

Reviews

Kandice Chuh, *The Difference Aesthetics Makes: On the Humanities “After Man.”* Durham: Duke University Press, 2019, 178 pages. ISBN: 978-1-4780-0092-1.

Kandice Chuh’s second book is a daring, rich, and broad-ranging work that, drawing from an impressive range of sources – Caribbean and European philosophy, theories of Blackness, Asian Americanist critique, queer studies, cultural studies, and more – attempts “to give positive weight to alternatives to liberal humanism” (2). It consists of an introduction, four chapters, a concise conclusion, and a postscript. The chapters combine theoretical discourse with readings of selected works by U.S. American writers and artists of different non-white ethnicities. In the introduction, Chuh posits that aesthetics, widespread in European philosophical reflection since Enlightenment, operates at the “*proto*-political level to define and classify humanity according to the capacity of aesthetic judgment” (18), and thus helps solidify the liberal construct of “Man” and its global primacy. Yet aesthetics also bears potential for rethinking the “antinomy of the universal and the particular” (20); its potential resides in the fact that it “inhabits the suppressed contradictions of modernity. The subjective experience of art, of difference, as a realm that has been subordinated to general Reason names modernity’s alterity” (21).

Chapter 1 and 2 call for a “deliberate disidentification” from the logics of the “received” humanities. Chapter 1 historicizes the complicity of the humanities with the liberal order and its underlying, disavowed violence, and finds analytic correspondences in Lan Samantha Chang’s short story “Hunger” (1998) and photographs by Allan DeSouza and Carrie Mae Weems. Related to the potential of aesthetics is the attempt to displace the “primacy of the visual characterizing the epistemologies of bourgeois liberal modernity” (xi). Chuh convincingly susses out the importance of sound and music in the works of Chang, Langston Hughes, and Toni Morrison. Chapter 2 offers a compelling discussion of Hughes’s short story collection *The Ways of*

White Folks (1934), followed by an analysis of Morrison's 1983 short story "Recitatif", which provides a model for "undertak[ing] the work of disallowing the correlation between visual markers of bodily difference [...] and knowledge of person, character, or being, without foregoing or disavowing the ways that that correlation has secured deep inequities in the material lives of the racially subjugated" (68-69).

What I find less convincing is the theoretical take-up of the idea of "literature", historically emerging, Chuh maintains, as a "phenomenon and artifact of the bourgeois liberal revolutions" (53). The category here appears excessively monolithic, crystallized so that it can aptly be "modified by the designation of difference" (54). In general, Chuh seems to take for granted that readers know what she is talking about when she talks about literature, modernity, liberalism, and so on. This risks oversimplifying categories that are simply too broad to be manageably condensed; yet perhaps some risks are worth taking, because most times, if not always, Chuh's argumentative moves are powerful and eye-opening. What also remains occasionally vague in the book is the connection between specific textual analytic moves and the encompassing theoretical argument. This does *not*, however, substantially diminish the overall high quality and originality of both.

In chapter 3, Chuh attempts to disidentify from "bourgeois liberalism and its cognate onto-epistemologies" (xi) by performing convincing readings of the novels *Ceremony* (1977) by Leslie Marmon Silko's and *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013) by Ruth Ozeki, and placing emphasis on *relationality*. A quasi-synonym for "relationality" is "entanglement," a term Chuh borrows from Ozeki – who takes it from quantum physics. "The distancing in time and place" (78) that rationalizes violence in the name of inevitability or progress "collapses in the face of the reality of that state of entanglement" (79). Entanglement is a condition that already is: the difficulty lies in "tuning in" it, in "reckoning with" it, due to the fact that it often entails living with the debris and detritus of past disasters and injustices. This chapter develops the idea of an "entangled" present wherein the past is continuously alive – which, in turn, runs counter to depoliticized pacification.

While recognizing that universalism has historically been put into the service of colonial modernity, in chapter 4 Chuh sets about to rethink – or, following Spivak, "mis-take" – the universal "as a category not of transcendence but of subtending grounds" (100). The chapter is elaborated around Monique Truong's 2004 novel *The Book of Salt*. One of its most interesting aspects is the argument for a *comparative* practice as a "hermeneutics of re-

lationality” (117) – an idea of comparison as relational rather than based on the solid identity of the subject of comparison and/or the objects compared. Through a daring intertextual journey that takes her readers from Troung’s novel to Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* via Gertrude Stein’s *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Chuh argues that “these texts in their interarticulation submit that the universal in global history is coloniality” (114).

Starting from this awareness, we are called to “mis-take the university and [...] enjoinders to expertise and compartmentalized knowledge” (121). It must be noted, however, that an affirmative project for a different university is never laid out *as such*: “an illiberal university must remain a question, a marker for striving for the realization of a radically different world” (121). We are left with the impression that it is mostly a matter of tuning in an already existing alternative: “other humanities [...] have long existed and percolate institutionally largely with and through minoritized discourses” (2). Chuh’s effort appears to be one of a spokesperson attempting to channel discourse on behalf of an expanding community: “Who are we after Man? [...] We are entangled particles; we are matter; we matter” (125-126).

Several questions remain open. For instance: how encompassing – or effective – can Chuh’s “we” be, if we keep in mind that, in any struggle for justice, conflicting views and interests may, and indeed often, arise? Or, how would all this play out at the institutional level – due to the fact that the university is and will be, in the immediate future, an institution with a structure and a hierarchy? Yet this book does not shy away from the questions it provokes. Its author bravely takes up the challenge to dwell in complexity and imagine alternatives.

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Jopi Nyman, *Equine Fictions. Human-Horse Relationships in Twenty-First-Century Writing*. Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019. 164 pages. ISBN: 978-1-52753226-7.

As the title indicates, *Equine Fictions. Human-Horse Relationships in the Twenty-First-Century Writing* is concerned with narratives that center on horses, or rather on relationships between horses and humans. As the