

“We Should Instead Dream of a Better World That Is Anchored in the One That Exists Now”

**Saleema Nawaz and Larissa Lai
in Conversation with Dunja M. Mohr**

The annual conference of the *Association for Canadian Studies in German-speaking Countries*—conducted online due to Covid-19 in 2021—topicalized the new realities Covid-19 had created for Canadian society, politics, economics, academia, and the arts. Charged with the task to organize one of the two cultural online events for the conference, I was thrilled when three excellent Canadian authors agreed to a reading for the Literary Café. Quebec poet and novelist Louise Dupré read from her highly acclaimed book *Tout comme elle* (2006)—a moving homage to the tender but troublesome relationships between mothers and daughters—with her translator, Ursula Mathis-Moser, kindly supplementing her superb German translations. Originally written for theatre performance, Dupré’s poetic text explores the tension between indestructible love and inevitable loss, an overarching theme on a personal and collective level in the other two readings. Larissa Lai and Saleema Nawaz read from their pandemic dystopias *The Tiger Flu* (2018) and *Songs for the End of the World* (2020). Because of its realist mode, its coincidental choice of a future deadly Coronavirus driven pandemic (called ARAMIS) originating in China, and its setting in 2020, Nawaz’s *Songs* comes surrealistically close to the globally shared actual experience of the Covid-19 pandemic, affecting nations and individuals very differently. *Songs* traces a whole panoply of characters and how they are affected by the spreading pandemic, but focuses on the activation of coping strategies, acceptance of the necessity to change, and conscious choices of solidarity, community, and responsibility. The dystopian future in Lai’s *Tiger Flu* is further removed in time. The world is split into various societies living in separate, gender-polarized quarantine rings—including an exiled feminist separatist utopia of genetically engineered clones—and the de-extinction of the Caspian tiger and the conversion of its bones into wine which causes a deadly flu that ironically threatens humans (men in particular) with extinction. Hope for survival emanates here from cross-materialities and cross-species collaboration. All in all, it was a great event, mesmerizing the large virtual audience. For the *Zeitschrift für Kanada-Studien*’s special section on the repercussions of the Covid-19 pandemic in Canada, Larissa Lai (LL) and Saleema Nawaz (SN) generously agreed to conduct an online interview over the months following the Literary Café. – Dunja M. Mohr (DM)

DM: First of all, thank you to both of you for agreeing to participate in this online interview, following your wonderful readings at the online “Literary Café” of the annual conference of *Association for Canadian Studies in German-speaking Countries* in February 2021. To start this off, I would like to begin with some more general questions. Where were you when the Corona pandemic was declared or, when did you realize that this was for real? Considering that you both had just published or were about to publish a novel that addressed a pandemic, did you immediately see any connections with your literary works?

LL: COVID had a rolling start for me because I was paying attention to the news from China. I was conscious of the impact that epidemic and pandemic viruses can have because of H5N1, the so called “bird flu” that broke out in Hong Kong in 1997, and SARS, which also affected that city while I was there for the *Hong Kong International Literary Festival* in 2003. I paid attention as well to what was happening in China in late 2019 and early 2020, so I knew COVID was a big deal. However, I didn’t think the Canadian situation was serious until the second week of March 2020, while visiting the Humanities Centre at the University of Winnipeg. My host, Dr. Serenity Joo, was very worried about it because she was in touch with her family in Korea. She convinced me that the issue was not to be taken lightly. I had been in Regina the week before that for the annual literary festival *Talking Fresh*. I remember I had a packet of disinfectant wipes and wiped down my seat, window, armrests and tray table on the plane both coming and going. I don’t usually buy disinfectant products—I tend to think of them as toxic and smelly. So, I was worried enough at that time to spend two whole flights breathing in that unpleasant chemical smell, but not worried enough to stop travelling. And we were being advised against wearing masks at the time.

I was travelling to promote *The Tiger Flu*, a novel about the long term, uneven effects of a pandemic, at the time COVID broke out. The connections were so obvious, it was impossible not to see them. *The Tiger Flu* recognizes that pandemics affect populations unevenly. Because of a long-standing interest in the politics and ethics of chance, I had imagined my fictional pandemic as unexpectedly affecting men more than women. There were some early reports out of Italy that showed demographics like this, but mostly COVID has affected poor people, Black people, Indigenous people and people of colour. We’re really seeing this now with countries in Africa and Latin America struggling to get first doses while many privileged countries are discussing the possibility of a third dose booster shot.

The Tiger Flu also saw the intensification of our lives online, though the way it is imagined is a bit different—a bit more science fictional. In *The Tiger Flu*, scientists find a way to upload consciousness to the internet, which they market as a kind of cure. But it only works for people who believe in the mind/body split. This “cure” forces those who believe to really commit to that belief—the body dies so that the uploaded consciousness can survive. And the internet, in the world of the novel is not

dispersed through a field of servers, but rather housed on two satellite mainframes called Chang and Eng. I didn't yet know about Space X, but such things have been available within the field of our cultural imagination for a long time. Chang and Eng rise and set like the moon, lighting up the city streets. One of my early interviewers, Smriti Bansal, found that the city of Chengdu in China is planning to launch an artificial moon to light up the streets and save electricity costs. She also found an article about conservation biologists planning on actually bringing the Caspian Tiger back from extinction—something I knew was possible but didn't know was in the works. Of course, I was actively extrapolating from phenomena I knew existed, so it's not like these ideas have come from nowhere. But it was a very strange coincidence indeed that COVID arose right on the heels of *The Tiger Flu*.

SN: I was in Montréal, Quebec, when the pandemic was declared. At that point, I had already been working with my editor to prepare a Covid-19-related FAQ sheet to accompany ARCs of my new novel out into the world—an idea that had been proposed in January 2020 because of the surreal similarities between the actual novel coronavirus and the one described in *Songs for the End of the World*. Back then, there was still some cautious optimism that the virus would be contained. By early March, we were working on adding a disclaimer, a Publisher's Note, and it was decided that the FAQ sheet would become a Q & A included in the book itself to provide necessary context on the many years that I spent writing it and the extensive research I carried out. The connections between the pandemic and my novel were not only immediately obvious—they were overwhelming. These connections resulted in large-scale meetings at the publishing house to determine possible changes to the release date, marketing and promotional concerns, and even late-breaking reconsiderations of the title (which ultimately did not change).

Most of all, we wanted to ward off any suspicion that this novel was written in response to the Covid-19 pandemic—since nothing could be further from the truth!

DM: How has Corona changed or affected your life and your work as a writer? And, by extension, how has Covid-19 affected the literary and cultural landscape in Canada from your experience or in your opinion? Do you see a particular development in terms of how the arts respond to Covid-19 in Canada? See, for example, the March 2020 *New York Times Magazine's* "Decameron Project" that true to the motto "When reality is surreal, only fiction can make sense of it" commissioned short stories on Covid from twenty-nine authors, including Tommy Orange, Edwidge Danticat, Charles Yu, Rachel Kushner, Colm Toibin, David Mitchell, and Margaret Atwood. Will we see Covid-Lit in the future or is there more of a tendency towards oversaturation?

LL: Oddly, COVID brought me a new awareness of my mortality. It made me want to look to the past—I'm working on a new novel about the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong. There is something about the way that COVID is public that allowed me

to inhabit the occupation in my imagination more intensely than I've been able to before. I'm not sure why this is the case—I lost friends during the AIDS crisis I inherit my fair share of what Marianne Hirsch calls postmemory. But for some reason, COVID connected me to that history.

In a more daily sense, I'm at my desk more than ever, which is not healthy. And I'm not travelling at all, at least not physically. Our cultural life has been transacted almost entirely on Zoom. Though like many of my friends and colleagues, I suffer from Zoom fatigue, I also appreciate the ways in which I'm able to visit and take part in events in other cities across the country and across the world. I'm aware, however, that the usual First World privileges apply. Those without access to the technology are more intensely shut out than ever. I miss that sense of being physically in touch with people regardless of their access to technology.

In terms of what we'll be talking about and writing about after the pandemic, I'm not sure my predictive skills will be any better than anyone else's! However, as a novelist and poet, I do hold the value and cultivate the practice of paying attention. I think we'll keep talking about the social and political conditions of the COVID moment because there's still so much to understand in terms of the range of experiences, and also how COVID has shifted everyone's daily life, and thus our relationships to one another. It seems likely that COVID will have long term effects on our social and individual lives. There are those who suffer from "long COVID". There are many who have died. There are many who have lost loved ones and will be grieving for a long time. We have certainly lost great writers, artists, activists, scientists, athletes and more. We have surely lost ordinary people who meant a great deal to their communities. Our world is already changed. New variants may keep plaguing us for some time to come. I'm sure governments have learned things about how to manage populations in ways that are both positive and negative. Their abilities to manage population health have vastly increased, but so has their ability to surveil us. There will for sure be economic effects and advances in vaccine science that we might benefit from more quickly than we otherwise would have. The thematizing of COVID as a hot topic might fade, but the experience of it and the relationship between it and other aspects of our lives will likely appear in novels, short stories, poetry, film and theatre for a long time to come.

SN: The pandemic affected my work quite concretely in terms of changing the format and release date of my novel (it was released early as an e-book in April 2020 and later, according to schedule, in print in August 2020), and it of course also framed its reception. As someone pointed out in a review, *Songs for the End of the World* can no longer be read or experienced in the way it was originally written or intended.

I can't speak to market considerations, and I'm not sure they always reflect what people are actually interested in reading. I have several students I am mentoring right now here in Canada who are working on dystopian novels, so I can confirm that the

impulse to write these works hasn't yet left us. For me, much of the urge to write fiction comes from the satisfying challenge of imagining something I haven't experienced, so for me, the real pandemic has removed that fundamental curiosity. But every crisis makes the next one that much easier to imagine, so that is another reason to continue to expect more pandemic literature, and, I suspect, more climate-related fiction in the future.

DM: There have been endless interviews, op-ed pieces, futuristic documentaries not only about how Corona has affected society and, tragically, individual lives. Much has been written about the changed way we work and socially interact, but also about possible post-Corona futures. Quite a few of these have voiced hope for fundamental changes: that we will rebuild a better and more humane world from this crisis. Others have cautioned that we will just be in for something worse and Corona has just been the prelude. And yet others have looked at the Corona pandemic as a precursor for what to expect once the climate crisis hits with full force if the world does not tackle it adequately. What is your utopian or dystopian or ustopian anticipation – what will the world, what will Canada look like after the pandemic? What have we learned, if we have learned anything at all?

SN: I am afraid that in this exact moment I feel perhaps a bit less hopeful than I did while I was working on my novel. Even though the majority of people have behaved well throughout the pandemic, it has been incredibly disheartening to see the rise of the anti-mask and anti-vax movements, and to see, particularly in the US, just how far misinformation and fear can be amplified and exploited by unscrupulous leaders. One can't help but wonder what kind of positive difference a competent American president might have made, on a global scale, if one had been in power at the start of the crisis.

I truly hope that positive change will emerge from this crisis—better global cooperation, improved disease surveillance, the expansion of universal health care, greater accessibility via virtual events, guaranteed sick days, wider accommodations to work from home, better personal hygiene and disease prevention, and increased science funding. I hope we can hold on to these ideas even as so many people clamour for things to "return to normal."

In terms of the climate crisis and what seems likely to be its many attendant catastrophes, I can only hope that citizens will put enough pressure on governments to make the best decisions in time. One thing we have learned, I think, is that on the whole, we are not good at facing things that aren't right in front of us—and even then, it seems, there will be those who continue to deny the facts. It is a very curious failure of both imagination (in not being able to project or dream beyond the current day-to-day) and reality (in not being able to face the truth without resorting to fantasy or conspiracy). Another thing I hope we have learned is the critical importance of having the right leaders. If most of the world could elect leaders with vision and

strong mandates on environmental issues, it could make a huge difference—perhaps even the difference between survival and extinction.

LL: We've entered a period of massive change. This was the condition that I was writing about in *The Tiger Flu*. If COVID signals anything, it's that we've entered a moment of acceleration. For me, it's a sign that the changes will be coming faster and more furiously than ever; it's this that the novel, at its core, was attempting to illustrate. If the virus signals anything, it signals a certain recursivity—the fact that humans are part of so-called "nature", that we impact it and it impacts us because we are continuous with it. These days, I find it helpful to think in terms of the tao because it's an understanding from my culture of origin that doesn't see humans as separate from nature, but understands them as a force within it, as it were. Some of the new materialists will talk about it as a series of mutually influencing autopoietic systems. (I like William Connolly's book *The Fragility of Things*.) I'm not a trained scholar of Taoism though, so what I'm describing is really Larissa's tao—the 'Tao for Now'. In such a field, what's better or worse for humans is pretty arbitrary. The Tao does not care; it registers energies and influences. Perhaps sometimes even causes and effects, though to think in terms of cause and effect is so crude, since the world is in a constant state of interaction and there are so many chance elements at play. At the same time, there are structures at work, both historically grounded human ones and non-human, earthly structures—always interacting of course.

For those of us who cling, however ambivalently, to the leaky life raft of liberalism, there are certain things we'd prefer. That the poor not suffer, that racism not intensify, that the rich not get too rich, that the oligarchs not call too many of the shots. I'm worried that everything that is already happening now is going to intensify—that the highs will be higher and the lows lower than they have been for the last fifty years or so. Right wing populism led by unstable yet charismatic leaders could be countered by stronger and more militant protest movements. The income gap could increase. Climate change could intensify—even if we take all possible steps to avert it now, it's already well under way. Racial divides could deepen. Those of us capable of the slow, nuanced work to shift it could become more and more marginalized. However, there may be little possibilities that erupt from the unpredictable interactions that occur as the change unfolds. These little utopian possibilities could grow and develop into unexpectedly good things. If the 20th century taught us anything, it is that the forced deployment of plans, however well-conceived, invariably lead to the unexpected, as many of the scholars and writers of utopia and dystopia have been telling us for a while.

What will Canada look like after the pandemic? We're going to have to work a lot harder to take care of the already vulnerable among us. The vaccine passport thing is going to be really weird—another wall in a world of so many walls. The right wing anti-vaxxers will be more self-empowered than ever. What if an anti-vax cult arises? In a sense, it already exists. The forces of self-righteous unreason are strong, and not

going anywhere. Media concentration, the collapse of universities in general and the humanities in particular will likely intensify, making for a less educated populace, less capable of complex thinking and more instrumentally minded. The concentrated publishing industry and media world could continue to make money off antagonism and scandal. People could become both stupider and more politically polarized, yet less able to explain their positions. These are the things I imagine with dread, though I also expect and hope for the unexpected.

DM: Over at least the past decade speculative fiction, dystopian literature in particular, has become mainstream literature with a large number of established authors contributing to the genre. In fact, this cultural upsurge extends to films on the big and the (not so) small screen, TV series, games, apps, video installations, visual and artistic performances etc. In *Dystopia: A Natural History* (2016) Gregory Claeys diagnosed that dystopia "defines the spirit of our times", Jill Lepore proclaims the "Golden Age for dystopian fiction" in *The New Yorker* (2017). Literary dystopia has become "fashionable" (Robinson 2018) up to the point of verging on "dystopia porn" (2018) in Vandana Singh's words.¹ It almost seems as if we're capitalizing on a decadent and fatalist lust for disaster, doomsday, a world in crisis, and our very own vulnerability, cynically revelling in dystopian party mottos and commodified dystopian tropes. Robinson warns that we risk an "all-encompassing hopelessness", if we don't begin to actively change that perspective, a view Rebecca Solnit's activists guide *Hope in the Dark* (2004, 2016) strongly supports and invites to join a 'game of future', "[t]o hope is to gamble. It's to bet on the future". Quite recently in *El País*, Margaret Atwood has also called on turning our collective scientific and aesthetic imagination towards hope and utopia, "We are going to have to figure out how to organize ourselves so that the planet remains habitable. Utopias are going to come back because we have to imagine how to save the world" (Fernández 2021). And preeminent utopian scholar Tom Moylan writes in his recent *Becoming Utopian* (2021), "it is clearly time for the political exercise of the insurgent hope of the utopian impulse with its transformative capacity". And that leads me to a twofold question: First, what is your take on this cultural dominance or prominence of speculative fiction, the dystopian imagination in particular? Do we succumb to a form of "impotence" of the "collective cultural imagination", as Franco Berardi's prophecy of doom goes in *Futurability* (2019)? And, secondly, what is your inkling concerning the full-fledged return of utopia, stepping

1 In a short piece in *Science Fiction Studies*, Indian speculative fiction writer and physicist Vanadan Singh argues that colonialism as one of the worst excesses of capitalism has created a "paradigm blindness" (429), incapable of dealing with the monstrous "World-Destroying World Machine" (429) it has created. The recent upsurge of dystopian novels and films has, Singh claims, too often obliterated imaginative alternatives that she sees originating from 'ordinary people' living in other worlds than the Western World Machine. For Singh, our speculative narratives must turn away from "dystopia porn, the easy techno-fix, or the escape-to-another-planet—so we might once more learn what it means to belong" (430).

through the vision door of hope? I read your novels, Larissa, *Salt Fish Girl*, *The Tiger Flu* and yours, Saleema, *Songs for the End of the World*, all as texts that incorporate a hopeful undercurrent, ending on a positive note. These are not utopian novels, but clearly, to me, they contain utopian nuggets. Perhaps you could elaborate on these thoughts?

SN: There is something to the phrase “dystopia porn” that makes sense to me on a visceral level. Why is it satisfying to watch global monuments be crushed or inundated with flood waters in Hollywood blockbuster movies? If it were real, the same scene would be devastating to watch. There is also an interesting kind of how-to narrative embedded within these movies and popular books that is usually centred upon a singular hero: as the world collapses, how is it possible for one person or family to carry on in spite of the odds? This narrative—of civil society breaking down in the face of disaster and a single hero facing it alone—is part of what I was trying to write against in *Songs for the End of the World*. While some kind of selfishness is part of human nature, I think we have a much greater capacity for community spirit and collective action than is generally reflected in these dystopian narratives. One of the ideas I was exploring in my novel is how the stories we tell about ourselves can go on to shape our actions—and it is therefore important what stories we are telling. Traditional narrative structures are centred on a single protagonist, so perhaps it is not surprising that these tales tend to relate and reinforce stories of individual heroism. But you can be sure that if humanity prevails in the face of huge, global challenges, it will be because of the actions of the many and not the one.

I do think it is important to imagine hopeful possibilities. I tried hard with all my background research to anchor my novel firmly in reality, and this commitment to reality included probing my general sense of optimism and faith in the goodness of humanity. In other words, this formed part of my research as well: verifying that most people—according to the findings of sociologists in disaster studies—will behave for the common good in a crisis. But humans are complex, imperfect beings, and our reality will always reflect that. I agree emphatically that we should turn towards hope, but not towards some ideal of utopia. There is no perfect society, and we have seen that attempts to create actual utopias have frequently resulted in dystopias. Utopia, from the Greek, literally means “no place”—it can be a dangerous fantasy. We should instead dream of a better world that is anchored in the one that exists now.

LL: I tend to agree with many of the critics you name, that too much dystopian thought can be dangerous. If one overcommits either to dystopia itself or the glamour of dystopia, there's a real danger of either wallowing in the horror, becoming apathetic, or embracing patriarchal (or otherwise elitist) narratives of survival. There's a certain fatalism and a certain self-righteousness to dystopia that can serve to reinforce conservative ways of thinking. Dystopia, at its totalitarian endpoint, wants to frighten us into submission: “If you don't go to sleep right now, the boogey-man will

get you" "If you don't clean up your trash, it will bring about the end of the world." To be clear, I'm all for getting good sleep and cleaning up one's trash, but it's the element of authoritarian threat underpinning dystopia that I don't like so much. Which is not to say that there aren't dystopian elements at work in *The Tiger Flu*, because of course there are. In that novel, the environment is a wreck, ordinary people are deeply disempowered, while corporate tycoons run the world. The de-extinction of the Caspian tiger and the making of wine from its bones brings about a flu pandemic that drastically changes the world's demographics. I partake of dystopian tropes partly to be in conversation with others, partly because I learned the hard way that you can't write fiction completely divorced from the world as it is, and partly because I do think it's going to be pretty difficult for humans to escape at least some of the consequences for their actions—unjustly and unevenly distributed, as it often is. However, *The Tiger Flu* is not a dystopian novel. My Grist sisters, in fact, come directly from the feminist utopian thinking of the 1960s and 1970s. I've just updated those ideas a little. But traces of Marge Piercy's Mattapoissett remain, as do traces of Ursula LeGuin's Gethenians and Monique Wittig's amazons. If there's a theory of action and consequence or utopia and dystopia at work in the novel, it's what I've been calling "emergent insurgency" or sometimes "emergent utopia". I'm with Tom Moylan from his earlier book on critical utopias *Demand the Impossible*. We need to continue to dream of better futures, even if we don't expect them to materialize exactly as we envision them. Rather, we need to act in the direction of those dreams. Our actions, concatenating with those of others won't bring about the future any one person sees, but it will bring about change. The better the dreams, the better the changes, or at least, that's the gamble. So, yes to Rebecca Solnit too and her idea of hope as a space of uncertainty. Our job—especially the speculative fiction writers and poets among us—is to attend to those moments when something hopeful erupts from the concatenation. For me, there is always a chance element and work. We do our best, and hope for the best. And more: life, like story, is a condition of constant flux. To see those moments of hopeful eruption—emergent insurgency—and to hold them up to the light is in a sense to create utopia. By attending to these moments—Idle No More, Black Lives Matter, the Arab Spring—perhaps we can attenuate them, draw them out, make them last a little longer. This can, but need not be, grand action. What's more important is that it is both human and possible. Of course, ugly moments also erupt, and hopeful moments always slip away again, but if we can see and breathe the hopeful ones when they arise, we can inhabit them, at least for the duration that they are with us.

DM: Following up what I just said about the dominance of dystopia in the current Western cultural imagination, it seems that Anglophone, but also indigenous and francophone Canadian writers in particular engage with the dystopian imaginary, e.g. Margaret Atwood, Cherie Dimaline, Catherine Knutsson, Daniel Kallas, Ronald Wright,

Michael Murphy, William Gibson, Anne Stone, Wayde Compton, Emily St. John Mandel, Élisabeth Vonarburg, Catherine Mavrikakis, or Thomas King, to name just a few, and of course your own work. Again, this is a somewhat larger question, or rather a number of impulses. For one, and this is perhaps a bit provocative, I was wondering whether potentially, this could relate to the overall long dominant theme of survival in the former 'Canadian (settler) canon'? Has Atwood's prominence, particularly *The Handmaid's Tale*, perhaps been a trigger or influenced authors to try out that genre (has her work been an influence for you in some way)? What *has* tempted or influenced you to write in this genre? Another thing I noted is that several works explicitly use the British canon as intertexts (e.g. Murphy – Cavendish, Wright – H.G. Wells, Atwood – Defoe, Orwell, Shakespeare, Mandel – Shakespeare).

SN: I think it is possible that in Canada our imaginations in this often-extreme climate do tend to turn in the direction of survival, but I haven't read enough world literature to say whether I truly think this remains a dominant theme in our canon particularly. I can say I haven't noticed it to be predominant in anything I have read to date.

I admire Atwood as a writer, though I have only read *The Handmaid's Tale* among her speculative works. I do think of her willingness to write across genre without sacrificing literary integrity is something that, for many of us, has removed psychological barriers to writing in different modes.

For me, I was not really setting out to write in the genre speculative fiction. Though *Songs for the End of the World* technically falls into this category, it was only set several years into the future at the time I was writing it. Its release in 2020, within the same year that its present-day fictional storyline unfolds, reflects that its setting truly is in the real world that we know here and now.

LL: It's really interesting for me to have a sense of how, from a European location, you're registering the formation of Canadian speculative fictions. Canadian Literature in general is a much more disparate field, I think, than our international friends and colleagues often perceive, especially now, as it is clearer than ever who has and hasn't had access to the means of publication and the possibility of review, whose stories get told by whom, and whose stories seldom if ever come to light. (Actually, this has been clear for decades to those of us affected by it.) Some of the writers you name, I suspect, would disavow the notion of survival, as this is both dated and exclusive to white settler writers with a long history of shutting the rest of us out, or seeing us as elements to be strived against and obliterated in order to survive. I think of Atwood in her 1972 book *Survival*, for instance, decrying Canadian writers' identification with "the Japanese" as though some of us are not Japanese Canadian (*Survival* 242). Her articulation of "nature", likewise, as a hostile presence to be struggled against and survived is both dated, and, for some of us, offensive, especial in the wake of successful Indigenous land rights cases here, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Survival, understood in Atwood's 1972 way, is a white nationalist project. (I'm sure her thinking has deepened since then.) While I won't deny that *The Handmaid's Tale* is an important book—we have much to fear from the religious right now as we ever did—I wouldn't call it a major influence for me personally. I'm much more influenced by writers like Ursula LeGuin, Marge Piercy, Octavia Butler, Monique Wittig, Angela Carter, Kazuo Ishiguro and the 17th century Chinese collector of tales, Pu Songling. While there's some crossover in the thematics of Atwood's more recent speculative fiction and my own, this is incidental. *Salt Fish Girl* was out a year before *Oryx and Crake*; it just didn't have the same publicity machine behind it. I was tempted, and indeed, convinced to take up speculative fiction as a form as a way of eluding the pressure that is often placed on racialized writers to write memoir or autobiography. I didn't want to self-anthropologize for the benefit of the white public that the industry here still largely imagines and produces for. This is not to knock BIPOC writers who do write in these genres. Each of us has our own reasons for doing what we do. The work of Fred Wah and others on the biotext has been useful for finding ways of writing the self that refuse easy consumption. Joshua Whitehead has been thinking lately about how to tell stories of the self in a mode he calls "biostory", again, to evade easy consumption. As for me, I find that the self has ways of erupting anyway out of whatever mode I choose, whether it's speculative fiction or experimental poetry.

Because of their reach and ubiquity, it's impossible to escape the influence of so-called canonical works; one has to talk back to them sometimes. I try just to be conscious of it when I'm doing it, and to make sure that I'm in conversation with non-canonical texts and writers also. In both *Automaton Biographies* and *Iron Goddess of Mercy*, I list my interlocutors, so that the whole field of conversation is available for further investigation for any readers who are interested. For me, it's more important to be part of a community than part of a canon. Canons have been so instrumental in a range of colonial and imperial projects. While it's harder than it might look to escape them, I'm not particularly interested in upholding them as such. (Which does not necessarily mean I wish to jettison texts, I just think we need to imagine and create better frameworks in which to talk about them.) I suspect the various writers you name may have their own reasons for engaging with Cavendish, Wells or Shakespeare. I won't presume to imagine what those are. For my own part, I don't feel bound by a national framework, even though my work might sometimes be studied and marketed through one.

I wonder, in fact, if the danger of dystopias is that they can tend to produce wounded nationalisms—one needs look no further than Michel Houellebecq's *Submission* as a case in point. I think the utopian element may be necessary to counter that. The more abject the dystopia, the more vengefully committed the wounded nationalism? This is why I advocate for story that traverses elements of both hope and despair. Without this movement we lose track of our own agency and the full range of the possibilities of our relationships with others.'

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