

Integration of Local Poetic Voices: an Interview with Lawson Inada

By Alma Rosa Alvarez and John R. Almaguer

Lawson Inada is considered one of the fathers of Asian American Literature. Much of his work has been in creating a space for Asian American writers through anthologies like *Aiiieeee! An Anthology of Asian American Writers* (co-editor 1974) and *Only What We Could Carry: The Japanese American Internment Experience* (editor and author of introduction 2000). Lawson also worked on recuperating writers like John Okada, writer of *No-No Boy* (1957). Before Lawson's work with other writers, however, he was already a poet in his own right. He published *Before the War: Poems as They Happened* in 1971. His most famous work, for which he won the American Book Award, is *Legends from the Camp* (1993), which poetically and hauntingly renders his internment camp experience. In 1997 he won the Oregon Book Award for Poetry for *Drawing the Line*. The interview that follows was conducted over three sessions at a local coffee house in Ashland, Oregon, where Lawson lived and taught for over thirty years. I first met Lawson when I interviewed for my job at Southern Oregon University. Lawson was my greatest champion when I joined the faculty in 1996. My son, John Rafael Almaguer, has known Lawson all of his life. The interview with Lawson reminded us of the debt we owe to those who were trailblazers in ethnic literature. —*Alma Rosa Alvarez*

AALDP: What were the struggles that Asian American writers faced when you were starting out as a writer?

Alma Rosa Alvarez is a Professor of English at Southern Oregon University where she teaches ethnic literature of the U.S. Dr. Alvarez is the author of *Liberation Theology in Chicana/o Literature: Manifestations of Feminist and Gay Identities*. She is currently working on a poetry manuscript.

John R. Almaguer is an undergraduate student at the University of Chicago where he is pursuing a major in English. His first exposure to poetry was through a book of poetry given to him by Lawson Inada.

Lawson Inada: It is important for people to understand that when I was growing up, the category of Asian American did not exist. If I had been asked to categorize myself, aside from identifying as a writer, I would have said that I was a Japanese writer. I would have said I was *sansei*. At the time that I began writing, things were still quite segregated. There was an us/them mentality, meaning Caucasian American as the "us" and people of color as the "them." This was also made manifest in the publishing world with New York publishers catering to Caucasian Americans, or what they believed were Caucasian American tastes. There was the idea that there wasn't a market for West Coast writers, especially if they were writers of color. The "Asian" texts that existed were of the Orientalist variety. Despite this, I am of that generation that seemed like we were the first writing our literature. And what it was, was that we were the first to be able to research our own literature. Our educational system did not teach us about our literature and our heritage. I don't know that we even knew about the Harlem Renaissance. This material was not taught in schools. You had to kind of find out incidentally. That all started happening in the 60s and 70s.

At the time, new writers were coming into being. My first book of poetry, *Before the War; Poems as They Happened* (1971 Morrow Press), was the first Asian American book published with a major New York publisher. Of course, there were more Asian American poets before me, except they hadn't published in New York firms. They had self-published. In terms of Japanese American literature, we had poets publish in Japanese American journals or newspapers. We had quite a contingent of writers in Japanese America writing in Japanese and English. But we didn't know that. We had to find that out.

In 1974, a gentleman named Ed Burroughs who ran a radio station, I think, at the University of Michigan, had a grant to bring different writers of color together. He was an interesting, nice Caucasian guy. In those days, grants like the NEA and NEH were available for different ideas. So a bunch of us convened in Stevens Point, Wisconsin, that summer. We had the campus or at least a dorm and facility to ourselves. I don't know how they decided to

bring our particular group. I was there with a couple of other Asian American writers my age, and it was wonderful because we were able to meet each other more deeply. It was like the age of discovery.

I had met other Asian American writers earlier through Ishmael Reed, the famous African American writer in 1972. He had a book deal to put together an anthology of writings by people of color with Doubleday. He had since moved to Berkeley, so when that anthology came out, he threw a big party. I got invited through mutual friends. There I met my good friend, Frank Chin. Victor Hernandez, a Puerto Rican writer was there. All of us at that party, it turned out, had been through the college system in our separate worlds as English majors. I met Alex Haley at the party. He had not become Alex Haley yet. He had written *The Autobiography of Malcom X*. That was famous enough. I asked him, "What have you been doing lately? He said, "I am working on my own background in Africa." He was working on *Roots*. Anyway, there were all these people. So the Asian American writers, we said, let's get together later on. So we did.

In that conference out in Wisconsin, there we were Asian American writers meeting for the first time. The Latino writers present were Rudolfo Anaya, Gary Soto (a very young guy), and some Puerto Rican writers from the South Bronx. There were a couple of Native American writers, among them, Leslie Marmon Silko. There were African American writers. We had access to the audio visual facilities, so we video-taped ourselves giving readings. As a result of that, we had this spirit of coming together. You had the impression of no longer working or trying to get published in an isolated manner. It had been difficult before because all the publishers were in New York City and were establishment-oriented. Shortly thereafter, still in the 70s, it seemed like there were all these firsts. There was N. Scott Momaday's novel, an American Indian novel (1969); Rudolfo Anaya and *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972); there was James Baldwin and Leroi Jones. James Baldwin was already famous, and he was talked about in magazines, but everyone else was pretty underground. Leroi Jones was living like a bohemian in Greenwich Village. He was part of an experimental group of writers. So for each of us, we were able to connect with

our own people, so to speak, and then with people from other ethnic/racial groups.

AALDP: So John Okada and Milton Murayama were a generation or so before you. When did you discover those writers?

LI: Milton Murayama was a little older than I was, I think, but he was a Japanese American living in Hawaii. At the time, those of us in California didn't know anything about Hawaii.

With John Okada, one of my friends discovered *No No Boy* in a dusty bin in a San Francisco bookstore. We wanted to re-publish the book, so we asked for the rights from Tuttle, which had published the book in 1956. The topic on Japanese American loyalty during internment, of course, was controversial. We got the rights, but no press wanted to publish the text, so several of us put up \$600 to publish it. Shawn Wong had all the Okada books in his home, and he would mail out orders.

We discovered other Asian American writers through the first Asian American Writers Conference in Oakland in the 1970s. We invited people, including our elders. That was an eye opener. All of the people found it kind of exciting. Man, you never heard of this kind of thing before.

At this time, the NEA was very open to applications from people of color. We were all getting NEA fellowships. As a writer in society, you could also go read your work at some college and at Vietnam War protests. It felt like you were working with others.

AALDP: You mention how poetry was somehow involved in the world. In terms of poetry, do you think that poetry should be something specific in the world? Can you tell us something about the poetic process of some of the writers of your generation?

LI: Poetry in the world was something that *we* had, the so-called writers of color. But at the same time, all of us who had been in college were trained a certain way. When I was in graduate school, my teacher, Philip Levine, a Jewish man from Detroit had been trained in the Anglo tradition, so when he

taught all of us how to write poetry, he had us writing in Shakespearean sonnets. I think it was like a musician going to a conservatory. You learn how to play classical style. There were no magazines that would publish you outside of any other style or literatures, so you had to aspire to write in a certain way and then get published in certain magazines. At the same time, you wanted to have something that could distinguish it, so you could write a poem that looked like a Shakespearean sonnet but it would be about the *barrio* or something. It had that certain edge to it which was nice. When you published, that became part of your appeal later on. I think that all of us went through that phase of the conservatory.

AALDP: Does poetry have a particular mission in the world?

LI: In school, the writers that appealed to me were those who could do the little flashes of poems, like William Carlos Williams, and then I learned later on that there was a group of poets who had called themselves Imagists, and that they had been inspired by Haiku Japanese poets. I think in my day there seemed to be a lot of rules, but at the same time, you could see waves of bending or avoiding the rules. I think what happened, in the 1960s was that fortunately we began to have a sense that we could be part of the oral tradition. You know, the Beatniks, they were giving all of these readings, and it was pretty obvious that the oral tradition had a place in which you could relate to the community. The community didn't have to sit around and read or buy your books. You would show up. Poetry became community-oriented which was what we had had in our own older societies any way. That was the use of poetry.

In terms of a rich oral tradition, I am reminded of meeting the Puerto Rican poets from the South Bronx. They were doing readings on the corner, and while they had been trained in the Shakespearean tradition, they had a sound to them—a style. There was something there. They had a big influences on writers Ntozake Shange and Jessica Hagedorn. The Puerto Rican poets realized that how you inflected your poem, which was not always discernable on the page, could bring the poem out. There were writers like Alurista. He was one of the ones that invented poems with Español. There was this guy

Jose Montoya, the writer of "El Louie" who used English, Spanish, and Pachuco words. It was really exciting. There was a lot of poetry of that sort. It was like jazz. Inflected in a particular way, the poetry connected with the people.

AALDP: Have you ever been concerned that your poems, as they lie on the page without the benefit of the voice inflection, may feel flat to people?

LI: It concerns me. Actually, after giving readings and reaching out to the community, I realized I needed to write some poems that intended to be heard. To me, my role as a poet, so to speak, was to be flexible. I got to be like a musician who could shift between classical music, church music, wedding music, etc. Similarly, I had to pick up ways of writing poetry that could have various intentions. I still like the idea of being invited to read something, and then I will write something for the occasion, kind of like in the jazz tradition.

AALDP: You were selected to be poet laureate of Oregon in 2006 and served two terms. What were the most important things you wanted to convey to the Oregon public about poetry during your tenure?

LI: I was wanting to convey and bring out as a teacher the poetic spirit that everyone has. When I was poet laureate, while I read some of my own work, I also did a lot of workshops in communities where I would tell the people about their own poetic spirit, honoring it, trying to bring it out in young ones and old ones. That was my mission, so to speak. I would go to a little place and say, "What you just wrote is just wonderful. Very insightful. I've got to leave today, but next week, why don't you give a poetry reading yourself and invite people in your little community here." In some places they did that, but in most places, they were so unaccustomed to engaging that way. Nonetheless, I kept trying to encourage all of them. When I went to Eastern Oregon, I told the people of Baker City and around La Grande "You should do something." Because they didn't live on the I-5 corridor, they had something different in terms of their poetic spirit. They eventually published an anthology. During my time as poet laureate, I also shared some Asian

American poetry or Japanese American poetry and talked a little bit about our experience with the camps.

AALDP: What were the most important lessons you learned during your tenure as poet laureate?

LI: As poet laureate, I went out all over the state. I would try to hook up with a literary group. I would also try to connect with teachers. I realized that teachers had furthered the cause of literacy and creativity. Previous to this, I had published a few things here and there with MLA, but that was such an elitist group, whereas NCTE (National Council of Teachers of English) was in the trenches. High school and college teachers were wanting to know, "What do I teach on Monday?" It was really wonderful working with them.

Again, the world was opening, developing and changing. NCTE, at that time, was one of the largest organizations in the nation. They had offices in Urbana-Champaign, Illinois. They had one African American person on staff there; she had a doctorate and had been instrumental in starting a Black caucus for all the Black teachers throughout the nation. However, in those days, within the university system, a person of color tended to be the only one in their institution. One day, several of us folks of color who did not have our own caucus, were invited to join the NCTE Black caucus. We were able to coordinate our efforts and have panels about multicultural literature, a hands-on kind of thing. You see, you might be living in a big city with a large Latino population or something like that. Teachers wanted to know from us what to teach. We formed the Rainbow Coalition. All you needed to do was get out there and show people what you use in the day-to-day practice. Working with the NCTE was a great source of knowledge for me as poet laureate.

AALDP: Many writers, within their writing, return, again and again, to an experience that deeply impressed them. For example, Primo Levi writes about the Holocaust because he was a Holocaust survivor. As a child, you and your family experienced internment camps. Do you feel that most of that experience is primarily contained within *Legends from the Camp* or does that experience permeate and inform the rest of your writing?

LI: I was recently at the Tulle Lake Camp out by Klamath Falls. It became a camp for disloyal people. So I went over there and took part in this pilgrimage. The internment camp experience continues to permeate because we are always learning more about our own experiences. You can see it through a different lens or in context of another way. The writing about my interment years, I am always thinking something different about it because the whole experience was mysterious to me. I was in the internment camps from four to seven years old. You get to see this as your own experience in particular, but also as facets of the human condition. This experience allows me to see other experiences as connected. One of the connections I see today is with what is happening at the border with the family separations. I would have thought that given what we had lived through with the internment experience that all the folks in those towns would have protested the detention and separations of families. It is very sad to see this aspect of detention happening today. This current crisis points to something about our human condition.

AALDP: How do you move from one experience or set of images, for example, those influenced by the internment camp experience, onto work focused on something else?

LI: I just continued. I was fortunate that I had different areas of interest that I would keep writing about, so I kept moving that way.

AALDP: Any last comments?

LI: One of the things that I want to end the interview with is stating the necessity of having scholars do more with the community. For scholars, they need to move beyond doing scholarship. Sometimes, as academics of color, we lose touch with where we came from. Maybe we can work together to give something back to our own communities. If our people don't show up, then, we need to go to them, we need to bring poetry to them. We also need to get beyond tribalism. We need to make sure to exchange ideas.

Inada's jazz poetics is a site of cross-racial identification that enables us to think beyond the centering of whiteness that the binary of "colored v. white" produces. In its engagement with a predominantly African American music, his writing provides an alternative to thinking of the "American" in "Asian American" as white American culture. However, I am not proposing Inada's poetics as a model of cross-racial cultural hybridity that conflates and flattens out the differences between two very distinctive modes of racialization. Cross-racial cultural identification

Southern Oregon's Lawson Fusao Inada has been named the 2020 Charles Erskine Scott Wood Distinguished Writer, an honor given by Oregon Literary Arts that recognizes a lifetime of literary accomplishment. The award will be presented at the annual Oregon Book Awards ceremony on April 27 in Portland.

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