

"Who's to Judge? Identity Politics v. Inner Lives." *New Republic*, 21 April 1997, 18-19.

"Who's Irish?" *New Yorker*, 14 September 1998, 80.

Who's Irish? and Other Stories. New York: Random House, 1999.

Russell Leong

Interview by

ROBERT B. ITO

Russell Leong was born in San Francisco's Chinatown in 1950. He began his writing career with "Threads," in Kai-yu Hsu's *Asian-American Authors* (1972), and "Rough Notes for Mantos," in *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers* (1974). Since then, his criticism, fiction, and poetry have appeared in numerous anthologies and journals, including *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, the *Seattle Review*, *The Open Boat*, *Zyzzyva*, the *New England Review*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Charlie Chan Is Dead: An Anthology of Contemporary Asian American Fiction*, and *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique*. Leong has been the editor of UCLA's *Amerasia Journal* since 1977, and he has also edited *Asian American Sexualities* (1996). His first collection of poems, *The Country of Dreams and Dust* (1993), received the 1994 PEN Oakland Josephine Miles Literature Award. His first collection of short fiction, *Phoenix Eyes and Other Stories*, is forthcoming from University of Washington Press.

Although I have known Leong for three years, I was initially unsure about how an interview with him would go on

account of his cutting wit, particularly in group settings (two days after the interview, he amused a group of students with an extended run about how certain Asian American authors could market their own lines of underwear). I was also aware of his "life is war" philosophy as well as his disdain for academics (Leong considers himself a cultural worker rather than an academician). Before the interview, Leong lent me his short story "The Painted Branch," which had recently been published in an issue of the *New England Review* entitled "Questions of Identity: Ethnicity, Apprenticeship, and the New American Writer."

RB Here's that journal you lent me. I think I'll get a copy.

RL You should because there are other things in there. Other "apprentices."

RB Yeah, what's that about? You've been publishing for about twenty years. How does it feel to have the *New England Review* call you a "new writer" or an "apprentice"?

RL Well, that's their point of view. Writers of color in America help validate American writing. Actually, the editors are the apprentices because they're learning from us.

RB How are they using the term?

RL Oh, probably in the academic way, like we are traveling beyond our ethnicity and learning English, or learning how to write, and not relying on our politics or ethnicity. That's probably the implication, that real writing is "universal" and can get beyond the barrio and the ghetto. Very patronizing, but not unexpected.

RB I thought there was an interesting parallel between that whole apprenticeship idea and the other article you lent me, "Litany" (republished as "Paper Houses"), where the white woman covets your friend's Thai pillow and says something

like, "This would look good on my patio." After getting published in journals like the *New England Review*, do you ever worry about your work becoming commodified, becoming a kind of "Thai pillow"?

RL The Filipino writer N. V. M. Gonzalez put it well: For too long, Third World writers, and Third World people, have been furniture in the colonialist's house in the sense of being domestic servants—minor characters; if not furniture, then people who dust and move furniture around rather than the subjects or owners of the houses. So, while things have changed, many times we have been relegated to the furniture of literature.

RB Why the pseudonym Wallace Lin in "Rough Notes for Mantos" in *Aiiiiiiiii*!?

RL Wallace Lin was a pseudonym based on Wallace Stevens, who was one of my writing icons. Lin was a Chinese surname. So I combined the two. The bio, I think, was written by Shawn Wong. Nothing is true. The reason I used the pseudonym was that the story dealt with some sensitive subjects, such as father and son relationships. Part of it was this diatribe against my father or against his questioning of a relationship, and I didn't want my father to read it. He read it anyway.

RB Knowing that you wrote it.

RL I think so. The details were accurate: the steel cleaver, vegetables, mixed emotions between father and son. He probably recognized himself.

RB Were you primarily concerned about your father reading it?

RL Maybe other people as well because I was young then, maybe eighteen, nineteen, when I wrote it, and these were unsettling issues about my own sexuality and about my rela-

tionship with my father, relationships with men or women. And, at that time, since I was also involved in the Asian American movement, issues of sexuality could not really be a primary concern for me. The main focuses of the movement were the reclamation of community and community history, so questions about sexuality were seen as bourgeois preoccupations. I actually wrote the story in Jeffery Chan's class, which was one of the first Asian American writing classes at San Francisco State College.

RB1 What was that like?

RL It was a lot different in those days. We did our writing, and we had those little purple mimeographs that we'd hand around the room. A lot of Asian American writers—at least on the West Coast—came through either San Francisco State or the Kearny Street Workshop. I remember people like Shawn Wong, Alan Chong Lau, George Leong, Janice Mirikitani, Genny Lim, Merle Woo, Al Robles. A lot of artists and musicians, too—Paul Yamazaki, Jim Dong, Nancy Gee. San Francisco is a really small place, so artists, writers, and community activists all came together.

RB1 *The Country of Dreams and Dust* was originally entitled *The Migrant Ideograms*. For the non-Buddhist readers—why “dreams and dust”?

RL Even though “dreams and dust” is a Buddhist or Taoist term, even non-Buddhist readers may get something out of it. Those are pretty common words, so I think you'll still be able to get some sense of your own dreams. “The Migrant Ideograms” sounded too sociological. What do you think?

RB1 I thought that “migrant ideograms” made it sound like you would be completely focusing on the immigration experience in terms of a one-way, East to West move, when your poems seemed to be more concerned with prisons or bondage.

RL Originally, when I wrote *The Country of Dreams and Dust*, I utilized some historical material, but then, as I began writing, I realized that it was not a historical text or a reconstruction of history; I was just using certain historical reference points to talk about other things. So, even though it's been reviewed as a piece about Chinese migration, that's just the topmost level. Those historical reference points serve as props for other things that are occurring: prisons, bondage, liberation.

RB1 The poems have these huge historical moments—you called them *props*—but then you pick out seemingly random smaller moments within them to focus on. For instance, the Tiananmen Square poem, “Name,” deals almost exclusively with one student's escape.

RL Well, there's the view of history as grandiose, the “sweep of history,” but most history is made up of the lives and actions of ordinary people and really not the “heroic” in the sense that it's even recorded. It could be just about something mundane that happens. I wanted to show the juxtapositions between larger historical moments like, say, the Opium War and a child growing up in a Chinatown barrio a century or more later and to try to find the connection, if any. The grand sweep of history is for traditional historians, and that presupposes that history is linear, and that it's going someplace, and that there's a beginning and an end, a goal located within a master narrative. But many times, when you're just living life, you're not sure of its end point, or its beginning, or its middle. Also, in Buddhism, history, karma, a lot of things become transformed; there's a constant process of transformation and transmutation.

RB1 You were talking about the juxtapositions between larger historical moments and these smaller “histories,” but you also juxtapose lines from an 1882 English/Chinese lesson

book—the text of authority and domination—and Asian American “countertexts,” for instance, the poems scrawled on the walls of Angel Island by imprisoned Chinese immigrants.

RL I was educated in both American schools, which taught English, and Chinese schools, which met after the American school, so I feel that what’s not officially written is just as important, if not more important, than what is within the text. For instance, I remember that, in Chinese school, Chinese history would go up only to 1949, and then, afterward, we’d go into geography, the provinces of China, or something like that. The classes were held in a Methodist church that had connections with the KMT [Kuomintang]. So Christianity and the KMT were a sort of conglomerate. I talk about that in the poem “Ideograms”—that the lessons we learned in American school and in Chinese school were both official versions of history and that they neglected other parts of history or other perspectives, both here and in relation to modern Chinese history and politics.

RBI Does this poem reflect your take on Christianity as you now look back on your experiences in Christian schools, or were these problems you felt at the time?

RL Even though I don’t think the poem is anti-Christian, it does subvert certain kinds of Christian and English texts. They were the official texts that I grew up with—English and Christianity—and they remained so throughout my education, even in college. English, the language of instruction, the language of learning, the language of opportunity—even the language of Asian American studies. We must question that and incorporate other languages in our art as much as possible: the language of film, theater, music, both Western and non-Western.

RBI But the poem is pretty harsh. You compare Christian missionaries to prostitutes and leeches, and one of the priests

is a serial child molester. Does your critique go beyond just the fact that Christianity and English were the tools or voices of authority?

RL Yes. The line between the body and the spirit, in terms of sexuality and sexual mores, has been carved out by the church. Fragmented, and split: How do you reconcile these parts? What matters between my heart and my thigh?

RBI Is this part of the reason that you find Buddhism more applicable to your own life?

RL Yes, Buddhism is a more apt metaphor for my view about life, writing, relationships. It seems to be a very self-contained philosophy and yet expansive and inclusive. When you look at the spread of Buddhism in Asia, you can see how it has been adapted to local cultures, local languages. It is a very inclusive philosophy rather than a static or an oppressive one.

RBI You use a lot of fire and incense imagery in “Dreams and Dust,” and also in “Unfolding Flowers,” as symbols of purification and cleansing. In “Unfolding Flowers,” you mix images of incense burning with the fires of the LA riots, and the poem ends with, “Americans bombed Baghdad, / now burn their own cities. / Always, what we do returns to us.” Do you see the riots as part of a natural process?

RL If you allow too much scrub to grow underneath the trees, natural fires will occur. With the LA riots, we allowed things to deteriorate for too long: education, housing, city hall politicians, the infrastructure. Then one spark ignited a prairie fire, to paraphrase Mao.

RBI “Geography One,” your short story in *Charlie Chan Is Dead*, is one of the few Asian American stories to deal with the problems of intraethnic relationships, an intraethnic gay relationship.

RL Even though the text deals with two Asian guys, and though it deals with an intraethnic relationship, those are just props, too, this ethnic stuff, and this sexuality stuff. People in Asian American studies or critical studies tend to focus on these catchy words: *intraethnic*, *interethnic*. To me, "Geography One" is about various terrains: The terrain of the floating world, of sexual and physical desire. Also the terrain of spiritual searching. And the other terrain, of course, is the very real terrain of LA and the different types of people one encounters, whether it's a man and a woman, a man and a man, a woman and a woman. Whatever race or sex or age, these encounters happen in LA: in the laundromat, in a bar, in a temple. So LA is just a metaphor that leads you into the other terrains: sensual, spiritual, physical.

But, in terms of the differences, or problems, in the intraethnic relationship, I built those differences in to show that, even among Asians, there are many differences and that these differences are based on subtle nuances around Orientalism and colonization. So one cannot always blame the Western colonizers. In Asia, you can't forget that many of the colonizers were also Asian—the Japanese in Korea and South Asia, the Chinese in other places—so the process of incursion and colonization is also intra-Asian. That carries over even now—certain prejudices and biases within our Asian American communities—and so I put it in the context of a personal relationship.

RBI Staying on the subject of colonialism, your essay "Litany" talks about the overlap between colonialism in Asia and in Asian America. Do you want to talk about that?

RL Yes, because that's partly the reason why *The Country of Dreams and Dust* turned out the way it did. It's ironic that a lot of the first Christian ministers in Chinatowns were missionaries who had originally served in China, in Canton, in Ningbo, in Shanghai, so they knew the languages. And so, in

a sense, Chinese settlements here were the last outposts after China, "post-China."

RBI Do you see a connection between that type of dual colonization and the inability or refusal of many white Americans to distinguish between Asians and Asian Americans?

RL Probably, in the sense that colonization crosses oceans and national borders, so that you bring it to China, or you bring it to Hong Kong, and so there's a complex relationship. Also, besides colonization through education or through economics, there's the colonization of the body and sexual domination. Even now, it's common knowledge that images of whites and Asians in advertisements or in pornography—whether you're talking about straight or gay images—are usually of white men and Asian women or white men and Asian men. Richard Fung talks a lot about it in his work on film and sexuality.¹

RBI It's also in "Geography One," where you talk about that fetishization. Can Asians have Asian fetishes?

RL Frantz Fanon talked about the fact that, even after the colonizers leave, they have already educated and developed a class of people who have internalized attitudes of the oppressors, so that they will be the ones who oppress their own people.² An African filmmaker, Sembene, did a satiric film called *Hala* where he talks about how, after the French colonizers leave, you still have this class of people left behind who will do the dirty work. And, yes, I think that Asian Americans also internalize a lot of these ideas. But what do you mean by *fetishization*?

RBI When you look at fetishization in terms of white male and Asian male or female, it's latching onto certain stereotypes about Asian sexuality, stereotypes that Asians presumably should know better than to believe. But, given the way

that society works or that the media work, do you think that these assumptions also come into intraethnic Asian relationships?

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RL Edward Said said it best, that Orientalism is so ingrained in Western culture that it affects all of us. And Orientalism is not just a matter of stereotypes; it's a whole system of dominance: educational, literary, cultural, political, economic, and so on, and includes racial and sexual stereotypes. It's very hard to even talk about it because you're faced with it at almost every turn. Winthrop Jordan wrote a book called *White over Black* where he talks about the origins of "blackness," European and Western attitudes about "blackness."³ Before Africans were forcibly taken to the Americas, they had been contextualized by the Elizabethans. Certain perceptions of darkness and lightness became ingrained in literary and cultural imagery and became part of our cultural baggage. So I think we can recognize them, and we do our best, but I'm sure that I have certain fetishes. Colonized is colonized. But through language and through my writing—that's why it's a personal thing for me, language and writing—I'm trying to counter my own internal colonization.

RBI So what are some of these internal fetishes?

RL [*Long pause.*] I don't know whether you'd call them *fetishes*, but ideas about the dominance of the West, its technological superiority, its ability to conquer, to develop the nuclear bomb to destroy the world. So that's a certain amount of power and arrogance, and, like it or not, a lot of Third World countries are following the path, as a mark of sophistication, and trying to develop nuclear warheads, and basically polluting their countries with more industry. So you can see the dominance of Western technology.

I wouldn't call it *fetishization*, though I see and acknowledge that type of power. But I'm also a part of the West, so

sometimes I do question whether going into metaphysics and looking at these things metaphorically could be an escape from direct political confrontation. Maybe I should join more political groups, ecology groups, to put my beliefs to the test. But, then again, I don't want to end up another groupie, either. There are various ways to effect change, and I'm trying to do it through the language I use and how I write. I also try to question certain tropes and assumptions about "great moments" in Asian American history. For instance, in my poem "Ideograms," I think the young schoolchildren are not scrawling poems like the Angel Island immigrants did; they scrawl cusswords and other kinds of graffiti on their desks.

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RBI In your poem, one kid scrawls "your mama" on his desk.

RL Yeah, because they may be more influenced by African Americans than Asian American history or Chinese poetry. That's just a reality, unless you major in Asian American studies or something.

RBI In "Geography One" and "Rough Notes for Mantos," the protagonists are fairly unlucky in love. We talked about how you use certain tropes as "props": are these autobiographical incidents that you worked into stories?

RL Some of my fiction is based on my own experience, and some of it is based on observation. But, as a writer, I heighten, dramatize, or manipulate time, action, language, etc. to create a richer text, often different from "what happened" to me personally. Personal desire becomes public domain once you write about it. So writing is basically this dialogue between the personal body and the body politic.

RBI Here's the obligatory "emasculatation of the Asian male" question. Defend Asian men as sexual beings.

RL Why? I never have any problems. Defend Asian men? Do they need a defense? That's sort of a defensive posture.

RBI But I think that, any time you talk about emasculation in literature or the media or in films, it always is somewhat defensive.

RL I always thought that the ideal Asian man would be a combination of three things: a poet, a politician, and a warrior. And they're not necessarily mutually exclusive: you could be a politician in your daily life, a warrior when you have to defend your country or your family, and a poet when you create some distance from your day-to-day living and you're able to analyze it and express it. So I don't see flower arranging, let's say, as feminine. I enjoy it myself. I also took karate and judo—it didn't do me any good—when I was younger. But a lot of this emasculation bullshit is because we've become internally colonized and accepted certain kinds of images as the ideals. The new kinds of Asian American yuppie magazines like *Transpacific* are not providing very interesting alternative images of Asian males. For one thing, the Asian males usually all look like they stepped out of some shopping mall. They're usually a certain age, and they're very commodified. It's basically consumer commodification; even if they look hip, they also look highly commodified by current consumer cultural standards. It's not interesting at all. I'd rather look at Asian men and women in erotic pillow books, whether Chinese or Japanese, or eroticism in South Asian sculptures; it's much more sensual and, I think, much more authentic, although I guess this could be construed as Orientalist in some ways. But then I'm Asian myself.

RBI Loni Ding talks about an elderly Chinese man who watched English-language videotapes just to see Asian faces. You don't have a TV, right?

RL No. It broke. But I see Asians in my dreams. I touch them, talk with them. Make love with them. No barrier between them and me!

RBI But what about when you're awake? I think that a lot of Asians probably hate *Transpacific* for some of the reasons that you mentioned, but they might pick up an issue just to be able to look at Asian faces. Is that where you go—to the pillow books—to see beautiful Asians?

RL Let's see. Where do I see beautiful Asians? At Asian American conferences? No. Well, this may seem like a funny answer, but, when I go to the temple—it happens to be a Vietnamese temple—and I see the various types of Asians. Sometimes I see little children; they're beautiful in their kind of active way. Then I see elderly women—Vietnamese women and some Chinese women—who have another type of beauty that comes from experience, survival, a certain type of living in the world. That's what I would call beauty, beauty that's based on "living in the world." And I see my Sifu. He has a certain kind of gaze, a direct gaze, and he's also handsome, has a very stoic look.

There are various types of Asian imagery that I'm drawn to; it can range from the very young to the very old. But it's more the presence of mind that creates a certain type of beauty. And there's beauty only when it's juxtaposed against the corruption of the world. Also vegetarians; I'm not a pure vegetarian, but vegetarians tend to have better skin. And more luminous eyes. So I guess there are vegetarian beauties. Walking vegetables. No, I'm halfway joking. But, as I said, there's a certain kind of beauty that comes from living in the world and also through a certain amount of discipline, intellectual and spiritual discipline. As for sexual beauty, the Western kind of sexual beauty is to let everything hang out, wear as little as possible. But a lot of times, at least for East Asians, we're pretty clothed. Just the contrast of skin against cloth is very sensuous.

RBI Mishima had that whole thing about the kimono against the nape of the neck.

RL Yeah, that's true. But Mishima had a lot of hang-ups about other things, and he also worshiped a certain Western type of beauty. As a child, he admired the image of Saint Sebastian being shot with arrows, as he said in his autobiographical *Confessions of a Mask*.

RBI Maybe more than admired.

RL Yeah, what do you call it, your favorite word . . . *fetishized*? Well, you guys are into that. Maybe academics are basically sort of repressed and horny.

RBI That's probably true. Shifting gears here, you're good friends with Frank Chin.

RL Yeah, I've known Frank Chin since I was eighteen. I've known the *Aiiieeeee!* people for a long time. They emerged at a crucial time in Asian American history. Warriors out of the Dawn? They played an important role in a number of ways. For one, I think, raising issues of racism in the reception of Asian American literature; you have to remember that this is in 1970. The *Aiiieeeee!* people acknowledged the alliance with African Americans in terms of publishing and certain types of sensibilities when it came to language. Ishmael Reed was a great influence, and *Aiiieeeee!* was published by Howard University Press when white publishers would not publish it. And they did try to draw attention to certain motifs in Asian American lit, like father and son relationships and the idea of autobiography as Christian confession. They were able to bring out some important ideas that had not been brought out before as well as to bring neglected works to light: *No-No Boy*, *Eat a Bowl of Tea*, *Yokohama, California*, etc. And so I think they should be looked at with a historical perspective.

RBI Do you think a lot of the criticism of *Aiiieeeee!* ignores this historical perspective?

RL A lot of times the *Aiiieeeee!* folks all get lumped together

as rebellious voices from the sixties—a gross oversimplification. And the sixties themselves were rather complicated, so I think it's basically dismissive.

RBI What gets glossed over?

RL What's glossed over is that they're trying to grapple with certain issues: racism and the relationships between whites, blacks, and Asians. Frank Chin's *Chickencoop Chinaman* questions assimilation. I think that these were themes that the *Aiiieeeee!* editors talked about head-on.

RBI I think part of the reason that they all get lumped together is that they all signed their names to the somewhat famous—infamous?—editorial introduction to *Aiiieeeee!* But what are some of the differences between those four?

RL When you look at their writing, they're quite different. Lawson Inada is primarily a poet, and his writing is very epigrammatic. It draws heavily from jazz, the blues. He's a "dealer" of language; he deals language like somebody deals cards, fast, smooth, like one of those Asian dealers in casinos, where dealing cards almost becomes a part of your body. But Lawson takes on quite a number of themes: the camps, racism, the *ornamental Orientalist*, which is Frank's term for it. Lawson also gets around; his poems get carved on rocks. So Lawson is a real wordsman.

Shawn, I find, is not as fast with the words; his second novel is coming out after fifteen years. He's crafted, a poet also, and deliberate in the way he constructs his stories. But Shawn has gone into academe, heading the Asian American studies program at the University of Washington. And he's involved in a lot of publishing as well as teaching and supporting younger writers. He has a slightly different sensibility. A lot of times his protagonists are Asian and white. I think this reflects his coming to terms with being Asian in America and to what degree one can assimilate.

Frank, of course, is the most prolific by far, and not just as a playwright, but also as a journalist. He's done a lot of journalistic work in both print and broadcasting, documentary work. He's done a piece that's been published in the San Diego paper on Chinese on both sides of the border, Mexico and California. So I think Frank's skills as a journalist and as an observer of Asian American life have been overshadowed by the polemics of the debates.⁴ I think of the four, Frank is the most driven by his curiosity and his quest for history.

Jeff Chan. He's the most comfortable. Being a history teacher at San Francisco State, he hasn't written that much. But some of his works are classics of Chinese life. His middle-class suburbanites reflect his own lifestyle, too. He does live in Marin County. So I think they are quite different in terms of their language, their voice, their sensibilities.

RB There's a perception that some of the ideas in the *Aiiieeeee!* introductions, particularly the distinction between "the real and the fake," are primarily Frank Chin's ideas that the rest of them signed their names to. Do you buy a lot of his distinctions?

RL Well, Frank is the most driven as far as "the real and the fake" goes, and he considers himself the most real and almost everything else fake, which is a pretty clear distinction that means you don't have to worry about the other stuff since it's all fake. I wouldn't necessarily apply these distinctions as consistently as he does because, being Buddhist, I can see that things could get transformed from one to another. Despite Frank's polemic, I think it's crucial to take a stand on literature, on history, on craft. So I'd agree with him there.

RB I'm not sure what you mean by that.

RL Well, what appears real might turn out to be fake. Like in the story of the monkey, where there is a fake monkey running around, and they have this big fight, and they're trying

to figure out which one is the real monkey and which one is the fake monkey. And so that's possible too: that what we're seeing as real may change or maybe it has changed.

RB What are you working on now?

RL I'm working on a novel called *Oxidation*, which deals with the transformation of people, elements, energy, life, death, at different levels. *Oxidation* is the transfer of electrons from positive to negative, and it's a certain metaphor for things I'm interested in.

RB So it will deal with some of the themes of transformation and change that you've been playing with in your poems?

RL Yes, a continuation of those themes, but more developed, because with a novel you can really develop a plotline that you can only hint at in short stories or in poetry. And it's going to be much broader; I'm not going to write another Chinatown novel. I think it was Heraclitus who said that you can't stand in the same river twice—water moves on, as do writing, time, and passion.

Notes

1. See Richard Fung, "Looking for My Penis: The Eroticized Gay Asian in Gay Video Porn," in *Asian American Sexualities: Dimensions of the Gay and Lesbian Experience*, ed. Russell Leong (New York: Routledge, 1996).
2. See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967), trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove, 1982).
3. See Winthrop D. Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes towards the Negro, 1550-1812* (1968; Baltimore: Penguin, 1969).
4. See Frank Chin, *Bulletproof Buddhists and Other Essays* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998). The essay on Mexico and California is "Lowe Hoy and the Strange Three-Legged Toad."

Selected Works by Russell Leong

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INTERSECTIONS

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Transcultural Studies

Russell C. Leong
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