

A Virtual Interview with JENNIFER TSENG, M.A. Class of 1997

Jennifer Tseng, a graduate of the UCLA Asian American Studies M.A. Program, is the recipient of a prestigious \$50,000 literary award given by A Room of Her Own Foundation. Ms. Tseng, a Los Angeles-based writer who was selected from a field of 441 women applicants to be the first recipient of this new "Gift of Freedom" award, will use the grant to finish her second book of poetry.

When were you a student in the M.A. program? What kind of work did you do during your time at the Center? With whom did you work?

I came to the program in 1995 to do multiracial theory, but that claim evaporated as soon as I discovered that I had the freedom to do what I really wanted to do—write. With the support of my committee members David Wong Louie, Valerie Matsumoto and Paula Gunn Allen, I wrote a collection of poetry, fragments and stories for my thesis—the first creative thesis in the then twenty-five year history of the program.

Photograph by Erica Lee.



The Center's stance on theses was if you can find faculty support for your project, go to it. That was great for me. David was instrumental both as a creative inspiration and a whip cracker. He chatted for hours with me about my characters, we gossiped about them as if they were as real as you or me. Valerie, who is both a respected historian and a creative writer, argued my case to the public policy

folks who tended to want me to write two theses—a creative thesis as well as a quantitative description of it, complete with charts, graphs, statistics, demographic data, etc. Valerie did the work of legitimizing my project, which I myself was not equipped nor qualified to do. I was also fortunate to work with writer Paula Gunn Allen. Often there were things I thought I was experimenting with, things that hadn't yet been done in Asian American literature, and she would show me that they had already been done in Native American literature. Paula was acutely aware of her literature's history and was quite generous in sharing what she knew. She was very innovative; she was a visionary.

What were some of the milestones in terms of your development as a writer after completing your M.A.? How did the program help in those achievements?

Some milestones for me since graduation have been finish-

ing my first collection of poetry *The Man With My Face*, finishing a draft of my first novel *Woo*, being a fellow at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, and becoming a teacher. My M.A. thesis was the first long project I had ever worked on. For almost two years, I wrote from 9-12 five days a week, sometimes on the weekends, and then one day I was finished. That experience of daily writing taught me about my own work habits, my own capacity to work. The sense it gave me of myself as a serious, working writer was crucial in writing the books I went on to write; it made my stay at the Fine Arts Work Center more productive than it may have been otherwise. It put me in the habit of focus, in the habit of managing my time, placing my work first.

The program has also given me teaching experience and for that I will always be grateful. I taught "Imagining History: Chinese American History from a Literary Perspective" the summer after I graduated and again four years later. These teaching experiences helped clarify my own desires and concerns as a teacher, and they made it possible for me to teach at other universities.

What are you working on with your A Room of Her Own Foundation award? Can you talk specifically about what themes you tackle in your writing?

The AROHO award is funding the writing of my second book of poems, tentatively titled "Dark Logic." Dark Logic refers to and legitimizes the "other" logic of the colored or dark person's mind. It insinuates a world that contains absurdity, a kind a twisted or dreaded logic, a world that is flawed but can be made sense of. Every poem in the book will try to reckon with such a world. The title invokes a logic that has been darkened or obscured, a kind of invisible justice that exists, transcending all the visible justice of the visible world. The book as a whole will attempt to access this invisible justice system, this other logic, darkened as it is from view.

More generally speaking, to create a poem is to create a world. I do so in order to engineer a logic of my own making, an arena in which records are set straight, confusions clarified, lost things found, strange doors opened. I like a poem to occupy that mysterious place between what is, and what can be, between present day world confinement and timeless world possibility.

How do you use your experiences in the Asian American community in your writing? How do these inform your poetry?

(Continued on next page.)

(Jennifer Tseng, continued from previous page.)

Being an Asian American woman and especially the daughter of a Chinese immigrant impacts my work immensely. The experience of growing up in a multiracial, immigrant household has prompted my interest in language, translation, race, culture, exile, immigration and nostalgia. Many of my poems explore these issues.

Do you ever plan to do any more work at the Center, such as teaching or mentoring students?

It has always been one of my dreams to teach a creative writing class at the Center. I have a class called "Life Writing: Reading and Writing Asian American Memoir" that I'd love to teach, in which students read memoirs by Asian Americans and then write about their own lives. I'd love to teach poetry; I love to mentor young poets—that's something I had the opportunity to this past spring as the Writer-in-Residence at Hampshire College. I'd love the chance to do something like that with Asian American students at UCLA.

What are some of the issues facing Asian American poets and writers? Where do you fall in with the scope of Asian American poetry or where do you deviate from it?

I hesitate to speak for other Asian American writers—we all come from such vastly different places and families. But I imagine most Asian American writers, especially those who are immigrants and/or those who retain ties with their immigrant relatives, all grapple with issues of language. The words we use to say something to one ear are often different than the words we use to say a similar thing to a different ear. Then too, what we whisper to one ear, we might never utter to another. How will this poem translate? Will it translate? If so, what will be lost? All these are concerns.

For some of us, there is still the task of rehabilitation. There is the age-old issue of the impracticality of being an artist, something that may or may not weigh more heavily on Asian American poets and writers. Whose Asian American parents dream their children as poets? Not mine. Typically, art is not what our parents and their parents before them crossed the ocean in search of. Though what a worthwhile journey that would be!

Your question about the scope of Asian American poetry and where I deviate from it is difficult to answer. I'm no Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge, but then few of us are. I deeply admire the work of Li-Young Lee, Lee Ann Roripaugh, and Marilyn Chin. I love the work of fiction writers David Wong Louie, Sigrid Nunez, Chang Rae Lee, Fay Myenne Ng and Louis Chu. I recently heard Monique Truong read from her novel *The Book of Salt* and it sounds fantastic—smart, funny, beautifully written.

Have any Asian American organizations or workshops helped you in any way in developing your writing?

The Snazzy Writer's Workshop (a group of queer API writers) was a great help to me in the mid-90s. I found important

readers there, readers whom I still work with today. The Asian American Writer's Workshop sponsored a reading of mine in the late 90s. That was the first time I'd ever flown somewhere for the sole purpose of giving a reading—very exciting—and the AAWW-affiliated APA journal will be publishing some of my work soon.

The Center is celebrating its 35th anniversary in 2004. . . Do you have any thoughts on Asian American writing during the past 35 years and where it could go in the next 35 years?

Thinking back to 1969, one can see why the program began as a very public policy-oriented one, growing as it did out of the civil rights movement. By 1969, very few literary works had been published by Asian Americans. Surely, for the first twenty-five years of the program, part of the concern about creative projects must have been where to place them in a larger context. Now that more and more Asian Americans are publishing, I hope that creative projects will have more legitimacy. At this point, no one can deny the larger literary context. As for the future of Asian American writing, especially at the Center, one can only hope that as the quantity of writers increases so will the quality of the work.

Linda Mabalot, 1953-2003

In late May, Visual Communications lost someone very dear to us to lung cancer, former executive director Linda Mabalot. A close friend, mentor, and community leader, Linda devoted her life to Visual Communications' mission and supporting Asian Pacific American artists in every aspect. She believed wholeheartedly that through media, we could help relieve social ills and correct gross injustices by educating and sharing different points of view. And because of her worldly view of media, Visual Communications is today a full-service media arts center with programs in Education, Preservation, Production and Presentation.

To help keep her vision alive, Visual Communications has established the Linda Mabalot Legacy Fund, which will support VC programs and operations with the long-term goal of an endowment fund.

—Leslie Ito, Visual Communications

LINDA MABALOT
LEGACY FUND
Please make checks payable to the Linda Mabalot Legacy Fund
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