Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Long Live Lewis MacAdams & A Few Books for National Poetry Month

Mike Sonksen · Wednesday, April 22nd, 2020

Before discussing a bunch of poetry books I want to dedicate this essay to Lewis MacAdams, the poet and activist who started the Friends of the Los Angeles River in 1985-86. Lewis passed on Tuesday April 21st at the age of 75. He was an important mentor to me. I met him in 1999 at the Los Angeles River Center at an event he was reading at with Gary Snyder and Mike Davis. In the years to come we did quite a few events together, took a few walks along the River and spent some time on a few rooftops in Downtown Los Angeles. I'm too sad for the moment to say much more, but I have written several pieces on him over the years.

In March of 2018, I wrote this long essay about him on this site and it highlights his long career and the park named after him along the Los Angeles River. In 2013, I wrote this essay for KCET. Here's an audio poem I wrote for Lewis before that. His long career bridged poetry and politics. Over the years we did a lot of readings together. Two of the most memorable were in 2005 at Union Station with Wanda Coleman and in 2001, we did a guerilla reading out in front of Pink's Hot Dogs on La Brea. Among the many brilliant tributes to Lewis in the last 24 hours, this one by his son Torii MacAdams hits the hardest. Torii is a music journalist and his prose carries on the family's literary spirit. Thank you Lewis MacAdams, we're not done.

12 Books for National Poetry Month

If quarantine has been good for anything, it's been catching up on reading. Piles of poetry books stack on my desk year round and in the last 6 weeks I have finally had a chance to bring it down to a much more manageable size. Here's a roundup of as many poetry books as I could get into one column. Many of these following books are brand new, but a few are from within the last year to year and a half and I finally have had a chance to slow down and talk about 'em.

The Portrait of Self As A Nation
By Marilyn Chin

Marilyn Chin was the featured reader at Cal State LA's annual Jean Burden Reading in late February. Chin read 11 poems and kept the crowd on their toes the whole time. The crowd knew her work so well that she took requests for most of the poems because folks were so familiar with her work. The first poem she presented, "How I Got That Name," is one she recited from memory. The subtitle of the poem is "an essay on assimilation," and the poem beautifully meditates on her Asian American heritage. The poem is a remarkable mix of personal history,

poignancy, sarcasm and social commentary. She has a masterful command of it and projects it with deep skill. Among the many quotable lines within the poem, here's a particularly potent series of lines:

> *Oh, how trustworthy our daughters,*
> *how thrifty our sons!*
> *How we've managed to fool the experts*
> *in education, statistic and demography""*
> *We're not very creative but not adverse to rote-learning.*
> *Indeed, they can use us.*
> *But the "Model Minority" is a tease.*
> *We know you are watching now,*
> *so we refuse to give you any!*

She defamiliarizes stereotypes and also talks a lot about her own family, how her parents named her, her divorce and long career in poetry. The poem was one of the most electrifying beginnings I have ever heard at a reading. Chin had on an AC/DC shirt and her dynamic personality definitely translated on the stage like TnT. Her next poem, "Blues on Yellow," was equally engaging. She followed that up with "25 Haiku," and there were members of the crowd reciting along with her. In between poems she shared stories and her perspective. A memorable sentiment she shared echoed in my brain for days after the reading. The statement was, "we carry our ancestors' music with us."

I showed up at the reading with her 2018 book, *A Portrait of the Self As a Nation* and followed along poem by poem with her set as she announced each one. This book is her Selected Poems and she was definitely sharing her Greatest Hits. In the book's Preface she states, "I see myself as an inventor of a fusionist aesthetics, of bilingual and bicultural forms. For decades I have been toying with the Chinese-American quatrain, stringing beautiful and subversive jewels into fractured necklaces." She also created the sonnetnese, a hybrid poem combining the sonnet with the Chinese lyric. Another form she enjoys writing is what she calls "bad-girl haiku."

Chin is fearless, happy-go-lucky and deeply thoughtful all at the same time. The poems work well on the stage and the page. Other really memorable pieces she shared were "Identity Poem #99," and the final poem of the night, "Black President." She offered advice to young writers and when someone asked her about specific references in poems and using other languages within your work, she said she no longer tries to explain things. She laughed and said, "Let them look it up on Wikipedia." Chin left the crowd empowered and signed a lot of books before the night was over. She was so compelling that nobody wanted to go home. I highly recommend her Selected Poems.

Two other poems of Chin's in her book that are really well known but were not read at Cal State LA are "Brown Girl Manifesto, One of Many" and "Brown Girl Manifesto (Too)". In the former she asks a lot of great questions and sets the record straight: "Who is this "˜I" that is not the "I'?" "The speaking subject is also the lyric poet: am I making art or am I only producing material for your ethnographical interest?" Chin is courageous and shows what's possible for the poet who's not afraid to go there.

Letters to a Young Brown Girl
By Barbara Jane Reyes

Bay Area native Barbara Jane Reyes is a courageous, inventive and dynamic poet. Her new collection continues the velocity of her last title *Invocation to Daughters*. A finalist for the California Book Award, Reyes mixes the personal, political and formal seamlessly into precise lyrical prayer-poems. Divided into three sections, Brown Girl Designation, Brown Girl Mixtape and Letters to a Young Brown Girl, the 39 poems in this new collection sing with intention and care for her readers. In the poem, "#AllPinayEverything," she meditates on what it means to be Filipina and she celebrates and laments her father, "Because our being, our breathing, our speaking were never guaranteed; because our father's bones rest in this land and we have grieved; no, I will never leave this place, and no, I will never leave him; because his roots, this land are also mine."

Her "Glossary of Terms," sets the record straight. This excerpt from her definition of Pinoy exemplifies the veracity of her poetics: "You know what annoys me? People who won't see the through line from Joe Bataan to Bruno Mars. You ever wonder about the sound of a poet rappin' with ten thousand carabaos in the dark? You ever eat fish and rice with your hands, off Styrofoam plates, in a hole in the wall, south of Market Street?" Reyes connects the dots across generations of Pinay Poetry and its part of why she's become an icon to up and coming poets across the country.

Kontemporary Amerikan Poetry
By John Murillo

Similar to Barbara Jane Reyes and Marilyn Chin, John Murillo speaks hard truths with virtuosity and passion in poems that take no prisoners. His first book, *Up Jump the Boogie*, was a landmark collection and this new one is just as strong. Murillo grew up in Los Angeles and now teaches at Wesleyan University. The centerpiece of this new book is a fifteen-sonnet cycle of poems on racism and police violence against men of color. Artful references to Marvin Gaye, Biggie, Terrance Hayes, Ernie Barnes, Etheridge Knight, Amiri Baraka, Phillip Levine, Bob Kaufman, Gil Scott-Heron, Robert Hayden, Robert Frost, Yusef Komunyakaa and Elizabeth Bishop reflect his influences and he masterfully responds to all of them in commanding poetry.

Meditating on confessionalism, epiphany, prosody, negative capability and contemporary American poetry, Murillo breathes in the boulevard. The opening lines of "Mercy, Mercy Me," offer a stunning portrait of his serious skills and empathetic capacity: "Crips, Bloods, and butterflies. / A sunflower somehow planted / in the alley. Its broken neck. / Maybe memory is all the home / you get. And rage, where you / first learn how fragile the axis / upon which everything tilts. / But to say you've come to terms / with a city that's never loved you / might be overstating things a bit." Murillo is a poetic marksman.

Animating Black and Brown Liberation
By Michael Datcher

This book of essays offers an innovative analysis on literary giants like Gloria Anzaldua, June Jordan, Audre Lorde, Wanda Coleman, Kamau Daaood, Toni Cade Bambara, Cherrie Moraga and Ishmael Reed. Datcher shows how Black and Brown community organizing can be amplified by creative cultural production. He shows the connection between off the page activism and writers that practice praxis. Melding theory with concrete examples the book begins and ends with specific instances at literary events. The opening section, "Liberation Vibrations," spotlights an intergenerational community forum held at a poetry reading in Inglewood in 2013 that discussed Trayvon Martin and the school to prison pipeline. Datcher asserts that "American literatures are lighthouses that can show a way out of no way. American narratives can illuminate liberatory

possibilities."

Datcher's discussion of literary theory is grounded in his deep connection to the poets he writes about. Datcher was the Workshop leader for many years at the World Stage in Leimert Park. His reflections on the World Stage's cofounder Kamau Daaood reflects his understanding of the griots work. "Daaood juxtaposes joy and sorrow, hope and despair, in ways that are often surprising and surreal," Datcher writes. "The poet's surrealist oeuvre has been informed by Los Angeles's surreal juxtaposition of ethnic diversity and ethnic segregation, extreme wealth and crushing poverty, and progressive racial politics and virulent anti-Blackness." Datcher offers equally accurate assessments of Wanda Coleman, Audre Lorde and Gloria Anzaldua. Datcher shows how these writers are not just poets of witness but emissaries "uniting the scars to make something beautiful."

A History of African American Poetry
By Lauri Ramey

Lauri Ramey presents a history of African American Poetry that conceives of an expanded canon demonstrating that it started even before Phillis Wheatley. "A major goal of this book," writes Ramey, "is to raise questions about how and why we have inherited a fundamentally conservative canon and to think about how it might be imagined differently." Discussing a variety of poetic styles and critical perspectives, she also represents both the oral and literary aesthetics and how they are used to address politics, race, religion, duality, identity, slavery, freedom, music, discrimination, Africa and America. Through her comprehensive presentation of dozens of innovative African American poets she skillfully raises the question: "Why has so little attention been paid to the skillful originality and purposeful innovativeness of African American poetry?"

Pontificating on the work of Jayne Cortez, Lorenzo Thomas, Will Alexander, Douglas Kearney, Evie Shockley, Harryette Mullen, Erica Hunt and Marilyn Nelson and going back to not just Phillis Wheatley but Lucy Terry and Jupiter Hammon and other lesser known African American poets from the 18th Century, Ramey shows how a pattern of neglect by many scholars has created gaps in the canon. Dozens of anecdotes and lesser known but equally important poets are featured throughout the text. This is not a Top 40 breakdown or a parade of more popular poets, Ramey does a beautiful job of spotlighting trailblazers like Fenton Johnson, Welborn Victor Jenkins, Michael Harper, Cladia Rankine and Toi Derricotte. The book's spirit is about demonstrating how "Afircan American Poetry holds an inextricable role in reflecting and defining American identity, in addition to its ability to inspire world poetry and serve as a source of literary and cultural inspiration."

Everything Must Go
By Kevin Coval

This illustrated collection of poems is presented in the spirit of a graphic novel. Coval's poems are accompanied by illustrations by Langston Allston. Carrying on the spirit of Coval's previous book, *A People's History of Chicago*, this book zeroes in even closer to focus on Chicago's Wicker Park neighborhood, where Coval lived in the late 1990s and his grandparents lived two generations before. Showing how gentrification has changed the neighborhood, though the book is about Chicago, I recognized my own coming of age in the late 1990s doing similar things in LA's Koreatown. Coval knows urban history: "The expressways were built / & my parents remember, / they left & i return."

Coval is not afraid to turn the lens on himself: “i was born here / but haven’t been in some time. / my grandfather grew up a few blocks / from where I’m dizzy with smoke. // what does it mean when we appear // the children of white flight.” The book’s subtitle sheds further insight and also offers a nod to the seminal urbanist Jane Jacobs, “The Life and Death of an American Neighborhood.” Coval offers odes to the waitress, the tamale man, the dive bar, the old bowling alley, the men on the avenue, the gallerist, the incense man and apartments that he used to live in. He “knows the names of everyone,” and honors them in these poems. This is a great example of making the personal, political and universal.

Everything Seems Significant: The Blade Runner Poems
By Jan Bottiglieri

This unique collection of poems circles around the movie *Blade Runner*. The imagery is cut cinematically. Poem by poem isolated moments from the movie are highlighted, explicated and sprinkled with dialogue and famous lines from the movie in italics. Aficionados of the 1982 SciFi classic will recognize the references. *“My mother! I’ll tell you about”¦”* My favorite section of the book are the final eight poems, Bottiglieri calls them “Character Ghazals,” because they are each about a specific character and they not only use lines said in the film, the repetition of the last word at the end of every other line hammers the point home powerfully. Each one is precise and really well executed. The piece about Roy Batty is titled, [I want more life.] The final four lines of the poem demonstrate how well the form works:

> *Who named me Roy? What kingdom: death or life, Fucker?*
> *Kiln-crazed vessel into which you poured life, Father.*
>
> *Rain-smeared, stripped bare better to adore life, I falter.*
> *Memory chains/unchains us.* I want more life, Father.

Mowing Leaves of Grass
By Matt Sedillo

There might not be a poet in America who has done more gigs in the last 10 years than Matt Sedillo. A self-taught Marxist, Chicano intellectual, Sedillo does his homework and inserts it into his poems with performative mojo that hammers the point home. The closing lines of his piece, “Stolen Lives, Stolen Lands,” offers a great snapshot of how his work rises and then crescendos at the end of each piece in potent epiphany: “A war on drugs is a war on our young / Bloody Christmas, Reefer Madness, fifteen to life for four ounces / East Oakland, West Baltimore / South of La Brea and Oliver North / Plymouth Rock, Jamestown and the Rio Grande / Stolen lives, stolen Land.” The 30 poems in this collection reflect his political consciousness and his conviction. Sedillo pulls no punches whether he’s calling out confederates, John Wayne, Ted Cruz, Hulk Hogan, Ivanka or Ann Coulter. If you should have any doubt, check his last poem, “Custers.” These poems have punchlines.

Dancing in the Santa Ana Winds
By liz gonzalez

A fourth generation Southern Californian, liz gonzalez drives readers down Route 66 from San Bernardino and eventually all the way west to North Long Beach. In her “Fall in the Chaparral,” “Santa winds howl / down Cajon Pass” and “Flailing yucca swords / slash the moonlight.” She meditates on her coming of age and pays tributes to the matriarchs who raised her.

One of my favorite pieces is, “Best Granddaughter” and several others build on this theme like “The Four Food Groups in Grandma’s Summer Lunches.” It’s easy to hear her grandmother telling her in the poem, “You want / big muscles like Popeye’s, don’t you?” Other pieces like “Catholic Death” are more pensive and stay with you long after you read it. “Police report states / they found him under the / front tire She fears / God will never / forgive him.” Shaped like a candle, this one of several haunting poems in the collection. Memories, humor and family tradition blend as gonzalez dances in the Santa Ana winds.

Nuclear Shadows of Palm Trees
By Nikolai Garcia

The native Angeleno Nikolai Garcia is the Assistant Editor of Dryland and the author of straightforward, heartfelt poems. His poems like “Wanda Coleman’s Roar,” and “Everyone is Flirting with the New Waitress,” combine vulnerability and wit into sublime poetics. Ingrid Calderon-Collins exclaims, “He is a native plant reminiscing on the hours, days and years that’ve passed him by. We become the infrastructure of his heart, the soft tissue of his agony.” He makes heartbreak beautiful. Garcia tells us, “I have a room / in my house where / it rains all day. This / is the reason why / my shirts are always wet. / I don’t want to hold on / to this grudge. But / everywhere—everything—is painted / with memory.” Garcia”s heart is a compass.

The Blvd
By Jenise Miller

Similar to the great pioneering poet Jayne Cortez, Jenise Miller grew up between Watts and Compton. Her first book of poems, *The Blvd*, maps the Compton of her youth and of the present day. An urban planner and cartographer with a Masters in Urban Planning, Miller even includes a few of her own drawn maps in the collection. These highly original poems make language beautiful. “Jacarandas,” is a concrete poem shaped like the tree and many of these poems name streets like liturgy. 8 short poems recount her time spent on different streets with her family in her childhood. The 5 line “On Lakewood,” states, “At an astronaut / hotspot turned decayed motel, / her family’s next steps / uncertain as the new moon. / Here, she learned to not take space.” Miller shows another side of Compton and also what it means to be Afro-Panamanian. The closing lines of “Ode to the Mamas Who Make Language Beautiful,” pay tribute to the women she grew up with: “Ode to the mamas who be the first and last poets, / linguists, lyricists, warriors of words, / with bars for the ages. / Like Aretha said give her her propers / and put some / RESPECT / on her name.” Put some Respect on these poems.

Imperial Liquor
By Amaud Jamaul Johnson

Similar to Jenise Miller, Amaud Jamaul Johnson grew up in Compton. Though he now teaches at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and has won fellowships with the MacDowell Colony and Cave Canem, Johnson’s poems capture the ennui of the 1980s in the Hub City. Douglas Kearney warns on the back cover, “Sip this fire slowly.” John Murillo uses an epigraph from Johnson in his book reviewed above and the characteristic they both share is intense lyricism and formal dexterity. In the piece, “LA Police Chief Daryl Gates Dead at 83,” Johnson writes, “And the deacon board smoked. / And the economists saluted Reagan. / And the police called it an economy of dust. / One meteorologist predicted / a low–pressure system in the abdomen.” Johnson is a poetic alchemist and in this collection he spells out the redemptive metaphysics of his aesthetic.

Conclusion

If you are looking for some new poetry in your life, look new further than the books above and if you don't know about Lewis MacAdams, look him up. I'd like to close this account with the last 5 lines of his poem, "The Voice of the River."

> *At the center of itself*
> *the River is silence,*
> *and that's where I come in:*
> *with the sounds in my head*
> *and the words in my heart.*

(Featured photo of Lewis MacAdams by Malakhi Simmons)

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