You and Chi are about the same age, you think. You may even have been at Melbourne University at around the same time. But you didn't meet. Or if you did, you didn't form a connection.

C: I mean, even in creative writing I was surrounded by private school kids.

E: And mostly white kids?

C: Yeah, totally. Their writing style and my writing style were completely different. I didn't really enjoy what they were writing. The teachers, because it was all about postmodernism at that time, really liked my style of writing, which was chop and change. And so I got really good marks. But I felt really socially alone in that context, I didn't feel like I had a cohort of fellow writers that I connected with.

You think about the connections and the differences, the ways in which your stories have similarities and vast chasms of difference. You were one of the white private school kids. No doubt you contributed to the sense of social isolation Chi talks about. She talks about finding a slightly stronger sense of belonging when she got involved with the theatre department, on a summer break. It was her first time doing theatre—

C: because public schools didn't have a great theatre program. Melbourne Uni theatre department had one of their big 'everyone's welcome' projects. So I got my first taste of theatre

E: As a performer? Or as a—

C: Yeah, as a performer. I was completely nervous, on stage for the first time, terrified that I would vomit and faint simultaneously, which didn't make sense, but that's how I felt. But I got my three lines, playing the tree or whatever, out.

E: And you survived.

C: I survived. I loved all the theatre games and warm up games. It was Bruce Gladwin and Rose Myers who were in charge of the theatre department at the time. Incredible practitioners. And to have that as your first experience,

You think you may have been there just after that? You can't quite recall, but you did a few things with the theatre department and didn't get to know either of those practitioners so either your timing or the things you got involved with didn't sync.

C: There was one other person who came from a public school and was Asian. Everyone else, from private schools, had gone through all their schooling, having done theatre productions. Prestigious schools with big, nice theatres. A lot of them were doing law and would do law review stuff. Some of them went into television comedies.

You remember, when you were very involved with performing and improvising in your twenties, not through Melbourne Uni, but an impro company, and at a show one night, producers and key creatives from the comedy improv show *Thank God You're Here* were in the audience. And you were hyper aware they were present and tried not to be hyper aware. They asked, if you remember right, two of your company to be on the show. You were not one of them.

Trying to get a handle on what is emerging, what you are unravelling with these parallel stories, something in the language that Karen Barad uses in her book *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning:*

> First and foremost, as Haraway suggests, a di√ractive methodology is a critical practice for making a di√erence in the world. It is a commitment to understanding which di√erences matter, how they matter, and for whom. It is a critical practice of engagement, not a distance-learning practice of reflecting from afar (Barad 2007: 90).

She writes about a diffractive rather than reflective methodology for research and knowledge making. Since reflection tends to show us back the singular thing we are looking at, whereas diffraction:

> In contrast to reflecting apparatuses, like mirrors, which produce images—more or less faithful—of objects placed a distance from the mirror, di√raction gratings are instruments that produce patterns that mark di√erences in the relative characters (i.e., amplitude and phase) of individual waves as they combine.
> So unlike the phenomenon of reflection, which can be explained without taking account of the wavelike behavior of light (i.e., it can be explained using an approximation scheme called ‘‘geometrical optics’’ whereby light might well be a particle that bounces o√ surfaces), di√raction makes light’s wavelike behavior explicit (i.e., it can only be accounted for by using the full theory of ‘‘physical optics’’) (80).

‘At a stretch’, you write in your notes, ‘I could say that me looking at my practice via other people is a process of diffraction rather than reflection.’ It is a way of making connections between differences rather than specifically looking for similarities. Or rather, a way of accounting for ‘more’ kinds of ‘wavelike behaviour’, where this is a metaphor for how a person’s emergence and development as a writer, a practitioner, evolves.

C: During summer break, I rang up my local community arts centre, which is Footscray Community Art Centre and said what do you have here, what do you have going on? And it turned out that they were running a youth theatre group. And that was finally where I met people like myself from diverse backgrounds, from the west, public schools. Most of them were slightly younger than me, so they weren't at Uni. I got involved. Soon I was working as a casual facilitator and next thing you know, I'm writing scripts. Next thing you know, I'm writing grants.

E: So that segued into working there. And meanwhile you finished your degree which was commerce arts,

C: Yeah, commerce arts. And then suddenly I'm working in community arts a lot. At least three 20-week projects per year.

You dropped out of Melbourne University and launched into theatre. You wanted to be an actor but also had some idea of the importance of doing other things so you worked, on independent projects, for a few years, as a stage manager and tech. You didn’t have quite the pragmatic personality required for either. But, like many young women in theatre, you were capable and could learn quickly. Your actual paid, part time work though, was in hospitality and then in admin, firstly in community services at the office where your job placement provider worked and then in palliative care, and drug and alcohol. While the desire to act was transformed, by epiphany, into the urge to write. To be. A writer.

> Di√raction can occur with any kind of wave: for example, water waves, sound waves, and light waves all exhibit di√raction under the right conditions. Consider a situation in which ocean waves impinge on a breakwater or some very large barrier with a sizable hole or gap in it. As the waves push through the gap, the waveforms bend and spread out (Barad 2007? 74).

Here is where you might write a poem about the apparatuses of diffraction in the development of a writing practice. The things that make us 'bend and spread out'.

> Luce feeding me bites of her poached pear.
>
> Chi making bánh chưng cake.

And what is happening now, with this project and the continued process of diffraction, where you are very aware you are not a theorist, making sense of the world via physics or even via linguistics or philosophy but rather, a writer, making sense of things via how you construct a piece of text.

The confluences between autotheory and creative practice theory continue to be apparent: 'According to Mieke Bal, art-making is thinking. Living, too, involves a practice of thinking; in many autotheoretical practices, both art-making and living become practices that the artist theorizes' (Fournier 2021: 67).

What are you doing to and with form? Making an interview more broad, more referential, more contemplative, more poetic. Blurring lines between interview and conversation and between object and subject and also, trying to make explicit and visual how we are always in conversation with our past, our practice, our community, our reading. Capturing that process on the page. Is it the interview you are playing with, or the play or the poem? Perhaps it is stretching what these forms can accommodate?

C: Initially, when I was doing short story writing, it felt like a really lonely form. Whereas when I found community theatre and then just making theatre full stop. That felt like a much more kind of sociable, collaborative form, and I really enjoyed it.

I just love collaboration and theatre allows that to happen and theatre people, especially in the Melbourne indie and community art scene, seem to be the best kind of collaborators compared to other industries.

Amongst artists whose forms are kind of solo, like a visual artist who mostly does work by themselves or someone who is a novelist, I feel like their level of understanding of what collaboration can be, the social attitude that you need to bring to that, to make that work successfully, I do think it's undeveloped in other areas.

We talk about a few specific projects of Chi's one in particular that I saw at Footscray Community Arts Centre called *The Dead Twin* (directed by Deborah Leiser-Moore) which had a similarly gothic tone to her novella *Anguli Ma* and you are reminded of how it feels to slide between forms, to be a reader or to be an audience member. To be a reader or to be a writer. The many layers of meaning making and translating and interpreting that go on. In your email to Chi, after the interview, you write:

I thought you might enjoy these couple of mistranslations that came up:

Vietnamese - you getting them ease
Anguli Ma (variously) - ungodly mom – unruly mob - Anglee man

> Autotheory points to modes of working that integrate the personal and the conceptual, the theoretical and the autobiographical, the creative and the critical, in ways attuned to interdisciplinary, feminist histories (Fournier 2021: 7)

E: Do you mind if I just kind of throw the kind of bomb in there and ask you to sort of reflect sort of broadly on, on how you place yourself within some of those terms? Um, like whether feminism has any meaning for you as a maker or not, and whether questions of success, how you navigate those or what that means for your work?

C: Yep. I think. Okay. I think in the past (now it's a little changed again because I'm older and not living in Melbourne) but I think in the past, my kind of feminism was more to do with wanting to fight against traditional-sexism, that existed more within the Vietnamese community. Older generation Vietnamese in Australia had a certain mindset about what young women could do. And I was dead set against that. I didn't care that there weren't any kind of people like me writing for theatre at that time. And in fact, that was a really, in terms of anger as a driver, that was a really strong reason to start writing.

So there's that. And then, within the traditional Vietnamese culture, again, it's quite nuanced. Superficially it is sexist or was sexist, but the deep culture is a matriarchy. So before the Chinese, the Chinese were in Vietnam for a thousand years, before that, land and lineage went down the female line.

My experience always was that Vietnamese women are really strong in that they're the ones who actually hold together big families and big communities and they got stuff done. And then the men were there to kind of be the public face of stuff. But an older kind of female in extended family drew a lot of respect from everyone. There wasn't, it's not the kind of culture where you're older and female you—

E: Disappear.

C: I'd grown up with the reality of Vietnamese women running all the small businesses and keeping the family together or working really hard; in Vietnamese culture, women are allowed to be very strong. Sometimes that power was more hidden, exerted behind closed doors, rather than clearly asserted in public. I didn't see the Uni campus feminism of the 90s reflect this nuance regarding cultural difference. I may have misunderstood what was going on, but at the time it felt like if I wanted to be a good feminist, I had to renounce my values as a Vietnamese Australian.

And then for me, when I was in mainstream Australian society, the context was more to do with race and language.

When I say language, it's to do with monolingualism and the English language. The way that your brain should just think in English and hold all the values that come with a brain that only thinks in English. And I think that's stifling and I can't understand why the rest of the world is able to be successfully multilingual, and certain countries that are English speaking just cannot do that at a kind of institutional level. So, this is what Michael Clyne, the linguist talks about, in terms of the monolingual mindset (he's passed away). He said that on the ground Australia's very multicultural and multilingual, but its institutions are really, those in power and the institutions that run the country: parliament, the law, education, are very monolingual, to the point where they can't even see the use of other languages. And this kind of connects with my PhD at the moment.

> Today, many artists maintain adjacent professional practices as scholars and educators, curators, writers and critics, editors, directors, and community organizers, and the question of the role philosophy and theory play in the production and reception of their work is one they must consider at some point (Fournier 2021: 47)

Are we indeed in a new era where this is true? More so than other times and if so, why? Is it because of the increase of professionalism? There are more artists, so more artists also have to work and want work that is meaningful and in fact being 'just an artist' is pretty rare. Was it ever not rare? You imagine not, but do more people now feel entitled or bold enough to call themselves artists?

E: When you talk about having a focus too on aesthetics as opposed to kind of just a primary focus on the kind of social justice or social function side of things, can you talk a bit about how you articulated this? Is it, was it a particular aesthetic or was it more just the notion that aesthetics were, were important to you? If that makes sense.

C: I think, I mean rightly or wrongly, I had grown up in the suburbs watching SBS world movies, or the experimental short films like the ones presented on 'Eat Carpet'. There was mainstream Australian culture. And then there was SBS world movies and in those stories, ambiguity, nuance, was allowed.

E: I love hearing about the influence of those SBS world movies. That sounds like they allowed your imagination to enter a space that maybe other things you were encountering didn't. Is that a fair sort of thing to have got from what you said then about like, did that kind of awaken something in you about how you could tell story and how you could make art and write, or was it less conscious than that? And looking back now, you can see that that was an influence?

C: It was certainly an influence. I think it was more that those stories felt truer, emotionally more honest, even though sometimes they were absurd. Kind of like drawing on the tradition of the absurd or the non-naturalistic. I encountered characters with amoral perspectives and that, I guess, connected to the dream world a lot more, the images that I would have through dreaming.

For as long as I remember, I have always had surreal images or dreams. Even as a child in Vietnam, I recall having very vivid, surrealistic dreams. So some of the wonderful films I watched on SBS, or at film festivals in the 90s really confirmed the 'emotional truth' of those experiences.

You reflect on how you came to this kind of sophisticated and more nuanced appreciation for different kinds of aesthetics in storytelling and film making later in life, as an adult. As a kid you were deep into pop culture – musicals like *Grease* and escapist movies like *Star Wars* and you loved reading but it would all have been English and American authors.

E: It's fascinating, listening to the development of an artistic consciousness too. Like that lovely thing you said about having an idea that needed to be brought out with that first piece that you wrote.

The conversation is slowly winding up. You are aware of taking up Chi's time. The cat is calm on your lap. Your tea is drunk, cups empty. You talk about a few final things including Chi's play *Coloured Aliens* (directed by Beng Oh) and the sense of anticipation and disappointment you know so well from your own experiences with Australian theatre:

C: It was part of the Lotus program. And it was this weird thing where they were supporting it and then when it came to the national playwright's readings, they didn't select it. I would have thought that the topic in the play, this would have been the best forum for us to talk about this, which is to talk about the centrality of whiteness in Australian theatre.

I mean, why support the writing of the play, but then not let it be read out in a national playwriting forum? And I just thought this is really weird. I never got an answer about why it was not selected. It felt like the omission was confirmation that Asian Australian playwrights are only allowed to write about themselves as the exotic other, rather than turn the spotlight back on how the white Australian theatre is.

E: That's frustrating and speaks to some serious issues, having seen the play, and it's also hilarious from memory, it could have opened so many conversations, you know, as well as just being a great piece of theatre.

Scholar Bonny Cassidy writes about this lack of ability, on the part of some institutions, to see clearly the kinds of practices they are perpetuating and the news ways of practice they are therefore not seeing:

> In their accounts of creative writing learning and teaching experiences in Australia, Bobuq Sayed and Natalie Kon-Yu do indeed identify a dominant system, as well as a gap that has formed between the knowledge produced by that system, and the situation of its participants. The gap is not seen from within the structurally white academic system, yet it is seen by writers and readers whose practices lie at least partly outside (Cassidy 2020: 4).

E: Does that impact your desire to continue as a playwright? Or do you just go, well, that's just how it is?

C: I think as I've gotten older, I've become what I feel to be a bit more clear sighted about the agendas at play in various organisations. When I was younger, I didn't understand that every organisation has a mission, a vision for being, and therefore, a set of values that underpin that. And so for some of these larger organisations, the values might be in competition with my values, in terms of the degree of how much I want to push things, right? They might be able to support work by a second-generation writer in English from a perspective of: 'Hey, this is

what it's like having been born in Australia and grown up with Brown parents, being a Brown person.'

But that is quite different from an experience of someone who's first-generation or 1.5 generation who remembers being part of the dominant culture in another culture. I remember what it was like to have all the mainstream advertising directed at me. I remember what it was like to be where everyone knew how to say my name and understood how beautiful it was.

And then when I came to Australia and people are mispronouncing my name, I'm like: 'Oh, they don't know how to pronounce my name properly. Right.' Whereas someone from a second generation, they might think: 'Oh, my name is shit. Why are my parents shit, they don't even know anything. Let me make a whole theatre show about how shit my migrant parents are.'

That's a different mindset. And it could make you feel very insecure, I think. Whereas I'm just like, they don't know. So I feel that it's easier to say: 'Oh yeah, we've got some people in our program, but they're likely to be from the second generation.'

And this is fine as a first step, but if that's all that ever happens, then we may not be challenging ourselves enough as a culture. At its worst, this kind of 'comedy' is actually a way of inviting the mainstream audience to make fun of, or laugh at, people's cultural difference.

The person who is born here is much more likely to have internalised the dominant culture perspective on themselves. The way that the mainstream society sees them and how they see themselves is the same. Whereas I'm saying, actually, I don't agree with the way you view me, and this is actually about you, not me.

Chi is so clear-sighted about the cultural and political realities of living in Australia and continuing to work here as a writer, despite the frustrations expressed above.

C: They're all the really frustrating things. And I think what has kept me energised and still coming back to making work, despite feeling like: 'Oh I'm in a context that may not be that interested in someone like me,' I think the thing that has made me be engaged is the idea of craft.

I'm still growing my craft. I'm still learning. As long as I can keep polishing and honing my craft, that's the reason why I do it. And whenever someone younger, who's seen my work, that's multilingual, from a different perspective and that's given them confidence to do that themselves. The culture hopefully slowly changes.

Who gets to define what constitutes theory, who constitutes a theorist? Whose theories are valuable or valued in a given institution or discursive space? What modes of making work are understood as legitimately critical or sufficiently rigorous for academia and the contemporary art world? Who can write or make work in ways that are understood as theory? The autotheoretical impulse, tied up as it is with intersectional feminist histories of bridging theory and practice, art and life, is entwined in these questions. To respond to these questions, I consider autotheory as practiced by a range of working artists looking to contested meanings of theory across contexts (Fournier 2021: 48).

C: There's a whole untapped area in Australia to do with bilingual creativity. So, when you're writing a play or a scene, you're using stimulus, like provocations, motivating stimuli. And one day I was listening to this list of verbs: English, Vietnamese, English, Vietnamese, I realised that the Vietnamese words were triggering other storylines and other kind of emotions in me than the English words. And one of the things I read about from this linguist named, Francois Grosjean, he's got a great book on bilingualism, he points out that some novelists have also experienced that, that when their provocations are in another language, it takes them to a different kind of storyline and even in therapy for some people, if they're doing psychoanalysis in one language, they feel too much in control and they don't access all the interesting stuff. Whereas if they use the other language, they're not so in control and then they're accessible. And I wonder whether, if you experienced trauma in a first language, then it would make more sense that to go back to that - you would need the first language.

And I certainly don't remember any of that bilingual creativity and provocations being suggested at any of the creative writing subjects or courses I've done.

Cassidy writes about First Nations knowledges in her critique of creative writing pedagogy, but the parallels can be drawn between her argument and Chi's insights above:

> Creative writing pedagogy can no longer be justified as an end unto itself, that is, by some neutral, teleological destination called 'knowledge'. Nor can it be justified by the commercial business of the university (Cassidy 2020: 16).

There is much to be learned from people who are able to see the unchallenged norms of societies, cultures and subcultures (such as literary and theatre sectors).

> Sometimes autotheoretical work is heavily citational of more canonically philosophical and academic materials, with the artist drawing attention to those references by rendering them visual and material, sculptural and poetic, otherwise self-reflective work (Fournier 2021: 48).

While you are running on the treadmill at the gym, the word surreal floats up. Because running on a treadmill is surreal. You have set the incline to 5% and you can feel the burn. This might be a place where you can dig into the dream world of running while not moving and writing by listening.

E: That's a huge untapped area. In a country where, as you say, there are a lot of people living day-to-day who speak more than one language and are negotiating that all the time. Yeah. Like that being, being in dual, well, maybe multiple, you know, ways of, of consciousness in a sense.

C: I've always brought in other languages in my community theatre work, but that's just because for the actor or the non-professional participant, if their first language is not English then the only way you're going to get them to be that confident, present person, is in their first language. In their second language, they have a different physicality. They're terrified. They're really anxious. And their presence is just not there. And so you don't get a good performance from them in a second language. So, I think intuitively that's always been part of my practice and my practice in collaboration with other people, but, of the creative writing subjects I've done formally at the different universities I've done them in, there's not been

a real question. Noone has said. ‘Why don't you try to trigger your writing, your creative writing with other languages?’ In America they have bilingual MFAs. Spanish-English mostly.

E: I mean, when you say it, it sounds so obvious. Some of those very clear ideas that have just never been seen.

C: I didn't see them in a conscious way until recently. I really want to maintain my Vietnamese. That’s why I keep spending my time on these things that have nothing to do with my career. It's not like I want to be an interpreter for Centrelink or the courtroom.

E: It's a way of staying engaged with language

C: With another part of me.

You finish with Chi’s words. You are gathering conversations and starting to create a map of connections. The writers you are near to, similar to, different from, their different parts and yours. How this always has been part of your practice and how now, it is becoming clearer. Deliberate. A poetry of community and conversation.