

*California Polyphony: Ethnic Voices, Musical Crossroads.* By Mina Yang. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008. 208pp. ISBN-13: 978-0252032431 (hc).

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*California Polyphony* offers six case studies in music making, which Yang argues, are deeply entwined with issues of racial/cultural diversity and power, more complex than the usual black-white paradigm might suggest. Given this expansive goal, the small size of the book (140 pages of text, supported by 45 pages of notes, bibliography, and index,) assures that the author's treatment of her chosen topics is highly selective and, on occasion, approaches oversimplification. Yet the range of issues addressed is impressive, the questions raised are foundational, the analyses offered are challenging, and, despite the occasional error, the writing style is admirably fluent.

The most interesting of Yang's case studies are set in Los Angeles since 1940. Although it is of interest to any student of late twentieth-century culture, the book is much more about Los Angeles than San Francisco, let alone California in general. That is a plus, since every American city is uniquely marked by its long term immigration patterns and its accompanying mixes of cultural features, as well as its physical and geographic characteristics. Until we explore these unique features, we are unlikely to fully grasp the sweep of American culture, and of American music as an essential, formative element in that culture. In particular, Los Angeles has a far different history from that of other West Coast cities.

Los Angeles retained its cultural ties with Mexico even after its small population, consisting of Mexican, indigenous, and a few Anglos, was separated from Mexico and became part of the Union in 1848. (The California Gold Rush had almost nothing directly to do with the area's development.) The city was soon dominated by white US-born immigrants, although they did not come in huge numbers until easy rail transportation became available in the 1880s. Even European-born immigrants were less abundant here than in other coastal cities. There was always a Mexican, African American, and Asian (first Chinese, then Japanese) presence, but these remained relatively small numerically until World War II and its aftermath. Despite its own continuing and significant internal fissures, the Anglo population retained near-absolute, increasingly rigid political dominance for several decades after World War II, even re-electing its segregationist mayor (Sam Yorty, 1961-73) several times. The city's arts commissions faithfully reflected this white, anti-"popular" music hegemony. Now, in the early twenty-first century, Los Angeles is firmly established as one of the great polyglot cities, with its unique population "rainbow." Yet the violence, both official and unofficial, that has been part of its history continues to hang over the city.

Cultural changes since 1940, then, could hardly be more dramatic. It is these changes—really some of their high points—whose musical components Yang explores here. She has chosen her topics "for their relevance to the outstanding concerns of nonwhite populations in general and to California culture specifically: immigration, boosterism, police and the technologies of spatial control, film and media representation, orientalism, the civil rights movement, and interracial encounters that transpire outside the reductive strictures of the black/white paradigm" (5). She includes the four largest racial groups of California ("white, black, Latin, and Asian") and "the different types of music (classical, experimental, jazz, rhythm and blues, rock, and hip-hop) that factor significantly into the larger history of American music" (5). She claims in conclusion that she has examined the "convergence of music, race, and ethnicity" in Los Angeles (139).

Her fearless choice of topics reveal a clear attempt at balancing issues, time periods, and points of view. One chapter moves "From the Mission Myth to Chicano Nationalism," for example. Here she begins with the early Chamber of Commerce-generated, idyllic "Mission Myth." She then contrasts the myth with the far more complicated evolution of the "mestizo identity from Mexican to Mexican American to Chicano" (99). A century after the early Fiestas of the 1890s, Chicano rock appeared as a vital East Los Angeles adaptation, "harnessed as an instrument of ideological propaganda" (111).

Other contrasts are drawn in separate chapters. Orientalism is explored as a tactic used by certain white composers to establish their individual identities; she chooses works from the 1930s by Henry Cowell, John Cage, and Harry Partch as examples. Elsewhere, as a balance of sorts, the author treats much later uses of popular music, especially hip-hop, by Korean Americans, part of their response to the Rodney King disturbances of 1992. Yang argues in favor of the adaptation of hip-hop by non-African American minorities; "it is the very success of this musical art that now renders it too big to be owned by any one person or community," noting its "transnational impact" and the "significance of this music to diasporic populations everywhere"(135). A chapter on the use of African American female characters to embody evil in selected (white-created) Hollywood films noir presents a dramatic contrast with another chapter that offers statistical documentation of police harassment in Central Avenue jazz venues in the 1940s and early 1950s, so severe as to be a major factor in shutting down that once-widely-patronized district.

Yang begins with a summary of early Anglo cultural and musical life in California, so general that it contributes little to her overall argument about the non-Anglo minorities of Los Angeles. Here I regret the absence of a focused description of white-dominated public music making in southern California

around 1950, when a level of reaction had set in that is, to our postmodern eyes, quite astonishing.

Yang's various analyses raise meaty questions. For example, the phenomenon of orientalism deserves a broader investigation. How, for example, do the orientalism of composer Henry Eichheim (a serious student of Asian musics) and dance guru Ruth St Denis (founder of modern dance in the US, long based in LA) inflect the arguments around musical and cultural borrowing? More on the work of Lou Harrison, whose involvement with Asian musics, in his case those of China, Korea, and Indonesia, was far greater than Cage's, would also be welcome. What about the music making of immigrants from other Asian cultures in addition to that of a few Korean Americans, and the interactions (briefly hinted at in one instance only) among the various Asian national groups? A more continuous narrative of music making by Mexican Americans would be welcome. The entire issue of stereotyping, however inflected, begs continuing interrogation from all directions. Did Hollywood actually invent the stereotypes they exploited? What of the occasional individual of every race and ethnicity and gender who, entranced by the sounds of some (for him or her) atypical genre, follows a maverick path or pioneers some new, hybrid genre, possibly even refusing the stereotyped identity we wish to assign him/her?

These questions cannot possibly be addressed in the range of one short volume. It's to Yang's credit that this reader puts this book down wishing for more than the author has given us in her fast-moving narrative. By bringing together this range of issues and suggesting a multitude of new questions, her book serves a valuable function, as well as, one hopes, laying out the course of its author's own further research.