

Fabiola Carranza and Steffanie Ling On Ling's *Nascar*, Vancouver: Blank Cheque, 2016

Steffanie Ling is the author of two books, *Nascar* (Blank Cheque, 2016) and *Cuts of Thin Meat*, (Spare Room, 2015). She writes criticism and essays on subjects that range from contemporary art and cinema to professional wrestling, microwaves and the K-pop awards. Her latest work, *Uber Everywhere*, is a short play commissioned by the 2nd Kamias Triennial in the Philippines. Ling has worked as a curator at CSA Space and as an editor of *Bartleby Review*. She writes a monthly Vancouver arts column for Akimbo, organizes a reading series with Emma Metcalfe Hurst (*LIT LIT LIT LIT*), and co-edits a new journal (*Charcuterie*), which she founded with Bopha Chhay. I spoke with Steff about her most recent book, *Nascar*, sometime in December. It is now June and Blank Cheque has just released the second printing of the book.

Smoking is the ritual that flows from one story to the next in Nascar. It acts as some sort of frustrated resistance to the responsibilities of adulthood and professionalization. With the advance of vaping, your embrace of smoke as the ongoing thread in the book becomes a funny but also poignant marker. Blah, blah, I'm blabbing. Did you know right away you were writing a book about cigarettes?

I was blabbing the book until it was all out of me, like a person who can't stand awkward silence. I just kept talking. I did readings of some of the texts in *Nascar*, and many I wrote to accompany exhibitions. I managed to talk about some of the things that you mention, like resistance or hesitation to professionalize – a dangling carrot which isn't a carrot but some other thing that stands in for our various and amorphous ambitions and desires.

In the book, smoking is a motif that

indicates social awkwardness, the performance of maturity and/or worldliness and the traffic of judgment coming from, or directed toward, the narrator, rather than smoke as a noun where cigarettes are the object of study. When I look back on it, the book starts to depict how I experienced the wake of PC culture, seeing my neighbourhoods get gentrified, trying to find jobs and fulfill a sense of productivity, all the while, smoking and feeling this pressure to perform/succeed and be charming, be present and stay connected. All of this millennial-as-scum-of-the-earth type stuff.

The book borrows its title from the National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing, a family-run organization that basically establishes when, where and how car races are sanctioned. NASCAR runs the second most highly televised sports franchise in the United States. Why did you choose this as the title for your book of stories?

Wow, I didn't know it was family-run. That makes it seem quaint. The title, *Nascar*, was my way of identifying a form that interests me by way of how it alienates me: the sexy race car. I started to refer to fancy people as fast cars, because "fast cars" are often expensive to maintain, really clean, ostentatious and, more than likely, non-smokers.

I had also read Renata Adler's *Speedboat*, a collection of loose prosaic, intimate episodes in the milieu of a female journalist working in the '70s. There is nothing specific in her book that hearkens to speedboats either – the book is punctuated by vignettes of the socially anxious and upwardly mobile variety, wading in and out of a certain class of people who have speedboats, or friends who have speedboats. When I first read Adler, I couldn't get into how "about" nothing her

book felt. It was well written but it didn't keep my attention for long. I picked it up again while I was working on *Nascar* and changed my mind about it, finding it brutally honest, sad at times, written with a smart set of eyes. I wonder what changed in me that shifted my appreciation of the book. I think whatever that was must have occurred sometime between starting to write and publishing *Nascar*.

In the title story, you describe the performance and appearance of an opera singer at the same time as you describe the sight of a sexy car in a speedy race. The narrator is bored by these performances, but boredom itself is interfered with in the story as it oscillates between high and low culture. Does excellence bore you? Do you perceive mastery as straightforwardness, a linear trajectory?

Conventional excellence bores me, but I also think we have a somewhat empty relationship to mastery. Boredom isn't the counterpoint to excellence. Boredom might be a muffin-top, but excellence is the display of flexing sweet abs – which is cool, thumbs up, but I can't really relate to this muscle. Is there such a thing as a sincere six pack? I would find more interest in it if we thought of it in terms of someone who is constantly flexing underneath their clothes, while trying to maintain a casual stance. I want the narrative or psychology of this character. I keep returning to the metaphor of physique – also echoed through the motif of back pain spiking up every time the narrator gets caught in a painful or anxious social dynamic. This logic around the repetition of what we do, or don't do, accomplishes a certain affect on our behalf. In *Nascar*, smoking is portrayed as both action and reaction. She has a cigarette when she feels anxious, when she feels annoyed or smokes in place of placing a harsh judgment. There is this thing that happens [where] every time she smokes, a character is conjured: the woman with the black SUV, the man with the gash on his head. For the most part, smoking acts not so much [as] a forthright rejection but rather as a deep suspicion of excellence.

You graduated from art school two years ago. You're what 23, 24, 25? How did you respond to the experience of being a student? Is there a diaristic impulse for you to read life as you write about it?

I felt like a fraud being an art student and making people critique my work and hear me talk about it or make it seem worth their time. When I was in school, we were being asked what our "practice" was, and my impulse was to interpret this quantitatively. You know, that logic behind "practice makes perfect" implies that repetition leads to mastery. We all felt this amazing, motivating pressure to become interested in things and express all this knowledge at the drop of a hat. I didn't feel any confidence or expertise about any

given subject, though, but I told myself and others that I did, to keep going. I have talked about pressure a lot, haven't I? It's all I feel sometimes: pressure to do this and that. What did I spend the most time doing? Smoking. Was I an expert smoker, a *master* smoker? I preferred committing to that practice than to any other grandiose idea. I was sincerely into things like theory, philosophy and other rhetoric as seen through the scope of contemporary art, which resonates with me only briefly compared to more blatant or pedestrian practices [of smoking, pathologically rearranging furniture, lying to customer service people, flexing underneath one's clothes. Edification isn't discernable in these practices but I don't think they're trivial ways to pass the time. These things just excited me in an unexpected way]. I haven't been able to judge whether what I'm feeling is a certain amount of real disenchantment with art content, or just getting a bit older and becoming less generous or open to want[ing] to spend time with really esoteric things.

In "The Convenience Store," the narrator asks where she's from during a point-of-sale transaction. She says she's Asian and describes how she often wants to lie when answering this type of question. It's later revealed that the question was asked of her by a newcomer to Canada and not by an established white Canadian, as one would be all too quick to assume. In either case, the question usually runs from privilege down in real life, but not in this story. To me, this is a sort of subversion. Was writing about "where are you from?" something you felt you had to write about? Did the idea come from a real experience of being asked this yourself?

I wrote it when I realized how we are well prepared to have our nuanced identities belittled or reduced; we even have rhetorical defence mechanisms set in place. For me, lying is a way to get through this repeated and impersonal-but-personal conversation while we conduct banal commerce, because the conversation doesn't carry any consequences – like giving a fake name for a food order or a drink. Insincerity meets insincerity. But is it possible that the question comes from another complex and nuanced identity? Fewer and fewer white people ask me this question now; it's more often not. I wanted to portray how assumptions about this particular question undermine the possibility of letting a sincerity – however naïve – prevail over an episode that usually ends in our affirmation of another person's conversational tactlessness, general insensitivity or ignorance. We just leave the exchange feeling violated and righteous. That's the power dynamic that we sustain, which is borne from the otherness.

In "The Editor, The Painter and The Merchandiser," the narrator contemplates writing a personal essay and titling it, "In Defense of Some Straight White Males." Like "The Convenience Store," this story refuses to give a negative repre-

sentation of white people using the usual stereotypes: racists or misogynists, or anti-feminist, or all too accepting or unquestioning of white privilege. Although it does seem to suggest that quite a few, if not all, of these white friend characters, are apolitical. In either case, both stories tend to throw fixed identity out of circulation. Did you ever worry that the book would come across as being a bit apologetic of whiteness?

You write: "The more I linger on this presumed rejection of the straight white male, the more the defeatist stance he takes sounds less like a legitimate attempt to excuse himself and more like a deep expressed lack of authenticity felt standing before the threshold of cultural participation. I don't feel equipped to try and encourage him, or myself, to be more outspoken about a garden variety of things."

There was a worry coming from the same place as the apprehension I recognized among my Caucasian peers who felt like they couldn't participate, or that their opinions were not valid, appreciated or could be taken seriously because of sudden cultural guilt, and persecution on top of that. That alienation, confusion and then passivity ultimately leads to business-as-usual art making. Lines get drawn, and it's a radical sentiment to know what we want, who we are and what we stand for – but you can't motivate someone to engage until they are ready or compelled to, otherwise, that participation is subject to righteous ridicule or ignorance. The cultural climate is more alienating or hostile than it is inviting to handle the tension of sharing discordant positions and experience. I don't have the answers. I guess I wrote [that] to try and put the feeling in front of me that I'm surrounded by good, intelligent people, who are arrested by the pressures I described earlier: to be successful, to gain recognition, to be a good friend, to do unpaid work, to seek meaningful employment, to retain authenticity, to be politically correct, to speak their mind, to resist dogma, to have sex, to attend openings, parties and lunch. What does that have to do with smoking, again?

I want to go back to the motif of physique, as you've called it. Is it of essence to the stories?

It is a reaction to an emphasis on fitness that pervades mainstream lifestyle cultivation. Fitness grated up against the more poetic righteousness of my own smoking and self-deterioration. A fruitless and absurd protest, but protest is bound by absurdities. The only "pragmatism" we get is the pleasure of the act. That's a naïve and predictable sentiment that I'll wilfully prop up as an essence to the stories.

Why?

I know I have a lot of hubris about how I can, and do, abuse my body at this point in my life, but not enough to feel like I am capable of writing something [that] could accomplish lasting, robust, sturdy, agile, efficient meaning – on purpose, anyway.

Those are all things I feel bound to when I'm writing as a critic, essayist, administrator or job hunter, but excellence without the requisite sincerity comes from a sickening place of having to prove oneself without knowing to whom one is talking to exactly. I guess, at this point, I associate physical excellence with a kind of morality, a respect for an ambiguous oppressor – an abstract boss, gatekeeper, rubber stamp welder. The "mood back pain" from overexerting myself emotionally and physically through rampant participation strikes as physical, but it stands in for pain and all the various forms it could take. Writing about your twenties is not so much hanging dirty laundry to fly, as it is the airing of a dated wardrobe.

Fabiola Carranza (b.1983) is a Costa Rican/Canadian visual artist living in Southern California. She holds an MFA from the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. Carranza recently attended the Chris Kraus Summer Institute at Plug-In, Winnipeg and the Summer Program at SOMA in México City. She is currently at work on an English to Spanish translation of *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* by David Wojnarowicz.

Steffanie Ling is a producer of criticism, pamphlets, stories, essays, exhibitions, reviews, bluntness, anecdotes, shout outs, wrestling storylines, proposals, applications, jokes, readings, minimal poems, poems, dinner, compliments and diatribes. She lives in Vancouver, frequenting grocery stores, The Cinematheque and other air conditioned spaces.