

[Review of the books *Career Moves: Olson, Creeley, Zukofsky, Berrigan, and the American Avant-Garde; Leaving Lines of Gender: A Feminist Genealogy of Language Writing; The Language of Inquiry*]

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derings. Maxine Hong Kingston, David Henry Hwang, and even Frank Chin join the ranks of those guilty of collaboration with “Western distortions of the East” (xiv); in fact, “[t]he vigor with which these Asian Americans revolt against Orientalism tacitly acknowledges the family lineage of the two” (xv). Although the book identifies writers such as Toshio Mori, Hisaye Yamamoto, and Joy Kogawa who do not fall into the trap of depicting the “phantasmagoric Orient or the bewildering Oriental” (xiv), it does not spend much time distinguishing between these new versions of the real and the fake. Ma is unabashedly more intrigued with how “Orientalist *mis*representations conceivably become *self*-representations” (xiii).

One especially perceptive reading in this vein shows Bruce Lee films as “grounded in the old stereotype of the Oriental’s inhuman cruelty yet endeared to the public in the context of the civil rights movement and global changes,” where “Lee’s performance becomes a projection of, simultaneously, the volatile age and the mystical Orient” (xx). This “double vision” influences the widespread popularity of martial arts heroes, whether appearing in Asian American fiction or Jackie Chan films. Such a perspective informs one of the most disturbing moments of the book: a reading of the Vincent Chin case that frames Chin as a “real-life casualty of the ‘Fighting Chinaman’ image” (xxi). Ma’s analyses are enhanced by constant reference to specific historical and political contexts; where such background is missing, as in the final chapter’s presentation of Anglo-Japanese novelist Kazuo Ishiguro as “postethnic” writer, the results are much less satisfying.

Read in light of Palumbo-Liu’s thesis, what is “Asian” remains at the heart of modern and contemporary “America.” Ultimately Ma’s claim for the inseparability of “Oriental” and “Asian American” is neither shocking nor contentious. What’s at stake is not denial of this interconnection but illumination of its intricate and persistent mechanisms, a task that both *Asian/American* and *The Deathly Embrace* perform with skill and conviction.

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Career Moves: Olson, Creeley, Zukofsky, Berrigan, and the American Avant-Garde. By Libbie Rifkin. Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press. 2000. viii. 172 pp. Cloth, \$37.95; paper, \$16.95.

Leaving Lines of Gender: A Feminist Genealogy of Language Writing. By Ann Vickery. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan Univ. Press; Hanover, N.H.: Univ. Press of New England. x, 354 pp. Cloth, \$60.00; paper, \$24.95.

The Language of Inquiry. By Lyn Hejinian. Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press. 2000. ix, 438 pp. Cloth, \$45.00; paper, \$17.95.

These three books—two critical studies and one volume of collected essays by a prominent language writer—consider relations of politics, professional-

ism, and the public voice of formal innovation in American language writing traditions. Rifkin's study adroitly combines biography, autobiography, socio-poetics, and rhetorical analysis to study the roles and career transitions of four major avant-garde poets since midcentury. The 1965 Berkeley Poetry Conference is a useful stepping-off point, because the event brought together formally experimental work of the East and West coasts. The ingeniousness of this study depends upon its concise takes on moments of career transition and well-articulated theoretical underpinnings. If too much avant-garde theory has placed anti-establishment politics in opposition to "making it" and to institution building, Rifkin rightly perceives that this view defines the cultural field too narrowly and underestimates the construction of authorial agency itself as artifact and site of reception. She finds more "fluctuating," "multilateral" formations of avant-garde identities, often in confrontation with the binaries lodged in poetic tradition, in a variety of wavering authorial performances through which problems of reception are reworked. Charles Olson's talkfest at the Berkeley Poetry Conference reading, a shattering of ego equilibrium for both the poets and audience members, is paradigmatic of the kind of authorial performance that may be seen in other venues, from Zukofsky's cutting and culling of a hermetic archive at the University of Texas to Ted Berrigan's elaborate staging of the death and resuscitation of coterie publications. Given that much has been said about at least three of the four poets in this study, the consequences of these career moves for biography or for the reading of experimental texts is not always expected. Yet wherever Rifkin opens a new chapter in the history of the cultural field, she convinces us that each writer is freshly shaping the contours of reception. A chapter on the least known of these figures, Ted Berrigan, succeeds especially well in capturing the comic bravura and strange ironies of Berrigan's "monumental self-elegizing gestures" and Keatsian kitsch (124). Indeed, the genre of elegy itself, functioning as a poetic institution, may have more to do with shaping structures of anticipation for avant-garde poets than is explicitly discussed.

Whereas Rifkin's study elides the question of women and gender, presumably drawing firmly together career-making, masculinities, and cultural capital, Vickery's historiographic approach to women's participation in language writing movements of the seventies, eighties, and even nineties foregrounds an impressive accumulation of gender-marked evidence. The double marginalization of women in language writing movements—differentiating themselves from feminist orthodoxies of the unified self and from conventional poetic notations of lyric subjectivity—has been commented upon by writers such as Kathleen Fraser, Joan Retallack, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, and Susan Howe. But the surprise of this extensive survey of unpublished letters (the Howe-Hejinian correspondence appears to have been especially important), tapes, interviews, workshops, and ephemera of language-writing events is how many lesser-known voices and highly inventive projects register as important to how and why gender lines have been drawn or resisted. Work by Rae Armantrout, Bernadette Meyer, Johanna Drucker, Tina Darragh, Carla Harryman,

Lyn Hejinian, Leslie Scalapino, Hannah Weiner, and others are mentioned, and this is the only study in which certain projects such as Hejinian's editorial work and design of Tuumba Press postcards or Susan Howe's poetry radio programs have been examined in such extensive detail. Megan Simpson's *Poetic Epistemologies* (2000) does consider relations of rhetorics and epistemologies, but in Vickery's capable hands, we have a distinctly feminist and materialist history, concentrating more on processes of power, social exchange, and community building that are part of "going public." To her credit, Vickery acknowledges that her "patient documentary" (19) of archives entails mediating among different forms of witnessing, and that such forms exist in "uneasy" relationship to traditional models of historical truth and to the published forms of experimental poetry. The historiographer's task is to negotiate layered messages, in order to reveal what is hidden or more predictably acknowledged: that women have had an active role in shaping the reception of language writing movements, and that they have been especially vocal on the politics and ethics of inclusivity.

Of course, many women in language writing movements have approached feminine aesthetics and feminist discourse with ambivalence, and there has been little in the way of consensus. Vickery does not make the mistake of assuming otherwise. Her obvious investment in feminist theoretical discourse allows her to provide a much-needed history and analysis of the interpellation of French feminism and poststructuralism—the "ruptured vocabulary of feminism" (50) among women loosely affiliated with language writing movements. Vickery concludes that women who embraced these influences may have used them to achieve a "middle" ground of feminine and feminist poetics by which alterity in language is assimilated at the level of experience yet contested where narratives of femininity appear too confining. Having as much to do with feminist theories of gender and language as with histories of language writers, Vickery's chapter on women's experiments in collaborative practices also makes a much-needed contribution. Here Vickery launches her broadest (and most utopian) claim—that collaboration as erotic exchange potentially restructures both desire and knowledge. Whether the homosocial-homosexual bond is similarly transformed when male poets in language writing collaborate in the building of poetic institutions remains to be seen, since it lies outside the scope of her study.

If anything, the appearance of a first "collection of essays" by Lyn Hejinian, a volume consisting of 20 pieces first presented as talks or academic papers or published in journals of innovative writing, should remind us of how fluid the boundaries of mainstream and margin have become in the past twenty-five years. The essays are written under the sign of William James, Gertrude Stein, and the Russian formalists, a triple modernist legacy, repeatedly invoked, and providing an impression of some distance from local skirmishes. Explanatory headnotes, some of them short essays in themselves, provide scholars and general readers with a sense of the occasion and the autobio-

graphical and discursive contexts. If there were ever any doubt that recycling, transposition, and republication of material is one of the ways that reception is shaped (a point repeated in Rifkin's study), one has only to compare the edited monologistic version of Hejinian's contribution to the panel on language and power "What Is Speaking?" to the fractious exchanges surrounding that panel's presentation in Vickery's account of the same event. This is not to detract: each of these essays is worth savoring for the stylistic awareness and the probing, often dazzling, quality of thinking through writing, poetry, and poetics together. Hejinian's more academic essays, such as "La Faustienne," on feminine figurations of knowledge are wonderfully uncluttered yet make theoretically exacting demands. This rich and varied collection not only confirms the impression that language poetry's encounters with multiple forms of difference is necessarily tied to worldly engagement but also discourages any suspicion that articulation of radical poetic principles under the aegis of politics and professionalism spoils the fruit.

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***American Literary Environmentalism.* By David Mazel. Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press. 2000. xxv, 198 pp. \$40.00.**

David Mazel has opened up the ecocritical conversation with *American Literary Environmentalism*. His inspiration derives less from Thoreau and John Muir and more from Judith Butler and poststructuralist theory; an ambitious and provocative study results. At the core of his argument, Mazel contends that "the environment is itself a myth, a 'grand fable,' a complex fiction, a widely shared, occasionally contested, and literally ubiquitous narrative. More precisely, this study treats the environment as a discursive construction, something whose 'reality' derives from the ways we write, speak, and think about it" (xii). This mythic construction has functioned to obscure historical relationships between culture and environment that privilege the dominant culture, but, as Mazel claims, through his critique "environmentalism will instead be democratized and enriched" (xv).

Mazel's first test case is the National Park Service. Citing its refusal to place Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* in the bookstore at Little Bighorn National Monument (the site of Custer's defeat), Mazel links Park Service politics to the culture wars of the eighties and nineties. Through this alignment, we begin to see how the environment itself has been racialized.

Literary environmentalism, as it is described in this study, "is a process of rendering natural landscape into disciplinary text that can help ground a stable American identity" (167). Predictably, this stable identity is in the service of white capitalist patriarchy. Mazel examines this process through John Underhill's reports and drawings from the Pequot War and Mary Rowlandson's captivity narrative. While Underhill is often subverbal—Mazel claims

