

Book Review

Min Hyoung Song, *The Children of 1965: On Writing, and Not Writing, as an Asian American* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), pp. xiv, 296.

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Min Hyoung Song's *The Children of 1965* reads contemporary Asian American writers in relation to a matrix of French post-structuralist thinkers and phenomenologists, including Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Brian Massumi, and Henri Bergson. Song argues that the "new" Asian American literature may be interpreted as working within the theoretical domain described by Deleuze and Guattari as "becoming," "language as rhizome," or "lines of flight,"¹ while their works enact new forms of racial and cultural subjectivity. This argument is all the more important because the world is changing ever faster and becoming increasingly multicultural and diverse. To support his claims, Song closely engages with a large number of contemporary Asian American writers and poets, including Susan Choi, Kiran Desai, Cathy Park Hong, Ha Jin, Jhumpa Lahiri, Chang-rae Lee, Bharati Mukherjee, Brian Ascalon Roley, and Gene Luen Yang. This so-called new generation of Asian American writers was mostly born after the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, and its members achieved their fame during or after the 1980s. Moreover, many of them, in the 1990s, were winners or finalists of prominent literary awards, like the Pulitzer Prize, PEN/Hemingway Award, National Book Award, and Barnard Women Poets Prize.

In the Introduction, Song sets out his general argument that contemporary Asian American writers are actively engaged in the project of redefining "Asian American literature" and "what it means

to be an Asian American,” and this project distinguishes them from the “previous generation of self-consciously Asian American writers” and their political aims.² In other words, the contemporary writers care more about bringing a diverse set of heterogeneous perspectives to racial boundaries rather than maintaining the “tradition of racial solidarity-making among Asians in America.”³ When asked how they feel about being labeled as “Asian American,” Song says, many of these writers show, to varying degrees, discomfort and reservations about the meaning of this “racialized” labeling and its impacts on their writing. But Song also argues that this does not mean that these writers have totally abandoned the concept of “Asian American” ethnicity or race. The main project of *The Children of 1965*, then, aims at dislocating and relocating Asian Americans and their literature in a “zone of indeterminacy that continually coproduce[s], and reproduce[s],” so that the concept of “race” can be more an expression of creativity.⁴ It is also noteworthy to find some parallels between Song’s “new” Asian American identity and Deleuze’s “becoming” subject, which constantly de-territorializes the meaning of the self as it searches out lines of flight. In this way, over the course of the book, his notion of Asian American develops into a more “innovative, fascinating and richly complex” concept.⁵

The first chapter is concerned with how the contemporary Asian American subject requires an active identification process and therefore should be differentiated from Althusser’s idea of “interpellation.” Song’s “becoming” Asian American refers to those who decline to accept a socially and culturally pre-given identity and do not give priority to the “stereotyped” meaning of Asian American ethnicity.⁶ For this reason, they should be understood as a “subjectless” group—a group with the potential to create themselves anew endlessly.⁷ Besides drawing on terminology from Deleuzian theory, Song invokes such French phenomenological concepts as Massumi’s “potentiality” and Bergson’s “evolution” to approach Asian American identity. Moreover, borrowing from Deleuze’s “Literature and Life,” Song notes that the primary function of literature is to lead readers to an “incomplete” state or a zone of “proximity” and help them become “minority” subjects.⁸ Similar to the Deleuzian understanding, the fundamental aim of Asian American

“literature,” for Song, is not so much to abandon the idea of race itself but to both “criticize” and “desire” political subjectivity so that the meaning of “race” can be constantly reconstructed, creating a more powerful concept.⁹ Chapter 2 observes the ideological complexity of writings on ethnicity produced during the height of the Asian American movement in the 1960s and 1970s. These Asian American writers were much more politically engaged, joining Asian American unions and inventing a new language to serve as “the medium of culture and people’s sensibility,” as shown in the manifesto of *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian American Literature*.¹⁰ To the editors of this anthology, for instance, crafting a language of their own and speaking for themselves was synonymous with making a new cultural identity, which was their most urgent task. In other words, the writings produced during this activist phase were intended as political weapons through which their racial group could have a strong voice.¹¹ According to Song, however, many of these writers, such as John Okada, suffered from a tension between the desire to identify their rituals and customs as unique to their own community and a conflicting desire to explain them as having value only in themselves, unaffected by the collective idea of “ethnicity.”

In Chapter 3, Song elaborates on how the notion of race in contemporary Asian American literature differs from that of ethnicity, which is based more on “similarity” or “sameness.”¹² For example, Susan Choi, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Chang-rae Lee often point to themes outside the boundaries of Asian American ethnicity, demanding a new definition of “we.” Song notes that these writers also write about “race,” but in a different way, making readers think about how the term departs from the logic of “ethnicity.”¹³ These writers often confront a dilemma: they fear turning their back on their own people, who have experienced oppression due to the distortion of racial narratives in American society, yet they also desire to tell non-Asian American stories and present non-Asian American characters. However, Song argues that by not writing about ethnicity, certain novels—such as those of Sabina Murray, Name Le, Susan Choi and Ed Park—also contribute to creating the idea of “race” in more candid and original ways. Park’s *Personal Days*, for example, aims to invent a more diverse and post-structural notion of “we,” the

meaning of which is stripped of the strict sense of racial and ethnic boundaries, while helping characters obtain the “most enduring form of identification.”¹⁴ In other words, Park’s notion of “we” refers to people whose identity is not based on shared ancestry or cultural practices, but on the similarities of their daily lives and social positions created by the system of governance. Chapter 4 continues to examine the struggle between the longing of these Asian American people for a sense of “belonging” and a “center” and the desire to defy those senses and cohere to a neutral identity existing beyond them. Through characters such as Thomas, Gabe, and his mother Ika in Roley’s *American Son*, Song shows what it feels like not to belong to the “box of identity politics,” while still longing for a safe refuge of political subjectivity.¹⁵

Chapter 5 explores how Asian American race cannot be equated with a cultural and racial minority, since Asian American represents a particular visual mark of American history. He supports this argument by quoting Lisa Lowe’s definition of an Asian American identity that exists both outside and inside the national polity in America. Also, Song’s term, “visual mark,” can be understood similarly to what Joseph Jonghyun Jeon explains as “an inert mark incapable of signification” in *Racial Things, Racial Forms*; that is, the language of Asian American poets, which carries a different temporal index and challenges homogeneous cultural and national identities.¹⁶ Through the examples of Gene Luen Yang’s comic novels like *American Born Chinese* and *Gordon Yamamoto* and other graphic narratives, Song further examines how race is not a “transcendental signifier” but an “empty signifier,” whose meaning can extend in different directions and which can be changed in accordance with its relationship to other subjects.¹⁷

Chapter 6 examines Lahiri’s *Unaccustomed Earth* to investigate how her protagonists, Hema and Kaushik, resemble Deleuzian “nomads” traveling around the world without any sense of strict cultural or national roots. For instance, Rome, where the two protagonists finally meet, symbolizes not the center of Western culture but a place to “roam” without any sense of destination.¹⁸ By using such sound play, Lahiri also shows that the protagonists’ cultural roots take hold in unaccustomed earth, such that their bodies are dislocated, and they become new

cultural subjects. In this way, Lahiri constantly frustrates the reader's expectations about what will happen to the characters.

In chapters 7 and 8, Song introduces two contemporary Asian American novels, Hong's *Dance Dance Revolution* and Miné Okubo's *Citizen 13660*, while also comparing the new generation of Asian American subjects to Deleuzian "nomads" wandering through the desert and constantly de-territorializing the meaning of their original cultural and historical identities. Song concludes the book by warning against the habit of reading empathetically, deriving identificatory pleasure from such literary works. What frustrates him most is the possibility that literature may be reduced to the "epiphenomenon of the hard and unchanging world," reaffirming the same hegemony of the self over the other.¹⁹ Instead, he encourages us to break free from chronological time and history, which normalizes and naturalizes certain ways of thinking. Pointing out that the world's increasing interconnectedness has created a "literature of globalization," he argues that contemporary Asian American literature shows "the capacity to make [a new] world."²⁰ And this world-making process is none other than that of stepping outside the flow of time and seeing the potential of our bodies and surroundings beyond the constraint of "the possibles."²¹

There is much to admire in *The Children of 1965*, which makes a significant contribution to scholarship on contemporary Asian American literature and should serve as an important corrective to the prevailing distorted racial narratives of Asian Americans. One slight critique is that Song includes so many examples of Asian American literature that his central argument tends to become buried under the summaries, quotes, and citations. And, as previously mentioned, the analysis of contemporary Asian American literature is heavily theory-oriented. It includes many technical terms from French theory, meaning that the audience that will benefit from the book is relatively small. Nevertheless, *The Children of 1965* delivers an important message of what it means to live in this fast-changing, globalized world in which different cultures and languages daily intertwine, borrowing ideas from each other and forming new cultural and racial identities.

Notes

¹ Min Hyoung Song, *The Children of 1965: On Writing, and Not Writing, as an Asian American* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 231.

² Ibid., 63.

³ Ibid., 5.

⁴ Ibid., 11.

⁵ Ibid., 14.

⁶ Ibid., 44.

⁷ Ibid., 47.

⁸ Ibid., 46.

⁹ Ibid., 48.

¹⁰ Ibid., 71.

¹¹ Ibid., 67.

¹² Ibid., 84.

¹³ Ibid., 83.

¹⁴ Ibid., 97.

¹⁵ Ibid., 115.

¹⁶ Joseph Jonghyun Jeon, *Racial Things, Racial Forms: Objecthood in Avant-Garde Asian American Poetry* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012), 8.

¹⁷ Song, *Children of 1965*, 142.

¹⁸ Ibid., 157.

¹⁹ Ibid., 229.

²⁰ Ibid., 228.

²¹ Ibid.