

Mantos, Unmasked

By Russell C. Leong

"I exchange one face for another, not knowing that I have always lived in the same body."



Russell C. Leong is the author of "Rough Notes for Mantos," published in *Aiiieeeee!* under the pseudonym Wallace Lin. Leong was born in [Chinatown, San Francisco](#). Russell C. Leong's collection *Phoenix Eyes and Other Stories* (University of Washington Press, 2000) garnered an American Book Award and was cited by the *Los Angeles Times* as one of the best 100 books of that year. A poet, writer, editor, and adjunct professor of English at UCLA, Leong edited *Amerasia Journal* for three decades at UCLA and as the visiting Dr. Thomas Tam Fellow founded the CUNY FORUM for the City University of New York's Asian and Asian American Research Institute. He edited the first books on Asian American sexualities and independent media, and his stories, poems, and essays are anthologized and translated in the US and East Asia. Leong studied the social sciences at SF State College, comparative literature at National Taiwan University, and received his MFA in Film Directing from UCLA. Contact: rluong@aasc.ucla.edu. See, www.russellleongwrites.com.

To come out as the author of “Rough Notes for Mantos” unmasked as a gay person of color for the 45th anniversary of the publication of *Aiiiiiiiii!* I share “Donkey Room, Human Room,” an as yet unpublished poem. “Donkey Room” is about the melding of sexuality and spirituality, whenever and wherever she, or he, may find it.¹

Ironically, because there is at least one gay person “outed” in this landmark anthology, it softens the accusations that the editors were exclusionary of women, closed to gender differences, and so forth. Indeed, Shawn Wong had originally wanted the story “Phoenix Eyes” (later to become the lead story of my book) but I demurred then and substituted “Rough Notes for Mantos” instead, more oblique, less obviously gay. (Remember that to be an Asian American activist in the 1960s you were also surrounded by Chinatown paternalism, and the Chinese and Cuban political ideology of the time that saw homosexuality as bourgeois and part of the decadent class. How could one “serve the people” and service a man at the same time?! There were also familial considerations.

Indeed, I garnered my understanding of gender and desire not from Asian American writers or activists (there were few gay or lesbian ones), but mostly from European, Japanese, and American writers including James Baldwin, Jean Genet, Cavafy, Marguerite Duras, Yukio Mishima, Alberto Moravia, Jean Cocteau, and others. Though their desire was unmasked in their writing, mine remained hidden for far too long. I sorely lacked, and needed, confidence.

So the fact of the editors including a gay person in this early collection is commendable. However, for many gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered folks of color in the 1960s, ‘70s, and ‘80s—and perhaps even today, their alternative sexual orientation was not culturally, politically, or ideologically acceptable or viable in daily life. Karen Buenavista Hanna, in a recent issue of CUNY FORUM (2018), published a ground-breaking essay on gay and lesbian Filipino American activists during the anti-Marcos period. Sometimes, as she points out, there were conflicts over political and sexual allegiances; like oil and water, at times the two could not blend.

There are other examples in film, creative and scholarly works, and documentaries that explore the tenuous positions of queer Asian and Pacific Americans in the latter part of the 20th century. Two early anthologies, in particular, *Asian American Sexualities* (Routledge, 1996) edited by Russell Leong,

¹ The author would like to thank the four editors of *Aiiiiiiiii!* and colleague King-Kok Cheung for their support. This essay is dedicated to my father, Charles Leong, who was the first Asian editor of San Jose State’s daily college paper in the 1930s. Leong, born in Watsonville and educated at Stanford, was a pioneer journalist and publisher both in China and the US from the 1940s through the 1970s.

and *Q & A : Queer in Asian America* (Temple, 1998) edited by David Eng and Alice Hom, helped pave the way for academic inclusion within Asian American Studies, women studies, and queer studies curriculum. A more recent example is King-Kok Cheung's essay, "Art, Spirituality, and the Ethic of Care: Alternative Masculinities in Chinese American Literature," (*Masculinity Studies & Feminist Theory*, ed. Judith Kegan Gardiner, 2002) which examines works by Shawn Hsu Wong, Li-young Lee, and myself.

With the third edition of *Aiiiiiiii!* I hope that readers and teachers can better understand the racial and political pressures the all-male editors felt, and also the urgency to stand up and define a newer, less encumbered type of Asian American manhood and masculinity.

Almost fifty years later, the compass of gender and sexuality has shifted, to include women of all orientations, peoples of color and of mixed racial and ethnic descent, and even gay Asian American men, who evince an alternative type of masculinity, shorn of both traditional Western or Eastern paternalistic proclivities.

Thus, the re-publication of the anthology, with a new contextual preface by Fickle, should be seen as pioneering, even radical, in its thought and language, no less radical than *Aiiiiiiii!* in the late '70s. Whatever forms of sexuality implied or expressed by the various writers' stories, we must now see them as part of the "donkey room, human room" —the realm of consciousness, of flesh and freedom, of motion and emotion that we all share.

The following poem is based on a stone seal, "Donkey Room," that the Chinese painter Bada Shanren (1626-1708) used to sign some of his paintings. It is said the artist had dozens of seals, literary names which he utilized not to disguise his identity, but to extend his consciousness. LGBTQ writers, in a similar vein, help to delineate and extend our consciousness of being, and coming into our own in the 21st century.

To be yellow or brown is simply not enough: we must out-speak our sexualities in order to be fully human, to be fully awake, to freely saunter: to break the chains of tradition and to hear iron links clatter to the ground. With this poem, I also share a recent self-portrait: "Mantos, Unmasked." Using India ink and tempera watercolor on Japanese board, I've added the Chinese characters, which, translated, mean, "Heaven and Earth, (Self) Liberation." I was perhaps also influenced by protests during the past few months for democratic reform in Hong Kong, noting that one of its organizers, activist Jimmy Sham, was brutally attacked and beaten by unidentified thugs for both his queer identity and community politics.

In this particular Hong Kong example, and there are many others around the world, sexual orientation, post-colonial politics, and culture converge on the

global human rights platform on which we are standing—as brown bodies in action.

DONKEY ROOM, HUMAN ROOM

In the donkey room

Smell of flesh and money leads me on

Even the bit cannot stop my nose

And mouth from quivering

Smell of cunt and cock and the cold

Whiff of gold bracelets and anklets

Around my slavish mind

In the donkey room

Body casts a four-legged shadow on the wall

And dances on the floor

I am animal by nature

In the human room

Smell of flesh and money still leads me on

My tongue quivers even after

I have been sentenced to this cell

Of Birth and decay

Yet as gold bracelets

And anklets fall away from bone
The beautiful slave is now free to leave

In the human room
Body casts a two-legged shadow on the wall
And dances on the floor
I am human by nature

Donkey room human room
Wherever I find myself
I exchange one face for another
Not knowing that I have always lived
In the same body
Same flesh same freedom
Same second same season
First nature second nature
All nature Buddha nature
Donkey room human room.

(Revised for the 45th anniversary of Aiiieeeee!: Los Angeles and Taipei, 1998,
2020)

Dear Russell,
It is a translation of your poem "Donkey Room: Human Room" which young Chinese poets like very much. So do I. I hope it is a graceful and faithful translation of your piece. Zhang Ziqing
Feb. 4, 1998

驴舍：人舍

——读八大山人传有感
[美] 拉塞尔·梁
张子清译

在驴舍里
肉欲与金钱领我向前
甚至嘴角难停止
我鼻与嘴的颤动。
我嗅到阴道与阳物，嗅到
绕着我卑下头脑的
金手镯金脚镯
冰冷的气味。

同样的时刻：同样的季节。
驴本性：人本性。
众生本性：菩萨本性。
驴舍：人舍。

在驴舍里
我的躯体在墙上投下了四腿的身影
我在地上跳舞。
我本性是动物。

在人舍里
肉欲和金钱依然领我向前。
甚至在我被罚进这间
出生与死亡的房舍，
我的舌头颤抖着，
带着聪明的话语和可爱的微笑。
但如同金手镯金脚镯从骨骼上脱落，
这俊俏的奴仆此刻将自由地离去。

在人舍里
我的躯体在墙上投下了两腿的身影，
我在地板上跳舞。
我本性是人。

驴舍：人舍
我不论在何处发现我自己
我总是以一处换到另一处而告终
却不知道我一直生活在
同一间房舍里。

同样的肉欲：同样的自由。

Caption: Translation of "Donkey Room" by Prof. Zhang Ziqing, Nanjing University.
Handwritten note about response of young Chinese poets.