



## Interview with Daryl Qilin Yam by B.B.P. Hosmillo

**B.B.P. HOSMILLO:** Hi Daryl. Congratulations on the publication of your debut novel, *Kappa Quartet*. How do you feel now?

**DARYL QILIN YAM:** I feel rather ambivalent. That's a strange thing to say, right? I mean, I felt elated and excited whenever I received an update about the book – anything at all, from the cover to the edits to the layout, it made me giddy as a child. I felt genuinely happy at those moments in time. And yet when I found out that the book was finally available for sale I felt – I don't know. I certainly didn't feel satisfied. I still don't. And then I realised that I was actually looking to see if writing *Kappa Quartet* alone would be enough for me, in some sort of way. But it isn't. It's not enough. I'm not done. I took it as confirmation from the universe that I'm no way near done with writing at all.

**B.B.P. H.:** The moment when you told yourself “this novel I'm writing is called *Kappa Quartet*,” what was it like and how did it happen?

**D. Q. Y.:** It all happened in the span of a single shower. I had written a draft of the first chapter, and I was toying with the idea of expanding it



into something bigger. And then I thought of three things: first, the figure of the kappa, and how the mythological creature alone was full of symbolic potential; second, that I wanted to emulate a length and format that was similar to Stephanie Ye's chapbook, *The Billion Shop*; and third, that there was an anime airing in Japan titled *Yozakura Quartet*. And so voila – I had character, structure, and a title. That's how it all first came together.

**B.B.P. H.:** How do you imagine a queer Southeast Asia? Is there a conscious effort from you as a creative writer to reflect such kind of imagination in your writing? Why or why not?

**D. Q. Y.:** I imagine a queer Southeast Asia the same way I conceived of that moment, in the fourth chapter of my novel, when the narrator's neighbour related an anecdote of how she had walked to the supermarket and saw the hole in Takao's head. She knew him for the creature that he was, and yet left him alone all the same. What I am saying is, queer people in Southeast Asia are all in hiding, and yet they are also all in plain sight. We are there and yet we are not. I can't think of another way to describe it.

As a queer writer I do think I consciously strive my best to conceive of queer characters in queer situations. And it's not entirely about social responsibility, either. As a kid I always imagined myself to be rather, er, magical and witchy? I'd always wanted to feel like I could effect change in reality, or that I could conjure something out of nothing. I loved *Harry Potter*, and Phillip Pullman, and *Charmed*. I think a lot of that need for conjuration crossed over into many of my storytelling decisions.

**B.B.P. H.:** What does queerness mean to you, particularly in relation to your own social circumstances, and how do you think this definition might change in the future?

**D. Q. Y.:** Queerness is all about acknowledging one's radical position in society. Queerness is self-acceptance multiplied by danger and transgression. I know many gay men who want nothing more than to cure themselves of their queerness; they want to de-queer themselves so that they can slide smoothly into the norm and feel a

semblance of security and comfort. And trust me when I say that security and comfort are very lovely things – I want them more than any other person alive – but I don't think either of them can ever compare to the happiness that comes from self-acceptance.

**B.B.P. H.:** For how long did you write *Kappa Quartet* and what was a habit you had to do or something you had to keep in mind or touch or see—something that was an integral part of the writing process—during that time?

**D. Q. Y.:** I wrote *Kappa Quartet* over a year, and the bulk of it happened during my time in Japan. It was the year between 2014 and 2015, when I was an exchange student at the University of Tokyo. The dormitory I stayed in was located in Mitaka city, just a quick bus ride from Kichijoji station, and I had spent many cold afternoons doing work at the Starbucks nearest to Inokashira Park.

It was a perfectly sized cafe, neither too big nor too small, and although I was constantly surrounded by people, or occasionally visited by friends passing by in the neighbourhood, I had always been left to my own devices. I went there so often and so regularly that the staff came to know my usual order — chai tea latte, M-size, with ice – and I, in turn, came to recognise the young men and women who staffed the outlet. It was this personal routine I upheld that made it possible for me to maintain the momentum I had been building with my writing.

**B.B.P. H.:** *Kappa Quartet* reminded me of the beautiful works of Simone Weil. Reminded in such a way that I thought I needed to go back to her works and figure out how your work and hers might be in a dialogue. I could say that Simone Weil was one such thinker that absolutely had so much determination in exploring the human soul and its relation to social and political activities. As a side note, I should say that a literary text with the word “soul” anywhere in it tends to either bore me or compel me to reflect on how badly I don't know myself. The latter surely excites me! In *Kappa Quartet*, the word “soul” is first mentioned in the second chapter, “The Anus Is the Centre of the Soul”; and I read it in such a way that I began to feel the novel was about to expose a thing so wrong I wouldn't ever

want to touch or see it, which is not the point of exposure. Because when exposure to an intimate part of us takes place, it is important, I believe, to remember that our senses serve very specific political functions. In other words, from that part on there were high curiosity, fear, and a sense of yearning altogether to listen to your voice until it ends. It takes many arresting vicarious journeys to think about the soul and your novel is one of them.

Simone Weil says: "If we want a love which will protect the soul from wounds we must love something other than God." In your novel, you exposed the life of a young Singaporean gay man who might have lost his soul. How important is it for you to write about this? How has Singapore, love, pain or sexuality conditioned you to imagine a person without soul?

**D. Q. Y.:** Well I think a lot of has its roots in the schools I had been to before university. There was a very specific culture that these schools promoted – overwhelmingly male, sports-oriented, elitist, Methodist, privileged. I was such a femme kid growing up that bullies often made the existence of my own cock in question, which in turn steeped me in an endless amount of shame.

If there was anything I learnt it would be that faggotry begets monstrosity – there is no running away from this in life – and you can interpret this statement in whichever way you wish. Faggots are monsters. They will never be considered human in the eyes of ignorant, un-enlightened people, and so that is the shame I've learnt to live with. Some might find this point of view rather extreme, but to quote my friend Bing, femme life is really a matter of survival, because how we speak, how we bend our wrists, how we laugh and walk and cross our legs constantly expose our queerness to normative society. We've got no place to hide, no mask to hide ourselves under, and no government willing to protect us from our prosecutors, or at the very least legalise our right to fuck. So what does a faggot have to do to feel safe around here? To what claim does he have to a soul? How supernaturally resilient and strong and defiant must a faggot be in order to live under such conditions?



Dehumanisation aside, I did write this novel at a particularly introspective period of my life. In Japan, in 2014, I was struck by how I hadn't been in love with anyone for more than 5 years. I was conscious about this, and a little worried for myself; I'd often joke about how I was incapable of such emotions any longer, which constantly put a large aspect of my own humanity into question. I'd often imagine it as a hole in my heart, through which all the things I used to feel had leaked and left me. And so I would say that the roots of Kevin's characterisation arose out of reasons both sociopolitical and personal.

**B.B.P. H.:** I'm currently preparing myself to write a collection of poetry focusing on the aftermath of the American War in Vietnam, specifically about the construction of disability in relation to Agent Orange attack, a decade-long herbicidal warfare executed by the Americans. Although I feel so strongly about this project, I also sometimes feel that somehow I'm not the right person to do it: I'm not Vietnamese, I don't speak Vietnamese, and I certainly have no history of exposure to dioxin, the most prominent deadly chemical found in Agent Orange.

Very significant in *Kappa Quartet* is the creation of an imagination of things as they are in Japanese, in what you are not and will never be. A bold assemblage of things that can only belong to time or in the past. Your borrowing of the concept 'kappa' from Japanese folklore is terrifyingly creative and extraordinary. I only encountered 'kappa' twice; in the novel of Ryonusuke Akutagawa entitled *Kappa* (1927; trans. by Geoffrey Bownas, 1970) and in the film *Summer Days with Coo* (Keiichi Hara, 2007). In your writing, formal transition, growth, looking into oneself, and, to an extent, healing meaningfully contribute to how transnationalism is discussed in the contemporary time. What does it mean to be a novelist speaking through another culture? Why did you need to go beyond your own culture to write? Was it scary? And were you in doubt of what you were creating?

**D. Q. Y.:** It was certainly scary, and I was certainly in doubt over myself, throughout the entire duration of the project. Because apart from the whole Japanese side of things, I knew what else was at risk. I repeatedly asked myself a whole bunch of questions while I was



writing *Kappa Quartet*. Am I too experimental? Do I have too many characters? Too many locations, too many time skips? Am I overreaching here? Am I too young to make a claim on any sort of ambition? Who am I to think I can pull this off? And so I took my time, in both the writing and the editing phase, to make sure that I was as prepared as possible. I needed to make sure that behind every aesthetic decision there was a concept and a belief that I could stand by.

And so with the incorporation of Japan into this novel I was afraid of being accused of cultural appropriation. In response to that fear I travelled, I spoke, and I read, Akutagawa's *Kappa* being one of the books I studied extensively for a module on modern Japanese literature. After a while all you can tell yourself is that you've done as much homework as you possibly can.

I think transnationalism seems almost vital and necessary in contemporary culture. I was trained to have a global outlook, and although one might view Singapore as being awfully limited in size and scope, I've come to view places such as countries, neighbourhoods, entire continents, as opportunities in which stories can be shaped in and situated. It's a determinedly macroscopic outlook that I believe transcends xenophobic conservatives and territorial, gatekeeping liberals. Reading David Mitchell, for one, set for me a very important and life-affirming precedent on how far and wide the imagination ought to take us.

But no matter how touristy I feel, or how curious I am about different countries and cultures, I will always return to telling stories about Singaporeans, and about Singaporean identity – no matter where in the world they might be.

**B.B.P. H.:** Creative writing has a lot of demands since it is a discipline, and a creative writer, in the simplest way of putting it, has to create means in order to withstand the difficulties of the discipline. Life with creative writing is definitely harder for writers of marginalized backgrounds. How have you developed a sense of trust in creative writing; that life is particularly meaningful when it is spent to write?



**D. Q. Y.:** It's all about validating your own existence, isn't it? It's about having lead a life that has constantly been put into question, and which has constantly been held under the sway of someone more legitimate, more authoritative than yourself. I think it's about having, finally, the opportunity to wrest back some sort of control over your own narrative.

In terms of creating the means in which I can sustain my own work, I am thankful for having found a job at Sing Lit Station – it's a literary non-profit in which I get paid a decent wage, flexible working hours, and the space to do my own writing when the time comes.

**B.B.P. H.:** What is your next project after *Kappa Quartet*? Have you started working on it?

**D. Q. Y.:** I have a manuscript of poems intertwined with short stories in development at the moment; it's a tricky, narrative gamble, balancing two different forms in a single volume, and so I'm just allowing myself to take my time with it. Separately I'm also conducting research and reading a lot of science fiction for my second novel.

**B.B.P. H.:** Thank you very much, Daryl! For your time and beauty. For letting us listen to you. I wish you the very best.

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BIOGRAPHIES:

**B.B.P. Hosmillo** co-edits *Queer Southeast Asia: A Literary Journal of Transgressive Art* with Cyril Wong, Hendri Yulius, J. Pilapil Jacobo, & Pang Khee Teik.

**Daryl Qilin Yam** is a writer of prose and poetry, born and based in Singapore. His first novel, *Kappa Quartet* (Epigram Books, 2016), was longlisted for the 2015 Epigram Books Fiction Prize. He is also one of the series editors of the *SingPoWriMo* anthology series by Math Paper Press, a director / administrator at Sing Lit Station, and a

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