



Author	Jee Chan
Publication Date	21 May 2021
Category	Reflection
Review status	Peer Reviewed (Editorial Group)
Article DOI	https://toolstotransform.net/portfolio/jee-chan-20210521-ref-using-insisting-and-remembering-to-eat/
Cite as	Jee Chan, "refusing, insisting and remembering to eat," <i>Tools To Transform</i> , May 2021, https://toolstotransform.net/portfolio/jee-chan-20210521-ref-using-insisting-and-remembering-to-eat/
Credit as	<p>Jee Chan, "refusing, insisting and remembering to eat," <i>Tools To Transform</i>, May 2021, https://toolstotransform.net/portfolio/jee-chan-20210521-ref-using-insisting-and-remembering-to-eat/</p> <p><i>Tools to Transform</i> was initiated by Asia Art Activism, in partnership with DAMN*/Deutsche Asiat*innen, Make Noise! (DE), Healing Justice London (UK), House of Saint Laurent Europe (DE), Unthaitled (DE), The Voice of Domestic Workers (UK) and The Six Tones (VN/SE). This project has been supported by the European Cultural Foundation's Culture of Solidarity award and University of York and Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).</p>

refusing
insisting

and remembering to eat

a complaint at the royal conservatoire of scotland

2019-2020

this document is my account of a complaint I filed during my final year as a student on the ba (hons) contemporary performance practice programme at the royal conservatoire of scotland. organized in collaboration with nine other students, the complaint foregrounded numerous instances of misconduct and abuse perpetrated by then-head of programme prof. deborah richardson-webb. the complaint was upheld, yet no action was taken by the institution. an independent review panel was convened by the rcs only after I launched a public-facing online campaign which attracted significant media coverage. notable outcomes following this review include a re-evaluation of the rcs complaints handling procedure, the inaugural adoption of an anti-racism action plan, and the dismissal of prof. richardson-webb.

in designing a contribution to this workbook, I made the active decision to speak from a humanizing position as opposed to further amplifying the voice of the violent institution. this document comprises six texts, each centered upon a moment of making, eating and/or sharing food. it seeks to emphasize the practices of care I had to establish for myself and which my peers and I, as a collective, developed together in order to sustain ourselves throughout this laborious process. spanning two years and two continents, this document reflects the extraordinary efforts of so many. I hope it will serve as a functional resource and offer inspiration to those who find themselves engaged in similar struggles, as well as those who may be differently but conjointly oppressed.

january 2019
kelvinbridge, glasgow

we had all agreed on 6pm at my place. I'm walking home from school and of course it's raining. this week has been barely survivable. in the sainsbury's next to my flat, I stop for a moment in the fruit and vegetable aisle and inhale deeply. I had offered to cook dinner tonight. a few days ago my flatmate O made a huge pot of chickpea curry. I figured it had to be that; something quick, hot, preferably with a lot of garlic and ginger. I swivel myself into the next aisle with a shelf matter of factly labelled "oriental" and grab three cans of coconut milk.

I chop the onions, ginger, chilli, peel and smash the garlic, scrounge out ground coriander, cumin and cinnamon from the bottom drawer, crank the stove on high, put on alice coltrane's reflection on creation and space (a five year view), throw everything into a big pot, oil and sizzle, slice up a few tomatoes, throw them in, throw in three cans of chickpeas, two cans of coconut milk, more oil, salt and pepper. just as I set the rice cooker to cook, the doorbell rings. I adjust the fire and get the door. it's E! I usher them in and we hug. I spoon a bit of turmeric powder into the pot, add a splash of water and stir out a warm golden hue. it just strikes me that I forgot to get curry leaves, but whatever. the rice cooker puffs up clouds of light steam. within the next thirty minutes, nine of us sit around the living room and we facetime D in. ten of us. I pull out what seems like all the bowls there are from the kitchen shelves, scoop a bit of white rice into each and ladle the simmering chickpea non-curry over. we gather and eat and begin to discuss what could possibly happen next. all of us study on the contemporary performance practice programme at the royal conservatoire of scotland where I am in my final year. M asks that I tell everyone what happened again just so we're on the same page. I do.

after last week's programme meeting, during which I was asked to share my experience on a recently concluded exchange semester in berlin, the course leader, prof. richardson-webb, requested to meet me in the staff office. I followed her to the office, where she told her colleagues to leave the room. once we were alone, she screamed, "I think you should reconsider what you are trying to do here on my programme, in fact whether you want to be here at all!" initially stunned by this aggressive outburst, I realised that she was referring to what I had shared at the programme meeting, specifically how much I enjoyed my exchange semester. what ensued was a shouting match between us, brought to an abrupt close with the by now livid professor repeatedly yelling "this conversation is over!" and storming out of the office. still trying to make sense of what was happening, I pointed out her complete lack of professionalism to which she shot back, without turning around and with a dismissive flick of her hand, "then file a complaint!"

I finish the last few chickpeas in my bowl. this group has come together because each of us has faced some unique instance of abuse during our studies, many of which have been perpetrated by prof. richardson-webb herself. they are all open secrets, which is to say many students and staff on the programme know but there has been little to no effort made in addressing them. students are fearful and the institution is complicit. "no, that's just not on ..." R says, as D shrieks in digital disbelief. A rolls her eyes and lets out a heavy sigh; N is laughing on the floor.

I am still shaken from that encounter. in fact, I felt myself physically shaking as I re-told and indeed, re-lived the experience. earlier in the week, the president of the student union told me that nothing like this had ever been attempted before. we met to discuss the prospect of filing a formal complaint and agreed that it would be best to gather as many testimonies as possible. so here we are now, six laptops open, rattling out each of our experiences in detail, the warmth of our breath and bodies fogging up the windows. someone brought honeycomb ice cream. listening to our laughter (how did that even happen? how amazing that we're doing this! how the fuck is this person still employed as an educator??), I become acutely aware of the power we hold as a collective body.

"although it is the existential basis for denouncing domination, unjust suffering, in itself, cannot spark resistance. what sparks resistance is a triple discovery: that the oppressor has weak spots; that there are paths, no matter how narrow, to fight against oppression; and that there is some capacity to tread those paths. herein lies the hope (the opening up of an opportunity) and the joy (the capacity to benefit from it) without which no resistance is possible ... unlike fear and sadness, hope and joy are the existential preconditions of resistance. in social struggles, joy and revolt frequently go together; joyful moments best express the value of solidarity and underwrite the hope to win." — boaventura de souza santos, the end of the cognitive empire: the coming of age of the epistemologies of the south, 2018

october 2019
brunnenviertel, berlin

S and I have invited N over for dinner. the nights are getting colder and I've spent the better part of last month embroiled in [a mind-numbing email volley](#) with hugh hodgart, director of drama, dance, production and film at the royal conservatoire of scotland. it began with me demanding an update regarding the complaint my peers and I had filed against prof. richardson-webb. in march, [our complaint was](#)

[upheld by an investigation panel](#); yet strangely enough, prof. richardson-webb continued to teach on the course as well as maintain her position as head of programme. I've now graduated and moved away to berlin, my friends are trying to deal with the extreme stress of still being on the course, others still have decided to drop out. as a collective, we are dispersed and all but exhausted by the way the rcs has been handling our complaint.

"I was hearing accounts of unexplained and excruciating delays; but I was also hearing something else beyond the mess or in the mess. I was listening to the sound of machinery: the clunk, clunk that was telling me that inefficiency is not just about the failure of things to work properly but can be how things are working. in other words, I began to realise that inefficiency was not just about errors in an operating system; errors can be an operating system ... making it hard to complain is thus not some separate realm of institutional activity from the rest of the work being done. making it hard to complain about what is being done is how institutions are doing what they do: the beep; beep of an error message is the clunk; clunk of a machine." — sara ahmed, [strategic inefficiency | feministkilljoys](#), 2018

when I was in high school, I would eat yong tau foo every other day. fishballs, surimi, brinjal, chillies, pak choi, boiled eggs, tofu puffs and more blanched in hot water then served either "dry" with a sweet-salty bean paste and chilli sauce, or in a bowl of clear broth topped with spring onions and fried shallots. I loved the springy texture of these white fishcakes, but not so much the ones that popo, my maternal grandmother, made at home. back then, I could never reconcile why her fishcakes turned out to be harder and greyer than the ones sold "outside". these fishcakes would feature in a traditionally hakka variation of yong tau foo which she made. consisting of tofu stuffed with fish paste and minced meat, then braised or deep fried, it's what I've decided to make for this special gathering. it's also the first time I've ever made it and the learning curve has been steep.

after spending the day smashing up an atlantic cod, omitting the minced pork and substituting / improvising with numerous other ingredients, S, N and I are lounging on the studio floor, a mountain of fishcake-stuffed tofu bags tossed in a mixture of fermented black bean paste, caramelized ginger, garlic and spring onions (I suppose this is the dry version) before us. the fish cake is grey. the sun is just setting. I feel a strange mix of dissatisfaction and pride.

N is an artist with a long history of being politically active in berlin and beyond. I know her through S, and our intense conversations belie the fact that we'd only met fairly recently. between mouthfuls of rice, I tell N about the student abuse at rcs, the complaint we filed and the continued inaction of the school management. I talk about how, since the very start, the institution has taken pains to remind my peers

and I that we are subject to a policy of confidentiality under the rcs complaint policy. I'm eager to hear what N has to say, especially since she has held faculty positions at various art institutions.

"but is that legally binding?", N asks

"because if it's not then you should just go public with it".

throughout the past month, I have been insisting to hugh hodgart that he respond to my emails by such-and-such date or I will write to the press. interestingly, he has met every single deadline I've set even though the content of his responses has been nothing but disappointing, only ever teeming with the emptiest of platitudes. S brings up the conversations we've been having about [sara ahmed's writings on complaint](#). listening to the both of them, a renewed assurance falls upon me.

october 2019
chalk farm, london

we are in a random pub which B recommended we visit for their "apparently excellent service". B is one of my truest friends. the last time we were in london together was in 2017 when I missed my bus back to glasgow because, just as I was leaving her flat, she suggested we play a game where we both freeze in position and do not move for thirty minutes. I sometimes tell her that she is a real artist.

earlier this year, right around the same time that the rcs complaint emerged, B shared with me a difficult situation she was facing. the insurance company she has a policy with was refusing to cover her mental health treatment. in singapore, mental illness continues to be regarded with fear and ignorance, resulting in overwhelming social stigma towards those who suffer from them. B's letters to the insurance company were either encrypted in officialese, replied to five months later, or simply ignored, disappeared into the bureaucratic void without so much as an automatic email response. as a result, B decided to write an open letter which informed others about her situation as a way to bring attention to how insurance companies in singapore can, and indeed very often do, get away with discriminating against people with mental health conditions, from depression to dementia to drug or alcohol addiction. I remember reading that letter some months ago and thinking that there might be something for me to learn from here.

B's dessert arrives. she distractedly prods the scoop of vanilla ice cream around the bowl just as the waiter returns with my miso-grilled aubergine, a tribute to the inseparable bedfellows of london cosmopolitanism and british colonialism.

"itadakimasu! you have to help me ok, this is way too much". while studying in tokyo, B worked as a waitress at a michelin guide seafood restaurant without speaking much japanese but somehow still made it work. "if I didn't understand something a customer was saying I just smiled politely and slowly retreated into the kitchen", she explained to me once.

I bite into a piece of aubergine, salty and creamy with a spark of toasted sesame. the rice is perfect too. I make a mental note of it, something so simple and delicious, something I will end up making over and over again, each and every time a striking reminder of B, her deep sense of self, her inimitable wit.

1 aubergine

2 tablespoons white or yellow miso paste

2 tablespoons mirin

1 tablespoon brown sugar

1 tablespoon sake or rice wine

1 tablespoon sesame seeds

vegetable oil

- 1. heat the oven to 220 degrees C*
- 2. cut the aubergine into thin (1cm) slices, lengthways*
- 3. in a small bowl, mix together the miso, sake and mirin together until you have a smooth paste, then add the sugar and mix again*
- 4. spread a thin layer of this paste onto one side of each aubergine slice*
- 5. liberally pour vegetable oil onto a baking tray and lay the aubergine slices onto the tray, miso side up. optional cracked pepper and/or chilli oil. another glug or two of vegetable oil, evenly poured*
- 6. place in the oven for approx. 15 minutes, or until the miso is bubbling and starting to char. optional to flip aubergine slices*
- 7. remove from the oven and top with sesame seeds*
- 8. serve immediately, with warm rice and fresh green vegetables*

november 2019
siglap, singapore

I've missed this thirty degree heat. it's two in the afternoon and I'm here for the popiah. sold at a tiny stall just a five minute walk from home, the elderly couple who run 'aunty rojak' are as sulky as I remember them to be. literally 'thin pancake' in teochew, the popiah is a fresh spring roll stuffed with finely-grated braised turnip, lettuce leaves, crushed peanuts, shredded omelette, garlic paste and sweet soy sauce. I'm still arriving. nothing has been the same since popo (my grandmother) passed in may 2018. her room in our apartment has been empty and now I've moved into it, my house an alien landscape of stacked cardboard boxes, freshly returned from storage where they sat during a renovation project my mother orchestrated a few months ago. everything feels both monumental and ordinary.

“要辣椒吗? ”, the aunty of 'aunty rojak' asks me. ya, of course. always, always chilli. I nod my head and smile. I've missed this place. '936 ltn food village' is a haphazard whirl of blaring backlit signboards (EMPRESS PLACE TEOCHEW BEEF KWAY TEOU; A HOCK LAM ST TRADITION SINCE 1921), huge vats of bubbling soup, whole roasted birds hanging from metal hooks in display windows, their seared skin glistening and dripping with fat, the faint odour of detergent rising from a freshly mopped floor, the drink aunty (a different aunty) shouting my order across the room (TEH O PENG SIU DAI!). the popiah aunty grumbles something at her husband (the popiah uncle). the drink aunty returns with my teh o peng siu dai, hokkien for iced tea with no milk and less sugar. I pay for it and drink it all at once.

last month, I posted [an open letter](#) "calling for accountability of widespread abuse of students at the royal conservatoire of scotland" on my facebook page. since then, three [news articles](#) have further broadcasted the situation. I've been receiving messages from numerous friends, rcs students and staff, expressing their solidarity, relieved that these grim truths are finally coming to light. someone who had studied on the contemporary performance practice programme and suffered similar abuse from prof. richardson-webb emailed me, thanking my friends and I for our courage; they graduated in 2004 and since then, due to the sheer trauma of their experience, has never performed or worked in the arts again.

my popiah is ready; I collect it and sit at an off-white table in the warm shade. two rolls cut into four slices each. eight slices. just as I pick up my chopsticks, my phone buzzes. I tap the messenger icon.

"I came across your petition about prof. deborah richardson webb, and it was such a relief to see others have taken her on. well done. I am a nearby neighbour who

for many years has been a victim of her bullying so it's not just at work she behaves like that. hopefully now others will believe me. thank you."

I eat my popiah. the fire from the chilli cradles my tongue. the drink aunty passes my table, screaming someone else's order across the room.

february 2020

marine terrace, singapore

I turn around and wave at S, almost as if to check that he's actually there and I'm not dreaming this. there he is, sitting in the bustle of the hawker centre. he grins and waves back. it's the first time S is in singapore and this is his first kaya toast breakfast. as his partner and local host, I'm on a personal mission to get him to try every food at its most delicious (is it good? do you like it? it's nice right??)

literally translated as 'rich' in malay, kaya to me is a food for the gods. depending on whether it's cooked with brown sugar (attributed to the hainanese) or pandan leaves (attributed to the peranakan nyonyas), kaya is a golden-brown or pale green coconut jam made from coconut milk, eggs and sugar, often eaten on toast with a generous slice of cold, hard butter. I am standing by the stall, waiting for my order, watching two women toast bread over a charcoal fire, its dry heat meeting the moist morning air. the queue snakes longer by the minute. the harried stall assistant gestures towards me and I gratefully collect my tray.

after the [accounts of student abuse at rcs](#) blew up on the news, the rcs principal commissioned an '[independent review](#)' to appraise the conservatoire's complaints handling procedure as well as the culture of the ba (hons) contemporary performance practice programme. [he pledged to "nurture" students](#) but continued to fall short of issuing a public statement of apology. right before the panel published its findings, rcs senior management confirmed that prof. richardson-webb had been suspended. looking past the moral grandstanding and flagrant disinterest of the rcs in upholding its duty of care to students, this was a positive outcome. it's now been an entire year since our complaint was filed. I'm tired, but I count my blessings; S is here (!!) sharing this plate of crispy kaya toast with me. the set I ordered includes two soft-boiled eggs and kopi o kosong (black coffee with no sugar). I watch him crack an egg open with a teaspoon.

an immaculate orange yolk wobbles out into the bowl. I drizzle dark soy sauce and puff a cloud of white pepper onto the egg puddle.

from the beginning, S has witnessed the events of the complaint unfold like an absurd, unironic sitcom. yet throughout this whole time, the life we share together has been a constant reminder to me that this complaint is but one aspect of my work. in moving towards an understanding of how to untangle myself from this situation, I recall something toni morrison said, that "*the function, the very serious function of racism, is distraction. it keeps you from doing your work. it keeps you explaining, over and over again, your reason for being*". I don't think she meant that one shouldn't stand up to racism (or any other form of structural oppression); rather, one should be aware that one has a life above and beyond responding to bigots. in a similar vein, S has been reminding me to be absolutely clear with what outcome I want from the complaint so that I know when it's been accomplished and can focus on the many other things which equally deserve my time and energy. it's now on the rcs to actually make the changes it says it wants to make.

"it's good right? do you like it?", I ask S, slightly unnerved by his silence. he takes a sip of kopi, "this is definitely one of the best breakfasts I've ever had."

this is an outcome I want. the hawker centre is getting busier and an elderly man asks if he can sit next to us. "ya, of course!", I half-sing. S and I clear some of our plates and bowls to one side, happily making room at the table.

october 2020
mitte, berlin

the sky is steel grey. I'm on my bike, pushing headfirst into a freezing gust of wind. it's one of those days. S and I slide past the french embassy, down towards brandenburger tor. it's saturday morning and we're on our way to get groceries. 'go asia' beneath potsdamer platz has become our go-to for noodles, seaweed, soya milk, chilli oils, miso paste and other such things necessary to, as far as I'm concerned, a full and happy life. I always look forward to going, but today I sense a leaden weight in the pit of my stomach. it's probably just the cold; or the fact that I haven't had breakfast; or seasonal affective disorder has come early. probably all of the above, plus the imminent destruction of the world brought about by the unholy trinity of patriarchy, colonialism and late-stage capitalism. we stop at a red light.

"are you ok?", S asks.

"mm ...", I mumble behind my scarf.

we hike our bikes onto the pavement. "maybe we should eat something first", S responds intuitively, "we could go to ishin?"

I immediately agree. ishin is the japanese canteen-style joint S introduced me to shortly after we first met. coasting through virtually-empty streets, we arrive at our table in ten minutes. despite fresh fears of a coronavirus 'second wave', the place is relatively busy. I clasp my hands around a steaming cup of green tea, thawing my icy fingers as I make a cursory attempt to articulate what I'm feeling to S. he tells me that there's actually a german word which describes the very experience I'm having — "weilschmerz". apparently, it expresses a deep sadness about life, arising from an acute awareness of evil and suffering in the world.

following the [initial review findings](#) in february 2020, the rcs published an ['independent review action update plan'](#) in july 2020. this document presented confirmation that, amongst other things, the rcs has formally dismissed prof. richardson-webb. clearly, this was huge. at a similar time, I was contacted by J who was about to start her first year on the cpp programme. she had learnt of the complaint through social media channels and was deeply concerned with how, despite having removed prof. richardson-webb, the rcs had yet to acknowledge the deep-rooted structural racism within its walls. the two of us collaboratively drafted an ['open letter on building an anti-racist rcs'](#), which we collected signatures for through an online campaign. this was published in late-august 2020; another [news article](#) later and after some scrambling, the rcs responded with the ['rcs anti-racism action plan'](#), published as a working document in september 2020. a welcome gesture; I hope J and future generations of students will be safer than we were. as the dust settled, it became clear to me that this was the last action I would take. my personal journey with this complaint had come to a close.

our food is here! salmon rice-soup for me and ume rice-soup for S. yay! I thank S for suggesting we eat, for his flexibility, for introducing a wonderful new word to me. I'm so grateful for him. slurping a spoonful of warm broth and oily fish, I feel each drop (each msg crystal) restore my soul from the inside out.

"I was going to die, if not sooner then later, whether or not I had ever spoken myself. my silences had not protected me. your silence will not protect you. but for every real word spoken, for every attempt I had ever made to speak those truths for which I am still seeking, I had made contact with other women while we examined the words to fit a world in which we all believed, bridging our differences. and it was the concern and caring of all those women which gave me strength and enabled me to scrutinize the essentials of my living." — audre lorde, the transformation of silence into language and action, 1977