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Poetry Matters

Russell C. Leong

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**UC HASTINGS CENTER FOR RACIAL AND ECONOMIC
JUSTICE CONFERENCE:
“CONNECTING THE THREADS THAT BIND:
CONTEXTUALIZING LEGALIZED VIOLENCE AGAINST
ASIAN AMERICANS”**

SEPTEMBER 10, 2021

*Poet Russell Leong punctuated the conference with his creative work.
He conducted a live reading of his two poems, “It’s Another City
Today” and “Epilogue: Saved by America?”*

Poetry Matters

RUSSELL LEONG

Biography:

Russell C. Leong is a poet activist who believes in the power of words to free the future. Leong was chief editor of UCLA Amerasia Journal (1977-2010) and later founded and edited the CUNY Forum: *Asian American/Asian Studies for the City University of New York’s Asian American Asian Research Institute*. His stories, “Phoenix Eyes,” garnered an American Book award, and his poetry, The “Country of Dreams and Dust,” received in Oakland PEN Josephine miles award. Leong’s stories and poems have been translated and published in Shanghai, Hong Kong, Taipei, and Nanjing, and have been included in American anthologies edited by Jessica Hagedorn, Ishmael Reed, Shawn Wong, and others. Leong has an MFA in theatre and film from UCLA, where he was an adjunct professor of English and Asian American Studies.

Transcript

First, a shout out to the organizers and also to the students who are reading poetry throughout the day. Earlier, it was mentioned why poetry isn't just a lunch break; rather, poems have a unique place in our profession and practice. Poems can question power. Poems can create community. Finally, poems can humanize our activism and politics. Poems can be carried in the mind; you cannot imprison the mind.

Today, I'm going to read two poems written twenty years apart. The first poem, "It's Another City Today" actually is connected with one of our panelists, Professor Stephen Lee. In 2001, he was an MA student at UCLA, and actually he was staying at my house before going onto Irvine. I remember the morning of 9/11. We turned on the television: it was about 7:00 in the morning. There were images of the planes running into Manhattan's Twin Towers. I asked Stephen "Hey Stephen is this a Godzilla movie or rerun?" because I figured he knew more about films. The planes and towers appeared over and over on loop. Newscasters kept on repeating themselves saying "It's another America today because America had changed. It's another city too, especially New York City because of the downfall of its iconic Twin Towers."

After that fateful day of September 11th, actually Stephen became an editorial assistant for *Amerasia Journal*. Together with Don Nakanishi and myself, we put together this first (maybe the only book on 9/11) *Asian Americans on War and Peace*. If you take a look at the cover, you can see at the top there's a picture of Sikhs in New York, taken by the late Corky Lee, and on the bottom a sign from World War II that says no "Japs or Hindus allowed." So, you can see the connection between what happened on 9/11 and today, goes way back to World War II, and before. During this time, Stephen actually had a chance to go back to New Mexico where he was born and raised. He wrote about his experience looking for the internment camps, also about his own identity as a person of color and as an Asian American.

I want to read this poem, "It's Another City Today." It's based on the mantra of the newscasters who are repeating over and over again that "it's another city".

"It's another city today,
They say.
Another New York. Another L.A.
Another America changed forever.

Newscasters, generals, and presidents say
It's another city today.
They say
Bring their world terrorists to justice.
Look for someone slightly darker (than even me)
Maybe a guy not so slant-eyed, taller.
Who speaks Arabic.
Not Chinese or English.
It's another city.
They say.
He or she or they may be praying or plotting
in a mosque. In a temple. In a church.
In a truck, car, or plane.
It's another city.
They say.
Nah. Mexicans don't qualify as the enemy.
They just cross borders, every day, they say.
Not even Chinese or Russians are enemies.
That's another place, another time.
It's another city.
They say.
But what if the enemy lurks within?
Within the alley of the aorta.
Within the barrio of the brain.
Within the gutter below the skin.
Within the bullet of the eye.
Within the twist of the blade.
Within your back?

Dead or alive I'm a different person, then who I was yesterday.
Look me in the eye, I say for it's another city today."

I think for everybody, whether in Asia, in the Americas, North or Global South, it's not only another city, it's another world. Professor Alina Ball asked me to read the first poem. It so happened that Kabul had just fallen, and I was inspired to write a short piece called "Epilogue Saved by America". Asian Americans—not only East Asian—but South Asian, Southeast Asian and those from the global diaspora are indeed a part of our world. What happens in Kabul, Myanmar, Hong Kong, Mumbai, Singapore—also has profound implications for Asians in the Americas.

Epilogue: Saved by America?

“I thought it would be saved by America,
so in Hong Kong I opened my yellow umbrella.
I thought I would be saved by America,
so in Rangoon I clutched my Buddhist rosary.
I thought it would be saved by America,
so in Kabul I waved my visa.

I thought I would be saved—
but now I fall to my feet
as heaven and earth converge
in the narrowing arc of my eyes

umbrella splinters
beads scatter
visa torn

My freedom will soar on broken wings
but no--I will never be saved by America alone
We save ourselves--together

Thank you. The fact that poets and writers throughout history have been—
and still are--jailed, imprisoned, put on blacklists, means that poetry still
matters enough. So, thank you so much for including poets and poetry in
today's program because poetry is a form which matters.