

## *The Gift of Aiiieeeee!*

By David Mura

In 1974, after college, against my father's wishes (he wanted me to go to law school), I decided to become a writer and a scholar and entered the Ph.D. program in English at the University of Minnesota. A couple years later, in 1976 or '77, a fellow student, Marilyn Nelson, the African American poet, gave me a copy of *Aiiieeeee!* and said something like, "I thought you might be interested in this."

But, I was not. In my lit and creative writing classes, I'd been told, explicitly and implicitly, that writing which focused on ethnicity or race was destined to a sort of literary ghetto. It was not aesthetic, it was too political, it tried to get into the literary canon through a culture of complaint, sort of a backdoor affirmative action program (though the wide use of the term "affirmative action" and the Bakke decision were still a few years away). The English Department hewed to the literary standards of T.S. Eliot, with his emphasis on the traditional canon and a grounding in the classics. The contemporary poets I admired were either associated with the New Critics, poets like Lowell, Berryman and Jarrell, or certain poets who were overturning that aesthetic through the influence of Latin American and European surrealists, poets like Robert Bly and James Wright who produced what I later dubbed a prairie surrealism.

It is difficult for me to get younger writers these days to understand how

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Mura's four poetry collections are *The Last Incantations*, *Angels for the Burning*, *The Colors of Desire* which won the Carl Sandburg Literary Award from the Chicago Public Library, and *After We Lost Our Way*, a National Poetry Series Contest winner. His other books are *A Male Grief: Notes on Pornography & Addiction* and a book of critical essays, *Song for Uncle Tom, Tonto & Mr. Moto: Poetry & Identity*, published in the U. of Michigan Press Poets on Poetry series.

Mura has taught at the Stonecoast MFA program, the University of Oregon, the University of Minnesota, Hamline University, Macalester College, St. Olaf College and the VONA Writers' Conference. He has worked as the Director of Training with the Innocent Classroom, a program that trains K-12 teachers to improve their relationships with students of color. Mura helped found the Asian American Renaissance, a community based arts organization, and was also a member of the Don't Buy Miss Saigon Coalition which successfully forced a local presenting organization to apologize for putting on the musical and to promise never to present it again.

thoroughly white and Eurocentric the literary canon and poetic aesthetics were back then. Or how ignorant I was of any other way of viewing literature or creative writing.

Then, too, back then, I did not think of myself as a Japanese American or an Asian American or a person of color. In the psychological aftermath of their internment, my parents had shed or downplayed any sense of a familial Japanese culture, and they honed to a politics of assimilation. As my mother said years later, “We raised you to be individuals first, Americans second. We didn’t really think about your being Japanese.” In high school, I’d think of it as a compliment when a white friend would say, “I think of you, David, like a white person.”

In short, I was a banana. I didn’t want to be touched by the taint of “minority” literature. I thought of myself as an American, not a Japanese American. What could an anthology of Asian American writers have to do with me?

And so I didn’t pick up the anthology for a couple of years. And when I finally did, I don’t think I understood much of the introductions by the editors, Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada and Shawn Wong; I didn’t understand why they insisted that “a true Asian American sensibility” involved a perspective that was not Christian, emphasized the masculine in opposition to stereotypes of the effeminate Asian and focused on the American born Asian American rather than the immigrant. (Years later, now that I have a context for their argument, I would disagree with or complicate these assertions.) I recall, several years later, at my first MLA conference, when I went to a panel which debated the controversy between Frank Chin and Maxine Hong Kingston and “the real and the fake,” I still had no idea what anyone was talking about.

When I finally opened *Aiiiiiiii!* a couple years after Marilyn lent it to me, I first read the selections by Japanese American writers—Toshio Mori, Wakako Yamauchi, Hisaye Yamamoto, John Okada, Momoko Iko. Almost against my will, in these portraits of Issei and Nisei Japanese Americans, I recognized something of myself, or perhaps more accurately, of my family. Reading Okada—a stark contrast to my parents’ silence about the camps—I got a glimmer of the damaging effects of the Japanese American internment, and there was something in Ichiro’s angry and bitter interior monologue about the distance that he felt between him and his mother that I recognized in myself, some vague place where filial conflict was mixed with anger and resentment over being placed in the margins, at odds with the all-white all American dream.

But it was Momoko Iko who spoke to me most at the time. I’d seen a production of her play *The Gold Watch* as a teenager on PBS, and it was the first time I’d ever seen Japanese Americans on television (I’d also later seen a PBS production of *The Soul Shall Dance*, Wakako Yamauchi’s play, whose original story was also in

*Aiiiiieee!*). In my adolescence and twenties, my Nisei father and I were often locked in struggle—about my applying for conscientious objector status, about my atheism and objections to the Vietnam war, about my decision to become a writer and not a lawyer. The surface sources of our conflict were different from the conflicts between the Issei father and Nisei son in *The Gold Watch*, but the Oedipal aspects of that struggle, set in a Japanese American community, just before and after Pearl Harbor, struck me powerfully.

Against the all-white canon I was studying in my Ph.D. program, I discovered that as a writer I had forebears; there were others who had written about the Japanese American and Asian American experience. I wasn't the first tree in the forest. And though part of me still resisted the labels of ethnicity and race, part of me also sensed that my identity as a Japanese American might possibly be seminal to what I could become as a writer. (It would take Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin White Masks* to finally turn me around.)

So many seeds sprouted in me from that anthology. Years later, in the 1990s, I met Frank Chin and, in his ad-hominem style, he lambasted other Asian American writers whom he deemed fake—and at times, he implied I was probably going that way myself. But I had read by then the introduction to *The Big Aiiiiieee!* and I was struck by the material on the No-No Boy draft resisters, which laid out the historical context for John Okada's famed novel. When I visited Frank Chin at his home, he showed me letters and documents about the resisters and the Japanese American Citizens League's collaboration with the government, including a letter where the President of the JACL, Mike Masaoka, suggested the separating of the Issei from the Nisei, and another letter that mentioned the possibility of branding the Issei with tattoos. I understood that the JACL was not simply the holder of picnics I went to as a child in Chicago; it had a darker, more complicated past. And I saw more clearly the stance of the No-No Boys and their fight for their Constitutional rights—a stance very different from the soldiers of the 442<sup>nd</sup> whom I'd been brought up to revere. All of this eventually led me to my novel, *Famous Suicides of the Japanese Empire*, which tells the story of Ben Ohara, the son of a No-No Boy.

Years later, I also met Wakako Yamauchi when we both won a Lila Wallace fellowship and later, with Garrett Hongo, I visited her in California. It was thrilling to meet this great short story writer and playwright whose work had meant so much to me. Unlike some others in my community, she encouraged the impulses behind my memoirs, the investigations I had conducted into my family's silence about their internment camp experiences; of course, she understood the Nisei reluctance to talk about the injustices and pain of the internment, but like a surrogate mother or

beloved aunt, she also understood the cost of such silence on those of my generation.

These days, there are times where I sometimes ask “What if I hadn’t....” I ask such a question in surprise at what my life has been, the people I’ve met, the communities I’ve been a part of, the work I’ve produced. And one of the biggest is, “What if Marilyn Nelson hadn’t lent me the anthology *Aiiiiieee!?*” It’s hard for me to picture being the writer and person I am without it.

Years later, I would see Marilyn at the AWP Conferences and I’d always thank her for lending me the anthology and apologize for never giving it back. But I think Marilyn understands why I never gave it back, and she’s glad her gift had such a lasting effect.

I feel the same about the four editors of the anthology, Chin, Chan, Inada and Wong. If I still disagree with some of their conclusions or positions, I am forever grateful for their seminal anthology which has had such a profound effect not just on Asian American literature but on American literature. Their anthology shook this once banana and changed him profoundly, very much for the better.