

Empathy is an End Point: Solmaz Sharif and Rickey Laurentiis in Conversation

By Solmaz Sharif & Rickey Laurentiis

This conversation developed over several days through various media, including text, email, and Google chats.

I'm really sick of the soft soapboxing on Facebook

Like what?

Mostly, FB is toxic stew and white folks and their allies, alternatively, in KKK hoods or black mourners' dress. All of it is obnoxious--noxious.

And so our print conversation begins lol

Yay! Lol

I've been wondering if I shouldn't reserve some of what become flash FB status as POEMS or bones of poems, and what that makes me feel about what poems can/should do. So, on my list is the "lyric" and just how it may function.



Do you ever feel like fb wastes that opportunity?
Meaning you have to not post it on fb in order for it to remain a possible poem?

I'm kinda delirious too btw lol

Rickey Laurentiis: — Or so at least we imagined that was the start. When SUBLEVEL approached us with this idea for a formal conversation, I remember we both jumped at the idea. At least I did. In your measured, cynical yet politically nuanced and, by this measure, poignant way, I count you as one of the pillars of my *own* thinking, however increasingly, wayward, wild,

like trying to leak literally out of my brain, it's-a-mess my thinking can be. And I see our usually every-day-or-so text conversations as playing a significant part in how I order my own world. But have you noticed our natural correspondence dwindled since being asked to converse formally or, better said, with the expectation of publicity? I wonder why that is — when it's not been uncommon for me to text you some random poem or FB post or political news article at 2AM with strange emoticons. I'm tempted to write here the self-comforting "lol," as if we're still texting.

Anyway, as we do inch toward "the public," I wonder if that could be among the very things we discuss: the public, to be public and the idea or relevance, even, of audience/readership. And as I write this I suddenly want also to collide "the political" into the conversation, and a writer's relationship to these phenomena.

Or maybe it's surveillance I'm creeping toward — so much of (a critique) of surveillance lies in in the crux of your first book, *Look*, both as content (the title poem itself) and tactic ("Reaching Guantanamo.") Would you agree? Do you feel surveilled upon in this conversation, in any way, even right now? Am I projecting? Maybe I am feeling that way. Do editors surveil, or is it the (imagined) audience again? Or is it something like all of these things I've named — alongside other topics of the poem itself, the lyric and its possibilities, "aesthetics," the didactic (your word), the argumentative (mine) — is it that all of these things are co-touching, co-mingling, intimate with the other, so that maybe it's *that* frisking we experience as "experience." Maybe it's this that becomes — what more silence? awkwardness? or, if we're lucky, maybe a poem?

Am I making or escaping sense here? One thing seems true: somehow we've acted as if the fact of this public conversation is itself contagious, so much so we've almost entirely avoided it or LOL'd our way around the fact of it. Should we explore it?

Solmaz Sharif: Is "LOL" the new "sorry"? It's rather painful to read it with a "public" eye — public calls up surveillance, yes. But more so it calls up obligation or duty — a need to make it worth people's time. There is not much time after all.

I jumped at this chance because you are my political and intellectual and lyrical kin; because I find you often oblivious to or enraged by whatever celebratory parade or righteous gathering passing by. It seems many times we are the only two consistent naysayers there. Is it safe to say we are skeptical of all "we"? Or at least we refuse its shelter? Much of my — and your? — self feels driven by refusal.

I jumped, kin, because I have also wanted and believed that there should be longer form records. Documentation. I am thinking of archives of letters between writers, the archaeology of friendship and knowledge they provide, which might be lost in text message. Their essays might be lost to FB post. Reading letters or journals of writers I often feel, private as they are, there is an awareness that they might be read in some future. Some awareness that one is recording one's thought and relationship in time.

Surveillance by the State, by the editors, by the readers of the post who demand and deserve something relevant to their lives, a conversation that extends beyond refusal into some kind of vision is what I'd like (can we try to name one?) — but beyond these immediate surveillances

and audiences, the ones I am more intimidated by: the future and the dead.

Between us, over text I mean, it might be enough to critique, to take down, to name the things we do not want to do. In public, this feels haughty. Easy. It is actually an easy public position to take. That's what I have come to hate about FB. Harder yet would be to create, to put positively what we want of literature, of the public, of the political, thereby offering ourselves as the things to be destroyed. And its not fear that prevents me from doing this as much as fluency... What is the argument to be made? I will try: I say "soft soapboxing" over text. Here, I don't want to point to what I *don't* want to do or what is done *wrong* as much as I want to name and enact what I *want*, what I believe the "soft soapboxing" might prevent or get in the way of — vision, rigor, risk, sustained inquiry, sustained agitation, proactive rather than reactive thought.

Lastly and only loosely related, though I think deeply related to all things us, I want to throw a quote in here that Lynne Tillman posted on FB recently, Gramsci, as I remember her remembering it: pessimism of intellect, optimism of will.

RL: I love this word, "kin." I love its acknowledgement of camaraderie, togetherness, and of blood. In me is the desire to say "comrade" here as well, but then I'm aware of all the connotations and histories that word necessarily dredges up. Maybe it's as if — *because of* this knowledge — I want to say it. That's certainly related to why I, almost robotically, write "LOL" — because it *does* dredge up these other meanings, "sorry," at least some admittance of self-embarrassment, vulnerability. Wound.

Wound, I'm imagining, is what the "and" is doing in your phrase: "the future and the dead." I'm saying this before I quite know what I mean, but saying it here since — kin — I trust you to be patient with me. Anytime I look out toward "futurity," which it is to say toward the imagination, I recognize it as a gesture full of palpable possibility: excitement and terror, a gesture to delight as well as to potentially harm. "The dead" come to my ear as a state of being (nonbeing? once-being? always?) that is all of that: the dead are "ghosts" when they harm, "ancestors" when they delight. Always they're instructive, at least. I suppose the dead, yes, do exist as a kind of uber-public, and through that lens suddenly all these terms fall into place: obligation, duty, even surveillance.

I'm always very grateful how the dead, in no easy or oversimplified way, critique us. What a tenderness that is. The dead are so nuanced — at least, that's how I'm willing to describe their silence. Sometimes this is a question in my mind, evoking Lorde: *Is* silence always un-protective? Then, as soon as I ask such, and especially given our times, to ask such seems immediately childish, maybe even privileged. I hear you, I think, when you speak about the tendency to be one way via "text" and another via "the public." I wish I had had that quote from Gramsci all my life, but it *is* so hard to live up to, at least the last half of it: to be optimistic of will. It almost drives me back to Foucault, and his notions of the "will to knowledge." He might say something, though, that always "to know" has led us down restrictive corridors of power. But this could just be me misremembering anyway. It's so easy to do that, huh, with the dead?

SS: I have a few questions to ask Lorde, too. *Can't* the master's tools dismantle the master's

house, for example? Isn't a hammer a hammer? I have a hard time with metaphor in general for this reason — it rallies, it stokes, and its power frightens me. I know what she is saying, of course, and am largely in agreement, but still....

I think this conversation, all it's meandering and stops and starts, this friendship and its documentation, its relative uselessness, its inability to stay on topic or keep audience in and out of mind, is optimism of will in action, by the way.

So yesterday, I was with a fellow poet and I asked him who his kin was. He said poets that have been displaced and listed a few. Then he asked me and I said poets that are against empire. And are cranky.

Aleppo: that also came up yesterday. The silence around it and how fully despised the Arab body has become. Did you see the U.S. Ambassador to the UN?

RL: "Is there nothing in the world that will shame you?" — or something to that effect. That ambassador?



SS: Yes. The fucking nerve.

RL: Yes, yes — her remarks seemed, themselves, particularly shameless: full of self-righteousness and a kind of moral superiority I only ever truly see in whiteness. And they were shameless because they seemed to move in the air of that room without any way real, certainly no rigorous, awareness to history, and particularly where the U.S. fits in its history of — in her words — "barbarism," political or militaristic.

SS: "My feeling is that an intervention in Iraq even a unilateral one is undoubtedly going to make Iraq a more humane place." [That's what Samantha Power said in 2003, by the way.](#) "An American intervention likely will improve the lives of the Iraqis. Their lives could not get worse, I think it's quite safe to say."

RL: You know, thinking through this in the light of the question you asked that poet, I may have remembered her words most simply because the word "shame," always, strangely, attracts me. I think poets who are kin to me, in addition to what you and the other poet named, also investigate "shame," abjection, horror in their work and politics. By which I think I mean, ultimately, there's self-implication. There's nothing more horrible or potentially shameful than seeing where one is self-implicated in the very systems they are earnestly trying to defeat, no?

SS: Absolutely. There is something, though, about "self-implication" or the writer's culpability that has become a workshop tic. We must know that the writer knows that they are not above or outside of whatever is happening. The fact that it, like empathy, has become a workshop tic, and that political repression is really built into the aesthetic practices of the U.S. is what is giving me pause here.

RL: I agree, and I've become even aware of that self-awareness in my work. Recently, there was a review of my book that threw a hard frame around this, suggesting that my poems, in some sense, "survive" because of the speaker's willingness to self-implicate. I felt both relief and terror at this notion, and I think this is why the newer work comes out of me much slower and with greater effort. What to do when one knows they know they're culpable, and how not to let that "epiphany" function as any other "epiphany" in a poem, as a cheap gimmick, get-out-of-jail-free-card.

Is it maybe because this self-implication always (or in many cases) rushes up to the shore of "empathy" that the "tic" can feel cheap? But, probably, empathy actually takes work to achieve. Before that, if I'm speaking for myself, I need to muck through the very real shit of less "noble" feelings, ugly feelings. Like — pity. Few would dare write a poem "pitying" an abject situation, but it seems false to me that we're always and immediately "empathetic" to a situation, as if pity isn't something we experience and, in ways, are indoctrinated to feel.

SS: Frankly, I wonder if pity would be more useful at times. I've really come to hate empathy.

RL: Well, it's certainly more honest. And honesty, however hard, is usually more useful. Baldwin's: "I want to be a good writer and an honest man."

SS: Pity is more honest and it leads to "charity," which fills me with a kind of disgust, but it also fills my plate. Empathy is emotional tourism.

RL: Do you know I was born in Charity?

SS: No!

RL: I mean it — [Charity Hospital of New Orleans](#). Post-Katrina, it's now basically a hollowed-out skeleton overlooking the Central Business District.

SS: Perfect. I have a Post-it on my computer screen from something I said in an earlier conversation and you told me I should use it in a poem, so I made a note: "I don't care if it's true or not — it's perfect."

RL: Yes! I remember when you said it! And you should use it. Interestingly, this isn't unlike how I came to realize the fact of being born "in Charity" was, well, "perfect." Someone once asked where I was born, and they meant literally, and I said, "in Charity." And they immediately responded: "You *have* to use that!"

SS: You *do* have to use it!

RL: I guess I had become so used to hearing that phrase said matter-of-factly that its potential lyricism was closed to me. So, "Charity" led to me, in a sense. Now "Charity" is a skeleton. And I am still thinking about your earlier point, about how pity often leads to charity. Do you think pity can lead elsewhere? Should it?

SS: I think pity leads necessarily to elsewhere. Maybe disgust and turning away. Maybe charity and savior complexes. Once you pity, you *do* something with it. Empathy, on the other hand, feels like an end point. Being rather than doing. Something here about our market-eroded, self-improvement industry-driven "Buddhist" moment — "Don't just do something, stand there." Something about convincing oneself that one can enter the emotional reality of another and that

journey being wisdom enough.

RL: Maybe empathy is an end point because it ropes too quickly or too easily a point of connection, claiming: "You and I are the same, and so I understand your plight." And — yes, what to do with that? Probably it only makes one, personally, feel "good." It makes the other person, at best, feel "heard." But have they been fed? Has their home been unoccupied? Can they sleep peacefully at night? Necessarily, all these questions began specifically rising up in my head and in my ego during and after my visit to Palestine. I think I'm realizing now that it felt increasingly dishonest to me to feel or even to strive for "empathy" with what I was witness to there, even as I fully understand there *are* some similarities to be made and felt between, say, police brutality and a militarized occupation. But whatever "rope" I was building and am still building needs to be long and as complicatedly intricate as what I was witnessing, as it must understand the discrepancies, the points of difference. Difference, finally, and I think I remember Lorde telling us as much in an essay, seems a more actionable rallying point or topic of discussion, than sameness. And sameness is what empathy depends upon.

SS: Bingo.

RL: I have a question for you, and it's related to these ideas of pity but also the public. You mentioned to me once that you revised and deleted sections of "Look" (the title poem of your book) primarily because those lines weren't any you wanted or could stand to read before those persons or groups of persons implicated in their words. Is that a fair summary? I'm curious about that. Since you said it, that revisionary tactic struck me as, well, "perfect." But would you still make the same decision today? Was "pity" involved?

SS: That is right. I couldn't stand reading them, not out of fear, but because they were indulgent and dull. When you hand a sheet to someone to read, they can choose the pace, they can choose to leave a poem or linger, skip some lines or reread them. Performance is more dictatorial. Propriety keeps people in their seats. I am acutely aware of the time the audience is giving me, the time I am demanding, and so some lines get edited out as I read the poems out loud. I don't know if I would call that pity. I would say it is a deeper consideration of audience, a deeper awareness of the momentary and minute power that I am holding over them, and, so, a greater urgency to just get on with it. Maybe it is useful to think of this as pity?

RL: Maybe? It did make you "do" something, no? It inspired revision. Performatively, but also on the literal page. If I recall, there are slight edits made between the poem as it appears in the book and a previous version published online, right?

SS: Right. Pity and humility.

RL: Humility, yes! The secret sister! And, at least as I'm receiving it, not a *false* humility, a *false* kinship. Can I tell you I'm so sick of all this political rhetoric of "working together" and "we have more in common than we have in difference" and — this is going back to ideas from earlier — "we are all united and the same." But what if we aren't — all the same, I mean — and that's *okay*?

SS: Exactly!

RL: And what if we regard that we're all different, distinct, and still need not feel pressured to "unite" toward an uneasy amalgamation, assimilation, bipartisanship?

SS: I don't even like using the word equality for this reason.

RL: Equality sucks!

SS: LOL. Now what?

RL: Well, for a time I began substituting "equity" for what I felt I really meant by "equality." Now even that feels insufficient. And, in a recent poem, I found myself even questioning "solidarity." Does it matter to have a singular term to describe what it is we're after? Is what we're after so necessarily complicated, divergent, and even at times contradictory that, in fact, a singular word can never exist to fully describe it? Do you see poems operating somewhere in that gulf? But I hope we haven't cornered our way back to that annoying argument, the one that asks "Can poems 'do' anything?" Lol.

SS: "Justice" seems to be the word for me. What did Dr. West say? Justice is love in the public sphere? And can a poem *not* do anything? Can a poem do *nothing*?

RL: I just looked up "pity," by the way. Apparently, it's related to a Latin root that meant "piety, loyalty, duty." "Duty" is the word that arrests me. And "justice" feels related to that.

SS: Yeah, pity seems to me of an era where one owed other people something. Feudal harm reduction.

RL: I like to think of my own poems, I guess, as having a duty, even if the duty is to my kin.

SS: There aren't many who think that way, I think. About poems and duty.

RL: You think so? Now I have notions of poems and duty in my head, as if in concert with Dr. West's idea: justice is love in the public sphere.

SS: I have posed the question to some young poets before. Do you think poetry has a moral or ethical obligation/duty? It's surprising how many say no. Maybe I shouldn't say "not many" — and maybe some are in a bit of a crisis right now. But surprising nonetheless because I can't even imagine what then the impetus to write might be. Duty is social love in the individual sphere?

RL: Individual, but also public? You mentioned the word "feudal," and so this brings to mind, briefly, foregone notions of a kind of knightly duty. That was a public contract to a certain extent, no? And do you know we've made a circle? You said earlier: "Public calls up surveillance, yes. But more so it calls up obligation or duty — a need to make it worth people's time. There is not much time after all." So, here we are again with surveillance, duty, and mortal time.

SS: Full circle indeed! What do you see your duty as being?

RL: I think my duty is pitched toward the past (the dead) and toward the future (the not-yet-born). Paradoxically, this means I must be explicitly, deeply, critically moored to the present. I think of a description of the poem you often mention, but I forget the attribution: about poems functioning as either "diagnostic" or "curative." I find I lean toward the former, which means to face and acknowledge *all* of the past, brutal or otherwise. And I lean this way towards hoping, in a future, that my poems, however contaminated they may very well be, may approach the latter. What's yours?

SS: I love what you say here. What I say is based on something I heard or read Dunya Mikhail say and that I now can't find. Overall the election hasn't caused much of a shift in my sense of duty or aesthetics (that a poet frees and interrogates language, agitates the state, names their historical moment, etc.) because I already saw myself writing in fascism, but I have returned to an earlier difficulty I've had with poetry as diagnosis, namely that diagnosis is not enough. When crisis is so acute, it seems useless to point out the crisis. It made me wish I had more poems that offered some movement beyond diagnosis, some vision from "yes, but" to "yes, but... *and...*" But this is a long preface to saying tonight I think the duty of the writer, as you ask this question now, is to remind us that we will die. And that we aren't dead yet.

[DIALOGUE](#): A wide-ranging conversation between two people.