

# A POETICS OF SUSPICION: CHICANA/O POETRY AND THE NEW

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## I. A Brief History of the “New”

From its inception, American poetry—at least the American poetry now remembered—obsessed about the new, or was largely a “new” entity formally and stylistically. Whitman, of course, casts his shadow long over American poetics. Though perhaps it is too easy to suggest that the expansiveness of Whitman’s lines formally iterates the nation’s simultaneous imagining of larger social and economic borders via manifest destiny, we know Whitman himself relished American frontier expansion. In a letter to Emerson, Whitman proclaimed, “Open the doors of The West. Call for new great masters to comprehend new arts, new perfections, new wants. . . . The genius of all foreign literature is clipped and cut small, compared to our genius, and is essentially insulting to our usages, and to the organic compacts of These States. . . . Authorities, poems, models, laws, names, imported into America, are useful today to destroy them, and so move disencumbered to great works, great days.”<sup>1</sup> To the inheritors of Whitman’s America, such statements come as no surprise; America’s expansionist imagining is an old story, and it is easy to pick on Whitman for his imperialist sentiments. Yet Whitman’s words illuminate the very condition of the “new” in American poetics. The “new,” the avant-garde, post-avant, or any such term denoting cutting-edge work, often carries with it imperialist undertones not easily ignored (though largely ignored nonetheless). Chicana/o poets know this all too well. The

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<sup>1</sup> Walt Whitman, “Walt Whitman to Ralph Waldo Emerson,” *The Poetics of the New American Poetry*, ed. Donald Allen (New York: Grove Press, 1973), pp. 5-7.

“new,” regardless of its configuration, too often serves to maintain systems of power and control that leave Chicana/os specifically, and minority poets in general, outside the parameters of what might be considered the forefront of poetic relevance.

American poetry has (arguably) come a long way since Whitman. Various poetic communities of various aesthetic preferences now litter the land. Yet the trajectory of the poetic narrative has not changed. The new movement replaces the old, sometimes swiftly, sometimes laboriously, but one finds the same exclusions abound. For all the talk about revolutionary poetics, Chicanos still find little to no space in discussions of the avant-garde. But this is expected, and the desire here is not to claim a space for Chicana/o poets in the avant tradition. Rather, the essay intends to question the relevance and efficacy of the new (and its concomitant “old”), the term’s usefulness in assessing poetic merit, and to demonstrate the degree to which terms of newness too often appear as power moves designed to maintain the native guard.

Some fifteen years ago, John Yau criticized Eliot Weinberger for making a now familiar claim about modernist-derived avant-gardisms’ appropriation of the Other.<sup>2</sup> More recently, Timothy Yu expands and further delineates the complicated relationship between ethnic minorities and self-proclaimed avant-garde communities. In his *Race and the Avant-Garde*, Yu notes the tendency for avant-garde movements to claim a position of alterity that essentially equates such groups with minorities. Yu calls this the “ethnicization” of the avant-garde and uses Ron Silliman and his work as a primary case study. Yu explains,

Silliman puts forth the tendentious argument that Language writing is the form of avant-garde practice particular to politically progressive white men—a claim that allows him to see “Language poet” as analogous to “woman poet” or “Asian American poet,” even as it has invited charges of racist and sexist exclusion. This “ethnicization” of the avant-garde—linking a particular poetic practice to a socially delimited group—has deeply troubled many of Silliman’s readers; but it also reflects a contemporary context in which the discourse of race and of the avant-garde increasingly intersect.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. “Neither Us or Them,” *American Poetry Review* 23.2 (1994), pp. 45–54.

<sup>3</sup> Timothy Yu, *Race and the Avant-Garde: Experimental and Asian American Poetry Since 1965*, ed. Gordon H. Chang (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2009), p. 39.

As Yu makes clear, often claims of aestheticism—the avant-garde’s forte—occlude politics. Yu concludes, “This is the inevitable effect of declaring that the ideological struggle of experimental writers is conducted ‘in other (aesthetic) terms’: such writers are granted access to, and indeed a monopoly over, the universalizing category of ‘the aesthetic,’ whereas women, minority, and gay writers are excluded from that category.”<sup>4</sup> That is, despite claims to a position of alterity, such self-proclaimed alterity in fact lends the avant-gardist a position of power that too often excludes those who are minorities by circumstance, not choice.

Yet the exclusion of minority writers for the sake of propagating “new” poetics is not solely the result of avant-garde poetics. The most recent example—of Yu’s “ethnicization” and of Chicana/o (and Latina/o) exclusion—is the Norton Anthology, *American Hybrid*. Perhaps not surprisingly, though tellingly, the anthology organizes around a racialized term, hybridity. Though it denies an avant-garde status, the anthology nonetheless is positioned within the avant tradition; it is, after all, “A Norton Anthology of *New Poetry*” (emphasis ours). In her introduction to the anthology, Cole Swensen walks a fine line between the avant-gardist tradition (derived from European modernisms) and the self-contained verse tradition of the New Critics. In an attempt to reconcile the two traditions within a new hybridized ideal, Swensen even slips into a paradox in which she cannot help but embrace marginality: amidst the many schools and traditions of poetry, Swensen sees “a thriving center of alterity.”<sup>5</sup> For the ample representation Swensen and St. John provide, not a single Chicana/o poet can be found within these pages. The anthology is composed of and edited by writers whose work we deeply admire; however, who inside this collection is really outside; where is the alterity so central to the anthology’s organization?<sup>6</sup> In an anthology about hybridized poetry, the Chicana/o has no voice. This is particularly problematic considering the decades worth of criticism devoted to articulating how Chicana/o identity and poetics

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<sup>4</sup> Timothy Yu, p. 50. Yu’s treatment of the Language poets is deft and invaluable. See his discussion of the group in Chapter Two of *Race and the Avant-Garde*, pp. 39–72, but especially his analysis of the epistolary exchange between Andrews, Bernstein, and Silliman regarding the journal *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, pp. 51–60.

<sup>5</sup> Cole Swensen, “Introduction,” *American Hybrid*, ed. Cole Swensen and David St. John (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009), p. xx.

<sup>6</sup> It is the ideology guiding the anthology’s construction that appears to be particularly problematic for reasons that will be stated.

is situated in states of plurality, of “hybridity.” But given the particular poetic history that Swensen and St. John trace and even validate, how could Chicana/os find a place in this anthology? In instituting the binary of the two traditions, the editors of *American Hybrid* assume a particular history of poetics (and politics),<sup>7</sup> and, unfortunately, the history of poetics and politics constructed by Swensen looks over/through the rise of Chicana/o literatures and politics in the ‘60s—the rise of a truly “new” and “hybrid” political identity and voice in the U.S.

This oversight occurs perhaps because the concept of “voice” remains troubling for many “new” poetic movements. Indeed, today’s poetry—constituted as the avant-garde or its heirs—considers identity as a voiced construction passé, if not heretical. In a recent edition of *Poetry*, Kenneth Goldsmith reasserts the abolishment of identity even as he challenges fragmentation and non-linearity. He asserts,

Our immersive digital environment demands new responses from writers. What does it mean to be a poet in the Internet age? These two movements, Flarf and Conceptual Writing, each formed over the past five years, are direct investigations to that end. And as different as they are, they have surprisingly come up with a set of similar solutions. Identity, for one, is up for grabs. Why use your own words when you can express yourself just as well by using someone else’s? And if your identity is not your own, then sincerity must be tossed out as well.<sup>8</sup>

Our contention with Goldsmith’s assertions has little to do with the actual work of Conceptualism or Flarf; many of these works are interesting and challenging (though they are far from entirely “new responses”). However, Goldsmith’s essay is troubling

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<sup>7</sup> A “hybrid” poetics rooted in a thesis and antithesis finding synthesis assumes a particular dialectical vision of history, a dialectics rooted in a particular hierarchal historical projection with knowledge of its own end, an unstated and perhaps unconscious teleology. This is why the poetics of *American Hybrid* moves from assuming a possible binary in its analysis of literary history to needing to claim it as fact—to not claim it as fact would illegitimate the anthology’s conception of itself as “hybrid.” In other words, the anthology wouldn’t be necessary—as it is, it makes itself necessary. On another note, William Stobb’s excellent analysis in *Miporadio* (Episode 32, “The Idea of a Hybrid Poetic”) opens this discussion to an outstanding scope.

<sup>8</sup> Kenneth Goldsmith, “Flarf is Dionysus. Conceptual Writing is Apollo: An introduction to the 21st Century’s most controversial poetry movements,” *Poetry Magazine*, <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/journal/article.html?id=237176>>. Blog and comment responses to Goldsmith’s post/article are dizzying, but helpful. Much of what we say, of course, has been said in various permutations. For a full scope of the conversation, see the comment stream on the blog.

for the Chicana/o poet for the claims it makes about identity. Chicana/os still lack a viable social and political self. And though Chicana/o identity is, in many ways, a question—even “up for grabs”—the culture and society in which the Chicana/o lives, works, and breathes, too easily solidifies and essentializes that identity by denying the Chicana/o a voice. Expression matters in the current social and political climate for the Chicano. To say—to express—matters. For the ethnic-racialized subject whose very subjectivity is invested in terminologies of identity (“Latino,” “Chicano,” “Hispanic,”), *language* is vital. Thus, to dictate a teleological aim for language, to posit that our poetics progressively move forward in a narrative that requires newness, is to offer a colonial dictation for the ethnic-racialized subject’s ontological and national status. Questions of identity are still at the heart of Chicana/o poetics, and, though the Chicana/o poet is decades removed from Corky Gonzales’s assertion, “I am Joaquin,” Gonzales’s proclamation has not lost its pertinence. Indeed, Chicana/os “have come a long way to nowhere,/ unwillingly dragged by that monstrous, technical,/ industrial giant called Progress and Anglo success . . .” precisely because they have long struggled to express themselves “using someone else’s [words].”

To put it in other terms: one must have a politically and economically viable identity in order to willingly lose it, to throw it to the wind. Those who say that for aesthetic reasons identity is dead, fragmented, or passé, often have a viable identity they do not need to worry about. Being invisible or visible as a white male is quite different than being invisible or visible as a Chicana/o. This invisibility itself speaks to a broader symptom in the poetics of the “new.” The invisibility of identity is a symptom of a broader ideological construction: that of the exclusion of Chicana/o voices in the broader cultural hierarchy (this is not a categorical absolute, but rather, a fact of this particular moment in U.S. history). The exclusion of a representative Chicana/o and Latina/o voices (NB: Rodrigo Toscano, Lorna Dee Cervantes, and even Juan Felipe Herrera arguably fulfill the publication and aesthetic criteria) in *American Hybrid* and other such “avantist” anthologies is symptomatic of this broader ideological exclusion and social disparity.

## **II. In Other Words: Alternative Histories**

In the mid-1960s, the Brown Power movement is forging ahead and is before the nation: Corky Gonzalez articulates “Yo Soy Joaquin,” and Cesar Chavez begins organizing. In the realm of poetics this is particularly problematic because just as the postmodern poetic begins to advocate for the erasure of self, and as it questions previous forms of “authority,” various minority groups, Chicana/os included, begin proclaiming their right to national selfhood and are in fact calling to have some authority over what happens in their lives.

This is the social climate from which the new American avant-garde emerges. Though the postmodern avant-garde claims to move away from authoritative power, it only does so to inscribe that power in a new, “destabilized” discourse: Chicanos proclaim “I am Joaquin,” and avantists claim there is no “I.” But to erase the “I” is also to delegitimize the very vehicle by which Chicana/os proclaim national and social viability. And in establishing themselves as the new, avantists inevitably construct all others as the old.<sup>9</sup> As Charles Altieri notes, “where there is an avant-garde, there must be an arrière-garde. And where there are such binaries, there will be ego formations that have a great deal at stake in maintaining the relevant distinctions.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, the postmodern poet who hopes to deconstruct binaries stakes her or his very identity within one, and in dictating the terms of newness, exercises a power that excludes a whole host of aesthetics and communities that foster them.

The historical result is that what comes to be known as “official verse culture,” “the School of Quietude,” or simply “conservative” verse is in fact a nebulous space that can only be defined in the negative, by what it is not (as is the case for “avant” traditions). Moreover, because “innovative” poetics resist and reject any sense of singularity, the narrative lyric—a form with which many foundational Chicana/o poets identify due to its ability to affirm identity while also lineating that identity’s experience—is summarily rejected, as it smacks of old romanticism. The result is a type of

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<sup>9</sup> It is, of course, as stated earlier, a privilege to have a social self that one has the luxury to erase. Furthermore, like any essentialist move, there exists the opposite or “other” of the avant-garde’s claim to not only alterity, but also newness.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Altieri, “Avant-Garde or Arrière-Garde in Recent American Poetry,” *Poetics Today* 20.4 (1999), p. 633.

political hijacking on the avant-garde's part. On one hand, the American avant-garde aligns itself with the disenfranchised in that it too resists perceived dominant culture. On the other hand, it rejects the very forms of representation by which "minority" poets largely speak.

By the time Language Poetry comes to define the postmodern avant-garde in the late '70s and into the '80s, the politics of poetry become increasingly polarized. In turn, as Marjorie Perloff states,

. . . the eighties witnessed the coming of the minority communities: first women and African-Americans, then Chicano and Asian-American and Native American poets, gay and lesbian poets, and so on. In their inception, many of these poetries were, ironically, quite conservative so far as form, rhetoric, and the ontology of the poem were concerned. But counterculture poets and critics couldn't—and still can't—say this out loud because they would have immediately been labeled racist or sexist.<sup>11</sup>

The notion that the avant-garde could be considered racist or prejudiced remains problematic for those critics and poets precisely because the avant-garde is, in many implicit ways, racist or sexist. Perloff herself operates on the same "make it new" assumptions that the avant-garde does, and thus makes a gross generalization regarding what is and is not "conservative." Herself the primary scholar who legitimized Language poetry—a group consisting of few to no "minorities"—to the academy, she finds it "ironic" that these "minority" poetries were in fact "conservative" in how they formally organize their work, how their content speaks (but not necessarily what it says), and how they create and assert selfhood. But an illegitimate divide occurs between the aesthetic and the political. Form is understood as an extension or revelation of content, as Creeley asserted, and even the ontology established through these devices is dismissed from the very real identities that suffered very real political—not just aesthetic—oppression. The move allows Perloff to assume the avant-garde can remain more "countercultural" than the "minority" poets whose very bodies, rhetorics, and ontologies challenge dominant culture's ideas of normalcy. What one sees here is Perloff relying and judging poetics based on the standards of an avant-garde

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<sup>11</sup> Marjorie Perloff, "Whose New American Poetry? Anthologizing in the Nineties," *Diacritics* 26.3/4 (1996), p. 118.

that understands its innovative notions through a foundationally expansionist, even hegemonic, concept of the “new.”

One could argue that some of these assertions—like those of the avant-gardist—are overstated. That contention is fair enough. Nonetheless, one may defy terms of newness because claims to the new not only create a faulty binary but also because “new” is not new, nor is it all that revolutionary. America thrives on the concept of the new, the forward-thinking, and the idea of progress. Every year brings forth a “new” car model, a redesigned computer, or newer, sexier jeans; and every few years there is a new school of poetry. However, the “new” car still runs on an engine whose design is a century old,<sup>12</sup> the new and sexier jeans still are, well, jeans (what matter is it that they are called ‘apple-bottom’). The “new,” as it is currently conceived, is only “new” superficially. Is it possible the term *avant-garde*, and in extension claims of “innovative/experimental/post-avant/new,” require revision from how they are currently being employed in contemporary American poetry?<sup>13</sup>

### **III. The Challenge of Chicana/o Poetries**

When one attempts to speak about “innovation” in Chicana/o poetry in light of the larger poetic discourse, one faces several problems. There immediately exists insti-

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<sup>12</sup> The new “hybrids” can be argued to be new; however, the complete electric car was designed and employed years ago; however, it was discontinued for very real and unjust economic reasons; thus, the truly “new” didn’t fit the socio-political reality and was eliminated, while the acceptable “hybrid” (which doesn’t entirely threaten the oil industry, i.e. the existing hierarchy) is now being offered as a “suitable” replacement.

<sup>13</sup> We realize our contention is not all that new. The claim of the death of the avant-garde occurred in the visual arts as early as 1964; in *The Times Literary Supplement*, Johnathon Miller claimed the obsolescence of the “experimental front,” that “we no longer seem able to imagine an experimental front, way up front the main body of art, beyond the reach of current understanding” (Paul Mann, *The Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde* [Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991], p. 34). The death of the theoretical avant-garde is not a new argument: eminent critics such as Paul Mann, Rosalind Krauss, and Hal Foster have written extensively on the topic. In fact, the topic of the death (and consequent rebirth) of the avant-garde is itself passé. It is compelling to see the avant-garde resurrected, in this instance, under the title of a “hybrid” poetics (other titles being “Flarf” and “Conceptualism”). Is this conception of the new disingenuous? After all, Flarf’s claims of being new because of the emergence of technology still rests on collage and Dadaist techniques established over a century ago, techniques whose theories of social critique are far from revolutionary (one might argue they reify a particular elitist social order and hierarchy) and the legitimacy of a “hybrid” poetics, as it is conceived in the anthology, is questionable.

tutional prejudice. Yet identity and representation themselves are highly problematic given their tendency to push toward an essentialist ontology. Post-structuralist theories, and history itself, have taught us that any affirmation of an “essential” Chicana/o identity erases particular Chicana and Chicano subjectivities, and that such essentialization excludes even as it attempts to include. However, to say that there is no “real” Chicana/o identity also dismisses the real social, economic, and physical damage done to those subjectivities as a result of a dominant culture’s own essentialization of the “Chicana/o.” Indeed, one can say that a certain shared Chicana/o experience can exist because of the dominant culture’s imposing social and economic oppression.

Many post-positivist realist critics take the position that one can have “true” experience with the world. Basing much of their criticism on Satya P. Mohanty’s work, such critics understand the “objective” or “true” as always already mediated by language, that it is always already constructed. As Paula M.L. Moya asserts, scholarship needs to move away from a binary-based understanding of identity and operate on the logic of identities being “both real and constructed: how they can be politically and epistemically significant, on the one hand, and variable, nonessential, and radically historical, on the other.”<sup>14</sup> Such an understanding of identity mediates the self through community, believing the self is communally constructed. Under these terms, poetic identities can represent communal experiences precisely because the speaking self is communally constituted. Indeed, “it is on the basis of this revised understanding of experience that we can construct a realist theory of social or cultural identity, in which experiences would not serve as foundations because of their self-evident authenticity but would provide some of the raw material with which we construct identities.”<sup>15</sup> An identity, then, is formed and tested within a communal context where each subjective experience comes to be a piece of truth that informs one’s understanding of the “objective.” Yet, because experience is the basis for identity, one’s truth is always open to revision as one continually interacts with one’s own as well as other communities.

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<sup>14</sup> Paula M.L. Moya, “Introduction: Reclaiming Identity,” *Reclaiming Identity: Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism*, ed. Paula M.L. Moya and Michael R. Hames-García (Berkeley: U of California Press, 2000), p. 12.

<sup>15</sup> Satya P. Mohanty, “The Epistemic Status of Cultural Identity: On *Beloved* and the Postcolonial Condition,” *Reclaiming Identity: Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism*, ed. Paula M.L. Moya and Michael R. Hames-García, (Berkeley: U of California Press, 2000), p. 31.

Such an understanding of identity immediately changes the dynamic by which one can speak about a Chicano/a self in relation to “new” poetics. If the self is understood by and through community, speaking about Chicana/o innovative poetics can only be done through the “local.” By “local” we mean “located” or placed historically, geographically, socially or economically. We emphasize the local because even the notion of the Chicana/o as embodying a borderland insinuates a geographic and even economic location that continued generations may not in fact experience.

Finally, because any avant-garde conversation operates on a binary, one must always ask how a work is avant-garde in relation to whom, to what, or to when. A binary can only be effectively used when it is located, not generalized. If, and as, one moves toward generalization—that is, toward ever-larger localities—one must remain wary about how tenuous and thin identity claims become, all the while acknowledging that this does not necessarily invalidate such claims.

Thus, though one might say the work of, for example, Gary Soto or Lorna Dee Cervantes is not avant-garde in relation to dominant culture’s standards of innovation (which is already a troubled understanding—as exemplified by their and others’ absence from *American Hybrid*), one can say that Cervantes’s work is innovative in that it challenges Chicano phallogentrism and that Gary Soto’s work is avant-garde only in that some of his work challenges notions of an actual, tangible Chicana/o history.

In the end, we offer this critique in order to begin a dialogue and, in consequence, to perhaps arrive at some answers to troubling questions concerning aesthetics and socio-political realities. We suggest that the critical dialogue turn its words not toward suppositions about the aesthetic absolutes of text, but toward considerations of the contexts in which text takes shape in order to ask how particularized expressions and implementations of language sustain, regenerate and even challenge the communities in which we live. After all is said, the question one should ask is not “what is new,” but what is useful, and how in fact the self and the community is made new through the work.