

Event Title: "Memory that Pricks the Skin": Five Asian Women Poets Writing About History

Event Description: Poetry is a vital genre for engaging with archive and reckoning with historical events that have been forgotten or ignored. In this panel, five Asian women poets explore how their work grapples with public and personal histories. Writing on a range of subjects—from war to colonization to ecological violence—these poets will read their work and discuss poetry as a space to challenge dominant narratives and find healing within reflection and documentation.

Event Category: Poetry Craft & Criticism

Event Organizer and Moderator:

Marianne Chan is the author of *All Heathens*, the winner of the 2021 GLCA New Writers Award in Poetry. Her poems have appeared in *Poetry*, *Kenyon Review*, *New England Review*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, and elsewhere. She is currently a PhD student in English & Creative Writing at the University of Cincinnati.

Event Participants:

Tiana Nobile is the author of *Cleave*. She is a Korean American adoptee, Kundiman fellow, and recipient of a Rona Jaffe Foundation Writer's Award. A finalist of the National Poetry Series and Kundiman Poetry Prize, her writing has appeared in *Poetry Northwest*, *The New Republic*, *Guernica*, and *Southern Cultures*, among others. A founding member of The Starlings Collective, she lives with her family in New Orleans, Louisiana.

Jessica Q. Stark is the author of *Buffalo Girl and Savage Pageant*, which was named one of the Best Poetry Books of 2020 in the Boston Globe and in *Hyperallergic*. Her poetry has appeared in *Best American Poetry* and others. She is a Poetry Editor for AGNI and the Comics Editor for Honey Literary. She co-organizes the Dreamboat Poetry Reading Series and is an Assistant Professor of Creative Writing at the University of North Florida.

Cynthia Dewi Oka is a poet and author of *A Tinderbox in Three Acts*, *Fire Is Not a Country*, *Salvage*, and *Nomad of Salt and Hard Water*. Her writing appears in *The Atlantic*, *Oprah Daily*, *Poetry*, *Academy of American Poets*, *Poetry Society of America*, *The Rumpus*, *Hyperallergic*, *Guernica*, and elsewhere.

Emily Jungmin Yoon is the author of *A Cruelty Special to Our Species* (Ecco|HarperCollins, 2018). She is the Abigail Rebecca Cohen Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Chicago and is the Poetry Editor for *The Margins*, the digital magazine of the Asian American Writers' Workshop.

Event Outline:

Marianne Chan – moderator opening remarks (3 minutes)

Reading by Tiana Nobile (5 min)

Reading by Jessica Stark (5 min)

Reading by Cynthia Oka (5 min)

Reading by Emily Yoon (5 min)

Moderator Questions & Discussion (about 30-40 min)

Audience Q&A (about 10 min)

Marianne's Opening Remarks (5 minutes)

Thank you all for coming to this panel, "Memory that Pricks the Skin": Five Asian Women Poets Writing About History. For those needing or wishing to follow along to a written text, please let me know and a printed copy will be delivered to you. Please make sure that spaces marked for wheelchairs remain clear of chairs or other barriers. Treat service animals as working animals and do not attempt to distract or pet them. Be aware of those with chemical sensitivities and refrain from

wearing scented products. Please be aware that your fellow attendees may have invisible disabilities. Do not question anyone's use of an accommodation while at the conference, including for chairs reserved for those with disabilities. If you have any questions or concerns regarding conference accessibility, please feel free to email events@awpwriter.org.

My name is Marianne Chan, and I will be your moderator for this event.

The twenty-first century has been a period of historical reckoning, a time of monument removals and the renaming of school buildings, a time where artists are correcting the distortions of historical records.

Along with other artists, poets have also taken on history as subject matter in their work. Poetry that engages with events in history has an ancient tradition, hailing back to Virgil's *Aeneid*, as well as Pindaric odes, which recorded the victories and great deeds of individuals. History in poetry was much less popular during the Romantic era, where poets turned away from events and politics and turned toward nature and the individual thoughts and emotions of the speaker (Harrington). But in the 20th century, poets, like Muriel Rukeyser, William Carlos Williams, and Charles Reznikoff, blended poetry with other nonliterary writing, such as journalism, court records, and interviews. Since the publication of *Book of the Dead* by Muriel Rukeyser in 1936, there has been a growing interest in poetry that engages with history, documents, and archives, and poets and scholars have been working to solidify a definition for documentary poetics.

But in this panel, we will focus on Asian American poetry that engages with history. Why is this panel so important?

As a Filipino American who grew up on an American military base in Germany and in a small town in Michigan, I was not taught about Filipino history in schools. The Philippine-American War, for example, which resulted in the deaths of 200,000 Filipino civilians, was only a blip in the study of American history. It wasn't until I was much older and struggling over questions about who I am and where I come from did I learn the nuances of my history, through not only historical nonfiction but also literature, like Jessica Hagedorn's *Dogeaters* or Gina Apostol's *Insurrecto*. And this historical knowledge has helped me see myself and my encounters with the world with greater understanding and clarity.

Writing down and speaking aloud specific, unique, or forgotten stories is subversive in its resistance to erasure. Viet Thanh Nguyen, in *Nothing Ever Dies*, laments the scarcity of stories by ethnic racial others, as this lack contributes to a

monolithic remembering of ethnic groups. He writes, “[W]hile dominant Americans exist in an economy of narrative plenitude with a surfeit of stories, their ethnic and racial others live in an economy of narrative scarcity” (Nguyen 203). In “Immigration, Citizenship, Racialization,” published in *Immigrant Acts*, Lisa Lowe argues for viewing “Asian American cultural productions as countersites to U.S. national memory and national culture.” In our engagement with history as Asian Americans, as “racialized others,” we are engaging with what George Lipsitz calls “counter-memory,” looking “to the past for the hidden histories excluded from dominant narratives” and forcing “revision of existing histories by supplying new perspectives about the past.” These thinkers argue for narratives that express unique and forgotten stories, as a way of building an inclusive conversation, a more complete telling of the past.

Today five poets, Tiana Nobile, Cynthia Dewi Oka, Jessica Q. Stark, and Emily Jungmin Yoon, will read their poems and discuss how poetry, or creative writing in general, can be a subversive space where historical narratives can be challenged, or erased narratives can be resurrected. I hope this panel today inspires all of us to continue working to ask questions to understand ourselves and our encounters with the world, to contend with the past -- our own histories and the histories of others.

To give you a sense of the structure of this panel, I will introduce the panelists by reading their bios, and they will each tell us about their work and read a poem or two. Then, we’ll move on to a conversation. The final ten to fifteen minutes of this panel will be dedicated to Q&A from the audience.

Reading by Tiana Nobile (5 minutes)

The Last Straw

“US woman put adopted Russian son on one-way flight alone back to homeland”
– *NY Post* headline, 9 April 2010

Little boy in a yellow jacket

stinger pinned to the zipper

on his chest a note

written in a hand

not his own Russia-bound

After giving my best. . . for the safety of. . .

Who belongs to whom?

How do we dance without

the proper shoes?

He drew a picture. . .

The carousel

of abandonment

endlessly

spinning

Of our house burning. . .

How many

splinters

does it take

to start

a fire?

I was lied to . . . misled by . . .

A fuse

a body

pleas for

water

nothing

but

matches

Operation Babylift

“We bucket-brigade-loaded the children right up the stairs into the airplane.”
– Col. Bud Traynor, pilot

April 4, 1975

Skin still wet with mother’s grief.
*I brought my baby to them,
I admit it.*

Airlift Takes Off

Tucked in cardboard and stowed.
Two to each seat.

At 23,000 Feet Systems Fail

In the event of being born
in a country ravaged by war –

Explosion

*I heard rumors that mixed babies
would be burned alive. Retaliation
for consorting with the enemy.*

Split Cables

Save – Rescue – Liberate

Descends

*I asked about the papers. How
will I find her? How will we reunite
in America?*

Skids in Rice Paddy

In the event their skin is soaked in gasoline –

4:45pm

Those who didn’t fit
would make the trip
in the cargo area.

Crosses Saigon River

Under the circumstances,
the evacuation became necessary –

Thrashes Trench

The promise of reunion
too appealing to pass up.

Fractures in Four

Jam-packed flock, throng of new bones.

Fuel Ignites

It was no longer a choice.

Fifty Adults

The only option.

& Seventy-Eight Children

Fire and Rice

“There were large sheaves of papers and batches of babies. Who knew which belonged to which?”

– Bobby Nofflet, worker with the U.S. Agency for International Development in Saigon

Though the first flight crashed,
it didn't stop them.

Planes full of moonless hair
black as peppercorn.

The mission seemed simple.
The same planes that shelled cities

swapped blitz for babies.
Procedural paperwork waived

to expedite departure.
Mothers made promises of *meet again* –

Yellow-haired surrogates burying
the truth of it –

Meet: In the dike next to the river,
mouths full of fire and rice.

Reading by Cynthia Oka (5 minutes)

NOTE: I remember feeling sorry for my father, who had completely misjudged the *where*.

It was the second or third month of English when he packed for my lunch rice with fried slices of Spam – an American, therefore prized, meat back home. I was being bullied every day at school, not by white kids, but by Chinese kids eager to flex their newly minted Canadian belonging.

“That’s not a place,” they said when I told them where I was from. “You don’t speak Chinese, so you’re not Chinese,” they said when I told them what I was. “You look like a hobo,” they said, pulling at the adult-size clothing my parents bought from garage sales then sewed up to fit my ten-year-old frame. My father tried to help me gain their respect with his culinary choices, but it had the opposite effect. “I wouldn’t feed my dog that,” they said.

Not all marked with communism were killed. Thousands more were imprisoned. On Buru Island, inmates built the barracks, latrines, bridges, and roads required for their own detainment, which for many lasted well over a decade. Tore alive with their fingers lizards, rats, anything that crawled to supplement the soil’s poor yield.

If they survived, Indonesians marked “ex-political prisoner” on their identification cards, as well as their relatives and children, were legislated out of various forms of education and employment in the decades that followed, like those marked “foreigner.” My mother, born in Yogyakarta to a Chinese father, was a “foreigner.” During the anti-Communist purge in 1965, her Chinese language school was shut down permanently, while Res Publica University, founded by the Chinese Indonesian organization BAPERKI, was burned down. In place of the latter, the Indonesian government established Trisakti University, a private institution my father would later attend.

What was everything to us / there meant nothing to them / here, though the reason we were “not [of, in, for] a place” was because our lives meant nothing to anyone / anywhere. Later my father would look at me and see them / here more than us / nowhere, with a glint of hatred, while I would see him

everywhere. I ate

alone in the bathroom stall. I roamed the back edges of the field with spitballs in my hair. “Salju,” I said, meaning, snow. That was how I learned to live outside the time of nations.

March in the Garden of Ghosts

We, crest of a rooster's crow. Holy
ladder whose tips rake the sun, hereby

declare ours

this hard, good earth on which, we, not
gods, lay our feet, and stand

the spine, not

rope, of our spine; claim protection
through regimes of hazard and ill

begotten will,

by gossip of the vaporized dew, sea's
green aggression born

on a cloud of goats –

we, who subsist on the small bones
of our mother's hand, which

admit her whole

life by the way they leap
over our mouth, say today is not

an exit. Look,

how light melts the forest, the city
awakes and falls by its nerve-work

of fire. Extremity we

have tasted like a sweet dark tea,
who prowl the plastic dresses

of the postcolony

placing bets against our dangerous
teeth. We mist, we brute

melancholia, for what

we have been told never happened,
or happened in a way we have

misunderstood, or is still

happening, therefore maintain
a vigilant smile. The calendar is

an electric grid, time

saltwater gathering heights.
Astronauts claim it takes

leaving earth

to know earth, how alone and woven
we are, o zone, how

wondrously thin

the layer of glow defending
us from obliteration.

The cloak that

makes language fall down. From
great distance, the permanent storms

beneath it

are visible, but not those who weather
them. In this sense all big pictures

enact blinding.

The circle is a cruel shape.

Crueler when it fails to
close, when the hand journeying

back toward the point

of its beginning falters, is
deleted. Our minds crescent, while

grief spirals

down, down, a generational
design. We too want prosperity,

peace. Multiple

dimensions wrung into
miraculous, unrepeatably color

before splitting apart

in the official record to which
our vanishing is offered

like air. We,

flowerless bee. We, sleep
in a dragon's jaw.

We said to our life,
dear life. Look up from

your searching.

The petals ground to stone,
they are not tears. Under your weight

the fruit that cracks

whitely releases its dust-boned
fury. Weep, or don't, you will be

surrounded by listening.

For wings to batter the empty
sunset as though it were

a cave, because

metaphor lets nothing go.
After you, there can be no other.

Build any world

you can love. Dear life, what is
more foreign than

the whole sky?

Refuse the vain candle. Forgive
none who has not asked

for forgiveness.

We walk holding our hands
into the bleached eye. We wear snake

like a garment,

our pointed mind sheared. If fire is
our portion, then may bones of

the unheroic deleted pour

like wax. A garden exceeds, is
subject to revision.

Against archive,

the hanging vines.

If we remain beautiful.

If paper, folded like roses, taped to our faces.

If dream were another dream.

If hen.

If fireproof.

If our voice thrown at the moon.

If our body housed in our shadow –

exhale.

If discovering our wet heart like a banner among the leaves.

If to peel the topsoil with our only hands.

If the solidarity of a stone.

If we do not stray,

who –

Reading by Jessica Stark (5 minutes)

MADAME NHU'S ÁO DÀI, 1946

for Trần Lệ Xuân

Before the fit trim and the clapping
of hands: a face bent in

violent repose. Still, the photograph
of a captured figure with a

blanket for a shield and a baby
on a battlefield.

This is not where we die and later,
she would deny an interview

after the age of fifty-two. The projected image
is no match for time's continuous

undoings: crossroad cruelties
etched under lash. A

student of the Lycée Albert Sarraut, Madame
Nhu was fluent in protection,

utility, and beauty's arsenal, but the civilizing
mission had one message:

to burn the piano that held no secrets,
to cast the face away like stone. In

her prime, she spoke French at home
and could not write in

her native tongue—sharp thorns
catching fabric, aflame.

There is a tradition of noble and heroic

mothers here. After all,

Lê Lợi hid from the Chinese under
his mother's skirts. Buffalo

Girls know how to tie a permanent
knot around incidence, how to

mine mythology's antidotes for the
fate of carrying and burying.

Madame Nhu was many things
including a dancer, once a

soloist at the Hanoi National
Theatre. She

dragged hems

across the knife edge

between death and retreat. It is here
where we depart (still alive)

while inside, the Viet Minh are
steading the flame, forgetting about

the baby who—covered by
her mother's jacket—is turning

away from the tidy story.

Is taking heaps of cloth in laughter,

undoing each perfect edge.

HUNGRY POEM WITH LAUGHTER COMING FROM AN UNKNOWN SOURCE

She's still there the further you look back. I mean before the war,
and the wolves, and the other war, and the French, and her departure,
and even the Chinese—I mean *that* way back. And since I'm talking
about my mother, let's talk a hair-down, cat-eyed perfection, heels on a
borrowed Vespa kind of laughter—filling whole highways
with her eyeliner (another kind of laughter) and a deep belly
laugh at the thought of the Trung Sisters ever jumping from
a single thing besides the time it takes my mother to flip the switch
on a boring conversation with a dick joke—*what did she say?*—
I mean keep up, I mean *that* far back—when Vietnam knew a world
could be best run by women and more women with still more laughter
charging the void—a still-life silt, a nitty-knot of a lump in the throat—
that sensation between choking and uncontrollable, heaving laughter
at the very thing that controls you and your body and your mother's body and
my sisters—my dear sisters—we always had laughter for our bodies that kept
planting deeper into the woods // *groundcover* // insert cut-scene, rescind the fairy
tale: we all know there are no true villains—we're just a bunch of hungry animals.
I would jump with you, I would. I would give it all for you—laughter at
sundown, laughter at the feet crushing statuary, laughter until our very

last word on this dying Earth that just keeps turning and turning its
silhouette shadow figures slipping back into human skin at dawn.

WAR (G)HOST

First thought: not rot.

Double gloves, white heat,
doctors like a far-flung field.

The night nurse seems annoyed
at my mispronunciation of
laparoscopy—takes her time

with desperate meds. I inspect
your wounds *here and here*
and slowly, like a hidden cause.

I feel most American when
holding your legs convulsing
in a Rituximab fever-dream.

You talk in tongues and I realize
this might be the only way to
discuss loose ends.

Buried in an insurance call,
I remember the side unit on

agent orange. This bug

that doesn't run in the family,

but rhymes with body-debt, with

tourists today smiling at Cu Chi.

It's an everyday question

of what's passed on and what's

not. You can make a bit of peace,

but in the end ghosts require

pronunciation. Glucose, potassium,

white blood count—*low*.

You can't outrun a burn scar just

like you can't stay here forever,

mother—bloodless, without history.

Most times I forget I'm

holding your hand. Other

times, I am the shrapnel of

your bone. Swift, bird-like—

never trembling like hard data.

Never grieving like

something deeply loved.

They are worried that the

fluid from your lungs

might return, and then return.

I pack away uneaten food

for you like worship, watch

the sun kiss dead hills again.

I'll come again as a wrathful

beast, and like all things monstrous—

I am indeterminate and on borrowed time.

But for now they've put out the

light for the night. They say

I'll need to go.

Reading by Emily Yoon (5 minutes)

[brief context + TW: sexual violence]

Testimonies

Pak Kyung-soon

There was a man about 45 years of age with a mustache
who told me to work for Japan
and meet my brother in Hiroshima
The man said my refusal might not be good for my parents
The man and his men took me to Shimonoseki
I was led into a room I was told to take a bath I was told
to take off my clothes
I only begged that I meet my brother
When they finally took me to Hiroshima, my brother was alone
in a big, empty room he asked if I came
as a “comfort woman” and I promised
I would return
to see him again
When flower buds were about to appear
I was taken to Osaka In its room
I was Number 10 I was then
a “comfort woman”
I became so sick with syphilis I could not walk
One night an officer came and told me to get ready
I was in such great pain the next thing I remember
is arriving in Seoul It was June 1945
Immediately I had a miscarriage
The mustached man learned of my return
told me to return to the “comfort station”
To avoid the draft again I got married
our new life a rented room
I could smell the odor of my weekly “#606”
arsenic for syphilis

My baby discharged pus from his ears
 was called crazy

My brother returned home with burns and lumps
 all over his body from radiation
 discharged disintegrated bone
 the size of teeth near his wounds

The Japanese soldiers discharged
 discharge out of charge into
 every room

Kim Soon-duk

there was “girl delivery” just like
farmers’ mandatory delivery
of harvested rice
to the government. I wanted to hide
but what if my mother was captured
in my place
My mother was needed at home Mother
Mother I decided to go
they promised a job as a military nurse in Japan
Mother a man gathered us near the county office
and took us to Pusan to Nagasaki
That night the girl next to me went missing
Each night they sent several virgin girls to military officers
a military officer came to me and said
every young girl experiences sex in her lifetime
that I might as well do it now
they took us they took us to Shanghai to a ruined village
my body a ruined village a damaged house
our manager gave me packets of black powder
to reduce my bleeding from the vagina
He then told me it was made
from a leg
of a Chinese soldier’s corpse
I dream of human legs rolling around I dream it to this day
I scream to wake myself up Mother Izumi
he was kind to me I told him about my thoughts of suicide
He was surprised so surprised
he sent me home sent me letters
I did not reply. I had my new life to live:
as a washerwoman, a street peddler and I did other things too
but Mother, the hardest time was when I was dreaming of
suicide
while soldiers were standing in line to satisfy their lust

in the ruined village
when I was dreaming of legs that could not go anywhere.

Moderator Questions (conversation will be 30-40 minutes)

1. Because this is a panel about poetry and history, I'm going to ask a dreaded question: Why is poetry specifically your genre of choice for engaging with historical events? Why not historical fiction, nonfiction, or other artistic genres? What does poetry offer that these other genres don't?
2. Let's talk about research: Can you talk a bit about how you researched the research-heavy poems in your books? What is the relationship between research and poetic inspiration for you?
3. While you've all written intelligently about history, you don't stray from including and expressing emotion in your work. Can a few of you talk about the role emotions play in your writing?
4. I've been thinking about the rhetoric of documentary poetics and how different poets position themselves in relation to their audience. In the field of documentary film, theorists talk a lot about the interactions between the filmmaker, subjects (the people in the film), and the audience, but I find that it's not something we talk about much in poetry. I'm wondering how you all thought about audience when writing your books. I think many of us write poems in order to ask questions, so maybe audience isn't in the forefront of your mind while writing. My question is: Did any of you have a specific audience in mind? If so, how did you want that audience to engage or respond to your work? And even if you did not have an audience in mind, after publication, how did you feel about reader response after publication?
5. As Asian American poets and writers, who would you consider to be your poetry ancestors?
6. Are there other books that engage with history that you'd like to recommend to the audience?

Audience Q&A