

(Re) Solving the Dilemmas of Modernity: Liu, Linmark, and the Umbrella of Asian American Subjectivity

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(Re) Solving the Dilemmas of Modernity: Liu, Linmark, and the Umbrella of Asian American Subjectivity

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Three moments in nineteenth-century poetry foreshadow the modernist crisis in subjectivity. Ross, in *The Failure of Modernism: Symptoms of American Poetry* (1986) points us to the first, a moment under the great night sky from Emerson's "Nature":

Standing on the bare ground—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space—all mean egoism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball. I am nothing. I see all. The undercurrents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.

This willed self-erasure finds a more dramatic echo some eight years later, in Matthew Arnold's "Empedocles on Etna" (1852). Here, the philosopher-poet climbs Mt. Etna in a journey towards suicide, despondent because the Truth is no longer One; it is fragmented, and shines out in innumerable directions, like sunlight from the pieces of a broken mirror. This self-erasure, too, is voluntary; it comes from the poet's perception that "the sea of faith" is withdrawing from Western culture, that the credibility of Western metaphysics is disappearing with a roar down the beach.

Another span of eight years and we locate our third moment in Whitman's attempt, in the *Calamus* poems, to construct a "real" self, not the public persona of his poems to that time. David Bergman draws attention to this change in his *Gaiety Transfigured: Gay Self-Representation in American Literature* (1991): "Whitman wishes us to know that in Calamus the mask of Everyman is to be dropped for his real face, a selfhood that, although less all-encompassing, is human-scaled and clearer" (49). His previous self was fueled by the dynamism of public life, but the self to be created will reveal a secret source of energy in his "love of comrades" (49).

Whitman failed in this attempt to construct a private self; Bergman uses this failure as a point of departure for a discussion of the egolessness of the gay poet: "Identity is not self-generating; it demands a culture, a history, a society in which to develop . . . Whitman had no social, poetic, or personal mirror in which to gain a view of himself, and no identity can be viewed in such a void" (49).

The three moments entice us with their differences. Emerson, from his position in a moment of mystical fusion with the universe. Arnold, conscious of the waning moon of the British Empire and the declining currency of Western metaphysical systems, declares ideology to be the man in having Empedocles destroy himself on Etna. Whitman, on the other hand, is at the source of mythopoetic thought, not at its flaccid end; in Ross's view, "Whitman's premodernist vision of *Leaves of Grass* as a 'language experiment' [offers] 'new words, new potentialities of speech' to the newest poet of the

‘American’ sublime” (209–210).

Whitman’s egolessness, unlike that represented in Emerson or Arnold, is not voluntary. It derives from a personal, psychological condition revealed in the poems of Calamus. The absence of a lover-comrade deprives him of a sense of selfhood. Bergman suggests: “Whitman particularly feels the isolation [of] having no one in which to ‘see himself reflected,’ since without such a mirror, he loses his integrity, his sense of being, his identity” (50).

The purpose of this paper is not to review the conditions of subjectivity in modern poetry, nor is it to explore the relationship between modernity and Anglo-American poetry. My purpose here is to examine the poetry of two contemporary Asian American gay poets, Timothy Liu and R. Zamora Linmark and to assert a place for them within the traditions of gay American poetry outlined by Bergman. It is my contention that the two poets are cultural poets in the sense von Hallberg (1985) resurrects from Karl Shapiro’s distinction between “culture poetry” and (mere) “poetry”:

The first type is that which attempts to explain culture. It can do this in the manner of Metaphysical poets, who were troubled by scientific knowledge and who wished to compete with science; by rewriting history according to a plan; by tracing the rise and fall of a particular belief, and so forth. Culture poetry is always didactic, as indeed most modern poetry is. It is a means to an end, not an end, like art. Culture poetry is poetry in reverse; it dives back into the historical situation, instead of flowering from it. And there it remains to enrich the grounds for criticism. (1960: 22; in Hallberg, 2)

Shapiro’s ideological framework betrays a kind of cultural naivete and yet is useful for distinguishing those poets whose work goes beyond the oppressively personal. In singling out Liu and Linmark as representative Asian American ‘culture poets’ I mean to distinguish them from some gay Asian American poets whose poetry is chiefly of a confessional nature. At the same time, Shapiro’s framework displays the unforgiveable innocence of white, middle class America unaware of the plight of minorities in their midst: “culture poetry is poetry in reverse; it dives back into the historical situation, instead of flowering from it.”

At the peal of this innocent bell we find ourselves back on the cusp of Emerson’s willed egolessness and Arnold’s gratuitous despair; minority literature, be it gay and lesbian or Asian American or African American, can hardly flower from the historical situation. Emerson’s willed selflessness may be a flower of some aesthetic value, but Whitman’s despair over a lack of self-constructing community or Morrison’s rendering of the circumstances of Beloved’s death can be, at best, *fleurs du mal* of the variety which testify to the monolithic poverty and violence of America’s historical imagination.

This paper proposes to examine Liu and Linmark as being within what Bergman identifies as the tradition of the egoless gay poet, but at the same time I want to suggest that more work needs to be done to examine the position of minority literature in relation to the discourse of modernity. How can we relate Ross’s claim that the failure of modernist poetry lies in its equation of “[an] attack on

the epistemological and metaphysical tradition of subjectivism with a literary (or practical) attempt to dispossess or to purge poetic discourse of subjectivity tout court” (xv) to the inability of gay poets like Thom Gunn to experience subjectivity? Bergman comments that, in Gunn’s case, the impersonality of his poetry “originally stemmed not from any aesthetic doctrine he might have embraced” (46) but rather from a personal lack; Bergman reports Gunn’s relief at Eliot’s remark—of no small interest to us here—that “art is the escape from personality” (46).

Bergman traces two directions for gay poets since Whitman, two ways of dealing with the dilemma of egolessness and the need to assemble a gay poetic subjectivity:

The first direction is to resolve to go without a poetic identity—to regard the unitary and limited construct of the ego as a seductive, but ultimately unnecessary piece of poetic baggage. The other direction is to construct a self out of the growing tradition of gay literary presence. Neither of these directions could exist without Whitman, whose heroic failure constitutes a bulwark upon which so much of American poetics is situated. (52)

Bergman sees John Ashbery, one of the most important of contemporary gay poets, as being representative of the first direction, and Richard Howard as exemplifying the second. For Ashbery, Whitman

guards a ‘holy land’ compounded of the American past, Ashbery’s own idyllic childhood . . . [a] world [which] is threatened not by the loss of *unselfconsciousness*—since Ashbery does not have a clear enough self to be conscious of—but of *nonselfconsciousness*, the awareness that his lack of selfhood is itself the fall from grace, a recognition brought about most commonly by the emergence of the homoerotic. (53)

This first direction in the tradition of the egoless gay poet is characterized by a formalism of style and an obscurity of meaning (Ashbery’s poetry is notoriously obscure) which is similar to the formalism and obscurity of modernist poetry, notably that of T. S. Eliot; it is not surprising that of the three American poets Ross treats in his study of the modernist attempt to “purge poetic discourse of subjectivity,” Eliot is one and Ashbery is another.

Timothy Liu shares this formalism and obscurity even as he laments the absence of self. In “Ariel Singing,” the opening poem of *Vox Angelica* (1992), we find the speaker sated with men “standing in line waiting to show me [their] poppies/ and doves,” for when the men depart, when their “magic act is over” nothing remains but “an empty cage” (3). In these encounters he does not experience the self: “In the glass I saw/ one soul, not two colliding into one.” This is not happiness, the poet declares; nor is the alternative of what “priests continue to hold out . . . to the weak.” Liu, a former Mormon priest, has moved beyond institutional Christianity even as he attempts to come to grips with the real, the actual in lines that impart a secular echo of Eliot’s “Ash Wednesday”: “Teach me/how to sing in a grove of olive trees,/ to fall as a sparrow. It is all I want.”

The somber tone and muted mourning of the self in Liu’s poem recall lines written by Ashbery

nearly twenty years earlier, in his much-celebrated “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror” (1975). Here the older poet reconsiders the representation of the heterosexual male ego in Parmigianino’s self-portrait, even as he considers the fabric of his own days. While Bergman directs our attention to this poem as a moment of confrontation between the weak homosexual ego and the assertive smugness of Parmigianino’s self-portrait (56–59), he does not draw our attention to the following lines evocative of Liu:

I see in this only the chaos
Of your round mirror which organizes everything
Around the polestar of your eyes which are empty,
Know nothing, dream but reveal nothing.
I feel the carousel starting slowly
And going faster and faster . . .
Why should it all boil down to one
Uniform substance, a magma of interiors.
My guide in these matters is your self . . . (*Norton Anthology*, 2651–2652)

Here again we find the mirror empty of self, as well as a questioning of its necessity: “why should all boil down to one/ uniform substance.” In Liu’s “Labyrinth” we find an acceptance of egolessness as the weak or absent self is represented by a brightly colored shirt in an image that calls up Yeats’ “tattered thing”:

The yellow shirt of joy hangs
like a ghost in the moth-eaten
heart. I accept this absence,
this gift that has not fallen
apart in my hands. (4)

What distinguishes the egolessness of the gay poet from the modernist attempt to rid poetry of subjectivity—two conditions which we have noted in Ashbery and Eliot look very much alike—is the gay poet’s determination to use his “specialness” to cleanse his world—at least in the space of the poem—of distorting forces like patriarchy and the colonial impulse, formations which accrue as the heterosexual ego, unconscious of the Other, asserts his place in the scheme of things. Hence in Liu’s poem quoted above he celebrates the absence of ego and names it “this gift that has not fallen/ apart in my hands.”

Bergman sees the influence of Whitman in this determination to subvert those cultural forces which have already distorted or eliminated the subjectivity of the poet. Quoting a study of the nineteenth-century poet by Michael Moon (1991), Berger agrees that Whitman’s poetry illustrates ““subjectivity simultaneously *in the grip* of a deforming cultural formation . . . and *in the act of*, or perhaps more precisely, *in the act of imagining*, subverting the formation”” (Moon 163, in Berger 50; italics original in

Moon).

In Liu's "The Tree That Knowledge Is" we see the poet demythologizing organized religion even as he locates the homoerotic that now claims him:

I do not want to die. Not for love.
Nor a vision of that tree I cannot
recollect, shining in the darkness
with cherubim and a flaming sword.
All my life that small still voice
of God coiled up inside my body.
The lopped-off branch that guilt is
is not death. Nor life. But the lust
that flowers at the end of it. (5)

Similarly, in "Apostasy," religious memories of the speaker's home, where "a pen lies/ on a desk for forty years in fear/ of faded passages/ marked in red— "(Online poetrymagazine.com) are superimposed upon images which are actual and present to the speaker. It is Liu's signature act to take the abstractions of childhood, many of them religious in origin, and juxtapose upon them images of the actuality visible to the speaker. The emphasis in this poem is upon human love as opposed to the distorting demands of the "Word of God in my father's house/ a monolith/ that grew to heavy/ for us to lift." The cross at the end of the poem is no longer the abstract sign of Christianity, but an actuality the speaker embraces, "the cross not loved/ as symbol but as wood and nail."

As noted above, the second direction gay poets have moved in since Whitman has been "to construct a self out of the growing tradition of gay literary presence" (Bergman, 52). While Bergman chooses to illustrate this second way of attempting to negotiate "the problem of the social construction of a gay poetic selfhood" (52) with the erudite poetry of Richard Howard, the famous translator of Gide and other French literary figures, I would like to suggest that a more fundamental touchstone for poets seeking a construction of self in the traditions of American gay poetry lies in the work of Allen Ginsberg.

Ginsberg's *Howl* (1956) resurrected the repetition and open-ended line of Whitman's poetry as it created new ontological possibilities for the gay poet, much as Audre Lorde's *Zami* had served as a Genesis for black lesbian poets and writers. The self created in the angry lines of *Howl* is outraged and outrageous; outraged at the deformations of American society in the Eisenhower years and determined to assert an outrageous, openly gay voice against the injustices of that society. It replicates Moon's vision of Whitman's existence as "subjectivity simultaneously in the grip of a deforming cultural formation" while preparing an assault on that very formation. My second assertion in this paper is here: that R. Zimora Linmark's poetry is clearly in this Ginsberg tradition, in the open-endedness of its lines, in the use of repetition as a structural key, and in the presence of a self constructed in the joy of

outrage.

This construction of self through and in outrage can be seen most clearly in Linmark's novelistic montage of poetry and prose, *Rolling the R's*, memories of a gay Filipino American boy's elementary schooldays in Hawaii. While some of the chapters were originally published as poems, others with a look of prose reveal their poetic nature through Ginsberg-like repetition of phrases. One such chapter is "Blame It on Chachi," a prose-poem on the construction of gay identity:

Edgar Ramirez is a faggot. Mrs. Takemoto knows it. She's always telling him to stop putting his hair behind his ears.

"And cut your hair, Edgar," she says, "It's getting long again."

Edgar Ramirez is a faggot. Christopher and Rowell, the fifth grade bulls, know it.

They're always tackling him in flag football.

"A flag for a fag," they say, "Fag flag."

Edgar Ramirez is a faggot. Nelson and Prudencio, the other fifth-grade bulls, know it.

They're always shooting him with heir slingshots or tripping him each time he walks by swaying his hips hula-style.

"What, cannot walk without heels?" they say.

Edgar Ramirez is a faggot. Caroline, Judy-Ann, and Maggie the Hot-to-Trot girls, know it.

They're always fighting over him because he looks like a Filipino John Travolta. (3)

The difference here with the formalism of Ashbery or Liu is evident in the openness of the lines as well as the open-handed, accessible meaning. There is, too, a building of energy in the accumulation of repeated structures, an energy that threatens to spill over into the question that outrage pushes at the reader: so what?

In place of the more obscure identities of modernist verse we have a beating drum that will not go away. Edgar asserts the closeted queerness of those around him and declares, in the pidgin of the island, "But the next day, I march back to the court in my skimpy PE clothes for be the I Shall Return Queen"(6). In the space of the first six pages of Linmark's work the protagonist has achieved a gay subjectivity.

In the poem-chapter, "They Like You Because You Eat Dog," the speaker catalogues the reasons Filipinos and Filipinas, gay and straight, are "appreciated" in the first world. Here the speaker takes on those postcolonial attitudes common to first world "visitors" to the Filipino American world. Again, the repetition of phrase Ginsberg-style is the chief structuring element in the poem:

They like you because you eat dog, goat, and pig's blood.

They like you because you grind your women the way you eat pulutan.

They like you because you drink, play mah-jongg, and cockfight.

They like you because you go to church every Sunday.

They like you because you go to church every Sunday.

They like you because you kneel hard, bend over quick, and spread wide.

They like you because you worship blue passports.

.....

They like you because you're a copycat, want to be just like them.

They like you because—in a few more years—you'll be just like them,

And when that time comes, will they like you more? (71–72)

The question in the final line of the poem explodes the tension that has built up in the catalogue of hegemonies that rule Filipino American life: the hegemony of the American passport and the American way of life, hegemonies that Linmark will take on again in a later poem, “A Letter to Claire Danes from a Fan in Manila.” In the lines above Linmark also points to the hegemony of white gayness in the brown gay world. The poem is a mini-course in postcolonial hegemonies.

“A Letter to Claire Danes” makes use of the controversy surrounding the American actress’s comments on Manila in an interview. Linmark prefaces his poem with her comments: “The place just fucking smells of cockroaches. There’s no sewage system in Manila, and people have nothing there. People with, like, no arms, no legs, no eyes, no teeth. We shot in a real psychiatric hospital . . .” The tone of the speaker is calm, for after all, he is a fan, as the title informs us: “what you have said about this city/ or roaches and missing extremities/ are bold impressions I cannot hold/ against you, for first time travelers/ from First World countries all undergo/ cultural seizures here . . .” (*Take Out*, 168).

Linmark abandons his characteristically long, open line to create an impression of furtive delicacy that begins to write its opposite script as the poem continues and reveals the hideous emptiness of the actress’s vision. The speaker’s gay identity reveals itself as the poem concludes with an invitation to Danes to revisit the Philippines: “Make another movie./ A romance, and not one filmed in a psych ward./ Do it with Matt, Damon or/ McConaughey or Broderick,/ but preferably Dillon. Or why not/ Matt Mendoza, Manila’s own/ achy-breaky heartthrob? And bring/ with you, once more, your dollars,/ your talent, and this time,/ crutches and roach spray” (168). The gay speaker’s vicarious interest in the idea of sex with one of the Hollywood male commodities barely disguises the irony of the final statement. This is Linmark talking through his (clenched) teeth.

Eng (2001) praises Linmark’s achievement in subverting the distorting formations of American imperialism in Hawaii: “*Rolling the R’s* brings together queerness and diaspora in innovative, destabilizing, and compelling ways that contest the dominant representations comprising the domestic image-repertoire” (224). Eng does not deal specifically with Linmark’s poetry or his place in any American literary tradition; his conclusion, however, is closely related to my own concern with the construction of gay subjectivity: “It is precisely sexuality—an obsessive queer sexuality that permeates *Rolling the R’s* from beginning to end—that binds [Linmark’s immigrant adolescent characters] together as a social group with a common sense of purpose and spirit de corps” (225).

As members of various Asian American ethnic groups, the characters in Linmark’s mosaic of poetry

and prose are subject to the same kinds of fragmentation which weaken minority groups and keep them vulnerable to the predatory habits of American racism and imperialism described above in “They Like You Because You Eat Dog.” Eng sees the availability of a “queer diaspora” in Linmark’s work as offering the possibility of a new subjectivity:

This type of queer affiliation allows us a particular insight into minoritarian identity politics. It allows an understanding of queerness as a form of social and political organization that proffers the provisional identity of a name. This is a name under which provisional politics can be strategized and rallied, one not predicated on the suppression but rather on the engagement of racial, gender, class, and national differences for its social efficacy and effectiveness. In our contemporary moment, this is what a diaspora organized around queerness potentially offers. (226)

Eng sees this potential subjectivity as being, primarily, a breakthrough for the “Asian American male . . . in the twenty-first century” (228). It is the contention of this paper that the poetry of Liu and Linmark partakes in a wider tradition of American queer poetry, a poesis which transforms the absence of subjectivity, through the subversion of distorted social formation, into a new subjectivity born in a genesis of outrage. Bergman shares the moment of his own personal rebirth into this tradition in his “Introduction,” where he recalls how his consciousness of America’s racist history on a visit to Harper’s Ferry roused the figure of Walt Whitman from his unconscious and opened the valves of his blocked creativity:

Not until my lover at the time and I took a day trip to Harper’s Ferry—that scene of another attempt at liberation—did language and emotion open, and out of the glove compartment of his rusted Beetle I took a piece of paper and wrote the beginning of a series of poems addressed to Walt Whitman. On a scrap of paper, I jotted “To be American is to be queer,” and in so doing united the currents of the national spirit with my literary ancestry and my erotic desires. (10)

To be American is to be queer. Bergman addresses those words to Walt Whitman, the font of the American tradition of gay poetry. Under the banner of this proclamation, unfurled by an awareness of civil protest as much as by an awareness of Whitman’s poetry, Bergman opens up an ontological space not unlike the promising subjectivities created by Linmark in his poetry.

It is when Bergman steps back into history at Harper’s Ferry that he becomes aware of this new subjectivity; it is a motion diametrically opposed to Emerson’s mystical ecstasy described above, a union he achieves by stepping *out* of history. More work needs to be done in delineating the shape of modernity and its desire to extinguish history, its permanent craving for the “tabula rasa” (Ross, 212). Empedocles’ ontological dilemma on Etna devolves from the impossibility of reconciling ideology with the evidence of history. Liu’s reclamation of “the cross not loved/as symbol but as wood and nail” provides a re-entry into a material history, stripped of its ideological deformations. Linmark’s work, on the other hand, establishes a paradigm of minority intervention to raise new roof-beams of collaborative subjectivity.

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