

Pacific Reader

a review of books by asian pacific americans

The Cup Runneth Over

Reviewed by Russell Leong

I wuz sitting in a Filipino barbershop in a Latino/Asian section of Los Angeles one late afternoon, drinking strong coffee and reading the "New Asia" issue of "The Portable Lower East Side." It's portable, discreet, and no one else noticed it because it barely covered the palm of one hand and the other customers were into the oversized fashion mags with pretty white boys and girls staring out of those white pages.

Cold blue eyes and bared white teeth. The volume I had, on the other hand, had images of Asians, photos by Angel Shaw, Gene Moy, Nina Kuo, Ai Wei Wei. The images and representations were distinctly of people of color, though rendered in black and white.

On my second cup of coffee, straight, without cream, I began reading the articles: Yong

Soon Min, talking about the "geopolitics" of an emerging transnational Asian identity; Peter Kwong and Dusanka Miscevic mapping out the Chinese involvement in the heroin/opium trade; Johanna Lessinger investigating the phenomenon of Asian Indians in the Newsstand business and Ho Wai Hung describing the tribulations of Chinese students who deliver meals for New York Chinese restaurants on their bicycles.

The articles made it clear that Asian businesses in New York, whether above ground or underground, neither reflected the aspirations of a model minority nor purely individual enterprise and hard work. Indeed, the drug, newsstand, or restaurant businesses usually require large amounts of capital, and are controlled by interlocking business interests of a powerful and wealthy few. The articles opened my eyes once again; the Apple was wormy at the core.

On my third cup of coffee, this time with milk to blunt the bitter aftertaste of the articles, I turned to the poetry. Not sweeter, but shorter. A few that caught my heart: Therese On's "Chin-Hairs," on seeing the familiar act of cutting chin hairs in an entirely new way; Simeon Dumdum Jr.'s "America," with his "moon...rising and it was bigger than in America;" Indran Amirthanayagam's Sri Lankan-vision of an Asia connected by elephants, Rushdie and expatriate legacies. And

more: Vipin slurping the "thingruel of want," in his poem, "The Thick-tongued Guerilla;" Meena Alexander, writing "Against Elegies."

The poetry was complex, offerings to the Asian experience in America on a mat of expectations interwoven with grass reeds and silk, brass and silver, humor and tears, with burnt, frayed edges if you looked closely. And there were more offerings in prose: on the solitude of the short story writer by Shashi Tharoor; "Outrageous," by Adrienne Tien; "Secrets," by Marina Budhos, and Jessica Hagedorn's "Travels in the Combat Zone."

All demystify the old myths of inarticulate and inexpressive Asians, while at the same time creating new archetypes, not easily pegged, not easily forgotten. As Hagedorn's protagonist says, "She will commit their names to memory, she will remember to stay angry. The sun is blazing. She keeps walking."

Walking together, facing the heat. That is the beauty of this collection edited by Indran Amirthanayagam, Luis H. Francia, Kimiko Hahn and Peter Kwong. This volume touches the heart and belly, linking the desire and destruction of life, tempered by a keen editorial vision. Buy it, read it, pass it on.

The cup runneth over: is it coffee, Thai style, Indian style, Hong Kong style, Filipino style, New York style — or, simply, New Asia style?

Drink up!

"The Portable Lower East Side"
New Asia, Volume Seven,
#2

Edited by Indran
Amirthanayagam, Luis
H. Francia, Kimiko Hahn
and Peter Kwong
New York City, 1990



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for long

from death valley
you brought me a rock