

Movement Upstream, Downstream: a lyric essay

By Mộng-Lan

Early on, without knowing I was part of a movement, I was part of the movement of the Asian American cultural and literary phenomenon. Because it was necessary to bear witness, to tell my story, my stories, our stories, the collective story, my observations, which keeps on unravelling, I began to write. Racism, I've faced all of my life, practically everywhere, even when I went back to Viet Nam, my war-torn place of birth, for the first time in 1995.

Everything, all the odds, was always against me as a writer and artist, even my family and professional parents. Being female made it that much harder. Growing up Vietnamese American in conservative states in the south and southwest, made it exceedingly difficult.

Reading the writings of Asian American writers before me in solitude, as no one was teaching them in the schools where I attended, made me realize that I could have a voice, as they did. As the authors in *Aiiieeee!* did. Indeed, I spent much time in solitude reading, voraciously.

What moves one, and almost invisibly, to be part of a movement without knowing it? Because one moves in it, like fish in water, one moves unknowingly, unconsciously, part of the stream. At the beginning, we were, I was, going upstream. With the passage of time, I'm making a point of consciously going downstream.

Cultural evolution. Sometimes it feels like it isn't moving fast enough in a lifetime. How fast can people's ideas about another group of people change? And

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now, it seems with the current political climate, we have gone backwards. A California friend of mine has a cousin in Texas. She's Japanese American. She's often told by some irate white Texan, "Go back to where you came from." She would always say, "I was born here, in Texas."

When I was growing up, people, kids usually, used this command language to me, while living in the small towns. Now the current president is using this incendiary language to congresswomen publicly and in the social media, "Go back to where you came from."

There's still much work to be done, culturally, continuing the work started by the editors of *Aiiieeee!* 45 years ago. The majority of states in the US are not like California, where the majority is the minority. Who wants to hear our multitude of voices outside of California, New York and Washington?

On the commercial literary front, we must consider who controls the notable publishing houses, and how this affects what is being published, or *not* being published. *Aiiieeee!* confronts this power dynamic head-on. For fiction, who are these agents who control what is being fed to the reputable publishing houses? Are most of them European-Americans, with little or only a stereotypical understanding of what it is to be Vietnamese American, Asian American, other, and scant understanding of our stories, backgrounds, and histories?

Of course, now in 2019, there are new modes of publishing, new ways of making ourselves heard and read, seemingly without limits if we know how to use them. Should we, and if so, how shall we embrace them? What will be the new *Aiiieeee!*?