Conclusion

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Abstract and Keywords

The conclusion briefly elaborates the significance of American Orientalism in the formation of Asian American literature. By reconsidering the complex negotiation with Orientalism in the work of the figurehead of the ethnic nationalist movement, Frank Chin, this conclusion suggests the persistence and continuing significance of an Orientalist legacy for Asian American literature.

Keywords: Frank Chin, Chickencoop Chinaman, American Orientalism, Charlie Chan

Frank Chin's groundbreaking play *The Chickencoop Chinaman*, first produced in 1972, opens with his main character, Tam Lum, explaining his birth: “My dear in the beginning there was the Word! Then there was me! And the Word was CHINAMAN. And there was me” (6). Tam elaborates in thunderous tones:
Born? No! Crashed! Not born. Stamped! Not born!
Created! Not born. No more born than the heaven and
earth. No more born than nylon or acrylic. For I am a
Chinaman! A miracle synthetic! Drip dry and machine
washable. (8)

Tam’s immaculate conception is miraculous because he comes
“out of junk-imports, lies, railroad scrap iron, dirty jokes” (6).
The list goes on, but this first handful of detritus sketches an
American past of cheap Asian imports and labor. Tam cannot
simply jettison this mess; instead, it comes together to create
him. In fact, Tam orphans himself in the play in order to claim
a lineage of exclusion and Orientalism. A synthetic creation
made from the dregs of racism, Tam is an emblem of Asian
America: the miracle of Asian America lies in this
transformation, a new cultural formation come to life against a
history of anti-Asian sentiment and policy. Tam explains that
“The Word is my heritage,” but this grim past has been
especially difficult to embrace for Asian America.
Asian America has dramatically expanded since its 1968 creation. Perhaps we may read the literary shaping of Asian America in the last forty years as a dialectic of exclusion and inclusion, in which periodic delineations inspire new entries. The originary “Word” as Chin construed it, however, continues to be theorized as a hard limit: Asian America has a heritage, but it is emphatically not Orientalism. The breach between Orientalism and anti-Orientalism has widened since The Chickencoop Chinaman as a growing field of scholarship has significantly uncovered an anti-Orientalist literary past. As a result of these crucial excavations, Asian America created a canon untainted by American Orientalism. Yet the Asian American movement itself provided an extraordinary demonstration of the artistic riches that could result from grappling with an Orientalist heritage, and Asian American artists have returned again and again to Orientalism as a complex source for new experiments. Jessica Hagedorn's important 1993 anthology of Asian American literature proclaimed that “Charlie Chan Is Dead,” but the truth, as the anthology demonstrates, is that reviving him is a means of bringing together a wide range of texts. The original spark of resistance was the miracle of Asian American literature, and later generations of Asian American artists continue to return to this potent stance, in ever-changing and often surprising ways. Indeed, resistance hasn't gone away in Asian American literature because Orientalism has never gone away—and the call to Asian American political resistance seems as crucial in the twenty-first century as it was when it was first sounded in the late 1960s.
It has been the aim of this study to examine this heritage by reopening a past of literary Orientalism which has long been walled off from Asian American literature. The Orient examined in the first half of this study was ultimately a legitimizing force: Pound and Snyder secured their authority in the Far East, and the poetry that resulted from their transpacific journeys presented Eastern aesthetics as the mode of an American literary revolution. Each was locked into his own distance from the United States, and each found a way of grasping an essence of nativity by sailing due east. To garner authority in a distant land in order to trumpet it back home is a well-known colonial enterprise, but these American adventurers presented a subtle twist on the old formula by operating through alliance over difference. At the base of such alliances lay commerce: these literary accords were offshoots of political and commercial ties across the Pacific which periodically hailed a friendly Orient. The sympathetic Orient these poets discovered and, in particular, their aesthetic admiration for the Far East presented a singular bind for Asian American poets. Asians in the United States tend to be branded with alternating praise and blame, each of which calls for varying tactical responses: “junk-imports, lies, railroad scrap iron, dirty jokes” provide fodder for combat, but altogether different maneuvers are required to negotiate a legacy of haiku and scroll painting. How to respond artistically to this Orientalism, one premised on appreciation—in all senses of the word—and not denigration, has been the central conundrum of this study.
In making the leap from Orientalism to Asian America, I have attempted to convey the formidable task of creating a new culture out of an ill-fitting heritage—and routing this question through poetry brings to bear a distinctly formal pressure. The modernist and counterculture poetic revolutions were shot through with Orientalism, and it is my claim that this heritage conditioned the formal innovations of Asian American poetry. Lawson Fusao Inada's poetry presents a significant experiment away from this past: he turned to different cultural amalgams, applying African American and Latino rhythms to his verse, but he also critically revised Orientalist forms for Asian America. My study closes with further formal experiments in Asian American poetry, in which an Orientalist heritage is invoked in order to break it open and reveal the fissures within. Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and Myung Mi Kim reopen a literary past, and their difficult poems provide a kind of anatomy lesson for American poetry as they dissect its forms. *Apparitions of Asia* has traced Pound's modernist apparition of "Petals on a wet, black bough" to Myung Mi Kim's "azaleas in full bloom/Composed of many lengths of bone." Against the momentary flash of Poundian Imagism, Kim's apparition refers to a bitter transpacific history. At the end of the twentieth century, Asian American poets newly invoke the United States–East Asian alliances that drove the literary revolutions of the past.
American poetry is itself a supremely synthetic creation. For the poets of the first half of my study, the component parts of their verse were aligned with an American ambition: they dreamed of bardic status, a role which had long been declared defunct. These poets quite literally circumvented the problem of their full belonging to America—the first and most important requirement to be a bard—by reforming their native land through a discipline learned in the Orient. In reading the poetic forms of American Orientalism, I have sought to examine the precise configurations that result from transpacific alliances in order to understand their significance within modernist and Beat poetics—and, further, in order to comprehend the formal burden they present for Asian American poets. The miracle synthetic of Asian American poetry emerged in the wake of these extraordinary claims to nativity. In querying their own belonging to the United States, these poets conducted experiments in verse which took apart and newly assembled the forms that constrained them in literary acts that ultimately renewed American poetry. (p. 160)