



# **Racial Things, Racial Forms: Objecthood in Avant-Garde Asian American Poetry (Contemp North American Poetry)**

*Joseph Jonghyun Jeon*

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In *Racial Things, Racial Forms*, Joseph Jonghyun Jeon focuses on a coterie of underexamined contemporary Asian American poets—Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Myung Mi Kim, Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, and John Yau—who reject many of the characteristics of traditional minority writing, in particular the language of identity politics, which tends to challenge political marginalization without contesting more fundamental assumptions about the construction of racial form. In the poets' various treatments of *things* (that is, objects of art), one witnesses a confluence of heretofore discrete factors: the avant-garde interest in objecthood and the racial question of objectification.

By refashioning avant-garde investigations of *things* into questions about how American discourse visualizes race *in* and *on* the body, these poets implicitly critique dominant modes of racial visibility, seeking alternatives to the unreflective stances that identity politics often unwittingly reproduces. At the heart of Jeon's project is the assumption that racial form is continually recalibrated to elide ideological ambiguities and ambivalences in contemporary culture. Thus, rather than focusing exclusively on the subject—on interiority and individual experience—*Racial Things, Racial Forms* also uses the calculated strangeness of the avant-garde art object as an occasion to emphasize the physical and visual oddness of racial constructs, as a series of everchanging, contemporary phenomena that are in conversation with, but not entirely determined by, their historical legacy.

In this critical study, Jeon argues that by invoking the *foreignness* of an avant-garde art object as a way to understand racial otherness, these writers model the possibility of a post-identity, racial politics that challenges how race is fundamentally visualized. In addition to appealing to those interested in Asian American studies and race in American literature, *Racial Things, Racial Forms* addresses readers interested in contemporary poetry, art, and visual culture, paying particular attention to the intersections between literary and visual art.

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