

## *On the Republication of Aiiieeee!*

By *Garrett Hongo*

I was in Berkeley the summer of 1974 and went to hear poet and novelist Al Young read at Moe's Books one evening. I'd just come back from a post-graduate fellowship year in Japan, studying Buddhism and writing poetry, and was catching up on the American scene. I wanted to be a poet and had been an avid reader of the magazine *Yarbird Reader*, co-edited by Young and Ishmael Reed, trail-blazing authors I'd followed. These two were giants to me, Black writers interested in the multi-culture, publishing writers of all colors and ethnicities, including Asian Americans like Frank Chin, an astonishingly brash, *I'll-fuck-you-up*, voice. I wanted to know everything I could about these writers.

From the podium that night, Young acknowledged a tall man in a dark beret and long leather jacket. It was Ishmael Reed himself, and he nodded back. It was a quick, almost ignorable gesture, but I felt a bolt of respect flash between the two men, and I admired them even more.

After the reading, I spoke to both of them and Reed told me that the book I'd heard about, *Aiiieeee!*, an anthology of Asian American literature edited by Chin and others, had already come out, that he'd just gotten his copy from Howard University Press, its publisher, the other day. I was overjoyed, said I'd get myself one that night. But it wasn't yet in bookstores, Reed said.

"Look, give me your address and I'll run my copy over to you tomorrow," Reed said.

The next afternoon, there he was, ringing my doorbell, his six-foot frame filling the doorway when I answered, the great book in his hand.

I read that book cover-to-cover almost in its entirety that evening, from the fulsome, yet liberating screed and declaration of literary independence of its Preface and Introduction to all the entries by its varied contributors. I recognized only a few

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names—editors Chin and Lawson Fusao Inada. Of its contributors, I only knew of Chin himself and novelist John Okada, as Inada had given me a copy of *No-No Boy* the year before. But, writer by writer, the book revealed to me a startling array of literary expression like nothing I'd read before. It was as though I was hearing from a vast family gathered for a reunion picnic, telling me the secret stories of my own ancestors, of outrageous acts and forgotten tragedies. I recognized lost and suppressed pieces of myself, read my own uncles and cousins, who'd labored in the canefields, into the memoir of Carlos Bulosan, a field hand and labor organizer himself. The stories of Wakako Yamauchi and Hisaye Yamamoto pulled a curtain back and I could see what the Nisei and Issei were like, whose past lives had gone unacknowledged, even by our own culture. Reading *Aiiieeee!* was like a revelation, a bolt of lightning that lit an ink-dark sky and flashed over a horizon I'd never imagined. To me, it created Asian American literature and inspired me to try and find my place within it.

I confess I kept the copy Reed loaned me long past the time I should have. I think it was because it wasn't only a text to me. It was a talisman. It was the key to liberating consciousness, to formulating an identity out of defiance for the norm, reverence for our past, and gratitude for the multiple voices of a new family we might belong to. TV and cinema images had debased our presences, caricatured our ancestors, and made us contend with false effigies of ourselves for far too long. *Aiiieeee!* was that first scream of literary protest that rejected stereotyping, that stood its ground against assimilative imperatives, that provided critique and alterity so those of us who followed its cry could inherit strength and resolve from having been empowered by its boldness and vision.

Homage!