

(B)Aiiieeeee!: The Future is Femme and Queer

ONE MORNING in the summer of 2016, I found myself in a Super 8 Motel in Decatur, Georgia, dousing my face with setting spray in a mostly-futile attempt to keep my eyebrows from melting off in the heat. I was in town to coach a team at the National Poetry Slam, and I had woken up disastrously late, far too late to make it to the annual Asian and Pacific Islander American Open Mic. I felt terrible about missing one of the few yearly opportunities for us to gather. Later that day, I met up with Sheena Raza Faisal, a poet on my team, and asked her how the event had gone.

She rolled her eyes. “Franny,” she groaned. “It was like a straight/cis/East Asian/boy convention.” I listened as she recounted the experience—poem after poem rife with Bruce Lee references, mainly concerned with smashing stereotypes of docility, speaking against the emasculation of Asian American men through hypothetical renderings of violent revenge, and so on. Listening to Sheena, a fellow queer APIA woman poet, I’ll admit I felt just a little better about missing the reading; a little gladder about the extra time I’d spent instead on my eyeliner.

Anyone who keeps up with contemporary poetry by APIA authors might point out that Sheena’s description doesn’t exactly match current publishing trends. It shouldn’t, however, strike us as a surprise that a contingent of young, male, Asian American poets ended up at this narrative. After all, it’s exactly the kind of work that the four (cisgender, straight, male) editors of *Aiiieeeee!: An Anthology of Asian American Writers* celebrated in their foundational 1974 collection—an anthology that, for better or for worse, is still centered in the courses in which so many young people first come into contact with Asian American writers. It’s the kind of poetry that I’d tried to emulate after reading *Aiiieeeee!* in my Intro to Asian American Literature course, and the kind that, to some, is most quickly recognizable as resistant to white supremacy. Unfortunately, it’s also the kind of Asian American poetry that remains driven by a possessive investment in masculinity.

But when I look around me and imagine the future of APIA poetry, Frank Chin's brood of straight boys is—sorry 'bout it—nowhere to be found. What I see instead is a vibrant APIA poetics that is building a diverse set of alternatives to modes of resistance that rely on masculinist dominance—a poetics that is both newly emergent and laughing at you for not realizing it's been here all along.

In beginning to sketch out my attempt to answer the question, “What is the future of Asian American poetry?,” I made a list of every emerging¹ APIA poet I could think of. Confession: I wrote twenty-two names before I got to the first straight, cisgender man. In saying this, I don't mean to exclude any writers from the redefining-the-canon party (#NotAllMen, and so on). But from Ocean Vuong to Tarfia Faizullah, Lehua Taitano to Mai DerVang, one thing is clear: the future of APIA poetry is femme, queer, and brighter than ever.

As a little case study, let me tell you about three queer Chens I know. The first, Ching-In Chen, is one of the only poets whom most people might agree to call “experimental” whose work makes me cry every time I encounter it. Their poetry, with its boldly inventive syntax and fluid borders, straddles multiple media as well as performance art, yet manages never to stray more than an inch from the emotional urgency that drives it. In contrast, Chen Chen's work approaches the lyric with a vibrant, wicked sense of humor. At times essayistic, at times conversational, and always persistently contemporary, his sentences are perfect spies; we never quite see the magic coming. And then there's Jess X. Snow (who previously published under the name of Jess X. Chen), an eco-feminist poet and visual artist whose poems, much like their murals, unfurl like enormous wings—surreal, epic, both deeply spiritual and fiercely political. Their poems are vast, richly imagistic worlds of radical fantasy.

Besides being a cute thought exercise, this little, arbitrary cross-section is emblematic of the wide range of strategies that emerging queer and femme APIA poets are employing in order to build a new, alternative literary canon. All three poets are raising challenges to white supremacy and heteropatriarchy that not only look nothing like each other but also look nothing like the possessive investment in masculinity that remains stubbornly at the center of APIA literary study. Rather, these poets and their peers are creating new territory of their own by challenging traditional boundaries of syntax, form, and subject matter, by drawing from fresh lexica and building strange new language-worlds.

Women, queer, trans, and gender nonconforming poets are truly leading the charge in all corners of APIA poetry. Poets like Jennifer S. Cheng, Solmaz Sharif, and Soham Patel are continuing the tradition of the Asian American femme avant-garde, building off the groundwork laid by Myung Mi Kim, Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge, and others. In the realm of the lyric, Jenny Xie, Lo Kwa Mei-En, and Mai Der Vang are some of the voices serving muscular, wild, at-the-bone-of-the-thing realness. Poets like Fatimah Asghar, Hieu Minh Nguyen, and Sarah Kay continue to prove that freshly contemporary, rigorously crafted work can succeed both within and outside of traditional literary spaces. South Asian, Southeast Asian, West Asian, Pacific Islander, and multiracial femmes and queers are dismantling East Asian-centrism and challenging the very usefulness of the category “APIA”—perhaps most notably through the pan-Pacific collective behind the groundbreaking performance *She Who Dies to Live*: Jocelyn Kapumealani Ng, Terisa Siagatonu, Kathy Jetñil-Kjiner, and Jahra “Rager” Wasasala. And new traditions are being built from the ground up, such as the new queer Vietnamese lyric (led by such poets as Ocean Vuong and Paul Tran) and APIA Undocupoetry (Wo Chan, Janine Joseph, and others).

Though the task of defining queer/femme poetics is certainly too large for the scope of this essay, I offer that one thing all these poets may have in common is a commitment to radically investigating and expanding the boundaries of empathy. It is a shift in focus that can come only with decentralizing East Asian American emasculation as the primary driving concern of our literature. And it is this shift toward the ever-expanding possibilities of empathy that allows for the birth of new schools, new languages, new urgencies and histories to wrestle with, to uncover and attempt to render with honesty and precision—rather than limiting ourselves to the narrow range of solutions that heteropatriarchal violence offers.

If you can think of a thousand other names that I should have mentioned, it’s at least in part because so many emerging poets resist the fairly easy categorizations I attempted to use here. And if it seems as though I’ve taken this address as an opportunity to shout out all my friends, you’re not exactly wrong. But we femmes and queers have always had to look out for each other, to create our own families when white/straight/cis/male literary institutions told us we couldn’t sit with them. These days, with spaces like Kundiman and the Asian American Writers Workshop, the coming-of-age of the spoken word

generation, and the support of our poetic aunts (Aimee and Joseph and Kazim and Don Mee and Bhanu)—with the support that queers and femmes have built for us, our chosen families are stronger and more fabulous than ever.

Let us also remember that, while heteropatriarchy continues its hold on contemporary literary institutions, one could argue that the history of American poetry is decidedly femme and queer. If all students of poetry are told to look to Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman as the founders of the American lyric (at least, until Ezra Pound showed up and cosplayed as a Chinese woman), then small wonder that it's not straight boys inheriting this patch of earth. It's remembering these legacies, as well as the legacies of women, queer, and trans Black, Latinx, and Native writers that came before us, that strengthens my belief in the power of my family's voices to shape the future of American letters.

And yes, the range of this belief does include spaces like the poetry slam world, despite the anecdote with which I began this piece. Even in such a space, in which performative hypermasculinity has historically enjoyed a particular kind of success, I have faith in the APIA femme and queer poets who are providing alternate routes to freedom on stages across the country; poets like Chrysanthemum Tran, Arati Warrior, Gretchen Carvajal, Kate Hao, Jess Rizkallah, Nancy Huang, and so many others.

The gatekeepers tried, as they always try, to feed us the myth of scarcity. They said there could only be one of us at a time; that we'd have to get sneaked in through the back door; that we were lucky for any scraps of success we could get. Perhaps this is why, for example, Fatimah Asghar has repeatedly been mistaken for Tarfia Faizullah: the white heteropatriarchal imagination can't fathom that there could be two South Asian women poets absolutely killing the game at the same time.

Well, bitch, there are. There are hundreds of us: femme, women, queer, trans, and gender nonconforming poets from all corners of the Asian diaspora, speaking dozens of languages, spanning multiple legacies of American war and occupation, from all class backgrounds and migration histories. Here's to our continuing arrival. Here's to everything we are leaving behind to get here: the attempts to flatten our identities, the prescribed assimilation narratives, the demands of legibility, all the myths of whiteness, and of course the possessive investment in masculinity to

which we're supposed to owe allegiance. To all of that, we flip our hair, smack our gum, throw back our heads, and with a sound that is, as Frank Chin wrote, "more than a whine, shout or scream," we send up a collective, resounding "Byyyeeeee!"

NOTE

¹. Here, I define "emerging" as having no more than two full-length poetry collections published. It's a terrible definition. What can you do?