

american poets

THE JOURNAL OF THE ACADEMY OF AMERICAN POETS FALL-WINTER 2023 VOLUME 65 POETS.ORG





Unbinding Poetic Lives

Biographies and best-selling memoirs have secured the legacies of countless poets, though often at the expense of the histories of the communities in which their individual careers flourished. Diving into the archive, Eunsong Kim highlights the close relationship between poets Willyce Kim and Pat Parker as well as the larger community of lesbian feminist artists who communed and created art in the San Francisco Bay Area in the late-twentieth century.


In describing his efforts toward Asian American literature, the Chinese American author and scholar Shawn Wong tells me, "We knew we couldn't be writers unless we took the older generation with us." He recounts his efforts to interview the journalist and writer Hisaye Yamamoto, the fights he had with various publishers, and his early work writing for poet Janice Mirikitani at Glide Memorial Church in San Francisco. They protested the war and wanted to find each other. He tells me about the conferences organized by him and writer Ishmael Reed and how one iteration was delayed for hours because the poet Etheridge Knight had been stopped by the police for driving while Black. Wong emphasizes that he is not a literary scholar; he is a literary activist. He tells me that this is why he continues to republish out-of-print Asian American books. His first venture into this was *No-No Boy* by John Okada. This year it will be Willyce Kim's lesbian adventure novel *Dancer Dawkins and the California Kid*. He wonders, rhetorically, what political history and literary activism mean for contemporary Asian American writers. He then tells me how relationships have changed over the years, how time has been kind to some and unkind to others.

Toward the end of our discussion, he recounts the story of artist and poet Kathy Change's (born, Kathleen Chang) self-immolation in 1996. She was briefly married to writer Frank Chin, and Wong and Change knew each other during this marriage. In *Immigrant Acts*, Lisa Lowe lays out a formative critique of how Asian American cultural nationalism bypassed feminist analyses in its accounting of the violence of colonialism and how in a "construction of a fixed, 'native' Asian American subject" gender and desire become displaced.¹ I think about Lowe's theories as I ask about Change. I always ask about the footnoted wives and friends, the exes, the lesbians, and their drafts. More than their writing, I want to know if they were supported and loved even when they

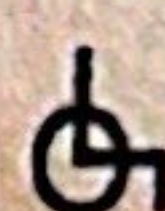
were difficult to be around, perhaps especially when they were difficult to be around.


Though I have known Wong for over a decade, our latest conversations were prompted by Pat Parker's archives and the questions I had while reading her papers during the summer of 2022. I found flyers for the poetry and performance group Unbound Feet in Parker's archive. Wanting

UNBOUND FEET THREE:
Kitty Tsui Nellie Wong Merle Woo



BREAKING GROUND
a benefit reading
saturday august fifteenth 8pm
\$4

CHILDCARE  **WOMEN'S BUILDING**
3543-18th Street, San Francisco



Dykes for an Amerikan Revolution
photographic exhibit by
Cathy Cado, Paula Wallace, Donna Gottschalk

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 12th
6 to 9pm
childcare provided, refreshments
poetry reading by
Nancy Adair, Brenda Crider, Willyce Kim, Pat Parker

glide memorial church
corner of taylor and ellis streets, san francisco
fellowship hall
sun. nov. 12th 6-9pm

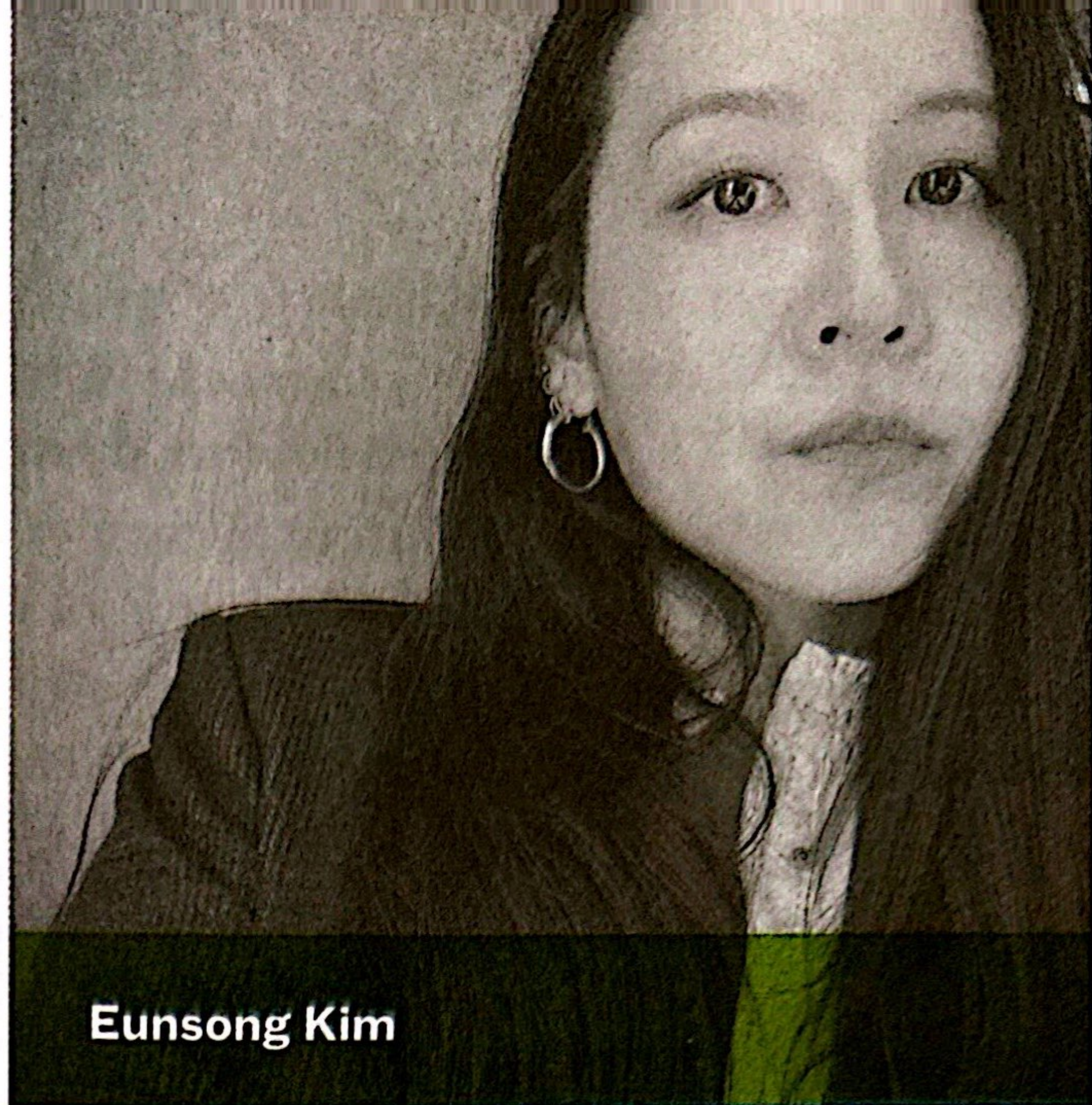
1. See Lowe, 76-77

to reach out to its members, I asked Wong for help. Parker kept promotional flyers for their reading series as well as their newsletters. I thrillingly read the words of group members Kitty Tsui, Nellie Wong, and Merle Woo, wherein they describe their political positions as lesbians and queer, socialist women, who wanted the group to take a more radical position against U.S. empire. In one of the newsletters, there is a handwritten note from Parker that reads: *What ever happened to this?*

It should not be a surprise that Black and Asian American poets organized and supported one another throughout the 1970s and 1980s, that queer women of color poets found and created a community. And yet theirs is a story too often embedded into archives and their memories, obscured from public discourse. Too often we are taught about individual poets and individual poems rather than their communities, intimacies, and disagreements. I searched in the archives to learn about how these poets lived, whom they loved and how. How did they fight? How did they speak during their fights? Who visited them in the hospitals? Whom did they visit?

I found letters from the novelist and poet Willyce Kim to Pat Parker. In an undated letter Kim writes to her friend, “Pat Parker, what the hell is wrong with us romantic poets? [...] I am out of my mind, wildly in love with the woman. I don’t even know what the word self-protection means.” Included in the letter is a portrait of Kim from her book *Eating Artichokes* and two poems, “The next woman” and another from her collection *Under the Rolling Sky* with the same name. The letter concludes with lines from “The next woman” that read:

And when we love,
I promise you love
How we will love to love
Each other’s loves...



Eunsong Kim

The verse was prompted by a statement from Kim to Parker, “Here’s what I wish for the both of you.”²

Through Wong I was connected to Kim, who told me what she could about the lesbian poetry scene in the 1970s and beyond, her friendships with Parker and Audre Lorde, and her approach to poetics and activism. When I visited Kim’s home in March, I saw a poster for “Dykes for an American Revolution,” a poetry reading at Glide—the home of the “Poetry for the People” workshops organized by Mirikitani and June Jordan, which I discussed in an essay for the spring-summer issue of *American Poets*. You can see Kim’s and Parker’s names prominently featured on the reading flyer. This is 1972. Kim tells me that the event was organized by lesbian photographers, and thus the reading coincided with an exhibition of their artwork. In a matter-of-fact tone, Kim describes who she read with throughout the 1970s and 1980s, “the only people I read with were other lesbian writers—ninety-five percent,” and that Parker, Kim, and Judy Grahn were invited to universities by queer student groups and took road trips to the events together. Evergreen State College in Washington provided gas money, and the students at Santa Rosa Junior College and the College of Marin provided what they could, but honorariums and reimbursements were then, as they are now,

2. This paragraph with edits comes from a foreword to Willyce Kim’s novel, *Dancer Dawkins and the California Kid*, to be published by University of Washington Press, 2023. Pat Parker Archives, Box 4, Schlesinger Library, Harvard University

a source of tension. The students who invited them were under-resourced, though their universities were not. The troupe did not turn down reading requests; instead, Kim supplemented the expenses by working odd jobs. Questions of money and material conditions are reflected often in Parker's journals. In an entry from July 1965, Parker writes, "Finances is [sic] a problem. Have only one unemployment check left."

Kim, Parker, and Grahn were all published by the Women's Press Collective, and Grahn worked there with some regularity. Akin to Mirikitani and Jordan, Kim and Parker worked with young students in a community poetry program. Kim worked with students in Oakland's Chinatown from the late 1970s to the early 1980s until the program was discontinued, and Parker was part of a California Poets in Schools program from 1975 to 1978. In her workshops, Kim asked students to write from their feelings and observations and prioritized the reading of their poems. This is reflected in Parker's journal entries, in which she writes about the open prompts she used to encourage the writing process, such as "I used to be," and fostering collective writing. When I ask Kim if her and Parker's teaching had any overlaps, Kim instead tells me about visiting Parker in the hospital after her chemotherapy. This memory is reflected in a letter to Audre Lorde about cancer in which Parker describes Kim as a "sister" who visited her during treatment and as a performer for a benefit held in her honor.³

Kim recounted rooming with Parker and other lesbians in a house on Terra Avenue, and the various ways in which they fostered one another to write, read, and exist. When I ask Kim if they read each other's drafts and workshopped each other's poems, she tells me they did not but that they knew when the other was writing through the night and how quickly or slowly the others wrote. In an undated piece from her poetry journal Parker asks, "Where would I be without you?" On the next page are the following lines of verse: "We are pre-destined / it is said / our paths crossed / guided by a plan / & we only stand able / to complete a play."⁴

The archivist and ethnographer Jarrett Drake formatively critiques archives as carceral spaces wherein histories, documents, and memories are institutionalized. In pointing to how the visiting of an archive too often parallels prison visitation with their various ID and security checks, and how an archive may work to sequester conversations and act as a site of exclusion (such as Parker's papers, held by Harvard's Schlesinger Library: How easy is it for those outside of Boston's academic spaces to access her papers?)—Drake cautions against the easy romanticization of archival objectivity and its evidentiary promise and asks for more criticality to be practiced when interacting with its objectification of memory.⁵

I visit people and their archives and read their histories with cautious admiration. I approach the language they leave behind in journals and letters with a longing for a secret they may have that this present does not. I approach their drafts, their language because they were trying something, and I want their plays to be extended and woven into our present and future. ★

3. Pat Parker Archives, Box 5, Schlesinger Library, Harvard University

4. Letter to Audre Lorde, September 8, 1988 (MC 861, 11.2)

5. See Drake, Jarrett Martin. "Processing Power: Archives, Prisons, and the Ethnography of Exchange." In *Paths to Prison: Histories on the Architecture of Carcerality*, edited by Isabelle Kirkham-Lewitt, 241–65. New York: Columbia University Press, 2020. And Drake, Jarrett Martin. "Diversity's Discontents: In Search of an Archive of the Or

Poem by **Willyce Kim**

Untitled

The next woman
that I love
should know
know this well.
That when we meet
the earth will not
move,
and when we touch
no thunder shall
crack the sky,
and when we lie
 aye to aye
oceans will not part,
nor winged horses
tumble
to carry us high,
but, when we love
I promise you love,
how we will love
to love
each other's loves....

From *Eating Artichokes* (Women's Press Collective, 1972) by Willyce Kim.
Used with the permission of the author.