



News from

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A Conversation with Ching-In Chen author of

The Heart's Traffic: A Novel-in-Poems

The goal of Arktoi Books is to publish lesbian authors in order to involve them further in “the conversation.” What does it mean to you to be published by this imprint?

I love being published by an imprint where the goal is to move what's marginal towards the center and to create access to a place at the table for those who might not have that. What I am passionate about and spend my time and energy on is doing that work. As a queer woman, as an Asian-American woman, and even as a poet, it's disheartening to see how many of the presses that published our work have folded over the years or how the people behind them get burned out from that work. So many of the books that have been crucial to my own development as a writer and person living in the world today would never have lived in the world without independent publishing. So I'm grateful that Arktoi is in existence and has chosen me to be part of this community, which is how I view it, rather than just as having a book published.

This book was conceived as a novel-in-poems, with a fictional narrative thread loosely connecting these poems together. Could you talk about your choice of this form? And how did this effect the discovery of each individual poem as you wrote?

Each poem was a discovery and a challenge to do something I hadn't tried before. I don't think I realized it was a novel-in-poems until after I had written the first set of poems. Slowly, as each poem of that first thirty unfolded, I realized that the protagonist voice wasn't me (because previously, I had never written in persona before), it was Xiaomei. After I figured that out, it was a matter of getting to know her better and the world around her and the people she comes across.

Because this was a very different way of working for me than before (when I was just making poems from making sense of my daily life), I found that using poetic forms helped me contain my imagination to this one girl's story.

Names are an important motif in the book. Several characters in the book change their names. How do the journeys of the characters in the book reflect these transitions? How does this affect the characters in the book who do not change their names?

At the core of this book is a journey of self-discovery and of coming to terms with each character's own ghosts, even though some may be manifested more explicitly. The practice of naming and renaming, and invention and transformation is happening on some level for all the characters in the book, regardless of whether they actually go through the act of changing their names.

However, I think that I wanted to highlight this journey through the characters who do change their names (Jenny to Jing Jing; Jani to Jaden). I wanted to point to some very real identity shifts with certain consequences for the characters. For both Jenny and Jani to change their names is a political act, to cast off a former self and to reach towards inhabiting who they really are as full and complex human beings. This is what Xiaomei is also reaching for through the arc of the book and she only becomes ready to begin towards the end of the book.

This issue of naming personally resonates for me because I asked for a name change on my birthday when I was in the second grade because of the shame of having a “foreign” name and being made fun of for it. As a young adult, I changed my name back. I wanted to reflect this sense of complicated shifting of each character's relationship to their physical body as well as their place in the world.

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The first poem in The Heart's Traffic arises from the dialogue between a community's history and myth. How does the mythic collective imagination affect the individual characters in these poems? Does the collective imagination change shape throughout the book or remain in place?

The mythic collective imagination affects the individual characters in the book, even if they are not aware of it. I'm fascinated by this idea of how individuals belong or do not belong to communities—how they find a way that is both unique, but in what's going on in the universe around them. I believe that this is very much the mentality of belonging to an immigrant family and slowly having to learn to navigate in what may be a New World for this particular family, but in a place that is already grounded in layers of history. Even though Xiaomei and her family are newly arrived in the United States, they are already connected to this larger history of what's come before them, just as we all are. They experience life both on their terms as well as in response to how others interact with them. I wanted to capture how complex this is.

I hope that the collective imagination does change, both Xiaomei's participation in it and her community's sense of what is possible as well as for the reader. This is what the book is about for me, how we can figure out how to create our own myths that will help us and let go of those which do not, a sort of growing into our own history.

From your work as Director of the Asian American Resource Workshop for three years and to your organizational efforts with the national Asian Pacific American Spoken Word and Poetry Summit and your co-editorship of The Revolution Starts at Home: Confronting Partner Abuse in Activist Communities, you've diligently worked as a community organizer. Do you feel as if your political concerns have fed into your writing? Do you feel a social responsibility as a poet?

My commitment to my community work has always fed my writing, but I think that the way that it has done that has changed as I've matured as both a community organizer and a writer. I was led to writing through my community work and I owe a huge debt to the community that I come from, for nurturing my voice in many ways.

I do feel, however, that there is no one way to be a socially engaged poet, and I'm interested in new ways of being just that in the world. To me, that means giving back to my community in whatever ways I can. Right now, I'm just finishing up an online writing workshop for girls and women of color and non-gender-conforming people of color on gender, militarism and war that is connected to an anthology I'm working on putting together with a collective. I donated my time to lead the writing workshop. I'm about to begin leading another workshop for Asian-American poets with another friend where we are reading contemporary Asian-American poets and then writing together as a community. I see both those efforts as giving back to the communities that I'm coming from and helping pass on what I've learned to my peers and friends.

You've compared your work to that of Sarah Gambito's Matadora and A. Van Jordan's M-A-C-N-O-L-I-A. What is it about those collections that sings to you?

I found Sarah Gambito's *Matadora* so intriguing and arresting, yet I didn't always understand what it meant the first time I read it. Each time I read it, I felt that I understood a little sliver of the book or a different meaning so that by the third or fourth time, the flavor deepened. I like books that you can re-visit over and over and continue discovering little pieces of story or history, but that can also remain elliptical. I believe that's in some ways what poetry is—little slivers of life that attempts but can never fully capture the whole. I hope that *The Heart's Traffic* can emulate this kind of complexity over multiple readings.

A. Van Jordan's *M-A-C-N-O-L-I-A* inspires me both as a deep investigation into one woman's life—a woman who is not the type of character normally written about in a lot of poetry -- in a novel-in-poems and also by the diversity of poetic forms and devices that Jordan uses to tell her story. But even more than that, there is an engagement between the larger world around Macnolia and her life which I am drawn to and inspired by, and hope that *The Heart's Traffic* reaches towards that goal.

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