



AAP Interview: May Lee Yang

Hmong writer and community activist May Lee Yang was recently awarded an Artists Initiative Grant from the Minnesota State Arts Board to spend time on her writing. A former Many Voices Fellow of the Minnesota Playwrights' Center, May Lee Yang is also a founding organizer of the popular VISION conferences for Hmong youth, and a member of the F.I.R.E. spoken word troupe. Her work has appeared in a variety of publications, including the ground-breaking Bamboo Among the Oaks Anthology, Unarmed, and the Paj Ntaub Voice Hmoob Literary Journal. She lives in Saint Paul. AAP caught up with her recently to talk about her work.

Interview by:
Bryan Thao Worra
of the Asian
American Press

Asian American Press: What are you working on right now?

May Lee Yang: Currently, I'm working on a series of vignettes that explore the idea of sex from different Hmong women's perspectives. When I talk about "sex," I'm including explorations into sex as a gender, the act, the orientation, and sexual growth.

AAP: You've had a busy year. Which types of projects do you like working on the most?

MLY: I've actually really enjoyed working on the series of vignettes. The issue of sex is interesting because, even though many people talk about it, no one actually really talks about it. One of the things I like about the different female perspectives I've chosen to explore is that they're honest, humorous, and they represent voices I've never heard from before. I've also really enjoyed being a member of the spoken word collaborative F.I.R.E. (Free Inspiring Rising Elements). F.I.R.E. has really given me the opportunity to perform at more venues (We're going to part of the Fringe Festival); it has encouraged me to write more poems; and it has really improved my performance skills. Although I consider myself a writer first, I think that having good reading/performance skills is pivotal to helping audiences understand your work at readings.



AAP Interview: May Lee Yang

AAP: How long have you been writing?

MLY: I've been writing since the age of twelve, which, allows me to say that I've been writing for over ten years now. I've actually always been serious about my writing, even when I was a teenager. It's only been in the last couple of years that I've made more concentrated efforts at trying to move towards artistic self-sufficiency.

AAP: What do you like about writing in the Midwest? Do you feel that it shapes your writing differently from Asian American writers living on the coasts?

MLY: Definitely. Being Asian American in the Midwest is different from the coast. While we have an array of Asian American voices here, Minnesota happens to be home to the unique voices of Southeast Asians. I say unique because we've already heard the stories of Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans but very few people have actually explored the voices of Southeast Asian whose experiences often include being refugees and being poor. Many of the voices are also immediate in the sense that many of the writers are living their experiences right now. It's not as though they are doing research to recount the experiences of family members many generations back.

AAP: What are some of your favorite themes to work with?

MLY: I'm very much interested in capturing slices of life. I think that sometimes, in wanting to be "deep," we want to explore larger themes that are supposed to be more meaningful such as racism, war, identity, and philosophical issues. In the meantime, however, we forget to remember and document our lived experiences, the little things that are often forgotten but which enrich life. I'm also interested in exploring old issues from a new perspective. For example, in a short story I'm currently working on, we see the story from the point of view of a fifteen year-old girl whose mother has just become a second wife. Generally, when I've heard people talk about polygamy, it's easy to bash the husband and label the second wife as evil. We usually empathize with the first wife and her kids. But I wondered, What about the new family? There must be a great story beneath their shame and voicelessness, and so I began writing it.



AAP Interview: May Lee Yang

AAP: What has been your biggest challenge as a writer?

MLY: Discipline. I've got lots of ideas. I've even attempted to write full-length novels, but I've never had enough discipline to finish a larger project. Establishing discipline is one of my goals for the year.

AAP: What got you started in writing?

MLY: I was bored. As a kid growing up in the nineties, my parents had a great fear that my siblings and I would be influenced by gangsters, so we couldn't go out. They were afraid we'd date and have sex, so we couldn't go out. I essentially had no freedom except within the realm of my mind. So, I started reading books. I started creating my own worlds, and, somewhere along the way, I realized I actually liked this.

AAP: Do you have a personal favorite piece out of all of your writing?

MLY: I can't really pinpoint anything that I would call an all-time personal favorite. However, I do remember the poem, "Keys," primarily because it was the first poem I wrote that I actually liked. Most of my poetry is generally blunt and in-your-face, but this poem was simple, subtle, and yet meaningful.

AAP: How would you describe your writing process?

MLY: I don't ever plot things out. Most of the time, I don't actually know where a poem or story will take me. I'll usually see a scene, remember an image, or come up with an idea and try to capture as many details as possible. I've often thought of this as similar to watching a movie right in the middle. As you catch a few scenes from it, you need to figure out what came before and what will come after. This is pretty much what I do: write down the ideas and scenes and then figure out the story later.

AAP: What do you look for most in your own writing?

MLY: Uniqueness. I don't believe that we all have to come up with new, never-before-seen stories (although I'd love it if I could) but we just need to come up with new angles. I mean, how many times can Hmong people talk about being caught within two cultures or women being oppressed by men? I also look for honesty. I don't believe in regurgitating stereotypes about Hmong culture. Rather, I like to explore the issues in all their complexities.



AAP Interview: May Lee Yang

AAP: Has your family been supportive of your writing?

MLY: Yes and no. No one has actually said, “Get a real job”--probably because I already have one--but no one has actually said, “That’s great”--probably because I’ve never actually asked. I must admit I am a little timid about asking their opinion because, in some of my earlier writings, I did diss some family members in telling my truths. As this question comes up quite a bit, I should probably find the answer to it at our next family gathering.

AAP: Who are some of your favorite writers?

MLY: While I’ve primarily talked about my Hmong writing in this interview, I’ve actually been influenced by writers of many genres that include--in the order I discovered them starting from age twelve-- Louisa May Alcott, L.M. Montgomery, Christopher Pike, Dean Koontz, Amy Tan, Sandra Cisneros, Louise Erdrich, Mai Neng Moua, Johanna Lindsey, Jane Austen, and Marguerite Duras.

AAP: Do you think there is an Asian American aesthetic?

MLY: Yes. As much as I hate to admit it, many Asian American writers I’ve read are very interested in identity and racism. It makes me afraid to know that, twenty or thirty years ago, Chinese and Japanese Americans were writing about wanting to be so American only to return to their Asian roots and now, Hmong Americans are doing the same thing. Or the stories about how white people call them “gooks” and “chinks. “ I’m not delusional in thinking that this stuff doesn’t exist. They obviously do. They are part of many people’s experiences and that’s why they are written; however, if all we do is keep regurgitating these same stories, we may never move beyond wallowing in our own oppression. This is not to say that I don’t believe in being ethnocentric because I’m a strong believer in the idea that we should create worlds in which people like us exist. However, I’m also very interested in seeing an Asian American experience that exists outside of being nothing more than a reaction to the white man.

AAP: What do you hope your audiences will take away with them after watching your work performed?

MLY: I hope that they will either laugh, get mad, say, “Deep” or just go, “Hmmm. “ Any of these reactions are better than apathy.



AAP Interview: May Lee Yang

AAP: Do you have any advice for younger writers?

MLY: Write what you're interested in. There are no rules that say, just because you're Asian, your writing needs to have Asian themes. Have faith. Don't dismiss writing as idealistic. Although it's easier to write when you don't work and don't go to school, and don't have a social life, it really could be fit into your schedule if you want it to. Writing is a very powerful artistic, political, and therapeutic form and, depending on who you are, it could also be very profitable.