

BOOK REVIEWS

A FIELD GUIDE TO THE POETRY OF THEODORE ROETHKE

By William Barillas, ed. Reviewed by Christian Knoeller.

111

TRAFFIC IN ASIAN WOMEN

By Laura Hyun Yi Kang. Reviewed by Nicolyn Woodcock.

112

Editorial note: Book reviews are lightly edited for clarity and typographical errors.

A FIELD GUIDE TO THE POETRY OF THEODORE ROETHKE. By William Barillas, ed. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2020.

Throughout much of his literary career, Theodore Roethke was considered a preeminent twentieth-century American poet, likened by his contemporaries to T.S. Eliot and even hailed as a successor to Walt Whitman. Poets of Roethke's generation bridged the historical transition from traditional patterned forms to free verse, and his own writing reflects that trajectory. With essays by forty-four contributors encompassing poems from seven major collections, *A Field Guide to the Poetry of Theodore Roethke* reassesses the magnitude of his contribution to American letters. In aggregate, this eclectic collection of essayists brings a variety of theoretical and philosophical perspectives—ranging from Romanticism to pastoral, Judeo-Christian thought, classical mythology, and even Eastern religion (e.g. Taoism)—that add nuance and complexity to the discussion of Roethke's poetics and our appreciation of his work.

The manuscript is organized chronologically, progressing through Roethke's collections in order of publication from *Open House* in 1941 to *The Far Field* in 1964. This arrangement is conducive to appreciating development of Roethke's mature style as his writing gravitated toward free verse. The book's embrace of formal analysis of verse is a contribution in itself, and the comprehensive reconsideration of his distinctive poetics is a valuable addition to Roethke studies. In fact, the volume offers a timely corrective by re-emphasizing elements of poetic form, a central critical concern for generations that has gradually waned. In fact, each essay offers a close reading of a single poem, often examining the impact of formal elements while reappraising the poet's craft in terms of new directions in literary criticism ranging from feminist to ecocritical, for instance. To his credit, the editor does not privilege any one approach, evenhandedly juxtaposing a variety of theoretical frameworks such as feminist or ecocritical perspectives. As Edward Hirsch describes in the Foreword, the volume's title evokes an underlying ecological metaphor: "We think of a field guide as a manual to help us identify things in their natural environments... This guidebook leads us down the different pathways of his imagination. It enables us to see him whole." (xiii)

Editor William Barillas, author of *The Midwestern Pastoral: Place and Landscape in Literature of the American Heartland* (Ohio University Press, 2006) which also addresses Roethke in depth, has assembled an impressive array of essayists representing a wide range of critical perspectives conveying a host of fresh insights into the poet's craft. While many contributors are established academics teaching at colleges and universities across the country, the roster of scholars includes others teaching and writing outside of the U.S. in Canada, Germany, Hong Kong, Ireland, and Spain – as well as a cadre of specialists affiliated with the Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature. Particularly masterful chapters include several by prominent Roethke scholars such as Walter Kalaidjian, Jay Parini, and Bernard W. Quetchenbach. In "The Ecological Visions

of "The Far Field," for example, Quechenbach concludes that "Roethke's ecological mysticism emphasizes horizontal movement across liminal zones where matter and spirit intersect and communicate... the convergence of worlds, and a traveler could cross between environments... Nature abides in immediate particulars integrated into a holistic, enduring net of relationships" (259). These are quintessentially ecological insights.

This *Field Guide*, the first book on Roethke in more than twenty years, will appeal to readers from a variety of interlocking disciplines, including scholars and students of American literature as well as twentieth-century poetry more generally. With its emphasis on close reading and formal analysis, it might also be of use to practicing as well as aspiring poets. Similarly, since chapters are written in a highly accessible style, the book is of value to students of creative writing, especially at the graduate level.

Taken together, these essays provide a synthesis of previous generations of criticism, while a number of contributors adopt forward-looking critical approaches such as ecocriticism. As such, it represents a unique contribution to Roethke studies: a comprehensive analysis of his craft, a careful examination of his poetics, and a timely reassessment of his literary legacy and relevance.

Christian Knoeller
Purdue University

TRAFFIC IN ASIAN WOMEN. By Laura Hyun Yi Kang. Durham: Duke University Press, 2020.

Laura Hyun Yi Kang's *Traffic in Asian Women* centers the "comfort women issue," working from its ascendance to international prominence in the early 1990s to trace backwards and illustrate the ways "Asian women" have been enfigured—and effaced—within the 20th century's evolving ideological movements surrounding "women's rights as human rights."¹ Taking the "comfort women issue" as exemplary of the complexities of inter-Asian geopolitics both past and present, Kang proposes "*thinking* 'Asian women' as method" (Ch. 1)—as *analytic* rather than hapless object of study subject to "empathetic identification with *those* bodies in pain" (35). Such method, rather, "think[s] and think[s] again through 'Asian women' as bodies of knowledge and ways of knowing" (35). Performing this methodical work, Kang connects disparate records in archives of "global governance" such as the League of Nations, United Nations, and Allied military intelligence organizations with literature, testimony, news media, and other cultural productions, demonstrating how the "comfort women issue" falls through so "many cracks in the shifting international edifice of investigating and monitoring" sexual and gendered violence across the 20th century (104)—from "traffic in women" between the World Wars (Ch. 2) through Cold War anxiety over "sexual slavery" (Ch. 3). Tracking these through their transformation to the capacious category "violence against women," Kang charts the coinciding transnational conditions of possibility which have made the issue hypervisible from the 1990s into our present (Ch. 4). For instance, Kang's close archival review shows that the early-20th century linguistic turn to "traffic in women" as "inclusive" corrective to the late-19th century use of "white slavery" as synonym for prostitution persistently retained the former's racial hierarchy. And, although "sexual slavery" is now the definitive concept for understanding the "comfort system," Kang's

study reveals the issue was ignored in UN discourses that initially focused on the years *after* WWII, an oversight designating it an unremarkable wartime exception.

In the latter half, *Traffic* presents now familiar subtopics in the “comfort women issue,” such as truth, reparation, and memorials for our re-consideration. Kang prompts us to dwell on photographs and military intelligence reports “unearthed” from the US archives in the early-1990s, for example, which have circulated as “irrefutable proof” of Japanese war crimes, re-reading them, first, as incriminating proof of U.S. knowledge about and complicity in making the “comfort system” invisible; and second, as a discomfiting record of imperial contact between Asian American servicemen and Asian women (Ch. 5). Next, she challenges notions of “just compensation” through re-examination of the Asian Women’s Fund, situating it as one of several rhetorical calculations of the economic cost of “violence against women” which reduce women’s bodies, labors, and traumas to measures of capitalist (un)productivity (Ch. 6).² Finally, Kang considers the rhetorical effects of digital memorials, an unexpected pivot away from the “controversies” over physical memorials in recent years (Ch. 7). Specifically, she analyzes the digital museum of the AWF, an enduring memorial not for honoring the “comfort women” but to remember this Japanese effort at “correcting” the past.

Traffic in Asian Women is a generative text for scholars of the comfort system and its legacies, Asian Studies, transnational American and Asian American Studies, and Gender and Sexuality Studies, among others. Kang critically rethinks “comfort women” in order to dislodge the term from identifying only persons affected by a fixed temporal event.³ Effectively “zooming out” from this example, Kang demonstrates the value of continuously learning from those possessing intimate knowledge about experiences of racial and gendered violence and living their effects. In the “comfort women” case, specifically, survivors’ situated knowledges do not uphold the comfort system as just one egregious instance but collectively and repeatedly use it to point to patterns of violence and injustice—particularly toward Asian and other marginalized women—that are deeply rooted, intersecting, and ongoing.

Nicolyn Woodcock
Clark University

Notes

1. “Comfort women” is a euphemistic nomenclature that refers to the women and girls victimized by the Japanese Imperial Army’s Pacific/World War II-era system of militarized sexual enslavement. Estimates suggest that more than 200,000 women and girls were forced into sexual servitude from the early 1930s through 1945 across a geography spanning the growing Japanese empire and occupied territories through the wars, including but not limited to the Korean peninsula, the Chinese mainland, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Indonesia.

2. Established in 1995, the Japanese Asian Women’s Fund was controversial because it was privately funded by donors rather than by the Japanese government. While some former “comfort women” accepted payment from this fund, most refused them as a disingenuous attempt at reparation.

3. See Kandice Chuh’s call for such work in “Discomfiting Knowledge, or, Korean ‘Comfort Women’ and Asian Americanist Critical Practice,” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 6, no. 1 (2003): 5-23.

