Making Waves

The Creation of Stanford's First Asian American Writers' Workshop Community

by Iris Law

The idea for Oceanic Tongues originated from a conversation I had with Professor Stephen Sohn in September 2007. I was taking his Introduction to Asian American Literature class, and was excited to finally meet someone who might be able to mentor to me in my struggles to write about my ethnic identity. During the past three years, I had been trying and failing to find an audience for my work. My classmates and mentors had been mostly sympathetic, but they hadn't always grasped my intentions. Many of them didn't know how to respond to my work because they misread its cultural implications. Once, when I wrote about my mother (whose English, as a result of her colonial education, is actually better than her Chinese) and her love for the Romantic poets, a professor commented that it was strange that someone with "broken English" should try to teach me about British literature. Another time, I submitted a poem about my inability to speak Chinese, only to have classmates remark that perhaps what the draft lacked was some "actual" Chinese dialogue.

I came to Professor Sohn looking for advice. How, I wanted to know, could I get more connected with other Asian American writers as I approached graduation? He reeled off suggestions: take more AAS courses, join an Asian American writing group...

"But there isn't a group like that," I protested.

"Well," was his reply, "start one!"

That was the beginning of things. We decided that what was needed was a group that would bridge the gap between the creative writing and Asian American communities on campus. It would be a safe place for students to explore what it meant to be writing as an Asian American in college, one in which writers could grow by participating in critical discussions, receiving feedback on their work, experimenting with new genres, and linking up with mentors from the Bay Area arts community. We pitched the idea to department administrators, made announcements to classes, sent out email flyers and printed signs. The initial support was overwhelming. The Creative Writing Department provided food, the A3C and the English Department helped publicize, and Professor Tom Kealey offered advice. Eventually, as a core of members coalesced, the name "Oceanic Tongues" (an allusion to a poem by Li-Young Lee) was suggested, and the Workshop was born.

This was an encouraging start, but it wasn't until one night in February that I fully understood the importance of what we were doing. It was mid-term season, and we were holed up in Building 460 discussing Angela Balcita's essay, "Dumping." Our session went by slowly until we reached the passage in which the young Balcita unwraps a siu-pau dumpling in the lunchroom and is met with a chorus of "Chink food!" Suddenly, people snatched all the food around the table. "I really connected with this," ventured Henry, "That's been me." One by one, the others chimed in. The energy with which we were drawn to Balcita's story was enormous. Never before in a discussion on craft had I witnessed such a visceral response from the participants.

Our shared memories of traumatic lunchroom experiences were a powerful point of convergence. Suddenly, we weren't just examining the elements of Balcita's prose; we were staring into her story as if into a mirror, and seeing an eerie reflection of ourselves.

Since then, O.T. has continued to grow. We've held "craft seminars" and writers' workshops, traveled to San Jose to hear Kimiko Hahn read, participated in SOCA's An Art Affair, and held our first public reading. We recently became an official VSO, and are very excited about our upcoming collaboration with the Asian American Theatre Project. O.T.'s roster boasts a bevy of energetic young writers, and as I graduate and move on to other things, I am confident that I am leaving behind a passionate community that will continue to develop and thrive.
And the white man in Chinatown who squints, stooping over along the way to take handfuls of half-cigarette butts—how far has he come, like the moth toward the fixture in the ceiling (not for the light but for the shadow behind it) to be here, under this yellow sun with ashes on his tongue? And how far have we flown only to use the same fragile bowls of rice, only collecting small pocketfuls of change, looking for a night to sleep in stillness? Well, here is change sticking to the roof of my mouth, hoarded and forgotten, here is change drying in my throat like leftovers.

Oceanic Tongues: Stanford’s Asian American Writer’s Workshop is a community of students who are interested in exploring creative writing in the context of Asian American ethnic identity. We are open to writers of all backgrounds and experience levels. To find out more, visit us online at http://oceanictongues.stanford.edu.