

REVIEWS

Asian American Poetry: The Next Generation. Edited by Victoria Chang. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004. 194 pp. \$19.95

If lyric poetry is the most introspective of all literary forms, the most remote from public and political concerns, how should we read lyric poems that come to us under the label of Asian American writing? Should we read a minority writer's embrace of the lyric as a sign of literary maturity, a transcending of narrowly ethnic concerns and political propaganda? Should we see it as a strategic withdrawal from society, following Adorno's dictum to read social pressures as "imprinted in reverse" on the lyric? Should we join those who would criticize lyric poetry as an abdication of the poet's political responsibilities to his or her community? Or are such demands themselves a form of racism, denying the writer of color the same freedom we grant to white American authors of lyric?

These are just some of the questions raised by the publication of *Asian American Poetry: The Next Generation*, a new anthology of young Asian American poets. They are the same questions addressed a decade ago by the first two major anthologies of Asian American poetry: *The Open Boat: Poems from Asian America* (Anchor Books, 1993), edited by Garrett Hongo, and *Premonitions: The Kaya Anthology of New Asian North American Poetry* (Kaya Press, 1995), edited by Walter K. Lew. These groundbreaking anthologies were conceived and published at a moment when Asian American literature, once seen as a vehicle for political goals, seemed to be embracing a wider range of aesthetic commitments. Both anthologies, in their very different ways, acknowledged and responded to this shifting landscape, placing their selections in dialogue with the history of Asian American writing. While *Asian American Poetry* cites these earlier collections, its lack of historical awareness may cause readers to question whether "Asian American poetry" has any continuing relevance as a category. Nevertheless, a few writers within its pages do offer a new kind of public lyric—one that never loses sight of the ways in which the individual consciousness is shaped by the discourses of race.

Despite its sweeping title, *Asian American Poetry* is a slim volume with relatively modest ambitions, surveying the work of about two dozen writers under 45, whom its subtitle calls "the next generation" of Asian American poets. As editor Victoria Chang acknowledges in part, it has less in common with *The Open Boat* or *Premonitions* than it does with collections like

American Poetry: The Next Generation, whose goal is the promotion of rising young stars. It speaks less for the Asian American community than for that familiar demographic known as Generation X.

Chang is more frank than is usual about editing with an eye to the market. *Asian American Poetry*, she writes, is part of “the growth of anthologies that cater to specific subgroups of readers, a development that indicates readers’ strong desire for editorial expertise.” This volume’s publication by an academic press would seem to confirm that editorial authority. Yet the historical and aesthetic narrowness of this collection stands in sharp contrast to the scope suggested by its title. The editor of a specialized anthology should not be faulted for selecting work according to her own tastes. But readers have a right to expect more from a collection titled *Asian American Poetry* and published by a university press. The volume’s publisher, it seems, wishes to capture the growing market for Asian American literature without committing to the necessary scholarship.

The work of the “next generation” of Asian American poets, Chang writes in her introduction, represents a departure from the work of “first generation” writers like Cathy Song, Li-Young Lee, and Marilyn Chin—writers who form the core of Hongo’s *Open Boat*. First-generation Asian American poetry, Chang argues, “tended to focus on issues of culture, identity, family, politics, ethnicity, and place. These poets generally wrote ‘protest literature,’ exposing their inferior treatment by the mainstream culture.” Younger Asian American poets, in contrast, “write less about ethnic or political issues” and more about “mainstream American” ones, employing a wider range of “innovative styles” and “new voices.”

Cathy Song and Li-Young Lee would, I imagine, be surprised to hear themselves described as writing “protest literature.” In a foreword to Chang’s anthology, Marilyn Chin, one of the most skilled and self-aware of the first-generation writers, wryly alludes to the “mega-Chinese-food-tropes” of her poems’ “old-fashioned minority discourse.” In fact, Hongo’s *Open Boat* was an open rebuke to the activist writing of the 1970s, with what Hongo viewed as its “culturally biased” image of the Asian American writer as a politicized propagandist obsessed with his “community roots.” *The Open Boat* concerned itself less with claiming a dissident position for Asian American poets than with celebrating the success those poets had achieved by the early 1990s within the literary mainstream. In his introduction, Hongo listed the numerous awards won by Asian American poets during the 1980s, from Song’s selection as a Yale Younger Poet in 1982 to Guggenheim awards and National Poetry Series publications. The marginalized position of the Asian American writer, Hongo notes, had “dramatically changed,” as “some of us even serve on foundation and NEA panels, sit on national awards juries, teach in and direct creative writing programs, and edit literary magazines.... We

are included in the textbook and annual anthologies published by Norton, Heath, McGraw-Hill, Little Brown, Morrow, Godine, St. Martin's, Pushcart, and Scribner's."

For Hongo, this mainstream success correlated with a new aesthetic for Asian American poetry, one whose values we might very well call lyric. Music and purity of voice—"We lift our bodies, voices from the sand, and call"—were valued above forceful statements of Asian American identity. The collection focused on younger writers like Song and Lee, who replaced explicitly political statements with explorations of individual experience. Such poets were primarily interested, Hongo writes, in "a personal subjectivity and poetics *within* the American experience, minority or mainstream."

Hongo thus turned away from the aesthetic of those writers who, in Chang's generational scheme, we would have to call the "zero generation" of Asian American writers, the first consciously to write under that label: poets such as Lawson Fusao Inada and Janice Mirikitani, who achieved wide readerships in the 1970s with their fusion of political, populist content and jazz and haiku styles. While Hongo did pay homage to the "brave" and "innovative" efforts of these earlier writers, providing an account of their pioneering role in the creation of a distinctively Asian American literature, he also harshly criticized elements of their legacy. The typical Asian American writer of the 1970s, Hongo suggested, was preoccupied with a "polemicized critique" of American culture; he was "macho," "crusading," proud of his "political and ethnic consciousness" grounded in "community roots and allegiances," "stable and secure" in his identity. (It is not hard to recognize here a caricature of that best-known of Asian American anthologists and provocateurs, Frank Chin.) Hongo argued that this attitude, carried forward into the early 1990s, had hardened into a kind of "intellectual bigotry" and "ethnic fundamentalism" on the part of those writers and critics who continued to judge Asian American writing by purely ideological criteria. For writers of Hongo's generation, then, the goal of Asian American poetry was not to establish and defend a distinctively Asian American identity, but to resist orthodox, "sociological," and "essentialist" notions of that identity that had become oppressive. Against any "litmus test of ethnic authenticity," Hongo's anthology offered a wide range of subject matters, privileging the introspective lyric and eschewing the public rhetoric of racial politics.

Yet this turn to the lyric inevitably raises the question of what remains distinctively Asian American about poetry that abandons ethnic markers in its celebration of an American self. Thus *The Open Boat*, while well-received by mainstream readers, has been criticized by some Asian American scholars for offering a narrow, depoliticized view of Asian American writing. Critic Juliana Chang, among others, has warned that Hongo's anthology, in its privileging of mainstream American experience, risks the "appropriation

of Asian American poetry into hegemonic narratives of immigration and assimilation.”

One hoped that the next generation of Asian American poets would respond to these dialectics—ideology/poetry, social/individual, politics/subjectivity—with a new synthesis. But Chang’s *Asian American Poetry* offers what is largely a replay of Hongo’s generational logic, while redefining the players. Hongo and his peers, once seen as rebels against the vulgar politics of an older generation, are now seen as purveyors of that politics. Their work’s concerns with “culture, identity, family, politics, ethnicity, and place,” however muted, are viewed as constraining by Chang’s younger poets, who are even less interested in “ethnic or political issues” than their immediate predecessors. The more explicit political engagements of the zero generation, acknowledged by Hongo, are a historical footnote for Chang, and are relegated to a single paragraph that summarizes Asian American writing since the 1890s. Chang gives us an account of Asian American writing in which ethnic and political concerns—and perhaps even the category of the Asian American itself—may soon disappear altogether. Her anthology, she writes, “reflects a shift away from [the] ideal of a ‘recognizable Asian voice’ and toward a poetry that transcends racial, gender, and cultural boundaries.” While Marilyn Chin’s foreword holds out the hope that younger Asian American poets will continue to “march onward, bear witness, and work with a conscious effort to build a magnificent, dynamic canon,” Chang’s introduction shows little interest in such rhetoric.

If Asian American poetry is moving even further away from identity politics, Chang suggests that is in part because it is becoming more “experimental.” As in most discussions of contemporary poetry, the term is used in the broadest sense to describe even the slightest play with “stanza, white space, and syntax”—anything, in short, that does not sound like the transparent voice of the workshop lyric. In Chang’s analysis, experimentation is opposed to politics and to the use of “traditional” Asian American themes or subjects. It is through experimental style that younger writers mark a “physical separation” from first-generation writers.

Despite Chang’s claims for a generational break, a glance at her selections shows less difference between the first and following generations than one might have imagined. The opening of Monica Ferrell’s “Persephone”—

Mother, I love you. But with the dead
we drink differently, holding the cup
in the left hand, pouring the wine this way
into our mouths. Please understand.
What we do not say, I still mean;
the sound of purple drowns those other words out.

—could be an alternate version of Sharon Hashimoto’s “The Mirror of Matsuyama” in *The Open Boat*:

Mother, what trick of light
brings you back—your face rising to the surface?
Is it my need that imprisons you behind
the cold glass? When you lay still,
the flowered quilt no longer warm with your body,
I didn’t believe your promise.

Familiar motifs appear, perhaps most noticeably in poems featuring Asian cooking and cuisine. In *The Open Boat*, David Mura uses food as a mark of authenticity:

As Sam crumbles lumps of tofu on her tray,
I sizzle onions in oil, shoyu, rice wine,
add noodles, ginger, sugar, *shiitake*;

shoots of bamboo and chrysanthemum leaves.
Before the beef, veined with fat, thin as gauze,
I stir what for years I could not love.

Asian American Poetry offers a round of variations on this theme, including Tina Chang’s “Fish Story”:

It is the hour of news. The television cracks
its voice over the radiator and the blue carpet. Always
that same cooked silver of you, oil spilling
from the mouth, ginger and scallions burning

through the scales. My father thinks you are delicate
as he steals the eggs from the purse
of your belly, white interior exposed and steaming.

The few differences between these first- and second-generation writers may be attributed less to changes in the demographics and experience of Asian Americans over the past two decades than to shifts in what mainstream American poetry is doing. The sense of the line is somewhat less slack; there’s a self-conscious frame placed around autobiographical content; there is less earnestness and more humor. Chang claims that her authors are “bolder about sexual topics.” But there is little here to match Mura’s uncomfortable linking of racism and desire in his attraction to white pornography in *The Open Boat*, or the “hard-ons and mermaids” of R. Zamora Linmark’s hustler’s Hawaii in *Premonitions*.

There is plenty of evidence, though, of the desire to transcend race that Chang describes in her introduction. The polished lyrics of Rick Barot are studies in natural and erotic beauty, classical in their referents and reaching toward the universal in their insights. Jennifer Chang's mother-daughter drama is figured not in racial or historical terms, but in religious ones, as a form of "unction." It could be argued that this is a natural outgrowth of the aesthetic of first-generation writers. Mura's work moves toward domestic joys, "the island of light we make with our bodies," while Li-Young Lee develops a sort of erotic philosophy in poems that have "something to do / with death...something / to do with love." But Mura and Lee continue to place these projects in the context of Asian American experience. If the work of younger poets lacks that context, Asian American poetry would appear to have a dim future.

There are poets in Chang's anthology who do suggest new directions for Asian American writing, often in work that reactivates the dialectics of politics and form. It's a surprise to realize that the writing of Mông-Lan, a rising star in the field, echoes the work of one of the best-known of the zero generation, Janice Mirikitani, in its jagged arrangement of words on the page and its archetypal power. Then there's the antic brilliance of Linh Dinh, whose juxtapositions of humor and horror refresh the idea of political, historical writing. Dinh's "The Most Beautiful Word" takes literally Adorno's sense that writing lyric poetry in our time is barbaric:

I think "vesicle" is the most beautiful word in the English language. He was lying face down, his shirt burnt off, back steaming. I myself was bleeding. There was a harvest of vesicles on his back. His body wept. "Yaw" may be the ugliest. Don't say, "The bullet yawed inside the body." Say, "The bullet danced inside the body."

Dinh's "Earth Cafeteria," with its deceptively simple style and its parodic recitation of ethnic-food stereotypes ("Rice people vs. bread people...Kosher sub-gum vs. knuckle kabob") is reminiscent of the early work of zero-generation writer Lawson Fusao Inada and of the recent poetry of John Yau.

The best work in *Asian American Poetry* moves outward into public space, but never loses sight of the way such spaces are marked by politics and race. Nick Carbó's engaging poems feature as their protagonist Ang Tunay na Lalalaki (Tagalog for "The Real Man"), a muscular star of 1970s and 1980s Filipino liquor commercials; his American counterpart, as Carbó notes elsewhere, would be the Marlboro Man. Carbó imagines Ang Tunay na Lalalaki as he "stalks the streets of New York," seeking a role for himself in American culture:

He looks at his reflection
on a book store window, notices
that his hair has grown shoulder-length—

like Tonto in the Lone Ranger
he would watch on TV. He turns to the right,
his profile now looks like the young Bruce Lee,

as Kato in the Green Hornet. Yes,
he realizes it will always be the face
of a supporting character.

Like many younger American poets, Carbó displays a hip facility with popular culture, but his poems show a wry awareness of the vexed role of the Asian in that media landscape. These poems, which take seriously the inner life of a pop-culture creation, offer an alternative to the fadeout of Asian American identity foreseen in Chang's introduction. They offer the pleasures of lyric introspection, but place such insights at a critical distance—one that allows us to see the way race and culture continue to structure the individual Asian American experience. Through such work, Asian American poetry may have a future after all.

Still, it would be hard to argue that this anthology gives an adequate sampling of experimental Asian American work. The focus on emerging writers seems to have excluded more established experimental poets such as Myung Mi Kim, Tan Lin, and Catalina Cariaga (although Timothy Liu, the well-known author of four books, is included), and the work of promising younger writers such as Hung Q. Tu, Pamela Lu, Truong Tran, Sianne Ngai, and Brian Kim Stefans is not included. That's a shame, because these writers provide a sense of how experiments with form can remain profoundly political, deepening new connections to earlier Asian American writing rather than severing them. Indeed, the complex writing of the zero generation itself, far from being mere propaganda, testifies to the ongoing search for the appropriate forms in which to articulate an Asian American sensibility. Chang's lack of interest in these bodies of writing impoverishes her anthology's sense of possibility.

For what is still the most comprehensive statement on the role of formal experiment in Asian American poetry, readers would be well advised to return to another anthology of the 1990s, Walter K. Lew's *Premonitions: The Kaya Anthology of New Asian North American Poetry*. Published in 1995 by a small Asian American press, *Premonitions* never received the same popular and critical attention as *The Open Boat*, despite containing twice as many poets and pages. Chang mentions *Premonitions* but, like many readers, gives it short shrift, claiming that it "focuses on experimental poetry and features

only previously unpublished work.” Neither of these statements is accurate. While Lew did feature less well-known poems by the major authors in his collection, many selections had already seen book or journal publication. And far from focusing myopically on the “experimental,” Lew offered a range of poets that was massively comprehensive. He included generous selections from many of the major lyric poets featured in *The Open Boat*, including Marilyn Chin, David Mura, and Agha Shahid Ali, while also including more stringently avant-garde writers who fell outside Hongo’s aesthetic, such as Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Myung Mi Kim, and Tan Lin. Lew even made room for the achievements of important Asian Canadian writers such as Fred Wah and Roy Miki.

The image of *Premonitions* as a parochially avant-garde collection may have been encouraged by Lew’s afterword, which did not mention *The Open Boat* by name but did critique those “previous anthologies” that had been “either too small or conservative to convey the astonishing diversity and eloquence of new poetics” being written by Asian Americans. “The work in this anthology,” Lew wrote, “is not confined to conventional models of verse.” Despite its bulk, *Premonitions* thus took up a position of aesthetic dissidence not unlike that of Donald Allen’s *New American Poetry*.

Is it the case, as Chang asserts, that the experimental is the enemy of the political? Perhaps *Premonitions*’ most impressive achievement was its argument that recent experimental trends in Asian American poetry are, in fact, profoundly consonant with the work of the writers of the zero generation, whose political commitments were matched with a willingness to explore different genres, forms, and modes in order to create a distinctively Asian American writing. If *Premonitions* has not been embraced as the authoritative anthology of Asian American poetry, that may be because the demands on such an anthology have shifted over the past decade. The rapid growth of college-level courses in Asian American literature means that any successful anthology of Asian American poetry will have to do double duty as both trade book and textbook. Chang’s *Asian American Poetry* acknowledges this reality, both in its broad title and its academic imprimatur, but its narrow aesthetic and chronological focus, along with its lack of attention to historical or scholarly context, makes it of little use for the classroom.

The new, truly comprehensive anthology of Asian American poetry needed now would draw generously from both the 1980s lyric as represented in Hongo’s *Open Boat* and the avant-garde work of the 1970s and 1990s featured in *Premonitions*, as well as offer notes and introductions that place these aesthetics in their historical and literary contexts. But it would also offer a much longer historical perspective on Asian American poetry, building on the work of scholars such as Juliana Chang, whose *Quiet Fire: A Historical Anthology of Asian American Poetry* recovers Asian American

poems from as early as the 1890s. It would place this work alongside poems by younger writers who represent some of the newest Asian American immigrant groups, while using three decades of experience by teachers of Asian American writing to help measure what poems have been most useful in the classroom. Such an anthology—ideally a collaboration between critics and poets—would provide an invaluable introduction to Asian American poetry for general readers, while providing the depth that students, scholars, and writers need. But since there is no widely available anthology of this sort even for Asian American literature more generally, it's a safe bet that readers seeking this big anthology of Asian American poetry have a long wait ahead of them.

Timothy Yu

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Donald Revell. *Invisible Green: Selected Prose*. Richmond, CA: Omnidawn, 2005. 187 pp. \$14.95

Let's begin with Revell's pantheon, or, perhaps I should say, his guest list. Pride of place belongs to Thoreau, who gives Revell his title: "Methinks my own soul must be a bright invisible green." Among the American poets, we find Whitman, Pound, Williams, Olson, Creeley, Ashbery (actually, the whole New York School), and Ronald Johnson; among the English, Traherne, Marvell, Blake, Coleridge. The French are represented by Apollinaire, whom Revell has translated so ably, and Reverdy. In this visionary company, there are also some nice surprises from both the past and present—Skelton, Merwin—Revell being nothing if not catholic. And for attending philosophers, we have Plotinus, Whitehead, Sartre, Camus, Blanchot, and Deleuze. Ives provides the music; Jonathan Edwards blesses all present, along with sundry spiders. It's quite a party, and you couldn't find a more genial or gracious host.

Welcome, then, to Donald Revell's Poets' Paradise, aka America ("I believe all poets everywhere to be Americans in the necessity and abandoned stewardship of bliss"). Here, the poets commune with each other and with Poetry, "the soul of poems," which "does not reside or rest in them." Poetry is Ecstasy ("Death or ecstasy: there are no other options"), Horizon ("Horizon speeds to the opened eye at light-speed"), and above all, Friendship ("When I am writing, there is myself, and there is my subject or purpose. My friend makes three"). Poetry comes to us through reading, but "To see poems as the culmination of reading or of any process is to turn them against themselves, to make obstacles out of energies, shadows from daylight." Poets, therefore, do not suffer from the anxiety of influence; rather, they experience "the Delight of Influence," and like Orpheus, "go ensemble all the way in a moving space shared with the god, the poem, the beloved." Nor do poets, who are