Chana Porter Interviewed by Matt Finch, June 2021

Playwright, novelist, and education activist Chana Porter joined me in the summer of 2021 to talk about her haunting new novel *The Seep*.

In the book, Porter imagines an alien invasion of an unusual kind. The Seep find their way into the Earth's ecosystem and cause every living being on the planet to become connected. "Capitalism falls, hierarchies and barriers are broken down; if something can be imagined, it is possible."

Trina Goldberg-Oneka, a middle-aged trans woman, is the book's protagonist. An artist who retrains as a doctor after the invasion, she cherishes "the casual overthrow of everything that had felt codified but broken for so long" -- until her partner Deeba decides to use the Seep's power to be reborn as a baby, moving on to a new life. The book follows Trina along her spiral of grief as she begins a strange quest through the brave new world of the Seep.

Our conversation touched not just on the novel, but also Porter's plays and her work as an education activist. She is a founder of the Octavia Project which brings together young women and trans, gender non-conforming, or non-binary teens to create speculative fictions offering "new futures and greater possibilities for our world", blending creative writing, art, science, and technology.

I began by asking Chana Porter about her first glimpse of the idea that became *The Seep*.

C: There's a secret book that probably no-one will ever see, written from the point of view of a teenager in my hometown.

I was really intrigued by this concept of an *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* style alien takeover, without it being a cut-and-dried thing of "This is good, this is bad." This is also the feeling I have when I watch the 1978 *Body Snatchers* movie; it feels so brutal because we don't really understand what these beings are feeling or what they care about, but the more that we understand as a scientific community about how trees communicate with each other, and protist communications, the more we question: what is alive? What is a life? What is social? What is a community?

When you use the lens of a horror film to reflect on these issues, when you consider the destruction we have wrought on the planet, it prompts you to ask: what if it's not bad?

So that body-horror-teenager-in-the-suburbs novel was like the first under-painting of *The Seep*. I needed to write that messy book a few times, of this teenager and her point of view. I don't know if I'll ever return to it, but I needed to go through all of that to figure out the mechanics of what this being might be and how it might relate to animals and plants.

I'm very good at destroying things, or just putting them in a drawer; I'm really not precious. I had put *The Seep* into a drawer, too -- I think that's the best thing to do when you're stuck. That was *The Seep*'s first kernel, even though you could trace it further back to me at

nineteen, reading Octavia Butler's *Lilith's Brood*, and thinking about change, how God is change, and how community is being changed by these alien beings. As I was writing *The Seep*, that was when the drums of "Make America Great Again" were sounding, sending us back to *The Parable of the Sower*, and seeing that Octavia Butler had predicted that.

It's this idea that humanity is static, that there is a greatness that was achieved in the past, and it was achieved through heteronormativity and whiteness and the nuclear family, and that we're always trying to return to that, instead of allowing these systems to break down or to change. Now, in the United States, we're having this conversation finally about defunding the police, and it makes some people's heads explode just saying those words. This idea that you'd give money to the things that you want to see more of, such as mental health services, affordable housing, teaching art, all of those things, sits at odds with the militarisation and weaponization of people who have never really been there to serve and protect everyone. The joy and the beauty of a systems breakdown is hard for people who are afraid to imagine something new. All of the things that I do, writing and teaching, both harbour this question of what happens and what it means when the systems break down.

M: The novel does a great job of showing the ambivalence of experiencing this kind of breakdown. Your protagonist, Trina, sits somewhat at odds with the society which the Seep has brought about and even bristles at the well-meaning attempts of her community to intervene as she suffers in her grief. This is a world which comes after our own, with different values and different frustrations as well as different pleasures and rewards.

Steven King said he felt gleeful at tearing down our current society in his apocalyptic novel *The Stand*; what did it feel like for you to write this story?

C: I relate to Trina, my protagonist, very much. I think anyone who has worked in community organising or any kind of activism has had this exasperated feeling: do we really need to have another talk? More processing? There's a reason why I'm a writer, and why I do a lot of things by myself; it's tough to be in community with other people!

I think the ongoing conversation about libertarian values in American culture is key to our national identity, but if you follow the logic all the way through, you see that how you treat your land impacts everyone and all the beings around you. If we're really talking about being free, that means free not to take on harm from any other places. Those conversations are really slippery, and I had to cut out from earlier drafts of *The Seep* lots of material that I thought was really funny around co-op and community meetings, debates about the legitimate uses of a carrot - "I could use that carrot as a dildo, Bradley, and you wouldn't be able to say a thing about it!"

Really we're talking about the rejection of current social mores; the yellow-meeks in the book, who have renounced all social ties right down to their names, exemplify this. I'm standing on the shoulders of so many writers in doing this, particularly Samuel Delany. I love his *Trouble on Triton* so much, with this wild playwright who doses her unsuspecting audiences with three-minute hallucinogenic drug trips during her performances, and all of this exciting gender stuff.

It's about holding all at once the concepts of being free and being an individual - something that's very important to me personally - alongside the notion of being in community, and the idea that no-one is ever truly standing alone and doing it by themselves. I mean, you didn't pave that road alone, you didn't collect your own trash, you're dependent on all this infrastructure and the activities of others to live your free and individual life. The conversations we're having now about understanding ourselves as part of a great organism, with a part to play in the health of a total body - I wanted to tease them out in *The Seep*, including the ways in which I personally chafe at some aspects of those collective spaces.

I read something online in which someone claimed that my book was a takedown of leftist culture, but I don't agree! I'm very lovingly poking fun at things I'm very entrenched in.

M: It reminded me of the very loving satire in Carol Emshwiller's *Carmen Dog,* where all the women in the world are turning into animals and the animals are turning into women. She offers this gently teasing depiction of some of the feminist discussion groups she was deeply involved in, and clearly cared about very much.

I did wonder if Pina, the bear in *The Seep*, who has human cognitive abilities and a very dry sense of humour, had come out of *Carmen Dog*.

C: The bear was Rachel Pollack's idea! She was my mentor and I just remember, in a much earlier draft, Deeba turned into a dolphin instead of a baby. I had to lose all this stuff about Trina hanging out with her wife on a pier all the time, realising she can't cope with being married to a dolphin any more - but then Rachel asked me why the point of view had to be so human-centric in this novel; what if a bear turned into a person through the Seep?

M: You've made it really clear that *The Seep* was nurtured and brought into being by a communal effort, with a great deal of support from the people around you. How does that tension play out, between working alone on your own thing and being part of a creative community? Is it different when you're working as a novelist versus your work in the theatre?

C: Yes! There was a time in my life when I was trying to preserve all of my energy for myself, partly because I knew that what I wanted to do was very tough - and it's still very tough. There was a real loneliness to it, and I didn't like that every second of my day was either thinking about the work that I made or the jobs I was doing to pay my bills.

So, in the middle of trying to become a published writer, I cofounded the Octavia Project. It made the journey to becoming a published writer take longer, but I met so many incredible people through it, and it just really drilled home for me why stories are important, and why it matters who gets to tell them. It might sound cheesy and aphoristic, but the journey really was what made the final destination. I wouldn't be the person I am now if I hadn't had these weird jobs in my 20s; it really shapes my point of view, and how I feel now about labour, and about time.

I moved out to L.A. because I fell in love with someone who has two young children, so my life has changed enormously, and especially with the pandemic too; I'm homeschooling these children for half my time! It changes the quality of my writing time, too, I'm still very glad that I don't have full-time children, and I feel for my colleagues that do, especially as

we've had so little support in our country during the pandemic, but my days are different, and the way that I relate to people is different, in terms of going in and out of spaces where there are other people, and then getting to cocoon in my own mind, which I feel very very grateful for.

Theatre is a similar kind of shape: you write the play by yourself, and then with all the productions I've had, I've been there the entire time, partially because my plays aren't kitchen-sink plays; they tend to be of an absurdist bent, or more poetic. I wrote a play about a woman who turns into an elephant - another reason I need to read *Carmen Dog*!

There came a time where I got burned out on that kind of collaboration too, and I wanted to retreat into writing novels. The processes are so different. The novel gets written at a glacial place, then it goes to your agent - and my agent is a very good editor, so then there's a lot of back-and-forth between us about the meat of the book. Selling the book is a much smaller part of her job, at least for me. There are also a couple of people who I trust to look at my work, and in the COVID times I've joined a writing group, which has helped me to be a little less insular - but the novel is something where you really have to love to explore your own mind. Not every writer will do this in the way that I do it, with so many drafts; some people can write a really marvellous book in a couple of drafts, but I feel like I have to write it and then think about it, write in and then think about it, going through that process a lot of times. What I love about that, when you're in communion with your subconscious mind, is that you find things - I still do this in *The Seep* now - where I didn't fully understand a symbol, or a connection that was being subconsciously made, and I can still read and get new things from it now. It's a wonderful way to tell yourself a story.

M: I was reading about your play *Leap and the Net Will Appear*. You talk about the play coming to you after a silent retreat. I wondered about what the balance between writing-as-inspiration and writing-as-carpentry was for you?

C: I think you have to know what stage of the process you're in, and then to know that it's not a linear thing. I like to think: "This is the generative time" and "This is the editorial time", and to know that I can't be wearing my really rigorous, critical, editorial hat when I'm trying to generate, or I'll cut myself off. I think this is something a lot of writers do, and they call it writer's block. You're thinking about the product when you don't yet know what your story wants. I like to think of it as going spelunking into a cave: there's going to be worms and dirt and stuff, and there's going to be jewels, but I can't sort the dirt clods from the jewels until I bring it out up into the sun.

First and foremost, I write a lot. For me, it's an amazing recipe to stave off depression and anxiety. I'm in a constant dialogue with my creative mind, and most of what I put down will not see the light of day; those things that do see the light of day will be very changed.

Here's an example: the scene of the full moon party where Deeba first says she wants to become a baby? That whole thing was just a line or two that I glossed over as I wrote a draft: a party with everyone sitting on the floor, everyone toasting each other, all their old friends there, and when Deeba said that, Trina thought that it was a joke. And then, when I'm looking back at my draft, I see that, and recognise that it's a scene, it's not just a couple of lines, and it ends up becoming a lynchpin, a moment that Trina goes back to in time.

I think that tension of knowing when you're being generative and knowing when you need to be very critical, and not mixing the two, is really the key.

M: It speaks to that tension between going into yourself and sharing a text with an audience. You seem to have a really strong and long-standing sense of your identity as a writer; was there a point where you first moved from creating for yourself to sharing those creations with others?

C: As a person who stutters, my relationship with speech was very fraught, especially as a teen. But it was also this amazing super-strength, because at some point when I was very small, I realised I was never going to be "normal". If I never talked, maybe - but then if I become the girl who never talks, that's not a normal thing either. This thing that for many people is very simple was never going to be simple for me. That really gave me something: if you're not going to be normal, then what are you going to be? All the kids are trying to fit in, and you can't! I experimented quite heavily, shaving my head at fourteen, wearing my father's clothes or my mother's 1970s dresses, really playing with my persona - and some of this was a defensive stance, that others couldn't call me strange, because I was going to deliberately be stranger than they thought.

Looking back, people were actually very nice! But I would give these elaborate speeches in class, singing them, because we had all these oral presentations to give throughout high school - they felt like the bulk of my life - and what I discovered was that I could stand at the front of class with my little note cards trying to talk about something I cared about, stuttering through the whole thing, and feel so blocked and so stuck that I couldn't express, feeling very mad that I couldn't say what I wanted to say, when I felt I had good things to put out there - but I wasn't going to stop having to give these presentations, so I found my own way to do them: as a puppet show, as a rhythmic spoken word poetry thing, which is a much easier way for me to talk, and I think that it was so out that people didn't really know what to expect or how to react. That was when I realised standing out is really great, and I think I really like reading and singing the things that I have made. I would call them poems and would say they were for different people to take different parts; and now I see, that's literally a play, that's what plays are! I had seen zero experimental theatre at that point in time, so I thought that to have a play you needed a boy and a girl going to a place and falling in love, maybe a song, that kind of thing.

When I went to college, I'd planned to study a lot of different things, but I kept coming back to theatre, because what I found was that I'd go to a science class and find that I could use some of that to write a really really cool monologue. I would take a dance class, or a Russian literature class, or a sculpture class, and all of that would make it into the play somehow. As someone with a lot of wide curiosities, writing was this amazing container for me to live.

Recently I've been on this big nonfiction tear, partly because I'm trying to finish another novel, but also because I don't know where my next idea is going to come from, so the breadth of that kind of reading really appeals to me.

M: Even in *The Seep*, you feel other genres pushing at the novel: aphorisms, koan-like sentences that break out and enrich the narrative without entirely being a part of it. Like your

early “poems for different voices”, you talk about the novel originally having been this sprawling, polyphonic thing, where now we just have Trina’s voice, and the voice of a second character, Aki, in the accompanying story *And the World Was New*. What was that journey, from the original teen-girl body horror, to the many voices of the intermediate draft, and then narrowing it down to the focus of the finished text?

C: That was where having other people around me really came through. I was starting to work on another novel, but I realised that *The Seep* was so dear to me, and I really wanted it to find its way. All of the people who had more power in the publishing world told me time and time again that I really had something with the story of Trina and her grief, and everything else I wanted to explore, beautiful as they were, fascinating as the images were, digressions like Aki’s parents following him into the world, and this girl who had a crush on him doing the same too?

We had all five of them’s point of view, and Horizon Line’s point of view. I had to keep paring it down until it was just Trina and Aki, alternating chapters from each point of view, but my agent had to get me to focus even more, and when in my stubbornness I finally relented, and let it just be Trina, emotionally I felt like it really did work on me on a different level, in terms of being a book about grief. I still have hope; I’d love to make it into a TV show or a miniseries at some point in time, because there are so many narrative possibilities in that world. You could pick anyone from a crowd in *The Seep*, zoom in and follow them, and you’d find a boundless world of people who have lost a lot and gained a lot. It’s a fascinating thing to explore, but the engine of the book, it became clear, was really Trina.

M: I wanted to ask about writing from the point of view of Trina in a way that’s respectful, taking on the voice of this trans Indigenous woman. You have the character of Horizon Line in the novel, an artist who transforms their appearance using the Seep in a way which offers a kind of cautionary tale about ventriloquising and appropriation. As you settled into making this a story focussed on the voice and character of Trina, how did you address those issues?

C: I was lucky enough to be working on the book with Rachel Pollack, who was about 70 at the time and is trans; she served as a guide for me on that point of view. We spoke a lot about Trina, and the creation of a trans narrative that wasn’t a coming-out story, or a story of trauma. I wanted to center Trina’s pain precisely because her life has been so great; she’s had this really successful marriage and career, family and friendships, so her loss is felt so deeply because the pleasure is so strong.

I feel so lucky to be alive now, when we’re thinking and relating about genre in a very nuanced way, and it’s helped me parse through my own identity. It’s also why the TERF dialogue makes me so sad; I think they’re coming from trauma, which is really important to acknowledge, but they’re also coming from this scarcity mentality of: “You’re taking my woman identity”, engaging in this pain Olympics, “I’ve had more trauma than you have!”

The ways in which my trans friends enrich my life and help me think more expressively, more nuanced, and more playfully about gender, help us in so many ways. They help us with our conversations with our kids about gender; it feels like a natural decomposition of patriarchal structures. But systems and binaries are very hard to untangle! I think what a lot of TERFs are saying, when you really strip it down, is: “Let me have my pain.” Well, you have your pain

- everything that has happened to you in terms of male violence, and growing up in rape culture, it's all true. But it doesn't mean that you can harm other people and make other people less safe because of the way that your trauma and your pain gives you visions. We've just had this wild thing happen here in the States where this woman sat before Congress and talked about all the things she was scared of about trans people in bathrooms, and yet there's absolutely no documentation of trans people doing this in bathrooms, so what she's doing is essentially presenting dark violent fantasies of abuse in a government setting! Just reeling off a list of all the things you're scared of in this way, it might be right in the context of a therapy session -- but a legislature, a political context?

I think we have to honour and acknowledge the fear and the trauma behind these decisions and then make it clear that no-one is seeking to take your freedom away, to take your identity away, to take your pain away.

As for Trina's race and ethnicity, I made her Jewish and Native American because I wanted to underline the idea of the Seep aliens solving all problems as a kind of science fictional white washing. Half of Trina's family is of Jewish diaspora, underlined by YD's character--longing for a place that no longer exists. As a Jewish person, this was very comfortable for me. Historically, Indigenious people have already experienced apocalypse, invasion. But one thing I wish I had done in writing *The Seep* is name Trina's tribe, which I had decided was the Mohegan from the Connecticut area. I'd done my research, and had constructed my reasoning, but I didn't name her tribe in the book. That specificity would have been a good thing, I realise now. There is always growth to be had when writing outside of your own identity.

M: I love the conversation between Trina and Bart in the novel. Bart is a character who switches back and forth between genders using the power of the Seep, which to Trina seems like an awful lot of work, but she tells herself, it makes Bart happy, so why pass judgment? I thought that was immensely valuable, the number of different ways *The Seep* dismantles assumptions about genres.

The book is so steeped in grief, and it's a theme we see elsewhere in your writing; the play *Phantasmagoria* has this question, for example, "Do the dead truly leave us?"

How did grief come to the forefront in this particular novel?

C: Don't you think that ageing is a kind of grief? We betray our younger selves, our ideas of who we were or what we wanted, as we move on in time. I've lost some dear people who are close to me, people who died suddenly and young, so I have a little more of that shock of grief than some -- but I think that in any kind of long-term relationship, what people don't tell you about marriage is that there is a slow betrayal of whoever you were on your wedding day. I think that if there's not, you're doing it wrong!

You need to become another person when you make this commitment, and you're very lucky if you can change alongside your partner in a way that you get to rediscover one another. I don't really know how we manage to promise anyone else anything, except to be clear, and true, and kind.

M: If *The Seep* was written from Deeba's perspective, it would be a different tale. She tells Trina, we can't just hang out and watch old movies and *Deep Space Nine* forever, you might pretend you'll be happy doing that for another thirty years, but you won't…

Is it also about where we draw the strength to keep changing from? Does the work you do as a teacher, both with the Octavia Project and elsewhere, nourish you in that way? I think of Toni Morrison's comment: "All my work has to do with books. I teach books, write books, edit books, or talk about books. It is all one thing."

C: I think if you bring your presence and your consciousness to whatever you do, it's going to feed and impact it. If I was a bus driver, it would really impact and feed me as a writer!

There's this amazing beautiful story of Philip Glass in the 70s or 80s going into someone's house when their sink broke, because he was a plumber for a long time, and someone recognised him from the Met. "Are you that composer?" "Yes, and that's $100 please, because I'm gonna fix your sink now."

This idea that "important" and "unimportant" work can be divided has to be challenged. It's the fight we've been having in the US over dignified work and the minimum wage, but also the notion of the essential and non-essential worker during the pandemic.

I think when you're a writer and you're really attending to your craft, of course teaching that craft is going to be a boon, particularly teaching it to people who don't have the same sort of expectations. I like to work with teens and even with younger kids on playwriting and art projects.

Seventh grade is an amazing time, because at that age they're not bringing any baggage around what's a play -- you just get things that are much more weirdly juxtaposed and interesting than at college age, which I find a little bit tougher. That's when I really throw my entire pedagogy at the students, throwing so many things at them while they're writing that they cannot stick to the story they've already planned in their heads. It makes them mad, they tell me that they already know what their work is going to be, to which my response is, "Well, why would you want to write such a thing, if you've already solved it?"

As I live now with these two young kids, I see that children are so strange. I love being around these little people that don't have any assumptions, or that do have assumptions which are clearly, fascinatingly wrong: like when I'm told, "You know that watermelon contains more water than water does?"

We just looked at one another and I said, "Just say that again. Say it a few times", and then he saw that it didn't make any sense.

M: It makes me think about *The Seep* again, too. You say, "Why would you write it if you've already solved it?" and one of the great things about *The Seep* is that it puts all of these questions in play without being didactic, or seeking to resolve them with a take-home message.

How do you know, writing so many drafts, when a work is finished? How do you know when to lay aside your pen and send the novel out?

C: I think I'm getting better at that! Knowing when things are done is very tough. I wanted to bring readers through an emotional journey with Trina. My main goal was to have this emotional response, and pose these philosophical questions about the meaning and the preciousness of having a temporary life, but I don't really know: I would like there to be some sort of bell that rang in my own bdy to let me know the novel is done!

You have to give drafts to people you trust, which is also why we can't be afraid of critique. I'm a big fan of subtlety - I want there to be things that people have to think about - but I'm in this process with my next novel now, where I can give it to three very smart trusted people, and I see what they get and what they don't. If these three aren't getting the things I'm trying to explore, then I know I'm not doing my job.

A lot of people aren't going to pick up what I'm putting down, and that's okay - a life in the theatre has really prepared me for that! I'm happy to get reviewed at all, so I don't get indignant about my critical reception. If people read what I've written, and candidly write about their response for other people, then that's really the best that I can hope for.

Maybe this goes back to my stutter, too, and my realisation that I can't be for everyone, so why would I aim to write something that everyone loves? Are you making vanilla ice cream? Are you making gum?

M: Do you have a feeling of the impact you want something to have when it goes out into the world?

C: The overriding goal of every single thing that I write is that I want it to make the world more free, more compassionate, and more kind. I want it to help break apart the things that are frozen, to help people connect to themselves emotionally - but beyond that, I don't know.

I just got to do a couple of events before things shut down, and it was really cool, because at a few of them, there would be one trans or one non-binary kid, maybe twenty, maybe as young as seventeen, who said they were really glad I was talking about how gender identity and gender expression differ, and that they didn't see this being expressed elsewhere in popular culture. That felt really great, and that's also me just writing to my past self, wanting to see these kinds of possibilities, an expansive idea of gender, of what a woman is. That, in particular - any time I meet someone and have a conversation like that, it'll really do it for me.

M: When I read *The Seep* again to prepare for this interview, I thought a lot about notions of the public and private. The Seep want information about what it is to be human, that's our end of the bargain which is made with them, reminiscent in some ways of the age of Big Data. There's the artist Horizon Line, who in some ways is as close to an antagonist as the book gets, who is seeking a kind of stardom or power through performance, putting on this uniquely rapturous show at the novel's finale -- in some ways reminiscent of that gleeful hallucinogen-dispensing playwright you mentioned in *Trouble on Triton*. And thirdly, the book

is dedicated to the “secret writers” in your family. Could you say more about the secret, the private, the public, the performative?

C: No-one in my family has ever taken up space in the way I’m taking it up now, being an intellectual in public. It feels great, it’s part of why the Octavia Project is so important to me - lots and lots of us are special, and if we disentangle class and gender and these other boundaries, you will have a much richer public cultural landscape. We’re poorer, currently, for all of those people who don’t get to have this public voice.

So many of the opportunities I have now are because my parents worked so hard to become middle class and then they got to send me to liberal arts school, and I got to read Dostoevsky and not think about how I was going to get a job. It’s fraught and complicated.

Before my grandmother died, we found she had written all these books of poetry and other writing. She was a housewife, born in 1910, who had four children, her husband was an alcoholic, and I don’t think she was ever looked on or thought of as someone who had that sort of interior world. Having an inner life, in terms of wanting to make? I really think that our souls on this planet want to make, want to creatively express. That doesn’t mean you have to be “good”, or win a prize, or get money, or professionalize, but I think that making things because, as humans, we’re creative and curious and playful, is part of how we get to know ourselves. When I think about her, and other members of my family who have a book tucked away in a drawer which maybe only a couple of members of the family have read, I know that the reason my book isn’t tucked away in a drawer is because I pushed it all the way through, with the support to do this.

M: Is there any aspect of your work which you feel has been overlooked or neglected, or that you wish you were asked about more?

C: I like thinking about it through this lens: the Seep is real and on our planet, a consciousness that unites everything. When you imagine that we are already immortal beings incarnating and having lived human experiences across the whole gamut, including nothingness - I sometimes wonder that people don’t spend more time taking on that point of view.

M: That sense of profound connectedness. There’s a point really early on in the novel where Trina wants to kick a building in frustration and she says, since the Seep, I can’t do this any more, because now we know even the buildings have feelings.

When you talked about grief, you framed it in terms about grief for who we once were. This conversation has ranged from the colonialism of the American frontier to the boundaries of reality. You also said that in some ways your writing is about sending a positive message back to your younger self.

If you think back to the point where you really realised you were writing *The Seep*, seven or eight years ago, what is the conversation that the Chana of 2021 would have with her?

C: I’m just so proud. I really feel like I started writing novels because I was frustrated that my plays weren’t being produced. It’s funny that I pivoted to something else that is also so very

difficult. I'm proud of my tenacity, because it's given me so much both in terms of outward things, connections with readers across the globe, but also inwardly. What I love about writing novels is that you're writing into your own mind and your own creativity. It's a process of self-knowing that never stops. It's really the great love of my life.