

Screaming Monkeys: Critiques of Asian American Images Interview with M. Evelina Galang

Q. *Screaming Monkeys: Critiques of Asian American Images* was sparked by an article in *Milwaukee Magazine* which referred to a Filipino child as a "rambunctious little monkey." At what point did you decide that a book would be a more effective way to deal with the incident than another letter?

The Filipino American community from around the country, and eventually the globe, were e-mailing *Milwaukee Magazine*, looking for a public apology for the comments and also a historical explanation so that readers would understand why calling a Filipino American child a monkey carries such weight — it's a historically racist name given by white American soldiers during the Spanish American War and also to many of the first Filipino immigrants on the west coast as far back as the early 1900s.

Milwaukee Magazine never apologized nor did they use this opportunity to educate why the misunderstanding took place at all. Several of us even met with the editor, John Fennell, who assured us he'd try to respond to our request, but in the end the magazine didn't.

Eileen Tabios and I talked about the root of the problem, which wasn't *Milwaukee Magazine* or John Fennell, it was the way we Americans are taught American History—the perspective is so narrow that our textbooks fail to give us a sense of the various persons and the diverse heritage of our communities. If all children grew up reading about, for instance, the first wave of Filipino immigrants to have come to America and how they got here—calling the boy a "rambunctious little monkey" would not have occurred. So we thought a book that begins to address this deficit in our education and will hopefully encourage other texts, other versions of what it means to be part of American History, was an appropriate answer to the issue. We wanted to get at the root of the problem—or at least begin to dig at it.

Q. How did you get the word out to other Asian American

writers, scholars, and artists about your idea for the book? There are more than a handful of contributors. Did you have any trouble getting submissions, especially from the more famous contributors like Maxine Hong Kingston?

The book is community based. That is to say that when the *Milwaukee Magazine* article was published, we organized on the internet and began a massive campaign to protest and educate the author and editors and when we did not get an appropriate response we opened up the issue to the community in the same way—word of mouth. We said, "Let's be proactive, let's do more than scream. Let's educate ourselves and move forward." So first of all, word of mouth, internet, networking with our mentors, our teachers, our colleagues, and students. We also put a call out in literary journals such as *Poets and Writers* and the *AWP Chronicle*. We had no problem with submissions and people interested in using text and image as a way of protest, a way of change. What I love about this book is the variety of voices and experiences. There are emerging writers and never-before writers and scholars and not-writers contributing their perspective. There are very well known and beloved writers and scholars in it too. It is about community. Maxine Hong Kingston is the epitome of what this book wants to do—taking our stories and writing them down to transform language and culture and history to include everyone. I call her the Godmother of Asian American literature. She was very excited about the idea of this book and wanted to support it in any way she could.

Q. Some of the advertisements, such as the ones for Hennessy and Skyy Vodka, are quite offensive. Were there any obstacles in reprinting them in *Screaming Monkeys*?

The Fair Use Act was established in order to give us the opportunity to read, reproduce, and comment on works for the specific purpose of educating, critiquing and providing social commentary. That's what this book is about and ads like the ones for Hennessy and Skyy Vodka are covered under the Fair Use Act.

Q. What did you learn from putting *Screaming Monkeys* together?

I learned a lot. I learned that there is so much we don't know, even when we are talking about ourselves and our own histories. Some of the testimonies—like that of Carlos Bulosan or Wen Ho Lee—and some of the government documents—like Executive Order 9066 that put all Japanese Americans into internment camps during World War II or the US Army POW report that describes captured Korean Comfort Women as "not pretty either by Japanese or Caucasian standards" really made me angry, made my body react with heat—and I knew I could just scream or I could do something about it. I learned that everyone has a perspective and no one is necessarily right, but everyone has a right to their perspective. And things make so much more sense to me when I let these differences exist without denying them or trying to justify them or change them. I learned how to listen and how to practice respecting other voices. And by that I don't just mean traditionally marginalized voices—I mean all voices. Respecting views and culture that are not your own is a great concept—the practice of respect is another challenge all together. I learned that we silence each other all the time and there are entire communities who have been dying to speak their stories and their ways. We have to open up our eyes and try to see the world in new ways. We have to stop expecting everyone to live, see, think, want the things we do.

Q. *Screaming Monkeys* is composed of seven separate sections: Savage, History, Women, Culture, Men, War, and Transcendence. Why did you decide to organize the book this way? A number of poems, essays, and stories encompass several categories. Did you have any difficulty deciding where to put them?

There was so much to cover and there was no way to cover all of it and do it justice. So I decided to use this opportunity to introduce these ideas and like a painter I took a brush and I made broad gestures. I began with the premise that we have been historically portrayed as savages and built a foundation with history lessons that gave concrete examples of how Asians and Asian Americans have been portrayed in history during times of peace and war and during times of imperialist reign. This foundation allowed us to move toward more abstract ideas like imaging of women, men, and culture. Finally, we end with the notion of transcendence—how to

go beyond the physical plane—how to move toward resolution even when the world is content to uphold images that are racist, classist, and sexist. I'm hoping there is an arc to the book, a movement that holds the hands of someone very new to this world and guides the reader through the fact and fiction of the way we have historically represented and treated the citizens of Asia America. That the pieces overlap and cross sections is natural because in the end we are taking the issues, breaking them down, pulling them apart, experiencing them, analyzing them, reacting to them and then we bring it all back together again—and so yes it's all connected.

Q. Is there an aspect of the book, or the experience as a whole, of which you're most proud?

I love that this book is community based and that the voices and expertise illustrate a wide range of life experiences. I am also proud of the fact that the book is a form of community protest and response. We are protesting the silencing of our history and we are responding by speaking our history. We are inviting dialogue, exploration, and new works to make the root of the problem that I noted before work as an inspiration and not a limitation or obstacle.

Q. *Screaming Monkeys* includes a lot of history that never made it into our textbooks. Do you see it being taught in the classroom?

Yes. In the classroom. At the kitchen table. In our community youth gatherings.

Q. One could argue that *Screaming Monkeys* is not only the work of artists, but the work of activists. How closely is activism tied to art?

That depends on the intentions of the artist. But for me, gathering, organizing, and hearing words-writing-has always been my tool for activism.

Q. Do you have any expectations for your readers?

I expect our readers to take in all these images and all the stories and parts of histories here and not to take our word for it. To explore for themselves how much of what they read is true and right for them, how much is still missing, and how much they can contribute to the growing conversation of what it means to be a part of history.

Q. Are you going to send a copy to *Milwaukee Magazine*?

With great respect, I will send them a copy, yes.