

Literary Conversations: TRANSitional Writing

March 23, 2022

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Shahenda Helmy: Hello, everyone, and welcome back to PEN/Faulkner's *Literary Conversation* series. My name is Shahenda Helmy, and I'm the Director of Literary Programs at the PEN/Faulkner Foundation. I'm so excited to welcome you all here tonight for TRANSitional Writing. For those of you joining us for the first time, PEN/Faulkner Foundation is a literary non-profit organization based in Washington, D.C. with a mission of celebrating literature and fostering connections between readers and writers to enrich and inspire both individuals and communities.

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 through our education programs, which bring free books and author visits to D.C. public and public charter schools. If you'd like to learn more about the work we do, please visit our website at penfaulkner.org and follow us on social media.

Before I introduce and bring on tonight's amazing panelists, I want to mention a few technical notes about tonight's webinar. There will be live captions provided this evening. To turn them on and off, you can use the CC button at the bottom of your zoom screen. There will also be a brief Q&A session at the end of the event. Please submit your questions using the Q&A panel. You can also upvote your favorite questions and we'll do our best to get to as many as we can in the time that we have. You can also find our panelists' books on sale through politics and prose through the links that will provide in the chat shortly. Be sure to check them out.

All right, it's time to get this conversation started. I'm very honored to introduce tonight's panelists who have so graciously taken the time to join us from all over the United States and the world. The joy of virtual events. First up, we have Zeyn Joukhadar who is the author of *The Thirty Names of Night*, which won the Lambda Literary Award and the Stonewall Book Award.

He is also the author of *The Map of Salt and Stars* which won the Middle East Book Award and was a finalist for the Goodreads Choice Awards and the Wilbur Smith Adventure Writing Prize. His work has appeared in the Kink anthology *Salon*, *The Paris Review*, *PANK*,

and elsewhere, and has been twice nominated for the Pushcart Prize. Joukhadar serves on the board of the Radius of Arab American Writers and mentors emerging writers of color with the Periplus Collective.

Next up, we have Torrey Peters, who is the author of the bestselling novel *Detransition, Baby*, which was a finalist for the 2021 National Book Critics Circle Award for the John Leonard prize, longlisted for the Women's Prize, and was a Roxane Gay's Audacious Book Club Pick. She is also the author of the novellas *Infect Your Friends and Loved Ones* and *The Masker*. Peters holds an MFA from the University of Iowa and a master's in comparative literature from Dartmouth. She splits her time between Brooklyn and an off-grid cabin in Vermont.

Also, joining us tonight is Neon Yang, the author of the Tensorate series of novellas from Tor.Com publishing, which includes *The Red Threads of Fortune*, *The Black Tides of Heaven*, *The Descent of Monsters*, and *The Ascent to Godhood*. Their work has been shortlisted for the Hugo, Nebula, Lambda Literary and World Fantasy Awards, and their debut novel, *The Genesis of Misery*, will be published by Tor in September of 2022, so be sure to look out for that.

Finally, moderating tonight's conversation is the amazing P. Carl, who is the author of the memoir *Becoming a Man: The Story of a Transition*. His work has been published in *The New York Times Magazine*, *The Boston Globe Magazine*, and *Lit Hub*. He is currently working on the stage adaptation of *Becoming a Man* which was commissioned by American Repertory Theater.

Carl received a bachelor's degree in English literature and a master's in Peace Studies from the University of Notre Dame and holds a PhD in Comparative Studies and Discourse and Society from the University of Minnesota. He was born in Elkhart, Indiana, and now lives in Boston with a spouse, the writer Lynette D'Amico, and their dogs, Lenny Obama and Sonny. All right, that is it for me. Thank you all again for being a part of tonight's exciting and important conversation. Carl, please take it away.

P. Carl: Thank you, Shahenda. Thank you so much for having me and us to PEN/Faulkner. It's really a pleasure to be here. I hope my dogs will not bark, so we will. Yes. I guess we'll jump into some questions. The one thing I would say is preparing for this and reading your-- I've read your books, but getting back into them, if I had to pick three books that were completely unlike, I might pick the three of yours together. That was fun. I thought what we might do is just put the energy of the work into the room at the start.

The way I thought we might do that is that the worlds you create are all incredibly different culturally, racially, ethnically, and transly, which is a word I've just created. They're different in all of those ways. I just wonder if you would talk about the origins of those worlds, and then as you're thinking about the world, either you could read a little section from your book first or you could talk about the world and then read after, however you want to do that. Maybe, Zeyn, you'd start if you don't mind.

Zeyn Joukhadar: Sure, yes. Thank you. I'm super excited to be here with you all. This is awesome. Yes, I think I can talk a little bit and then read a little bit if that works. I think when I was thinking about creating the world of the book for *Thirty Names of Night*, I think, first of all, I was kind of focused across time because there's two timelines. There's a section that's in this neighborhood of New York that still exists but in a very different way now. There's only a few buildings left, but this historic neighborhood, let's say, of little Syria in the '30s and '40s. Then there's like a contemporary timeline of characters that are in, obviously, the same city in New York City, but are living completely different lives and have a completely different relationship to the city.

In both timelines, I'm still focused on what it is like now and was like then to be Syrian-American, to be Arab in New York, and to be queer and or trans in that community in that place, even though both timelines span so much time. I think I was just trying to focus on what was possible, what was probable based on the research I did, where I could fill in the gaps in the archive in a way that would have been recognizable to the people I was writing about both in the '30s and '40s, and also something that the characters in the contemporary timeline were able to connect with, in terms of either their own ancestors, in a similar way for me of connecting with folks that could have been my own ancestors, whether in America or in Syria, and just focusing on those relationships, both across time and then within the timelines. I think it was really based in people for me.

The section I was going to read for tonight is just a super, super short section from the middle that talks about some of this in terms of the contemporary timeline and the relationships between the characters in the contemporary timeline. First things you need to know, the main character is a non-binary person who is in the process of choosing his new name, and so is unnamed for most of the book. In this particular scene, he is dragged out dancing by a friend named Sami on whom he also has a crush, but Sami doesn't know this. Sami is also, to the best of the narrator's knowledge, cis and gay, and so there's some tension there with the main character, wondering if the crush is going to be returned or not. Also because a lot of these characters are queer and/or trans and also Muslim and either Arab or SWANA, Southwest Asian North African.

A lot of the relationships are also these intracommunal relationships and are specific in those kinds of ways. Maybe the best way to talk about that is just to read the excerpt. All right. "The DJ turns the music down and the room stills to listen. Even over the bass beat, the sound of the isha' adhan next door is loud enough to make itself heard. The DJ has lowered the music out of respect so that the call to prayer becomes part of the music. The room continues to dance as though this is simply another rhythm to move one's body to. Once, a friend of yours from Marrakesh played us a recording of the adhan from the streets of the old medina.

She said it reminded her that no matter what she was worrying about, life was fleeting, and one day none of the fears that plagued her would matter at all. I always liked that about the adhan, that a sound could both remind me that I was going to die and comfort

me with the reminder that I was still alive, that it could remind me of the ways my ancestors touched their foreheads to the earth, that a single sound could tap that ancient place in my bones and make it sing like a plucked string. The last time I went to the masjid with you is as alive as though it is still happening. It is Ashura and I'm fasting. It is a hot day. I put on my abaya, wrap my hijab, and walk with you up the stairs to the women's room.

I take off my sandals and set them in the cubby, and inside, the carpet meets my hungry toes. The women burst into the room like eagles, faces bright, their abayat emerald and night-black and pomegranate. Half of the women who greet me look like Teta, like the woman I am supposed to one day become. As-salaamu Alaykum, we say to one another, as women arrange themselves in rows for prayer, Wa Alaykum As-salaam. We recite and bow our heads and turn to our angels on either side. Then the day is gone and we break our fast behind closed doors where teenage girls whip off their hijabs and laugh, sequester themselves from their mothers, tell dirty jokes, oil their fingers with turmeric chicken.

Bismillah, we say, and eat until we are full. In those days, as out of places I felt in the world, I would've dared anyone to tell me we were anything less than our own feast. I haven't prayed since the day they slid you into the earth. Your grave faces a copse of pines that separates the cemetery from the homes of rich families who don't want to see the dead and the grieving. We buried not a person, but a continent that day. We're made from clay after all, aren't we, and underground Springs and threads of copper run in our veins. When this country asks me where I'm from, they aren't asking for the city on my birth certificate, but whose earth is in my blood.

Then the adhan is over and I'm swimming in the music. I paint the space around me with my body. I think of the last time I used my hands to make something beautiful. As long as my body was not for myself, I stopped allowing myself the luxury of wanting, but here in this space that smells of sweat and sage and cigarette smoke, anything seems possible, even desire. Sami curves his back, his knees, his neck. He is beautiful and I am still in love with him, and this is not a mistake. I bend and untangle and step out of my body, lightening myself into this swollen room where boys like me are arcing and vaulting our unruly bodies, shaking the wet newness from our wings." Stop there.

P. Carl: Great, I love that. I love that passage and the image. Neon, would you maybe go next and do the same, talk about the world and read a little?

Neon Yang: Okay. I might do something slightly different and I will talk about the world and read a little and then talk a little bit more about it. Basically, I'm reading from my first Novella, *The Black Tides of Heaven*, which is part of the Tensorate series. I wrote two Novellas that were released at the same time, which was *The Black Tides of Heaven* and *The Red Threads of fortune*. Technically, this was the second book that I wrote, but when I created this world its secondary world fantasy, but I wanted to write the kind of fantasy that I knew growing up, which was very Asian inspiring or journey to the west kind of fantasy. That is what I created with this, well, as an Asian. It's like infused secondary world fantasy.

The first two books explore the lives of a pair of twins who are like the children of the Supreme Ruler of the little empire, Akeha and Mokoya. In this world, children are not assigned gender at birth and they have to, at some point in their childhood or teenagehood, the adolescence, that was the word I was looking for, they have to choose gender. Unfortunately in this role, they're very binary, so they have to pick a binary gender. This excerpt that I'm reading is from *Black Tides of Heaven* where Akeha, one of the twins has had a revelation after realizing that their twin Mokoya has chosen to be assigned a woman. I'm just going to read from it now.

Akeha walked and walked, the diplomatic wing had a courtyard of its own, an austere stone garden with an enormous black plinth standing in its middle. The plinth was a work of art, titled *Reflections upon the Past and the Future*. Its ebony surface was polished to glasslike smoothness and lit by a dozen sunballs fixed to the ground. Standing in front of its massive bulk. Akeha's reflection was super superimposed over a void so pure and deep, it seems unending.

Akeha stared at themselves, the shorn head, the genderless robes, the strap facial features that were identical to Mokoya's. Until a young person confirmed their gender. The masters of forest nature kept the markers of adulthood at bay. They had never imagined themselves any other way. It frightened them to think that this was not true for Mokoya. A fundamental chasm had opened between them through which many of things could slip.

Their inner voice whispered conspiratorially, but that chasm has always been there. You've always known about it, Akeha. They start unblinking at their own face as they recited feminine pronouns, like a sutra. I am, I want, I will. Like a sutra, the words came out of their mouths rote and meaningless. There was no connection between what was said and the person in the black mirror. Akeha bit their lip, a thought occurred to them. In all honesty. It had been occurring to them for some time and occurring with much greater frequencies since Mokoya's announcement two nights ago.

It was a thought that took hold in the back of their mind whenever they look at Thennjay, at the shape of his body, underneath his clothes. A thought that he had been trying to drown out to ignore. Slowly as if stepping into unilluminated edge of a lake, Akeha switched to using masculine pronouns. I am, I want, I will. Their heart quickened in their chest. The words rolled and clicked in their mind, sharp and electric. I want, I want, I want.

Akeha had not grown up amongst men. There were male monks, to be sure, but they were not men as Kuanjin society considered men. There were no men in the Protector's family. A few amongst those, she allowed close to her. Men were creatures of distant fascination with their broad backs and tanned cheeks. Akeha had never considered that they might be one of them. They imagined themselves dressing up like a man with their hair tied up like a man. It felt different. Not right exactly, but there was something there. I want, I want, I am."

Interesting thing about this novella was that I came out as non-binary after writing it, because part of writing Akeha's experience was what made me realize that I was not as cis

as I thought I was. [laughs] I think, whenever I read excerpt of this book, I always tend to read this particular passage, because I think it has significance from you. I was just like, "Hmm, this was a gender awakening for me as well."

P. Carl: That's fair. You brought yourself right into yourself, which is cool. Torrey, go ahead.

Torrey Peters: I wrote *Detransition, Baby*. I think I'll just start by reading it, but just a little elevator pitch for it is it's the story of Reese, who you can think of as like fleabag, but trans, and then Brooklyn. She's a mess. She's sleeping with married guys. The actual book kicks off when her ex ends, who used to be a trans woman named Amy but detransitioned, approaches Reese with the news that Ames has gotten his boss Katrina pregnant, and would they like to make an unconventional family together? I realize that sounds like a lot. It's really convoluted, but actually, that's just the first chapter.

I'll just start from the beginning and just read the first page. "The question, for Reese, were married men just desperately attractive to her? Or was the pool of men who were available to her as a trans woman only those who had already locked down as his wife and could now explore with her? The easy answer, the one that all her girls advocated was to call men dogs, but now here's Reese sneaking around with another handsome, charming motherfucking cheater.

Look at her, wearing a black lace dress and sitting in his parked Beamer, waiting while he goes into a Duane Reade to buy condoms, and she's going to let him come over to her apartment, avoid the point of glare of her roommate Iris and have him fuck her right on the trite floral bedspread that the last married dude bought her so that her room would seem a little more girly and naughty when he snuck away from his wife.

Reese had already diagnosed her own problem. She didn't know how to be alone. She fled from her own company, from her own solitude. Along with telling her how awful her cheating men were. Her friends also told her that after two major breakups, she needed time to learn to be herself by herself. She couldn't be alone in any kind of moderate way. Give her a week to herself and she began to isolate, cultivating an ash of loneliness until she was daydreaming about selling everything and drifting away on a boat towards nowhere.

To jolt herself back to life, she went on Grindr or Tinder or wherever, and administered 10,000 volts to the heart by chasing the most dramatic tachycardia of an affair she could find. Married men were the best for fleeing loneliness because married men also didn't know how to be alone. Married men were experts of being together and not letting go no matter what, until death do us part. Her married man this time was similar to her others, only this man was better because he was an HIV-positive cowboy turned lawyer. He had a thing for trans girls and had seroconverted while cheating on his wife with a trans woman, and the wife had stayed with him, and now he was back at it again with Reese. Wheeeee."

That's the first page. I will say why I write it? I was writing it because I was on the far side of transition, and I really felt like as a trans woman, the opportunities or the horizon of possibility for me was different than the generation that came before me, and I was looking around, I was like, "All right, well, I did transition. Now, how do I live?"

The generation before me, their models were survival. Actually, for me, I felt like I had that more possibilities, but as a result, those other women were like, "Well, we don't know, we were just trying to survive. We don't know how to make a life." The great thing about fiction is that it like works as a test case. You don't actually have to go into a coal mine yourself. You can create a character and send a man and be like, "What happens if you do this?"

In one of the things that I think it was most difficult or most like, "Can I do this? Is it possible?" is the idea of being a mother as a trans woman, how could it happen? What would it mean? How do you make those negotiations? Rather than, I wasn't sure what I wanted, but I was like, rather than doing this myself, I'll have Reese do it. She can figure it out and then at the end of the book, maybe I'll have some answers. Yes, that's basically it.

P. Carl: That's cool. Let's pick up a little bit on that question of generation. Last week, I was called an elder three times, and I'm preoccupied with it at this point, it's never happened before, and then happened three times. This generational question, I think you're all dealing with that in your books. I just wonder, it's where you get some insight and maybe if, Neon and Zeyn, you have some thoughts about that as well how you're thinking about it and how you're maneuvering it in terms of your writing. Take it. Neon, I think you're up.

Neon: Oh, am I? [chuckles] I was just waiting for people to start talking? It's interesting because I think one of the things for me is that I am an alder millennial, geriatric millennial, but I'm fairly new to the concept of chances because growing up, I didn't really have or models for being neither not to one or the other, because for a really long time, it was very difficult for me to consider myself transgender, because I was like, well, I don't identify with being a man, I don't want to be a dude.

I think it's very different now I think for people growing up because when I was like a child of the '90s, there was no such talk about people being non-binary or whatever. It was a revelation for me in my mid-30s that, oh, I actually don't have to be the gender that I was assigned at birth. It's still a very new experience to me, and I'm still learning and still negotiating my position with respect to gender.

Yes, I think part of it is although I came through to this realization through writing, I have started to realize that this is much more personal, and it's not really something that I also personally want to explore in my fiction. It is actually honestly a thing that I'm moving away from writing about these days, just because I think it's my personal journey. I don't really know where I'm at. Everything's very messy. If I have figured out something, I will put it in a book, but otherwise, I don't want to do that self-figuring out to the public. You know what I mean? [chuckles]

P. Carl: Yes, for sure. [laughs] I think that's always the trick of writing in any context, right? What are you feeling about yourself, and what do people think you're revealing about yourself, I guess, especially in fiction. Obviously, Zeyn, your book is a lot about this question of generation and exploration. Again, just the insights you had in terms of that question, writing it, and why you were compelled to go back, I guess.

Zeyn: Yes, it's funny because I know a lot of other trans-Arabs and trans-Muslims. I'm really lucky in the sense that I have a whole-- I really do feel that I have a whole community of folks very much like me in the sense of having models of possibility and that sort of thing. Not to say that I grew up having that, but I have that now, but that said, I definitely still get a lot of reactions, especially from white cis folks about this idea that somehow my existence or our existence is like a contradiction in terms or somehow is new or that to write historically about the existence of people like me is somehow an anachronism or somehow impossible.

Being somebody who has maybe always been long before I knew that I was trans, has always been hungry for models of possibility and knowing that other people passed the way that I've passed that I'm passing now. It's always been important to me. I think even with my first book, I was writing across timelines and trying to make connections to things that are happening now, to things that have happened before. Just because I think that it's one of the ways that we survive is to know that other people have survived the things that we're going through, even if it's just in some shade or sense of what's happening now.

I think that was what drove me into the archives at first, was to say, "Maybe I won't find explicit evidence of what I'm looking for, but maybe I'll find the possibility." Let's say enough space, where a person like that could have fit, and just this empty space will be enough for me to know that even if I don't find a sign saying, "Look, here I am, of someone using the exact same language, of the exact same terms that I would use now," I will still know that they existed because of course they did in some fashion. I just want to know how they survived. I want to try to imagine what a person like that what their life might have been like. That was what I did with the past timeline in *Thirty Names of Night*.

I think that from that, I was able to, maybe I didn't find all the answers that I was looking for, but I at least found a sense that, "Okay, it was certainly more than possible that someone else passed this way before," and that makes me feel just a little bit more confident in my ability to survive what I'm going through now, and to know that also for people that are coming after me, people that are coming after us, that they'll be able to do the same thing and make a life.

P. Carl: Yes, I think that it's that thing, I often hear my students saying, "Who were role models?" How do I know I will survive? Because they're looking forward, and I think, in many ways, you have to go back at this moment, at some point, it'll still be more forward out there. It's very interesting. I guess, Zeyn, too, and with all of your books, because they really have such a different sensibility and all in really beautiful ways. I was listening to an

interview you did, Torrey, about moving to Brooklyn to be part of the transversion of the Harlem Renaissance, which I wondered if it had happened yet, but I was curious.

You said some of the interesting things about how writing with other, I believe trans women, but maybe these other trans women was really had a huge impact in terms of how you thought about the book, versus had you just been by yourself and not in this group of people writing together.

Torrey: Totally. Well, we came-- I came to the scene after I'd already started, and started with a small scene in Brooklyn in around 2013, 2014. Senator on this press top side press that was publishing only trans people was run by trans people, but I think more than just the production, the question was, it was a change in the idea of the audience. This is something that I think we took from other minority groups that had gone through stages of literature, where you heard about writers like Toni Morrison who stated in her Nobel Prize speech that she writes explicitly for Black women, and that everybody else can basically keep up.

We were like, "Well, all these other great writers are doing it, let's write really only for other trans people." This sounds like a political project, but actually, it's an artistic one, because what happen when you're assuming a cis audience, you explain things. It might be like 70% story, 30% explanation, but when you've got a trans audience, it's 100% story. The actual quality of your writing changes. That's the first thing that happened. The second thing that happened is when you assume a trans audience, you have to bring a higher level of insight.

If I told you all about hormones, you would be bored, you would yawn at me. You'd be like, "Great. Yes, we do it every week." For me, that doesn't mean though that I can't talk about hormones. It means that if I'm going to talk about hormones with you, I need to bring an insight that you haven't thought about yourself. I need to say something to you all about hormones that you haven't experienced, and that's just a much higher bar to clear. Imagine that trans audience actually just makes me a better writer. The thing is, people are like, "Well, can cis people keep up?" In fact, I don't think cis people are stupid. I think cis people can keep up, and if I bring a higher level of insight, guess what? Cis people benefit.

The idea of audience was really what shaped that scene, and part of it was that we had our own press, so we weren't thinking about-- or in my case, I self-polish, I wasn't thinking about the needs of the market in terms of what comps were, what had sold before. I think our theory was proven out in the fact that a lot of really great writers came from that scene, even as the scene itself imploded because there was scarcity and all that sort of stuff.

Yes, that was the animating philosophy of that scene, and now I think going on almost a decade, it's been borne out in the work that we've produced, and the fact that that trans audience translates very easily into a cis audience, the same way that Toni Morrison's work translates into an audience of all races.

P. Carl: Yes, I think that was interesting thing about reading your book is that the effort not to accommodate cis people actually accommodated cis people. [laughs] Because they could relate to attraction, affairs. It was all the things. I found that really fascinating in terms of how that emerged.

Torrey: Yes, I was interested in creating affinity across these differences, and part of the ways that you create affinity, I think, in fiction, is through techniques. If you give somebody a story that never stops, they'll come with you. They'll come with you across all sorts of differences.

P. Carl: Yes, and I think that it's interesting because of the ways that you're all writing different genres. Neon, for you, you're in that sort of cross of like sci-fi fantasy, and I missed the dinosaur era. I have students who are really into dinosaurs, but I totally missed that, There's dinosaurs, but there's also this sense of this technical world. Your audience, it also is very much into-- I was watching some interviews and the adoration of the worlds that you're creating in terms of sci-fi, and then fantasy combined, and I just wondered about how you bring those two together, and then how you're weaving these bigger questions into those future type of worlds that you're creating.

Neon: Yes, that's a whole thing in that I tend to write stuff that confuses or blurs the line between genres as we tend to think them in science fiction and fantasy. Mostly because my brain is very unruly. It thinks of things and it doesn't think about boxes to put it into, which is what publishing wants, because they want to be able to market a book as a science fiction or fantasy to the right readers of one or the other. To me, it's all kind of one space that's like fantastical and speculative fiction. When I create worlds or I think of things, I don't generally put a distinction between them.

Personally, for me, I came from a science background, I was a science student through my entire life, and basically told I was too stupid to do humanities because I was not good enough at English and stuff like that. I grew up very working-class. Literature was something that I came into in my later years, so I always blend, I think, science and fantasy. I have a scientific background, so I tend to write science fiction, but I also, am very bored with a lot of science fiction and I want stuff like magic and stuff just happening. I always combine the two. I put into my books about whatever I want. [chuckles] I'm sorry, what was the question?

[laughter]

P. Carl: No, I mean you answered the question. Then I think weaving that in. Do you feel like the audience is broader? There's this weird way in which a trans book is a trans book. I remember the publishers all scheduling my book tour in queer bookstores, and I thought, "Why only queer bookstores?" I totally didn't understand that at all, and so I'm curious in terms of your work, how it moves past that because there's also this whole subculture of people who are reading the kind of this intersection of sci-fi and fantasy.

Neon: I think it also ties a bit to what Tony was saying in that you write a book for a certain audience, but the other audiences can also keep up. Publishing is a business, and they need to be able to market stuff because they want to know what audience the book sells to, and whatever, but also, I think that people benefit for reading more from categories that they don't naturally read. I was always like, yes. I think you will have an ideal audience in your head, and maybe most of the time it will be an audience that something, someone like you. Because sometimes you just write books for yourself, but then you will be often surprised to find how large a population of people who also enjoy your book that you did not imagine enjoying it, I think.

P. Carl: Like I said, it was fun to watch the videos because the geekdom about sci-fi, which I love, there was that-- the enthusiasm for that I think is its own thing, and then the way in which gender works in the books is a different thing, but also connected, so it's cool. I had a really hard time not reaching out to you, Zeyn, as I was reading your book because I'm a bird fanatic. I bird like four hours a day, almost every day and do bird photography. I started reading your book, I'm like, "No way," and like ornithologist.

I'd like to just, we could just stop and I just talk about birds for a couple of days. What you do so well in the book I think is you're really very fluidly mixing this very urban space around these very urban issues and then with this natural world that is real and not real. Sometimes it's more real, sometimes it's less real. I just wondered if you might talk a little bit about both where birds came from, just because I need to know, and then also how that weaving felt for you and why that was such an important part of how you told the story.

Zeyn: Well, first of all I love anytime that I meet someone else who's obsessed with birds, so someone who understands my heart. A lot of my work has always had fabulous elements in it, you could say, pretty prominently. Also, I think that the birds in a very specific way in this book were the start maybe of a larger obsession that is still developing for me with nonhuman or supernatural forces, and particularly the ways in which the natural world is very much alive and communicative in a way that it's not usually portrayed as such, let's say, in a lot of like the Western literary canon, or even just the way that at least in the United States, and let's just say that.

At least in the United States, we're not usually taught to think about the natural world as being alive in that way or present to us in that way, but also, I was going into the book with a very specific thematic desire, I guess, you could say, to talk about the sacred and the search for the sacred as a trans person, and especially the search for the sacred within one's own body. This is something that I was trying to find a way to talk about even before I knew that birds were going to be in the book at all.

Throughout the book, there's actually a lot of mentions are woven in of this, I guess, what you could call it a Sufi epic poem, a sacred work called the Conference of the Birds that talks about the search for God, the search for the divine. There's a great translation into English actually by Sholeh Wolpé that's really, really excellent. I had read, and it's even quoted in the book a little bit, but essentially, the character being trans and Muslim is

looking for the sacred. Pretty much all the characters in the book are doing the same thing in their own way.

The birds weave in and out as a symbol for that search, in a way that sometimes borrows from or sometimes touches on that poem, *The Conference of the Birds*, in the sense that in the poem the birds they want to find their king or leader. One of the birds suggests that they find the Seymour, which is there's a longer, we could have a discussion about a lot of the deeper symbology in this, but the birds go looking for this Seymour, which is a symbol for the divine. They slowly drop away and it's too difficult and they stop. Then at the very end, only 30 birds actually reach the Seymour.

Then you find out that when they see the Seymour, the Seymour is a reflection of themselves, and you realize that Seymour actually means 30 birds. This idea of the divine being a reflection of you, and I think that for me really just touched me as someone who was trans and Muslim, and it's searching for the divine in my own life in various ways, and wanting to write a character who's doing the same thing. This idea of, well, if I could write about the Divine Being, a reflection of someone like me, what would that look like or what would the search look like?

What would it look like not just for one character who's trans or queer, but a lot of different characters in a lot of different times? That's why because that search is so prevalent for so many characters, that is what ultimately made the birds appear and then proliferate all over the place.

P. Carl: Once you start looking at birds, they're everywhere. I bring my students bird photographs to class, I hand them out. Then they start to text me, "I just saw a robin." You don't notice that world, and then suddenly, it is everywhere. I love the way that it happened beautifully in the book, so really great. Shift a little, which is thinking a little bit about provocation. I thought I'd do it specifically, and then maybe we pan out into the meaner nastier world of where we are as a culture.

I'm getting some message here. Just adapting this to the audience. Am I supposed to drop a question? I'm thinking I'm asking them. I want to make my provocation. I have to start with you, Torrey, because I just remember seeing the title of your book, before I was like, "What?" Clearly, you know how to do a provocative title, and it's either, I suppose it was either a risk or a magnet, like, "Oh, my God, must read immediately." Like, "What the hell is this?" I'd love for you to talk about that provocation of detransition as the title and then sort of taking that on in the book in a way that I haven't seen done in that way. Was there any pushback, or just how it evolved for you?

Torrey: Yes, there was pushback. Categorically, there was pushback. There was definitely both trans people didn't like it, and bigots didn't like it. That feels good to me. If I'm pissing off both sides, it probably means that there's something happening. One of the things I wanted to do is I wanted to take back that word. In order to detransition, you first have to

transition. Detransition belongs in some ways to trans people. It's an experience that looms for us that doesn't loom for other people.

That means that I don't want to see it, I don't want to let it get weaponized against trans people and be like, "Well, this is the story that gets used against us and we never get to touch it because if we touch it, everybody else I see detransition, detransition, detransitioning." "Trans people, if you transition, your life is going to be filled with regret, you're going to regret doing this." Whatever the narrative is I wanted to take it back, but also I wanted to say, "So what?" The narrative about detransition is that, you transition, you decide you've made a mistake, and now the myth is that you're what? You're deformed for the rest of your life? In fact, that's not the case. Many people transition and then they go backwards a little bit, and they live very happy life. They found a place that makes them happy.

Then thirdly, even on top of that, let's say you do regret. To that, I also want to say, "So what?" Many people do things in life that they then regret. You move across the country for a job, the job doesn't work out, you don't say to people, "Well, we're not going to let anybody move across the country for jobs." That's not the way it works. You say, "Well, it didn't work out." You come home, maybe their tail between your legs, and you try again.

What's happening with concepts like detransition is that instead, there's shame around it, there's silence. When people come home, in the metaphor of the job across the country, they're essentially shut. By talking about detransition by saying, "Here's a detransition story." The reasons that people detransition are varied. Usually, it's just life as a trans person it's hard, but let's even just give you all the other possibilities. Let's talk about it, so that when somebody detransitions, when somebody says, "I transitioned, I turned to binary gender," because my character aims doesn't go exactly back to being the man he was before.

It's not like, "Oh, you've betrayed the trans community or something like that. Let's just have our beer flourishing of conversation." In order for things to force our way, I think you have to speak shame. You have to say the things that are supposedly unsayable and then once you say them out loud, you realize they're not that big a deal. That's how shame works. You say it, you say the thing you're ashamed of, and then you can look at it. You can pick it up and you're like, "Not that big a thing."

A lot of my work, especially where shame is involved, it's not provocation for the sake of provocation, it's provocation for speaking the thing that I feel should be said so that it can be dealt with, so that it can be examined, so it can be discussed, and so that people aren't living in pain around these concepts, and that these concepts are weaponized in all sorts of divisive ways.

P. Carl: I think it raises such a great question for any artist who gets-- I think every artist now is being boxed into singularity of identity, and I want to talk a little bit more about that. Particularly when you think about transitioning, there's a lot of, as I would say, flux

and what that word means. Any of you can address this, but I wonder how you deal with this idea of flux because what transition, of course, suggests is destination. What detransition is like oh, it what the wrong destination? What's the right destination? There's no, "Where are we actually going?"

My own argument would be we have a lot of problem with the idea of flux in the culture. You have to know where you are all the time. I just wonder to what degree do you feel that pressure in your writing in terms of representing and the ideas that your thoughts about all of these subjects will be in flux? How do you hold that, and then also feel consistently, you have this voice that you trust and can write from?

Torrey: Should I take that one or should [crosstalk]--

P. Carl: Go ahead. Oh, yes. Great.

Torrey: As I was writing, I began to think as much about affinity as I did identity because I think identity is oftentimes politically determined. It's something that this is what this identity is, this is what this identity is, and then you can get locked in and you're supposed to follow various cultural scripts for various identities. Affinity was very useful to me.

For instance, my book is dedicated to divorced cis women. The reason I dedicated my book to divorced cis women, is I actually think that there's an affinity between trans women and divorced cis women, in that you live your life a certain way with certain expectations, and then there's a break or a failure, and you have to move forward without reinvesting the illusions that brought you to that failure or getting bitter.

When I hear conversations by divorced cis women, I'm like, "Oh, you're asking the same questions that I'm asking. Oh, we have affinity. There's an affinity between us." That affinity means that actually, we can have a conversation. It breaks a stay in your lane mentality, it breaks the cultural script. My answer to this is not to complain about identity, but to say, "Yes, identity, and other things to move flexibly. Affinity, humor, play, all these things will get you around that stuff. That's what I enjoy in other people's work, especially trans authors.

P. Carl: Cool. Zeyn, Neon, thoughts about that question?

Zeyn: I can talk a little bit about that. I thought a lot as I was writing this book about the space where you are, how do I say this? Where you're not yet arrived and maybe figuring out that you're never going to arrive in the sense that other people expect you to, from a particular perspective of not identifying with a binary gender, but in a lot of other ways, as well. One of the ways it shows up in this book is that for most of the novel, the narrator is unnamed.

I initially got pushed back on that and had to figure out, "Well, there's a lot of canonical examples of unnamed narrators, but one, why is it that as a trans writer with a trans

narrator, that I'm getting pushback about that from cis readers?" Also, if that makes me feel a certain kind of way, then what do I do with that feeling. What I decided to do was, I decided to just erase the name. What happens is that in all the chapters, until that character chooses a name, they're actually erased by hand. Looks like this on the page where there's just a scribble where the dead name would be.

Because I was like, "Yes, I want the character to live in this in flux state, and I want the reader to be forced to be in that space with him. Also, I want to draw attention to the fact that that state of flux make some readers uncomfortable. I want them to sit with that and be like, "Why am I uncomfortable with this? What would it feel like for me to be in this space for a while? Not just for this character, but maybe are there places in my own life where I'm in flux in this similar way? That space of flux, rather than simply being uncomfortable can actually be a space of possibility and can be a generative space, let's say, or a place where healing can happen.

I think that that goes beyond just trans people. I think that that can apply to lots of different people and situations. I don't know. I tried in this book, and I think in a lot of my work lately to lean into that and to be like, "Okay." In a similar way to what Torrey said, I think, if it's something that makes me uncomfortable or make someone else uncomfortable, or there's shame around it, around not being "presentable" in a way that I'm supposed to be or expected to be. Maybe that's actually a place where I want to sit with that feeling, rather than trying to escape it.

P. Carl: Neon, thoughts on that question?

Neon: I actually really like the idea of writing to affinity rather than just identity, because I think over the past few years, I have had a lot of thoughts about writing as a marginalized person in many axes. Like being not American and not White and non-binary and stuff. The feeling that writing specifically only to my identity has turned me into this educator, tour guide, and a spokesperson for all the different identities that I represent. Honestly, that's a lot to ask of any one person.

The book that I have coming up this year, it's not quite secondary world fantasy, but science fiction takes place in the far, far future with people who are descendants of people who left birth on a generation ship. It's not a book where I put a lot of myself as a person into it, but I put a lot of my thoughts about things that are happening around us with regards-- In a way, it's a lot about a book about truth and conspiracy and self-radicalization and things like that. I think for me, I want to write more about things that I'm thinking rather than things that I am if that makes sense. The two don't have to be entirely separate because who I am reflects and affects what I think about things that are happening in the world.

I think that's how I navigate writing as a person of multiple marginalized identities because I don't also want people from the majority to read my books and think like, "Oh, all people who share your identity think like this, or all people who share your identity are

like this." Which is not a fair judgment to make whatsoever. That's how I've balanced the obligation. I always feel as a marginalized person to explain the marginalized experience to people who aren't and what I personally want to write as an artist.

P. Carl: I think you're getting at something and I want to-- We have a few more minutes here before questions, I want to get into which is you're talking about wanting to write what you want to write, more or less, not what you feel like you're supposed to write or-- I've been in this very interesting situation. I drafted my book into a play, and some theater side art produce it and I realized that I want to talk a little bit about authenticity. This weird thing has happened where for over a year now we've been trying-- people want to produce it, COVID slowed that down but we've just been trying to read it.

So far, it's taken a year, we still have not been able to read the play aloud because no one will cast it. The reason that no one will cast it is because of the casting people in the theaters are cis people, and they will not cast trans because they are not trans. My play has just been sitting because there's a notion of authenticity. Then I got a bunch of resumes of casting people who were either trans or nonbinary, and I found on one of those resumes that the person specialized in authentic identity casting.

I thought, "What is an authentic identity? What's my authentic identity?" I've been just pondering that notion of authenticity which is a word that I used to use in a different kind of way, like somebody being real but real would be complex, not singular. I just wonder how you think about that question of being authentic in your writing given these kinds of what I think are very bizarre, as you're saying, Neon, a bizarre expectations of what other people think it is for you.

Neon: [laughs] That's a very interesting question. In terms of authenticity, that's actually a thing that I think about a lot because people always, especially if you're a marginalized person, people talk about the authenticity in your books a lot. In any marginalized identity, you will find a range of experiences, which one of those experiences is authentic? The answer is-- It's like a question that you can't answer, especially when you're talking about somebody who's writing about an identity they have because what's authentic to one person may ring as false to another person from that same identity.

For me, I think authenticity is what you say, is being real with yourself, and I think for me, it's a lot about emotional fidelity, writing something that feels true to you. Also as a writer, as an artist, you have to learn to let go of the story once it's out of your hands because in the hands of the reader, it's going to become a different story than what you thought you were writing because everyone interprets the stories they read differently based on their own experiences. You have to learn to let go of your story and let it become what it will become in the hands of the readers. It might be a completely different thing than what you thought when you started writing, and that's just the nature of art.

That's basically how I'm navigating it personally in my head that I write what I want to write, and I make sure that at the end of the day, what I'm putting out is like, "This is what I

want to put out into the world and however it grows and develops after I've done actually shaping it is its own thing. I don't have control over that and that's fine."

P. Carl: Great. Zeyn, Torrey, either of you on authenticity?

Zeyn: I'm happy to jump in. I probably would have answered this question differently a few years ago, but now I think authenticity is a trap for a number of reasons. For one thing, it's like our White authors asked whether their story is authentically White, or cis authors, is your story an authentically cis story? No. It comes from a lens of dominant culture. That trap, unfortunately, puts you in a space where instead of writing about a very specific person or group of people, you're asked to write about a generic person or a person who tick certain boxes. That often, I think in my own experience, just prevents you from writing people who feel like people which is central to any good work of fiction.

I don't think it's a useful thing to think about when you're writing. I think a much more useful question-- not question, I think a much more useful way to think about the craft of making characters is just to be curious and to be specific, and to be like, "Okay, I want to know people as they actually are, not as they're supposed to be and I want to know myself as I actually am and not as I'm supposed to be. If somebody who is not me, and doesn't share many, let's say, traits with me, or experiences with me, somehow thinks that I should be something else like, as Neon said, that's out of my hands. It's not really going to be helpful for me in crafting my story anyway so I might as well just let it go."

P. Carl: Torrey, your thoughts on that question?

Torrey: I think Zeyn, Neon said pretty much everything I feel, perhaps better than I could have said. Thank you both.

P. Carl: We're a minute or so from questions. Anything that you wanted to ask each other, anything that's come up that you want to draw from in this conversation? I just want to make sure that everybody-- There's something that I wanted to say, and I haven't said it, you get a chance to do that. Otherwise, I have some great questions up here on the slide. Anything that I-- I missed many things in my questions, there's a lot. Yes, Torrey, take it, please.

Torrey: I'll just say to people who are interested on that question of elders as you now have been an elder three times this week, that I think that this has been a preoccupation in a lot of trans art over the last decade. I'll just take this opportunity to mention some of the art that has been done around that to people who are interested in this generational question, what's going on with trans people now, what were trans people doing for the last 50 years?

You have artists like Zackary Drucker doing movies with people who were at Stonewall, Miss Majors, and the three women from the *Factory Girls* from Andy Warhol's time. You have the recent documentary. *Framing Agnes* by Chase Joynt and Morgan Page who talk

about the UCLA Medical Clinic where trans people were doctors and collected trans stories, and Morgan M Page's podcast, *One from the Vaults*, it's great. It's just historical gossip about trans people.

I think if you look out there now, the archive is being told in which for me I'm happy about because it allows me to look at this moment, I appreciate that there are so many people doing different things, but on that question of where were trans people for the audience, if that's something that interests them. I recommend all those things because they are beginning to fill in those questions so that artists like us can build on those things as these are also already done.

P. Carl: That's great. I think and always that stuff is undiscovered and then suddenly in the moment of the Black Lives Matters protests, when all of these wonderful books suddenly made the New York Times bestseller, they were out there for 10 and 15 years and all this. I think that it's not like the stories people haven't been telling them in different ways, in different places. We're, I think, in a place of both discovering and making at the same time, which is exciting. Zeyn, Neon, any couple of final thoughts before I ask a couple of some questions from the audience? No. Good.

I'm going to go through the Q&A up here. Can you all see the Q&A, or is it just me? I'm going to read the Q&A. The first question, going off something Torrey said, but anyone can answer the question, how do you feel about non-trans or non-queer authors writing trans characters, trying to tell trans stories, because assuming a trans audience raises the bar and benefits every reader, should works mainly by non-trans authors be written in partnership with trans authors, editors, et cetera? Just curious, because in writing classes, I hear a lot of people trying to build the space but not sure how to respond.

Torrey: I'll say something about that, which is that, I think there's this idea of the trans people are placing that stuff, or that we're the ones who are screaming about, you can't do this or that. I think anybody can write anything, the question is whether or not you can write it well. What I said about that is that, if you're going to talk about hormones, you just say something that even trans people don't know. I think the difficulty for a cis person is to tell a trans audience something about being trans that trans people don't know.

It's a question of quality, not a question of identity. If you are a cis person, and you can tell me something about being trans that I don't know, I would love to read your book, I will blurb your book, I'll do anything you want for that book. There's no identity litmus test to tell these stories, but there's a quality test. That experience and having experienced things allows you to write a higher quality of work, in my opinion. If your students can do it, go for it, but they may also discover that trans people are quite bored or that they've gotten things wrong, and you have to live with the consequences of having written something that's wrong.

There's no way around that. That's what writing is. If I write something bad people are going to tell me.

Zeyn: I feel like Torrey hit it out of the park. The only thing I can add beyond that is to say that, unfortunately, cis people writing about trans people can be wrong and cis gatekeepers often won't know the difference and their work can make it quite far while getting things wrong in the text, which is unfortunate. That caveat is always there too, of just you don't know what you don't know if you're not writing about your own experience, which again, just as Torrey said, that doesn't mean that you can't do it, there's nobody's telling you, oh, no, you absolutely can't write something.

It's just knowing what the risks are of doing that and of that you not only may get something wrong, but you may not even realize it and that the people who have the power to then publish you may not even know it either. It's complicated.

Neon: I agree with both Torrey and Zeyn what they said, because I think like anyone, I don't think that there should be policing of whether who can write what, but always understand that if you're writing from an identity that you yourself haven't lived through that the onus on you will always be a lot greater because you're coming from a perspective of an outsider. That being said, you don't know what you don't know. You don't really have that base of experience to work off of. You have to do a lot more work.

If you can't actually write something that contributes to the discourse or knowledge in general, that's great, just go ahead and do it. That's what Torrey said, but it's always going to be a lot more work and something that you will have to deal with as also people look at your work a lot more critically, because they understand that you're writing from a perspective that is quite different from your own and you will have to learn to deal with that as well.

P. Carl: I guess I throw a little provocation there with like-- but also I think trans people might get it wrong for other trans people. I think that's always the difficulty of what we know and the assumption that we all, the more of us know more about something, we might, but it might be really different. I think that question is a complex one in that way about who gets to write what, and who's representing in a way that is accurate. Sometimes that's a simple question of accuracy and sometimes it's, I think, more complex. Anyway, just something I'm thinking about. Torrey.

Torrey: I'll just say that when trans people get it wrong, we tell each other. There's no mafia that's like, keep it quiet. I got lots of pushback from trans people on my book. A lot of people, the experiences I described are mine and I try to be careful to basically be like, this isn't a universal representation. I like to push back on the burden of representation, but also, even between trans people, we are quite critical of each other's work. We do let each other know when we think something is wrong. If something is wrong, mostly even more charged within trans discussions.

What cis people then discover when they write from that identity, is they're not getting a special, extremely harsh attack, they're getting the exact same attack that we do to each other. It's like, "Welcome to the trans conversation, the gloves are off." If you can't hang in

that conversation, I don't know what you expected. Look at how trans people talk to each other, and then if you like that, well jump in, but if it's too much for you, don't have done it. Spend a day on trans Twitter then decide if you want to write a book.

P. Carl: [laughs] You mentioned that word earlier, scarcity. I think that battle inside. Exactly right. I think trans people are taking each other on just as much as they're taking on cis people in terms of what is the agreed-upon representations and what can be discussed and not. In your history with the book, when you say pushback, do you mean, push back as you were writing or people that just write to you and say, "How could you have written about-- like that. How could you have done that?" I'm just curious if it's present tense, or if it was something you try to work out in the writing.

Torrey: Present tense, past tense, there is future tense, I'm sure.

P. Carl: I assume that but I just wonder if there was 100% consensus that you did it okay.

Torrey: No, and if I did got 100% consensus, I probably wrote something bland. It's like, this is part of the experience. Everyone on this panel knows that that's part of the experience is wrangling with that in a public sphere where people will tell you that that they don't like what you did, and that they feel personally implicated by what you did, by dent of identity

P. Carl: I'm going to do another question. As an aspiring screenwriter, I've consistently struggled with developing trans characters with their own trauma and experiences, but I've also found writing to be a valuable outlet for exploring and processing my own experience as a trans woman. Does there exist a proper balance between these two mentalities? If so, how does one cultivate that balance?

Neon: I think personally that there isn't a standard agreed-upon certified balance for these things. It's a very personal question that has to have a very personal answer like what is your level of comfort in writing parts of yourself and your own trauma in the works that you create? For some people, they don't want that parts of themselves in their work and for others, they just want to put everything in. I don't think that's the correct answer for what is too much and what is too little, it's just basically, how much are you comfortable with putting in? For me, it's like bit's, half of it. I don't know.

Zeyn: I think it's a really thorny issue. I think it's hard for a lot of writers maybe for all writers. What I will say is that I did recently have an experience where I decided to write about something that had actually happened to me in the broad sense and then to take it and put it in a completely different context for a completely different character. What I found in doing that was that you have to get a lot of distance from something that is upsetting or traumatic before you can actually write good fiction about it. I think I can really only answer this in terms of fiction for now.

I just think that it's very difficult without a lot of time and processing and maybe therapy, at least for me, therapy has been super important. I find that I need a certain amount of distance from something to be able to actually write about it in any kind of way, where it's going to make good fiction on a craft level, and that often means that the processing of the thing has to happen on a separate track as without an expectation of making it into fiction and just let that take however long it takes and do whatever it needs to be done to let that happen without expecting that someday I'm going to make this into a story.

Because if I'm looking at it with my fiction writer hat, then I'm not allowing myself the space I actually need to heal from it potentially. Personally, I don't think those things can happen at the same time. That for me is the difficulty.

P. Carl: Anybody else wants to respond to that? All right. In that case, first of all, I just want to thank all three of you. It was such an incredible pleasure to prepare to interview you, of course, just remarkably talented and again, in ways that were so distinct and it was such-- these are the panels it's like, "Oh yes, I get to prepare for this? Is this work? This is great fun." Thank you for that, and for PEN/Faulkner for having us all here and I cannot recommend these books enough to all of you out there, it is just terrific writing and provocative and just smart and fun. I really enjoyed all of the reading.

I'm going to now introduce the executive director of PEN/Faulkner. Happens to be somebody that I've known for around 20 years, Gwydion Suilebhan. Something like that. We met at the bar. No, not really. It was a coffee shop. We had coffee about 20 years ago. Anyway, Gwydion is going to take it from here and thank all of you and the audience for joining us.

Gwydion Suilebhan: Hello everyone. As Carl just mentioned, I'm Gwydion Suilebhan, I'm PEN/Faulkner's executive director, and I too want to offer my tremendous thanks for all of our generous guests and our spectacular moderator, and to all of you too who are here in the audience for making this another incredible *Literary Conversation*. What a humbling reminder it was of how stories both writing them and reading them are such a powerful way of discovering and recreating the self. At the same time, being able to have this conversation together, even in this virtual space is such a meaningful way to be a self in community with others. We couldn't do any of that without your participation, all of you.

I am so very grateful. I wanted to close tonight by mentioning that PEN/Faulkner works really hard to give students in grades 3 through 12, who attend low-income schools in DC experiences just like this one, reading and writing and meeting authors. They help students discover themselves and reinvent themselves. The books we donate help keep them connected to a larger world and survive difficult circumstances, just like they do for all of us. I've asked to have our donation link dropped into the chat.

I just want to say even \$5 from you can help one young person see themselves as they are and see their story reflected in literature. For \$5 a month, if you can manage that, it helps us do the same thing over and over again throughout the year. PEN/Faulkner has

continued to stay strong and to stay hopeful and part of what has given us that hope and that inspiration is all the support we've gotten from you. Thank you so much in advance for anything you can do and thank you again for joining us tonight, too. Again, we're very grateful. Have a great night.

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