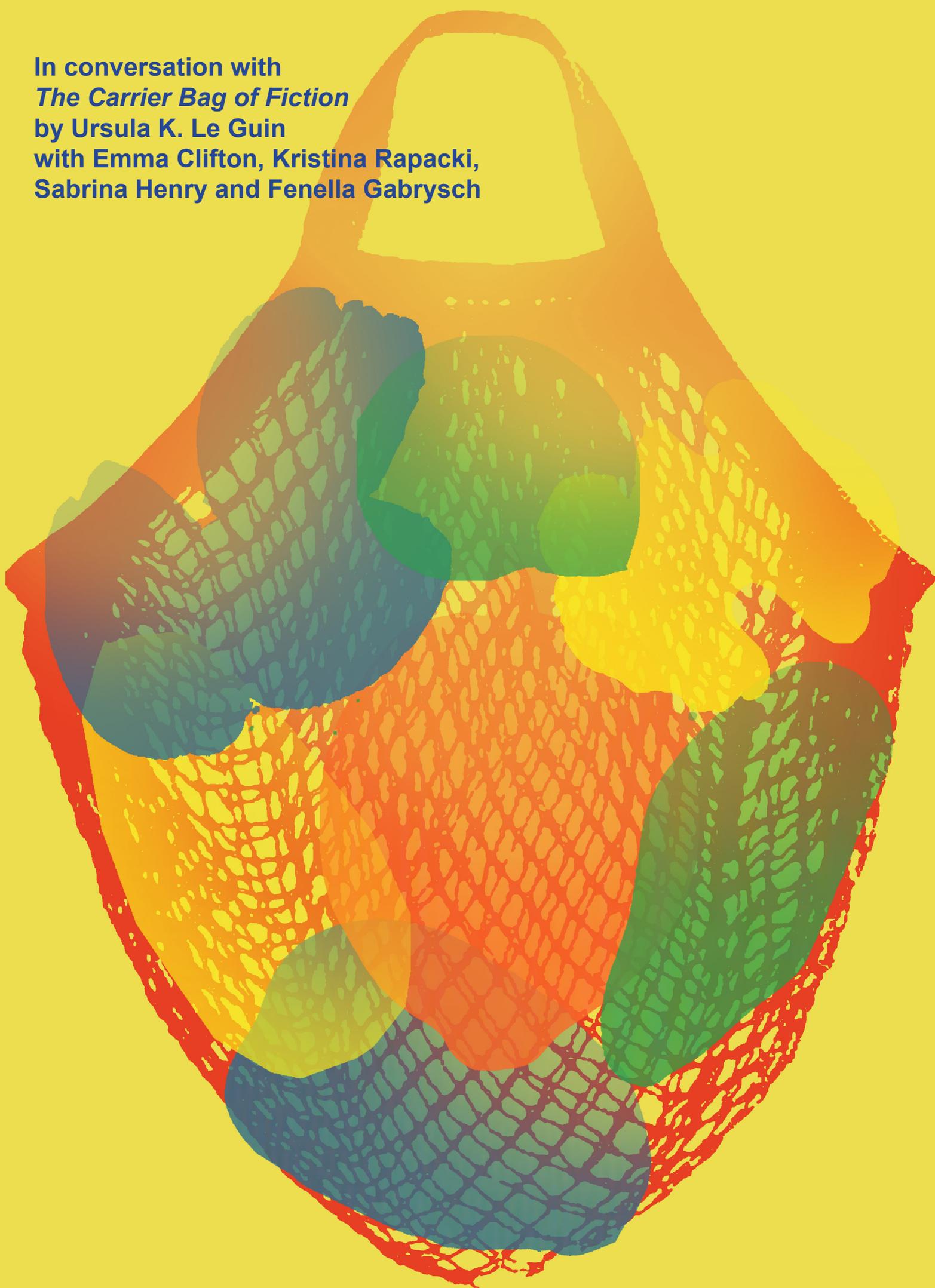


In conversation with
The Carrier Bag of Fiction
by Ursula K. Le Guin
with Emma Clifton, Kristina Rapacki,
Sabrina Henry and Fenella Gabrysch



EMMA CLIFTON:

Okay Hello Kristina, Sabrina and Fenella! Thank you to Polly at Brighton CCA for encouraging me to respond to Ursula K. Le Guin's essay 'The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction'. In the spirit of the text I wanted to respond with more than a singular voice. I'm joined in the chat with Kristina Rapacki, Sabrina Henry and Fenella Gabrysch.

Would you guys mind introducing yourselves?

KRISTINA RAPACKI:

Sure, thank you Emma for inviting us to take part. I'm Kristina. I'm deputy editor of a magazine called Disegno, which looks at design, architecture, and tech through a critical lens. I write for the journal too – mainly long-form features, on a variety of topics. I'm interested in experimental non-fiction

May 1, 2:22 PM

And where are you writing to us from today?

I'm in lockdown London, at the end of my second week on furlough. Feeling a little isolated at the moment, like many of us, I suspect So it's especially nice to connect!

May 1, 2:24 PM

It does make a bit of a change from a zoom call which I am enjoying.

What about you Sabrina?

May 1, 2:26 PM

SABRINA HENRY:

Im writing from Dumfries, a smallish town in the Scottish Borders, I arrived back here a few days before the country got locked down. Its actually a beautiful place to be isolated. Many things coming up after a year in Glasgow not least the difficulty of feeling any inclination whatsoever to get out of bed everyday... I'm in maybe week 3 or 4 of furlough, I've genuinely lost count, but feeling very lucky to be furloughed tbh. I work as an assistant curator at CCA Glasgow. When you invited me to be a part of this Emma, I'd just listened to someone reading the text allowed not 3/4 days before so seemed strange how it came up I've not read much Ursula Le Guin, only this and A Non Euclidian View of California... sometime late last summer, and it gave me a really beautiful and optimistic sense against where I felt I was. Maybe thats enough about me! Lol

That's great. I was so surprised by the coincidence and luck of you having encountered the text independently from this.

And Fenella?

May 1, 2:31 PM



FENELLA GABRYSCH:

hey everyone, i'm currently writing from a tiny coastal village in the Scottish Highlands, about 40 mins south of Wick- I moved here back in Oct last year to start working on a youth programme for Timespan. I am also currently working for the local community gardens growing fresh veg for the village (which is currently quite hard to get hold of if you don't drive...) this is actually the first text that I have read by Ursula Le Guin, but it resonates so strongly for me in a practical sense (i spend so much of my day carrying different things between places- particularly seeds, soil and water) but in many other ways to and v grateful for sabrina sending this over the other day

i think thats me!

Great!

May 1, 2:39 PM

And yourself Emma?



And I'm Emma. I'm a Glasgow-based Costume Designer/Maker and Senior Teaching Fellow at the University of Edinburgh. My areas of interest include ritual costume, culture of clothing and gender. I'm currently in my ground floor flat in lockdown and can hear the old man that lives above me shouting at this friend on his phone. It seems that his friend it still going out and about and my upstairs neighbour is explaining how not sensible that is which quite a lot of swearing.

May 1, 2:42 PM

Hahahaha

Hah!

Getting on to the text. What were some of the things that jumped out to you?

For me, the idea of a 15-hour work week! With leisure time, creative time, time for health. Not taking/making more than we need. How this lockdown could be a reset button for this way of working?

i think the thing that i thought about for a long time after was the idea of a holder/recipient/ carrier

How the stories we read affect how we think of ourselves in terms of narrative. As a woman I'm sometimes trying to think of myself through the eyes of the male protagonist as a love interest.

I like how flexible that metaphor of the receptacle or carrier bag is – from the earliest cultural artefact, to the home, a sling, a novel

May 1, 2:46 PM



"The mammoth hunters spectacularly occupy the cave wall and the mind"

"15 hours a week for subsistence leaves a lot of time for other things..."

"The first cultural device was probably a recipient" "...with or before the tool that forces energy outward we made the tool that brings energy home."

"That's right they said, what you are is a woman. Possibly not human at all, certainly defective. Now be quiet while we go on telling the story of the Ascent of Man the Hero."

"It is the story that hid my humanity from me"

"Cannot be characterised as either conflict or as harmony, since its purpose is neither resolution nor stasis but continuing process"

"Fiction is a way of trying to describe what is...going on, what people actually do and feel, how people relate to everything else in this cast sack....this womb of things to be and tomb of things that were..."

Male protagonists

and learning empathy. I was thinking about how if you're not

represented in literature/films etc you have to do a bit of a leap to empathise with the main character. In

order to get the most out of the story. So people who are less represented have to practice empathy

for people less like themselves whereas people who are represented more closely

have to stretch their empathy less.

and

maybe thinking a lot

about that in relation holding or carrying as more

of a bodily experience than a human experience- in the way that stories are

carried by multiple bodies (of land/ sea/ person/plant) and shared between

bodies- and between times

Women as defective men.

How PPE is made with the man's measurements

as the norm and so can put female workers into danger due to

ill-fit.

May 1, 2:50 PM

Also, the Hero as having an imperialist nature

The Hero narrative gets imposed on things

Multiple heroes. Calling NHS workers heroes. As like a reverse scapegoat.

When thinking about this bag I started to think

about whats in the bag, if im the carrier

Is there a possibility I can get into the bag....?

Can I feel with the things in the bag?

And what if the bag dissolves as a carrier bag has a sense of the temporary?

Can we hold each other enough that we wouldn't need a container anymore?

Multiple heroes.

A story with many heroes. Marvel Avengers. Hero overkill.

Trying to have multiple bests. Instead of complex relationships taking into consideration gender, race, sexuality etc

What are we afraid of when we tell stories of Heroes?

It seems like the Hero narrative is often anathema to complexity, to ambivalence, to ambiguity

May 1, 2:53 PM

Interconnected characters

in a narrative in a web rather than as

satellites around the main character. People

other than yourself are real people.

Is it worth taking stock of some of these thoughts? I mean this in the context of this conversation

Sorry, I didn't mean to stop the flow!

Yes i'm scrolling through now.

Please, if anyone wants to jump in on anything totally go ahead.

Let's go into some more detail on a few of the points made. Which btw

are amazing. It's so nice to see what other people think. I was thinking there

would be a lot of overlap but I think everyone comes at it from their own background.

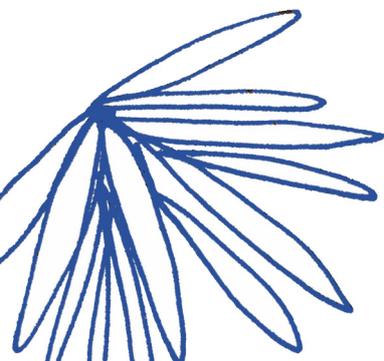
I think i think about the

essay specifically in the sense of stories I can tell myself,

we can tell ourselves that don't need to be sanctioned outside of my mind

In a sense it reminds me that I can create my own truths, which is of course as dangerous as it is liberating

But what is not dangerous really in this existence that doesn't warrant a new way of doing, being, seeing and telling



Knowing that you can create your own truths/narratives feels very liberating. I think that as much as I try to subvert and create my own narrative (specifically about men/women) I find it hard to shake off the stuff that got in there early.

Yes

I thought a lot about that – I sometimes employ linear narrative in my writing and while I've never gone in for, you know, full-on hero worship, I wonder what is so comforting/appealing about falling into familiar narrative structures

'But what is not dangerous really in this existence that doesn't warrant a new way of doing, being, seeing and telling' What do you think is in place that stops the new ways? I suppose any change/energy to change tracks is so much harder than just continuing the same way.

it makes me think of what you mentioned before sabrina "Can we hold each other enough that we wouldnt need a container anymore"

Kristina, there's quite a lot of pleasure in identifying with the hero too I find. The idea that you're special?

It makes me think of what you mentioned before sabrina "Can we hold each other enough that we wouldnt need a container anymore" ' That's lovely. What could that look like?



Yes, I think that maybe one of the things that's comforting about Hero is that we don't have to face complexity, empathise with others, handle ambivalence, and all these things which are actually quite hard work

i guess im thinking alot about what does it mean to hold/ be held

Im not sure yet... but I think it would need to start with relating to everything you put inside the container beyond the fact you put it inside there

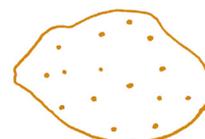
I like that idea a lot.

It sounds like a form of care

somehow even within how liberating the text feels, it got me to wondering how you can create a balance when you are the collector and other things are in the container... maybe the skill comes in creating a balance...

like understanding subjectivities that are far beyond your own... like the potato...

Haha, yes! I love that



Fenella, the word hold can be so tender. Especially now, with the distance.

What you're saying here also makes me think about what's being put in the bag, and what's being left out

May 1, 3:12 PM

If you think of the carrier bag as a text, then you're including some things (facts, voices, perspectives) and inevitably leaving others out
So there's a kind of ... editorialisation that happens with the carrier bag too

With the hero there's one thing on a pedestal and everything else is left out but with a container with some things in it the things that are left out seem easier to point at/define.

but i also feel that maybe the two interact...

in what way Fenella?

maybe because things are never in or out of the bag (okay yes we select what goes in the bag at a given moment) but it doesn't prevent them from being in existence

Truth

"It is the story that hid my humanity from me"



for example if in my bag i placed a seed with soil and water, they will form their own existence and interaction within the bag, the seed may flower and create its own seeds again, and the holder no longer chooses what is in the bag, because the bag has transformed again

magic :))))))

Nice!

and so eliminates temporality

mhmmm

but it makes me think about the bag and maybe that to say that it describes human existence limits its ability to embody multiple body experiences

I suppose within fiction the writer controls to some extent how things go but in nature and maybe life the individual elements have their own agency and you could be surprised further than you could have imagined an outcome to be. Good and bad.

May 1, 3:23 PM

Well yes, but the things you put in the bag as a writer can also go out and have a life of their own

'and maybe thinking a lot about that in relation holding or carrying as more of a bodily experience than a human experience- in the way that stories are carried by multiple bodies (of land/ sea/ person/plant) and shared between bodies- and between times' I like the idea of experience being in a bag that you can share and pass on. There's something giving and good about that.

Kristina, do you think people like these stories about individuals more because they are less complex and easier to understand?

That it takes energy to think about many people?

Yes, I think it does require some emotional work, but perhaps the rewards are greater when you do?

On Newsnight this week, Nicki Credland, who is the chairwoman of British Association of Critical Care Nurses, said that it was 'unhelpful' and 'unsettling' to be called a hero

And in many ways, declaring someone a hero, however well-meant, could work to erase their real, human, needs

Hero leaves no space for complexity at all does it? Also with what's going on now it feels like giving someone a medal but nothing else.

Just in response to your question there, Emma, I meant to make the point that the real complexity of someone's situation can be a lot harder to attend to/grasp/get your head around, than simply calling them a hero. it is comforting to call someone a hero

Exactly ... Hasn't a medal even been discussed?

I saw something about a badge? A little enamel pin.

May 1, 3:28 PM

I think I would rather have the piece of mind I wasn't being put in danger when other people are being protected.

I think some mental health charities are also beginning to warn against this kind of rhetoric – badges, heroes, angels – because it can make those wanting to raise concerns about their own safety feel "cowardly" which is awful

It reminds me a little of how soldiers in the first world war might have been described as heroes. Maybe helps to alleviate the guilt of people who put them there. Yes totally. NHS workers called on to be more than human as part of their job.

Yeah I think you're right about the militaristic overtones of the current rhetoric, and Le Guin also seems to locate heroic narratives very clearly within a violent original context (i.e. mammoth-slaying!)

I loved what she said about women not being loyal to civilization. That rang true to me. I don't really want to be part of a violent/colonial/taking world. But then I sometimes worry that if you don't make a stand against it or engage with it it will just go on being that way unconcerned about the lives of women. And then again I feel like we are relegated to the margins of the story as it goes on in the world.

May 1, 3:45 PM

Yeah. I suppose the Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction is one way of giving us all a mental image/metaphor/template of what a different kind of story could look like

And, as was mentioned, a reminder that we can create our own truths But what if the gatekeepers who control the reach those stories get to have are all still totally enamoured with the Hero narrative?

It feels like the people who want to be heroes in an ego way get to be in charge of other people. People who can disregard the complex community and think singularly. It would be incredible if we could think more communally, and band together to get things done. I've seen quite alot of chatter about how we will have to rethink how society works after this. But I'm not sure how hopeful I am. What do you think?





We are doing this discussion over two days and sadly Fenella won't be able to join us for part two. But to continue where we left off, Sabrina, Kristina are there any points made that you'd like to discuss further here? Prior to our break we were talking about how the word Hero is used/ Heroic narratives/ violence.

Yeah we talked about Hero narratives in journalism, in particular in relation to the current pandemic

Maybe a way of segueing into thinking about how the Carrier Bag Theory could be helpful in culture going forward, we can talk a little about how we felt it resonated with our own professions? Obviously we're not defined by our jobs, but it struck me that a Carrier Bag Theory of Curating, for instance, could really interesting to explore Here in London, the big museums often go for monographic shows, seemingly thinking they're most reliable as blockbusters Centering on one individual, their supposed progression, etc. etc. – it's a Hero narrative for sure How might a different type of curating look?

That's really interesting. Sabrina, how do you think it effects your practice? Is is a theory that you already explore within curation? Also after it would be great to hear about how you think the theory could be applied or is already applied to journalism, Kristina?

I think this works beautifully as a model of curating, especially if you think of curating more of the process of coming together to explore an idea In practical terms, I think this looks like naming sources and references Speaking outside of your profession to keep what your framing in relation outside of art so that art expands and public expands / the two spheres merge

I think its also about not looking for answers but being more process driven in the work What do you we learn from the process of bringing works together as artist and curator but also as writer, illustrator, costume designer, community worker - as in large part the themes being explored, or so I have found recently, very much relate to each other and its important to keep them in relation as much as possible for example thinking about community gardening, seeds, cotton, dyes through to the process of constructing a costume

Its a very linear timeline, but it also overlaps in loops

That's such a beautiful way of seeing it Does that resonate ith you Emma?



Thinking back
to the source like that and
the way that for example fabric
doesn't just appear from nowhere.

That it's touched many hands and how have
those people been treated and how ultimately it's
been **grown and who grew it**. Sort of expanding your
understanding wider and further back about where a product
has come from. Ignorance isn't really an excuse now. You should
be thinking about everything and everyone and trying to make good,
ethical decisions as much as possible. Which I totally understand
is the harder route. The route where you have to consider many
people, and all the decisions along the way. You can't just
disregard everything that doesn't benefit you directly.
I think that relates to the hero vs collective narrative. It's
harder and maybe less exciting to have to think/consider
everyone and **their narrative** but ultimately it feels
kinder and more human.



May 3, 12:19 PM

Im not sure its less exciting

I think it's more exciting!



i think when
you think against
a singular narrative
not only do you come into
relation in places and with
things you didn't consider
you'd be in relation too
but somehow, the potential
of source becomes
infinite!

Yes, it shouldn't be less
exciting. For sure. I think just thinking maybe how I'm imagining other
people viewing the story. But then why am I having to do that. I am feeling more conscious and sick of stories/
processes where I can sort of pin point now who's views are not being explored.

And I suppose that applies not only to the material
reality of costume/dress, but also the cultural or symbolic dimension of it. Where
and how did certain cuts, emblems, shapes emerge? Within **whose communities?** How
would they have been understood and so on?

to both your comments - exactly!

That's true. Actually giving
recognition to the source of the cut/shapes/patterns/labour going in to
embroidery. How different places and cultures have influenced things in an ongoing process not just saying it
manifests as soon as it becomes relevant for you/the trend in your country or time.
How have you been thinking about it in relation to journalism?

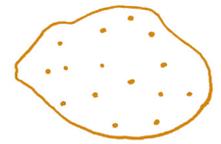
Hmm, reading the text it really made me want to think about a **Carrier Bag Theory of Non-Fiction**

ha, i wondered that too!

Perfect.

May 3, 12:26 PM

I think we've already seen how, in certain types of news reporting, it's easy to slide into the Hero narrative – it's considered rousing or whatever



A Carrier Bag Theory of Non-Fiction, I think, looks more like a text that provides fact, voices, contextual information

And lets the reader do the opining

Let's the reader make up their own mind as to how the things presented relate to each other

I think it requires more space – as in, a longer word count

May 3, 12:29 PM

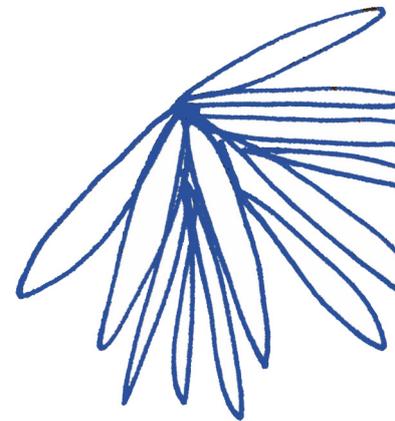
And perhaps a reader who is sympathetic to that type of writing

That's nice in that the reader must bring their own view to it to and they have to be active in engaging with the piece. Rather than being told a view.

It sort of feels the opposite to those kind of click-bait things I feel like I see all the time.

Yeah, I think that's what the Hero narrative does – it's not only individualistic, it sets up a good-and-bad dichotomy
Hero = good
No room for complexity

"no room for complexity"
very true



I think that adhering to a Carrier Bag Theory is easier said than done though! Like, for example, when I write a feature, I will interview as widely as I can, sometimes hour-long conversations with each interviewee
Only a handful of quotes actually end up in the piece
That's why I was going on, earlier, about what goes in the carrier bag and what gets left out
Obviously, I can't put everything in – so what are the principles that should inform what I pick?
These are some of the things I was already thinking a lot about in my work
But reading Le Guin's text really gave me a helpful analogy to think about the choices I make

Im guessing when you approach the article there are usually different ways to tell the story and different stories you could tell... does it then become about which story you choose this time?
but maybe to never imagine the story as finished or the carrier bag as full
do you remember sac magique on Tots TV?
infinite!

Ha! That's a really good way of thinking about it!

May 3, 12:37 PM

I remember the theme tune with absolute clarity but I'm less good on the bag. But I love that idea of know that things aren't finished. Not forcing a streamlining to create a standard structure story arc. With ficton or non-fiction or within an exhibition.

Or a kind of Mary Poppins bag which is endlessly capacious

As part of the programme at Brighton CCA they are using

The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction to look at social narratives and the models of organisation which reflect them. As they move through the programme they are beginning to look to the future and how alternative understandings of social narrative could affect change.

Coming out of this specific global situation how do you think a more

Carrier Bag approach could make change?

Or how could we encourage this approach?

Or implement it in our own lives?

I think it might be in the spirit of the text for each and every reader to think, for themselves, how best to implement it in their work – I would hesitate to say “this is how it should be used/applied/implemented”
I wish the text was more widely known and read, I suppose
In that sense Brighton CCA is already doing great work in making it so visible!

It's so good!

May 3, 12:41 PM

When reflecting on the text this week, I listened to this... well started to at least... I still have an hour to go!

Oh wow, what a panel!

But something that I thought interesting was this quote by Gayatri Spivak...
“One of the reasons why I thought planet though was useful...was because it could move from animism to the white mythology of post rational science as a limit to us (humans) without being a designated limit.... it travels....”

Reading it really made me feel something on quite a gut level. About how I individually feel about being excluded from certain types of narratives but also how I would like to move towards being.

This also made me think of a text shared with me by artist Emilia Beatriz - The Historian as Curandera by Aurora Levins Morales

Curandera, as in a healer?
(Just googled it!)

which speaks of a specific methodology behind history making, or retelling history that requires the imagination and a specific focus or direction in order to remake/retell histories (human and non) that have frequently been erased by others

That's a beautiful idea and feels so much different from that 'the winner writes history' idea

May 3, 12:45 PM

I think there can rarely be a 'right' way of doing it, and we will likely 'fail' multiple ways in the process, but if the intention is to widen the scope, lessen or change the hero, reprioritise narratives etc... then that is how we must begin in the story telling...

and in that way, I'm not sure it matters whether it is fiction or non-fiction as the retelling, and finding and gathering of these stories requires a lot of imagination

And a reexamining of what we understand as 'truth'

Totally!

I want to do a big line of thumbs up and A-OK emojis but I'm on my laptop.

Hahahaha

I miss laughing with people in person :))))

So much!



Just before we wrap up. I wanted to pop in a link for a video I watched during my research. Along with Q and As with [Ursula Le Guin](#), who by the way seems absolutely charming and fantastic and I'm so sad I've been missing the boat on her for so long, [I watched this lecture](#)

May 3, 12:50 PM

Amazing, thank you!
Before we go
Do you think Kristina, that its possible to write news in this way?

Hmm. I think it's difficult with the current media climate we have in this country. Also, the ways in which we consume news – most get their news through social media, and the infinite scroll really favours clickbaity journalism. News organisations know that clicks = ££, so it's a vicious circle. The platforms on which we consume news begin to shape the content

However,
I am heartened by the incredible rise in popularity of other longform formats such as podcasts
Which resists the clickbaity snippification of news journalism

I think [Carrier Bag-style writing](#) – whether fiction or non-fiction does require a little more space – a longer podcast episode, a slightly longer read
But we should take that space
[We shouldn't be afraid to take up space](#)

Fully agree

Sabrina, you had a great idea about how to open up and continue this discussion after we stop?

Indeed!

I wondered how we could open this conversation up, maybe to continue from ours with others to further expand and continue thinking about how we can intergrate the text into the every day
I notice or maybe feel that the limit to us right now feels like money/funding as though this leads the decision making...
perhaps im mistaken but i certainly feel that when wondering why we cant just X, y, Z...
so that could be something for us to think on privately as well....

Oh yes
If those who hold the purse strings are still enamoured with the [Hero narrative](#) ...
It just makes things endlessly difficult

and maybe we need re-evaluate our thinking too... which will be slow,
but is it possible to reposition our view on this
which might help liberate us to some extent from the restrictions on how
[we speak, why, for whom, etc](#)

Excellent. Okay. Well I'm going to call an end to our current discussion. We've managed to look at some really interesting ideas thrown up by the text. It's amazing to see how much there was to potentially explore especially when you are including [several viewpoints and areas of interest.](#)

May 3, 1:06 PM

Thank you so much Emma for organising, and for inviting us
I have so many references and things I want to look up now having heard everyone's thoughts

yes thank you so much Emma! So nice to be able to think and talk with you both
Me too!

There's so much more that can be discussed and looked into and so many more possible viewpoints on the text and we really encourage you to continue the discussion. We want to include everyone in the [Carrier Bag](#).
THANK YOU!!!!!!!!!!



After the discussion we continued to e-mail and Fenella wrote the following:

Thanks so much for the kind words. It's been really comforting to read through the rest of the transcript this morning, as it really resonates with a lot of thoughts that I was having yesterday morning in the context of my friend passing. I went into the community garden to move some turf that I had been digging last week and whilst I was carrying all the turfs, you all kind of popped into my mind. So I thought I would share a little contribution- even though I couldn't be present yesterday!

I was thinking a lot about my friend passing and feeling very detached from the community which we both co-existed within. Maybe I was finding it hard to not be with other people to come together at the time of another's passing. I think this is maybe the first time in my life that I have been humanly alone in grieving.

And then I guess it got me thinking a little about some of the discussion from Friday, and that to put something in the bag, would be to potentially attempt to isolate it. What we carry with us, either story, soil or seed, the things we place in the container, can never act in isolation. Maybe the bag is a membrane, breathable, able to interact with other forms of existence.

I guess I was kind of thinking about being alone, in a geographical sense does not necessarily mean that I am alone in my existence, and therefore not alone in grieving. It reminded me of something I read in the Skinny in an interview with Emilia Beatriz:

'I'm not a scientist... My readings of physics are messy and poetic. But from what I understand, classical physics – including Einstein's thoughts – are based on the idea that two different particles are governed by 'locality'. So, if I'm over here and you're over there, first of all, we can't affect each other at a distance, and secondly, we're separate, individual things

"Quantum physics is disproving one or both of those theories, and scientists at Glasgow University managed to take a picture of this! [The result are] these beautiful sparkly images showing simultaneous 'entangled' action at a distance... They're using this to prove what we already know from our bodies and from the land, especially in diasporic contexts – that matter affects matter even when it's no longer touching."

and then reading through the transcript this morning, it reminded me of something that you mentioned Sabrina:" i think when you think aghainst a singular narrative not only do you come into relation in places and with things you didn't consider youd be in relation too but somehow, the potential of source becomes infinite!

