Apparitions of Asia: Modernist Form and Asian American Poetics. By Josephine Nock-Hee. New York: Oxford UP, 2008.
$55

The goal of the *Apparitions of Asia* is ambitious: "to create a modern history of transpacific literary alliances" (3). To accomplish this literary-historical feat, Park examines poets as varied as Walt Whitman, Ezra Pound, Ernest Fenollosa, Gary Snyder, David Hsin-Fu Wand, Lawson Fusao Inada, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, and Myung Mi Kimto, striving to illuminate in each poet "the formal significance of modernism's Orient" (3). With compelling historical nonchalance, she traces the trajectory of Orientalist and counter-Orientalist poetry in America roughly since the completion of the transcontinental railroad.

Apparitions is structured in two parts. The first addresses, in two chapters, the roles of canonical poets Pound and Snyder in the Eastern inflection of U.S. modernism. The second focuses on the "ethnic coalition" of poet-activists on the West Coast in the 1960s. These latter two chapters, which investigate the "afterimage of American Orientalism" in the works of Inada, Cha, and Kimto, are the most compelling of the book (3). Indeed, they are shockingly convincing in their assertions that the best Asian American poetry, in both a historic and an aesthetic sense, is also Beat poetry.

Park sets up this breakthrough literary-historical claim by making explicit early on the centrality of Eastern preoccupations in the "Whitman-Fenollosa-Pound-Snyder genealogy" (16). Each of these poets "reinvigorate an epic sense of America through contact with the Orient" (16). By asserting the "ambassadorial functions" of transpacific poetry, Park creates a refreshing synthesis to the dualist choice between top-down and bottom-up models of cultural transmission along the Pacific Rim (22). The problem with these models, Park suggests, is that each obscures the cultural impact of Orientalism in poetry, seeking instead to either defend or renounce such Orientalism.

Park historicizes "Asian American studies" as an academic field that emerged "out of a movement to redress such lacunae" as the erasure of Chinese labor from the historical record of westward expansion (16). In the process of revising the historcal record, Asian American studies scholars sometimes deny the status of Orientalist literature as "an instigator for Asian American literature" (19). In the process, they disregard such crucial transitional figures as David Hsin-Fu Wand, an associate of Pound and Snyder turned activist-poet. Wand's career, astoundingly pertinent to Park's historical argument, is all but absent from other accounts of Asian American poetry.

Obviously, Park is able to draw easy lines of inspiration from Pound to Snyder: both are Fenellosa-inspired translators of Eastern poetics. What's interesting is not Park's pairing of the two poets, but her contrasting conceptions of each poet's poetics. Though both "thunderously crossed the bridge first imagined by Whitman and subsequently gilded by Fenollosa," Pound was

essentially a “Confucian” whose “statal ideal” is countered by Snyder’s anti-ideological Buddhism (59).

Beat cultural historian Michael Davidson disagrees somewhat with this contrasting polarization of Pound and Snyder, as both poets assume a “Paradise on earth” objective to their poetry (Davidson quoted. in Park 59). Where Pound’s paradise corresponds to a fascistic state, Snyder’s elevates the American wilderness as an alternative to governmental forms. Though Snyder is one of many “American adventurers [who] found their way to Japan to lament its waning exoticism,” his transpacific excursion impacts specifically American literary terrain, specifically the production of America “as wilderness” (60). This American vision is Snyder’s key “Beat invention” (60).

In the process of his invention, Snyder takes the cultural particularism out of Zen Buddhism. He abstracts its principles and mobilizes them to aid the crisis of the disappearing American wilderness. In discussing Snyder’s enduring ecopoetics, Park makes a useful contrast. She compares Norman Mailer’s conception of the urban White Negro to Snyder’s “White Indians,” a phrase from *Earth House Hold*. Snyder’s “White Indian” echoes Andrew Ross’s conception of Mailer’s White Negro as an agent of “post-agrarian” organic creativity. In contrast to the “post” status of the urban primitivism, the white Indian has a kind of “trans” status, what Park calls an “absolute nativity” that unfixes the conception of “nativeness” from specific historical contexts. The other difference between the White Indian and the White Negro is that Snyder’s Indian is deracialized.

This deracialization is precisely what Asian American writers in the 1960s counteract. The chapter titled “Beats and Bandits” begins with a reading of racial essentialism in *Big Sur*, a novel whose Asian American characters are repeatedly diminutized and represented as woefully bound to their Orientalness. Unlike his shape-shifting dharma bums, Keoruac’s Asian American Beat characters, such as Arthur Ma (Victor Wong) and George Baso (Albert Saijo), have to “bear the weight of the samurai” (104). Park explores the biographical record of Kerouac’s relationship with these Asian American characters, especially the collaborative poem that Kerouac, Saijo, and Lew Welch wrote: *Trip Trap*, which riffs on Snyder’s poem “Riprap.”

The specifically American terrain of the highway seems to be the metaphoric space that links Snyder to contemporary Asian American activist-poets. Park examines this reconciliatory metaphor through her reading of *The Buddha Bandits Down Highway 99* (1978), a “collection of poetic meditations on a California highway” (106). The collection’s poets—Inada, Garrett Kaoru Hongo, and Alan Chong Lau—deliberately reference Snyder’s poem “Night Highway 99,” and likewise reinvent Kerouac’s poetics of the highway. Highway 99 connects one Chinatown to another, becoming, in Inada’s words, “THE YELLOW STRIPE DOWN THE BACK OF AMERICA” (109).

Here as elsewhere in *Apparitions of Asia*, Park takes pains to demonstrate the Beat-inflection of Asian American activist-poets. For instance, she explains that Inada orchestrates his cohort’s

emergence along the Beat pattern of “singular events” (109). His preface to *The Buddha Bandits* names the collective’s “first performance” in a way that is “notably like one other: the famous Six Gallery reading” (109). This Asian American version of the 6 Gallery event has a university setting (CSU Long Beach), which both contrasts with the anti-academic aesthetic of the 6 Gallery reading and foreshadows the interdisciplinary academic field that the bandits’ “panethnic coalition” will help engender (109). In sum, *Apparitions of Asia* produces an original literary-historical argument, one that gauges the stylistic exchanges between Beat and Asian American poetics.