

**Monica Youn**

**Race and Relevance: Anxieties of the Topical**

When I first started thinking about the topic of the “topical,” for purposes of this panel, I found myself drawn to the wording of Rae’s panel description. Rae, more than almost anyone I know, is someone I think of as being exquisitely attuned to the nuances of contemporary usage. So her phrasing around the term “topical” is deeply revealing about the usage of that term in poetics and in politics.

Let’s reiterate these questions.

How do poets write good topical poetry?

Does topical poetry run the risk of being ephemeral or short on craft?

Is a non-topical poem irrelevant?

In these questions, I hear two forms of anxiety that are bound up in the way the topical poem is discussed, two forms of anxiety that are at odds with one another.

First, in the question, “How do poets write good topical poetry,” I hear the suspicion that topical poetry is often not “good,” whatever that means. Then, we flesh out the meaning of this “not good-ness”: First, the risk of being “ephemeral” – an interesting charge, especially if we think that certain supposedly spontaneous poems are canonical – “Ode to a Nightingale,” “Charge of the Light Brigade,” “Easter 1916,” “The Explosion,” “The Day Lady Died.” And second, “Short on craft” seems to be based on the assumption that presumably a topical poem might have been written under greater time pressure than a poem that’s revised for decades. But again, poetry is replete with examples of exquisitely “crafted” poems written on the spur of the moment – from Bassho to Terrance Hayes’ poem “George Floyd,” which was written in 8 hours the morning after a BLM march.

Why should the topical poem be more expected to rebut suspicions of impermanence, of sloppiness, of not-goodness than any other poem? Is this all a function of time constraints? Do we have reason to think that when poets talk about the topical, they might be using the term as a proxy for some other less mentionable category? I’ll just leave that question hanging for the moment.

At the same time, the topical poem generates a second, and seemingly contradictory type of anxiety: Is a non-topical poem irrelevant? Of course Rae is hardly being literal in referencing this fear, but there's a real anxiety underlying the question, an anxiety related to guilt or shame – “irrelevant,” not just in the sense of book sales or readership, but ethically, morally deficient somehow, inert, privileged, even complicit.

This double-edged quality is shared by categories with which the topical is often associated – namely the political, as well as the racialized, the gendered, the embodied, and the historically determined. As Dorothy Wang, among many others, has argued, mainstream literary thought often opposes these categories – the realm of the cultural – against the intellectual, the abstract, the impersonal – which it conceptualizes as the realm of the literary.

Now I don't intend to rehash these well-trodden arguments here. Instead as a poet writing in a discursive sphere structured by these assumptions, I'm very interested in what I can do with them and what I can do against them. That is to say, how can I as a poet harness these anxieties? How can I observe and expose their effects in my own work and in the work of others?

In my own work, I've mostly been considering these questions with regard to a category closely congruent to the topical, and subject to the same and other anxieties – the racial. In particular, a phrase from my high-school math teachers keeps coming to mind – SHOW YOUR WORK. Which is to say here, what happens when you intentionally give the racial – which often manifests in a poem as a set of autobiographical, thematic, syntactical, or formal gestures – explicit salience in a poem?

What happens when you mark race as a subject of a poem? Here I thought I'd track this question through the work of one poet – John Yau – one of my poetic idols, whose influence has spread exponentially, particularly in the last decade. All of the factual details here – and much of the analysis – I've cribbed from Dorothy Wang's extensive account of his career in *Thinking Its Presence: Form, Race, and Subjectivity in Contemporary Asian American Poetry*.

One of the poems that I considered when first thinking about the question of marking race in my own work is “Chinese Villanelle,” from John Yau's 1979 book *Sometimes*. John is an interesting poet to consider here because he has explicitly had the concepts of the topical and the political weaponized against him in the context of race.

In the mid 1990s, John wrote a review of Eliot Weinberger's anthology *American Poetry Since 1950: Innovators & Outsiders* criticizing the collection for, in essence, being insufficiently inclusive in terms of gender and race. In response, John was subjected to a barrage of ad hominem attacks in print. Some of these accused him of being, in essence, not Chinese enough – that he wasn't bilingual, that his work didn't feature sufficient Chinese content. One of these attacks stated, “[Yau] has probably never written a topical social-protest poem in his adult life. . . .”. Another commentator, writing years later, suggested that “Yau doesn't have a political bone in his body.”

I note these criticisms because they chime with the second anxiety I identified in Rae's initial formulation of the “topical” – that for a poet not to write “topical” poems is somehow ethically inadequate. For this particular controversy, these commentators assume that Yau's supposed failure to write “political” or “topical” poems somehow disqualifies him from speaking about race or gender. Again, I'm not quite sure what to conclude about all of this, except to note the association of the ideas of the topical, the political and the racial.

Which brings us back to “Chinese Villanelle,” a poem, which, of course, predates this particular controversy by decades. Now if we can consider, for a moment, the poem without the title – whether or not the poem has explicit racial content is open to debate. Dorothy Wang, for one, suggests that the poem employs Chinese themes and images, and I defer to her knowledge of this context. Lacking this knowledge, I read the nostalgic pastoral of the images as relatively placeless. And the inclusion of the terms “lute” and “king” evoked a European, rather than an Asian, setting.

But then there's the title, which insistently racializes the poem. Suddenly, we are told that the mountain is a Chinese mountain, the pelican is a Chinese pelican. But is that really all that John is doing with this gesture? What struck me here is the contrast between the racial explicitness of the title, as opposed to the decontextualized content – the poem and its title function separately, almost at odds with each other. And John has repeated this gesture, including the word “Chinese” in the titles of poems that otherwise have no explicit racial context or content. The title functions as a racial marker. And what does a racial marker do?

This may seem impossibly self-regarding, but when I looked for an extensive discussion of the racial marker in poetry, the most extensive one I found was by

the poet and critic Will Harris in a recent essay in *Poets and Writers* that contains a lengthy discussion of a poem of mine, “Study of Two Figures (Pasiphae /Sado).” So that, of course, raises the risk that Harris’ discussion of racial markers is a little too tailor-made to my personal preoccupations. But with those caveats, Harris makes several observations about what the racial marker does in the poem: “It takes the reader outside of the narrative: It implicates the society in which the text exists and draws attention to the poet.” In other words, a racial marker brings the poet out from the polite fiction of the speaker: it makes the author’s own racial identity salient. It creates another level on which the poem demands to be read, quite apart from the erstwhile “content” of the poem.

As Harris says:

*In revealing a racial marker you’re drawing attention to your already-marked state. The question, then, is not if but when and how you reveal it. And this is made more complicated by a white literary culture which...seeks “unmediated expressions of lived experience, to be consumed for their ‘authenticity.’” [quoting Sarah Howe]*

*The racial marker confers authenticity...*

*How do you resist being made into a fetish object, consumed for your “authenticity”? If you remove racial markers from your work, you risk whitewashing it, acceding to a tradition of authorial invisibility. But if you use racial markers—containing your experience—you risk having your work consumed by (white) readers as evidence rather than as art. And like any piece of evidence, you can be dismissed.*

A racial marker makes the reader’s racial identity salient in a gesture that can be read as militant, inclusive, obsequious, apologetic, confrontational, virtue-signalling, self-victimizing or affirming – all of the multitudinous ways that playing the race card is always read.

So given all of this, I’ve followed with interest the ways in which Yau’s work has become more explicitly racial and more explicitly political. Perhaps the apex of this political context is in the recent “President’s Telegrams” poems, which appear in his new collection *Genghis Khan on Drums* (Omnidawn 2021). These are frankly kickass, topical poems par excellence. But what especially caught my attention here is the inclusion of the date, which is not at all a typical move for John. Of course, the date has a functional aspect – if you were so inclined, you could look up the date and see what particular

tragedy happened on that date and what our unlamented-ex-president had to say about it.

As with a racial marker, I'm curious about what the explicitly topical does to the relationship between the author and the reader. Similar to the way the racial marker functions, the topical marker brings the author out from behind the veil of invisibility, creates another level upon which the poem demands to be read. The positionality of the author becomes salient, and to a lesser extent, so does the positionality of the reader, who might ask themselves what it was they were doing that day, might call into question their own reaction to that particular event.

So the question I end with is whether – in contemporary poetic discourse – the relationship between the topical and the political is congruent to the relationship between the racial marker and the racialized. That is, does the topical *mark* the political, give the political a heightened salience with regard to the positionality of author vis-à-vis reader? I'm thinking about this question in my current work, manipulating these shapes of thought, playing with gestures that mark the topical, the ephemeral. Whether or not I reach any conclusions remains to be seen.