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Resistance, Healing and Empowerment through
Autobiographical Therapeutic Performance—

愛 · 媽媽 (*Love, Mum*): A Solo Matrilineal Memoir and
Autoethnographic Inquiry on Chinese Womanhood and
‘The Good Woman’ Ideal

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
in
Creative Writing

at Massey University,
New Zealand.

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2024

Abstract

My research is an autoethnographic inquiry that employs creative and critical methodologies to examine the question: *How does the process of writing and performing one's life experiences and trauma act as a form of resistance to the dominant 'good woman' narrative, leading to personal healing, empowerment and transformation?*

Through the creation of my one-woman show, 愛, 媽媽 (*Love, Mum*), a matrilineal memoir about three generations of Chinese women, I investigate how the creative process involving the writing, rehearsing and performance of my play can become a form of resistance and counter-storying against the dominant 'good woman' narrative, leading to personal healing and empowerment.

I begin by discussing the historical context of the virtuous Chinese woman, and present research by scholars who demonstrate that depression in women contains a gendered lens, resulting from the socio-cultural pressures of living up to the 'good woman' ideal.

My analysis uses the methodological framework of autobiographical/autoethnographic therapeutic performance (ATP). This is a method that focuses on the *working through* of personal traumatic material through writing and performance. My research utilises a transdisciplinary praxis, combining both arts-based and psychoanalytic theories and practice related to trauma recovery and the healing processes of ATP.

My investigation is autoethnographic and deeply personal as my own life experience and creative process is used to answer my research question, as well as shining a light on the socio-cultural structures we live in. Employing a mixture of creative practice, personal reflection, theoretical examination, and a close reading of my play script and performance, I demonstrate

how the creative process I went through has led to a form of personal healing and transformation, with the potential to impact and engage with the wider community.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank my parents, my family, loved ones and close friends who have been an unwavering source of support. During the past four-and-a-half years, I have had my fair share of ups and downs, but their encouragement together with my love of my research has kept me going.

The production of my play has been a family affair. I have the utmost appreciation for my mother 王台麗 / Cecilia Toi-Lai Wong, and to my grandmothers 鄭佩英 / Cheng Pui Ying and 李雲英 / Lee Wan Ying for living courageous lives and allowing me to share their most private stories. This work would not have been possible without their generosity, love and blessing.

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my brother Oliver for being a great sounding board and artistic/production team member, to my father 林天立 / Lam Tin-Lap for shipping props from Hong Kong and fact-checking our family histories, to my aunt 林春顏 / Lam Chun Ngan for her beautiful calligraphy, to all my relatives for sharing their memories, to my forefathers, to Nana for her support during rehearsals, to Gavin for always putting a smile on my face, and to Peiyu and Siri for being a constant source of encouragement and good humour.

I am indebted to Kanta Kochhar-Lindgren, who went above and beyond to transform my play script into a dynamic and aesthetic piece of theatre. Her mentoring in the artistic and business aspects of producing a show has been invaluable.

I would like to thank Stuart Hoar, for his positivity and for creating a safe space which allowed my story to flow. I would also like to thank A/Prof. Jenny Lawn for her insightful feedback on early drafts of my thesis, and Prof. Elspeth Tilley whose expertise guided me through the final stages of my dissertation and examination. I appreciate the support A/Prof. Geoff Watson has shown during these transitions.

I have met some amazing people along the way. These include movement/tai chi/writing coaches who have been generous with sharing their time and knowledge: Jordan Rosin, Sifu Bruno Rubini, Slade Billew, Stephanie Han, Deborah Black and Yokko. I am most grateful to my fantastic artistic, production and design team for 愛 · 媽媽 (*Love, Mum*) in both Auckland and Dunedin. Producing a play is no small feat and I would not have made it happen without every single one of you. I carry those memories with me in my heart.

Lastly, to my colleagues at Massey University library, to my doctoral support group, to the team at the Auckland and Dunedin Fringe Festivals, to the staff and students at St. Hilda's Collegiate School, to the support team at the Herald Theatre, to my friends and to all those who attended my staged reading, performances and workshops, I thank you for your kind words and for being a part of my journey.

Table of Contents

ABSTRACT	II
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	IV
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	VI
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	1
METHODOLOGY	6
LITERATURE REVIEW	21
CHAPTER OVERVIEW.....	41
CHAPTER TWO: TRAUMA / ATP / SITUATING MYSELF	42
TRAUMA, HEALING AND AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL THERAPEUTIC PERFORMANCE	42
THE ‘DOUBLE OPPRESSION’ OF BEING A CHINESE WOMAN	48
THE ‘GOOD WOMAN’ AND DEPRESSION	64
CHAPTER THREE: CREATIVE PROCESS PART ONE—THE WRITING / COUNTER-STORYING WOMEN’S LIVES.....	74
WOMEN AND COUNTER-STORIES	75
HEALING FROM TRAUMA THROUGH WRITING	89
WOMEN AND RECOVERY: SHAKING OFF THE ‘GOOD GIRL’ IDEAL	104
CHAPTER FOUR: CREATIVE PROCESS PART TWO—REHEARSALS / MOVEMENT / EMBODIED WAYS OF KNOWING.....	115
TAI CHI.....	126
DRUMMING / WOODEN FISH	143
RUNNING FOR SURVIVAL/PLEASURE	153
CHAPTER FIVE: CREATIVE PROCESS PART THREE—PERFORMANCE / WITNESSING AND TRANSFORMATION.....	162
THE STAGED READING PERFORMANCE.....	166
STAGED READING FEEDBACK: RESONANCE AND PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION	172
愛, 媽媽 (LOVE, MUM): PUBLIC PERFORMANCES IN AUCKLAND AND DUNEDIN.....	203
CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION / FUTURE RESEARCH AND CREATIVE PRACTICE.....	218
CHAPTER SEVEN: THE PLAY: 愛, 媽媽 (LOVE, MUM)	226
REFERENCES.....	303



Fig 1. Poster image for 愛, 媽媽 (*Love, Mum*), 2022. Photo by John Rata Photography, Flower image by Celine Chan.

Chapter One: Introduction

When I first embarked on my thesis project, I did not know exactly where my research would lead me. All I knew was that I wanted to create a one-woman show, a matrilineal memoir, that encapsulated the stories of myself, my mother and two grandmothers. Writing for me was a way to understand myself and the world in which I lived. It was a way for me to explore my inner world, my feelings and thoughts, as well as the external world which included my relationship to people and the wider socio-cultural environment.

I am not sure when I started to form ideas about womanhood. More specifically, how a woman should look like, behave, speak, dress and relate to others. As a young girl, I remember trying on my mother's high heels, pearl necklaces and lipsticks when she was away at work. I would clonk around her bedroom, looking forward to the day when I would grow up and be just like her. Perhaps in my early teens, I started to become aware of what the 'ideal' woman looked and sounded like, and the role this revered woman was expected to play in society. I think these ideas came to me through messages from television shows, fairytales I read, conversations I overheard, and observing the women around me and the interactions they had with others. I wanted to be like the heroine in these movies, the woman who is adored and admired, the one who is 'good'. Certainly, I thought that if I followed this formula and behaved as I was expected to, a good life and happiness would follow.

I had absorbed all these messages about womanhood unconsciously. As a young woman I had never questioned whether this ideal I was trying to live up to was just or right for me. It was

much later in my adult life that I started to question this ‘good woman’ ideal, and saw how it was partially linked to my state of unhappiness and depression.

These revelations only became clearer to me when I had finished writing my play 愛, 媽 媽 (*Love, Mum*). At the beginning, I had not set out to question the detrimental effects of being a woman living within a patriarchal society. I was not entirely clear as to what my play was going to be about, but I knew that I wanted to come to terms with something, to try to understand something, and to work through my feelings of trauma and depression. This is what I wrote in an early draft of my play in the prologue:

I guess I wrote this play as I wanted to understand myself and how I came to be. It’s hard for me to define in words; I guess I wanted to unravel the complexity of my feelings... why I became unhappy or depressed, why I felt so alienated from myself, why I felt like I never really ‘belonged’ anywhere—whether that was in Hong Kong or New Zealand, why I felt that I couldn’t speak up as a woman, thinking that to be quiet and calm and elegant was the ‘ideal’, putting others’ needs ahead of mine. And I guess, at the root of it, I wanted to figure out who I was, why I was, and how my relationship with my mother came to be. I guess I sensed that all these issues were inter-connected, and that if I wanted to move forward in my life with happiness and forgiveness and awareness, then I first had to lay something to rest. I had to understand my roots as a Chinese person and more specifically as a Chinese woman; and my way into that was in reliving and embodying the lives and experiences of my mother, my Ah Mah and my Por Por.

My play is about many things. It is a memoir that interweaves my struggles growing up, my relationship with my mother and grandmothers, their lives and hardships. It is a story about

familial and self love, and about finding oneself amidst the weight of socio-cultural expectations and patriarchy. It follows the journey of how a woman learns to live authentically.

Methodologically, I viewed my research project spatially as a peeled boiled egg. At the core would be my play, my matrilineal memoir. This would encapsulate the private life stories of myself and my foremothers. The process would require mining my memory, researching our family stories, and writing them down. The outcome would commit our stories to paper, and craft them into a coherent narrative. Then, emanating outwards, would be the analytical research, the exegesis which would accompany the play, offering analysis of the play and its processes; that which exists between the yolk and the egg white. The white of the egg, the albumen, would be when I move from the private to the public. This would incorporate the sharing of my personal life story into the public performance space. It would include dialogue and feedback with the wider community, to see how the personal reverberates with the universal. This would then include another layer of analytical examination and research, the layer of membrane that encloses the egg. There would be no egg shell, as the shell would be cracked once the journey of diving into the process of writing one's life story begins.

In a way, cracking open the egg shell is analogous to the act of breaking down one's external façade—the socially acceptable 'self' that is presented to the world—and accessing our most private and vulnerable experiences. It is a place that contains our most important stories; our pain and trauma. Sometimes, in order to survive and make life more bearable, we choose to numb the pain, enclosing and hiding the traumatic experience so that it becomes lodged somewhere in our hearts and bodies, hardened and immovable like scar tissue. Therefore, to

revisit the trauma is the moment we access the wound, to open it up, to look at it, to reflect and feel it again.

As we work through our pain and confusion through the writing and sharing of our trauma stories, both to ourselves and to others, something starts to shift. What used to be too difficult to look at, to think about and to confront, slowly starts to soften, to move and to melt. What was once buried is now out in the open. What was once in the shadows is now out in the light, to be healed.

Sophia Richman talks about the creative transformation of trauma. She argues that ‘creative activities that allow for self-expression provide powerful opportunities for recovery of the very same functions that were destroyed by trauma’ (644). Furthermore, feelings of helplessness and isolation that are usually at the core of psychological trauma can be transformed into feelings of empowerment and reconnection (Richman 644). Trauma survivors can regain a sense of control: ‘What was originally overwhelming can be faced by survivors in their own terms and at their own pace. What felt fragmented and meaningless can now be seen in context. What was once a source of shame can now be a source of pride, as it is transformed into a beautiful painting, a haunting melody, or an inspired memoir’ (644). Studies examining the psychological benefits of autobiographical writing have demonstrated that autobiographical writing and constructing stories is a fundamental way in which we understand our lives (Valtonen 711).

Research Questions

Although the circumstances of my life story are unique to me, parts of it hold universal resonance with the experiences of other women. Therefore, I will be analysing certain aspects of

my personal experiences within socio-cultural and political contexts, examining dominant narratives related to ‘the “good” woman’ ideal and how that impacts a woman’s sense of self. Ultimately, this is a thesis that explores how women find their voice and resistance through the processes of writing their truths and sharing them through performance. Closely following the method of autobiographical/autoethnographic therapeutic performance (ATP), I will demonstrate how this process can lead to healing and empowerment on a personal level, with its effects potentially reaching beyond into the familial and wider community.

My research primarily attempts to answer the question: *How does the process of writing and performing one’s life experiences and trauma act as a form of resistance to the dominant ‘good woman’ narrative, leading to personal healing, empowerment and transformation?*

I break down this main research question by investigating the below lines of enquiry:

1. What are the messages that are passed down to women? What does it mean to be ‘a good woman’, and in particular ‘a good Chinese woman’?
2. How do these dominant narratives and standards of ‘a good Chinese woman’ affect a woman’s sense of self, her voice, her mental health and the ability to live authentically?
3. How does the process of (i) writing, (ii) rehearsing, and (iii) performing one’s truth and trauma—through solo autobiographical performance—lead to healing, transformation and empowerment on a personal, and potentially wider familial and community level?

Methodology

To examine my research questions, I utilised a practice-based research approach in which knowledge and insights are gained through the creation of a solo autobiographical play. Therefore, my thesis involves both creative and critical components. More specifically, I employed autobiographical/autoethnographic therapeutic performance (ATP) as an overarching framework to analyse my creative process and subsequent outcomes. I will be breaking down my analysis into three distinct stages: (i) the writing, (ii) the rehearsal, and the (iii) performance process. I provide a brief definition of the key methodological concepts below. Some of these will be examined in more detail in subsequent chapters when I discuss my creative process and the accompanying critical analysis.

Practice as Research (PAR)

The umbrella methodology of ‘practice as research’ (PAR) places creativity at the heart of research, employing creative performance as a method of enquiry (Kershaw 105). Baz Kershaw argues that fundamental to practice as research, is the radical dis-location of ways of knowing (107). Robin Nelson defines practice-led research as ‘rendering porous the firm institutionalised binary between theory and practice’, involving an ‘iterative, dialogic engagement of doing-thinking’ (19). Furthermore, he adds that ‘at the “performance turn” it is widely recognised that we “do” knowledge, we don’t just think it’ (66). This insight renders the subjectivity of the agent—the person performing or writing or creating—a critical factor in the research (66). This ‘porous’ and ‘dialogic’ engagement between research and practice, between my creative output and critical analysis, involved both circular and back-and-forth movements, and required shuttling between adopting ‘peripheral’ and ‘immersive’ subject/object positions as

researcher/researched. As an insider-outsider, my 'location' within/without the research constantly shifted, with each informing and in dialogue with the other. This became a circulatory method in which the creative project informed my critical analysis, which in turn informed my creative process. In a similar vein, Donna Lee Brien describes the process of creative-writing-as-research as co-existing in a state of cross-fertilisation, where it becomes impossible to identify which part of the work is 'research' and which part is 'creative practice' (57–58). In many ways, each informs the other. Therefore, my thesis interweaves theoretical analysis together with examples from my creative process including excerpts from my play and creative journal throughout.

Another aspect of PAR is the idea that the 'rules' emerge retrospectively (Green 4). Bill Green claims that there is always an emergent quality to research-as-practice. He describes this as a 'desire, a willingness to let go, to attend to what happens, what emerges, a will to "undoing"' (4). He highlights two main aspects, the first being that the research produced within this context is generated without recourse to 'rules' or 'models', and the second that such research incorporates experimentalism in which researchers 'literally don't know, and can't, until the work is completed' (4). Therefore, there is an 'openness' to the process in which the researcher/creative practitioner can only 'realise' what happened after the work is completed. I realised in my case for the creation of my play and exegesis that this was true.

Autobiographical/Autoethnographic Therapeutic Performance (ATP)

When I began my research project, I did not intentionally set out to examine the therapeutic aspects of solo autobiographical performance. The methodology of autobiographical/autoethnographic therapeutic theatre (ATP) was only discovered after I had

completed writing and staging my play. When I began my research project, I had not necessarily aimed to write a play with the specific aims of personal healing, nor did I intentionally set out to examine the therapeutic aspects of solo autobiographical performance. However, as I continued to write, research and rehearse my play, there were moments when the rehearsal process with my creative supervisor and director mirrored aspects of my relationship with my psychotherapist. These moments had both surprised and intrigued me. What was emerging within me was a curiosity towards this *process* of autoethnography and solo autobiographical performance. I could sense that a shift was taking place within me. At the beginning, I decided only to sit with this and observe, taking notes in my creative journal. What finally emerged and became clearer towards the end of the process was a movement towards healing both within myself and in my relationship with my mother. It was only after I had finished staging my play that I came across the methodology of ATP, and realised that it mirrored my own creative process and the journey I had embarked on.

It is in this light that I would like to introduce the concept of ATP. I would like to state ahead that my process does not mirror all of the aspects outlined in the common understanding of ATP. However, there are enough similarities in the process for me to deem my project a form of ATP. There are also some deviations. I believe that the deviations can be an important and interesting point of discussion and analysis, adding to the field of study within ATP.

Susana Pendzik et al. discuss how self-referential or personal theatre—theatre in which the content of the performance consists of material from the actual lives of performers—can be loosely categorised into *autobiographical* and *autoethnographic* forms (2). Autobiographical forms focus on the performer's personal life, whereas autoethnography is a self-reflexive form that draws on one's unique position and locality-based gender, race or sexuality as material and

commentary (Pendzik et al. 2; Freeman 3). We can further categorise this into *therapeutic* forms, where the aim is personal growth and healing, and *nontherapeutic* forms in which the goal of the performance is primarily artistic, educational or advocacy (Pendzik et al. 2). However, this does not mean that therapeutic theatre does not strive for artistic achievements, but that the main focus or outcome of the performance is one of personal healing and growth. ATP needs to involve a reflexive practice that aims at self-discovery. Psychoanalyst Charles states that in a true therapeutic process, ‘a dialectic takes place between the present “I” and the past “me” (qtd. in Pendzik et al. 2).

In an earlier article written by Pendzik, she describes ATP as a form of drama therapy that involves the development of a performance based on personal material, presented in front of an audience, and conceived with a therapeutic aim. However, she adds that:

Even such a broad definition already implies what it is not: It is not an improvised piece, but one that is developed over time, and is therefore subjected to a rehearsal phase; it is not centred on literary or universal works, but on personal experience; it has a communicative function: it is meant to be performed in front of other people, thus taking their implicit presence into consideration. Finally, it is not made for entertainment ends, but there is a therapeutic aspect at play. The combination of these premises also indicates the existence of a balance between *process* and *product*—one which is indispensable to keep; for in autobiographical therapeutic theatre both ends of the rope are equally important.

(Pendzik, “Poiesis” 4–5)

In a more recent article, Pendzik lists the five main elements that make autobiographical performance-based interventions therapeutic. There have been questions regarding the potential

risk of re-traumatising a person through the reenactment of lived experience without proper integrative tools (251). Expressing a personal experience on stage does not automatically lead to a therapeutic result, which is marked by a change or transformation in regards to the material expressed (258). Therefore, Pendzik argues that in order for autobiographical performance to promote psychological healing and advance personal growth, it needs to incorporate the below five elements in its creative and performative process:

- Narrating lived experience
- Shaping the material into aesthetic forms
- Embodying and rehearsing
- Performing in front of an audience
- Reflecting and integrating

(Pendzik, “Performance” 251)

For my analysis regarding the process for the creation and performance of my play, I have divided my discussion into three main components: (i) the writing process, (ii) the rehearsal process, and (iii) the performative process. These distinct stages incorporate all of the above five elements required for therapeutic change to take place.

Pendzik describes ATP as ‘a powerful personal statement made public in ritual form: It is performed in the presence of a witness, from a special (almost sacred) platform: the theatre stage. A feeling of *communitas* is likely to ensue, as performers (and many times audiences too) are emotionally involved in the piece’ (Pendzik, “Poiesis” 21–22). What is interesting to note is that ATP is usually performed only once. Pendzik et al. discuss that this requires further exploration: ‘Why? Is this connected to the rite of passage implicit in the form? The anxiety generated by the task of ATP and its resolution upon completion, applause, and relief should not be misinterpreted

as a successful resolution of the psychological wound itself’ (Pendzik, “Performance” 15). I will delve further into this area in chapter five, due to my own experiences of performing my matrilineal memoir *愛, 媽媽 (Love, Mum)* more than once, and the different feelings that accompanied the different performances.

Armand Volkas, a psychotherapist who works within the genre of ATP, likens the performer’s quest to heal themselves as an initiation rite: the client embarks on a journey towards change, confronts the unknown and returns to a changed self. In a larger psychological sense, the performance signals a transformation in which the initiate is reborn into a new role (Volkas 114).

Although ATP is not a socially recognised rite of passage, Volkas argues that ATP offers a drama-therapeutic structure through which therapeutic change for the performer can take place (116–117). Akin to many initiation rites, a breaking down of old belief systems and a psychological opening up occur in many ATP clients as they experience personal transformation (Volkas 117). I discuss these concepts in more detail when I examine my own creative process in subsequent chapters.

Self-Revelatory (Self-Rev) Performance

At this point, it is helpful to discuss Self-Revelatory performance (Self-Rev), a drama therapy process conceived by Renée Emunah which is closely linked to ATP. Although Emunah developed Self-Rev before the term autobiographical therapeutic performance became standardised, Pendzik et al. stress that Self-Rev is a specific form with its own criteria, with an emphasis on exploring current personal issues with a depth of therapeutic *working through* and a high degree of artistic mastery (9). Emunah describes what she means by ‘working through’:

It means that there is a conscious effort to contend with the material, dive into it, untangle the issues and better comprehend their origins and implications. It means psychological self-examination as well as ownership of our own interplay with the forces that shaped us. And it means finding ways to be strengthened or softened by the material, and to ‘move through it’. What does moving through mean? It can mean letting go, taking hold of, coming to terms with, confronting, embracing, shifting, admitting, committing, forgiving, inviting, renewing, revolting, revisiting, recreating. Each individual and each issue is different, with particular features and complexities, so there are no formulas.

(Eemunah , “Self-rev” 74–75)

Eemunah further elaborates that ‘working through’ does not mean that there is a clear resolution: ‘There is no undoing nor fixing, and possibly not even any clear resolution, but there can well be a discovery of how to live with, learn from and construct out of our experience’ (Eemunah, “Self-rev” 75). The creative process involved in Self-Rev is also very similar to ATP in that the unconscious is activated: ‘And while the attempt is conscious, the unconscious is activated—including dreams, memories, symbols, creative processes, and what I believe is our innermost and overriding inclination to heal ourselves’ (75). Eemunah lists the below methods as examples of ‘working through’ personal material:

- Embodying parts of the self
- Taking on roles of others
- Trying something new
- Closing and opening chapters
- Preparing for immanent change

- Integrating dramatic healing ritual
- Confronting a perpetrator
- Integrating an internal nurturing figure
- Commenting on process in the here-and-now

(75-77)

I have adopted some of these methods through the creative process of producing my play, which will be explained in subsequent chapters.

Similar to ATP, ideas of ritual and the performance being a rite of passage are highlighted: ‘Much is at stake. While all theatre is transitory in nature, many Self-Rev theatre pieces are performed only once, before a single audience, highlighting the ephemeral nature of performance and yet at the same time heightening a sense of ritual or rite of passage, in which something of long-range repercussion is being marked and imprinted’ (Emunah, “Behind” 44). The audience in this sense, becomes an empathic witness to the performer’s life story (Emunah, “Behind” 47; Rubin 138). At the end of the performance, there has been a kind of birth (Emunah, “Behind” 45). Emunah emphasises that ‘at its core, Self-Rev is about *revealing* something new not only to an audience but also to oneself’ (Emunah, “Self-rev” 73). Although there may be differences in terminology and origins, the underlying processes of healing and personal transformation of Self-Rev and ATP are closely linked. For the purposes of this thesis, I will use these terms interchangeably and mainly refer to my creative process through ATP, although the Self-Rev concept of ‘working through’ highly resonates with my work.

Autobiography

The term autobiography consists of ‘auto’ meaning ‘the self’, ‘bio’ which signals an aspect of a life-story and ‘graphy’ which means to write. Although the boundaries that separate the fictional and the real in creative works are unstable and at times blurred, I use the term autobiographical performance to refer to those performances grounded in real life stories, real people and events.

In regards to my creative process, I began by writing memories related to my life story, as well as my relationship and lives of my mother and two grandmothers. As a solo matrilineal memoir, the ‘data’ have come from my memory, thoughts and feelings, as well as conversations with family members to recall specific events. The reason why I decided to focus on memory and my own subjective thoughts and feelings towards my life and matrilineal history is because my goal for writing my solo piece is first and foremost to understand myself and the relationship I have with my mother.

Deirdre Heddon claims that history is dependent upon memory (61). The ‘writing of history is about the transmission of memory’, and the practice of history is a highly specialised form of commemoration (Jordanova as qtd. in Heddon 61). Heddon argues that ‘as first-hand witnesses to certain historical events die, the responsibility of bearing witness to the personal experiences of “history” passes to the second generation, passing through their bodies’ (62). In this sense, oral histories or personal memories become a form of archive, one of genealogy’s documents (Heddon 62), that requires ‘mortal bodies to take it up and carry it in and through time’ (Eisner as qtd. in Heddon 63). Daughters, in this sense, become ‘agents of transmission’ for the stories of their foremothers. Moreover, collective memory is a dynamic and shifting socio-political construct which must be perpetually rekindled and performed for each new generation (Kurasawa 104). This necessity for repetition suggests that collective memory is perpetually

open to flux and revision (Heddon 63). I will be discussing more on memory in relation to autoethnography in the following section, and a more detailed description on female autobiographical performance in Chapter Five.

Therefore, through the exploration of my inner life, I hope to unravel the complexity of my feelings, to understand the decisions I have made and to honour the legacy of my foremothers. I concur with Joan Didion who claims that ‘I write entirely to find out what I’m thinking, what I’m looking at, what I see and what it means’ (6). Thus, I will be writing from an emotive and partial position where ‘truth’ (my truth) is subjective, and not a neutral and unimpassioned one. This subjectivity is linked to the concept of autoethnography which will be discussed below.

Autoethnography

I would now like to elaborate on the definition of autoethnography which is one of the key concepts that underlies my work. Although memoir, autobiography and autoethnography negotiate the relationship between the stories we want to tell and the histories we have lived through, what sets autoethnography apart is a ‘default focus of cultural analysis and interpretation of the researcher’s behaviour, thoughts and experiences in relation to others in a particular society’ (Freeman 84). While the boundaries between definitions are fluid, we can argue in many cases that ‘autoethnography is ethnographical in its methodological focus, cultural in its interpretive focus, and autobiographical in its content focus’ (Freeman 84). Norman Denzin claims the critical autoethnographer is one who ‘enters those strange and familiar situations that connect critical biographical experiences (epiphanies) with culture, history and social structure’ (34). Therefore, autoethnographic enquiry works through a self-reflexive process of self-

examination and self-awareness that allows the researcher, who is also the subject of enquiry, to gain a cultural understanding of self and others. Thus the self will be situated and analysed against social, political, cultural and historical forces.

Tony Adams, Stacy Holman Jones and Carolyn Ellis define autoethnographic stories as ‘stories of/about the self told through the lens of culture. Autoethnographic stories are artistic and analytic demonstrations of how we come to know, name, and interpret personal and cultural experience’ (1). To further elaborate, they state that autoethnography is a research method that encompasses the below characteristics:

- Uses a researcher’s personal experience to describe and critique cultural beliefs, practices, and experiences.
- Acknowledges and values a researcher’s relationships with others.
- Uses deep and careful self-reflection—typically referred to as ‘reflexivity’—to name and interrogate the intersections between self and society, the particular and the general, the personal and the political.
- Shows ‘people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of their struggles.
- Balances intellectual and methodological rigour, emotion, and creativity.
- Strives for social justice to make life better.

(Adams et al., *Autoethnography* 1–2)

Arthur Bochner claims that autoethnography not only permits, but encourages a focus on self-understanding: ‘this orientation creates methodological challenges for autoethnographers because a self in the process of inquiring into itself is inside what it is studying—subject and object.

Recognising the provisional character of the self-understanding they seek, autoethnographers

bear witness to their lived experiences, disclosing their longings, losses, sorrows, and failures' (70). By drawing readers into the stories presented, autoethnographers want readers to 'dwell in their stories, to take these stories to heart and use them for themselves', thus the '*heart of autoethnography is connection*' (70). In addition, autoethnographers may reveal 'stories that have been shrouded in secrecy—hidden or silenced stories that may shame others into acknowledging truths we haven't dared to tell' (Bochner 70–71). It is in this sense that autoethnography promotes a relational ethics of caring and community, advocating for the betterment of human life and its advancement towards social justice (Bochner 71).

Freeman concurs that autoethnography and memoir are examples of the writer rendering his or herself visible and inviting readers into a dialogue with them (14). Autoethnography is a self-reflexive method that can enhance a researcher's self-awareness. Freeman states that autoethnographers 'write their experience into narratives and are themselves key participants in the research, and often also its subject'; thus 'the idea of research as a neutral process is abandoned in favour of a self-reflective form that explores the researcher's perspective on the subject in question' (2). My self-reflexive form will draw on emotion, mood, memory, and subjectivity for its material. Autoethnography suggests that writing about and through oneself can add, rather than detract from the research process, as one's unique position and locality-based gender, race or sexuality can be useful to the analysis (Freeman 3).

Freeman likens autoethnographers to 'a detective in search of clues as to motivations, desires, beliefs, ways of thinking and words for description' (9). He argues that 'we live our lives in the present and yet all forms of research, like detective narratives, are backwards looking, fuelled by interrogations into what happened, when and why?' (Freeman 10). By drawing on the past, autoethnographers are able to create new insights in the present. Bochner therefore claims

that ‘to do autoethnography is to engage in two kinds of interrelated work: memory work and story-making work’, as ‘whatever is remembered must be made into (composed as) a story. We are forced to find language that fits or coheres with the experiences and events we have remembered’ (72). Bochner emphasises that autoethnographies are works of memory, and every autoethnographer needs to be mindful of the workings of memory. Memory needs to be evoked: ‘By talking of memory as *work*, I signify that remembering is active and continual; it is personal, political, emotional, and relational. When we remember, we embark on a journey to a destination, a place we inhabit or revisit in order to question and reflect on the meaning of the past. Remembering becomes enquiry’ (Bochner 73).

As an evocative and emotional form of writing, Susanne Gannon argues that autoethnographic writing ‘inverts binaries between individual/social, body/mind, emotion/reason, and lived experience/theory in academic work’ (475–476). There has been some criticism that suggests that autoethnography has abandoned theory (Gannon 476). However, Gannon argues that authors have been able to demonstrate ‘how theory might “dance” with the personal in autoethnographic writing that is powerful, evocative, and theoretically sophisticated’ (476). Therefore, autoethnographic performance texts not only invert binary categories, they can also ‘collapse these categories into one another without abandoning any of the frames available for thinking and being in the world’ (Gannon 477). I believe that throughout my thesis, I have demonstrated how autoethnography and ATP can combine evocative and subjective writing, as well as robust theoretical analysis that engages with an audience both intellectually and emotionally.

Tami Spry, whose research and practice focuses on performative autoethnography, explains that ‘performative autoethnography is written from the assumption of live engagement

with others whether this be a theatrical audience, an audience at a conference, a personal gathering of others, or a reader on the other side of the body/paper/stage looking in at the embodied words you have created' (Spry, "Matter" 175). It is written 'to move off the page doing the labour of meaning-making with and in the presence of others' (Spry, "Matter" 175). In this sense, autoethnography is never about the self alone, making it a relational, rather than individual, practice (Spry, "Matter" 175; Adams et al., "Introduction" 11). Furthermore, Holman Jones claims that critical autoethnography 'is also a deliberately political practice, one used to show how our experiences with/in relationships, institutions, communities, and cultures are enlarged or constrained by power and (in)justice' (Adams et al., "Introduction" 11). Autoethnographers therefore, reflexively examine and challenge injustice and unequal power relations and structures in the societies in which they live. It should be made clear though, that not all autoethnography focuses on pain and suffering: 'some autoethnographers try to connect with readers' experiences of joy, love, and happiness by writing about the beauty and significance of everyday events and encounters, as well as about positive and formative memories and relationships' (Adams et al., "Introduction" 8). I believe that my work and research has demonstrated how amidst pain and suffering within systems of oppression, there are also moments of joy, humour and levity—all aspects which are part and parcel of the fullness of life. Therefore to conclude, I would like to put forward Bochner's summary, who argues that in practice, autoethnography is not only a methodology, but a way of life and a form of moral discourse:

[O]ne that acknowledges contingency; finitude; embeddedness in storied being; openness to otherness' dedication to justice, ethics, and moral imagination; and a desire for

edification—to keep the conversation going. Autoethnography focuses on the fullness of living and, accordingly, autoethnographers want to ask: How can we make life better?

(Bochner 77)

It was through the method of autoethnography and ATP that I was able to gain insights and clarity into how the socio-cultural environment has affected my life choices and feelings of depression. It was by *working through* my personal trauma that I was able to understand how the personal is intrinsically linked to the political, to our socio-cultural environment and structural oppressions. By writing and performing my story, I was able to connect with others/audience in a profound and meaningful way. By doing so, I had started my own healing and transformation, as well as starting a dialogic exchange with others, which hopefully would pave the way towards change through greater collective awareness. As an autoethnographer, my subjectivity is a core component of my research, therefore to clarify the parameters of this subjectivity, I include a positioning statement in the next chapter of this thesis.



Fig 2. Playing the character of Ah Mah in 愛, 媽媽 (*Love, Mum*), Auckland, September 2022.

Photo by Shelton Leong.

Literature Review

Although the methodological processes and concepts behind ATP have been written about from the point of view of the director or psychoanalyst, not much has been documented from the perspective of the client or artist. Current studies related to ATP have included feedback from participants through surveys and questionnaires, however I have yet to find a substantial body of research that follows and documents the process that an artist has been through from conception to performance. Therefore, my research project which has examined the creative process from a writing, rehearsal and performance perspective, fills a particular gap within the field of ATP.

Utilising an autoethnographic approach, my own unique standpoint of being a contemporary Hong Kong Chinese immigrant woman has been explored to answer my research question regarding the ‘good woman’ ideal. I have interwoven trauma, feminist and narrative theories, as well as including audience feedback and my own reflections to examine my arguments.

The solo play I have written is original and autobiographical. Within the context of Aotearoa New Zealand, although there are a number of solo autobiographical performances, there is no documented play that is labelled specifically as ATP. However, this does not necessarily mean that there are no performances which contain elements that closely resemble the workings of ATP. ATP is a rather specialised form of dramatherapy that is usually performed only once to an intimate invited audience, therefore it is understandable that playscripts and information of ATP performances are not widely available and accessible to the public. I had experienced the workings of ATP during my own creative process, even though I performed my play more than once. Therefore, I have not excluded performances which have had multiple performance seasons from my scope for examining work that already exists in this vein.

In order to fit the fundamental criteria for ATP, I was looking for solo autobiographical works that were performed by the writer and not by another actor. This is because ATP works with the writer’s personal and autobiographical material, with the process necessitating that the writer go through the rehearsal and performance stages as part of the healing journey. Another important aspect is that there is a therapeutic intention or aspect involved. Therefore, some form of trauma should be evident together with a sense of ‘working through’ some of these personal issues. A sense of personal transformation should also be evident in the play since the focus is on personal growth and healing, rather than craft or entertainment.

Although ATPs are typically performed solo, there have been examples when other actors are involved to represent other characters or inner aspects of the self (Dokter and Gersie 190–191). However, in the interests of my research and literature review, I will focus my discussion on solo shows in New Zealand that bring to the forefront marginalised voices, social issues and aspects of therapeutic change. I believe that the intimate nature of topics related to trauma, healing, shame and social stigma are conducive to a one-to-one process involving the actor and director, before this is performed to a wider audience. Although other actors may be brought in, the main focus is the work and story of the playwright.

In New Zealand, there are a number of solo shows which are not billed as autobiographical, which may or may not be performed by the playwright. Some of these include artists who present work related to their ethnic or cultural identity against an Aotearoa New Zealand backdrop. These include Jacob Rajan's *Krishnan's Dairy* (1997) (see Tilley 312), Sonia Yee's *The Wholly Grain* (2003) (The Big Idea), and Renee Liang's *Under the Same Moon* (2015) which explores intergenerational conflict across three generations of women (Liang). Others are inspired by true events related to their ancestral country, such as Ahi Kharunaharan's *The Mourning After* (2011), which tells the story of a New Zealand born protagonist who travels back to his father's village in Sri Lanka in the aftermath of a tsunami (Q Theatre).

There are solo shows written by women exploring women-centric stories. Although not autobiographical, they are based on the lives of other women and shine light on the female experience. These include Gabe McDonnell's *The Inept* (2000) about postnatal depression ("Inept"), and Dianna Fuemana's *Mapaki* (1999) which was inspired by a true case on domestic violence. In addition, Fuemana's *Falemalama* (2006) is a semi-autobiographical play about Fuemana's late mother (Playmarket, "Dianna"). Claire Waldron's *Stupid Bitch Wants a Puppy*

(2020) is a one-woman show that ‘offers the audience a kaleidoscope of snippets of women’s lives’ (Lam, Review)

Then there are shows which are based on the lives of real people and not performed by the playwright. These include Tom Scott’s *The Daylight Atheist* (2002), a play loosely based on the life of Scott’s father (Auckland Theatre Company). *Barrier Ninja* (2018) created by Fran Kewene is a one-woman verbatim play that weaves together personal stories from doctors, patients and nurses to shed light on the inequalities Māori face in the New Zealand healthcare system (Mare Haimona-Riki).

In Aotearoa New Zealand, there are a select number of autobiographical plays that are performed by the playwright. However, the major motivation behind the creation of these solo shows does not appear to be therapeutic. These include Bruce Mason’s *The End of the Golden Weather*, a solo show based on Mason’s youth growing up in a small coastal town in 1930s New Zealand which was first performed in 1959. Mason ended up performing his show nearly a thousand times over the course of two decades, touring it throughout New Zealand (G. Parker 45). Another is Mervyn Thompson’s *Coaltown Blues*, a solo autobiographical show about his childhood in a West coast mining township which was first performed in 1984 (G. Parker 80). Reviewer Sebastian Black claims that both Mason and Thompson were ‘forced to become a one-man band, performing and parading [their] own work’ due to the lack of support from professional theatre companies (qtd. in G. Parker 80). Therefore, it appears the playwrights had taken on the additional role as performer mainly for practical reasons.

Another more recent example is Cian Parker’s *Sorry For Your Loss* (2020) which is a ‘story of a young woman who is unexpectedly introduced to a father and family she never knew she had’ (Auckland Live). Parker had originally conceived this as a full ensemble piece, however as not many people turned up for the audition, her mentor Laura Haughey had suggested she

write a solo show instead (C. Parker 0:38–0:47). Thematically, Parker had wanted to explore her bicultural identity, but Victor Rodger suggested she write about the relationship with her father, which eventually became the main story of the play (C. Parker 1:44–2:27). Although we can argue that a play can still possess healing and transformative effects for the writer/performer even though it was not conceived with that intention in mind, the motivation to work through traumatic material for therapeutic change needs to be present for the work to be considered a form of ATP.

Alice Canton's *WHITE/OTHER*, which premiered in 2016, is an exploration of racial identity in Aotearoa New Zealand. Canton describes this as her journey to 'self un-discovery' (Canton, "Why"). Being of Chinese and Pākehā descent, Canton describes the motivation behind the creation of her solo show: 'Writing and performing *WHITE/OTHER* is about me coming to terms with my cultural identity, in the hopes that others will see how the system we currently operate in is broken, and that we all need to be responsible for fixing it' (Canton, "Why"). Canton had mentioned to me in a previous interview for another of my research projects that writing her solo show was a response to the political and social happenings around that time. This included the list of Chinese names that featured in the media in relation to the Auckland housing crisis, and the use of yellowface in New Zealand Opera's production of *Nixon in China* (Canton, Lam Interview; Standing Room Only). In her interview with me, Canton recalled: 'Ah, I'm writing something in response to what's happening right now' (Canton, Lam interview). Therefore, although the show was a way for her to come to terms with her identity, the main driving force was to raise awareness around racial stereotypes and discrimination instead of working through trauma.

I would also like to mention the below performance even though it does not fit the criteria of ATP, as the matrilineal genre resonates with my work. Lynda Chanwai-Earle's debut semi-

autobiographical play *Ka-Shue (Letters Home)* (1996) is a one-woman show about three generations of women. Although not entirely autobiographical, the playwright claims that ‘this play is as close to the bone as far as my family history is concerned’ (Chaiwai-Earle 5), and that ‘it is a fictionalised account of my own Chinese family, the Dong clan of Bak-Chuen, Poon-Yue County, Canton’ (Meteor Theatre). The play premiered at Circa Theatre in Wellington (1996), and has since toured the country and overseas with more recent performances at TAHI Festival (2020) and the Auckland Writers Festival (2022) (Brooks).

A matrilineal story that follows three generations of the Leung family, Chanwai-Earle plays all five characters: the grandmother Paw Paw, grandfather Gung Gung, the mother Abbie, The Ghost/Lady Li who is Abbie’s birth mother, and the protagonist Jackie whom we can deduce is modelled after the playwright herself. Chanwai-Earle mentions in the Playwright’s Note that she is a fourth-generation New Zealander and Eurasian by ethnicity. She discusses the play and her intentions behind writing *Ka-Shue*:

Based on the Chinese side of my family (the Tung clan of Bak-Chuen), *Ka-Shue* uncovers some of the last 150 years of a buried history in New Zealand. There has been a noticeable absence of a Chinese voice in this country. Perhaps it is because the Chinese community has been producing its own work for its own people, but this work has been largely inaccessible to a wider public until now. The material has often been spoken in Chinese, and not produced for mainstream audiences. [...] I am aware that this play is as close to the bone as my family history is concerned, but I hope in the end that I have attempted a universal story about immigration, about the systematic alienation of particular immigrant groups. For me, *Ka-Shue* is also a story about immigrant women, struggling to make for themselves a sense of home and identity.

(Chanwai-Earle 5)

As disclosed by the playwright above, together with the semi-autobiographical nature of the play, it should be safe to assume that *Ka-Shue* is not a form of ATP. I was fortunate to watch the show when it toured to Auckland in 2022, having read and studied the play for my research a couple of years earlier. Although it was fascinating to watch Chanwai-Earle live in performance, I did not get a sense of a personal transformation nor the playwright/performer going on some sort of therapeutic journey. Chanwai-Earle admits that it was for practical reasons that *Ka-Shue* was written and performed as a one-woman show: ‘it was the unavailability of Asian actors that made her conceive the play as a solo show and ultimately to perform it herself, in order to guarantee its production’ (Calleja 105).

Finally, I would like to discuss four works in detail, as I believe they bear some of the hallmarks of ATP. These are Michael Metzger’s *The Changing Shed*, Michael Parmenter’s *A Long Undressing*, Rob Mokaraka’s *Shot Bro — Confessions of a Depressed Bullet*, and *The White Guitar* produced by The Conch

One of the solo autobiographical works that I managed to find in Aotearoa New Zealand that contains many elements associated with ATP, although not labelled as such, is Michael Metzger’s play *The Killing Shed* (2019). *The Killing Shed* was created as part of Metzger’s doctoral research project exploring gay identity in rural New Zealand (Metzger 3). Employing a practice-based methodology, Metzger investigates the relationships between gay identity and rural masculinity through developing a solo theatre work, situating it within the context of queer autobiographical performance (Metzger 3). The show was later renamed to *The Changing Shed* for subsequent performances at the Dunedin Fringe Festival in 2021, and later at TAHI: New Zealand Festival of Solo Performance in Wellington in 2022 (“Changing”; Lyons). Billed as ‘a play about overcoming the long-term effects of bullying while offering a heartfelt message of

hope and solidarity', it is an autobiographical work about growing up queer in 1970s rural Otago (BATS Theatre).

The play interweaves Metzger's childhood memories with his present-day experiences of training and running for a marathon (BATS Theatre). The series of different scenes that make up his play are presented in non-chronological order. Metzger calls these vignettes 'a collection of fragments built around a theme of rural masculinity and gay identity' (Metzger 43). He states that the dramaturgical strategy, the process and method he employed for composing and performing his work, was bricolage with himself as bricoleur (Metzger 45). He explains that bricolage refers to something made from bits and pieces already at hand, extending to ideas as well as objects (Metzger 45). What is interesting in Metzger's dramaturgical strategy is the emphasis on process as well as product, which is a hallmark of ATP. Furthermore, the possibilities of self-transformation inherent in the process are highlighted:

My method of making autobiographical performance paves the way for a kind of transformative self-writing where new insights and understanding arise from juxtaposing the bric-à-brac of lived experience. Ultimately, it is a self-reflexive process that involves an 'unmaking' and 'remaking' of self. [...] Rather than simply repurposing materials at hand, my process involves 'unmaking' the self with the intention of making something new.

(Metzger 45)

As Metzger discusses the transformative possibilities of writing and performing the self, he describes how the transformative aspect of the writing and performance of his past trauma was unexpected: 'I set out to answer a question about gay identity and rural masculinity. I didn't expect the process to be transformative or that giving testimony as a survivor of trauma in

childhood would become an important part of that process' (Metzger 48). By examining the creative processes he undertook to create his autobiographical one-man show, Metzger describes the transformative potential of his creative work and research:

For me personally, the outcome of this research has been to reframe what masculinity meant for me and how I relate to men. I no longer feel that sense of 'otherness'; that I need permission to enter to be accepted into a male domain. I believe my particular version of masculinity is as complex and as valid as any other man's, gay or straight. These are big steps. It has been a process of self-bricolage in which I have written myself into a new narrative. [...] The killing shed stands as a place in which the writer has agency to kill off his demons; to reframe his narrative constructively. It's not about transformation in the sense of a superhero where one being becomes another. It's about reframing one's personal narrative through self-writing and performance, repurposing the component parts of self to, as Foucault might have it, disassemble and reassemble them to create new ways of thinking and being in the world.

(Metzger 50).

Metzger's statement above demonstrates the process of coming to terms with something, to accept, to reframe, to kill off and to transform on a personal level. These are all evident in the possible outcomes experienced during the 'working through' of trauma in the ATP process.

In a similar vein, Michael Parmenter's solo autobiographical dance-theatre work *A Long Undressing* (1995) has parallels with *The Killing Shed* in that it explores gay identity (Metzger 13). *A Long Undressing* is an experimentation with a novel hybrid form that includes confessional monologues interspersed with dance interludes that illustrate and embellish the narration which is presented in chronological order (Kolb 46). In his autobiographical work,

Parmenter talks about growing up gay in a conservative Christian family, his acceptance of his homosexuality while attending Otago University, his study years in New York city and experience with the gay scene, his medical history of living with cancer and AIDS, mourning for his friends who died from HIV, the fulfilment he found in dance and his exultation in life (Kolb 46; Metzger 13).

Parmenter is a well-known New Zealand dancer and choreographer, and his work speaks explicitly about his identity as a gay man, counteracting the silence of the closet and making a powerful political statement (Kolb 45–46). When interviewed by Alexandra Kolb, his rationale for the creation of his solo work was to ‘explore the solo narrativ genre’, and not to come out as gay or HIV positive (Kolb 45). Parmenter had already opted to go public about his sexuality and HIV when returning to New Zealand in the late 1980s, doing a series of television programs, documentaries and magazine stories (Kolb 51). In Parmenter’s email interview with Kolb, he explains:

For sure, much of this media stuff was a direct response to the fact that when I was originally diagnosed, there were any number of public figures dying from AIDS (Freddy Mercury, Rock Hudson, Rudolf Nureyev) and I was rather offended that the knowledge of their HIV status was not revealed till they had died. So certainly when I received my diagnosis, I went against the advice of friends and decided to be very vocal about my status and health. *ALU* [*A Long Undressing*] was certainly a continuation of this ongoing agenda. (Kolb 51–52)

In this sense, Parmenter’s work is ‘a stark artistic, as well as political statement against the invisibility and powerlessness of heterodox culture’ (Kolb 51). I could argue then, that *A Long Undressing* does not suit the criteria needed to define the autobiographical work as a form of

ATP in terms of working through personal trauma and self-transformation, since Parmenter seems to have already come to terms with his past and identity. However, what I find most interesting is the closing scene, in which Parmenter, after a slow undressing over the duration of his two hour performance appears stark naked. Kolb helps us to envision this striking scene:

Cast in a red light on an otherwise almost dark stage, the naked artist stands upside down on his head and shoulders, before descending in a very slow motion—deformed, contorted and hunched, his limbs angled and bent. We see him in foetal positions on the floor with his body tensed and in a grotesque standing posture in which both arms are flexed, fingers protrude toward the sky, and his torso leans to the left with his legs bent. But at the very end he resumes—stark naked—an upright and fully frontal position, as if to say, ‘This is what I am, now judge me’.

(Kolb 46)

Parmenter’s dance movements in the form of body contortions and nakedness (or near-nakedness) are characteristics of *butoh*, a Japanese form of dance theatre that focuses on the grotesqueness of the human condition. Parmenter himself explains to the audience in the show: ‘*Butoh* is a form of dance that casts aside, or more truly...breaks open the mask of formality in dance, to leave the body exposed and quivering’ (qtd. in Kolb 56). This ‘breaking open of dance’s formal parameters figures as an artistic metaphor for the collapse of the traditional public and “civilised” persona’ is demonstrated throughout Parmenter’s work (Kolb 56). In addition to appearing naked, the breaking down of the fourth wall by addressing the audience with the house lights on, the disclosure of explicit sexual matters, the revelation of his frustrations, family secrets and embarrassing details transgress traditional social norms, disregarding what is usually shared in public versus private settings, shifting the boundaries of shame (Kolb 52–53).

Therefore, the ending of the show in which the audience see Parmenter, standing in an upright position, naked and facing them, is almost as if he is saying ‘this is me’. In a way, this ‘announcement’ to the public, to the world, who he is after having exposed his warts and all, can be interpreted as a sign of rebirth. It is the rebirth of a more authentic self, without the weight of societal norms and masks of civility.

Another autobiographical show that is not labelled as ATP but contains many of its distinguishing characteristics, especially in the way it promotes healing is Rob Mocaraka’s *Shot Bro — Confessions of a Depressed Bullet*. The one man play details Mocaraka’s seven year journey from depression and attempted suicide to healing and self discovery (Yellow Brick Road). In 2009, Mocaraka set himself up to be shot by police by reporting the sighting of an armed man. Unbeknownst to police, he was describing himself. Carrying a meat cleaver, he confronted police and was shot in the chest. He miraculously survived, and has taken the experience of what came before, during and after that point to create his play (Mocaraka, RNZ; Mocaraka, “Shot Bro”; Richards 44).

Mocaraka had started writing the play script when he was in hospital, trying to understand how he had gotten to a point in his life where he felt that suicide would make everyone around him better off. He discusses his spiritual and mental breakdown, and how writing was a way for him to figure things out: ‘Writing all this in the hospital with my guts wide open, trying to figure out why I was in this state of trauma. It’s trying to articulate what was wrong inside of me.’ (Mocaraka, “Shot Bro” 6:01–6:15). Mocaraka talks about his unresolved trauma from being molested in childhood, and how the making of the show was opening up doors to his past: ‘I had this hurt little boy in me, who didn’t know what was wrong with him’ (Mocaraka, “Shot Bro” 13:19–13:22). Here we can see how Mocaraka’s motivation to

understand his attempted suicide through writing and self-reflection became an integral part of his journey towards healing and self-discovery.

What stands out about *Shot Bro — Confessions of a Depressed Bullet*, is Mokaraka's enthusiasm to help local communities affected by suicide. The show has toured New Zealand to community halls, marae, prisons and schools, and its effect on audiences is profound (Webb-Liddall). Mokaraka describes how his own experience has given him the resources to help others in a similar situation: 'In a sense, being shot, surviving it, it's a blessing. And now I can use my knowledge and compassion to help anyone in trauma, to understand and not have to go there' (Mokaraka, "Shot Bro" 4:20–4:37). In a panel discussion hosted by Pio Terei, when asked 'Why did you make *Shot Bro*?', Mokaraka's reply demonstrates his desire to bring communities together in order to heal together: 'Please don't take your life, please. That's the ngākau [heart] of it. And I was uncovering it, so I could understand why as well, and in a safe space. Basically to create a safe space so we could collectively save a life. It takes a village to heal a village' (Mokaraka, "In Conversation" 18:20–18:50).

Mokaraka's connection with the audience is an important aspect of the show. Sally Richards who watched *Shot Bro* comments in this reciprocity between performer and audience:

Direct address and audience interaction occur throughout the performance, some digressions and anecdotes, but mostly Mokaraka checking in with us. A dialogue has begun that will follow through to the after-show kōrero. He creates a distinct gestural language—two hands that create a heart shape—so he can spread *aroha* (love) to the audience. We receive Mokaraka's *aroha*, we create hearts with our own hands and reciprocate.

(49).

Mokaraka's show is structured so that audience members have an opportunity to share their own stories after the performance. There is a forum for people to share what they have just experienced, as well as a more relaxed setting where they can approach Mokaraka individually over some food and a cup of tea (Mokaraka, RNZ). Audience members sometimes share their own experiences of how a loved one or family member committed suicide. Indeed, the impact of Mokaraka sharing his own struggles is profound. In a documentary about the making of the show, we witness Mokaraka being invited by an audience member called Stephy to a memorial for her son Bobby Farrar, a twenty-year-old Māori boy who committed suicide in 2018. Mokaraka ends up performing his show to Farrar's whānau and family at a marae in Tokoroa (Mokaraka, "Shot Bro" 43:47–52:38; Webb-Liddall). Mokaraka's compassion and his ability to share his knowledge to help communities are commented upon by Stephy: 'Rob's here because people need to know the truth, and he uncovers the truth about depression' (Mokaraka, "Shot Bro" 44:06–44:12). In this sense, we can see how Mokaraka's attempt to understand and heal himself has led to connection and potential healing for the community. The wider ramifications of Mokaraka's individual experience and how it has impacted others go both ways, with the community feeding knowledge and wisdom back to him:

Mokaraka helps to heal through reconnection to te ao Māori, the natural world, and deep relationships with others, and through this journey, he's been healing himself. [...]

Mokaraka knows with each new show he's reaching people with their own fights, and with each encounter, he learns something new — about suicide and depression in New Zealand, about Māori struggles and intergenerational trauma, and about himself.

(Webb-Liddall)

Mokaraka's experience of reaching out to the community is demonstrative of the final stage of Herman's trauma recovery, with the audience feeding back into Mokaraka's own healing and vice-versa. Labelled as 'reconnection', the last stage involves restoration of social bonds with others in the community and the discovery that one is not alone. The connection with others who have shared a similar experience helps to dissolve feelings of shame, isolation and stigma attached to the traumatic event (Herman 215). Herman's stages of trauma recovery will be explored in more detail later throughout my thesis. Mokaraka sums up the healing potential of performance distinctly: 'I'm not out here to get anyone, blame anyone. I just want anyone who's hurt to know it's not their fault. And for me, you need to acknowledge that trauma, to release it, to cry it out. Release that shit into the air, because it's not ours to hold' (Mokaraka, "Shot Bro" 20:29–20:49). By sharing our stories of trauma, the notion of shame dissolves and the trauma within us is given an avenue to be released.

Another production worth mentioning is *The White Guitar* produced by The Conch, one of New Zealand's leading Pacific theatre companies co-founded by Nina Nawalowalo and Tom McCrory. Directed by Nawalowalo and Jim Moriarty, the show toured throughout New Zealand in 2015 and 2016, receiving rave reviews and playing to sold-out seasons (The Conch, "White Guitar"). Although not a solo show, it is an inter-generational autobiographical performance that bears many hallmarks of ATP.

Based on the true story of the Luafutu family, the script was collaboratively written and performed by patriarch Fa'amoana John and his two sons, Matthias and Malo (also known as hip hop artist Scribe) (Fransham). The show is a 'confessional work based on the lives of the Luafutu men and their relationship with each other' (Fransham). The actors play both themselves and other family members. *The White Guitar* is a story about Pacific Island immigrants, with

Fa'amoana immigrating to New Zealand from Samoa as a child in the 1950s. Upon his arrival, he was renamed 'John' by teachers who were not prepared to pronounce his name (F. Luafutu, E-Tangata) Experiences of racism, abuse, drug addiction and violence are recounted by all three men (Allan). Fa'amoana also talks about the abuse he suffered as a child in New Zealand's state care system, and how he worked together with The Conch to produce the show: "I teamed up with a theatre production company called The Conch. We did a play called *The White Guitar*, a true story about my family. My sons and I took part in the play. We touched on abuse in the boys' homes. The Conch helped me articulate that story" (F. Luafutu, E-Tangata).

The White Guitar was inspired by an autobiographical book that Fa'amoana Luafutu had written, *A Boy Called Broke: My story so far....* Fa'amoana 's son, Malo, describes how the play came about:

It initially started as the brainchild of Nina's husband Tom McCrory and my brother who was a student of his at Toi Whakaari. I think Tom read my dad's book *A Boy Called Broke* which my brother gave to him as a gift. Tom read it and I think he visualised or he could foresee it being a great piece of art for the stage. And in discussions with my brother, because it was initially supposed to be a one man show, [...] I think Tom suggested the idea of getting myself and my dad involved.

(Malo Luafutu, "Malo and Nina" 0:05–0:44)

Even though the idea for a play version was initially proposed by McCrory, the playscript was based on the book that Fa'amoana Luafutu had written as a way for him to come to terms with his traumatic past:

And I started writing a book about myself just to exorcise myself from it. I'll put myself in a book, chuck it out there and then I can breathe free. But having this play, we've had

to relive that book, and seeing myself replayed by my sons has been really emotional for me, and it's been really cathartic because I'm looking at how I was [...] I wasn't a very good parent and then the boys tell their story about how I was.

(“The White Guitar – The Luafutu family story” 1:35–2:05)

There is an interesting element to the play in that Malo and Matthias play both themselves and their father. This seems to have given both Fa'amoana and his sons different perspectives and a better understanding of one another. In *Self-Rev*, Emunah explains how one of the methods of ‘working through’ painful materials is by taking on and inhabiting the roles or perspectives of others. By doing so, one can ‘broaden one’s scope of understanding, shift one’s viewpoints or attitudes, or gain a multigenerational view, such as in the transmission of multigenerational trauma’ (Emunah, “Self-rev” 75-76). Matthias talks about the difficulty in playing his father, ‘as it forced him to look at things from his father’s point of view’ (Fox). At the same time, Matthias also talks about the healing effect of this process: ‘Dad says arts are a way of release. With each performance we are able to bring up things and being in a safe environment are able to leave it there on stage. So it’s not so hard anymore’ (Fox). Matthias describes how he now realises what his father had been living with for so many years: ‘It’s been enlightening to understand it. In my dad I see a different man, our relationship is totally different, it’s beautiful. Forgiveness has been a big part of it. I haven’t been the perfect son so I had to ask forgiveness too’ (Fox).

The autobiographical nature of the story and the cathartic nature of the process—of reliving parts of your life on stage and gaining something from that—aligns with the healing nature inherent in ATP. Moreover, the closeness of their relationship with McCrory and Nawalowalo during the whole process from script development to production gave the Luafutu family the courage and safety to share their stories in a deep and meaningful way. Malo Luafutu

describes the level of trust and safety that Nawalowalo and McCrory offered, likening their relationship to ‘family’:

Because of the nature of the story and us being a family, and *The Conch* being a family, was integral, because a lot of trust has to come in there, and having Tom and Nina there building that trust with us allowed us and gave us the space to really open up with what we wanted to share and how far we wanted to share it and how deep into the darkness we wanted to go because you can only do that stuff in a safe environment.

(Malo Luafutu, “Malo and Nina” 3:14–3:46)

The close relationship with the producers of the show had allowed the Luafutu men to trust in the process to tell their trauma stories. This is characteristic of the process involved in ATP where the healing journey becomes an intrinsic component. Matthias Luafutu describes the healing effects of telling and sharing his story:

We were a family of men who never really spoke to each other at all, only through our mom. So yeah, it’s been an amazing journey actually, to finally speak about it and to know that what we’re saying is going to be accepted with love and spoken with love. So it’s been a healing journey, not only just a play that you’re rehearsing, it’s a life bared for all and emotions built up.

(“The White Guitar – The Luafutu family story” 2:30–3:03)

The healing effects of writing and performing the play had not only affected the Luafutu family, but those in the audience as well who resonated with their stories and had similar experiences:

There were a whole lot of CYFS¹ kids that came to see *The White Guitar*, and afterwards they all cried. I want these kids to know they’re not by themselves, there are other people

¹ CYFS is ‘Child, Youth and Family’, now called Oranga Tamariki. It is a government ministry responsible for keeping children and people safe.

who have been through this abuse, who went through tough times growing up and understand what they are going through. I want them to see how they can use different mediums to express themselves. Some of the kids were really enlightened. And that's what I am about. To initiate better change for the care of kids. To initiate change so they don't end up wasting their lives like I did.

(F. Luafutu, E-Tangata)

After *The White Guitar*, Fa'amoana Luafutu continued to work with The Conch on another play *A Boy Called Piano* which focused on his time in state care (Fox). It was written by Fa'amoana Luafutu and performed by himself, his son, and his grandsons (Luafutu, E-Tangata). The play was written when the government was 'drawing up the terms for a Royal Commission of Enquiry into the terrible abuse of children in state care' (The Conch, "A Boy"). The show had its development season in 2019 in Wellington, and was set to premiere at the Herald Theatre, Auckland, in 2020 when Covid-19 struck. In response, a radio play was developed which debuted on Radio New Zealand in 2021. A documentary film was subsequently produced in 2022 (Fox).

After the shows, Fa'amoana Luafutu has continued to advocate for Pacific children in the state care system. He gave evidence at the Pacific hearings of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care in 2021, speaking about the abuse he suffered during his time in Ōwairaka Boys' Home, Kohitere Boys' Training Centre, and other foster placements (F. Luafutu, E-Tangata). During the inquiry, Fa'amoana Luafutu has continued to share his story in the hopes of helping others, as well as detailing how the arts have given him a creative outlet to heal:

There are some things that a psychotherapist can't help you with. I felt like it was the system that I needed to address, so that is why I engaged with MSD [Ministry of Social

Development] and have come forward to the inquiry. I still have that angry little baby inside but it's asleep most of the time. And I try and keep it that way. But sharing my story helps me put that baby in a deeper sleep each time.

(F. Luafutu, E-Tangata).

Therefore, even though *The White Guitar* and *A Boy Called Piano* were not labelled as works of ATP when they toured throughout New Zealand with multiple seasons, the healing and cathartic nature of the storytelling for both the writers/performers and audience members, as well as the close relationship Fa'amoana, Malo and Matthias Luafutu developed with Nawalowalo and McCrory align with a lot of the key characteristics of this particular form of dramatherapy. What made it interesting was that the Luafutu men would play the roles of each other, which had some similarities with my own experience when I embodied the roles of my mother and two grandmothers, enabling us to gain a broader multigenerational point of view and understanding. In the case of *The White Guitar*, to be both a 'witness' and 'participant' to your own story makes for a most illuminating and moving experience. Therefore, although not a solo show, *The White Guitar* bears a lot of the hallmarks of ATP worth discussing.

In recent years, there seems to be an increase in the number of solo shows performed in New Zealand. A search on TAHI: New Zealand Festival of Solo Performance website showcases previous shows from emerging to established artists from 2019 onwards (TAHI). Not all are autobiographical nor are they performed by the playwright. Nevertheless, the rise of solo shows demonstrates the popularity and versatility of this artform, whether to entertain, to shine light on social issues, to provide a platform for marginalised voices and/or to heal from trauma.

Chapter Overview

In this chapter, I have described the aims and objectives behind my research, my chosen methodology of ATP, examined some cases of solo performances in Aotearoa New Zealand that are similar to my work, as well as outlining key concepts pertaining to autoethnography and solo autobiographical performance. In the following chapter, I will describe the historical and socio-cultural background that I grew up in in order to situate myself as both research subject and researcher. I will also investigate the effects of growing up in a patriarchal and colonised society, together with being a young migrant in a foreign country within the context of socio-cultural oppressions and trauma.

Chapters Three to Five will examine the processes behind the creation of my solo play 愛, 媽媽 (*Love, Mum*) and how it relates to the methodology of ATP and recovery from trauma. The creative process will be broken down, with chapter three focusing on the writing process and how writing our life stories becomes a form of counter-discourse and resistance against master narratives. Chapter Four will detail the rehearsal process, examining the key movements of tai chi, drumming of the wooden fish, and running in connection to embodied knowledges and feminine ways of knowing. Lastly, Chapter Five will investigate the performance of my play and how that relates to the concept of audience, testimony and bearing witness. The transformation of self and connection with others and community will also be discussed.

You will find my playscript 愛, 媽媽 (*Love, Mum*), together with a video link to my performance, in the final chapter.

Chapter Two: Trauma / ATP / Situating Myself

Trauma, Healing and Autobiographical Therapeutic Performance

In order to explore the processes of healing within ATP, I first need to discuss the concept of trauma. Healing implies that a wound is present in the first place. In this chapter, I will provide a brief definition of trauma, then proceed to situate myself within a socio-cultural context as the subject of autoethnographic research. My life story will be examined within the larger historical and socio-cultural forces that impact on a woman's sense of self, her voice, her mental health and her ability to live an authentic life.

Trauma is an aspect that permeates throughout my play. There are different aspects to trauma that can come in the form of cultural and societal factors such as (1) patriarchy: oppression of women and being undervalued in society based on your gender, (2) colonialism: being a Chinese immigrant overseas and growing up in colonial Hong Kong where Whiteness is privileged, and (3) capitalism: where value is placed on wealth and money, versus my chosen profession to be in the arts. These personal struggles are interwoven throughout my play *愛, 媽媽* (*Love, Mum*). The critical portion of my research examines these factors through an intersectional lens, namely the 'double oppression' of being a Chinese woman growing up within a patriarchal culture and being a young immigrant minority in a Western society.

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), the definition of trauma, of the diagnostic criteria 'Criterion A' of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder is as follows:

Exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence in one (or more) of the following ways:

1. Directly experiencing the traumatic event(s).
2. Witnessing, in person the event(s) as it occurred to others.
3. Learning that the traumatic event(s) occurred to a close family member or close friend. In cases of actual or threatened death of a family member or friend, the event(s) must have been violent or accidental.
4. Experiencing repeated or extreme exposure to aversive details of the traumatic event(s) (e.g., first responders of collecting human remains; police officers repeatedly exposed to details of child abuse).

(American Psychiatric Association 271)

Thus trauma can be defined as ‘a wound to the psyche, one that spills over the dams of peoples’ coping strategies, flooding them with intolerable affect’ (Brown 96). However, Laura Brown also points out that feminist and multicultural writers have criticised the DSM definition of trauma, and that an individual’s culture, context and identity must be taken into account (95–96).

Brown argues that what constitutes a threat of death, injury or threat to physical integrity is not always intuitively obvious (96), and that an individual may experience a threat to life from a word being spoken (97). These may include verbal aggressions based on one’s race or gender, and she gives an example; ‘many African Americans report that when they hear the epithet commonly referred to as “the N word” they feel at risk because of the resonances between that term and violence against their communities’ (97). Therefore, constant daily exposure to racism can be experienced as traumatic for some individuals. Similarly, women who have been sexually harassed in the workplace or those who have experienced some form of hostility because of their

gender can experience the phenomenology of feeling unsafe (98). Therefore, Brown argues that we need to think broadly as to what might constitute trauma for a particular individual, instead of having a fixed list of events that are perceived to be traumatic (98).

Brown also states that another conceptual framework for understanding trauma is through the lens of insidious trauma, also known as microaggressions (103). This highlights that trauma may not be the result of one catastrophic event such as the Holocaust, but instead could be the result of constant yet subtle and indirect discrimination and aggressions. These can occur in apparently banal ways, such as when the media consistently portray a group of people in a stereotypical and negative manner. Therefore, for individuals who are a member of this target group, usually a minority group within dominant society, daily existence becomes a potential site for traumatising (103). Thus everyday racism, sexism, homophobia and so on 'are the small but ever-present pulls of energy toward a survival level of consciousness, the reminders that someone somewhere is trying to make you and people like you less welcome on the planet' (103).

Brown references the work of clinical psychologist Maria P.P. Root, stating that when an individual is subjected to this form of insidious traumatising, they will experience a gradual and often imperceptible erosion of the psyche (Brown 104). The result of cumulative microaggressions, although each one may not be impactful enough to be a traumatic stressor in itself, when taken and compounded together have the potential to yield a traumatic experience stressful enough to trigger the full symptoms of posttraumatic stress (104). Insidious trauma can lead to internalised oppression, where the targeted individual starts incorporating and believing the negative messages that undermine their sense of self-worth (104). Brown's message is that daily microaggressions against a particular group in society, whether that be based on ethnicity

or gender, may potentially lead to a wound in one's psyche, impacting one's sense of self-value. Leigh Gilmore argues that 'trauma is never exclusively personal; it always exists within complicated histories that combine harm and pleasure, along with less inflected dimensions of everyday life. Remembering trauma entails contextualising it within history' (31). Thus highlighting the importance of taking into account the socio-cultural and historical context in which an individual lives when examining trauma.

However, what is important to note is that this form of insidious trauma may be 'unconscious' to the individual being targeted, without them being aware of the impact this has had on them. They may one day realise they are suffering from the symptoms of posttraumatic stress without consciously knowing why. Therefore, rendering insidious trauma extremely toxic:

Everyday racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, and other forms of institutionalised oppressions may seem so familiar to people as the background noise of their lives that they may have no cognitive construct into which to place these encounters; they simply have the posttrauma distress and dysfunction arising from doing battle every day against an army of small toxic agents.

(Brown 106)

Therefore, although it is important to understand one's individual trauma, the larger socio-cultural context also needs to be taken into account. Stef Craps warns against the dangers of narrowly focusing on the individual rather than the larger socio-historical context which enabled the abuse:

Moreover, by narrowly focusing on the level of the individual psyche, one tends to leave unquestioned the conditions that enabled the traumatic abuse, such as racism, economic domination, or political oppression. Problems that are essentially political or economic

are medicalised, and the people affected by them are pathologised as victims without agency, sufferers from an illness that can be cured through psychological counselling. The failure to situate these problems in their larger historical context can thus lead to psychological recovery being privileged over the transformation of a wounding political, social, or economic system. Insofar as it negates the need for taking collective action towards systematic change, the hegemonic trauma discourse can be seen to serve as a political palliative to the socially disempowered.

(Craps 50)

I mentioned earlier that the impetus for writing my play 愛, 媽媽 (*Love, Mum*) was to understand the world in which I lived. I was unhappy and I did not know why. Although there are a myriad reasons why someone may suffer from depression, I had an inkling that part of it was due to the world in which I lived: all the beliefs and oppressive structures that made me feel that I could not live the life that I wanted. I wanted to unravel some of the messages, values and belief systems that were impacting how I was behaving in the world. These belief systems were both helpful and unhelpful, and I had to learn to filter out which of those made me feel empowered and which undermined my sense of self. The fact that I had chosen theatre as my mode of expression and medium for the transmission of my story, demonstrates that I had wanted to reach a wider audience in order to spread the message about the socio-cultural oppressions in society.

It was only a few weeks before my opening performance, after months of rehearsals and analysing my play script, that I managed to put into words what my play was really about on a

larger socio-cultural level. I summed this up in my marketing programme to be handed out to audiences during my performances:

It was only in my 30s when I started to pursue my writing and literature degree in New Zealand, that I began to really think and become aware of the societal and cultural structures that bind us, those that influence and shape our beliefs and behaviour. I realised that I had received these messages growing up—whether overt or covert, intentional or unintentional—through the media, society, peers, family, culture, books and the wider sociocultural environment. These messages, whether helpful or unhelpful, have impacted and shaped my thoughts on how I thought I should behave and the life I should lead. What does it mean to be successful? What does it mean to be good woman? And in particular, a good Chinese woman?

(Lam, “Note from Playwright”)

Writing my play was a way and method for me to be aware and to try to understand these belief systems and values which were either handed down, learnt or absorbed through the socio-cultural environment.

In a similar vein, Volkas discusses the concept of ‘life scripts’ used in Transactional Analysis (TA), a method of therapy founded by Eric Berne, which Volkas applies to ATP. Transactional Analysis proposes that dysfunctional behaviour is the result of self-limiting decisions made in childhood in the interest of survival. Life scripts are unconscious relational patterns, our life plan and beliefs that govern the way our life is lived (Volkas 121).

Volkas argues that spoken and unspoken parental and societal messages and injunctions—such as ‘Don’t grow up’, ‘Don’t be successful’, ‘Don’t speak up’—can be

uncovered through the process of drama therapy (121). These limiting beliefs can be made conscious during the ATP process, potentially leading to the transformation of one's life script.

Through the creation of my play script, rehearsals and the subsequent staged reading and performances, I was then able to 'work through' and address some of the issues, which included my relationship with my mother, my relationship with my ex-husband, my depression, and my sense of identity as a Chinese woman writer growing up in a patriarchal, colonial and capitalist society. It was all one big jumble at the beginning, with multiple strands interwoven together. I did not know where it was all going or how it was going to end. All I could do was to stay true to my story, and write down my memories as they came, piece by piece, vignette by vignette.

It is important that I situate my life story in order to place myself within a particular social, cultural and historical context, and that is as a Hong Kong Chinese woman born in the 1980s growing up in colonial Hong Kong, and as a young immigrant child to Aotearoa New Zealand. My unique standpoint and positionality need to be taken into account as they impact my discussion, research and analysis.

My own life story, interwoven with snippets of my foremothers' lives, will then become my 'case study', as is the method of autoethnographic research, and more specifically autobiographical/autoethnographic therapeutic performance (ATP).

The 'Double Oppression' of being a Chinese Woman

In order to begin my enquiry, it is important to situate myself and understand the cultural background in which I grew up, namely that of a Chinese woman growing up during colonial Hong Kong. I had also migrated to New Zealand as a young child of five years old, where we stayed for three years and then returned to Hong Kong where I studied at an international school

under the British education system. When I was a teenager and almost a young adult, the Hong Kong 1997 Handover took place in which Hong Kong transitioned from British colonial rule back to communist China. It is important that I investigate this unique cultural and socio-political background as it has impacted my values and sense of self in regards to my being a Chinese woman, and how the infusion of Western values has also affected that mix.

For this reason, I would first like to discuss how Confucianism has impacted how women are seen and placed in Chinese society, which is traditionally patriarchal.

A 'Virtuous' Chinese Woman and Confucianism

Confucianism is a philosophy and belief system that originated from China, becoming one of the most influential schools of thought for more than two millennia. It was propagated by Confucius (551 to 479 B.C.E.), a Chinese philosopher and politician who created Confucianism as a social ethic, political ideology, scholarly tradition and way of life ("Confucianism", *Britannica*; "Confucianism", *National Geographic*). Confucianism was upheld as the dominant social ideology by the feudal dynasties from around 200 B.C.E. to 1911 when the Qing dynasty was toppled, and by the nationalist government from 1911 to 1949 (Xiongya Gao). Confucianism as a value system has exerted a profound influence on spiritual, political and family life ("Confucianism", *Britannica*).

Confucianism dictated familial relations, and this in turn impacted how women were regarded. Confucian doctrine did not accord women equal status to men, and accepted the subservience of women to men as natural and proper (Andrea and Overfield 145). Prejudice against women had existed long before Confucianism, however it was Confucianism that turned

the marriage system into a form of bondage for women, treating them as possessions of their husbands (Gao 114). Confucian doctrine and Chinese society accorded women—in their roles as mothers and mother-in-laws—respect and reverence due to their ability to reproduce sons to carry on the family surname (117). This also may be partly due to the fact that the Chinese social system was originally matriarchal, thus the mother in the family was accorded honour and power within the family structure (Gao 117; Andrea and Overfield 145). However, that power remained within the familial structure; a woman was accorded no legal or property rights (Gao 117).

Ban Zhao (also referred to as Pan Chao) (c. 45–120) was the first woman historian of China and is considered the foremost Confucian female scholar of the Han dynasty (206 B.C.E. to 219 B.C.E.) (Lee; Andrea and Overfield 145). She is most well known for her contributions to *Han Shu* (*History of the Han Dynasty*), as well as *Nü Jie—Lessons for Women* or *Admonitions for Women*—which became the standard reference for the education of daughters and women from the Han to Qing dynasties in China (Yuen Ting Lee). Ban Zhao realised that Confucian texts contained minimal instruction for women, and thus she sought to fill that void with a set of guiding principles in behaviour and moral thought for young women (Andrea and Overfield 146). Ban Zhao explains how she came to compose these instructions under the title, *Nü Jie* or *Lessons for Women*: ‘But I do grieve that you, my daughters, just now at the age for marriage, have not at this time had gradual training and advice; that you still have not learned the proper customs for married women. I fear that by failure in good manners in other families you will humiliate both your ancestors and your clan’ (Swann 146).

Ban Zhao began work on *Nü Jie* around 106 C.E. when she was serving the Han imperial court (Lee). This was a time when China’s Confucian society sought a philosophical doctrine and way of life to stabilise its complex familial relations, which usually consisted of multiple

generations including wives, concubines, grandparents and in-laws all living under the same household. Thus *Nü Jie* became a useful treatise on how women should behave, as no other Confucian texts existed at the time which addressed women (Lee). Although originally written for her own daughters and elite palace ladies living in the imperial court, *Nü Jie* has achieved a much wider audience and influence than originally intended (Lee).

The lessons taught in *Nü Jie* are divided into seven chapters: (1) humility, (2) husband and wife, (3) respect and caution, (4) womanly qualifications, (5) whole-hearted devotion, (6) implicit obedience, and (7) harmony with in-laws (Lee). Some of the teachings in *Nü Jie* include (from chapter on ‘Humility’):

Let a woman modestly yield to others; let her respect others; let her put others first, herself last. Should she do something good, let her not mention it; should she do something bad let her not deny it. Let her bear disgrace; let her endure when others speak or do evil to her. Always let her seem to tremble and to fear. When a woman follows such maxims as these then she may be said to humble herself before others.

(Swann 147)

Nü Jie advised women to be submissive to their husbands, and to serve the household by sacrificing their own spiritual and material interests: ‘Let a woman retire late to bed, but rise early to duties; let her not dread tasks by day or by night [...] Let a woman be correct in manner and upright in character in order to serve her husband’ (Swann; Lee). The later Chinese saying *San Cong Si De* (Three Obediences and Four Virtues) which emphasised typical ‘feminine’ virtues of obedience and loyalty were largely derived from this treatise (Lee; Gao 116). The Three Obediences required a woman to obey her father before marriage, to obey her husband

after marriage, and then to obey her eldest son after the death of her husband (Gao 116; Lee). The Four Womanly Virtues included (1) womanly virtue, (2) womanly words, (3) womanly bearing and (4) womanly work, which outlined that woman should ‘guard her chastity’, ‘choose her words with care’, ‘to wash and scrub filth away’, and ‘with whole-hearted devotion to sew and to weave’ (Swann 149 in the chapter ‘Womanly Qualifications’). Thus, the Four Virtues referred to sexual morality, proper speech, modest manner and diligent work (Gao 116). The four womanly qualifications seem to indicate that a woman should not stand out or be exceptional in any way: ‘Now what is called womanly virtue need not be brilliant ability, exceptionally different from others. Womanly words need neither be clever in debate nor keen in conversation. Womanly appearance required neither a pretty nor a perfect face and form. Womanly work need not be done more skilfully than others’ (Swann 148–149). Thus the dictum for women indicates that they should be obedient and diligent in household chores, serving the household and men in their lives.

Women were not expected to speak out, stand out, or to show any form of disobedience towards their husbands, family and in-laws. In the chapter on ‘Implicit Obedience’, Ban Zhao advises young women to never disobey their mother-in-law: ‘Whenever the mother-in-law says “Do that,” even if what she says is wrong, still the daughter-in-law submits unfailingly to the command. Let a woman not act contrary to the wishes and the opinions of parents-in-law about right and wrong. [...] Such docility may be called obedience which sacrifices personal opinion’ (Swann 149). Ban Zhao refers to the ‘natural order’ of the relationship between husband and wife as Yin and Yang. The Yin element being the ‘soft yielding feminine’ principle, and the Yang as the ‘hard aggressive male’ principle: ‘If a husband does not control his wife, then the rules of manifesting his authority are abandoned and broken. If a wife does not serve her

husband, then the proper relationship between men and women and the natural order of things are neglected and destroyed' (Swann 147–148).

A woman's place was strictly confined to the home; women were not allowed to participate in affairs of government. Loyalty to their husbands was highly cherished. During the Song Dynasty (420–478), Confucian scholars dictated that widows who remarried were committing a crime. A woman's 'chastity' was deemed of utmost importance, and a woman who chose to end her life after her husband's death was greatly honoured (Gao 117). Chaste widowhood lent honour not only to the husband's family but also to his clan and entire village (Gao 117). Many of these incidents of women who committed suicide after their husband's death to guard their chastity, were recorded in *Biographies of Virtuous Women*, one of two classics for women during the Han period written by Liu Xiang, together with Ban Zhao's *Nü Jie* (Gao 117; Ebrey 47). Many neo-Confucian scholars urged parents to instruct their daughters in these two classic texts (Ebrey 48). Thus young women were encouraged to cultivate Confucian values of filial piety, loyalty, diligence and obedience, and warned against evil traits such as selfishness, scheming and sensual indulgence (Ebrey 47).

The influence of Ban Zhao and Confucian values on women can not be underestimated. By the Song Dynasty over a millennia later after Ban Zhao, the *Book of Filial Piety for Women* was in circulation. It is a women's version of the Confucian text, *Book of Filial Piety*. Although the *Book of Filial Piety* is gender-neutral and addressed both men and women, the author was aware that it was implicitly addressed to males, and thus needed considerable adaptation for a female audience. The *Book of Filial Piety for Women* could have been written anytime after the Han Dynasty by a Miss Zheng or Cheng, who wrote the text for her niece who was about to marry Prince Yong, which could potentially date the text to around 730 of the Tang Dynasty

(Ebrey 48; Murray 95). In the text, the author casts Ban Zhao as the equivalent of Confucius, where she features Ban Zhao holding a dialogue with her students: ‘Lady Ban was at home at leisure and the women were sitting in attendance’, versus the ‘male’ version which reads: ‘Confucius was at home and Zengzi was attending him’ (Ebrey 49). Thus we can determine the influence of Ban Zhao and her teachings on women in the Confucius doctrine in the many years after her publication of *Nü Jie*.

Confucianism and its doctrine on women started to lose its influence during the 1912 bourgeois revolution and the May Fourth Movement in 1919 in China. The May Fourth Movement was an anti-imperialist and anti-feudal movement, one of its famous slogans was ‘Down with the Confucianism’ (Gao 124). In the late 1800s, prominent liberal male reformers such as Liang Qichao and Kang Youwei championed the ideology of female equality. Old Confucian values such as the family system, marriage, divorce, chastity, suicide and the education of women were addressed and reformed (Gao 124). With the downfall of Confucianism, significant changes in ideology and social practice began to take place concerning sexual equality. Chaste widowhood, arranged marriages, the concubinage system and bound feet were denounced. With the rising textile industry, women could go out and work, they were no longer confined to the home, and divorce became possible (Gao 124). The formal education of women was also introduced, with Peking National University admitting its first cohort of women in 1919, followed by co-education in almost all colleges. Women began to participate in politics, and many became revolutionists and soldiers fighting alongside men during the Sino-Japanese War from 1937–1945 (Gao 124). Since the Communist party took control in 1949, the government has made efforts to ensure that women get equal access to education, employment and social activities (Gao 125). However, these measures cannot fully eradicate traditional ideas

and ideology which have permeated Chinese society over two thousand years. Confucian ideology concerning women and their relationships to men continue to permeate and manifest itself in a patriarchal society even today.

Although times have changed and women have a lot more status and freedom with the right to work and own property, there are some values that our family adheres to that are strictly patriarchal. In my family on my paternal side, we have a Lam family book that follows the patrilineal system of documenting descendants. This is not untypical of Chinese families even today. Under the patrilineal system, both the names of sons and daughters are documented; however once the children are married, only the descendants of the male sons are documented in the family book. This is because once the daughter is married, she takes on the surname of her husband and is thus considered as ‘belonging’ to her husband’s family.

The Infusion of Western Values: Growing up in Colonial Hong Kong and Migrating to New Zealand as a Young Child

On top of growing up a Chinese woman within a patriarchal Chinese culture, my family emigrated to New Zealand when I was five years old. This was over a decade before the 1997 Hong Kong Handover, when there was a lot of uncertainty over what would happen when Hong Kong transitioned from British colonial rule back to communist China. My parents decided that it would be a wise option for the family to emigrate to New Zealand to obtain a second passport, just in case anything happened and we had to leave Hong Kong. When our family returned back to Hong Kong a few years later—since job prospects were better for my parents and they wanted to be closer to their parents and relatives in order to take care of them—my parents sent both me

and my brother to an international school in which we were schooled under the British education system and we were taught by mainly Western teachers. This was partly because our Chinese reading and writing abilities were already behind those of local Hong Kong students, and my parents had ambitions to eventually send both of their children to university overseas.

Hong Kong is characterised as a cosmopolitan society, a hybrid of East and West; with traditional Chinese values emphasising family and education blending with Western ideals of economic liberty and rule of law. I would like to demonstrate how growing up with this unique socio-political and cultural background together with migrating to New Zealand at a young age, and then returning to my home country, has impacted my sense of identity and self. Thus on top of growing up a Chinese woman in a patriarchal culture, there is another layer of being a Chinese migrant in a Western country, as well as being a Chinese woman growing up in her home country that has been colonised.

Prior to the transition of the British Crown Colony of Hong Kong to the sovereignty of the People's Republic of China on 1st July 1997, there was an upsurge of people wanting to leave Hong Kong and emigrate overseas (Ngan 241). Despite the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration on the future of Hong Kong in Beijing in 1984 and the passing of the Basic Law in 1990, whereby China would guarantee the continuation of the existing system in Hong Kong for at least fifty years after the handover—the principle known as 'one country two systems'—the specifics of how this would be implemented were vague.

The Hong Kong handover resulted in a wave of emigration from Hong Kong perceived as a clear response indicating people's uncertainty towards Hong Kong's future. The flow of immigration was principally to Canada, Australia, United States and the United Kingdom. New Zealand also became an important destination at a later stage for Hong Kong emigrants (Ngan

241). In New Zealand, between April 1986 and March 1998, the country gained 101,300 immigrants from China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Japan, comprising 52.3% of the total net gain of non-New Zealand citizens (Bedford et al. as qtd. in Ngan 241).

In his research on emigrants who returned to live in Hong Kong, Chan Kwok-bun explains how returnees to Hong Kong demonstrate a 'hybridity' in gaining competency in more than one culture (26), can also experience ambiguity and pain from being a 'marginal man' (25). For Chan the marginal man is someone 'at the margin of two cultures that do not interpenetrate or mix, wanting to belong to both but not accepted by either' (25). These transnational intersections have strong implications for the development of the migrant identities, expressed in the questions: Who am I, where am I going next, where do I belong? Where's my sense of belonging?

Due to having lived in more than one place, migrant and transnational identities are defined by multiplicity, plurality, hybridity and doubleness. This often means that conceptions of 'home' are no longer fixed. As Chan explains: 'Home, and belongingness, is here, there, everywhere – or nowhere (31). Although people who have lived in more than one country and experienced a different culture are usually said to 'have the best of both worlds', research conducted by Salaff and her associates claim that 'stayers'/non-immigrant families (those who have never emigrated overseas) and sometimes known as 'the community of the poor' (from working class families), possess a strong sense of identity and belonging: 'Things in Hong Kong matter to them. They belong; Hong Kong is home; they feel at home, homely here' (Chan 32). They are called the 'patriots of Hong Kong', the interviewees claiming: 'even after I retire I'd choose Hong Kong... I believe that Hong Kong is among the best places in the world' (32). There is also a strong sense of local community, keywords from the interviews being: 'We do

everything together. Community. Neighbourhood. Neighbourliness. Solidarity. Comfort. Feeling at home. Homeliness' (32).

Lucille Ngan concurs that although returnees possess cross-cultural qualities such as cosmopolitanism, overseas experience and language skills, which are seen as foundations for social development, the hybrid nature of their identities and their cultural differences do not always lead to empowerment in places they reside (235). It is particularly difficult for immigrant children who grew up overseas. Having internalised the norms of their previous homes abroad, Ngan argues that immigrant children 'think, feel and behave differently from the locals, their notions of home and belonging and their sense of identity are transnationalised, and they thus are considered as a "stranger", even in their homeland' (Ngan 235). The complexity of the differentness of returnees is exacerbated by the fact that they 'look' Chinese but do not necessarily possess the internalised ideals (language, values and social behaviour) of 'being Chinese', thus leading to marginalisation and stigmatisation (Ngan 235–236).

Ngan claims that the experience of the offspring of return migrants has been scarcely discussed in literature. These children form a unique group of migrants as their diasporic experiences of home and belonging are uniquely spaced between the host country and homeland. In the host country, adult immigrants can experience liminality as they enter an ambiguous phase of separation and incorporation through the disjuncture of cultural experiences from one identity to another (238). In contrast to adult immigrants who possess a relatively clear sense of identity, the impact of migration may have a greater impact on their children (238). Chan and Chan's study on returning migrants in Hong Kong indicates that returnees are likely to move again due to feelings of alienation, of constantly being caught in an overlapping space, a grey area of belongingness and exclusion, intensifying their 'homeless minds' (Ngan 239).

The above research demonstrates the detrimental impact migration can have on one's sense of identity and belonging, in particular for those who have moved overseas at a young age. The idea of 'divided selves', the marginal man, and its resulting questions—Who am I? Where am I? Where am I going?' (Ngan 252)—are illustrative of this point. As a return migrant to Hong Kong myself, having moved to New Zealand at a young age, returning to Hong Kong for some of my primary and secondary schooling, then moving overseas to the United States for college, returning to Hong Kong to start my career as a young adult, and now returning again to live in New Zealand, these transnational movements of inhabiting more than one culture are very applicable to my research project. Below is a scene from the play in which I talk about the contrasting feelings related to my sense of identity growing up as a teenager in colonial Hong Kong, after immigrating to New Zealand as a young child:

Scene 2.1 Banana

In HK, outside parents' house at Perth Apartments/ near high school. Then walking along a busy street near Mong Kok MTR / Nathan Road.

CYNTHIA

Am I a banana?

(change tone slightly as if reciting definition from dictionary)

White on the inside, yellow on the outside.

(revert to conversational tone)

Well, maybe I used to think I was a banana, when I was growing up in Hong Kong, studying at a prestigious international school.

(change tone slightly as if reciting definition from dictionary)

Someone who is of Chinese ethnicity, but behaves more like a Western person in terms of language, lifestyle and their cultural identity. Someone who has assimilated into European or Western culture.

(revert to conversational tone)

As a teenager, my friends and I used to be proud that we could speak English so fluently, unlike the ‘local’ Hong Kong Chinese people.

I used to be feel quite ‘proud’ to be called a banana.

Not so much anymore.

I mean, I’m not sure that the term ‘banana’ is even an accurate description.

(emphasis, speak more slowly): I’m Chinese, how can I be ‘White’ on the inside?

Well...I studied under the British education system: took my GCSEs and A-levels.

I have lived overseas: in the States and now New Zealand.

But I also grew up watching TVB and 周星馳/ Chow Sing Chee, and listening to Beyond and 四大天王 / ‘4 dai teen wong’...

(increase in energy/enthusiasm):

I enjoy eating my 雲吞面 / wanton noodles and ‘雞蛋仔/ ‘gai dan jai’ and 豬腸粉 / ‘chu cheung fun’.

I like taking my walk from the busy MTR station back to my parent's home, looking at all the small interesting shops along the way.

And how the city is always alive and you can find a local 糖水 / 'tong sui' place for 芝麻糊 /

'zee ma wu' or 芒果西米露 / 'mung go sai mei lo' at 10pm at night.

(pause, change of tone):

But, I'm ashamed to admit, that I am more fluent in the English language than I am in my mother tongue.

In my twenties I enlisted my neighbour where she taught me how to read and write Chinese, and I helped her teenage son with his English essays.

That made me feel better.

(change tone, more enthusiastic)

At least I could sing Cantonese pop songs at karaoke and read the menu at our local 茶餐廳 / 'tsar charn teng'.

(emphasis: big question to audience and myself)

So... does that still make me 'White' on the inside?

(Lam, *Love Mum*, Scene 2.1. Banana)

The love of my Chinese culture and upbringing is contrasted with a sense of inferiority related to my Chinese ethnicity. When migrating to New Zealand as a young child, I had felt out of place, different and scared. When returning to my birth country as a returnee a few years later, I had experienced feeling out of place again, as I became alienated from the Chinese language and the local people, re-experiencing feelings of difference and otherness. Colonisation had assigned Whiteness and Western values as superior, therefore impacting my sense of self, identification and pride in my own culture and heritage.

This sense of confusion and oppression of growing up as a Chinese woman in a patriarchal, colonial and capitalist society has served as a backdrop to my enquiry, and together with my personal life experience has prompted me to write a one-woman autobiographical play about myself and my foremothers, a matrilineal memoir entitled 愛, 媽媽 (*Love, Mum*) which will be discussed in more detail in the following chapters.

The ‘Good Woman’ and Depression

Michelle Lafrance claims that feminist scholars have firmly situated women’s depression as a consequence of patriarchal society (1). The World Health Organisation cites depression as a leading cause of disability amongst women, ranking it as one of the most important health problems amongst women worldwide (Lafrance 2). According to the American Psychiatric Association, the risk of depression amongst adults is estimated to be between ten to twenty-five percent for women, and five to twelve percent for men. Although the likelihood of reporting and seeking help for depression amongst genders may contribute to the difference in these statistics, my research is focused on how hegemonic constructions of femininity are a major contributing factor to women’s pain and distress.

Lafrance claims that while depression continues to be the focus of attention and debate, researchers have largely ignored the expression of recovery from depression, which is the focus of her research (3). Her findings reveal that while women explained depression in a variety of ways, their accounts were notably gendered (11). In particular, she argues that ‘the socially revered “good” woman identity directs women to be pleasing and self-sacrificing, contentedly denying their own needs and pleasures in the interest of nurturing others’ (11). Thus, hegemonic constructions of femininity are implicated in women’s pain and distress.

Lafrance argues that mainstream formulations of depression rely on check marks of a symptom list that ignore the messy and complicated realities of women’s everyday lives (15). Referencing the work of Janet Stoppard and Jeanne Marecek, Lafrance concurs that when depression is constructed as an individual pathology—focusing on individual factors such as hormones, neurotransmitters in brain chemistry, and cognitive coping styles to explain women’s misery—the social and cultural context of her life is ignored (Lafrance 15). Therefore the

phenomenology of depression—the subjective and embodied experiences of what it feels like to be depressed—together with the cultural, social, political, economic and interpersonal facets of a woman's life is obscured (15).

Through her in-depth interviews with women who narrated their stories of depression and recovery, Lafrance uncovered a very different picture when she approached her research not from the standpoint of a diagnostician, but through aligning her view with that of the women. What she discovered was that ‘when women talk about being depressed, they talk of their lives, and in particular they talk of their lives as women’ (15). In fact, ‘many spoke of their struggles to be “good enough”—good enough mothers, wives, girlfriends, daughters’ (15). When women were given the opportunity to speak and to be heard, they spoke of victimisation, trauma and depression in the same breath, and of depression as being one of the worst times of their lives (15, 16).

Thus, we can see how a gendered lens comes to the fore when women speak of their experiences. Lafrance identifies the root causes of women’s depression as violence against women, poverty, women’s struggles in heterosexual relationships, and their everyday lives (65). Lafrance asks for the examination into systematic ways in which violence against women occurs. She claims that violence against women cannot be regarded as isolated events, but as one consequence of living in patriarchal society (19). She references the work of Jacquelyn White and James Frabutt who argue that since ‘men are accorded more value and power than women, they are situated in a web of interlocking ideological and institutional forces that secure their dominance across political, economic and social spheres, including those of family and interpersonal relations’ (Lafrance 19). Therefore, individual violence becomes a reflection and

embodiment of gendered social and cultural contexts, where men's dominance over women is displayed.

Women's relationships with men, and in particular within intimate partner relationships are discussed through the work of Dana Crowley Jack. Jack discusses how a 'loss of the self' is the most pervasive metaphor used when women describe their inner experience impacted by depression (29). Jack explains how in depression, the active, creative, spontaneous self is effectively silenced, robbing one of a sense of meaning and purpose, potentially leading to a veil of numbness (128). Jack utilises case studies on women with depression and their intimate relationships with their partners to state her case since she believes that a woman's primary relationship affects her core sense of identity: 'a person is brought into being, shaped and reflected in intimate attachments' (60). She quotes the words of R.D. Laing to argue her point: 'the sense of identity requires the existence of another by whom one is known; and a conjunction of this other person's recognition of one's self with self-recognition (qtd. in Jack 60).

Through her exploration of case studies on women with depression, she explains how this 'loss of self' is intimately linked to a loss of voice, women's inferior social position in relation to men, and cultural notions of what it means to be a 'good woman' and a 'good wife'. Firstly, she explains how the articulation of a 'loss of self' conveys numerous things, the first being a 'loss of *voice* in relationship':

Voice is an indicator of self. Speaking one's feelings and thoughts is part of creating, maintaining, and recreating one's authentic self. As these women fail to hear themselves speak to their partners, they are unable to sustain the convictions and feelings of "I" and slip, instead, into self-doubt about the legitimacy of their privately held experience.

(Jack 32)

When a woman denies her emotions and the validity of her inner feelings in order to preserve her relationship, outwardly presenting a duty-ridden ‘good self’, she ends up effectively betraying herself: ‘The wider the gap between outward presentation of self and inward experience, the more likely that a woman will feel anguish and despair over her inauthenticity and her self-betrayal’ (32).

Secondly, the loss of self happens when women try to fit into an image provided by external forces such as their husband, parental teachings, and culture (Jack 32). Jack quotes a woman in her case study who explains this as: ‘Trying to be the way that other person wants me to be instead of the way that I am’ (32). As I have demonstrated in my discussion on Confucius ideals of what a virtuous woman entails, these cultural messages are extremely powerful and durable. What it means to be a ‘good’ wife, a ‘good’ daughter, a ‘good’ woman in society have been passed down through the generations, seeping into women’s everyday lives.

Thirdly, Jack explains how women refrain from speaking out against their partners not only to avoid conflict but because they fear they may be wrong (33). Jack argues that this prevalent feeling of being ‘wrong’ relative to the male partner stems from women’s inferior social position relative to men, and not just based on her individual psychology (33). If a woman questions or confronts her male counterpart, she is in a very real sense going up against the masculinist culture, who has the force of Western civilisation and history behind him, a force that has consistently justified and elevated males whilst discounting and demeaning females (33). Women become alienated from their own ‘ways of knowing’, accommodating to cultural standards and practices that discount femininity itself, including its knowledge, perspective and values (33).

Women who are or were in abusive partner relationships describe this ‘loss of self’ to a loss of voice in a relationship, a loss of self-esteem, and unexpressed rage (36). This sense of connection, of speaking up, and of being heard, listened to and acknowledged is lacking:

Dialogue with an intimate partner, the interactive movement of speaking and listening, hearing and being heard, emerges in women’s narratives as critical to the experience of connection and to the ongoing life of the self. When dialogue dies, as it can with either person’s failure to speak, to hear, or to acknowledge the other, then part of the self also dies.

(Jack 36)

Depressed women in abusive intimate relationships recount how their desire to insert their voices, and thus their selves, into the relationship can lead to violence and intimidation in physical and/or verbal forms. Thus in order to avoid these aggressive outbursts, women adopt a self-censoring process and prefer to remain silent either out of fear of aggression or out of fear of losing the relationship. Jack argues that this exhausting process of continual self-censoring and of feeling invalidated within a relationship is part of what leads to an existential sense of a loss of self, and thus to depression (Jack 37).

When women try to live up to this ideal of a ‘wife’ or ‘good woman’ learned from modelling their parents or the wider culture, they may end up adapting to the needs of those around them, putting others before themselves, and thus becoming alienated from their true selves (Jack 44, 45). The message that women receive is: ‘alter the self in order to connect in ways believed to be pleasing to the man’ (46). These attachment behaviours, which are culturally defined as feminine and taught to girls at a young age—helping, pleasing, oneness, self-silencing, all these ‘shoulds’ that women should adhere to—undermine women’s sense of self-

esteem and their sense of self, potentially leading to depression (Jack 55–56, 62). These idealised images of feminine virtue, ‘a good woman’ are extremely durable, their historical legacy living on in the inherited collective image of the feminine (Jack 85).

In alignment with this argument is the work of Jill Reynolds and Margaret Wetherell which is referenced by Lafrance: ‘despite women’s advances socially, their value often remains at least partly dependent upon their ability to attract and hold male attention, and women who fail to do so are readily positioned as object—as the sad spinster, unwanted woman, and representation of failed femininity’ (Lafrance 23). Therefore, born out of this desire to secure relationships, women learn to strive to be what is socially most desired and valued: the ‘good’ woman.

Lafrance also listened to how women were consumed by domestic practices that were governed by the needs of others (28). Women’s everyday lives appeared to be organised in relation to discourses of femininity. The practices of femininity are the actions through which women regulate and govern themselves in adherence to what they consider to be the ‘proper’ ideals, which become markers of a woman’s worth (Lafrance 29).

I think what is important to note in all of these different circumstances that may contribute to a women’s state of depression, is that women’s suffering is often dismissed and silenced by others, and regarded as incomprehensible to the women themselves (Lafrance 46, 49). Lafrance explains that discourses of femininity—which involves how women and society understand and construct the idea of womanhood—serve to silence women’s pain in multiple ways. She explains how ‘when a woman’s life fits within the parameters of “the good woman’s good life”, she may be left without ways of understanding feelings of distress and dissatisfaction’ since it is perceived that women should be content in their prescribed roles (50). Secondly,

practices of femininity often ignore the ways in which women's physical, mental and emotional energies become depleted. Women's work is rendered invisible, and the splitting of women into Madonna or whore, angel or monster, good or bad, leaves them with no room to express their distress (50). Therefore, it becomes difficult for women to make changes in their lives and to relinquish the markers of a 'good' woman without invoking moral judgement (50). In some cases, when a woman tries to understand the source of her depression, her everyday life and the socio-cultural environment remain invisible as possible sources of her pain (Lafrance 50). In these cases, women may default to the biomedical reasoning as the source for her pain.

It should be noted though, that not all women in relationships experience a sense of disempowerment and feeling like they need to sacrifice parts of themselves in order to serve the needs of their partners or others. Intimate partner relationships can also be extremely rewarding, leading to a sense of safety, fulfilment, and empowerment. The case studies and research presented above are utilised to render visible certain aspects of a woman's life which may lead to depression and silencing of the self, aspects which may not be 'conscious' as they can be so embedded and regarded as the 'norm' in a woman's life.

In terms of my own depression, I have always had a hard time admitting this to myself. Having depression made me feel weak, vulnerable and that there was something inherently wrong with me. I wanted to appear strong. I thought that with my own willpower, through the reading of self-help books, I would be able to 'cure' myself. When I embarked on the writing journey for my play, the below thoughts and feelings just tumbled out of me. Below is the opening scene to my play, and the first vignette which I had written. This is the edited version for the final play script:

Scene 1.1 Intro/ About my Mother

In living room, New Zealand

Addresses audience

CYNTHIA

So... I've been meaning to talk about my mother.

She's all I've been thinking of since yesterday evening. As I was hanging my clothes in my closet, I saw this neon-pink windbreaker jacket that my mother had gifted me on my last visit back to Hong Kong.

And so I sent my parents a message on our family group chat, saying: 'Saw this in my closet, reminds me of our good times going down to eat dessert and walking around Kowloon park in the winter evening!'

But what I really wanted to say — was to send a personal message to my mum saying: 'I miss you, I love you [heart emoji]'. But I didn't.

I've been meaning to talk to my mum since yesterday, but I've been putting it off.

Like how I always put things off.

And what do I do? I retreat inside my head — into the world of ideas and intellectual thoughts, as ‘that’s where I feel safe’ — as my psychoanalyst would say.

Because whenever I think of my mother, and our relationship — or the relationship I could’ve had with her if I wasn’t so angry or sad for the past two decades of my life — I want to cry.

The thing is, is that I’ve repressed my anger for so long — that I ceased to feel.

I felt ‘numb’/ ‘nothing’ for the longest time.

But I never could really admit this to myself, until now.

Other people are depressed, but not me.

Or I would say ‘I was mildly depressed when I was in college, but I’ve read so many self-help books that I’m OK, I’ve cured myself’.

Anyways, I really should call my mother — I’ve been putting it off

(Lam, *Love Mum*, Scene 1.1 Intro / About my Mother)

In some ways, this was the first time I openly admitted to having depression, putting it into writing to be potentially made public. Reading back, I am still not one hundred percent forthcoming. I replace the word depression with words such as feeling ‘numb’, ‘sad’ and ‘repressed anger’. I talk about ‘being mildly depressed’ and how ‘other people are depressed, but not me’. This could partly stem from social stigma attached to people with mental health issues who are perceived as emotionally unstable and incompetent, and my wanting to appear ‘strong’. I did not view my sensitivity, vulnerability and anger as positive traits to possess. I did not want to acknowledge these ‘negative’ emotions, and censored certain feelings and behaviours that I felt were socially unacceptable. However, by not embracing both my strengths and vulnerability, the full range and flow of my emotions, I ended up feeling dead inside.

I did not want to look at the wound inside of me, the part that felt fragile and sore, the part that was hurting. I would look away, and delude myself that I was okay, that I can fix this on my own. Therefore, by admitting my depression, by committing it onto the page, by writing it down, became the first step towards my healing.

In this chapter, although I have discussed how hegemonic constructions of femininity—‘the good woman’ ideal—have contributed to women’s depression, women can and do recover from their depressive states. In the next chapter, I will explore how women resist and ‘talk back’ to these dominant discourses and practices that seek to silence and oppress them through the use of counter narratives and counter discourses. I will illustrate this through my own creative process of writing my play.

Chapter Three: Creative Process Part One—The Writing / Counter-Storying Women's Lives

In order to conduct my analysis, I would like to bring us back to my main research question:

How does the process of writing and performing one's life experiences and trauma act as a form of resistance to the dominant 'good woman' narrative, leading to personal healing, empowerment and transformation?

In order to answer my research question, I will be discussing my own creative process, and how the writing and performance of my one-woman show (愛, 媽媽 (*Love, Mum*)) becomes a form of resistance and counter-narrative to the 'good woman' ideal, leading to personal healing and transformation. I will be examining my creative process in three distinct stages:

Stage One: The writing process

Stage Two: The rehearsal process

Stage Three: The performance process

Throughout this chapter and subsequent chapters documenting the creation of my playscript from writing to performance, I will be examining the creative process using the relevant theoretical frameworks, as well as utilising the overarching principles of ATP and Judith Herman's stages of trauma recovery for analysis.

In this chapter, I will be exploring the first stage of my creative process—the writing of my playscript, and discuss how women's stories hold the potential to disrupt hegemonic systems of meaning by bringing awareness and talking back to socio-cultural expectations of the 'good woman'.

Women and Counter-stories

Feminist scholars and activists Suzanne McKenzie-Mohr and Michelle N. Lafrance describe how women's stories hold the potential to disrupt hegemonic systems of meaning through counter-stories and discursive resistance (202). Their research came about when they discovered that a common struggle amongst women's accounts was the difficulty to tell their stories and make meaning against dominant understandings (Lafrance and McKenzie-Mohr 2). Their work describes how women attempt to 'counter-story' their lives when prevailing discourses and hegemonic narratives are unhelpful, and even harmful (1).

Stories matter, they are not merely reflective, but also have a constitutive and performative effect (2). They enable people to make sense of their worlds, by being 'shared linguistic templates that legitimise claims, justify, provoke, explain, and bring some things into view while ignoring others. They direct us to what is good and valuable, and to what is wrong, and in doing so shape our subjectivities and choices for action' (3). Stories illuminate different facets of the human experience, providing a blueprint for people to make sense of their lives:

Stories animate human life; that is their work. Stories work with people, for people, and always work *on* people, affecting what people are able to see as real, as possible, and as worth doing or best avoided [...] human life depends on the stories we tell: the sense of self that those stories impart, the relationships constructed around shared stories, and the sense of purpose that stories both propose and foreclose.

(Frank 3)

Furthermore, stories are not merely individual creations, but are born out of social and political environments. Humans are born into a culture that has been permeated by narratives which they refer to in their daily lives and social interactions (Lafrance and McKenzie-Mohr 2–3). However, it is important to note that not all narratives hold equal power and status. There are stories that have been elevated to become what is known as ‘master-status’, ‘master narratives’, ‘dominant discourses’ or ‘canonical narratives’. This happens when certain narratives become ‘expected stories’ where their storylines and vocabularies are easily understood and taken for granted as legitimate knowledge and truth (3). In this regard, master narratives hold rhetorical power and become more ‘tellable’ and ‘hearable’ than marginalised alternatives (3).

The familiarity that turns narratives into ‘common sense’ can also render them invisible, allowing them to wield their power in imperceptible ways (3). The process of learning master narratives has been likened to the unconscious learning of language through repeated exposure, which can come to us through family, media and the wider social-cultural environment.

When master narratives contain such immense power to enable people to make sense of their lives, we can argue that they can be used for both utility and harm. On the one hand, stories can provide guidance through their teachings; but on the other hand, they can limit the possibilities for individualised roles and constrain our choices if they veer from the master narrative (4). Lafrance and McKenzie-Mohr cite the work of Molly Andrews to summarise their argument:

One of the key functions of master narratives is that they offer people a way of identifying what is assumed to be a normative experience. In this way, such storylines serve as a blueprint for all stories; they become the vehicle through which we

comprehend not only the stories of others, but crucially of ourselves as well. For ultimately, the power of master narratives derives from their internalisation. Wittingly or unwittingly, we become the stories we know, and the master narrative is reproduced.

(qtd. in LaFrance and McKenzie-Mohr 4)

Due to the imperceptibility of master narratives, women and men can unintentionally absorb and circulate dominant ideologies even though they may be harmful and discriminatory towards women and marginalised groups. Therefore highlighting the ways in which dominant discourses are omnipresent and yet also invisible (LaFrance and McKenzie-Mohr 5).

Writing the Play / Counter-Storying Our Lives / The Ethics of Autoethnography

In the face of master narratives that are harmful to women within a dominant patriarchal culture, what can women do as a form of resistance? Feminist scholars propose the idea of discursive resistance, often conceptualised in terms of ‘counter-narratives’, ‘counter-discourses’, or ‘counter-stories’ that disrupt hegemonic framings of social realities (LaFrance and McKenzie-Mohr 7). As counter-stories are positioned in direct opposition to master narratives, they can shine a light on normalised master framings and thus rendering them visible (7). This visibility can then expose and make people aware of the underlying politics at work behind a master narrative, and the interests of those they serve and those they seek to undermine. Counter-stories therefore disrupt dominant ideologies and allows individuals to have more agency to intentionally assess and evaluate which narratives they would like to accept and those they prefer to reject. (8). Counter-stories can offer an alternate vision and way of living, altering not only people’s understanding of themselves but also our collective understandings (8).

Some of these master narratives that I grew up with were related to how my life trajectory was supposed to look like, which included being married with a man and having children by a certain age. To hold down a stable nine-to-five job in a professional or business capacity in order to earn a good income. To take care of the household and be a supportive wife and obedient daughter-in-law. I cannot say that these are not ideal aspirations to have, but I had taken this trajectory as ‘normal’. It was the only acceptable way to live and that any deviation would mean that I had ‘failed’ in some way or that there was something wrong with me. It was not something that I had ever questioned. But what if deep down I wanted a different way of living, a different vocation? What if I had tried to push down these yearnings and instead lived on auto-pilot, numbing myself in order to try to fit in with society? Therefore in order to choose a different vocation, I had to explore and take risks on my own. It was like heading into a strange dark forest, whose path was not illuminated and marked out. Therefore, by choosing the path that I did—leaving my corporate job and marriage in Hong Kong, and coming to New Zealand to study English literature and creative writing in order to pursue my passion of becoming a writer—is a rupture to the master narrative accorded to women.

At the same time, when writing and reflecting on the lives of my foremothers, I realised that they in some ways, had also chosen a different path. They were not the submissive and passive women touted by Confucius values. Although I never met my Ah Ye, my Ah Mah was very much the matriarch of our family. She had survived the war and had walked from her hometown to Hong Kong with a few of her friends for a better life. She was loud, robust and hardworking. My Por Por had travelled to Taiwan to reunite with my Gung Gung. She was vibrant, had a cheeky sense of humour and rode horses when she was young. All of these being courageous acts by strong and fierce women. My mother was a passionate career woman,

dedicating herself to her corporate job and cultivating relationships with her clients and staff. She was not a typical housewife. She told me that whenever she went to work, she viewed it as ‘going into battle’. She wore professional looking suits as she did not want her colleagues to ‘view her as a woman’ (Love Mum, Scene 1.2). I think what she meant is that she wanted her peers to view her as their equal, someone who is competent and effective at her job.

Therefore, recounting a small part of my foremothers’ life stories becomes a form of counter-narrative as it goes against the stereotype of the subservient and obedient woman who lives to serve and please others. Although there are nuances in every relationship and family dynamic and nothing is ever black and white, I believe that by showcasing stories of these courageous women who possess strength and self-determination is a rupture to dominant discourses regarding the ‘good woman’ ideal.



Fig 3. Playing character of my mother as a kick-ass career woman in the world of finance in 愛, 媽媽 (*Love, Mum*), Auckland, September 2022. Photo by Shelton Leong.

I had mentioned earlier that when I began to write my play, I did not know exactly where it was going to take me, nor what my play was actually going to be about. I knew that I was unhappy, and I sensed that it was partly due to my socio-cultural environment in which I was trying to live up to the ‘good woman’ ideal. I had hoped that through the process of writing, I would be able to work something out, bring something to light and gain a better understanding: ‘I guess I wrote this play as I wanted to understand myself and how I came to be. [...] why I felt that I couldn’t speak up as a woman, thinking that to be quiet and calm and elegant was the ‘ideal’, putting others’ needs ahead of mine’. I had also sensed, that this understanding and

awareness was going to come through the writing and performing of the stories of myself and my foremothers: ‘and my way into that, was in reliving and embodying the lives and experiences of my mother, my Ah Mah and my Por Por’ (Lam, *Love Mum* early draft, Prologue).

The writing process for my playscript was emotive and instinctual. I wrote my play based on ‘bursts’, meaning that I did not plan my writing in a highly structured or chronological way. Most times, I would be engaged in a quiet activity such as making tea, and an emotion, memory or an image would come to my attention. This image, feeling or memory would spark in me a desire to write. Most times, I would not know where the writing would lead to, but I would trust my instinct and let the writing flow out of me. These writing bursts resulted in short vignettes, usually around one to two pages long. I would show these to Stuart Hoar (hereafter: Stuart), my creative supervisor. During this stage of the creative process, we were meeting on a weekly basis, and every week I might have one or two vignettes to discuss with him.

These vignettes were not written in any particular order, but they were all related to my mother, and my relationship with her, or they were about my life and my struggles, or about my two grandmothers. I remember the first time I showed my writing to Stuart, I felt rather vulnerable. It felt like a ‘confessional’ type of writing like I was showing someone something I had written in my diary, intended for my eyes only. I almost did not show my writing to him, as I felt a bit embarrassed about my emotional outburst. To my surprise, Stuart was intrigued, and encouraged me to write more.

We operated on a premise that whatever I chose to reveal, I could always edit out later. I had the power to not make anything public that I felt uncomfortable about. Thus making me feel safe to continue writing in this way. I think the ability to create a safe writing space was one of the reasons why I ended up writing the way that I did.

The care taken towards myself and my story is one of the ethical considerations needed to be considered during autoethnographic research. As the writer and actor performing autobiographical material containing elements of trauma, there have been concerns from scholars regarding the idea of re-traumatisation: ‘a question emerges regarding the potential danger of re-traumatising a person through the reenactment of traumatic events or experiences, over and over again, both in rehearsals and in shows’ (Pendzik, “Performance” 251). In my case, I went into this project with a sense of empowerment and purpose. In ATP, the goal towards healing is driven by the actor, and not by the director. Therefore, the power imbalance that usually exists in most theatrical productions where the director holds most of the power were not present. I was always consulted in any artistic decisions, and I felt that I could always edit my stories, removing parts which made me feel vulnerable and too exposed.

Another major ethical concern in life writing or autobiographical performance is writing/performing the lives of other people. I realised that this was going to be a sensitive matter when writing about my experiences with family and intimate partners. I had given this a lot of thought during the writing process, and treaded with care. I did not want to harm or anger anyone, yet at the same time, I could not have written my story without interweaving parts of other people’s story, since our lives are intrinsically linked. Bochner explains that ‘as an ethical practice, autoethnography is stepped in competing interests. Autoethnographies move events and situations of private interest into the public domain. Human beings are relationship beings, and thus every story of the self is a story of relations with others’ (76). Freeman discusses this dilemma:

Ethics depends on the position from which we are viewing, and also from the time.

Would Nelson Mandela have needed permission from his Robben Island guards before he

could tell his story, if indeed the story he told could be said to have been his to tell? Does a victim of crime need permission from the perpetrator? Does an abused child need permission from the abuser before s/he is able to talk? Does an ex-wife need her former husband's consent in order to write about their marriage and subsequent divorce? [...] Of course, gaining permission is usually the best and safest option, just as letting all concerned have pre-publication/pre-submission approval is considered desirable, but such does not always happen, not least because issues of positive ethical consideration can morph all too easily into issues of pedantic ethical control.

(Freeman 97)

The alternative may be to choose silence, yet self-silencing is also not an ethical ideal (Bochner 77). Bochner claims that 'to a large extent, the calling of autoethnography is to bring stories shrouded in secrecy into public awareness' (76): 'we know how frightening and harmful matters not spoken of can be' (Bochner 76-77). When we bring our private stories into the public realm, it may be beneficial to others who may take cues on how to deal with similar situations:

To bring evocative insights to the dramas of life, you go public with the kind of secrets and unmentionables that you usually cram in the back of the closet [...]. Picking the ripened fruit of your lived experience, you interrogate various ways of dealing with life in the here and now by reflecting on a particular there and then, putting your consciousness on the page and thereby showing how a person might endure life's injustice, pain, and suffering, or escape it, or cope with it.

(Bochner 71)

In my play, it was unavoidable to talk about some of the key relationships that formed who I had become and the decisions that landed where I am today. Freeman explains that 'telling stories is

a fundamental part of being human and few if any stories exist without implications for someone, somewhere. Narrating lives then, narrating real lives, is not just something people do, it is part of what people are' (98). In a matrilineal memoir, my relationship with my mother was one of the foundational premises behind my work. Therefore, I went into this process with a high level of care and thought. I did not want to write anything that would hurt my mother. At the same time, I wanted to be truthful to my experience. I had to balance being authentic to my story and protecting those I loved. Therefore, there were certain instances where I asked for my mother's approval to share a particular story which I thought may have contained sensitive material or would make her feel vulnerable.

Other factors which I took into consideration included not naming my ex-partner and removing any identifying information. I tried to centre the story on my experience with him, rather than about him. Therefore, there were some scenes in early drafts which I omitted from the final script. All in all, I wanted to respect my story and my experience, and although some of the details were omitted, at the heart of it, I wanted to be able to express something that is, in essence, emotionally truthful.

After I had written over fifty pages of these vignettes, we got together to start categorising them, such as 'Por Por's story', 'Ah Mah's story' or 'Cynthia and mother's story'. I started to see that the vignettes could be ordered and re-ordered according to how I wanted my story to flow. As part of the creative process, I printed out each vignette on a separate sheet of paper and laid them around a large table according to their original sequence. Stuart and I then went around the table, looking at the scenes, discussing, categorising, and re-ordering them. We played around with this

process, and it helped me to make sense and ‘digest’ what I had written. It also made me realise the ‘fluidity’ of my story.

What I had to take into account was that I was creating the text for a play. This was difficult for me as my writing could also be read like a memoir, and I loved the poetry and all the words and descriptive writing I had used. Since this was a performance piece, I had to bear in mind that the piece worked on text and visual imagery within a certain time limit, and I did not want to be seen reading a large chunk of text on stage. Therefore, I had a lot of editing to do. What made it easier was that we decided that we could end up with two versions of what I had written: a performance text for my thesis, and another version which could be published as a memoir afterwards. This made it easier for me during the editing process, as I felt that I was not ‘throwing away’ a lot of my writing.

In retrospect, I realised that writing in this way felt very freeing and liberating. I did not have to adhere to a certain narrative writing structure or follow a particular order. I was writing based on a mood, emotion, image or a memory that moved me. I wrote in my creative journal during this time: ‘It got me thinking, that how I wrote it was freeing and liberating. I wrote it based on an “impulse”, driven by feelings and imagery (or an image) rather than logical thought. I didn’t have to think “how to connect this scene to the next” or “does it flow logically?”’ (Lam, CJ, July 21 2021).

I mused in my creative journal in regards to my writing process: ‘This I could say, is a “feminine” way of writing—as I’m not following the “rules and logic” of writing in the “normal” way of structure and dialogue and what not. There was no “cause and effect” (Lam, CJ, 21 July 2021). This poses some questions for me to continue and explore in my research: What is

considered a ‘feminine’ way of writing and expression? Could the simple fact that I wrote this ‘organically’ and by not following the usual way of writing be considered anti-patriarchal? And if so, how? If I had to follow this line of argument, then would I first need to demonstrate and prove that the established form of writing is ‘patriarchal’, and would the fact that because literature was previously written and dominated by men be enough of an argument?

Maybe instead of this, I should focus on how different theorists have tried to argue this point, whether directly or indirectly. New Zealand dancer and academic Karen Nicole Barbour writes: ‘As a feminist, I am interested in critiquing dominant Western knowledge’ (Barbour, *Dancing* 28). Although Barbour’s work focuses on dance, her research into solo female performances based on personal narratives and lived experience is relevant to my work. In one of her interviews with fellow female solo dancer Raewyn Thorburn, they discuss ‘the colonisation of the body’ by a patriarchal control of how the body is supposed to move:

When I began training in modern dance, jazz and ballet, my dance voice was reshuffled and at times torturously categorised to the norms of those codified techniques. My natural sense of weight and momentum in space was pruned, coerced or restricted into patriarchal criteria of how the body worked. Also, the presence of self-expression of one’s own creativity was ignored and even denied.

(Thorburn as qtd. in Barbour, *Dancing* 53)

Thorburn is making the argument that codified dance techniques are ‘unnatural’ to the way how a body moves, and are thus conforming to patriarchal criteria and beliefs as to how the body worked. In response to this, Thorburn has created her own solo dance work:

I am allowing myself to take full ownership of my movement again. Now dance comes from all things that influence me. I'm allowing a natural process or impulse—the impulse to allow movement to be alive, active, to let it “speak”, to listen nerve and bone to it. That's the place that the work comes from. It's an integrated place. It's very alive and fertile and there's an immediacy of action. It's like you commit yourself to your own aesthetic and to your own body: it's that simple and that demanding.

(Thorburn as qtd. in Barbour, *Dancing* 53)

Thorburn is saying that by listening to her own body and to her impulses, and allowing her body to move in a way that does not adhere to restricted forms and traditions, she has created a feminine way of expression. Thorburn's way of creating her solo dance piece echoes my process of creating my solo play. By following the impulse that has arisen from my own feelings and subconscious mind, I have been able to draw out something from inside me, and have used that to create a piece of outward expression through words.

Following one's impulse and trusting in the unfolding of the creative process is touted by artists and creative practitioners. Julia Cameron discusses how creativity requires faith, and that faith requires that we relinquish control (193). She continues to elaborate: 'Creativity—like human life itself—begins in darkness', and that 'bright ideas are preceded by a gestation period that is interior, murky, and completely necessary' (194). Ideas, she argues, are like stalactites and stalagmites, forming in the dark inner cave of consciousness: 'they form in drips and drops, not by squared-off building blocks' (194–195). She warns that 'as creative channels, we need to trust the darkness' (195). This process reminds me of my own writing process, when I wrote vignettes inspired by a memory or an emotion. I did not know where these short bursts of text would lead,

but I continued to follow this creative impulse, until I was able to start weaving all the vignettes together to form a coherent narrative.

In the framework of ATP, Pendzik uses the term ‘poiesis’, the Greek root for the word ‘poetry’, to describe the creative process which she associates with the unconscious forces at work: ‘*Poiesis* is not what we do, but what occurs when we allow the creative process to unfold’ (Pendzik, “Poiesis” 9). She argues that in order to allow ample space for poiesis, performers need to allow the process to lead them (10). During the initial phase of ATP, the creation of an empty space is required so that ‘the light can be perceived. This state of mind evokes a surrendering to the world of dreams, but one in which we actually never fall asleep; for our self-awareness alternates from leading to being led by the process, from conscious search to unconscious exploration from left to right brain hemisphere’ (10). Pendzik likens this to the hero’s journey and an initiation rite: ‘a step towards the unfamiliar must be taken if an initiatory process is to take place. I believe that if a theme or idea need to be addressed, they will persevere and return of their own accord; but that neither the creative power of poiesis, nor therapeutic insight, will manifest in a process that is not open enough to the unknown’ (10). The ability to sit with the unknown is also demonstrated in the process of autoethnography, which Bochner describes: ‘To be alive is to be uncertain. As an autoethnographer I’ve spent many hours at my desk pointed in the direction of the unknown, attempting to make something out of the ambiguity of my experience, only to find myself immersed in doubt. [...] Other genres of empirical inquiry show an insatiable appetite for abstractions, facts, and rigour; we hunger after details, meanings, and peace of mind. These are not issues to be resolved, only differences to be lived with’ (77). As demonstrated in my own creative process, I had to sit with the unknown and allow the unconscious and instinctual to guide me.

Healing from Trauma through Writing

So how does writing about one's emotions and difficult experiences promote healing? Pendzik claims that the act of narrating aspects of our lives helps people to make sense of their experiences (Pendzik, "Performance" 251). She references Dan McAdams who argues that weaving traumatic events into a coherent narrative enables people to better cope with it; this is particularly true in trauma, where the narrative is broken and the events seem to make no sense at all (Pendzik, "Performance" 251–252). Rubin references her own experience to claim that stepping into the role of storyteller afforded her the humour and distance to step into and out of the trauma and shame from her childhood, as the storyteller wove a coherent narrative (138).

The second key element is shaping the experience into aesthetic forms. Pendzik compares this process to therapy: 'Just as therapy is not only about listening attentively to a client's story, but also about helping the client to deconstruct unhelpful narratives and reframe them, the ATP facilitator works through story, helping the client to elaborate the material by searching for aesthetic forms into which the experiences can be shaped (Pendzik, "Performance" 252).

In my case, the shaping of my life events into an aesthetic form was self-directed. The emotive and instinctual writing process allowed me to release some of my emotions, which I had partly repressed. I realised that by using the form of story to frame or reframe my experiences enabled me to 'contain' painful material in a way that felt manageable. This was very much true when I was writing about some of the experiences with my ex-husband in Scene 2.7 'The Power of Three'. I had decided to use a literary device, namely 'the rule of three' to list out three traumatic experiences. This allowed me to 'contain' the trauma whilst remaining truthful in my narration. By shaping my material into an aesthetic literary form, it afforded me some emotional distance whilst remaining faithful to my material.

Volkas likens the performer's quest to heal themselves as an initiation rite, following a similar pattern to Joseph Campbell's *the hero's journey* (114). Campbell's theory of the monomyth in his ground-breaking book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) is a study of comparative mythology in which he discusses the idea of an archetypal hero found in myths around the world. Campbell asserts that the Hero's journey followed a basic pattern of Departure, Initiation, and Return (Janet Croft 217; Dee Goertz 69). During the first phase of initiation, the hero departs his ordinary world. A threshold is crossed usually with the help of a supernatural aid as the hero embarks on his adventure. Some form of self-annihilation, or a symbolic death or rebirth, is experienced. In the second phase of initiation, the hero goes through various trials, culminating in a supreme ordeal which results in him winning his reward or boon. Finally in the last phase, the hero returns to his own world (Goertz 69). When the hero returns, it is usually expected that he is a changed man—could be in skills, maturity or experience—and that he is able to share the fruits of his boon with his community.

Volkas explains that the process of psychotherapy generally follows the structure of an initiation rite of passage: the client embarks on a journey towards change, confronts the unknown and returns to a changed self. However, 'what is different in ATP is that the spiritual and emotional emergency, often necessary for therapeutic change to occur, is self-induced by the client, with the guidance of the therapist/director' (114). In a larger psychological sense, the performance signals a transformation in which the initiate is reborn into a new role (114).

Although ATP is not a socially recognised rite of passage, Volkas argues that the processes involved during ATP can give access through which therapeutic change can take place (116). ATP offers a drama-therapeutic structure for performers to transition from one state of being to another, such as 'from grief and loss to embracing life again, from rage at an absent

parent to making peace with the limitations they had, from a state of fear to finding courage and standing up for their own emotional rights' (117). Similar in many initiation rites, a breaking down of old belief systems and a psychological opening up occurs in many ATP clients as they experience personal transformation (117).

During my own creative process, I could say that my 'rite of passage' began when I started to create my autobiographical play, *愛, 媽媽 (Love, Mum)*. The intention of wanting to work through my issues was the driving force behind the conception of my one-woman show, which was signalled earlier in my prologue mentioned in chapter one. My wanting to 'lay something to rest' in order 'to move forward in my life with happiness and forgiveness and awareness' signals a desire for something to transform. It demonstrates my intention of 'working through' past and present issues of trauma in order to heal and move forward in my life.

From a psychiatric and psychotherapeutic standpoint, Judith Herman discusses how recovery from trauma unfolds in three stages. These are as follows (155):

1. The first stage is the establishment of safety.
2. In the second stage, the central task is remembrance and mourning.
3. The third stage concerns reconnection with ordinary life.

Herman iterates that these stages of recovery are a convenient fiction and not to be taken too literally since stages of recovery are inherently complex (155). Her three stages of recovery are an attempt to impose simplicity and order. Herman explains how others have divided their stages of recovery into further stages, and that no single course of recovery follows these stages in a linear sequence, and most often oscillate back and forth (155).

Although Herman's analysis focuses on treating patients in a clinical setting, I see similarities in how the three stages of recovery proposed by Herman are not unlike the processes of healing and transformation outlined in ATP, and the process which I myself experienced.

This initiation rite outlined in ATP, mimics that of the hero's journey which I have discussed earlier. Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner sum up the three principal phases involved in rites of passage:

1. Separating the individuals involved from their preceding social state.
2. A period of transition or initiation in which they are neither one thing nor the other.
3. A reintegration phase during which, through various rites of incorporation, they are absorbed into their new social state.

(Volkas 117).

The key point is that the individual departs from 'ordinary life' and goes on a journey which could be an emotional journey into their past. This journey could be achieved through the reliving of past traumatic experiences through art, writing and performance. There, they confront some key challenges which could be psychological in nature. During this process, they are in a liminal or transitional state. One of the key characteristics of this liminal stage is the psychological opening up of the individual to their profound interior changes (Volkas 117). This psychological openness is achieved through rituals designed to break down the individual's belief system, the internal mental structures of concepts and categories through which they perceive and interpret the world and their relationship to it (117). The individual then experiences a form of rebirth, and returns transformed. Volkas concludes that ATP gives people the opportunity to give aesthetic form to wounding experiences and negative messages that have shaped them, helping them to reintegrate traumas into a new life-affirming sense of self (126).

Stage One: Establishment of Safety

I will break-down Herman's stages of recovery, to demonstrate how the processes involved in ATP and my own creative process hold many similarities. In this chapter, I will focus on discussing the first two stages: the establishment of safety, and remembrance and mourning. Stage three: reconnection with ordinary life will be discussed in subsequent chapters.

In the first stage of recovery 'the establishment of safety', the therapist focuses on establishing a trusting relationship with the patient and diagnosing the disorder. Traumatic symptoms cannot be treated properly if they are not diagnosed accurately through informed diagnostic evaluation (Herman 156). Safety also means restoring power and control to the patient, since trauma robs the victim of these attributes (159). Establishing safety begins by focusing on control of the body and gradually moving outwards to the environment (160). Issues of bodily integration include managing sleep, diet, exercise and the control of self-destructive behaviours. Environmental safety includes safe living conditions, financial security and a plan for self-protection (160).

When working within ATP, the processes may cover and overlap one or more of the recovery stages outlined by Herman in relation to trauma. An example is how Sheila Rubin, a director of Self-Revelatory (Self-Rev) theatre, who created her own process which she terms *Embodied Life Stories*, describes how she approaches her work. Rubin describes her process of establishing safety for the performer through witnessing, storytelling and counter-shaming:

The role of the self-revelatory director as the first witness can mirror the attachment of early childhood. The role of the audience as witness can repair a vital link, bringing the person back into the community from isolation. The act of unpacking stories, first to the

self-revelatory director, then to the audience, can be profoundly healing and transforming.

(129)

As mentioned earlier, stories can also act as a container and create a sense of safety for the performer as some emotional distance is created from the retelling of past events. Rubin explains that ‘when there has been trauma, the stories that would have naturally flowed outward can get truncated, withheld, or lost. The level of support and attunement between the self-revelatory director and the storyteller can create a safe-enough container for the student to step out of shame and feel and express his or her true self’ (130). She describes Self-Rev as a process that transforms painful material—something that is on a person’s psychological edge, that perhaps they want to move forward but do not know how—into art (131). Thus art and storytelling can help the individual to separate, even if only by an incremental amount, from painful past events so they can try to put it into a coherent narrative.

During my own writing process, I experienced something similar with my creative supervisor. I started by writing about my relationship with my mother. I was caught by an emotion and just followed it. However, I then felt embarrassed with this personal revelation and did not want to send this to him. He in turn, reassured me. His reassurance came from his encouragement, and his promise that any writing that I did was between me and him, and that we could edit anything out that I felt uncomfortable with before showing it to any other third party. He therefore created an environment in which I felt I could write freely. Below are two of my early entries in my creative journal:

March 12 2020

I began my writing simply by impulse and instinct. I got caught up in an emotion in which I was thinking about my mother and our relationship. I got emotional, and began writing in my journal. I typed this up, and hesitated before sending it off. To my surprise, Stuart liked my writing, and it got him interested in the story, the character in the story, and the writing. Today, we talked about my fear of being too 'self-absorbed'. He mentioned that 'it's personal, not self-absorbed', which gave me the confidence and courage to continue in this rather 'personal vein' of writing. (Lam, CJ)

March 19 2020

I've realised that I've been 'evading' telling my story. I've been throwing in things I've written in the past, my story written in the third person coated in mythology, my first poem that I wrote about my traumatic experience with my manic ex-husband embedded in symbolism and mythic figures and dreams. Stuart would like me to just tell my story, simply and directly. I have an issue with my writing being too personal and revealing too much. I'm worried that it might hurt people I know, those closest to me like my family (if one day, they shall read this monologue I have written). I have a lot of fear and worries holding me back. A tip I learnt from Stuart though, he told me that I should just write it, and the editing is when I can take out anything I think was too personal or hurtful. Thus, I will continue and try again... (Lam, CJ)

Therefore, the sense of emotional and psychological safety I felt had come from the space created by my creative supervisor, as well as the artform of storytelling that provided me with an aesthetic form to contain painful material whilst remaining truthful to my experience.

Stage Two: Remembrance and Mourning

Herman's second stage of recovery focuses on remembrance and mourning. This is when the patient tells the story of the trauma: 'She tells it completely, in depth and in detail. This work of reconstruction actually transforms the traumatic memory, so that it can be integrated into the survivor's life story' (Herman 175). The basic principle of empowerment applies during this stage. The therapist plays the role of witness and ally, as the patient confronts the past, speaking the unspeakable (175).

In order to reconstruct the traumatic event, the therapist and patient slowly reassemble fragments of memory and sensation into an organised and detailed verbal account, oriented in time and historical context (177).

The role of the therapist is to 'help the patient move back and forth in time, from her protected anchorage in the present to the immersion in the past, so that she can simultaneously reexperience the feelings in all their intensity while holding on to the sense of safe connection that was destroyed in the traumatic moment' (178). Herman emphasises that reconstructing the trauma story also includes 'a systematic review of the meaning of the event, both to the patient and to the important people in her life' (178). In this sense, the traumatic event challenges an ordinary person to become a philosopher, theologian and jurist (178).

In psychotherapy, the goal of recounting the trauma story is integration, not exorcism (181). Psychotherapy does not get rid of the trauma. Instead, in this process of reconstruction, the trauma story undergoes transformation, making it become more present and real as the experience is re-lived through its retelling. The fundamental premise of this work is the underlying belief in the restorative power of truth-telling. Through truth-telling and

remembrance, the trauma story as relayed by the patient becomes testimony (181). Herman explains that testimony includes both a private and public dimension. The private aspect which is confessional and spiritual, and the public which is political and judicial (181). Therefore, testimony incorporates both of these aspects, lending a larger meaning and affect to the individual experience (181).

Trauma is inevitably accompanied by a sense of loss, whether that loss be physical or a wounding of the internal psychological structures of a self securely attached to others (188). The recounting of the trauma story thus plunges the patient into a state of grief and mourning (188). Ultimately, psychotherapy believes in the restorative power of mourning and the capacity for renewal (194). After many repetitions of recounting the trauma story, there comes a moment when the retelling no longer arouses such intense feelings (195). The trauma story ceases to hold its once overwhelming power over the individual, and becomes one part of the individual's experience (195).

During my own creative process, I have had some time to process some of my past traumatic experiences before writing the play. Over the years, I have written about some of my experiences as well as talking about them with a therapist. Upon reflection and self-examination, I was able to realise the immense pressure I felt in wanting to get married by a certain age, as well as my own patterns of codependency in intimate relationships. Below is a scene from my play:

2.7 Ex-Husband

Counsellor's office, university in NZ, seated on comfortable sofa couch. Slight smell of disinfectant, light from outside window and campus buildings outside.

CYNTHIA

When I first arrived back to New Zealand after more than two decades away and in the midst of contemplating a divorce, I remember crying out to my therapist in a rather uncharacteristic manner: 'I think I'm going crazy!', and he said 'you're not going crazy, Cynthia', in a fatherly telling-me-off-kindly kind of way.

I've always been attracted to men whom I thought had an 'interesting' dimension to them... not your normal type of nice-guy... but men with issues whom I thought I could 'fix'... co-dependent relationships is what my therapist would say.

Not that that's a bad thing. I mean, you depend on your partner, spouse, boyfriend, girlfriend for things, right? Whether it's emotional security, or financial security... a

hug at the end of the day, or someone who says: 'I agree with you', even though you secretly know that you are in the wrong.

But what I mean is... well my ex-husband, he was bipolar, manic-depressive. I didn't know he was bipolar when I first met him, even he didn't. In fact, he didn't exhibit manic behaviour nor did he get officially diagnosed until after our wedding. We met when we had both recently gotten out of long-term relationships. So.. we were both on a rebound, I guess.

....and I was desperate to get married. Not to him in particular, but just to get married, if you know what I mean.

Or maybe you don't, in fact, now looking back, I don't get it myself. But back then, in Hong Kong, past the age of 30, and unmarried, that's kind of...uncalled for. Leftover women. 剩女 / 'Zing lui'. That's what they called us. Unmarried women over the age of 30. Leftover women.

Anyways, I've digressed. I was talking about co-dependent relationships of the unhealthy kind, because one day it hit me that the partners I had chosen for myself were in part, a mirror to myself. It never struck me that I was depressed, and a highly

emotional person. On the outside, I seemed ‘calm and elegant’ (as my friends would say).

CYNTHIA stands.

I’m a good girl. And good girls are always nice. Never angry. Never jealous. Never aggressive. They are nice. They wear nice clothes. Are helpful, people-oriented, non-confrontational. They greet their aunties with a smile and buy small gifts for everyone. They stay with a husband who wants to drink first thing in the morning. *(louder)* And smile at their mother-in-law when they steal that foot massager your husband bought for you, somehow moving it into their flat upstairs without you knowing!

(Lam, Love Mum, Scene 2.7 Ex-Husband)

The above was not an easy scene for me to write. I was revealing highly personal details about my past relationship, parts of which I had preferred not to talk about or discuss. Only my family and closest friends knew the details, so I felt vulnerable and exposed. I also had to admit my responsibility in the poor choices I made. There was also a sensitivity around disclosing my ex-partner’s health condition. Therefore, I tried to focus the discussion on my experience with him,

rather than about him. I also did not disclose any personal details that may identify him, apart from the fact that he was my ex-husband.

During the staged reading group feedback session, an audience member had asked ‘How do you think about humour functioning in the piece?’. I thought this was an interesting question as I had not previously given this much thought. I realised, as demonstrated in the scene above, that at times I used humour as a ‘source of protection’, an emotional balm to coat and lubricate the recounting of painful experiences. This is what I replied: When I’m talking about painful things if I use humour it makes it less painful for me in a way. Although the pain is still there [...] I think that’s maybe part of it, how I used it [humour] because it’s too painful and I can’t just, I don’t want to cry my eyes out so maybe I make it a bit cynical or whatnot to deliver it’ (Staged Reading, Group).

As described in the scene above, this was a time in my life in which I felt immense societal pressure to get married. This pressure did not come from my family, but pressure which I had given to myself. Most of my friends were getting married and I had absorbed messages from the media and socio-cultural environment about ‘leftover women’. There was a stigma attached to women who were unmarried over a particular age. They were seen as undesirable, the ones who were left behind. Therefore, I thought that my value as a woman was partly dependent on my marital status.

At the end of the scene, I talk about the attributes of a ‘good girl’. Someone who never shows anger nor aggression. Someone who behaves amicably and looks nice. Appearances matter. Although there are definitely positives in being a generally nice and caring person, the detriment to one’s well-being occurs when the ‘good girl’ ideal is taken to its extreme. In this scene I talk about being the good girl sarcastically. I am angry, partly at myself. When writing

this scene, looking back I thought it both funny and ridiculous how I could have behaved so submissively. This last paragraph contains the crux of my message, encapsulating how I now feel about 'the good woman' ideal, signally a turning point to come.

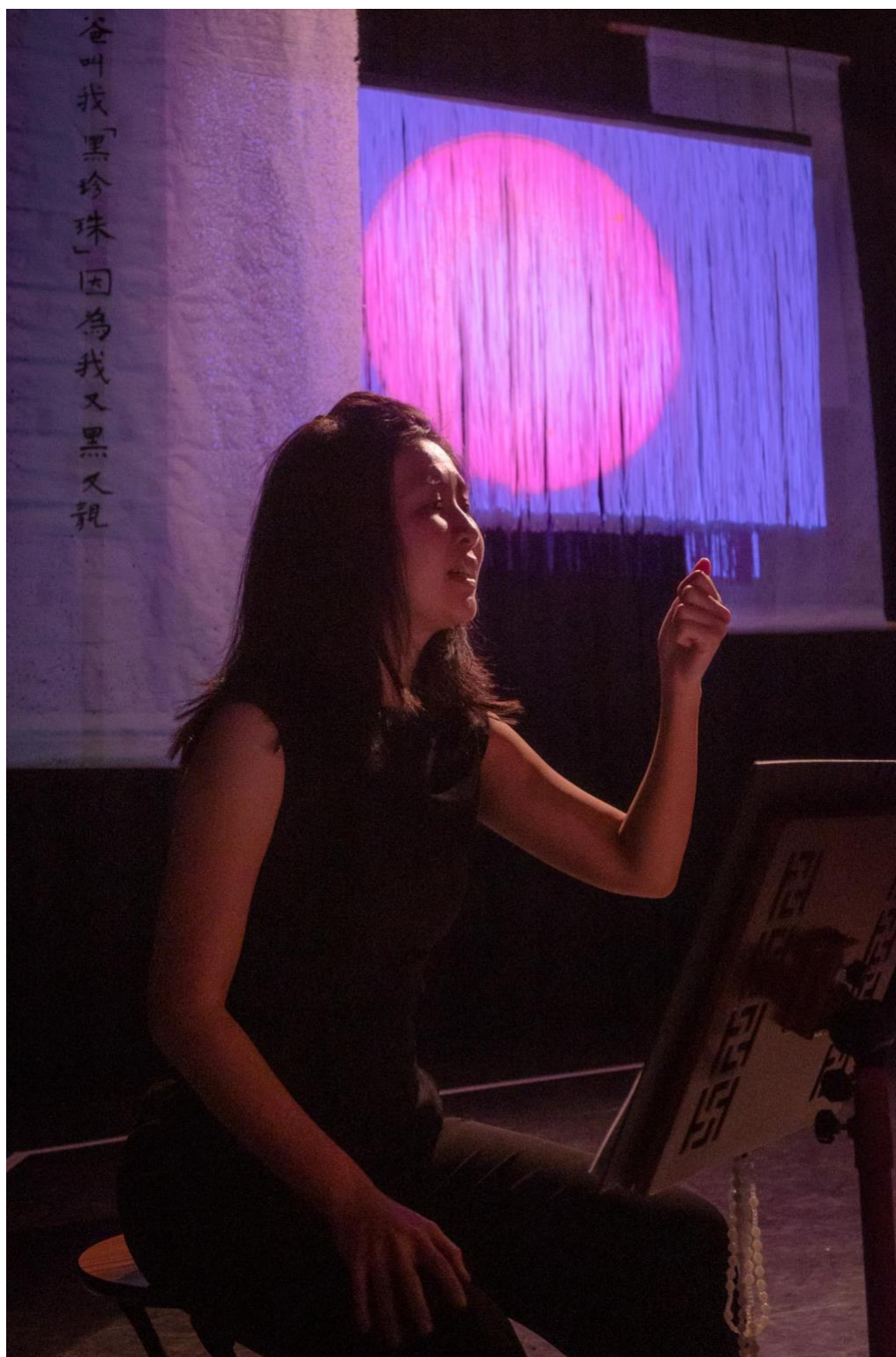


Fig 4. Recounting our stories in 愛, 媽媽 (*Love, Mum*), Dunedin, March 2023. Photo by Kerry Hodge.

Women and Recovery: Shaking Off the ‘Good Girl’ Ideal

The ‘good girl’ ideal is something that has been ingrained and conditioned in me since a young age. By striving to be the ‘perfect’ woman, wife and daughter-in-law, I ended up pleasing other people and suppressing my own needs, wants and desires. I wanted to avoid confrontation. I wanted to fit in and adhere to what I thought society expected of me. I gave myself pressure to be the woman who is ‘Never angry. Never jealous. Never aggressive. They are nice’ (Lam, *Love Mum*, Scene 2.7). This eventually cost me my mental health, where I lost my voice and my sense of self, and in its place was unexpressed rage.

According to Lafrance, when women talked of their recovery, it involved the rupture and resistance of the ‘the good woman’ ideal. These women discovered a different way and language to express themselves and their stories of depression, which enabled them to act on their despair and lead them onto the road of recovery (Lafrance 67). Through her interviews, two central patterns of accounting emerged. In the first, women asserted the legitimacy of their depression through the medical model: ‘in these accounts, recovery was heralded by the provision of a medical diagnosis that defined their experience as “real” and their selves as blameless victims’ (67). This allowed the women to ‘put a name’ on their distress, therefore legitimising their pain. However, there are limitations to the medical model. Positioned as ill, a woman may be regarded as unstable and dangerous, and thus easily undermined and disregarded by others (76). Therefore although a medical diagnosis may offer some form of validation, it disregards the social and cultural conditions impacting a woman’s life, and ultimately ‘serves to silence and subvert women’s voices, positioning them as in need of surveillance and control under the masculine gaze of medical science’ (76).

In the second and sometimes overlapping method of accounting, the women described recovery ‘as a process in which they threw off their “good” woman selves and began to pay closer attention to their own needs, desires, and well-being’ (67). The women in this group talked of recovery as a personally transformative experience and a re-authoring of their identities (11, 67). Operating within the confines of my research, I will be focusing on the second method of accounting which focuses on women’s recovery through personal transformation through their rejection and resistance to hegemonic constructions of ‘the good woman’.

It should be noted that the term ‘recovery’ does not adequately reflect the experiences of the women interviewed. In fact, many struggled or rejected this term as it implies ‘returning to the way one was before depression’ and ‘no longer being affected by depressive experiences’ (12). The reality is that the women emerged from their depressive states not as before, but as changed persons with a better understanding of their condition and working towards changing themselves and their circumstances. Recovery also does not imply that depression never returns.

When women talk of personal transformation, they first reposition the usually revered ‘good woman’ identity in negative ways (67–68). The ‘good woman’ identity is described as fake, superficial and oppressive. Lafrance gives the example of a woman called Amanda, who describes her former self as a patchwork of social expectations, playing out the person she was supposed to be: ‘passive’, ‘compliant’ and ‘happy’. She then disengages from what she describes as her former ‘fake’ self, and uncovers the person she has always been, her authentic self (86). Lafrance explains that Amanda’s process is constructed discursively through two critical narrative features: (1) the characterisation of a former identity that is identified as unreasonable and unsustainable, and (2) a discursive disengagement with this former self (86).

Amanda's trajectory towards personal transformation is similar to what many of the women in the interviews experienced. All had previously described themselves as 'good' girls or 'good' women: 'the good girl', 'the good daughter', 'the good dutiful daughter', a 'good mother', 'good wife', and 'the obedient wife, little girl' (86). All of the above involved identifiers that coupled the descriptor 'good' with a feminine identity such as daughter, wife or mother. None described themselves with a non-gendered identity, such as 'good person' or 'good worker'. Below is a description of what being a 'good' woman entails:

The 'good' woman is pleasing, obedient, and quiet; she serves her family by cooking, cleaning, and caring, and is happy and fulfilled by doing so. She puts the needs of others ahead of her own, neglects herself, and never asks for anything in return. In fact, not caring for herself emerged as a fundamental aspect of the 'good' woman identity.

(Lafrance 87)

In addition, the repeated use of adverbs throughout the interviews such as 'always', 'everything' and 'never' reveal the extent and unyielding demands of the 'good' woman identity placed as a burden onto women (Lafrance 88). In summary, the interviews point to the realisation that the 'good' woman identity is constructed as a superficial identity that masks and constricts women's authentic selves.

In Scene 2.7 of my play, I am able to recognise the unrelenting demands of striving to be the 'good girl', a woman who is 'always nice' and 'never angry'. The focus on maintaining a pleasing appearance and catering to others' needs at the detriment of one's own benefit is advertised and mocked. As Lafrance had mentioned, one of the first steps towards recovery is the

rupture and resistance of the ‘good woman’ ideal by realising the unrealistic demands placed on women.

A metaphor of ‘standing’ is used to embody the women’s resistance towards hegemonic constructions of their identity. These include phrases such as ‘stand on my own two feet’, ‘getting back on my feet’, having ‘stood up for myself’, and ‘standing up to my family’ (Lafrance 96). A newfound sense of self-reliance and self-sufficiency is described in the women’s accounts as they begin to construct new identities that are independent, autonomous, assertive and governed by their own needs and desires (97). Therefore, by ‘standing up’ for oneself, and asserting one’s needs and desires in empowering ways, women can start to reclaim their lives and live in more authentic ways.

The metaphor of ‘standing’ or ‘standing up for myself’ is evident in my play. In the dialogue with my mother below when she questions my desire to become a writer, I shot back: ‘When you say something like that, I feel challenged to prove you wrong’ (Lam, *Love Mum*, Scene 3.2). This is a scene towards the end of my play when I finally decide to prioritise myself and take action to pursue my dream of becoming a writer: ‘I no longer cared what other people thought, what society thought, what I thought my mother thought’ (Scene 3.2). It is a moment in which living my life authentically became more important than fitting in with societal standards of what I thought it meant to be a successful woman. Below is the full scene:

CYNTHIA

Deciding to come to New Zealand, in my thirties, to study English literature and creative writing, was one of the best decisions I have ever made for myself. It was a decision, made when I hit rock-bottom, when my life was crumbling, and I felt that I had nothing left to lose. I no longer cared what other people thought, what society thought, what I thought my mother thought. It was my big ‘f**k you, and hello to me!’ moment.

I considered it to be my second life, or my second chance in life. I could re-orient, rebuild, reinvent. Mind you, it wasn’t all a bed of roses. I remember studying in the library during one of the many weekends I spent alone, and I whatsapped one of my good friends in Hong Kong, I said ‘Oh my god, I have no friends here!!’.

But I knew that I was finally on the right track for myself. It finally felt right.

As the only Hong Kong Chinese person in my writing classes, I started sharing stories about my family history and culture; which made me realise and appreciate the uniqueness of my upbringing and heritage.

And I lapped it all up....life writing, poetry, short stories....I studied postcolonial theory and literature, I read about the ‘mimic man’, someone who is alienated from their own culture and starts adopting the language, culture and attitude of its colonisers because they think it gives them a higher ‘status’ in society.... I realised myself in those books.

Writing my life stories provided me with a sense of self understanding and healing... I started to *feel* a lot of things, a lot of stored up feelings and memories of shame and rage and dislocation pouring out of me... and I was excited.

Now, creative writing was no longer just a ‘hobby’, it had become my priority.

(pause)

*

When I visited Hong Kong after my first year in New Zealand, my parents and I were having dinner at a local Chiu Chow restaurant in Kowloon City. I recounted animatedly to my mother just how happy I was that I was finally studying and doing something I loved. My mother, who initially thought I was only going to New Zealand for a 3 month post-divorce holiday, shot back: ‘And what is it that you think you can do with your writing?’.

We have a Chinese saying: 一桶冷水淋落佢頭上 / ‘yud tong lang sui lum lok gor tau seung’, which literally translates to: ‘she threw a whole bucket of cold water over my head’. That’s how it felt. I felt deflated.

I shot back: ‘When you say something like that, I feel challenged to prove you wrong’.

‘Okay, then prove me wrong’ she fired.

I took that as a direct challenge. I was fired up to prove to my mother that studying to become a writer can bring success. Whatever the definition of ‘success’ meant, to me or to her at that time, I am pretty sure there was a wide discrepancy between our individual interpretations.

The funny thing about this whole scenario though, is when I asked my mother about it a few years later, she had a blank look on her face. Apparently, she had forgotten that we ever had this whole sorry conversation.

And eventually, after some time, she came around.

(Lam, *Love Mum*, Scene 3.2 NZ age 30)

The breakdown of my marriage was partly an impetus for me to reassess my life. Not just from a relationship perspective, but also important aspects related to my vocation and how I wanted to live. My divorce became a catalyst, prompting me to move to New Zealand to pursue my passion of becoming a writer. At first, I was not sure how long I was going to stay. I just needed some time to get away, to reassess and to think. I wanted some time to myself, to begin anew without all the baggage. To study something that I loved, to do something for me.

I had enrolled in a mixture of creative writing and literature classes. I realised that one of my favourite classes was ‘life writing’, and I began writing stories about my childhood, my relationships and the female figures in my life. It felt cathartic. I began to remember emotions that I had buried or hidden away, and I started to relive those moments and to understand them. Through writing, I was able to make better sense of my world and my past.

Studying the works of other writers helped me to learn the craft, as well as learning about the socio-cultural context in which we live in and how that impacts our sense of self. Reading postcolonial literature and theory made me realise the effects of colonisation on a person’s sense of self. I never thought about the effects of growing up in colonial Hong Kong and migration until then. Feminist writers awakened something within me. I loved the poetry of Anne Sexton and plays by Maria Irene Fornes. At times I would marvel at their ingenuity, how their writing contained poetry, meaning and power. Their words expanded my mind as well as creating resonance.

Writing became a form of salvation. I now see how my writing from all those years ago was both therapeutic and autoethnographic. Writing about my life and the people around me was a way to understand myself and the society in which I lived in. The journey towards my own healing and self-awareness had started all those years ago.

Feminist scholars assert that feminist practice has emerged out of a need to de-pathologize and politicise women’s personal experiences (McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance 198). Two widely employed therapeutic strategies within a feminist-narrative approach include (i) externalising, and (ii) the use of an audience (199). Externalising occurs when a woman’s problem is placed on

external factors, so that she is ‘not the problem, but rather the problem is the problem’ (McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance 199). When a problem is externalised, alternative beliefs regarding a woman’s identity as well as issues related to political and socio-cultural influences can be explored (McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance 199). As evident in the scene of my play above, I realised that the confusion in regards to my sense of identity as a Chinese person, living overseas and in my home country, was an issue encountered by other people living in colonised places: ‘I studied postcolonial theory and literature, I read about the “mimic man”, someone who is alienated from their own culture and starts adopting the language, culture and attitude of its colonisers because they think it gives them a higher “status” in society.... I realised myself in those books’ (Lam, *Love Mum*, Scene 3.2). In this regard, I felt a sense of relief and validation, as the reasons for my sense of shame and inferiority regarding my Chinese identity became externalised.

The second therapeutic approach is the use of an audience or witness. Stories are, in essence, collaboratively performed events that require a teller and an audience (McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance 200). Although writing is a private affair and can have powerful healing effects on its own, stories need to be heard and validated in order for them to take root and grow (200). I will be discussing the use of an audience in Chapters Four and Five.

In summary, this chapter has focused on the writing process of my solo memoir play as part of the ATP journey towards healing and empowerment. Writing my life story and those of my foremothers has become a form of resistance against dominant hegemonic narratives as I counter-story our lives. By speaking about the oppressive structures of living as a woman within a patriarchal, colonial and capitalist society, it became a way to rupture the master narrative, presenting an alternative and more authentic way of living. The act of revisiting some of my past

trauma and lived experiences was made possible through the emotional safety and distance provided through the use of story as a container. Being able to talk and write about my younger self and the struggles that I faced in regards to my mental health, abusive relationship and shame in regards to my ethnic identity became the first step towards my own healing. In the next chapter, I will proceed to discuss the next step of my creative process which is rehearsals, as I progress from written to performative text.

Chapter Four: Creative Process Part Two—Rehearsals / Movement / Embodied Ways of Knowing

After completing the playscript to a degree which both my creative supervisor and I were happy with, we were ready to move on to the next stage of the creative process: the rehearsal process. I ended up working with three different ‘directors’ for this phase consecutively. For the first few months, I continued working with Stuart. I then began rehearsing with Jordan Rosin, a physical theatre artist and director from the United States with whom I had taken butoh classes. We worked together all the way up until the staged reading where Rosin also took on the role as facilitator for the group feedback session. After that, I worked with international director and choreographer Kanta Kochhar-Lindgren to produce my show for a public stage. I ended up performing my play 愛, 媽媽 (*Love, Mum*) at the Auckland Fringe Festival 2022 and then later toured to Dunedin after winning the ‘Tour Ready’ award to take part in the Dunedin Fringe Festival 2023. As both Rosin and Kochhar-Lindgren are based overseas, all our rehearsals took place online.

I understood that through rehearsals and the subsequent stages, that changes may be made to the script. The current aim of moving through rehearsals was to have a version of my play which would be ready for performance within the parameters of a staged reading. A staged reading is an important developmental process in which the lines of the play are delivered reading from the script and in character, but with minimal production elements such as stage props and lighting.

I remember feeling nervous about moving into the rehearsal process, since I am comfortable with writing, but not so much with performing. I have enjoyed writing ever since I was a teenager. I am especially keen on first person writing, as I would use that as a mechanism to pour out my thoughts, feelings and anxieties. Therefore, writing in a diary-like or ‘confessional’ format has become second nature to me. I also view myself as a natural introvert, and having to perform the text I have written makes me feel exposed, self-conscious and uncomfortable, even though I am currently only performing in front of an audience of one. In this sense, Stuart became the first ‘witness’ to my storytelling performance.

Stuart had asked whether I wanted to hire an actor to perform in my play for the staged reading. Instinctively however, I felt that the performer had to be me. As this was such a personal story, I could not envision having someone else ‘play’ me, my mother and my two grandmothers. Therefore, I was willing to go through the emotionally and physically challenging process of performing our stories to a live audience. In hindsight, I am glad that I made this decision, as the rehearsal and performance became an integral part of my deepened understanding, healing and reconnection to myself, my foremothers and my ancestry. This is not an uncommon trajectory that writers and performers of the ATP process go through.

We decided to rehearse the play in paginated order, from page one onwards. We started work on the first ten pages. This is what I wrote in my creative journal when I began rehearsing my play with Stuart in the theatre laboratory on campus:

I feel excited, yet am also feeling a bit ‘self-conscious’ whilst ‘performing’/reading my script out loud. SH encourages me to just ‘play around’ with it, and ‘just move’ — so I start with a chair, and I use that as a prop. Sometimes I sit down, most times I’m standing, I try to gesticulate with my arms, and project my voice. SH suggests that we

dim the lights, to make it feel more like a stage setting, and the dimmed lighting somehow eases my nerves a bit.

(Lam, CJ, Oct 30 2020)

Stuart mentioned that ‘the text and story is now outside of you’, and that although I am playing myself, I am also playing a character called Cynthia. I believe he said these words to try to encourage me to ‘play around’ with my script, to relax into my role and to have some fun with it. Although I understood this concept intellectually, it took me a lot of time and practice to break-out of my feelings of self-consciousness and awkwardness.

Through our rehearsals, I encountered the idea of ‘characterisation’ early on. I wrote my play script as a one-woman show, therefore I had to inhabit the role of not only myself, but also the roles of my mother, my paternal grandmother (Ah Mah), and my maternal grandmother (Por Por). Below is an entry from my creative journal:

I remember it being a bit difficult to ‘embody’ my Por Por, and then my Ah Mah. I realised there are distinct differences between their personalities. My Por Por, is more soft-spoken, yet has a rather cheeky and mischievous nature to her. My Ah Mah is loud and robust. I found it easier to ‘play’ my Ah Mah. My Por Por was more difficult, as I realised that somehow, from her being bold and riding on horses, perhaps something ‘changed’ in her along the way? Maybe the hardships in life? I’m not sure. It was also then that I thought about how when she speaks Cantonese, she speaks it with an accent, like saying the word ‘cat’ in Cantonese, and how my Yee Yee (aunt) would tease Por Por in a playful way. This has also made me aware that Por Por is not Han Chinese, but an

ethnic Chinese, an ethnic minority in China. Which I guess, adds an interesting dimension to it (Lam, CJ, Oct 30 2020).

Through the exercise of characterisation, it made me delve more into my grandmothers' histories and backgrounds. I wanted to flesh things out. It was during this time that I remembered how Por Por spoke Cantonese with an accent. This sparked further memories regarding her ethnic Chinese heritage and how my father and aunt would respond to that.

It was during the rehearsal process of inhabiting the characters of my grandmothers that certain personality traits and attributes came into prominence. It was not that I did not know these things about them, such as my Por Por being ethnic Chinese, but previously I had not given this too much thought. It was only when I had to embody and play her character, that I realised what a distinguishing trait this was about her. After this insight, I added the below section into my play, which references the stereotype of ethnic women being enchantresses or possessing special powers to seduce men:

Anyways, my aunt Shirley always used to tease Por Por's accent. They say she was 苗族
人 / 'Miao jook yan', an ethnic Chinese person; which I guess was affirmed by her dark
skin and high cheek bones. My father always used to joke that Por Por probably put some
迷藥/ 'mai yeuk', some special potion used to seduce men in his food, thus explaining
why he was so taken with my mother.
(Lam, *Love Mum*, Scene 1.6 Por Por's story).



Fig 5. Transitioning into the character of Por Por, 愛, 媽媽 (*Love, Mum*), Auckland rehearsals, September 2022. Photo by Shelton Leong.



Fig 6. As character of Por Por speaking in Cantonese with English subtitles projected onto the bamboo framed screen, 愛, 媽媽 (*Love, Mum*), Auckland rehearsals, September 2022. Photo by Shelton Leong.

In Self-Rev, one of the methods of ‘working through’ painful material is ‘taking on [the] role of others’ (Emunah, “Self-rev” 75). Emunah explains that the performer may inhabit the roles/perspectives of others ‘in order to broaden one’s scope of understanding, shift one’s viewpoints or attitudes, or gain a multigenerational view, such as in the transmission of multigenerational trauma’ (75-76). Therefore by taking on the role of my foremothers during the rehearsal process, I had gained a deeper awareness and understanding of them. Here is an entry from my creative journal which illustrates how the rehearsal process, through the embodiment of

the text and my mother's character, had allowed me to gain a better understanding of myself and her:

We discussed/ SH [Stuart] observed how these scenes about my mother demonstrate 'my world vs. my mother's world' – showing me these 2 different worlds and how these 2 interact. Through my writing, I've been able to 'step outside' these 2 worlds.

It is also interesting to me to see how the scenes convey subtle undercurrents and reflect certain aspects of our relationship, without me being 'consciously aware' of this when writing out the scene. SH comments: 'it's all there in the writing', and that you 'can't force-feed subtlety to the audience'. I also realised that through the rehearsal process, the nuances in the text come alive. This was rather illuminating for me, as I understood now (like really, in person and through experience) this idea of 'embodied performance' and embodied learning from one's unique 'location'/ standpoint. Previously, I could only argue this 'in theory' [...], but now I am actually experiencing this through my own practice. Thus this makes me think of 'practice based research; and research based practice', and how they feed into each other, like a constant loop. I actually now understand why I needed to 'act it out' (act out my text, instead of just reading it in my mind like prose). It's like I get to 'dissect the text', even though I was the one who wrote it!

It gives me more understanding of myself, my mother, and my relationship with her, including the context and outside influences of perhaps how our personalities and relationship formed and was shaped.

SH comments that this piece is about me ‘finding myself’ and acceptance of what’s different and similar. E.g. I’m not an accountant like my mother, but my mother is in me. (Lam, CJ, Nov 27 2020)

This increased understanding through the embodiment of the playscript is also utilised in ATP. For instance, Pendzik discusses how talking and reminiscing about autobiographical memories is not the same as using the body to re-experience these memories (Pendzik, “Performance” 252). In ATP, through the performance of embodied actions, executive brain functions become activated and integrated through repeated action during rehearsals. This repetition, which is part of the rehearsal process, may help the performer to reflect and gain new insights on past experiences (Pendzik, “Performance” 253). Body re-enactments and repetitions help the writer/performer to process the experience, facilitating the incorporation of a new vocabulary of the self (253). Barbour defines embodiment as a ‘holistic experience’. She argues that this is different from ‘body’ experience:

[E]mbodiment encompasses an individual person’s biological (somatic), intellectual, emotional, social, gendered, artistic and spiritual experience, within their cultural, historical and geographical location. Embodiment is not a random or arbitrary set of genetic material—it recognises the material conditions of race, gender, sexuality, ability, history and culture. Embodiment therefore indicates a holistic experiencing individual. Most importantly, embodiment can also be understood through movement, an embodied activity.

(Barbour, *Dancing* 88)

In Barbour's interviews with solo female dancers, Susanne commented that making solo dance work was a way for her to deal with 'whatever is the big issue in my life at the time'. She claims 'It's cathartic, getting it all out, a way of expression. It was another way of expressing my relationship with the world, or how I felt about relationships in the world' (Barbour, *Dancing* 92). Barbour comments that for Susanne, 'Creating her solo work had not only been a cathartic release of emotion, but it had also become a liberating, powerful source of knowledge. As she performed she came to further understandings of herself and her world' (*Dancing* 92–93). Barbour concludes: 'I have this sense that I am my body of knowledge and I am the site of my research' (Barbour, *Dancing* 94).

Hui Niu Wilcox, a researcher, dancer and founding member of Ananya Dance Theater (ADT), an ensemble company of BIPOC women dance artists, claims that embodied knowledges 'foster a sense of community and challenge Eurocentric and male-centred systems of knowledge production predicated upon the body/mind binary' (Wilcox 104). Embodiment has the potential to forge creative alliances and to transform how knowledge is produced (104). In ADT's study guide (2008), artistic director Ananya Chatterjea, states that the company's vision intersects at the point of artistic excellence and social justice: 'We believe that women's stories, particularly those of trauma and resistance, are seldom noted in history....For us then, our bodies become a site where knowledge is actively produced' (109). In this sense, a pedagogical and epistemological shift is signalled that draws attention to bodies as agents of knowledge production (Wilcox 105).

The Western concept of 'knowledge' was characterised as information gained through reason, with its claim to truth evaluated against objective criteria (Barbour, "Embodied" 210). Truth in this sense, is defined as being universal and objective. The pursuit of knowledge

required subjects who were neutral, with any differences between them unaccounted for (Barbour, “Embodied” 210). Moreover, referencing the work of feminist philosophers Simone de Beauvoir and Elizabeth Grosz, inherent in Western knowledge sat a dualistic ontology, which included knowledge/experience, mind/body, reason/emotion, culture/nature, public/private, thought/sensation, object/subject and universal/particular (Barbour, “Embodied” 210; Wilcox 105). These dualisms are overlaid by gender, with the first of each pair attributed to the male and considered superior (Barbour, “Embodied” 210). Therefore, mind and intellect were considered superior to experience and body in the quest for knowledge and truth. This way of thinking was especially pronounced during the Enlightenment period, also known as the Age of Reason, in which the importance of science and reason was emphasised. This created an unrealistic separation of the mind from the body, while also privileging the intellect in the knowledge creating process.

It was only when feminist thinkers started to critique this ontological concept as privileging the White Western male that the idea of embodied knowledges and alternative ways of knowing came into discussion. Barbour argues that women tried to reclaim their power in this way:

Feminists saw that what was required was not simply the addition of women’s understandings into ‘knowledge’, but also a reconstruction and acceptance of multiple ‘knowledges’ (Davion 1994). Articulation of women’s lived experiences was especially important as women sought to reconstruct knowledge, power and authority in relation to their different experiences.

(Barbour, “Embodied” 211).

In this sense, the creation of knowledge also relies on an individual's lived experience, in which 'the individual experiences of women could be understood as socio-culturally and politically contextual' (Barbour, "Embodied" 211). Barbour cites the work of Sara Mills and how the feminist slogan 'the personal is the political' comes to mind: 'those problems which many women have once considered to be their fault...have come to be seen...as problems which are structural and therefore political' (qtd. in Barbour, "Embodied" 211). This is an important point as it relates back to LaFrance's research on how women's discussion of their experiences with depression contains a gendered lens and cannot be separated from the social and cultural context of their lives.

Regarding my own creative methodology, the process of moving from the writing to the performative phase of the rehearsal process forced me to focus on my body, my movement and my voice. The energy of the stories no longer just resided inside me, they now had to be projected and expressed outwards through bodily movements, gestures, facial expression and voice intonation. Being able to communicate the stories in a way which engaged the audience's visual and auditory senses became a way to heighten engagement and bring them into my world. Pendzik et al. claim that rehearsal practices allow experiences to become more rooted in our brains and bodies, whilst exposure in front of an audience helps to validate them (2).

Throughout my play, I had incorporated certain movements as part of the performative aspect of the text. I would like to focus on three key movements that were integral to my performance: the first being tai chi, the second involving the beating of a Chinese temple block also known as a wooden fish, and the third being running.

Tai Chi



Fig 7. Performing tai chi chen sequence during live performance of 愛, 媽媽 (*Love, Mum*), Dunedin Fringe Festival, Dunedin, 24 March 2023. Photo by Blake Armstrong.

I decided to incorporate tai chi in my play for three main reasons. Firstly, tai chi is a traditional form of Chinese martial arts originating from China over thousands of years ago. Therefore, I feel it is a style of movement that is part of my ethnic tradition and allows me to connect with my cultural roots. It is a beautiful art form that can range from slow meditative flowing movements to faster, more explosive and powerful actions since tai chi is in essence a form of martial arts. The philosophy behind tai chi—one that upholds a sense of balance and harmony, a connection

to the natural environment, and a balancing of the masculine and feminine energies, the yin and the yang—also appeal to me:

The essential principles of Tai Chi are based on the ancient Chinese philosophy of Taoism, which stresses the natural balance in all things and the need for living in spiritual and physical accord with the patterns of nature. According to this philosophy, everything is composed of two opposite, but entirely complementary, elements of yin and yang, working in a relationship which is in perpetual balance.

(P. Lam)

Secondly, tai chi has a personal connection to me on a familial level. My mother has been practising tai chi since her retirement, together with my aunts in Hong Kong. I found a teacher here in New Zealand to teach me tai chi on a regular basis. Therefore, tai chi has become a form of connection between my mother and I, as we exchange things that we have learnt, with my mother showing me different forms during our video calls. This shared common interest has aided our relationship, as well as providing my mother with a community and hobby after her retirement. The practice of tai chi has become a shared topic of discussion between my mother, her two sisters, and myself.

In terms of craft, the tai chi adds another layer to the play's narrative, breaking up the heavy text and long monologues. It also fits in with the stylistic, philosophical and cultural context of the play. The idea of genealogy and the 'passing down' of a craft that has historical significance to my Chinese ancestry is also apt.

In terms of embedding the tai chi within the narrative structure of my text, I decided to incorporate two tai chi segments: one faster, and the other slower. I shared my intention with my

tai chi teacher Sifu Bruno Rubini, discussing the intended role of tai chi within the narrative context of the particular scenes. As I am a novice to tai chi, my teacher had to find a form that was compatible with my abilities as well as modifying some of the stances which were too difficult.

It should be noted that long after I completed my play, I have continued to practise tai chi. It has become a form of physical, emotional and spiritual practice for me. It has helped me to slow down, focus on my movements, and to stay in the present moment which has benefitted my mood and anxiety levels.

Shaolin Staff / Yin Shou Gun

The first segment was a faster segment to be placed in Scene 2.9 ‘The Power of Three’, the last scene of Part Two. Sifu Rubini decided to teach me a faster tai chi section using a staff made of bamboo which he calls ‘tai chi kung fu cane’. The staff or cane is used as a weapon to fight off opponents and can also be used as a form of self-defence. This was the form that was performed in my staged reading. It should be noted, that after the staged reading I changed the sequence to another form using a longer and heavier bamboo staff called ‘Shaolin Yin Shou Gun’. This new sequence was featured for my public performances in Auckland and Dunedin. I had always wanted to learn this form and thought that it commanded more strength and power, making it more suitable for a larger stage and audience. I was taught this sequence by martial arts choreographer Slade Billew.

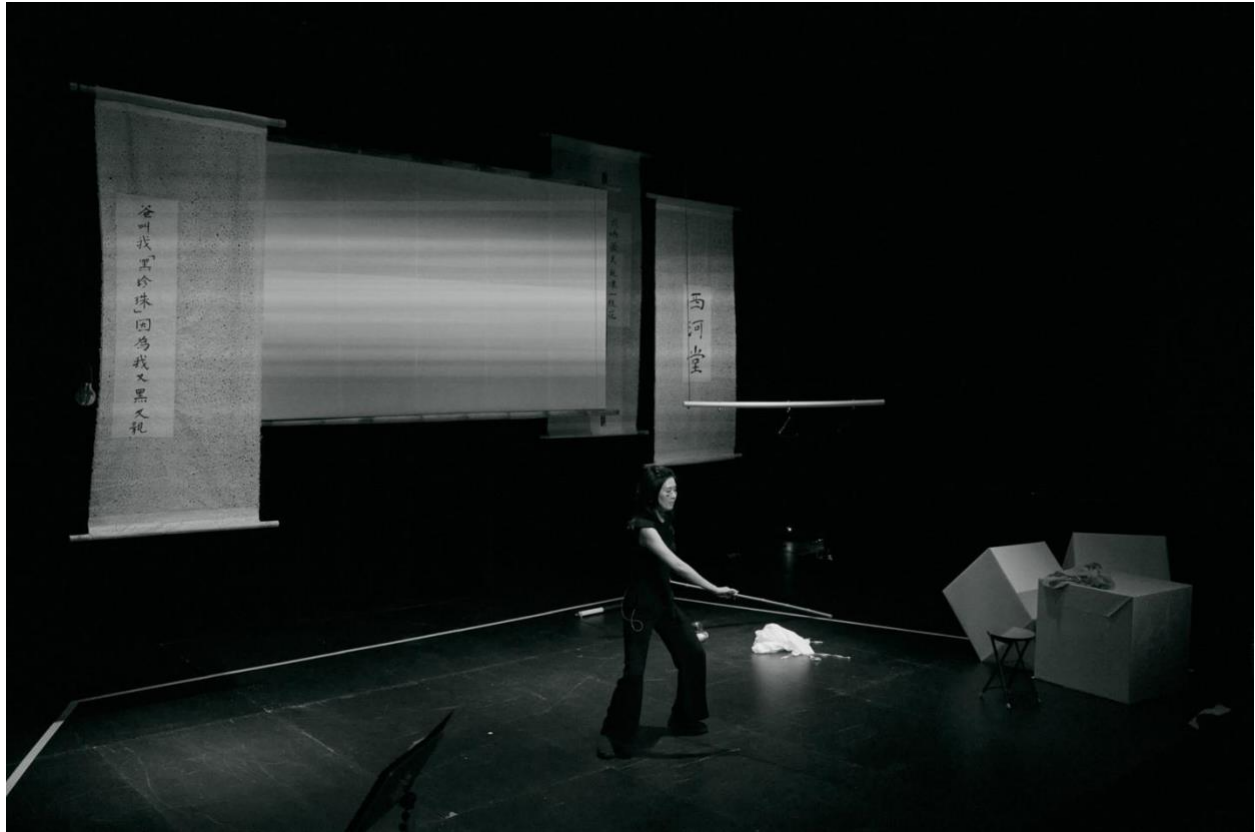


Fig 8. Performing Shaolin staff sequence during rehearsals of *愛, 媽媽* (*Love, Mum*), Auckland, September 2022. Photo by Shelton Leong.

In the scene before I perform the Shaolin staff, I reveal three moments. Each moment reveals a traumatic part of my relationship with my ex-partner leading to a final tipping point in which I decide to leave the relationship. The tai chi segment was to follow this climax. Therefore, I wanted a movement section to portray my anguish and despair, hoping to channel and evoke feelings which I could not convey in words. The tai chi also served as a transition scene, as I moved from anguish to calmness and then empowerment. Below is the end of Scene 2.9 and the beginning of 3.1:

2.9 Power of Three

HK, Tsing Yi. Around apartment, then car, then shopping complex downstairs/ taxi stand.

CYNTHIA

Tense, still.

[...]

The third time it happened...I ran out of the apartment, barefoot, him yelling. I ran past two security guards, the first one smirked, the other stood up, alarmed. I remember running on the concrete podium, and the smooth cold tiled floors of the shopping complex downstairs. I remember stepping onto the hard steel ridges of the escalator, which eventually took me to the rough wet ground outside, where I waited in queue for a taxi. I remember a young man looking at my profile as I stood in line, then he looked down at my feet. When I got into the taxi, I called my father, I said: 'I'm coming home, but I'm not wearing any shoes, can you bring me a pair of shoes when you come down to meet me'.

I remember saying to myself, 'this is the third time, and I'm not going back'.

Cynthia picks up tai chi staff and performs Shaolin Yin Shou Gun movement segment.

PART 3

3.1 Rain

Ah Mah's village house courtyard.

CYNTHIA

CYNTHIA inhales and exhales deeply. Looks soothed and relieved as if after a storm. Rain is drizzling around her. Smiles. Holds staff upright in hand. Starts moving/sweeping the floor in large circular motion with staff when talking about Ah Mah.

I love the smell of rain.

It used to be more pronounced when I was younger.

The smell.

It's an earthy musky kind of smell—

The kind that makes you want to inhale deeply.

Nowadays it's very faint, either my nose has gone or somehow the rain doesn't smell like how it used to.

But I still get that soothing feeling, it calms me down.

It reminds me of my Ah Mah, when I would be staying at her village house during the holidays.

It would be raining, and I would see her walking about in the courtyard, doing this and that.

Never stopping.

She would wear one of those hard woven brown hats, with a wide brim and a pointy top.

They were great for sheltering the rain, freeing your hands up.

My Ah Mah had big strong hands. You know, the kind with big sturdy knuckles.

I will always remember her hands.

The skin on them thick and healthy, and slightly tanned.

And her confident fast gait.

She would be criss-crossing her courtyard, at around 5pm every day.

The smell of incense wafting in the air.

That was the time of day when she would place incense all around the grounds, as an offering to the earth and spirits for protection.

As I move from one scene to the next, the staff enables me to use it as an object and symbol of transition. After re-living and telling parts of a traumatic past relationship through words and movement via the Shaolin staff sequence, I transition to the next scene where I continue to hold the staff as I begin to talk about the soothing effects of rain, a memory of the smell of rain from my youth, which then leads to a memory of my Ah Mah working in her courtyard whilst raining.

The staff morphs from a fighting tool to a domestic household utility, as I use it to sweep the grounds and embody my Ah Mah, being reminded of her strength and resilience. In a way, I take on the strength of Ah Mah and embody her spirit as I become her.

In addition, Ah Mah placing incense in and around the house, as an offering to the earth and spirits for protection, is symbolic of my ancestral spirits protecting me during a time of chaos. A linear sense of time no longer applies, as the memory of my Ah Mah becomes a source of strength and protection during a time of personal struggle, and the spirit of Ah Mah and me merge to become ‘one’.



Fig 9. Performing Shaolin staff sequence during dress rehearsal for 愛, 媽媽 (*Love, Mum*), Dunedin, March 2023. Photo by Kerry Hodge.



Fig 10. Using the staff in Scene 2.5 as Por Por poking fleas on the wall in performance of 愛, 媽
媽 (*Love, Mum*), Dunedin Fringe Festival, Dunedin, 24 March 2023. Photo by Blake Armstrong.

Tai Chi Chen style

The second tai chi segment was a slower form of tai chi from the Chen style. The Chen style system of tai chi is known as the original form of tai chi originating from the Chen family and is characterised by silk reeling, alternating fast and slow motions and bursts of power. This sequence was performed to accompany a poem that I wrote, entitled 'Red'. The initial idea was to read the poem out loud combined with movement.

During rehearsals with Stuart when we were experimenting with different styles of expression, I had tried two different versions of performing the poem. Initially, I tried a 'performance poetry' type of approach, in which I was reading the poem loud and expressively, like I was 'yelling with rage'. However, we both agreed that this felt a bit forced. Then I read the poem naturally and inserted some tai chi movements, and Stuart remarked 'that it worked. This version also seemed "most like me"' (Lam, CJ, Nov 27 2020). Stuart also commented how tai chi was familiar enough to audiences that it would not be too distracting from the poem, whilst also emphasising the stillness inherent in tai chi. I realised that 'by slowing myself down with tai chi, SH began to hear the text differently' (Lam, CJ, Nov 20 2020). As a performer who was playing myself, I felt a congruence in my body when I combined the flowing fluid movements of tai chi together with the text of the poem. I felt that it flowed. This style of performance felt the most natural to me, and the most apt in regards to what I was trying to convey through body and words.

At the end however, I decided to play a recording of myself reading the poem whilst doing the tai chi. I realised that in order for me to focus on my movements, it made more sense to play a voice recording of myself reading the poem instead. The voice recording also signalled to

the audience that they were listening to my inner thoughts as well as to a more universal message pertinent to the play. This was accompanied by an animated red flower projected onto the background, its symbolism which I will explain after the poem.

Red is....

The colour of sacrifice...

Money, security, comforts, the desire to please...

All need to be relinquished

For the chance to live a vibrant and authentic life.

Red is...

The colour of blood.

That which flows from mother to child.

The ability to feel in our bones

Of a love and pain so deep

that it sears through our hearts.

Red is...

The colour of rage.

That which I have kept hidden

In the deepest recesses of my

Being.

Red is...
The colour of passion.
Of devoting myself to things
That I believe in.
And of devoting oneself, to oneself.
To soldier on, despite the bottomless cold echoes of fear.
To face oneself
In the mirror,
All illusions gone.
And then...
To find that,
I am my mother, and my mother's mother,
And all the mothers that have come before me,
All along.
(Lam, *Love Mum*, Scene 3.7 Epilogue / Red Poem / Tai chi)

Red to me, is a deeply feminine colour. It is a colour that denotes boldness, passion, love, rage and blood. I think of the folktale 'The Red Shoes' told by writer and Jungian psychoanalyst Clarissa Pinkola Estés in her book *Women Who Run With The Wolves*. It is about a poor motherless girl who fashioned a pair of red shoes made out of scraps of cloth. Although she did not have much, her shoes gave her immense joy since she had sewn them together herself. She later meets a rich old woman, who takes her into her home and burns her humble shoes to ashes. Although the girl is now surrounded with riches, she is effectively trapped in a gilded carriage:

‘she was made to sit still all the time, to walk without skipping, and to not speak unless spoken to’, and so ‘a secret fire began to burn in her heart, and she continued to yearn for her old red shoes more than anything’ (Estés 232). The girl eventually chooses a shiny pair of red leather shoes, which turn out to be a deadly substitute when she meets the spirit of dread / the devil and dances herself to death (232–235).

What I take from this story is that something vital was taken away from the girl when the old woman threw away her handmade shoes. Although she was surrounded with a wealth of material possessions, they neither gave her joy nor vitality. The child was now left with a starved soul: ‘It is a famine of the soul that makes a woman choose things that will cause her to dance madly out of control [...] The loss of the handmade red shoes represents the loss of a woman’s self-designed life and passionate vitality, and the taking on of a too-tame life (236). When we build something from scratch, from a place of authenticity and love, that is when we find joy and meaning. This is why the below explanation by Estés regarding the folktale partly inspired me to write my own poem entitled ‘Red’:

Life and sacrifice go together. Red is the colour of life and of sacrifice. To live a vibrant life, we must make sacrifices of various sorts. If you want to go to university, you must sacrifice time and money and give intense concentration to the venture. If you want to create, you have to sacrifice superficiality, some security, and often your desire to be liked, to draw up your most intense insights, your most far-reaching visions.

(239)

The path that needs to be taken to live a life filled with vibrancy, meaning and authenticity is not always easy. It usually requires some sort of sacrifice, whether that be material comforts, or the desire to fit in and conform. It may involve going against the grain and shunning societal and

familial expectations. It requires deep thought, self-reflection and an acute listening to one's inner voice. Most importantly, it requires courage. The courage to walk the path of one's inner calling, a path that perhaps not many people have walked before.

In the same vein, the red hibiscus flower is highly symbolic for me. It is a flower that brings me back to my childhood, when I would stand next to my Por Por and she would pluck one of the flowers growing near her gate and tell me to suck as its tip. The sweetness of the nectar would surprise and amaze me. I've always associated my Por Por with someone who is sensual, feminine, strong and courageous. She travelled by herself to find my Gung Gung who was fleeing communist China. She rode horses. None of which were common for women in her village. She had a spunky personality, a soft body and 'the most beautiful breasts in her village'. Therefore the hibiscus flower combined with the memory of my Por Por signifies authenticity and femininity. It heralds a more simple time in my life, bringing me back into my body and senses.

In the closing scene, the red hibiscus flower appears on the projected screen, slowly rotating with golden nectar gliding onto it as I perform the tai chi with the 'Red' poem being recited. The poem, the tai chi and the red flower all converge to convey a feeling of femininity, courage, strength, and peace.



Fig 11. Performing chen style tai chi in closing scene of 愛, 媽媽 (*Love, Mum*), Dunedin, March 2023. Photo by Kerry Hodge. Flower animation by Celine Chan.

Some of the feedback that I received from audience members during my staged reading regarding the tai chi included:

- ‘I thought it was really emotive [...]. I thought it was a really good linking between the sequence of the stories as well’.
- ‘I really, really, really liked the tai chi sections, so you have lots of... there’s lots going on with the movement and the text, and then the movement and the text and you hitting the drum [wooden fish]’.
- ‘I also wished that the wushu [faster tai chi staff segment] was longer, [...] because there was tension right before the scene, right? The wushu moment is a

calm yet releasing moment...I wanted it to be longer, because I felt as soon as I got into the mood, that state of emotion, it ended. [...] when you're actually watching it, you realise the emotions come in but then it's not long enough for the emotion to sink in and linger'.

These comments demonstrate that the tai chi sections have an emotive effect, linking the different scenes and propelling the narrative forward, oscillating between words and movement and sound as the stories unfold.

Theatre reviewer Jeff Chen, who witnessed the full production in Auckland commented, 'A spiritual dimension clearly pervades the show and is manifest through Tai Chi and martial arts performances, fluid movements that release tension and create a space of acceptance'. The communication of a feeling of acceptance is integral to the play as evident in the last scene in which I, as a performer, move through the slow, fluid and precise movements of tai chi, focusing on my breathing and body and hearing the poem I wrote about legacy, ancestry, motherhood, rage, sacrifice, self-confrontation and the desire to be authentic. Feelings of peace, acceptance and the ability to heal and carry on with love, grace, and strength were emotions and messages that I felt and wanted to convey. As I moved slowly across the stage, past the boundary of my performance space, and the lights faded out to black, I thought of self-love, familial love and how at the end, we are just one small dot in the vast expanse of the universe. I hoped that I had managed to convey all this through my body, through my movement, my performance, my voice, my words, my breathing and the visual aesthetics of theatre.

Drumming / wooden fish



Fig 12. Kneeling in front of wooden fish during dress rehearsal for 愛, 媽媽 (*Love, Mum*), Dunedin, March 2023. Photo by Kerry Hodge.

The ‘wooden fish’ or muyu / 木玉 is a percussion instrument fashioned from a hollow wood block, also known as a Chinese temple block. It was originally used by Buddhist priests and nuns to beat a repetitive drumming sound when chanting sutras and prayers. The wooden block is beautifully carved with two fish heads embracing a pearl to symbolise wakefulness and attention when chanting sutras, since fish do not close their eyes when they sleep (Chinaculture). The wooden fish is typically placed on a small, embroidered cushion to protect the instrument and quality of the sound. Depending on the size of the wooden fish and the type of wood used, the

depth and pitch of the sound can vary and is unique with every instrument. Overall, the sound produced is crisp and resonant.

I wanted to feature the wooden fish in my play as I enjoy its deep resonant sound and what the instrument symbolises. The meditative quality and sense of ritual, of wanting to achieve harmony and acceptance by working through one's trauma made the beating of the wooden fish compatible with the themes in my play. Similar to tai chi, it is an art form that is part of my Chinese culture. I also thought that the carvings on a round wooden block looked beautiful in a natural and harmonious way. Through the repetitive beating of this beautiful instrument and hearing its reverberating calming sounds, it engaged my senses in an auditory and sensory manner, with the ability to transport me to a different mental and emotional state.

There are two scenes in my play in which I beat the wooden fish. The first is during the start of my play. The wooden fish is placed in the upstage left area of the stage. When the lights are still out, I enter the stage and kneel behind the wooden fish. A pre-recorded sound score created by sound composer Jake Budenz consisting of syncopated rhythms of the wooden fish mixed with my voice speaking Cantonese phrases begins. When the soundtrack begins to fade, I raise my hand and start to beat the wooden fish in a slow and steady rhythm. I do not stop at a prescribed number of beats, I beat until I feel ready to stop.

The beating of the wooden fish transports me to a different time and space. I am about to begin my story. I use this as a device to bring the audience along with me, so that they are now entering into my world. The repetitive drumming of the wooden fish is thus used to shift the mood, time and atmosphere, so that the audience and I can move together into a different world.

The second time that I beat the wooden fish, is when I recount the story of my Por Por's death. I begin the scene by kneeling behind the wooden fish, and listening to a recording of my mother singing Por Por's favourite song, a Cantonese opera 帝女花 / 'Da Lui Fa'. After listening to my mother singing the first four lines, I start to speak and introduce the song. When I finish speaking, I begin to beat the wooden fish in tandem with a recording of my voice recounting a scene from Por Por's birthday at the hospital. Below is the scene from the play:

3.3 Mum 'Dai Lui Fa'

At Por Por's funeral, Shatin funeral parlour, HK.

CYNTHIA

Kneels behind wooden fish. Recording of MUM singing 'Da Lui Fa' begins to play.

CYNTHIA speaks after listening to MUM singing four lines of song. The song continues to play until towards the end of the scene.

That's my mother singing Por Por's favourite song, a Cantonese opera 'dai lui fai' / 帝女花. This song was considered novel, because it was the first time that an operatic song contained such a beautiful melody.

*CYNTHIA starts beating wooden fish in tandem with the voice recording
below and MUM singing.*

[recording]

I remember when my Por Por was in hospital, she had bone cancer.

They had already moved her to a more beautiful wing, with pastel coloured walls and artwork of flowers and scenery.

I understood that her time on this plane was nearing an end.

Her sickness didn't stop her from exclaiming in excitement when I told her that I landed myself a new job, earning ten-thousand dollars a month.

Her eyes lit up, she seemed more excited about my job than I did.

Nor did it stop my mother from ordering a huge 'sau bau' / 寿包 (Chinese birthday bun) filled with more than ten mini sau baus inside for my Por Por on her birthday. Can you image that—mini baby birthday buns filled with lotus paste and egg yolk, sprinkled with pink, all wrapped inside a gigantic sau bau?!?

We were all at the hospital, my mother wanted to do something special for Por Por.

I can't remember if Por Por ate much.

My mother always said that Por Por chose to pass away on a day when she wasn't visiting;

As she didn't want her to be scared.

[recording ends]

CYNTHIA

CYNTHIA stops beating wooden fish. Stands up and speaks below.

Outside my Por Por's house, right where the wired fence of the main entrance sits, was a plant that bloomed large bell-shaped bright red flowers. My Por Por would pluck one of these beautiful blooms off, its petals stretched intense-red and wide; she would tell me to suck at its tip, I would turn my head to gaze up at her, she showing me how.

Sweet smooth nectar would run into my small young mouth: surprised and amazed and delighted all at once.

(Lam, *Love Mum*, Scene 3.3. Mum 'Da Lui Fa')

In the above scene, a recording of my mother singing an old Cantonese opera and my introduction that it used to be Por Por's favourite song signals to the audience that I am about to bring them into another time period; namely a memory that involves the bond between my mother and her mother. This was a difficult time as Por Por was in a hospital bed dying from bone cancer. It was particularly hard for my mother, and my recounting of this memory—of my mother bringing Chinese birthday buns for Por Por for her birthday—demonstrates the love that

they had for one another. Even when Por Por passes away, my mother believes that she chose to do so on a day when she was not visiting, so as not to cause my mother further anguish.

I close the scene by moving out of this memory and into another one: my own childhood memory of me and Por Por. This memory was particularly poignant for me, calling to mind a more simple and tender time through its evocation of sensory taste and touch.

This moment is in direct contrast to the business world that my mother and I used to inhabit. That which required hardness, logic and drive. That which caused a lot of stress and exhaustion. Instead, in this moment with my Por Por, I am returned to a part of my youth and ancestry that is natural, sensual and nurturing. The red hibiscus flower and the sweet smooth nectar are symbolic of the nurturing aspects of the feminine.

Beating the wooden fish whilst reminiscing about my Por Por provided a sense of ritual as well as a form of acceptance and healing surrounding the feelings of grief, love and sadness relating to her death. It was a way to soothe the pain and calm the mind and spirit. It reminded me of the Buddhist monks and nuns beating the wooden fish whilst chanting their scriptures. When performing in my play, beating the wooden fish helped me to move into a meditative internal state. The repetitive soothing sound of the drumming, intermingled with my mother singing Por Por's favourite Cantonese opera, and a recording of my voice recounting a memory of my mother and Por Por as she is dying was almost hypnotic as I felt myself being transported to another time and dimension. It was as if three generations of women, their spirits—my mother, Por Por and myself—were present on stage all at once. A linear sense of time disappears, and the past and present weave together, meet each other and overlap. In Self-Rev, one of the methods of 'working through' painful material is by 'integrating [a] dramatic healing

ritual' (Emunah, "Self-rev" 76). Similar to the tai chi, the beating of the wooden fish was integral in helping me to process my trauma.



Fig 13. Beating of wooden fish in Scene 3.3 during dress rehearsal for 愛, 媽媽 (*Love, Mum*), Auckland, September 2022. Photo by Shelton Leong.

Non-linear Sense of Time / Speaking to My Younger Self

This concept of a non-linear sense of time is present throughout my play, as memories and the past lives of my foremothers are presented on stage through a mix of the recounting of events and monologue delivery in the first-person when I embody the characters of my foremothers in the present tense. The delivery of the stories of both myself and my foremothers in this way seems to have had a positive effect on the audience, with theatre reviewer Tim Scott, who

watched the performance in Dunedin, commenting: ‘Lam delivers cathartic spoken-word monologues, inviting the audience to glimpse into both her own and her family’s minds. Depicting three people’s lives is no small feat, and this stream-of-consciousness approach was inviting and accessible to the audience’.

Another way in which I speak to the past, is by speaking to my younger self, to the younger Cynthia. After the staged reading, I began working with director and choreographer Kanta Kochhar-Lindgren, who is currently based out of the United States and had lived and worked in Hong Kong and India for a number of years. Since she is based overseas, all our rehearsals were conducted over zoom. One day during rehearsals, Kochhar-Lindgren asked me to read a section of my script as if I was speaking to my younger self. This is what I had reflected in my creative journal:

Rehearsals with Kanta, about speaking to the ‘other Cynthia’, who is standing at the back of the audience, listening. A younger Cynthia, a more naïve one, who was not as wise, and not as emotionally secure. Still figuring things out, still hurting.

I realised, that there was (and is) a ‘wound’, and that by telling her this story, I was ‘healing’, Slowly, but I was there. Every word that came out of my mouth, was to soothe her, entertain her, to tell her ‘that it’s alright’, you will make it, and you will come out the other end, strong, happier, and with more self-acceptance.

(Lam, CJ, June 2022)

In Self-Rev, the ability to ‘integrate an internal nurturing figure’ becomes one of the methods of ‘working through’ trauma (Emunah, “Self-rev” 77). Emunah claims that ‘often, healing components of Self-Revs involve self-nurturance, in which the performer responds to or cares for a hurt or neglected part of him/herself which, in many cases, is the child s/he once was’ (77). The

recognition and soothing of my younger self is demonstrative of this. The speaking to my younger self and to my past was acutely observed by theatre reviewer Scott: 'As her unwavering gaze swept through the audience, I didn't know whether she was gazing through a window to the audience or a mirror to her own past'. Scott's observation demonstrates that he, as a member of the audience, was able to observe the inner workings of my performance. He concludes '*Love, Mum* is a tribute to our past selves while looking forward to the person we strive to become'.

The speaking to my younger self becomes part of the initiation rite outlined in ATP, when the individual embarks on a rite of passage, the first two stages which include (1) separating an individual from their preceding social state, and (2) a period of transition or initiation in which they are neither one thing nor the other. In this case, I have 'separated' from my present state, and embarked on a journey into my past, reliving past moments, and speaking to the younger me. Volkas iterates that the key point is that the individual departs from 'ordinary life' and goes on a journey which could be an emotional journey into their past. This journey could be achieved through the reliving of past traumatic experiences through art, writing and performance. There, they confront some key challenges which could be psychological in nature. During this process, they are in a liminal or transitional state. One of the key characteristics of this liminal stage is the psychological opening up of the individual to their profound interior changes where old belief systems are broken down and personal transformation may eventually occur (Volkas 117). As evident in my creative journal, by speaking to the younger Cynthia, I realised things about my younger self, and was able to observe some characteristics about her that perhaps I never had given much thought to before. The important realisation that there is an inner psychological 'wound', and that by telling her my/our story, some kind of healing and soothing process was taking place, is quite profound.

The moving back and forth in time becomes an important aspect of the healing process. In Herman's second stage of trauma recovery which involves 'remembrance and mourning', Herman states that the role of the therapist 'help the patient move back and forth in time, from her protected anchorage in the present to the immersion in the past, so that she can simultaneously reexperience the feelings in all their intensity while holding on to the sense of safe connection that was destroyed in the traumatic moment' (Herman 178). Although Kochhar-Lindgren, the director for my play is not a therapist nor was she assigned this role, I believe that when working on traumatic material such as those in my play, the director not only acts as first 'witness' for the recounting of my story, but her role can bleed and overlap into one which is similar to that of a therapist. This overlapping of the role of director/therapist is a common feature of ATP. Pendzik et al. explain there is variation in the degree to which the director serves primarily as a therapist or drama therapist, or focuses more specifically on the artistic task of bringing ATP to fruition (15). In my case, I believe that the director weaves in and out of her different roles depending on the context and situation being explored. This is evident when my director had asked me to 'speak to the younger Cynthia', and I began to feel a shift in my emotional state and how I began to approach the material I had written. As demonstrated in my creative journal, I started to remember my younger self and began to feel a greater sense of compassion for her.

Herman explains that in psychotherapy, the goal of recounting the trauma story is integration, not exorcism (181):

Psychotherapy does not get rid of the trauma. Instead, in this process of reconstruction, the trauma story undergoes transformation, making it become more present and real as the experience is re-lived through its retelling. The fundamental premise of this work is

the underlying belief in the restorative power of truth-telling. Through truth-telling and remembrance, the trauma story as relayed by the patient becomes testimony.

(181)

I will be discussing the concept of testimony in relation to witnessing and audience in more detail in the next chapter.

Running for Survival/Pleasure

The presence of trauma, and the idea of a ‘wound’ is central to the premise of ATP. With that, I would like to discuss the theme and symbolism behind the movement of ‘running’ which is a central motif in my play.

‘Running runs in our family’, is how I began Scene 1.7. I then go on to describe how I come from a family of runners, which includes my father running at the age of seventy, my brother and I being sprinters and competing in athletic competitions in school, and then my mother running topless as a child. In this sense, running is instinctual and provides a sense of freedom, pleasure and excitement, such as when running in a competition. It is also a way to comment on stereotypes, or the breaking of them, as here we have the athletic Asian family, including my father who continues to run at the age of seventy.

We also have my mother, who raced with the boys in her village: ‘This horrified my Por Por. My mum was a bit of a tomboy as a child. She was unlike her eldest sister, who was quiet and 斯文 / ‘see mun’, which was considered more feminine and proper behaviour. My Gung Gung, who was quite strict and traditional, favoured my mum’s eldest sister, but my mother was

very close to her mother' (*Love Mum*, Scene 1.7). In Cantonese, when we comment that someone is 斯文 / 'see mun', this generally means that they are polite, elegant and gentle, implying how a girl should behave. In a way, I could read this as an expectation on young girls, as a way to control and inhibit their natural and boisterous behaviour.



Fig 14. Running scene about my family during dress rehearsal for 愛, 媽媽 (*Love, Mum*), Auckland, September 2022. Photo by Shelton Leong.

From another angle, running could also be read as a means to survival, or as one of the ‘flight’ responses when we encounter danger. The flight mechanism in a fight/flight/freeze response is also instinctual and rooted in the body. In my play, you have my Por Por running away from the communists, and towards her husband who has escaped to Taiwan. They then settle in Hong Kong to make a life for themselves and their family. We also have my Ah Mah, who ‘walked and walked and walked’ away from poverty and towards Hong Kong, for a better life. Running away from something can also mean running towards one’s dreams, for something or somewhere perceived to be better. Running towards something or someone can signal a longing for connection, such as when I was a child and would run after my mother whenever she left to go to work.

In another scene that also involves the concept of running, is Scene 2.9 with my ex-husband. I ran out of the apartment, barefoot. I was running away for my own safety:

The third time it happened...I ran out of the apartment, barefoot, him yelling. I ran past two security guards, the first one smirked, the other stood up, alarmed. I remember running on the concrete podium, and the smooth cold tiled floors of the shopping complex downstairs. I remember stepping onto the hard steel ridges of the escalator, which eventually took me to the rough wet ground outside, where I waited in queue for a taxi. I remember a young man looking at my profile as I stood in line, then he looked down at my feet. When I got into the taxi, I called my father, I said: ‘I’m coming home, but I’m not wearing any shoes, can you bring me a pair of shoes when you come down to meet me’.

I remember saying to myself, ‘this is the third time, and I’m not going back’

(Lam, *Love Mum*, Scene 2.9)

The above situation had encouraged me to move to New Zealand, to start anew, to reflect, to heal, and to pursue my passion of becoming a writer.

Running is also tied in with the theme of depression, and the idea of running away from one's problems and demons. Towards the end of the play, I talk about Ah Mah's black dog and me running away from her as a child. I was aware that when I was writing this scene, that a black dog is a common symbol used to represent depression. In the below scene, if analysed metaphorically, it also represents me finally facing my depression and confronting it. Similar to the child who realises that when she stopped running, the dog only wanted to play, I realise that my depression was not as frightening as I thought.

Recently, this image keeps on coming to my mind...

It's me, as a four year old... I am living with my Ah Mah at her village house, and she always kept a big black dog with loose long hair, usually on a leash... but one time, the dog was let loose, and I got scared, and I started running... I ran outside the house... past the steel gate... past the 黃皮 / Wong Pei fruit trees... past the soy sauce factory with all its jars of fermented black beans... I couldn't stop running, as the dog was running behind me, and behind her were my cousins... I think there was 泉鈺姊家 / 'Chuen Yuk ga-jer' (Big sister Chuen Yuk) and 威豬 / Wai-Ju and 翰仔哥哥 / 'Hong-Jai gor gor' (Big brother Hon)... they were all running in a line one after the other, after the dog yelling at me to stop running....啊盈, 停呀! 唔好跑呀! 停呀! / 'Ah Ying, ting ah!

Im hau pau ah! Ting ah!' (Ah Ying, stop running! Stop!)

So finally... after repeated shouts....I stopped. I stopped running. I turned around, and realised that the big black dog didn't actually want to bite my head off...she only wanted to play....she was happy and gentle and not all that scary after all.

(Lam, *Love Mum*, Scene 3.4)

Theatre reviewer Jeff Chen describes the above scene and comments: 'When she eventually does stop, she realises that all the dog wants is to play. In many ways, her stories all share a message of confrontation, courage and honesty. Everything starts when you stop running'. This echoes back to the start of my play, when I announce my depression publicly for the first time. In this later scene, I am facing and confronting my depression, and realising that it might not be as insurmountable or scary as I had initially thought. It also relates to an endearing childhood memory in which my cousins are all behind me. In a way, I have the love, support and backing of my ancestors, my relatives and my rich family heritage to draw upon.

The idea of facing one's demons—whether that be depression or related to one's traumatic past—and then leading into integration, acceptance and being able to move forward, is one of the outcomes reported by many ATP practitioners. Linking forward to the closing scene in which I perform tai chi, I am no longer running away or running towards something. I am now settled into my life in New Zealand:

You might now be wondering about that dream of mine... the white house by the sea... I used to think that I had to be 'whisked away' by some European man who lived in the South of France to order to have my dream life. Well, to my pleasant surprise, I didn't need a man to whisk me away. Somehow, it had begun to happen, and I felt I was starting

to live the life I had always envisioned for myself; a life that was authentic and natural and ‘hand-made’...a life that back then, seemed so far away and hard to reach.

When it’s deep into the night, and if I step outside onto my deck, under the blanket of the indigo sky and the silver stars above...and if I’m still... I can feel the cool wind caressing my face and hear the sound of the waves lapping in the ocean....

CYNTHIA does a Chen style tai chi sequence.

(Lam, *Love Mum*, Scene 3.7)

The flowing and measured movements of the final tai chi scene becoming symbolic of my newfound state of mind.



Fig 15. Performing tai chi chen style during closing scene of 愛, 媽媽 (*Love, Mum*), Auckland, September 2022. Photo by Shelton Leong.

In this chapter, I have explored the rehearsal process in the creation of my play 愛, 媽媽 (*Love, Mum*) from a movement and embodied knowledges perspective. I have focused my discussion on the key movements of tai chi, drumming of the wooden fish and running. The inclusion of tai chi was analysed from both a craft and personal angle, examining how the practice is related to my culture and to a sense of connection with my mother. The drumming of the wooden fish was explored in relation to Buddhist rituals, death and the creation of a non-linear sense of time and space. Finally, the theme of running was dissected from a familial and somatic perspective,

related to one's natural instinct to run for pleasure or for survival, as well as being intrinsically tied to the theme of depression and facing one's demons.

Therefore, when moving from the written text to a more physical and embodied expression, it became a method for me to connect and interact more deeply with my written material. Through embodiment, I was able to connect more meaningfully with the memories of my foremothers, and my ancestral culture, rituals and spiritual philosophy. Embodied reenactments allowed me to gain new insights and understandings of my younger self and past experiences.

Through the rehearsal process, I was able to experience and express what feminine scholars have termed as embodied ways of knowing. Embodiment does not mean that I discount the mind and intellect, and focus solely on my body and physicality. Embodiment meant that I was able to gather the 'wholeness' of my being—which includes my individual uniqueness, my heritage, ancestry, my foremothers, the rich cultural traditions and the present ground and socio-cultural conditions in which I stand—and be able to experience all that internally, as well as becoming an outward mode of expression and connection. The connection with others is what I will be discussing in the next chapter on audience, performance and witnessing.

Chapter Five: Creative Process Part Three—Performance / Witnessing and Transformation

As the creative process continued to evolve, it began to expand outwards. Writing a playscript intrinsically implied that there will be a performance in front of a live audience down the line. I had chosen this form, a one-woman show, to recount this particular story. I did not choose to write prose with the end goal being a manuscript to be read. As mentioned earlier, I had followed my instincts, not knowing where the process would lead me. I am glad that I had listened to my inner voice, as the rehearsal and subsequent performance became an integral part of my healing and personal transformation. Performing in front of an audience led to connection with those who watched and listened to my story, sparking dialogue and resonance as they began to share their own stories and family histories with me.

Autobiographical/Autoethnographic Performance and Women

Pendzik et al. cite the work of feminist scholars who stress the link between the healing and empowering effects of autobiographical performance and its association with the feminist and political inception of the genre, ‘which fueled the sense of personal agency exercised by the authors/performers, underlined the transformative possibilities inherent in the act of storying our lives, and offered a place of centrality—literally, a stage—to uncanonical, radical, and public representations of the personal’ (2–3). Ryan Claycomb argues that ‘staged life writing offers feminists a compelling conduit to bringing women’s voices—often silenced ones—into the realm

of authority' (19). When the narrative voice is made live through embodied performance, the claim to truth and authority is enhanced (Claycomb 18–19).

Heddon argues that autobiographical performances are acts of possibility that suggest a movement culminating in creation and change (2). The relationship between marginalised subjects and the appeal of autobiographical performance is not coincidental (2).

Autobiographical performance is a medium in which the subject takes centre-stage, providing an opportunity for otherwise silenced or marginalised stories to be heard. It is a chance for one to speak out and talk back to hegemonic structures and value systems, offering alternative stories, histories and perspectives. bell hooks argues that 'moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonised, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side to side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of "talking back", [...] that is the expression of our movement from object to subject—the liberated voice' (hooks 9). Heddon claims that the autobiographical and the political are interconnected: 'Who Speaks? What is spoken? What sort of lives are represented, contested, imagined?' (20).

Lynn Miller and Jacqueline Taylor suggest that 'encounters between live performers and live spectators always have political and social sequences' (3). They claim that creating an autobiographical narrative 'reconstitutes the self, the audience, and surrounding cultural contexts. It makes sense of the self, gives each part a voice and a body' (3). The autobiographical process allows one to share one's life through writing or performance, and in doing so, enables it to 'resonate in the broader realm of public consequence' (3–4).

As mentioned in Chapter One, performative autoethnography is written 'to move off the page doing the labour of meaning-making with and in the presence of others' (Spry, "Matter" 175). In this sense, autoethnography is never about the self alone, making it a relational, rather

than individual, practice (Spry, “Matter” 175; Adams et al., “Introduction” 11). Spry states that performative autoethnography ‘seeks to identify and call into question performances of class, race, and gender marked as normative which restrict and belay alternative ways of being’ (Spry, *Body* 161). By allowing marginalised voices to take centre stage, ‘a single dominant performance of power, is articulated, challenged, and deposed by performative autoethnography by its creation of socioculturally transgressive stories of reality’ (Spry, *Body* 161). Holman Jones argues that critical autoethnography is ‘a deliberately political practice, one used to show how our experiences with/in relationships, institutions, communities, and cultures are enlarged or constrained by power and (in)justice’ (Adams et al., “Introduction” 11). She claims that by ‘naming and claiming these marginalised identities, contributors marshal the forces of oppression to “make sense of the senseless” and to use writing as an act of protest’ (Adams et al., “Introduction” 11). In this sense, autoethnography ‘challenge injustice and unequal power dynamics’ through the creation of what Crenshaw calls “intersectional accounts”—stories that consider aspects of (often marginalised) identities including gender, race, ability, sexuality, spirituality, geography, and space with the goal of storying “the complexities” of intersecting power relations that produce multiple identities and distinctive perspectives’ (Adams et al., “Introduction” 11). Therefore, by reflexively examining and challenging the unequal power dynamics and structural oppressions in which we live through the exploration of our personal lives, ‘the personal is political’ comes to mind.

Heddon claims that the political potential of autobiographical performance was harnessed for the first time during the 1970s second-wave feminist movement in the United States (21). Collective consciousness-raising activities had enabled women to realise that their problems were not individual but part of a collective oppression of the whole sex (Whelehan 66). As such,

‘the personal is the political’ becoming a powerful political slogan during the women’s movement and continues to be used today. The story of women’s autobiography is ‘the story of resistance to the disembodied, traditionally masculine “universal subject”, whose implicit denial of skin colour, gender, sexual orientation (other than the heterosexual), and economic disparity constrained women as “others” with no voices or physicality’ (Miller and Taylor 4). Therefore, women’s autobiographical performances and/or those of marginalised voices become political vehicles to speak up and speak against dominant narratives that have usually cast women as passive objects.

There has been some criticism of the women’s movement in the 1970s, in which some women felt marginalised or invisible, namely those who were not White or middle-class. Women of colour felt that their experiences did not resonate with those presented in the feminist work produced during his time. Heddon argues that the idea of an essential female subject had denied differences between women, and that the lack of diversity and multiplicity of experiences made it difficult for other women to perform different stories (25, 26). In a similar vein, the idea of establishing a ‘community of women’ becomes problematic, since this ‘community’ is based on sameness, ‘with any differences between the women ignored, denied or erased’ (32).

Since the 1970s, progress has been made with more women of colour coming forward to tell their stories with their own unique cultural flavour and language. In my case, coming from a more conservative Asian culture, taking centre stage to relay stories on what is considered private and sensitive subject matters such as mental health and divorce is not common.

Therefore, I argue that what I had achieved through my performance in *愛, 媽媽 (Love, Mum)* was not only a deeply healing act but also a radical and political one.

The Staged Reading Performance

The staged reading of my play 愛, 媽媽 (*Love, Mum*) was conducted live online via Zoom on January 20th, 2022. I decided that an online staged reading would mitigate any restrictions imposed by COVID, and would allow me to invite an international audience. I had taken some movement and writing classes online, and had met other writers, theatre practitioners and choreographers who were based overseas, and so staging this online proved an ideal option to receive feedback from this group. I also wanted to invite some people from Hong Kong, mainly my close friends, as that is where my cultural background and sense of identity comes into play and is explored through my work. People from New Zealand such as my doctoral colleagues in other disciplines as well as creative artists were also invited. On the day of the staged reading, attendees from Hong Kong, New Zealand, Singapore, Taiwan and the United States were present.

I wanted to invite a range of different people, including Chinese and Western people, men and women, and also industry (writers, creative artists and theatre practitioners) and non-industry people. I wanted to see what kinds of responses my play would elicit. Nineteen people showed up to the staged reading which included my two supervisors who could also provide commentary and feedback if they felt inclined, and fourteen people stayed behind for the group feedback session.

A few people had to leave after the staged reading, but a time was set up to provide individual feedback at a later date. I also received additional individual feedback from attendees who attended the group feedback. A recording of my staged reading was made, which was sent to individuals who could not make it to the staged reading but viewed my performance and

provided feedback at a later date. In total, I received individual feedback from eight audience members, seven verbal, one written.

As mentioned previously, Jordan Rosin was the facilitator for the staged reading. We had been working together for the past few months with Rosin as acting coach in preparation for the staged reading performance. He proposed that for the feedback session, we employ Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process. Utilising the structure of Lerman's process was a way to ensure that the feedback received was as constructive as possible, so that I would feel excited to head back into rehearsals to continue refining my play. According to Lerman and John Borstel, the definition of 'good feedback' is that the artist feels inspired to return to their studio to continue with their work: 'What I experience is that people get up from Critical Response and they cannot wait to go back into the studio. That is my definition of good feedback' (Lerman and Borstel 20).

Lerman's Critical Response Process involves the following three roles:

- The artist—offers a work-in-progress for review and is prepared to question that work in a dialogue with other people.
- Responders (one, a few, or many)—committed to supporting the artist's intent to make excellent work, engage in dialogue with the arts.
- The facilitator—initiates each step, keeps the process on track, and works to help the artist and responders use the process to frame useful questions and responses.

(Lerman and Borstel 16).

Lerman's Critical Response Process involves four key steps when eliciting feedback from audience members. The core steps are as follows:

- Step One: Statements of Meaning
 - What has meaning for you about what you have just seen?
 - What was stimulating, surprising, evocative, memorable, touching, unique, compelling, meaningful for you?
 - Note: although not explicitly asking for affirmations, these statements should be framed in a positive light.
- Step Two: Artist as Questioner
 - Questions can be general (usually elicits more varied response) or more specific questions (more focused and precise commentary).
 - The facilitator may step in to probe the artist to elaborate: for example, 'How familiar or unfamiliar did the story seem?'. This is done in order to clarify the question or answers given, and to probe deeper.
- Step Three: Neutral Questions from Responders
 - Responders can ask the artist informational or factual questions.
 - Responders need to practice forming the opinion into a neutral question, for example: 'Why is the cake so dry?' becomes 'What kind of texture were you going for?'

- Step Four: Permissioned Opinions

- Responders first name the topic of the opinion and ask the artist for permission to state it, for example: ‘I have an opinion about costumes. Do you want to hear it?’.
- Artist has the option to reply ‘yes’ or ‘no’ or ‘not right now’. Maybe the artist has already heard enough about costumes, or thinks costumes are irrelevant right now, or doesn’t want to hear about costumes from this particular responder.
- In most cases, the artist will say ‘yes’ because the process has laid the groundwork for this moment.

(Lerman and Borstel 16–18).

The idea is that by the time the feedback session progresses to the final step, a sense of trust and positive communication would have developed between the audience and the artist, so that the artist would feel open to receiving ‘permissioned opinions’. In my case, with the aid of Rosin as a skilled facilitator, I realised that this was true.

Performing Live on Zoom

I decided that the best place for me to perform my show would be in the comfort of my own living room. Since I had been rehearsing online with Rosin and recording most of my practice sessions there, the space was suitable and bright enough, and I would have all my props handy. These included a desk and ‘power chair’ (office chair) for when I play my mother, as well as all my clothing changes. The only issue was as this space was not as large as a conventional theatre space, the faster tai chi staff segment felt a bit cramped, although still feasible. I also had to

operate some of the technical aspects of the show, which included playing the audio recordings which were saved on my iPhone. The quality of the sound was tested previously, and a microphone was set up for better sound quality. We had an IT technician on zoom to handle any technical issues that might crop up.

What added an interesting dimension to the staged reading was that it was performed live online. As a performer, this provided for an interesting experience, as during rehearsals I could watch myself and ‘design’ the set, deciding what I wanted to include in the frame and what I wanted to leave out. In a way it is similar to a theatre set or when taking a photograph, but unlike traditional theatre, I could also be a ‘witness’ to my performance simultaneously. In effect, I had become both the performer and the witness/audience.

Earlier in my creative process, when I was moving from the written script towards movement/rehearsals, I had attended a nine-week Six Viewpoints class online, taught by Deborah Black based on the teachings of American dancer, choreographer and theatre artist Mary Overlie. The Six Viewpoints technique is known as a philosophical articulation of postmodern performance as well as a teaching system. I wanted to attend this course as I found myself not knowing what to do with my body when I ‘performed’ the script. I also felt that I did not know how to utilise the stage space as I would always end up gravitating towards the centre. As part of the course, participants had to create a final performance around five minutes long. I performed a short section from my play which included a collage of different expressions related to the experience with my ex-partner, such as a poem, lines read from the ‘the power of three’ scene, coupled with the drumming of the wooden fish. Below is an excerpt from my creative journal based on my observations and reflections:

The good part was that I could really ‘zoom in’ on a certain body feature I wanted to highlight — in this sense it was my left fist, clenched, and rolling together my thumb and forefinger when nervous. It made me think of a ‘film still’ and the idea of ‘framing’ for ‘focus’ so to speak.

It was also interesting, in that as this was a zoom/online performance, I realised that I could ‘design the set’ (what went into and was left out of the frame), as I could ‘observe’ myself (instead of being just a ‘participant’, which is what happens during a live rehearsal together with SH. I cannot see ‘how I look’ on stage, only he can). Thus in this sense, I could be both actor/participant and observer / witness / audience member at the same time.

In Mary Overlie’s chapter 13 in *Standing in Space: The Six Viewpoints Theory & Practice*, ‘The Matrix’, she states that: ‘The Matrix is the laboratory of the fully functioning observer/participant. Rather than approaching performance as the creator/originator, which requires that you distance yourself from the creative work, the observer/participant performer stands within the materials allowing them to direct action as equal partners (111).

(Lam, CJ, April 3 2021)

Overlie’s teaching that ‘the observer/participant performer stands within the materials allowing them to direct action as equal partners’ (111) is an interesting concept. It reminds me of the ability to be both performer/audience in which I am both telling my story and being witnessed by myself at the same time.

Staged Reading Feedback: Resonance and Personal Transformation

Overall, the feedback I received from both the group and private sessions was quite comprehensive. Fourteen people stayed behind for the group feedback session, and I received further feedback from eight individual sessions at a later time. The group feedback session lasted for around forty minutes, and individual feedback sessions were usually between thirty minutes to an hour. It should be noted that individual feedback sessions did not necessarily follow the steps outlined in Lerman's Critical Response Process, especially if audience members had already attended the group feedback sessions and had additional things they wanted to share and comments to add. Therefore, the format of these sessions tended to be more free-flowing and loosely structured. At times it felt like a conversation between friends, centred around the topics brought up by my play.

I will be highlighting a few of the key findings that have bearing on my main research question, and those specifically related to the processes of ATP. Although I went into the feedback session with the concept of improving my play from a craft perspective as well as gauging audience feedback on particular issues, what emerged at times was a dialogue in which audience members started sharing their own personal histories and stories upon reflection of the experiences that I had shared. This was particularly true in the individual feedback sessions.

To begin the group feedback session, the facilitator began with Lerman's Step One of the Critical Response Process: Statements of Meaning. Rosin invited the audience to type in the chat box one to three words or phrases representing images, ideas, lines, thoughts or themes that they remembered or found meaningful or interesting. The audience were also given an option to

unmute themselves and speak, resulting in a ‘popcorn of voices’. Some of these statements of meaning from the audience included:

- A personal story in a personal place
- The flower nectar
- I don’t belong anywhere
- The musical instrument and what it represents
- The beating of the drum
- I wish I had...
- Love, journey, new beginnings
- Resilience
- I couldn’t feel my body, numbness
- A second chance in life
- Couldn’t handle her emotion
- Transformation
- Disconnection to culture and language
- Pink jacket, white blouse, red sweater
- I’m a runner

- Authenticity, being true to one self
- Leftover women

In this section, I realised that what stood out for the audience included not only their analysis of the overarching meaning of the play, but images and symbols (flower nectar), sounds (the drumming of the wooden fish), the props that I used (clothing), and key words or phrases that I had said.

Rosin then read out some of these statements, and continued by asking: ‘If this artwork had a particular meaning for you, what was it?’ Some statements typed into the chat box included:

- The struggle for self-definition/discovery in response to generational and personal trauma.
- Ancestral trauma
- The importance of belonging, authenticity and possibilities of development and finding happiness.
- We carry our legacies through genes, words, memories that reverberate through generations. Small moments can have lasting impacts.
- The importance of self-acceptance and the messiness of life is real and finding meaning in it.
- Boundaries set by society for Chinese women.

What stood out for me in these responses was the overarching theme of matrilineal trauma and legacy, and how the struggle for self-definition and authenticity fits in within this matrix. When invited by Rosin to elaborate and speak, a male member of the audience opened the discussion:

I resonated with a lot of what she said [...] A journey through working through some of the demons she's had, her relationship with a mom, seeing it from her mom's perspective and her grandparent's perspective as well; but I think coming out through the other end. For me, it's really about that, I think someone wrote transformation, it's almost that chrysalis, the process of going through all those things and working out our own demons and coming out stronger.

I was glad that a male audience member had opened this discussion. As although I categorised my play as a matrilineal memoir, it was interesting to know that aspects of my play had a lot of resonance with him. He mentioned the journey of 'transformation' and about 'the process of going through all those things and working out our demons and coming out stronger', which is a key journey that the writer/actor goes through during the ATP process.

This segment was important for me to hear as an artist, as there are a few key themes that are interwoven throughout my play—how to live an authentic life despite societal and cultural expectations of women, depression and mental illness, marriage and relationships, one's identity growing up in a colonised society, intergenerational conflict and matrilineal legacy—and so I was keen to see what stood out for the audience, whether my play had struck a chord with them, and what they thought was the overarching theme of the play.

On a personal level, resonance was important because it meant 'connection', whether that meant connection with a part of my story, with me, or finding similarities in our interpersonal

relations and the wider socio-cultural environment. It signalled to me that parts of my personal story struck a universal chord. When audience members started sharing with me their own experiences, I realised that a dialogue was happening in which this was not a simple one-way feedback about my play, it also provided a platform for them to share similar experiences. In a way, we were listening and bearing witness to one another's stories, and creating a form of support network for one another. This relates to Herman's third stage of recovery in which 'the encounter with others who share similar experiences helps to dissolve the individual's feelings of shame, isolation and stigma attached to the traumatising event' (Herman 215).

In Lerman's Critical Response Process Step Two: Artist as Questioner, one of the first questions I asked was: 'My play is framed around Chinese womanhood, but I wanted to know whether my play resonated with you, and if so, in what way?'. Some examples from the group and individual feedback sessions included:

- I would say, very much so, for me. I mean, some of the things that you describe. You know, I also was in an abusive marriage with someone who was struggling with their mental health and so those sorts of things connected for me very directly. But even the experiences that are far from my life experience as someone who grew up in the United States, I think the specificity with which you communicated those stories really connected them for me emotionally in a way that works really nicely.
- For me it resonated in three aspects: (i) identity; (ii) abuse in a relationship and (iii) cultural association. [...] I'm a fifth-culture kid and Cynthia's third-culture kid experience resonated with me very well. Born into one country and culture while living in another a country and culture while creating your own identity—a blend of both. [...]

Seeing aspects of Cynthia's Chinese heritage and the history of her grandmother's story during China's tumultuous 50s and 60s reminded me of my grandparents and their struggle to be free from British rule in South Asia.

- Yes, definitely resonated with me in terms of how I made choices because of my mom's actions and comments. Also turning to self-help when I really needed to be in my body and face my trauma.
- Your closing lines, 'How we are the sum of all women' [in 'Red' poem] just hit me hard. I actually started crying, because I felt for all women, that was a significant statement. Any woman over the age of twenty-five who has pondered their mother, grandmothers or maternal figures, that's a profound statement [...] and it would resonate with every woman regardless of cultural background. [...] I felt that was almost the heart of your message, and that's the 'ah ha' moment for your audience, where they have this dang! And then instantly, your story is their story, that point of connection is cemented.
- What resonated with me was because of your family and your family background and also the culture in which you live in, the States, in Hong Kong and so forth. [...] And then because in our Asian cultures, it's more about not standing out, more Confucius, whereas in Western society, it's more about being more individualistic. But what I felt in general, when we live in a society in which we are born, we have all this history, culture that is trying to influence us, or we felt that it influence us, but we lose ourselves.

From these responses, I can determine that my play had resonated with the audience on different fronts, whether it reminded them of their own mother-daughter relationships, trauma in intimate relationships, or their cultural identity. The last response is particularly perceptive as it points to the socio-cultural and historical forces that oppress and ‘influence us’, but in the process we lose our sense of self.

As the feedback session progressed, the boundaries placed on Chinese women was also mentioned by one of the female audience members from Hong Kong:

I think in early stages, you were kind of also following the path of your parents, your mom, and what the society thought or things we should do as women in Hong Kong, you know be in the corporate world, get married, when to have kids, that kind of thing.

This response points to the structural oppressions placed on women in Hong Kong and the wider ramifications felt by other women living in a similar environment, which reverberates further than my own lived experience.

Pendzik describes how in ATP, the personal is inscribed in the collective (Pendzik, “Performance” 253). Volkas explains how the process inherent in ATP brings about this universal quality from the hero’s journey perspective:

Because the ATP process aligns with the timelessness of the archetypal hero’s journey, it gets to the source of the actor’s primal wounding and fuels the fires of their creativity. It taps into the actor’s desire to be seen and elevates their story to mythic proportions. It paints their individual struggles with a collective brush, connecting to the existential and universal dilemmas we all face.

(Volkas 126)

Rubin recounts how many audience members report being reminded of their own life experiences when watching Self-Rev performances, resulting in a feeling of connectedness and universality (137). Pendzik quotes Shea Wood who claims that ‘watching someone else share their personal story appears to give the audience permission to think about, feel, and share their own stories’ (qtd. in Pendzik, “Performance” 254).

In a similar vein, autoethnography can help us to ‘engage and compel responses from audiences’ (Adams et al., “Introduction” 4). Adams et al. suggest that ‘while writing and performing can be personally cathartic processes, autoethnographers do not write or perform only for themselves; they write and act for others’ (Adams et al., “Introduction” 8). By ‘processing painful, confusing, and uncertain cultural experiences’, the autoethnographer/performer offers others ‘equipment for living’: reflections and insights that enable others to make sense of similar experiences or struggles (Adams et al., “Introduction” 8). Based on my own experience as recounted above, this was exemplified during the staged reading feedback sessions in which feelings of connectivity were cultivated between performer and audience through the sharing of our stories.

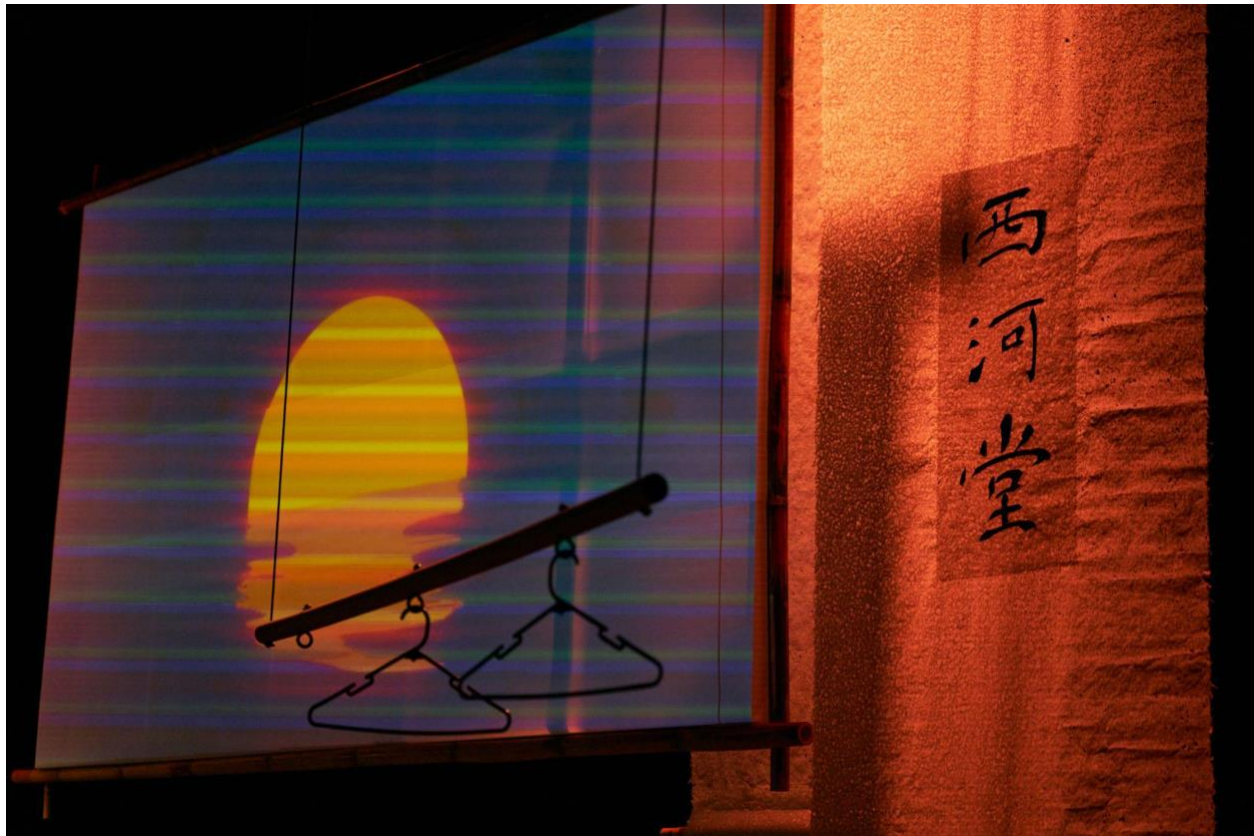


Fig 16. Imagery of ‘break of dawn’ in Scene 3.5 愛, 媽媽 (*Love, Mum*), Auckland, September 2022. Photo by Shelton Leong. Animation by Celine Chan.

Performing in front of an audience is an integral part of the process of theatre. In ATP, this usually involves a small invited audience, with the performance process paralleling a rite of passage resulting in therapeutic change for the actor/writer. As mentioned in earlier chapters, this process involves the writer/performer embarking on a journey towards change, confronting the unknown, and returning to a changed self. The performance therefore is an integral part of this process and signals a transformation in which the initiate is reborn into a new role (Volkas 114).

Pendzik describes how for the performer, ‘the translation of painful experiences into stage language is not performed only as a means to express their pain, but also in order to allow it to evolve, to transform into something else’ (Pendzik, “Poiesis” 19). She argues that a performance that has a therapeutic horizon ‘usually brings forth a sense of hopefulness—even if a mild one—which resonates with the author as well as with the audience’ (Pendzik, “Poiesis” 20). Emunah explains the process leading up to this moment as follows:

The process leading up to the moment of sharing the piece before an audience has been a gradual and relational one, between performer and director, along with the performer’s singular excavation of inner pain, discovery of resources and resilience, and unravelling layers of insight. A new element, which continues the journey of externalisation and bringing to light what may have been dormant, is now being introduced: sharing the production with an audience. Performers need to ready themselves for this momentous encounter.

(Emunah, “Behind” 43)

In my case, I believe that the process of going through rehearsals, of slowly sharing my story with my creative supervisor and then my acting coach Rosin, led me to feel comfortable enough to openly share my story to a small invited audience. I had control over who I wanted to invite to the staged reading, so although I felt nervous I also felt safe. This was aided in my trust with Rosin as a skilled facilitator who I had worked with over the past few months.

Emunah calls this encounter with the audience a momentous occasion, and points to the healing powers inherent in this process:

But this presence on stage is not one of persona, but of person, the performer as her truest self. And not just self, but self about to change, in the presence of an audience [...] The performer is not only about to make an offering to the audience, but is about to receive a formidable gift: a culmination, intensification, and solidifications of the healing in the Self-Rev process.

(Emunah, “Behind” 43)

Emunah states that the role of the audience is crucial, affecting the performer in new ways—cognitively, emotionally, spiritually—as the story is being shared (44). She explains that while all performances involve an actor’s vulnerability, the therapeutic change in Self-Rev performances heightens this vulnerability, taking the performer’s connection with an audience to new levels (44). The reference to ritual and the performance being a rite of passage is highlighted: ‘Much is at stake. While all theatre is transitory in nature, many Self-Rev theatre pieces are performed only once, before a single audience, highlighting the ephemeral nature of performance and yet at the same time heightening a sense of ritual or rite of passage, in which something of long-range repercussion is being marked and imprinted’ (44). At the end of the performance, there has been a kind of birth (45).

The audience’s witnessing has the power to affect the performer’s connection to the content of the piece, potentially amplifying insights and revelations, eliciting new levels of awareness or unanticipated emotionality whilst on stage (44). The audience in this sense, becomes an empathic witness to the performer’s life story (Emunah, “Behind” 47; Rubin 138).

By sharing one’s life story with an audience, this is also the moment when the telling of private stories moves into a public space, where stories can be heard, witnessed and validated.

The results of this process include the ignition of dialogue, connection, healing and personal transformation.

The idea of personal transformation was mentioned previously in the beginning of the group feedback session when an audience member commented: ‘I think someone wrote transformation, it’s almost that chrysalis, the process of going through all those things and working out our own demons and coming out stronger’. Taking the concept of transformation further, a different audience member observed the birth of a new self, ‘a new Cynthia’. In her individual feedback session she commented: ‘Each scene has a different question, and the play has a question. I think the play’s question is “How does a woman become a self? How did she find herself? How does she become whole?” That to me is the question of the play’.

In one particular scene towards the end of my play, I announce my Chinese name—one which I had previously renounced when I was a child—to the audience, and to myself, for the first time:

Recently, just the other day, when I just woke up and felt the sun hitting my eyes, I suddenly wondered: what my mother felt when she finally birthed and laid eyes on me for the very first time.... (*smile wistfully*). My parents decided to name me Hiu Ying 曉盈 (*pause*), 林曉盈 (Lam Hiu Ying). My name means—‘abundance at the break of dawn’.

(Lam, *Love Mum*, Scene 3.5)

The same audience member further elaborates on this particular scene:

And I thought ‘aha!’, this is a section of the birth of the self. That’s how I read it, this is where you realise you birthed yourself by choosing a different life. You gave birth to a new Cynthia. And so I kind of wanted other people to recognise that too [...] I felt like at the end we’re seeing this character Cynthia, as a complete being. I mean, that’s what is amazing about it, we watched the evolution of how she became complete. Like she shed the expectations but could still love and acknowledge history and memory, but she’s fine, complete, living differently.

I actually had not fully realised ‘the birth of the self’ until this audience member had pointed this out to me. It was quite moving for me when she shared that. It also signified how the audience had witnessed a personal transformation: ‘we watched the evolution of how she became complete’. A deep sense of acceptance is also conveyed at the end: ‘she shed the expectations but could still love and acknowledge history and memory, but she’s fine, complete, living differently’ (Staged Reading, Individual). This acute statement and observation clearly signifies what the goal of ATP is all about, and why this process is worth doing.

The concept of personal transformation by ‘working through’ past issues and traumas, and the therapeutic effect it has on oneself was also expressed by another audience member during an individual feedback session, he asked:

I think art in essence, gives you a platform to divert all your emotions into that art [...] It brings out the inner soul in you, and project it out onto the play or a piece of art, and that’s how I felt when I was watching it. One question I want to ask is, is it more therapeutic for your depression? With expressing all this in your play?

This was a thoughtful question in relation to my depression, and the therapeutic effects of art. I replied:

I think when I wrote this, I didn't think 'okay, I'm writing this so I can cure my depression', I just started writing and I think when I wrote it, then I realised I had all these feelings that I never really explored, it just came up. And I think it was only after, upon reflection, towards the end of the play, that I realised, 'no, this is actually really good for me', and this process actually started not just from writing this play, like one or two years ago, it started ever since I came here [New Zealand], six years ago; and I started writing about my childhood, and all these memories started popping up. And I don't know why they popped up, you know how they talk about the subconscious mind, so it means that it was wanting to be addressed.

But I think this play was really me writing it in such an honest and straightforward way, it was written in almost like a confessional manner. I didn't want to write it like this, but somehow my creative supervisor, he kind of encouraged me and created a safe space for me to write like this, which is why it ended up being like this [...] and I realised it was really therapeutic.

By being honest with myself, and being able to revisit and retell my trauma story in a safe environment gave me some form of catharsis. The story structure in itself provided a vehicle and container for me to process and organise my thoughts, feelings and lived experience in a way that I could make sense of. The ability to then connect with other people who listened to and bore witness to my story, and the resulting conversations that occurred provided me with a sense of connectedness and acceptance. I realised I was not alone. The encouragement and support that

I felt from the audience helped to remove the shame and stigma that I had regarding my mental health and past relationship issues. After the staged reading and performance, I thought to myself: ‘Now my story is out there, I actually feel okay. More than okay, in fact, I feel good. I feel lighter’, probably because the emotional baggage I had been carrying around with me had been released. The shame and fear and stigma I had internalised evaporated. I was no longer hiding this burden inside of me, I had released it out into the world.

I think it is important that we recap what Emunah means when she describes the process of ‘working through’ or ‘moving through’ the material. Although she emphasises that each individual is different and that there are no set formulas, she describes this as:

It means that there is a conscious effort to contend with the material, dive into it, untangle the issues and better comprehend their origins and implications. It means psychological self-examination as well as ownership of our own interplay with the forces that shaped us. And it means finding ways to be strengthened or softened by the material, and to ‘move through it’. What does moving through mean? It can mean letting go, taking hold of, coming to terms with, confronting, embracing, shifting, admitting, committing, forgiving, inviting, renewing, revolting, revisiting, recreating. Each individual and each issue is different, with particular features and complexities, so there are no formulas.

(Emunah, “Self-rev” 74–75)

It is evident to myself and to some members of the audience that I have been dealing with and working through my personal issues through the creation and performance of my play. As mentioned earlier in Herman’s second stage of recovery ‘remembrance and mourning’, the fundamental premise of this work is the underlying belief in the restorative power of truth-

telling. Through truth-telling and remembrance, the trauma story becomes testimony (181). Herman explains that testimony includes both private and public dimensions. The private aspects are confessional and spiritual, and the public are political and judicial (181). Therefore, testimony incorporates both these aspects, lending a larger meaning to the individual experience (181). Through the responses received from audience members during the staged reading, the links between the personal and the larger socio-cultural structural oppressions have been perceptively commented upon.

Healing from Trauma through Performance

In his decades-long research on trauma and how it impacts the body, Bessel van der Kolk demonstrates how trauma disrupts the workings of mind, brain, and body: ‘trauma changes brain development, self-regulation, and the capacity to stay focused and in tune with others’ (347). In addition, trauma ‘devastates the social-engagement system and interferes with cooperation, nurturing, and the ability to function as a productive member of the clan’ (349). For healing to occur, a focus on the body needs to be prioritised, Van der Kolk explains: ‘The body keeps the score: If trauma is encoded in heartbreaking and gut-wrenching sensations, then our first priority is to help people move out of fight-or-flight states, reorganise their perception of danger, and manage relationships’ (349). One of the methods Van der Kolk explores in treating trauma is through the medium of theatre. He explains its benefits as follows:

Traumatised people are terrified to feel deeply. They are afraid to experience their emotions, because emotions lead to loss of control. In contrast, theatre is about embodying emotions, giving voice to them, becoming rhythmically engaged, taking on and embodying different roles. [...] Trauma is about trying to forget, hiding how scared,

enraged, or helpless you are. Theatre is about finding ways of telling the truth and conveying deep truths to your audience. This requires pushing through blockages to discover your own truth, exploring and examining your own internal experience so that it can emerge in your voice and body on stage.

(335)

The benefits of performing and embodying my past self and those of my foremothers were mentioned earlier during discussion of the rehearsal process, in Chapter Four. In my performance, I was able to incorporate movement, text, and sound for my storytelling which enabled me to convey emotions and experiences that I could not, or did not want to, convey in words. The tai chi helped me to connect with my culture, my foremothers, and my emotions in different ways. The ritualistic beating of the wooden fish provided a soothing and healing effect when relaying the death of my Por Por. Through movement, I was able to feel more grounded in my body, re-living my past experiences and being able to move through all the feelings and thoughts that came along with them. By utilising my body as well as my voice in storytelling, I was better able to process and work through my past trauma.

Performance artist and research scholar Niki Tulk brings a feminist lens when examining the intersection of trauma and performance (Tulk 1). She claims that performance ‘is perhaps the only way to overcome a traumatic severance of body and mind and to come back to mind through the body’ (35). Tulk argues that ‘trauma severs body and mind, sends both into an orbit, and it is not only mind/mind re-integration that must happen, but that the body must be brought back, re-owned, re-lived in, moved into and held, inhabited’ (Tulk 35–36). In this way, it is possible for art and performance to heal the split between knowledge and experience, through the embracing of forms that allow not only for both to exist, but to acknowledge the wound/rupture

that is there between them (Tulk 36). It is through performance then, that the body is given a space for reclamation (Tulk 35).

Tulk brings in the work of Bracha Ettinger, who utilises the womb as a metaphor to describe ‘the shared space between performer and audience/viewer as a uterine space: two subjects move between and around each other in a web of interdependence that allows both to appreciate, to truly see, each other; both, in doing so, are profoundly changed’ (Tulk 4). Ettinger emphasises this idea of ‘co-carriage’ to describe this space of encounter where each of us has the ability to ‘carry’ one another:

In listening and seeing the other’s trauma—compassionately awakens our own wounds.

What an audience experiences in performance may resonate with their own stories, as at the same time they feel connected with what they witness. This is part-exchange, part-joining, part one carrying another [...] Within the environment of transaction and exchange, there is a joint healing work of the witness and survivor.

(Tulk 5).

During the feedback sessions after the staged reading of my play, the resonances experienced by the audience and the exchanges of family stories and experiences that followed, point to the co-carriage that Ettinger describes: ‘where the burden of woundedness is shared; we recognise that it is in our joint wounds that we share a common humanity’ (Tulk 7). Ettinger posits this connection as existing at the opposite end of a spectrum from voyeurism, as it allows ‘the wound to “cry out” (Caruth) and be heard in a way that allows for compassionate acknowledgement’ (Tulk 7). This magical exchange between audience and performer holds the possibility to effect healing and change.

Patrick Duggan argues that the performance event ‘is defined by its existence in a specific time and place, never to be repeated in quite the same way again, for an audience which is unique to that moment’ (86). The uniqueness of the theatrical medium is that ‘the very nature of bodies witnessing bodies creates a visceral human connection enabling the audience to be physically and emotionally moved by what they are presented with’ (87). In this sense, it is through the ‘muscular and emotional connection to the performance’ that the audience gains experience or knowledge of that which is presented on stage (88). He concludes that ‘art, in other words, is an embodied revelation and reflection of our enigmatic and enfolded capacity for knowing (in) the world’ (88). This relates to embodied ways of knowing as discussed in Chapter Four, except that Duggan expands this concept from the performer to the audience, and argues that the ‘interchange’ that happens between the bodies of the audience and the performer—of ‘bodies witnessing bodies’—becomes a form of knowledge creation. He explains how performance holds the possibility for a society or culture to ‘know the world’ and ‘think itself through’ (88)

The healing effects of the audience-performer relationship are demonstrated through the concepts of testimony and witnessing which are seen as potentially curative elements in the trauma cycle: ‘it is through testimony and witness that the survivor-sufferer might be able to understand the trauma-event better, placing it in a historical perspective, and so diminish its impact in their present’ (Duggan 94). Similar to the notion of emotional safety and distance created through the structure of narrative discussed in Chapter Three, the modality of theatre is able to provide a space ‘for a safely distanced encounter with and witnessing of traumata in order that it might be more clearly process and regulated into “normal” consciousness’ (Duggan 96). In addition, by adding the human voice to these testimonies, the audience is invited into a

kinaesthetic relationship with the performer through their bodies, which is less possible in a reader's relationship to a text (Duggan 110).

In similar vein, Tulk identifies the healing effects of performance as located in the ways it facilitates an exchange/dialogue/encounter/co-carriage between performer and audience: 'somehow performance is able to go further than literature, in that it facilitates a space that allows for a way of listening and receiving difficult stories that involves human bodies, light, space, materials, words and music—all aspects of art that can reach the limbic brain, speak to and with it' (36). I think of how passionately I wanted to produce a show after the staged reading. I was encouraged by the responses I received and the dialogues that transpired. I felt a sense of resonance with the people who participated in the staged reading. I felt heard and supported. In some ways, there was also a sense of relief that other people had similar thoughts and experiences regarding family, relationships, and identity. Therefore, I wanted to go further and expand what I had accomplished in the staged reading. I wanted to share my story with a wider audience and invite them into my world. I hoped to accomplish this through the modality of theatre—which offered lights, sound, movement, space, the spoken word and the presence of a physical body—to engage with the audience on a visceral, aural, and somatic level.

Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub argue that in order to bring the trauma story out of silence, it needs a witness in order to be heard. Although Felman and Laub's work focuses primarily on Holocaust survivors, the principles of testimony and bearing witness can be applied to my analysis. It should be noted though, that their work is part of canonical trauma theory which has received criticism from some postcolonial scholars for being too Eurocentric. Firstly, in its focus on the Holocaust and adherence to the traditional event-based model in which trauma results from a single, extraordinary, and catastrophic event; therefore discounting the ongoing

traumatic impacts of racism and other forms of structural oppressions (Al-Maani 49; Craps 50). Secondly, that trauma is an individual phenomenon thereby distracting attention from the wider social situations in which the chronic psychic suffering produced by the structural violence of gender, race, class, and other inequities has not been fully accounted for (Craps 49; Craps and Buelens 3–4). Ammar Al-Maani claims that classical trauma theories ‘cannot explain the trans-historical, trans-generational, or trans-national complexities of insidious traumas’ (133) and that ‘they fail to consider non-Western traumatic events’ (49). Stef Craps and Gert Buelens argue that trauma studies needs to be re-situated to account for ongoing structural violence to allow for the transformation of a wounding political, social, and economic system (4). The autoethnographic aspects of my work relate to this concept where the personal story leads to wider implications due to its commentary on the wider socio-cultural and political environment.

Trauma is an aspect that permeates throughout my play. My personal story is related to a wider collective trauma that can come in the form of cultural and societal factors such as (1) patriarchy: oppression of women and being undervalued in society based on your gender, (2) colonialism: being a Chinese immigrant overseas and growing up in colonial Hong Kong where Whiteness is privileged, and (3) capitalism: where value is placed on wealth and money, versus my chosen profession to be in the arts. As demonstrated throughout my discussion, these socio-cultural oppressions can lead to mental health issues, stigma, and shame. Therefore, the discussion and acknowledgement of trauma can lead to healing within a drama-therapeutic framework, but necessitates the presence of an audience bearing witness. Laub, a psychiatrist and clinical professor, describes the necessity of having a witness: ‘Testimonies are not monologues; they cannot take place in solitude. The witnesses are talking *to somebody*: to somebody they have been waiting for for a long time’ (Laub 70–71). The role of the witness/listener is

important, as ‘the listener, therefore, by definition partakes of the struggle of the victim with the memories and residues of his or her traumatic past. The listener has to feel the victim’s victories, defeats and silences, know them from within, so that they can assume the form of testimony’ (Laub 58). Laub claims that it is only when the testimony is heard, that the survivor can ‘hear’ and acknowledge his own story: ‘Testimony is the narrative’s address to hearing; for only when the survivor knows he is being heard, will he stop to hear—and listen to—himself’ (Laub 71).

Laub recognises ‘three separate and distinct levels of witnessing in relationship to the Holocaust experience: the level of being a witness to oneself within the experience; the level of being a witness to the testimonies of others; and the level of being a witness to the process of witnessing itself’ (Laub 75). As a Holocaust survivor, Laub’s first level of witnessing—being a witness to oneself—stems from his own autoethnographic experiences as a child survivor (75). The second and third levels of witnessing refer to his role as the interviewer of Holocaust survivors who gave testimony for the Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University (76). As the immediate receiver of these testimonies, Laub describes himself as a companion who ‘actually participates in the reliving and reexperiencing of the event’ (76). During the third level—being a witness to the process of witnessing itself—he observes how the narrator and himself as listener ‘alternate between moving closer and then retreating from the experience—with the sense that there is a truth we are both trying to reach [...] The narrator and I need to halt and reflect on these memories as they are spoken, so as to reassert the veracity of the past and to build anew its linkage to, and assimilation into, present-day life’ (76). Laub espouses the importance of telling one’s trauma story:

The survivors did not only need to survive so that they could tell their story; they also needed to tell their story in order to survive. There is, in each survivor, an imperative need to *tell*

and thus to come to *know* one's story, unimpeded by ghosts from the past against which one has to protect oneself. One has to know one's buried truth in order to be able to live one's life. (78).

Laub says that it is 'essential for this narrative that *could not be articulated*, to be *told*, to be *transmitted*, to be *heard*' (85). He states that what matters ultimately in all processes of witnessing 'is not simply the information, the establishment of the facts, but the experience itself of *living through* testimony, of giving testimony' (85). Therefore, I take Laub to mean that it is the *process* of the telling and of the receiving, that *encounter* between performer and audience, and the resultant dialogue, exchange, and validation that follow, that promote the integration of the trauma story into one's psyche so that one can begin to heal and fully live.

Part of my writing process began to unpack these systematic, structural, and cultural oppressions. When growing up, these socio-cultural oppressions were not always 'visible' to me, nor was I consciously aware of how they operated. On the surface, I tried to fit in and accepted things as they were, yet deep down I was unhappy but did not know why. It was this long journey of study, self-reflection, and exploration of my inner and outer worlds through the arts that kick-started my own healing process. Felman talks about this idea of 'accessing the wound' in order to heal, navigate, and 'work past' something (Felman 29). Testimony thus becomes not only a vehicle for historical transmission, but also a mode for healing. Felman asks: 'Is the testimony, therefore, a simple medium of historical transmission, or is it, in obscure ways, the unsuspected medium of healing?' (8–9).

The idea of historical transmission also relates to memory, past events, and 'truth': what is truth? Does someone need to verify the truth? In my play, I am mainly presenting my subjective truth, the story told from my angle. It is also important for me to record parts of my

mother's and grandmothers' lives, as their stories bear the historical account and relate to the passing-down of my stories for future generations. My role is similar to the feminine role of The Intermediary in Emilio Carballido's play, *Yo También Hablo de la Rosa (I, Too, Speak of the Rose)* (1965). The Intermediary is a symbolic figure who acts as storyteller and narrator, with her body as a storehouse of knowledge and cultural memory. In her analysis of the play, Diana Taylor claims that 'The Intermediary looks to her body as the receptor, storehouse, and transmitter of knowledge that comes from the archive ("I know texts, pages, illustrations") and from the repertoire of embodied knowledge ("I also retain memories that belonged to my grandmother, my mother, or my friends")' (Taylor 81–82). As a symbolic figure, the knowledge that The Intermediary possesses relates to the embodied and feminine ways of knowing discussed earlier. Concepts of memory and cultural memory are also discussed in relation to the body: 'Memory is embodied and sensual, that is, conjured through the senses; it links the deeply private with social, even official, practices. [...] Memory, like the heart, beats beyond our capacity to control it, a lifeline between past and future' (Taylor 82). As Taylor describes, cultural memory is, among other things, 'a practice, an act of imagination and interconnection' (82). The circulation of knowledge, therefore, derives from our bodies, our memories and oral histories. It is the passing down of stories through generations: 'her knowledge is embodied and she communicates it in the here and now of performance' (Taylor 89). Similar to my role as storyteller and guardian of the stories of myself and my foremothers, I bear the responsibility as mediator, interpreter, and transmitter:

The Intermediary tells stories from the past that continuously unravel into the future. [...] She is a vital life force, mediating, interpreting, transmitting. Without her, there is no (his)story. Although a humble woman, she is now a tlatoani [ruler / 'one who speaks'] of

sorts, whose authority stems from speaking. She assumes the pride/authority of custodian memory. Her address to the audience is intimate; she speaks both of the past and to the future. [...] Those stories constitute the frameworks that allow for cultural memory and enable the transmission of particularised knowledge.

(Taylor 89)

By telling and performing our life stories, I am safeguarding our matrilineal memories and ensuring that the lives of myself and my foremothers are recorded and transmitted. This, I could say, contrasts with our family book which follows the patrilineal system of recording the names of descendants. There is agency and empowerment involved in this act, a disruption to the patriarchal: 'our (matrilineal) stories matter' underscores my storytelling. Therefore, I concur with Felman that testimony becomes a process, a discursive act, a performative speech, rather than just a theory (5).

The play I have written serves as a form of testimony to my account of the events that have transpired in my life. Some of these have been more traumatic than others, such as being in an abusive relationship. And although I have shared parts of my story with close friends and family, the act of writing a play and wanting to perform it in a public venue, brings my story to a public platform. Stuart mentioned that 'once your story is out there, it's no longer in your hands'. This to me is a rather scary thought as I no longer have control over my story and how it is received and interpreted, yet at the same time I also find this thought liberating. I feel as though I can lay the past to rest, and move forward with my life in a more positive manner. When the trauma story is heard and compassionately witnessed, then the story can be set free (Tulk 36).

I would like to refer to the first level of witnessing Laub discussed: 'being a witness to oneself within the experience' (75). I believe that this has played a crucial part in my healing, as

the process of writing down my story and trying to make sense of it, and then rehearsing and performing my past experiences, made the present ‘I’ serve as a witness to my past self. This was evident through rehearsals with Kochhar-Lindgren (see Chapter Four), when I started recounting my story to my younger self, the younger Cynthia. It was through this process that I developed compassion for my younger self, wanting to entertain and soothe her. What is interesting is that the use of my inner witness through performance was acknowledged and witnessed by an audience member, theatre reviewer Scott who attended my opening performance in Dunedin: ‘As her unwavering gaze swept through the audience, I didn’t know whether she was gazing through a window to the audience or a mirror to her own past’. This relates to the second and third level of witnessing that Laub refers to, being witnessed by another who is also witnessing the act of witnessing itself. This observation from Scott served as a form of acknowledgement and validation for me. I felt on some level that not only had he heard my story, but that he understood the workings behind my play and storytelling.

I think of how Stuart, Rosin or Kochhar-Lindgren ‘bore witness’, and how at times their role was similar to that of a therapist during rehearsals. The idea of bearing witness is not just in the listening, but also becomes part of the healing process which involves the understanding of a past situation, viewing things from different angles, and the increased self-awareness that comes along with it, all of which have evolved from conversations and dialogues as we discussed the play and some of the situations it involved. The below is an excerpt from my creative journal during one of my earlier rehearsals with Stuart, before I began to work with Rosin:

Thus this brings in the idea to my own project, in regards to ‘perception’/ lens — the stories that we tell ourselves, and the stories that others tell about us. My perception of myself and my story and my experiences (subjective), can thus be ‘shaped’ (or re-

shaped), according to how I (as an active agent) re-write my own story, possibly with a 'witness' to help me to re-shape my perception. This 'witness' could be my psychotherapist, or it could be Stuart — who has been witnessing and giving me feedback not only on my writing, but also views about my mother and foremothers. [...] he has given me a slightly different perspective and emphasis on things. Of course, this 'witness' needs to be a 'good' witness, with 'active' listening skills as required in testimony and bearing witness (such as those outlined in Shoshana Felman's work). My own perception of my own story (as an active agent, with the agency and autonomy to tell and shape my own story) has also shifted in time — with myself being 'involved' in my own memories, but also being able to 'step back' and see things from a 'distance'.
(Lam, CJ, April 9 2021)

The ability to be 'involved' in my memories as well as being able to 'step back' and be an observer reminds me of Overlie's teaching in the Six Viewpoints about being an observer/participant at the same time: 'the observer/participant performer stands within the materials allowing them to direct action as equal partners' (Overlie 111). This 'dual' role works like a symbiotic relationship, in which each feeds off and benefits the other, and they at times overlap and work in tandem. This is similar to Laub's idea of developing one's own inner witness, in which one is both witness and performer at the same time.

In a similar vein, Caroline Wake utilises the 'deliberately doubled phrase': the 'performing witness' (Wake 188). She says that actors, characters and spectators are all 'performing witness(es)', although how they carry out their task differs (187). Wake specifies that this doubled phrase derives from two main bodies of theory. The first relates to scholarship on documentary and verbatim theatre, which are known as 'theatre of testimony' and 'theatre of

witnessing', in which the 'performing witness is typically a character (based on an actual person) that testifies to a personal, social, and/or historical trauma' (188). The second main body of theory is spectatorship theory in which 'the figure of the performing witness refers to the observer who becomes so ethically and emphatically engaged in or by a performance that he or she is transformed from a passive watcher into an active witness' (188). Although definitions of the performing witness differ according to the different bodies of theory, Wake argues that 'both of these discourses agree that the function of the performing witness is to enable and engage with subaltern speech and to render visible those subjects who might otherwise remain invisible' (188).

What I gather from Wake's analysis and the theorists discussed above, is the overlapping and interconnected roles that people involved in a performance play—whether as an actor/performer, the director who may be the first 'external witness' to the trauma story, the audience/spectator, or the performer who is able to develop her own inner witness. All these aspects of witnessing work together so that the story can be heard, validated, and set free. This has the potential to heal the survivor/performer and the audience/witness, in which both are transformed by the encounter and exchange. Through performance which results in the act of co-carriage and ethical and emphatic listening, we are able to acknowledge and share in our joint woundedness and shared humanity. As mentioned in my creative journal entry, when a performer is able to integrate their trauma story, their perspective begins to shift. This change in perspective as well as other positive effects is mentioned in the last stage of Herman's stages of recovery process, stage three, which is about reconnection.

Herman's Recovery Process Stage Three: Reconnection

The third stage of recovery is about reconnection. After coming to terms with the traumatic past, the individual now needs to focus on creating a future that most likely encompasses new relationships and new beliefs. This is when the individual reclaims her world and a new self is birthed (Herman 196). By this stage, the individual is ready to engage more actively in the world (197). Herman identifies that the core experience of trauma are feelings of helplessness and isolation. As the individual moves towards recovery, those transform into feelings of empowerment and reconnection (197). A key component of this stage is that the traumatised person recognises that she has been a victim and understands the effects of her victimisation. In turn, she is ready to integrate the traumatic experience into her life, learning to protect herself from future danger and deepening her alliances with those she trusts (197). This gives the individual a sense of empowerment and control, allowing her to face the world more confidently.

Herman states that the simple statement, 'I know I have myself', could stand in for the final stage of recovery. A new self is born through the integration of the individual's past experiences as well as what she hopes for herself in the future:

The survivor no longer feels possessed by her traumatic past; she is in possession of herself. She has some understanding of the person she used to be and of the damage done to that person by the traumatic event. Her task now is to become the person she wants to be. In the process she draws upon those aspects of herself that she most values from the time before the trauma, from the experience of the trauma itself, and from the period of

recovery. Integrating all of these elements, she creates a new self, both ideally and in actuality.

(Herman 202)

Integration of the traumatic experience is important, as the individual most likely had learnt how to be resourceful, adaptive and resilient in the face of adversity. Thus ‘compassion and respect for the traumatised, victim self join with a celebration of the survivor self’, resulting in a sense of renewed pride (204).

Reconnection also entails developing deeper and more intimate relationships with others, whilst maintaining her sense of autonomy and personal boundaries (205). A significant minority may also decide to take social action with the aim of helping others, ranging from concrete engagement with particular groups to more abstract intellectual pursuits (208).

The restoration of social bonds with others in the community begins with the discovery that one is not alone. The encounter with others who share similar experiences helps to dissolve the individual’s feelings of shame, isolation and stigma attached to the traumatising event (215). The group and community can bear witness, recreate a sense of belonging and acceptance, and restore the individual’s humanity (214). Speaking to a group of people with similar experiences becomes a form of collective empowerment (216).

It is important to note that resolution of the trauma is never final, nor is recovery ever complete (211). Posttraumatic symptoms may resurface when an individual encounters different life stages that may trigger a revival of those symptoms. What is different is that the individual now has the awareness and resources to deal with her reaction to certain triggering stressors.

In a similar vein, Emunah explains that by the end of the performance, ‘performers typically experience not only surges of relief and accomplishment, but also waves of self-acceptance and the churning of change being activated’ (Emunah, “Behind” 45). She acknowledges that post-performance, there is much to digest. Psychological healing is an ongoing process that can create some unrest as performers assimilate the intense internal changes that have taken place through the Self-Rev process and performance (45). In regards to my play, the time taken to integrate the internal changes and personal healing that occurred happened organically and ‘subconsciously’. I will touch upon this process in the following section.

愛, 媽媽 (*Love, Mum*): Public Performances in Auckland and Dunedin



Fig 17. Set of 愛, 媽媽 (*Love, Mum*), Auckland, September 2022. Set design by Kanta Kochhar-Lindgren, set fabricator Brett Schwieters, calligraphy by Lam Chun Ngan. Photo by Shelton Leong.

Although ATP performances are usually performed only once to an intimate invite-only audience, what differed in my case was that after the staged reading, I felt compelled to produce my play with the full technical and stage aspects included. It should be noted that after the staged reading, I had made some changes to the script based on the feedback I had received from audience members. The main change included changing the sequencing of a few of the vignettes and scenes. These are listed below:

- In regards to sequencing, the story of my Ah Mah was introduced earlier. Thus bringing the section in regards to my ex-husband (climax of the play) happening later, and therefore shortening the segment that comes after the climax.
- The slower tai chi segment with the ‘Red’ poem was moved to the very end of the play. This was done after realising that the poem contained the heart of my message, and that the tai chi movement sums up the feeling I wanted to convey, which is one of acceptance of one’s past and reaching some sort of equilibrium.
- Since some of the segments have been moved around, I have made some slight changes in regards to some of the transitions.
- I have re-worked and lengthened the faster tai chi staff segment (Shaolin staff), in order to allow the emotions to ‘sink in’ more, for both myself and the audience.

These changes demonstrate that craft was also an important aspect to my play script and performance. By this stage of the creative process, I was starting to move my performance from a more intimate setting to a public stage. Therefore, it was important that I keep my audience in mind. Part of this meant that I had to tell an effective story in which I was able to bring the audience with me on an emotional and intellectual level. The focus then, expanded from a point of personal healing and catharsis, to creating an experience for the audience. In Self-Rev performances, an offering to the audience is emphasised: ‘The audience’s time, intellect, aesthetic sensibility and emotional intelligence are respected. The issues are not only *worked through*, but the piece is *worked on*, until it achieves a theatrical quality worth of presentation before an audience’ (Emunah, “Self-rev” 79). In a similar vein, Bochner talks about the craft of storytelling in autoethnography: ‘Story-making is work. How are you going to stage the “facts” (happenings)? How are you going to colour and shade them? You become an artist fashioning an

emotional experience for the reader. You must keep in mind your allegiance to real events as you understand them, but your focus now shifts to the work of making a story of them' (74). The reader/audience is important, as autoethnography 'aspires to emotional, dialogic, and collaborative truths' (Bochner 75). At the end of the day, autoethnographers 'want their readers to dwell in their stories, to take these stories to heart and use them for themselves' (Bochner 70). By witnessing and interacting with the story presented to them, the audience may see resonances with their own lives.

The motivation to produce my show was based on gut instinct. I felt deeply that if I did not produce the play, then the creative process did not feel complete. As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, choosing to write a one-woman show implied that it would eventually be performed in front of an audience. I wanted to have my story out there in the world, and to share it with others who may be interested. I wanted to enhance the telling of my story through all that is available through live theatre—whether that be via sound, lighting, movement and multimedia images—as I wanted to heighten the sensory experience for the audience and to enhance the storytelling. Jake Budenz created a mesmerising soundscore composed from the following aural notes from my play: the drumming of the wooden fish, my mother singing, Cantonese phrases that I spoke, and the sound of the whipping Shaolin staff. Animator Celine Chan created the multimedia images. Each scene contained one or two moving images and tended to be more abstract in nature. They consisted of different shapes, colours and movements in order to symbolise the feelings and emotions pertinent to that particular scene.



Fig 18. Multimedia images used to enhance storytelling in 愛, 媽媽 (*Love, Mum*), Auckland, September 2022. Photo by Shelton Leong. Animations by Celine Chan.

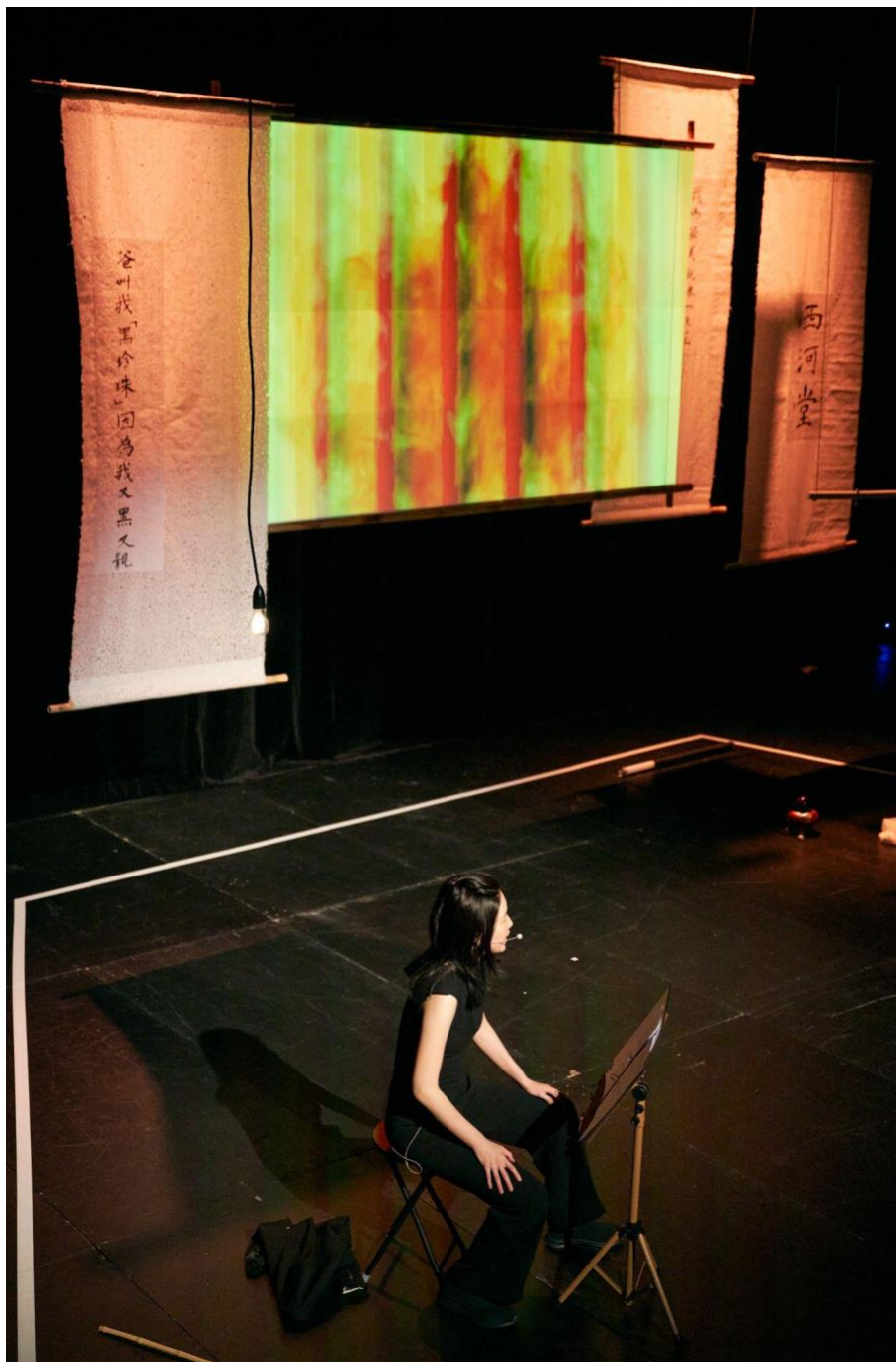


Fig 19. Multimedia images used to enhance storytelling in 愛, 媽媽 (*Love, Mum*) Scene 2.1

‘Am I a banana?’, Auckland, September 2022. Photo by Shelton Leong. Animations by Celine Chan.

Theatre reviewer Tim Scott, who watched the live performance in Dunedin, had commented on the use of lighting and multimedia imagery in his review of the show: ‘Clever and subtle techniques illustrated the transmission of intergenerational trauma. At one point, a projection of flames morphed and expanded beyond the confines of the screen while the stage was bathed in purple’. Thus illustrating the powerful effects of visual imagery and lighting to enhance the storytelling.

Therefore, as well as being the writer and actor, I took on the additional role of producer, and worked with international director and choreographer Kanta Kochhar-Lindgren. Kochhar-Lindgren took on the additional role of designing the set concept, with Brett Schwieters as set fabricator, and Alex Worthington as technical designer. We wanted a backdrop that was reminiscent of Hong Kong. Therefore, the projection screen where the multimedia images would be projected as well as the calligraphy panels were made of bamboo wooden frames and washi paper for an Asian aesthetic. I wanted the writing on the panels to refer to my ancestral home and foremothers. Therefore, on one of the calligraphy panels was written 西河堂 / ‘Sai Ho Tong’ which refers to an area in China where our early ancestors, those descended with the surname of Lam had come from. This calligraphy panel also reminds me of my Ah Mah’s village house, as our family compound was named by Ah Ye bearing a plaque with the same name.

Calligraphy panels usually contain beautiful poetic language, however I wanted to keep mine light-hearted and grounded with a touch of humour, therefore I used colloquial sayings from my foremothers—a phrase in Cantonese repeated from my play—on each of the two calligraphy panels. Both were sayings from my Por Por: one panel read 爸叫我「黑珍珠」，因為我又黑又靚 / ‘Father would call me the “black pearl”, as I was dark and beautiful’ and the other 我媽最美就像一枝花 / ‘My mother was as beautiful as a flower’. The words were slightly

edited so that they would situate nicely within the panel size. A personalised touch was added since it was my aunt Lam Chun Ngan who wrote the beautiful Chinese calligraphy.

There was a hanging clothesline for my costume changes suspended from above, which was a reference to the dense residential areas part of the Hong Kong landscape where people would hang their washing outside of their windows in their small high-rise apartments. The lightbox projected the Chinese character of my family surname 林/Lam. The brown stool which I sat on to deliver the majority of my monologues is a common fixture in Hong Kong: I remember sitting on many of these stools in the local Hong Kong diners known as 茶餐廳 / 'char tsarn teng' or 大牌檔 / 'dai pai dong' (open air food stalls), and also at my grandmother's houses. These foldable stools were very handy when you suddenly had to cram a lot of relatives at the dinner table.

The production of the show became a bit of a family affair as my father Lam Tin-Lap sent the stools and tai chi costumes from Hong Kong, my brother Oliver came on board as part of the production and artistic team, and my mother Wong Toi-Lai sang and recorded two songs which were played in the production. When I first embarked on this project I was not sure what my family would think and whether they would like what I had written, so it was particularly reassuring to have their support and see them rallying around me. The initial aim of my work was to gain a better understanding of my life and move forward with more love, forgiveness, and happiness; I believe I achieved this not just through the creative process discussed, but because my play brought my family closer together and fostered a greater understanding between us.

I ended up performing two shows for the public in Auckland as part of the Auckland Fringe Festival on September 16th and 17th, 2022 at the Herald Theatre. We later toured to Dunedin to perform an additional two shows six months later as our show had won a touring award from the Auckland Fringe. The performances took place on March 24th and 25th, 2023 at the performing arts centre at St. Hilda's Collegiate School. During my time in Dunedin, I also ran a memoir writing workshop as part of the Dunedin Fringe Festival offering, and created a special programme for a girls' high school in which I performed the first part of my play, followed by a Q&A and then a writing workshop in which writing prompts surrounding society's expectations of women were discussed and shared. The students who attended this programme were fifteen years old and above. Writing prompts evoked from watching my play such as 'What is the expectation that your family has about how you will live and what is your dream? In what way is it similar or not, and why? Did your mother have dreams?' generated some thought-provoking discussion and inspired them to continue exploring these prompts in later classes.

For the purposes of my research, I will focus on discussing the effects of performing my show more than once in relation to trauma, recovery and ATP. Below is what I recorded in my journal in between the Auckland and Dunedin public performances:

But what I wanted to say is, rehearsing for my play this time feels different. My brother said that my first performance season last year felt more emotional, and I agree. I think it's because the 'edge' I had has now dissipated a bit. It's good in a way, as that tells me that I have come to terms with something, made peace with something, and I am now ready to move on.

Even my director mentioned she did not sense the same level of sarcasm I had for my 'banana: yellow on the outside, white on the inside' scene. And I realised that it was

because I had come to terms with a lot of things. I had experienced some sort of integration and acceptance in regards to my identity, my depression and my feelings towards my mother. I used to be angry partly because I felt that she always prioritised her job over me. Now I realise she had worked so hard mainly to give our family a better life. A life away from the poverty she experienced as a child.

But I realised now, that it was more than that. Growing up, I aspired to be like her—a kick-ass career woman in the corporate world. Her hard work and sacrifices made it possible to create a better life for herself, her children, her mother, siblings and relatives. On top of that, she received fulfilment from her job. Maybe in the back of my subconscious mind, I knew what was hoped for me. And a part of me wanted to fulfil that, whether it was for me, for my parents, or for society, I'm not sure. But deep down, I knew that I was someone different to that projected ideal.

[...] Most importantly, the writing and creation of my play had given me and my parents a better understanding of each other, and my recent trip back to Hong Kong during my mother's illness had made me realise and cherish a lot of things, a lot of moments that I got to spend with her, and with my father and my relatives. I had gotten back to my roots, to the place where I was born. I had gotten back in touch with all my memories growing up, of place and family, and I appreciated it all. I appreciated them all. (Lam, CJ, March 15 2023)

After my performance in Auckland, I went back to Hong Kong to visit my parents. My mother at this time had been diagnosed with stage three thyroid cancer. I believe that returning to my home country and spending time with my parents and relatives had given me pause and much room

and inspiration for reflection. It had also reminded me of my ancestry, my roots, and the importance of family.

I cannot say whether I would have reached this stage if I stopped my creative process after the staged reading. Perhaps I would still have eventually got there, but the process for me, whether that be from a craft or emotional perspective, would not have felt complete.

The above entry exemplifies the process of ‘working through’ one’s trauma and moving towards a state of acceptance and understanding. As a result, my performance in Dunedin felt different from my performance in Auckland. Although I did not feel as emotionally intense towards my material as I had in Auckland, the emotional distance afforded me the opportunity to relax and to focus more on the craft of delivery, I wrote: ‘There was a sense of fun and anticipation, a sense of *play*, when I walked across that stage to my starting point when I would kneel down behind the wooden fish, the beautifully carved round wooden instrument used in Buddhist temples, and strike my first resounding rhythmic repetitive note’ (Lam, CJ, March 30 2023).

As Herman had emphasised in the second stage of recovery: After many repetitions of recounting the trauma story, there comes a moment when the retelling no longer arouses such intense feelings. The trauma story ceases to hold its once overwhelming power over the individual, and becomes a part of their experience (Herman 195). Ultimately, underscoring the process of this work towards healing is the restorative power of remembrance and mourning, and the capacity for renewal (Herman 194).

Pendzik describes this last stage in the ATP therapeutic process as ‘reflecting and integrating’. The integration of new insights in the post-performance reflection is described as follows:

In ATP, this phase is not only about processing the sense of community, of belonging, of empowerment that were generated throughout the process and event, but it is also about incorporating pieces of our lives and new insights about ourselves, so that a renewed sense of self can emerge in real life. The post-performance process needs to be accompanied by therapeutic reflection.

(Pendzik, "Performance" 255)

The integration of new insights and constant self-reflection leading to personal transformation is also discussed in autoethnography. Bochner explains the autoethnographic temperament as follows: 'You listen closely to yourself talking; you talk back to yourself, commenting directly on what you hear yourself saying: you don't stop there but rather insist on keeping the conversation going, interpreting, discovering something strange about the self you started with as you try to transform yourself into a new being' (71). As demonstrated in my creative practice, it took a lot of courage, vulnerability and work in order to create and produce a show. The whole process for me since the conception of my playscript to my final performance has taken over three years. Going into my research, I did not anticipate the healing, transformation, and connection with others that took place. Therefore, I was pleasantly surprised when I noticed how my feelings about myself, my past, and my relationship with my family and the world around me started to shift. This process of self-healing and transformation had happened organically and subconsciously. As with autoethnography and most qualitative research methods, the transformation that took place within me cannot be 'tracked' nor 'measured', it is something that can only be experienced.

In conclusion, this chapter has focused on the performance as the final stage of the creative process and how that relates to healing, personal transformation and connection with an audience. Although craft is an important aspect of my play, the emphasis in my analysis has been on the psychoanalytic processes involved in the healing process, which I have examined through the lens of ATP, Herman's recovery process, and theoretical concepts of healing and bearing witness in relation to performance.

The role of ATP has a communicative function and therefore implies the presence of an audience. The performance is seen as a rite of passage, in which the initiate is reborn into a new role. I have demonstrated how the process of writing, rehearsing and performing my play 愛, 媽媽 (*Love, Mum*), has led to personal transformation, in which audience members have witnessed and commented on the 'birth of a new Cynthia'. The difference between what has been previously studied within the field of ATP is that I performed my play more than once. Through my creative journal and personal reflections, I have documented this change and the difference in feelings towards my subsequent performances.

The connection and resonance that I felt with performing my story in front of an audience has been one of the unexpected joys for me. The conversations and dialogues that happened in the individual feedback sessions was especially affirming. My performance and writing workshop with the young women at a girl's high school demonstrated to me that the topics I raised in my play had a more profound and wide-ranging effect than I had anticipated. I hope that the issues I have brought up in my play will continue to reverberate outwards.



Fig 20. Live performance of 愛, 媽媽 (*Love, Mum*), Dunedin Fringe Festival, Dunedin, 24 March 2023. Photo by Blake Armstrong.

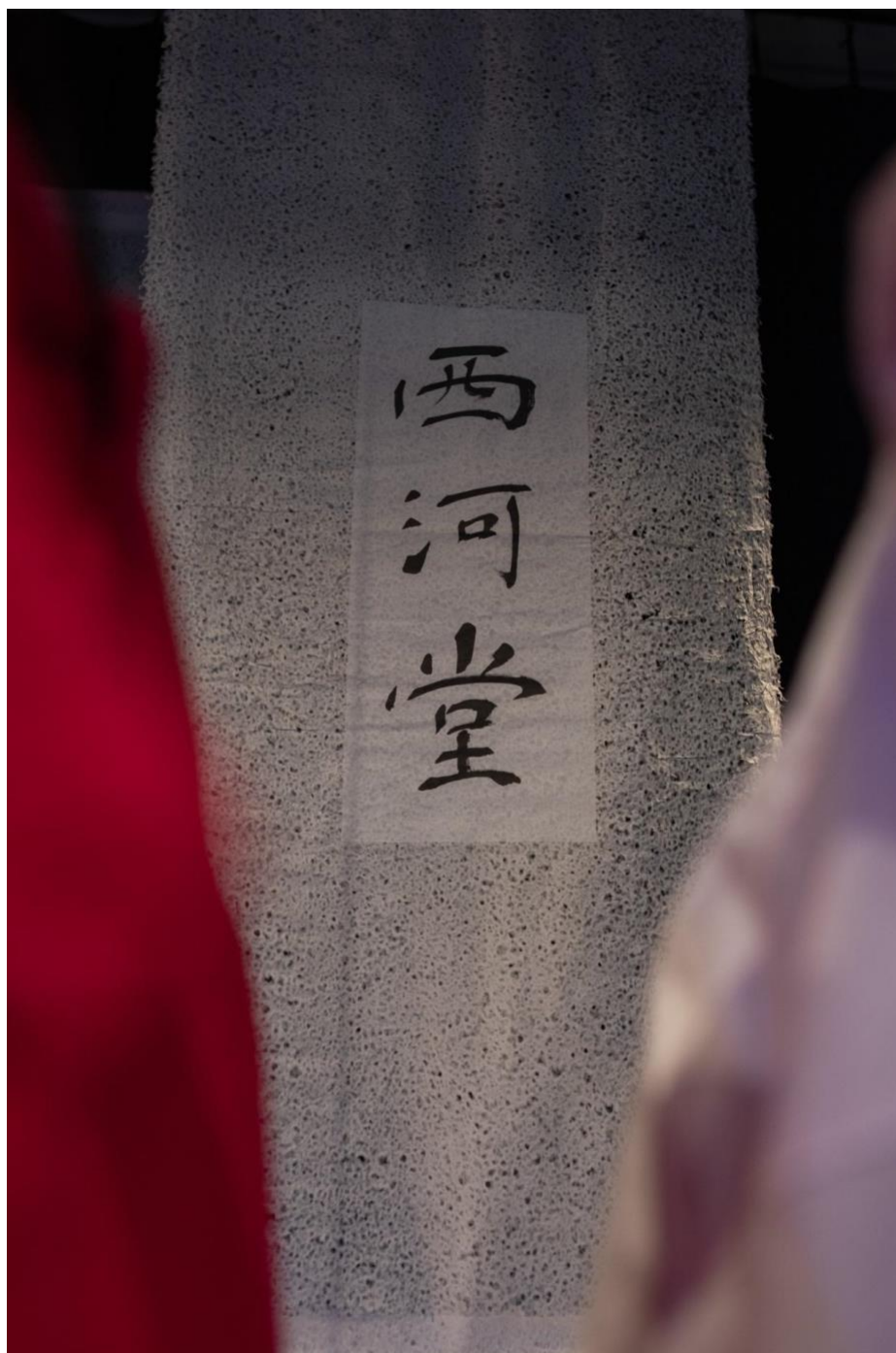


Fig 21. Chinese calligraphy written on washi paper in 愛, 媽媽 (*Love, Mum*): 西河堂 / ‘Sai Ho Tong’ is the name of Ah Mah’s village house, as 西河 / Sai Ho is the place in China where our paternal ancestors, the Lams / 林 came from, Dunedin, March 2023. Calligraphy by Lam Chun Ngan. Photo by Kerry Hodge.



Fig 22. Props in 愛, 媽媽 (*Love, Mum*) including my play script on a wooden music stand and a stool reminiscent of the ones commonly used in Hong Kong, Dunedin, March 2023. Photo by Kerry Hodge.

Chapter Six: Conclusion / Future Research and Creative Practice

I went into this research project not knowing where it would lead me. All I knew was that I wanted to write a play, a one-woman show about myself, my mother and two grandmothers: a matrilineal memoir. I wanted to gain a better understanding of myself and my depression, to figure out why I felt I could not speak up as a woman, why I had all these self-imposed restraints regarding how to live, and to unpack the relationship that I had with my mother. I had a sense that all these issues were interconnected, and that the exploration of my story and those of my foremothers would be my way into that. It was like entering an unknown forest without a clearly marked path. I had faith though, that if I listened closely to my inner voice, I would find my way.

My inner voice has been like a guiding light, and by paying attention to my feelings and thoughts throughout the creative process, I was able to observe early on how the interactions with my creative supervisor mirrored aspects of those with a therapist. As we rehearsed parts of my play which involved my mother, our conversations and his comments began to shift my perspective. At the beginning, I only decided to sit with these observations, noting them in my creative journal.

From the outset, I did not follow a particular dramatherapeutic process. It was only sometime after I had completed writing, rehearsing and performing my play that I stumbled upon ATP. I realised that the theoretical concepts and methodological process had mirrored most aspects of the creative process that I undertook. What was apparently different from the beginning was that I had performed my play more than once, to both an intimate invited-only audience and also to the wider public. I also realised that there was not much literature that documented the process of ATP from the client/actor perspective.

My creative and critical outputs stem from my unique perspective and embodied knowledges. Therefore, my play is autobiographical/autoethnographic, and the subsequent analysis autoethnographic in approach and form. Through this thesis, I have attempted to answer the question: *How does the process of writing and performing one's life experiences and trauma act as a form of resistance to the dominant 'good woman' narrative, leading to personal healing, empowerment and transformation?*

I first explored the concept of trauma, and how socio-cultural and historical forces have shaped our beliefs, behaviours and value systems regarding what it means to be a woman living in a patriarchal society. Part of my process was exploring how these socio-cultural influences have impacted my sense of self, agency and voice as a Chinese woman growing up in colonial Hong Kong and as a young immigrant in New Zealand. I have demonstrated how these socio-cultural influences oppress women as they try to live up to the 'good woman' ideal, impacting their mental health and their ability to live authentically.

By documenting and examining the process of writing, rehearsing and performing my play 愛, 媽媽 (*Love, Mum*), I have demonstrated how personal healing and transformation, as well as connection with a wider community can be possible. The writing of women's life stories can be a form of resistance against hegemonic master narratives that dictate how a woman's life should look like and what she should aspire to. By writing my own trauma story, the story structure acted as a form of container, providing emotional distance and enough safety for me to retell my story and reorganise my experiences within a form that I could make sense of.

Next, by moving the written text to a more physical and embodied expression, I was able to connect more deeply with my younger self, my foremothers and my cultural traditions. By revisiting my past experiences, I was able to reconnect with my younger self and develop a

deeper sense of compassion for her. This helped me to integrate my past self and experience, and aided in my healing. The tai chi was a bodily expression of my feelings, conveying emotional states as well as helping me to connect with my mother and my ancestral roots and traditions. The drumming of the wooden fish connected me with Buddhist rituals and transported both myself and the audience to a different time and space. Thirdly, the literal and metaphoric meanings related to running were explored in relation to the ability to face one's demons head on.

Finally, the performance of the play completed the creative process, resulting in personal transformation and a form of rebirth. The ability to tell one's story, to be heard and witnessed is an essential part of this process. The connection with an audience, to experience resonance, feedback and sharing became an integral part of the healing process. The opportunity I had to work with young women was rewarding and gave me a glimpse of how my work can reverberate within the wider community.

Therefore, embarking on my PhD was like going on a personal and philosophical quest to find the answer to a very personal question. Although what I was seeking and the material which I used to mine for the answer was personal and individual, what I found had larger repercussions and applicability to the wider community. As an individual living within a particular time and place in history, my experience is a reflection of the wider socio-cultural phenomena at play. By utilising an autoethnographic approach, I have demonstrated how the performance of my matrilineal memoir has touched others, encouraging the audience to think about their lives, relationships and how they interact with the larger socio-cultural, political, and historical systems they live in. By shining a light through the medium of storytelling and performance, I have generated awareness on the socio-cultural and structural oppressions that drive our decision-

making, hoping that this would lead to a happier, more peaceful, and fulfilling life, for myself and others.

Finding My Voice and Courage

In some ways, my writing and autoethnographic journey began all those years ago, before I embarked on my PhD, when I arrived in New Zealand for my 'second chance in life'. Back then, I did not know I was doing autoethnography. All I knew was that it felt good to express myself through life writing. Writing became a way for me to reflect on my life and feelings, whether those were expressions of shame, insecurity, joy or nostalgia. Writing made me feel things, emotions which I had bottled up and dared not acknowledge. However, I did not feel ready to share my writing publicly, only to classmates through class tutorials.

Therefore, embarking on my PhD and choosing performance as my medium became a turning point or pinnacle moment for my years of studying creative writing and literature. In order to share my private stories on such a public platform, I had to be brave and vulnerable. There were many 'firsts' for me: the first time I would share my private story so publicly, the first time I would act in a solo show, the first time I produced my own show, and the first time I ran a writing workshop for women. Although producing and performing my play was one of the most stressful and challenging things I have ever done, it was also one of the most fulfilling.

The creation and performance of my matrilineal memoir, and the analysis and reflection that accompanied it has been very rewarding for me, on both an emotional and intellectual level. At the start of my research, I thought that the creative and critical aspects of my thesis were separate. I used to think that when I wrote creatively, I was engaging with my heart and emotions; and when I did the theoretical analysis, I was engaging with my brain and intellect.

However, as I immersed myself in the analytical write-up after the creation of my play, I realised that the creative and analytical aspects fed off one another. As I was engaging in the reflection and examination of my play in regards to ATP— such as the beating of the wooden fish in relation to my mother and Por Por—I realised just how emotional that aspect of the analytical writing was for me. It was then that I understood what Lee Brien described as the ‘cross-fertilisation’ that happens during the process of creative-writing-as-research where it becomes impossible to identify which part of the work is ‘research’ and which part is ‘creative practice’ (57–58). Each informs the other: so that instead, I am reminded of the yin-yang symbol, where the creative and critical bleed and flow into one another, and that there is always a small aspect of each in the other.

This ‘blending’ and cross-fertilisation of seemingly opposing values and binaries reminds me of what Bochner so beautifully describes what autoethnography, at the heart of it, is about:

Autoethnography is not an oppositional paradigm of research and writing. It is grounded on the premise that there is more than one legitimate goal to which inquiry in the human sciences can be directed. We autoethnographers believe that research on human life should be oriented not only toward facts but also toward meanings; not only under the rules of scientific rigour, but also under the inspiration of moral imagination; not only for the purpose of attaining better predictions and more control, but also to achieve peace of mind and to alleviate injustice and suffering; not only from the stance of neutrality and distance, but also from the position of caring and vulnerability; not only for the purpose of producing conventional, received texts, but also with the goal of performing evocative, creative, and dialogic expressions of lived experiences.

(Bochner 78)

I did not know, when going into my research, that I would end up writing in such a personal and passionate way. I was not sure that my inquiry was ‘legitimate’ in terms of academic scholarship, rigour and validity. Therefore, during my first year, I had cloaked my personal dilemma into broad theoretical concepts, case studies on other theatre companies, and what I thought would be intellectually acceptable to deem my work worthy of a doctoral degree. It was only when I read the writings and research of fellow autoethnographers and feminist thinkers/practitioners that I realised a new way and paradigm of thinking and expression. I thought to myself—*yes, I like this way of writing. It is refreshing. It resonates with me and speaks to me. It is passionate, personal, lucid and thought-provoking. This is the type of writing and research that I would like to do.* Thus I embarked on a journey that has involved my heart, my intellect, my *whole being*; I have found my voice, and I leave my PhD feeling at peace with myself and inspired to do more—to have more love and care—for myself, for others, and the community.

How My Thesis Has Evolved / Following My Instincts

The ability to keep my research process fluid and to follow my instincts resulted in a fruitful and cohesive outcome. I made a few critical decisions during my research which deviated from what was proposed during my doctoral confirmation. My original proposal had included case studies on Hong Kong theatre companies using a decolonial theoretical approach for analysis, the creation of an additional group theatre project involving participants on top of the creation of my solo play, and to stop my creative process at the staged reading without producing my one-woman show to the public. At the time, I felt that I had too many different projects and strands

going on, and trying to incorporate everything would be spreading both myself and my research thin.

Therefore, by focusing on the creation, performance and analysis of my solo autobiographical play 愛, 媽媽 (*Love, Mum*), I felt that I was able to delve deeply into my creative process and produce a robust critical analysis. I always knew that my passion involved research and creative projects that held a deeply feminist angle and centred on women's life narratives. Another passion of mine involved psychotherapy, healing and trauma, so I was enthused when I stumbled upon ATP and realised that my research and creative process combined both of these elements. I was then able to employ both an arts-based and psychotherapeutic approach centring on the theme of womanhood within a patriarchal culture for my critical analysis. There are secondary themes related to colonisation, immigration and capitalism that I explore in my play and research, however these are interwoven within the larger context of my main theme related to my identity as a Chinese woman.

Although the creation of a group theatre project would no doubt have been interesting and furthered my research, I felt that the production of an additional show would amount to enough work for a second thesis. In order to do my research justice, I had to focus on my one-woman show, which already provided enough material for me to work on and examine. In its place, I ran a memoir writing workshop for young women at a girl's high school as part of the Dunedin Fringe Festival. This experience provided me with the beginnings or next steps for possible subsequent exploration after the completion of my thesis.

Lastly, stopping at the staged reading is not uncommon in doctoral research in which candidates may produce the show only after they have completed their thesis, or not at all. However, after the staged reading I felt compelled to produce my show and bring it to a wider

audience and public stage. I am glad that I followed through on this instinct, as my sense of healing and personal insights had deepened after I had staged my show publicly. I felt only then, was my creative process complete.

Thus when pursuing the critical analysis of my thesis, I embarked on a journey which in some ways paralleled that of my creative project. The evolving nature of my research and creative process meant that I had to learn how to combine the use of my intellect and my heart in decision-making. I had to listen to my instincts, not knowing where they would lead me. As someone who generally avoids confrontation, I had to find the courage to speak up in the face of push back. I had to reclaim my voice and authority in the decision-making process, as I was so used to giving it away. It helped that my stubbornness stemmed from the belief in my play and my work—I believed in what I was doing.

Therefore, even though my PhD journey has been long and at times arduous, the trajectory of my personal growth, the insights I gained, the people and mentors I met who helped me with the production of my one-woman show, the closer bonds I have fostered with my family and ancestral traditions, has been a most rewarding and illuminating experience. The confidence I gained has been earned not just from the creation, performance and production of 愛, 媽媽 (*Love, Mum*), but also through the journey that has encompassed my doctoral research. I hope to continue this process, to document my life experiences and those of other women despite fear and vulnerability, and to share our stories as they come.

Chapter Seven: The Play: 愛, 媽媽 (*Love, Mum*)

In this final chapter, I have included the playscript for 愛, 媽媽 (*Love, Mum*). It should be noted that this is the final version which was performed to the public in Auckland and Dunedin. My second public performance at the Herald Theatre in Auckland on September 17th 2022 was recorded and live-streamed on Vidzing, an online streaming platform. I wanted to make my performance available to those residing outside of Auckland, including my family, friends and relatives from Hong Kong. A link to my recorded performance can be found here:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=31G4pbCrIXQ

You may find more information regarding 愛, 媽媽 (*Love, Mum*) on my website Love Mum Creatives at www.lovemumcreatives.com/plays. The show's programme and promo trailer can also be found there.

愛，媽媽
(LOVE, MUM)
BY CYNTHIA HIU YING LAM

'Life and sacrifice go together. To live a vibrant life, we must make sacrifices of various sorts. If you want to go to university, you must sacrifice time and money and give intense concentration to the venture. If you want to create, you have to sacrifice superficiality, some security, and often your desire to be liked, to draw up your most intense insights, your most far-reaching visions'

— that is a passage from Dr. Clarissa Pinkola Estes' *Women Who Run with the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype*. It is explained in her story *The Red Shoes*.

Cast of one: I will play the roles of myself (Chinese woman in her 30s), my mother, 阿嫲 / Ah

Mah (paternal grandmother) and 婆婆 / Por Por (maternal grandmother).

Introduction / Prologue

In a quiet corner of a house, facing a window with trees outside.

CYNTHIA

Beating wooden fish, kneeling, as if in prayer.

PART 1

Scene 1.1 Intro / About my Mother

In living room, New Zealand.

Addresses audience

CYNTHIA

So... I've been meaning to talk about my mother.

She's all I've been thinking of since yesterday evening. As I was hanging my clothes in my closet, I saw this neon-pink windbreaker jacket that my mother had gifted me on my last visit back to Hong Kong.

And so I sent my parents a message on our family group chat, saying: 'Saw this in my closet, reminds me of our good times going down to eat dessert and walking around Kowloon park in the winter evening!'

But what I really wanted to say — was to send a personal message to my mum saying: 'I miss you, I love you [heart emoji]'. But I didn't.

I've been meaning to talk to my mum since yesterday, but I've been putting it off.

Like how I always put things off.

And what do I do? I retreat inside my head — into the world of ideas and intellectual thoughts, as ‘that’s where I feel safe’ — as my psychoanalyst would say.

Because whenever I think of my mother, and our relationship — or the relationship I could’ve had with her if I wasn’t so angry or sad for the past two decades of my life — I want to cry.

The thing is, is that I’ve repressed my anger for so long — that I ceased to feel.

I felt ‘numb’/ ‘nothing’ for the longest time.

But I never could really admit this to myself, until now.

Other people are depressed, but not me.

Or I would say ‘I was mildly depressed when I was in college, but I’ve read so many self-help books that I’m OK, I’ve cured myself’.

Anyways, I really should call my mother — I’ve been putting it off:

Scene 1.2 Mum at work

Mum's office in a modern high-rise office building, Hong Kong.

MOTHER

Gets dressed, put on suit jacket in slow stylistic motion when the voice recording of MUM below plays..

[pre-recording of schedule below]

6:00: Wake up, turn on the TV.

6:05: In the bathroom, with the door open, listening to what is happening on Bloomberg. Paying particular attention to what is happening in the financial markets.

6:15: Go out to eat my breakfast which Josie has already prepared for me.

6:30: Go back into the room, wash my hair, wash my face. Blow dry my hair and start putting on make-up. Getting ready for my day at the office.

6:55: I am out the door before 7, I take a taxi to the nearest station, and squeeze into the MTR.

7:55: I arrive work before 8. I am one of the first ones there.

[recording ends]

MOTHER walks swiftly out of door towards desk, sit down and look at computer screen.

Sits in 'power chair'.

The first thing I do is to log onto the Reuters computer terminal to check the interest and exchange rates. If I notice something unusual, I immediately place a call to one of my trusted bankers.

Speaking to audience.

I love my job. It gives me a sense of satisfaction. A kind of satisfaction that I never got from home.

Head turns to call out to Anne.

Anne, can you please come into my room?

The HIBOR rate is extremely volatile. It has gone up from 5 to 8 percent.

This is unheard of.

We need to borrow 150 million. I am going to start calling the banks now.

I want to lock in 3 tranches, of 50 million each.

Addresses audience.

As the first Asian woman to be promoted to Group Treasurer of my company, I am proud. I have rose through the ranks, starting as an accounting executive to Group Treasurer. I have worked there for over 28 years. I have a small team of people who work for me, and I have a great relationship with all my key bankers.

Stands. Gestures at clothing.

When I go to work, I make sure I dress in a collared shirt and suit. No frilly dresses for me. The last thing I want, is for my colleagues and bosses, to view me, as a woman.

MOTHER stands very tall and straight. Then limb by limb collapses e.g. right knee, then right shoulder, back, then head/neck, finally the whole body collapses onto a chair, limp.

Scene 1.3 Two Careers

In Hong Kong, busy financial district.

CYNTHIA

Steps aside, gestures to empty chair where MOTHER was at desk.

I guess... a part of me wanted to be just like my mother, a kick-ass career woman in the corporate world.

She was the first Asian woman to occupy a position that was previously held by Western men, in one of the largest Far Eastern trading companies set up during colonial Hong Kong.

(pause)

When I was in my twenties, I felt pulled in two different directions. I had ‘two big dreams’ or ‘fantasies’:

The first... I was the CEO of a multi-national company. I would be wearing a classy suit and bossing people around all day. I would have lots of money and power and...

Looking back, I’m not sure why that used to appeal to me...but it did, to my twenty-year-old-something self, it did. I wanted to ‘make something’ of myself...make my parents proud...and a lot of my peers were working in banks... And I wanted that too.

(pause)

And for a time being, I did... I worked for a financial magazine listed on the London Stock Exchange. I held the title of 'Business Development Manager'. I got to travel to Singapore, Brunei, Mexico and Brazil for business. I would have up to 8 meetings a day with bankers and corporate executives selling advertising space, bringing in half a million US dollars for the company on an annual basis.

(pause, reflective)

But... I also had this recurring 'vision' of sorts... it was me, as a writer, living in a white 2-storied house by the sea. I would be walking out of my house...down the slope... the breeze would be blowing through my hair... and I just felt... relaxed, and calm and free.

(like 'interrogating' myself)

Did I say I was ungrateful?

No, I'm very grateful.

I'm very grateful for having the money to shop at Lane Crawford, whenever I wanted.

To wear Diane Von Furstenburg fuschia-colored wrap dresses.

To own multiple Faliero Sarti cashmere silk scarves.

To travel to Singapore for business and stay at the Ritz Carlton.

To meet CEOs and government ministers when in Brunei.

To travel to Rio de Janeiro and stay along Copacabana beach in an upgraded suite.

To dine on scones and strawberry milkshakes at the Shangri-la in-between business meetings.

To be paid handsomely whilst not doing very much.

...

I never said I was not grateful.

I never said I don't like nice things.

Of course I like nice things.

But that was my life.

And I was miserable.

Scene 1.4 Barbie Doll

Living room in parents' house, Homantin, Hong Kong. Large and spacious with polished wooden floors.

CYNTHIA

CYNTHIA as young girl, kneeling, playing with imaginary Barbie dolls and house.

One Christmas when I was twelve years old, my parents bought me a three-storey Barbie Doll house, complete with its own white Victorian-style elevator.

I had five or six Barbie dolls — all blond and gorgeous, with big boobs, a small waist, and legs that went on forever. I also had a Ken doll (*holds one up*), of course.

I would send them up and down the elevator, into the various rooms of this magnificent mansion, and occasionally have one of my Barbies make out with Ken (*mimic Ken and Barbie making out*).

(pause)

I want to be just like my parents when I grow up.

I want to be a 'company person', a 公司人 / 'gung see yun': someone who works in a company.

I want to carry a big black rectangular briefcase.

I want to wear high heels, a suit jacket and shiny white pearl earrings, just like my mum.

I want to wear a bra.

I want to have twenty boyfriends when I grow up, and marry my favourite one when I'm twenty-one.

Scene 1.5 Nanny's story

In Nanny's room behind kitchen, Hong Kong. Me sitting on her bed, she seated on her chair by the desk near a window. Tiled floors.

CYNTHIA

When I was young, I remember having fun. My brother and I were pretty much left to our own devices after school.

We had a domestic helper who played the role of part-nanny, part-surrogate mother to us. She had lived with us for many years.

I remember how she would play with me and my brother after school. We would ask her to chase us, and we would run round and round our large dining room table.

I remember sauntering into her room, and marvelling at all of the unfamiliar objects — a wooden cross, and beaded rosaries (*picks up rosary beads, looks at them, prays whilst speaking*). When I asked, she gifted me a glow-in-the-dark set, and I remember diligently praying on each rosary bead for a while.

One day, I remember asking her about her husband. Her niece had just gotten married, and as a 12 year old girl, I was curious.

She began to tell me how she used to work in a factory back home, and how she was one of the best workers.

Her husband would wait for her outside the factory. But she was not keen on him, she kept on saying how dark and ugly he was.

So, she would just ignore him whenever he tried to get her attention.

As she lived with her younger cousin, one day, he came to the house, and her cousin had let him in.

He tried to talk to her, but she just ignored him.

However, he got very angry, and started to chase her round and round the house.

She kept on running, but he managed to catch her (*wraps arms*). She told me: ‘he touched me here, and here, and here’ (*gestures to different parts of body*).

After that, he came to her cousin’s house, asking for her hand in marriage.

She told me that she hated him, but as he touched her already, her cousin said that she had to marry him.

And so she did.

But she still didn't want to talk to him.

He kept on asking, why she didn't love him.

Then one day, she saw him, crouched down over a basin, washing her undergarments, crying as he did.

She told me, that she felt sorry for him, and that that was the day, she began to love him.

Picks up rosary bead to look at it whilst speaking. Walks across stage.

As a young girl, I remember feeling a bit strange after hearing this love story. I did not know how to respond. I hadn't heard of such a love story before, and so I have kept it, sitting here, inside me, all these years.

Scene 1.6 Por Por's Story

Por Por's village house, at the top of a small hill, to get there you need to walk up steep concrete uneven steps. A bit run-down. In a courtyard by the gate.

CYNTHIA

Starts putting on Por Por's red Chinese top when introducing her.

My 婆婆/ Por-Por, who is my maternal grandmother, my mother's mother was born on December 7 1925 according to the Chinese lunar calendar.

Her name is 李雲英/ Lee Wan Ying.

She was born in Qingzhou, Guangxi province and got married at a young age, to my 公公 / Gung Gung, 王伯豪/ Wong Pak Ho, a high-ranking Kuomintang official, who was exactly twenty years her senior.

Back then, the Kuomintang was the most powerful political party in China, that is, before the Communist party took over.

Anyways, my aunt Shirley always used to tease Por Por's accent. They say she was 苗族人 / 'Miao jook yan', an ethnic Chinese person; which I guess was affirmed by her dark skin and high cheek bones. My father always used to joke that Por Por probably put some 迷藥 / 'mai

yeuk', some special potion used to seduce men in his food, thus explaining why he was so taken with my mother.

POR POR

POR POR has a playful mischievous quality to her. Can be playing with hair (like low pigtails) at the beginning.

POR POR speaking as if recounting her story to someone/me.

Speak below in Cantonese.

我阿爸叫我做「黑珍珠」，因為我又黑又靚。

我唔似我阿媽，佢好白嘅。

我阿媽最靚，一枝花嘅靚。

但佢成日病，日日躺係床上。

我阿爸開賭檔，日日叫我坐佢大牌，話我旺佢㗎！

我後生嘅時，最鐘意騎馬。

嗰時，女人騎馬好大膽㗎！

我着件小背心，露我個胸。

嗰時我個胸全村最靚！

我個村有兩媽生兄弟，兩個又靚仔又甜。

我中意大個，佢叫做「呀強」。

但係你阿公，日日來我屋企，又槍又兵，嚇走其他男仔！

我結婚嗰時，你阿公要綁我係床上，因為我仲細。

我之後生咗你嘅 11 舅爺，共產黨打贏仗，

你阿公係國民黨高官，所以要走路。

嗰時一起走太危險，所以佢一個人先去台灣。

我之後預住 11 老去搵你阿公，但我俾人追到，要返番去。

所以我下一次自己走路，留底 11 老俾親戚睇。

我之後成功去到台灣，生咗你姨媽同你阿媽。

你阿媽叫「台麗」，因為佢係台灣出世呀嘛！

[English translation]

My father would call me ‘black precious pearl’, since I was a rare dark-skinned beauty. I was not like my mother, who was prized for her white skin, delicate and fragile.

She was the most beautiful woman I have ever seen, just like a number one flower, but always sick; she would rest on her bed all day.

My father would ask me to sit on his lap whenever he gambled, he was the owner of a gambling house, the largest in our village. He said I was his lucky charm.

When I was young, I loved to ride horses, which was very daring for a young woman back in those times. I would ride my stallion down to the river, wearing only a singlet which followed the curve of my breasts. I had beautiful ample breasts, the most beautiful breasts in my village.

There were twin boys from my village, both of them very handsome and sweet, I fancied the older brother, his name was ‘Ah Keung’.

But your grandfather, a Kuomintang official, would show up at our house every day, with his guards and his guns. He scared all my suitors away!

When we finally got married, I remember your grandfather had to tie me to the bed — I was still so young back then!

I gave birth to a son, your ‘Uncle 11’, but then when the Communists came, your grandfather, being a Kuomintang official had to flee the country.

It was too dangerous to escape all together. So he fled by himself first, to Taiwan.

However, I followed suit, carrying my son with me. But then I got caught and so had to return.

The next time I tried to escape, I went by myself and left my son behind with relatives.

And that is how I ended up in Taiwan and gave birth to your aunt and then to your mother. Your mother is called Toi-Lai, because she was born in Taiwan.

Scene 1.7 Running

Kowloon Tsai Park, open air and sunny. Then moves to Por Por's village house.

CYNTHIA

Running runs in our family. My dad is a runner. He used to be his high school athletics captain. He used to bring me and my brother to go running at Kowloon Tsai Park. Even today, at the age of seventy, he still goes running, outdoors in the sun.

My brother, is also a runner. More like a sprinter actually, like me. My brother is also a strategist though, he's good at chess. I think you can tell a lot about someone's personality by the way they play games. He utilises careful deliberation, whilst I move my players quickly and impulsively.

My mum, when she was young, was also a runner. She told me how she would run, topless, with the boys in her village, racing down the hill. This horrified my Por Por. My mum was a bit of a tomboy as a child. She was unlike her eldest sister, who was quiet and 斯文 / 'see mun', which was considered more feminine and proper behaviour. My Gung Gung, who was quite strict and traditional, favoured my mum's eldest sister, but my mother was very close to her mother.

When my mother was very young, she was given away to a neighbour, a couple who didn't have their own children. When my Por Por and Gung Gung arrived to Hong Kong after fleeing from Communist China, they lived in poverty. They raised pigeons to sell in the market. My Por Por didn't have the money to feed so many children, so she gave my mother away.

My mother cried for days and days, until her eyes became all swollen (*squats*). As my Por Por could hear my mother crying, eventually she took her back. I don't think my mother left my Por Por's side after that. Whenever my Por Por went to the toilet, my mother would go too. It was one of those squat toilets, those 'hole in the ground' types, and my mum would squat in front, and my Por Por behind.

Scene 1.8 Mum Fragile Woman

In family living room in Hong Kong. Me watching/listening to MOTHER sing karaoke, she is standing. Our relatives (her sisters, my aunt Shirley, uncles etc.) are also listening to her.

CYNTHIA

Me seated towards side of stage, listening to a recording of MOTHER singing Faye Wong's 容易受傷的女人 / 'Fragile Woman' / 'Easily Hurt Woman' / 'Vulnerable Woman'.

Points upwards with finger to 'music'

After first 4 lines of mother singing, then speak below:

That's my mother singing one of her favourite songs at karaoke. The song 容易受傷的女人 / 'yong see sau seung dik leu yun' means 'a fragile woman' or 'a woman who is easily hurt'. My mother used to say that she didn't know how to handle her emotions. When she had to leave me behind as a toddler to live with my Ah Mah for a while, she recounted: 'whenever you cried, I cried'.

She later told me that she didn't know how to deal with my issues because she 'couldn't even handle herself'.

CYNTHIA seated and listening to the song as well as the voice-recording of herself speaking, as if lost in thought.

[CYNTHIA voice recording below]

I used to cry for my mother, the hysterical panicking kind of crying whenever she had to leave me at my Ah Mah's house.

She and my father had to work in the city, in Kowloon, and couldn't take care of me when I was around one and a half years old.

I would always run after her.

Later, when they could afford to hire a domestic helper,

They took me back to live with them.

And I remember,

Crying again, hysterically, running after my mother, whenever she had to go to work in the mornings.

And I was left with Vicky,

Who couldn't speak my language,

And I couldn't speak hers.

In that apartment,

I would play with my Barbie dolls,

And my belly would ache,

Whenever I used the toilet,

And I would cry out for my mother.

Hoping that she would soothe the pain.

I'm not sure when it was that I started to shut myself off, or to shut myself out. Somehow, somewhere, at quite a young age, I decided it was probably safer for me to do so.

But feelings only get submerged, they never really go away. I realise today, that I am still crying out for my mother.

[recording ends]

CYNTHIA sings part of verse and chorus of Fragile Woman together with MOTHER's singing after Cynthia's voice recording finishes.

Fragile Woman song ends / fades out, CYNTHIA whips out phone.

Scene 1.9 Mum/Me Videocall

In NZ living room, me calling her in HK.

CYNTHIA

Seated, looks into distance as if speaking to someone on videocall.

喂, 媽咪? / ‘Wai, Mummy?’ (hello, Mummy?)

(pause)

I can’t see you, turn on the video.

What?

I... still can’t see you.

Can you see me?

Oh, you see me? Great.

But I still can’t see you.

I’m looking at a black screen.

Alright, should I call you back?

No?!

What?? You’re worried you don’t know what button to press.

Ok fine, you call me back.

Wait, do you know how to?

Ok, great, call me.

PART 2

Scene 2.1 Banana

In HK, outside parents' house at Perth Apartments/ near high school. Then walking along a busy street near Mong Kok MTR / Nathan Road.

CYNTHIA

Am I a banana?

(change tone slightly as if reciting definition from dictionary)

White on the inside, yellow on the outside.

(revert to conversational tone)

Well, maybe I used to think I was a banana, when I was growing up in Hong Kong, studying at a prestigious international school.

(change tone slightly as if reciting definition from dictionary)

Someone who is of Chinese ethnicity, but behaves more like a Western person in terms of language, lifestyle and their cultural identity. Someone who has assimilated into European or Western culture.

(revert to conversational tone)

As a teenager, my friends and I used to be proud that we could speak English so fluently, unlike the ‘local’ Hong Kong Chinese people.

I used to be feel quite ‘proud’ to be called a banana.

Not so much anymore.

I mean, I’m not sure that the term ‘banana’ is even an accurate description.

(emphasis, speak more slowly): I’m Chinese, how can I be ‘White’ on the inside?

Well...I studied under the British education system: took my GCSEs and A-levels.

I have lived overseas: in the States and now New Zealand.

But I also grew up watching TVB and 周星馳 / Chow Sing Chee, and listening to Beyond and 四大天王 / ‘4 dai teen wong’...

(increase in energy/enthusiasm):

I enjoy eating my 雲吞面 / wanton noodles and ‘雞蛋仔’ / ‘gai dan jai’ and 豬腸粉 / ‘chu cheung fun’.

I like taking my walk from the busy MTR station back to my parent's home, looking at all the small interesting shops along the way.

And how the city is always alive and you can find a local 糖水 / 'tong sui' place for 芝麻糊 / 'zee ma wu' or 芒果西米露 / 'mung go sai mei lo' at 10pm at night.

(pause, change of tone):

But, I'm ashamed to admit, that I am more fluent in the English language than I am in my mother tongue.

In my twenties I enlisted my neighbour where she taught me how to read and write Chinese, and I helped her teenage son with his English essays.

That made me feel better.

(change tone, more enthusiastic)

At least I could sing Cantonese pop songs at karaoke and read the menu at our local 茶餐廳 / 'tsar charn teng'.

(emphasis: big question to audience and myself)

So... does that still make me 'White' on the inside?

2.2 Me Running

Kowloon Tsai Park with dad and brother. Then moves to Por Por / Gung Gung's village house in Yuen Long, with caged pigeons in the courtyard.

CYNTHIA

Like I said, I studied at a prestigious international school in Hong Kong when we first returned from New Zealand—first primary, then secondary. Most of my peers were either children of well-to-do expats or from local families.

Over 95 percent of my teachers were White.

My mum made sure that me and my brother got into the best schools; she had already made the arrangements (*sits down and mimes dialling a telephone*), calling the principal before we left New Zealand. Whenever she called, she would hear the assistant exclaim 'It's Mrs. Lam from New Zealand!', and she would hear the pitter-patter (*running*) of the Principal's feet running to the phone.

(*pause*)

Like I said, I come from a family of runners. I used to be a runner, or more specifically, a sprinter. I'm not one of those long-distance runners though, don't ask me to run the marathon—no, thank you.

One of my favourite runs, is to be the first leg of the 4 by 100 metre relay.

I loved crouching down for that start in my black spike shoes (*mimics, pause*),

then leaping up to cheers and noise...

then running round that bend.... how my body would slightly tilt at an angle—you had to run as close to the inner white line as possible without actually crossing it....

...and how you sometimes couldn't really make out who was winning until you reached the end and the lanes began to level.....

I was a bit of a late bloomer back then—my best friend Alice used to be half a head taller than me—we're the same size now, so I was short, and fast.

Anyways, there was this one time, when I was competing in the 100 metres, and I almost, almost beat the girl who always won— she was blonde and popular with long white legs, and almost a head taller than me.

I guess I was on good form that day.

I'm not sure what happened, but there seemed to be more than usual excitement coming from the stands. I remember a girl who I wasn't that close to congratulating me after—she seemed more happy than I was.

Alice told me that some girls were talking about me in the locker room after. I wasn't sure what the big deal was. In hindsight, maybe it was because, that day, I had almost broken the status quo; as no one expected the small quiet Chinese girl to *almost* outrun the tall blonde.

Scene 2.3 Ah Mah

Ah Mah's village house, walking/ working in her large courtyard.

CYNTHIA

My 阿嫲 / Ah Ma, my father's mother, was born on August 16, 1917 in Guangdong province.

Her name is 鄭佩英 / Cheng Pui Ying. She was the fourth wife of my 阿爺/ Ah Ye, grandfather, 林炳均/ Lam Ping Kwan.

His surname, Lam, 林 is the one I have taken after. Our family surname consists of two Chinese characters 'mook' 木, which means 'wood', so people would sometimes say 雙木林 / 'seung mook Lam', double wood Lam, to refer how the character is written.

There are many 'Lams' all over the world.

According to our Lam family book —the most well-known ancestor of the Lams is 比干 / 'Bei Gan', the uncle of King 纣 (Zhou), the last king of the 商/Shang Dynasty . 比干 / 'Bei Gan' was killed by the evil King who cut open 比干 / Bei Gan's heart to check whether he was loyal to him.

Luckily, his pregnant wife, managed to escape and gave birth to a son inside a stone cave at a place called 长林 ‘Cheung Lam’.

The King was later defeated by 周武王 / ‘Zhou Wu Wang’ (King Wu of Zhou), and formed the new Zhou Dynasty - 周

When 比干’s son was 3 years old, they went to see the new King who recognised 比干 as a nobleman with great courage, and thus bestowed his son with the surname of 「林」 Lam.

(pause)

Anyways, so although Ah Mah was officially Ah Ye’s fourth wife, my cousins descended from the other wives would call her “Yee Por” 二婆 (or Grandma number two).

That was because the first two wives were betrothed to Ah Ye when he was a child—I think he was only 7 or 12 years old, and his wives were much older than him; this type of marriage in those days was known as “tong yuen sik” 童養媳, meaning that his ‘wives’ acted more like his ‘nanny’ and were married into the family as ‘daughter-in-laws to raise a child’.

Anyway, Ah Ye had run away from home as a young man supposedly because his mother was ‘super fierce’; my Ah Mah used to say: 聽阿爺講佢很兇啊! / ‘teng Ah Ye gong kui hou ork

gah!’ (I heard Ah Ye say that she was super fierce!). And so he ran away from his hometown of Huizhou in Guangdong province and arrived in Hong Kong at the age of seventeen.

It was somewhat later after Ah Ye had settled into Hong Kong, and started his own business, that Ah Mah was introduced to him. He was 25 years her senior.

When Ah Mah first journeyed to Hong Kong at the age of seventeen, she told me that she had walked and walked *and walked* for many days and nights over the mountains, almost without stopping, until her feet were in a lot of pain.

She walked all the way from her hometown together with a few of her friends, to Hong Kong, for a better life.

AH MAH

AH MAH has a practical, direct, strong quality to her. She speaks in a loud voice. She is energetic. She has large bones, hands, and tanned healthy skin.

Speak below loudly in Cantonese.

你阿爺中咗馬票，第三獎！

嗰時好多錢㗎！

佢用嗰啲錢嚟做生意，買賣鎢礦。

嗰啲鎢礦用嚟做槍。

嗰時生意好好。

但你阿爺太信人，係人問佢借錢佢都借。

然後畀生意拍檔呃晒佢啲錢！

佢跪喺度，求你阿爺放過佢。

你阿爺你呀爺太過心軟，無將佢拉去差館。

也都做呀！

你阿爺生意失敗，無晒錢，我也都做呀！

係「李祥和」入豆豉，釘膠片，綉花…

又要做家务：上山斬柴煮飯，斬菜喂豬，擔豬屎豬尿淋菜，耕田。

嗰時真係好窮，新年先至有隻雞食呀！

你做乜嘢去日本讀書？！

日本仔打香港呀！

嗰時，一聽到空襲警號，就要匿係防空洞。

裏面又黑，又濕，又凍。逼滿晒人。

我一便拖住「旦家」，一便預住阿 B。

嗰時阿 B 重係一個 BB。

有一次，阿 B 撞嚟佢個頭，大聲咁度喊。

我叫佢唔好喊。

唔係日本仔知道我哋喺邊，炸死晒我哋！

嘿！跟住佢真係唔喊呀！

出便有好多死人，啲手手腳腳炸到周圍都喺。

有一次，我行番屋企時，有個日本兵搵我囉柚。

好彩佢搵我囉柚只呀！

[English translation]

Your Ah Ye had won the lottery, the third prize! It was a lot of money in those times. He used that money to set up a metal trading business—a special type of metal called wolfram. You mix it with iron to make the gun barrel, so that it will not curve from the heat of the shooting.

Business was very good.

But your Ah Ye, eh! He was too trusting, he would lend money to whomever asked! Then his business partner cheated him of all his money! He begged your Ah Ye not to report him to the police. He was begging your Ah Ye, crying on his knees. So your Ah Ye let him go!

I did everything!. After Ah Ye lost the money, I did all sorts of jobs. I worked in the soy sauce factory next door at Lee Cheung Wor factory, I put the black beans into small pouches... I knit flowers onto mittens, take care of the kids, I had to work in the fields, feed the pigs, take the pig manure to use as fertiliser for the vegetables...

Back then we were so poor! We would be lucky if we had a whole chicken to put on the table!

Those were reserved for Chinese New Year.

Why are you going to Japan to study?

The Japanese attacked Hong Kong! We had to run and hide in underground shelters whenever we heard the air raid sirens. It was cold and damp and narrow and crammed full of people.

I was holding the hand of Tang-Ka, he was still so small, and carrying Ah-B, who was still a baby, on my back. Ah-B hit his head on the ceiling of the shelter, there was a huge bump on his head, and he started to cry! I told him that he better stop crying otherwise the Japanese will know where we are and will bomb us all to death! Ah! He really stopped.

Outside, there were so many dead people! There were bloody legs and arms flung everywhere on the railway tracks.

One time I was walking home and a Japanese soldier pinched my bottom!

Luckily, that's all he did.

Scene 2.4 New Zealand age 5

First house in Auckland (Mangere Bridge), from our garden to the neighbour's house. Then a classroom at primary school.

CYNTHIA

When we first emigrated to New Zealand as a family, I was five.

My Ah Mah decided to come with us, for six months, to help us to settle in.

I was one of my Ah Mah's favourite grandchildren, and would follow her everywhere she went.

I remember my Ah Mah, who didn't speak a word of English, growing some Chinese melons in our garden.

She decided to bring one over to our neighbours—whom we didn't know—and she brought me along to translate.

My English wasn't that good yet, I couldn't even understand the cartoons on TV whenever my brother and I watched them together in the mornings.

All I remember was my Ah Mah striding across their lawn, towards their house, knocking on the big white door, and she handing them the melon.

I can't remember if it was a slim middle-aged lady, or if it was her together with her husband; they seemed friendly enough.

But she didn't want the melon—I think she didn't know how to cook it.

But my Ah Mah was insistent, she kept on telling me to tell them.

I was small and didn't really know what to say; all I remember was seeing this large stripey green Chinese melon being passed back and forth between them—like they were playing a ball game of sorts.

Finally, I managed to blurt: 'she says it's for you'.

The lady finally relented, and said 'thank you'.

After that, our family got invited to their house for a party.

*

When I first arrived in New Zealand at the age of 5, my family had decided to come here to get a 'second passport' just in case anything happened during the 1997 Hong Kong handover.

Although this was still over 10 years away, a lot of people were migrating to Canada, United States, Britain, Singapore... as there was a lot of fear over what would happen when Hong Kong transitioned from British colonial rule back to communist China.

I kind of fell in love with New Zealand. I was amazed at the spiky brown hedgehogs that appeared in our vegetable garden, the orange monarch butterflies that would perch on my outstretched finger, and the rainbows and double rainbows that kept on appearing out of nowhere....

But it was also here that I felt rather displaced... I felt different. I felt weird. I remember my first day at school, I couldn't speak a word of English, and my classmates immediately paired me up with the only other Chinese person in class, a boy named Wai.

I didn't want to be paired up Wai. It made me feel even more different from everybody else.

Although now, if I could go back in time, I would comfort my young self, give her a hug and tell her to embrace her own unique beauty and heritage.

I wished...

I had proudly said 'I eat rice' when a classmate asked my 5 year old self what I ate at home, instead of saying 'potatoes'.

I wished...

I had cheered my mother on when she walked across the stage 'that's my mummy!', graduating from the University of Auckland, like my brother had proudly done.

I wished...

I hadn't exclaimed 'no!' when my father told the lady processing my New Zealand passport that my name was 'Hui Ying', instead I stated 'my name is Cynthia!'.

And that—

I wished that someone could've just talked to me, when I was growing up, to deal with all this shame. The shame I felt at feeling and looking and sounding so different from everyone else. The shame that crept up on me, as a child, from being a Chinese person in a foreign country. The shame and silence that came with being born a girl.

Scene 2.5 Thoughts Can Kill

In bedroom in evening, can't sleep. Balwin Court, HK. CYNTHIA as late teenager.

CYNTHIA

Did you know? That
Thoughts can kill you.
They swirl around your head,
Descending
Like a kettle of
Vultures.

Black on red.
Black ink blots
Spilt
On blood red silk.
Twirling
Orbiting
Inwards

They swoop down,
Close in
On their prey.
Of course they

Know you.

They have an instinct

For the weak,

the injured,

the susceptible,

the most

Sensitive.

If

I am not

Aware,

I shall be

Consumed alive.

I tend to space out a lot. Or more like, it appears as if I have spaced out; whereas in fact, some thought had pulled me into myself, and I am ruminating over that thought I just had or thing I just said.

Or sometimes I start to feel anxious, and I start rubbing my thumb and forefinger together in a circular motion (*demonstrates*). If there is a piece of tissue I can grab (*grab tissue*), they end up as little snowballs all around the floor.

Apparently, my Por Por did this a lot too. She would exclaim that it was fun to knead a piece of chewy white rice together.

It reminds me of the dessert that my Por Por loved to eat and make: 湯圓 / 'tong yuen', a chewy sticky sweet dessert made from glutinous rice flour. We would roll the sticky dough in our palms, until they became perfect round little balls.

My Por Por liked her tong yuen to be small and without any filling. We would boil it with a few slices of ginger and rock sugar. It was sweet and spicy and chewy and hot and watery, and well, deeply satisfying for the belly and soul.

Take wooden staff/ cane, and use energy to poke on the wall/ in audience as if there are fleas. At times look at audience.

I have another image of my Por Por. She is wearing her cotton pajamas, white with some small flowery orange pattern. Her hair would be black and permed but a bit lopsided and flat on one side from the previous night's sleep. She would be talking softly to my uncle, mumbling something which I couldn't quite make out. She would be standing in her courtyard, holding a wooden stick.

She had a dog. The dog had fleas, and she would use her long wooden stick, and pop the fleas that were on the wall. Sometimes I would look at that wall, and see the yellow-beige paint smudged with reddish grey streaks.

Scene 2.6 Depression

HK, Perth Apartment, bedroom. Reading Anthony Robbins (CYNTHIA in early 20s).

CYNTHIA

It's taken me a while to come to terms with my depression—this chronic layer of 'low mood', like a low buzzing sound of a fly or the 'zz zz zz' of constant radio static. A 'high functioning depressive' is what one of my psychoanalysts called me.

I can't pinpoint the exact time or year or age when I started being unhappy. I think it slowly crept up on me around my teenage years, I suffered from terrible insomnia around this time, I would climb into bed around ten or eleven, and not fall asleep until three or four in the morning.

Then when I arrived in college in the United States, after all that initial 'rush of excitement and sense of newfound freedom!!', I think that's when the depression really hit me. And it lasted all the way after I graduated, all the way into my twenties... thirties...

It's taken me a while to come to terms with it though. 'Other people have depression, but not me. I can cure myself by reading self-help books'.

One of the books that I held very dear in my early twenties was Anthony Robbin's... *Awaken the Giant Within*. Back then, Tony Robbins was a hit sensation, and I remember me and my friend, almost deciding to go to one of his *Unleash the Power Within* seminars—you know, the life-

changing kind where you walk over hot coals, barefoot. I mean, come on, if you can walk over hot coals barefoot, then you can conquer the world.

In 'Chapter Six: How to Change Anything in Your Life', Tony Robbins talks about using the following six master steps from Neuro-Associative Conditioning, NAC, in order to change our behaviour. These include

CYNTHIA points to NAC steps projected onto screen.

NAC Master Step One: Decide what you really want and what's preventing you from having it now.

Step Two: Get Leverage: Associate massive pain to not changing now and massive pleasure to the experience of changing now!

Step Three: Interrupt the limiting pattern.

Step Four: Create a new, empowering alternative.

Step Five: Condition the new pattern until it's consistent.

And finally, Step Six: Test it!

Sounds pretty promising, positive, and possible right? The problem with me at that time though, was that I was in such a deep dark hole, that number one, I hadn't figured out what it was that I really wanted, and number two, I was feeling lethargic and numb eighty percent of the time. Thus, I can only say that I was hovering around NAC master step one for a rather long long time...

Scene 2.7 Ex-Husband

Counsellor's office, university in NZ, seated on a comfortable sofa couch. Slight smell of disinfectant, light from outside a window and campus buildings outside.

CYNTHIA

When I first arrived back to New Zealand after more than two decades away and in the midst of contemplating a divorce, I remember crying out to my therapist in a rather uncharacteristic manner: 'I think I'm going crazy!', and he said 'you're not going crazy, Cynthia', in a fatherly telling-me-off-kindly kind of way.

I've always been attracted to men whom I thought had an 'interesting' dimension to them... not your normal type of nice-guy... but men with issues whom I thought I could 'fix'... co-dependent relationships is what my therapist would say.

Not that that's a bad thing. I mean, you depend on your partner, spouse, boyfriend, girlfriend for things, right? Whether it's emotional security, or financial security... a hug at the end of the day, or someone who says: 'I agree with you', even though you secretly know that you in the wrong.

But what I mean is... well my ex-husband, he was bipolar, manic-depressive. I didn't know he was bipolar when I first met him, even he didn't. In fact, he didn't exhibit manic behaviour nor did he get officially diagnosed until after our wedding. We met when we had both recently gotten out of long-term relationships. So.. we were both on a rebound, I guess.

....and I was desperate to get married. Not to him in particular, but just to get married, if you know what I mean.

Or maybe you don't, in fact, now looking back, I don't get it myself. But back then, in Hong Kong, past the age of 30, and unmarried, that's kind of...uncalled for. Leftover women. 剩女 / 'Zing lui'. That's what they called us. Unmarried women over the age of 30. Leftover women.

Anyways, I've digressed. I was talking about co-dependent relationships of the unhealthy kind, because one day it hit me that the partners I had chosen for myself were in part, a mirror to myself. It never struck me that I was depressed, and a highly emotional person. On the outside, I seemed 'calm and elegant' (as my friends would say).

CYNTHIA stands.

I'm a good girl. And good girls are always nice. Never angry. Never jealous. Never aggressive. They are nice. They wear nice clothes. Are helpful, people-oriented, non-confrontational. They greet their aunties with a smile and buy small gifts for everyone. They stay with a husband who wants to drink first thing in the morning. *(louder)* And smile at their mother-in-law when they steal that foot massager your husband bought for you, somehow moving it into their flat upstairs without you knowing!

Scene 2.8 Sour pit poem

Ex-husband's house, HK. In his 'energy sphere'.

CYNTHIA

CYNTHIA stand very still and straight, stiff back, arms at side, clenched fists.

I have a sour pit churning in my stomach.

But I keep it covered.

My palms are sweating.

But I keep them hidden.

I want to scream.

But I keep mute.

I want to slam the door.

But I stay still.

I want to thrash my body around, throw myself onto the floor. Smash things.

But I stay rigid.

Feet together.

Mouth closed.

My heart beating wildly.

But no one sees, or feels, or hears.

But me.

When my ex-husband was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, he told my father that the problem was with me. That I was sick, not him. And that the psychiatrist had said that he was sick, to make me feel better. Sounds outrageous right? The problem was, was that I felt so weak and afraid, my sense of self so eroded, that somehow I was worried I might one day actually believe him.

My ex mother-in-law refused to acknowledge that her son was manic depressive, she said he was just being a ‘dai lum yun’—an alpha-male with opinions, ‘just like her husband’ she would add. She would tell me how with a bit of love and care, like how one of his many ex-girlfriends had taken care of him, he would become better.

Didn’t I already treat him with enough care and nurse him through his depressive episodes?

She remembered how he would cry one minute, then laugh the next.

Oh, so this happened before?

Apparently she knew about his manic episodes. Most of his family knew but me.

When his mother came to speak to my father, on the night after I ran out of his apartment and vowed not to return, all she could talk about was the ‘antique cupboard’ that I had crashed into on my way out. She was worried that I might’ve damaged it.

I wished I had.

But I did not.

I kept quiet and restrained. I didn’t want my temper to flare, or my anguish to show.

I was so afraid of being labelled 'crazy'. That they were going to turn the tables on me. And say that I was the crazy one, not him. His mother was already telling the family that I was emotionally unstable. They wanted to gaslight me.

In hindsight, I wished I had screamed and cursed and thrashed and smashed that prized antique cupboard of hers. It wouldn't have mattered that they thought I was hysterical and angry and distressed and crazy. It would've brought me some relief.

Scene 2.9 Power of Three

HK, around apartment, then car, then at a shopping complex downstairs / taxi stand.

CYNTHIA

Tense, still.

I've always believed in the power of three. I've always tried to honour that number. You see, if something happens to you once, twice... and by the third time if you don't pay attention, then something bad of the epic kind might happen. Because you haven't been paying attention, to what the universe is trying to say to you.

The first time it happened... we were taking a walk at night. This was during the early stages of his manic phase, so he was a bit hyper. He had to take long walks and sometimes I would accompany him to eat a late night snack. He accused me of trying to ruin a business deal for him. He started to berate me, and continued until we arrived back home; then he started yelling at me again for who knows how long.

The second time it happened... we were in his car. He was driving his black convertible, and we were arguing. I was mad. Then he got even madder. He pressed the accelerator, pretty damn hard. And well, I got scared. He forced me to apologise, otherwise he was going to 'send me back to my parents'. He pressed the accelerator. Harder. It was night time. I remember the strip of fluorescent orange from the lamp lights outside whizzing by. I was apologising, because

frankly, I was very scared. I apologised. Again. It wasn't enough now. He was on a high, and he wanted to punish me.

The third time it happened...I ran out of the apartment, barefoot, him yelling. I ran past two security guards, the first one smirked, the other stood up, alarmed. I remember running on the concrete podium, and the smooth cold tiled floors of the shopping complex downstairs. I remember stepping onto the hard steel ridges of the escalator, which eventually took me to the rough wet ground outside, where I waited in queue for a taxi. I remember a young man looking at my profile as I stood in line, then he looked down at my feet. When I got into the taxi, I called my father, I said: 'I'm coming home, but I'm not wearing any shoes, can you bring me a pair of shoes when you come down to meet me'.

I remember saying to myself, 'this is the third time, and I'm not going back'.

Cynthia picks up tai chi staff and performs Shaolin Yin Shou Gun movement segment.

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PART 3

3.1 Rain

Ah Mah's village house courtyard.

CYNTHIA

CYNTHIA inhales and exhales deeply. Looks soothed and relieved as if after a storm.

*Rain is drizzling around her. Smiles. Holds staff upright in hand. Starts moving/
sweeping the floor in large circular motion with staff when talking about Ah Mah.*

I love the smell of rain.

It used to be more pronounced when I was younger.

The smell.

It's an earthy musky kind of smell—

The kind that makes you want to inhale deeply.

Nowadays it's very faint, either my nose has gone or somehow the rain doesn't smell like how it used to.

But I still get that soothing feeling, it calms me down.

It reminds me of my Ah Mah, when I would be staying at her village house during the holidays.

It would be raining, and I would see her walking about in the courtyard, doing this and that.

Never stopping.

She would wear one of those hard woven brown hats, with a wide brim and a pointy top.

They were great for sheltering the rain, freeing your hands up.

My Ah Mah had big strong hands. You know, the kind with big sturdy knuckles.

I will always remember her hands.

The skin on them thick and healthy, and slightly tanned.

And her confident fast gait.

She would be criss-crossing her courtyard, at around 5pm every day.

The smell of incense wafting in the air.

That was the time of day when she would place incense all around the grounds, as an offering to the earth and spirits for protection.

Scene 3.2 NZ age 30

University campus library, NZ. Then Chiu Chow restaurant in HK.

CYNTHIA

Deciding to come to New Zealand, in my thirties, to study English literature and creative writing, was one of the best decisions I have ever made for myself. It was a decision, made when I hit rock-bottom, when my life was crumbling, and I felt that I had nothing left to lose. I no longer cared what other people thought, what society thought, what I thought my mother thought. It was my big ‘f**k you, and hello to me!’ moment.

I considered it to be my second life, or my second chance in life. I could re-orient, rebuild, reinvent. Mind you, it wasn’t all a bed of roses. I remember studying in the library during one of the many weekends I spent alone, and I whatsapped one of my good friends in Hong Kong, I said ‘Oh my god, I have no friends here!!’.

But I knew that I was finally on the right track for myself. It finally felt right.

As the only Hong Kong Chinese person in my writing classes, I started sharing stories about my family history and culture; which made me realise and appreciate the uniqueness of my upbringing and heritage.

And I lapped it all up....life writing, poetry, short stories....I studied postcolonial theory and literature, I read about the ‘mimic man’, someone who is alienated from their own culture and

starts adopting the language, culture and attitude of its colonisers because they think it gives them a higher ‘status’ in society.... I realised myself in those books.

Writing my life stories provided me with a sense of self understanding and healing... I started to *feel* a lot of things, a lot of stored up feelings and memories of shame and rage and dislocation pouring out of me... and I was excited.

Now, creative writing was no longer just a ‘hobby’, it had become my priority.

(pause)

*

When I visited Hong Kong after my first year in New Zealand, my parents and I were having dinner at a local Chiu Chow restaurant in Kowloon City. I recounted animatedly to my mother just how happy I was that I was finally studying and doing something I loved. My mother, who initially thought I was only going to New Zealand for a 3 month post-divorce holiday, shot back: ‘And what is it that you think you can do with your writing?’.

We have a Chinese saying: 一桶冷水淋落佢頭上 / ‘yud tong lang sui lum lok gor tau seung’, which literally translates to: ‘she threw a whole bucket of cold water over my head’. That’s how it felt. I felt deflated.

I shot back: ‘When you say something like that, I feel challenged to prove you wrong’.

‘Okay, then prove me wrong’ she fired.

I took that as a direct challenge (and I *love* a challenge). I was fired up to prove to my mother that studying to become a writer can bring success. Whatever the definition of ‘success’ meant, to me or to her at that time, I am pretty sure there was a wide discrepancy between our individual interpretations.

The funny thing about this whole scenario though, is when I asked my mother about it a few years later, she had a blank look on her face. Apparently, she had forgotten that we ever had this whole sorry conversation.

And eventually, after some time, she came around.

3.3 Mum ‘Dai Lui Fa’

At Por Por’s funeral, Shatin funeral parlour, HK.

CYNTHIA

Kneels behind wooden fish. Recording of MOTHER singing ‘Da Lui Fa’ begins to play.

CYNTHIA speaks after listening to MOTHER singing four lines of song. The song continues to play until towards the end of the scene.

That’s my mother singing Por Por’s favourite song, a Cantonese opera ‘dai lui fai’ / 帝女花. This song was considered novel, because it was the first time that an operatic song contained such a beautiful melody.

CYNTHIA starts beating wooden fish in tandem with the voice recording below and MOTHER singing.

[recording]

I remember when my Por Por was in hospital, she had bone cancer.

They had already moved her to a more beautiful wing, with pastel coloured walls and artwork of flowers and scenery.

I understood that her time on this plane was nearing an end.

Her sickness didn't stop her from exclaiming in excitement when I told her that I landed myself a new job, earning ten-thousand dollars a month.

Her eyes lit up, she seemed more excited about my job than I did.

Nor did it stop my mother from ordering a huge 'sau bau' / 寿包 (Chinese birthday bun) filled with more than ten mini sau baus inside for my Por Por on her birthday.

Can you image that—mini baby birthday buns filled with lotus paste and egg yolk, sprinkled with pink, all wrapped inside a gigantic sau bau?!?

We were all at the hospital, my mother wanted to do something special for Por Por.

I can't remember if Por Por ate much.

My mother always said that Por Por chose to pass away on a day when she wasn't visiting;

As she didn't want her to be scared.

[recording ends]

CYNTHIA

CYNTHIA stops beating wooden fish. Stands up and speaks below.

Outside my Por Por's house, right where the wired fence of the main entrance sits, was a plant that bloomed large bell-shaped bright red flowers. My Por Por would pluck one of these beautiful blooms off, its petals stretched intense-red and wide; she would tell me to suck at its tip, I would turn my head to gaze up at her, she showing me how.

Sweet smooth nectar would run into my small young mouth: surprised and amazed and delighted all at once.

Scene 3.4 Mum giving Birth / Black Dog

HK, living room. CYNTHIA seated on sofa with MOTHER. Then right outside Ah Mah's village house near soy sauce factory/ Lee Cheung Wor.

CYNTHIA and MOTHER

It took my mother over twenty-four hours in labour to give birth to me.

'It wasn't even a proper hospital' she recounted, teary-eyed.

No doctors, just two nurses.

All the women in labour just walked in, lay on a bed beside one another, gave birth, then left.

Many who arrived after my mother had already given birth and gone home.

My mother wasn't given any assistance.

My Por Por came to see her during labour, but she told her to leave, 'I didn't want Por Por to be scared', she had said.

Although I don't think my Por Por would've been scared.

My Por Por had given birth at home, on her sofa, multiple times.

She had cut the umbilical cord of her babies herself.

I think my mother probably meant: she didn't want my Por Por to see her in so much pain.

When my mother got pregnant the next time with my brother,

She chose to give birth in a hospital. In the city.

It was a much easier and more comfortable birth.

When I told my psychoanalyst of my mother's long and difficult labour, she exclaimed: 'You didn't want to be born'.

Sometimes in the past, when I was feeling particularly overwhelmed by life, I used to wonder about that statement, and think: 'perhaps'.

*

(pause)

CYNTHIA

Although since deciding to move to New Zealand to pursue my passion, something has shifted. I can't pinpoint the exact what or when or where or how, or maybe it was a culmination of all this work I've been doing on the self....

Or it could've been this 'big fight' I had with my mother when I finally told her how I felt during one of my trips back to Hong Kong....

Or perhaps it was how researching for this play and sharing memories has brought me and my mother and my family closer together.

It was like letting the rot out in order for the light to seep in.

(pause)

Recently, this image keeps on coming to my mind...

It's me, as a four year old... I am living with my Ah Mah at her village house, and she always kept a big black dog with loose long hair, usually on a leash... but one time, the dog was let loose, and I got scared, and I started running... I ran outside the house... past the steel gate... past the 黃皮 / Wong Pei fruit trees... past the soy sauce factory with all its jars of fermented black beans... I couldn't stop running, as the dog was running behind me, and behind her were my cousins... I think there was 泉鈺姊家 / 'Chuen Yuk ga-jer' (Big sister Chuen Yuk) and 威豬 / Wai-Ju and 翰仔哥哥 / 'Hong-Jai gor gor' (Big brother Hon)... they were all running in a line one after the other, after the dog yelling at me to stop running.... 啊盈, 停呀! 唔好跑呀! 停呀! / 'Ah Ying, ting ah! Im hau pau ah! Ting ah!' (Ah Ying, stop running! Stop!)

So finally... after repeated shouts....I stopped. I stopped running. I turned around, and realised that the big black dog didn't actually want to bite my head off...she only wanted to play....she was happy and gentle and not all that scary after all.

Scene 3.5 Queenstown

Queenstown NZ. Living room, luxury rented house.

CYNTHIA

After I had settled into my new life in New Zealand—post-divorce—I took a trip to Queenstown with my parents when they visited.

I decided to confide to them my struggles with my identity growing up.

I told my mother that I never felt like I belonged anywhere, and that I had spent a lot of time trying to figure out who I was: ‘Who am I?’ I constantly asked.

My mother laughed and laughed, she imitated me (pause):

Who am I? 我係邊個! 我係邊個啊?! 我係邊個! 我係邊個啊?! 我係邊個! 我係邊個啊?! /

‘ngor hai been gor ah?! ngor hai been gor ah?! ngor hai been gor ah?!’ (Who am I?! Who am I?!)

Who am I?!

For some reason, I found her response hilarious, and I thought—perhaps I was too serious about this whole quest about my identity. She made it all seem a bit funny and ridiculous, and somehow I saw the funny side too.

(pause)

*

My mother retired a few years ago. Her company hosted a lavish party for her, and all her colleagues, bosses and bankers were all there to celebrate her and the 28 years of her illustrious career. She gave a speech....and although I wasn't there as I was in New Zealand, she thanked me. She thanked me for being a 'little mummy' to my brother Oliver, so that she could focus on her career.

(pause)

Recently, just the other day, when I just woke up and felt the sun hitting my eyes, I suddenly wondered: what my mother felt when she finally birthed and laid eyes on me for the very first time.... *(smile wistfully)*. My parents decided to name me Hiu Ying 曉盈 *(pause)*, 林曉盈 (Lam Hiu Ying). My name means—'abundance at the break of dawn'.

Scene 3.6 Mum/Me Videocall Two

At my house in NZ, living room.

CYNTHIA

CYNTHIA speaking on phone/ video call to MOTHER.

喂, 媽咪? / ‘Wai, Mummy?’ (hello, Mummy?)

What?

Okay show me what you learnt.

Oh, so like this?

(CYNTHIA does some tai chi move)

廿四式 / ‘yar-sei sik?’ (24 form) Is that the 24 style?

What? 42-式/’sik’?

They have a 42-sik?

I didn’t even know they had that.

(pause)

Oh, so you’ve written down all the moves in your little notebook.

(pause)

You actually look like you have a six-pack now.

你真係好利害呀! / ‘lei chun hai sai-lei ah!’ (you are so great!)

(pause)

Oh yes, so you know how I said I am writing our stories...I wanted to ask—

Did Por Por say that she gave birth on the sofa?

No sofa? They didn't have sofas...

So where?

As I thought she told me she gave birth in the living room, and cut the umbilical cords of her own babies.

(pause)

Por Por is very 大膽/ 'dai-tam' (brave).

(pause)

In the tree?

She gave birth up in the tree?

What? To hide?

From whom?

But how can she give birth up in a tree?

(laughs)

Okay so perhaps not in a tree, but in the living room, but maybe not a sofa, maybe a bench? I don't know.

(laughs)

Ha? No, not yet.

Oh I told Daddy not to send us any more face masks, we already have those 6 boxes you sent over already.

(pause)

夠啦夠啦 / ‘gou lah gou lah’ (we have enough).

Anyways, do you want that cle de peau face wash?

I have some Asia Miles that are going to expire at the end of this month.

No I don’t need anything.

Let’s not waste it, I’ll order it for you.

You use that one right?

Don’t worry, there’s nothing I want.

Anyways, okay, I’m going running now.

好啦好啦 / ‘ho lah ho lah’ (okay, okay)

遲啲再傾 / ‘chi dee choi king’ (chat to you later).

好啦 / ‘Ho lah’ (okay) , I love you, take care.

You hang up.

No, you hang up.

Okay, I love you. Bye.

Scene 3.7 Epilogue / Red Poem / Tai chi

CYNTHIA

You might now be wondering about that dream of mine... the white house by the sea... I used to think that I had to be ‘whisked away’ by some European man who lived in the South of France in order to have my dream life. Well, to my pleasant surprise, I didn’t need a man to whisk me away. Somehow, it had begun to happen, and I felt I was starting to live the life I had always envisioned for myself; a life that was authentic and natural and ‘hand-made’...a life that back then, seemed so far away and hard to reach.

When it’s deep into the night, and if I step outside onto my deck, under the blanket of the indigo sky and the silver stars above...and if I’m still... I can feel the cool wind caressing my face and hear the sound of the waves lapping in the ocean....

*

CYNTHIA does a Chen style tai chi sequence whilst voice recording of poem below plays..

[voice recording of CYNTHIA]

Red is....

The colour of sacrifice...

Money, security, comforts, the desire to please...

All need to be relinquished

For the chance to live a vibrant and authentic life.

Red is...

The colour of blood.

That which flows from mother to child.

The ability to feel in our bones

Of a love and pain so deep

that it sears through our hearts.

Red is...

The colour of rage.

That which I have kept hidden

In the deepest recesses of my

Being.

Red is...

The colour of passion.

Of devoting myself to things

That I believe in.

And of devoting oneself, to oneself.

To soldier on, despite the bottomless cold echoes of fear.

To face oneself

In the mirror,

All illusions gone.

And then...

To find that,

I am my mother, and my mother's mother,

And all the mothers that have come before me,

All along.

[recording ends]

CYNTHIA finishes tai chi sequence.

END

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