Reading After Trump, Episode 4 Solmaz Sharif

Alex Woloch: Hi, I'm Alex Woloch.

Kenny Ligda: I'm Kenny Ligda.

Alex Woloch: This is Reading After Trump. Our aim in this podcast is to initiate conversations with literary scholars, critics, and historians about what literature can tell us about this critical moment. The views expressed here are and don't necessarily reflect the view policy or positions of Stanford University.

Kenny Ligda: We're going.

Alex Woloch: Okay, we're going. Welcome. It's been a few weeks. We are joined, this episode, by Solmaz Sharif who we're very happy to welcome in.

Solmaz Sharif: Thank you so much for having me.

Alex Woloch: Yeah.

Solmaz Sharif: Thank you so much for having me.

Alex Woloch: Solmaz is currently a Jones Lecturer in the Creative Writing program at Stanford. I guess, you've been doing that for-

Solmaz Sharif: Three years, yes.

Alex Woloch: Three years.

Solmaz Sharif: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Alex Woloch: Before that was a Stegner Fellow in poetry here at Stanford. She was a student at Berkeley and NYU, and has been teaching poetry and writing in the Bay area for the last five years or so. Solmaz is the author of a book of poetry that came out in 2016 called Look. We'll get a little bit into the book, but it's a book that's very much ... It's a book about war and it's a book about language. It's immediately about those two things and it's a book that's about how you can engage the violent language of the world, the kind of the base language today.

In a way, what we're thinking about in this podcast is what it means to bring literature to this moment, and to read literature, and to write literature at this moment. Our idea was to talk with Solmaz about what writer she's been reading, what writers come to our minds in relation to politics today. I know one person we're gonna talk about is James Baldwin

and it's pretty interesting what's going on with him as an example of this writer that seems to have become powerfully reactivated in the last few years.

He's a great figure for us to touch on. It's a really different strand of writing than what we've looked at the last couple of podcasts. Okay, I don't know if there's anything else by way of introduction.

Kenny Ligda: Well, there's a place to start here. Was there anything just in reaction to this introduction that you wanted to say?

Solmaz Sharif: One thing I'm interested in talking about and one thing I've been thinking about, and I think about in my own work, and thinking about Reading After Trump, is the overlap between writing and reading. I'm approaching this kind of as a writer, but more and more I'm seeing a poem not as an active writing but as an active reading. It's asking for a very specific kind of reading of a reader. One moment of or one possibility of political use and import especially after Trump is really trying to figure out how to read the texts and the languages that are being used by him through the eyes of a poet, or as a poem, right?

Alex Woloch: Yeah, mm-hmm (affirmative).

Solmaz Sharif: Then what pressure that might put on the language itself that's being used.

Alex Woloch: Yeah, it's interesting. I was thinking as I was looking at your book, looking, looking ...

Solmaz Sharif: I know it's ...

Alex Woloch: There's two forms of that reading. There's the reading of the present and of this present day vocabulary. You invent a system for how to do that and then there's the reading for any poet of reading and projecting back a poetic inheritance and so they seem like radically different kinds of reading.

Solmaz Sharif: Yeah.

Alex Woloch: The way that you're using the language from a ... I want to get the manual right.

Solmaz Sharif: The Department of Defense's *Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*.

Alex Woloch: Yeah. Yeah. That's it.

Solmaz Sharif: Sorry.

Kenny Ligda: [crosstalk 00:03:42] We all keep that on our desks, but ...

Solmaz Sharif: I know, right?

Alex Woloch: Yeah. On the one hand, the Department of Defense's Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms, which is a thing that you're reading-

Solmaz Sharif: Yes.

Alex Woloch: So there's a kind of reading going on with that, and that's very different than Gulliver's Travels or James Baldwin's inspiring work. I'm curious like how those two kinds of reading ... The reading that has taken place of older poets and earlier poets, and writers against the kind of like ... There is a reading lesson in this book, right?

Solmaz Sharif: Mm-hmm (affirmative). I'm thinking that you put the dictionary here and then you put Baldwin here. I'm thinking I wish more people would read also the dictionary or the language of the state, and the deadness of the language of the state, and kind of mourn how it's not Baldwin, and mourn how, you know, being aware of the possibilities of the English language really trying to look at the dead language of the state through that lens and that grief.

Alex Woloch: Right, the grief as well. The notes are so interesting here because it's so ... What's fascinating about the dictionary is it has to keep being updated almost for the opposite reason. It's when we don't need to define a word anymore, that it's not relevant, right?

Solmaz Sharif: Right. Yeah, if the word has entered common English, then the military dictionary doesn't need to provide it as a supplementary definition anymore. It's just our own language. That's a very different pace and speed than a poem or a lyric thought, and so it was a weird thing to try and keep up with or to decide to not keep up with actually.

Kenny Ligda: It seems like a really formidable task for poetry to recover language.

Solmaz Sharif: Yeah.

Alex Woloch: This language, this military language.

Kenny Ligda: Yeah, language once it's been through the mill of the state. I guess I wondered what is the kind of work of recovering the language. What is it that you see a writer able to do?

Solmaz Sharif: I don't know that, that's what the writer does with language. I don't know if it's recovering. The closest I've gotten is a kind of care taking. Using care taking, on the other hand, that means actually the ability at times to step back and let language do what it will democratically, and allow it to be alive and influx, and shifting, and changing, but also being able to step in and point out where it's being obliterated and misused, and there is a violence occurring against language. I think I'm becoming more and more convinced that poetry is a form of reading and not of writing.

Kenny Ligda: Even as a poet?

Solmaz Sharif: Yes.

Kenny Ligda: Can you kind of-

Solmaz Sharif: Unpack that a little bit?

Kenny Ligda: Yeah. Yeah.

Solmaz Sharif: Maybe because I work in a kind of documentary form and so I use a lot of source material and found material. When I put, say, a Wikipedia entry in a poem, one could say it becomes the poem because I've decided that it's the poem, right, and I've placed it in a poem. But really, it becomes the poem because the reader is then reading it as if reading a kind of lyric moment, and so what does that reading look like or what is the reader primed for and expecting and looking for in the text. It's maybe more useful to start identifying those and talking about that moment for me rather than the writing of it and the decision of including certain materials.

Kenny Ligda: I asked about the kind of literature that's occurred to you since the election or in recent times. You have a few quotes by Baldwin and Rukeyser. Do you want to tell us about this first one?

Solmaz Sharif: Sure. The one from *The Devil Finds Work*?

Kenny Ligda: Yeah.

Solmaz Sharif: I'll read it first. He says, "I loved my country, but I could not respect it. Could not, upon my soul, be reconciled to my country as it was and I love my work. Had great respect for the craft, which I was compelled to study and wanted it to have some human use. It was beginning to be clear to me that these two loves might never, in my life, be reconciled. No man can serve two masters."

I had actually copied this quote down in a notebook, in a journal. I was going through my notes and so I found it again. I had actually forgotten

the context of it and when you go back, and you look at the context of it in *The Devil Finds Work*, which is really a collection of essays around film, this happens at the end of Baldwin's description of his first encounter with the FBI.

One of the things that I've been thinking a lot about after the election and, I think, maybe the first thing I read after the election was the apology, Plato's *Apology*, because I've become concerned or become aware, again, of knowing how to deal with state repression of thought-

Alex Woloch: And of art.

Solmaz Sharif: ... and of writers, and of art, and how did that actually play out. How has that played out historically and what does that look like, and so here we have ... We can kind of actually see a writer having to interact with the FBI during the McCarthy era actually. The reason that this kind of jump out at me from my notebook was that I think it's my duty and it has been my duty, obviously, to be bane to the republic, but also to really question the idea of nation itself. If anything useful can come from this Trump crisis, it's not that we focus on Trump, but that Trump is maybe just a symbol of something larger, and a symbol that was made almost inevitable by the construction of the nation itself.

When Baldwin is saying that there's something to art and there's something to writing, and he says this elsewhere too where he talks about artists as necessarily opposed to every system. It just really spoke to me and it felt especially important now.

Alex Woloch: I just want to fly a couple of things. It's a pretty amazing narrative of this encounter with the FBI.

Kenny Ligda: He's pulled out of a diner to be interrogated about someone who's a marine deserter and suspected basically like un-American activity.

Solmaz Sharif: Yes.

Alex Woloch: Yeah, amazing to think about that in relation to the apology, I mean the high stakes of the apology where the origins of philosophy are wrapped up with the execution of the philosopher. It's, again, it's a structural position where philosophy, as such, is kind of positioned in some kind of fundamental opposition to the state. It's a pretty interesting association from that to this scene in Baldwin.

Kenny Ligda: I guess I wanted to ask about this quote. "I love my country, but I could not respect it." I think I get what Baldwin is thinking about here, but

what's that tension been like in your life? How do you think about that, like love of country?

Solmaz Sharif: Well, yeah. I think love of country is a kind of loyalty. You're loyal and so unquestioning to a kind of we or a collective identity. Whereas poetry, I would say, is the opposite and actually a repeated questioning and active inquiry, and maybe even an active betrayal over and over of moving away from or against the collective. For me, those two things just can't be reconciled. There are certain allegiances to a nation, to the myth of a nation that should not be broken, but would be necessarily broken if you were to follow a line in inquiry to its conclusion, which is basically what a poem would ask you to do.

I think this just goes back, basically, to the earlier question of a poem is an active reading also and what happens when you put that pressure on state-sponsored language itself. What happens if you position that person and that self within the larger machine. It just won't-

Alex Woloch: Yeah. It's this odd idea of responsible betrayal, right?

Solmaz Sharif: Yeah.

Alex Woloch: I mean, both that there's a responsibility to betray actually.

Solmaz Sharif: Absolutely.

Alex Woloch: Another way that the betrayal is responsible in that it's precise and kind of careful, and artistic. I guess this gets us to the next Baldwin quote. As you were talking, it does feel he's saying the same thing. Baldwin really is authorizing that kind of relationship to writing. This is from an essay called The Creative process.

Solmaz Sharif: Yes. It's just a short almost manifesto.

Alex Woloch: Right. The dangers of being an American artist are not greater than those of being an Artist anywhere else in the world, but they are very particular. These dangers are produced by our history. They rest on the fact that in order to conquer this continent, the particular aloneness of which I speak, the aloneness in which one discovers that life is tragic, and therefore, unutterably beautiful could not be permitted, and that this prohibition is typical of all emerging nations will be proved, I have no doubt, in many ways during the next 50 years.

This continent now is conquered, but our habits and our fears remain. In the same way, that's become a social human being one modifies and suppresses. Ultimately, without great courage lies to oneself about all

one's interior uncharted chaos. Have we, as a nation, modified or suppressed and lied about all the darker forces in our history? We know in the case of the person, that whoever cannot tell himself the truth about his past is trapped in it. He's immobilized in the prison of his undiscovered self. This is also true of nations. We know how a person in such a paralysis is unable to assess either his weakness or his strengths and how frequently, indeed, he mistakes the one for the other. This, I think, we do.

We are the strongest nation in the western world, but this is not for the reasons that we think. It is because we have an opportunity that no other nation has in moving beyond the old world concepts of race, and class, and cast, to create finally what we must have had in mind when we first began speaking of the new world. But the price of this is a long look backward when we came in an unflinching assessment of the record. For an artist, the record of that journey is most clearly revealed in the personalities of the people the journey produced. Societies never know it, but the war of an artist with his society is a lover's war. He does, at his best, what lovers do, which is to reveal the beloved to himself and with that revelation to make freedom real. That's an amazing passage.

Kenny Ligda: It's a lot there.

Solmaz Sharif: Yeah.

Alex Woloch: It's almost a challenge to how to start to like talk about it.

Solmaz Sharif: Talk, yeah.

Alex Woloch: The war of an artist with the society is a lover's war would be another version of that oxymoron or the kind of responsible betrayal.

Kenny Ligda: What are some of the key things for you here?

Solmaz Sharif: I think that last line and the use of war, again, and this kind of opposition or oppositional position that is taken actually out of love. Also, earlier on, the appearance of the word courage is another thing that I've been thinking a lot about and what it means to speak courageously, what that actually looks like today when there's so much talk about safety and maintaining safe spaces, and what that might limit, and actually what confrontation requires, and what freedom really requires, which is a kind of obliteration of certain things, of maybe one's identity, what one has held true thus far, and how that's inherently not safe a position to be in.

His idea of how the role of a writer is basically to reveal or point to the dark forces or what it is that we, as individuals, and then if we zoom out, we, as a nation, look away from or repress, or deny how important it is to

bring that to light so that it can actually be dealt with responsibly. Until it is, we'll get a Trump really.

Kenny Ligda: Yeah. The nation is enslaved to a past that it doesn't understand.

Solmaz Sharif: Sure.

Alex Woloch: Yeah. One of the things that strikes me with this passage is the precision of it because they're setting up this chain of thinking that could so easily lead to generalization, but however the clause is working. They kind of hold onto the precision of what he's talking about. These are dangerous words precisely for becoming vapid of courage. There's a kind of tight rope he's walking on with this passage as well.

Solmaz Sharif: Yeah. They're words I would fight any other writer really using them or even societies never know the never constructions and often whenever that appears, I will be like, "Well, no." But here, it feels precise. It feels exact, feels right.

Kenny Ligda: I want to admit that it took me a long time to do the reading for this. There is this sense-

Alex Woloch: Maybe because like you wanted to stay with language and-

Kenny Ligda: Yeah, exactly. There's always this feeling of kind of earning the words. I wanted to go back to ... You mentioned courage. A big word that jumped out to me in a lot of Baldwin is fear, but that also comes up a lot when he talks about his life, when he talks about how people watch movies. How have you been thinking about that word?

Alex Woloch: It's interesting.

Solmaz Sharif: Fear?

Kenny Ligda: Well, courage was the one that you mentioned.

Solmaz Sharif: Oh, courage.

Alex Woloch: Yeah, the fear, maybe fear.

Solmaz Sharif: But fear.

Alex Woloch: Part of it is it's another paradox. Part of what Baldwin support is like what takes courage is to be afraid.

Solmaz Sharif: Right.

Kenny Ligda: That's something that, just in the last few years, this is something that never occurred to me before as I've [inaudible 00:17:51] more things that scare me basically. It's like is there a difference between courage and bravery. In my mind, there's one quality, which is a kind of obliviousness, like you don't realize that it's dangerous. Maybe courage is like being scared, but being able to deal with it in some way.

Solmaz Sharif: Yeah, or moving towards it actively actually seeking out the fear and knowing that if the fear is indication of a thing that needs to be looked at and dealt with, which is what, I think, Baldwin does over and over.

Alex Woloch: Yeah. That's the unflinching, right?

Solmaz Sharif: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Alex Woloch: It's the imperative that's lurking in your title, the difficulty of looking, actively looking, looking at the things that we've overs- I don't know. What is it? Looking with ... It's so hard with Bal- As I was reading, but it's like you read them and ... It's like you read them and you like ... I found myself agreeing like he gets it right and now I have it right because I've agreed with him, but then I won't be able to put it into those words.

Solmaz Sharif: Right, yeah.

Alex Woloch: When I say it, it comes out not right.

Solmaz Sharif: Yes.

Alex Woloch: It's weird.

Solmaz Sharif: It is.

Alex Woloch: I guess that's what sends you back to the text because there's fear in this passage too. There is that question of looking in this passage as well.

Kenny Ligda: Well, so I think a secret agenda on this podcast is always to get in as many Orwell references as possible.

Solmaz Sharif: Yes.

Kenny Ligda: There is one where Orwell is talking about ... It's in 1945 and he's talking about the conditions on the European continent. He says basically this whole business of getting people to see what's going on beyond their own small circle is one of the major challenges of our time, and it's going to require a new art to be developed, which I mentioned because it resonated to me with the title of your book and just the difficulty.

Alex Woloch: It's not necessarily the things we're not seeing. It's more complicated than just resting something into visibility and then it's there to see and recognize.

Solmaz Sharif: Right. No, it's about bringing a kind of attention to the thing that we're seeing rather than having visual information in front of us that we're not actually registering or dealing with, you know?

Alex Woloch: Yeah.

Solmaz Sharif: But I love that. I love the small circle quote. When I'm writing and especially around warfare, that's a constant struggle, right, to reawaken Americans and to recognize that they are currently at war, right?

Alex Woloch: Yeah. This is something that gets forgotten.

Solmaz Sharif: Yeah, exactly. Because you're not seeing it in your immediate circle, perhaps it becomes easy to not register that or recognize it and so how can I make sure that, that circle explodes basically. More and more is allowed in or as Rukeyser says, "With the [inaudible 00:20:43] of the [inaudible 00:20:44] is not to bring things together, but to not allow them to be torn apart." What I mean to say is to show how false that small circle is and the idea of the existence of it is false itself.

Alex Woloch: What things does she mean by ... What's being put together? Is it basically like readers with the actuality of what is happening out in the world?

Solmaz Sharif: She would probably include that, but it's whatever ends up in the poem itself. I think we often, when we talk about a poem, we talk about it bringing together disparate objects and putting them next to each other, right?

Alex Woloch: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Solmaz Sharif: She's asking us to see a poem as not bringing together, but not allowing those things to be torn apart, that actually with every decision for every line, you're committing an act of exclusion. You're deciding to exclude more than you're deciding to kind of bring together, and so can we see a poem and see ourselves as something as a force that is trying to not allow things to be left out or torn out.

Kenny Ligda: Let's get into Muriel Rukeyser. This is the Life of Poetry, which I think is a World War II era ...

Solmaz Sharif: Just after, yeah.

Alex Woloch: Is that a book that has been important to you?

Solmaz Sharif: Very important to me. Very important to me because she's writing it after a crisis and in response to crisis, and because it's kind of stran- It's actually her language is really strange to me and hard to pinpoint, but I feel her reaching for, and she talks about it elsewhere in the book, reaching for in a kind of emotional intelligence for which we don't yet have words-

Alex Woloch: Yeah, it's interesting.

Solmaz Sharif: ... or language. She's creating that language and the syntax of that emotional intelligence throughout the essay. I still find her language very strange, simple, and musically driven, but I have to spend a lot of time with it to know.

Kenny Ligda: Yeah. Do you want to read this quote here?

Alex Woloch: This was an epigraph, right?

Solmaz Sharif: Yes.

Alex Woloch: [crosstalk 00:22:38] in your-

Solmaz Sharif: Yeah. This is the epigraph from my book.

Alex Woloch: Did you come to it early or late in terms of the book?

Solmaz Sharif: Rather early.

Alex Woloch: Okay.

Solmaz Sharif: Yeah.

Alex Woloch: So you had that in mind.

Solmaz Sharif: I did.

Alex Woloch: The epigraph of the book existed a little bit before the book as a whole.

Solmaz Sharif: Yeah. Yeah, it definitely did. The quote reads, "During the war, we felt the silence and the policy of the governments of English speaking countries. That policy was to win the war first and work out the meanings afterward. The result was, of course, that the meanings were lost. You cannot put those things off."

Kenny Ligda: It's a really difficult quote. I think that basically we never really understand what's happened until years later. It seems like it takes societies years to ... It takes individuals years to process what's happened in any event. But maybe the point is that sometimes we don't try.

Solmaz Sharif: Maybe. I don't know that it needs to take years to process something. I think what she's pointing to is a violence that was being committed against language and the violence that one has to commit against language in order to commit actual state-sponsored violence, right?

Kenny Ligda: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Solmaz Sharif: I think that if we are aware of that as a tactic, then we should be able to kind of respond to it as it's happening because it will happen. Every war will be premeditated in that moment of violence against language every single ... Right?

Kenny Ligda: Yeah, and the language itself will be baked to make the whole thing more tenable.

Solmaz Sharif: Yes.

Kenny Ligda: Orwell, again.

Solmaz Sharif: Exactly. Yeah, exactly.

Kenny Ligda: I think that the quote is like political speech is the defense of the indefensible, and something like we will not put the sword back into the scabbard sounds better than we won't stop dropping blockbuster bombs. The violence on language has to happen.

Solmaz Sharif: It has to happen, and it will happen, and it is happening. If we see it as a formal problem or a tactical problem rather than a content, I think often times we get caught up in the content of the language and trying to sort that out, and maybe that takes years. But the form of it, actually, is pretty consistent and could be responded to immediately.

Alex Woloch: Well, I was thinking about this with look. These are our issues with this book, right?

Solmaz Sharif: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Alex Woloch: Again, beginning with the title, the reader is curious to know about when it was written and which part of the war is it referring to. It's just such a long war. My question was gonna be what's the temporality of the book. Then part of my own answer to that question was this book does feel like a

document of the endless war, actually, that we're in. It's now 15 years since 9/11, 16 years. This has been the longest war of this country's history with no end in sight. Is that right, that this is the time of endless war and look?

Solmaz Sharif: Yeah. There are a number of wars that appear and for me it was so important. For example-

Alex Woloch: There's the wars from the '80s, the Iraq War.

Solmaz Sharif: Yeah, and then to use the U.S. Department of Defense's *Dictionary* to describe an Iranian in the Iran-Iraq War, for example, is me, again, trying to make an argument about how this is a tactical problem and not so much one of moment and place, and geopolitical specificity. While most of the book deals with the endless war that we say began with 9/11, but really also predates that, I wanted actually there to be a blur between World War II, the Iran-Iraq War, this war, while still naming and claiming the particulars of each of those as well.

Alex Woloch: Yeah, because it does raise a hard question, which is like the war will always be with us. If that awareness of the crisis can tip into a pessimism that it's an unchanging condition ... This has been coming up in our podcast. That's just by random, I mean, nothing is really random, but it did feel like we were falling on this books that were pessimistic, like that inhabited a radical position like Gulliver's Travels, you know? I don't know if that's something you tarried with in writing this or ...

Solmaz Sharif: Pessimism?

Alex Woloch: Yeah, the pessimism of war as a inescapable condition.

Solmaz Sharif: I don't know that it is and I don't know that I would use will. It's the condition we have been in and will continue if we don't do something radical about it. But I don't think that it's necessarily inevitable. I always return to the Gramsci quote of the pessimism of intellect optimism of will. Yes, the book actually does feel rather pessimistic to me in that it's caught in the elegy and it's caught in brief, and it's not really exiting that.

Alex Woloch: Yeah, and it has these cycles.

Solmaz Sharif: It doesn't and it's not looking to.

Alex Woloch: It's interested in the cycles [crosstalk 00:27:28].

Solmaz Sharif: Exactly. Exactly. But that pessimism is at the service of a kind of greater optimism of what then can be done with that work or after that work.

Alex Woloch: Yeah. One thing I was thinking with Baldwin is ... The prophetic quality is really important. You see it in this quote. There does feel like a way that ... I don't know. It's like, the prophe- It's a weird term. The weird thing with Baldwin is the rationalism of it at the same time. He's making a logical point that the world he's writing into just isn't ready to hear. There's a way that you read his stuff now and it's got the prophetic theme, but it also just feel completely analytically accurate. I think we could see that now. It's like Baldwin seems, to me, like he's a figure that has figured out things before the letter and then we've caught up to him in our politics like the contemporary view on identity.

With Black Lives Matter or something, it's like Baldwin is there. He definitely is something that's writing, in a way, for a future audience that had yet to be born. I guess, part of his writing is trying to bring that into being. If you had to put your finger on that contemporariness, what do you think it is?

Solmaz Sharif: I don't know. I do think it has something to do with his ability to use those ... Well, those more abstract nouns with precision gives it a lasting quality. There is something to how outside he was standing at that moment and that sense of a kind of outsider looking in. That feels like he was so in his time, that he was not in his time and so that becomes contemporary. His position remains the same through time.

Kenny Ligda: Yeah. Our last episode was a conversation with Blakey Vermeule about Gulliver's Travels. There is this curious moment in George Orwell's writing where he talks about how the first time he read Gulliver's Travels he was a day short of eight-years-old. He knows that because he stole the copy that was gonna be given to him for his birthday and read it.

I was reading *The Devil Finds Work* and there is this passage, which is not the same, but it's ... Here's the passage. He's talking about his fascination with Uncle Tom's cabin when he was a kid. First of all, all these writers from the past read at this amazing level. Anyways ...

Alex Woloch: Well, this goes back to the reader and writing thing. It's like you are a reader before you are a writer.

Kenny Ligda: Right. There's this passage in *The Devil Finds Work*. He says, "I had read *Uncle Tom's Cabin* compulsively, the book in one hand, the newest baby on my hipbone. I was trying to find out something, sensing something in the book of some immense import for me, which however, I knew I did not really understand. My mother got scared. She hid the book. The last time she hid it, she hid it on the highest shelf above the bathtub. I was somewhere around seven or eight." I was like the same age. It's weird.

"God knows how I did it, but I somehow climbed up and dragged the book down." Then my mother, as she herself puts it, didn't hide it anymore.

Indeed, from that moment though, and fear, and trembling began to let me go. When we were talking about it, as Alex pointed out, one is like a lower upper middle class, white English kid who's gonna get it on his birthday. The other is a black American kid whose mother is trying to protect him from knowledge of how race works in America. In a way, they're really different. But there's something that I love about both, the transgressiveness and the allure of reading.

Solmaz Sharif: Yeah.

Alex Woloch: And the importance of childhood reading. Do we all have books that had that sort of relationship where they're making it like a tactile thing? Reading is tied up with your identity and with your formation.

Solmaz Sharif: No. I'm just thinking about my own childhood reading and what it felt like, and how I had free reign to read whatever I wanted basically. There's no censorship of any sort. I'm a kid and I'm coming across all these violent or sexual moments, and that's being encouraged to-

Alex Woloch: Allowed.

Solmaz Sharif: Allowed and permitted. I also know that my mom has read it and so we're having a secret conversation that we would actually never have face-to-face, if that makes sense.

Alex Woloch: Like through reading the book.

Solmaz Sharif: Through reading the book. Reading, to me, has always felt like somehow you're having a conversation or you know at least it's an end in another person's mind.

Alex Woloch: That's super interesting. I had the experience remembering being a child, a kid, and some of the books you're reading are books that your parents own.

Solmaz Sharif: Right.

Alex Woloch: There is a weird way that when you read that ... You're reading it sort of like ... Yeah, it is weirdly about the relationship.

Solmaz Sharif: It's like, "Oh, you thought that." Yeah.

Alex Woloch: Some of them are like they bought them before you existed.

Solmaz Sharif: Right. Yeah.

Alex Woloch: It's like an old book or something.

Kenny Ligda: Little of it needs to be concretized in speech like that your mom had also read it because there's a kind of imaginary part of ...

Solmaz Sharif: Right.

Kenny Ligda: Yeah. There's an aspect of this that you mentioned and I wanted to get back to. Rukeyser talks about how kids like poetry, which-

Solmaz Sharif: Yeah. I love that part.

Kenny Ligda: You mentioned the fear of poetry and Rukeyser talks about this. It's something that kids don't have and then they begin at school, and then there's a fear of poetry. Do you see that going on and what do you make of it?

Solmaz Sharif: Yeah. I think what she says ... I think it's pretty spot-on, which is that it happens around the time or the age where you start asking what am I feeling and you start asking what should I be feeling. You start looking around to other people to make sure, you know, your own emotional reality becomes suspect and something to police. Of course, the idea of a poem and venturing into that emotional and very intimate moment, and being asked to then come back and report publicly what you know, and reveal yourself, I think people are still really afraid of and think that they don't have it "right", right?

Kenny Ligda: Yeah.

Solmaz Sharif: Like you're not getting the poem, you're not experiencing it properly, and so much of the work has to do with just getting people to speak through the fear of the poem itself.

Kenny Ligda: You've been listening to Reading After Trump, Conversations and Literature in Politics. This is a production of the Stanford English Department in collaboration of the Office of the Vice Provost for Teaching and Learning. Reading After Trump is created and hosted by Alex Woloch and Kenny Ligda. Sound engineering and editing is by Catherine Wong except where messed up by Kenny Ligda. Music is by Brett Yarnton.