

“Hope, but also Danger”: A Conversation with Larissa Lai on not Going Back and the ‘Re’ of Recuperation

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Larissa Lai is a poet, fiction writer and academic who holds a Canada Research Chair at the University of Calgary, where she directs The Insurgent Architects’ House for Creative Writing. She has authored nine books. Her most recent works are *The Tiger Flu*, *Iron Goddess of Mercy* and *The Lost Century*. She is a recipient of the Jim Duggins Novelist’s Prize, the Lambda Literary Award and the Otherwise Honor Book. She was recently awarded a Maria Zambrano Fellowship at the University of Huelva in Spain and has been actively engaged in cultural organizing, experimental poetry and speculative fiction communities since the 1980s. Her work often explores themes of identity intertwined with elements of science fiction and the fantastical imagination. This interview took place in Parque García Sanabria on 24th March 2023 during a visit of Larissa Lai to the University of La Laguna and it focuses on the convergence of history, myth and affects, providing a reflection on the circularity of time and the promise of happiness.

Sheila Hernández González: In preparation for this interview we have been reading your articles, and some of them, like the well-known “The Sixth Sensory Organ,” are pieces that you wrote in the 90s, which means they are almost thirty years old. In a previous interview with Anja Krüger, you stated

that you do not define yourself as a propaganda writer and that you are more interested in notions like history, technology and memory according to your own particular experiential and embodied location (97). Keeping this in mind, how do you feel about growing as a writer? Since your writing is both personal and political, have you noticed any change or growing concern that has shifted away from your early works?

Larissa Lai: First of all, thank you both for your time and for giving my work such careful thought and consideration. I am really honored and I appreciate it so much. Thank you as well for this beautiful first question. I would stand by what you just said about recognizing the importance of writing from my own embodied location. If something has changed over the years, it is a sense of what exactly constitutes that location because, of course, as the discussions move on, our understandings of Chineseness and Asianness changes. The way we think about gender and sexuality has changed too, and my own life has moved on, meaning that I inhabit relationships differently. If something has shifted in 30 years, it is probably a deeper recognition of my own embodied relationship to other racialized positions. I am particularly thinking about Blackness and Indigeneity and the ways in which Asianness is continuously coming into being in relation to those racialized positions and through the vast and violent movements of capitalism and colonialism that place us differently, specifically in relation to questions of land and the body, and particularly the production of property. If you think about how Blackness is produced, for instance, in part through the horrors of the transatlantic slave trade, and what that might mean in relation to the way Asian labor comes in later to supplement it: Black bodies are commodified and Asian bodies are nominally not. Experiences of labor overlap and diverge from one racial location to the next in complicated ways also. In relation to Indigeneity, the major disjuncture occurs around Indigenous commitments to sacred land counterposed against Asian participation in the conversion of sacred land into real estate, if one thinks, for instance of the Chinese sojourners who worked on the railways to open up the West for colonization, or if one thinks of Asian participation in contemporary real estate practices now. Discussions around these issues were available in the 1990s, but they were perhaps not so much at the forefront. And so, if something happened at that time for me, it was an important recognition of how deeply those differences produce my own embodied experience, but also the embodied experience of others. I need to be accountable and responsible towards both my own repressed history and those of other racialized people, but without reading those histories in overdetermined ways that close the door on those parts of our being that are subtle or not yet visible or yet to come. If I have learned anything in all these years it is that I must move slowly, be extremely

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humble and really do the work of listening, which is as important as the work of speaking, writing, etc. I was aware of these things when I was younger, but as I get older that sense of how deeply embedded we all are in fraught and complex histories, how little language and relationship we have to address the problems, and how much building needs to be done to be more conscious. In the early days, I was fortunate to have been given an unusual education by virtue of coming up through the cultural communities in Vancouver: a big part of my early education was not in the academy, but on the streets and in the artist-run centres and small art projects involving a very heterogeneous community of differently racialized people who were all trying to figure things out. I had the good fortune of being mentored by a number of artists engaged in a range of different practices and working from a range of different backgrounds too. Among them were writers, video artists, photographers, installation artists, curators, filmmakers, painters and more. One of the key things I learned from them was that the work is grounded in practice, and that practice matters more than the "results." I have committed myself to the work of practice. When you write on a daily basis, you figure things out about the way writing works, the way your own head works, what you are good at, what you are not, where you are able to see things very clearly, and also where you have tendencies make assumptions or fail to see, hear or feel. And so I think I am more aware of my own capacities and incapacities than when I was younger, which gives me a certain confidence around being able to speak of those things where I know I can see more deeply than others. But it also makes me more humble in those areas where I can see that I cannot see.

Jennifer Estévez Yanes: You write about possible futures and utopian dreaming, yet you always go back to the past. In your recent lecture "Why I Write Historical Fiction," you also emphasized the idea of working with that genre as a way of looking back to the past to understand the present. Would you say you revisit the past in a nostalgic manner (in an attempt to recuperate something lost), or are you critical in that journey back? Is it necessary to look backwards in order to look forwards?

LL: I would say that when revisiting the past a certain measure of nostalgia is probably unavoidable, nostalgia in that sense of an unattainable desire for a thing that is gone. For me, that desire is a huge part of what drives the work. The desire comes from an awareness that there are things about the past that we do not know, and also that there are things that are known but not very well known. There are also things about the past that have been recorded by people in positions of power in the past whose relationship towards the things known is not the relationship that I have. And so I think a certain nostalgia is

unavoidable in the sense of wanting to find the things that are not known, wanting to bring to the surface the things that are known but not well known, and maybe also a desire to retell, from my own location, the stories that have been told about me or my people and my forebears without much care or interest in us. So nostalgia as desire is unavoidable, although not necessarily bad. However, nostalgia and criticality are not mutually exclusive.

I think we need both research and the imagination. I fully believe in the power of the imagination to allow us to know things about the past differently from the truth of journalism or a scientific experiment, for example. One just needs to be aware of the possibility of romanticizing the past or reproducing power relations that you do not want to reproduce. Nostalgia is an attempt to recuperate something lost but with an awareness that you can never have the past again. So the 're' of recuperation is always the important thing to pull to the foreground. We have to recognize that any "return" is a turn again in which you get a repetition with difference. You do get something of the past but re-balanced with all of the present's troubles. I think that you can only make the future from the present that you have and the present that you have necessarily comes from the past as you understand it. And if you understand the past in a certain way you will tend to reproduce it. You do some kind of memory or genealogical work (which is the work of the imagination) in order to seek a different kind of relationship to the past because it places you in the present differently and in inhabiting the present differently, one hopes one can build a future, again, differently. It is about recognizing what is in the past to the best of your ability and developing some visions or ideals about what might emerge from that past. You do that work of imagining the future as well, and you dream it, but you are also working with others who may not dream the same dreams and may not imagine the same futures. So that is how I think about the relationship between the past and the future, but we are talking about linear time here. If we are thinking the way in which some Indigenous elders will teach (and also my recent work about the Tao), we see that there are other ways of being in time as circular or time immemorial where the past, the present and the future are coterminous with one another. And I think that is what story gives us. If you are not thinking in a linear mode, then story is just story, present and unfolding as it unfolds. But I think it is very hard for us as Western subjects to inhabit that and feel it. When we do this work you can maybe touch it for a moment, but that is it. One day, maybe. Or always, maybe.

SHG: Precisely regarding this recuperation of the past you are talking about and more specifically reading "Familiarizing Grist Village: Why I Write Speculative Fiction," which was published in 2020 and focuses on *The Tiger Flu*, we can see many connections to *The Lost Century*, even though these two novels

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initially seem to be very different. What stood out to me is that in this article you explore Hong Kong history and the recuperation of your own narrative because the older generations did not want to talk about it, and that is exactly what you will later portray in *The Lost Century*. Could you comment on that?

LL: Yes, there is a way of loving children that is perhaps a bit culturally specific to Chinese people. Do not get me wrong, this is not a cultural rule, rather, it is a tendency. If parents and grandparents suffered something, they keep it to themselves to prevent their children from experiencing it in hopes that the child will then have a happy life, unmarred by any memory of parental suffering. But Marianne Hirsch, through the concept of postmemory, shows us that children can know much about the suffering of their forebears even if they are never told about it: it can be passed on in unspoken ways, osmotically. Some recent research suggests that it might even be passed on genetically. Your generation and mine have the privilege of knowing in this kind of way because we are not living through what they had to live through. We can see how in our own bodies we can carry these knowledges—differently from previous generations—but it is in us, we still know, only differently. Our work seems to be to try to find out the content of that silence that was given to us out of love and yet, without having some sense of what the content is, we are actually kind of stuck in the past, and because we are stuck in the past we cannot move until we know. In order to have a future, we have to find out.

JEY: Also in "Familiarizing Grist Village," you wrote: "*The Tiger Flu* puts into play a utopian ideal: that of a society dominated by women instead of men. It is a response to our long, patriarchal moment, as all Utopias are responses to the historical moment in which they are written" (34). And we wonder, is there a particular trait of our current society that *The Lost Century* aims at responding to? Could we say *The Lost Century* comes from a recurring necessity to convey a particular message?

LL: In *The Tiger Flu*, I was trying to get at power relations among women and female-identified people. That is the question that is driving that novel. Historical novels and speculative fiction novels can only ever come out of the present because that is where you live, and even though *The Tiger Flu* purports to be about the future, of course it is about the present. In this case, it is about the difficulties in progressive communities to find ways of being in conversation with one another and getting along, which I think is something that is a concern in my life: just because we have been oppressed it does not necessarily mean we are going to understand one another in our different positions, even if there are overlaps in our experiences of oppression. *The Lost Century* asks that question too, but

in a different time and place: the British Crown colony of Hong Kong is invaded by another Asian nation and the characters have to grapple with what this can mean. What kinds of choices can and should one make about one's life, and how can one have friendships, alliances, and marriages in a place where your choice of loyalties lies towards the colonizer or the fascist? There is another layer too, which is about the cosmopolitanism of Hong Kong and relationships among Black, Indigenous and Asian characters in the story. The question of what the relationship can be among those people opens up in a horribly traumatic moment—the wartime Japanese occupation of Hong Kong, which is already a British colony. What happens when one formation of Asianness is attempting to “rescue another”? What if the so-called “rescue” is actually a mode of imperialism? So, if there is a question that the two novels have in common, it is: how can you fight oppression beside friends, allies or comrades? Is it possible to emerge from the suffering of the past working beside others from disparate locations, carrying problems of their own, which one may or may not understand?

On top of that, *The Lost Century* was written in the thick of a pandemic, and also in the wake of a novel about a pandemic, that is *The Tiger Flu*. COVID threw me into a strange, alternate temporality; it must have done so for many of us because your day and your relationships are not unfolding in the same way they had been in the months prior. I found it so surprising and strange and yet familiar because I had been writing about it just prior. Yet, while actually living through it, it was impossible to write about it. And I think that is part of what sent me spiraling back to the past, which is why the novel pays a certain attention to survival knowledge that I just seemed to have much earlier than most people. And of course, I had that knowledge because my family has been through similar times before, not quite in the same way, but I realize that it was the Japanese occupation coming out of me, two generations later. So, it is different from *The Tiger Flu* because it was a different kind of present. But you are right that the two novels ask related questions.

SHG: In your academic work, you also keep going back to history. In “Labour Asian Can: Grammar, Movement and the Institution,” for example, you present history as fragmented and sometimes circular, which other scholars have also agreed on regarding *Salt Fish Girl* (Huang). This is also palpable in *The Lost Century*, but given that it is a historical novel with a clear timeline and does not rely on fantastical elements we wonder how does historical fragmentation and circularity present itself?

LL: It is not so much that history itself is fragmented, it is that the narrative fragment is a form that is accessible to me from my own embodied location. I cannot claim to know or tell a story about a whole and complete past. But if I can

offer my readers enough fragments pertaining to the past, they might understand the past differently and more deeply than if I did not offer these fragments. We need multiple voices and multiple narratives in order for any narrative to make sense. In *The Lost Century*, the story that Great Aunt Violet tells Ophelia is more or less linear, but it is incomplete. She tells what she remembers and what she confabulates. She is not an entirely reliable narrator, but other voices erupt through the novel—Emily’s, Tak-Wing’s, Tak-Tam’s, and Courchene’s. There is also a third-person omniscient voice that for the most part tracks the story of Mah, and letters exchanged between Isadore Davis Wong and Morgan Horace, through which their stories unfold. It is a novel about interlocking relationships and the voices may be fragmented, but they are fragmented in order to show how the characters are connected to one another as they unfold their individual stories together. So it is both fragmented and stitched together. In some ways, it is quite different from *Salt Fish Girl*, in the sense that it addresses a much shorter time frame, four years rather than several centuries. Also, *The Lost Century* does not foreground fantastical elements in the same kind of way that *When Fox is a Thousand* or *Salt Fish Girl* do, though there are still fantastical elements at work in the novel. While the earlier novels engaged speculative elements as a mode of memory, I use them differently in *The Lost Century*, as marks of humility, the way a potter might press her thumb into an otherwise nicely rounded bowl. I do it to show that there is much that I do not know and that there are likely mistakes that I have made. Without the fantastical elements, the story might appear transparent and seamless. I put the fantasy elements in to remind the reader that the story is made up and that there is imagination at work to fill all kinds of gaps. It reminds the reader that some forgotten things remain forgotten; that there is so much I do not know. We can never truly have the past back. Great-aunt Violet says it in the novel and she is right. I am like a little dog in the dirt, digging to find the bones. Something does come back, but it is not actually the past. So, if I see something weird, like the laws of physics being defied in the throwing of a ball, for instance, I will put it in the story both in order to give myself and the reader something, like a token of the past, but also make it strange so that it is very clear that it is not factual truth of the past, that I do not have any more access to that than anybody else, and yet, I can still have something. It is not fact, it is not data, or the exact thing you were looking for, but it is something. So, for me, that is the work of the fantastic in *The Lost Century* and maybe if there is something in this recent novel that the work of engaging in the archive offers is that I am getting a little bit of fact. There are real traces there: photographs and written records, memoirs, autobiographies, newspaper articles, legal tribunals, etc. The source material is a bit different, the archive is a slightly more proper archive. It is still fiction, but there is more “fact” at work in it than in the previous novels. Different grounding materials do

lead to different kinds of narratives. Or to put it differently, the previous novels were more interested in narrative precursors and the truth of the fantastical imagination, while *The Lost Century* is interested in an existing historical record and the truth of the archive. But I would still have to contend with the problem of the archive that we know through Derrida, which is that the archive cannot really give you the past either. And yet there are powerful traces of the past in the archive. Working imaginatively with it offers something different than working imaginatively with myth and folk tale. In *When Fox Is a Thousand* and *Salt Fish Girl* my archive was folk tale and myth. I leaned on Pu Songling's *Strange Tales of Liaozhai* and other books like it, as well as bits of anthropology and bits of personal travel. In *The Tiger Flu*, I engaged not so much archive as intertext—earlier feminist speculative fiction about non-heterosexual reproduction, women's communes and lesbian collectives.

JY: On a similar note, and as for the inclusion and revision of “origin myths” (Harmer 1) and fluid temporalities in your work, can the use of mythology be considered an antidote to forgetting, that is, as a way of filling in the gaps?

LL: This gets at what we were talking about before. The work of myth, the work of story, does something that belongs to a different temporality than the temporality of the novel which wants progress and wants some kind of linearity. I think a certain level of forgetting is unavoidable for the reasons that we were just discussing: you cannot go back. But what myth or tale or story do is different from what the novel does in circular time and time immemorial. Myth does not recuperate, it does not do anything for that linear mode of time or forgetting, because forgetting belongs to linear time. Myth does not care about the calendar. The Lebanese Canadian artist Jamelie Hassan taught me a little bit about an Arabic way of being in story. They do not open their stories with “once upon a time,” they say “there was and there was not.” This is so beautiful because that sense of presence and absence layered into the same moment that we inhabit the minute we enter the story does not belong to history or memory. So, I would say no to the antidote, but yes to a sense of presence that we would not have any other way.

SHG: Considering that sense of presence you were just talking about, we might think of affects, which are deeply connected to the corporeal and bodily experiences. Some scholars (Oliver; P. Lai; Phung) have indeed written about how, in your work, the senses (and particularly the sense of smell) play a very important role. How would you relate the sense of smell and the past in your stories? Do you see a connection between embodied affective responses to the past and transgenerational memory in your texts?

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LL: In *Salt Fish Girl*, the sense of smell allows me to make an engagement with the work of memory. There is something about the sense of smell that is very evocative, it offers a different way of knowing, and therefore a different way of tapping into the imagination than the work of sight or the work of hearing. For whatever reason, because of the tradition we inherit, sight primarily is the sense that novels traditionally tend to hold up, more so than smell or touch. To think about smell allows me to engage with these questions of forgetting and memory. It can work in a kind of double time in the sense that if you smell the same smell that you smelled a decade ago, especially if you have not smelled it since, it can bring that moment back to you in a very immediate and visceral way. But it does not bring it back to you in a linear way: it is evocative, it does not give you the data on a decade ago or a news report from a decade ago, it gives you a sensation from a decade ago that can trigger things that you might otherwise have forgotten. Perhaps smell can allow us to consider postmemory, as in that connection you are carrying ancestrally in some kind of way. And I feel I have had these experiences traveling, for instance, in South China for the first time and smelling the air, the rice growing, the fish in the ponds, etc. And thinking "I know this smell even though I have never smelled it before." The sense of smell for me somehow verifies a sense of bodily connection to a place through family; as an ancestral connection or a kind of fleeting waft that does not belong to the field of reason and yet can be sensed. They do not provide an evidence-based kind of truth; they offer a different kind of truth and a different relationship to the past. I think it is possible to cultivate one's sense of smell through practice. And maybe that is something that fiction writers, and probably artists more broadly, might have to offer to the present moment: a way of getting that thing that slipped away from us, so it is not forgotten. It is a way of bringing things back that does not belong to any other mode of truth.

JY: Continuing with the implications of affect, Sara Ahmed writes about the promise of the good life very much in terms of Lauren Berlant's cruel optimism. As Ahmed puts it, "the very obstacle to happiness is what allows happiness to be sustained as the promise of the good life: as if happiness is what we would have, if that thing did not get in the way" (32). This is almost explicitly present in your speculative fiction novels. Particularly in *Salt Fish Girl*, we see how characters are promised happiness and prosperity if they follow certain social rules and participate in a devastatingly capitalist system. Would you say your work is critical of the "good life" as cruel optimism? If that is so, is this idea also part of *The Lost Century* and how does it manifest differently in speculative fiction than historical fiction?

LL: As I imagined it, the town of Serendipity in *Salt Fish Girl* reflects the acceleration of capitalism and the kinds of spaces and places that in the early 2000s were being constructed to make places for the wealthy and privileged, or at least, the middle class, to live lives advertised as, if not happy, at least comfortable and "safe." Serendipity is a gated community, a kind of cocoon sheltered from the horrors of the Unregulated Zone. The dream for the people who live there is, I think, more one of safety and security than happiness as such, though I suppose one could argue that the hope for safety and security constitutes a kind of optimism in Berlant's sense. The dream of safety and security is a fraught dream given the horrors unfolding right outside the gates of Serendipity. Miranda's parents, for instance, do not quite dare to dream of happiness. So, for sure, *Salt Fish Girl* is a critique of that mode of desire and those kinds of compromises that people make and hold up as a kind of ideal that capitalism makes possible, but at the expense of anybody outside the gates of such places. But it also has a measure of compassion for that position. There is a cost for those inside too, perhaps precisely of happiness. They foreclose happiness in order to stay safe. I would probably write it differently now, given all the changes that have been unfolding across the planet since its publication in 2002. However, Berlant and Ahmed are imagining a more or less contemporary moment. *Cruel Optimism* came out in 2011. *The Promise of Happiness* was published in 2010. I imagine they are both attempting to capture the affect of a late neoliberal moment. But *The Lost Century* is set in the thirties and forties. The promise of happiness is something that is held up as a way of keeping people in the thrall of an increasingly messed up economic system that we do not have a lot of tools to make otherwise. *The Lost Century* belongs to a different moment and the characters in the novel are the subjects of the early-mid 20th century. The promise of happiness in Hong Kong is a promise of happiness for the British. However, the characters whose lives are being considered in that novel are the people whose lives are incidental to the British colonial project. They are there to be instrumentalized as the British see fit. Society and its promises are not being constructed for them. They work to survive and build their lives out of available materials and narratives in a field that the British are producing for themselves. The Chinese are the majority population, but it is a colonial situation. So, if there is something that I am doing as a writer in the novel is trying to recuperate lives that have not been much written about. Maybe I am trying to recover fleeting moments of happiness for them, but their condition is not one that expects happiness. Obviously, they are not without agency. They are not so under the thumb of the British colonial administration that it is not possible to live. People make the happiness that they can with what they have. Emily is a strong dreamer. She is also fortunate in that there is an available cultural narrative for her to pin her hopes to. She pursues heterosexual romance as a way

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of trying to make a happy life for herself. Was it promised in any way? I think it is too early for this to exist as a promise. It is a possibility and a dream. It is available for her as a narrative that she can chase. She tries to make it happen. It does not end well, and the reasons could be understood as structural, but I think the structures of capitalism and race in early 20th century Hong Kong were quite different from how they are in contemporary Britain or the US. One of the main points of the novel is to illustrate the difference. The absence of an available narrative, an available dream, is more clearly read in the figure of Violet. In contemporary terms, we might understand Violet as lesbian or queer, but in her moment, she does not have the language for it. Though she has feelings for Ting-Yan, and though they eventually end up together, she thinks of her life as a life of service. Her actions are all actions to improve the lives of others. Most of my characters are not the willful girls of Ahmed's theory. Violet in *The Lost Century* and Kora in *Salt Fish Girl* have more of Roy Miki's "asiancy" about them. Their ability to act consciously with determined intent is an ability that flickers. Society does not provide them with any easy narratives to pursue, so not only is it difficult for them to summon the will, but it is also difficult for them to know what to direct the will towards. They need to invent the narrative for themselves.

I might say something, though, about the promise of immigration, which is not what unfolds in *The Lost Century* but of course, is on the horizon as a kind of utopian possibility available to some of the characters and not others. I am definitely thinking about the lives of contemporary Chinese Vancouverites in particular and trying to imagine the pasts that they come from. I no longer live in Vancouver and the novel is not set there, yet *The Lost Century* has that city very much in mind. There is a happiness promise for the immigrant: that they could become somebody else in this other place through a national ideal that they have not yet figured out is fraught. And of course, when one arrives in the new country you encounter all kinds of troubles, racism not the least among them; the pragmatics of a life unfolding in another place where you are not at home. And so maybe that is what is present as a promise of happiness in the novel.

SHG: We might argue happiness through your idea of "insurgent utopias" through which you attempt to reflect "eruptions of the unexpected" through the interaction of worlds. You state: "[f]or me this is where both hope and danger lie" (Lai, "Familiarizing" 34). However, the title of your last novel announces a lost world, or else century, but is it indeed lost, or is there any hope in loss itself? Are both hope and danger part of *The Lost Century*?

LL: The century is both lost and not lost. The novel is more an exploration of the problem of loss than it is a statement declaring loss. In the first instance, I am

thinking about the 99-year lease that Britain had on Hong Kong as a colony—a century minus a year during which the city was both not itself and becoming itself. The fact of British colonization is a large part of what makes the city what it is, though it is not a British colony anymore. Now it is both British and not British, lost and not lost. The so-called return to China has been very fraught, more now than at the 1997 handover. And of course, the China that Hong Kong “left” is a very different China from the one it has been “returned” to. Before the Opium Wars, Hong Kong was a very small and not particularly consequential outpost at the foot of the Pearl River delta. Through the colonial century it grew into a key port for import and export between China and the rest of the world. In those years, it also grew into a teeming metropolis. Many South Chinese crossed the border into the colony at various points—seeking work, fleeing famine, escaping persecution, or leaving dangerous political situations. And in the middle of the “loss” it was occupied by the Japanese for four years because the British lost the Battle of Hong Kong. In those years, it was lost to both Britain and China, in a twisted moment of occupation that was both fascist and decolonial. So I am really interested in the contradictions of loss, and the question “lost to whom?” or “lost to what?” In these large geopolitical losses (which are, of course, also gains, but contradictory ones), it is difficult for people to know themselves and even to know what stories to tell about themselves. Ordinary people suffered a lot, without narratives to make their suffering make sense. Some, like Emily and Tak-Wing, clinged onto narratives of romance or racial belonging. Others, like Violet, groped around in the haze of newness, trying to make sense of a cascade of unfamiliar and difficult experiences and trying to do the right thing in the thick of them. In order to hang on to pride and mitigate shame, and in order to remain hopeful for the upcoming generations, they kept a lot of secrets. So many stories were lost, and in the loss of story, I think it became hard for us to know who we were and are. And yet, through the work of imagination or an imagined time and the archive some things can be recuperated. I think the novel offers hope because the imagination and the archive have made it possible to bring something “back” from which, perhaps, a future can be imagined. Nevertheless, by putting the imagination in conversation with the archive, a writer might be able to put conditions in place for a moment of eruption, a knock at the door that could be the (temporary) arrival of a happy future. So there is a utopian home but also the prospect of terrible danger in this work. Yet, especially for those of us who have the capacity to imagine, I think it is our duty to take risks. And after that, you have to be open, nothing is ever guaranteed. So hope sure, but also danger.

JEY: As many works of speculative fiction, your novels deal with the idea of hope and have a hopeful ending where, after suffering loss and destruction, we are still presented with a world of possibilities through transformation, which is

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usually embodied through difference (like the Grist Sisters creating a new civilization at the end of *The Tiger Flu*). We also wanted to end this interview with that sense of hopefulness. What does hope look like for you and how does it connect to having empathy for others and their experiences?

LL: You are right. I tend to end novels on a hopeful note. I feel I have to. There are many stories told about our death and destruction in which we are disposable and incidental to the main narrative. We so often get blown up in the first frame of the movie or the second chapter of the book. There are plenty of stories out there as well in which we come to tragic ends so that white people can be happy, think of *Madame Butterfly*, for example. So I feel that, politically, it is important to show our survival, to show that we have continued, to show that we are the protagonists of our own stories. Although with the Grist sisters the way that the continuation happens is quite strange. And it is in the aftermath of a lot of things that are less hopeful. I do not want to be a pollyanna about it, there are many forces at work and not all of them are positive and productive. Some of them, even in spite of their best intentions, are doing things that one might not necessarily desire. Who knows what the outcome will be? Or outcomes, since the future is continuously arriving. So I remain hopeful as a matter of politics and responsibility. I think I have to show that there are possibilities for the ongoingness of life because otherwise how do we keep going? For me, that is the work: to show us continuing to live. When it comes to empathy, you cannot step into the shoes of the other, but you can still attend to the conditions of the other to the best of your ability. You have to listen, do your homework, read, and show up when you are asked to show up. And then hope that what is unfolding in the relationship is something that is moving in a productive direction. You act when your best judgement says to act. But you are also still and quiet when your best judgement says it is best to do that. For me, this is the work of hope. You hope for your own survival and you hope for the survival of Indigenous people, their stories, their world, their lands, and for Black people, and for Black lives. But I have to emphasize that you cannot know. There is a profound ambivalence that I know is very difficult to inhabit and yet, if we do not hang on to that ambivalence there is the danger of erasing what both you and others have suffered. That is the reason why it is dangerous to be too joyful. So, hope, sure, but tentatively.

JEY: I would say you can connect hope to agency. You mentioned something there about other generations in the past and the fact that you make what you can with what you are given and there is some agency in that.

LL: Sure, you have to do what you can do with what you have, that is your responsibility. And you have to attach hope to that because otherwise, why are

you doing what you are doing? But by the same token, one can be too arrogant about one's capacity to make the world. We have to recognize that we are always making the world in uneven collectivity with others. You cannot know with any certainty what the other desires, what they dream, what they are trying to do. Also, some others are doing horrible things. One cannot be naive about that either; there are fascist others. I cannot desire what others desire or dream their dreams, because I am not in their shoes. Yet I have to judge which others I will ally myself with and which I will not. So, when you act, you have to hope and you have to feel committed to the judgment you have made which cannot and should not be easy. But because none of us has total knowledge there is no knowing for sure that my action or my inaction, my speech or my listening, will bring about the thing that I want. Hope is there, not in the judgment or in the action, but in the interactions of beings and forces.

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