

Under a Warm Green Linden

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A Review of Sylvia Chan's *We Remain Traditional* — June 20, 2018

by Ben Rutherford

We Remain Traditional opens with a speaker in dialogue with herself: "In the old Vilnius flat, the pilot light has gone off. I look / at it and tell myself not to fix it. After two or / three poem lines, I think you'll ask anyway." The resolution—not to fix the pilot light—is shadowed by the thought of the beloved. Toward the end of this poem, the problem resolves itself, but the voice persists: "... the pilot light has returned. I am so happy I take two showers. 'You know, there are songs waiting. Why are you still rinsing your hair?' When I begin to write Adam's songs, I know I've gotten stuck in a place." And so the book opens with a subtle examination of how instruction is internalized and lived with, becoming corrosive over time.

That said, the use of this "you" is multivalent, a point made by the inclusion, in this opening poem, of a passage from Ariana Reines' *Cover de Lion*:

"Now that I am not addressing you
But the 'you' of poetry
I am probably doing something horrible and destructive.
But this 'I' is the I of poetry

And it should be able to do more than I can do.”

The implications are twofold. On the one hand, Adam is an entity, the voice one abides, at the same time as he is an archetypal presence. His name alone should suggest this much. And like the Adam of Judeo-Christian mythology, his power resides in his ability to name, i.e. a facility with language:

The waiter at the Hauptbahnhof bar asks
what language I speak & claims to know
it, too. When he pours me a gin and tonic,

you murmur, *Thanks, but no thanks*,
in a perfect, grammatical English.

In this way, language becomes a performance of social mobility, between lovers as much as strangers.

On the other hand, Reines’ quote designates the poem as a site for working through that power, a “place where we observe / each other.” The poem widens to house a range of figures. In the case of *We Remain Traditional*, those figures include Rihanna, Mariah Carey, Bei Dao, Paul Celan, Juliana Spahr, Roberto Bolano, Alice Notley, Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker ... Strains of these voices environ the work, not just to weave a tapestry of influences but to help carve a space for a discussion about violence and its witnessing.

That violence is both personal and political, as she oscillates between (mostly) verbal abuse in domestic spaces and the oppression endured by her grandparents’ generation in Canton. “Suffering,” asserts Chan’s speaker, “has not only led the Cantonese out of tradition; it has returned them to it time and time again. Isn’t this precisely the vicious circle of despotism which breeds suffering in the first place?” Where politically-driven crisis results in a longing for tradition, neither the past nor the future will suffice; both seek refuge in the other. It’s this cyclical quality of trauma, and of the past’s inescapability, that drive the collection. The psychological effects of colonialism work their way down through the generations like a disease.

Take the opening of the sequential “Prodrome”:

The body canopies arrive at midday
after the principal has been quartered

with a donkey tied to each limb.

The murderers send boxes, too,

for the stumped parts: my grand-
mother won't receive her entire husband,

just his wrist. Pinpricks
of severed nerves—like opium

needles in the back of a heel—
framing the base of his white

hand.

What is examined isn't only a history of violence and political upheaval, but the ways in which their damages become inter-generational, as though they were a matter of genetics rather than of historical, social or political contingencies. What is imposed from without gets confused with an innate quality. There's a biological tint that gains traction when we consider the medical terminology peppered throughout the book, a prodrome being the early signs of disease prior to more diagnosable signs (see, too, "Blues' Uppermost Organism"). Just note the progression of the above passage, how the final simile blurs the actual motivations behind what happened. Injections implied by the white pinpricks would be self-inflicted, not imposed from without, an image that speaks to the way trauma threatens to obfuscate its cause, distorting history. That threat permeates the work. In "Body Canopy," having resolved "to never marry and start a family," Chan's speaker asks, "what good emerges from writing / untenable mistakes into your daughter's / life? (I never dreamt of a son.)" The emphasis on writing complicates the poem as a place of escape. Escape for whom, when mistakes extend into the future? Recall the quote from Ariana Reines: "I must be doing something horrible and destructive." Chan's poem carries something of that admission. While it may be a place where the "I" can do more, be more, poetry may also aid in the transmission of pain.

Chan's mapping of trauma might recall some recent predecessors. At times, I was reminded of Dawn Lundy Martin's *Discipline*, for its awareness of the body as a site of colonization and control, and the way trauma is absorbed, re-lived, re-enacted. *We Remain Traditional* is plugged directly into its political, historical and literary backdrops, a quality seen most clearly in "The Part about Fate or Counterpoint." Placing footnotes in the right-hand margin beside its prose blocks, this poem pulls the eye to the right-hand column, where a piece of the poem's language is contextualized. When the opening prose block ends, for example, "She said to hold my body

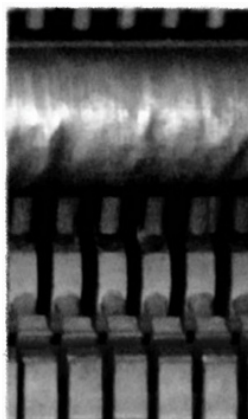
down like a political piece; men were those pieces who would enter my bed at night,” we find this extract from Juliana Spahr’s 2002 *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs*: “at night unable to turn over or away from this, the three legged stool of political piece, military piece, that has entered our beds at night.” Spahr’s passage doesn’t explain Chan’s so much as it activates it, creating alternate routes of meaning. Interpretative possibilities arise in the small space between them. The punning on “piece,” for instance, we might now read into the poem, and Spahr’s passage, about the erosion of a private sphere, infiltrates Chan’s. Other passages cited throughout are from Roberto Bolano’s *2666*, from which the poem gets its title. We could see this as no more than heavy citation, but the footnotes’ arrangement, eye-level with the work, and their frequency make them collaborative, relationships between past and present, the poem and its source material, played out on the page. It’s the fullest expression of what this collection seeks to create: a live connection with the past it sifts through, the poem becomes a social site where a range of voices, classical and contemporary, are set in dialogue with one another. Call it a community.

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