

Introduction

Asia is where
my people
are *from*.
America is where
I *live*.
Poetry is what
I *do*.
So there it is:
Asian American poetry.¹

THIS DEFINITION OF ASIAN AMERICAN POETRY by Lawson Fusao Inada launches this study of cultural hybridity in contemporary Asian American poetry. According to his poem “From Live Do,” Asia is the home culture of his ancestors, America is his home country, and his profession is poetry. These three aspects echo in Asian American poetry today, and denote the key concept of cultural fusion. Asia constitutes one of the cultural roots of the Asian American community, and the USA is their

¹ Lawson Fusao Inada, “From Live Do,” in *Frontiers of Asian American Studies: Writing, Research, and Commentary*, ed. Gail M. Nomura, Russell Endo, Stephen H. Sumida & Russell C. Leong (Pullman: Washington State UP, 1989): 238. Reprinted with the kind permission of Lawson Fusao Inada. Born in Fresno, California, on 26 May 1938, Inada is a third-generation Japanese American and has published poetry since the 1970s. His collection *Legends from Camp* (1972) won an American Book Award. The “poet laureate of Asian America,” he is especially known for his jazz poetry; Gayle K. Sato, “Lawson Fusao Inada (1938–),” in *Asian American Poets: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook*, ed. Guiyou Huang (Westport CT: Greenwood, 2002): 150.

home country. Therefore, Asian American poets are 'compositional subjects'² whose writing is influenced by majority American, Asian American, and Asian cultural fields (though other American ethnicities, of course, also exert an influence to a certain extent). "So there it is" – culturally hybrid contemporary Asian American poetry.

This hybridity, including the often neglected aspect of form, is the subject of the present study. Susan Koshy has observed, of Asian American studies, that "although substantial historical scholarship has been produced, the field has been weak in theoretical work."³ Through a careful discussion of hybridity in Asian American poetry, I hope, in "*So There It Is*" – the first extensive literary study of the subject – to have gone some way toward meeting the need for more substantial theoretical investigations.

Along with Xiaojing Zhou's *The Ethics and Poetics of Alterity in Asian American Poetry* (2006), Timothy Yu's *Race and the Avant-Garde: Experimental and Asian American Poetry since 1965* (2009) and Josephine Park's *Apparitions of Asia: Modernist Form and Asian American Poetics* (2008), it is one of the few book-length studies of contemporary Asian American poetry. My aim thereby is to demonstrate the values of cultural plurality and to question the constrictions and distortions of hegemonic discourse. I shall be countering imprecise, racist perceptions of Asian American poetry, including the prejudice that this literature deals only with Asian American issues and lacks aesthetic quality. Further goals of this work are the amplification of hitherto unheard voices and the articulation of an historical consciousness. I also align myself emphatically with an antisexist and antiracist discourse. This study not only looks at issues of ethnicity but also explores the literary quality and aesthetic achievement of the poetry examined, something too often overlooked by scholars in the field of ethnic studies. In her introduction to *Literary Gestures*, Sue-Im Lee affirms that a cultural-materialist, sociological, and historical analysis of Asian American literature must be counterbalanced by a consideration of literary aesthetics

² Laura Hyun Yi Kang, *Compositional Subjects: Enfiguring Asian/American Women* (Durham NC: Duke UP, 2002).

³ Susan Koshy, "The Fiction of Asian American Literature," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 9.2 (1996): 316.