

*On Reading and Writing: an Interview with Larissa Lai*

Sonia Villegas-López

University of Huelva

July/August 2014

**Sonia Villegas-López:** How did you come to writing?

**Larissa Lai:** I've always loved books. I was a bit of a loner as a child; my books were my friends. My parents are both philosophers, and my mother has a couple of degrees in English as well, so there were always books in the house when I was growing up. My father used to read to me a lot when I was little. He had a great reading voice. And my mother liked to introduce me to all the literature she loved, English literature when I was young, and some Chinese literature and history in English when I was older. In my teen years, I wrote a lot of bad, bleak verse that I'm sure most teenagers write. Later, at the University of British Columbia, I took a Creative Writing workshop from George McWhirter, who got me thinking about it a little more seriously. George introduced me to Jim Wong-Chu, who runs the Asian Canadian Writers' Workshop. Jim was the one to emphasize how badly the Chinese Canadian community needed writers and needed a literature in English. So through my undergraduate years, I messed around a little bit with poetry. But things really got going in the late 1980s and early 1990s, which was a time of real flowering for anti-racist cultural production in Canada. I was hanging out a lot with the writer Anne Jew at that time, and both of us were hired, along with Jean Lum and Kevin Louie to work on an exhibit called *Yellow Peril: Reconsidered* with the multi-media artist and curator Paul Wong and his collaborator Elspeth Sage. That was a

really formative summer. I met the critic Monika Kin Gagnon and the writer Shani Mootoo just after that. We had a writing group together, and that was when my first novel, *When Fox Is a Thousand*, really took off. I really felt the need at the time to produce the kind of literature I wished I had had when I was younger, to come more fully into myself, whatever that might mean. It was a time of great energy for anti-racist cultural production, and I think all three of us really felt it. Shani introduced me to her publisher—Press Gang, at that time—and they ended up publishing *Fox*.

**SVL:** What does writing mean to your everyday life?

**LL:** Well, it is my everyday life! Because I'm also an academic, I don't write creatively every day. But writing of some kind or another happens every day – whether it is critical writing, creative writing, grant writing, report writing, email writing, letter writing or whatever. But I suspect you are asking me what the relationship of writing is to other parts of life. To which I can only answer, they are profoundly entangled. I do write for the people in my life. For instance, for the last two years my partner has been keeping chickens in our backyard. Such a possibility has been legal in Vancouver for only the last three years or so. Before that there was a bylaw against it. The legalization of chickens is part of an urban food movement, attached to relatively recent environmental thinking. Though I have lived in rural-ish places before, I've never kept livestock. The only animals I've ever lived with have been animals kept for pets. To keep, for egg production, livestock at close quarters was very much an occasion of experiential learning. Even though I am fully aware that the meat I buy in the supermarket comes from animal sources, it is a fundamentally different way of knowing to keep those animals at one's home. Eventually the day came when one of the chickens died. I wasn't exactly devastated, but I was affected. As a regular eater of chicken meat,

I realize that, at some level, this is absurd, but it didn't stop me from feeling.... well... something – something that is hard to put in language. Chicken is chicken, right? I mean, live chicken is the same as chicken on a Styrofoam tray at the supermarket. These chickens were not supposed to be pets, and though I have much sympathy for the vegetarian movement, I am not a vegetarian. At around the same time that our chicken died, I read about a discovery that was made in Hell Creek in North and South Dakota about a prehistoric chicken-like dinosaur, with feathers, that the palaeontologists dubbed the “Chicken From Hell.” So the strange, vaguely melancholy feeling that accompanied the death of our first home chicken, combined with the weirdness of the discovery of the “Chicken from Hell,” combined with a conversation my partner and I sometimes have about Tibetan sky burial, became the basis for the story “What the Wyliei Wanted.” So you see, there is a relationship between writing and my everyday life in many senses. But these are not linear. I make no attempt to transcribe my life to text as such. I don't think that is what writing is for.

**SVL:** How do you usually come up with a story? What comes first in the process of your conception of a novel: character, topic, plot, or any other thing instead? How does it differ from conceiving and writing poetry?

**LL:** I can't say that I have much of a “usually.” Different projects come from different impetuses. *When Fox Is a Thousand* came from a need I felt for Asian Canadian women's voices, plus lots of library research. I felt a resonance with the fox archetype in old Chinese, Korean, and Japanese folk tales. I also felt a resonance with the story of Yu Hsuan-Chi, a woman poet from the T'ang Dynasty, accused of having murdered her maidservant. *Salt Fish Girl* also came from my interest in old Chinese folk tales, but also from my love for speculative fiction as a teenager. *Grist*, the novel I've been

working on for the past few years comes more from my love of feminist speculative fiction – the work of writers like Ursula LeGuin, Marge Piercy, Joanna Russ, Monique Wittig and Octavia Butler. How does it come to be that I love one thing and not another? That’s a mystery for sure, and one I prefer to leave as a mystery.

When I really get my hands into the writing, I’m listening first for voices. Without voice, I feel I’ve got nothing. Once I have the voice, then I suppose I look for contradictions and conflicts befitting the voice, though “look” is probably an overambitious word. I do a lot of freewriting in order to discover what is actually interesting. Plot is the last thing I look for, though of course, it becomes key later. It’s in the drafts that plot gets worked out. The one thing that is usual is that many drafts are required before the novel feels solid.

Poetry is different – it’s quicker, it’s lighter, it does not require as many drafts. There, I am also listening, not necessarily for singular coherent voices, but rather for a cacophony. For me, poetry works juxtapositionally and energetically. This is also true of fiction, but fiction requires, in addition, a narrative through line. Poetry doesn’t necessary need a narrative line, though it can have one. It subsists very well on sound, juxtaposition and resonance. And it needs lineation. But yes, it is definitely quicker and lighter. That means that when writing poetry, I get to keep a lot more of the raw energy of the writing. I enjoy this very much.

**SVL:** You have written both novels and poetry and sometimes the topics recur in both fiction and verse, like the Frankensteinian figure of Rachel, the cyborg in *Blade Runner*. Can you explain the process by which you choose one genre over another?

**LL:** There is a lot less agency in these choices than you might imagine. I enjoy writing the most, and feel I'm writing my best, when the agented, choosing, deciding, editing self has been shunted aside. That thing that Jung says, about the writer being a conduit for the work – I know it's cheesy, but I really do experience it that way. So for whatever reason, these figures speak to me. I'm sure that a psychoanalyst could tell you why. No doubt it is trauma related! For sure, when I am doing critical work, I can guess why. So for instance, the reason I suspect Rachel appeals so much is that she is such an immigrant figure – from the human side of the divide to the nonhuman one, but also, metaphorically, from a misrecognition of self as European to a melancholic, then enraged, recognition of self as Asian. I love her deficiency combined with her superefficiency, “more human than human.” She is a classic abject, both “here, where I am not” and “elsewhere and shining.” But I didn't choose her because of these things. I realized them years after I had already formed this powerful attachment.

**SVL:** I'm especially intrigued by how you conceive authority and power in the stories you tell in both your novels and your poetry. What's your view about locations of power, I mean, about how power is exerted in our world?

**LL:** I think of authority as a specific iteration of power, belonging to the bounded self, and belonging to patriarchy in particular and hierarchy more generally. If authority is enacted by an “author,” that author is a “top-down” kind of figure, a transcendent figure who lives a separate, privileged existence over and above the rest of us. When you think about it, though, authority has to come from somewhere – it must be “authorized” – from heaven above, or through some kind of social contract. But those of us who study the way language works know that contracts are always manipulable. Power flows through language in an uneven kind of way. Those authorized by social contracts – both

legal ones like the constitutions of nations, and implicitly, socially-circulated ones, like patriarchy – can keep skewing the social contract in their own favour. There is no justice in authority, though more or less justice-minded people may occupy positions of authority. This is a condition for many of us who teach and do research inside universities in our contemporary moment! We have authority, though we are not necessarily empowered to exercise it in ways that would actually free us, our students, our colleagues or our senior administrators in any substantive way.

For me, power is a more general term. Foucault's idea of power as a relation, and Butler's of it as something that is practiced and that produces contingent ontologies over time make a lot of sense to me. Power is attached to agency, or, that racialized capacity for action that Roy Miki calls "asiancy." I know for sure that power coalesces in stories, that who tells them and how they are told shapes the way we are empowered to act and the way we read the actions of others. Then of course, there are those large ideological channels through which power moves – capitalism, patriarchy, whiteness. These are, of course, historically contingent, but also deeply entrenched. In a way ideologies are stories – grand narratives by which we live our lives. The wonderful thing about stories, however, is that we all have access to them; we can all tell them. If we are aware of the ideological work they do, we can tell them in our own ways, and so shift the ways that power circulates through them. Of course, it also matters who is listening. The more listeners there are the more intensely power moves through the story. But the listener (or the reader) is not a passive figure. She listens in whatever idiosyncratic way she listens, in her own embodied and temporally specific way. How she hears (incidentally) and how she listens (actively) also affects the way that power moves through her, through the story and back through its teller. Story power is tidal; it

ebbs and flows with the telling and the listening. It ebbs and flows too with writing and reading, though the work of the eyes is different from the work of the ears.

The obvious question to ask here would be what the difference is between a storyteller and an author. If telling is related to oral culture and authorship to textual/visual culture, then we inhabit the body differently depending on which practice we engage. I'm interested in the reiterative power of storytelling, the way it can double over and back on itself depending on the moment, to enact its specific power at the right time. I do also think that to some extent, it is possible to enact a more oral/storytelling way of writing – that the best fiction writers do attend to the work of sound. Writing can be storytelling, and, though it is visual in the first place, can still attend to the work of sound. I like it best when it is like that, when it is not doing the work of lawmaking, but doing the work of reiterative and temporary practice. That is when it offers the possibility that we all – readers, writers, listeners and storytellers – might break through into another present, happier and more collective than the main line of history is open to.

**SVL:** The body “matters” in your writing. You focus not merely on the body as metaphor, but on its substance and materiality. For example, Fox inhabits women’s bodies in your first novel, and Miranda has a special body condition that makes her every pore reek in *Salt Fish Girl*. Why did you want the body to become so central in your projects?

**LL:** For me, recognizing the matter of bodies is a way of counter-balancing the recognition that identities are always historically contingent. Because, even knowing that this is the case, I think we still experience identity as attached to the body. We still feel that the body is “me.” I suppose much of my fiction plays out in such a way as to

interrogate this paradox. After all, it is in the playing out of this paradox that our power, or at least our agency, resides. The way one feels in one's body is always attached to the stories we tell ourselves. And conversely, the stories we tell ourselves shape how we feel ourselves to be in the body. So then the telling of stories is always political. And the body is always to some extent pliable. If we can understand and work with this recognition, then that is when we begin to experience something like freedom.

**SVL:** I would like to focus now on the hybrid beings you create, who seem to extend the either/or spectrum traditionally associated with femininity, for instance. For example, Miranda can be both taken as an angel and a monster, when she sells the rights over her mother's songs, or as neither. She is also partly human and partly animal, a product of technology, but also a miracle of nature, as descendant of Nu Wa. Is this your way of announcing the end of fixities – male/female, human/nonhuman, nature/culture, etc?

**LL:** Fluidities depend on fixities more than we might imagine. It is only possible to see the contradictions, after all, if we already hold fixities in our heads. So, I'm not sure that I'm announcing the end of anything. It's more that I am playing with the possibilities narrative offers to shift meanings, valences and associations. We can do things in and with narrative that we can't do in or with the "real world." But narrative can show us "real world" possibilities, not as one to one representation, but as a way of opening the imagination to what might be possible.

As for Miranda in *Salt Fish Girl*, yes, I wanted her ethical undecidability to be connected to her ontological undecidability. Through her, I suppose I express something of my own determined eschewing of purities of any kind. It's my – probably over-circuitous – way of railing against both national purities and activist purities, which



strike me as one another's dialectic twin, and part of our Christian Protestant inheritance in Canada, and maybe other Western locations as well.

**SVL:** You seem to reject the figure of a traditional narrator in your fiction, in favour of characters who tell their own stories. Your novels are told in many voices and, thus become plural in a sense. A somewhat similar strategy seems to apply in your poetry, where the experience of reading becomes tremendously rich and multifaceted. What is the importance you give to this variety of voices?

**LL:** I am interested in the work of difference, and in the experience of cultural specificity. I am sure that my interest in voices comes from the ways in which I was educated as a “strange,” immigrant child in Canada into a false universality and a discourse of equality without real, material experience of either shapes my interest in voices in many ways. By telling stories in the voices of the most unlikely characters – like Nu Wa or Fox – I open both my own bodily being and that of my best readers to unexpected and nonstandard ways of experiencing the self, or experiencing living continuity with other beings.

**SVL:** Which writers would you consider your closest influence? What are you reading lately?

**LL:** These days, my closest influences are my other writer and critic friends – Hiromi Goto, Rita Wong, Nalo Hopkinson, David Chariandy, Roy Miki, Fred Wah, Smaro Kamboureli. And in a just prior period, Monika Kin Gagnon and Shani Mootoo. Before I met them, I liked Angela Carter, Salman Rushdie, Jeannette Winterson, Hanif Kureishi, Jorge Luis Borges, Italo Calvino. I also take influence from the myth and

Larissa Lai & Sonia Villegas-López

folktale collector Pu Song-Ling in various translations, as well as a Dutch scholar called Robert Van Gulik, who wrote extensively about women in ancient China. As a child, I liked all the Andrew Lang Fairy Books, Robert Graves, and Lucy Maud Montgomery. I had a period through my 20s where contemporary video art was really important to me. Paul Wong was a friend and mentor. The poet jam ismail and the artist Jamelie Hassan have been important mentor/friends also, as has Aruna Srivastava who supervised my PhD. I also read contemporary critical theory and philosophy. I particularly like Rosi Braidotti and Donna Haraway.

I really love Dionne Brand's work also, and have just started her new book, *Love Enough*. I just read Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven*. I'm really looking forward to reading Lee Maracle's *Celia's Song*. A colleague recently turned me on to Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist*.

**Larissa Lai** is a novelist, poet and critic, based at the University of Calgary, where she is Associate Professor in Creative Writing. She is the author of six books, including the critical monograph *Slanting I, Imagining We: Asian Canadian Literary Production in the 1980s and 1990s* and the novel *Salt Fish Girl*. A recipient of the Astraea Foundation Emerging Writers' Award, she has been shortlisted for the Books in Canada First Novel Award, the Tiptree Award, the Sunburst Award, the City of Calgary W.O. Mitchell Award, the bpNichol Chapbook Award and the Dorothy Livesay Prize.

**Sonia Villegas-López** is Associate Professor at the University of Huelva (Spain). She currently teaches English literature and does research on contemporary women's writing

in English. She is co-author of *Transnational Poetics: Contemporary Asian-Canadian Women's Fiction* (2011) and has lately published articles in *Critique* and *Women's Writing*.