



AAP Interview: Victoria Chang

Victoria Chang is the editor of a new anthology, *Asian American Poetry: The Next Generation*, published by The University of Illinois Press.

Her first book of poetry, *Circle*, won the Crab Orchard Review Award Series in Poetry and will be published by Southern Illinois University Press in April 2005. Her poems have appeared in or are forthcoming in journals such as *The Nation*, *Poetry*, *Threepenny Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Slate*, *New England Review*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, and *North American Review*.

She has degrees from the University of Michigan, Harvard, and Stanford. She resides in Los Angeles and San Diego. Asian American Press caught up with her recently to discuss her anthology.

Asian American Press (AAP): First, congratulations of getting your book published. Do you have any new major projects you're working on now?

Victoria Chang (VC): I'm working on a new project, but it's my own book of poetry that won the 2003 Crab Orchard Award Series in Poetry and will be published by Southern Illinois University Press in March 2005. In addition to that, I'm working on some new poems and an essay on lyric intensity.

AAP: Were there any specific organizing principles you had in mind besides the poets being Asian American as you were editing your book?

VC: I specifically tried not to have any organizing principles, except to find the best poetry being written by Asian Americans. It was harder than you might think. There are a lot of Asian Americans writing poetry, which is exciting, but a lot of writers are beginners or their work wasn't as strong as the 28 poets in the anthology. In addition, I hoped to showcase the broadest spectrum of work as possible.

Interview by:
Bryan Thao Worra
of the Asian
American Press



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AAP: What was the biggest challenge for you as you began the project?

VC: The biggest challenge was making sure that I was able to find the best poets writing out there. I am a heavy reader of journals so I already had my own list of people and I worked pretty hard to find new poets I hadn't heard of. I sent out 60 or so queries to everyone I knew and people I didn't know asking them for recommendations. I asked friends, friends of friends, editors, professors, anyone that would respond to me. I'm pretty anal in terms of research. I got a huge list of names and started going down that list and getting books or soliciting works from them. There were about 140 poets I considered altogether.

AAP: Who are some of your favorite writers?

VC: I love poetry more than fiction. My favorites are wide and varied. I like Rick Barot, Nick Flynn, Yeats, Dickinson, Rilke, Brigit Pegeen Kelly, Carl Phillips, etc.

AAP: Were there any recurring themes that seemed to emerge among the submissions that were sent to you?

VC: The beauty of the project was the discovery that there weren't that many major themes that were recurring amongst the poems. I write about this in the introduction of the book--that some of the poets write in more traditional ways, following in the footsteps of "previous" generation poets such as Marilyn Chin and Li-Young Lee, while others branch off into entirely different territories--new subject matter, style, voice, etc.

AAP: Have you received any feedback about the anthology yet?

VC: Almost all of the feedback has been really strong. More established poets such as Reginald Gibbons and David Baker have called the anthology "the best anthology they've seen in years." The Asian American community has been generally supportive, although there are some poets that I have heard from that have little gripes here and there about the title not including "Pacific," which I explain the rationale in a footnote. Others lament that their favorite Asian American poet, X, might not be in there. Chances are that I've looked at almost every Asian American poet writing out there and ultimately looked for what I considered the strongest writing. People sometimes take offense to an editor's personal choices, but that's the main job of an editor, isn't it?



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AAP: Has your family been supportive of your project?

VC: They have been very supportive of the project since the beginning, although they aren't too sure exactly what poetry is. They are pretty conventional Asian parents, however, they support the arts as long as it doesn't interfere with my paying job!

AAP: What do you hope that readers will walk away with after reading the anthology?

VC: I hope that readers will realize that there are so many different voices on these pages that it'd be pretty difficult to stereotype Asian American poetry anymore. I also hope that readers realize that we are emerging as a major force in American poetry. Finally, I hope to inspire others in the community to take on such projects--I took this project on while I was "on the periphery" in the poetry community (I work in business for my paying job) not because I had all the time in the world, but mostly because I felt that if we didn't publish a book like this, we would miss the opportunity. I waited and waited, but didn't see any such project coming out, so I did it myself.

AAP: As you were developing the project, how were issues of cultural context addressed? (i.e. language, historical and literary references that were unique not only to Asian cultures but specific ethnicities?)

VC: I guess I assumed the broad poetry reader would be "smart" enough to pick up on cultural contexts or the poets themselves made such things clear in their own poems. The great thing about this anthology, as I write in the introduction as well, is that so many poets were writing about different things--a lot of the work didn't have a "cultural context," per se, and those that did, were sometimes related to things that are universally understood (food, for example).

AAP: If you were to do another project like this, what would your dream project be?

VC: I guess I don't have another dream project right now. I'm thinking of a few things here and there, but nothing jumps out just yet. It's all about timing and whether the greater literary community will be ready for certain projects. I was lucky to get an avid "yes" from the U. of Illinois before I even started the project and I would never start a project without getting a signed contract first, so it depends on what I think the world is ready for. Definitely I would like to do a project related to Asian American poetry again in the future, but first I'd like to get my own book out there and that will take a lot of work next year (doing readings, etc.) and continue to focus on my own writing for a while.



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AAP: Do you have any advice in hindsight now for future anthologists that you wish someone had told you when you'd first begun?

VC: It's way more time consuming than you would ever imagine. Make sure you know what you're committing to, before committing to it. Furthermore, be prepared for those that might not appreciate the amount of work that you put into such a project and be prepared for potential criticism. Finally, it's a selfless job. . .you have to love what you're doing and believe in the greater vision of the project. You get very little in return except for the gratification that it's out there in the world.