

Stop talking.
Oh my god.
You are still talking.
Listening in your cramped study.
To the conversation that took place in Chi's light-filled office.
When your fingers were wrapped around a mug of tea.
Listening. Transcribing. Reading.
You take up the whole first page.
And then Chi appears, responding to what you are saying:

C: I think that's really cool. That there's this kind of quite gritty side too, you know? Definitions of success and failure. Anger is a driver for making work. And then there's the kind of more poetic, angle on the same topic.

She listens, she is listening, genuinely interested in what you have to say. There is a stillness to Chi, a way she holds herself. She occasionally writes notes as you talk. You wonder if that is part of her thinking process. Part of how she listens.

And on you go:

E: **that's why the interviews are great because I just feel like I really want it to be, and also I'll be looking at doing it in context with theoretical frameworks**, like feminist theory, affect theory, creative practice theory.

C: What is creative practice theory? I would have thought there were many.

She is a really good listener. Seriously, it's two, then three, nearly three whole pages of transcript which is mostly you speaking.

And on:

E: **using the self as a way to reflect on a bigger cultural question, which means**, I guess, you know, **what does it mean to be a playwright, but a writer who works across form**. Who identifies as a feminist writer and how, what that can say about bigger questions around practice and industry and, um, pathways and that kind of thing.

There is a sense, in how you are talking, of trying to make sense of your research for Chi and its usefulness, to prove something of your own worthwhileness.

Sara Ahmed writes, in her book *What's the Use? On the Uses of Use*:

A relation of use can be one of affection. In this book, I take up *for*ness as a key to why use matters, forness as not only the point of an action (I know what a pot *is* by what it is *for*; the pot is a pot because I can use it for carrying) but also as an affecting or an affection. To be *for* something is to endow it with positive value. The pot thus acquires an expression: willing helpfulness (Italics in original) (Ahmed 2019: 7).

What is the use, then of a play? Or a playwright? A feminist playwright? Of you. What are these things *FOR*?

Later in the interview, which you realise, of all the interviews you have done so far, is most like a conversation (is that because of Chi, her listening style, or is it because you have a pre-existing relationship, some familiarity, a friendship? Is it a friendship? A peership?), the topic of feminism will be broached. Gently. With curiosity. Some sharpness. Like drawing an outline around what feminism might be with a pencil and then looking together at the outline. That will come later.

C: I started writing either poetry or short stories at high school.

I had an amazing English teacher, Mr Slattery, who was, even when I was in Year 10, encouraging me to be a writer.

At 16 I'd only been in the country for 10 years. And my mindset about teachers and schooling was very different from a kid who would have grown up in Australia.

You didn't have that. You think back to high school which, for you, was a private all-girls school. Sometimes you are self-conscious about this. But there it is. It was certainly a privileged upbringing. But also, of course, it had its limitations. You know the detail of both the privilege and the limits. That you liked school. You were reasonably smart, reasonably popular. Your sister, older, had a tougher time. Remembers being lonely and not fitting in. You wanted to be an actor but drama was not offered in your school beyond Year 10. The school had a very academic focus. You did art and music and literature as your way of engaging with ideas and creativity. The school had a high number of students whose heritage was not Anglo-Celtic-white. Students whose families were from Hong Kong, Malaysia, India. Students who were serious and dedicated, high achieving. It was the kind of school where the main question as you approached Year 12 was would you do medicine or law.

On the subject of who gets to do what, in her book *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism*, Lauren Fournier references a blogger, kc, who asks:

who has access to writing texts like The Argonauts, and answers that it is those who have already established themselves as legitimate within the terms of academia (or, relatedly, of contemporary art) (Fournier 2021: 26).

You are reading the book because you want to know if what you are doing could be classified as autotheory:

Most simply, autotheory is the integration of the auto or “self” with philosophy or theory, often in ways that are direct, performative, or self-aware—especially so in those practices that emerge with postmodernism (6).

You suspect autoethnography is a closer fit:

In autoethnography, one “seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experiences (auto) in order to understand cultural experiences (ethno),” turning necessary critical attention to oneself and one’s own position (24).

After all, you are not a theorist. However, nor are you an ethnographer. You are a writer. A creative practitioner. You’ve got to say, some of the definitions of autotheory read a lot like definitions of creative practice research. This from Fournier: Autotheory, for Bal, is ultimately “a form of thinking that integrates my own practice of art making as a form of thinking and reflecting on which I have

made as a continuation of the making,” recuperating the visual and audial back into the theoretical-critical, and back again (17). And this from R. Lyle Skains: in practice-based research (hereafter ‘PBR’), the creative act is an experiment (whether or not the work itself is deemed ‘experimental’) designed to answer a directed research question about art and the practice of it, which could not otherwise be explored by other methods (Skains 2018: 86). Two modes of scholarly enquiry winding their way alongside and towards each other.

C: We had this incredible intellectual struggle. And then in Year 10, he said, I want to send some of your writing. To Overland. And then a few months later I received a rejection letter and I'm thinking, what have you done to me?

I didn't even want to do any of this, and now I've been rejected.

And I think he was an incredible person who wasn't dismissive of the editor. It was a handwritten rejection letter and he said, so that's a nice rejection letter.

He wasn't dismissive about ‘what do they know’ or anything like that. It was straight. It was like: Oh, you're going to get a lot of rejection if you're going to be a writer.

E: Oh, wow. What a piece of wisdom to get very early on.

C: He just assumed I would be a writer and this is what you have to get used to. And I was really not sure about the whole writing thing, because it was terrifying.

E: So, did you feel a bit like you were humoring him in his, or it was more like you did have the desire within you, but it seemed like it was too out of reach?

C: Basically, I only wrote that piece because one day it, it felt impossible to contain those ideas. I wrote it and I was kind of embarrassed.

E: Do you still have the piece?

C: Yeah.
I certainly wasn't aiming to be a writer or anything like that.

You are trying to figure something out, about the different ways in which people are given opportunity and invitation. About the kinds of people who get to write. That's one thing. But further, who gets to have their writing read, shared, lauded, taken in the Zeitgeist.

You know you have hang-ups about this. You are a strange combination of culturally privileged and a self-perceiving outsider. Far from the inner sanctum, the kind of ‘writer who gets invited to writers’ festivals’ type of cache. You remember once, a young guy who was running a festival for emerging writers, responding to your application to be part of the festival, saying you nearly had enough, what was it, of interest, enough experience, enough ... something, to be included in the festival. But not quite. The inference was you should keep going, keep building the interest and the experience and maybe one day you would transform. From your quiet little writerly caterpillar self into a glorious, festival-dwelling butterfly.

When you were in Year 10 you would not have had any idea what Overland was (it is an Australian leftist literary journal). You had no ambitions to be a writer then. You wanted to be an actor. Specifically, a musical theatre performer, or a movie star. Possibly both.

Who gets to do what? Who is invited and how are the invitations issued? Fournier again:

Later that week, by chance, I would be invited to join Luce Irigaray's seminar for PhD students, which was taking place a bus ride away in Bristol; there I would workshop my earliest ideas about autotheory and feminist philosophical history at afternoon seminars and evening dinners with Irigaray and the PhD students, Luce feeding me bites of her poached pear while she told me quite candidly, over wine, firsthand stories about Jacques Lacan (4-5)

You write, on repeat:

Luce feeding me bites of her poached pear

Observe, the meditation app would advise, the emotions or thoughts that arise. They are, like your breath, like sounds, like sensations on your skin, an object of consciousness to be noticed. You can, also, decide how much you hold onto them and stay in the state they arouse in you.

You write, on repeat:

Luce feeding me bites of her poached pear

The feeling of smallness because you are not being fed bites of poached pear by Luce while she chats about Jacques.

A memory:

The anticipation of steam
The way the bánh chưng cake
Is carefully prepared
The many hours spent
In putting all the parts
Together
The long, slow cook
The years over which
You were involved with
And then aware of
This work
The careful creation
Of a performance
Sharing of tea
Of story
The sounds of bells
Of story
Of village
Of city
Of war
Of new year
Of family

You didn't realise, until reading back over the interview with Chi that you didn't talk about her work Bánh Chung, an interactive performance installation. You were part of a project that helped develop the work and you experienced it, later, in full. Where you were fed bites of bánh chung by Chi. Where Jacques (Soddell, not Lacan) created the sound for the performance. This reminds you to pay attention to who is sharing their work, their food with you, where you are being nurtured. It is not always out there far away or written in a book or indeed anywhere. It can be right here.

Chi writes on a large note pad as we talk, notes and words, phrases, doodles. As if she thinks through writing. As if certain concepts and words deserve marks to be made.

There is an opening. To see how you have internalised particular perceptions of value. That you may, in the echoes of the Australian 'cultural cringe' value the knowledges and statuses of people far away more so than the people of deep knowledge you are literally surrounded by right here. That, perhaps, part of what you are engaged with here, in this project, these interviews, is a reviewing of your internal archive (to use Ahmed's term) such that it may also open a space for others to do the same. That is, to tease out assumptions around value and success and achievement and status when it comes to writing, to art making, to feminist practice. To make trouble with these assumptions.

An archive can be built; we can be more or less at home there, even if we assemble our own archives from bits and pieces that are available because of where we have been. A useful archive could be thought of as a form of memory, a way of holding onto things (Ahmed 2019: 20).

C: I certainly wasn't aiming to be a writer or anything like that.

Chi has a cat and at one point during our conversation the cat jumps into your lap. Of late you occasionally get a tight throat and itchy eyes when you touch cats. But not always. Some cats jump into your lap or rub your leg with what feels like a gauntlet throw: *Whaddya gonna do about it huh?* Whereas some seem to know you are in need. Or you can offer them something they need. Today you feel honoured by this cat and enjoy the process of stroking its fur and the warmth it brings to your legs.

Chi talks about this teacher, the one who encouraged her writing, and how they had another—kind of—she can't quite find the word but it is something like a disagreement I suppose about the path in life she should be taking. Chi enrols in a commerce degree and her teacher observes:

C: Economists go from a lot of data to, what was it he said? There was some comparison between divergent thinking and convergent thinking. And he was trying to tell me that my brain worked divergently, it wasn't a convergent brain and I just didn't get it.

You are curious about her decision-making process and ask:

E: Were you doing it for, did you, was it for, kind of a financial security or just, do you know why you chose commerce?

C: I think it was a combination of things. I thought it would be financially secure, but also it was the recession. This was the early nineties. And my family had been through really fundamentalist communism, where they basically shut down the economy and they tried to send all the intellectuals to the jungle and wouldn't let teachers teach and all that stuff. The economy tanked and people tried to escape. And then we came to Australia where we've gone from being middle class to being

refugees with nothing. So I was super interested in what drives an economy and why does it work and why doesn't it, and why was Australia in a recession?

E: So it was your intellectual curiosity as much as anything,

C: And it turns out that actually economics is not, a commerce degree was not the right degree to answer my curiosity. It was only because I did an arts subject called the philosophy of economics that looked at what Marx wrote and the intellectual philosophical rigor of it. Rather than how do you account for the point at which supply and demand would intersect but the hidden assumptions about ideology in those instruments, in those economic instruments. And it was only by third year that they said, actually, these models are based on these assumptions. And I was like, what you're telling me now? This is interesting. But by then, I'd moved over to arts commerce and was doing creative writing subjects. And, I was terrible at accounting, nearly failed a few times. I was pretty good at macro-economics.

You are thinking about starting new things and how you are in relationship with them. You are loving the research of the PhD, the relationship with supervisors and peers, the incredible opportunity to think deeply and be supported to do so for a few years. You also think about the seminars around publishing and writing with authority and careers after PhDs and A1 journals and you are not sure you can add another world to enter, understand and conquer.

The words like 'essential' and 'you must' and 'it's vital' make your skin jelly-like. You are here to 'take a break' from the imperatives about what MUST be done and spend some time asking about how those imperatives get formed and if there is value in them. It's okay, you can just see the thoughts and the jelly of your skin like you would any other element of consciousness like sound or the weight of your body on the chair or indeed the weight of the cat on your lap. Who is, by the way, not wearing a hat.

You are re-reading Chi's novella *Anguli Ma* and you are really into her tone, the way she evokes states of meditation and also a kind of not entirely happy but not entirely unhappy state of existence among all the characters in the book. There is a quality of voice and state that you don't know enough about theories of fiction to write about articulately but which puts you into a really interesting state.

Not unlike spending time with Chi where you find yourself aware of slowing down and paying attention to detail and thinking with care about things like your choice of words.

And how much you talk.

Stop talking.

C: I think the reason why I write across different forms is that sometimes I have an idea and then I mistakenly think it should be this. So, for example, *Anguli Ma* started life as a theatre piece. I think a friend was renting a house and they had a really scary garage. We all kind of joked about: Hey, let's do performances in this garage.

And I remembered there was, from meditation class, this folk story, this ancient Buddhist story about Anguli Ma and, I thought, Oh, wouldn't it be interesting to make that as a performance to do in the garage, just amongst friends, and six months into WRITING the project, I'm like, ah, this is not working because half of

the story is a guy sitting alone meditating, and there's nothing happening. There's no dramatic - now I know the language - which is there's no dramatic conflict. And so then I had to change gears. And write it as a prose novella. Because of the interiority of the story.

E: And did that, did you just figure that out? You just ...

C: Yeah. I knew it was not working because nothing was happening. That was literally my language. There's nothing happening.

You keep bouncing back and forth between Chi's experiences of becoming a writer, and forming and identity as a writer, and staying a writer, and your own.

C: Again, I had a lecturer, George Papaellinas, who said I'm going to send your story to be published and then he sent it off and it got published and I was like, Whoa.

E: Do you remember your first publication?

C: It was something he was involved in. *Refo*, it was a very small publication looking at literary depictions of refugees. It was Christos Tsiolkas and George Papaellinas spearheading that.

And you recall your strongest 'writer formation' memory of being at Melbourne University was being in a tutorial with a tutor saying that you didn't really have a natural gift for writing. He meant creative writing, maybe it was a story you had submitted for something. And maybe, indeed, you didn't, at that time. Or even still. Maybe it's a skill you have developed, and a skill Chi had naturally. You never felt absolutely comfortable at Melbourne University. Your sense was of feeling lost and unmoored. It was too vast and you couldn't find a foothold.