



INTERVIEW

## BOOKS I HATE (AND ALSO SOME I LIKE): WITH TEOW LIM GOH

written by Guest Contributor April 19, 2017



I met Teow in a Denver living room. She presented the kind of poise and intelligence I like to pretend I have, and I considered myself lucky to share a creative space with her, even if only for a day. Her debut book of poetry, *Islanders*, was close to publication at the time. As accolades for *Islanders* piled up over the year that followed, I felt satisfied that, for once, the hype belonged to someone who deserved it. In speaking to me, she lent her formidable perspective to the question of unlikeable literature, and, naturally, the conversation veered into more meaningful territory.

You can read the *New Yorker's* review of *Islanders* here, and you can order it directly from her press, Conundrum, here.

### Why do you think people react badly to certain books? Is it personal?

I should say first that we all have our blind spots, including those of us who occupy marginalized identities. And we all make compromises, whether to survive or to get ahead.

But we don't make art in a social or cultural vacuum. Our work is shaped by the conditions of our lives. And though it might often feel that we're just scribbling in our caves, when we put our work out for the public to read, we influence how we see the world. The question is, do we reiterate old, tired, or harmful narratives or do we interrogate the stories we receive from the culture around us?

No one is perfect, but I appreciate the work of authors who ask these questions, even if they don't always succeed in doing so.

When we write in our notebooks or an early draft – things that are not meant for the public eye – we should write anything we want and worry about its politics later. But when we are preparing a work for publication, we have a responsibility to our subjects and our readers.

**In my classes right now, the subject of Lionel Shriver and her “I can do anything I want” attitude toward writing cultures in which she has not lived keeps popping up. What do you think about her stance?**

Writing and publishing are two different things. We can – and I believe we should – write anything we want. When we are at our desks, or going about our days living in our heads, we should follow where our thoughts and impulses take us.



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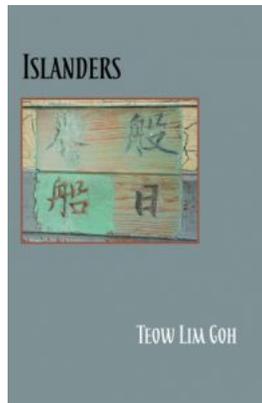
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his work, he struggled with the question of what right he had to write these stories. But he didn't claim to know the black experience. Instead, he examined his complicity with the murders. He interrogated his position in this history. It doesn't even the scales, but he basically wrote a history of white supremacy.

At a party last year, I talked to a white immigration lawyer who works with Central American refugees. We struck up a conversation when she said, "I used to think that if these people were detained, they must have done something wrong," to which I replied, "I know. I just wrote a book on Angel Island." She said that there are many stories that she would love to tell, but she's worried about appropriating them. On the other hand, these are important stories and how many people have the access that she has?



#### Did you have to come to terms with appropriation in a particular way with *Islanders*?

I did consider the question of appropriation when I wrote *Islanders*. My experience as a recent immigrant with a college degree and a professional job is very different from that of the Chinese during the exclusion era. But when I delved into the stories, I realized that I recognized the textures of the detainees' lives. I understood the context in which they acted. That's when I knew I could write their stories. Whether I succeeded in doing so is not for me to judge.

I'm curious about the Mexican border experience, but if I do write about it, it's unlikely to be in the form of intimate persona poems as I did with Chinese detainees at Angel Island in *Islanders*. I may be an immigrant too, but there are a lot of cultural nuances that I'll miss. That doesn't mean that I'll never write about the southern border.

I've been working on and off a project on the 1885 massacre of Chinese miners in Rock Springs, Wyoming. There are three main actors in the story: the white miners, the Chinese miners, and the Union Pacific officials. I hate to admit it, but I understand the UP officials best. Their experience is closest to my own.

#### How does your dislike of books manifest in your reading practices?

I believe art is a privilege and a responsibility. In the aftermath of the last election, AGNI editor Sven Birkerts wrote:

Is this work telling me something I need to hear in this new order of things? I'm not saying it must directly protest abuse or injustice or mendacious opportunism. But do I feel that the words have been put to the page out of some recognition of larger human urgency? Do they – if only in their fresh or arresting placement – signal that this is not business as usual? Are they blowing the dust off all the things that matter?

I tend to dislike books that reinforce "business as usual."

However, I like to keep in mind that a book I don't like may be balm for someone else. The question I ask myself is, do I dislike a book as a matter of taste, or are there deeper structural or ethical problems with the work?

I also think that I've developed a pretty good filter in choosing the books I want to read. I haven't read a book I outright hated for a while. I've read enough about *Fifty Shades of Grey* to know that I won't pick it up.

I think Ocean Vuong is a good poet, but for some reason, I couldn't get into *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*. I started it a few times, but I couldn't get past the first three or four poems. I don't hate it. I still have it on my shelf and will give it another chance when I'm ready.

As for genre, I have my preferences, but a genre shouldn't be judged by its mediocre examples.

#### Have you hated any specific books or authors?

I never got into David Foster Wallace. To be fair, I probably dislike the cult of sycophantic fanboys that shape the discourse around his work more than the work itself. I've read *Consider the Lobster* – meh – and I know *The Depressed Person* is a lifeline for many people. I can't bring myself to read *Infinite Jest*. It may be my loss, but I'd rather spend my time on just about anything else.

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destructive racial narratives and hides behind its willful innocence. And I hate the idea that we can help oppressed people by telling their stories. If we really want to help, we amplify their voices rather than speak for them.

I found Jack Kerouac insufferable, and I read *On the Road* and *Big Sur* in my early twenties, when I was living in Boulder, a gentrified former hippie town that houses the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics. I don't categorically dislike the Beats – I love Allen Ginsburg's early work, as well as Anne Waldman's performances – but even in my youth I could see that Kerouac and guys like Neal Cassady lived off their wives and mothers as they exalted the freedom of the road. Their ideas of art and freedom depended on having someone else pick up the slack.

**Word. I think of lots of other male writers when I think about those last two sentences: Henry Miller mooching off Anais Nin, Vera Nabokov subsumed and consumed by Vladimir.**

You don't need to be an artist to be an absent partner or to expect someone else to finance your life. Kerouac rarely wrote about the women in his life – or maybe I haven't read enough of his work to know whether he did – and I don't think he expected his wife or mother to midwife his books. I think he was more a deadbeat than anything else.

Men like Nabokov, on the other hand, expected the women in their lives to subsume themselves to their art. Eliot and Fitzgerald turned their wives into characters in their books while suppressing their wives' attempts to write. There is a sense of ownership and entitlement that's gendered.

It hasn't escaped me that among the Beats whose work I like, Ginsburg is gay and Waldman is a woman. They don't necessarily write about power dynamics of gender and art, but I think they have a level of awareness that suffuses their work with nuance.

**Do you think your dislikes have colored your reading of other works, or your writing practices?**

Maybe. As I said, I try not to judge a category by its mediocre examples. But I have little patience for certain kinds of books, and if I miss out on some masterpieces, so be it.

I like to think that I write from positive goals, that is, from what I want to do rather than what I would never do. I find that when I work from "never," I limit myself. But I'm sure my tastes and prejudices have shaped the way I write.

**Have you ever physically thrown a book across a room?**

No, but I came close with Robert Root's *Following Isabella*, which, if I remember right, is about how Root moved to Colorado and traced the footsteps of Isabella Bird, an English traveler who wrote *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains* in the late 1800's. I think I found every cliché about landscapes and the American West in the book. I didn't finish it.

Wait, there's Dani Shapiro's *Still Writing*. I still wonder what the fancy spices in her kitchen cabinet have to do with writing.

**Are there any books you find yourself regularly recommending?**

Lo Kwa Mei-en's *Yearling* and *The Bees Make Money in the Lion*, both volumes of poetry. I've read *Yearling* three or four times now, and each time I find something new. In *Bees* she exquisitely reinvents western poetic traditions such as the sonnet and the pastoral to write about alienation and citizenship, among other things. Both collections are thrilling.

**What are you reading right now, and do you like it or hate it?**

I'm reading an advance copy of Kate Zambreno's *Book of Mutter*. It's brilliant.

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Katharine Coldiron's work has appeared in the Rumpus, Hobart, the Normal School, and elsewhere. She lives in California and blogs at the Fictator.

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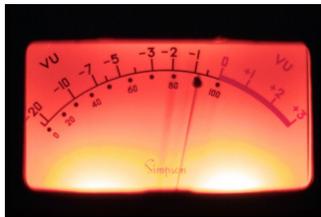
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