Literary Conversations: Indigenous

November 17, 2021

The PEN/Faulkner Foundation celebrates literature and fosters connections between readers and writers to enrich and inspire both individuals and communities.

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You can also purchase our featured authors' books from Politics & Prose: *The Sentence* by Louise Erdrich, *Sabrina & Corina* by Kali Fajardo-Anstine, *There There* by Tommy Orange, and *When Two Feathers Fell from the Sky* by Margaret Verble.

Bethanne Patrick: Good evening. Thank you so much for joining us tonight at PEN/Faulkner's final autumn 2021 Literary Conversation. We are talking tonight about Indigenous. My name is Bethanne Patrick. I'm the First VP and Programs Committee Chair for the PEN/Faulkner Board. I'm so excited to have you all here with us tonight. We've got a stellar panel coming up, but let me tell you just a couple of things about PEN/Faulkner first.

For those of you who are joining us for the first time, you should know that PEN/Faulkner is a nonprofit literary organization based in DC. Our mission is to celebrate literature and foster connections between readers and writers to enrich and inspire individuals and communities alike. We fulfill our mission by administering two national literary awards, the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction and the PEN/Malamud Award for Excellence in the Short Story, as well as throughout our education programs, which bring free books and author visits to DC public and public charter schools. Our Literary Conversations, which starts a new season in 2022, is on a virtual platform right now. You may have noticed that.

A couple of notes about the webinar today. There will be a Q&A session at the end of the event, so please submit your questions using the Q&A button at the bottom of your screen. You can also upvote your favorite questions, and we'll do our best to get to them in the time we have. We're very proud with our virtual platform to have adopted a Pay-What-You-Will model for these Literary Conversations in order to increase accessibility to our programs during these challenging times.

If you're able, please consider making a donation to us through the link that we'll put up in the chat. Any amount you give will go directly towards ensuring that we're able to continue giving excellent programming for our audiences across the country.

[Donate to PEN/Faulkner using this link! bit.ly/penfaulkner]

A final note before I introduce tonight's stellar panel. That is that half the funds of tonight's profits will be donated to Through Piscataway Eyes, a nonprofit that promotes and protects the welfare, culture, and history of the members of the Piscataway Conoy Tribe. We're really excited about that and so glad that we are able to honor the heritage of the land that we are housed on as PEN/Faulkner.

Now, without much further ado, let me tell you about our panelists because they are just fantastic. We have got – I don't even know how to start, but let's start with Louise Erdrich, I know you all

know her name. She's the author of 16 novels, the latest of which is *The Sentence*, volumes of poetry, children's books, and a memoir of early motherhood. Her fiction has won the National Book Award, the National Book Critics Circle Award twice, the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award and her work has been a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. She has received the Library of Congress Prize in American Fiction, the prestigious PEN/Saul Bellow Award for achievements in American fiction, and the Dayton Literary Peace Prize. She lives in Minnesota with her daughters and is the owner of Birchbark Books, a small independent bookstore.

Kali Fajardo-Anstine is from Denver, Colorado, the author of *Sabrina & Corina*, a finalist for the National Book Award, the PEN/Bingham Prize, The Story Prize, and winner of an American Book Award. She is the 2021 recipient of the Addison M. Metcalf Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Her work has been honored with the Denver Mayor's Award for global impact in the arts and Mountains & Plains Independent Booksellers Association's Reading the West Award. She has written for publications such as *The New York Times*, *O, The Oprah Magazine*, and many others, receiving fellowships from MacDowell, Yaddo, and Hedgebrook, and Tin House. She earned her MFA from the University of Wyoming and has lived across the country from Durango, Colorado to Key West, Florida.

Tommy Orange is *The New York Times* bestselling author of *There There* from Alfred A. Knopf, winner of the 2018 Center for Fiction First Novel Prize. *There There* was long-listed for the National Book Award for Fiction, 2018, the Aspen Words Literary Prize, and the Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Fiction, 2019. It was deemed a top-five fiction book of the year by *The New York Times* and won the John Leonard Award for best first book from the National Book Critics Circle, and a PEN/Hemingway Award for debut novel. It was also a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. Orange's next novel, *Wandering Stars*, will be published by Knopf in 2022.

Our moderator tonight is Margaret Verble, an enrolled citizen of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma. Her first novel, *Maud's Line*, was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. Her second, *Cherokee America*, has recently been listed by *The New York Times* as one of the 100 notable books for 2019. She lives in Lexington, Kentucky.

With that, I want to say, again, welcome to our panelist and our moderator, Margaret. Please take it away. You can donate to PEN/Faulkner by clicking the link that you'll find in the chat. Thank you so much.

Margaret Verble: I'm going to come on and welcome everybody to my basement. Some days I don't entertain in here every night, but I am tonight, and I'm glad to have all of you all, and I'm glad for our audience tonight. I've been looking forward to this for some time, and I hope that all of you have been looking forward to it too, and I hope we'll have a good time. Feel free at any time. I'm saying this to my other panelists here, but feel free to just jump in. We don't have to stand on any formalities here tonight.

I've been asked by the PEN/Faulkner Foundation to moderate this and to focus on things that are social issues for indigenous people. I want to start out with one that my three fellow authors all have written about, and that is native identity. Louise just read her new book. There's a sentence in there that shares – The title of that book is *The Sentence*. There's a sentence in *The Sentence* that a character says that sums up our jumping-off spot here, and that is, "The thing is most of us indigenous people do have to consciously pull together our identities." That's certainly the

thinking. I think that is an issue. I want to start out by asking all of you – Just jump in. I don't care who goes first – about talking about whether you had to do that. Was it necessary for you to do that? If so, how have you done it?

Louise Erdrich: All right. I'll start since you quoted the book. Everyone's born with an indigenous identity who is indigenous. That's not quite what I was talking about, as you know. I was talking about the power of the dominant culture and how the dominant culture will work so hard to acculturate everyone who comes into it. It has been an especially traumatic and difficult issue for indigenous people, not only because, from the very beginning, the stated goal was extermination, but it became assimilation. All these Latin ending words kept coming at native people and then termination, and it just goes on and on. At this point, pulling together the truth of who you are is complicated by that extremely organized, and really, it was a conscious attempt because these are government programs.

Pulling identity together is really – For me, it was really a matter of going back to family ties, to tribal ties, to home ties, land ties, and especially now, language ties. It's been that way for about 20 years that I've been trying to get my Ojibwe language jumpstarted. I'm doing it over and over. Here's how it goes. It goes on and on and on [laughs]. I'm seeing some smiles from Tommy and Kali because learning a language after a certain age is just about impossible, but you got to keep trying.

At this point, I have a very strong reason, and that is that my youngest grandchild is the son of my daughter. She's an immersion teacher at Lac Courte Oreilles Reservation, and she's raising him as a first speaker Ojibwe speaker. His first words have been in Ojibwe. I'm just like, I got to jumpstart this one again, and I'm going to stick with it because I need to talk to that little boy.

Tommy Orange: To jump in about language and jumpstarting language with what we're talking about, when I first started doing events and public speaking and this thing, I asked my dad, I said, "Well, how do I introduce myself, dad?" And he goes, "You say, 'my name is Tommy Orange,'" and starts going on like he's joking. My dad is a fluent speaker in Cheyenne. It was his first language, and he didn't start speaking English until he got into school. He has an allergy, I've learned over the years, to putting on airs or like learning the culture or their language for reasons that don't feel true to him or something.

He was joking when I first asked him, but he didn't raise us with the language. It was more of a time of assimilation, and that was seen as a strength, or he was busy. He was an engineer at the Lawrence Berkeley Labs. I think going out and becoming a public figure was one phase of the pulling together of the double consciousness of presenting as a native person and all the questions that come along with that is one phase of the pulling together, and then there's many phases.

I think when I first set out to write fiction, and I stopped writing stream of consciousness, sort of philosophical nonsense that was unreadable and started trying to pull my life into it, with that came all of these strands of my identity, which included having a white mother and a native father and growing up in Oakland, and all these different things. The way fiction interfaced with my life automatically was a pulling together of my identity, just to make fiction that resembled my life.

There's all these different phases of doing that, but I think the ones that are most painful are the ones that have to do with knowing the way the world sees you and wants you to present as a native person and then to touch on annoying things that they want you to say, like, when they

know I have a son, they're like, "Well, how are you raising him to be a Native American?" It was a good question I got early on in the tour. They want the answer. They're like, "Am I teaching him flute or drums?" These authenticators of how I'm passing on the monoculture of Native America.

There is a pulling together, but the reasons for doing it are layered, and there's very personal ones and there's language that we are constantly trying to reconnect with and jumpstart. Then there's these other ones that have to do with, unfortunately, interfacing with a community that largely is ignorant about how nuanced our many different nations are.

Kali Fajardo-Anstine: Just recently, there was some review that came up about my book, *Sabrina & Corina*, [that] said that I had limited the amount of Spanish in the book. I can't speak Spanish, and that really upset me because my family did not just lose Spanish, they lost Tiwa, and that was my great-grandma. To not have an understanding from readers that we actually lost our indigenous language at the same time that we were losing Spanish and French. That was happening in this forceful assimilation that was happening in my family in the 1930s when they came to the cities from Southern Colorado, Northern New Mexico.

I remember reading that and thinking, "Oh, they don't know. They don't get it." It wasn't that I wanted to reclaim Spanish and I needed to do that. I want to reclaim this older language that my family has had. I think as a Chicana who comes from indigenous ancestry from the Pueblos, in particular, Picuris Pueblo, I think it's very complicated how my community has tried to pull together our identity. It's something that we're constantly adjusting to and working on. It's being replaced with new narratives that are introduced through popular culture, or through literature, but it has been quite a long process for my family since they came to the cities and they started all over with a new identity, but they also retained these very strong ties to who they were.

I think it's just an ongoing process, and I think about when I have children, they're even going to be further removed from that space of origin, from our place of origin. How can that be reclaimed, if ever? I do think about, like, "Oh, maybe I should be taking Spanish classes," but I'm like, "No, actually, there's other classes I want to be taking, other language classes before that."

One of the reasons that makes me so sad is because I grew up in this family in Denver with all these elders, this huge family, and I don't know the structure of their thoughts. I don't know how they saw or thought of images or the ways that they articulated them and what rhythms. As a writer, I'm very obsessed with language and how sentences sound. That's one of the most, I think, sad losses that I feel. I just hope as I – I have a little bit more time now because I finished a new book, but I do want to focus on language.

Margaret: Okay. I was reading the *Cherokee Phoenix*, I guess, yesterday, that we only have 2,000 proficient Cherokee speakers. The tribe is putting in just millions and millions of dollars in order to regain our language. It's absolutely crucial. I think every year, I don't think they can spend too much money on it. It's got to be done.

As I was listening to y'all talk, one of the things that I wonder, I was raised in the family with the tribal attorney, when I was growing up, this tribal attorney for 40 years. Perhaps in your families, you too made fun of each other. We all made fun of everybody in our family. There was nothing off-limits in order to making fun. We all called [unintelligible] a professional Indian because he was

just always doing – He was just out there doing Indian stuff all the time. The rest of us, we were just trying to live, but he was dedicated. Cherokee Nation owes a lot to his dedication.

I grew up with this term professional Indian, and then now, as I'm living my life, I'm thinking, "God, I feel like a professional Indian, too." That's not really a comfortable feeling for me. Do you all feel that way? How does that make you feel?

Louise: I don't want to start again.

Margaret: Go ahead. It doesn't make any difference.

Tommy: Well, Louise, if anybody's a pro, it's you, so you should go first.

Louise: See, I think, from what I heard us saying, none of us are professional at being a native person. It's not something that you can go out and do in front of other people, really. What it is, is something that you have taken in from – some of it is from childhood that you've taken in, like Kali was saying, and some of it is what you've learned from your father. Maybe he is not as into being – Maybe he's worried about appearing to be taking on identity for other people.

I try really hard not to take on the identity for other people. I didn't start out thinking that this would be – It was way back when, but I didn't start out thinking, "Oh, I'm a native writer." I just wrote about what and who and how my life has been. I've continued to do that. I don't always write about being native because I'm a mixed person. Being a professional, for me, is the writing, it's all about the writing, but being indigenous or native is all about family and connection and community. It's all about being with people. That's one thing about – I said jumpstart the language, but as we all know, every language is so different and it's so hard to learn. That's why I'm still trying to get past all the verb forms.

Margaret: Who else wants to jump in?

Kali: I just had an event recently when I finished and I got off stage, somebody came up and told me I'm such a good role model for them. I didn't know what she was talking about. I didn't know who I was a role model for, which particular group. I was like, "Wait, it could be any one of my mixed groups that I could be a role model for." I think that's where it does – Sometimes there's perception, like this person, because they're a really good writer and they're really good at prose and they know how to structure a novel, they're also going to be very good about professionally talking about identity.

One of the reasons I became a writer is not only because I come from a long line of storytellers, my mother's a storyteller, and all the others were, it's because I was angry and upset that no one could understand what I was. I also had a hard time articulating exactly what I felt I was, but I knew I was an indigenous person, a place person from the American Southwest, from Colorado, from Northern New Mexico. I never saw myself or people like me exactly reflected in literature. We've heard this a lot, but it made me feel so lonely and isolated.

The fact that I write about what I write about is in direct response to that. I would hate for that to become professionalized in a way, that now I have to be the spokesperson for this. I really just wanted to write naturalistic prose about the people that I come from, about my community, about

my family, and that's what I'm continuing to do. If others want to project that spokesperson role model role on me, that's coming from their minds and not from my own mind.

Louise: Kali, you do have good earrings. I got to say.

Kali: Thank you. A woman in Pueblo, her last name is Yazzie, she made them for me.

Louise: Oh, it's so nice.

Margaret: Tommy, you got anything to say about that?

Tommy: Yes. I think in this particular profession or discipline, a part of our job is to explain ourselves and be able to talk through everything. I think that's really lucky to negate the professional Indian side of things. If I were a dancer, everybody's interpreting the way I look and the movements that I'm making and what is the tradition and this sort of thing. Nobody wants to hear me talk. They want to see me dance.

I think the very fact that when I do events or when I'm talking about – In the spaces that I'm being paid, that's the professional side of it. When I'm being paid to talk in front of people about it, I can be, like, super transparent because that's what I wrote into, that's what I lean into. Is the fact that, I'm not trying to say, I'm out here doing this Indian thing. I'm trying to say that I was born in Oakland and I come from this particular community. This was something that I made up.

I explored some people's minds and feelings in it but never was I saying in the book or do I ever say when I'm going around or pretend to be anything that I wasn't writing about what people are paying me to pick and talk about. It works out, I think, for writers as opposed to some other professional Indian jobs where you can't really get around it.

Margaret: That's good. We'll all stop right here and have a reading from one of your works. Louise, can we start with yours? Could you read to us a little bit?

Louise: All right. Earth to Earth, from *The Sentence*.

Louise reading from *The Sentence*: While in prison, I received a dictionary. It was sent to me with a note. This is the book I would take to a deserted island. Other books were to arrive from my teacher, but as she had known, this one proved of endless use. The first word I looked up was the word sentence.

I had received an impossible sentence of 60 years from the lips of a judge who believed in an afterlife. The word with its yawning, c, belligerent little e's, with its hissing sibilance and double t's, this repetitive, bummer of a word made of slyly, stabbing letters that surrounded an isolated human T, this word was in my thoughts every moment of every day. Without a doubt, had the dictionary not arrived, this light word that lays so heavily upon me would have crushed me, or what was left of me after the strangeness of what I had done.

I was at a perilous age when I committed my crime. Although in my 30s, I was still clinging to a teenager's physical pursuits and mental habits. It was 2005, but 1999 was how I partied, drinking and drugging like I was 17. Although my liver kept trying to tell me I was over an outrage decade older. For many reasons, I didn't know who I was yet. Now that I have a better idea, I will tell you, I

am a homely woman, not the kind that guys write or make movies about. Where suddenly I have a blast of blinding instructional beauty.

I'm not about teachable moments, nor am I beautiful on the inside. I enjoy lying, for instance, and I'm good at selling people useless things for prices they can't afford. Of course, now that I'm rehabilitated, I only sell words, collections of words between cardboard covers. Books contain everything worth knowing, except what ultimately matters.

Louise: [laughs] That's Tookie.

Margaret: Yes, and she's a delightful character. Well, I don't know if delightful is the word for it. She's entertaining. She conveyed that. I can say that for sure. I'm going to change the subject here a little bit. I want to talk about ghosts next. Kali, in your short stories, you have a story called *Ghost Stories*. Louise, you've just written a ghost story in some respects in *The Sentence*. My new novel out, *When Two Feathers Fell from the Sky*, is a ghost story. It has a major character as a ghost. I got into thinking about this. I wonder, are these ghosts that are swimming around in our works – is this a fad or do y'all think indigenous folks are more haunted than other people or more open to the spirit world?

Louise: I think we're haunted by a giant eraser, giant pink eraser that's erased so much of our background. That's it. I think we're haunted by any number of things. Each family has a different set of ghosts.

Kali: Yes, I'm planning a new book now. I was like, "I got to throw a ghost in this one." Because I had a ghost in the short story collection, and then I think maybe the novel has some ghosts. Yes, I think I have vividly felt connected to ancestors who lived long ago that I did not know in my lifetime, or my godfather, he died of AIDS when I was one year old, and I felt like I knew him. I don't necessarily think that was a haunting, more of a comfort. I was glad to have his protection, and just to feel his energy in that way. Yes, my family, they have stories of seeing ghosts, but they also have stories of the violent atrocities that have happened to us that they passed down.

I don't know if that was to haunt us or to try to protect us. It's made its way into my work because it's a huge part of who I am and my family.

Margaret: In your family, they talked about that? Because in my family, nobody was talking about that. Nobody was talking about – but did they talk about it in your families?

Louise: Yes. What about you, Tommy?

Tommy: I was going to say something else about ghosts. I was raised pretty religious, and ghosts were not – It didn't really fit with that. I think as native people, I think we think more about the dead because we understand loss. A lot of us have experienced more death than other people, but we also understand a legacy of loss and we inherit a legacy of loss as a people. A lot of that has to do with the gone.

The yardstick that we're measured by, the person on the other side, is a ghost image. The perfect Indian image that we're measured by whether or not we're authentic enough by the outside standards is a dead person. It's somebody who lived before and looks this particular way. We're measuring ourselves against ghosts. Our authenticity measure has to do with people that have

been gone for a long time. I think, being a native person, you tend to think more about those who are gone and ghosts in that way. I don't have any strong feelings against ghosts or for ghosts. I like ghost stories, but I didn't have any experiences growing up.

Louise: I was making a distinction in the book between ghosts and spirits. I always had this distinction that spirits were ancestors, and they were all the spirits that are in the world and that inhabit everything on this continual transfer of spirit between all that's alive. Ghosts, though, that's a much more – To me, that's a much more active term. That isn't really something that I did grow up with. I grew up with ghost stories like anyone else, but they weren't – I think we're talking about two different things that our ancestors are – I think there's too much –

As Tommy was saying, we have a lot of respect, and we stand back from our spirits. Ghosts, they're much more – To me, they don't have a lot to do with culture. In this particular book, Tookie is haunted by a ghost who is not native. She's not. I think that's what I was trying to get at, is that we're haunted by the history of colonization and everything else that happened that indigenous people are haunted more as –

Margaret: Every day of my life, I feel an obligation to my ancestors to speak for them what they could not say. I am almost driven by this. It is a presence with me at all times. I think a lot of people live for their future generations. I live in a large regard to give voice to the absolute silence that my elders were – the silence they lived, the things they could not say, the things they did not want us to know because they were ashamed. It breaks my heart. It just breaks my heart. I am haunted in that way, but you're right, Louise, that's not the same thing as a ghost, but we did.

Three of us, at least, have ghosts appearing in our work. I was like, "Well, let's delve into these ghosts and see." Maybe that's just a passing fad. I don't know, but it's not the same thing as the kinds of things that we're talking about. Anybody else want to say anything on that subject?

All right. Kali, do you want to read to us for a moment? You got a new book coming out, right?

Kali: Yes, I have a new book coming out. It took 10 years. I hope I learn how to write novels quicker. This novel is based on my great-grandma, Esther, and my auntie, Lucy, was her sister. They're the ones who came to the city first and just started our line in the city. I really wanted to honor their lives. They loved old movies, and they would just tell stories incessantly, but I really wanted them to feel like stars. I thought, "Oh, well, I'll just come up with a whole novel surrounding their lives." I started coming up with this idea when I was a teenager.

I'm going to read from *Woman of Light*. This is the cover. I'll just read the first couple of pages. This is the first chapter. It's in Denver in 1933, but there's a prologue before that, that starts on Pueblo in 1868.

Kali reading from *Woman of Light*: Luz Lopez sat with her auntie, María José, near the banks where the creek and the river met. The city's liquid center illuminated in green and blue lights, a Ferris wheel churning above them. The crowds of Denver's chili Harvest Festival walked the bottomlands, with their faces hidden behind masks of turkey legs and bundles of buttered corn. The dusk air smelled of horse manure and gear grease and the sweet sting of green chilies roasting in metal drums.

Through the smog of sawdust and food smoke, Luz was brightened by the flame of her kerosene burner, black hair curled around her noteworthy face, dark eyes staring into a porcelain cup. She wore a brown satin dress dulled from many washes, but still, she shined. "Tell me," an old man said in Spanish, fiddling with the white brimmed stetson across his lap. His eyes were murky and far away. "I can take it," he said. Luz searched inside the cup, tea leaves at the bottom. Along the edges she saw a pig's snout and deeper into the mug far into the future, she glimpsed a running wolf.

Luz placed the cup on the velvet cloth over her booth's wide table, which was really an old Spanish door. The rusted knob exposed like a pointed thorn. "Gout," she said, "a bad case." The old man lifted his hat to his sweat-salted head. "The goddamned beans," he said. "The lard Ma uses." "Can't always blame a woman," María José interrupted with reserved confidence. She was thick-set, with deep brown hair cut close to her face, and she wore workmen's trousers and a heathery flannel, her dark eyes peering through round glasses.

She told the old man that almost no one she knew could afford lard anymore, especially not in abundance. "You'll have to give it up," Luz said sweetly, "for your health. More time at life." The old man swore and tossed a nickel into Luz's tackle box, leaving the booth with the hunkered posture of a man bickering with himself.

It was an annual festival, a grouping of white tents in a lighted main stage, Denver's skyline around them pointed in gray, a city canyon beneath the moon. Railyards and coal smelters coughed exhaust, their soot raining into the South Platte River. Young people had unlaced their boots and removed their stockings, wading into the moon's reflection. Bats swooped low and quick.

"Can I interest you ladies in a reading?" Luz asked. Two younger girls had slowed their pace, dissolving cotton candy onto their tongues. They gawked at Luz's teakettle and leaves, her tackle box of coins. The taller of the two girls said, "Bruja stuff?" The shorter one giggled through blue teeth and licked the last of her candy. "We don't mess around with that," she said, and reached across the booth. She pushed aside a mossy stone, snatching one of Diego's handbills. The girls locked arms and skipped down the aisle of tents, bouncing toward the main stage where the Greeks were hosting their annual 'Win Your Woman's Weight in Flour' contest.

María José whispered, "The young ones are no good." Luz asked why, said at least she was trying. "Focus on the viejos, at least they're steady." "Sure they are, Luz said, "until Donio Sebastiano comes." María José laughed. "You're right, jita. Never met a dead man with a future."

On stage, Pete Tikas was at the microphone in a maroon suit with a red carnation pinned to his lapel. "Calling all homegrown Denver gals," he shouted, tapping the platform with his wooden cane. He owned the Tikas market and folks from all over, nearly every neighborhood, called him Papa Tikas. They brought him gifts from their gardens, rosemary, and cilantro, bootleg mezcal. They named their babies "Pete" and carried them into the market wrapped in white blankets. Papa Tikas welcomed all. While the many Anglo-owned stores turned them away, Papa Tikas said, "Money is money." He cared about his city, about the people his store fed. "I kind of like these big old gals," said María José, moshing with kissy lips toward the main stage. "Maybe we'll get customers from all this ruckus."

Luz and her older brother had lived with their auntie for nearly a decade. When Luz was eight years old, her mother, Sarah, decided she could no longer care for her children, sending them north

to the city to live with her younger sister, María José. Whenever Luz thought of her mother, she felt like a stone was being lodged into her throat and so she did not think of her often. "Doubtful," said Luz, sliding lower behind the booth.

Kali: I'll stop there.

Margaret: Thank you very much. When is that coming out?

Kali: June 7th.

Margaret: June 7th, okay. All right, so we got a way to go. We got a way to go for that, to build up to.

I want to change the subject entirely now, and I want to go to – We've talked about some painful subjects, but I don't want us to escape without getting right down to the dregs of it, and that's Indian boarding schools. This has finally gotten some press up in Canada. I don't think it's got nearly the press that it needs to get in Canada or in the United States. Tommy, your new book, I believe, *Wandering Stars* is about this, at least just from reading your excerpt, and I've got a book coming out in 2023 that's on it. We've all known about this, I've known about this. I can't remember not knowing about this. What I'd like to ask you all is in terms of your own tribes, can you tell us some stories about this, about your travel experience, or your tribes' experience with these boarding schools?

Because it's different for each one of the – As far as I can tell it's different depending on which tribe you're in, how they were dealing with you. If you were on a reservation, they made you disappear on paper through allotments. Tommy, do you want to start with –

Tommy: Yes. I've known about the boarding schools. I worked in a nonprofit for many years and I just knew the sepia-toned sad pictures and the name Carlisle. It just felt like, "That seems super-depressing." I didn't take it too much further than that and there's not that many – Nobody's really novelized it or the documentaries that have been made, at least that I've seen, weren't super engaging to me. I didn't have any plans on digging into it. When I was in Sweden as part of a translation book tour thing for *There There*, I was in a museum and I saw a newspaper clipping on the wall.

It said, "Southern Cheyenne at Fort Marion in St. Augustine, Florida." I just thought, "I don't know why it would be in Florida." That's where the curiosity began when I fell down this rabbit hole that is Fort Marion, which is a super-fascinating subject in and of itself. My interest became more – how Southern Cheyenne people or half of – The 75 prisoners that were there from 1875 to 1878 became the blueprint for the boarding schools. The experience that Richard Henry Pratt had with these prisoners, of successfully militarizing them, was the basis for his "Kill the Indian, save the man." He thought, "I should do this to kids."

This was his brilliant idea that everyone else thought was super brilliant too and became this very destructive thing that lasted decades after its inception into the '60s. The legacy of erasing our culture and the languages, we're still feeling it today. That was my entry point for writing about it. I don't have the same stories that you might be referencing in terms of having relatives that went

through it. I came at it from this particular angle of feeling like the particular people that I come from, Southern Cheyennes, had this blueprint and experience.

Margaret: Somebody else?

Kalia: Yes. Again, in my family, I think that they had already been away from their pueblos at this point. They had been intermarrying, but there were talks maybe of older brothers. An interesting thing happened to me. I lost a job in 2015 and the day I lost the job, I got a call from Fort Lewis College and they wanted me to come teach. I came out there and Fort Lewis had once been a boarding school and I was given all the remedial English classes. The majority of my students were native because that's one of the willfully inadequate things that Fort Lewis does is it gives free tuition.

I was teaching essays about boarding schools and I was really trying to put these into the curriculum. I wasn't really prepared for the amount of trauma that I was unlocking in my classroom and then the people above me wanted to take those essays. They wanted me to build a whole curriculum. I actually did not end up renewing the job there, because it felt so complicated to be there, especially when my family does not have a history with the boarding schools, like a lot of Chicanos who had been detribalized.

It was something that I didn't really think – Teaching that essay, at that point, did not feel like I was offering any healing and my students already knew. It didn't seem like something I needed to share with all of us who already knew and if I had been teaching other sections, maybe then,it would've been something more profound for my classes. At that point, I just decided that I was not going to teach those essays anymore.

Margaret: Louise?

Louise: I have boarding schools in almost every one of the books because I really try to talk a lot about boarding schools as a very complicated part of history and it's ongoing today. There's still boarding schools. My family, my grandfather was the first and his brothers and sisters were the first generation in my family who went to boarding schools. I went down to – Anybody can find their relatives, if there are native people listening and they're curious about whether their relatives went. If you go to the Library of Congress, the Plains archive especially, you can find your families.

There's everything in those files. Their files are there. The government kept all the files of all the students. I had a great person I worked with and I found my grandfather's file. Margaret, if you're writing about this, everybody has a file. I should say, my parents taught at a government and boarding school. The government boarding schools also became one of the largest employers of Native American people. People don't talk about that a lot. After that, my sister and other members of my family helped bring that boarding school back to tribal control and so it became a school that was a tribally run school.

Anyway, I looked at my grandfather's. It was incredible to find his files and my aunts and my uncles and everyone who'd been to various boarding schools. He was petitioning to get into the boarding school that my parents eventually taught at. I had a very complicated – Going through the actual correspondence between superintendents and students and parents, and a lot of letters written

by somebody else in the tribe for my great grandfather because he was illiterate. People had very complicated relationships with boarding schools and he was trying to get in because he wanted an education.

I also found a lot of letters from non-native people trying to get their kids into these boarding schools because kids got fed. This was the Depression and kids got fed during that time. I'm not in any way defending boarding schools because the very enterprise was completely wrong. It started with, of course, all of these boarding schools like Fort Lewis, like Fort Taton, all these boarding schools were military faces for the Indian wars, but then they became military schools. After that, they were taken over by the government.

I think it's important to distinguish between what happened with the government boarding schools and what happened with religious boarding schools, especially Catholic boarding schools. Government boarding schools, there was at least some set of oversights. In some sense, after the '30s, that there had to be a certain level up in teaching – and also taught, as I experienced it, taught many forms of – they had culture clubs. It's not something that I hear about a lot but previous to the '30s, that was the time when people were pulled out of their homes, children were pulled out and children were forced into boarding schools.

After that, it was more a sense that they were too far away. It was so hard to get an education and kids needed to get education. At least in my own background, kids went to boarding schools because they either couldn't go to the day schools on the reservation because it was too hard to get there or the parents were so destitute that these children needed to be – Yes, that was a long, long story.

Margaret: That's okay. It's a complicated issue. Tommy, you want to read to us from your book *Wandering Stars?*

Tommy: All right, I'm [clears throat] just going to read it. I'm not going to say anything.

Tommy reading from *Wandering Stars*: There were children and then there were the children of Indians because the merciless Savage inhabitants of these American lands did not make children but nits, and nits make lice. Or so it was said by the man who [unintelligible] for his 700 man-deep volunteer militia drank all night and marched at dawn with cannons on a camp made of women, children, and elders. This was before they tried to pry men out from under [unintelligible] institutionalized, dead Indian's children to save them from themselves as a school if they were to become Americans. But those creator-endowed unalienable rights of equal men laid out in the founding document.

Indian children were sent to schools and they were taken from their homes and their parents were jailed for keeping their children from the schools where it was taught that everything about being Indian was wrong. For decades, it went like this, it was policy and law. This [was when] all Indian medicines and ceremonies, rites, and rituals were outlawed. The plan was for Indians to become not Indians, to go the way of Washington to become Americans. The Carlisle Indian Industrial School first opened its doors in 1879 but the Indian eligibility for American citizenship wasn't even allowed until 1924, long after Carlisle had closed its doors.

All the Indians who were ever Indians never stopped being Indians and went on to have, not nits, but Indian children. These Indian children went on to have Indian children whose Indian children then went on – or became – American Indians whose American Indian children became Native Americans whose Native American children would call themselves indigenous or natives or names of their sovereign nations or NDNs on the internet. And all too often be told they weren't the right kind of Native American Indians to be considered real ones by too many Americans taught in schools their whole lives, but the only real kinds of Indians with those long-gone things, given Indians who loved the pilgrims as if to death.

Tommy: I will stop there.

Margaret: Right. Thank you. I have received a message from up high about taking some questions, and I know we'll do that. Let's see if I can find those questions. Okay. Did that cover the – All right. Let's see, here's the first question for you. What moved? Okay.

"I am struck that language is the first topic that comes up when we speak of identity. It is sad and tragic. But what ways do you have to express identity beyond language?"

We're going to answer that. In what ways do we have to express identity beyond lines? Of course, all of us are writers so that's our first choice.

Tommy: Is there a reference here to our native languages?

Margaret: Yes. That is true to our discussion earlier about the importance of native languages. I think what this question is getting at, which of course, I can't read their mind, but it is beyond language, how are native people expressing themselves as natives? I believe that's what that question is about. I can't swear to the best, that's the best I can do.

Louise: I'll just say the same way you are expressing yourself as a person, we would be expressing ourselves. Food, family, cooking, clothes, everything. Everything you do.

Margaret: Art?

Louise: Everything anyone does. Yes. Does that make sense?

Margaret: It does to me. All right. I'm going to –

Tommy: Just to defend my language briefly. I agree with everything that Louise just said about all the human things that we do. I think that the emphasis on language has to do with how much is embedded in language, how much worldview and how much about our specific tribes is embedded in the language. I think that's something that, as we try and try again to understand our languages, we're also trying to understand our worldviews and the disconnect and what might be familiar in those languages to what we recognize in our families, it's already there. I think the emphasis on language has to do partly with how much is embedded in language. That has to do with our people.

Margaret: Okay. Another question here. What is your writing process? Any rituals? Do you have advice for aspiring writers? That's a question we all get pretty often, I think. Probably have set answers to that. Who wants to go first on that?

Kalia: I worked as a bookseller for almost 15 years. My advice is always to read as many books as possible. I always want to tell people to just live and live openly, because you're going to get ideas from your experiences. I think sometimes we just come to the page and we try to force something to happen, but with this last book, with *Woman of Light*, I researched so much. Some of that research was just going around and living my life and talking to my elders and talking to my neighbors and just having fun with my existence. That is my advice to aspiring writers for developing your process. Just try to engage with your own world in a way that is inspiring to you.

Margaret: Okay. Louise, you want to go next?

Louise: I'd say, I like what you said about research and Tommy as well, doing research is one of the most important things I can think of. I think with a lot of native writing, people think that somehow it comes out of some sort of connection that is beyond words, and nobody can really describe and it's just all emotional and ethereal and something like that. No. You're working hard to find more about your background, our background, social issues. I would just concur that those are really good ideas.

Margaret: Tommy?

Tommy: I would add that sometimes with writing specifically, there is the sense that you're either inspired, you have some great story to tell, or you have writer's block. It's like it's mystified in ways that other disciplines [are] not. Somebody does not become really good at basketball because they're inspired or they have raw talent. I think the practice element of a painter or a piano player – like a concert pianist does not have concert pianist block. They have a discipline and they go at their discipline. Part of that is research and part of that is finding multiple ways to be working when you don't feel like you can work.

Research is useful for that. Reading, I think, is part of the craft also, but I think just approaching writing as a discipline and not as – sometimes it's mystified in ways that I don't think is useful.

Margaret: I would agree. I get up every morning. First thing I do after breakfast is I sit down, I read to research and then I write. I don't talk about writing. I don't think about writing. I don't hope I can write. I sit down and write every morning, every day. It is absolutely a discipline and I don't think you can do it any other way.

I've got another question here about writing, and since we're talking about writing, this one has popped up. What are the easiest parts of writing about your ancestry and what are the hardest parts? You're writing about your ancestry directly, Louise, and Tommy, I don't know that you have written about your ancestry yet. Maybe you have, I don't know. We can answer this. Are all of you writing about your ancestry?

Louise: Kali, you were writing about – I think everybody is in some way, right?

Margaret: Well, I am, but I'm asking the questions here –

Louise: I just feel like talk too much, so I'm just going to throw it out there. You guys take it. [laughs]

Kalia: Okay. Since I just wrote this epic book [laughs] and it's based on my ancestors. One of the hardest parts is – maybe it's not hard. It was just funny. They have sex in the book. This character,

who is based on my great grandma, is like having sex with somebody. That was a little bit weird to give them full – [laughs] like, you're a full human character. I think that is hard because it's not just about them expressing themselves romantically, it's also about these characters making poor choices or revealing something that's maybe a little bit ugly about their personality and that's not necessarily your ancestor, but that is the shadow puppet that you've created out of the stories of the ancestor or from my relationship with my elders before they passed.

I do think what's hard about it is you have to break away from the tyranny of truth because there really is not very much there. I listened to story after story after story in the same rhythm in the same spot in the house and the same couch, but that's not a novel. I think one of the hardest things to do is to crack that open and to provide it with life and give it the breath of life and let your characters go out and express themselves sexually. That was hard. [laughs]

Louise: Well said.

Margaret: Yes, absolutely. Tommy, do you have anything you wanna say on that?

Tommy: I thought I understood the question and then your question about the question confused me. Are we talking about ancestors or ancestry?

Margaret: Well, I'll have to go back over here. Let's see if I can find – ancestry. What are the easiest parts of writing about your ancestry and then we moved over to ancestors and that's okay. We get to do what we want to because we're adults.

Tommy: I was very much wanting to write in there about contemporary lives, but it's also because it's a book about identity, it's about – all of my characters are Cheyenne or Navajo people, so they're my people and it's about what that looks like today, but it's very much rooted in the people they come from. I don't think that I'm ever not really writing from that place and that's who my characters are. In the next book, there's definitely more historical stuff that has to do with being closer to some of the trauma that is definitely painful and hard.

I think sometimes writing, giving voice to stuff that feels like it hasn't been spoken or I haven't heard yet or I haven't read yet, can be helpful and can feel transformative and that helps. Some of that might seem harder. If you can feel it moving or transforming, then it becomes less heavy.

Margaret: We're about to run out of time. I have two questions in front of me, one of which might sound crazy. We'd have to talk about it for 30 minutes, which is about blood quantum. The other one is, what's given us joy during the pandemic? I think that that is what we ought to end on in terms of our responses here. What have you done during the pandemic that has sustained you and has given pleasure?

Louise: I've been reading. All I can say is reading. I read things for pleasure. What about you? What about you, Kali? What about you, Tommy?

Tommy: Before the pandemic, I had been given the advice when I first sold my book to say yes to everything. It made sense in a desperate way. Some people, I think they do have to do that. I took the advice and my book had enough success ultimately that I didn't have to do that, but I had said yes to a lot and I just got really burned out and I was away from home a lot and I was away with my family. While the world is crumbling and suffering – that was really intense to experience that,

from just watching. Getting into the rhythm as a family with my wife and son was amazing. I felt healing after being gone a lot and having a lot of anxiety around travel. Recalibrating at home to me this was really good.

Margaret: Kali?

Kalia: I had a pretty chaotic pandemic. I had to move three times. I spent a lot of my time moving all around Denver and getting in and out of apartments and trying to find an affordable place to live. I spent a lot of my time in systems navigating and it just reminded me of how horrible that is and something I should fight harder for other people. When I get further along, I can help more. I also became an auntie twice. I was already an auntie once, but then I became an auntie twice in the pandemic. My brother and his wife, they couldn't have any visitors when one of my nieces was born.

I was the first person that got to see the new baby because they drove past one of my apartments I had to vacate. They had me come down to the front and I got to hold this little tiny baby in the backseat of a car with a mask on. I'll just never forget that. I think just having all this new life enter into my family. I come from a family of seven children, I'm the second oldest and I don't have any children. To see all my siblings now starting to have these little babies, that's been such a joy during this time because it really made me realize, like, we are going to keep growing and we're going to keep being us. We're going to keep being a people. I loved being around that.

I also finished a novel that I started when I was 19 years old. I just spent a lot of time writing. I thought in the beginning of trying to finish that novel – *Sabrina & Corina* got nominated for the National Book Award in November of 2019. It was going to be the first time in my life that I was going to be able to make money because I was going to have speaking engagements and then everything was wiped out by the pandemic. Then I just went back to what my life had been before. I think that was a really interesting, humbling experience.

While I wish it wouldn't have been like that, I do think it was for the best because it kept me grounded and it kept me humble and it reminded me that my job is to be the storyteller for my family and to keep our stories alive and I did it and I finished it so that's how I passed my time.

Margaret: All right, congratulations. I just realized we got a little bit more time here left than I realized that we did. We've had a question pop up that I think is really interesting and that I talk about a lot myself when I'm the main show. I'd like to hear y'all's answers. This question is, how would you compare what – they've moved there – Hold on, okay, there.

How would you compare the idea of the hero in the dominant culture versus the hero in the native culture? Is hero something relevant in indigenous culture? For example, this keeps moving around here. Well, I've lost it, the screen is moving, I can't do it. Let's talk about this – the idea of the hero in Western culture is problematic, I think.

Louise: Well, I do too. I think that if anyone would talk about a hero – we're not talking about a blanket idea of native culture because it's all sovereign tribal nations that we're talking about. One thing in common is that if there was a hero that would be the humblest person in the community. A hero would be the person who was the most generous and who gave away most of their

possessions, that would be a very different hero. Maybe we can talk more about that. I did say Cheyenne, so Tommy, you might have to take this one.

Tommy: I think it's like a pan-indigenous loaded question, and I think there are ways to speak to it. There's a communal versus individualistic, Western versus native thought. I think, like you're saying Louise, the attributes of a hero in the [way] Western mythology construes the hero, and the way we still continue to think of the hero, even in Marvel movies – it's like something bad happens and then this really cool guy comes along, then saves things, and things return to the status quo. The guy was really loud and probably good-looking and buff – whatever. I think that's a far cry from native values and the way that we think of things.

I think there's a lot of transformation in native story. The idea of just returning to the way things were is not very inspiring. I don't know that it's the same in native stories. I think transformation is something that's a little more prevalent. I think there's a lot of differences in the way we think of heroes, that's all I have to say for now about heroes.

Margaret: Kalia, do you have something to say about it?

Kalia: No.

Margaret: Wait, you're muted so it's a good thing you didn't rather say anything.

Louise: Maybe it's better to say that the hero is the man or woman who thinks of everybody else, who is really considerate and who is looking ahead and really putting other people first, I think that's part of it.

Margaret: Well, I know that in some of your books, Louise and Tommy, and at least in the paperback version of *There There* and in my book, *Cherokee America*, we have a list of characters in the fronts of our books. The reason that there's a list of characters in the front of my book is because there are a lot of characters. I'm talking about a whole community of people who are intertwined rather than about one person who rises up above everybody else. Everybody else is down here and this person is saving them. I think that notion of we're all intertwined and giving to each other and not meshed in a bad way, but tied to each other, really, in real-world ties, is something that is pretty common.

That just feels normal to me, but it's completely different than the Western concept of the hero and the leader. I see that as a major difference between indigenous writing and dominant culture writing. You all are nodding your heads. Anybody want to expand on that?

Louise: Well, I wrote about my grandfather in the last book. I know he was considered a hero. I did research on him the way Tommy and Kalia do research. I slipped up everything I could. What I kept finding was this person who became a hero, one way was through suffering, really, through suffering. He had a very, very hard life and he worked really hard. I say, he tried to get back into boarding school, but he also ran away from Haskell in Lawrence, Kansas, and he was nine years old. I don't know how he got back up to the Turtle mountains under the Canadian border, and how he managed to do that at nine years old. He lived an incredibly demanding life.

I think that's part of it, that you don't go out there like – I like what Tommy said, this buff hero coming out magically assuming superpowers somehow, and then coming out and saving the world.

He did save our tribe, he saved the Turtle Mountain nation. He saved that. He saved our people during termination. He was the most modest person I can think of. I ended up knowing him as a hero.

Margaret: Do you think that modesty is more of an indigenous value than a dominant culture value?

Tommy: I think it's seen as a strength in ways that [in] the dominant culture confidence is seen as a strength, and I think loudness, as opposed to waiting to see what other people have to say. There's a lot of inverse things that are seen strengthened in the dominant culture that in native culture, it's the opposite. I think it's interesting the way that we – Just the differences in basic things like that. A lot of our tribes believe deeply in generosity, and that's not something that we are allowed as a native attribute.

It could be because we've been objectified over so many years and frozen in time, it's like, what are we wearing or what do we sound like, and we're not driven [by] these human qualities that are deeply important to us, like generosity and modesty as strengths.

Margaret: Harmony, getting along with people.

Louise: I think that all those – and Kali probably has something else to add – all these are ways that we practice our cultures. These are ways of practicing culture. I'm sure that we do different things. We might dance when I do things, but I resisted answering that way. These are really important.

Margaret: I don't think people associate these values with indigenous people.

Kalia: They should. [laughs] Generosity and being humble is the primary energy of my family. When I lived in Durango, I lived by myself on the south side of Durango, Colorado. My neighbor woman, she would sit outside and smoke cigarettes and she was an elder. She called me over one day and she started feeding me. She would give me green chili and beans, and she made homemade tortillas. I told her, I said, "This is just like my family's food." She said, "Yes, I think we're the same culture." I said, "Oh, I think so too." Based on the food. But she was the first person I visited when I was there a couple of weeks ago.

She's older now, so she was sick and she couldn't make any food. She said she was sorry about that. I found out that her family was [unintelligible] too from generations back. That just shocked me because I knew she was a Chicana but I didn't know she was Chicana from the same exact origin space. We met because she was feeding me, and she recognized me, and she wanted me into the house. I call her every time something happens and I want her to know that I have a new story out or new books coming out.

Yes, that's how I knew this, we're still part of the same people. We've been spread out, but somehow we recognize each other. It was through the generosity and the humbleness and also feeding me really good food.

Louise: That's great.

Margaret: Yes, that's a good story. Well, we are about out of time now. I want to ask before we wind up, is there anything at all that is hanging out there that any of you want to say? If that's

plugging your next book, that's good too because people are here because they're interested in you, want to know what you're doing.

Louise: I want to thank everybody who tuned in, all of you. This has been a really terrific conversation. Thank you.

Kalia: I want to thank everybody as well. Thank you, Tommy and Louise. This is a big honor for me. It's still unreal to me that I get to be a professional author, and get to talk to people. Thank you. Thank you to everybody. Somebody on my Instagram said they woke up in the middle of the night in France to watch us.

Margaret: Oh, wow.

Kalia: Thank you to everybody watching.

Margaret: Alright, anything else? Tommy, do you want to say anything?

Tommy: Just likewise, thank you to our panelists. It's a real dream to be on a panel with Louise. Thank you for sharing this panel with us, for continuing to write incredible books. Thank you, Margaret, for leading us through and for PEN/Faulkner for putting this all together. Of course, everybody for coming. Appreciate it. My book plug is an anti-plug. I don't know when my book's coming [out]. My editor hasn't seen the latest draft yet. It was announced that it's coming out next year. I'm not sure if that's true. This is an anti-plug.

Margaret: Well, we'll keep your fingers crossed for that. I want to thank all of you for being delightful panelists. I want to thank everybody that has joined us for your questions and for your generosity in spending your time with us. Because you have other things you could do other than spend it with us. We appreciate it. I want to thank the PEN/Faulkner Foundation for [having] all of us and for making this a pleasant experience for us. I hope that I'll see you all in person someday and not in my basement.

Amanda Liaw: Thank you so much, Margaret. Good evening, everyone.

Margaret: I'm leaving.

Amanda: I'm Amanda Liaw. I'm PEN/Faulkner's Media and Communications Associate. Please join me in thanking our featured authors tonight – Kali, Tommy, Louise, and, of course, our amazing moderator, Margaret. Thank you all for being here with us and for facilitating such an incredible conversation about your relationships with language, ghosts and haunting, the concept of the hero, and so much more. To each of you on the other end of this screen, thank you for joining us, for engaging with us, and for asking such thoughtful questions that really made this conversation as fruitful as it was.

If you enjoyed tonight's program, I hope that you'll consider contributing to PEN/Faulkner by completing our post-event survey and, if you're able, by making a donation through the link that we're about to provide in the chat.

[Donate to PEN/Faulkner using this link! bit.ly/penfaulkner]

At PEN/Faulkner, we believe in a world where stories and storytelling are accessible for everyone. We work hard to connect and support readers and writers of all ages through giving out three national awards, through hosting Literary Conversations such as this one, and through our education programs, which provide students in low-income schools across DC with free books, writing instruction, and visits with authors.

Your support tonight will help sustain us in creating spaces for people of all generations can feel encouraged to tell their stories, listen to each other's stories, and foster connections as a community. In addition, half of all the funds donated to tonight's event will be going to Through Piscataway Eyes, a nonprofit that promotes and protects the welfare, culture, and history of the members of the Piscataway Conoy Tribe, on whose ancestral land PEN/Faulkner and the entire DMV area operates.

Every dollar makes a difference and however, you're able to support, we really appreciate you being part of our literary conversation tonight. Thank you, once again, for joining us. Have a great evening and we hope to be with you all soon.