Publication Date

2024

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Skin Pulled Back:

Race and Literary Abstractions in the 21st Century

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in English

by

Dandi Meng

2024

© Copyright by

Dandi Meng

2024

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Skin Pulled Back:

Race and Literary Abstractions in the 21st Century

by

Dandi Meng

Doctor of Philosophy in English

University of California, Los Angeles, 2024

Professor Uri Gervase McMillan, Co-Chair

Professor Anahid J Nersessian, Co-Chair

This dissertation argues that abstraction is an important and undertheorized axis through which to think about race and aesthetics in contemporary American literature. The project seeks to work against two critical tendencies: 1) the overwhelming focus on representation, in both quantitative and qualitative terms, when analyzing and interpreting works of art by non-white artists, and 2) the primary way that abstraction, when it is addressed at all, has been characterized in such analyses—namely, as a non-figural visual style that can only be read either as post-racial or else as bluntly referential of some racial content. Against both of these approaches, I suggest that thinking about abstraction as a productive, multifaceted set of aesthetic and social tools can produce an alternate metric by

which to describe and evaluate literature's engagement with race, one which can ultimately move us through the impasse of prescriptive approaches to racial representation.

I take as my case studies four works of experimental poetry by 21st century American writers of color. Chapter One focuses on Simone White's 2016 book, *Dear Angel of Death*—in particular, the titular essay that makes up the second half of the book—and its engagement with philosophical and theoretical abstractions. I take up philosopher Charles Mills' distinction between ideal and non-ideal theorizing as the basis of reading White's intervention on contemporary Black thought. Chapter Two identifies metadata as a key preoccupation in the genre-bending work of Tan Lin. I focus on his novella, *Insomnia and the Aunt*, the most conventionally narrative of his works, which ostensibly recounts childhood visits made by a Lin-esque narrator to his Chinese aunt's motel in rural Washington state. Chapter 3 takes a comparative approach, and examines the visual poetics of Don Mee Choi and Renee Gladman, two writers whose works transmute the pressure put on literary abstraction by racialized visibility into formal transformation.

The dissertation of Dandi Meng is approved.

Miriam Posner

Daniel Scott Snelson

Uri Gervase McMillan, Committee Co-Chair

Anahid J Nersessian, Committee Co-Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2024

For mom and dad.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Flight From	1
-------------------	---

CHAPTER ONE

Unideal Theory	28
----------------------	----

CHAPTER TWO

Personifying Metadata	68
-----------------------------	----

CHAPTER THREE

Skin = Pulled = Back	99
----------------------------	----

CONCLUSION

Looking, Landing	133
------------------------	-----

BIBLIOGRAPHY	136
--------------------	-----

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Excerpt from “Dear Angel of Death” from <i>Dear Angel of Death</i>	Page 51
Figure 2: Excerpt from “Dollbaby” from <i>Dear Angel of Death</i>	Page 61
Figure 3: Excerpt from “Love Poem” from <i>Dear Angel of Death</i>	Page 64
Figure 4: “A Little Glossary” from <i>Hardly War</i>	Page 109
Figure 5: Verso of “FIG. 1” from <i>Plans for Sentences</i>	Page 124
Figure 6: Recto of “FIG. 1” from <i>Plans for Sentences</i>	Page 125
Figure 7: Adrian Piper, <i>Food for the Spirit</i> , 1971	Page 133

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Much like Adrian Piper (if I dare make such a comparison), I have sought time and time again to escape from the various enclosures of actual life through abstraction. I have done so primarily through school, which I have been lucky enough to attend in some form nearly without pause for my entire life. I was guided by many wonderful educators throughout that time, and was particularly affected by Carolyn Allen, Eva Cherniavsky, Maria Elena Garcia, Jenny Halpin, Curtis Hisayasu, Sonal Khullar, Jose Antonio Lucero, Frances McCue, Rob Prufer, Chandan Reddy, Pimone Triplett, and Alys Eve Weinbaum, each of whom took me seriously as a thinker and encouraged me to keep thinking.

I have received enormous support during my time at UCLA. Many thanks to Mike Lambert, who somehow knows the answer to every question and is always a delight to talk to. I am proud to have gone to two public university and to have been represented by a union while I was a student worker—my thanks go to UAW 4811 and especially to those members who push every day to make sure that the union continues to work for the people. I took life-changing classes with each member of my committee—Uri McMillan, Anahid Nersessian, Miriam Posner, and Danny Snelson—and have been so fortunate to continue thinking alongside them. Their mentorship and encouragement—not to mention their incredible intellect—have seen me through some tough and rewarding times. Thanks also to Barbara Fuchs, Sarah Kareem, Arthur Little, and Richard Yarborough.

I don't know who I would even be without my friends, both (relatively) old and (relatively) new. I have known Anita Lo, Emily Lo, Amanda Sie, Venecia Xu, and Emily Zhang for longer than I am comfortable admitting, and we still have things to talk about all these years later. Thanks especially to Emily Lo and Amanda Sie, with whom I have spent

countless hours writing (and gabbing) over video chat. My Seattle crew—Jack Chelgren, Hazel Jones, Cali Kopczick, and Ashleen O’Brien—came together during that amorphous post-college time when everyone was just trying to Figure It Out, and I cannot express how lucky I feel that we have continued to be in each other’s lives. After hearing many horror stories about the terrible people one encounter in grad school, I hit the most unlikely of jackpots. Andrea Acosta is stringently committed to having the most fun at all times, and constantly reminds me that it’s not that deep. Nick Schwieterman introduced me to heel hooks, hassles, negative doubles, and amanitas, and has generally revolutionized my free time. Rhonda Sharrah keeps me abreast of all the new movies coming out in theaters and knocks me down a peg in the most necessary ways. Sammy Solis is funniest person I’ve ever met, full stop. Shouhei Tanaka is a warm hug embodied. Tony Wei Ling thinks deeply and precisely, and makes an art of conversation. Jesslyn Whittell is whatever the opposite of a poetaster is, and is an exemplary co-mom to Wednesday and Sassy. To my friends—life is made infinitely more exciting and worth living with all of you in it. I love you!

Lastly, I want to thank my parents for their truly unwavering support in every imaginable way. I say “want” because I know I will never be able to thank them enough, no matter what I say or do. Thank you, and thank you again.

VITA

EDUCATION

M.A., Department of English, UCLA, 2020
Digital Humanities Certificate

BA, Department of English, University of Washington, 2015
Minors: Art History and Mathematics

HONORS AND AWARDS

Dissertation Year Fellowship, UCLA, July 2023 - June 2024
UCLA/Keck Humanistic Inquiry Graduate Research Award, UCLA, Summer 2022
Andrew W. Mellon Fellowship of Distinction, UCLA, 2021-22 and 2017-18
Graduate Research Mentorship (with Professor Anahid Nersessian), UCLA, 2020-21
Mellon-EPIC Fellowship, UCLA Excellence in Pedagogy and Innovative Classrooms, 2020
Graduate Summer Research Mentorship (with Professor Daniel Snelson), UCLA, 2019
University Fellowship, UCLA, 2017

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

"On Renee Gladman's *One Long Black Sentence*" *Annulet: A Journal of Poetics*, October 2022.

"The Confessing Image" *Jacket2*, October 2020.

"Dickinson's Luxury" *The Rambling*, August 2019.

"'nothing to see but / all to spark': On Jane Wong's *Overpour*" *Poetry Northwest*, April 2017

SELECTED CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

"In the Bend: Renee Gladman's Abstract Markmaking" Association for the Study of the Arts of the Present (ASAP) Annual Meeting at University of Washington, October 2023.

"Unideal Theory" Association for the Study of the Arts of the Present (ASAP) Annual Meeting at UCLA, September 2022.

"Ambient Stylistics and the Abstract Immigrant" Center for Expanded Poetics Conference: *The Poetics of the Fragment: Romantic, Modernist, Contemporary* (virtual), June 2021.

“Databent Blackness in manuel arturo abreu’s *ambient portraits*” Berkeley-Stanford Conference: *Sense and Consensus* (virtual), April 2020.

“Ring the Ambience: Black Pop, White Noise” University of California, Riverside Disjunctions Conference: *Moving Voices*. April 2019.

“Hardly=War: Don Mee Choi’s Poetics of Nonequivalence” American Comparative Literature Association Annual Meeting at Georgetown University. March 2019.

“*Garments Against Women’s* Noninformational Lyric” University of Chicago Interdisciplinary Graduate Student Conference: *Exhaustion: Tired Bodies, Tired Worlds*. November 2018

Introduction: Flight From

Adrian Piper dreamt of flying. In a 1987 essay titled “Flying,” she wrote:

Abstraction is flying. Abstracting is ascending to higher and higher levels of conceptual generalization; soaring back and forth, reflectively circling around above the specificity and immediacy of things and events in space and time.....

Abstraction is also flight. It is freedom from the immediate spatio-temporal constraints of the moment; freedom to plan the future, recall the past, comprehend the present from a reflective perspective that incorporates all three; freedom from the immediate boundaries of concrete subjectivity, freedom to imagine the possible and transport oneself into it...¹

Piper goes on in the essay to reflect on two stages of engagement with abstraction over the course of her career: “from materiality” and “from identity.” In the first period, which she dates from 1967 to 1972, Piper describes a move away from representational art and, subsequently, from 3D art objects as a whole—an abstraction away from traditional art mediums. “Reality could be rearranged,” she writes breathlessly of this new approach. “I was drunk on intellectual construction, theory, abstract structure.”² She began to “experiment with [her] own object-hood” as an artistic medium, but found herself “traumatized...[and] burnt out,” ultimately “plummet[ing] back to earth” from a

¹ Adrian Piper, *Out of Order, Out of Sight Volume I: Selected Writings in Meta-Art 1968-1992* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996), 224.

² Ibid., 227.

combination of the political events happening around her and “others’ responses to [her] perceived social, political, and gender identity.”³

This failed attempt at transcendence leads into the second section, “Abstraction from identity,” dated 1972 to present. Piper begins with an account of a newly-found obsession with western philosophy. After being advised by a friend to read Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* to help her think through the conceptual foundations of a previous work, Piper dove deeper into philosophy, eventually completing a PhD in the subject. Through philosophy, she found that she was able to make “political sense of [her] anger...in simplified form.”⁴ Rather than turn away from abstraction after the failure of her early experiments with herself as medium, Piper instead pivoted to a different kind of abstraction. Through this, she hoped to find reprieve from and clarity about why her earlier efforts proved unsuccessful.

Nevertheless, she once again finds her attempts at flight thwarted. “At the end of graduate school, I was poised to fly,” she writes. Then: “My first academic job nailed my feet to the ground.” She enumerates a series of incidents in which colleagues and students made racist, sexist, homophobic remarks, both against her specifically as a white-passing Black woman with changing gender presentation, and in more general terms. “Unlike materiality,” she reflects, “I can’t transcend these barriers *solely* through the intellectual act of ascending to higher conceptual levels.”⁵ Despite all this, the essay ends with an

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 228.

⁵ Ibid., 230.

affirmation of the art practice that Piper has developed through her engagement with philosophy— “a reflecting mirror of light and darkness, a high sunny window that holds out to me the promise of release into the night.”⁶

This last, conflicted suggestion of possible future flight also rounds off the essay’s titular metaphor. Though the association of flying with freedom, and in turn, of flying with abstraction, may seem quite simplistic, the metaphor functions in quite unexpected ways throughout the essay. The constant push and pull Piper details between preparation for flight and subsequent grounding do not map easily onto abstraction and its opposites, since abstraction is both what allows her to imagine the possibility of flight in the first place, and also what informs the kinds of external judgment that obstructed her ascent. What we can take from the essay is not that abstraction itself is antithetical to the particularities of identity, but rather that the kinds of abstractions that Piper was concerned with in her engagement with conceptual art and philosophy did not match up with the ways in which she herself was being abstracted by others through social categories; Piper repeatedly notes that it is others’ “perceptions” of her identity, rather than her identity itself, that led to her failures in flight. Whereas she saw abstraction as “freedom from the socially prescribed and consensually accepted,”⁷ it was precisely the socially prescribed and consensually accepted associations with abstraction that excluded her from its promise of freedom. Though there are obvious differences between the time during which Piper wrote “Flying,” the time she details in the essay, and the current moment, I read the essay as

⁶ Ibid., 232.

⁷ Ibid.

documenting an early moment in which the capacity for and access to abstraction, in art and in being, were becoming associated with race, or “racelessness,” in these ways that are recognizable to us in the present.⁸

This dissertation examines the contemporary misalignment between abstraction and race. By abstraction, I mean the simultaneously social and aesthetic interest in generality over specificity. By race, I mean to invoke both actual racialized subjects—those for whom race cannot be unthought—as well as the discursively constructed social categories that exist independently of any particular subjects. By misalignment, I mean a conflict between categorically unlike things, which is neither direct contestation nor antinomy, but a vague sense of disorientation (in the sense elaborated by Sara Ahmed⁹), of which Piper herself detailed a version. By contemporary, I mean the loose period of time up to and including the present moment in which the discourse around race has focused overwhelmingly on the amount and degree of *representation* for racially and otherwise minoritized subjects, which in turn has made abstraction, its ostensible opposite, an illegible concept for thinking about race. This concept that is at the heart of racial common sense today must first be clarified in order to contextualize the fate of abstraction.

The representation-centered approach to contending with racial inequality takes the form of everything from calls to include more people of color in film and television, to changes in hiring practices in various corporate and cultural organizations, all with the goal

⁸ This has not always been the case. Abstraction in art has existed in some form since the beginning of human expressive culture, and for a variety of purposes, but the particular version of abstraction that is the concern of this study—abstraction as an aesthetic quality associated with non-aesthetic ideas of disembodiment and whiteness—is a more recent development, and can be traced, as I will argue later in this chapter, to the claims about art’s autonomy that developed in relation to modernism and specifically to abstract expressionism.

⁹ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

of accumulating a sufficiently representative set of particulars. “Representation matters” under this regime because it is implicitly understood to effect material change by increasing access for people of color to white-dominated spaces, whether directly (for example, hiring an actor of color to appear in a film) or indirectly (others “seeing themselves” in the actor). While this principle of foregrounding representation in racial work can certainly create meaningful and positive change in the lives of select individuals, it can also serve to obscure the systemic nature of racial inequality by conceiving of its amelioration as an additive project. In fact, the very euphemisms of “minority” and “underrepresented group” used to describe non-whiteness implicitly suggest that racial inequality is a matter of statistical enumeration, and that injustice can be chalked up to a lack of representative presence, rather than to structural and historical conditions that created the imbalance in the first place.

Alongside the so-called “cultural turn” that began in the academic humanities and social sciences in the 1970s, cultural production has become the primary site of political contestation in the popular imagination. The issue of representation in cultural production is two-pronged, since art is representational in both the referential sense—e.g., a series of physical and psychological descriptions of a human character that are understood to represent a person—as well as in the metonymic sense discussed above—e.g., a character/person also standing in for larger “types”. Of course, the degree to which this latter metonymic sense is activated differs depending on the degree to which a represented subject falls in line with normative identity categories. Minoritized subjects, operating in “a

restricted economy of minority representation in which one speaks for all,"¹⁰ must shoulder the pressures of exemplifying the entire social group to which they belong, whereas subjects whose identities are culturally dominant have no such pressures.

This burden of representation results in a restrictive economy of production and reception by which works by people of color are judged. For example, it is generally assumed that works of fiction in which a central character is the same race and/or ethnicity as the author themselves are loosely autobiographical and hence realist, and they are often read in terms of what they say about the "authentic" experience of the identity group in question. On the other hand, a lack of recognizable racial markers in a work of art is understood as signaling the artist's lack of interest in, if not outright antagonism for, thinking about race. Again, because racial representation is essentially synonymous with racial politics in nearly every aspect of contemporary culture, engagement with racial concepts can only be thought of in representational terms. It is perhaps telling, for example, that some of the most well-known of Piper's works—*My Calling (Card)* series (1986-1990); *Self Portrait Exaggerating My Negroid Features* (1981); *Mythic Being* (1973-1975)—were completed after her turn to abstraction, but today are remembered and discussed primarily as works about identity, rather than as conceptual art. More often than not, abstraction is the domain of white people, and attempts at abstraction by people of color are either subsumed under the interpretive framework of identity politics or else read as a sign of the artist's betrayal of their racial duty to represent themselves and their community.

¹⁰ Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York & London: Routledge, 1994), 21.

I have summarized what I understand to be the racial common sense of our times in order to contextualize why abstraction may seem to be an unintuitive concept with which to think about race. In short, if the problem of race is posed, as it often is, in terms of absence and underrepresentation, the natural solution would be to assert presence at a wide scale through direct representation of the minoritized group. One of the implicit aims of this dissertation is to challenge the unquestioned supremacy of representational thinking for the study and conception of race. However, my suggestion is not that abstraction is necessarily morally or politically superior to representation; rather, it is simply that the knotty problems bound up in thinking about abstraction alongside race provides crucial insight into the state of racial formation and the role of art in our world today.

In fact, there are some sound reasons, beyond the hegemonic call to represent, to be suspicious of the capabilities of abstraction for racial work. Abstraction's potential offense is two-fold. On the politico-conceptual side, abstraction has been instrumental in the dehumanizing objectification of non-normative subjects throughout history. One only needs to think of the foundational violence of chattel slavery and its conversion of African people into commodities,¹¹ or even of the more mundane notion of racial stereotyping,¹² in order to understand this point. The forcible stripping away of particular qualities that characterizes racialized abstraction plays out along axes of power and domination, such that the abstracted version of a subject isn't simply partial (all mediated forms are), but

¹¹ See Bhandar 2014 for an extended treatment of the legal role of abstraction in chattel slavery.

¹² See Bow 2022 for how abstraction forms the foundation for the variety of affective charges associated with racial stereotypes.

oriented towards the further entrenchment of racial terror. On the aesthetic side, abstraction as an artistic style¹³ is associated with modernist and avant-garde traditions that have tended to privilege form over content, and as such, the very principle of abstraction seems to contradict the notion of art as being able to engage in worldly, anthropogenic matters such as race at all. These aesthetic lineages are also usually dominated by white practitioners (or narrated as such), due to a combination of canonization bias and unequal access to the art world, further contributing to the reputation of abstraction as a white aesthetic.

There now exists important scholarship that provides alternate accounts of modernism and other traditionally white movements by centering the contributions and practices of artists of color,¹⁴ but the dominant associations of these movements with whiteness still remain. Despite the understandable and historically-grounded associations of abstraction with whiteness I have outlined above, I contend that the exclusion, either externally- or self-imposed, of people of color from abstractionist practices and of abstraction from racial work, is actually consistent with a racial order that mandates racialized labor and usefulness, and thus actually reinforces the social partitioning it seeks to critique. That is, the ideal racialized subject today still must be of use, which extends to the realm of cultural production as well. While this is true for essentially all subjects living under capitalism, there is a particular version of usefulness that artists of color are

¹³ The use of “abstract” as a descriptor of art far postdates the philosophical or conceptual sense of “abstract,” and was first used to describe music, possibly derived from Wagner’s “absolute music.” See *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), s.v. “Abstract.” https://www.oed.com/dictionary/abstract_adj?tab=meaning_and_use#3343772

¹⁴ See Dozier 2020, Francis 2012, Jones 2006, Mercer 2006, and Park 2008 for examples.

expected to perform through their work, which translates aesthetically into a demand for explicitly racialized representation.

As I have just alluded to, these demands for artists of color to produce representationally “useful” work do not always come from white thinkers. There are countless examples of abstraction being explicitly articulated as the enemy of racial politics and thinking, and even of people of color as a whole, by those who are directly implicated in these claims. This is often done in relation to both of the facets of abstraction—social and aesthetic—simultaneously. Some of these examples can be found within the academic humanities, an institution known for having a particular penchant for the abstract. In an essay published in the landmark 1981 anthology, *This Bridge Called My Back*, for example, Gloria Anzaldua tells the titular “3rd world women writers” the following:

There is no need for words to fester in our minds. They germinate in the open mouth of the barefoot child in the midst of restive crowds. They wither in ivory towers and in college classrooms. Throw away abstraction and the academic learning, the rules, the map and compass. Feel your way without blinders. To touch more people, the personal realities and the social must be evoked—not through rhetoric but through blood and pus and sweat.”¹⁵

Here, abstraction is aligned with the academy, and its opposite with the body and lived experience through the figure of the child and the masses (“restive crowds”). Abstraction is figured as a textual limit, “blinders” formed in and through rhetorical tinkering that severs

¹⁵ Gloria Anzaldua, “Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to 3rd World Women Writers,” essay, in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua (Watertown, MA: Persephone Press, 1981), 173.

the connection between verbal expression and embodiment, while true writing happens through an engagement with the senses, even bodily excrement. The essay doubles down on the ethos of specificity by deploying an epistolary form, which begins with Anzaldua trying to conjure up a mental image of the addressees, the Third World women writers who would be reading this piece, and ends with a familiar sign-off— “Love, Gloria.” She suggests that in order for their writing to be effective—meaning, able to “approximate... intimacy and immediacy”¹⁶—it must look to the concreta of what we might today call minoritarian life for its raw materials, rather than the abstractions of academic writing and thinking. Without it, the writing would be “wooden, cold,” qualities Anzaldua fears she inherited from the “esoteric bullshit and pseudo-intellectualizing” of academic training.¹⁷ The political deficiencies of abstraction for Third World women writers thus also inhere in aesthetic terms in Anzaldua’s imagination.

Similarly, in the 1987 essay “The Race for Theory,” Barbara Christian writes that “people of color have always theorized—but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic.”¹⁸ Christian, a scholar of African-American literature, marks a distinction between theorizing—an activity which by definition requires a certain level of abstraction—and the specific “Western form of abstract logic” that she saw as plaguing literary studies at the time of her writing. Christian’s specific diagnosis involves what she saw as a “takeover” by Western philosophers of an intellectual space that had become

¹⁶ Ibid., 163.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Barbara Christian, “The Race for Theory,” *Cultural Critique*, no. 6 (1987): 52, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1354255>.

increasingly empty. In this description, the abstraction of “Western logic” does not exhaust abstraction as a whole; she goes on later in the paragraph to describe literary work by Black women as taking “the form of the hieroglyph, a written figure which is both sensual and abstract, both beautiful and communicative.” Whereas Anzaldua saw abstraction as firmly residing on the side of the out of touch and predominantly white academy, Christian did not see abstraction as a problem in and of itself. Instead, the issue for her lay in what “Western” abstraction was missing—sensuality and beauty—without which it became disconnected from lived life. For both Anzaldua and Christian, abstraction threatened to smooth out embodied truths into sterile generalities, rather than promised, as it did for Piper, “release into the night.”

Both of these essays came out of the tumultuous decades that followed the creation of ethnic studies and women’s studies departments in US universities, beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and subsequently, the rise of literary theory that began in the 1980s, at the time of their composition. Mark Chiang notes about the latter of these trends that “its impact on the various forms of ‘minority studies’ takes a specific trajectory that must be understood in relation to their political dynamics, which are distinct from those of the ‘traditional’ disciplines.”¹⁹ Chiang analyzes this period of transformation through the frame of social capital, and examines debates over the proper relationship between minoritized communities and the university ethnic studies departments that claimed in some form to represent them. While he does discuss the aesthetic component of these

¹⁹ Mark Chiang, *The Cultural Capital of Asian American Studies: Autonomy and Representation in the University* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009), 9-10.

debates, especially within literature, the issue is framed mostly through form. In Anzaldua and Christian's essays, the political dynamics of the period are conjoined to aesthetics specifically through abstraction, which, as we saw, can be a matter of form (Anzaldua's letter), but can also be a feeling about something being out of place.

In the two essays, abstraction is invoked as a seemingly neutral description, while in fact carrying with it a statement about the value of the phenomenon described as such. The abstract, then, is an aesthetic judgment,²⁰ which as Sianne Ngai reminds us, is an implicitly normative and intersubjective claim, calling on agreement from an external party even as it appears to take the form of an objective statement. In a case explored by Ngai, the designation of something as a gimmick communicates not only a perception of the object or experience—i.e., that it is pointlessly overwrought and not worth the money and/or time spent on it—but also a prescription about how it ought to be—i.e., cheaper or more useful. In that vein, I wish to suggest in this project that the judgment of a work of art as abstract often has a degree of racial feeling attached to it, a latent sense of the kind of racial function that the artwork is or is not performing. Specifically, the judgment of a work of art as abstract, regardless of whether it is made in derogatory or praising terms, carries with it a feeling about the artist of color's refusal to engage in representation. When said derogatorily, it suggests that the artist has failed in fulfilling their duty to bolster the amount and quality of representation for their racial community; when said praisingly (a

²⁰ Sianne Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick: Aesthetic Judgment and Capitalist Form* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022), 21. The intersubjective dimension of judgment doesn't quite apply to the abstract in the way that it does to gimmick—whereas Ngai says that the judgment of something as a gimmick implies the imagined existence of a person who is successfully convinced that the object is a non-gimmick, for the abstract, the judgment would inhere in the same phrase ("This is abstract.") but the difference would be the implications of the statement, e.g. "This is abstract" [derogatory] vs "This is abstract" [sincere].

less common but equally potent occurrence), it suggests the artist is exceptional among their peers. Either way, the aesthetic judgment encodes within it a great deal of normative thinking about the proper relationship between race and abstraction.

The conceptual foundation of this project is also greatly informed by Ngai's suggestion that "ordinary ways of communicating aesthetic feeling can be analyzed as art-like artifacts." Though the authors of both of the essays I considered above had at least one foot in the academic world, those particular works had in mind a generalist audience, and their diagnoses of abstraction's ills is fairly continuous with popular understandings of the matter. In one particularly compelling passage about the usefulness of studying ordinary aesthetic judgements, Ngai writes about the "silence of the sublime and the garrulousness of the gimmick—two divergent aesthetic responses to mature, crisis-prone capitalism,"²¹ noting that whereas canonical, high-brow aesthetic categories like the sublime appear exclusively in academic writing, whereas ordinary acts of judgment like the gimmick only appear in vernacular speech. Taken together, these two aesthetic judgements form a full picture of capitalism, incorporating both "the ways in which capital thwarts our ability to represent it...[and] all the ways in which representation takes place."²² Abstraction, however, crosses these boundaries with ease, finding itself in the flow of everyday conversation as well as in the pages of abstruse tomes. It seems both strange and fitting that abstraction, which, in at least one of its senses, is antithetical to representation, is able

²¹ Ibid., 33.

²² Ibid.

to do both—it is at once the reification of the stifled awe we feel when faced with capital's immensity and the ceaseless churn of trying to make lack into something to talk about.

What do we get, then, when we take a Ngaian approach to abstraction, which is to say, when we understand the abstract as a capitalist form and an aesthetic judgment? For one, we are able to think of abstraction as something more than a style or a set of formal features, though it could also be that. We are also able to see how abstraction is tethered to notions of work and use which inform its varying reception across different social milieus. Finally, and very crucially, we can understand the connection between abstraction, artistic autonomy, and the commodity form. Whereas in western aesthetic theory, there has been an attempt to separate the art object from the commodity, or in other words, an affirmation of the autonomy of the art object, in ethnic studies, there is a similar separation, but with the crucial difference that the ideal art object is precisely *not* autonomous, but in fact directly reflective of, and even coextensive with, lived experience. The former is especially true for the avant-garde, which art theorist John Roberts calls “the recurring name we give to the conflict between free artistic labour and capital, and, therefore, the recurring name we give to art’s long and embattled intimacy with the revolutionary tradition itself.”²³ An ideal anti-capitalist art object (or better yet, performance or action) refuses to be converted into commodity, and thus cannot circulate in the marketplace in any form. Yet, the expectation of the racialized art object to produce social change requires the object to circulate publicly, making it fundamentally impossible, in this particular imagination, for it to be resistant to commodification. To greatly oversimplify, whereas abstraction is a

²³ John Roberts, *Revolutionary Time and the Avant-Garde* (London: Verso, 2015), 289.

desirable trait for avant-garde art that understands itself to be an exploration of forces outside of the strictures of historical, personal, and otherwise particularized constraint, it is on the contrary deeply undesirable for ethnic studies to have no grounding for its art objects in the external social world.

We can perhaps understand these aspirations for racialized art objects alongside what Leigh Claire La Berge terms “decommodified labor,” the steady waning of wages and increase in work responsibilities beginning in the mid 1970s which she links to the emergence of “socially engaged art.” While La Berge focuses on fine art that “attempts both to represent forms of social inequity and to amend those forms through the artwork itself,” I find that her analysis is useful for a larger set of aesthetic objects, spanning populist and academic realms. If we understand, as I think we should, cultural production as the dominant mode of political work contemporarily, then the dominant way of reading art by people of color is necessarily as “socially engaged art,” that is, art which attempts to address the condition of decreasing wages and increasing labor in contemporary workplaces by creating institutions in miniature in which to act out and remediate those conditions.

Key to La Berge’s argument is the transformation of labor in the early to mid 1970s in the United States, which marks the beginning of what has been variously called “the long downturn,” “financialization,” “deindustrialization,” “neoliberalism,” “late capitalism,” etc., in which the production and circulation of commodities ceased to be the primary means of capital accumulation, and instead, finance came to the fore as the site of profit. In characterizing this period as a time in which labor was decreasing in analytical importance, what La Berge fails to account for is that labor as it is traditionally conceived became

increasingly performed by immigrants who had been arriving in the U.S. following the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. Roderick Ferguson explains that subsequent amendments to the 1965 act limited the immigration of technical professionals while continuing to allow family member immigration, resulting in “increasing numbers of immigrants into the working and petit bourgeois classes, causing class stratification among immigrants to rise.”²⁴ The American labor force’s increasing incorporation of immigrant workers into its fray in the wake of these demographic changes coincided with what is generally narrativized as the beginnings of deindustrialization. While the literary examples in which Ferguson roots his analysis are realist fiction, rather than the kind of institutional critique in which La Berge is invested and the abstract literary experiments that I discuss, his recognition of how changes in immigration powered “dramas of affirmation” from which the representation- and inclusion-based racial politics of today emerged are deeply relevant to this project.

An important flashpoint in the development of abstraction’s reputation within the American context was the post-WWII rise of abstract expressionism, which had an enormous effect on the popular imagination about modern art, and as I’ll suggest, about abstraction and realism as such. Jackson Pollock, a major figurehead for the movement, gained such prominence that he was featured in the November 1st, 1950 issue of *Life* Magazine with the provocation, “Is he the greatest living painter in the United States?”²⁵ As

²⁴ Roderick A. Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things: The University and Its Pedagogies of Minority Difference* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 175.

²⁵ “Jackson Pollock: Is He the Greatest Living Painter in the United States? .” *LIFE* 27, no. 6, August 8, 1949.

many have pointed out, the popularity of abstract expressionism was no fluke—the movement was specifically funded by the CIA in conjunction with the Museum of Modern Art as part of Cold War ideological contestations.²⁶

Moreover, abstract expressionism was posed in direct opposition to realism. In “Is Modern Art Communistic?” a defense of abstract expressionism written for the *New York Times*, MOMA’s first director, Alfred H. Barr Jr., grouped Soviet and Nazi German aesthetics under the banner of “Socialist Realism” administered by “totalitarian dictators. Aside from the obvious political misidentification of communism with Nazism, it is notable that it was specifically compulsory realism that became the aesthetic poster boy for what was wrong with the “unfree” world, even as there was a rich tradition of Soviet futurism, a thoroughly non-realist style, that existed contemporaneously.

Abstract expressionism, then, was far from a niche phenomenon locked away behind the gates of official artdom.²⁷ It supplied an entire generation of American artists the visual vocabulary for what abstraction was and could be, and solidified abstraction as *the* defining aesthetic marker of modern art. When we hear abstraction, we think of streaks of paint on a flat picture plane, presided over by the full force gesture of an imperious white man with a cigarette dangling out from his lips. The nonreferentiality and inscrutability of that kind of abstraction became evidence of a particularly American individualism and democratic liberalism, one which not only allowed for freedom of expression, but which was also dynamic, sophisticated, and on the cutting edge of high culture.

²⁶ See Guilbaut 1983 and Cockcroft 1985.

²⁷ According to Google Ngram, “abstract” began appearing with increasing frequency in American English texts around 1945.

At the same time, the rise of abstract expressionism and its associations with American essence and identity during the Cold War bolstered suspicions about ethnicized and politicized realisms. Social realism came to be coded as utilitarian and coercive, un-American and un-free. Joe Cleary argues in his introduction to the “Peripheral Realisms” special issue of *Modern Language Quarterly* that mid-20th century debates over realism vs. modernism were “warped by the subsequent history of the Cold War and by the United States’ eventual victory in it”²⁸ such that realism became deprioritized even within the newly emerging field of postcolonial studies that was gaining ground as the Cold War reached its close.²⁹

There are two ways of thinking about abstraction in light of these historical circumstances from which abstract expressionism came to prominence. The first is to say that abstraction was, from the start, in cahoots with white heteropatriarchy, and as such, it was only natural that it became the artistic cause célèbre on the American side of the Cold War. The second—and the way I am inclined to think about it in this project—is that it was actually the CIA and MOMA’s deployment of abstract expressionism for the political ends outlined above that resulted in abstraction being confined to the realm of white male individual artists from that moment onwards. We might note how artists like Norman Lewis, a Black painter who by all accounts was both aesthetically and socially an abstract expressionist, is excluded from most mainstream accounts of the movement. I invoke Lewis not as a way of supplementing the historical record of abstract expressionism, but to

²⁸ Joe Cleary, “Realism after Modernism and the Literary World-System,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 73, no. 3 (September 2012): 262, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00267929-1631388>.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 264-5.

suggest that it was not that artists of color were not interested in abstraction, even abstract expressionism, but that their presence was out of alignment with the narrative about abstraction that was deliberately promoted for political ends. The ramifications of these narrative strictures extend well beyond the visual arts.

This dissertation builds on recent scholarship that seeks to challenge the centrality of representation in racial discourse and to question the political effectiveness of seeking increased visibility. Much of this conceptualization comes from the work of Black feminist thinkers like Saidiya Hartman and Hortense Spillers, who provided the foundations of analysis that conjoins race, gender, and sexuality. It has also been elaborated through the work of Jose Esteban Munoz, who pioneered the framing of minoritarian aesthetics as a multiracial configuration organized around performed difference, most notably through his elaborations on disidentification as a process of engaging with dominant culture while finding spaces of recuperation and reconfiguration.

One notable vein of the pushback, which has taken root especially in queer of color performance studies, valorizes opacity as a response to the demand for minoritarian subjects to be transparent and knowable by majoritarian culture. This opacity takes many forms, and can involve displacing or problematizing visibility as the locus of analysis in favor of other senses like sound and touch.³⁰ Interestingly, the move away from representation within this field has not necessarily meant a move away from embodiment, but instead often involves a kind of radical enfleshment, which capitalizes on the

³⁰ See Camp 2017 and Quashie 2012, for example.

objectification of raced, sexed, and gendered bodies as sites of fluid, albeit contested, potentiality.³¹ Amber Jamilla Musser, for example, thinks about opacity alongside what she calls “epistemologies of fleshiness,” writing, “to think with the flesh and to inhabit the pornotrope is to hold violence and possibility in the same frame.”³² She suggests that the excess of minoritarian embodiment—that is, its deviations from normative subjecthood—is itself a form of opacity that “violence produces and cannot incorporate.”³³ Thus, when performers refuse to comply with the demands of “transparent racialized spectacle” through representational acts, they are able to weaponize the opacity that is part and parcel of their subject formation in order to gain a degree of agency in their objecthood.

Where I depart from this body of work is that my interests are not in the obfuscation of minoritized identity against a dominant regime that seeks to see, know, and subjugate—though there is of course good reason for the existence of this kind of obfuscation, and of its study—but rather in the further elucidation of matters of race through abstraction. Much like how Piper did not turn away from her philosophical training after encountering the grounding effects of racism and sexism, and instead used the abstract modes of thinking she was now proficient in to probe the very foundation of those issues, the works I take up in this project seek to use abstraction as a tool for further clarity, rather than for opacity.

Other critics have contended with the issue of representation directly. Tavia Nyong’o, for example, takes up Gayatri Spivak’s classic distinction between the two senses

³¹ Amber Jamilla Musser, *Sensual Excess: Queer Femininity and Brown Jouissance* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2018), 12.

³² *Ibid.*, 11.

³³ *Ibid.*, 9.

of representation—“vertreten [to speak for] and darstellen [to depict]”—as the basis of theorizing what it would mean to “unburden representation” for Black artists through what he terms “Afro-fabulation.” Nyong’o writes of Spivak:

I read her as instead suggesting that there is always a space of intervention, if only sometimes a hairline fracture, between the two senses of representation: vertreten and darstellen. However much they can and do align, it is their tendency to pull out of sync with each other, for their alignment to be less than seamless, that enables possibilities. This misalignment of political and artistic representation is exploited by Afro-fabulation, which is thus not properly speaking solely an aesthetic strategy, or a political one, but *a tactic for taking up the time and space between them*.³⁴

The point Nyong’o makes here about what the relationship between the two senses of representation should be is a fairly nuanced one—it is not that the two senses are interchangeable (as he says a naive reading of Spivak would conclude), but it is also not that they are wholly separate, as post-racialists would claim. At the same time, Nyong’o is careful to point out that this critical approach can only be effective when there is a concomitant acknowledgement of “the political economy of image-making that idealist political theories of democracy tend to occlude.”³⁵ In other words, it is dangerous to conceptually separate political and artistic representation without also acknowledging that the production and reception of art is always already structured by material realities, rather than an autonomous process of self-expression enacted by fully agential beings.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

This framing of representation and its capacity for racial work helps us to see why unnuanced demands for increased artistic representation not only fail to index political power, but can in fact reinscribe the logics of the very minoritizing structures that undergird the initial lack. To lift the burden of representation requires understanding the simultaneous incommensurability and inextricability of aesthetic and political representation, and Nyong'o's Afro-fabulist methodology is not so much aimed at bringing art and politics closer together as much as it is an intervention in the very mechanisms of representation conventionally conceived.

A small body of recent scholarship has directly argued for the minoritarian possibilities inherent to abstraction, mostly within the realm of the visual arts.³⁶ Although this project draws quite a bit from scholarship in (visual) art history, in both historical/aesthetic insight and in methodology, literature's relationship to abstraction is not at all analogous to visual art's relationship to abstraction. Moreover, my identification of contemporary American abstraction's roots in abstract expressionism is not meant to suggest a shared aesthetic genealogy in the divergent histories of visual art and literature, but rather is meant to pinpoint how the medium-specific sense of painterly abstraction, and all of its cultural associations, came to dominate the concept of "abstraction" *in toto* in the wake of abstract expressionism's cultural impact in the United States.

Whereas in visual art there is some degree of consensus about the kinds of formal qualities that make a work "abstract," the same cannot be said for literature, since canonical western literary history does not contain explicit engagement with the concept of

³⁶ See Guzman 2017, Lancaster 2022, Mercer 2006, Musser 2017.

abstraction. There is perhaps an ordinary language sense of “abstract literature” and what it might signify—unconventional syntax, perhaps, or the absence of a recognizable subject or plot structure—as well as a selection of literary movements and styles that could be reasonably described as abstract. Part of the aim of this project is to flesh out the implications of thinking about literature through abstraction given this relative lack of medium-specific theorization.

One corollary in literary studies might be found in debates over realism, which have raged with particular fierceness in the domain of US ethnic literature. Gene Andrew Jarret, for example, describes the “racial realism” operative in African American literature as having “a long history in which authors have sought to re-create a lived or living world according to prevailing ideologies of race or racial difference” in order to meet “public expectations of realism.”³⁷ Similarly, Julia H. Lee characterizes realism as having such a “stranglehold....on capturing ethnic experiences” in literature that it is only through the narrative trope of exile that characters in the realist novels she writes about are able to escape the constraints of compulsory realism³⁸.

A particularly pertinent case in which realism is explicitly posed in opposition to abstraction can be found in Philip Brian Harper’s *Abstractionist Aesthetics*. In his discussion of the critical potential of different aesthetic approaches to African American cultural production, Harper defines his preferred approach of “abstractionism” as “emphatically

³⁷ Gene Andrew Jarrett, *Deans and Truants: Race and Realism in African American Literature* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 8.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 140.

stylized and thus indisputably *nonrealist*.”³⁹ Interestingly, abstractionism, as Harper conceptualizes it, is antithetical to realism, but not to figuration—he instead suggests that it is the “realist ethic of reception” that makes figuration susceptible to being co-opted by a realist agenda, but that figuration in and of itself has the capacity to be “metarepresentational” and thus abstractionist. He points to this susceptibility as being especially prevalent in the visual arts, since “the visual realm is a classic focus of worry over proper—and hence properly *realist*—black-racial representation,”⁴⁰ and makes the case for literature as “the domain in which abstractionism can gain maximum critical purchase at present, given that it comprises the *locus classicus* for narrative function.”⁴¹

When he expands on literary abstraction in a later chapter, Harper takes care to distinguish between prose and poetry. He makes the counterintuitive claim that even though poetry seems like it should be more linguistically estranging than prose and thus more likely to be abstractionist, it is in fact “customarily *expected* to present such formal particularities” and thus not as liable to emphasize its own artificiality.⁴² By contrast, prose, which is “generally taken to promise a maximally direct mode of reference,”⁴³ presents a more notable challenge to realism in its potential to disrupt the impression of what Harper

³⁹ Phillip Brian Harper, *Abstractionist Aesthetics: Artistic Form and Social Critique in African American Culture* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2015), 10.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 136, emphasis in original.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 138.

calls *consequentiality*, “which joins a recognized sense of temporal elapse with received understandings of cause and effect.”⁴⁴

Although I find Harper’s genre-based claims to be oddly simplistic, his provocations about the abstractionist affordances of prose and poetry are helpful to think about with my own set of objects, whose authors are generally known as poets yet usually write prose or otherwise non-lyric poems. Within postwar American poetry studies, which has particular bearing on the literary objects in this project, the closest cognate to debates over abstraction is contestation over “official verse culture.” Originally coined by Charles Bernstein, “official verse culture” derogatorily refers to mainstream poetics that are largely lyric, transparently autobiographical to some degree, and easily digestible for a general audience. For Language poets like Bernstein, the “identity poetry” of writers of colors fall squarely within this realm, lacking in formal experimentation and instead dealing in uninterrogated forms of lyric address. As Christopher Chen and Timothy Kreiner explain, form and identity came simultaneously and contradictorily to the forefront in the social world of postwar American poetry:

This politically charged division of literary labors naturalized an interpretive framework in which women, people of color, and queer poets embody what could be called a poetics of recognition organized around ideals of self-expression. White heterosexual men, on the other hand, have nothing to lose but their subject positions holding them prisoner in the house of class belonging... The antinomies of postwar poetics, in short, continue to structure interpretive approaches to poetic

⁴⁴ Ibid., 131.

works that seem to straddle or bridge the divide between this influential genre distinction.⁴⁵

The “poetics of recognition” that Chen and Kreiner identify as the naturalized lot of minoritized writers inheres in the representation-based racial politics that continues to be dominant. The only way that poetry can be read as engaging with race is to participate in tradition of lyric expressivity by which it can easily be read as an extension of the poet’s particularized subjectivity, putting it at direct odds with the formal attempts to escape recognizable subjecthood ostensibly being performed by “White heterosexual men.”

While the literary works I examine in this dissertation are by and large “nonrealist” and “non-lyric,” their abstraction cannot be reduced to their rejection of conventional realism and lyricism. Instead, I suggest that what they have in common is a particular kind of aesthetic deviation—in the absence of a canonical literary history of abstraction, each of these works takes up recognizable forms of abstraction from non-literary or para-literary mediums in order to fashion its own intervention in abstraction. Each writer also has a specific orientation towards how abstract form can be deployed in relation to racial concerns. To paraphrase Ngai, these works take up the compromised form of the abstract, and risk being read as raceless, obscure, useless, etc., in order to take up the contradictions inherent to the project of racial representation.

⁴⁵ Christopher Chen and Timothy Kreiner, “The Politics of Form and Poetics of Identity in Postwar American Poetry,” *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Economics*, September 17, 2018, 30-31, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315640808-3>.

This dissertation consists of three chapters, each organized around a kind of literary engagement with a non-literary form of abstraction. Chapter One focuses on Simone White's 2016 book, *Dear Angel of Death*—in particular, the titular essay that makes up the second half of the book—and its engagement with philosophical and theoretical abstractions. I take up philosopher Charles Mills' distinction between ideal and non-ideal theorizing as the basis of reading White's intervention on contemporary Black thought. Chapter Two identifies metadata as a key preoccupation in the genre-bending work of Tan Lin. I focus on his novella, *Insomnia and the Aunt*, the most conventionally narrative of his works, which ostensibly recounts childhood visits made by a Lin-esque narrator to his Chinese aunt's motel in rural Washington state. Chapter 3 takes a comparative approach, and examines the visual poetics of Don Mee Choi and Renee Gladman, two writers whose works transmute the pressure put on literary abstraction by racialized visibility into formal transformation.

The case studies in this dissertation come primarily from African-American and Asian-American literature, though my argument is meant as a more generalized provocative. In some ways though, these two racial groups are limit cases for my assertion that abstraction can be productive for racial thinking. Whereas African-Americans are prized to the point of fetishization for their expressive culture—which has a long and well-documented history in the United States—and despite that, still remaining socially and politically abject, Asian Americans are understood to be upwardly mobile model minorities with minimal (or entirely ancient) artistic traditions, bordering on complete inexpression. Although this project does not explicitly attempt comparative analysis, nor does it aspire

towards an internally homogenous theory of minoritarian aesthetics, it is my hope that these juxtapositions will be generative.

Chapter One: Unideal Theory

Writing in the aftermath of the backlash against—or at least downturn of—theory in literary studies at the turn of the millennium, the editors of the collection *What's Left of Theory* describe a general “leftist skepticism” that stems from the fear that the “loss of referentiality” that theory enables could in fact be “tantamount to the loss of political relevance” altogether.⁴⁶ The role of literary texts and how they are deployed within theory is also suspect—for some, theory signifies “a certain operation of formalism...a way of reading that culminates in a self-referential move, e.g. the text allegorizes some feature about textuality itself,”⁴⁷ such that any attempt to read a text as thematizing or even referencing the external, social world would be deemed invalid. In the face of these accusations, it is easy to see why theory could be treated with suspicion by scholars of minoritarian culture. Without an anchor in the world of social relations, of the power structures and historical formations that inform so much of the existing explanatory frameworks for understanding identity as it functions textually and interpersonally, there seem to be no options available for the analysis of aesthetic objects in racial, or otherwise identitarian terms. In short, perhaps theory is simply too abstract for the study of social matters such as race.

In this chapter, I examine theory as a form of literary abstraction that could, in fact, have some meaningful bearing on racial thinking. I start by looking to the establishment of ethnic studies in the United States as a moment where the viability of using theory—here,

⁴⁶ Judith Butler, John Guillory, and Kendall Thomas, introduction to *What's Left of Theory?: New Work on the Politics of Literary Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2001), xi.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

in a broad sense—for the study of race were being intensely and contradictorily articulated, specifically in relation to the university as an institution. I make the case that although theory's associations with academic vagary make it a difficult fit with what is often understood as the grounded, materially-transformative nature of racial work, it is nevertheless possible, and even necessary, to treat the affordances of theoretical thinking seriously in the study of race. I then turn to a philosophical schematization that attempts to demarcate different kinds of theory, in order to help tease out the terms of debate and establish a shared vocabulary for describing theory. Theory is not a monolith, but like any other discursive construction, an internally differentiable set of ideas and approaches that range in scope and utility.

From there, I further narrow in on the kind of theory that concerns this chapter, the one known mononymously as “theory” within literary and cultural studies, but which actually indexes a narrow set of scholarly practices that concerned the editors of the anthology quoted above. What this set actually contains is ever-evolving, but the particular case that concerns us here is a version of theory that is necessarily bound up in the literary, in several senses. I then turn to a book which explicitly thematizes, engages with, and adopts the forms of theory as it comes to bear on the nature of racial Blackness and Black culture. Specifically, through the pairing of lyric poetry with scholarly analysis, the text folds together the ostensibly self-expressive nature of lyric poetry and the commanding and generalizing voice of criticism in order to form a more capacious theory of Black culture. My argument does not attempt to reclaim the esoteric abstraction of theory in the name of minoritarian opacity—not to say that that is not a valid political or aesthetic strategy—though the two do converge in their rejection of representational legibility.

Where my interest diverges from opacity is in my investment in the propositional content of theory, what it says, not just what it refuses.

It may already be apparent from the opening of this chapter that I say “theory” to mean several different things. I mean to signify both the narrow sense of theory—as a formation of thought that is confined almost exclusively to the academic humanities and (sometimes) social sciences—and the broader, ordinary language sense of theory, as general models that attempt to capture but do not always perfectly reflect lived reality. The latter, more general definition haunts the image-complex of the former. Moreover, even if we only consider the narrower of these meanings, it remains unclear what modes of thought the word “theory” is meant to encompass. In one attempt to wrangle and catalog the many possible referents of the word, Vincent B. Leitch lays out at least six different versions of what it could mean, ranging from the all-encompassing (“general principles and procedure—methods—as well as the self-reflection employed in all areas of literary and cultural studies”) to the highly specific (“structuralism and poststructuralism, the works of Levi-Strauss, Lacan, Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida, Kristeva, and company, plus their followers and imitators”—in short, French “high” theory).⁴⁸ The lack of consensus among scholars further contributes to the impression of academic theory as an extension of our ordinary understanding of theory, which crucially includes its ostensible opposition to “practice” and material reality.

This has a particularly noticeable effect in the realm of ethnic studies and other minoritarian disciplines. Because accessibility is often held up as a beacon of democratic

⁴⁸ Vincent B. Leitch, “Theory Ends,” *Profession* 2005, no. 1 (2005): 122–28.

virtue within these spaces, the invocation of theory can conjure up some of academia's most reviled signifiers—the ivory tower, gobbledygook jargon, ex-radicals interpellated into a life of bureaucratic inanities. In this particular imagination, theory is only comprehensible by those with high level academic training, and is the aspect of academia that most readily reveals the distance between scholarly work and actual social transformation. In the case of ethnic studies, often narrated as a political project aimed at creating a space within American universities for the interests of students of color, the presence of theory reeks of the encroachment of regressive elitism into utopic enterprises. As I will expand on in the section to come, a great deal of the apparent contradictions of thinking about race and theory together can be seen in the circumstances surrounding the institutionalization of the study of race within the US academy, and continue to have reverberations in our conception of theory's relation to racial thinking today.

In the introduction to the essay collection *Where Is Your Body?: And Other Essays on Race, Gender, and the Law*, legal scholar Mari J. Matsuda recounts a story she heard from a student, an Asian-American woman who asked her women's studies professor why the class' syllabus contained no Asian women. The professor replied to the student's question with a startling claim: "This is a theory course. There aren't any Asian women doing theory."⁴⁹ Reflecting on the student's experience, Matsuda writes:

⁴⁹ Mari J. Matsuda, *Where is Your Body?: And Other Essays on Race Gender and the Law* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2001), ix.

I know of Asian women running battered women's shelters, figuring out how many kinds of rice to keep in stock to make sure that women of different Asian ethnicities feel at home in the kitchen; figuring out why the kitchen is important; and figuring out how patriarchy defines masculinity and then takes it away, as defined, from Asian men, creating flashpoints that end up scarring women's bodies. This is theory.

I read Asian women writers. I read their anthologies, their novels, and their self-consciously postmodern papers presented at academic conferences. This is theory.⁵⁰

Between these two paragraphs, Matsuda provides two versions of theory as counterexamples to the professor's assertion that Asian women did not do theory. In the first paragraph, she finds theory in what we tend to think of as its opposite (practice), detailing the kinds of abstract thinking required for social work. In this initial rhetorical inversion, Matsuda redescribes theory as a nonspecific version of abstract thinking that produces an actionable outcome (decisions about what types of rice to buy) as well as the conceptual foundations for that outcome (why the types of rice matter in the first place). She willfully deploys a sense of "theory" that is at odds from what the professor likely had in mind, perhaps to emphasize the narrowness of the professor's imaginative framework, and traces the imprint of theory in every step of a practical decision in an almost syllogistic fashion, building towards a final pronouncement that invokes the recognizably academic language of "patriarchy" and "flashpoints."

⁵⁰ Ibid., x.

In the second paragraph, Matsuda leans in to the more conventional academic meaning of “theory” and directly refutes the professor’s comment on its own terms. This paragraph is much shorter and more direct, and its rhetorical tactic is much simpler than that of the previous paragraph. She lists several types of writing she has encountered from Asian-American women, concluding with the most recognizably capital-T Theory genre of all, the “self-consciously postmodern” conference paper. The “theoryness” of these works is presented as self-explanatory, and there is no need for the kinds of syntactical torquing that structured the first paragraph. Even though creative works like novels do not necessarily constitute theory in the narrow academic sense, they are breezily and anaphorically brought into the fold of theory by that last invocation of the conference paper.

I am being lavish with my close reading of this relatively straightforward passage because of how neatly it encapsulates many of the key features of theory as it exists in our collective imagination today, all of which will reappear later in this chapter. For one, we see from the passage that theory exists in tension with practice—even when the two are dialectically synthesized into “praxis,” that third term once again generates a new antithesis, usually something to the effect of “high theory” or “pure theory.” Moreover, we see that there is an inescapable association between theory and academic writing. Even as thinkers try to reclaim “theory,” open up its borders to historically marginalized forms of thought and other kinds of engagement, the association with scholarly writing remains as a central characteristic of the ordinary language sense of the word. Lastly, we might note that for Matsuda, the section quoted above is meant to provide context for a collection of her own writing, which she wishes to justify as theory. Especially since Matsuda was

writing in the field of legal studies, from which critical race theory had somewhat recently emerged, it is easy to see why it might have been of paramount importance for her to classify her own work within that lineage.

The fact that a legal scholar invokes literature (at all, but also specifically as theory) may seem somewhat surprising at first. For the most part, the essays in the collection are about legal cases, and contain none of the close reading and affiliated practices in which scholars of cultural objects generally traffic. Tellingly, however, an entire section of the collection, titled “Who Owns Speech? Language and Power,” deals directly with issues of language and linguistic capital. We are reminded that language is an issue central to racial politics even outside of the literary arts because of the associations of literacy with education and assimilation, such that the question of what is or is not considered “theory,” in some ways the ne plus ultra of academic engagement, holds immense ideological weight. The question becomes—what kind of cultural capital does a university education afford, and can that capital ever be converted into furthering knowledge about matters of race?

In fact, literature has long been a major player in debates over belonging, assimilation, and disidentification within the academy. In the Barbara Christian essay referenced in the introduction for example, we see the assertion that theorizing for people of color takes the form of narrative, rather than “abstract logic,” and literature is one such kind of narrative. The use of theory to analyze that literature, however, constitutes for Christian a foreign, white- and male-coded imposition onto pure, unadulterated literature. At the same time, literature remains central to the canon of most ethnic studies disciplines, and realist fiction in particular often are used as supplements for primary historical documents or are framed as providing direct insight into the lived experience of a

particular minoritized group. In this way, Christian shares some of the beliefs espoused by the professor in Matsuda's anecdote, in terms of maintaining a strict separation between the representational, experiential realm of ethnic literature and the disembodied abstractions of theory.

We can see issues like these being bandied about around the time when ethnic studies departments began springing up in U.S. universities in the late 1960s and early 1970s out of the pressure exerted by students of color organizing. Writing about a cluster of contradictions that surfaced at this pivotal moment in institutional history, during which "ethnic studies' relation to the traditional forms of higher education" were being actively worked out, Mark Chiang highlights "autonomy" and "relevancy" as keywords that emerged in the discursive field. In his discussions of these concepts, it becomes clear that "theory" was also lurking in the background of these debates, an invisible term that helps to explain what made these historical developments so internally fraught.

In his description of the founding of the Black Studies department at San Francisco State University, Chiang emphasizes the degree to which autonomy and relevancy were bound up in determining the scope of university education and its relation to the aims and functions of extra-institutional racial and ethnic communities, insofar as they are mapped onto the dyad of theory and practice that has always and continues to structure our understanding of minoritarian politics and representation. Chiang examines two sets of demands put forth by student groups during the Third World Strike—one from the Black Students Union and one from the Third World Liberation Front—and finds a meaningful difference in the fact that whereas the former "called for an autonomous black studies department controlled by the faculty, the TWLF's first demand was for a school of ethnic

studies in which control would be vested with the *students*.”⁵¹ Chiang sees in this discrepancy both the functional impossibility of the demands being fulfilled—due to the lack of “guaranteed and irrevocable funding”⁵² that the asked-for autonomy would have required—and what he sees as the misidentification of the demands. He suggests that what the students wanted were “actually heteronomous units, in which institutional control would be granted to those outside the institution,” a demand which is consistent with the goals of many activist groups who sought to level the difference between academic and community institutions and members, but which was ultimately at odds with the professed demand for autonomy.

“Relevancy,” the other principal that Chiang identified in student demands, also has to do with how Black students wanted to relate to their racial and ethnic communities outside of the university. Chiang situates relevancy in the historical debates in Black education between the Du Boisian “Talent Tenth” approach and the practical, technical education approach advocated by Booker T. Washington. By contrast, the call for relevant education neither focused exclusively on vocational, skills-based learning nor on the “uplift” of exceptional Black students into white-dominated liberal education, but instead was built around the idea of boosting students’ consciousness of Black cultural forms and traditions as an epistemological intervention into the whiteness of dominant culture. That is, students wanted an education that would deepen their understanding of their own racial and ethnic cultures, rather than give them practical skills or cultural capital that they would

⁵¹ Mark Chiang, *The Cultural Capital of Asian American Studies: Autonomy and Representation in the University* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009), 65. Emphasis in original.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 68.

allow them to “give back” to their respective communities, and were, in short, guided more by cultural nationalist principles of pursuing alternative social formations rather than by civil rights reformism. Chiang paraphrases a main tenet of relevancy as the belief that “[l]iteracy in itself is of little value without the consciousness—that is, the knowledge and the conceptual frameworks—that enables one to understand the significance of what one is reading.”⁵³ The characterization of this consciousness as involving “conceptual frameworks” suggests that theory is in fact deeply embedded in the project of forming alternative knowledge regimes, yet largely unacknowledged.

These contestations over autonomy and relevancy ultimately boil down to a question of the extent to which ethnic studies departments were to be modeled in the image of traditional academic disciplines, and in turn, what kinds of knowledge and action could or could not be produced from them. Among these “deliverables” is indisputably the matter of theory—whether theory could or should be produced through these new fields, what kind of theory was appropriate for them, and if that theory could be put to any use. The fact of the university is built on theoretical (as opposed to practical) knowledge put additional pressure on the fine line that proponents of ethnic studies tried to walk between, on the one hand, acknowledging that institutionalization would grant cultural capital—which is, by definition, premised on majoritarian approval—to ethnic studies and associated endeavors and, on the other, arguing that the very basis of higher education should be radically transformed by the emergence of these new disciplines. An “autonomous” department that provided “relevant” education would be unrecognizable

⁵³ Ibid., 78.

either as a part of a university or as a community project such that it would neither accrue cultural capital as part of a dominant institution nor be a truly separate, alternative regime.

This results in an intellectual formation that exists uncomfortably in an inhospitable institution, with conflicting aims. In an article surveying the lack of “systematic theoretical work” in Black studies, T.K. Daniel argues that “a Black Studies analyst [should be] simultaneously a theorist, a reformer and a pragmatic manipulator.”⁵⁴ Moreover, the very notion that race requires “study,” that inquiry about the nature of Blackness and Black culture have to be literally disciplined into a “studies” is itself a contestable claim. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten observe wryly that there is “fire aimed at black studies by everyone from William Bennett to Henry Louis Gates Jr.”⁵⁵ Writing about Black Study, in contradistinction to Black Studies, Harney and Moten position “study” directly at odds with the goals of the modern western research university. They suggest that the true student “studies but...does not learn” because “[i]f she learned they could measure her progress, establish her attributes, give her credit.”⁵⁶ By avoiding the metrics of success that could be used to gauge improvement in a teleological way, culminating in the ostensible end of study (i.e. graduation), the student continually avoids paying off the accumulated debt that in Harney and Moten’s imagination should not have been subject to the value form in the first place. In light of all this, what is the Black Studies theorist to do? What kind of theories can and should they produce?

⁵⁴ T.K. Daniel, “Theory Building in Black Studies,” *The Black Scholar* 12, no. 3 (1981): 29–36, 33.

⁵⁵ Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Studies* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2013), 41.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 62.

In “‘Ideal Theory’ As Ideology,” philosopher Charles W. Mills writes about the descriptive and moral failure of what are called ideal theories in ethics, and inadvertently gives us a way of parsing out the different functions of theory. He makes a careful distinction between “abstraction” and “idealization,” two concepts which are often conflated. Though Mills was speaking directly to the field of moral philosophy, where ideal theories ran rampant, I find the distinction he makes to be extremely helpful in providing a nuanced understanding of the role theory can play in the study of race, such that we can articulate a relationship between race and theory that is neither strictly antagonistic nor willfully inattentive to potential misalignments. In short, Mills gives us a rubric for distinguishing between helpful theoretical abstractions and unhelpful ones by rearticulating the issue under contention in terms of *ideality*.

Mills begins by arguing that all theories by definition require abstraction—that is, some form of generalization that enables a theory to cover more than one local case. Abstraction conceived thusly, Mills argues, is not in and of itself an ethical or methodological problem. However, it becomes a problem if the abstraction in question also requires idealization, which he defines as abstraction “*away* from relations of structural domination, exploitation, coercion, and oppression,” abstraction that excludes and marginalizes “the actual.”⁵⁷ In contrast to this kind of theoretical abstraction, Mills argues that nonideal theory uniquely recognizes “the centrality of oppression...[and that] a theorization of the ideal-as-descriptive model type...is not just a minor ‘deviation’ from

⁵⁷ Charles W. Mills, “‘Ideal Theory’ as Ideology,” *Hypatia* 20, no. 3 (2005): 165–83, 168.

ideal-as-idealized model,” but a different theoretical endeavor altogether. Although it is impossible to avoid “includ[ing] certain features while omitting others”⁵⁸ when creating a generalized (read: abstract) model of a phenomenon, nonideal theories “abstract without idealizing,”⁵⁹ that is, without naturalizing hegemonic norms as part of the abstraction.

Mills cites Fredrick Douglass’ 1852 speech “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” as an example of a critique of ideal theory. Douglass’ speech gives the lie to American ideals of freedom, equality, and independence by centering a national subject who experiences Independence Day in bondage. This subject’s misalignment with the idealized national subject posited by the uncritical celebration of the Fourth of July reveals the extent to which the abstractions of nationalist pride paper over the unfreedom of the enslaved. Mills reflects it is “no accident that historically subordinated groups have been deeply skeptical of ideal theory, generally see its glittering ideals as remote and unhelpful, and are attracted to nonideal theory.”⁶⁰ Whereas ideal theory reproduces culturally dominant abstractions in exchange for its generalizing power, nonideal theory abstracts without relying on those norms.⁶¹

I find this distinction between abstraction and idealization, and in turn, ideal and nonideal theory, to be a simple but powerful tool with which to think about the debates

⁵⁸ Ibid., 166.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 168.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 170.

⁶¹ There is an interesting contrast to be made between Mills’ conception of non-dominant theorization and Barbara Christian’s. Whereas Christian sees people of color incorporating “sensuality” alongside abstraction in their theories, Mills’ model does not seek to supplement abstraction as a theoretical strategy, but rather to parse out the *kinds* of abstraction used by different theorists. The latter is more in line with my own approach. See Barbara Christian, “The Race for Theory,” *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 1 (1988).

over representation and abstraction, as well as the role of theory, in the study of race. Put simply, the objections levied against theory's appropriateness for racial discourse often conflate ideal theory with theory in toto, and fail to see the necessity and presence of nonideal theory in some of the most trenchant and vital writing on race throughout history. Without abstraction, there would be no ability to recognize the significance of racial and ethnic groupings, and the consequences of those groupings; without (nonideal) theories, there would be no ability for racial consciousness to form, since there would be no principled basis by which identity-based claims could be made. What I hope to argue is that theory has always been built into the institutionalized version of racial thought that we know today as ethnic studies, which has, for better and worse, profoundly shaped contemporary understandings and operations of race

It is interesting to note that Mills makes his argument about nonideal theory in the discipline of analytic philosophy, a notoriously white and intractable field which has become nearly synonymous with out-of-touch, elite academic theorizing. Mills' most well-known work, *The Racial Contract*, performs exactly the kind of nonideal theorization he endorses—it examines social contract theory from the perspective of human subjects traditionally excluded from the terms of those contractual agreements and makes the case that “global white supremacy... is itself a political system” that runs on an invisible contract keeping the idealized form of the dominant social contract in place. Moreover, analytic philosophy methodologies and instincts differ in important ways from the continental traditions that have shaped contemporary literary theory and close reading practices. Davide Panagia writes:

French close reading reads passages with the status of the work in mind and explores the juxtaposition between the particularity of the passage and the “problematique” of the whole work. Anglo-American social science reads statements with their verifiability in mind and for the purpose of parsing statements from pseudo-statements. Whereas the former interrogates the integrity of the work; the latter verifies the integrity of the statement.⁶²

The positivism described in the latter case can be seen not only in traditional analytic philosophy, but also in ethnic studies, which exist in part in a social scientific lineage. In either case, the principle of verifiability is directly at odds with the thematic analyses involved in close reading and literary theory, since claims made about aesthetic objects, including literary works, *as* aesthetic objects are by definition unverifiable in the natural world. A way that scholars with a positivist bent in any number of disciplines have tried to circumvent this problem is by reading literature as direct insight into the phenomenal, social world (rather than as aesthetic objects), such that falsifiable claims can be made and their integrity can be evaluated. This is true even in some versions of literary criticism, especially ones that seek political or social relevance. Sometimes this is not a problem — literature can be as useful as any other speech act or piece of media for providing evidence for certain kinds of claims. But when critics pay lip service to the idea that a work has uniquely *literary* critical potential that should be centered in interpretation, rarely is any real theoretical heft ever attributed to a work of literature.

⁶² Davide Panagia, *Sentimental Empiricism: Politics, Philosophy, and Criticism in Postwar France* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, forthcoming 2024), 96.

Theory that is deployed with this kind of verifiability in mind often does not argumentatively depend in any significant way on the particular pieces of literature it uses for exemplification. Case in point: if my aim with this chapter were merely to argue that theory is a form of abstraction, and that it is in turn necessary for the study of race, there would be no argumentative incentive to turn specifically to a literary work for “evidence.” Evidence could be provided in many other forms—direct logical argumentation, anecdotes, other forms of media, etc. Literature, if it were used as an example in that context, would merely be a specific emanation of the more general conceptual argument, rather than essential to the nature of the argument itself. That is, the argument would be incidentally rather than inalienably literary.

Given the deployment of nonideal theory in Mills’ scholarly writing, and its general adherence to the generic expectations of academic philosophy, it might be difficult to intuit how literature could perform similarly theoretical work. In the section that follows, I will turn to Simone White’s multigeneric 2018 book, *Dear Angel of Death*, a work which, I argue, is able to engage with theory and race in nonideal ways specifically *because* of its direct engagement with literariness. Alongside a reading of the titular essay, I will look in depth at the relationship between that more traditionally theoretical section and the rest of the book’s lyric sections. My aim is not to level the generic and aesthetic differences between the poetic and essayistic sections and read indiscriminately across them, but instead to note that the thematic and typographical overlaps between the sections rewards attempts to read them together.

Specifically, I make the case that the book puts forth its own nonideal theory of Blackness by drawing out and making use of the literary character of theory. Although White is mostly known as a poet, and *Dear Angel of Death* is often described as a book of poetry—and indeed, the first two sections of the book are what we might readily call lyric poetry—the titular long piece that makes up over half of the book is in fact an adapted version of a chapter from White’s doctoral dissertation, and reads much more like an essay than, say, a prose poetry. This essay is preoccupied with the status of theory in racial thinking, and its critique operates both on the level of content—claims about racial Blackness and its relation to Black culture and aesthetic objects—and on the level of form—claims about how the previously mentioned content-level claims are made. White takes aim at what she sees as a way of thinking about Blackness that has become dominant and irrefutable within what is known as the Black radical tradition. White’s own stake in the debates over theory is not to repudiate theory’s abstractionist tendencies as such, but rather to examine and critique the *kinds* of abstraction that undergird existing theories of Blackness, particularly with Black music at its center. White suggests that the problem with music-centered theories of Blackness is not only that they are descriptively inaccurate, but also that they exclude aspects of Blackness that do not participate in a particularly masculinist lineage of theorizing.

In making the claim that the “lyric” and “essayistic” sections of *Dear Angel of Death* should be read together as part of a single project of nonideal theorizing, it is necessary first of all to get a sense of how the book is organized in conventional terms. The table of contents breaks the book down into three sections: “Dollbaby,” “Endings,” and “Dear Angel of Death.” “Dollbaby” consists mostly of left-justified poems with relatively short stanzas

and similarly length lines, including a handful of longer poems in which stanza breaks coincide with page breaks. It is the most conventionally lyric of the three sections, although even here there are moments of strangeness—several of the stanzas across multiple poems are printed in blue ink, and two of the poems are single-stanza prose poems, dense blocks of text that sit heavily within the section. “Endings” begins with a visually similar block in the form of a three-paragraph long quote from Giorgio Agamben, and contains just five poems. They are formally much looser than the ones in the previous sections—typographical shenanigans regularly punctuate the poems, line lengths often vary drastically within the same stanza, and it feels at times like the poems are running amok on the space of the page.

Crucially, one poem in the section invokes an “Angel,” seemingly prefiguring the addressee of the last section’s framing epistle. “Dear Angel of Death” begins as “Endings” does, with a series of epigraphs, one each from Fred Moten and Nathaniel Mackey—two figures who are central to the content of the essay to come—and one, surprisingly, from Steve Albini, a white music critic known, among other things, for his history racially charged commentary. Despite the address in the title of the piece, it is unclear how or if the essay takes the form of a letter—it begins with a short, cryptic set of declarations (e.g. “stubbornly persistent contextual negativity beginning knowledge of consistently pleasing immemorial connection”), followed by a playlist, which is contextualized as “[a]n abbreviated list to make soft, to undo the R&B of my mind today.”⁶³

⁶³ Simone White, *Dear Angel of Death* (New York, NY: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2019), 72.

The structure of the book—with the recognizably lyric poems gathered into two sections at the beginning and the titular essay placed after—alongside the recurring fixation with motherhood, sexual desire, and conflicted attachment, which span the entire book, suggest a relation of extrusion or overflow between the lyric and the essayistic sections. In contrast to the conventional view of lyric poetry as the spontaneous overflow of powerful emotion, an alchemical transformation of feeling to page, it seems in *Dear Angel of Death* that it is in fact the essay that is made to bear the excesses of the lyric. Whereas the lyric sections are fairly easy to parse for the most part, despite their clipped, poetically ungrammatical phrasing, the essayistic prose, from which one might expect explicatory and rational clarity, is composed of many nearly undiagrammable sentences, abrupt changes in style and medium, and seeming non sequiturs. The essay is packed with references to other, oftentimes equally complex thinkers, its own set of poetic and thematic throughlines, and meta-reflections on the very notion of citation and referentiality itself. To complicate matters even further, the essay was adapted from the last chapter of White's doctoral dissertation, a piece of writing that is itself hard to describe in full—at the very basic level, it is an exploration of "the metaphor of descent as a search for originary sources of creative power,"⁶⁴ but its scope in execution is wide and idiosyncratic in a way that exceeds any possible paraphrase.

The relation of the lyric and essayistic sections is certainly not one of primary and secondary, lock and key, but it is difficult to characterize what exactly it is. Perhaps it is an answer to what poet Anne Boyer has posed as "the problem of what-to-do-with-the- -

⁶⁴ Simone White, "Descent: American Individualism, American Blackness, and the Trouble with Invention" (PhD diss, City University of New York, 2016), 11/

information-that-is-feeling.” White’s “prose exertions” (a phrase she uses in the essay to characterize some of Amiri Baraka’s writings) do not work to demystify or explain in plain English the poetics of the earlier sections, nor do they even make any pains to explain themselves. What emerges instead, suspended between lyric poem and academic essay, is a nonideal theory of Black expression that harnesses rather than forsakes the abstracting tendencies of theory in its pursuit of a more expansive and useful account of racial Blackness. I call this an *unideal* theory, conjoining the nonideality formulated by Mills with the purposefully pejorative connotations of “unideal” in order to register White’s preoccupation with compromised attachments, even and especially in the realm of theorizing matters of race. In this sense, I see White working in the tradition of the Combahee River Collective, a Black lesbian feminist group based in Boston, whose 1977 joint statement pointedly refused white lesbian separatism and spoke to the necessity of solidarity between Black women and Black men in the face of white supremacy, even as Black women also needed to “struggle with Black men about sexism.”⁶⁵

Before I begin to look at the text in depth, I wish to note one of the main difficulties of writing about White—the need for exegesis beyond what the compressed space of one dissertation chapter can allow. Her work courts the kind of detailed critical summary that is usually reserved for sacred texts or canonical philosophical texts, and rarely for poets, even more rarely for Black women, and rarest of all for Black women poets. While this is certainly not a feature unique to White’s writing, it is perhaps unexpected for a work like

⁶⁵ “The Combahee River Collective Statement,” 1977, <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/combahee-river-collective-statement-1977/>. Interestingly, the Combahee River Collective also coined the now-ubiquitous term “identity politics,” a phrase which haunts and animates this dissertation because of its associations with the kind of representation-based criticism that I write with and against. For a truly thrilling account of the Marxist roots of this coinage, see Lye 2020.

this to necessitate such sustained attention. Much like how the New Critics believed poetry to suffer when subjected to the “heresy of paraphrase,” *Dear Angel of Death* is a work that calls for line-by-line—if not word-by-word—commentary and analysis, rather than quick recapitulation. One of the recurring features of White’s prose style is a distinctive kind of associative digression, in which she introduces an abstract concept, then abruptly segues in the next clause of the same sentence into an example that has an oblique relation to the concept that is unpacked in the rest of the sentence. As such, some incredibly potent insights can be found lingering in dependent clauses on the way to another full thought, and direct quotation, without the full context of the surrounding section, becomes a challenge that I attempt to take on in the analysis to come.

To clarify further, I mean exegesis here in the tradition of analytic philosophy (rather than biblical hermeneutics), in which exegetical writing is a complete genre in its own right. In literary studies, by contrast, the summative decoding of a literary work happens alongside its quotation, up to and including the choice of what to quote in the first place. As Jonathan Kramnick suggests, free indirect quotation—in which the critic excerpts from a literary text in a way such that the chosen phrases and words fit seamlessly into the grammatical structure of the sentence, whether that sentence is meant as recapitulation or analysis—has become so naturalized in literary studies that the transformative aspects of the maneuver has become completely naturalized. Because “*Dear Angel of Death*” straddles the line between literature and criticism, “primary” and “secondary” source, the complications involved in my (possibly tertiary) analysis are ever proliferating.

It is clear from the titular essay that White is preoccupied with the formation of theory and its relation to Blackness, theory in both the strict, academic sense of systematic philosophical thought and in the more general sense of speculation and contemplation. As a result, the “intervention” of the essay is as much about the actual content of the writers with whom she engages as it is about their circulation. She takes particular aim at the semi-established canon of Black male intellectuals who have formed what she sees as the overriding consensus about Blackness and its relation to Black culture, a group that includes, among others, W.E.B. Du Bois, Amiri Baraka, Fred Moten, Jared Sexton, and Nathaniel Mackey. White writes that she “cannot get off the first page of Baraka’s *Digging*” and that she must “deal with this page as an image.” White then commands us to look at this page (see Figure 1).

The page appears not a typographically reproduced version of Baraka’s page, but is instead a literal image of that page, likely a screenshot or a scan of the first PDF page of *Digging*.⁶⁶ “Before I read,” White then writes, “I see a block of text, and the name, ‘W.E.B. Du Bois,’ which functions as a picture and a mode of transport toward a variety of ideas relating to the intellectual significance of black persons in the history of the idea of America.” White’s formalist analysis of the block quote acts as an abstraction layer on top of the page she reproduces, redirecting the reader’s attention away from the content of the Du Bois quotation and Baraka’s commentary on it to the visual force and the citational implications of the quote. She reads the form of the block quote as a “visual-verbal bridge

⁶⁶ Note that the PDF version I have of the book seems to have used a different technique for scanning the screenshotted page as opposed to the typed pages, since the creamy white of this particular page is very different from the cooler white of the other pages, whereas in the physical copy, the color warmth is the same.

that shatters the isolation between the thinking and writing that is in front of us—before us—on the page *and* writing that is before us...that has come before us in time.” In this formalization, which is to say, abstraction, White finds race and gender not abstracted away from, out of the frame of consideration, but doubly clarified: “the masculine order of black writing...is an order that values being seen together: it is an order of claiming being together...The compositional assertion that the texts must be read together means something.”⁶⁷

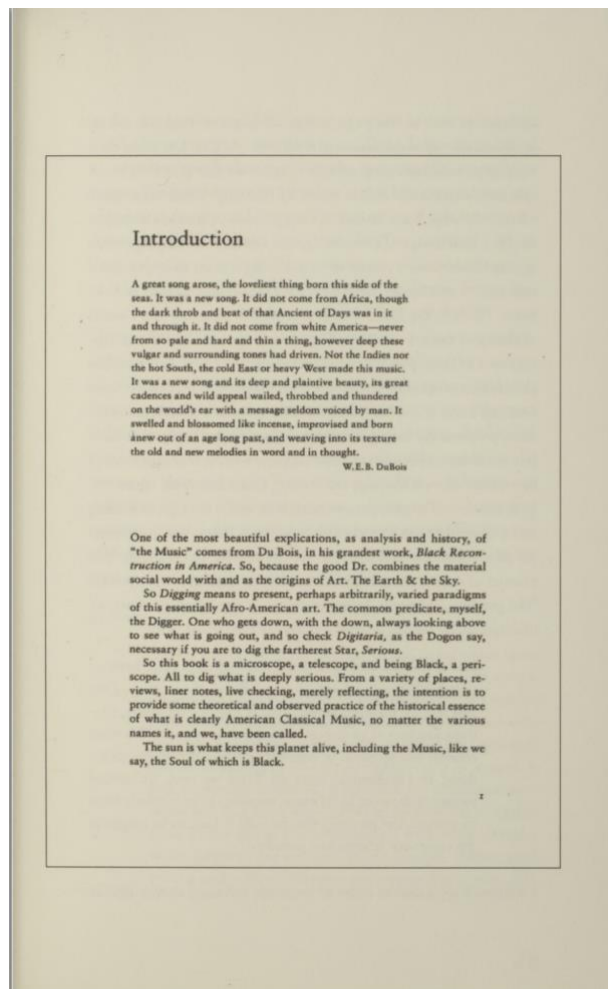


Figure 1.

⁶⁷ White, *Dear Angel of Death*, 79.

In fact, White suggests that this “being together” informs the content of the theory developed by these male thinkers. This togetherness is what is “at stake in music-centered theories of black art/making black art...a communal/cultural practice in itself, for itself; these men giving language to each other as its own kind of wanting to be together and wanting to be loved; a kind of freedom.”⁶⁸ Rather than locating freedom in the structure of the performance of Black music itself, as the existing theories proffered by these male thinkers have tended to suggest, White sees the freedom drive coalescing around and through the common love object of Black music within the community of theorists, and the formal invocation of their peers in this community. That is, White identifies the utopian impulse usually attributed to artistic practices—say, the improvisation at the heart of jazz—within the social space in which that aesthetic freedom is theorized instead, in language and forms that are borrowed and taken up and reworked.

This is a profound observation in and of itself. White performs a kind of aesthetic sociology of this group of thinkers—and indeed, identifies their mutual affiliations as a group worthy of attention—and finds in their sociality the kind of elusive “out” that they strive and search for in their writing and theorization of Black cultural forms. It is not, or not just, the performance and composition of the music itself that “means something,” but the performance and composition of these Black thinkers’ reception of the music that means something. What’s more, White performs a virtuosically ekphrastic close reading of the first page of Baraka’s *Black Music* that links the simultaneously visual and literary force of citation to a genealogical claim to past, mythical authority (“what is *before* us”) that is

⁶⁸ Ibid., 85.

based on yet a third medium, that of music. In this synaesthetic analysis, White implicitly demonstrates the extra-textual formation of the communitarian common sense within this now-established group of thinkers, which she suggests has overdetermined our contemporary understanding of Blackness and Black cultural production.

Although White professes not to feel the same draw to Black music, especially free jazz, as exemplary aesthetic object for theorizing Blackness as this group, she does not simply invoke this difference in opinion as a point of departure for her own critique—she engages in earnest with the group’s members and their theoretical lineage, and not in spite of her criticism of them, but by way of it. White continues with a meditation on the central metaphor of “digging” in Baraka’s text, noting that there is a “more-than-whisper of sexual domination in the coverage of the verb ‘to dig.’”⁶⁹ If this metaphor, this text, form the foundation of the Black radical tradition, White suggests, if this is what motivates these male thinkers to center jazz as Black music in their theorization of Blackness, it is ultimately an account of Blackness that depends on a mythical aesthetic purity and singularity, one which ignores the realities of what Black music actually is contemporarily and idealizes away, as Mills would say, from gendered and sexualized violence. “I am stuck on why I cannot quite perceive in the discourse of digging those actions done to the thing that has been gotten down on or gotten with, looked up and down,” she writes. “As a woman what happens when a thing is acted upon in any of those gendered ways. (I want to get with her. I got with her. She could get it.)”⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Ibid., 83.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

More than sexualized metaphor, White contrasts the action of digging with other possible kinds of spatial relations. There is digging, which is “getting down”; fugitivity, which is “getting out;” “getting up,” which could be either of the previous two terms, or something else altogether, and all of these terms relate to the freedom drive often invoked in Black culture. On the other hand, there is White’s preferred set of terms—folding in its many variations, which produces topologically more interesting relations. Within her disidentificatory embrace, the relations become a matter of “black intellectual infolding,”⁷¹ her way of conceptualizing the relations between Black thinkers who build upon each other in dreaming of freedom without resorting to theoretical locker talk. This is not to say she is not without her reservations, especially since she gets “folding” through Moten by way of Deleuze. She asks, half serious, half in jest: “Also—why do we have to talk like this in order to describe black people’s being together? Who cares what Gilles Deleuze said about folding?”⁷² Despite her grouching, there is a good reason for her attraction to the metaphor.

When we talk about folding, we attempt, I heard Mei-mei Burssenbrugge say, to bring together earth and sky. The discourse of folding is a discourse of relation that touches the actions of bringing together both elements that are infinitely far apart and those that are infinitely close (inherent). When we talk about folding, we gain access to a language of betweenness with tremendous symbolic sweep, language

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., 127.

appropriate to figuring blackness as that which is so far from the subject whose objecthood it names.⁷³

Everything about this characterization of folding depends on conflicted attachment. This is not a “betweenness” of equivocation or neutrality, but a knowing synthesis of disparate and far apart elements. Folding creates a new dimension in which opposite ends can be conjoined, such that apparent paradoxes can be understood together without compromise. For White, this formal abstraction is conceptually crucial for the simultaneous critique and embrace she repeatedly exhibits throughout the essay.

With this schematization of infolding, White counter-theorizes the foundational metaphors of Blackness, while at the same time acknowledging the status of Du Bois and Baraka as theorists in their own right. But even within what White refers to as a “club of undesirables who theorize the undesirable,” not everyone is made equal. “Membership in this club...is policed and fought over just like everything else,”⁷⁴ she writes, immediately after her reflections on the masculine order of Black radical writing. Even as Blackness is for many the horizon line of abjection, that undesirability, White suggests, contains internal division, and involves a theory. In other words, undesirability is just as prone to being theorized ideally as anything else, even by undesirables themselves. What matters in this point is not only White’s feelings about her place in this masculinist theory of Blackness. Nor is it even a simple intersectional critique that demands gender be included as an axis of consideration in theorizing Black culture and essence (as much as that alone would be an

⁷³ Ibid., 128.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 85.

important and welcome intervention). Instead, what seems to be at stake is the very image of Blackness and what can and cannot be thought by way of these theoretical metaphors, whether, in short, what digging at the foundation of Black thought yields and what it misses.

I do not think that White presents a viable alternative to this, nor does she aim to, insofar as the objects she instinctively prefers over canonical Black Music are, she would admit, equally politically suspect, albeit in different ways. She writes of listening to rapper Vince Staples's song "Blue Suede" and reflecting "this music is fucked up, it isn't about freedom at all." At the same time, she professes a deep enchantment, affective and intellectual, with the song, but one which crucially does not tether it to an ideal Blackness. "How to say this tripped out singularity blows my mind, but I do not rely on it. How to say what I learn from this is caution; I can take no strategy from this, poetic or otherwise for thinking a better social life as an artist or human being." To "take no strategy" from Staples is, colloquially, less than ideal. In politically-motivated criticism, a love object that has no tether to radical critique or practice is as good as useless. White knows this, and knows that her theory is unideal as a result. But she cannot disavow Staples as a part of the reality of Black music today.

In one of the most robust pieces within the scant scholarship on *Dear Angel of Death* (and indeed, on White's entire oeuvre), Dhaveer Singh Brar objects to White's engagement with Baraka and with the genres of R&B and trap, and offers instead a different reading routed through poet Anne Boyer and multimedial artist Free.Yard. Brar claims that "it is not gender in and of itself that is the object critique in 'Dear Angel of Death,'" but rather

“class and taste.”⁷⁵ With this claim, Brar takes White’s invocation of Black male intimacy at root in theorizations of Black music to be both wrong and ultimately inconsequential for what he perceives to be her actual bugbear: Baraka and co.’s snobbishness towards Black popular music, in contrast to and favor of free jazz and other associated forms of “New Black Music.”

This framing of White’s investments misses the mark entirely. Gender is not incidental to her claims about the shape that contemporary Black theory has taken, nor is the distinction between R&B and jazz solely a matter of class and taste. Although Brar heavily cites Alexander Weheliye’s work on R&B in support of his argument, he focuses almost exclusively on Weheliye’s comments on technology, of the genre as a “technological style.” What he fails to mention is the extent to which gender is a key component of Weheliye’s theorizations of R&B, specifically, what he terms the “BlackFem singing voice.”⁷⁶ For Weheliye, R&B is first and foremost a female-coded genre that has been sidelined in scholarship precisely because of its gendered associations. Moreover, his interest in Black *popular* music means that the primary dyad of concern for him is not R&B and free jazz, but rather R&B and hip hop—both popular music genres.⁷⁷ In the same article cited by Brar in his essay, Weheliye writes: “While hip-hop routinely transacts black ‘masculine’ exterior

⁷⁵ Dhanveer Singh Brar, “Knowing Manufacture of an RNB Feeling,” darkmatter hub, June 9, 2021, <https://darkmatter-hub.pubpub.org/pub/3x25j469>.

⁷⁶ This particular phrasing did not appear in print until 2022 in Weheliye, “Don’t Take It Away: Blackfem Voices in Electronic Dance Music” e-flux, and more recently in Weheliye, *Feenin: R&B Music and the Materiality of BlackFem Voices and Technology*. Both of these postdate Brar’s essay, but Weheliye’s investment in the centrality of gender as an analytical lens for thinking about R&B has been recorded as early as 2002 in Weheliye, “‘Feenin’: Posthuman Voices in Contemporary Black Popular Music,” including in the essay cited by Brar, Weheliye, “Rhythms of Relation: Black Popular Music and Mobile Technologies.”

⁷⁷ Weheliye, “Rhythms of Relation: Black Popular Music and Mobile Technologies.”

braggadocio in its obsessions with guns, hypersexuality, and conspicuous consumption, R&B might be said to stage a more 'feminine' version of the (black) subject that traffics in love and sex stories without hip-hop's hardened outer shield."⁷⁸ For Weheliye, as for White, R&B's association with femininity is central to its analysis, rather than incidental.

Brar correctly identifies that for White, "the historical form of Black Music...has not been suitably updated to deal with the conditions and feelings carried in trap," yet in his subsumption of White's interest in gender to what he sees as overriding concerns about class and taste, he fails to register that White's intervention in the discourse about Black Music already assumes a tense but nevertheless extant and storied relationship with Black masculinity. Moreover, what Brar seems to miss entirely in his literalist reading of "Dear Angel of Death"—his reduction of it to propositional statements—is the thematic recurrence of conflicted attachment and the essay's imbrication with the rest of the book. As I suggested in my initial readings of selections from the book, every object or idea that White writes "against" is also something with which she professes, explicitly or implicitly, a deep affective engagement, an "unideal" engagement which should be taken seriously not in spite of her various critiques, but is in fact bound up in those inescapable circuits of infolded affiliation.

I emphasize this point not simply to affirm that there is value in studying "bad objects" and cruelly optimistic attachments—though those are undoubtedly true as well—nor to fetishize interpretively messy objects for their ambiguity, but to highlight how White composes theory through the essay-poem-dissertation form. When White repeatedly

⁷⁸ Ibid., 110.

professes not to be able to “get off the page” of Baraka’s writing, it is not because she feels helplessly in thrall to his overdetermining power, completely incapable of escape, but because she finds something vitally of use in his work, and in the work of the Black male thinkers who follow from him, despite her disagreements with them. The very title of the essay⁷⁹ and the collection as a whole is an homage to Nathaniel Mackey’s own epistolary project, *From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate*, in which each entry begins with the phrase “Dear Angel of Dust.” White takes up a version of this phrase for her own project not for dissent and reappropriation, but as a mark of theorizing alongside Mackey. Much of this theorizing happens in the lyric sections of the book as well.

Looking back at the earlier lyric sections, there are clues about how *Dear Angel of Death* had been preoccupied by its own theoretical possibilities from the very start. In the first (unnamed) poem in “Dollbaby,” the speaker begins with an urgent request—“First, secure the milk.”⁸⁰ The poem proceeds through what appears to be meditations on the emotional and embodied experience of new motherhood, returning several times to the phrase “secure the milk.” In the last of these appearances of the phrase, there is a surprising turn: “Secure the milk / and we’ll talk about / ‘Marxism Leninism Mao-Tse Tung Thought’ / which is milk thought / which is what I believe.” Whereas the conditional structure of “Secure the milk / and we’ll talk”—which I hear as, secure the milk first, *then*

⁷⁹ This marks a change from the dissertation chapter, which is titled “Dear Tom Krell,” a reference to the musician known as How To Dress Well, whom White quotes in both versions of the essay on the subject of openness and the social space that music, especially live performance, creates.

⁸⁰ White, *Dear Angel of Death*, 9.

we can talk—would seem to suggest that the content of the discussion is less important to the speaker than the securing of the milk, the lines that follow draw the abstract theoretical endeavor of “Marxism Leninism Mao-Tse Tung Thought” and “milk thought” into close proximity. Rather than pitting embodiment and theory against one another as opposites, White folds the two together, posing them as compatible systems of experience. This is not the theory of Anzaldua, a cold, white thing devoid of “blood and pus and sweat,” but rather a set of thought on which a child might be nourished.

The poem shifts to a different register and subject matter two pages later. “Of the long poem I had said there could be / a secret text, a sacred accompanying text / unreadable but for its having been written / and erased. But how to establish secrecy?”⁸¹ These lines are the first of several stanzas that follow printed in blue ink, a typographical choice that recurs occasionally throughout the rest of the book. In the essay, the blue mostly seems to designate quotation and interpolation, but its function here is a bit less obvious (see Figure 2).⁸²

⁸¹ Ibid., 11.

⁸² For an interesting point of comparison on the use of blue and black text, see Huxtable, *Mucus in My Pineal Gland*.

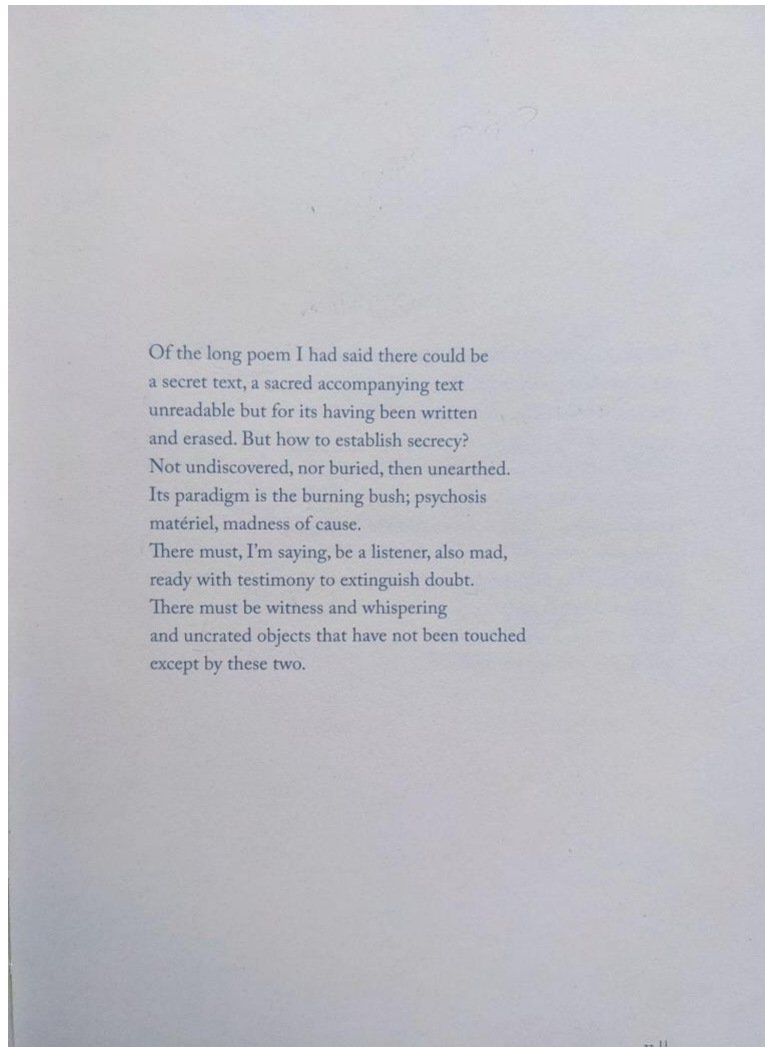


Figure 2.

Look at its shape. The rectangular stanza, sonnet-esque, proleptically conjures up the block quotes that White both uses as epigraphs and analyzes in “Dear Angel of Death.” As a part of a long poem in itself, the stanzas in blue seem like they could in fact be part of the “secret text” in question, parergonal to the “main” text. The stanza’s turn introduces the figure of the “listener” (later figured as a “witness”) through whom the text gains its secrecy. Lyric exchange is figured here as mutual psychosis: the writer’s burning bush and the listener’s extinguishing testimony. This kind of dynamic regarding secrecy seems consistent with a lyric ethos, which poses an alliance between the speaker and the reader, a

whisper network of two in which clandestine information is purportedly conveyed from the poet herself, through the speaker, directly to the reader. The strictness of this relay between poet and reader is extreme, to the point where the conditions of the text's readability is its having been previously erased, rendering it impossible to be perceived by anyone else. We might read these blue stanzas as theorization of the ongoing long poem, which they are both about and within. When we return to black text, we also return to the more personal, recognizably material world of the poem's first two pages, with concrete nouns that seem to signify literally (milk) rather than symbolically (burning bush). The tone turns incantatory, bent on manifesting: "Perspicacious beyond health, / All things are effortless. / You milk the baby; it is effortless. / Your choices are beautiful. / You have read everything."⁸³

Following the blue interjection of metacommentary, the poem has a different recourse to what it wants done. What the commanding voice at the beginning of the poem merely calls out for is, by the end, simply declared and spoken into existence. Milk is secured, and it is effortless. Neither poetry nor theory are tantamount to action, but they each nevertheless bear a different relation to the possibility of performative uttering. It is not that there is no difference between art and criticism in White's work, between what she makes in the name of poetry and what she makes in the name of theory. Folding is not blending, after all. In fact, the existence of a nonequivalent relationship between literature and theory—the tendency towards a kind of codependent antinomy—is important to

⁸³ White, *Dear Angel of Death*, 17.

White. In Nathaniel Mackey's poetic work, she sees Mackey the theorist come into productive conflict with Mackey the poet, writing in the essay:

I can't shake the intuition that with these four books [in the *From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate* series] Nathaniel Mackey does the impossible by insisting on the correctness of the music-based theory [of Blackness] while accessing a poetics that permanently destabilizes all its premises.⁸⁴

What follows this quote is the most legibly literary-critical of White's analyses within the entire essay. She focuses her commentary on what she calls "the trope of the 'up and out'" from Mackey's series which she sees as being connected to the "familiar poetic discourse of ascent/descent" discussed earlier. From there, she turns to the specific motif of balloons, and quotes several paragraphs from Mackey, which she describes altogether as "a philosophical fragment."⁸⁵ Each of the paragraphs in the block quote begins with the phrase "The balloons are," and White follows suit in her commentary on the quote, beginning each of the next two pages' worth of paragraphs in the same way. She writes herself directly into the lineage of thought on which she comments, following in "an anaphoric history." She presses her language right up to Mackey's, italicizing her contributions to the balloon paragraphs and setting off in quotes the small phrases she interpolates from him, both delineated in such a way as to indicate non-belonging to the essay while remaining a central part of it.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 111.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 102.

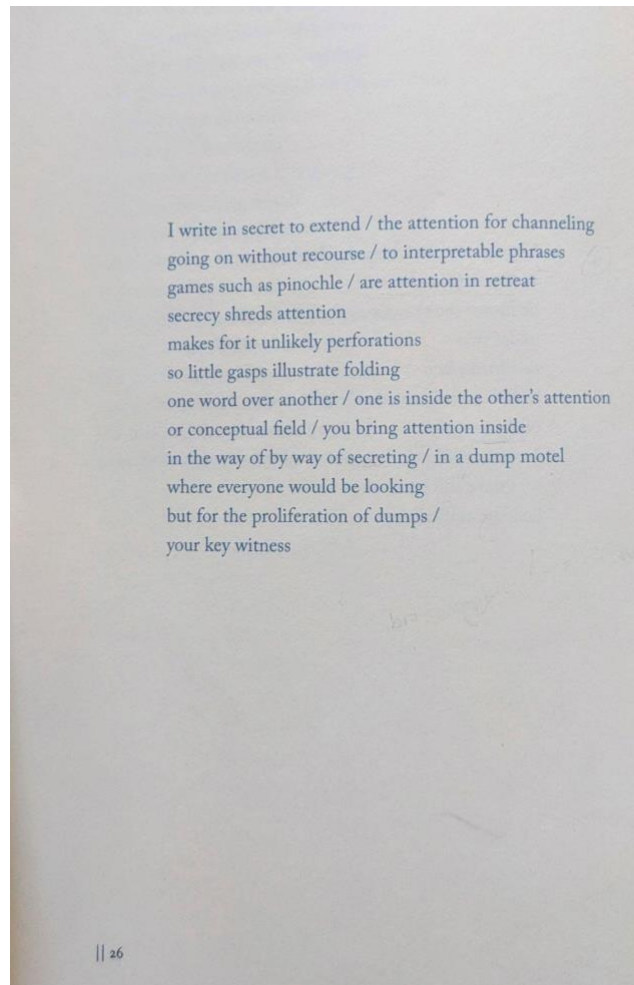


Figure 3.

White's engagement with Mackey is also conditioned by the fact that someone else had already gotten to it before her. She writes about her excitement about the passage quoted from Mackey, and the subsequent realization that Moten had already written on the same passage a decade earlier. In this way, she once again arrives too late to the scene, and has to make do with another unideal state for criticism. Rather than choosing a new critical object or treating criticism as a zero sum game, White reframes the convergence between her and Moten's interest as evidence of infolding, of the mutual study of and attention to a common theoretical object.

Another stanza later on in the same section, from a poem titled simply “Love Poem,” extends the first poem’s lyric theoretical project. This stanza, too, is blue, a secret text (see Figure 3). In the lines “I write in secret to extend / the attention for channeling / going on without recourse / to interpretable phrases,”⁸⁶ the reader is straddled between the gerund “channeling” and the verb “going,” bumping over the double -ings trying to map one side onto the lyric and one side onto the essayistic and finding nowhere to land. The “secret” text alluded to in the earlier stanza and at the beginning of this one transforms into “secreting,” which in turn becomes “dumps,” confession as excretion, the lyric as uncountable and excessive proliferation. In this stanza, the slashes that appear in the middle of some lines recall the notation used to indicate line breaks when quoting verse, rather than the prosaic use to indicate uncertainty or alternatives. They also recall Dickinsonian dashes, flexible diacritics whose association with one of the most well-known lyric poets in American history clearly lands White’s project in the realm of lyric theorizing. The phrases separated by slashes are all roughly the same lengths, averaging around seven syllables each, with the kind of loosely iambic cadence of standard speech. The last line of the stanza, which is also the last line of the whole poem, is exceptionally short and punchy, holding back the stanza like a doorstep. Unlike in the untitled poem, we do not return to black text to see the effects of the theoretical intervention on the capabilities of the lyric. We stop short at “your key witness,” ending on a callback to one of the untitled poem’s two central figures.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 26. The 1st and 3rd slashes are original to the quote, not part of the line break notations.

Although the stanza begins with an “I”-headed declarative phrase, the subject and object being described in it quickly become fuzzy. As was the case in the untitled poem from earlier, this stanza appears to be a moment of reflection on the composition of the rest of “Love Poem.” The beginning of the poem contains the typical lyric “you” and “I,” albeit rendered in scare quotes that destabilize the assumed relation, and appears to recount a romantic relationship on the rocks. On the poem’s second page, a “he” is introduced: “he grips my clavicle in the dead of night / with unexpected power / he moves the skin along the bone / under skin.”⁸⁷ The male figure’s actions are posed ambiguously between sex and violence, and the speaker’s attitude towards him is equally ambivalent. When the “I” returns, it is as a detached witness—“I watch us work to move away from each other.”⁸⁸ The mutuality established by “us” is immediately undercut, and it carries through the vexed gender relations hinted at by the previous lines, “this kind of womanhood whose longing / is not to be made stupid in its face.”⁸⁹ One line later, we move into the stanza in blue.

White’s characterization of Emily Dickinson’s poetics as one of “emotional shorthand [in which] she develops her own affects and ‘cadence’ around a relatively slim repertoire of words”⁹⁰ seems an apt description of this blue stanza. It is almost devoid of concrete nouns, and as such, it is hard to locate the subject. The word that appears by far the most in the stanza is “attention,” which shows up immediately within the first line and

⁸⁷ Ibid., 25.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 24.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 147.

is subsequently passed down line by line—channeled, in retreat, shredded, stuffed inside, brought inside—as if it were a tangible thing. One of the invocations describes it along the lines of infolding: “one word over another / one is inside the other’s attention.” Attention here is figured as a capacious object, and although the word used only twice in “Dear Angel of Death,” we can see how its appearance in this stanza signals some of the same preoccupations with “being together” and its discontents. Following the logic of the poem, the way that attention is brought inside—incorporated, folded in—is “in the way of by way of secreting / in a dump motel,”⁹¹ that is, through lyric overflow, however seedy. Though the scene of interpersonal struggle presented in “Love Poem” may seem miles away from the theoretical preoccupations of the essay, its efforts to imagine how “men” and “women”—“you” and “I” and “he”—can come together, must come together, despite the distancing effects of an uneven field of power and circumstance, is continuous with the essay’s ethos. The project of Black culture as the project of seeking an out cannot do without these unideal alliances and conflicted attachments, White suggests. But rather than espousing the personal as political in any kind of straightforward homology, what we encounter here is an extension of the theoretical efforts of the essay to reimagine relationality in a compromised field of struggle. What the first two stanzas of “Love Poem” stage as interpersonal fracture, a “move away,” is brought back together by the blue stanza’s theorizing, not re-sutured into a mythical, originary whole, but held close by a witness.

⁹¹ Ibid, 26.

Chapter Two: Personifying Metadata

“A poem, even though it is composed in the language of information is not used in the language-game of giving information.” —Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*⁹²

“What attracted you to this book, to cause you to pick it up? Was it the title, the publisher, the cover art? Whatever it was, it almost certainly was not the content of the book itself.” —Jeffrey Pomerantz, *Metadata*⁹³

Richard Hugo once advised fellow poets to “give up all worry about communication”—“if you want to communicate,” he quipped, “use the telephone.”⁹⁴ Indeed, literary language is often defined by its opposition to the normal communicative function of language, and avant-gardists in particular take this idea to its extreme, intentionally deranging the normal operations of language as a way of critiquing social and aesthetic conventions. Specifically, the modernist embrace of medium-specificity has often manifested in the literary arts as an embrace of what is seen as the material aspects of language, defined in opposition to its semantic properties. The tradition of “concrete” poetry, for example, sidelines linguistic sense and focuses instead on visual impact and effect of language. For these avant-garde practitioners, the materiality of language is located in its form, whereas its informational capacity—its “content”—is arbitrary, merely

⁹² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1967), 28e.

⁹³ Jeffrey Pomerantz, *Metadata* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), 4-5.

⁹⁴ Richard Hugo, *The Triggering Town: Lectures and Essays on Poetry and Writing* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2010), 5.

trafficking in the routinized abstraction of reducing language to meaning. In practice, this results in a kind of paradox: while experimental writing that emphasizes language's formal qualities are generally understood by their creators to be more materially grounded than conventional writing, it appears, from anywhere outside of that experimental coterie, as the most supreme of abstractions, language so stripped back it becomes completely unrecognizable.

If we think of standard, communicative language as a bucket, capable of holding information, which can then be ferried from one source to another, literary language, here broadly defined, is perhaps a pair of boots—it could work alright in a pinch for transporting water, but to judge it by its capacity to do so would be to miss the point of them entirely. At the same time however, a shoe, once submerged, can't help but to carry some water with it. Language is sticky, it gets around, and contrary to Wittgenstein's proclamation, quoted in the epigraph above, words do not simply stop communicating information altogether when deployed literarily. Despite the aspirations of avant-gardists to cordon off language from conventional meaning, if not meaning altogether, the most base function of language can't help but slip through. Words and phrases unwittingly participate in multiple language games at once, and the particular game of giving information so powerfully common that it can't help but to bear a mark on most instances of language use, which is to say, on all sorts of language games. Just because language does not set out to take on the task of communication does not mean that the possibility of communication disappears without a trace. This is of course not to suggest that literary language should be read in exactly the same way as non-literary language, but the relay of

information is simply mediated by literary forms in a different way than it is by non-literary ones.

Hugo's invocation of the telephone—the primary form of long-distance communication at the time of his writing—touches on a crucial connection between poetry and information technology. In an account of the “poetics of information overload” that has appeared in different forms throughout the 20th- and 21st century, Paul Stephens suggests that contrary to the tech-phobic tendencies of official verse culture, “one of the distinguishing features of the poetic avant-garde has been its ongoing engagement with changing technologies of information and communication.”⁹⁵ For Stephens, the decades since the turn of the millennium have marked a period of proliferating digital information and intensified datafication, resulting in the ascendance of cultural forms such as the index and the database. This in turn has led experimental writers of the last few decades to reject the specific critical milieu of the Language poets of the 1970s—whose works were premised largely on “refusing conventional syntax at the level of the sentence—and instead embrace a form that Stephens terms “parodic compendia,” which works through “restructuring and reframing aggregate data” in these new informational forms through “passive indexing.”⁹⁶ In this way, these recent writers are not so much actively resisting the overdeterminative power of capitalist forms through their writing as much as they are inhabiting those forms as a way of denaturalizing their normative, abstracting effects.

⁹⁵ Paul Stephens, *The Poetics of Information Overload: From Gertrude Stein to Conceptual Writing* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 14. To clarify, Hugo is far from an avant-garde poet, but his recourse to the telephone as an example of ordinary communication—and as a counterpoint to poetic language—nicely exemplifies the relationship that these two uses of language have (or don't have).

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 154.

One of the writers Stephens identifies as engaging in this aesthetics of “Vanguard Total Index” is Tan Lin, whose work is the subject of this chapter. Since the late 1990s, Lin has pursued an approach to experimental writing that he has termed “ambient stylistics,” a mode of literary composition that is intended to be coextensive with non-literary forms like ambient music, meditative practices, and painting, all of which, for Lin, induce trance-like moments of absorptive consumption. In distinct opposition to the heightened critical attention and difficulty that are characteristic of many modernist-inflected avant-garde projects, Lin’s approach aims to blend into the background, not in preparation for a sneak attack on normative institutions, but as a reflection of the newly mediated sensorial and informational world of the new millennium.

In the titular manifesto-cum-conceptual-poem about ambient stylistics, Lin writes that poetry “should aspire to ever more bureaucratic forms of data transmission and delivery”⁹⁷ and that “[t]he best sentences should lose information at a relatively constant rate.”⁹⁸ This characterization of poetry is deliberately provocative in its bureaucratic flatness, at odds not just with the normative view of lyric poetry’s commitment to stylized emotionality, but also with the Language Poets’ and other avant-garde movements’ emphasis on linguistic disruption as a microcosm of larger ideological and political work. Lin loosely historicizes the version of poetry he presents as belonging to the long 1970s—“A poem, like a disco hit, is designed to be immediately forgettable,” he writes, “and some of the best presidents of recent memory were elected in the '70s when Quaaludes were

⁹⁷ Tan Lin, “Ambient Stylistics,” *Conjunctions*, no. 35 (2000): 128.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 133.

extremely popular.”⁹⁹ In contrast to both “official verse culture” and Language poetry—which, despite their strong opposition to each other, are united in their conviction that poetic language is and should be distinct from the language of banal activities like “data transmission” and, implicitly, that it should be memorable—Lin purposefully draws non-literary language games close to that of poetry and insists that information transmission be considered an unalienable component of literary language. This point is, to some extent, evergreen. Polysemy is, and has always been, both the enabling condition and hard limit of linguistic sense. But in the particular historical moment in and about which Lin writes—from Cold War era intelligence-gathering¹⁰⁰ to the always-online conditions of today—information has loomed large as topos and watchword. “Words now travel,” Stephens writes, “for better and worse, instantaneously across borders. We are all being indexed all the time.”¹⁰¹ This proliferation of readable information by way of digital systems within the past several decades has dramatically altered how and what kinds of information flow in and out of literary space and objects. And as digital information systems have increasingly encroached on the daily experience of reading in the past several decades, texts, even when they are not born digital, are ever more touched by the dematerializing and datafying effects of digitization.

Central to this transformation is metadata—often defined as “data about data”—an abstraction that enables nearly every form of digital recordkeeping and transmission

⁹⁹ Ibid., 128.

¹⁰⁰ See Xiang 2020.

¹⁰¹ Stephens, *Poetics of Information Overload*, 155.

today. Whereas data records pertinent information about a given phenomenon, metadata enables these records to be put in relation to one another, and makes vast stores of information parseable on a human scale. It is infrastructural, meaning that it undergirds the normal operations of everyday life while going largely unnoticed, except in moments of failure or significant deviation. As the epigraph from Jeffrey Pomerantz illustrates, the effect of metadata can be observed at quite a micro level (i.e. the individual choice to read a book), even as it operates on a large-scale system of standardized information. To briefly list just two examples of metadata's reach in the literary sphere, "personalized" recommendations of (both physical and electronic) books from online retailers, bookstores, and even libraries, and decisions about publication—what genres a book is classified as, what marketing strategies are used for the book, whether a book is published at all—are now often powered by algorithms, which in turn run on metadata. Even when there appears to be human agency and discernment involved in these recommendations and decisions—a bookseller asking about your reading preferences and handing you a book of their choosing; an editor personally advocating for the publication of a book—those actions are conditioned by existing metadata structures in terms of what they understand to be significant and relevant metrics of comparison.¹⁰²

Without broaching the thorny topic of how human attention has been transformed by the widespread use of digital technology, we can still see how reading and reading-adjacent practices have been materially changed by the informational systems that power them. The constant availability of information, of a seemingly infinite corpus of language,

¹⁰²See Zalokostas et al. 2023 for a recent cluster of work about this topic.

defines the contemporary media landscape. Lin's interest—and mine as well—is not in adjudicating the political or moral consequences of contemporary practices of reading and attention, but rather to observe and put pressure on its ramifications for literary form and reception. Similarly, Lin's practice does not seek to resist or counteract the by now rote list of social and political ills associated with the ubiquity of digital technologies—shortened attention spans, state surveillance, racialized disparities of access, environmental degradation resulting from the mining of rare earth minerals, just to name a few. If anything, Lin's work self-reflexively engages with the present conditions of literary production and interrogates how the activity of reading literature is affected by and affects in turn the non-literary acts of reading in which we are now constantly engaged (of push notifications, of magazine headlines, of tweets, of print ads, of Wikipedia, etc.). Directly in line with this line of thought is the question of how we should parse out reading from other consumptive activities. Lin refers to “reading” somewhat interchangeably with “looking,” in much the same way that he, as we will see later, purposefully conflates different mediums and genres.

I specifically emphasize metadata as the component of digital information technology that is most relevant for consideration in relation to Lin's writing practice for several reasons. For one, we could say that the “ambient stylistics” approach Lin pursues in his work is, in essence, an aesthetic whose very medium is metadata. By this I do not mean to say that Lin merely takes up and resituates the form of metadata for poetic use. Instead, perhaps counterintuitively, I suggest that he restages metadata as content, skirting the aboutness of content that is so often contested by the avant garde by fully indulging in its technical precondition. Additionally, because metadata enables and disables access to a text

and structures the conditions of its comprehensibility, it is perfectly situated to register the dialectical relation between specificity and generality, a topic which has consistently interested Lin. Metadata is an abstraction of an abstraction—first, of objects into data, and then of data into metadata. In practice, this double abstraction enables us to wrangle with the unimaginably large corpuses of data surrounding us at every moment, not by getting ever closer to the objects which is its about, but by casting aside some facets of an informational object in favor of only its characteristics determined by a system of normative priorities to be relevant. “Interacting with the complex systems of modern life requires a simplified interface between the system and us,” Pomerantz writes, “and that interface usually relies on metadata.”

Lin meditates on the literary effects of this “simplified interface” by drawing out the implications of metadata for narrative and poetic detail. This approach differs in important ways from how some of Lin’s contemporaries—including the other writers mentioned in Stephens’ chapter that includes Lin as a case study—have responded to the same set of historical and aesthetic conditions. The most well-known among this group is Kenneth Goldsmith, whose practice of “uncreative writing” emphasizes wholesale copying from existing text, relying on Duchampian de- and recontextualization in order to defamiliarize ordinary language. In contrast to uncreative writing, Lin’s work feels for the most part like it is “made by hand,”¹⁰³ a kind of crafting that, while conceptual, remains distinctly creative. Even in moments when Lin makes use of some version of conceptual plagiarism, he does so for the purpose of evoking a particular genre or mood, rather than to foreground the status

¹⁰³ A riff on the title Lin’s forthcoming book, *Our Feelings Were Made By Hand*.

of his work as a pastiche of found texts.¹⁰⁴ In his version of emphasizing the contemporary condition of informational glut, Lin does not disavow the possibility or exigence of literary creation altogether—it is simply that the activity is organized in new ways by metadata.

It may at first seem like a stretch to think of metadata as a form of *literary* abstraction, since it is separate from and outside of the text, and thus not even literary *per se*. But there is a literary-critical precedent for this line of thinking if we understand metadata as an extended form of paratext, which Gérard Genette has characterized as being the “threshold” to the text, an interstitial textual space that contributes to the decoding of meaning. Some metadata, such as the title, author, ISBN, cover art, publication year, etc., are part of what is traditionally considered a book’s paratext; other, often less visible metadata, such as genre classifications, identification codes within cataloging systems, keywords, target audience, etc., are not necessarily considered paratext, since they tend not to be within the physical book object itself. In either case, metadata is essential to how a book makes contact with its readers and how readers take it up in return.

Although I have just taken pains to justify metadata’s status as literary abstraction, what is unique about it, among the other forms of literary abstraction I discuss in this project, is that it is simultaneously, and very crucially, a form of banally nonliterary abstraction as well. As I have repeatedly emphasized, metadata is ubiquitous, the scope of its reach extending far beyond literature. Highlighting its literariness for the purpose of reading Lin’s work serves to demonstrate a point that Lin himself implicitly makes: the

¹⁰⁴ Kristen Gallagher, “Cooking a Book with Low-Level Durational Energy: How to Read Tan Lin’s ‘Seven Controlled Vocabularies,’” Jacket2, May 27, 2011, <https://jacket2.org/reviews/cooking-book-low-level-durational-energy>.

importance of metadata for literature is a direct consequence of the generalized, medium-independent centrality of metadata in the present historical moment. What Lin is attempting to work out through literature is a problem that exists both outside and throughout it, one which attempts to get at the root of all meaning-making practices in an environment of informational plenitude.

The implications of this question stretch beyond formalist hobby horsing into the realm of the social. Regarding Kenneth Goldsmith, Stephens notes that “[t]here would seem to be little need here to worry much about what the New Critics called ‘the biographical fallacy’ (the excessive reading of biography into a literary work),” since the disinterested reproduction of language within his compositional process ostensibly displaces the particularities of the authorial role and any bearing that the “writing” would have on the “writer.”¹⁰⁵ Lin, however, seems to be acutely aware of how the biographical details of his life, or what is assumed as such based on available metadata, would impact the reading of his work. On the cover of his 2010 book *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, Lin reproduces or—a more tantalizing possibility—invents¹⁰⁶ the Library of Congress subject headings assigned to the book, metadata that is usually reserved for the copyright page of a book. The first subject that appears is “China—poetry,” despite the fact that the book barely mentions China, beyond a brief interlude that I will discuss later in the chapter. It is instead a clear reference to Lin’s own Chinese heritage, or more specifically, what might be assumed about the contents of the book based on an assumption of his Chinese heritage.

¹⁰⁵ Stephens, *Poetics of Information Overload*, 168.

¹⁰⁶ The official Library of Congress records for the book do not seem to use the same subject headings, though this information turned out to be quite difficult to confirm.

At the risk of oversimplification, Goldsmith, about whom there is “little need to worry,” neatly fits into the mold of the white avant-gardist, and his “racelessness” dovetails with what Stephens understands to be the necessarily disinterested practice of conceptual writing. Lin assumes an inevitable transfer of contextual information onto the reception of any text, and more specifically, the risk of a text being read autobiographically when its author is racially or otherwise marked, even when their aesthetic affiliations would suggest otherwise. This phenomenon of context overtransfer is of course not limited to matters of race or even social identity more broadly, but Lin sees in how metadata funnels and directs readerly priorities and attention to the dangers of being read along the wrong lines. Despite these concerns, Lin does not engage with race and ethnicity as representative problems, or at least, not as problems to be tackled at the level of representation. When asked about how his work fits into the avant-garde tradition of writing that is “argumentative or aggressively defending its position,” he responds that, in his work, “the violence is symbolic; it is registered as violence per se (what is that anyway?)” and that the seemingly documentarian photographs he often uses in his work “don’t describe violence in racial or other terms, though one might be able to read some of this into the photos, peripherally, as one would in a painting.”¹⁰⁷ This peripheral looking is an ambient activity, one that locates action in the background, at the edges of one’s vision, rather than in the foreground. Lin’s framing of his deviation from the avant garde tradition bespeaks an understanding of the limitations of aesthetic interventions to a material problem, and

¹⁰⁷ Katherine Elaine Sanders, “Tan Lin,” BOMB Magazine, March 29, 2010, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/2010/03/29/tan-lin/>.

underscores Lin's embrace of relaxation over difficulty, ambience over disruption, as a materially-engaged literary experimentalism.

In his work, Lin capitalizes on and dramatizes the fact that cultural and social preconceptions and norms, including the many disparate games in which language is engaged, as metadata that pre-informs the reception of any text. Specifically among these norms are our understandings of race and ethnicity and their narrative contours, and the impact of these understandings on the experience of reading. Lin uses the abstract form of metadata as the basis of his exploration of racialized and ethnicized literary tropes and reception, making careful use of the structural similarities between metadata assignment and the processes involved in racialization. What Lin is concerned with, above all, are the structuring conditions of reading itself, including the choice to read a particular text in the first place, and the assumptions that a reader comes into the reading process with.

Perhaps because of the manifestly formalist impulse of his oeuvre overall, very few pieces within the body of scholarship on Lin's work address his engagement with race and ethnicity. The scant work that does attempt to discuss race tend to situate his work in an Asian-American aesthetic lineage associated with terms like weakness, minimalism¹⁰⁸, affective flatness¹⁰⁹, inscrutability¹¹⁰, and racial melancholia,¹¹¹ generally making the case

¹⁰⁸ Irene Kim, "On Ambience, Tan Lin, and American Minimalism," Post45, April 27, 2023, <https://post45.org/2023/04/on-ambience-tan-lin-and-american-minimalism/>.

¹⁰⁹ Takeo Rivera, *Model Minority Masochism: Performing the Cultural Politics of Asian American Masculinity* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2022).

¹¹⁰ Xiang, *Tonal Intelligence*.

¹¹¹ Ashley Chang, "Sensing Sounding: Close Listening to Experimental Asian American Poetry" (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2016), ProQuest Dissertations & Theses.

that Lin exemplifies these specifically Asian-American-coded aesthetic forms. While I am also invested in Lin's engagement with race, and I think these aesthetic assessments of his oeuvre are, on the whole, accurate and critically productive, I am more interested in how Lin's overarching engagement with metadata—and the information systems they undergird—include race and ethnicity as a subset of social experience more broadly, even as they retain the particular relation to racial formation mentioned previously. This interest in social and aesthetic ramifications of metadata does not seem to me to be an Asian-American-specific aesthetic or concern, but one that has happened to take on the appearance of such due to the biographical particularities of Lin's own existence, subject to conversion in metadata object.

I argue that for Lin, language exists within metadata schemes that always already overdetermine the range of its signifying possibilities, resulting in a kind of ambient linguistic surround that contains within it overlapping language games and cultural associations. Contra Wittgenstein, words in Lin's estimation are saturated by the metadata of quotidian language use, and the deployment of language for non-communicative purposes nevertheless must make recourse to those well-worn chains of signification. That is, despite the pains with which writers and theorists have tried to distinguish avant garde literature from everyday speech, the lexical medium of experimental writing is one and the same as the medium of ordinary communication.

The bulk of this chapter will focus on Lin's *Insomnia and the Aunt*, which has been described as, among other things, an ambient novella, an experimental memoir, and a

“social autobiography.”¹¹² This book that marks a stylistic departure for Lin, whose earlier work was much more manifestly experimental—that is, they featured more formally innovative and disruptive elements that made the reading process different from that of conventional books of any number of genres—and it foregrounds the linguistic and categorical construction of racial identity as part of its abstractionist project. The book takes up and subverts the tropes of immigrant literature—that much is abundantly clear—and it does this not so much through narrative tropes (insofar as there is even narrative to speak of) as it does through the very approach to composition, which dramatizes metadata under the guise of narrative. In order to contextualize the important changes that occurred over the course of Lin’s career, and the formal and receptive pressures that shaped *Insomnia*, I will first provide a brief account of some important flashpoints in Lin’s decades-long career.

About his 2003 book *BlipSoak01*, Lin reflects:

When I wrote *BlipSoak*, I tried to write a book — you know, I come out of a language poetry movement that’s premised on issues of difficulty, so I tried to write a book that would be deeply relaxing, like yoga or meditation... I tell everyone this book is designed so that it can be read quickly; it’s modular; it’s mostly short,

¹¹² Patrick F. Durgin, “New Life Writing,” Jacket2, February 14, 2012, <https://jacket2.org/article/new-life-writing>.

inconsequential, anecdotal chapters; it's very, very easy to read. But I often talk to people and they come up and say, "Oh, I found your book quite difficult."¹¹³

Although *BlipSoak01* is—true to Lin's word—made up of relatively short sections of lineated verse, mostly composed of couplets, and can be read out of order without great loss of meaning, the accusations of difficulty are understandable. The book begins with a preface that functions as a kind of *ars poetica*, detailing an approach to reading poems that emphasizes the activity's temporal dimensions, its coextensivity with other, more mundane activities and objects, and boredom over beauty. The preface ends with the proclamation that "the most beautiful poem is a poem that is looked at one word and then one letter at a time," and is followed by ten pages of seemingly random large-font letters and letter clusters. There is also no consistent speaker or overriding narrative throughout the book; moreover, even in the later sections of more conventional lineation, there are typographical oddities (crossed out words, markings reminiscent of computer code) and half-words, cut off seemingly arbitrarily. Even when the reader realizes that the lines are meant to be read across two-page spreads, "meaning" does not come clearly into view. Lin has described the book elsewhere as "too 'intelligent dance music' to be avant-garde, too trance to be mainstream,"¹¹⁴ a diagnosis of failure that is rooted in the book's inability to alter the reader's reading practices and postures vis-a-vis experimental poetry. If the mode of easy ordinary reading that Lin aims to replicate with his work is a relaxed slouch—

¹¹³ Colin Marshall, "Ambiently Breaking Reading Conventions: Colin Marshall Talks to Experimental Poet Tan Lin," 3 Quarks Daily, July 5, 2010, <https://3quarksdaily.com/3quarksdaily/2010/07/ambiently-breaking-reading-conventions-colin-marshall-talks-to-experimental-poet-tan-lin.html>.

¹¹⁴ Sanders, "Tan Lin," 2010.

receptive shavasana—the actual posture of readers encountering experimental poetry might be one of critical rectitude, a being at attention that accompanies the disciplined anticipation of difficulty and the necessity of fortitude.

Unlike the difficulty courted by language poets and other avant garde literary traditions, the difficulty of *BlipSoak01* seems to be rooted in precisely what Lin believed would make the book accessible—its stylized mimicry of ordinary, non-literary forms that are by and large passively received by readers. It is the learned resistance to this quotidian passivity that ironically prevents readers—or, capital-R Readers, those who have been trained to pay a kind of medium-specific attention to literature—from experiencing the relaxation that Lin ostensibly intended with *BlipSoak01*. What Marcel Duchamp famously derided as “retinal” art at the start of the 20th century—art that is focused on visual effect rather than intellectual engagement—becomes for Lin a guiding literary principle. In the wake of 20th century avant-garde traditions, in both the literary and visual arts, that have gorged themselves on conceptualisms of various sorts, Lin seeks to overturn the emphasis on aesthetic difficulty in these traditions, choosing instead to “relax the avant-garde.”¹¹⁵ The kind of passive reception that Lin aims to cultivate with his retinal literature failed to land with contemporary readers, who have been conditioned to be suspicious along Duchampian lines to seek intellectual challenge and stimulation.

Lin’s most well-known book, *Seven Controlled Vocabularies and Obituary 2004. The Joy of Cooking:[AIRPORT NOVEL MUSICAL POEM PAINTING FILM PHOTO HALLUCINATION LANDSCAPE]* (2010), features some of the same stylistic features of *BlipSoak01*, but even

¹¹⁵ Mathies G. Aarhus, “Relaxing the Avant-Garde: Tan Lin and the Language-Oriented Tradition,” *Symploke* 24, no. 1–2 (2016): 293–307, <https://doi.org/10.5250/symploke.24.1-2.0293>.

more pointedly foregrounds the book as a media object existing as an extension of other media objects, all of which is organized by metadata. The very title of the book indexes a preoccupation with the structuring conditions of readerly attention: not only does the inclusion of *Joy of Cooking* increase the algorithmic likelihood of the book being discovered in an internet search for the famous cookbook of the same title, the subtitle gestures to an unlikely aesthetic continuity between otherwise disparate cultural forms. The subtitle notably begins with “AIRPORT,” the oddball of the group,¹¹⁶ since it is the least conventional artistic genre among the list. Its inclusion is likely an allusion to Brian Eno’s genre-defining ambient album, *Ambient 1: Music for Airports* (1978), named for Eno’s experience of waiting for hours at the Cologne Bonn Airport and wishing for an alternative to the easy listening muzak that pervaded the experience.¹¹⁷ Taken altogether, the subtitle presents a litany of provocative possible equivalences to the form of the book, encouraging a reading practice that deprioritizes linear linguistic sense and suggests instead an altered form of looking.

In a section titled “2 Identical Novels,” an “English speaking subject,” as Lin puts it, briefly appears to “recounts anecdotes about life with a Mercedes 280SE, a father, and Chinese cookbooks.”¹¹⁸ The section contains some of the most straightforwardly narrative components of the entire book, and indeed, of Lin’s entire oeuvre up to that point. The speaker bears notable biographical similarities to Lin himself—he too spent time in New

¹¹⁶ Alongside, arguably, “HALLUCINATION.”

¹¹⁷ The notion of the ambience of an airport inducing a state of calm relaxation is an interestingly racialized proposition. As a counterpoint to Eno’s album, see Chino Amobi, *Airport Music for Black Folk*, CD, P-Vine Records, 2016.

¹¹⁸ Sanders, “Tan Lin,” 2010.

York following his graduate degree and his father also died in 1989. He describes the various foods he ate during this time in New York and how and where they were prepared, along with other details that seem to fall neatly into the category of personal anecdote. Among these descriptions is a reference to the first Chinese cookbook the speaker buys, which initiates a series of reflections on the relationship between food and language. The passage ends with a fork in the road: the speaker's mother is narrated as reacting to a claim made by the Chinese cookbook in one of two ways, either "That is very true" or "That is a load of nonsense (hoo sha ba dao)," followed by a handwritten rendering of the phrase in Chinese characters, printed upside down. The divergence here undercuts not only the facticity of this particular anecdote, it also calls into question the basic premise that first-person narration elicits truth statements.

Elsewhere in the same section, we see the speaker depart from his first-person narrative capacity and instead deliver cryptic pronouncements reminiscent of *BlipSoak01's* preface or "Ambient Stylistics." In a poem (or chapter) titled "1:1," the speaker remarks: "Generic information is perfect information. Most books, unfortunately, are very imperfect: that is why they are read more than once."¹¹⁹ Generic information is implicitly contrasted with the "illusionistic" aspirations of the novel—"Reading a novel," Lin writes, "is like looking at a movie of a rainbow in order to get one's bearings."¹²⁰ In this formulation, the

¹¹⁹ Tan Lin, *Seven Controlled Vocabularies and Obituary 2004. The Joy of Cooking: [AIRPORT NOVEL MUSICAL POEM PAINTING FILM PHOTO HALLUCINATION LANDSCAPE]* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2010), 102.

¹²⁰ How one is to read pseudo-aphoristic pronouncements like this one, which can be found throughout Lin's work, is an open question. On the one hand, they seem to, read together, form a fairly cohesive and good faith Warholian treatise on literary production. On the other hand, it seems patently absurd to take at face value statements like these—surely a novel is not exactly like a painting, a film, or an airport. The blunt absurdity of the statements calls to mind Gertrude Stein, who, like Lin, often equated her writing to painting.

purported shortcoming of the novel form lies in its nonrelation to the experiential and rational world. Lin aims for a degree of genericity in his writing atypical of literary writing, and this genericity is the condition of the kind of abstraction in which he works, which sits in direct opposition to the transparency to which realist novels aspire. In that vein, it is easy to see why ambience, a concern with generality and surroundings rather than representation of subjects, might be a particularly appropriate keyword for embodying Lin's literary approach.

Given these purported poetic aspirations—to lull, to bore, to not stand out—why then would Lin engage with the conventional modes of narrative that we find early on in “2 Identical Novels,” and even then more forthrightly in *Insomnia and the Aunt*? That is, if the project of ambient stylistics as Lin has outlined it aims to move the reader away from conventional kinds of readerly attention to literature, why turn to the critically overdetermined genre of immigrant fiction as a starting point? I suggest in appearing to abide by the generic conventions of what we might call the immigrant novel, Lin finds a way into engaging with the metadata abstractions that condition reading that is much more potent than either mere disavowal or direct contradiction of those conventions.

Insomnia and the Aunt, published in 2011, appears at the outset to be—for lack of a better word—a normal book. In contrast to the paratextual shenanigans of *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, the book that immediately preceded *Insomnia* in Lin's oeuvre, the front cover, back cover, inside flaps, title page, copyright page, etc. of this book are fairly standard, and the text itself, though interspersed with photographs and punctuated by footnotes, is made up of short paragraphs of prose, and also does not look particularly out of the ordinary. The

Library of Congress subject headings attributed to the book are not included, neither on the copyright page, nor on the front cover (as was the case in *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*).

The volume is relatively slim for a narrative book, but is within the expected range for a book of poetry or novella. With the book jacket is taken off, the back cover features a halftone version of the black and white photography on the jacket, and the front cover spells out “JACKET HAS BEEN REMOVED” in a dotted font reminiscent of the reprographic effect of the back cover. As a cheeky reminder of the materiality of the physical book, the design introduces an awareness of the circumstances under which the book is being read.

I begin with a description of the book’s paratext and its visual force in order to give a sense of what an initial encounter with the physical book object might be like, and the kinds of expectations that this encounter would prime the reader to have about the experience of reading the book. In contrast to the way that *Seven Controlled Vocabularies* aggressively preempts readerly expectations by confronting the reader right away with the book’s subject headings on the front cover, *Insomnia and the Aunt* is subtler in its approach, seeding some convention elements of immigrant fiction into its design while retaining some degree of aesthetic plausible deniability. In other words, rather than attempt immediate formal subversion as he had done in his earlier work, Lin leans into what some of the metadata about the book would suggest about its content, priming the reading experience with a layer of familiar calm.

Takeo Rivera reads *Insomnia and the Aunt* as an unlikely entry in the genre of the Asian American bildungsroman, and notes that the book does not feature “overt moments of racism and othering” and instead provides “affective and phenomenological explorations

of living in and perceiving a world in which one has already been racialized.”¹²¹ What I would add to this characterization is that the “already racialized” world in which the characters reside is also one that is already metadatafied. In fact, the banal racialization that is assumed and inhabited by the book is a direct effect of the techno-orientalist metadata that makes its appearance possible. I will return to this idea later in this chapter.

Insomnia and the Aunt ostensibly concerns a speaker recounting his aunt, a motel owner in rural Washington. The speaker once again bears some biographical similarities to Lin himself, so much so that in multiple interviews and profiles he has clarified that he does not have any such aunt. Instead, the aunt is characterized as an extension of the motel itself, specifically a television set that she and the speaker make a habit of watching during his visits. Over the course of narrating these visits, the speaker reveals certain facts about the aunt, which have the appearance of factual accumulation, but which in the end do not add up to anything logically or otherwise internally consistent. Occasionally, there is something that resembles a concrete, specific fact—the aunt is said to have adopted a boy from Taiwan in the mid 1980s, for example¹²²—but it is always told in the same breath as

The central organizing trope of the book—using the character of “the aunt” to stand in for a variety of concepts—is what we might call personification, generally understood to be the conversion of an abstract concept into a concrete entity with the aim of making the abstruse more grounded and understandable. In his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, William Wordsworth famously rejected “personifications of abstract ideas...which Writers in metre

¹²¹ Rivera, *Model Minority Masochism*, 98.

¹²² Tan Lin, *Insomnia and the Aunt* (Chicago, IL: Kenning Editions, 2011), 28.

seem to lay claim to by prescription” and endeavored instead to “keep the Reader in the company of flesh and blood.”¹²³ This dichotomy between abstract ideas and sensed materiality paved the way for lyric poetry’s tendency towards concrete images and objects over immaterial concepts and ideas, and the subsequent backlash to this tendency from experimental writers. Personification is, in this way, understood as a kind of etiolation of actual persons, a stripping away of the concrete specificities of embodied being that leaves behind a bare instrument of metaphorization.

In the case of Lin’s book, the aunt is, notably, exactly that, *the* aunt, a definite singular generic aunt, rather than the more intimate and familiar personal possessive (i.e. *my* aunt). But because it is not clear what is meant to personify, her figuration ends up toggling between fleshing out and bearing out, that is, between person and concept. Lin uses this half-tone personification as the primary strategy in two apparently contradictory pursuits within the text. On the one hand, the-aunt-as-personification deepens the illusion of generic realism, and on the other emphasizes how metadata enables the abstract principles at play in literary racialization. The aunt is rendered throughout the book in highly emotional, even loving, language, which, combined with the surreal, often contradictory specificities of her narrated existence, form an abstract person-device who nevertheless is capable of filling narrative roles typically reserved for real people or synecdoches of real people. Even as her crying is described as rote and mechanical, happening each visit in the same way and at the same time, it is also characterized as

¹²³ William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads* (New York, NY: Penguin Classics, 2007).

“uncontrollable,”¹²⁴ a descriptor that sounds more like “spontaneous overflow of powerful emotion” than tears on a timer.

Literary racialization is, of course, related to extra-literary racialization, and although they are not identical, they share some of the same infrastructural processes. In the case of the titular aunt, we are primed for her racialization by a number of paratextual markers that precede what we would usually consider the formal reading experience. The black and white photo of a young man and an older woman, both Asian, featured on the cover of the book and immediately before the beginning of the narration, the name of the author, and even the classification of the book with the Library of Congress subject heading “Asian American families,” all point towards the particular genre in which the book ostensibly belongs.

The actual text of the book begins with an account of the speaker’s journey to visit his aunt, in a run-on sentence that is characteristic of the prose style of the rest of the book:

On March 10, I board a plane to Seattle, rent a white Honda Acura and drive eighty-seven miles to Concrete, Washington and the Bear Park Motel, a cheap motel on the western edge of North Cascades National park that is run by a half-Chinese, half-English woman who happens to be my aunt.¹²⁵

There is an astonishing mix of specifics and generics in this first sentence. It begins with the exact date that the speaker arrives in Washington, as well as the precise distance driven down to the mile and the make and model of the car, but the year of the visit, one of the

¹²⁴ Lin, *Insomnia and the Aunt*, 10.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

most consequential pieces of narrative information for scene-setting, is left unspecified. What appears at first like conventional present-tense exposition gives way to an eerie habitual description—this opening can easily be read as a mechanical ritual, a visit that can or has happened repeatedly, always on March 10th, always in a white Honda Acura, a series of visits with fixed temporal bounds.

The speaker's aunt is also curiously drawn within this first passage. For one, the description of her as half-Chinese and half-English does not correspond to the narrative details made available to us in the rest of the book. In fact, as the book unfolds, it becomes clear that the description is actually of the aunt as a linguistic construct, in which "Chinese" and "English" seem actually to refer to languages rather than ethnic origins. Even more bewilderingly, the speaker's description of his relation to her—that she "happens to be" his aunt—is an aleatoric rather than familial one. The construction of "happens to be" immediately undercuts conventional affective bonds between a racialized subject and their immigrant family, and by extension, the generic expectations of ethnic fiction. This subversion works through an intensification of the synecdochic relationship between "the aunt" and the ethnicized extended family of which she is a part to the point of total rupture: the aunt because so intensely generic, so infinitely capable of "standing in," that she loses even the defining character of auntliness—the fact of familial relation.

The provocatively named (and actually existing) town of Concrete, Washington is not only close to Seattle, where Lin spent a portion of his childhood, it also immediately sets in motion the book's preoccupation with dichotomy between the specific and the general, Concrete and abstract. Two postcards are reproduced in black-and-white near the beginning of the book. One depicts the Lake Washington Pontoon Bridge in Seattle, and

bears the caption “THE ONLY CONCRETE PONTOON BRIDGE IN THE WORLD,” while the other contains two drawings of “City Center Motel,” captioned “WELCOME TO YAKIMA, WASH. / THE EASTERN GATEWAY TO MT RAINIER.” Both of these can be found, with a quick search, to be real postcards depicting real places in Washington state, yet they are not photographs of the aunt’s motel because it is, as far as we know, fictional. Yet the inclusion of the two postcards lends an air of documentary reality to the narration, both in the physical proximity of the depicted places to the aunt’s motel, and in their status as ephemera. Taken together, the postcards approximate a genre of place to which the aunt’s motel belongs, even as they fail to substantiate in any conventional way the facticity of the motel’s (and the aunt’s) existence. What looks to be concrete evidence dissolves into ambient surround.

The faux-facticity of Lin’s compositional style is also enabled by his frequent use of generic pronouncements. This type of statement fits neatly into guides, manifestos, and other similarly prescriptive and instructive genres, such as Lin’s “Ambient Stylistics” essay, but it stands out in a work like *Insomnia and the Aunt*, whose memoiristic bent would usually not encourage generics. In one such statement, the speaker explicitly references the changing classificatory schemes in which he and his aunt are implicated:

My aunt has always told me, in an inconsequential sort of grammatical inversion, that this is “the story of your lives” only backwards, from America to the real America, from China to somewhere you’ve never been before. **And like most Orientals in the mid-seventies (or “Asian people” as they have been called since the mid-nineties), there was never the slightest bit of emotion on her**

face when she told me this story. Someone said “The Orientals, we are good at killing emotions,” and I think that person was right.¹²⁶

This generic statement marks a terminological shift in racial categorization that occurred over the course of the late 20th century. While at first blush it appears to be a borderline-racist naturalizing stereotype that directly implicates the speaker’s aunt, the parenthetical inclusion of the categorical transformation from “oriental” to “Asian” as part of the statement complicates the reading. It is further called into question by the unattributed quote that follows, which is from the perspective of one such “Oriental.” Takeo Rivera describes this peculiar racialization as a “techno-Orientalization of the self,” a “blurring [of] the boundary between the body and technologized mediation in the production of self.” Whereas Rivera sees these generic statements as moments of “televisual masochism”¹²⁷—which for him is a product of the vexed relation that Asian Americans have to the figure of the model minority—I suggest instead that we read these generics as marking the constitutive effect of categorization, the moments in which metadata containers are created and reified.

The characterization of the aunt’s statements as “grammatical inversion” is also notable. The clause that follows, which is positioned as a relative clause meant to clarify the first clause, does not in fact end up including anything that could be construed as a grammatical inversion. The only thing that seems like a plausible inversion is the invocation of a backwards movement “from America to the real America, from China to

¹²⁶ Ibid., 8, emphasis mine.

¹²⁷ Rivera, *Model Minority Masochism*, 119.

somewhere you've never been before." Much like in the case of the aunt being described as half-English and half-Chinese, the speaker treats her in this passage as a linguistic construct, the subject of a sentence whose inversion constitutes her own. The trajectory that this phrase describes also deviates from the most kind of movement associated with immigration, from the "mother country" to "America." Instead, the introduction of two additional and more nebulous locations, "the real America" and "somewhere you've never been before," transform this typical migration pattern into something less teleological and more surreally indeterminate. It does not so much resist the narrative of assimilationist bildungsromans as render them irrelevant—what, after all, can you even assimilate into when you are "somewhere you have never been before"?

All of this movement is mediated by television, and constitutes a kind of armchair migrancy. The speaker explains prior to this passage that his aunt and uncle had moved from the larger metropolitan center of Seattle to the comparatively rural Concrete, as a way of traveling "*into* the wilderness," to get away from "serving people American Chinese food." This mythical search for origins, here for "the real America," does not take the immigrant from their country of origin to "America," as is conventionally the case, but instead from a metropolitan center to a rural town. Much more central to the narrative movement of the book than geographical location is the persistent hum of the television set in the aunt's room in the motel, and later, after she has died, of the speaker's own television, through which he is able to find some kind of communion with her. In fact, the entirety of what can be called the drama of the book unfolds by way of the television, which the speaker and his aunt seem to be watching nearly all the time, and which seems to saturate the narration even beyond those explicitly narrated moments of watching. A

recurring dichotomy in the kind of programming that the aunt chooses to watch involves the notion of liveness—she prefers re-runs to live programming, because the latter “feel canned” to her, “as if they have been rehearsed once in real life and once on television.”¹²⁸ This blatant contradiction in terms—live television as canned—gets at the heart of why the book is able to operate simultaneously at the level of abstraction and concreteness, genericity and specificity, metadata and information.

While television—“old” media—is at the center of *Insomnia*’s narrative content, “new” media in the form of internet search structures the book’s form. Footnotes scattered throughout the book take phrases from the body of the text, run them through a search engine, and reproduce excerpts from the resulting pages. These footnotes often have very little to do with the text aside from shared keywords—for example, the sentence “The first voice is the English practiced by a Chinese person and it sounds like an answering machine”¹²⁹ yields a footnote that comes from a blog post from *Times Union*, based on the proximal appearance of the words “voice,” “answering machine,” and “sounds like”¹³⁰—and rather than attribute a source for the marked phrase, the content of the footnote diverts the main text’s narrative into a completely separate piece.

What the construction of these footnotes suggests is that the internet serves as a kind of collective linguistic unconscious that operates through metadata, a structuring condition of reading and sense-making that inescapably primes a reader’s understanding of

¹²⁸ Lin, *Insomnia and the Aunt*, 19.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 25-6.

¹³⁰ Naomi Seldin, “16 Messages,” *Times Union*, February 25, 2009, <https://blog.timesunion.com/simplerliving/16-messages/6151/>.

the text. The diverting form of the footnote simultaneously expands the textual scope of the book object and situates it as a node in the very large corpus of contemporaneous readable text, a significant portion of which is digitally searchable. In this way, the book extends beyond its physical borders and casts itself into the company of unlikely compatriots, which, taken together, make up the corpus of all extent searchable text. Moreover, in a curious move in an interview published by the Asian American Writer's Workshop, Lin talks about additions that he would make to the text of *Insomnia* in "the next edition" in order to make certain thematic elements of the book more explicit, and includes two full paragraphs of these additions in the body of the interview. Although "non-canonical," these additions further expand the boundaries of the book, making the physical fact of the book an incidental rather than definitive form.

There is one exception to Rivera's observation that *Insomnia* does not depict overt moments of racism, near the end of the book. In an uncharacteristically vivid scene, the speaker recounts a memory from when he was fifteen years old, waiting for his aunt in the car while she runs errands in town. He notices residents of the mostly white town staring at his aunt, which reminds him of a story from his parents about racist landlords they encountered while trying to find an apartment in 1956. This scene is striking in its narrative specificity and its interpretive obviousness. In contrast to the rest of the book, which has resisted the trappings of documentary facticity and pat depictions of racial trauma and microaggressions, the two episodes described here hew closely to standard accounts of racializing encounters—a brief moment of othering, as the subject of staring; an anecdote that illustrates the systemic forces structuring interpersonal interactions and

the domestic sphere. In both of the accounts, the racist underpinnings of the experiences are obvious, to the point of being rote. Given the otherwise unconventional narrative approach of *Insomnia*, how might we read such a recognizably trope-ridden scene?

In his retelling of the experience, the speaker adopts the gaze of a generic, implicitly white, observer, who sees and stares at “a Chinese woman who gets out of a Jeep Cherokee in the Pacific northwest and goes into a store.” This description places the aunt, who has, for the majority of the book, been described in particular and habitual relation to the speaker, into the social category of “Chinese woman,” a familiar metadata category. This assignment is undercut both by the characterization of the aunt in the book’s opening paragraph as “half Chinese and half English” and by the shift noted earlier in the book from categorizing someone like the aunt as being “Oriental” to being “Asian.” In defiance of both of these complicating factors for racial identification, the assumed categorization imposed on the aunt by the white gaze becomes an unstable and particular characterization, rather than the kind of staid fact that it otherwise might be. The aunt’s ethnicity is not described as being transparently identified by this generic gaze as it is shown to be actively constructed through the limited available information and existing metadata categories.

Right before the narration returns to the speaker sitting in the car waiting for his aunt to return, he historicizes his father’s anger over the racism he and the speaker’s mother had encountered:

[M]y father’s anger is more blurry than that ‘litany of hate’ that a scholar of Chinese-American history said was directed at the first few generations of Chinese people

who came to America, and which was not rectified until the Civil Rights Act of 1965, when I was seven and my sister was five.¹³¹

This passage is strange in its erratic and circular movement, first from the father's anger to the hatred of an entire population, then from that hate to the historical event that would legally (though not actually) put an end to it, and finally returning back to the speaker's family through an invocation of himself and his younger sister's ages—largely irrelevant at the time of the law's passing. Moreover, the father's anger is compared not to the reactions of other early Chinese immigrants, but to the already existing (and implicitly white) Americans, looking at people like himself with hate. Just as in the passage where the speaker briefly adopts the white gaze of Concrete in describing his aunt, this passage engages in a transmutation of perspective, seeming to implicate the speaker's parents in a generic category while at the same time withholding their belonging. These moments of overt racism are thus recontextualized through the abstractionist principles established earlier in the book as matters of metadata retrieval.

¹³¹ Lin, *Insomnia and the Aunt*, 47.

Chapter Three: Skin = Pulled = Back

Because the discourse surrounding abstraction is overdetermined by the visual arts and visuality more generally, there is a sense in which all manner of abstraction, pushed towards their limits, tend towards a visual idiom. As I noted in the introduction, racialization in an American context is heavily metaphorized through visual tropes as well, to the point where invocations of visual phenomena are themselves abstractions (e.g. “the color of their skin” as a synecdoche of race). It is no wonder then that racialized abstractions can be so insistently haunted by the visual, if only as lacuna.

In a passage from which this dissertation takes its title, Renee Gladman speaks of her drawing practice as “language with its skin pulled back.” The continuity that this phrase creates between writing and drawing results in an activity that Gladman refers to as “markmaking,” a unified field in which the very form of written language expands to accommodate what is traditionally conceived of as the domain of the visual arts, the lines and curves of letters stretching and contorting into slight figuration. Language stops signifying semantically when words and letters becomes “marks” under Gladman’s guidance, even as other features surrounding the work continue to suggest that it can be read textually. Instead, almost as if to bear the pressure of what can and cannot be said, writing liquifies into pluripotent marks, overrunning the invisible borders of lineated script. In this liquification, the marks do not escape signification in toto, and instead occupy a space in between saying and showing.

The notion of drawing as a deskinned version of writing is provocative in its surreally racial connotations. It evokes a scene of gruesome white-washing, but one that is rendered in such visceral terms that it is anything but abstracted deracination. I of course

do not mean to suggest that Gladman's turn to drawing constitutes a turn away from racial identification or racialized aesthetics, but rather that the characterization of the practice in such boldly physicalized form demands a reading that attends to its material correlates. If anything, Gladman's unforgettable phrase contravenes purely phenotypic or representational readings of race, in which the complexities of racial identity and history can be readily swapped out as interchangeable terms of difference—skin, actual skin, is not so easily pulled back, and what is underneath is not elemental forms but unconstructed viscera.

This chapter considers the works of Don Mee Choi and Gladman in various lineages of visual poetics, and contends that the overwhelmingly visual basis of racialization can deform medium itself. Whereas Chapter One considered a supremely literary and textual form of abstraction (theory), and Chapter Two dealt with a term that bridges the literary and the non-literary in its ubiquity (metadata), this chapter deliberately pushes literary abstraction to—if not past—the edges of textuality, arriving at a form of literary abstraction that is scarcely linguistic. In the works of both writers, the practice of close reading is refigured into a different kind of looking, perhaps literalizing the kind of medium-agnostic looking that Tan Lin, however cheekily, advocates for in his work. This pairing of writers also presents a useful comparative opportunity, not as a way of generating simplistic conclusions about the character of Asian American vs. African American abstraction, or even to suggest their possible commensurability under the banner of minoritarian abstractions, but instead to look closely at what an attention to abstraction can yield for our understanding of how the basic premises of racialization continue to shape, quite literally, artistic practice. In other words, the juxtaposition of these

two similarly minded aesthetic projects, pursued under very different circumstances and informed by disparate cultural legacies (though perhaps overlapping aesthetic ones), gives us a view onto the powerfully and unevenly keeled pressure that the racial formation exerts on cultural production.

Hardly War takes as its raw materials various textual and photographic documents from the Vietnam and Korean Wars, which together form what Sunny Xiang has called “the American Cold War in Asia.”¹³² Not unlike the other works I have discussed in this dissertation, the book is a very personal and intimate one, and so forthrightly so that the charge of abstraction might seem like an outright impossibility. Many of the photographs used throughout *Hardly War* are sourced directly from Choi’s father, a war photographer who traveled around sites of conflict during the 1950s to 1970s. Choi also interviewed her father while researching for the book, and she herself was born in the midst of this era. She weaves her father’s and her own memories, albeit often in distorted and opaque ways, into the book.

Because of these markers of documentary and lyric veracity, it is easy to assign the book’s visual poetics to the role of supplement, and in turn, to read *Hardly War* primarily as a work of documentary poetics tinged by the lyric. In this reading, the book’s more experimental elements would be understood as being primarily in service of the production of an emotionally truthful and politically useful account of the historical events with which it engages. Daniel Y. Kim, for example, lays out his reading of the book as an

¹³² Xiang, *Tonal Intelligence*.

exploration of “the expansive and transnational historical understanding of the Korean War that her writings unfold, one that highlights that event’s pivotal status in the twentieth-century history of US empire...[and] its affective poetics.”¹³³ I aim to supplement this documentary poetics lens with an eye towards experimental form in order to draw out the racial work done by the abstractionist principles in the book’s visual organization. When considered in relation to Choi’s work as a translator and preoccupation with translation as a practice, as well as her implicit engagement with the varied histories of concrete writing and avant-garde poetics, the hardly-literary abstraction of the book—and its broad exploration of Asian racialization in the context of American imperialism—comes into sharper focus.

Hardly War is split into three distinct parts—“Hardly War,” “Purely Illustrative,” and “Hardly Opera”—the last of which, as its name suggests, takes the form of a libretto. Across these sections, what is immediately striking about the visual style of the book is its constant shuttling between what we might roughly call minimalist and maximalist approaches to the page. On the minimalist side, there are sparsely-populated pages, such as the poem “A Little Menu,” composed of a single centered stanza of short lines, made up almost entirely of food items, as well as the bold sparseness of a page in which the front and back of a black and white postcard are reproduced. On the maximalist side, there are frenetically multimodal pages like the poem “A Little Glossary,” composed of a photographs, long daisy-chained equations in Hangul and English, and one bar of music in C#, or visually busy pages like the last section of “1950: The Fall of Seoul,” in which a stanza printed in white is superimposed

¹³³ Daniel Y. Kim, “Hardly Emotion: The Minor Feelings of US Empire and the Translational Poetics of Don Mee Choi,” *American Quarterly* 74, no. 3 (September 2022): 666, <https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2022.0045>.

over a full bleed photograph. Additionally, the book is heavily annotated throughout—although there are no superscript indications of the notes in the body of the text, the “Notes” section at the end includes additional context (historical, personal, linguistic) for the majority of the book’s poems.

One of the components of the book that most decidedly marks its departure from works of poetry or documentary literature is the constant presence of equal signs. In the very first poem in the book, “Race = Nation,” the speaker narrativizes a series of equations:

My early education in South Korea trained me to think of race as nation and of nation as race, hence race=nation. A Korean term, *uri minjok*—our race, our national identity— was imagined, a crucial construction and a mobilizing force in the anti-colonial independence movement during the Japanese occupation, 1910-45. When Korea fell under the control of the US military government in 1945, a part of our race had split off as *ppalgaengi*, Reds or Commies. But really, anyone in “those white pajama things,” traditional pants, which the majority of the Koreans wore back then, was seen as a gook. This is how a gook=nation was born. Our race, our national identity, even our clothing became racialized and geopoliticized within the global class war. Therefore, when I was born in the tiny, tile-roofed house, I was already geopolitically raced. Hence, me=gook.¹³⁴

These almost syllogistic equations, embedded amidst personal and historical context, function at once as glossary of the book’s key preoccupations and as pseudo-proof by

¹³⁴ Don Mee Choi, *Hardly War* (Seattle, WA: Wave Books, 2016), 3-4.

formal logic. Each of the three equations included in this passage (which I will call “equivalence phrases” to account for their lexical components) are embedded in the geopolitical narrative through which the speaker gives an account of her own existence. The first sentence places this narrative in the pedagogical scene of childhood, ground zero of racialization. From there, the descriptions shuttle back and forth between the conceptual abstractions of the equivalence phrases and the historical specificities by which those phrases are informed. The speaker’s own place in the racial matrix unfolding around her becomes increasingly dialed in, as she reasons her way through the social and political forces that formed her racial identity.

The final equative movement of the stanza, in the sentence “Hence, me=gook,” is especially provocative in its invocation of blatantly racist categorization by way of slur and in its direct implication of the speaking subject into the geopolitical situation of the poem. As the footnote for another poem in the collection notes, this equivalence phrase is a play on the Korean word 미국 , often rendered as “Miguk,” meaning “America,” and the individual characters in the word signify “beauty” and “nation.” Deployed within the narrativized set of equations in the poem, the equivalence phrase works like a punchline, both through its racially loaded content and its abstract, non-narrative form that deflates the otherwise prose-y stanzas. It seems out of place, in other words, for a work either of lyrical confession or of historical accounting to culminate in the decidedly non-literary form of the equation, especially since the equation is prefaced by “hence,” suggesting that it is the conclusion of deductive reasoning.

It is hard not to read Choi’s use of equal signs in the lineage of Language poetry, a movement of poet-academics in the US that began in the 1960s and 70s that sought to

defamiliarize language through the disruption of its habituated use. The group coalesced around the journal $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$, and the equal signs in the title—one of the more notable literary use of equal signs in English-language writing, to my knowledge—have been interpreted in many different ways in alignment with the group’s aesthetic and political ethos. In investigating the implicates of the “graphically modified noun,” Barrett Watten ultimately concludes that the title’s “uniting...of like and unlike individual letters together” speaks to a kind of “negative politics” of the avant-garde, primarily in the form of “multiauthorship” valued within experimental traditions, which does not coalesce into a unified whole of individual subjectivity. For Watten, the utopian aspirations of Language poetry is premised precisely on the rejection of the bond between “equivalence and violence,” and the embrace of an incommensurability that implicitly guides practitioners and readers “not to perish at the thought of an other.”¹³⁵

In contrast to the law of identity embedded in a phrase like “A rose is a rose is a rose”—the famous pronouncement by the foremother of much of English-language experimental writing of the 20th and 21st century, Gertrude Stein—the sequential chain embedded in the title of $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ requires more than formal logic to substantiate and interpret. The writing of the Language poets is largely composed of recognizable words, albeit in defamiliarized arrangements. As such, it does not tend to actually conflate one letter with another, in the way that, for example, a Dada poem might, such that the word “language” is of equivalent value and meaning as the word “elnuellg” or, even more extremely, “zkl;oapsojasdf.” The relationship established by the equal signs in

¹³⁵ Barrett Watten, “The Secret History of the Equal Sign: $L = A = N = G = U = A = G = E$ between Discourse and Text,” *Poetics Today* 20, no. 4 (1999): 612.

the movement's name and central text is thus not one of complete interchangeability, the kind that a purely logical and mathematical use of the equal sign would signify.

Likewise, the equivalence phrases in Choi's "Race = Nation" (as well as in "Ugly=Nation"¹³⁶ and "The Tarzon's Guide to History,"¹³⁷ two other poems in the same collection that make similar use of these phrases) do not abide by mathematical notions of identity. Nevertheless, they invoke a possible relation to that kind of abstracted rationality. Mary Poovey, in documenting the rise of what she calls the "modern fact," focuses specifically on the kind of epistemic authority granted by numerical representation in "the sciences of wealth and society" (roughly: economics and social science) beginning in the 17th century and continuing through the current moment.¹³⁸ Although equal signs can be used outside of the realm of the numerical, they first and foremost suggest an arithmetic operation, the implicit basis by which numerical manipulation can occur and objective truths can be verified. As Poovey notes, the virtue and authority of numbers was secured specifically through their opposition to the squishier realms of rhetoric and literature, which were portrayed as susceptible to subjective feeling and factual error.

Downstream from this kind of thinking, we can perhaps see how this narrative has helped to land us in the contemporary diagnosis of abstraction's functions and faults in the social world—namely, that it is on the side of majoritarian violence enabled and enacted by those "sciences of wealth and society," while on the other side, minoritarian accounts of

¹³⁶ Choi, *Hardly War*, 25.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 32-3.

¹³⁸ Mary Poovey, *A History of the Modern Fact: Problems of Knowledge in the Sciences of Wealth and Society* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

subjective experience supposedly correct these abstracting tendencies. A central fixation of Choi's poetic practice concerns undercutting the epistemic authority of political reasoning, not by rejecting its abstract symbology, but by thematizing the simultaneous complicity of humanistic pursuits in the waging of war. In the case of *Hardly War*, instead of counteracting warmongering abstraction solely through its diametrically opposed terms, Choi weaves in the compromised form of the equation into what could otherwise be read as straightforward personal narrative of resistance to imperialist narratives.

Returning to "Race = Nation," we see that in breaking up "Miguk" into two homophonic components and connecting them with an equal sign, Choi emphasizes both the linguistic and visual character of the phrase. We can either read it by leaping over the equal sign in order to string together the letters, forming one recognizable Korean word, or we can read it mathematically and, thus, symmetrically. In this latter case, we should be able to say just as validly that *gook*=me, but this of course disrupts the legibility of the former case, since it would no longer sound like "Miguk." In order to preserve this double meaning, we must reject the purely mathematical reading of the poem's use of equal signs in favor of a non-commutative equivalence.

The last paragraph-stanza of the poem turns to an *ars poetica* centrally involving the titular concept, which is treated as an ambiguous noun, something that can be "imagine[d]" and "gets to speak."¹³⁹ The speaker describes her aspirations towards a kind of "geopolitical poetics" that "fold[s] race into geopolitics, and geopolitics in poetry," setting the stage for the project of the book as a whole. The paragraph ultimately culminates in the

¹³⁹ "I'm trying to imagine race=nation, its language, its wars.....which is to say race=nation gets to speak its own faint history in its own faint language." Choi, *Hardly War*, 4.

book's titular equivalence phrase, "hardly=war," a striking formulation that speaks at once to the diminutization of the Vietnam and Korean Wars in the American imagination and to the enduring impact of the violence, including the violence of historical amnesia, on the psyches of these nations and their populations in diaspora. We might theorize the "hardliness" that emerges from this phrase as the blunt force of being made to not remember.

Despite the presence and interruption of the syntactically off-beat equivalence phrases, "Race = Nation" ultimately reads as fairly standard prose paragraphs. (It is thus perhaps unsurprising to read in the footnotes that the piece was originally a talk given at the Race & Creative Writing conference in 2014.) But the illusion of the book as a plain-spoken, memoiristic account of war with stylistic embellishments quickly falls apart in the poem that follows, "A Little Glossary" (see Figure 4). The top half of the poem's single page is taken up by a diptych of black and white photographs of the Taedong River Bridge in Pyongyang, North Korea, one taken by Choi's father, and another taken by a different photographer one month later after the bridge had been destroyed by air raids. The lexical components of the poem below the photographs and title are spare, just two short stanzas of words and phrases in English and Hangul, separated by equal signs, and one bar of music.

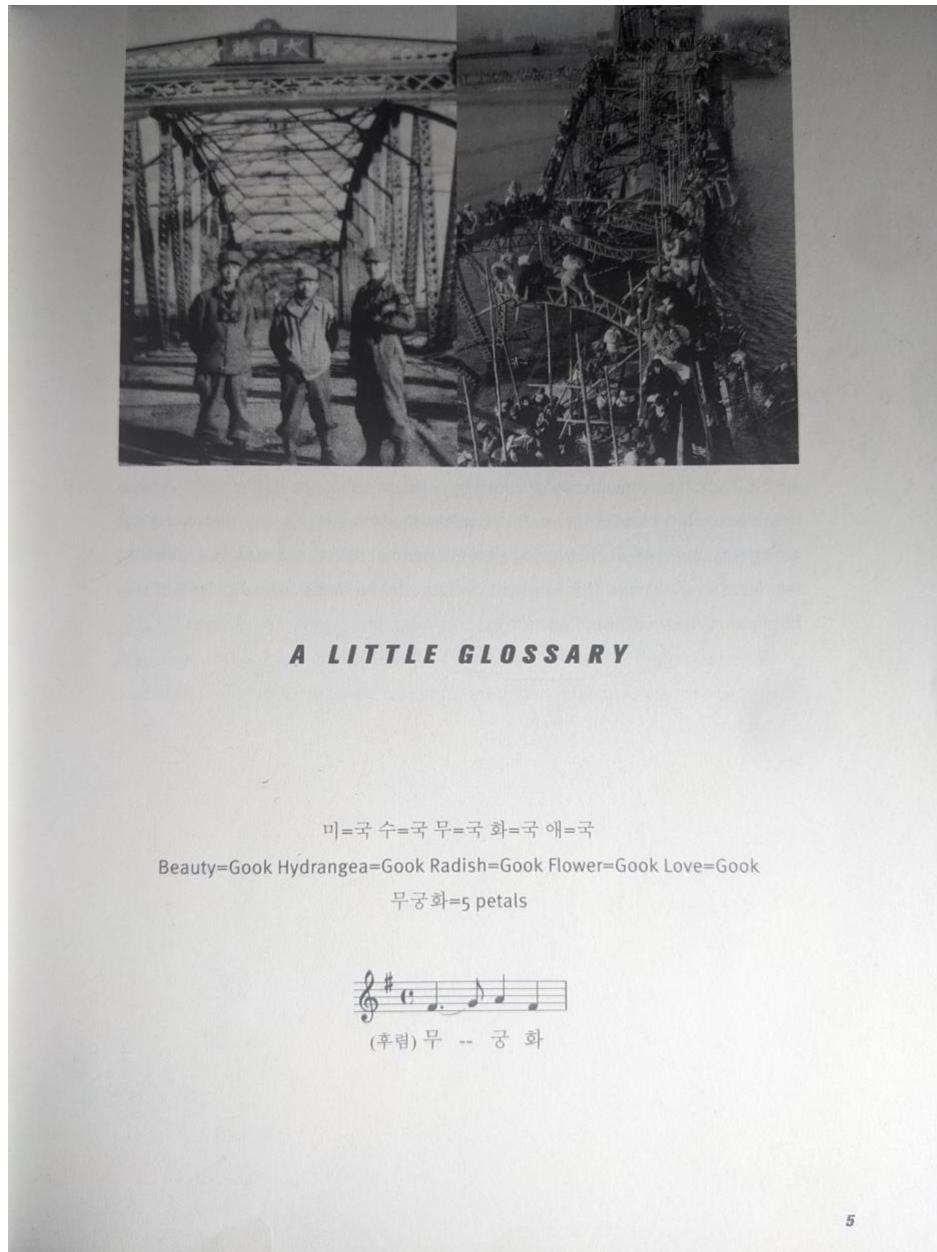


Figure 4.

On first glance, the title of the poem suggests that it is perhaps a guide, however stylized, for the equivalences established in the previous poem, and the pairing of Hangul and English stacked on top of each other, similarly spaced and formatted, also suggests translated equivalence. It is important to note that the equal signs do not connect Korean and English equivalents of the same word or idea, but function more similarly to their use

in “Race = Nation,” creating patently false equivalences between unlike words and compounding the sense that the line should not be read as clarifying or informational in any conventional sense. Instead of being a legend for the rest of the book—the kind of meta-instructive moment of reading that we are trained as literary critics to look for and apply to our interpretation of the work as a whole—“A Little Glossary” further defamiliarizes equal signs and what they are meant to signify. In the crystallization of lived experience into abstractly articulable senses of one’s relation to things that extend beyond oneself—one example of which we simply call racialization—scale and particularity fall away and all that seems to be left is one and the same.

Perhaps more important than even the internal operations of the poem, it is here, in the diagrammatic presentation of “A Little Glossary,” that we really begin to see how Choi works with the simultaneously verbal and visual dimensions of language, turning experimental literary form into visual abstraction. The non-symmetric property of “me=gook” can be read anew in this light, as proof of its status as racial diagram rather than truth statement. Posed decisively against the well-established legacy of East Asian pictographic scripts being seen as ornamental or asemantic by western readers,¹⁴⁰ “A Little Glossary” thus teases the possibility of complete, transparent understanding and equivalence—in much the same way that the narrativized equivalent phrases in “Race = Nation” was suggestive of mathematical and logical reasoning—and then denies not only this transparency, but even the suitability of applying linguistic meaning to the deciphering

¹⁴⁰ See, for example, Ernest Fenollosa and Ezra Pound, *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry: A Critical Edition*, ed. Haun Saussy, Jonathan Stalling, and Lucas Klein (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2010).

of this and other poems. Crucially, the meaning of the Korean characters included in this poem are withheld from non-Hangul-reading audiences, even in the footnotes, calling into question how we should read the poem's claims to being a glossary.

What we see in this piece is not so much a document for decryption as much as something we might be tempted to call a concrete poem. Jamie Hilder writes that concrete poetry across different practitioners can be understood as prioritizing "a spatial, rather than a discursive, syntax," and that it would "strive for a fusion of form and content by foregrounding the visual character of words and letters over their semantic or phonetic functions."¹⁴¹ In other words, concrete poems leverage the syntactical features unique to writing for the purpose of creating a distinctly visual, rather than linguistic, effect. That visual effect is somewhat submerged in *Hardly War*, since its poems tend to stay within the vertical space of the line—they do not run diagonally or vertically across the page, as concrete poems are perfectly within their right to do. Nevertheless, it is clear that the lexical units in the book cannot just be read straight through, left to right, for their semantic content—a different organizational logic emerges from its nonequivalent equations.

Intimately related to the formal operations of equations is that of translation. Choi, herself a long-time translator, has written extensively on what she sees as the political potential of a deliberately counterhegemonic translation practice. In "Translation is a Mode=Translation is an Anti-neocolonial Mode," Choi reflects on how the title of the essay combines a line from a translation of Walter Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator" with "its twin—a retranslation, a radical hybrid of Benjamin's brilliant concept and an anti-

¹⁴¹ Jamie Hilder, *Designed Words For a Designed World: The International Concrete Poetry Movement, 1955-1971* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016), 8.

neocolonial stance.”¹⁴² If translation is usually thought of as a mechanical equivalence, a simple swapping between perfectly mappable systems, Choi’s articulation endows the translator with agency, and transforms the practice into something with the potential for active remaking. Of course, the notion that translation requires more than flipping open a dictionary is not in and of itself novel. What Choi specifically highlights in this nonequivalence of source text and translated material is its relation to racialized geopolitics—“I traverse such order-words and map them,” she writes, “and superimpose another kind of map—the map of my dislocation.”¹⁴³

These problems of translation—its false claims to equivalence, the inevitable violence it does to the source material—become explicit in “6.25.” This poem juxtaposes a blocky stanza of tonally hodge-podged prose text on the first page with an arrangement of numbers, English words, and Hangul characters, similar to “A Little Glossary,” on the second. On this latter page, we see three distinct sections with no line or stanza breaks—the first consists of five lines Hangul characters; the second, five lines listing out the numbers between 1 and 5 with an equal sign linking each sequence of numbers to a single Hangul character; and the last, five identical lines that read “I refuse to translate.”¹⁴⁴ Even putting aside the explicitly articulated negation in the last section of the poem, there is an evident opacity in the poem’s form. After reading the first page, which alternates between a seemingly realist account of the speaker’s father’s experiences in the Korean War and more

¹⁴² Don Mee Choi, *Translation Is a Mode=Translation Is an Anti-Neocolonial Mode* (Brooklyn, NY: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2020), 1.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 3.

¹⁴⁴ Choi, *Hardly War*, 10.

cryptic—and sometimes, aggressive—declarative statements (“Fire them up!—burn them!—cook them”), the encounter with the next page throws the apparent legibility of the first page into disarray. The numbers in the diagrammatic second half of the poem do not serve the social and epistemic function that Poovey has theorized—they derange rationality rather than substantiate it, and even the poem’s title, which at first glance appears to refer to a date, gets caught up in the derring flow.

Equal signs continue to populate the rest of the book, to varying effects. In “Suicide Parade,” they appear at the end of the first and last lines as bookends (“Father—Cyanide=” and “Daughter—Cyanide=”). If these are equations, the em-dash could be read as a minus sign, and the lines both as unanswered questions. If they are structural formulas—an interpretation potentially buoyed by the poem’s invocation of the chemical composition of napalm—we could see the em-dash as a single bond and the equal sign as a double bond, and the lines as a whole as scientific statements with one end left open. If the symbols are read instead as bespoke punctuation, in the vein of Dickinsonian dashes, the ostentatiousness of their form nevertheless mark the phrases as outside of the discursive field of the rest of the poem. In “Operation Punctum,” we see the only instance of actual arithmetic calculations being performed in relation to an equal sign, involving the numbers 19 and 13, drawn from war footage taken by Choi’s father and work by the Korean poet Yi Sang, respectively. However, the calculations in the poem are, in essence, infelicitous—we do not find any answers in the calculation of these sums. What the meaning of the two 3s that are added to 13 to yield the result of 19 is utterly inconsequential and without referent, undercut even further by the immediate followup statement “19=13.”

Just as important as the equal signs that appear throughout the book are the invisible equal signs that are implied, yet absent. The poem “Neocolony’s Colony” is constructed from a series of center-justified lines all seemingly addressed to a second person, a “sir” that suggests military authority. One key anaphoric stanza in the poem makes use of homophonic translations of key sites of massacres in the Vietnam War carried out by South Korean military forces (e.g. “Binh Tai” becomes “been there” and “Go Dai” becomes “good dad”), with the addition of “Me” at the beginning of every line and “Sir!” at the end of every “translated” line to create the effect of a subordinate soldier reporting their actions. What is conspicuously missing from this stanza, and from the poem as a whole, are equal signs, which would seem to be thematically appropriate for a poem that heavily makes use of translation. Instead, the poem is punctuated with exclamation points (which appear with startling regularity, and lend these lines a sense of staccato derangement), tildes, slashes, and em-dashes. If we were to extend the sense of punctuation beyond written marks, we could also consider the varying font sizing, bolding, and letter cases as part of the rhythmic modulating system at work in the poem. In any case, “Neocolony’s Colony” is typographically structured to evoke the sense of non-identical symmetry that characterizes the form of the equation. The eye-catching line “ME ~ OW,” for example, most obviously connects back to the surrounding lines’ invocation of felines, as well as the repeated use of “me” mentioned above, but it notably also balances two letters on each side of the tilde in a visual approximation of an equation. On a more macro-level, the poem is book-ended by two anaphoric stanzas, the first repeating “Me” at the start of every line and the latter repeating “O.” Read vertically, these stanzas become

fraternal twins at a distance, portending a kind of parallelism that can be seen when you look for what has been omitted.

Crucial to the poem's thematic engagement with the discursive construction of war is its opening line. "You provide the prose poems, I provide the war."¹⁴⁵ The line is taken directly from *Citizen Kane*, which in turn adapted the phrase from an actual statement made by William Randolph Hearst, the inspiration for the film's central character, in response to the report that there war had not yet erupted in Cuba.¹⁴⁶ Choi recontextualizes the quote in order to highlight the imbrications of cultural production and propaganda, in parallel to the way that photography in Hearst's original statement stood in for a kind of ostensibly objective documentation that could be made to appear as evidence of a thing it is at the same time actively constructing. In a short essay about Korean prose poems, Choi notes that the form resurged in popularity during the late 1970s and 80s (following the first wave of the form's appearance in the early 20th century) when intensifying suppression of political dissent led women writers in particular to take up the genre as a counterpoint the the "gentle and refined" poetry that women were expected to write.¹⁴⁷ It is not the case that prose poems are somehow formally susceptible to warmongering—to the contrary, they were deployed specifically to resist war according to Choi's narration—but Choi invokes them in order to turn the poem back on itself, and the homologies in which it does and does not traffic.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 43.

¹⁴⁶ Hearst reportedly said, "You furnish the pictures. I'll furnish the war."

¹⁴⁷ Don Mee Choi, *Translation Is a Mode=Translation Is an Anti-Neocolonial Mode* (Brooklyn, NY: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2020), 33.

Even when formal equivalences do not appear in *Hardly War*, they hang in the air as the abstract principle at the root of the book's overarching concerns. In positing equations as a part of the book's formal topography, Choi probes the racialized roots, as well as the continual racializing consequences, of the American Cold War in Asia. Rather than lamenting or excusing the equivalences gets lost in translation—between languages, between people, between historical moments—*Hardly War* takes up that gap as the difference engine by which to defamiliarize the ledgers of imperialism.

If it takes a feat of imagination to see the poems in *Hardly War* as visual artifacts, it requires even more concerted effort to understand the contents of Renee Gladman's drawings as sentences, as literature at all. *Plans for Sentences* continues a project that Gladman officially began with the publication of *Prose Architectures* in 2017, which itself grew out of an attempt to circumnavigate language. As Gladman tells it, she began her drawing practice in 2006, and found that it "extended [her] being in time; it made things slow. It quieted language. It produced a sense that thinking could and did happen outside of language." Through drawing, she found a way of "pulling the act of writing from the act of making sense, so that [she] could look almost mechanically at what writing was." Drawing was, for Gladman, a way of getting closer to language, nearer to its core, rather than moving away from it. In my reading of *Plans for Sentences*, I contend that Gladman's embrace of drawing as an extension of writing grants us insight into how the always already racialized mechanics of looking and seeing can find their way into poetic and visual form.

Although Gladman never uses the word abstraction in this description of her work, the telltale markers of some kind of abstractionist practice are evident. Her desire to

perceive “what writing was” at a remove, “mechanically” rather than representationally or even formally, indexes an interest in the possibility of an art practice that is investigative rather than purely representational. The drawing/writing practice Gladman developed is only perceivable as a hybrid form under the artificially separated domain of arts disciplines. Unlike other accounts of writers turning to drawing (most recently, Nicholson Baker in *Finding a Likeness*), Gladman’s experience is not one of late-in-life experimentation in a new medium. Drawing instead constitutes a redoubled commitment to what Gladman has long pursued in her writing, the search for what lies at the basic levels of form. When Gladman’s drawing is seen instead as the logical extension of a social investigation into form, the apparent hybridity of her work resolves into a single purpose and practice, something that Gladman has referred to at various points as “markmaking,” her abstract formulation of choice.

This is not, however, the kind of search for elemental abstractions that shies away from particulars. In a conversation with fellow African-American experimental writers, Gladman writes:

But what is great about fiction, or rather prose ... is that in having to face the sentence, again and again, in the context of building or skirting or dismantling some kind of narrative, you make contact with the mechanics of experience. I think working consciously in language has to make you aware of the minute gestures of thought such that the dance of that marks the look of your language...What is cool is to add identifiers such as “Blackness” or “queerness” to the question of experience.

How quickly that (historical) narrative of wholeness, of centeredness, of capture breaks down.¹⁴⁸

In this passage, Gladman poses the structuring logic of sentences alongside and in tension with the “mechanics of experience,” that which is necessary for the fleshing out of a sensible world. At the risk of oversimplifying matters, this is where the abstraction of form meets the concreteness of life in a social world. In “having to face the sentence,” the sentence-writer encounters a grammatical constriction of what is lived outside of (linguistic) grammar. They must reconcile what can be said within the demands of the sentence form—which, at base, requires some level of sequential movement of cause and effect—with what must be said in order to account for oneself.

What any of this looks like when stacked with “Blackness” or “queerness” is an open question—what would a Black, queer sentence look like? Or, in other words, how would a sentence informed by the “mechanics” of Black, queer experience look different from one that is not? In the absence of explicitly racialized (and sexualized) imagery in Gladman’s drawings, we have to explore alternative ways of adjudicating how social experience shapes her work. Evie Shockley proposes one version of an alternative in her consideration of *Prose Architectures*. She begins by asking a stripped back variant of the questions I have posed in the previous paragraph: “What does Blackness look like?”¹⁴⁹ She suggests that neither a focus on the Black body—however that is defined or identified—nor a recourse to language would provide a satisfactory answer to the question, the latter point further

¹⁴⁸ Renee Gladman et al., “African American Experimental Poetry Forum,” *Jubilat*, no. 16 (2009): 124.

¹⁴⁹ Evie Shockley, “On Seeing and Reading the ‘Nothing’: Poetry and Blackness Visualized,” *New Literary History* 50, no. 4 (2019): 499, <https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.2019.0051>.

complicated by the fact that the colonial language of English is “a language developed over the past few centuries precisely to facilitate, legitimate, justify, and downplay the commodification and devaluing of the bodies who might speak ‘in the first person.’”¹⁵⁰

Even more pointedly, Shockley contends that Gladman’s drawings in *Prose Architectures* “seem to present no challenge to the ideology of colorblindness”—they can be understood entirely absent of the context of Gladman as a Black writer, or her interest in the difference made by adding identity markers to the consideration of prose writing. Shockley rebuts the apparent colorblindness of the book by situating Gladman’s drawing in a visual tradition that she calls “‘black graphics,’ a term that points to the fundamental relation between pictorial or figurative representations and the written sign systems that represent language.”¹⁵¹ For Shockley, it is precisely in the convergence of the verbal and the visual that black graphics offers that we are able to locate a visible blackness that defies the colorblind readings and expectations that would be easy to assign to Gladman’s work. She writes of Gladman that her “recourse to drawing is not interested in mimesis” but rather an interest in “the line” as a spatializing feature of both writing and drawing,¹⁵² which converts these two practices into tools of mediation rather than communication.

Shockley further expands on the notion of spatialization by taking up David Buuck’s reading of Gladman’s drawings and written work as a form of “city-writing.”¹⁵³ She writes:

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 500.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid., 513.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 515.

In a society in which both the terms “urban” and “inner-city” remain functional as coded references to African American people and cultures (gentrification and displacement notwithstanding), I am comfortable positing that this “city-writing” quality in Gladman’s work does not “transcend” racialized subjectivity any more than it can be reduced to racial experience.¹⁵⁴

These observations are left tantalizingly vague. The essay turns at this point to June Jordan and Katherine McKittrick, who Shockley narrates as being fellow travelers in theorizing black feminist geographies. The narration of these connections is, to my mind, indisputable, as is the notion that Gladman’s work does not “transcend racial subjectivity.” Yet how Shockley understands these concerns, theories, and qualities actually play out in the drawings remains a mystery.

While I agree in broad strokes with Shockley’s assessment of Gladman’s work, I find her emphasis on the resemblance of *Prose Architectures*’ drawings to cityscapes and architecture to be less convincing when we consider Gladman’s other drawn work. Moreover, I diverge from Shockley’s periodization of post-Reagan era colorblindness as the most pertinent historical context in which to situate her work. Instead, I maintain that the representation-centric racial politics that I have argued forms the basis of the contemporary discursive characterization of race and abstraction as incompatible terms should inform our reading (and viewing) of Gladman’s drawings. There is no question that *Plans for Sentences* is the most minimally racially-coded work that I examine within the

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 515-6.

current project, yet it is precisely for this reason that it is able to most stringently test the limits of abstraction as a valuable reading practice for racially-engaged literature.

Plans for Sentences directly extends the investigation into markmaking begun in *Prose Architectures*, with the addition of an important element: actual written sentences. Gladman describes this return to recognizable language thusly: “For a long time, I hadn’t wanted legible, narrative language anywhere near my drawings. I felt that no matter how I arranged, one or the other...would fall into the category of illustration. I wasn’t interested in that dynamic until I was.”¹⁵⁵ What Gladman further emphasizes in her account of this return is that the titular “plans” refer to the drawings rather than the writing, and that the writing should be seen as “descriptions” of future sentences. This difference in type, however seemingly slight or inconsequential, doubles down on the future anterior undergirding of the book’s commitments, a tense which Jackie Wang posits as enabling “the grammar of survival.”¹⁵⁶ In fact, the written portions of the book are largely composed in the future tense (most begin, “These sentences will...”), a curious and unusual choice for something characterized as “descriptions.” But when we think of it in light of the characterization of the book as a series of sentences that will already both exist and have existed, this future tense makes perfect sense. In fact, the temporality of the writing and drawings is complicated even further by the dedication page, which reads: “These sentences—they—will begin having already been sentences somewhere else, and this will

¹⁵⁵ Renee Gladman, *Plans for Sentences* (Seattle, WA: Wave Books, 2022), 139.

¹⁵⁶ Jackie Wang, “Future Anterior: The Grammar of Survival?,” Tumblr, January 28, 2013, <https://loneberry.tumblr.com/post/41720404289/future-anterior-the-grammar-of-survival>.

mark their afterlife, and this will be their debut.”¹⁵⁷ There is a circuitous logic to this description, an eternal return that renders the sentences almost divinely eternal. The future tense in which the dedication (as well as most of the rest of the book) is a potentially utopian tense, granting us the ability to imagine otherwise from our current moment, but it also brings with it a vertiginous sense of uncertainty.

One word that we find recurring throughout is “blackening,” the most explicitly racialized motif that appears in the book. Much like “markmaking,” it is a concept that unifies the practices of writing and drawing by assimilating them both into a more abstract category. Unlike “markmaking,” however, “blackening” also invokes some version of a racializing process, akin perhaps to the Afropessimist notion that racial Blackness came into existence through the Middle Passage as the constitutive outside of human subjectivity. Some scholars, including Zakiyyah Iman Jackson¹⁵⁸ and C. Riley Snorton¹⁵⁹, even refer to Black people as “blackened people” in their writing for the purpose of emphasizing racial Blackness as a violent external imposition of white heteropatriarchy. Gladman, whether she is consciously drawing on this lineage of scholarship or not, picks up on this framing in an aesthetic register, and uses it to unite the (for her) parallel processes of drawing and writing, of marking up a white page with black ink.

The way that language and drawing are juxtaposed on the page is worth noting. Each pair of pages is organized with drawing on the verso and text on the recto, and each

¹⁵⁷ Gladman, *Plans for Sentences*, 1.

¹⁵⁸ Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World* (New York City, NY: New York University Press, 2020).

¹⁵⁹ C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

page of text is titled “FIG.,” inverting the typical relationship of drawing as figure and text as explanation. Gladman implicitly assigns language the function of demonstration, and drawing the function of description, in much the same way that, for example, my verbal description of Choi’s “A Little Glossary” earlier in this chapter is substantiated through a reproduction of the actual page of the poem. Through this inversion, the written sentences in the book lose, to some degree, their lexical qualities, and take on the role of visual demonstration. As “descriptions” rather than “plans,” they approximate and provide information about future-existing sentences, yet are not actively constituting or imagining them.

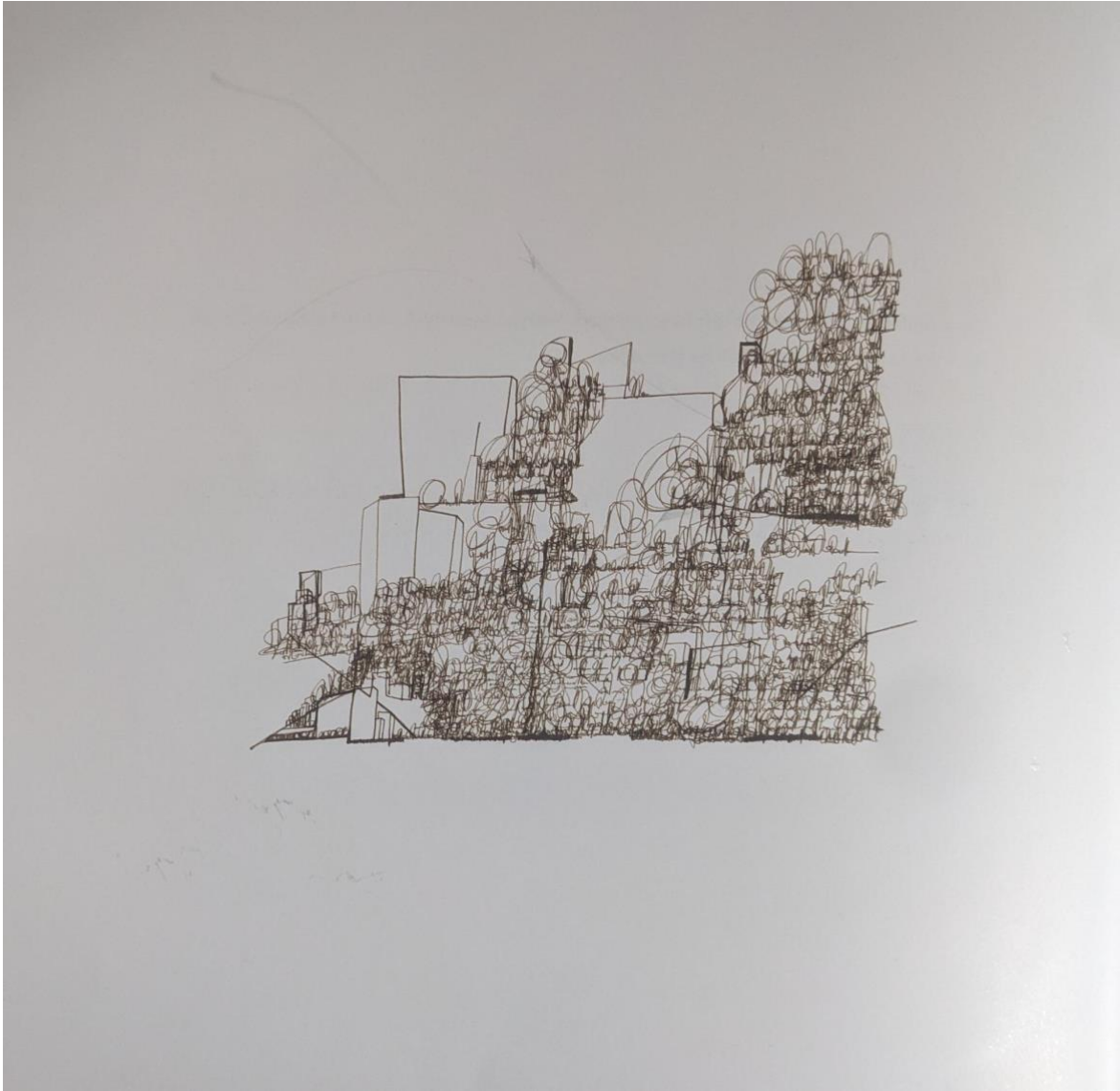


Figure 5. Verso.

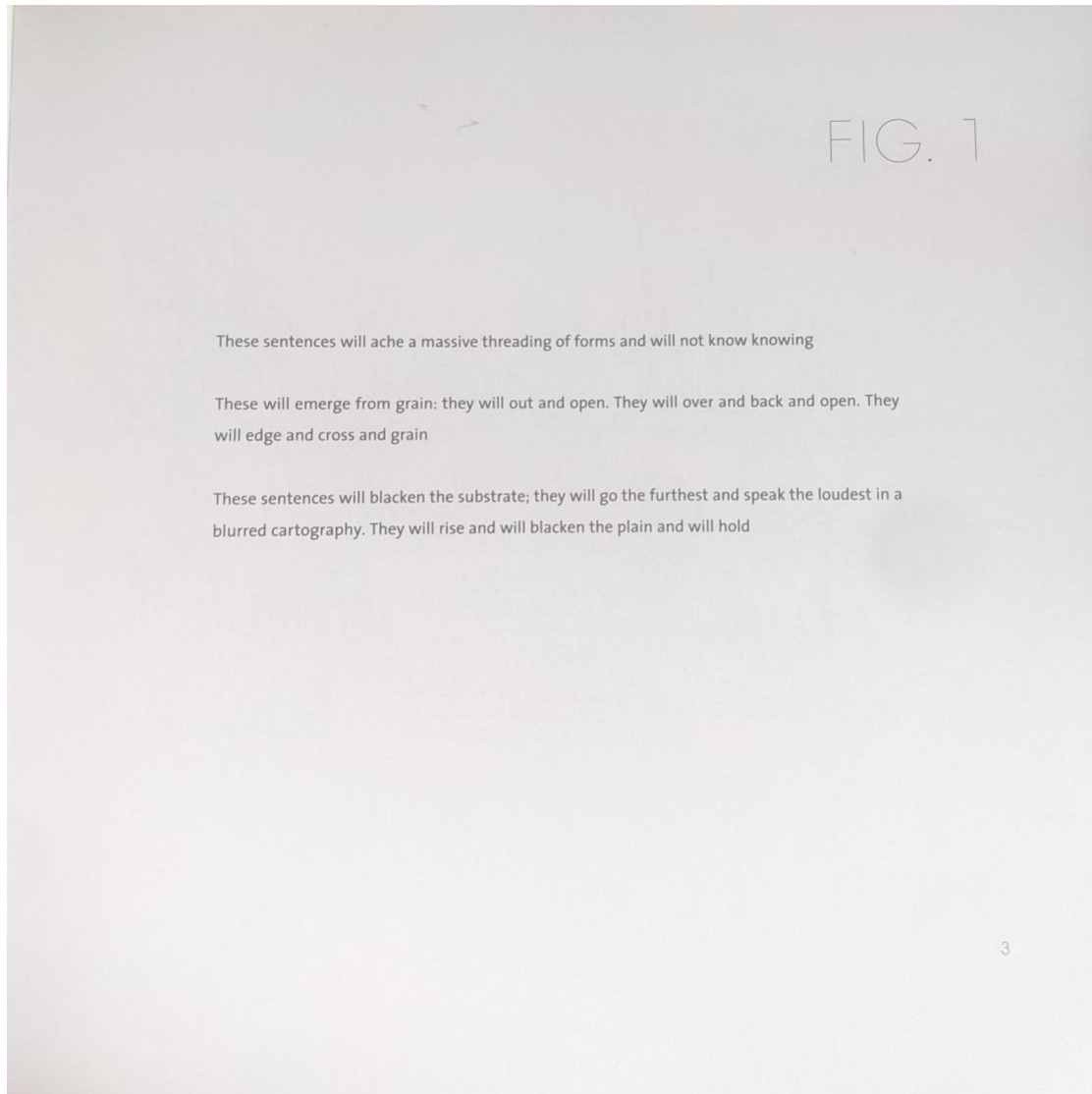


Figure 6. Recto.

In “FIG. 1 the first pair of drawing and text in the book, we see, on the left, a drawn structure composed of scraggly sepia loops with several segments of clean, sharp lines and, on the right, three short stanzas of one to two lines (see Figures 5 and 6). The drawing, although composed of similar looping, clustering lines as those in *Prose Architectures*, does not evoke the same kinds of cityscapes, power lines, grids, maps, and built environments which appeared in that earlier book. Its lines are thinner, its loops denser, and the overall

impression of the structure is that of a simple machine, levers and scales holding up buzzing clouds of near-language. On the facing page, the text reads:

These sentences will ache a massive threading of forms and will not know knowing

They will emerge from grain: they will out and open. They will over and back and open. They will edge and cross and grain

These sentences will blacken the substrate; they will go the furthest and speak the loudest in a blurred cartography. They will rise and will blacken the plain and will hold¹⁶⁰

The temptation to read this text as in some way complementary to or descriptive of the drawing it is paired with is almost irresistible. What holds us back from it at all is the sentence's utter abstraction. Even with the subject of the text clearly identified ("these sentences"), it is nearly impossible to track. How something can "ache" a "threading"—what a "threading" even is, and how it can be "of forms"—is entirely unpicturable; what kind of grain—agricultural, filmic, textural—can birth sentences and then turn into a verb, impossible to say. At every juncture where the text seems on the verge of concrete imagery, it swerves away into abstraction, not necessarily in the form of immaterial concepts (peace, love, justice), but through polysemous juxtapositions.

The last stanza in the text invokes "blackens" twice, first in relation to "substrate," then to "plain," both of which can have geographic connotations. Combined with the inclusion of "cartography," we hear perhaps an extension and inversion of *Prose*

¹⁶⁰ Gladman, *Plans for Sentences*, 3.

Architecture's cityscapes, in the form of the natural world. As with the previous two stanzas, it is hard to imagine how a sentence might interact with a landscape. But if we read the lines according to their own internal logic, what they prophecy is a transformation of the natural world through "blackening," a process that fills and abrades, darkens and illuminates, affecting as much the page on which these words are inscribed as the fictional world it lightly narrates.

We see a similar set of concerns appear in "FIG. 43,"¹⁶¹ which features sentences in concert with other linguistic objects ("afterword," "nominative force," "caption") and a variety of natural phenomena ("shoals," "erosion," "plain," "umbel," "blight," "tendrill"). In these stanzas, the sentences are again described performing actions that defy normative sense, including grammatical sense. In the phrase "they will umbel the afterword into a funnel," "umbel" functions as an ambiguous verb form of a concrete noun, whose obscurity is further compounded by the minimal referentiality of "the afterword" and "a tunnel." That is, while both of these nouns of course refer to specific things in the world, the lack of surrounding context in which to situate them renders them supremely abstract. "The" afterword, despite its definite article, does not actually point to anything within the reality constructed by the book (which, notably, does not have an afterword). In a different, but equally abstract sense, the word "funnel" can refer to both a physical object used for funneling as well as the general shape that such an object may have. The combined effect of these words in sequence is a sentence with the rhythm and shape of an informational sentence, but one that suggests rather than describes.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 87.

“Blackening” also appears once in this figure, though this time as a noun, “a blackening that is also a map.” Here, blackening and markmaking merge into a single activity, but importantly, they do not constitute the titular sentences. The blackening in this passage is created as a result of the movement of sentences, which “will narrow in an out-and-through and leave behind” that map. There is nothing concrete in this sentence, only the sense of movement—even “out-and-through,” despite being implied to be a noun by the affixed article, is impossible to claim as an object or a place; it evokes the kind of narrowing and widening that might be found in a waterway, and as with “funnel” and “tunnel,” it is primarily a shape or form. Regardless of its referent, or lack thereof, what the passage appears to dramatize is the gestural movement of sentences towards a marked existence.

It’s hard to find language for any of this, riddled as the book is with it. I dwell on the use of “blacken” in this and other passages in the book not as a way of uncovering secret hidden racial meaning in a text that does not explicitly address race, but instead to note the aesthetic effect that they exert on the text. I am suggesting simultaneously that a text does not necessarily contain secret racial content, waiting to be unearthed by scholarly investigation, and that it may be fruitful to read a text in light of racial concerns. We can surmise from the extra-textual evidence I have presented here (i.e. sentiments Gladman has expressed about her own writing) that she is likely in fact interested in the mediation that social identity provides for aesthetic form. This insight alone, however, cannot motivate the entirety of our reading. When we look at verso and recto together as a unified visual object, we start to notice some features of the piece that otherwise may have remained unseen. We see, for example, the warm tones of the drawings’ ink, closer to sepia than to the cool black of the book’s printed text (and of *Prose Architectures*’s drawings).

One easy reading of racial content in Gladman's work would involve mapping the black-and-white color palette of the drawn and written page onto some kind of relationship between racial Blackness and whiteness, but the explicit non-blackness of the drawings contravenes the reading of this binaristic relationship onto the drawings, and, more broadly, the book as a whole.

As a useful counterexample, this exact dynamic between black and white is explicitly thematized in Gladman's *One Long Black Sentence*, published in 2020, in which drawings were done in white ink on a black background.¹⁶² In a review of the book for *Bookforum*, Albert Mobilio asks, "Is the 'long black sentence' the motionless container, the space around the restless, declaratively white line?"¹⁶³ Along these same lines, Fred Moten writes in his "Anindex" at the end of the book that this background is really a "background: that nonrepresentational capacity that lets all representation take place."¹⁶⁴ Both of these sentiments suggest that the inversion of black and white, foreground and background, do not constitute a perfectly substitutive reversal, wherein all of the cultural baggage of the binary are simply flip-flopped, i.e. black is good/subject/central, white is bad/object/peripheral.

What exactly then is granted by this tradeoff between black and white? We could think, for example, of how white marks on a black surface invoke types of markmaking that are subtractive rather than additive, such that Gladman's drawings do not "blacken the

¹⁶² Gladman has expressed that she does not consider *One Long Black Sentence* a part of the larger project that *Prose Architectures* and *Plans for Sentences* are situated in, but I find it useful as a point of contrast.

¹⁶³ Albert Mobilio, "Renee Gladman & Fred Moten: One Long Black Sentence," *Bookforum*, September 3, 2020, <https://www.bookforum.com/print/2703/renee-gladman-fred-moten-one-long-black-sentence-24184>.

¹⁶⁴ Renee Gladman and Fred Moten, *One Long Black Sentence* (Ithaca, NY: Image Text Ithaca, 2020).

substrate,”¹⁶⁵ but instead maybe constitute a revision or an incision into the readymade world of the page. This is drawing that resembles writing that resembles etching. On the contrary, the covers and spine of the book are embroidered in white thread with the title, author, and a pair of Gladman’s drawings. Through bump and crevice, markmaking becomes a thoroughly tactile activity.

Moten, in his characteristically elliptical anindex, reads *One Long Black Sentence* in a Black radical tradition that is preoccupied with performative explorations of freedom, of finding an ongoing out in a world that is otherwise unlivably anti-Black. Moten has previously described this out as a “cut” and a “break,” often in relation to his pet obsessions with poetry and jazz, but in Gladman’s work, he finds the possibility of something else. “What if discontinuity is more of a bend than a break?” he writes, “What if a break is, in fact, a bend—” In a different context, Gordon Teskey writes what he calls “bent abstraction,” a form of abstraction that “renounces transcendence by entering time”¹⁶⁶—it forsakes the allure of peerlessness for the pleasures of materializing. A sentence, it seems, is a line that bends without breaking, unlike the poetic line, which breaks constantly and with vigor.

For Gladman, however, this distinction is a bit squishier. Sentences find their movement through bending, their constituent lines plumping up as they skew and cross and torque. Disruption is a continuous and ongoing event. Her drawings bend towards the crook of a question mark, but not as a commitment to indeterminacy or ambiguity. Simply, a body might appear out of the stuff of language and nothing might become of it. It is not an

¹⁶⁵ Gladman, *Plans for Sentences*, 3.

¹⁶⁶ Gordon Teskey, “Bent Abstraction,” *ELH* 88, no. 2 (2021): 318, <https://doi.org/10.1353/elh.2021.0014>.

every-body, a little too distinctive to be a stick figure, but also not any recognizable figure. It is a body that remains resolutely unincorporated, not representing, which is to say, not doing the work that representing would require. Thick swoops of translucent white cup the body while it bends and is bent by the lines that surround it.

The oft-theorized prints of visual artist Glenn Ligon—which feature striking overlays of provocative textual fragments of varying degrees of legibility—traffic in the black/white dichotomy that *One Long Black Sentence* takes up to some extent and *Plans for Sentences* deviates from. One of the most well-known of Ligon’s prints is one that features the phrase “I FEEL MOST COLORED WHEN I AM THROWN AGAINST A SHARP WHITE BACKGROUND,” taken from Zora Neale Hurston. The words repeat down the length of the print, breaking at different points in the sentence in each iteration, including sometimes in the middle of a word. The double reference of the piece is clear: on the one hand, it clearly concerns the experience of the Black artist (Ligon) and writer (Hurston) viscerally feeling their own ever-renewing racialization under the white gaze; on the other, the print itself features a literal white background on which black text is “thrown.” As the words become increasingly obscured as we move further down the piece, there is the promise, perhaps, of a re-situation of b/Blackness as background, both literal and metaphorical that would counteract the violent racializing effects of default whiteness.

In *Plans for Sentences*, however, we do not get such promises—there is no metaphoric structure in place by which to even entertain the notion of such promises. While Gladman repeatedly invokes blackening and blackness, very plausibly with an intentional eye towards racial Blackness, the book does not ultimately grant a one-to-one racial reading, the kind of fugitive map that Moten and others seek to find in Gladman’s

work. What we see instead is Gladman experimenting with the consequences of making marks in the sentence and *as* the sentence, finding what forms it can yield for herself as a Black artist. It is irreducibly Black without being black, and through an abstraction so extreme that language becomes drawing and back again, it takes flight.

Conclusion: Looking, Landing



Figure 7. Adrian Piper, *Food for the Spirit*, 1971

Every book I have discussed over the course of this dissertation is something that is as much to be looked at as it is to be read. I have resisted the urge to overload the chapters with figures, if only because adding even one leads to the desire to add another, and

another, and so on, until it feels like a crime not to reproduce an entire book alongside my analysis so that the work can really speak for itself, or perhaps more accurately, put itself on display. The intense visuality of this collection of books I've assembled has to do, I think, not only with their shared status as experimental poetics that delight in bending and breaking forms, but also, as I've alluded to throughout the dissertation, because of their shared interest in how race functions in the world today.

When we turn away from representation as the primary metric of racial engagement (not to even venture into racial *politics*), we turn towards something far murkier. By definition, abstraction has no guarantees, no anchors in the world of appearances, nothing to check against to determine truthfulness or fidelity. Literary abstraction proves to be an even less trafficked arena, with few forebearers lighting the way of what such a pursuit could even be. It is no wonder then that writers have had to make use of every dimension of their literary work, including the extra-literary realm of the visual, in which so much of the drama of racial work continues to play out.

I began with Adrian Piper in this dissertation out of an instinctive attraction to her decades-long preoccupation with how language shapes and is shaped by the always racialized practice of looking and being looked at. After Piper undertook a serious study of Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* in the summer of 1971, she began to dissociate: "my involvement in it was so great that I thought I was losing my mind, in fact losing my sense of self completely."¹⁶⁷ In order to assure herself that she was not disappearing, Piper began taking pictures of herself in the mirror in her room and recording herself receding

¹⁶⁷ Adrian Piper, *Out of Order, Out of Sight Volume I: Selected Writings in Meta-Art 1968-1992* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996), 55.

passages from the book, as a kind of “reality check.” The resulting series of 14 photographs, titled *Food for the Spirit*, features Piper’s at various stages of undress reflected in a mirror, looking, in each instance, with a distant and wary gaze at her own reflection and at us, looking at her image as well. “Piper looks and demands to be looked at in a most specific way,” Aria Dean writes about one of these photographs; “she is both the black female body in the frame and the maker of the picture at once.”¹⁶⁸

In addition to their contribution to a Black feminist “politic of looking,” as Dean suggests, the photographs strike me as an attempt to ward off the dematerializing effects of abstraction without renouncing it altogether. I see her, mystic-philosopher-in-training, muttering Kant’s words while taking stock of her own body’s image, unwilling to let go either of the chance at flight that the words promised, or the grounding—however fitfully embodied—of the material world. If abstraction really is a form of flight, we still have to have somewhere to land, and perhaps the page is as good a place as any.

¹⁶⁸ Aria Dean, “Closing the Loop,” *The New Inquiry*, April 18, 2017, <https://thenewinquiry.com/closing-the-loop/>.

Bibliography

- Aarhus, Mathies G. "Relaxing the Avant-Garde: Tan Lin and the Language-Oriented Tradition." *symploke* 24, no. 1–2 (2016): 293–307.
<https://doi.org/10.5250/symploke.24.1-2.0293>.
- Ahmed, Sara. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006.
- Amobi, Chino. *Airport Music for Black Folk*. CD. P-Vine Records, 2016.
- Anzaldua, Gloria. "Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to 3rd World Women Writers." Essay. In *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, edited by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua, 165–73. Watertown, MA: Persephone Press, 1981.
- Bhandar, Brenna. "Property, Law, and Race: Modes of Abstraction." *UC Irvine Law Review*, July 30, 2021. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/86p1x6qg>.
- Brar, Dhanveer Singh. "Knowing Manufacture of an RNB Feeling." *darkmatter hub*, June 9, 2021. <https://darkmatter-hub.pubpub.org/pub/3x25j469>.
- Bow, Leslie. *Racist Love: Asian Abstraction and the Pleasures of Fantasy*. Duke University Press, 2022.
- Butler, Judith, John Guillory, and Kendall Thomas, eds. *What's Left of Theory?: New Work on the Politics of Literary Theory*. New York: Routledge, 2001.
- Campt, Tina. *Listening to Images*. Duke University Press, 2017.
- Chang, Ashley. "Sensing Sounding: Close Listening to Experimental Asian American Poetry." PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2016. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses.
- Chen, Christopher, and Timothy Kreiner. "The Politics of Form and Poetics of Identity in Postwar American Poetry." *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Economics*, September 17, 2018, 27–40. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315640808-3>.

- Chiang, Mark. *The Cultural Capital of Asian American Studies: Autonomy and Representation in the University*. New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009.
- Choi, Don Mee. *Hardly War*. Seattle, WA: Wave Books, 2016.
- Choi, Don Mee. "The Prose Poem in Korea." *Sentence: A Journal of Prose Poetics* 5 (2007): 31–34.
- Choi, Don Mee. *Translation is a Mode=Translation is an Anti-neocolonial Mode*. Brooklyn, NY: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2020.
- Christian, Barbara. "The Race for Theory." *Cultural Critique*, no. 6 (1987): 51–63.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/1354255>.
- Cleary, Joe. "Realism after Modernism and the Literary World-System." *Modern Language Quarterly* 73, no. 3 (September 2012): 255–68.
<https://doi.org/10.1215/00267929-1631388>.
- Cockcroft, Eva. "Abstract Expressionism: Weapons of the Cold War." Essay. In *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, edited by Francis Frascina, 125–33. London: Harper & Row, 1985.
- Combahee River Collective. "The Combahee River Collective Statement." 1977.
<https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/combahee-river-collective-statement-1977/>.
- Daniel, T.K. "Theory Building in Black Studies." *The Black Scholar* 12, no. 3 (1981): 29–36.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.1981.11414182>.
- Dean, Aria. "Closing the Loop." *The New Inquiry*, April 18, 2017.
<https://thenewinquiry.com/closing-the-loop/>.
- Dozier, Ayanna. *Rebellious Inventions: Abstraction in the Black Diaspora*. False Flag, 2020.
- Durgin, Patrick F. "New Life Writing." *Jacket2*, February 14, 2012.

- <https://jacket2.org/article/new-life-writing>.
- Fenollosa, Ernest, and Ezra Pound. *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry: A Critical Edition*. Edited by Haun Saussy, Jonathan Stalling, and Lucas Klein. New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2010.
- Ferguson, Roderick A. *The Reorder of Things: The University and its Pedagogies of Minority Difference*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2012.
- Francis, Jacqueline. *Making Race: Modernism and "Racial art" in America*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2012.
- Gallagher, Kristen. "Cooking a Book with Low-Level Durational Energy: How to Read Tan Lin's 'Seven Controlled Vocabularies.'" Jacket2, May 27, 2011.
<https://jacket2.org/reviews/cooking-book-low-level-durational-energy>.
- Gladman, Renee. *Plans for Sentences*. Seattle, WA: Wave Books, 2022.
- Gladman, Renee. *Prose Architectures*. Seattle, WA: Wave Books, 2016.
- Gladman, Renee, and Fred Moten. *One Long Black Sentence*. Ithaca, NY: Image Text Ithaca, 2020.
- Gladman, Renee, Evie Shockley, Douglas Kearney, John Keene, Dawn Lundy Martin, Mendi Lewis Obadike, Rowan Ricardo Phillips, and Tyrone Williams. "African American Experimental Poetry Forum." *Jubilat*, no. 16 (2009): 115–54.
- Guilbaut, Serge. *How New York stole the idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.
- Guzman, Joshua Javier. "Between Abstraction and Action." Essay. In *Axis Mundo: Queer Networks in Chicano L.A.*, 303–15. Los Angeles, CA: ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives at the USC Libraries, 2017.
- Harney, Stefano, and Fred Moten. *The Undercommons: Fugitive planning and Black Studies*.

- Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2013.
- Harper, Phillip Brian. *Abstractionist Aesthetics: Artistic Form and Social Critique in African American Culture*. New York, NY: New York University Press, 2015.
- Hilder, Jamie. *Designed Words For a Designed World: The International Concrete Poetry Movement, 1955-1971*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016.
- Hugo, Richard. *The Triggering Town: Lectures and Essays on Poetry and Writing*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2010.
- Huxtable, Juliana. *Mucus in My Pineal Gland*. New York, NY: Capricious & Wonder, 2020.
- Jackson, Zakiyyah Iman. *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiracist World*. New York City, NY: New York University Press, 2020.
- "Jackson Pollock: Is He the Greatest Living Painter in the United States? ." *LIFE* 27, no. 6, August 8, 1949.
- Jarrett, Gene Andrew. *Deans and Truants: Race and Realism in African American Literature*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013.
- Jones, Kellie. *Energy/Experimentation: Black Artists and Abstraction 1964-1980*. The Studio Museum in Harlem, 2006.
- Kim, Daniel Y. "Hardly Emotion: The Minor Feelings of Us Empire and the Translational Poetics of Don Mee Choi." *American Quarterly* 74, no. 3 (September 2022): 665–88. <https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2022.0045>.
- Kim, Irene. "On Ambience, Tan Lin, and American Minimalism." *Post45*, April 27, 2023. <https://post45.org/2023/04/on-ambience-tan-lin-and-american-minimalism/>.
- Lancaster, Lex Morgan. *Dragging away: Queer Abstraction in Contemporary Art*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022.
- Leitch, Vincent B. "Theory Ends." *Profession* 2005, no. 1 (2005): 122–28.

- <https://doi.org/10.1632/074069505x82707>.
- Lin, Tan. "Ambient Stylistics." *Conjunctions*, no. 35 (2000): 127–45.
- Lin, Tan. *Insomnia and the Aunt*. Chicago, IL: Kenning Editions, 2011.
- Lin, Tan. *Seven Controlled Vocabularies and Obituary 2004. The Joy of Cooking: [AIRPORT NOVEL MUSICAL POEM PAINTING FILM PHOTO HALLUCINATION LANDSCAPE]*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2010.
- Lye, Colleen. "Identity Politics, Criticism, and Self-Criticism." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 119, no. 4 (2020): 701–14. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-8663603>.
- Marshall, Colin. "Ambiently Breaking Reading Conventions: Colin Marshall Talks to Experimental Poet Tan Lin." 3 Quarks Daily, July 5, 2010. <https://3quarksdaily.com/3quarksdaily/2010/07/ambiently-breaking-reading-conventions-colin-marshall-talks-to-experimental-poet-tan-lin.html>.
- Matsuda, Mari J. *Where is Your Body?: And Other Essays on Race Gender and the Law*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2001.
- Mercer, Kobena, editor. *Discrepant Abstraction*. MIT Press, 2006.
- Mercer, Kobena. *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies*. New York & London: Routledge, 1994.
- Mills, Charles W. "'Ideal Theory' as Ideology." *Hypatia* 20, no. 3 (2005): 165–83. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2005.tb00493.x>.
- Mobilio, Albert. "Renee Gladman & Fred Moten: One Long Black Sentence." Bookforum, September 3, 2020. <https://www.bookforum.com/print/2703/renee-gladman-fred-moten-one-long-black-sentence-24184>.
- Musser, Amber Jamilla. "Architectures of Blue: Race, Representation, and Black and Brown Abstraction." *The Brooklyn Rail*, October 5, 2017.

- <https://brooklynrail.org/2017/10/art/Architectures-of-Blue-Race-Representation-and-Black-and-Brown-Abstraction>.
- Musser, Amber Jamilla. *Sensual Excess: Queer Femininity and Brown Jouissance*. New York, NY: New York University Press, 2018.
- Ngai, Sianne. *Theory of the Gimmick: Aesthetic Judgment and Capitalist Form*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022.
- Panagia, Davide. *Sentimental Empiricism: Politics, Philosophy, and Criticism in Postwar France*. New York, NY: Fordham University Press, forthcoming 2024.
- Park, Josephine Nock-Hee. *Apparitions of Asia: Modernist Form and Asian American Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Piper, Adrian. *Out of Order, Out of Sight Volume I: Selected Writings in Meta-Art 1968-1992*. The MIT Press, 1996.
- Pomerantz, Jeffrey. *Metadata*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015.
- Poovey, Mary. *A History of the Modern Fact: Problems of Knowledge in the Sciences of Wealth and Society*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998.
- Quashie, Kevin Everod. *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012.
- Rivera, Takeo. *Model Minority Masochism: Performing the Cultural Politics of Asian American Masculinity*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2022.
- Roberts, John. *Revolutionary Time and the Avant-garde*. London: Verso, 2015.
- Sanders, Katherine Elaine. "Tan Lin." BOMB Magazine, March 29, 2010.
<https://bombmagazine.org/articles/2010/03/29/tan-lin/>.
- Seldin, Naomi. "16 Messages." Times Union, February 25, 2009.
<https://blog.timesunion.com/simplerliving/16-messages/6151/>.

Shockley, Evie. "On Seeing and Reading the 'Nothing': Poetry and Blackness Visualized." *New*

Literary History 50, no. 4 (2019): 499–528. <https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.2019.0051>.

Snorton, C. Riley. *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

Stephens, Paul. *The Poetics of Information Overload: From Gertrude Stein to Conceptual Writing*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2015.

Teskey, Gordon. "Bent Abstraction." *ELH* 88, no. 2 (2021): 315–41. <https://doi.org/10.1353/elh.2021.0014>.

Wang, Jackie. "Future Anterior: The Grammar of Survival?" Tumblr, January 28, 2013. <https://loneberry.tumblr.com/post/41720404289/future-anterior-the-grammar-of-survival>.

Watten, Barrett. "The Secret History of the Equal Sign: L = A = N = G = U = A = G = E between Discourse and Text." *Poetics Today* 20, no. 4 (1999): 581–627.

Weheliye, Alexander G. "'Feenin': Posthuman Voices in Contemporary Black Popular Music." *Social Text* 20, no. 2 (2002): 21–47. https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-20-2_71-21.

Weheliye, Alexander G. "Rhythms of Relation: Black Popular Music and Mobile Technologies." *Current Musicology*, no. 99/100 (2017): 107–127. <https://doi.org/10.7916/cm.v0i99/100.5347>.

Weheliye, Alexander Ghedi. "Don't Take It Away: Blackfem Voices in Electronic Dance Music." *e-flux*, December 2022. <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/132/507589/don-t-take-it-away-blackfem-voices-in-electronic-dance-music/>.

Weheliye, Alexander Ghedi. *Feenin: R&B music and the Materiality of BlackFem Voices and*

- Technology*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023.
- White, Simone. *Dear Angel of Death*. New York, NY: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2019.
- White, Simone. "Descent: American Individualism, American Blackness, and the Trouble with Invention." PhD diss. City University of New York, 2016.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Zettel*. Translated by G. E. M. Anscombe. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1967.
- Wordsworth, William, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. *Lyrical Ballads*. New York, NY: Penguin Classics, 2007.
- Xiang, Sunny. *Tonal Intelligence: The Aesthetics of Asian Inscrutability During the Long Cold War*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2020.
- Zalokostas, Anna, Christopher Grobe, Aaron Chandler, Susan Koshy, Ben Libman, Sarah Brouillette, Gerónimo Sarmiento Cruz, and Guy Davidson. "Reading with Algorithms." Edited by Sarah Brouillette and Susanna Sacks. Post45, 2023.
<https://post45.org/sections/contemporaries-essays/reading-with-algorithms/>.