

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

AIIEEEEE! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers

Review Author: Susan Evangelista

Philippine Studies vol. 24, no. 3 (1976) 469–472

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at philstudies@admu.edu.ph.

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>
Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

AIIEEEEE! AN ANTHOLOGY OF ASIAN-AMERICAN WRITERS.
 Edited by Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, Shawn
 Hsu Wong. Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1974. 200 pages.

White America has always, according to anthologists Chin, Chan, Inada, and Wong, pictured the yellow man as "something that when wounded, sad, or angry, or swearing, or wondering, whined, shouted, or screamed 'aiieeeee!' " (p. vii). Hence the title of this anthology of Asian-American writing. And it is actually in response to this totally uncomprehending picture of the Chinese- or Japanese-American that this book came to life. The editors contend, in fact, that the whole Asian-American sensibility is so strongly influenced by the white-American stereotype that the Chinese- and Japanese-Americans themselves have formed their own consciousness through white eyes. In their comprehensive 50-page introduction, the editors go to the existent literature by Chinese-in-America to clarify the white picture of the yellow man, announcing that the internalization of the myth, the "complete psychological and cultural subjugation of the Asian-American . . . stands out as White Racism's only success" (p. xxvi). The acceptable Asian, as seen through Lin Yutang's *A Chinatown Family* and C. Y. Lee's *Flower Drum Song*, is passive, timid, and silently cooperative, having given up his "manhood" and accepted his "place" in a country where he is only welcome if he behaves in a properly subservient fashion.

This book is not for people who like the prettiness of Lin Yutang. Neither is it for people who are smugly satisfied with the idea that the Asian-American is mostly like any other American except that he mouths funny sayings from Confucius. The editors of this anthology emphatically reject the notion of the "dual personality" of the Asian-American, the I-am-Chinese-because-I-eat-chop-suey-and-American-because-I-eat-hot-dogs approach. This is a book with a conscious sociopolitical purpose, which is to give a voice to the unique culture that is neither Asian nor American, and certainly not just a little bit of each, but Asian-American. It is something new, something different, and probably its closest analogue, at least in type, would be found in the culture of the American black ghetto. It is a culture strongly influenced by poverty, ghetto life, and the pressure white racism exerts on the boundaries of ghetto lives, with all its social, psychological, and literary concomitants.

The Asian-American world is somewhat complicated by relations between minority groups, these again being ultimately controlled by the white stereotypes. There is a certain amount of enmity between Chinese-Americans and Japanese-Americans, but part of this is because the whites play them off against each other. For instance, the Chinese were the "good guys" during the Second World War, the obedient, patriotic Orientals who were willing to join the American army and fight against the Japanese. Japanese-Americans were, of course, incarcerated in huge detention camps for the duration of the

war. "Chinese-Americans became America's pets, were kept and groomed in kennels, while Japanese-Americans were the mad dogs who had to be locked up in pounds" (p. xv).

The Chinese- and Japanese-American selections in this anthology are fascinating and make a perfect case for the contention that the Asian-American culture is unique. No Asian Chinese or Japanese would believe that this writing came from his people. The white American has to strain his powers of imagination to see this coming from his country. So there it is. In "The No-No Boy," John Okada writes of a young Japanese who went to prison instead of fighting against his father's people in the war. He has a friend who loses a leg fighting in the white American army, and a mother who refuses to believe Japan lost the war, even when she receives letters from a family in Tokyo begging for financial help. He is caught in what might be one of the most painful traps ever set by history — but he ends up saying no to both his Japaneseness and his Americanness. Being a Japanese-American turns out to be something else.

In "Eat a Bowl of Tea," Louis Chu constructs a real American Chinatown, light years away from the white-approved Lin Yutang version: "It is a Chinatown that we are familiar with — filled with vulgarity and white whores, who make up for the scarcity of Chinese women" (p. xxxi). Chu's womenless men sit around in a basement "clubhouse," gossiping, and drinking tea. They play mahjong, lose money on horse races, and cannot pay the rent collector, also Chinese. The only white who enters this particular Chinatown is a prostitute.

But the most interesting selection in this book is probably Frank Chin's play, *The Chickencoop Chinaman*, in which the Chinese-American narrator-main character is adept at word play and verbal satire, speaks a language like nothing the non-Asian-American has ever heard before — although he can just as easily imitate Helen Keller or W. C. Fields — and brings himself and his whole Asian-American culture under the blade of his satirical tongue. And everything is there. Tam Lum, a Chinese-American writer and film-maker, goes to visit his Japanese-American friend Kenji, who is called Black Jap Kenji because he grew up in a black ghetto and learned to think and act in the dialect. Tam finds Kenji living with Lee, a Eurasian woman who passes for white, and who has had a series of different lovers and has borne children in all possible racial combinations. Kenji will not sleep with her because she is white, but Tam recognizes "the blood" in her at once. Here Asian-American culture is set up against black American culture and white American culture, and some important observations fall from Tam's quick tongue, in the guise of comedy, where black-yellow togetherness comes to life as two men side by side pissing into the bushes.

Chin's story alone draws together the lives of Chinese- and Japanese-Americans, but certainly the experiences of the two groups are close enough

so that it makes sense to put their works together in one collection. I wonder, though, whether the same can be said of the Filipino-Americans, who are generally subjected to the same economic oppression as the other groups (they provide the cheap labor in hospitals, hotels, fields) and to the same pressures from white racism — although the white stance toward the Filipino is more likely to involve a patronizing attitude toward “little brown brother” than to take the form of distrust of “Oriental inscrutability.” Nevertheless, Filipino-Americans *are* different. Peñaranda, Syquia, and Tagatac, who write the introduction to Filipino-American literature, are aware of this. They immediately reject their task:

We cannot write any literary background because there isn't any. No History. No published literature. No nothing. Just “Flips” all over the place (p. xlix).

In both the preface to the book and the introduction to Filipino-American literature, the situation of the Filipino is said to be unique because of the cultural tie-up between the United States and the Philippines, the historical forces of the colonial period, and so on. These differences are real; yet I wonder how much effect they have on the lives of long-time Filipino-Americans. *Why* has this group produced no literature? Is it perhaps because among Asian-Americans, Filipinos are still economically “low men on the totem pole?” Or because their internal colonization has been even more “successful” than that of other Asians? Peñaranda does say that many Filipino-Americans “think they are white.” We know how such writers as Bienvenido Santos see Filipino oldtimers, but how do they see themselves? Do they feel any unity with other Asian-Americans? Do they recognize their own culture as a distinct one?

The book contains three Filipino-American selections: part of Bulosan's *America is in the Heart*, Oscar Peñaranda's “Dark Fiesta,” and Sam Tagatac's “The New Anak.” None of the authors was born in the United States: Bulosan immigrated when he was 15 years old, and Peñaranda, who describes his own sensibility as definitely Filipino, when he was 12. “Dark Fiesta” is set in the Philippines, and it is hard to understand what about it could be considered Filipino-American. The selection from *America is in the Heart* is good, is Filipino-American, if only first generation, and makes a perfect beginning for the book, as the selection ends with the author's discovery that he could actually write understandable English, and his exclamation:

They can't silence me anymore! I'll tell the world what they have done to me!

But Sam Tagatac's story “The New Anak” is the most clearly Filipino-American, and is fascinating if rather disjointed, with its juxtaposition of Filipinos and Americans fighting Japanese in the Philippines, Filipino-Americans fighting the white man's war in Vietnam, a rather nightmarish apparition of a young girl who carries the smell of death, and the oldtimer

who keeps asking if he can be in the "pilm." This story alone brings out a uniquely Filipino-American viewpoint to stand beside the Chinese- and Japanese-American viewpoints set up in the other selections.

So we are left with an interesting collection of Asian-American writing with a unique and new sensibility. But this reviewer is also left with several questions in mind with regard to the Filipino-American selections: why was Bienvenido Santos, who has written well about Filipinos in America, left out? Why are all the Filipinos included first-generation Americans? Why was Peñaranda's purely Filipino story included? And finally, if indeed the editors had no choice — Filipino-Americans are simply not writing — *why* is that the case?

Susan Evangelista

FOREIGN TRADE REGIMES AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT: THE PHILIPPINES. By Robert E. Baldwin. New York: Columbia University Press, 1975.

The foreword states that "this volume is one of a series from the research project on Exchange Control, Liberalization and Economic Development sponsored by the National Bureau of Economic Research." The book does not stand by itself; actually, nine countries besides the Philippines have been studied by senior scholars, all using a similar analytical framework. Empirical generalizations have been drawn from the experience of all ten developing countries and are brought together in a final eleventh volume. Nonetheless, the study of the Philippines is self-contained and most welcome. There is anything but an oversupply of serious analyses and criticism of trade policies and practices in this country. The National Bureau of Economic Research deserves praise for its sponsorship of this project.

Professor Baldwin knows of the studies which present too few facts from which are drawn too many conclusions. The first chapters of his book present a detailed description of Philippine trade and payments policies from 1946 to 1971, covering the exchange crisis of 1970 and its immediate aftermath — the era which closed with the beginning of the New Society. A page of the introduction is given to a useful summary of important dates, starting with the Bell Trade Act of 1946 and ending with the Export Incentives Act of 1970. The period from 1949 to 1971 is one of continuing exchange controls except for a moment of relief begun under President Diosdado Macapagal.

Baldwin states that the main purpose of his study is to examine the effects on growth, resource allocation, and income distribution of the various controls employed, as well as of the fiscal and monetary measures which accompanied them.