

Koffler Centre of the Arts
Books & Ideas: Larissa Lai and Kai Cheng Thom
Wednesday, April 1, 2021

>> KAI CHENG: Thank you so, so much, Mary, and to the Koffler Center, and all of those who involved in bringing this amazing event together. I am so honored and delighted to be presenting and celebrating the latest work from Larissa Lai, who is an incredible, amazing - I can just do a lot of adjectives here, right – fabulous, wonderful, jaw-dropping, awe-inspiring, prophetic, powerful, is this worse than the awards? We were just talking before the show about how embarrassing it is to have one's awards listed, but maybe it's also embarrassing to list your best traits. I don't know.

So, I'll dive into the bio now. Sorry, Larissa. So, Larissa Lai has written eight books, including *Salt Fish Girl*, *The Tiger Flu*, and most recently *Iron Goddess of Mercy*. Will you raise your copy for us? Oh, there it is. Such a beautiful cover. *Iron Goddess of Mercy*. I also raised my copy, but it's an advanced reader copy. I know. People are like how gauche, but, actually, this means I got to read it before you because I'm important, so... Released by Arsenal Pulp Press. Yes! Round of applause for Arsenal Pulp Press, our amazing publisher.

Okay. I'm going to spare you the pain of your awards, Larissa, but let us just say that you have won many, many literary awards, as is fitting for someone of such talent and I would say stature in queer racialized literature, and you have won, oh, my goodness, just a lot of awards, including the Lambda and the Dorothy Livesay for poetry prize, and I'm going to leave it at that, but there's many, many more. For seven, more years than that, you have been involved in cultural organizing, experimental poetry and speculative fiction communities since the late 1980s. Larissa feels at home in both Vancouver and Calgary and holds a Canada Research Chair at the University of Calgary where she directs The Insurgent Architects' House for Creative Writing, which sounds like a house where I would like to live. I would also like to just say personally that Larissa Lai is like a heroine of mine. I was like a tiny baby child, yes, an actual infant reading Larissa's *Salt Fish Girl* and just bawling my eyes out and also feeling extremely jealous because I already wanted to be a writer and Larissa Lai had written the book that I wanted to write. That book is so powerful and so life changing for many reasons. I think particularly for queer Asian "Canadian" writers. You have really blazed a trail, created possibilities, dreamed possibilities for many of us who, I don't think, I don't think I would be in the career that I am right now if you hadn't written that book, or any of your others, Larissa, and I think that's true for many, and I just want to say, too, reading your more recent

novel, *The Tiger Flu*, I was struck by how the depth of your genius and power has only grown seemingly over time, and then also you predicted the pandemic in that book. So, that also was very scary. So, Larissa, thank you so, so much for joining us. What a delight to celebrate you bringing this latest amazing work of poetry into the world. Let's do, and I know no one can see us, but a round of applause for Larissa Lai. I will applaud here for us all to see. Thank you so much for joining us, Larissa.

>> LARISSA LAI: Thank you so much, Kai.

>> KAI CHENG: I just want to say I didn't intend to read my own poetry.

>> LARISSA LAI: I want you to.

>> KAI CHENG: But Larissa is making me, so. Not making me. I want to. I will read a short poem of my own about Batman, and this poem is called "I Want to Know What Bruce Wayne Dreams About." I want to know what Bruce Wayne dreams about. If he's Bruce during the day and Batman at night, does he even really sleep? So, all that superhero beat up the bad guys, I'm the biggest fucking cop in the world stuff got old a while ago, and in the era of contemporary social justice politics we know that Bruce ought to just give up vigilantism and donate his billions to the masses, right? Like that would reduce poverty, thus reducing crime, thus achieving his mission in vastly greater measure than he could ever accomplish by beating up the Joker 100,000 more times. But, you know, Bruce is a literal genius detective, and I'm pretty sure he's figured this out. So, I don't think he really wants to end crime or even violence. There's another thing in there that he's after, and here's where my curiosity comes in, because I think I get it. I think I know what Bruce Wayne dreams about. On the bat plane, between adventures in the gray space between dark and dawn, I think he dreams about the sound of his mother's pearls hitting the pavement, the crack of the gunshot, the warmth of blood, the smell of the air, the night they died. I think he dreams about being ready for the next time, in the next dream, where he'll be bigger, stronger, better prepared. Every real-life villain, a practice run for the next time he's in the alley and the mugger pulls the gun. I want to be Bruce Wayne's psychotherapist. I want him in my analysis chair. I want to tell him, Bruce, honey, can't you see, nothing you do is ever going to bring them back? And then he'll say, I crave justice. And I'll say, justice doesn't change the past. And he'll say, the villains need to be punished. And I'll say, punishing them won't make you feel safer. And he'll say, so what do you want me to do? And I'll say, I'm asking you to be brave. I'm asking you to forgive yourself.

Okay. So, that's the Batman poem. I am really, really excited now for Larissa to read from *Iron Goddess of Mercy*, which is a kaleidoscopic, like, powerful, I would call it like

ecstatic surge of language and spirit exploration of pop culture and history and revolution and diaspora and queerness and many, many other things. Larissa, would you do us the honor of a reading from your latest book?

>> LARISSA LAI: Thank you so much, Kai Cheng, for that beautiful introduction. I'm honored by it, and really pleased to be here with you, and thank you, also, for reading your Bruce Wayne poem. Friends, I did indeed sort of make her. I really, really wanted to hear it in this room. So, thank you. Thank you, thank you so much for sharing that with us.

I would like to say a few thank yous of my own before I start. I'd like to begin by acknowledging that I'm coming to you from Treaty 7 Territory, which are the Homelands of the Blackfoot Confederacy, the Tsuut'ina First Nation, and the Stony Nakoda. The city of Calgary where I live is also known as Mohkinstsis, and it's the home of the Metis nation of Alberta, Region 3.

In terms of a visual description, well, what should I say? I'm Larissa, I use she/her pronouns. I'm a Chinese queer human with long grayish-black hair, brown eyes and purple glasses, but the wiry kind so you can't really fully tell that they're purple. I'm wearing a maroon sweater and a silver pendant, and there's a photo behind me of a concrete bridge with yellow rings arched over it. Though it's a bridge, it looks more like a tunnel.

I'd also really like to thank the Koffler Center, especially Mary Anderson, for hosting me today and, as well, the brilliant Kai Cheng Thom for her wonderful introduction just now and for the interview that she's just about to do.

We're going through some really hard times in Asian communities right now, and Kai Cheng, I'd just really like to extend my solidarity to you and other people who do the work that you do. I know that you're living very much on the front line of it, and, yeah, you're in my heart in that work.

I would also really like to thank and acknowledge the press, Arsenal Pulp, for taking on this cooky project. Brian Lam, Robert Ballantyne, Shirarose Wilensky, Jazmin Welch, Cynara Geissler, and Jaiden Dembo. Thank you guys so much for all you've done on my behalf. Another beautiful and wonderful job. I'm very grateful.

Okay. I'm going to read five little fragments from the book. What do I need to say about it before launching in? This book is a number of things formally. I think you're going to hear in the first instance the epistolary nature of it, so it's a series of letters, and you're

also going to hear the ranting nature of it. It is a rant. I learned from my friend, Rita Wong, how to do that, and so it is kind of a rant. In terms of the history that it takes up, I'm thinking about in the first instance the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong, which were the conditions under which my parents were born, but I'm also thinking of course about the recent protests there and the draconian crackdowns that have been happening. I'm also thinking about our community life together, and I think you'll hear that. You know, we've been in BIPOC communities, in GBLTQ2SA+ communities and their intersections, and we've just been going through so much upheaval in the last decade or so. Some wonderful relationships getting built, but also a lot of, there's been a lot of difficulty and a lot of pain that's been hard to talk about, and I think one of the reasons why this book is sort of so smacked up and cracked up is it's struggling for a language in a place, you know, where we don't quite have a language yet, and so I think you'll hear that, as well. Okay. I think that's enough preamble. So, I'll read five fragments out of order. The first is Number 51.

Dear oolong. If there were no such thing as tea, none of this would have happened. Bo Nay, Gok Bo, Huang Pian, Longjing or Tieguanyin, I hum infusions, a solution to remaining alert to irony as sleepers puff opium, trading the doozy of drowsiness for the carrot of charity, draining the Oort cloud of our distant origins. Alert in the iron box, tempest teases schoolyard bullies, flipping their hair like Farrah. Mine's too flat to feather. Birds gather in conferences unable to bat comb for the standup comedian or punk rock pork hock. My dialect ditzes for the fetal leaf, unfurling in hot water as English Breakfast, Russian Caravan, Prince of Wales, or Earle and Lady Grey. I hack for smack, heroin, morphine, or crack as Jardin Matheson plies the China trade, pirating porcelain, silk, cotton, and tea, items of use traded for the inducement of rest. That's okay. I'll dream my way back into your loving arms race. Cold war or trade war, parading handbags from Prada, Coach and Chanel as students toss Molotov cocktails against teargas on the MTR. Our scars glisten bright as stars fishing for birds in the silver river, a sliver of memory flashing light on our addictions enforced by gun boat diplomacy while geomancers crack ox scapula for a route out of psychic unrest. What metal could test this gun powder green or iron goddess as my fireworks go up in smoke. I poke for a new Berlin, find a cross on the road as fentanyl crisis boom echoes across centuries of artificial sleep. Perturbed galaxy ejects. Tidal stream of stars. River jumps fish.

This is fragment 20. Dear Southern Ocean. Salt potion of my motion's insufficient vote. I taste by rote, a surfet of English that compensates yet dims my mother tongue. The fumble of Latin rumbling suffixes as though the shun of my shoosh could free me from all you were fleeing. I forgot before the memory had content, let rot the fishy horror and mix with chilis to make a paste for coating fresher meat. The sheet she tossed to blank

the confusion tangle, new feminist with a third world inkling, blinking newborn into a better future. What suture, dear angel of history, my feckless wreckage floats on a shifting current, mistress of the backstroke swimming for a world record unable to see the foam kicked up by her own feet. My haka boat sets sail for another coast, boasting mushrooms, scallops and bean curd sheets as though the beasts of your waters could beat the Manchu occupation. What peace could you lease? Will the Jesus you've borrowed for your vision release you if the white man won't let go? When modernity hangs its rice patty hat on the hook of one god, is that the bait your fish will take? I'm still waiting to walk on land. The iChing 2 traps fishes before releasing them back to the water reflow of time. What if, in spite of everything forgotten, the whole fabric remains swimming or stitching in fish form? Could I open my mouth, release another poetry? A lifetime's worth of pent-up Cantonese? Inside the black egg, white and yellow. Inside the brown egg, black and green.

This is fragment 47. Dear revolution, enhancing your chants for the cleanest hands. Rise and rinse me on the inside, flesh of my flesh and bone of my bone. You hone me, cut for the sharpest diamond, dogging the hog of my best meat-eating days. Praise the naked suffragette her longing for Park Lane, the glass tower of her vindication. She wants her chung som back, not the Japanese soldier. Put the scissors back in grandfather's hands. Redress the dress. Put the baby back in the cradle and send the soldiers back to Hirohito. Restore their innocence, and make their smooth skin shine again. Give them back to their mommas to raise them right. Refuse the white man's modernity. Send him back down the long arc of his land and spirit troubles. Return him to Eden to renegotiate with his one god the relation between body and mind. Dream a different dry martini, how the rev of another engine might feed our weather together, reigning for a new romance. Astronaut salary, stubs toe on first-world problems. Roughs' glum on rumba.

This is fragment 59. Dear pool. Only for you I doff my feather dress, swan swings sadly to lake, already ballerina fin on the verge of disappearance. Will you mourn me when I'm clean? I shed flesh, dreaming of princes who won't split the check. Dreaming of other swans. What bill does the one who spies buy? When the hunter looks, is it me or his own image he seeks? Does he dream becoming pure as the hunted, long for the dogs who lick his hands instead to shred him, release him from his own private emperor? Or does he want my disappearance so he, too, can peloton the pool, contemplate his rugged individual, reach out to grasp his own forgotten beauty. My hands swing digital before the last part of me vanishes into ether. I flit, tree to rock, mainframe to brain drain, seeking to say back the code to release trauma's treasure. I measure. Have I stated my case? Laid waste to ducks unlimited clamoring to get in the right row for the right show? I re-Tweet, remember massive wings that arched open to

sky. Now, satellites circle higher than my line of flight, dish the deal fast as data, spin the whirl of dizzy planets unwinding death to dance. Do you hear me in the circuits calling out my love? Or only the hounds, moon starved, ravenous, and confused over who's their daddy. All those color-blind soldiers I nursed in my white uniform. I storm, I mourn, screech my owl into gale force wind. You dim duck. To love the single swan is already surrender to the dying core.

I'll read the last, the very last fragment, the last fragment except for the visual bits in the book, so this is fragment 64. Dear Dao. Old rotary, turtle shell squeal whistling in flames to name the hell of a revolutionary god. I split my cod, debone its spine to line a whispered history, astronauts in possible labor climbs back down millennia, returns to earth. The iChing blusters to Shang ancestry, priestess geomancer of a bad romance. I'll take a chance on democracy from below glowing in the slow heat of another ember. Guilt shines beneath quilt of magpies flashing shimmery feathers as protestant lies down on her bed of nails, dials dialectic for that long distance feeling, beguiled by the gush of blood staining the shroud of her own making. What king could ding this, melt dragons in cauldrons to brew a better soup? I stoop, regroup, loop UA for Teen How, [word] for ocean goes, [word] of the long march across deserts, [word] of water, queen mother of a different west, rescues father and brothers from massive spiral, sea to sky storm. Now, her incense coil burns above, snakes from ceiling of wet temple, steps from station of the cross. We were not yet Chinese when Shang was ancient. I dream I am being returned to weavers once in future North Star. Dear Ton Yung. I pilot my ship on South China Sea, blink my split toenail, cast net for wishes, bungle my smuggle for a pot of rice steamed with salted fish. Echo wagers cap against standard, queues pool table to return love's body. Remembered in alphabets lunar pull.

So that is it. Thank you for listening.

>> KAI CHENG: Oh, my god. Okay. Can we please all just pour applause and love into the chat, please. All of your reactions, your responses. I'm seeing a lot of exclamation points and some clapping and a heart. How do you do emojis in Zoom? Very impressive. More exclamation points. Amazing. So inspiring and gorgeous. Oh, yeah. Yes. There will be more. More love pouring through for you, Larissa. We bow at the feet of the master.

>> LARISSA LAI: Stop it.

>> KAI CHENG: I will not. You can't make me.

>> LARISSA LAI: I can't even get you because you're just on my screen.

>> KAI CHENG: You have to allow yourself to be admired, but not too much. Okay. I'll move on.

I just have to say, I teared up a little bit at that Dear Ton Yung. I pilot my ship. I just, yeah, it means a lot. There's so much resonance in this work, Larissa, and it, there's so much, there's just so much there, but all woven together in this, like, shimmering rant, and I know the rant, you know, is a characterization that you've used for this work. I also see it as ecstatic, like it feels almost like that ancient shamanic chanting that our ancestors would have done at times when in contact with the spirit world. So, I just really want to thank you for that.

So, we have so much to talk about. I know I forgot to describe myself, so I will say quickly I'm an Asian trans woman wearing rectangular glasses with a black plastic frame and a blue sleeveless dress with a little stuffed cat sitting on the sofa over my right shoulder. And I think you know this cat, Larissa, because it has a fish in its stomach.

>> LARISSA LAI: Oh, yes, I've met this cat before. This cat likes to eat salted fish. Just like me.

>> KAI CHENG: Exactly, exactly. Because I love how this book ends on, like, a salt fish note, which is very much a motif of yours, eh?

>> LARISSA LAI: Yes, it is.

>> KAI CHENG: I know we want to talk about form, but I wonder if you can let us in a little on your salt fish love before we dive?

>> LARISSA LAI: Oh, I wasn't expecting that question. Sure. It's a favorite food of mine, and some of you will know I wrote a novel called *Salt Fish Girl*. In my younger years, although, you know, as I'm getting older my sense of smell is diminishing and it's very distressing. When I was younger, I was a very olfactory human, and I still am. The smells are still really kind of an important part of my bodily being, and of course salt fish is a longstanding traditional food stuff for South Chinese people, in particular. For those of us who have roots in South China, I mean, it's so hard to know because there's so much upheaval, but there's a longstanding history of life on boats and so lives of fishing and also of, you know, of poverty and of the need to preserve food, right, against times when there is little or not much, and salt fish is a food like that. But the other piece for me is, I'm a secret Newfoundlander. Not so secret. For those who know me, I don't make a secret of it. I grew up there, and it is also a traditional food in that place and

something that I grew up knowing about, probably knowing about more than my own culture in a lot of ways, because the salt fish trade for Newfoundland back and forth, well, not back and forth, through a triangular route between Europe, Newfoundland and the Caribbean, is a longstanding trade route history that I carry in a kind of land relation, I suppose. Thank you for asking because I keep waiting to be asked more about that. Like, people don't think, people think the Chinese connection, and that is true, and that is important, and that is very much kind of, you know, a South China Sea, Pacific Ocean kind of connection, but for me there's also actually an Atlantic connection in the sense that, yeah, my childhood was in that place.

>> KAI CHENG: Wow. Thank you for telling us that because, of course, yeah, I mean, before I knew you, like the salt fish was a, yeah, like a South Chinese connection, and then getting to know you, I'm like, right, and also this connection is about like your lineage's movement through geography.

>> LARISSA LAI: That's right.

>> KAI CHENG: There's a migration and ocean and yeah, a taste of Newfoundland there.

>> LARISSA LAI: Yeah, yeah, that's right. So, one might, also, you know, if you want to think about it, there's also a secret Portuguese connection, right, because the Portuguese were the one group that sort of moved through both spaces, so the early salt fish trade through Newfoundland was Portuguese before it was Spanish, before it was French, before it was English, but there were also Portuguese in Macao, which is like right next door to Hong Kong, and, so, yeah, so I think about these, you know, trade routes a lot. Big fan of the work of Amitav Ghosh. I don't know if you know who wrote that series, the Ibis trilogy, that talks about the Indian Ocean, South China Sea connection, which is also really important. So, there's a kind of globality moving through the figure of salt fish in my work, which is I think why it keeps coming back.

>> KAI CHENG: Because your work is so global, and I'm noticing it's like there's some globality showing up in the chat, as well. People are talking about the connections and all of that, and, yeah, think about that salt fish.

>> LARISSA LAI: That's awesome.

>> KAI CHENG: Just swimming through all of our worlds, that little salt fish.

>> LARISSA LAI: Diane Roberts is saying a Caribbean connection, as well. Very much

so, yeah, Diane, so, I mean, the whole thing of the trade of rum for salt fish for human beings, right, is a hard part of salt fish history that is also true and real and moves through the lands and waters that I know. Yeah, thanks for bringing that up.

>> KAI CHENG: I will bring up salt fish every time.

>> LARISSA LAI: Thank you, Kai Cheng.

>> KAI CHENG: Yeah, I also want to dive, though, into form, because this work of poetry is like a masterful exploration of form, in many, many ways, and you mentioned the epistole at the beginning of your reading, so maybe we can start there. I personally am, like, have long been fascinated by the epistolary format for any kind of genre, so I'm wondering why letters? What's, what is that dear, that opening dear - -

>> LARISSA LAI: Yes, yes, you see even there's a little deer on the cover? There's a little deer because at one point, there's a dear, a d-e-a-r, d-e-e-r. It made Marilyn Demont laugh when she heard that. Yes, the epistolary. So, it is one of the structuring forms and probably the most obvious structuring form for the book, and, in fact, I did a workshop for the Koffler Center and a youth group, the Holland Bloorview Rehabilitation Hospital youth group, last week about the epistolary, about the work of the letter. One of the things I think is really useful in this particular moment about the letter is that it allows you to make a direct form of address to the person, people, or beings, or ideas to whom you want to speak, and, you know, Kai Cheng, just because we're living in this moment where the fraught power relations that we've all inhabited ever since forever are so much on the surface of our lives, and for folks like you and me, you know, we're so aware of the project of European colonialism, and it's such a powerful and overarching form of violence that the temptation is to constantly write back to it in an accusatory mode because, holy crap, whiteness has done some shitty, crappy things, excuse my language, and I think it is valuable and important to do that, but I also feel like in doing it that we sometimes forget the other kinds of relationships that we have, you know, to one another, from one Asian location to another, from Asian locations to indigenous locations, from Asian locations to black locations, from human locations to plant or animal locations, and when we don't talk to one another, we can tend to forget that one another is there. We can also tend to forget the relationships of difference across these complicated fields, and I'm really interested in those relationships. Those relationships are actually really, really important to me, and I think that if we're going to get out of the horror that we're inhabiting now, it's by building those relationships and building them well, and in order to build them well, I feel like we need to know one another and we need to be able to talk to one another, and so the epistolary form allows me to do that, to write a letter. There is no dear Kai Cheng in here, but there could be, and I think

about that sometimes. I could write a poem or a letter to dear Kai Cheng, or dear Diane, or dear Kathy Mack, or dear Jane Shu, or dear YYZ girl. I could write to the folks who are in the room today, or I could write to other things, ideas that I like, or ideas that I don't like, or ideas that I am fond of but have a complicated relationship to. So, for instance, there's a letter in here to dear freedom of speech. I'm actually a believer in freedom of speech, but holy camoly, the idea of freedom of speech has been used for some pretty crummy stuff, right, in the last little while, so what's my relationship with that, and if I can write to it instead of writing to the trolls that I don't want to talk to, could I develop a different relationship to freedom of speech than this sort of somewhat antagonistic one that I have even as I desire freedom of speech for myself, for you, for our friends in the room today, and so the epistolary form for me is just a really powerful way of getting at that. Before I close off this a little bit of the conversation, I should say that I don't come to this on my own, and I have had a lot of help kind of coming to this idea, probably in the first instance from my friend Monika Kin Gagnon, who is a writer and a critic, primarily an art and media critic, mixed race Japanese Canadian living in Montreal, and I just, I remember, you know, in the early '90s when there was a huge struggle happening in the artist-run center system, and again, it was that, you know, that formation of BIPOC folks against white folks and just that kind of bull heading thing, and people speaking from either one location or the other, either BIPOC or white. Neither location very much nuanced and just like this. So much of the early '90s was like that. At a certain stage in a conference that was happening here in Calgary, and I didn't live here at that time, I lived in Vancouver, Monika was involved, she was fed up, she was heartbroken, she was at the end of her rope, and she started writing a series of letters to the artist Jamelie Hassan, a Lebanese Canadian mixed race artist based in London, Ontario, a series of letters, dear Jamelie, and all of a sudden all of this language was possible again, and they're very beautiful, like, if anybody ever gets a chance, it's in a book called *Other Conundrums*. It's just a beautiful set of letters, dear Jamelie, you know, I'm in such despair over the state of things here, I don't know what to do, I feel myself that I'm seen in this way, but I don't feel myself to be what I'm seen as, you know, I'm trying to struggle to understand my mixed race Asian location in relation to some of the other people that I'm fighting alongside. I don't know how to think about it. So, all of this thought, undecided language comes out in these letters from Monika to Jamelie, and I just found them so moving and I also learned a lot from her by reading them because they showed me how a conversation could be had across, and it's still across difference, but it's a friendlier kind of difference, but it's not, you know, there's still lots of things that Monika and Jamelie don't have in common that they would want to talk about, and I think it's perhaps in those kinds of relationships that, you know, our remaking of the world lies, and, yeah, so I have been carrying the form, I suppose, since that lesson from her.

>> KAI CHENG: I got chills at the end there when you were talking about that is the way in which we can remake the world. It stirs me in like reflection about relationality, right, and like the different ways that we can do relationship to difference and to conflict, as well, and I'm obsessed with conflict.

>> LARISSA LAI: Yes. In a beautiful way, you are. You do such great work on that front, Kai Cheng. It's, I find it very moving and really important.

>> KAI CHENG: Thank you.

>> LARISSA LAI: I remember the first time I came to know of you and your work and just thinking oh, my god, somebody's finally doing this work that I'm too scared to do.

[Laughter]

And you do it with such, well, you just, you do it, you know, with such courage and intelligence and kindness, and it has changed the world for me, like in a big way, you know, because it's scary. Like, the work you do is scary and hard and so necessary, but so difficult, and I have been thinking about the work that you do since I was in my 20s and just been too afraid to do it, so thank you.

>> KAI CHENG: Thank you, Larissa. All following compliments need to only be directed at you for the rest of this call.

>> LARISSA LAI: That's not the way it is. That's not the way it goes.

>> KAI CHENG: But, I mean, I think that is, like, this partly is this thing about the epistole is that what you're saying is that it can change our orientation even to things that are difficult, and I have to tell you that I paused over that dear freedom of speech fragment because I had my own moment of like, oh, my god, yeah, like, I love freedom of speech, but, also, it has been terrible to us recently, eh?

>> LARISSA LAI: Well, the freedom of speecher trolls are assholes, but I still believe in the principle, you know, but it's just some people deploy it to be a jerk and it's like, okay, I guess you're free to be a jerk, but you're still a jerk.

>> KAI CHENG: Right, but then, but what then about the letters that start dear troll, or dear asshole, or dear jerk? What happens, right, when we start writing with that in mind? Oh, my gosh. More there, but I also, dear Larissa, would love to ask you about the Haibun, and this may be a less obvious form that really shaped this book, as well.

>> LARISSA LAI: Yes, thank you. Thank you for that question. So, another form that this book takes is the form of the Haibun. I learned it from Fred Wah, so for those who know his book *Waiting for Saskatchewan* there's a long poem in there that's called "Mother/Father Haibun," and what the Haibun is, in a very small nutshell, because it's so much more than that, but it's traditionally a Japanese form of travel writing, and traditionally what you're supposed to do is you write Haibun when you're on a journey and you use it to document your journey. So, the Haibun is, you know, first you write like a diary entry, you know, today we traveled to the waterfall and, you know, the water had the quality of, you know, it rushed and it tinkled, it was very beautiful. The sun shone on us. We went to such and such tea house and we ate, you know, whatever they ate, and then at the end of the day before you go to sleep, you're supposed to write a little haiku that kind of crystallizes the essence of the day. So, it's very, very beautiful, this form traditionally, and of course I was concerned about the politics of cultural appropriation, because I'm not Japanese, but I'm also aware that there's, you know, a strong relation, especially here on Turtle Island, between Chinese Canadians and Japanese Canadians, sometimes friendly, sometimes not, and also because the book, you know, one of the core moments in the book, is, well, I'll tell it. It's a moment when the Japanese Imperial soldiers came to my grandfather's and grandmother's house during the occupation and asked, and demanded something of my grandmother that no one has a right to really demand of anybody, and what unfolded out of that, there were various family stories that I, that I won't tell because they're not really mine to tell, but there's a relationality, as well, there, and I think there's an opening up of the border between Chinese and Japanese in that moment in a very fraught kind of way, and so I take up the form, and I redeploy it towards another, towards another purpose that I hope that the uptake of the form is still respectful, and I hope that if the poem asks something, that what it asks might also come back through this form. So, if that makes any kind of, I'm still, you know, it's complicated because I think there's a, the economics cannot be the economics of tit for tat, right, because that's not productive, but if the form can allow something meaningful to return, that that would be good. The other thing about it is when I first started writing this, when I first started writing this poem, it came to me, the only, the first stuff that came was just the rant, so it was just this wall to wall kind of, like, wahn, like flood of, like, furious, not entirely sensical language that was just like full-metal gush, and when it came, I wasn't sure at first, I wasn't sure what it was. I wasn't sure that it was poetry. I knew it was language, but I wasn't sure it was poetry. I didn't know what to do with it, and I began to sort of, you know, break it down into fragments and I did some readings from it. The first, yeah, it was the first, the first time that I read from it at any length, Kai Cheng, it was so brutal to read without the haiku, it was so brutal to read, I just broke down. I just like broke down in tears. I could not read it because it was so, I was just so overwhelmed by it, and so there's something about the

work of the haiku that, I think because they function as resting places and they also function as moments of another kind of thought, so if the ranty part is just kind of like the mind or the maenads, the furies, out of control screaming, the haiku work as moments of reflection, as quieter, sort of more restful, more contemplative moments that maybe return something human to the poem that without it, it would just be this whirlwind of, you know, crayhem that can't be, that's just too much, that's just too overwhelming to, to inhabit for any length of time.

>> KAI CHENG: Uh-huh, uh-huh. That is definitely how I experienced them, like, reading through the book, it is this whirlwind, like, it is so powerful, and, I mean, I also, I mean, the rant part, the prose parts are rant, but they're also, they have their own deep intelligence, eh, like a deep intelligence and an internal logic and like a working image system, so I want to also, you know, bring all of that up, too, and then the haiku do slow us down again and then they, and then it picks up, and then it slows down, and then it picks up and it slows down, and it actually reminds me of a lot of, like, some of the mental health work I used to do and kind of that bipolar surge and swing and surge and swing and surge.

>> LARISSA LAI: Oh, interesting.

>> KAI CHENG: Yeah. But, yeah, I mean, oh, my god, there's so much I want to ask you about everything you just said and also to thank you for sharing the tender parts of that. Maybe one last question about the Haibun is if it's, if it is like a traveler's form, or the form for a journey, what's the journey that the narrator's going on?

>> LARISSA LAI: Oh gosh. Great question. That's a great question. I don't know. What is the journey? I mean if I, I think if there's something that unfolds from beginning to end, when the poem starts, it is just this kind of furious, you know, wind. It's a whirlwind. It's whirling, whirling, whirling, whirling. I think as it moves, like, it does come to the place where the soldiers are at the door, and after the soldiers, you hear my grandmother, or my grandmother at least as I'm carrying her, pouring so much love into somebody, maybe me, but it's this impossible love that can never be met, you know, because, because it is full of all that she's carrying, and so the poem, I think, takes a turn at that point, and the whirling voices do continue to whirl. Huh. But maybe you do get a little bit more of that chanting quality that you were talking about, Kai Cheng. You're not the first person. Walter Kwan also spoke about that, that, you know, there is, it's a rant, but it's also a rant, but it's also a chant, and the ranting quality never departs, but it just becomes, the fury pulls back, and the chanting quality pulls, steps forward a little bit. The chanting quality has always been there, as well, but I think it pulls forward a little bit towards the end, and so you do get a bit of a sense of the presence of more, huh, more

watery and more grounded spirits towards the end where they're perhaps more fiery and airy at the start, so maybe it's a journey from fire to earth or something like that.

>> KAI CHENG: Hmm.

>> LARISSA LAI: I don't know.

>> KAI CHENG: That makes me think about the iChing, and just so the audience, this book is a master work in craft, like it is shaped around the Haibun, also the epistole, but also around hexagrams of the iChing. There are 64 fragments in honor of the iChing. There's more here, too, but I also know that we want to open to answer for questions for the audience. Is that good, Larissa?

>> LARISSA LAI: Yeah, sure. That's fine. There's so much. It's a crazy book. So, yes, for sure, let's by all means open the floor.

>> KAI CHENG: Read the book. Buy the book. Let's open the floor for questions, and I believe that Francis has been collecting them for us. So, Francis, if you wouldn't mind releasing them, releasing those questions into the wild. Perfect. So, we have, Larissa, your epistolary form felt like direct address, intimate. Could you speak to the intimacy of the form? You already did, but I'm greedy. I want more.

>> LARISSA LAI: Oh, nice. Thank you. I'm not sure who that's from. I see that Francis has transcribed it. I'm not sure who the asker was but thank you for the question. It's an excellent question. Could I speak more to the intimacy of the form? Yes, so, I mean, you know, historically, the epistolary form is a form of address from one writer to another, right, and I think large it's from Dayne Ogilvie's life partner. Oh, okay, thank you, Dayne Ogilvie's life partner. Yeah, so I mean, historically the form is used, you know, as a form of address among intimates, people who care for one another. I probably haven't done as much research into European uses of the form as I might, and I should probably go back and look through the 19th century, 18th and 19th, I'm imagining a lot of letter writing because it's a main means people have for communication. There's no phone yet, right? There's no phone, there's no email, there's no text message. People write letters to others for whom they care, family members, lovers, husbands, wives, children, intimates, artist friends, it is, it is an intimate form because it's meant in the first instance to be written from one single person to another single person, and I'm sure that that's present in this book, although I'm also really conscious of the public letter as a form, so thinking about, we had our little workshop at the Koffler a few days ago, and, you know, I gave them Zola's public letter, J'accuse, and also MLK's letter from the Birmingham Jail to think about the way in which letters can also be used as a public

forum to speak about an issue of the day, and I think this book is probably doing a little bit of both. So, it is for sure seeking closeness with the beings it addresses sometimes and at other times not, right? Like, dear freedom of speech is not lovely. Dear squid twit, which is my poem to Donald Trump, is not lovely, but some of the other ones are, like, so there is dear brother, you know, dear brother or dear sister. I'm sure there are ones, as well, I'll tell you quickly. There's one to dear liver, you know, where the speaker is speaking to her own liver. That is very intimate. Dear migrant, dear moon. It's an intimacy but an intimacy that's a reach across, across difference. I'm not sure what more really to say about that. The intimacy allows one to see the other in their specificity, I suppose.

>> KAI CHENG: Hmm, and I see that from the question asker, we have the response, thank you, Larissa. In a couple of your read fragments, the fragments you read, it felt like the turn in a sonnet from something specific to something wider and more universal. Hmm.

>> LARISSA LAI: Hmm. Hmm. Hmm. That's interesting. I wonder if the turn in the Haibun is like the turn to the volta in the sonnet, you know, with the turn to that, the two line –

>> KAI CHENG: To the couplet.

>> LARISSA LAI: Yeah, the couplet at the end of the sonnet. That's interesting. That's an interesting observation. Thank you. I'm not sure what to do with it. I haven't really thought about it in those kinds of terms, but there is a sense of wanting to reach to a public, I think, in this book. I think so. Otherwise, why would I have published it, right? I'd be curious. I mean, it would be really interesting to see what falls out of the bag for readers, you know, because the language is so, it's such a world but it's also really polyvocal.

>> KAI CHENG: It's so polyvocal.

>> LARISSA LAI: Many voices, but also polyvalent, like many weights, as well, and I imagine that it will speak to different readers quite differently.

>> KAI CHENG: I think so. I mean, because there is, there are specific addresses, like, you know, the nature of it and also, it's, like, the references, you know, speak specifically to me in one way, like all the southern Chinese references speak only in a way that a southern Chinese reader would get, and then there's other parts, too, right, that are like that. I do want to, I think we might have time for one more question from the

audience, if there is one. Be brave, audience members. Drop your questions. This might be, well, this is your last chance tonight to ask a question of the great Larissa Lai.

>> LARISSA LAI: Stop.

>> KAI CHENG: I will not. If not one of the audience members, then I will ask a question. Going once, going twice. Oh, my goodness, I mean, I had so many prepared questions, but actually I've been dying, so, this book weaves together, oh, nope, there's a question from the audience. Are there characters in the book?

>> LARISSA LAI: It's a question from Kathy Mack. That's a great question. Are there characters in the book? Kind of. Kathy, kind of, there are. I don't know if I would call them characters. I'd maybe call them figures because they don't fully crystallize like in the way that, you know, in a novel where you're like, you know, okay, she's a clone. She's like this, she has this set of characteristics, she's on a narrative trajectory that's going to arc like this. There are figures in the book, so there are maenads, there are furies who rant and whirl and desire things and then change their minds and, you know, throw a hissy fit, and then, yeah, there are various classical figures who, you know, erupt in their own specific way and come up and speak and then go away again and come back. So, sure, you could call them characters. They have, you know, like the figure of the goddess Persephone shows up. I'm not sure that she sort of has that kind of humanist specificity in the way that one might ask of her if one were to write her in a novel. That's a really interesting question. You know, one of the things that sort of helped me, you know, helped this book crystallize was a moment I was driving in my car and listening to CBC radio as I sometimes do, and Colm Toibin was on Writers and Company speaking about a book called, shoot, it slipped away from me, hang on and I'll tell you. Oh, it's not here. The Book of Houses, where he's telling the story of the house of Atreus, and he says to Eleanor Wachtel, you know, you can't write about the furies, and the minute he said that, because I couldn't figure out what the voices were, I'm like, oh, my goodness, that's right. You can't write about the furies, but maybe they can write themselves through you, and his novel, of course, is trying to tell the story of the various characters in the house of Atreus as a novel and, indeed, I could see how that would be difficult and how you couldn't have the furies come into being and do the work of character, but if they are just whirling, then perhaps some of the, you know, the beings of classical mythology could kind of erupt in the text and make themselves present. Now, whether you want to call that character or not I suppose is a question of semantics and what we mean by character, but it's a wonderful question.

>> KAI CHENG: Hmmm, and a delightful answer. Thank you, Larissa. I'm afraid I have to stop us, which I really don't want to do, but it is the end of our time and I already see

thank yous and compliments pouring in for you, Larissa, in the chat, and I will call Mary Anderson. Come on up, Mary. Thank you so much, Larissa. You're a genius and the best.

>> LARISSA LAI: Stop it, stop it. Thank you so much for your generous hosting, Kai Cheng. I really appreciate it.

>> KAI CHENG: Any time, any time.