

BY: ENLING LIAO

# STUDENT SPOTLIGHT

# DONNALYN

# XU

Donnalyn Xu studies English and Art History at the University of Sydney, having previously completed a Bachelor of Arts in Media and Communications. An emerging Sino-Filipino poet, writer, and art worker from south-west Sydney, Xu's work frequently centers the fluidity of memory—"Particularly," as she says, "through our relationship with art and materiality." Her passion for art and its nuanced influences on her creative practice, perspective, and aspirations shone warmly as she spoke to me over Zoom in late October. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

**Enling Liao:** *How are you going right now? Is there anything delightful you've come across recently?*

**Donnalyn Xu:** 'How I'm going right now' and 'anything delightful' feels like they don't really match up! I've been doing uni online. It's been very lonely and kind of strange, because I just have to spend a lot of time writing my 20,000 word thesis alone. It's been quite difficult, but I'm very lucky to be able to work from home as well.

**EL:** *A dominant theme you explore in your writing is how odd and fluid memory can be. Could you tell me a bit about how you came to focus on this theme?*

**DX:** Well, I study Art History, and history's very difficult for me to write. I always say that I'm not a historian, but I'm interested in memory work. They're very similar, but you have to write in service of truth when you write history. I really respect history as a discipline because it's such honorable work, and very rigorous, but I just can't do it myself because I don't have that allegiance to the truth! [laughs] I also care a lot about feelings: how we feel about the past.

Lately I've been looking at archival objects and archival material, and thinking about the archive as a concept, and also the personal archive. Things that we remember—but instead of the actual objects, I keep thinking about everything that surrounds them: how we care for them, how we feel about them and what gets kept to begin with. And yeah, I love to say, like, "the strangeness of memory" because I think we think it makes sense, or we think of memory or history as a kind of certain truth, but it's extremely elusive.

**EL:** *You make quite frequent use of the ampersand and white space in your poetry. Could you first outline the significance of the ampersand in your work, and in the work of other marginalized writers?*

**DX:** Sure. I love the ampersand. The first essay I had published, ever, was on the ampersand, and it was this 2000-word reflection/statement essay I had to write for a creative writing class. [This was] after I had finished my suite of poems, [so I wrote] about things I had noticed in my own writing, or techniques of other writers

that I felt I could incorporate into my poetic technique. And I was really drawn to the ampersand. In that essay, I wrote about how the symbol '&' is a connector symbol, but it's also very jarring—there's a visual dissonance to it, but also [a] jarring disconnect through connection that I was drawn to. I like that it brings words closer together visually.

There's so much blank space in a poem. For me, poems are essentially about white space, because there is something so specific about how you place words in relation to each other. The ampersand is a very clear symbol that says, "We are visually close to each other, but in pulling things closer together we also separate them quite a bit." So in terms of representing my culture, or with regard to understanding my culture through symbols, I would say it's about connection and dissonance coexisting.

**EL:** *Moving on to your interest and work in the art world, can you tell me about how you first became interested in art and how your relationship with it has*



### *perhaps evolved since then?*

**DX:** The first thing I ever wanted to be was an artist! I was five years old, and I remember I drew some flowers in a vase, and I was like, “This is so good! I could sell this, and I could live that way.” [laughs] Obviously that’s not how life is, but I’ve always kept that desire: if I could only do one thing in the world, it would just be to make art.

I call myself an arts writer sometimes, or even an artist, even though I don’t make that much art anymore and I’ve only just stepped my toe into art writing—but I’m drawn to the phrasing of ‘arts work’ and ‘[arts] writing’ just because I think my writing is always in service of art. I think that even if I never got paid for writing poetry, or if nobody read my poetry, I would still write it. What does that feeling mean?

So I think art is... not really the inspiration of my writing, but almost the reason why I write. I’ve also been thinking of art as my day job. I always imagined that I would work in publishing and editing because I love grammar and copy-editing! But I find it really difficult having companies tell me, like, “Can you write this for me?” So I’ve been thinking: what do I want from writing? I want autonomy, and creative freedom. I don’t think I could be a full-time writer. So I think: what are my other skills? I’m interested in art; I care about art; I care about how artists are treated. Lots of the work that I do right now is involved with artists. So maybe art for me now could be a way that I can feel that I do good work, but it’s [separate from] my writing work [in that my writing is] external to money and things like that.

**EL:** *Do you have any particular reading recommendations for readers who are interested in learning more about the artistic and/or cultural environments that have shaped you, or your inspirations?*

**DX:** Being a student, I feel like I return

to theory a lot. I think theory and poetry are really similar—they’re both modes of inquiry, but we just think of them as “facing the other way.” I read fiction all the time, but I return to poetry, to theory because they sharpen my way of thinking about things. So I recommend Audre Lorde’s *Your Silence Will Not Protect You*—and I have my underlined passages where just reading them comforts me. In terms of poetry, Mary Oliver’s *A Poetry Handbook* has also been really helpful to me. Normally, I would never read a book that’s called *A Poetry Handbook*—it kind of insinuates that there’s a proper way to write poetry, but there’s a good quote in it: “If the poem is thin, it is likely so not because the poet does not know enough words, but because he or she has not stood long enough among the flowers—has not seen them in any fresh, exciting, and valid way.” I always feel that my life is so small, and the things I write aren’t interesting, but I think that [Oliver] knows that you don’t need to learn more, or use bigger words; you have to change the way that you think about things.

I also love Anne Anlin Cheng. She’s a theorist who writes about critical race theory and aesthetics, and, reading her book *Ornamentality*, I can’t believe that she has given words to something I’ve always felt. I can read it back to front like a fiction novel, and it’s pure theory.

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I always think about the young Asian-Australian women writers with whom I feel like my writing would have a home—or those with whom I aspire for my writing to have a home... Shu-Ling Chua, who’s a friend of mine: she wrote an essay collection called *Echoes*. And Cham Zhi Yi’s poetry collection *blur*. I just wrote a review on *TAKE CARE* by Eunice Andrada, who’s a Filipino poet, and it was the first time I had ever been asked to review a collection of poems by a Filipino writer. I would definitely recommend her writing.

**EL:** *What are you hoping to do in the*

### *near future?*

**DX:** Well, I need to write my thesis! That’s the immediate future, and it’s tiring, but I feel like no matter what I do, I put my whole heart into every single piece of writing. Once that’s over, I really just want to write *freely*. I think I’m at a weird cusp of my career where I’m such a baby writer and I don’t really have many things out—but I feel that the pressure to constantly produce, which I felt maybe one or two years ago, has lessened. Another thing Mary Oliver says that I really like is, “Every poet’s ambition should be to write as well. Anything else is just flirtation.” And I think that’s the most important thing to remember. So, in terms of what I want to achieve in the near future, I want to write well, even if it doesn’t get published anywhere and nobody reads it. I also want to enjoy writing more.

I get worried when I realize the only things I write are commissions, or publications—I think that’s not good for my heart. [laughs] I used to have a blog when I was 14, and that was the most fun I ever had. I started writing poetry because I was just like, “Oh my gosh, I have so many *feelings*, where will I put them? Like, I don’t want people to listen to this, I just have to write this really embarrassing teenage, angsty poem.” And now I’m all about craft, and I have to write a poem that people like. But that teenage angst poem is always... You

don’t grow out of that. So I want to write *well*, but I also want to write in a way that feels sincere, and earnest, and kind of clumsy. I recently had an editor say that my poetry feels very “young,” and I thought, *That is such an interesting thing to say*. Normally, wouldn’t you want someone to say that your poetry feels experienced and mature, and wise? But that kind of inexperience, and that clumsiness, are what I look for in poems that I like as well. So I want to keep that kind of emerging writer joy of writing, even as I think about career things! I think that balance is what I’m really looking for. ©