

5.1 We Have This-ness, Y'all! Ocean Vuong and Amy E. Elkins (EH)

Transcript

Emily Hyde

Welcome to Novel Dialogue, a podcast sponsored by the Society for Novel Studies and produced in partnership with Public Books, an online magazine of arts, ideas, and scholarship. I'm Emily Hyde, I'm one of the hosts you'll be hearing from during this fifth season of the podcast. Novel Dialogue brings together critics and novelists to talk about how novels work: how they're written, how they're read, how they're taught, and translated, and remembered.

Today we are lucky to have Ocean Vuong in conversation with Amy Elkins. Ocean Vuong is the author of the New York Times bestselling novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, which has been translated into 37 languages. It's a novel that is written in the form of a letter from a son to a mother. It's an incredibly brutal but also tender examination of race and class and masculinity and it bears witness to a particularly American, I think, kind of commingling of war and beauty and violence with survival. Ocean Vuong is also a poet and is the author of two poetry collections, *Time is a Mother* and *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*. He was born in Saigon, Vietnam and immigrated to the United States at the age of two, was raised in Hartford, Connecticut, and he currently serves as a tenured professor at New York University.

Amy Elkins is an associate professor of English at McAllister College. She is an artist, a theorist, and an interdisciplinary scholar. Her first book, *Crafting Feminism: From Literary Modernism to the Multimedia Present*, is all about process: it's all about the process of making textiles and digital design and collage, photography, painting, sculpture, all within feminist and queer literary culture. She's known for kind of experimental academic presentations that are also really fun, I should add, and she's also known for her multimedia academic writing, and that phrase is kind of a weak and jargony way to describe the kind of academic work that Amy has produced. Even that word "writing," I think, feels kind of inadequate to describe the way she mixes process and product, art, and theory, not to mention like different media and genres.

So without further ado, I'm going to hand things over to Amy to open up this interdisciplinary dialogue with Ocean Vuong.

Amy Elkins

Thank you so much, Emily, for that introduction, and thank you, Ocean. I'm so honored to be in your company and to have this conversation today. So *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is so sexy and edgy, but it's also a story told with deep, intense compassion. Pain and pleasure seem constantly entangled in the book, and in my own reading, and even on rereading and rereading again, it feels like a book that's so radical to me, but also so nostalgic, like it kind of provokes this nostalgia in me. So I wanted to ask you a question first about genre. While our listeners will probably be no stranger to *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, you began your writing career as a poet, as we just heard. At times in the novel, I'm thinking of two places in particular, the lines seem to fragment into stanzas instead of paragraphs, a kind of

undressing of the language of fiction, a stripping down of narrative framing. And the book is written as a letter to the narrator, Little Dog's mother, even though she will not be able to read it.

So I'm curious if you intended for poetry to creep into the novel in strategic ways, if you can help it, or how that happened, or how you approach genre in your writing.

Ocean Vuong

Oh, first of all, thank you so much, Amy and Emily, for having me here. When I heard about, when you asked me to be on this podcast, I was so excited because it seemed like such a nerd-centric podcast, so we can just nerd out and really go into the deep theory and scholarship of writing, which I rarely get to do, often in the majority of conventional media, you know, it's all about biography and aboutness, but very little but about theory and praxis, so this is a real pleasure.

And you're delivering with a heady question. I think what the idea of genre, you know, coming out of this question of what is even literature, you know, and we can, Shakespeare, for example, wouldn't really know how to answer the question of what is Literature with a capital L. So it's anachronistic, naturally, to kind of talk about genre in relation to history, because then we position it on the shelves in the categories in order to study it. So there is a usefulness to genre making, I think.

I know many of my students like this very radical approach to say, forget genres, forget labels, forget, you know, categories, and I agree to a certain extent, but on the other hand, I found my way because I wandered into a bookstore and there was a sign that said Asian American literature, queer literature, right? I found my people, I was saved, and I don't say that with hyperbole, because there were road signs that were products of a curatorial sort of aspirational, you know, organization from other people. And so I found Baldwin, I found Judith Butler, Anne Carson was somehow under queer literature, *Autobiography of Red*, right? And I think that's right, right? So I think there's so much to be said, and then queerness in a way helps us hold all of them simultaneously true. We don't have to decide, we don't have to have a binary polemic.

And so I think coming from that education, I saw genre as a very nebulous, much more nebulous than the commercialization of genre tells us, right? And then the subgenres or the genre of fictions, you know, detective novel, murder mystery, what have you. And so the people I were reading, my heroes were not best sellers. And so to, you know, to kind of harken back on your beautiful introduction, *On Earth* taking off quote unquote, it's still bewildering to me in a genuine sense. I still don't know why. And I think a lot of my peers and friends would also say agree. My heroes were obscure writers. I mean, Melville sold a thousand copies in his lifetime, Bhanu Kapil, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Djuna Barnes *Nightwood*, weirdos.

And I think starting as a poet gave me the courage or the expectation that it should be strange, first and foremost, which is often antithetical to selling. And I think I didn't realize this gift, being a poet because, you know, you be a poet, you start being a poet and they tell you, you're not going to sell. So okay, thank great. So now we'll just work on, towards pleasure. The excitement of making and crafting something. And so I was kind of free to be curious and experimental in how I approached things.

And I didn't realize that was different for, you know, contemporary young novelists until I became an MFA teacher, where young novelists would come into my office hours, and they'll ask things like, you know, how do I write a book in order to get an agent? What are publishers looking for? I don't know.

You know, I'm the worst person to ask because all of this, I was just following a formal ambition. And to this day, I couldn't tell you why it's translated in 37 languages. I can have some theories, but to me, it seemed like everything was against those odds because I didn't follow the, I just wasn't interested.

It wasn't even a rebellion. It's just, I think that's one of the things I'm really interested in in a queer practice is alterity. Not even a sort of oppositional approach, but totally turning one's back against a sort of hegemonic dialectic and trying to make something completely elsewhere. What is an elsewhere? And I think I looked at my bookshelf and I said, okay, how do I create a matrix out of these weirdos who've been life-giving to me? And my only goal, and I told my agent this with apologies to her in the beginning, I said, my only goal is an ISBN. If I can get this novel to just have a form and put it out there, I'll do my thing and then go right back to poetry, probably where I belong and I'll, you know, wouldn't bother anybody else with it.

And so that was the standard, very low standards. And so we're just kind of following, you know, the phenomena of it since then. But it was always very nebulous almost to the point of not even considering where one genre ends or one begins because in order to work against the novel, we must define the novel. And the novel being a very late genre is in a unique position of being both a container and an action, right? So it can hold, it's one of the rare forms that can hold the other forms, you know, it almost had to wait until the drama, lyric poetry, epic poetry, the romance to kind of mature and then it kind of became a, it just held it.

AE

Yeah, I feel like you're describing how the novel is like a vessel for the pleasure of the outcast. Like, how do we contain that experience?

I kind of want to push forward a little bit with a lot of these things you're talking about because I heard you once say that genres can be as fluid as genders and you've already gestured toward queer theory, but I wonder if you could talk a little bit more about how queer theory has informed your perspective on the novel form.

OV

Oh, yeah. I mean, if you track sort of like the hermeneutical methods of 19th century and 20th century literary theory, I think most of them were interested in the early 20th century about making, formalizing a sort of scientific approach with methods, right, structuralism, even with the Russian formalists onwards, all the way to the New Critics. And I think what queer theory relieved us from is to have an approach rather than constantly seeking out methods. In other words, seeking out instruments and rulers to measure something that is so absolutely mysterious.

And I think, and you're probably the expert here, but I think Freudian theory, psychoanalysis, and from that, queer theory, postcolonial studies, creating, you know, from Freud is kind of subconscious, kind of put an end to the fast-paced dialectic of literate theory. It's almost like after the subconscious has been legitimized, something we always knew, like there's this deep mystery, we don't know why something works or something doesn't or how we discovered a line that means something to us. When that kind of opened, it's almost like literary theory went to this vast cliff. You know, it's like, well, what do we do after the subconscious?

And so, in a way, it kind of disarms the power structures of the dialectic before. And now we can go back and say, well, let's use deconstruction methods when it works, and let's also use structural, and they're not mutually exclusive, right? And I think that too is a queer theory to use what has been discarded by mostly white male discourse.

So I think, you know, the great, exciting part of queer theory is that it does not allow history to stay where others have put it. And so I kind of used that approach when writing *On Earth*, because I knew that I was not going to have a plot, a traditional plot where things get going, right? This kind of very, I think, phallic promise with Freytag's, you know, triangle that will build the tension and relieve it orgasmically. And so I just wanted to kind of use the older styles, the Victorian styles of the subordinate clause, the meandering sentence, a la Dickens and Melville, Hawthorne.

Interestingly enough, we deem that style purple and thereby feminize it only when modernism came about. The Stein and Hemingway sentence, the laconic, clean, and thereby supposedly philosophically rich with clarity, truth, right? So, but in order to move from one epoch to another, we had to denigrate it using feminized terms, right? And so we associate purple prose with un-constrained, whimsical, metaphoric, abstract. And this is parallel to when we diagnose and pathologize, you know, depression in women with sexual frustration, right, in the 19th century, perhaps still. And so it's so interesting to me that in order to render a set of tools defunct, we had to first render it associated with women and the feminine and so, so fascinating.

So to me, there's like almost a queer literary drag to go back and say, well, these tools, just because, you know, they're defunct to you doesn't mean that they're useless to me, right? And so I think this is actually very, has parallels with my deep interest in, in antiquing and thrifting, right? Anyway, I'll, yeah.

AE

That's amazing.

Lately, I've been thinking a lot about this kind of creative, critical crossover and kind of starting to develop what I'm thinking of as an intersectional theory of creative flow. And so, much of *On Earth* seems to depict Little Dog in a sort of flow state, wherein like sensory impressions, mingle with history, journalism, literature, aesthetics. And so I'm really curious if you experience flow when you write or if there are variations in your critical practice.

OV

Oh, what a wonderful observation. I mean, I'm so glad you brought that up. I often forget about that. In other words, this, to me, Little Dog's observation is action. And this is also workshop 101 taboo, right? You can't have a passive protagonist, but passive to whom, right? And so I think this also comes with this sort of refugee, sort of you call aesthetic or praxis where vigilance is lifesaving. And so the more Little Dog observes, he learns from his elders that observation and being perspicacious can literally save your life. Vigilance is a method of survival.

And often in the West, the witness or the bystander, right, is someone who's passive, has no agency, has no skill. And so in the workshop, immediately we say, what, this person must react, they must do something. What is the rising action, the culminating action? So this demand for performative kinetic force rather than psychic one and privileging that over another is also part of this sort of hegemony and

not to say that it's better or worse. Like, you know, I indulge in, you know, the occasional murder mystery or what have you or even action films, but we've denigrated it. I think my interest is that why is there such a wholesale denigration of one method as opposed to another?

So we deny the plurality of what's possible. We go to art to see what else is possible. And yeah, so absolutely, I think one of my deep interests before I wrote this book is just to dignify the observer as a skill, right? So there's a lot of time that the protagonist takes to visualize and depict the world. And of course, this goes back to Flaubert's flâneur, right? But that's a very class based, it's a sort of upper middle class method of judging the social elite, which is why those novels were very voyeuristic in their strategies of depiction. This is before film, before, you know, mainstream photography. And so you looked at novels to see how the rich lived. And so these authors were really aware of this. And so they took a lot of, almost like a position of repose to describe the curtains on the wall, what they use, the utensils, the dress, the fineries.

And I thought, well, what if I did that, but positioned it as not just a depiction, almost a still life, but to imbue the protagonist with the agency of discernment. Because that's action too. And that's also very clear. We've learned to observe because at any given time, we can walk into a room where that room can turn quite dangerous on the drop of the dime.

AE

Yeah, you know, it's reminding me of the end of the novel too, where we have the protagonist in action, you know, kinetic action running. And even that is a form of cognitive flow, of creative flow, as sort of the material world just becomes this impressionistic assemblage of, you know, a culmination of the entire book in a way to, in a way that flow can kind of accumulate or collect, in a sense.

OV

Yeah, yeah, he runs and then he runs smack dab into a memory.

AE

Yeah--

OV

There's no forwarding, right you run, the time where he finally, you know, burst forth, he runs smack dab into the past.

AE

So and this, again, we'll pick up on something that I'm really curious to hear a little bit more about. You mentioned antiquing and thrifting as a passion. And I once heard you call yourself "an apprentice of the sentence," which I just loved.

In many ways, this novel is a book about the craft of writing: bodies are our forms of punctuation, and Little Dog often points the reader to the words embedded in words. So for me, "laughter" caught in the word "slaughter" will haunt me forever. Thank you. There's even an instance of revision made visible to us when a word is crossed out on the page and left there. But *On Earth* also seems propelled by craft in another sense, that of art making or of handicraft. Early on, the novel invokes metaphors of pigment,

weaving, etching and indigo dying with later references to painters, Duchamp's readymades, carpentry and metalwork. And I'd also add your new poem, "Woodworking at the End of the World" to this list.

The process of making things seems as much related to the material art world as the construction of sentences. So I'm curious if you make things by hand or if there are artists, collectives or craft forms or collection practices that have influenced your writing.

OV

By the way, I love your video essay on texture. I learned something so valuable and so evident in that it comes from the word text comes from textiles from Susan Howe. That was so, so incredible. And yeah, there's actually a really great book. I want, you must have already encountered called *Making* by Tim Ingold. Do you know that book?

AE

I do.

OV

It's a wonderful sort of anthropological approach. And yeah, so he makes this great demarcation between ethnography and anthropology and the anthropology is this active questing. And at one point he talks about the basket weavers, like the weavers, the circumference of the basket is a sort of product of the weavers arm length so that every basket is absolutely idiosyncratic.

And when I was in Italy over the summer, I saw the stone, the cobblestones of varying sizes and they fan out in these little arches across the street. And every single one has a different circumference depending on the mason's arm length, right? And so there's a language to that, right? There's a sort of, that is a sort of articulation of intent and there's a signature in the body. There's a somatic signature that is so beautiful.

And I think that is informed by being in the nail salon growing up, you know, most and foremost, and working in tobacco fields as I have. So I think this idea of labor, when we think about manual labor, and I cannot think of manual labor without thinking of Benjamin's essay on Leskov. It was kind of like, Leskov was kind of just a front for him. He mentioned Leskov for, you know, I think like two paragraphs and then he goes on, he goes off, as they say these days, on storytelling. And he makes this wonderful thesis of the difference between the oral tradition coming from the artisan, that the stories were once told while we made things, while we waited for the bread to rise, while we hammered out the iron ore for the blacksmith, the weaver. And the printing press, of course, sort of privatized the storytelling, but then brought forth interiority, right?

So one of the hallmarks of the novel is interiority. And I think this is, I think many scholars have consensus that this is why the first novel in our species is *The Tale of Genji*, written in 1011 by Lady Murasaki, because it was so interior. So funny, because when asked, you know, why she did this, because she was a lady in waiting, she was just in a court, you know, which you're supposed to be decorous and objectified. And she said, well, you know, why did you write a thousand word novel? She said, well, I was bored. That was so beautiful, like what an incredible response.

And also like true, like I think, I think despite what anyone can say, even what I've said so far, all these theories and intentions, ultimately, you know, why we stay at the desk is because we found something to cure boredom. This is, this is why we can talk about, we can have endless ink on why we do think, but I love Anne Carson's statement, and she says, it's pretty much her North Star, where she says, "my only goal is to never bore myself." And so, so true, because if you're bored, the reader's bored, and then what are we doing, right?

So I love that when in doubt, I'm just like, am I boring myself with this passage, particularly in editing and revising?

AE

Right, absolutely.

EH

I'll just jump in for a second there on the question of craft and making and boredom and like time passing too, because it reminded me of one of the poems that I really loved in your most recent collection, *Time is a Mother*, is the one where your mother is making fish sauce, which, which is certainly like not a gorgeous process for the anchovies in the jar. But, but it's a craft and it's a process that unfolds over time. And one of the things that I thought was so interesting about that poem was that it, the, the making, the fermenting of the fish sauce over time is, is provides a kind of temporal structure. But then the poem itself is all about the kind of present, what's happening in the present tense of that poem.

And I just, I feel like that connects to what you've been talking about with, with like writing and boredom, right? Like it is a process that unfolds over time, but it's also incredibly present. And if you can keep that presentness, even as you're doing the work, then you're, you get something as, you know, delicious as fish sauce at the, at the end of that process.

OV

Yeah, yeah. Oh, thank you so much for drawing that. Yeah, absolutely. And I think, you know, ironically, I'm not very good at hand crafts and hand things, right? I think my first goal was to be a photographer. I was just, I adored, I came out of skate culture as a high schooler. So a lot of my friends would photograph themselves or video tape themselves skateboarding. So, which is already a very outsider. It's interestingly enough, it was the only culture in high school that embraced my queerness. It was really, you know, interesting. But, you know, I couldn't do it. I didn't have the patience. I couldn't wait for the light to change with the camera.

And it was, and then so writing to me allowed me to be more present in the world when things were happening and then use memory to render it immediately, right? You get it perfect with a couple sentences, but with a camera the being dependent and at the mercy of the material world was too overwhelming for me. But I like to go antiquing because I think it's synonymous with writing in that the more, the older I get, the more I realize that the work of my writing is more curatorial. And this is most evident in the latest collection, particularly with the Amazon shopping history poem. I couldn't have, I didn't have the courage, I don't think to have written that in my first book. I always, I thought, oh, you know, like any young writer, you're very insecure about proving yourself. And so I thought, oh, I can never just leave a poem as found objects. But this time I had more confidence to let the object speak for

itself, a la , William Carlos Williams, no ideas but in things, you know, so the more I write, the more I realize it's actually looking at the world as a junkyard and then rescuing it towards some sort of structured and ordered meaning.

AE

Yeah, that poem really struck me as an extremely mindful poem in that it's just kind of a catalog of the present moment through these found objects through this collection. And I wanted to ask you, I know that you're practicing Buddhist, and I'm really interested in the relationship between Buddhist meditation and writing. And the queer theorist Eve Sedgwick, for example, wrote a lot about the overlap of Buddhist philosophy and her end-of-life cancer diagnosis. And I think in particular, she's really kind of grappling with the place of emptiness in a kind of material practice. And it's just fascinating to me. And she, of course, is working across media and using found objects and sort of images, image, you know, kind of like memories that are manifested through images and putting them together. So I wanted to ask you if you kind of feel these overlaps between mindfulness meditation or Buddhism more specifically and writing in your work?

OV

Oh, all the time. I mean, I, in a very subjectively would say it's a natural sort of result of writing is mindfulness because you're dealing with tiny objects with infinite possibilities. And so it's kind of the opposite of the fish sauce making because the fish sauce is meant to dissolve the discrepancy, the individuation of the anchovy is meant to dissolve into a liquid. But for the writer, it's actually to distinguish a sort of hierarchy and to make actual borders between, we depend on the borders between one word and another. This word rather than that, even thisness and thatness to me is such a, I mean, forget about going to the moon. I think, like, for our species to have invented thisness as opposed to thatness from words. My god, like, I know we take it for granted, but every day I'm like, we have thisness, y'all, like, right? I mean, and theness and anesss, right?

And so I think the attention and care. You know, I do think at its best and I don't think it's always this way, but at its best, writing can be a product of care. And it might even be a prerequisite to care. It leads to, you can't do it carelessly. And Susan Sontag said this, you know, there could be luck in photography. It could be luck in painting. There's no luck in writing, right? Maybe that's why we have a track record of ending up in asylums. They're just you just working on what it's like. There's no way to, you know, accidentally write well.

You might have a good idea. You might have a good word. An image can come. But to render it, the method of rendering comes from care, point blank. You know, it never just blurts out perfectly.

EH

I once heard you say that your Americanness, your citizenship, even your identity like as an Asian American writer began long before you were born. So it began when American bombs began falling in South Vietnam. And that just struck me as a as a teacher of literature as incredibly, incredibly interesting and challenging. So I wonder, you know, what would it mean if that was how we looked at American literature, this literature of the nation state? Like what if that was how we taught American literature or how we decided what was in the canon and what, you know, what made it onto the syllabi? What would

change do you think if American literature included the literature of American imperialism and warfare, no matter where it was written from?

OV

I think to me, it's an obligation of education. And I think it begins with kind of refusing to see reading as equating to celebration. And this is where I think a lot of my students, I found particularly young people, I tried to, you know, kind of revise this impulse to cancel authors, right? And I think, or take them off the syllabus. And I think, you know, if we take Whitman off the syllabus, we don't get to investigate. We don't get to investigate what's contemporaneous to Whitman, what he succeeded in, in innovating the the line. And thereby, we deny ourselves that education. We also can't see where he went wrong in his, you know, racism, his beliefs of Western expansionism, you know, and also the great trauma that he experienced as a queer person and how some of this, you know, self-rising barred, this sage was kind of like a persona in an ego mask, right?

That we can there's so much to do, but we would deny ourselves that. And it doesn't do much, quite frankly. It becomes a righteous moment in our liberal arts department. And that's, to me, more symbolic than practical, because down the street at the school where I came out from, the teachers underfunded, also splitting times between a lunch duty, parent-teacher conferences, where they're getting yelled at from both sides of the aisle. And they're just one chapter ahead in the teacher manual. And they're going to teach Whitman in the propagandist way. This great American bard, saved, you know, American literature and inspired the sort of democratic ethos from Langston Hughes to Lucille Clifton, also true.

So I think what we discovered is that there are many truths. Why not discover all of them? And make these decisions using critical thinking, one of the central tenets of any modern education. So to me, it's thoroughness and to be thorough is difficult because American history is difficult. It's full of contradictions. It does, and Whitman is actually an incredibly potent space to begin because arguably one of the most influential writers to this day. What other writer has, you know, can be, will be entertained by the president of the United States in, without, beyond a perfunctory manner. Like Lincoln literally listened to him. He also listened to Harriet Beecher Stowe.

So fascinating time. And I think we, to think about literature and kind of reinvestigate it and take it away from what popular culture has rendered it as, as this naturally mysteriously, naturally virtuistic endeavor and product, despite historical evidence of horrible authors doing horrible things, right? And so I was like, well, let's demystify that and accept them as people, flawed, self-serving.

But also maybe this is the very natural result of literature, which is creating a virtual, something virtually mimetic of life itself. In other words, I'm not surprised the more I read and write and teach that there are so many racist authors, right, misogynistic authors through history, because there are so many misogynistic, patriarchal and settler colonialist times in America. Why would there be one that somehow just hundreds of years ahead in social politics? But writers, I think, often become the site of these protests because they've engaged in this very fraught practice of rendering the social.

In other words, I'm sure there's even more, perhaps just as many racist biologists, we don't hear about them because their racism is not always on their work, or chemists or manufacturers. Right. We ~~we~~ hear sometimes snippets and we can surmise, but it's not always rendering there. So I tell my students, authors take a great risk in trying to capture, right, what is there through the myopic,

phenomenological, subjective body and what they can perceive. So let's not approach it, if we approach history with a dogmatic good or bad, we've already lost the game. We've taken critical thinking outside of the equation. And now we are asking ourselves to pick sides and now we're no better than CNN or Fox News. We're just we're just repeating them, the task of higher education is to give us the time and space to hold all complications equally at once, investigate thoroughly and then build both an archive of how to read, the hermeneutical archive and also a praxis towards the future on what to bring forth and what to leave behind.

And that takes a lot of time and rigorous discussion. And it can't happen if we just, you know, remove ourselves from the conversation. That might feel powerful at first as an act. I won't have so and so on my syllabus. But in the long run, we really just surrendered our agency and given the field back to the more dominant discourses.

AE

Yeah, I think that was one of the first things that captivated me by, you know, in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is this kind of like very legible anti-fundamentalism that seems to run through the novel and that there's almost the kind of building of a queer canon or even a syllabus of storytelling, that there's this incredible diversity. And we recently found out that we share a pretty close connection and that your grandfather was from Hot Springs, Arkansas, where I grew up. Like me, graduated from Hot Springs High School, shout out to the Trojans. And I grew up in a really dynamic storytelling culture. I was raised by a single mother in a racially and socio-economically diverse community. So there wasn't a lot of space for fundamentalism, if that makes sense in that there was a kind of complexity embedded in the very fabric of our social interactions in this kind of small corner of the world.

And so I wanted to ask you about, it's sort of a two prong question about the role of storytelling in your life, but maybe even more particularly now. I think in the last two years, a lot has changed. We've seen the product of fundamentalism in our culture and in our media, as you've pointed out, kind of emerge. And so I'm really curious if there have been shifts in the way that you experience storytelling.

OV

Oh, that's a great question. I think, I don't know if there's so many shifts because it came, you know, my approach to it was to, I've always felt that my influences were the women in my family who told stories, folklore, self-mythologizations. And in fact, the first autofictions I consumed was from my grandmother. And her stories would change depending on what she wanted out of the scenario, right. And so we saw that storytelling was a tool, a strategic tool.

AE

I'm familiar with that.

OV

Yeah, the guilt trip, in other words, right? And but also what was really, I think, retrospectively, I didn't know it then. But what I realized was that these women had very little power in the modern America that they encountered. And their, one of their central tools was to bolster themselves with a dignified sort of history. So the myth, if we were to say that the myth in the hands of the state is a sort of patriarchal lineage that must be defended through bellicose means, then the myth in the hands of the

outsiders like these disenfranchised women was to empower agency when so much of it has been stripped, right. And so there is no sort of innately dogmatic problem with storytelling. It's how it is sort of employed.

And, you know, I watched the elders in my home employ it to garner respect when they had so little. And in fact, all, they had all the reasons to lose respect as their children gained positions in life, acquired English language, began to read. They became more and more helpless, more dependent on the second generation to help them function through the bureaucracies of America. And so the more power that was stripped from them or denied or lost, the more stories they told to reposition themselves in the patriarchy. It so happens that all of my cousins are boys. There were no daughters amongst, right? So we had this very interesting, almost cinematic setup of a patriarchy of elders, you know, raising men. And, you know, a few of whom would become queer men. And I think it's because they were so and we never really had the crisis, the sort of queer crisis that cis white men raised in America that I saw, it was much more malleable for, you know, for many reasons.

But I think a lot of that came from witnessing women literally give power to themselves, right? Not take it from any, there was no way, they'd had no medium to take it from the world. But they made it from nothing but language. And, you know, say what you will about, you know, how true these stories were. It didn't matter. They believed it. And if they believe it, it's as good as true.

And I think that to me, I always try to reframe that in the conversation of autofiction. Autofiction has been happening since Melville and beyond. You can think of Thomas Aquinas or, you know, St. Augustine, but in the 21st century, it's been sort of commodified and sort of made finite by this sort of white middle class study of the mundane minutia, right? And then the drama of this sort of aporia of the helpless suburban middle-class minutia. And that's viable to a certain extent, but it's not autofiction, right? It's much more than that.

And so if you turn it right back to the women in my family, they influenced me just as much as, you know, and any other writer as much as John Cheever, Flannery O'Connor or what have you. And so I think that's also the work that queer theory has taught me was to wait a minute, like just because these influences were not in the canon does not mean they had no power.

AE

Absolutely.

EH

I think that's a wonderful place to stop, partly because you've just completely made autofiction fine for me. From now on, I'm going to be so much less annoyed with it than I have been thus far.

OV

I mean, and this is just all we're doing is expanding the terms to encompass the intentions and ambitions of other communities. And you see this in hip hop, which comes from the blues tradition, right? And you see why for so many refugees, hip hop becomes, it's not it's not an accident that hip hop becomes so central as a sort of tool to intervene on, you know, the narrative of the refugee, because it's, hip hop is centrally interested in recasting the self as the center of a narrative, right. You go back to "Rapper's Delight" from the nineties. It's the self being narrated through a day, right. You know, I wake up and I do

this and I do that and go down the stairs, right. And then you go that all the way to 50 Cent, to Drake. You know, just so Eminem even coming in and it's all about, again, what is Eminem, but this constant reinvention of an autobiographical self against, you know, the dominant class structures that says you are you should be X, Y, Z. And so it's actually a work of opposition in order to garner a more robust and idiosyncratic selfhood. And I think if we think about autofiction in those terms, all of a sudden it becomes much more richer than what, than the literary conversations we've had around it.

EH

As always, we close our episodes of Novel Dialogue with a signature question. So it's a question that's shared across all the different conversations that we're having this this season. So here it is:

Other than your actual writing supplies or devices, what do you need to sit down and write? So what makes the act of writing actually happened for you?

OV

Boots.

I don't know why I literally have to put on boots to write. Yeah, I think it's the ritual of like, you know, you put on you can't take them off. Like you got to commit. And I think it's like when you put on boots, you got to go somewhere. You can't put on boots to walk around your house. You know, so it becomes very Pavlovian to the sense that you're committing to a session and you feel like you're ready for the elements. And I think it's always you strap on your boots, you tie them up and then, you know, you cross the threshold. You can't second guess it. You got to go and you got to go do something. And I've always found that really, really helpful.

EH

I will never put on boots the same way again. It will always be more, more exciting.

AE

I think in the era of ~~of~~ Zoom soft pants, this is especially helpful, that we kind of reminder to get sort of fully in in the space for writing.

OV

Yeah, yeah, I recommend it. Give it a shot. See what happens. I love it.

AE

I will, I will.

EH

I'm going to close out by saying that we are grateful to the Society for Novel Studies for its sponsorship, to Public Books for its partnership. And we'd also like to acknowledge the support of Duke University.

Hannah Jorgensen is our website manager and transcript editor. Rebecca Otto is our social media manager and Connor Hibbard is our sound engineer. Novelists from past seasons include Orhan Pamuk,

Teju Cole, Sigrid Nunez, Tom Perrotta, Ruth Ozeki and Alejandro Zambra. And we have many more dialogues between novelists and scholars coming your way this season.

So from all of us at Novel Dialogue, thanks for listening. And if you like what you heard, please rate and review us wherever you get your podcast.