

INVOCATION TO DAUGHTERS. By Barbara Jane Reyes. San Francisco: City Lights Spotlight, 2017. 96 pp. \$14.95, paper

Reviewed by Jeremy Allan Hawkins

Barbara Jane Reyes opens her fifth book of poems, *Invocation to Daughters*, with two epigraphs—one from the Book of Genesis and another from Warren G’s old-school classic “Regulators.” Reyes exhibits what will be two major registers of the book: biblical verse and hip-hop lyricism. The biblical quote speaks of daughters like exchangeable property; Warren G’s line—“If I had wings I would fly, let me contemplate”—offers a kind of rebuttal, considering the potential for the lyric imagination to overstep the limitations of the real. This possibility is raised, embodied even, in the following lines:

And I close my fists, and I hear my voice
This soothsaying, this hollering me,
This lyric-making me, now a dazzling we—
We howl, we witness, we testify
We stand firm, and you cannot break us
We are raw nerves, and we are fire. We rise
And in writing, we restore our lives.

Invocation to Daughters enacts a belief in language’s power to affect the world. Reyes literally calls on women as daughters, calls them into presence and thus in defiance of forces that would efface them. “This death shroud un names you,” she writes in “Psalm for Jennifer Laude,” while literally naming Laude, a Filipina transgender woman strangled and drowned by an American soldier, honoring someone of whom “They say there is no word for you in your native tongue.” Others are named, praised, given voice, even the “plain Jane” Doe who would otherwise go unknown, and in Reyes’s poetry this takes the force of litany, sermon, and threnody. She remains a proven master of both formal repetition and the first-person collective:

We are salt and rock, hawk, bronze, and heart
We are born of the muck, of ruckus and fuss

But despite her use of repetition, Reyes does not repeat herself, not in the sense of being somehow stuck or hung-up, even if long-term readers will recognize familiar forms and themes. What *Invocation to Daughters* does repeat is a refusal on Reyes’s part to “move on” from political and cultural complaints, simply in order to “make it new,” in the avant-garde sense, for the sake of fashion or comfort. At the same time, the actual repeating devices in Reyes’s work are productive. An example can be found in the book’s two sonnet crowns, where the repetition of final lines literally helps produce the occasion for new poems.

Even in the case of content, however, repetition is the grounds for new production. The repeated invocation of daughters and their relationships to fathers sets the stage for a surprising series of poems late in the book which address and elegize the poet's father. In these, Reyes evokes a man who, in a community which prefers sons to the point of violence, is father to only daughters; she writes of him with tenderness and lucidity that do not contradict the fevered tone found elsewhere in the volume, but add critical ballast to all that might otherwise tend toward rising:

We are daughters of a man not godly or erudite, just this man whose
hands built things, carved bodies into wood, formed them from clay,
watercolored their light. He was never a man of words.

What reminds us of her mastery is that while the father is described with his own positive attributes, his elegy is told in relation to his daughters—a reversal of the patriarchal convention in which a daughter is at best a function of her father's agency.

The détournement of tradition is an approach Reyes favors, and we see it also in the book's opening poem, a "FAQ" appropriating a website convention designed to head off common queries. Here, she makes poetry out of a banal form and the tone-deaf questions she has received as an engaged poet, turning questions such as "*Why can't you just write about beautiful things?*" into effective and reflective lines:

Do you see the woman fighting for air? Do you see the woman
guarding her kin? Do you see the woman learning to speak? Do you see
the woman resisting being broken?

If you do not see the beauty in these, then I am sorry for you.

By answering the questions in poetry, she reappropriates the moment of imposition to create opportunities that align with her political engagements. The FAQ is meant to provide information, and in this sense Reyes is, as always, teaching:

2. *Don't you worry that other people might not understand you?*

People will come to understand what they want to understand.
Those who know *una significado es ilusyon (o delusyon)*, ang
intindi ay simaron, they know *liminaridad*. The ones who demand
understanding en una lengua, the ones who demand *una kortada*
ng dila, the ones who request *una violencia de la media lengua*,
intolerante. They really want *obediencia*.

Given that a FAQ is for the *frequently asked*, readers may sense how long the poet has been fielding questions like these, which could be taken as well-meaning but insensitive, or understood as passive-aggressive forms of critique. Who asks these questions, either literally or in forms that inspired the questions Reyes includes in her FAQ?

The poet does not reveal who and where she has been questioned in this way, but she portrays the queries so that their status as micro-aggressions comes forward, as her interrogators ask her to justify her language, her tone, and her position. Sustained political engagement over decades might induce fatigue, and a certain weariness may be read in the book as apparent in certain lines—"I am tired of talking about talking about race"—and latent in others—"I am telling you this, because you want access to something true and personal about me." In Reyes's hands, however, this seeming fatigue is another tool to make use of in her constant dialogue with readers, one that she employs to develop the themes of the book. As in the poems that address her father, the hints of fatigue may appear as momentary displays of vulnerability. These moments, however, can be read as a kind of tonal and thematic punctuation, playing counterpoint to lines that are more steadfast in the ways they enact resistance and defiance, and contributing to a volume that never surrenders to resignation.

Readers and critics have to be careful, though, not to reduce *Invocation to Daughters* to a political treatise, or even a series of activist positions, where Reyes does or does not reveal herself. "You don't get to catalogue me . . . You don't get to explain me . . . You don't get to draw my boundaries," she writes, anticipating every reading and review which might attempt to label this poetry as "Filipina," or "feminist," or anything else for that matter. Rigid taxonomies would miss the agency of this book.

