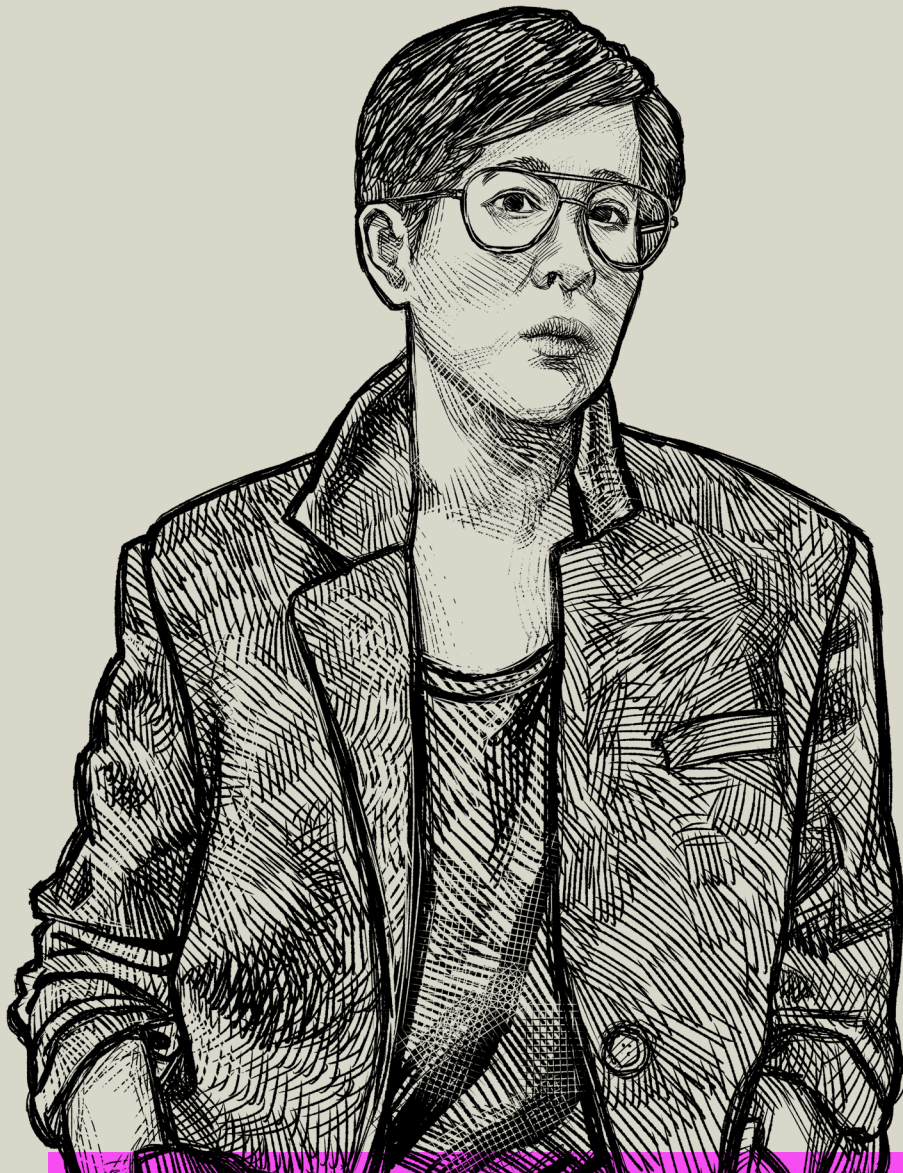


# CONVERSATION

WITH

BY YUE CHEN  
ART BY JULIETTE WU

# LISA KO



*I FIRST READ  
AMERICAN WRITER  
LISA KO'S NOVEL  
THE LEAVERS (2016,  
ALGONQUIN BOOKS)  
AT AGE 16 IN MY  
CHILDHOOD BEDROOM,  
SLOGGING THROUGH  
CALCULUS TOWARD  
THE INEVITABILITY  
OF A RESPECTABLE  
UNIVERSITY AND  
A RESPECTABLE  
CAREER. IT REWIRED  
MY BRAIN, RESETTING  
HOW I VIEWED THE  
LIMITATIONS AND  
POSSIBILITIES  
OF ASIAN  
AMERICANNES.*

This year, I read Ko's upcoming second novel, *Memory Piece* (Riverhead Books/Penguin Random House), at the same desk in the same room, now 23, logging on at six a.m. every weekday to remain employed at my respectable job in an increasingly outlandish and petrified world. I grew attached to the three protagonists—Giselle Chin, performance artist; Jackie Ong, rogue programmer; and Ellen Ng, housing and labor activist—whose friendship molds their lives as the decades crawl into a soberly viable dystopian future. In early January, I was excited to meet Ko over Zoom and discuss *Memory Piece*, Asian American cultural production, and the role of art in our world.

Both *The Leavers* and *Memory Piece* engage with professional, bodily, and psychological nuances to Asian Americanness. *The Leavers* follows the perspectives of Deming Guo and his mother, Polly, after her abrupt deportation and his adoption by two white professors in upstate New York. Ko was loosely inspired by the 2009 story of Xiu Ping Jiang, an undocumented immigrant from Fuzhou detained by U.S. authorities whose eight-year-old son was then given up for adoption to a Canadian family—though Ko also considered it imperative to highlight and value the perspective of the adoptee. She tells me, “I was trying to po-

sition [Deming's] identity and his decisions as a third option to these two very binary options that are presented by others: his Chinese-from-China upbringing and his biological mother, speaking Chinese and being an immigrant; then this white adoptive family who only speaks chart his own way: “It's not necessarily an ‘either-or,’ and I wouldn't say it's ‘both,’ but it's his own construction of self,” Ko notes.

Rather than litigate the common frustrations of being ‘too foreign for here, too foreign for home’ that often dominate Asian American identity discourse, Ko's novel connects Deming and Polly's racial and ethnic identities with their agency, their relentless energy and mobility. *The Leavers* is, at its heart, about searching. When I ask why Ko refers to Deming and Polly by those names—rather than ‘Daniel,’ to which Deming's white parents renamed him, and ‘Peilan,’ Polly's birth name—she asserts that ‘Deming’ and ‘Polly’ are “their true selves.” She says, “There are times when he's spoken to as ‘Daniel,’ but he's still seeing himself as Deming. And there are times when Polly goes by ‘Peilan,’ but it's her decision to become Polly. It's this empowered decision, so I prefer to think of her that way.”

Ko had to go  
on a literal

journey of her own to achieve Polly's “becoming.” In an essay entitled ‘A Better Life,’ she recounts her trip to Fuzhou—disclaiming in the piece, “I'm ethnically Chinese but have zero personal connection to China,” including any knowledge of national or local languages—in pursuit of Polly's “three-dimensionality.” When I ask her about her research process, she recalls that, before traveling to China, “I felt stalled in the imagination,” and found herself unable to visualize what Polly's life was like before she immigrated. Once Ko got to Fuzhou, things began piecing together, down to details like “seeing a nearby town that could be her hometown, or seeing a neighborhood where she could work,” Ko reflects. “Once you have those things in your mind, it's easier to imagine how this character would move around in the space and how she would interact with things.” Ko was committed to developing Polly and Deming's contextual contours across space and time, creating characters whose trajectories cannot be pared down to identity alone.

This same attention to characters' multi-dimensionality is also integral to *Memory Piece's* bildungsroman narrative. Giselle, Jackie, and Ellen's friendship begins when they casually march into a white family's backyard barbecue and help themselves to hamburgers,

**"I'VE ALWAYS BEEN A VERY OBSESSIVE JOURNALER AND CHRONICLER, WRITING THINGS DOWN EVERY DAY. I'VE DONE SO FOR MOST OF MY LIFE."**

pantomiming a racial oneness and uniformity that belie stark differences in background, passion, and values. Ko intentionally chose different origin stories for the three girls: for example, Giselle's father is Taiwanese and her mother grew up in the Philippines, while Jackie's wealthier parents hail from Hong Kong. Ko tells me about threading differences in immigration circumstance and community into the characters' destinies, "the sort of decisions that they can make and the work they can do. Like having access to family money, or even their access to whiteness, or proximity to other Asians." When contemplating their friendship, Ko adds, "That's probably unconscious for all three of the characters. They're drawn to each other because of those differences"—differences that resurface and bump up against their dynamic throughout the narrative. Ko goes on: "That echoes the path that a lot of us take, regardless of where we are on the assimilationist spectrum—seeking out something that feels more comfortable, feeling like we gravitate toward something, but also feeling intimidated by it. Especially in [our] twenties."

One way that *Memory Piece* engages with Asian America's racial politics is through the subtle and leering horrors of capitalism and what happens when digital commercialization goes unchecked. As the novel describes, Giselle is needled by fear of being discounted as a "bad Asian" because of the ways she seems to align herself with whiteness, whereas Ellen, even as a child, has "already outgrown the limitations of Asian American identity as a political home." Though the girls contend with the imposition of racial constructions on their psyches and perceptions by others, especially in their adolescence, *Memory Piece* ultimately does not mire itself in the minutia of assimilation or representation politics. Each protagonist, on her respective path, digs into the troubled fabric of our collective social life—not transcending racial discourse, but locating it in broader probes of labor, community-making, and creative value under capitalism.

At *Memory Piece*'s core is art of all kinds. It begins with a young Giselle interrogating what makes art art, and how an artist's biography influences audiences' appraisal of their art: "Work was a performance; life was work and also a performance. It wasn't that she

needed to wait for the perfect idea or invent something new. Instead, she recognized how she could shape her life into the performance itself," as *Memory Piece* recounts. Giselle's artwork contracts and dilates in scale and intellectual ambition as she gains entry into the white, male, money-driven space that is the artsphere, forcing her to choose between commercial success and artistic integrity. Her multimedia, performance-based artwork is inspired by Taiwanese artist Tehching Hsieh, one of several Asian endurance artists in whom Ko is interested because of how they work with time. If time is money, then passing time on an unprofitable venture is a way to reclaim it. This returns to Ko's creative habits; she tells me, "I've always been a very obsessive journaler and chronicler, writing things down every day. I've done so for most of my life." She adds, "[I've been] interested in different disciplines that I can't do or am not primarily doing and seeking them out... both as an influence to my writing, but also as a counterpart to it. Something that isn't text-based feels like such a relief when you're working with words all the time."

In particular, music has come to play a big part in Ko's life. In *The Leavers*, Deming, who has synesthesia, links colors to sounds as he tries to get his band off the ground in New York City. Ko writes in the novel: "*Music was a language of its own, and soon it would become his third language, a half-diminished seventh to a major seventh to a minor seventh as pinchy-sweet as flipping between Chinese tones. American English was loose major fifths; Fuzhounese angled sevenths and ninths.*" As a child, Ko herself played classical jazz piano, and she also calls music "a third language that I could speak." She considers, "I think the role of music was so large in the formation of my identity, like seeking the knowledge of bands and artists and aligning [myself] to certain kinds of subcultures and tastes." (Ko has curated mixtapes for her characters, which can be found on her website.) Ko also listens to music in early stages of writing to draw out the inner creative and suppress the premature editor: "For the first draft or more generative work or journaling, it sometimes feels useful to have music playing to supersede any unconscious criticism in my head."

Without giving too much away, *Memory Piece* ends with the three women's effort

to institute, organize, and collectivize memory through art, while living under a vertically-controlled technocratic state. Ko began writing *Memory Piece* in late 2016, about six months before *The Leavers* came out, starting with the fundamental question: "How do we create art under capitalism?" Ko has spoken about the freneticism of working full-time and freelancing while also writing *The Leavers*, and when I ask her about the differences between how she wrote her first and second books, she says that the latter brought pressures that she hadn't faced with her debut: "There's this idea of, 'Okay, this is a career.'" She recalls how youthful idealism enabled creative flourishing: "Thinking about the times of being a child, when I could just create art without even thinking of it as art... that ended up really being the inspiration for my main characters—that freedom, being as creative as you could be, without having to worry about that stuff. Because you didn't even know." Ko's parents emigrated to the U.S. from the Philippines on student visas in the 1960s, and she recalls how they measured time by efficiency and prosperity. As an author now, she finds herself "trying to rationalize not only to other people but to myself: what is the meaning of a lifespan, making art, versus other paths or careers? What if the point is not necessarily to ascend the career ladder or to make a certain salary but to prioritize artmaking instead?"

*Memory Piece* directly asserts that artmaking is labor, but it also represents a form of labor that is not always visible under a capitalist framework. As part of making their long-reaching, subversive *pièce de résistance*, the characters have to go off the grid. They must strain to unsubscribe from leeching, all-consuming structures of commoditization and totalization to fashion communities and ways of living that they believe in, answering the demands: "HOW DO WE LIVE HOW DO WE DIE WHAT DO WE NEED TO HEAR." This is, quite literally, marginalized artists seizing the means of production—and, with it, agency over how art is received. "To have more control over production and distribution—or not even to distribute it, just create it!" Ko reflects. "Does it count, in that case, if no one sees it?"

Artistic visibility and audience become more tenuous in the digital age, when algo-

*"HOW DO YOU  
CONTEND WITH  
THE FACT  
THAT YOU  
CAN'T LIVE  
FOREVER?"*



rhythms cull and fill our feeds. *Memory Piece* probes the prospects of technology's damning ubiquity—in the novel's projected future, whatever is omnipresent is omnisciently regulated. "I think a lot about the ephemerality of technology," Ko says. "You can digitize, but the equipment that we use to read this stuff doesn't necessarily last forever. Something I saw online said, like, 50% of the links cited in Supreme Court justice cases are already broken. That's an official institutional record. But even just thinking about all the other records of 2010s Tumblr and blogs from the early aughts, and all the cultural production that went into that, that was really meaningful—now, it's all gone."

What kind of effect does this have on the way we engage with the past: personal memory, collective memory, institutional memory? Certainly, Ko tells me, our means of recording and remembering have changed, but what remains constant is our impulse to document—whether through oral history, printed books, or any other form. "Now," she says, "the pull out of the present, for recording something online, feels stronger, because we have those tools and those expectations. You can't enjoy your trip without thinking of a picture for Instagram. So is it possible to be present without thinking? It's definitely possible." The project of 'making memories' can be undertaken intentionally, with perhaps less curatorial intent in the moment but more reflection. Sifting through relics, identifying what once made a life and is now worth preserving with an unsparing eye, is important to *Memory Piece's* case for radical artmaking rather than content creation.

The illusion of a digital eternity dissembles the crushing truth of our mortality and utter lack of singularity: our bodies and their variable pains and pleasures are the only things we can't upload to the cloud. No matter what neoliberal ideals sell us, we humans, like every other organism, will one day disintegrate, our discrete memories ground to dust. Ko asks us to confront these fallibilities: "How do you have awareness [of] the fact that your body changes over time, and isn't going to function in ways it was 20 years ago, without attaching value to it?" she asks. "The main question we have to grapple with as human beings is: how do you contend with the fact that you can't

live forever? Even technology, with all its promises, can't give that to us." Spanning over a century, *Memory Piece* tackles the question of what we might want to leave behind when we're gone. Art—physical, malleable art that is made and viewed and interpreted, that changes hands countless times—dissolves the individual into traces of themselves that are then entrusted to the care of others.

At heart is the issue of who gets to be the steward of another's work, into which they've put a stint of their time and labor. "It makes me think of all this analog technology from the pre-Internet years that isn't only an aesthetic choice to make at this point, but also can be something that's really powerful and necessary," Ko says. "Like having information in a paper zine versus on a website that can be controlled, or deleted, or surveilled." In *Memory Piece*, Jackie has to contend with the tech market's encroaching greed, and then with its brutal domination. As Ko aptly puts it, "Technology is only as powerful as who can use it and who controls it." Even though social media is ostensibly an equal arena where each of us can negotiate our identities through the images we build, the owners of these platforms have only one goal: profit. As the adage goes, "if the product is free, you are the product." "Certain kinds of memories are being engineered for us through the platform," Ko says. That's why *Memory Piece's* characters' choice to go dark is quietly revolutionary, and in the novel's stratified techno-economy, it is also a sacrifice. As the women narrate: "*We didn't take pictures anymore, didn't keep journals or write things down or leave evidence. It was a habit we'd broken ourselves out of. In leaving no records, we had ensured our survival, and in our survival, we made ourselves contingent on our own lifespans, our extinctions, the errors and limitations of our own failed memories.*" When you disconnect yourself as *Memory Piece's* characters do, what is left behind? What do you spend your life searching for? What possibilities for connection—however tenuous, however liable—do you access instead? Or as Ko asked: "What does it mean?"

What does it mean? On the day that Ko and I spoke, January 6, it was 91 days after Israel began its most recent bombing campaign in the Gaza strip, and 76

years into its colonial incursion on Palestine. At the time of writing, each of Gaza's 36 hospitals has been struck out of commission and the Palestinian death toll has surpassed 25,000—according to the World Health Organization and Associated Press, respectively. In the midst of this, from my position in the U.S., I've been thinking a lot about the ethics of a life well-lived. In my daily routine, I put on a wool blazer, take a car to work, and spend most of the day fight-or-flight-panicked about PowerPoint in a way that defies evolutionary logic. Sometimes I open Twitter, or skim through headlines, or think a bit about the world going to pieces just beyond the office's brittle glass walls, and then my cranium hurts like it's being split with a rock. Though it feels obvious that work (as in 'my job') matters, my attention and time are called to the work I see and engage outside of that (as in 'community' and 'art' and 'creativity'). I find myself all the more attuned to art's love and its power, how interfacing with art is one of the most tender and ruthless ways to struggle—something that *Memory Piece*, too, makes clear. "There's so many different kinds of art and so many different reasons we turn to it," Ko says. "We have to have room for all those shades and textures of life." In the face of catastrophe, "I can't say that there's a specific reason for art to do or be, but only that I feel like we continue to seek it out. And we continue to create it, and have always done so, regardless of what's happening around us."

Art, in Ko's eyes, is a lever and a grail. "There's so much happening now and in the near future. Is it really the best way to spend my time, writing a story about made-up people, consuming and producing art?" she sometimes asks herself. "I can't answer if it's the best use of my time. But I feel heartened when I hear that people value art and fiction in order to imagine possibilities, and imagine things that feel difficult to imagine." *Memory Piece* exemplifies the idea of art as a political imaginary; Ko adds, "That's something I'm trying to do—especially [with] *Memory Piece*—writing towards a future that feels very real to me, and not necessarily optimistic. What role can this novel play in terms of envisioning not only that future, but possibilities for how we can live in it?"

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