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The Buddha Bandit Poets

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In 1978 Asian American poets Garrett Hongo, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Alan Chong Lau published *The Buddha Bandits Down Highway 99*, a collaborative anthology of poems dedicated to meditations on the highway that runs north-south across California’s Central Valley. The “Buddha Bandits” helped inaugurate a wave of activist Asian American poetry after Modernism.

Hongo, Inada, and Lau all spent formative years in California before coming to prominence as significant Asian American writers. Garrett Kaoru Hongo is of Japanese descent and was born in 1951 in Volcano, Hawaii. When he was a child, his family moved to California’s San Fernando Valley before settling in Gardena, a Japanese American community in south Los Angeles. Hongo graduated from Pomona College, completed graduate work at the University of Michigan, and earned an M.F.A. from the University of California at Irvine. Hongo’s 1988 collection *The River of Heaven* was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize.

Lawson Fusao Inada is also of Japanese descent and was born in 1938 in Fresno, California. In 1942, as a result of Executive Order 9066, which authorized the U.S. army to “exclude” citizens from designated military areas on the West Coast, Inada and his family were interned in camps in California, Arkansas, and Colorado. Inada wrote about these experiences in his 1992 collection *Legends from Camp*, which won the National Book Award. Inada attended California State University, Fresno, and the University of California, Berkeley, and earned an M.F.A. at the University of Oregon before going on to teach at Southern Oregon University in Ashland.

Chinese American poet Alan Chong Lau was born in 1948 in Oroville, California, and grew up in Paradise, California. He attended the Nanga School in Kyoto, Japan, and studied art at the University of California, Santa Cruz. In the late 1970s Lau moved to Seattle, Washington, where he began working at an Asian produce grocery store in Seattle’s Chinatown district, experiences he explores in his 2000 poetry collection *Blues and Greens: A Produce Worker’s Journal.* Lau also continues to work as an artist, exhibiting works in sumi-e ink painting and mixed media.

Hongo, Inada, and Lau first collaborated as the Buddha Bandits in 1977 in a performance of music and poetry at California State University, Long Beach. Their 1978 anthology *The Buddha Bandits Down Highway 99* engages with the culturally and geographically heterogeneous landscape of the California state highway, particularly its history of Asian American migration and its significance as a site of Japanese internment during World War II. The authors depict a Highway 99 teeming with cultural and geographic diversity as well as cross-racial alliances in farming communities and the busy marketplaces of Chinatown. *The* *Buddha Bandits Down Highway 99* also can be read as a response to the Beat poet Gary Snyder’s long 1965 poem “Night Highway 99”. Whereas Snyder drew on the references and formal elements of Chinese and Japanese poetry to articulate the growing popularity of Zen among 1950s and 1960s counter-cultural writers and artists, portraying Highway 99 as a kind of wilderness where attachment could be loosed, the Buddha Bandits described 99 as “THE YELLOW STRIPE DOWN THE BACK OF AMERICA” — a road understood within the context of ethnic unity as well as firmly rooted in the United States landscape.

The Buddha Bandits shared the formal concerns and countercultural attitudes of their fellow avant-garde poets, particularly the Beats, but their collaboration also anticipated a rejection of American Orientalism in that same avant-garde. Activist Asian American poets of the 1970s and later rejected the depiction of Asia as a distant source of enlightenment, instead asserting a historically specific identity for the Asian American avant-garde. Subsequent anthologies of Asian American writing, such as *Aiiieeeee!: An Anthology of Asian-American Writers* (1974) and *The Big Aiiieeeee!: An Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature* (1991), both co-edited by Inada, further asserted ethnic nationalism as a critique of American Orientalism.

**List of Works**

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**References and further reading**

Chin, Frank, Jeffrey Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, Shawn Hsu Wong (eds.) (1974) *Aiiieeeee!: An Anthology of Asian-American Writers*, Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press.

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