Book review

**ENGINE EMPIRE BY CATHY PARK HONG**  
W.W. NORTON, 2012, $15.95

*Engine Empire*, Cathy Park Hong’s third book of poems, throws us into the domain of empire, where we begin to question the repercussions and audacities of ambition. Throughout the book, rather than target a specific empire, she challenges the very notion of empire itself. Kitsch reminds us of how we construct empire through familiar terms and symbolic vernacular. Indeed, in “Man that Scat,” she writes: “I’m a crass buscadero, wild- / eyed thumber, hired killer, / leather slapping kenner, / a no kin outlaw.” The empire exists because we acknowledge its existence: “We see the empire rising.” Yet she takes that which is visible—including the myths that go along with empire—and makes it implicit. Like the snow that returns throughout the book, empire is both there and not there. It arrives and dissipates within us.

*Engine Empire* is not unlike Hong’s previous collection, *Dance Dance Revolution*, which ambitiously creates a creole language. All three of her books believe in the transformative power of imagination, in reworking the stuff of our cultural baggage. In this sense, Hong is greedy—that is, for our detritus, which, in her recent collection, sprays across time and distances. In *Engine Empire*, the lyrical, the narrative, and the anachronistic come together in a kind of empire of language.

The book is split into three sections: “Ballard of Our Jim,” “Shangdu, My Artful Boomtown!,” and “The World Cloud.” In each, Hong extends our conceptions of boomtowns and frontiers by showing us how incredible ambition can be, and the language of *Engine Empire* reflects this ambition. Her stories reach beyond the fences of narrative. The notion of progress, as tied to empire, is also questioned. Indeed, where are we going? Are we moving forward? Or is this a movement that simply runs, not unlike a hamster on a wheel?

The first section plays with America’s formative history during the California Gold Rush. We romp through the lyrical narrative of our hero Jim, an orphaned “half-bit breed” sharpshooter. The American empire here is audacious and dangerous, as Jim perishes in the empire’s shadow, sinking into “the denuded earth.” Yet empire continues to flourish without him. In an interview with Robyn Creswell from *The Paris Review*, Hong addresses the idea of empire versus its reality: “The boomtown isn’t real; it’s full of strange, violent, sometimes surreal happenings. It’s my own way of mythologizing California, which is where I’m from.” Hong’s frontier myths are pleasurably unrelenting in an effort to catalogue “the stuff” of the Wild West: prairie dogs, malaria, fleas, etc. Yet she is careful to point out the dangers inherent in this growth. In “Ballard of Grace,” she writes: “But the mighty empire is a false pond.” This false pond acts as a trick mirror, fogging travelers’ eyes into “lamb-milk.” There is nothing alive in the pond, yet the pond stays.

“Shangdu, My Artful Boomtown!” takes on the rising cities of China, overcome with rapid industrialization. As the centerpiece, this is *Engine Empire*’s strongest section. Shangdu, dotted with factories, acts as Kublai Kahn’s mythic Xanadu. Hong’s industrial empire eschews culture and history for the tireless production of DVDs, polysynthetic fur, and reproduction Rembrandts. We see this preoccupation with “stuff” in poems such as “Gift.” In this city, litanies are bountiful:

[…] DVDs of every genre-  
apothecaries have set up shop, hocking ointments  
ointments claimed to be made of seal blubber
to cure inflamed thyroids,
balms as natural birth control,
and imported cold medicines tha’taste
like wincing sweet cherries.

Hong plays with how language changes under globalization. Language here is turned inside out, so that we have “tha’ taste” instead of “that taste.” Compound words are strewn throughout, so that the engine of language becomes the language of in- genuity. For example: “plaidwhelmed,” “hisshurled,” “mossclung.” At times, Hong’s language mirrors that of the hodgepodge products made in these Chinese boomtowns, like a pair of sneakers donning a Nike swoosh and Adidas stripes.

In Hong’s final section, thought itself is colonized and treacherous. This futuristic digital world beckons. In the opening poem “Come Together,” she writes:

Snow like pale cephalopods drifts down
as it melts into our lapels we are all connected
into a shared dream where we
don’t need our heirloom mouths.

This shared empire is particularly alien, to the point of historical irrelevance. There is no need for “our heirloom mouths.” She writes later that “all memories / [are] outsourced.” In the digital world, the engine becomes the search engine. It becomes that which is automated. Where we come from no longer matters; this contradicts our understanding of empire, which depends on the violence of past empires. Strangely, Hong suggests that empire settles within us, spreading through our veins: “recall the frontier inside us.” The book ends where the book begins, with James Joyce’s irresistible snow. Danger falls upon all of us: “One laborer accidently swallowed ice / and it caused him to hallucinate, blither in another language. / He was immediately exterminated. / We were forced to wear masks.” Yet the speaker ignores this warning and cannot help but swallow the snow. Empire glows within.

Now that snow is spreading through our veins, what can we do? Despite its grim outlook on the remains of empire, Engine Empire wholeheartedly believes in the engine of language. This is a language that goes off the rails, productively so. Hong’s incredible ear and voracity for new sounds and meanings keeps us moving with her. We, too, want “the stuff” of empires. We want the sordid stories in order to tell them. We want to swallow the “little lamp” of snow and see what she sees.