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On Such a Full Sea of Novels: An Interview with Chang-rae Lee

By Noelle Brada-Williams

Chang-rae Lee visited San Jose State in October 2015 as a guest of the Center for Literary Arts. The interview took place at the Martha Heasley Cox Center for Steinbeck Studies in front of a live audience. The Director of the Center for Literary Arts, Professor Cathleen Miller, introduced both Lee and the interviewer.

AALDP: I kind of feel that this is my “Pope Moment” because I have been teaching your work since I started being a professor and now I kind of feel like John Boehner, now that you have come, I may have to resign.

How many of you have read *On Such a Full Sea*? Let me sum it up quickly: It is his most recent novel, his 5th novel; it is the story of Fan, a diver in a fish farm in the not too distant future who leaves her enclave to find her missing boyfriend. In the process she travels across three different, distinct locations from her middle class factory town of B-mor, through the Counties, an anarchic realm without governmental services or protection from the dangers created by some environmental debacle, and on to the elite towns, the Charters, the cities for which Fan’s own town was built to provide healthy foods and supplies.

I must say that I found your most recent book eerily believable. The extremes of wealth were certainly very resonant for those of us who live in Silicon Valley. Every time I pick up the newspaper or turn on the TV there seems to be something that reminds me of that book. Just last week a report came out that pollution is killing 3.3 million people a year worldwide and that it is predicted to double by 2050. Also this one passage was particularly resonant. You write:

The settlements originally developed because the old-time towns and small cities were dying off because of crushing debts, as they couldn’t afford to run the schools and repave streets and fix sewers, the last intact services usually being the police. There were many opportunistic gangs and sundry marauders. But it didn’t take long for the inevitable turn, which is that the police forces took over the towns, the chiefs and their officers deposing (often violently) the mayors and the administrators; in fact, many of the settlements are now led by the descendants of those first

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strongmen, who generation after generation have exercised a martial level of control over the residents.

This passage particularly came to mind when I saw the images of Ferguson come across my television screen last Fall when you saw these military weapons turned on the citizens of Ferguson. So my first question is: Are you the Devil – or how else do you know what is going to happen in the future? I guess what I am really asking is how did you come to construct this world?

Chang-rae Lee: I didn't originally think I would have to construct a world entire. I was really focused on Fan's community. And that is what I was originally just interested in. I was interested in this immigrant enclave inside a sort of strange world, but really trying to focus in my mind at the start about how that little community, given its heritage, given its practices, given its cultures, endemic culture, how that would develop, sort of in an enclosed space, this cloister. So for me, the book was originally going to be a strange immigrant novel where the immigrants were kind of trapped in a bubble and could make their own little world. I was happy to think about that but the more I thought about that – and this may be responding to a question we had last night about context – obviously I can't just focus on this bubble, within the walls of this imagined community. So I began to think about what was happening outside. And of course that led me to certain questions about why the outside world would want this immigrant community to come and provide these things: pristine vegetables and fishes that weren't poisoned by the environment. So, every time that I went out in the world in my mind to think about, say, the Charter Villages where people really have everything that we know is – it's a very familiar society to us, a gated village, basically – or the so-called counties which as you describe, where nothing is really happening. There is a lot happening. There is human activity and human life but there is no oversight or anything like that. So, I basically just asked very simple questions about how those places got that way. The passage you read, it starts out because they just don't have any money to pay for anything. In my view, these places – you know I grew up in New York and Upstate New York is sort of a model for that. Upstate New York is very poor and has been poor for a long time, particularly post-industrially, after the Erie Canal era died out and then again after the wars. Basically, there are certain trends in our society that just have been apparent to me and worrisome to me: that we don't give enough money – that we don't have enough money because of certain tax laws and the way things are structured financially both at the governmental level and the private level – for people to have adequate schooling, places to live, decent neighborhoods and that these places in this society in which income inequality was the norm and a condition that no one was even questioning any more, that there would be less and less money for those sorts of people, that the income inequality that we think is pretty severe now would be even more extreme, so extreme that it becomes spiritual. That to me was I guess a kind of

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philosophical guide to all the expressions of that inside the society, the physical or societal expressions of that. You just take it to an extreme in terms of your imagined thought. What would happen to these towns? Who would end up taking over? Well, just the strong, the powerful, or those who had weapons, and just went on from there. And then what would happen inside those charter villages? Well, they would continue to accumulate wealth. They would become in some ways, smaller and smaller. But then of course, and we can talk about this later, if you want, but there are other consequences to living in a place of great wealth.

AALDP: Those of us who are involved in public education know nothing about the fear of loss of resources. [Snickers from the audience gathered at this California State University.] Speaking of education, I was wondering how much of your vision of the Charters and people like Glynnis and Quig are related to anxieties as a parent about educational opportunities for our children?

CRL: Oh yeah. It's the Charters who have everything – they feel they have the most to lose, because in the Charter villages –

AALDP: Because they *have* the most.

CRL: They have the most but also there's nothing protecting them. There's no safety net. It's all about them which is what we of course celebrate in this country, right? You are all so self-reliant but of course that's a fiction. We rely on each other so deeply. We rely on our government implicitly. But in this society there's none of that and so the only way that these Charters can retain their power, retain their wealth, retain their status is through the things that upper middle-class and upper-class people in our country know which is education, going to the right schools, having the right sort of associations. And once those breakdown, which is the case for one of the characters in the book, Quig, then they are in some ways banished forever. So that's a lot of anxiety, but you know with education—the state of public education and how we fund public education across the country, you know state universities—their budgets are cut and cut and cut and cut. And why? Well, where are those dollars going to? They're going to stadiums. They're going to prisons. They're going into all sorts of things that would be remedied if we gave more money for education. In some ways I think the novel is a novel that's very focused on class, and I've always been interested in class. I don't think ever people consider that I write about class but I've always felt very class conscious – maybe just the way I grew up – but I think all my books there is an underpinning of something, of a certain class conflict or class consciousness.

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AALDP: It seems most of your stories focus on folks on the higher end: Jerry Battle's family or Henry Park's family once they move to the bigger house, and the anxieties folks have at the upper end.

CRL: Those are anxieties that I grew up with. My folks were immigrants but my father was trained as a medical doctor so he didn't have anything to start with but he quickly accumulated a decent amount of some comfort in his life, but there was always a question of – I guess we grew up without a safety net because we were alone – but I guess there was always a question is this going to last? And that's why as a child I got a lot of pressure both explicit and implicit to do well. Because it wasn't about reputation or honor, it was just about making sure you survived and had security.

AALDP: I read in a magazine article¹ about the women divers of Jeju island, the *Haenyeo*, the women of the sea. Did you borrow from Korean culture when you were constructing B-Mor and its Chinese American hybrid culture?

CRL: I really wasn't. You know it's funny that you mention those diver women because I'd seen them on my visits to Jeju. They collect the abalones and all sorts of things. It's a great place to go eat seafood. But those women are amazing. They can stay underwater for many minutes. When I was thinking about what Fan would do and what this community would do, what function they would serve in this society, I knew that they would produce something, but I didn't quite know what. Was it electronics? Or this or that? I realized I wanted them to produce something very basic, something that everyone would value. When I got onto the idea about producing fish, I liked it very much because there seems to be something with me and water in my books. People are always swimming; they are always kind of submerged in some way, and I liked the idea that that she would be someone who was doing her work in some ways underneath of things and in an environment that was beautiful but maybe hostile.

AALDP: You said in another interview that *On Such a Full Sea* started when you went to Shenzhen and were doing research on the factory workers in China. What is it that makes you want to get on a plane and begin research in earnest? What is it about a topic that you feel there is a book in that?

CRL: I think it's something that has to have kind of rooted or infected you in a small way for a long time. I had just gotten this interest into China in general and I don't know why, particularly. Maybe because there are just lots of

¹ *Koreana: Korean Culture & Arts* published a four-article special feature titled “Haenyeo: Iconic Female Divers of Jeju” in its Summer 2014 issue (volume 28, number 2).

articles about the rise of China and all the things that were happening over there and as a pretty avid newspaper reader and magazine reader, I would always read any articles about China whether it was business, about politics, economics obviously, sometimes about all the internal politics but also about all the dissidents, and human rights kinds of stuff that go on there. So, I just found myself someone – again, I don't know if it is because I'm Asian – but I was just curious about it but the more I thought about it, the more I could see, and maybe I have a special sensitivity to it, but China really is at the forefront of our age and the age to come. They might have a meltdown and economic collapse and pretty soon, who knows! But that will just be a momentary thing. I mean, in the end, the loci of the global kind of energy, not just in capital but in other ways, is going to be in the East where there's a billion people in China, a billion people in India. That's really where it's going to be. That's going to be the generator for much of what the world is going to become. Just as an American I was fascinated by that and also awestruck by that and also kind of fearful. What's going to happen? I wanted to go in and explore these factories in particular because I'd read so many interesting stories about them and descriptions about them and I thought, gosh, this would be a time when, if you looked back, you would want to have said to yourself as a novelist, I should have gone over there and checked that out, all the millions of people coming from the provinces into the urban centers and factory centers of China and really being the engine of growth for the world. It would be like being able to go back to Pittsburgh in the 1890s and the steel mills there or England in the 1840s: the big pivots in history. So I thought this was one. But when I went over there, and I'm sure as you have read, I was all planning to write this novel, a very realistic novel about Chinese factory workers. But for a number of reasons I just felt that it was not my job in the end and I got onto this story.

AALDP: You write a lot about large scale events such as The Korean War and its impact in *The Surrendered* and the experience of the comfort women during World War II in *A Gesture Life*, these kind of iconic moments that have huge impacts on entire nations. What made you choose the topic for *Aloft*, a novel about a middle-aged man who has recently taken up flying and his troubled family?

CRL: I think all my books are sort of a response to the last book I've written just because I don't want to write the same book and I need to kind of – as people say today – “reboot.” I had just written *A Gesture Life* which is this really intense (for me) process. It took a long time – kind of a devastating time in my life, just all the things that were happening and after writing that book. It's a very very dark book. I consider it a horror story, really. People don't think of it that way but I consider it a monster tale. But after that I wanted to

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write something totally different, and also September 11th had happened and I guess I was in a kind of mode of feeling like I wanted to escape and dream. But of course *Aloft* is not entirely happy! But on the surface of things it is. Well, there's a lighter –

AALDP: There's a comfort.

CRL: There's a comfort to it or there's a succor to it that the other books don't have. But I was also at the time at that age – I was around my mid-thirties then – and I was thinking a lot about my parents and my parents' generation and how they were dealing with all these things: grown children and senescence, aging – they were just turning 60, and thinking about aging. They were not aging but thinking about it a lot and so I think I was just identifying with that. *Aloft* for me is what I would consider my most aesthetically purposeful novel. He has a certain language to how he describes his world. It's part of his mode of escape. That for me is why I was writing it. I wanted to try to write this Wordsworthian kind of reverie. But of course he has to deal with all the things he has to deal with.

AALDP: I remember when *A Gesture Life* came out, a lot of people were surprised that you ended up talking about the Korean comfort women during World War II, the women forced into brothels for Japanese soldiers, but using the perspective of a male soldier, albeit a sympathetic soldier. Have you ever tried – or did you try with that narrative – writing with a female narrator or as a filter?

CRL: I did. I did both – as a filter and as a narrator or narrators, and that was the original version of that book. I ended up writing two hundred pages or so of that first. After about 200 pages of that and I had done all the research. I had gone to Korea and interviewed some surviving comfort women and really had just everything I needed to write that novel. I did write two hundred pages of it, but I think after sitting down and looking at that – that's what we do every once in a while, you're working really hard and just have your head down, but every so often you have to look up and look at the whole thing and make sure that it's going the way you want it to go – I guess after doing that I felt it really wasn't doing anything special. I thought it was pretty good. Nothing was *bad* about it. The writing was fine. It just didn't have anything particularly remarkable – at least not in comparison to anything I had heard directly from my interviewees or the things that I had read that had been reported about them. It was solid reporting, but I didn't feel like it had that extra layer or level that a novel needs to have. A novel is not just about what happened. It is not even a really great description of what happened. There is that but a whole other thing which needs to be there for the novel not just to be written but to be worthwhile. I have written historical novels, but in the

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end they are not about the history, they are about, I hope, humanity, the moment someone's soul is exposed. I guess I wasn't getting to that stuff in the way I wanted to get to that stuff vis-à-vis just the women directly. I felt you could read that in a scholarly work -- the transcripts of what they said which were profound, and poetic, and real. So I ended up writing this story of Franklin Hata because I hadn't heard his story, and I was interested in his consciousness. How he thought about himself in that time and how he went about conducting his life afterward.

AALDP: You do deal with a lot of history in your novels but so many of them are enmeshed in these layers of memory. For example, Franklin Hata's story is not just his memory of the war but of raising his daughter. With Henry Park it is less the larger national history for *Native Speaker* and more about the layers of family history. Even *Aloft* is dealing with this history of the brother's loss. Not to mention the *Surrendered!* What draws you to these layers of history and memory and the embedding of these layers inside the narrative?

CRL: That's what history is, really. It's the secret histories that have never been written but that have been experienced. For the novelist and for me it's always the challenge and the fun of it is to try to figure out how to orchestrate all these -- well, first come up with them -- but then orchestrate all these sometimes opposing histories. Which thematically is chaotic sometimes given certain characters. So that for me is the fun of it. I guess I don't understand history in any other way. It's hard for me to make sense of the Korean war even though my father told me some stories and I have done all this research. It's not just about experience; it's about that underneath layer that's almost unspeakable. I think that's what you end up writing about. You have in front of you what we can all acknowledge and see, but what you end up writing about is something that is ultimately unspeakable and that for me is I think all the books are sort of like that.

AAALDP: So much of your writing deals with loss and mourning: obviously with *Native Speaker* and the loss of the son, in *The Surrendered* another lost son as well as a lost woman, Sylvie, that Jun and Hector share the mourning for, as well as losses in *Aloft* and the missing boyfriend in Fan's story. What draws you to focus on the process of mourning and loss with your characters?

CRL: I would say that loss is the central essential thing that defines all of us. It's not what we have--You could say that we have love and all these things, but in the end I think it's what you've lost that makes brighter and more special what you have. That to me, in the echo and the shadow of all that, and when placed against the happenings of life and vitality -- that's what makes it poignant and that's what actually lets us understand how we really are living; like a little kid, little kids are just happy until they experience that first smack,

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the first betrayal. I don't think loss has to be catastrophic. It doesn't have to be the loss of a mother or father, but it has to be profound and I think that it just feels natural to me that he should always be there.

AALDP: My students and I last Spring read your essay, "The Faintest Echo of our Language" before we read *Native Speaker*—and if you haven't read it, it is a beautiful elegy, both a tribute to your mother and also a memoir of her death from cancer. Do you find yourself pulling on that time of your own experience when you are writing your characters?

CRL: Oh, sure. Maybe more so back then. She died more than twenty years ago now—twenty-four years ago—and I wrote that essay probably twenty years ago—twenty-one years ago—but you know all that is still there. I hope it doesn't ever go away because it's just how I am. I'm a pretty happy person. I'm quite sociable and all that; I'm not your typical sort of misanthropic artist [laughter from the audience], but I still think when you're making things, when you're creating things, you do have to connect with stuff—or maybe you just *do* naturally—there is this other part of you that is running parallel to everything else, that is always kind of questioning, that is always kind of mourning, that is always kind of registering these kinds of things like a seismograph, so it's there.

AALDP: One of the things I am drawn to in your work is that your characters are always dealing with such trauma, but they tend to be very resilient people. So I enjoy living through their traumas with them because I have come to appreciate that you usually give us resolution of some kind, even if it is just aesthetic. I am wondering how you see the role of art in how we cope with trauma.

CRL: I've never been one to say that art should be therapeutic. I think it is. It doesn't *have* to be, though. I think it *can* be. Maybe not "coping with trauma" but just "coping." It doesn't have to be trauma. It is kind of even coping with good things. Going back to *On Such a Full Sea*, there's a lot in in that book about people who are suppressed or repressed, particularly those girls that are trapped in the Charter village and don't really have a life. The people in Fan's production facility or settlement who find themselves expressing their frustrations through murals and other kinds of public art works. I think it's the only way that we really make sense of ourselves. Making art doesn't actually lead to something that's easily definable—like you don't make art and think "ok now I am this person." I think that's actually misleading. It's just it leads you to another little stage of not really knowing who you are, but you're doing something. If you keep doing that you keep—I don't know if it's growing-but just moving, and I think that's the most important thing.

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Maybe I resist the idea that art makes you better. There are a lot of artists who are probably not better people. But I do like the idea that art keeps you moving and evolving in the way you are going to evolve.

AALDP: I had not really thought about those girls and their collective art project.

CRL: It's leading them nowhere. It brings comfort but probably brings misery, as all art does. It just keeps them moving. It's like a shark, you have to keep moving.

AALDP: Speaking of a collective project, how did you come up with the narrative voice for *On Such a Full Sea* and was the internet involved at all?

CRL: The internet? Why do you ask that?

AALDP: Well, I just find that voice really familiar, and kind of all-knowing but also often wrong.

CRL: I wanted that voice to be, again, in some ways very comforting, as all-knowing voices can be who aren't trying to prescribe things for you too much. But I did want to have that voice be one that was subject to skepticism by us, the reader, and also a voice that was sometimes confused, wrong, maybe too hopeful, maybe too wishing. I wanted that voice which is a collective voice to be as idiosyncratic as an individual voice. And that is why I decided that my collective voice would be maybe unknown to itself but as idiosyncratic as possible. That it couldn't help itself but to be that way. And I thought that that would be the right voice. No one has ever said that before, but it is sort of like the internet, I guess – always half wrong, misleading, but everything's there, right? Well, "everything."

AALDP: Obviously, *On Such a Full Sea* has been talked about as speculative fiction and I had not really thought about *A Gesture Life* as kind of a horror story. But I was wondering about *Native Speaker*. I know it was reviewed on websites for detective fiction or spy fiction. I was wondering if you thought of that as a kind of speculative project as well because there is a Korean American city councilman in New York and I know that book came out in 1995 but it was 2001 before we got the first Korean American Councilman [in New York City]. Did you think of that as a speculative project?

CRL: Well, all novels are kind of dreams. They are kind of wishes, wishes even if you are writing historical stuff, wishes for what should have happened, even within what did happen. For sure that councilman was someone that I and Henry Park were both looking for. He's really looking for – the

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character — is really looking for that character, for that figure because he is looking for someone who has a presence on a large stage, a public stage, on a civic stage. And I needed that person too. I needed that sort of figure in my life in lots of ways: personally, culturally, ethnically.

Yeah, they're all kind of speculative in that way. That's why I always tell my students that you shouldn't just write about what's happened to you because of course maybe not so much has happened to you yet. It's not about writing about what has happened to you or what is there. You have to write about things that need to be there. That's a different thing entirely.

AALDP: Speaking of your students, how has being a teacher impacted your practice? Or has it?

CRL: I probably would have written seven or eight books by now. That's partly true.² It takes time away from the writing. But I really enjoy my students, I really enjoy the teaching because they are fresh and energetic and most times they are fearless. And that for me is pretty inspiring. I try not to take what I say in the classroom home with me to my desk. I try not to listen to myself when I am writing.

AALDP: So, do as I say but don't make me do it?

CRL: Yeah, right, don't make me do it. It's my job as a teacher to guide and to try to figure out what my particular students need or what their particular stories need. Or a way to push them in a direction that they will find out themselves. Not that I am not in need of any advice, I just want to just try and be as pure and natural as a writer as possible and it's hard to do that when you are constantly thinking about writerly advice. I tell my students, too, the advice I give you here is always provisional. It might seem to be a good idea, but you might try it and find you have a more interesting idea, so please do that. There is never any right answer, obviously. And I don't want to rely on certain kinds of ideas or theories that might have developed for me over the twenty years that I have been teaching, and I try not to suggest that. I try not to present things that way to my students. I do that mainly through the reading I assign. There really is no rhyme or reason to the stories I give. They are always all different. And they are that way for a reason because I want to make sure that they never feel comfortable with "this is how a short story should be."

² In a conversation with San Jose State students the previous evening, in response to their questions about how he resists commercial pressures affecting his art, Chang-rae Lee made an interesting observation that the university where he teaches has been a kind of patron to him, allowing him to earn a living as a teacher and thus to avoid commercial pressures on his writing. At the time of his visit, he was a Professor at Princeton University. As of Fall 2016, he is now at Stanford.

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AALDP: You would encourage people to read a whole variety.

CRL: Oh, yeah, just for educational purposes. As a reader I think you'll tend to gravitate towards those things that speak to you for whatever mysterious reason artistically. So those things you should read over and over and over to try to figure out why you love it so much. But that does not mean that you should also restrict yourself. We want to be ourselves but the truth of course is that you can't just be yourself. You live in the world. The most interesting artists are those who, yes, have a "distinctive voice," but if you really unpack it and parse it, there are all these little influences that make that voice interesting.

AALDP: Now we've reached the part of the interview where I am contractually obligated to ask you about your influences. One thing I have been wondering about is how much Younghill Kang's work affected you. Had you read that before writing *Native Speaker*?

CRL: I hadn't! I had only read it after. In fact, they sent it to me after I published my novel! I wasn't really aware of a lot of Korean literature and Korean American literature. My influences were probably just the canon that one would get in high school. Pretty classic stuff. Not to say I loved it, I didn't – but that's what I read. For example, I still am not a huge fan of Victorian literature. For me, it just soap-opera-y – but wonderfully written. I don't know what my influences are. Other people probably could say better than I could. You could probably say better than I could!

AALDP: It gives us more to work on. Leave it to us. I was stunned by that answer though because there's a point where Henry and Lelia hear the news on the television and say they will both dream of fire and Younghill Kang's novel ends with a dream of fire and he says it's good luck. A lot of people also compared your first book to *Invisible Man* because of the complexity of identity – also there's fire in the end! And obviously *The Great Gatsby*. I love the ending of that novel because, like *Gatsby*, it has what I think of as a kind of "thesis" ending where it brings together all the various strands of the novel. I'm sure in your high schools you had to study the "green breast of the new world" and had quizzes on how it echoes the green light and Myrtle's injuries and the "pap of life...the incomparable milk of wonder" and all that. But in *Native Speaker* we have all these images of the mask and citizenship and lists – all these coming together – even the weight of the children which is so resonant for this man who has lost his child.

Do you think that artistic mentors are more important or do you think that finding kinds of cultural mentors is also important? I always wonder because I teach ethnic literature and many of my students do plan to become creative writers and they are often looking for mentors.

CRL: I think you need both. I didn't really have them culturally because of how I was raised and how I was educated. But I had other kinds of cultural mentors that were not in literature. So I think both need to be there. Artistically, again, it is very hard to trace exactly how you were influenced. There will be something that you read or some movie by a writer or consistency, a certain kind of poetics, that you'll get from a certain writer that you can't even explain why that moves you. Even if that writer is not of your culture, or of your experience, that's something that I think as a teacher to a student I would say you shouldn't deny that. If you read something and people say oh, this writer's probably not for you, but you think that that writer is something for you, you should really pay attention to that. At the same time, I think cultural stuff – because that's where you come from – it's enmeshed in everything you are, whether you like it or not, most often *not* liking. And so that's stuff that also absolutely needs to be considered as you sit there. Artists and writers have to consider everything. People think it is just about inspiration, but it's not. You have to consider everything. You are only writing a tiny tiny fraction of it. But you have to consider everything all the time: reject things, accept things, be skeptical. That's why sometimes when people assume that if I'm writing about Korean Americans then I have a certain kind of affinity for certain kind of Korean American identities, or that I have more wisdom about that than other people, but I don't. I am thinking very particularly and am thinking about all the things that I have experienced which can't ever be reproduced by someone else or exactly analogous to someone else's experience even if they were Korean American born the same year, living in the same place. Because we're talking about art here. We're not talking about sociology. We're not talking about politics. That's different. That requires other things. When we talk about art, there is too much mystery involved, but that's what we should embrace and that's what makes works interesting and hopefully makes them last.

AALDP: Last night you gave us the treat of reading from what you are working on and I noticed a quality of the narrator reminded me a little bit of Henry Park: they're both very perceptive. He was speaking to someone and in the process he was *reading* the details of the man. I'm reading Sherlock Holmes right now with my son. It made me think about that kind of deductive logic, the inferences that he was making very quickly about the person he was speaking with. Obviously Henry Park is a spy so that is part of his skill set. But also Henry Park describes himself as a writer, as a "banal historian." I'm wondering how much that role of the observer that takes down details and draws inferences from it is really the role of the writer.

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CRL: Absolutely, that's something that you both have to have naturally, a little bit, and also that you have to train yourself to be better at it. Because it's not just observing, but observing and commenting on it at the same time to yourself *in* language. So that when you meet a person and they strike you in a certain way, whether you like them or not, that it's not just an emotion, right? It's not just "ugh." It's "ugh" and trying to really parse all the things about that person that makes you feel that way. That's – I think – being an observer. Being an observer is being a commentator, ultimately. Because that observation is lost, lost in just a flush of emotion.

AALDP: So is there a tension between that person that can make cultural observations and the person that is writing the unique individual? I mean not so much in the person as in the output as the artist?

CRL: I'm sorry, I didn't quite understand.

AALDP: Let me try to redo this. On one level we are talking about that art is always about the specific, so you can't make grand claims about cultures, but at the same time, as the observer, and making inferences, there are certain kinds of generalities that come with that. Like, what is triggering my fear of this person or animosity? I'm just wondering how do you negotiate between the specificity and the kind of logic that, for example, Sherlock Holmes says, "Well, *everyone* with this thumb shape practices this profession?"

CRL: That's a good question because obviously every observation and every comment comes from a cultural origin, some kind of origin that is based in some view or experience in a certain kind of life or experience but I think: A) that's the only thing we have, but, B) I think we have to be skeptical of our own judgements and takes on things. That's absolutely the very next thing that has to happen is "*why* am I feeling this way?" Is it because of this, this, this, this? Is it because of them doing this, this, this, this? And it just gets endlessly complicated, which is ok. That's what you want – not that you are going to outline all those complications or list all those, but that all those are there and you can refer to them and then maybe the totality of it somehow does express both of those things – specificity and the context by which that specificity is known or registered.

AALDP: We've talked a couple times about either with the source material from Shenzhen, or with the beginnings of *A Gesture Life*, coming to this point when you feel like that's not the story and I need to go elsewhere. How do you edit your work? Is it completely an interior thing or do you read it to other people? What is your process?

CRL: Usually I just try to write it. In those cases, I wrote it and then stopped and then just started again on a different thing. Usually I don't show anything to anyone until I pretty much have a first draft of something because I don't really want to get sidetracked. I'm always – as anybody would be I would be – very curious as to help people would think about how it's gone, say a couple hundred pages in. I guess I'm afraid of good advice. Because good advice might not be the advice that my project really needs. “Good” advice. I want the project to be itself. Obviously it'll have outside influences, as I do. But if I've written the whole thing, then an editor, or my wife, or a good friend will be able to see what I've tried to do completely, and then be able to comment on it, rather than going into it saying, “Oh, I kinda like this but I'm not sure yet, but maybe this is what you want.” I don't really want to know that. I think if I don't really know what I want to do, then I should still keep writing until I know what I want to do, and then and then see if that is working. I did get to that point with *The Surrendered*. I wrote a draft of it and I gave the whole thing to my editor. She said, “I see what you're trying to do, I think this is what's not working.” That was probably the book that had the most input from my draft to the final final draft. But really the other books were all tinkered, manicured inside, but not really moved around a lot.

AALDP: How did you end up moving *The Surrendered*?

CRL: Oh! I can't even remember, but it's just a lot of stuff was moved around in terms of placement in time because it's a wide spanning story. It's pretty much sort of three different little novels inside of the novel. I found that doing a certain kind of mixing helped the flow the novel, at least in my view. It's a kind of a big novel and I wanted it to be engaging every step of the way and not just, ok, this is the part where we do this.

AALDP: Because it is a big novel, I haven't taught it because I'm always worried about how much my students can handle. But *Native Speaker*, as you know, gets taught a lot. When you were writing it, did you ever imagine it would become a textbook?

CRL: No! Not at all. I was just writing it because I had to write it for me. I mean I wasn't even hoping. I had written a whole other first novel before that, a totally different crazy book that nobody wanted and so *Native Speaker* was just a project that I think I really cared about. That's all. Obviously I hoped it would be published. That's about it. I didn't even assume that anyone would really read it even after publication.

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AALDP: I'm so glad to hear that you had another novel before that because I've mentioned it to my graduate students, which includes MFA's, that this actually started out as your MFA thesis and I usually say, "but no pressure." So it's good to know that it's not *truly* your first. Do you think there is any negative or positive impact when literature that is written often for pleasure is turned into an academic subject?

CRL: Well, I do sometimes worry that *Native Speaker* or any – people have taught all my books in certain classes; I always get notes from people. *On Such a Full Sea*, they're starting to use that in high-school-level stuff. I just worry sometimes that people try to use it as a sociological document, particularly *Native Speaker* because it seems to be about a time in New York and a specific ethnicity. I think it's easy to be a lazy teacher with that book. You could just say, "OK, this is what Koreans were like in 199_." I hope the book is so much more than that. As with all literature, with all teaching, it depends on the teacher, depends on how they're asking the students to look at it. If they ask the students to look at in the easiest, lowest-common-denominator kind of way, then that's too bad. I think they're missing a lot of what's *really* interesting and just giving the students what's probably *least* interesting about the book. I have no control over that. But I like the idea that people read it. A lot of people read it when they're quite young, in college, freshman year, or in high school, and I think there's something about Henry Park's consciousness that a lot of them remember, not maybe particular lines or anything, but just a kind of feeling about his consciousness and the way he thinks about things. That for me is great, if they can remember the feeling of that.