

FORUM

ANJA KRÜGER

Sedimenting the Past, Producing the Future An Interview with Larissa Lai on the Poetics and Politics of Writing

Introduction

Larissa Lai is a Chinese Canadian novelist and poet, and an assistant professor of literature at the English Department of the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. For many years she has also worked as a cultural activist. Both her literary and scholarly writings address highly topical questions in the fields of Canadian literature, culture, history, and politics, and situate them in a global context. They are thus of interest not only for Canadianists, but also for a broader public, and particularly for anyone involved in teaching Canadian literature. Highly innovative in form and imagination, her texts draw on a range of cultural backgrounds as a creative resource and illuminate various kinds of crossings and contact zones. Lai's debut novel, *When Fox Is a Thousand* (which first appeared in 1995 and was republished in 2004), revises Chinese folk tales about the fox spirit to challenge preconceptions her readers might have about gender, sexuality, or the linearity of history and time. Her second novel, *Salt Fish Girl* (2002), intertwines the stories of Nu Wa, a shape-shifting snake goddess from Chinese mythology, and Miranda, a young woman living in the Pacific Northwest in 2044. It is also the story of Evie, a human-fish hybrid clone, who rebels against her exploitation as a factory worker. Larissa Lai has published several short stories, and in 2009 three volumes of poetry appeared: *Sybil Unrest*, a collaborative long poem co-authored with Rita Wong, *Eggs in the Basement*, and *Automaton Biographies*, which consists of four long poems and was a finalist for the Dorothy Livesay Poetry Prize.

The interview took place on a hot summer day in June 2010, on the occasion of the interdisciplinary graduate conference "Crossroads: Canadian Cultural Intersections / Carrefours: Intersections culturelles au Canada" at the University of Konstanz,

to which Larissa Lai contributed a public reading from her work, entitled "Political Animals, Supernatural Machines: A Reading by Larissa Lai."

Anja Krüger (AK): Larissa, thank you very much for meeting me today for an interview on your work as a scholar of Canadian literature and culture and as a writer.

Larissa Lai (LL): It is my pleasure, Anja. Thank you for having me, thank you for being interested. (*laughs*)

AK: I would like to start, if you don't mind, by asking about the role space and location play for you: the Pacific West Coast and Vancouver, in particular, loom large in your fiction. How important is this Canadian context to you?

LL: That's a good question. The Canadian context matters very much to me; the West Coast context is really important. Maybe because of the way that I come from a history of movement, a politics of location is always really important. At the time that I began doing anti-racist cultural work, a politics of the body and a politics of location were key modes of engagement for me. That was the late 1980s and early 1990s. As an Asian Canadian queer writer, thinker, and activist, I had to be conscious of my geography. For me, it is very important to recognize the cultural specificity of stories and knowledge, so the way in which I experience the world and the way in which I write has everything to do with who I am, the context in which I live, and the communities I move through.

And so yes, Canada and the West Coast matter. I do less work that is overtly activist now than I did when I was younger, although I suppose the cultural labour I do still has an activist bent to it. The more I do that work in the cultural communities of the West Coast, the more important the West Coast seems to become, because the work deepens my connection to West Coast communities. I think in recent years I have become much more aware of my own presence there as a settler, but as a settler with Asian origins. As a settler, I am very aware of debts owed and responsibilities towards the Indigenous peoples of the land we call Canada, and of the West Coast in particular. I feel I have a responsibility as well to Indigenous histories and epistemologies, particularly as they relate to being on the land, since so many settler cultures, including my own, went there at least partly because of the land. Of course, I also have an investment in the Canadian state, since another historical reason for my being in Canada is the democratic possibilities it affords. These are fraught. I think of Canada very much as a democracy-under-construction. The ideals of democracy are there, and I value them, but we have not achieved them yet. Canada is important to me because I want to contribute to the building of its democracy. One of the major obstacles it faces is its ongoing colonial relationship with the First Nations. As a Chinese Canadian, even as I struggle for my own place within a nation that has not always included Chinese Canadians, I reinforce the power of the state.

So there is a paradox in my stance towards the idea of 'Canada.' It's a good thing I am okay with paradoxes! I hope that, as I do my work in the present, as I think, read, and write towards a better understanding of where I am, this subtly changes the geography and the communities in which I think, read, and write. It doesn't solve anything, but I hope it does a kind of democracy-building work. The more I engage in this way, whether through an interview with you, or in the writing of books like *When Fox Is a Thousand*, *Salt Fish Girl* or *Automaton Biographies*, the more these texts layer over one another, and over the thinking, reading, and writing of others in such a way as to continuously build place, build geography, and build communities. Thinking, reading, and writing sediment the past, but they also produce the future. I have a commitment to imagining a future for the city in which I live, for the Coast on which I live, and more recently – as two dear friends/colleagues, Rita Wong and Dorothy Christian, through their work on a project called *Downstream*, have been teaching me – in the watershed in which I live, as well.

AK: You have also lived in other cities in Canada. What makes Vancouver special for you?

LL: I grew up in St. John's, Newfoundland, which is completely the other coast. We went there when I was a small child. My father was a professor in the Philosophy Department at Memorial University in St. John's. I also feel an attachment to that city because it is the city of my childhood. What the two of them have in common is they are both coastal. The fishery has been an important industry for both cities – maybe more so for St. John's than Vancouver, but there is definitely a fishy presence in both places. So *that* city is also home, but in a very different kind of way. What makes Vancouver work as home-place for me, has to do partly with an absence I felt as a child, growing up in St. John's, where really there isn't a strong Asian presence at all. When I was a child, my own difference from the rest of the populace was something I felt very acutely. Interestingly, there is a much more active and longstanding racist history in Vancouver, but also a longstanding Asian presence that I think made and makes the city more comfortable when one is embodied as I am.

But Vancouver is also important to me because it is where, in my mid-twenties, I found a community of writers, artists and activists with whom I relate. In a lot of ways that community educated me and made me who I am. So I have a lot of appreciation for that.

AK: Would you consider yourself an urban writer?

LL: In *When Fox Is a Thousand* I am thinking about a group of young folks in a city trying to make sense of one another and their own lives in the city of Vancouver. So I suppose there are some urban aspects to my writing. I value the idea of the urban, or perhaps more properly, the cosmopolitan, because I think extraordinary things happen in cities, and in the interactions among cities. A city can be a real cauldron. Ideas, cultures, subcultures, habits, and ways of thinking can emerge or be developed in cities in ways that can be very productive, especially for those of us who are interested and invested in a cultural politics of difference. But that doesn't mean

that I'm not interested in the countryside. So much of *Salt Fish Girl* takes place in the countryside. I'm interested in the environment. And I'm interested in food. You can't be interested in these things and locate yourself in the city solely. So, I don't think that I would call myself an urban writer, but I am a writer who cares about the urban. I am engaged in it, but not solely.

AK: We Europeans, and I think especially Germans, often look to Canada as a role model for its successful politics of multiculturalism.

LL: Oh wow! (*laughs*)

AK: Reading your fiction, and also some of your essays, I got the impression that you are highly critical of the status quo, and that Canada might in fact not be the utopian place of harmony and mutual respect that we Germans imagine it to be. (*laughs*)

LL: We all have our fantasies of other places, don't we? And to be fair to German thinkers, Canada really markets itself abroad as a kind of multicultural utopia. And, of course, it's not a utopia. There are things about the ideal of multiculturalism in Canada, and Multicultural policy as well, that have facilitated the production of progressive kinds of literary and artistic work. But insofar as Canada markets itself as an ideal location of multicultural belonging, I think it is really important for us as Canadians to remember that our histories are very fraught. Canada has as messy, difficult, and racist a history as many other countries in the world, but it doesn't admit it readily. We can think, for instance, about things like the residential schools for Indigenous children organized by the Canadian state to separate Indigenous children from their families in order to destroy Indigenous culture, or the Komagato Maru incident, in which a shipload of South Asian migrants was turned away from the West Coast of Canada on the basis of the fact that they hadn't made a continuous journey. Or we can think about the Chinese Head Tax, which was a race-based fee to enter the country charged in the late 19th and early 20th century, or the later Chinese Exclusion Act, which shut Chinese people out altogether. We can think about the internment of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War. Canadian citizens of Japanese descent were evacuated from the West Coast, and their homes, boats, farms, and gardens were confiscated. Canada has a really messy, not entirely admirable history of discrimination against racialized people.

Sometimes one of my students asks, "Isn't that history all over now? We have the Multiculturalism Act and anybody can be a citizen of Canada if they fulfil the right criteria." I would argue that all of that racist history and the thinking that accompanies it hasn't really left us. It's still there; it's still deeply embedded in our social being; it still materializes itself on a daily basis in our everyday speech and actions. It is really important for us to be aware of these things. This is not to say that the multicultural ideal is a bad thing. It is an admirable ideal, but I think it is also really important to recognize its limitations. It is philosophically fraught because beneath it lies a desire to make sameness out of difference. You can do that at a surface level. My winter solstice meal is the equivalent of your winter solstice meal; my ritual to

celebrate the birth of a child is equivalent to your ritual to celebrate the birth of a child. But it doesn't address historical trauma, it doesn't address abuses of power. Those have to be erased, forgotten, and papered over in order for official Multiculturalism to do its work of vindicating the state. That is why apology is big business in Canada these days. But what apology ultimately does is release the state from its responsibilities in making multiculturalism work for people. Instead it dumps that responsibility back on the people who have suffered state racism and social marginalization to begin with. Worse, it puts the onus of erasure and forgetting on those who have suffered the trauma, who have been on the receiving end of power abuse.

So then, I think we need to ask whose desire is fulfilled by making sameness out of difference? When the clever young man in my 4th year class asks, "Can't we just let go, can't we just agree that it's over?," who does he mean by "we"? The state has a vested interest in forgetting its own violence. But for those who were traumatized by it, to repress the memory is to open the door to recurrence. Official Multiculturalism gives the state the appearance of benevolence and makes it appear as though the violence of the past is over, when in fact its legacy and its logic continues into the present. That is why racialized thinkers, writers and artists insist so adamantly on critiquing state policy. We don't need to live in the past, but we need to remember it, and we need to live in a creative relationship with it. So rather than say "Let's just forget it all happened," I think we need to consider how and what we forget and how and what we remember. The problem with song and dance multiculturalism is that it is only a cosmetic solution to historical violence and real cultural difference. And yet, until the state and citizenry get serious about rectifying injustice, we repeat the traumas and abuses of the past, in different forms.

AK: Well, given this, I am wondering if you have a strong political agenda in writing your fiction?

LL: I wouldn't call what I do agenda-based. I write from a very particular experiential and embodied location. I also write from the specificities of my own imagination. For me, everything – the fiction, the poetry, and the criticism – is always experimental. I'm always trying to test out an idea to see if it works or not. I am not a propaganda writer; I am not interested in raising anybody up for the sake of raising them up, or putting anybody down for the sake of putting them down. But what I am interested in is movements in history, movements in technology, movements in things like the way we think about memory, the way we think about time. I am interested in putting certain scenarios, or certain patterns and structures in language into play, and seeing what comes of them – I am looking for hope in those places. We live in such an entangled world, don't we? So when I find hope, it is usually in an unexpected place.

AK: Do you have a particular audience in mind when you write? Or, perhaps more bluntly: Who do you write for?

LL: I think that has really changed over the years and depending on the project. So, when I was working on *When Fox Is a Thousand*, which was my first novel, I was

very clear that I was writing for other queer Asian Canadian women, at least in the first instance. That novel was written in what was for me the middle of a really vital and important anti-oppression movement. So while it was written with one audience in mind, it wasn't written to the exclusion of other audiences, but just to see what it would mean to centralize and foreground a specific public, and to take into consideration how that public is constructed and how it conceives of itself. When we talk about the 'public' we usually don't stop to consider what we mean or who we centralize and normalize. And if we don't think about it, the public we normalize in our historical moment in the West is usually straight, white, and if not male, then at least willing to accept many patriarchal norms. When I was writing that novel, I was very aware of the cultural specificity of the kind of public and the kind of false universalism that many writers engage without thinking. And I was really consciously trying to think through what it would mean to centralize and normalize a different kind of audience, one that's usually marginalized.

In my later work – maybe, I've become a little bit more liberal in my old age (*AK laughs*) – I thought I might try to embrace a more normalized notion of what constitutes 'the public.' So *Salt Fish Girl* is written with a more mainstream audience in mind. Partly I was heartened by the broad reception of *When Fox Is a Thousand*. Partly I was interested in trying to see if I could make a living with my writing, and it seems to me that meant thinking about and addressing audiences the way the mainstream thinks about and addresses audiences. So I directed *Fox* at the audience I thought would be interested in me as a writer, and I was surprised to learn that more people than I thought would be interested were interested. That understanding gave me the impetus to reach out farther and more broadly for the audience for *Salt Fish Girl*. There is a Canadian scholar called Chris Fox, who has recently defended her dissertation on readership demographics for a number of queer Canadian texts, including *When Fox Is a Thousand*. It is always surprising who you think you are writing to and who takes it up in the end. I really hoped that scientists and activists – environmental activists and animal rights activists as much as anti-racist activists – would look at *Salt Fish Girl*. There is a critique of genetic engineering, patenting, and cloning in that novel as much as there is a critique of colonialism, and of the patriarchy. Our oppressions are all interlinked, but I feel we don't talk about that enough. We don't make alliances, often, I think, because we can't see what connects our causes. It seems to me that it is necessary to begin to see and articulate connectivities – so that is part of what I was doing in *Salt Fish Girl* as well.

After the publication of *Salt Fish Girl* I became interested in the West Coast/Canadian Prairie experimental poetics that was being engaged by a lot of people who I had actually done activist work with in the nineties. I went back to school between *Salt Fish Girl* and *Automaton Biographies*, and so I was hanging out in Calgary, which, for me, is one of the great homes of Canadian experimental poetics. So I was spending time with all these wonderful writers and becoming very interested in movements in language and the way in which language works rhetorically, but then also

the way that its deeper structures stretch the way we think, talk, speak. I tried working that way myself, and found the practice could be both playful and political in ways I had not experienced writing fiction. So, *Automaton Biographies* was really a book for that community. It's swimming with language games and foolishness. I thought only other experimental poets would read the stuff, but it was such a pleasure to write most of the time, and when it wasn't a pleasure, I still felt like I was learning something I wanted to learn. It's a little too early to really know how it will be received. It was shortlisted for the Dorothy Livesay Poetry Prize, so that means, I think, that again more people are reading that book than I expected. Maybe I need to raise my expectations! It will be interesting to see how it circulates because there is still, as ever, a critique of capital, a critique of patriarchy, a critique of racism in that book. But it occurs in a different moment and in a different language.

So my audiences do shift, and I am aware of it. I think that, depending on the project, my audiences can be wider or narrower. And for different kinds of reasons: with *Salt Fish Girl*, I wanted to rouse some people to thought and maybe even action. In *Automaton Biographies*, I was largely just having fun, and playing, and then making room for whoever has the same sense of fun, to also play. Of course, the fun of *Automaton Biographies* is serious fun. It takes up some pretty heavy issues – the second American invasion of Iraq, SARS, the abuse of animals in scientific experimentation, as well as my own family history, including what happened to my family during the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong. So I'm not playing to be stupid, or to make fun of anyone or anything – it's a kind of investigative play to see how we might see differently if we write differently. Or to hear how we might hear differently if we speak differently.

AK: I would like to ask about your long poems: in 2009 you published three long poems, not only *Automaton Biographies* but also *Sybil Unrest*, a collaboration with Rita Wong, as well as *Eggs in the Basement*. Given the strong tradition of the genre in Canada, I would be interested to know whether your choice of this particular form was a conscious and rational decision or if your texts somehow surprised you by materializing in the shape of the long poem?

LL: Well, probably a little bit of both. It's a tradition I admire. I'm a fan of bpNichol's *Martyrology* and Gerry Shikatani's *Aqueduct*. Or closer to home, Fred Wah's *Diamond Grill*, not to mention any number of serial poems Roy Miki has written. Roy and Fred have both been wonderful teachers and dear friends to me. It would be impossible not to be influenced.

I learned a lot from them just paying attention to the ways in which they document, articulate, talk back to, play with the material of their daily lives on a regular basis. I have had the privilege of travelling with Roy a few times and watching him write poetry on the plane. Occasionally, in a conference situation, I'll see him having dinner with everyone else at the end of a day, and in the morning, at breakfast, learn that he spent a large chunk of the evening writing in his hotel room.

What I love about the long poem is its engagement in the materiality of daily life. So, when it came to working on *Sybil Unrest* with Rita Wong, it seemed in many ways a natural way to work. We began it in 2003, the year of the SARS crisis and the year of the second US invasion of Iraq. Rita and I were invited to the Hong Kong International Writer's Festival together, she as a poet, I as a novelist. And everyone was just freaking out about SARS, both locally and internationally. There was a lot of outrageously racist coverage in the Canadian press that made equivalence between Asians and disease. It made me incredibly angry – probably irrationally angry – there was such a barrage of it, and it was so unconscious of its own rhetoric, it was really quite sickening. I got so mad, I all but neglected the fact that there was a real health crisis beneath all that ugly language. My going to Hong Kong was, in a way, a defiance of media racism! A bit foolish, I know. The disease was no less real for all the bad reportage.

Anyway, I was just feeling really stubborn and I went, and so did Rita. When we got there, the city was so quiet, which was very weird. I know Hong Kong to be a noisy, bustling, and busy city. But on this visit the streets were so, so quiet, which was very unsettling. A lot of the writers who were supposed to be at the festival didn't show up because they were afraid to travel there, so it was a very interesting writer's festival to attend by virtue of who wasn't there. The organizers still wanted to have the events, so we ended up doing way more events than we had originally been slated to do. And while we were there, the U.S. started dropping its first bombs in Iraq. So in the daytime we did festival stuff, and at night, we would sit in our hotel room feeling really dismayed and worried – the world just seemed so upside down and backwards. There was very much a sense of being implicated in particular kinds of ways: the figuration of the Asian body in the media through the SARS epidemic was just so intense that I, for one, felt my racialized embodiment very acutely. And as Western subjects, it was hard not to feel a sense of responsibility for the unjust violence that was taking place in Iraq.

So we would be sitting at our hotel room watching CNN and the BBC World Service feeling helpless and wanting to do something. And obviously not really having the power to do much, except pass a notebook back and forth across the room. That was how *Sybil Unrest* started. It was an accident in the sense that we weren't thinking or talking about form, we weren't thinking about the long poem, we were just trying to do something, maybe trying to talk at least to one another. Taking up the long poem form, then, was an accident in one sense, but in another, it absolutely responded to the long poem tradition of addressing both daily life and the larger social life in a serial kind of way. Although, to be perfectly honest, we didn't keep any of the text we wrote at that time. A short while later, at the Kootenay School of Writing back in Vancouver, we heard two other poets, Aaron Vidaver and David Fujino, perform a conversational long poem. I think it was then that it dawned on us that we had been engaging a form, back in our Hong Kong hotel room. And that form worked very well for these two poets we respected. Watching David and Aaron

perform this way inspired us to reengage what we were doing with the concept of the long poem a little more firmly in mind. But even then, we weren't sure that it was anything more than a game that the two of us were playing in order to talk to and entertain one another. It wasn't until we ourselves did a performance at the Kootenay School of Writing several months later that we realized we had a public for this poem. Fred Wah, Pauline Butling, and Michael Barnholden were very encouraging, I remember. That was what inspired us to take it to book length. Who knows, maybe there will be a second installment.

AK: My next question also concerns the long poem, but in the larger context of postmodernism. Canadian postmodernist literature in general, and the long poem in particular, have been associated with the political and the self-reflexive, the meta-fictional. So, given the political background to how you started poetry writing, would you also conceive of yourself as a postmodern writer?

LL: Oh, (*laughs*) that's a hard one. Yes and no. At the time I started writing – in the early nineties – postmodernism as an intellectual and artistic movement was well down the tracks. It wasn't something that, at that time, I was hugely interested in. I thought about it as being Eurocentric, as being very much a boy's game, as not having a politics. Now I think it's more complicated than that. To begin with, it depends on what you mean by postmodernism. If you think about it in Fredric Jameson's terms, as the style attached to late capital, then I would ask for whom is capital late, and for whom is it actually awfully early? I think it is really important to ask the question whose modernism are we 'post'? But if you are talking about Linda Hutcheon's description of it as a strategy of intertextuality that draws our attention to the cultural specificities that produce our norms, then I can see how that would fit, although I had not read Hutcheon when I began writing. At that time, I was busy trying to educate myself in Chinese history and mythology. I wasn't all that interested in the European tradition at that time, though I had inklings of it because it was so ubiquitous. I have taken an interest in it since, because it too has things to offer, and as I hope you've registered by now, I am neither a militant nor a purist.

The other way of thinking about postmodernism that was available to me when I started writing was the postmodernism that is attached to Roland Barthes' idea of 'The Death of the Author,' in which text and author are produced anew with each readerly encounter. The problem with that idea was that its reception in North America coincided with the moment that so many racialized writers first found a 'voice,' and that voice was decidedly embodied, historically situated and personally specific. It's all well and good for the author to be dead if he's been talking your head off for the last thousand years. But for those of us who did not historically have a voice, and were just beginning to find one, that idea was absurd to the extreme. Why would you want the death of the author when the specificity of your body and your experience which is important to you and has been so shut down and so silenced suddenly has a chance to be voiced? Suddenly, you have the chance to speak from your historically specific situation and the postmodernists are all saying

“well, too bad, so sad, it’s all about the text, the author is dead.” The obvious response to that from anyone in my shoes would have to be, “Dude, forget about it!”

But if we think about postmodernism in a more complicated way, and we think about the ways in which postmodernism recognizes the contingent kinds of ways in which language works, its historical specificity, depending on whether you want to stick postmodernism with poststructuralism or not, the historical specificity of any particular writing moment, the instability of the voice, the fact that all voices are culturally specific, specific to the historical moment, specific to location: all of that overlaps really well with a lot of the things that I would actually value, embrace, and engage.

It’s so hard to think these things through in terms of intellectual movements and in terms of social and political movements, as well, because movements are never bounded, right? And when you are working definitionally, you are always going to run yourself into trouble. Most people who consider themselves postmodernists, or poststructuralists, or postcolonialists, for that matter, are also suspicious of the work of definition because it closes down, because it – is that a word? – nomenclaturizes (*laughs*). Most of the time, I want to escape the work of definition and nomenclature, but then I recognize that definitional terms can be useful on certain occasions. Sometimes we need them to make alliances. Sometimes we need them to bring people who have been educated in positivist language (which is a lot of people) into the conversation.

So then, insofar as there are overlaps in the way we think about the work that postmodernism does, the way we think about the work that poststructuralism does, the way we think about the work that postcolonialism does, the way we think about the work that anti-racism does – if there are overlaps there, then some of those overlaps work for me. The things that I mentioned – contingency, the multiplicity of voices, the recognition that all truths are partial and incomplete – if those are concepts that belong to postmodernism, then I can be a postmodernist, today at least! But if I embrace certain so-called “post-modern” understandings, I don’t do it because they are called “post-modernist,” I do it because those things also work with my understanding, within a particular social, historical context – which itself can always shift and change. For those concepts work, at least partially, to get us out of a lot of the predicaments of the 20th century that have been so detrimental to the lives of so many marginalized people. Does that make sense?

AK: Absolutely, yes! Somehow along the same line, though: your texts are frequently subsumed under the categories of Asian Canadian/Chinese Canadian feminist literature, and they are also referred to as postcolonial writings, or diasporic or minority literature, among a lot of other categories. Despite the fact that such labels always limit and frame the reception of a text by creating certain expectations, I was still wondering which of the labels you would prefer?

LL: (*laughs*) Yeah, that’s a tough one. As I was just saying, the labelling becomes so oppressive after a while, because it does always limit and contain the way in which

the work is read and received. And, by the same token, without any framing at all, the work isn't legible to people who need frames. There's a real paradox there, in the sense that the labels limit but they also frame, and without the framing readers can't see. So you need them. That said, which one do I prefer? I think for me it's really context-dependent. In the context of global warming, I would like to be called an environmentalist writer. Because the way in which the world is going environmentally is really worrisome. But then, in another context – like in the late 1990s, when a boat load of Chinese migrant workers came to the West Coast of Canada, hoping to be accepted as refugees, and most of them were incarcerated first and then sent back to uncertain social and political conditions – I would say I am an anti-racist writer because in that context, I would want solidarity with those racialized migrant workers. So I don't think that there is any one term that I would embrace universally, under all circumstances; it would really depend on the moment and what else was going on. It would depend on context.

AK: You just mentioned the environment. While we are sitting here, the BP oil catastrophe is happening. And somehow the whole world seems to completely depend on BP's efforts to put a stop to this unprecedented oil spill and the disastrous consequences for the environment. Is this an example of increasing corporate power that your novel *Salt Fish Girl* is so critical of?

LL: It's difficult for me to comment on because, although I've been following the news, as we all have, I could probably stand to know more about the international oil industry than I do, so this will be a very contingent response. If there is a critique at work in *Salt Fish Girl*, it's a critique of neoliberalism – by which I mean the Milton Friedman kind of free market economy that functions at the expense of things like worker's rights, health care, education – that kind of neoliberalism. So, if there is a critique of neoliberalism at work in *Salt Fish Girl*, it's a critique that says that way too much power has gone into the hands of corporations, at the expense of a democratic imagination of the state, which works towards and guarantees those kinds of things that I was just describing: universal health care, environmental protections, universal education, all of those good democratic things that I still – in spite of a lot of reservations and anxieties about the state – actually do believe in.

The BP oil spill is an example of what can happen when international oil companies are given way too much freedom to do whatever the heck they want wherever there is oil under the surface of the earth, whether it is under the ocean or under the land. In this case, I would say there is insufficient regulation. This does not mean that I am not critical of the power of the state to regulate – I am. One of the big reasons that I am critical, however, is that states are so easily bought by rich corporations like BP. I think BP and the other owners of the Deepwater Horizon drilling rig, Anadarko and MOEX, should be responsible for the clean-up because they are the people who created the disaster. Possibly Hyundai and Halliburton as well, since they are responsible for the rig's construction. But even if these companies do their best, the question becomes, how can they possibly clean up all the oil? How can they

undo the damage they have wreaked? It upsets me that we, as citizens of the world, and also the birds, the land, the beaches, the fish, the ocean itself should have to rely on these unreliable, market-driven entities for the clean-up. How can entities whose main reason for being is to make money, ever possibly do right by the ocean? It would be so much better to have people who care about the ocean taking care of it, but even then, human beings as we in the West understand them are nothing but beings of pure hubris when it comes to nature as we commonly understand it (that is, as separate from the human). What we actually need is a better ontology, a better way of understanding our own being in the world so that human continuity with the ocean is obvious, and projects like the Deepwater Horizon oil rig are unthinkable. So sure, yes, the critique that's there in *Salt Fish Girl* can be easily extended to this moment. In that novel I am also trying to imagine other ways of being in/with/part of that entity we currently conceptualize as "nature."

AK: You have written two novels, *Salt Fish Girl* (2002) and *When Fox Is a Thousand* (1995, 2004), which both intertwine different narrative strands, and I would be interested in the process of writing: do you start with an overarching structure (*LL laughs*), or does it develop while you are at it?

LL: That's an excellent question. When I was writing *When Fox Is a Thousand*, I was 24 years old, I didn't have a clue! (*laughs*) I knew that I had some things to say and that there were certain ways of writing that I didn't want to reproduce. There was a tradition that I was writing against, which was a linear, monologic, autobiographical tradition – the tradition that I felt the mainstream publishing industry places on writers in general, but one that has particular consequences for racialized writers. If I was aware of what I was doing structurally, it was because I didn't want to be produced in a way that would permit the publishing industry and readers to read my body and the text as equivalents. Because when that happens, then readers and spin doctors tend not to recognize the creative capacity of the racialized writer at all. Instead you are imagined as a native informant on your culture, for the benefit of the mainstream which is understood as white, though it never has to articulate itself as such. So, that was the initial impetus to not write in a straight kind of way.

At that time, I was reading this wonderful book by the Serbian writer, Milorad Pavic, *The Dictionary of the Khazars*. It's a novel about an imaginary people, written in the form of a dictionary that cross-references the history of the Khazars as they are represented in three traditions: Jewish, Islamic, and Christian. Pavic was writing from and into a very serious political reality: Yugoslavia split up shortly after the publication of that book. I was very taken by his work. I was probably reading Salman Rushdie and Jeanette Winterson as well, and maybe even Virginia Woolf. My education at that time was not "proper" for a writer because my undergrad is in sociology. I didn't have a formal education in English Literature at that point. In retrospect, I think this may have served me by allowing me certain freedoms that a more formally educated person might not have had. At the time that I was working on *Fox*, I was doing my best to educate myself against the grain, as it were. I was

reading Chinese mythology in translation, and a bit of Chinese history, as well as all the unconventional texts by queer and racialized writers that I could get my hands on. So these novels offered possibilities for non-linear ways of writing.

I also really had the good fortune of very early on meeting a bunch of wonderful Canadian multimedia artists, people like Paul Wang, Sharon Yuen, Jin-me Yoon, as well as the artist Jamelie Hassan, who is based in London, Ontario. Watching the way in which they worked as largely visual artists was very inspiring and probably influenced me as well. They are all contemporary artists, so they engaged contemporary techniques like pastiche and montage – techniques that are very much about juxtaposition as opposed to linear, monologic truth telling. I was really inspired by what they were doing visually. And so I came to working in multi-voiced ways, as a way of speaking to them as elders. So, that's how *Fox* started. I guess I had a bit of a clue after all, just not a formally inculcated one!

By the time *Salt Fish Girl* came along, I was just in the habit of working with juxtaposition and multiple voices. Because of the ways in which I have moved through the world, I necessarily always have more than one voice running through my head because I live in more than one cultural context. When I come to the moment of writing, all those voices are there. So the compositional question is always how do I make space for all those voices? On the one hand, the voices are already there so you just listen to them and then transcribe them. But on the other, you have to structure the voices you hear. That's where artifice comes in. Technically, I do a mixture of two things. I listen, transcribe, and let the text do what it wants, but sometimes I also impose conventional narrative structure, or serial structure or other structures I've conceived in advance.

AK: I would like to talk a bit more about your novels and the themes they tackle. One theme particularly struck me: it seems that mothers are not a reassuring, stable presence in your novels. In *Fox*, for example, Artemis is adopted, and Miranda in *Salt Fish Girl* is haunted by her mother's stage career, and then she accidentally (or not) kills her mother, and she blames herself for her mother's death. And also, the act of birth in *Salt Fish Girl* is not a completely female nor a natural procedure anymore. I was wondering if you would be willing to share some thoughts on the notion of the mother and procreation, that is, birth and also rebirth, in your writing. I was even wondering if this kind of constellation is a consequence of your project to create a sort of artificial history, where the mother is not needed anymore as a stable presence?

LL: Oh, Anja, that is an excellent, thoughtful question. Yet it is difficult for me to answer. The reason that it is difficult is that there is a political consciousness at work, for sure, and then there is also my own family, and I promised my family that I won't talk about them. Which doesn't mean that the autobiographical doesn't sometimes leak. But there is a conscious effort to keep my family life separate from my creative work. So in terms of the absence of the mother in *Fox*, in so far as I can put it to work as metaphor, when I am thinking about Artemis in particular, I was very aware of

wanting to write a second generation immigrant cohort, a community of kids, who are markedly different from their parents to the point that in some ways one might imagine them as adopted. Dionne Brand actually does it beautifully *In What We All Long For*. She writes about children born of parents from elsewhere. They were born in the city of Toronto, and are ultimately of that city, but they are haunted by pasts that are located elsewhere. I suppose my writing Artemis as adopted is a way of allowing Artemis to be born, if not of the city per se, then of a sort of suddenly-imposed, artificial western culture. But I am very conscious of wanting to write a subjectivity that is imagined into a western context and educated in one, without necessarily having an embodied, 'biological' history in that culture. And constructing Artemis as adopted is a way of doing that. You are right, of course, that it makes the position of mothering and motherhood really fraught and locates the mother as both absent and artificial. So, as far as the absent goes, there is an obliteration there. It isn't because I want to deny that importance of mothering, but I suppose, it is my way of making sure I avoid writing about my family, and it produces some curious literary effects. In terms of the artificial, it produces Artemis as encultured through a break in tradition that one might understand as "artificial" if one were inclined to read that way. But this is part of the condition of many second generation immigrant children. In some ways, Artemis has been propelled into an ahistorical life, a life on the postmodern surface in the way Fredric Jameson conceives of it! But she is haunted, not necessarily by her mother, but by her Chinese past. The Fox is a figure of that.

For me there is that constant desire to recuperate the history because you need the history in order to be a full human being, I think. That may be very humanist of me – I still want it (laughs). But I must also recognize that not all of us have equal access to it. Not all of us can be parented in a traditional way, which I suppose some might think of as "natural." Displacement will do that to a person. My work is a lot about the desire to touch the past but across conditions of breakage. And an absent mother can, I suppose, function narratively to introduce that breakage, and place my characters in the position of having to address it.

As for *Salt Fish Girl*, it has two mother figures – the mythic Nu Wa on the one hand, and Miranda's cabaret singing mother on the other. She is a kind of super-mother – one that gives birth in her sixties and leaves behind a legacy of beauty and perfection that Miranda can never live up to. And then, at the end, Miranda and Evie become mothers themselves, with a little help from scientific intervention plus natural mutation. Their child is, in a sense, a child of Father Science and Mother Nature. It is also birthed in such a way that is empowering to the two young women. You know, I think there are ideal mother figures in that novel, they are just idealized in unconventional ways. There is something very queer about all of them. Men are not required for procreation, at least, not in the expected ways.

AK: A genre label that your writing engages with is speculative fiction or science fiction. You've been read a lot by a science fiction community. Apart from your novel

Salt Fish Girl, there is also your short story “Rachel,” which engages with, or writes back to, Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* and Scott’s film adaptation *Blade Runner*. Do you see yourself as a science fiction writer at all? Especially, seeing that you are a feminist writer, I was wondering what this genre has to offer you.

LL: I wouldn’t consider myself a science fiction writer as such, because I think of science fiction as extrapolating from the possibilities of science as its main driving force. My work occasionally addresses scientific questions or issues, but, when it is in its future-oriented mode, it is much more interested in extrapolating from the social and political questions of the present, and sometimes the past too. When it addresses science questions, it addresses them as corollaries of the social and political. I like science fiction. I grew up reading Isaac Asimov and Ray Bradbury. I also remember really liking Frank Herbert’s *Dune* and Ursula LeGuin’s *Left Hand of Darkness*. I still like Ursula LeGuin a lot. She was doing something different, even then. Or maybe I like her because as you say, I’m a feminist writer, and so is she. In recent years, I’ve discovered Octavia Butler, who I think is wonderful, and Nalo Hopkinson as well, of course, whom I feel fortunate to count as a friend. And of course I love Phillip K. Dick. I would accept the designation “speculative fiction writer” more easily, I think, if people want to apply it. But if someone were to say that I wasn’t, I wouldn’t be upset. I’m not uptight about being understood as a genre writer, the way some authors who made their careers in literary fiction first can be. But I do wonder whether what I do fits perfectly under any generic rubric. I play with the tropes of speculative fiction, for sure, but perhaps because I also experiment with form, I feel it’s hard to pin what I do. I occasionally teach at Clarion West, and I’ve taught once at the flagship Clarion workshop in San Diego as well. These are six-week science fiction/fantasy/speculative fiction workshops that have been running every summer since 1968. I always enjoy myself immensely. I think some of the students find me odd because I am not interested in the rules of the genre. But some of them really benefit from being shown where the edges are.

But here’s a tie-in to your question about mothers. Perhaps, as the child of immigrants running from the past and sacrificing the present in order to make a future for their kid, I’m that kid, obsessed with the future and haunted by the past. What better complex to have for writing speculative fiction? As for Ridley Scott’s *Rachel*, there is a particular scene in which she is beginning to doubt her humanness, and beginning to suspect she is a replicant (that is, an android). She shows the policeman Deckard a photograph from her childhood and says, “Look, it’s me with my mother.” And Deckard – the policeman and teller of truths – says to her, “Those aren’t your memories, they’re implants. They belong to Tyrell’s niece.” She recognizes then that her history is not her own, and that she is therefore not the person she thought she was. Sounds awfully familiar to me.

AK: Larissa, thank you very much for your time and for so generously sharing your thoughts!

LL: You are welcome. Thank you for all your thoughtful questions.