

## “SCREAMING MONKEYS”

BY M. EVELINA GALANG

Reviewed by *Susanne Lee*

*Screaming Monkeys* began life as response to a review of a Filipino restaurant in Milwaukee magazine by a not-very-astute writer who called the restaurant owner’s son a “rambunctious little monkey.” Without realizing its derogatory implications, the magazine offered up a limp apology, sparking a furious letter-writing campaign. The Letters to the Editor section included in *Screaming Monkeys* shifts rather abruptly to the main text.

M. Evelina Galang, the editor of *Screaming Monkeys*, has compiled an eclectic blend of nearly 500 pages of nonfiction, essays, found material, fiction, poetry, art, academic texts and political treatises. Impressive names (Maxine Hong Kingston, Gish Jen, Carlos Bulosan, Li-Young Lee) and unknowns all attempt to define Asian identity in a wide array of voices that range from the shrill to the incisive.

The book begins with the powerhouse poem, “The Cleaving” by Li-Young Lee, whose confrontation with immigrant identity through the imagery of chopping meat which evolves into an attack on Emerson’s unenlightened view of the Chinese.

“Reverse Racism” is an alternately amusing and hostile short by Thien-Bao Thuc Phi on Asians and Whites. Phi subversively turns all preexisting notions on their heads by creating a fantasy world where Asian men are dominant in all fields and sexually desirable, freely taking advantages with their prerogatives:

*I’ll make sure they are moved to a special little section of town that we’ll call Whiteyville, where tourists can come to shop for curios and eat exotic hot dish meals. The only white men allowed into this country will be the most highly educated white men from Europe: I mean, hey, we need someone to work behind*

*the counter at the gas stations for minimum wage, and who else is going to drive taxis or run 24 hour grocery stores in the hood?*

(p. 154)

The heavy tome includes a number of works that have previously appeared in other anthologies, and Galang and her editorial staff might have been more judicious in their selections. Some of the choices make for a haphazard juxtaposition: ads, statements, partial histories, articles from newsweeklies and presidential speeches. The speech by a law professor is simply inferior to the quality of the other writers and the “General Time Line of the Asian American Experience” is so inherently superficial and limited, it begs the question why even include it?

Undoubtedly the worst culprit of the collection and appearing too early in the text, is the self-help excerpt from Phoebe Eng’s *Warrior Lessons*. The self-acclaimed warrior describes one-dimensional mother-daughter and identity conflicts that come straight out of a second-rate pop psychology text. Eng blathers, “Rita’s death showed me in a heart wrenching way what can happen to a woman who is isolated and desperate and whose cries for help go unanswered.” This reviewer’s heart is breaking, Ah-Phee! (that’s what her mother calls her, we learn).

Eng’s narcissistic piece has the analytical and emotional complexity of a junior high school student’s homework; her examples of struggle resolve neatly, each tied with its own pretty pink bow. Eng shamelessly boasts: “I now live the life I have always dreamed of with a fluid schedule that allows me to travel and work when and where I want and a relationship with a man who doesn’t feel he has to control me as much as share his life with me on equal terms.” How very nice for Ah-Phee! How less than very nice for anyone other than Ah-Phee! When this Chinese Wonder Woman declares, “That must be the tiger blood in me,” it seems that only an immediate DNA test could prove to this deluded warrior that she isn’t the Lost Cub of Shere Khan.

“Four Million,” a poem to Filipina maids by Bino A. Realuyo, is a poignant

tribute to the women working as domestics across the globe from Singapore to Amsterdam to Dubai. Dedicated to Flor Contemplacion, a woman hanged for murder of another Filipino woman and a Singaporean boy, this poem depicts the mundane, the sense of homesickness from the longing for comforts to the displacement, and the easy mood of the women on their day off, eating dishes from home:

The nameless boats that took me  
brought me here,  
this city of salmon carts that endlessly roll by.  
Salmon is not fish; not the same fried salted  
milkfish in a flat rimmed basket;  
banana leaves over them to keep the flies away.

Another section of the poem is for Sarah Balabagan, an 18-year-old maid who was sentenced to death for killing the 85 year old employer who had raped her at knifepoint. In “Four Million,” Realuyo takes the reader on a journey, at times lonely, at times perilous, that these women travel, and isolates pivotal moments in their lives.

“Report No. 49,” a brief post-war official document, reveals the inherent racism in an interview with a “comfort girl,” a woman forced to be the sex slave of Japanese troops. In light of the horrors the woman survived, the document’s anonymous author’s conclusion that the woman is not particularly attractive seems superfluous and twisted.

A pair of Hello Kitty pieces, Nick Carbo’s “Assignment” and Denise Duhamel’s “Hello Kitty,” elevate the bland mouthless Japanese cartoon character Kitty to the status of Muse. Duhamel’s double sestina, though its poetics are less than brilliant, is a hilariously irreverent interpretation of the form. This clever concept is better than its execution.

Timothy Liu's poem "Five Rice Queens" is a scathing indictment of Gay Asian male fetishism from the naively romantic Chinatown date to an unabashed hardcore Madame Butterfly. Don Lee's short story "The Price of Eggs in China" explores the relationship of two poets, Caroline Yip, a frumpy waitress, and her counterpart, the glamorous, rich and successful Marcella Ahn. Contrasting the personalities and style of these two, Lee highlights their uncomfortable tension and the man who completes their awkward triangle. Lee undermines what could have been an insightful look at the conflicting images of Asian women and success with a sentimental ending, sleeping baby and all.

"Dictee" by Theresa Hak Kyung Cha is a moving piece about Yu Guan Soon, the Korean revolutionary. In an ironic tragedy, Cha was murdered in New York, shortly after publication, cutting short a promising career.

"The Barbarians are Coming," David Wong Louie's short story, follows a night in the life of Sterling Lung, cook to a wealthy white couple who host a party. Hopelessly ignorant and full of expectation, the women of the party are attracted to the exotic chef. His employers gabble insipidly about their trips to China and use their Chinese phrases on Sterling, who does not neatly fall into the subservient role they have created for him:

*Is Drake making fun of me, talking ching-chong talk? I can't believe he's doing this in front of everyone.*

*He does it again.*

*'He doesn't speak Chinese,' Drake says. 'Where are you from?'*

*'Oh. New York,' I answer, hoping people will hear New York City meaning Manhattan, preferably the Upper West Side, much more glamorous than 'Long-guy-lun' and its dull cookie-cutter towns.*

*'No, where are you from?'*

The constant questioning and flirtation of the party guests makes Sterling ill at

ease, as he struggles with his troubled relationship with a woman; in an improbably rebellious move, he ventures into vandalism and crime.

In the excerpt entitled “Talking About the Woman in Cholon,” Cecilia Brainard follows a couple on the eve of their separation. The man presents a bracelet to the woman, who becomes jealous when he tells her he saw a similar bracelet on a woman in Cholon; the girlfriend imagines a possible romantic relationship between the two in Vietnam. In a twist, the reader learns the woman from Cholon was unattractive. Unfortunately, Brainard cheapens the story with a clunky tragic ending, full of unearned pathos.

An excerpt from Maxine Hong Kingston’s *TripMaster Monkey* concludes the collection on a forceful note. Her hero, Wittman Ah Sing, considers nothing off limits: plastic surgery on Asian eyes, taped eyelids on Caucasian actresses, Charlie Chan, interracial relationships, depictions of Asians in Hollywood from the silents to the current cinema. “We’re shot, stabbed, kicked, socked, skinned, machine gunned, blown up,” Wittman laments,

*But not kissed. Nancy Kwan and France Nuyen and Nobu McCarthy kiss white boys. The likes of you and me are un stomachable. The only hands we get to hold are our own up our sleeves. Charlie Chan doesn’t kiss. And Keye Luke doesn’t kiss. And Richard Look doesn’t kiss. We’ve got to kiss and fuck and breed in the streets.*

Leslie Bow’s simplistic postscript/study guide attempts to render *Screaming Monkeys* into an uneasy cross between collection and wanna-be textbook. Pedestrian questions handhold and unintentionally insult the reader, as if this material were impossible to navigate solo. A list labeled “For Further Research Google This” — containing only thirteen items — speaks poorly for volume’s content. This reductive section feels like an afterthought and would have been better left out. Galang and her editors should have had the conviction to let much

of this striking work stand and speak for itself.

For the most part provocative, funny and illuminating, *Screaming Monkeys* would have been much better served with a firmer editorial hand. Even with its flaws, *Screaming Monkeys* manages to tackle the contradictory images of Asian America and to contribute a heartfelt addition to the body of Asian American literature.