

(can use cover of book UCLA published—out of the Dust—or screenshot from my video, below).

“Janice Mirikitani, Poet of the New Asian Nation”

(February 4, 1941-July 29, 2021)

*Dear Jan,*

*This note is fifty years and a day late; my sincere apologies. Yet, I hope that somehow these words will reach you.*

1.

You were always the beautiful (and you knew it!), passionate, and visionary poet way back then.

Was it 1972, on a foggy night at UC Berkeley’s Zellerbach Hall? It was also the 29<sup>th</sup> of January. We all had long black hair and brown skin. Green army flak jackets, skinny bodies, and loud voices. Filipino Igorot dances, Chinese music, and Japanese mask movements. Filipino. Chinese. Japanese—the first reading of poets of the New Asian Nation. The term—new Asian nation--reflected the political thrusts of the times, including the movement by some Blacks towards establishing a “Black Nation,” and the call for a “United Front of Asians in America” by community activists. Some called the evening a celebration of Asian cultural and spiritual nationalism.

Those who read: Nanying Stella Wong. Curtis Choy. Kitty Tsui. Russell Leong. George Leong. Bayani Mariano. Serafin Syquia. Sam Tagatac. Russell Robles. Alfred Robles. Emily Cachapero. Lawson Fusao Inada.

And you, Janice Mirikitani. I remember Lawson asked if you would prefer reading before him, because, as everyone knew, anyone who read after him—the main male show--would surely be eclipsed.

*“But No”* you smiled back at him, *“I can hold my own.”* (Actually, I think he did not want to read after you).

We were young. Experimental. Anti-Vietnam War. Anti-apartheid. Followed the Black Nation. Panthers. The Nation of Islam. Heralded a decolonized Africa, a rising China, grass roots movements in Central America.

That night, collectively, we called ourselves “The New Asian Nation”. Within this nation of S.F. Bay area students, activists, and poets, you taught us poise, pitch, and how to make poetry matter even more. We believed in poetry FROM the people, and poetry FOR the people.

The Word, like a torch of revolution, would always light the world, so we believed.  
And so we lived to write.

2.

Indeed, to counter the physical, erotic, and political subjugation of the Third World by the West, you, with a coalition of Black, Raza, Asian American, Indian and Native Island peoples founded Third World Communications in San Francisco in 1970. You published *Third World Women* in 1972, followed by *Time to Greeze: Incantations from the Third World* in 1975.

Who and what did you write about in your books of poetry? Your book titles are mini-koans in themselves: "*Awake in the River.*" "*Shedding Silence.*" "*We the Dangerous.*" "*Love Works.*" "*Out of the Dust.*"

You wrote about Love and Death. Inclusion and Exclusion. Lineage and Displacement. Mothers and grandmothers. Husbands and wives and daughters. The raw and the eaten. The free and the addicted. The awkwardness of sexuality. The cruelty of patriarchy. The oppression of sexism. Straight and gay and partnered and single and every other between.

Throughout the decades, your pen and voluminous notebooks precisely documented War and peace and Internment, on dusty Midwest plains below shadowy mountains, as well as the onerous, stubborn prison of the mind.

In "Loving from Vietnam to Zimbabwe," you pitched the intensity of lovemaking against the violence of war, in alternating stanzas. You contrast crimson and silk with boots and delta mud; a massage freely given with the capturing and stripping of a soldier. You end that poem with:

...

*call me strange Names*

*Hanoi*

*Bachmai*

*Haipong*

*loving in this world*

*is the sliver splinter edge*

*is the dare*

*in the teeth of the tiger*

*the pain of jungle rot*

*the horror of flesh unsealed*

*the danger of surviving.*

From the birth of the new Asian nation, onwards to today, many of us continued to read with you at protests and rallies and churches—be it for world AIDS day, to raise money for a shelter, or to abolish militia killings in Central America. And, we continued to publish, via the Kearny Street Writers Workshop, Third World Communications, the UCLA Asian American Studies Center, The University of Hawaii Press, etc., and through chapbooks, broadsides, and anthologies. Only blocks away from City Lights and Lawrence Ferlingetti, yet, we the denizens and writers of “The New Asian Nation” scattered about San Francisco Chinatown, the Tenderloin, the Mission, seemed ten thousand miles away from white male writers like Gary Snyder and others who had “discovered” Zen, the East, Buddhism, Taoism, and so forth on temple pilgrimages to Kyoto, Katmandu, or in ashrams in India, and through their fine translations of ancient texts.

Asian American writers on the other hand—like yourself, raised in a Japanese American Internment camp (Rohwer), or our brother Al Robles, who had worked and lived between the International Hotel (Filipino town) and Chinatown--had nothing too fancy or esoteric to uncover for a curious world.

Like Native Americans say to the colonizers and anthropologists: “You did not discover us, we were always here.” Here, because, life for you—and for us Asian Americans--was plenty complex and challenging enough already.

For you, watching your grandmother slice fresh rock cod, “Preparing Fish is a Political Act” (the title of a video homage to your poetry, see <https://youtu.be/6678VWq6o2c>. the truth of life revealed itself in every movement of the family and community around you—the creators, the cooks, waiters, cleaners, the hungry, the homeless, those women and men often of color evicted from the mainstream.

Sure, Zen and Buddhism and Taoism existed, but not always in books, in academia, in exotic locales. Japanese American Internment camps of World War II from Poston to Manzanar to Rohwer were “empty” enough for us to ponder for a lifetime. At that time, we kept any threads of Asian spirituality closeted, so as not to become Orientalist curiosities for the world. Sure, a typical Zen koan and a tap on a bald pate could bring enlightenment, but a simple meal for a homeless person in San Francisco’s Tenderloin could immediately fill the belly and bring peace of mind.

*Jan, you recognized the innate truth of survival on the broken streets around the temple of your mind.*

3.

Fast forward--fifty years later, with your unexpected leaving of this world of Samsara on July 29, 2021, I realize that time has passed, to paraphrase lines of the Diamond Sutra, as quickly as a drop of dew, a flash of lightening, a bubble, a dream.

So I'm right behind you, Jan, and I can sense the cool Pacific mist, picking up the fresh scent of redwood and carrying the murmur of lost Asian souls who were incarcerated on Angel Island in the last century.

I touch the green clay incense holder you had bought me from Kyoto, after visiting many small shops, you said. Tomorrow, I promised myself to bring it out to the garden and light incense in your memory, and to honor your word. (After we published your newer collected works in a book, "*Out of the Dust*" -- University of Hawaii Press--you received still more invitations to read and talk in Japan, and you took your daughter Tianne, I remember, to revisit. By this time, you had been already named as the second poet laureate of San Francisco. Jan—you were a luminous force of nature whose literary passion had matured, but never faltered or forgotten the rest of us.

4.

Yet, your throaty contralto and humor also saved many a day, even in dire lockdown times.

In the midst of Covid lockdown, on 12/31/20, I emailed you these lines:

A "Jan" thought!

We are the concubines of Covid

Our breath goes up and down

As red lanterns are raised or lowered

In the air, sound of soldiers on dusty streets

Have they come to rescue or to remove us?

Part of your response to me, here:

Hi Russ:

What a year. Cecil and I have been in lockdown for 10 months. It's time to have the baby. It's been rough and wearing, but have to count our blessings, working with those who are losing homes and in dire need of food for their families.

Glide is working harder than ever, having become mobile in our services and delivery of food and testing still for Hep C and HIV and syphilis—especially rising cases now among women of color....

And Yes, on a global scale. COVID has just raised our consciousness about how inhumane our societies are, and yes, I believe COVID is a natural response to our neglect and destruction of the planet and one another....

5.

*Jan—as I said at the beginning of this note—I’m a day late, Asian time. Apologies.*

*Anyway, anyhow, thank you again for helping us create and birth and breathe the New Asian Nation way back when.*

*For your compassion and kindness, we are grateful.*

*We know your poetry—when we are “awake in the river”, and recite your poetry, “shedding silence.”*

*I will miss you always as I will miss our friendship.*

*Love and peace, ebb and flow.*

From your Asian brother who keeps his Word,

Russell Leong

July 30, 2021