

DAVID LAU

interviewed by Brian Ang

Crisis, Struggles, Poetry

Born of a rigorous criticism of the toxicity of the economic system, this collection of experimental, socially conscious poetry reflects a world in crisis. It mobilizes scenes of struggle and instances of solidarity, from Occupy to Mexico's drug war, from Cairo to Athens. Linguistically daring, full of exigency, these poems are as damaged as life, still dirty.

—*Still Dirty: Poems 2009-2015* by David Lau (Commune Editions, 2016)

from “Communism Today”:

Call-in request line binding force
cut back, fought
with Mozart and the percussion great
called Non-Los Angeles.
They came around the

building with our comrades
in front of them as shields.
Fuck Dave Kliger.
Which one of these anarchist faggots stole my SIM card?
See if the janitor has the key to open these doors.

He's the person we need everything.
The telos today closer to undead,
insurrectionary Velazquezes incapable
of enduring independent labor monitors—
wild Mike is straight up drugs.

Sri Lankan and subjective confusions
adopted that language
as in Balzac when rude boys
had rivers to cross.
A snort of laughter to knot

en El Encanto Sanitarium
near the freeway river flowing 100,000 stanzas,
let Placitas bloom 1,000 at a time
quickly into inauspicious jobs.
Occupy everything, including Humanities

Brian Ang: *Still Dirty* combines references to culture and history with those to struggles since the 2008 economic crisis, with an openness to the dirtiness of post-crisis reality. For instance, “Communism Today” combines references to music, painting, literature, and Los Angeles with those to the California anti-austerity university struggles that began in 2009, including both “anarchist faggots” representing internal conflicts in those struggles’ homophobic ugliness and the struggles’ slogan “Occupy everything” that would influence the Occupy movement. What motivates this combination in your poetics and its openness to the dirty and ugly?

David Lau: I take my poetry to be unlike what’s the norm out there. “Lovely” writing in the variants of contemporary academicism dominates; it has lukewarm emotions, the equivalent of a spa or comfortable bath for a certain set of book readers. Pick up the big magazines and this is what you will largely see, along with some samples of other more interesting things. A slack postmodern scenic writing remains popular in North American poetry, and even if it doesn’t make great profits for anyone, there’s a bit of a commodity dimension to this writing as well; a formal lyric speaker concentrates on the precious, well-packaged moment of beauty. I search for a dirtier poetic, saturated with alterity and strangeness.

It follows that motivation and openness are in tension. As with any long-term communal practice like writing, I’m connected to the work that’s come before (including my own). Yet I’ve had to find my own way. I’ve sought and I’ve defied explanations. So there are many constraints if the practice of poetry is in line with the sense of freedom or openness you’re talking about. The delicate type may want to wear gloves when they examine the book, which is a season in indecency, hell, and chaos, with the overdriven signification familiar to readers of my first book.

There is a passage in Guy Debord’s *Panegyric* where he writes about the desire for an art or writing that’s close to life, and I think I have that sort of idea in mind with my recent poetry. It is close to the life I’ve known in the last decade. These have been years of struggle; years of poetry, dance, and music; years of writing essays and reviews, giving seminars and lectures. The specific poem you refer to in your question is largely derived from a series of protests in 2009. It is representative of the earlier poems in the book. There are several such “subject” poems in the collection. I often took notes during the events. I shot video and took photos. Social media was becoming much more significant in daily life and was used to amplify and augment the events of the broader student/anti-

austerity moment in the US. I would say a whole confluence of things happened to make these poems what they are; but then there is the question of technique.

In the struggle between the beautiful and the ugly, the lovely aesthetic of the commodity and the improbable mimesis of the hardened and alienated, to paraphrase Adorno, I come down on the side of the latter. Dissonance is a starting position for what I consider some of the fundamentals of a contemporary style, but there must also be tension and so you will find my poetry cutting back into rhythm and music, even persona associated with narrative.

I have learned to take maximum permission from complex texts and works of music. I assume the necessity of antithetical modes of development; I wrote work from an early age with this innovative negation of 20th century art in mind.

But I've also been drawn into political struggles because of my intellectual and lived commitments, my forms of employment and my circle of comrades. None of it could have been predicted in advance and the poetry remains dirtied, contaminated by its untimely sensibility. Close to life.

BA: In your connection to the past, how did life in recent years condition your use of references (Mozart, Velázquez, and Balzac above) and aesthetic theories (Debord and Adorno, as mentioned)? What do you seek to effect in the reader?

DL: These references to famed figures are the stuff of my mind. For some it may come off as strange to see such a frame of high culture in scrambled and “stir-fry” poetry like mine, but it just needs not be too forced to work in my poems. You spend time with music, painting, and novels and inevitably, so I've found, they find your way into the work.

I'm not sure what I can say about the readers except that they should be aristocratic and proletarian in outlook. With them in mind I try to create something hard enough to endure my own negative and doubtful scrutiny. I try to push the art, to make it do things it isn't supposed to do. I come from intellectual and poetic traditions that assume a competitive cultural level where the struggle for emancipation must also be won. A certain auto-didactic impulse is proper to poetry readers and to the working class militants to which Marx, Proudhon, and others once appealed.

BA: *Still Dirty* combines communist and ethnic political knowledge, dialect and economic language, blurring their dichotomies among ideologies of poetry in the present. What interests you in bringing these together?

DL: The poems take in different things—memories, struggles, bits of language—for different purposes. I wrote my way into the book through highly specific details of struggles during 2009-2010 student movement in California, one of a handful of political movements in response to the glaring injustice of the fallout from the financial crisis. It was a time when there was very little oppositional grain to the political poetry in the US as most liberal poets were and remain worshipful of Obama. Here I noted the backdrop of radical struggles out of which these 2009 protests and occupations emerged in California: the Bay Area Marxist and anarchist tendencies and overlapping radical black, brown, and yellow, and feminist tendencies emanating from the 60s. The latter struggles, represented in contemporary identity politics, are all but the official humanities and social sciences curriculum at the University of California. More recently I've thought about how I was producing then a form of "mimetic exacerbation" (Hal Foster) of the incipient protests themselves, borrowing images from occupied spaces (some of which I entered, while others were images circulating online), using a mashup or collage idiom of verbal density and minute closeups of the poetics of struggle in "signs" and slogans. Here I worked from my memory of things.

As the collection evolved in more recent years I began to move away from some of the close knife work manner towards a broader canvas. I tried for more reflective and historical passages. Panoramas and vistas I had in mind may never have quite come to pass in the surging, loosely hung together style I find necessary to my poetry. But the thought does count here I think. By the end of the book, an era has come and not quite gone. Something "washed ashore in the squares." The referent here is the 2011 movements of the squares or plaza occupations. We still don't know what we are (and we're certainly not something like Fredric Jameson's Universal Army), though perhaps some uncertain agency has slouched out of the megacity. Paul Mason referred to this new social type as the "Jacobin with a laptop": educated, marginally employed, radical as fuck. So my comrades were intimately part of the poetic work I was doing.

There are of course many contradictions of the movements you mention above, these 60s struggles in Berkeley, San Jose, Watts, East Los Angeles, and Delano. But the way most people encounter them today, the uprisings are arguably depoliticized and incorporated into public and private sector employer

narratives of diversity and individuals overcoming obstacles. The collective dimension gets lost. In defeat there were tepid reforms and new regimes of harassment and incarceration. Everywhere we turn now someone is promoting a garbled version of the past from which the radical current is thoroughly deleted. So I felt the need to struggle over these terms. Participants in those times have been transformed and much of the socialist past is hardly discussed, especially in the black, brown, and yellow movements. Radical forms of academic identity politics persist; but it is important to underline the Marxist account of exploitation and its universalization, for otherwise we wind up very cosy with neoliberalism. The universalization of our separation from subsistence, at the heart of the anti-capitalist struggles in 1960s Oakland and Detroit, for instance, needs to be affirmed as a way to unite struggles and their varied political and cultural fronts. The past has been interpreted in opposing directions, with a dominant liberal center, depoliticized for the most part in my experience of public sector academia. I held together things like the communist and Marxist commitments of the present with those of the past in taking on the diverse movements of the present.

BA: Throughout *Still Dirty*, there's both a negative capability toward the present ("the fightingest motherfuckers ever / who won't make sense right now" from "Pythian") and an orientation toward the future; your book's last poem, "Like a Storm System of Post-QE Emerging Market Bubbles," closes with "the fallen revolutionaries are immortal / fearless they faced down the upward redistributionists," a desire to preserve struggles into the turbulent future. As you say above, "We still don't know what we are"; what's the importance of getting down a record of this first chapter of post-crisis years amidst our present situation after the election of Trump?

DL: First the poetic: Well if you don't get it down yourself, others will give another version, a weaker one perhaps. Amiri Baraka once said something of that sort and so did Diane di Prima. Getting a radical poetry into the world is always a challenge and it's important because aesthetic distinctions need to be affirmed. So too do radical politics.

Indeed the last poem in the book is meant to give some sense of the stakes of current struggles. Upward redistribution is a way to understand how the capitalist class has and will continue to try to overcome the declining rates of profit in global export industries. I was trying to specify what is sometimes difficult to indicate clearly: the operations of class power on a global scale. It is a fight we will still face.

And about the climate for poetry: I can think back to 2009 and the flurry of adulatory poetry produced about Obama's election. These poems are perhaps now surpassed in the schlock category by the dreadful renga chain for Obama that every prize-winning poet alive and then some contributed to. By contrast today there are poem sites and books or pamphlets being produced that attack Trump. So that seems like a positive change in some sense but we will see. The literary world is dominated by liberals; it is effectively the weaker branch of the media empires and conglomerates. If the criticisms of the status quo in the literary world are caught in the bizarre loop of Russophobia, then things won't get very far or be very interesting. And if folks weren't critical under Obama, their objections now strike me as hollow and superficial. But perhaps a silver lining of the Trump election is that it will be a better period for poetry as a whole, especially if poets can play a role in the opposition that is forming. Poetry has no life as a form of obsequious fawning over any commander of the American Empire.

Brian Ang's current poetic project is *The Totality Cantos*, for Atelos. He edited a series on "Post-Crisis Poetics" and the magazine *ARMED CELL* (2011-2017).

David Lau is co-editor of *Lana Turner* and the author of the poetry collections *Virgil and the Mountain Cat* (UC Press) and *Still Dirty* (Commune Editions). He has published poetry and essays in *Boston Review*, *New Left Review*, *Harriet Blog*, *A Public Space*, and *Armed Cell*. He lives in Santa Cruz.