

A LABOUR OF LABOUR

WORK & OTHER UGLY FEELINGS IN THE QUEER CANTONESE DIASPORA

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ABSTRACT

From the nineteenth century onwards, the conditions of economic and political survival for Cantonese migrants were tied to their labour. Their citizenship was conditional upon assimilationist respectability politics of patriotism, “hard work,” and normative white middle-class femininity, masculinity and sexuality. Hence, queerness and failure (or queerness as failure) in the Cantonese diaspora inherently threaten hegemonic power structures. My arts-informed research project uses textile installation to question the stoicism of assimilationist imperatives, by holding space for personal & intergenerational failure and cultural loss. As an expansion upon (and critique of) liberal multiculturalism, it seeks to deromanticize Cantonese diasporic experiences and destabilize linear narratives of the self through an autotheoretical approach. By negotiating a refusal of legibility and acknowledging what Sianne Ngai calls *ugly feelings*, it problematizes labour as the longing for—and futility of—work within Cantonese diaspora, impacted by tradition, family, and queerness.

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DIS/CLAIMERS

I am queering this thesis.

Queering is a method to examine and embrace non-normativity through critique and decompartmentalization. Although the components of research-creation and thesis writing are seen as separate, I would like to consider this thesis (like my other artwork) as it folds itself into the autobiographical and autotheoretical parts of my text-based practice as a queer person: intimate, self-reflexive, and self-critical. In queering this thesis, I hope to challenge the boundaries of academic propriety and accessibility by writing in a language and ambivalence that feels more honest to me.

I am Cantonese.

Identifying as Cantonese is an intentional choice. When it comes to grounding one's positionality, specificity acknowledges the limits of my knowledge and experiences. By prioritizing *Cantonese* over terms such as *Asian*, *East-Asian*, *people of colour*, or *marginalized people*, my research and outcomes can present ideas that minimize overgeneralizations.

As a language, Cantonese is not tied to a geography. It is inherently diasporic, travelling with its people across oceans. Given the importance of language in my work, Cantonese denotes an ethnic group separate from Chinese nationalism and Mandarin hegemony. It also acknowledges the complex reality of my family's multiple generations of migration to Vietnam before coming to so-called Canada.

From a historical perspective, the majority of second generation Chinese-Canadians such as myself are Cantonese because they were the coastal populations near Hong Kong when it was still a British colony, one of the only ports from which migrants and refugees could leave to other British territories. The term thus carries historical significance and implies a specific experience under twentieth-century imperialism, globalization, and migration.

I am second-generation.

Each generation of migrant families faces unique trials, often causing cultural and linguistic rifts between them. I lost my language at the age of eleven and am dubiously regaining it in my twenties.

I do not have a *pinyin* keyboard downloaded, but I know that if I use Google Translate, I can find each of the three characters in my name by searching for translations of *remainder* for 余, *commitment* for 承, and *good* for 佳. I spent many hours debating the merits of including it on thesis' my cover page (as I do with many documents).

I am gender queer.

My pronouns are they/them.

I am francophone.

In the first few drafts of my thesis proposal, I had stated that my text-based artwork would involve three languages: Cantonese, English and French. Growing up in Montreal and going through the first seventeen years of my formal education in a formerly-Catholic French school, I was often reminded of language inspectors and policies, mandating the use of *bonjour* before *hi*. I assumed that such a large part of my life's experience would effortlessly find its way into my practice. However, my primary advisor, Soyang, remarked upon its absence in my current work.

In Quebec, the term *francophone* designates someone whose first language is French. Outside of the province, the word becomes looser, signifying someone who simply speaks French fluently. The term's first meaning—which doesn't apply to me—was most impressed upon me in my formative years, in census forms and class divisions that would define my social circles. It was not until I moved to Ontario that I allowed *francophone* to be one of my identifiers, a gesture not done out of pride or appreciation for the language, but (among other reasons) out of spite for all those who have looked at me with skepticism, thinking that a *francophone Asian* is an oxymoron. Hence, it is a reluctant political stance, one that also has deep roots in my family's experience with French colonial systems in Vietnam.

I use these multiple labels to situate myself, but equally to let my experiences seep into other labels, complicating them beyond mainstream understandings. Their respective stories testify to the ways in which certain violences are not coincidences.

INTRODUCTION: DIASPORA AS A MEASUREMENT OF DISTANCE

I was told that my grandmother was born in a bomb shelter (hiding from the Japanese), and that my mother was nearly born in one as well (hiding from the Americans). And I was also told that most people from my father's coastal village of Toisan all escaped to foreign countries to evade a counter-assassination by the king at the time. What time? He didn't specify. None of these are verifiable, nor citable, though to a certain degree, they give insights into the place of personal narratives within history. My work is a bit like that.

Marianne Hirsch, a professor of comparative literature and memory studies, coined the term *postmemory* as "the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they "remember" only by means of the stories, images, and behaviours among which they grew up."¹ Documenting an event can come in archival material, but equally in the traces left of relationships affected by the event. Stories from the perspective of a second generation have the capacity to be transformative reinterpretations or additions to the "fact" of historical reality. They say less about the original traumatic event, and more about how it still haunts us, in places where we might not have expected.

Hirsch's case studies into the descendants of Holocaust survivors described experiences that were "transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right."² On the other hand, in efforts to assimilate and possibly

¹ Marianne Hirsch. 2013. "The Generation of Postmemory." In *On Writing with Photography*: 206.

² Idem.

forget, my family did not speak of their experiences, and joined a generation of migrant silence. My work is also like these feelings without stories.

Although there is a lack of personal narratives in my repertoire, there are well documented accounts from ethnographers, historians, and critical race theorists of Asian-Canadian studies. For the sake of giving a larger context to my thesis, the following is the usual (academic) breakdown of the history of the Cantonese diaspora in North America:

During the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) from 1881 to 1885, government officials decided to bring in Southern Chinese labourers to cheapen their costs of production. After completing their precarious work on the CPR, the 1885 head tax was put in place to discourage the continued migration of Chinese labourers to Canada, starting at \$50 and then increasing to \$500 over a thirty-eight-year period.³ The capitalist need for cheap labour competed with the objective of keeping a white supremacist settler state. Their economic value would become the justification for their belonging in Canada later in the century, overcoming the portrait of 'aliens' incompatible with citizenship.

The transnational promulgation of European bodies to Canada was key in the early settler-colonial project. However, in 1967, the government abolished the discriminatory laws that would favour white settlers in the immigration system. Given that ethnicity was no longer legally a point of admission into the country, the government had to turn towards assimilating settlers of colour into the continuation of Canadian colonialism. The missing social, cultural and financial capital made it easier to enforce the oppressive rule of the Head Tax, and acquiring that capital became the new goal for Chinese-Canadians. At the same time, the national narrative was ready to embrace this 'model minority.'

Despite the overt and systemic discrimination against them, the changing global political climate of the Cold War would translate into social capital. In her book *The Colour of Success*, historian Ellen D. Wu details the transition of East-Asians in North America from "liability to asset."⁴ Taking in refugees from Communist countries (like China) served the USA and Canada's international image, and repositioned American imperialism as a benevolent force in the world. The better treatment of East-Asians was mirrored in their countries' economic rise in the Asia-Pacific region. Chinese-Canadians gained eligibility for citizenship (and thus the right to participate in elections and civic life) in 1947. Their promotion to first-class citizens repeats the differing racializations based on geopolitical affiliations again, but this time as a wedge group between white settlers, Indigenous people, and Black Canadians.

Among the assimilationist imperatives, Chinese-Canadians were "conscripted into the manufacture of a certain narrative of national racial progress premised on the distinction

³ Patricia E. Roy. 2013. "Images and Immigration: China and Canada." *Journal Of American-East Asian Relations* 20, no. 2: (2013), 121.

⁴ Ellen D. Wu. 2013. *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority*. US: Princeton University Press, 4.

between 'good' and 'bad' minorities."⁵ This was mutually upheld by media representation and the community's self-orientalized portrait of itself as quiet, harmonious and hard-working Confucian conservatism. The stereotype of the 'model minority' was used by the Canadian government to profess its successful liberal multiculturalism as its new national mythology, triumphing over its history of violent marginalization. Weaponized as a stereotypical success story against themselves (as well as against other minorities), their newfound citizenship was conditional upon assimilationist respectability politics of patriotism, neoliberalism, "hard work," and normative white middle-class femininity, masculinity and sexuality.⁶ Hence, Asian-American scholars Laura Kina and Jan Christian Bernabe suggest that queerness and failure (or queerness as failure) for Asian diasporas are inherently threatening to hegemonic power structures.⁷

However, the respectability politics of sexuality for feminine-presenting East-Asian bodies are shaped by the intersectionality of their racialization in twentieth-century relations. Asian-American writer Sunny Woan describes their interaction as *White Sexual Imperialism*.⁸ The previous century of military occupation in the Asia-Pacific region by American and European forces during the Philippine-American War, the Allied Occupation of Japan, the Vietnam War and the Korean War, has been defined by the hyper-sexuality and the hyper-heterosexuality of mostly white male soldiers meeting and/or abusing Asian women. These global conflicts became the foundations for their fetishization of as subservient, exotic, and sexually available. Contending with both White Sexual Imperialism and the assimilation towards white femininity, the pressure gradually becomes internalized by its subjects.

My arts-informed research project takes these conditions of labour, silence and assimilation within the queer Cantonese-Canadian diaspora as a starting point for an investigation into their effects and potential downfalls. My practice currently centers hand embroidery and textile installation, as tactile and intimate materials, to question the stoicism of assimilationist imperatives. As an expansion upon (and critique of) liberal multiculturalism, my practice seeks to deromanticize Cantonese diasporic experiences, and destabilize linear narratives of culture, intergenerational learning and healing, in order to reveal the seldom uttered shame and anxieties within queer communities of colour as urgent conversations.

Through a self-reflexive and autoethnographic approach, I examine the ambiguous longing of diaspora through fragments of my life, recontextualized as text-based installations. They take phrases and conversations often reserved for intimate and familial settings, and reformat them to emphasize what is often swept under the rug. In such a practice, the

⁵ Ellen D. Wu. 2013. *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority*. US: Princeton University Press, 3.

⁶ Ibid, 5.

⁷ Laura Kina and Jan Christian Bernabe. 2017. *Queering Contemporary Asian American Art*. University of Washington Press, 5.

⁸ Sunny Woan. 2008. "White Sexual Imperialism: A Theory of Asian Feminist Jurisprudence," 14 *Wash. & Lee J. Civ. Rts. & Soc. Just.*, 275.

artist can be both the researcher and the object of study. The artwork becomes a primary source in itself, a new site of meaning-making and knowledge production. This method recognizes subjectivity as not only inevitable, but key in undoing the violence of so-called objective authority over the narratives of others' lives. It recognizes the incompleteness and unresolvedness of stories. The methodology also dips into autotheory, a framework in which artwork uses—and productively misuses—academia to create their own language of theory.

My research questions take personal and global history as their basis. How can we use language and the manual act of labour in text-based art to explore the relationships between personal identity, family, and ancestry? How does failure or complacency within filial duty and the model minority impact Cantonese diasporic identity formation? Influenced by Roderick Ferguson's queer of colour critique, I wish to acknowledge the inextricable links between histories of migration, diaspora, racialization, gender, sexuality, class, and citizenship within socio-political issues, as well as within myself. My artistic influences are mostly credited to other Black, Indigenous, people of colour who practice on the stolen land of Canada: Nadia Myre, Michèle Pearson-Clarke, Jenny Lin, Eve Tagny, Olivia Whetung, Shellie Zhang, Jin-me Yoon, Camille Turner, and Divya Mehra.

The chapters of this thesis distill parts of my practice into themes, but each of them should be read through an intersectional lens that contribute to a holistic reading of my thesis work.

The first chapter, titled *Is There a Word for an Irony that Cares? Skepticism as a Framework*, emphasizes the place of doubt and uncertainty in my work, both in content and in methodology. Their importance in diaspora counters monolithic narratives presented by the State, whether it is Eurocentric, settler of colour hegemony, or homonationalism. Rather than anecdotes of heroism and virtue, my thesis project advocates for “ugly feelings” and noncatharsis, which recognize the awkward state of ambiguous identities.

My practice aims to use text as a narration and potentially intimate, diaristic engagement. *Longing for the Futile: Labour as Process* also considers the material of the text as a site of contrived production, as embroidery renders the labour of drawing, speaking and writing into an intensive and time-consuming method of communication. As labour is first and foremost the means and validation of economic and political survival for migrant people, it sometimes translates within communities as an affective language of care. It examines the longing for—and futility of—work for the Cantonese diaspora, as impacted by tradition, family and queerness.

Thick Legibility: Prose as the Greatest Form of Insincerity travels through the reasons for a partial refusal of engagement with audience legibility. The textual and narrative distance can be a protective measure in my autobiographical work, as well as an exercise in recontextualization. By focusing on gestures and words that are taken for granted, one may begin to undo the latter's internalized logics, and bring them away from normative frameworks. My work avoids the call for racialized artists to fulfill the liberal social

harmony of Canadian multiculturalism. It eschews the garish portrayals of Cantonese signifiers as a refusal of spectacle, in favour of an ambiguous and opaque (il)legibility.

Sparse clips of dialogue punctuate each section, as acknowledgements of the relationships built by the labour of my MFA cohort and their influence on my practice. I could not have done this nearly as well without them.

FY: Sometimes I think about making text-based art, and wonder, what does English do to me?

LG: Yeah, but also, what do you do to English?

IS THERE A WORD FOR AN IRONY THAT CARES? SKEPTICISM AS A FRAMEWORK

Should we read his inertness as a part of a volitional strategy that anticipates styles of nonviolent political activism to come, or merely as a sign of what we now call depression?

—Sianne Ngai⁹

Queerness has always been one for skepticism. With an ever-shifting definition of its own label and uninheritable communities, queerness is most critical of its own system of identification. In turn, it requires “an aesthetics that remarks on its own limitations, its inability to provide external answers and stable meaning [...] that devotes itself primarily to the dilemmas of representation”¹⁰ to be accountable to the contradictions of visibility.

Skepticism is a necessary tool for the marginalized. Although full conviction may seem like the stronger position from which to argue, recognizing nuances and unresolved issues anchors the need for change. In the context of diasporic re-discovery, there is often a risk of romanticizing the so-called homeland. Searching for queer narratives and practices in diasporic studies troubles the toxic monoliths that drive nationalist ideals of unity. As queer scholar Gayatri Gopinath notes:

⁹ Sianne Ngai. 2005. *Ugly Feelings*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1.

¹⁰ Meg Jensen. 2014. "Post-Traumatic Memory Projects: Autobiographical Fiction and Counter-Monuments." *Textual Practice*, vol. 28, no. 4, 705.

If conventional diasporic discourse is marked by this backward glance, this 'overwhelming nostalgia for lost origins, for 'times past;' a queer diaspora mobilizes questions of the past, memory, and nostalgia for radically different purposes. Rather than evoking an imaginary homeland frozen in an idyllic moment outside history, what is remembered through queer diasporic desire and the queer diasporic body is a past time and place riven with contradictions and the violences of multiple uprootings, displacements, and exiles.¹¹

These contradictions follow contemporary tropes of the queer racialized body, labelled as disruptive, angry, sensitive, etc. But it is precisely this eternal dissatisfaction that does not concede to partial histories. It does not foreground legacies over alternative ways of being. This queer lens on diasporic issues relocates utopia from the past to the future.



Fig. 1. *Please Reply III (detail)*, hand embroidered polyester thread on organza, 8.5" x 11" x 2", 2019.

My practice thus advocates for the admittance of skepticism and sensitivity, in order to keep a politically necessary ambiguity in my artwork. I use what scholar and writer Sianne

¹¹ Gayatri Gopinath. 2005. *Impossible Desires: Queer Disapora and South Asian Public Cultures*. Durham: Duke University Press, 4.

Ngai deems *ugly feelings*, which are “explicitly amoral and noncathartic, offering no satisfactions of virtue, however oblique, nor any therapeutic or purifying release.”¹² She favours minor affects, like irritation and anxiety, over the grander passions of the philosophical canon because their lack of intentionality or direction produces emotions that are skeptical of their own subjectivity. These feelings are hence more self-reflexive than their more passionate counterparts. The noncathartic feelings lead to a similarly noncathartic aesthetic, one that makes use of an emotional release’s failure. The role of ugly feelings and irony in my text-based work are hinged upon a refusal to neatly resolve ongoing issues, or to indicate a morally justified protagonist in the narrative. Ngai expands upon their relationship:

The equivocality of the Bartlebyan aesthetic suggests that there is a special relationship between ugly feelings and irony, a rhetorical attitude with a decidedly affective dimension, if not a “feeling”, per se. For the morally degraded and seemingly unjustifiable status of these feelings tends to produce an unpleasurable feeling about the feeling (a reflexive response taking the form of “I feel ashamed about feeling envious” or “I feel anxious about my enviousness”) that significantly parallels the doubleness on which irony, as an evaluative stance hinging on a relationship between the said and the unsaid, fundamentally depends.¹³

In keeping with the need for recognizing one’s own limitations, these “are feelings that contain, as it were, models of the problem that defines them.”¹⁴ The fragmentation in my work uses its nonlinearity to question the authority of the text and image as vehicles of narrative. The boundaries of the material and their limited content function together to “sustain uncertainty.”¹⁵

My series of hand embroidered essays, *Please Reply*, complicates narratives of identification through the embodiment of these ugly feelings and noncathartic aesthetic. The essays come in three iterations, each foregrounding variations of self-doubt and unsatisfying conclusions that acknowledge my paralyzing complicity in the systems I attempt to challenge. For instance, the cover of the second essay reads: *[you honour them] in a language they do not speak*. With one part obscured by the opacity of the cotton voile, these layers and palimpsests are the first indicator of a non-linear narrative across fifty pages of embroidered text. The repetition and circular thoughts lead to no great

¹² Sianne Ngai. 2005. *Ugly Feelings*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 6-7.

¹³ *Ibid*, 9-10.

¹⁴ Meg Jensen. 2014. "Post-Traumatic Memory Projects: Autobiographical Fiction and Counter-Monuments." *Textual Practice*, vol. 28, no. 4, 705.

¹⁵ *Idem*.

protagonist, nor antagonist, but rather an implication of entrapment within larger systems (see Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. *Please Reply II (detail)*, hand embroidered polyester thread on cotton voile, 8.5" x 11" x 2", 2019.

The thickest essay contains a personal story about my grandmother (though in truth, everything is about my grandmother), describing a time when she did not come to my openings (see Fig. 3). Diaristic in tone, the story alludes to the larger tokenization and inaccessibility of gallery spaces, academia and contemporary art. The dissonantly anecdotal writing style in Times New Roman font pokes holes into the authority of the white page.

The short length of each page and the tactility needed to flip them force the reader to enact a slowness that feels closer to reverence. In *Please Reply III*, the thinner pages make the last page (the only page with text) visible from the cover through twelve layers of organza. The rhythm of page turning creates an anticipation that mimics the phrase on which you land at the end: *a nostalgia for something you've never known*. The essays play on what Halberstam dubs "suspect memorialization." Memorialization's priorities of tidiness and convenience make it difficult to acknowledge marginalized information:

Memory is itself a disciplinary mechanism that Foucault calls “a ritual of power”; it selects for what is important (the histories of triumph), it reads a continuous narrative into one full of ruptures and contradictions, and it sets precedents for other “memorializations.” In this book, forgetting becomes a way of resisting the heroic and grand logics of recall and unleashes new forms of memory that relate more to spectrality than to hard evidence, to lost genealogies than to inheritance, to erasure than to inscription.¹⁶

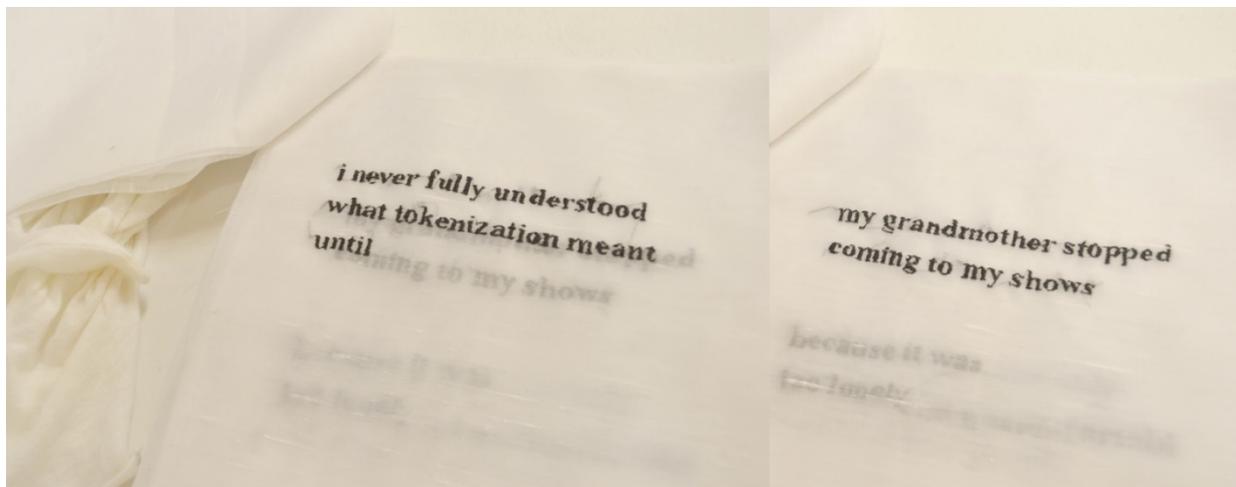


Fig. 3. *Please Reply II* (details), hand embroidered polyester thread on cotton voile, 8.5" x 11" x 2", 2019.

Between the all-too self-congratulatory mood of liberal multiculturalism and traumatic retellings of displacement, the artwork occupies a space in between for the unsettling quietness of ambiguous losses in the queer Cantonese diaspora: a personal loss of relationships, a cultural loss of traditional practices, a linguistic loss of expression. As these racialized forms of loss are not discussed in the dominant public sphere, their mourning is denied, unable to be processed by its subjects. The essays make room for the persistent remembrance of loss, or as Ngai describes it: “More specifically, racialization—as an act of self-constitution through denying and re-assimilating the Other—must be conceived of as a wholly melancholic activity.”¹⁷

But melancholy is easy, too tempting. Falling into the grandeur of sadness also feels performative, and possibly voyeuristic. Anne Cheng proposes the following as a critical state of in-betweenness: “[...] at the risk of speaking like a true melancholic, perhaps minority discourse might prove to be most powerful when it resides within the consciousness of melancholia itself, when it can maintain a ‘negative capability’ between

¹⁶ Jack Halberstam. 2011. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 16.

¹⁷ Sianne Ngai. 2005. *Ugly Feelings*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 54.

neither dismissing, nor sentimentalizing the minority.”¹⁸ In other words, holding these realities within oneself requires a “self-reflexive melancholy,” one that is aware of all the sentimental pitfalls of addressing identity and memory. Skepticism is key in destabilizing all-too tidy resolutions.



Fig. 4 *Please Reply I (detail)*, hand embroidered polyester thread on organza, 8.5" x 11" x 1", 2019.

On the top of the cover of the first stack of letter-size organza, it reads *i wrote in my grant that this was [supposed to be] healing*, with some words translucently visible from the second page. As a meditation on the expectations of artwork by queer artists of colour, the essays appropriate the stylistic conventions of contemporary art academia. They highlight the conceptual constraints on a holistic discussion of racialized queerness. The main dialogues in Canadian contemporary art currently valorize work that seek to heal intergenerational trauma, in efforts to respond to very real issues within Indigenous and racialized communities. However, as those of us who have attempted this know, it is an ambitious goal which can be tokenized for its grand ideals. Its parameters and methods potentially become flattened by the blanket statement made popular and legible by the

¹⁸ Anne A. Cheng. 1997. "The Melancholy of Race." *The Kenyon Review* 19, no. 1, 56.

vocabulary of governmental funding bodies. My work aims to complicate this institutionalized idea of “healing,” and to broaden the functions of queer, racialized art.

At the bottom of the cover (see Fig. 4) the shadow of my Cantonese name (Cing Gaai) between my legal names embodies the ambiguous place for a name that no one uses. The next twenty-five pages deal with a range of meta-academic topics, from linguistics and badly romanized Cantonese, to a notification from SSHRC (the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council). The title, *Please Reply*, takes its name from subject lines in emails, signaling the presence of an anticipated reader to these documents. In some ways, this artwork, created in the context of a thesis paper, is self-conscious of being theorized. It knows it will have to be scrutinized with a certain language, and so contains the vocabulary of its university administration context among its aesthetics. The work reflexively positions itself within academia and subjectivity, two positions that have been considered antithetical in the empirical origins of the academy. In practicing autoethnography as a method, its duality has become a model for the problems it describes. In this way, it has embraced skepticism within the methodology, bringing it closer to what York University scholar Lauren Fournier dubs *autotheory*:

In auto-theory, theorized personal anecdotes or embodied actions constellate with fragments from the history of philosophy to form potent analyses of gender, politics, academia, and contemporary art. Embodied experience becomes the primary material for generating theory, foregrounding disclosure and ambivalence as that which enhances critical rigour and relevance; this move is fundamentally feminist, even as many of these writers and artists openly problematize the feminist position. These writers have internalized such feminist precepts as “the personal is political” and have adjusted them according to new contexts. As postmodern subjects working in the wake of modernism—a long century in which the male-dominated spheres of literature and theory upheld “distance” and “disinterestedness” over emotionality or transparent investment—these artists and writers trouble the tenets of both the modernist canon as well as the younger canon of postmodern feminism.¹⁹

Using this autotheoretical method allows me to engage with frameworks despite the tensions that I find within them. My embodied practice of theory responds to their flaws and challenges, situating the messiness of ideologies and their manifestations.

¹⁹ Lauren Fournier. 2017. “Auto-Theory as an Emerging Mode of Feminist Practice Across Media,” abstract. IABAA, Panel 13: Feminist Practices, i.

In keeping with my methodology, I am also skeptical of skepticism. In particular, late capitalist public art institutions request what Canadian art critic Merray Gerges calls “performing criticality.”²⁰ In a virtue signaling attempt to mend a lack of inclusive content, museums and galleries often invite queer artists of colour to do that work for them in public programming, either through short-term residencies or workshops. Instead of focusing on the systemic problems in their hiring, curation methods, funding, or structure, marginalized artists become a hypervisible band-aid solution with performative changes, despite how risky and fatiguing this kind of public action can be for the latter. Gerges remarks that, because institutions themselves are unwilling to put in the work of decolonizing and implementing structural change, “the art world expects—demands, even—this emotional and intellectual labour from some of its most precariously positioned individuals, whose inclusion is the most conditional.”²¹

Perhaps the least harmful way of employing skepticism requires an audience of members of your community, rather than a general public, as they possess the knowledge and compassion needed in these vulnerable moments. Autotheory and skepticism present an opportunity to not shy away from seemingly dangerous questions; that is, questions that have the potential to shake the assuredness from which we pulled our authority and to make us doubt our foundations. Can we appropriate our own cultures? How can we rely on elders who may deny parts of our existence; of gender non-conforming bodies and practices? Are we just cherry-picking parts of culture with which we agree? Is there value in keeping traditions we find oppressive? Who gets to decide? The inclusion of noncathartic ugly feelings like anxiety, skepticism, and irony, in my practice allow me to center a conversation about culture that dares not reach a definite conclusion. It contrasts the assured monologues often exchanged when defending the rights of a marginalized group. It uses an aesthetic that points out its own limits. In doing so, skepticism honours the impossibility of giving permanence and certainty to subjectivities that defy essentialism.

²⁰ Merray Gerges. 2018. “On Being ‘Difficult’: Performing Criticality as an Art Critic of Colour.” Gardinermuseum.on.ca.

²¹ Idem.

AA: I dreamt last night that I read your thesis.
Central to it was the idea of using text that was
“viscerally retained.”

LONGING FOR THE FUTILE: LABOUR AS A PROCESS

Julie Farstad: There's a sense of absurdity to sewing that I like—that determination to pursue this extreme, manual labor that others might find pointless.

Karen Reimer: I was raised to think that work is of value in and of itself, whether or not it has a product. This is another reason I'm interested in the whole concept of labor—I'm kind of a workaholic and I can't stop myself. So, within this work ethic, you work to make *yourself* valuable.²²

My work is about work—artwork, paperwork, grad school work, job work, domestic work. However, the specific connotation of work for migrant Asian people is complicated by the ways in which the government and other citizens validate their existence in the country based on one's supposed work ethic and “skilled” labour. The history of Chinese objectification through labour in Canada dates back to the aforementioned railway construction. Chinese workers were only valued for their disposability as indentured labourers, and were deported once the job was complete. Although the conditions have changed since the Second World War, the global and local discourses of East Asian countries (and thus Asian people) have been focused on success as a marker of identity: *tiger economies* that boast rapid growth, rising Asian-American politicians, and upwardly mobile citizens. The impetus to “work hard” is part of the larger imperatives of national and cultural belonging.

²² Joan Livingstone and John Ploof. 2007. *The Object of Labor: Art, Cloth, and Cultural Production*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, spread.

The internalization of these compliant work ethics came from multiple origins, and self-stereotyping became a tool of cultural ascendancy. For the North American Chinese diaspora in the 1950's, hegemonic Confucian values enforce strict divisions of gender roles and social hierarchy, but were bolstered as philosophical evidence that the Chinese were similar to America's cultural conservatism of the mid-century.²³ Among their cited virtues were "the predisposition to harmony and accommodation, the reverence for family and education, and unflagging industriousness."²⁴ The State's imposition of work for economic growth thus translated into the community authorities' imposition of work for the purposes of assimilation into North America.

The emphasis on racialized labour in the national narrative of Cantonese people has always underlined their citizenship and place in society, compounded within East Asian communities as an honourable code of conduct. Internalized between state-sanctioned productivity and duty, the use of labour-intensive processes in contemporary art making for the Cantonese diaspora remains tethered to conservative values of worth. The ambition to reclaim one's labour comes up against imbedded systems of extraction and conformity, despite the ways it may feel fulfilling. In fact, the positive elements enmeshed in *work* are part of the ways hegemonic powers can justify oppressive practices, as scholar Sara Ahmed describes in her analogy:

The happy housewife is a fantasy figure that erases the signs of labour under the sign of happiness. The claim that women are happy, and that this happiness is behind the work they do, functions to justify gendered forms of labour not as projects of nature, law or duty, but as an expression of a collective wish and desire. How better to justify an unequal distribution of labour, than to say that such labour makes people happy? How better to secure consent to unpaid or poorly paid labour than to describe such consent as the origin of a good feeling?²⁵

These contradictions highlight some of the "ugly feelings," discussed in the previous chapter: feelings that produce an insecure skepticism about their own validity. Likewise, working for the sake of work can become a longing for the futile. *A Labour of Labour* (see Fig. 5) exemplifies such circular logic: throughout his life, my father has always told me "I work hard, so you don't have to." In a sense he succeeded; I work hard despite not needing to. Nonetheless, his mentality—as it was impressed upon him by issues of citizenship and

²³ Ellen D. Wu. 2013. *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority*. US: Princeton University Press, 5.

²⁴ Idem.

²⁵ Ahmed, Sara. 2008. "Multiculturalism and the Promise of Happiness." *New Formations*, no. 63, 121.

belonging for working class racialized families—was internalized within myself, though the latter half of his mantra has found no purpose.

The artwork's formal qualities mirror this absence. The work repeats the second part of the two phrases, distorting itself as it is further reproduced, and curls as to obscure its ending, suggesting an implied continuity. The size of the text traces the shadow of a body embedded in this supposedly nurturing object. Disheveled and stained, the comforter implies signs of a previous life.

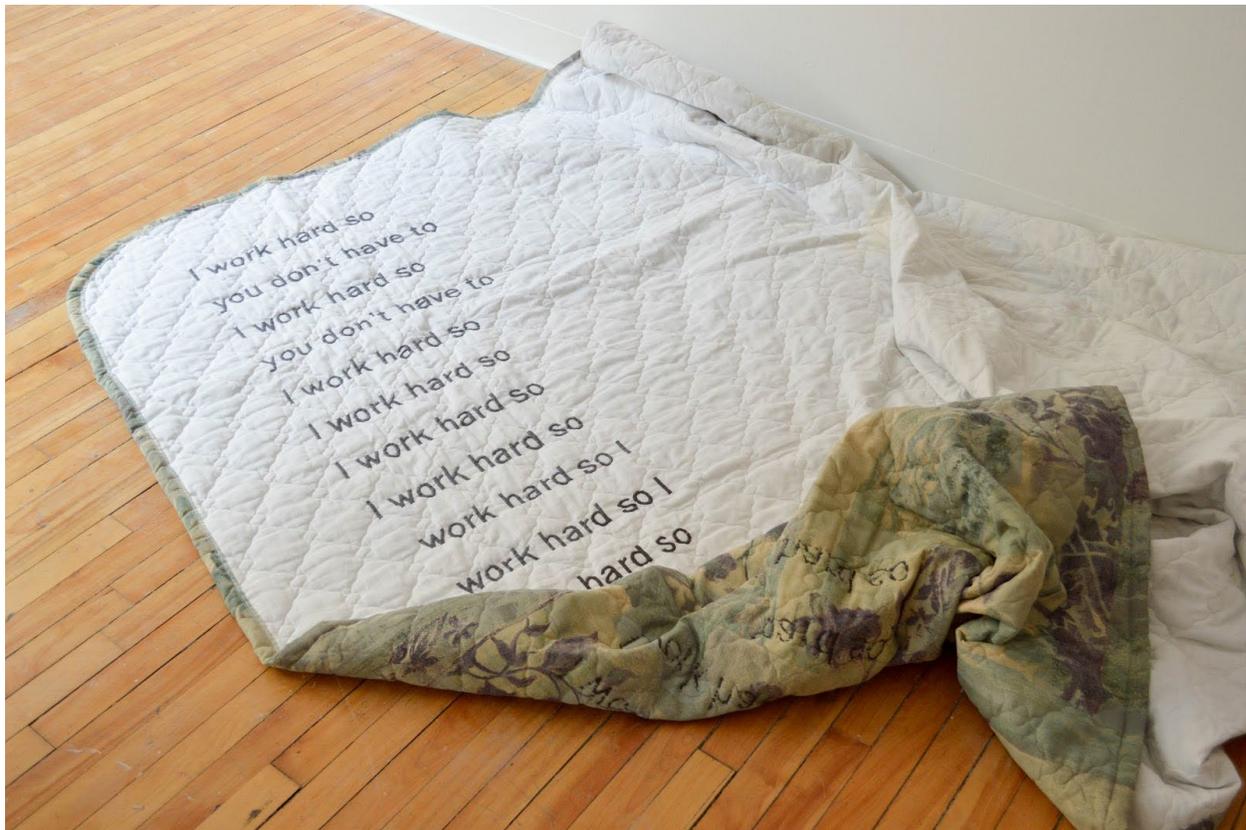


Fig. 5 *A Labour of Labour*. Hand embroidered polyester thread on ready-used comforter. 7' x 10', 2018.

Jumping off of Marcel Duchamp's foundational idea of the *ready-made*, Kimsooja speaks of the *already-made*,²⁶ alluding to the cycles of material extraction, labour, and processing that exist before the object is seen in an artistic context. On the other hand, she also emphasizes the *ready-used*, which recognizes the past functions, lives, and memories carried by the objects. She speaks to the importance of the object's soul and aura. The term *ready-used* seems more pertinent to my piece than the established category of *found object* due to the intentionality with which they are selected, and the implied personal

²⁶ Kim Soo-Ja, Stephanie Rebeck, and Vancouver Art Gallery. 2013. *Kimsooja: Unfolding*. Vancouver, BC: Vancouver Art Gallery, 25.

relationship cultivated with them. The labour-intensive process of hand embroidering the words insert temporality that metaphorically mirrors the memories and lived experiences of the object's past life. The labour of this piece is revealed to the viewer with each new line. The presence of the hand is dissonant from the hard edges of the sans-serif font, but more evident as you see the non-uniform lines up close (see fig. 5.1).



Fig. 5.1. *A Labour of Labour* (detail). Hand embroidered polyester thread on ready-used comforter.

The subject matter embodies the futility of (art)work, but more importantly, the process. The weeks of embroidery kept me gratified by a seemingly productive occupation, but I was left empty once again when the work was done. Somewhere between self-exploitation and self-soothing, the labour-intensive work was a long-term coping mechanism that had crashed in a last, silent scream.

A series of seminars in Sweden on art and labour vocalized these conflicting feelings in an open letter about “making a living:”

‘It is work that creates human beings.’ We no longer have societies and states that put humans—with all their contradictory character traits—at the centre of citizenship. First and foremost, we find that it is the working

individual, the productive human, who earns the right to membership in society. This right to membership has always been exclusive and built on borders, but today it is no longer guaranteed even to those who already belong. Social exclusion—that is, poverty due to lack of productivity—is a fundamental mechanism in today's society.²⁷

As a slight addendum to this statement, I would add that racialization, class, and citizenship have always been intertwined, even within those naturalized in a country. Seldom have racialized and Indigenous peoples been given the benefit of the doubt “with all their contradictory character traits.” Having been denied participation in higher-status occupations, or admonished for trying to seek them, histories of global antagonism follow bodies across borders and instill themselves into national narratives that articulate a necessarily exclusive, ideal citizenship.

Belonging in the nation state is conditional upon an occupation of one's time and resources for larger mechanisms of self-regulation; one's occupation of oneself. Between the late capitalist art market and the performative radicality of public institutions, can contemporary art do anything close to “subverting” such systems of labour beyond one's own gain? Art historian and curator Lars Bang Larsen writes on the paradox of work: “Art has an ambiguous, if not conflictive, relationship to production. It has been defined as being in excess of work—as a creative compulsion beyond the call of duty and the grind of routine —or as incomparable to work, because it is seen to fall behind the normal relations of production.”²⁸

This thesis navigates between the productive and self-destructive urge to *work*. As part of my research methodology, my practice centers around the manual labour of textile creation, and most notably that of embroidery. As a form of storytelling and an embodied knowledge practice, textiles connote personal, often intimate narratives. The act of embroidering by hand imbues a sense of temporality in the final product, while giving the maker an alternative way to reconceptualize the affective memories on display. It becomes an arts-informed method to process the multiple roles of work in my life: internalized coping mechanism, obligation, care, and relationality. This willfully inconvenient and inefficient form of labour defies the normative mode of capitalist production with its perceived futility and repetition. As Larsen describes the paradox of work, “art is non

²⁷ Pierre Bal-Blanc et al. 2012. *Work, Work, Work: A Reader on Art and Labour*. Berlin; Stockholm; IASPIS, Konstnärnämnden, 221.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 19.

production because it has not yet been inscribed into, and recognized by, cultural and social space. It is futurity, something that is coming into being.”²⁹



Fig. 6. *Letter size*, hand woven silk thread on wooden dowels, 16" x 25", 2019

Perhaps labour can be reclaimed from ideas of productivity and worth, if done in such inefficient and absurd ways as weaving a letter size sheet of silk by hand (see Fig. 6). Initially, my goal was to learn weaving as a skill, and to use the form of a letter size paper to displace its mundane function. In the end, the silk piece of “paper” documented the life of the process itself, in mistakes, changes, and unevenness. The silk hand weaving technique betrays the letter-size document’s need for stability, consistency, cleanliness, and objectivity. Instead, the page becomes its own documentation for the labour,

²⁹ Pierre Bal-Blanc et al. 2012. *Work, Work, Work: A Reader on Art and Labour*. Berlin; Stockholm; IASPIS, Konstnärnämnden, 23.

memories and affect embedded into the lines. The full stories of such interactions are illegible in the document itself, but can be felt in the text(ure) of the page (see fig. 6.1). The weaving becomes a form of writing. In fact, the word text originates from the Latin *textus* (“style or texture of a work”), which is a conjugation of the verb of *texere*, to weave. In the end, this seems to have become another text-based project.



Fig. 6.1. *Letter size* (detail), hand woven silk thread on wooden dowels.

Spending the time to weave this piece despite (or because of?) the gratuitous amount of required work, I have come to see labour and its manual imperfections become a language of care, one not in denial of longing but confirming it in its haptic qualities. It is perhaps because of its inefficient and overly-attached process of creation that the work develops this language. It has become an object made too precious to use.

In seeing the clear signs of the hand, the abstract time of labour is put back into the process. Unlike smooth products, there are indications of its making (in the warp left on the dowels) and its mistakes (in the wobbliness). It encourages a rethinking of one’s relationship to production and consumption by making labour the subject matter, content, and method.

FY: What do you think of my thesis?

TY: I haven't read it yet.

THICK LEGIBILITY: PROSE AS THE GREATEST FORM OF INSINCERITY

I care about you understanding, but I care more about concealing parts of myself from you. I don't trust you very much. You are not always aware of how you can be dangerous to me, and this makes me dangerous to you. I am using my arm to determine the length of the gaze.

—Eve Tuck & C. Ree³⁰

I don't know Cantonese well enough to be sarcastic, so my only option is sincerity. The vulnerability of saying everything at face value is daunting. There is no hiding under humour or irony. Likewise, I prefer prose because poetry is too sincere. My work relies on the awkward tone of daily conversations, repetitive anxieties, and off-hand remarks that say everything directly, but eschew context. What emerges is not the *double entendre*, but the *single entendre*. An open book with very little written. A thick legibility.

Somewhere between refusal and the current feminist mantra of “radical vulnerability,” thick legibility flirts with self-disclosure, while evading its details. The opacity becomes a means of keeping the viewer at a distance, but still at arm's reach. Whereas illegibility in contemporary art primarily denies information (through redaction, translation, destruction, etc.), thick legibility willingly confides in its reader, though seemingly just crumbs. It minimizes vulnerability through irony, structure, and unpoetic recounting.

³⁰ Eve Tuck & C. Ree, *A Glossary of Haunting*, 2013, 640.

The traditional idea of legibility pushes the maker to accommodate the viewer, make it comfortable for them to digest the work. In this case, the textured words and layered pages require the reader to slow down, and take information in small morsels. The chasm between my time spent making and their time reading is narrowed a bit. The *thickness* of this legibility encourages a more intentional, perhaps difficult, consumption. The sparsity of the narrative content forces the viewer to read between, under, and above the lines to imagine a possible context, hinted in the imagery. This type of legibility is viscous, something you must wade through.

Thickness is also reminiscent of the haptic quality made available to artwork when viewers can handle them. The paper-like fabrics are presented to only be accessible to one person at a time, fostering a more intimate setting. Thickness heightens a sense of connectedness through touch.

Legibility has always been a negotiated requirement in my practice. As autobiographical artwork, there are boundaries of self-disclosure, not only for the audience, but for myself and the other subjects mentioned in my work. Thick legibility becomes a necessary form of protection. Textual (re)presentation of information creates layers of separation between the initial event described and the artwork that is consumed by the public. Professor of English Literature and Creative Writing, Meg Jensen emphasizes the importance of such distance in her writing about counter-memorials:

For the post-trauma writer, storytelling itself is both the cause and symptom of suffering, offered in genre-blurring, pseudo-symbolic, and dangerous language. In this way, such works function as textual versions of the unbuilt and virtual counter-monuments whose very form speaks to the complexity of representing the traumatic past.³¹

The fragmentary mode of storytelling is an alternative rearrangements allow me to draw new interpretations of past events without reliving them, as well as keeping some semblance of privacy within narrative self-disclosure. Thick legibility is the complimentary antithesis to confessional work.

³¹ Meg Jensen. 2014. "Post-Traumatic Memory Projects: Autobiographical Fiction and Counter-Monuments." *Textual Practice*, vol. 28, no. 4, 717.



Fig. 7. *every time i almost came out to you*, hand embroidered red polyester thread on craft felt, inside found album, 10" x 7", 2019

Moreover, thick legibility functions as a tool for/to queer expression. Queering can be a method to examine and embrace non-normativity through critique and decompartmentalization. However, it has itself used (for better or for worse) a normative language of visibility among the general public: flamboyance, rainbows, glitter, etc. Although these inherently celebratory markers have their place in so-called queer culture, my practice is more so invested in the implicit manifestations of queer life, what Dai Kojima calls "the ephemeral forms of queerness beyond institutionalized forms of gay visibility and legibility."³² My work focuses on ambiguous and minor forms of intimacy, somewhere between tactics and acts of agency.

The ability to control how and to what extent information is given can be a powerful tool in this era of hyper-circulation. If hegemonic control is reiterated through standardization, subjects can weaponize illegibility as a tool for political autonomy.

³² Dai Kojima. 2014. "Migrant Intimacies: Mobilities-in-Difference and Basue Tactics in Queer Asian Diasporas." *Anthropologica* 56, no. 1, 39.

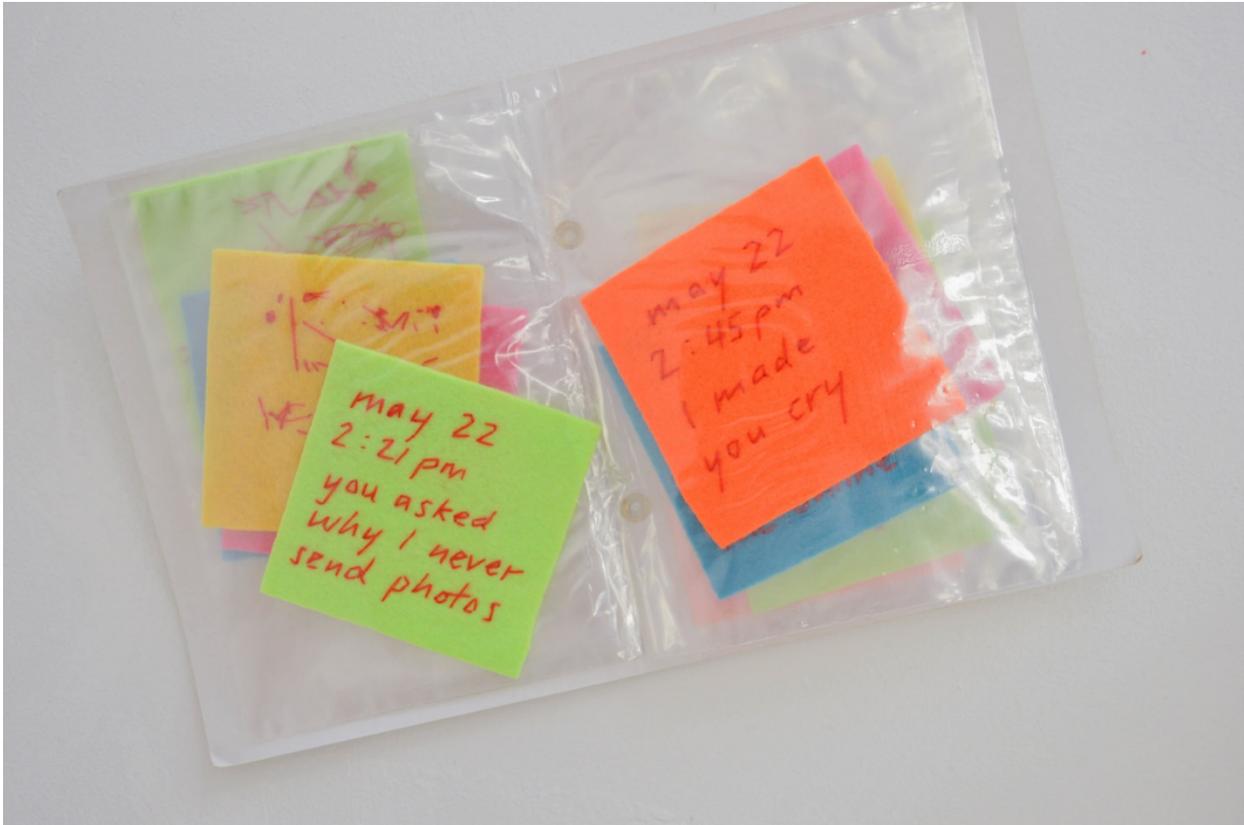


Fig. 8, *every time i almost came out to you* (detail), hand embroidered red polyester thread on craft felt, inside found album, 10" x 7", 2019

Legibility has also been a negotiation for me as an artist of colour. Viewers, curators, and peers will expect me to perform a familiar version of my ethnicity, while on the other hand, some chide my cultural specificity as annoyingly alien, or navel gazing. Dr. Yasmin Jiwani, Professor of Communication Studies, describes this as a “hierarchy of legitimate cultures,” in which non-dominant groups must contort themselves to fit the dominant view.³³ Instead of invisibility, there is a hypervisibility of a simple and monolithic presentation of culture, what Jiwani has coined as “ethnic exotica.”³⁴ This limits a culture to its non-threatening and entertaining displays: food, dress, dance, etc. Such superficial, liberal multiculturalism promotes a harmfully limiting definition of such groups, and denies the histories that do not reinforce the benevolent narrative of Canadian mythology.

Specificity combats the neutered generalization of ethnic exotica. Personal relationships and individual accounts without the gaze of the dominant group build up a cultural legacy, an archive of lived experiences. Hence, my work centers issues within Cantonese queer communities through anecdotes and remnants of my surroundings. The fragmentary

³³ Yasmin Jiwani. 2006. “Framing Culture, Talking Race”. In *Canadian Cultural Poesis*. 101.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 105.

assemblage titled *every time i almost came out to you* (see Fig. 7 and Fig. 8) is comprised of hand embroidered felt inserted into a found photo album. The stitches on each square mimic the thinness of ballpoint pen writing on sticky notes, though the chaotic lines of the embroidery are visible on the backs (see Fig. 9).

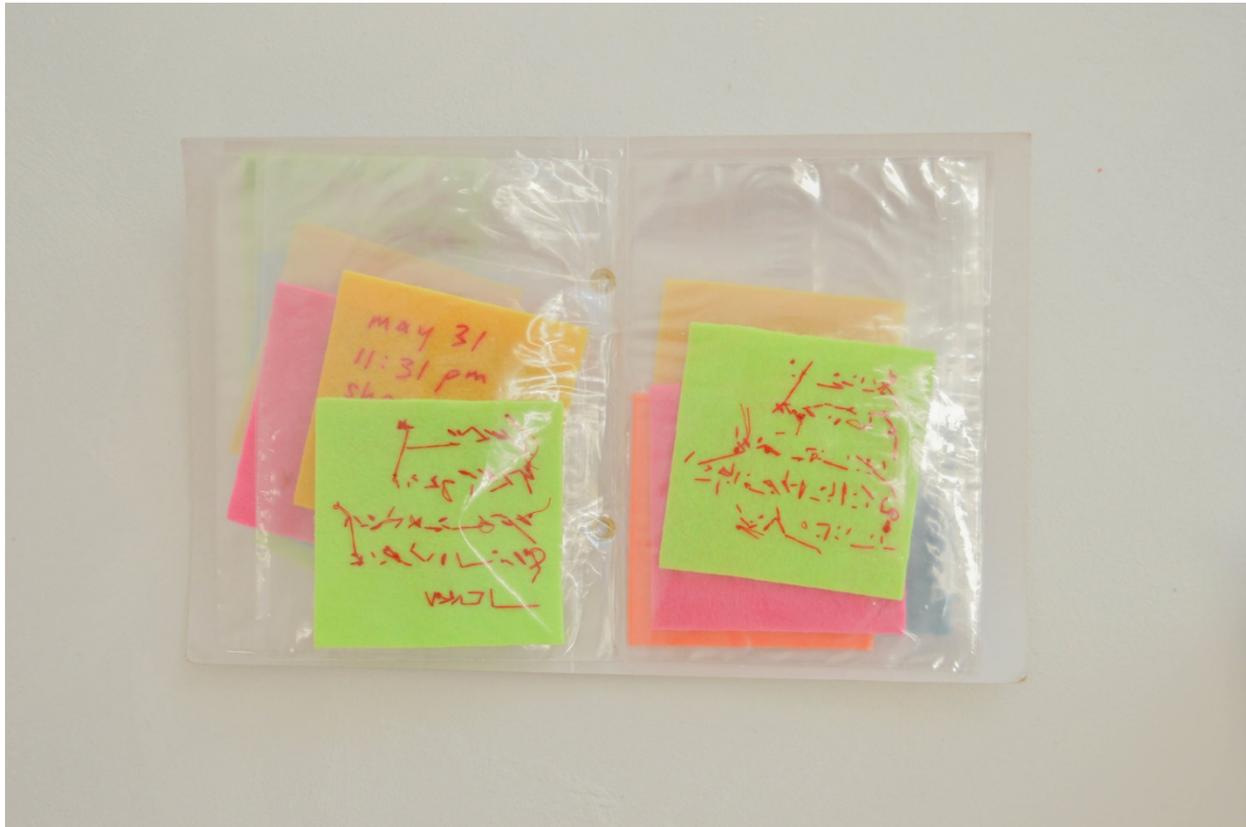


Fig. 9, *every time i almost came out to you* (detail), hand embroidered red polyester thread on craft felt, inside found album, 10" x 7", 2019

The album's contents draw on the intimacy of the anti-spectacular. Throughout its fifteen spreads, the work chooses to avoid the hypervisibility of racialized queerness, by leaving the plastic pockets with textual notes instead of the expected photographs. The text then betrays the romanticized outlook of relationships, by taking the form of mundane memories. They only gain their significance when paired with the artwork's title (also included on the spine of the photo album). The notes range from "you said hi" to "we were kissing when you called," keeping a flexible and ambiguous *you* and *we* across the album. It replicates the tensions of quotidian actions and reveals the separation and lack of communication incurred by queerphobic shame. The text's simple prose reminds the viewer of the quotidian nature of these interactions.

Between the gaudy colours of the sticky notes, the emptiness of the pockets and the dated design of the cover, the artwork intentionally eschews sublime beauty. Objects that are beautiful often stop the viewer at the aesthetic level of contemplation, left to gaze at the surface-level elements of the piece. As scholar and visual artist David Garneau attests, “beauty can be co-opted by the audience to experience a more comfortable or familiar feeling than the kind of political criticality needed to fulfill the artwork’s goal (if indeed that goal is political).”³⁵ For racialized art that relies on well-known cultural signifiers, this effect is aggravated because of the “exotic” allure of the work, which becomes doubly fetishized. Garneau argues that resistance is located in our choices of engagement:

The colonial attitude, including its academic branch, is characterized by a drive to see, to traverse, to know, to translate (to make equivalent), to own, and to exploit. It is based on the belief that everything should be accessible, is ultimately comprehensible, and a potential commodity or resources, or at least something that can be recorded or otherwise saved. Primary sites of resistance, then are not the occasional open battles between the minoritized, oppressed, or colonized and the dominant culture, but the perpetual, active refusal of complete engagement: to speak with one’s own in one’s own way; to refuse translation and full explanations; to create trade goods that imitate core culture without violating it; to not be a native informant.³⁶

The refusal of legibility is key in maintaining a cultural and personal agency. As alternative visibilities reinstate one’s complexity, they can simultaneously protect knowledge and experiences that are sacred to share to the general public.

On the other hand, there is a need to “de-romanticize the spectacular notion of struggle, [...] deferring to actual reality, sobering rationality, necessary detail.”³⁷ The mundane nature of my family conversations and their textual retellings give me the opportunity to slow down discourse to the pace of lived experiences. From the regular documentation of my personal interactions, I derail and reconstruct memories, conversations, screenshots, phone notes, and photos from fragments and text. This method is based on the concept of *defamiliarization*: recontextualizing familiar phrases, objects and habits to bypass the automatic acceptance of unconscious and systemic powers at play.³⁸

³⁵ David Garneau. 2013. "Extra-Rational Aesthetic Action and Cultural Decolonization." *Fuse Magazine*, Fall: 16.

³⁶ David Garneau. 2012. "Imaginary spaces of conciliation and reconciliation." *West Coast Line* 46 (2): 29.

³⁷ Njabulo S. Ndebele. 1986. "The Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Some New Writings in South Africa." *Journal of Southern African Studies: Law and Politics in Southern Africa* 12 (2): 150.

³⁸ Jacob G. Warren. 2017. "'Pay Attention Mother Fuckers': Outlining a Strategy of Wordplay in Australian Indigenous Text-Based Art." *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art*, vol. 17, no. 1, 57.



Fig. 10, *I tried to interview my dad*, hand embroidered polyester thread on inkjet printed silk organza, hung on wooden structure, 6' x 6', 2019

My work navigates authorized forms of legibility by appropriating template structures and speculatively creating their content, in formats such as letter size paper, post-its, institutional applications, essays, and thesis writing. By focusing on gestures and words that are taken for granted, one may begin to undo the latter's internalized logics, and bring them away from normative frameworks. For instance, by bringing tenderness to otherwise traditionally stoic vessels, the queerness of intimacy disrupts the once familiar phrase to give it new meaning.

I tried to interview my dad (see Fig. 10) is another text-based project that embodies these concepts of defamiliarization. The standards we have of interview formats—as being detached, impartial, objective—are queered by the intimacy of the relationship with my father, whose dynamic leaks into the tone of the text. The time-consuming labour of transcribing the interview with embroidery onto the silk organza gives a disproportionate importance to the conversation, at first dismissed as a trivial thought. The work is introduced by the narrative panel on the right with a childhood photograph of myself and my father, which reads: “my dad once saw me sewing and told me / that’s not how you

finish a knot.” The two other panels share an image of my great-grandmother in Toisan, whom I have never met:

who taught you
how to sew,
dad?

my mother

did you ever
use it for
anything?

nothing really,
there was a
point where
we made stuff
at home
because we
were poor

//

why didn't you
teach me?

it's not that hard,
it's a basic skill
you could learn
on your own
in a few hours...

did you want
me to show you?

yeah, i feel like
everyone does it
differently

when are you
going to come
back?

i don't know

The layers of unfamiliar longing (to a skill I never learnt and to a relative I have never met) stand in for the larger gaps in intergenerational knowledge transmission. The pressures of cultural assimilation and capitalist upward mobility are reenacted in the creation of the piece, but also repeat themselves in the separation evident at the end of the text.

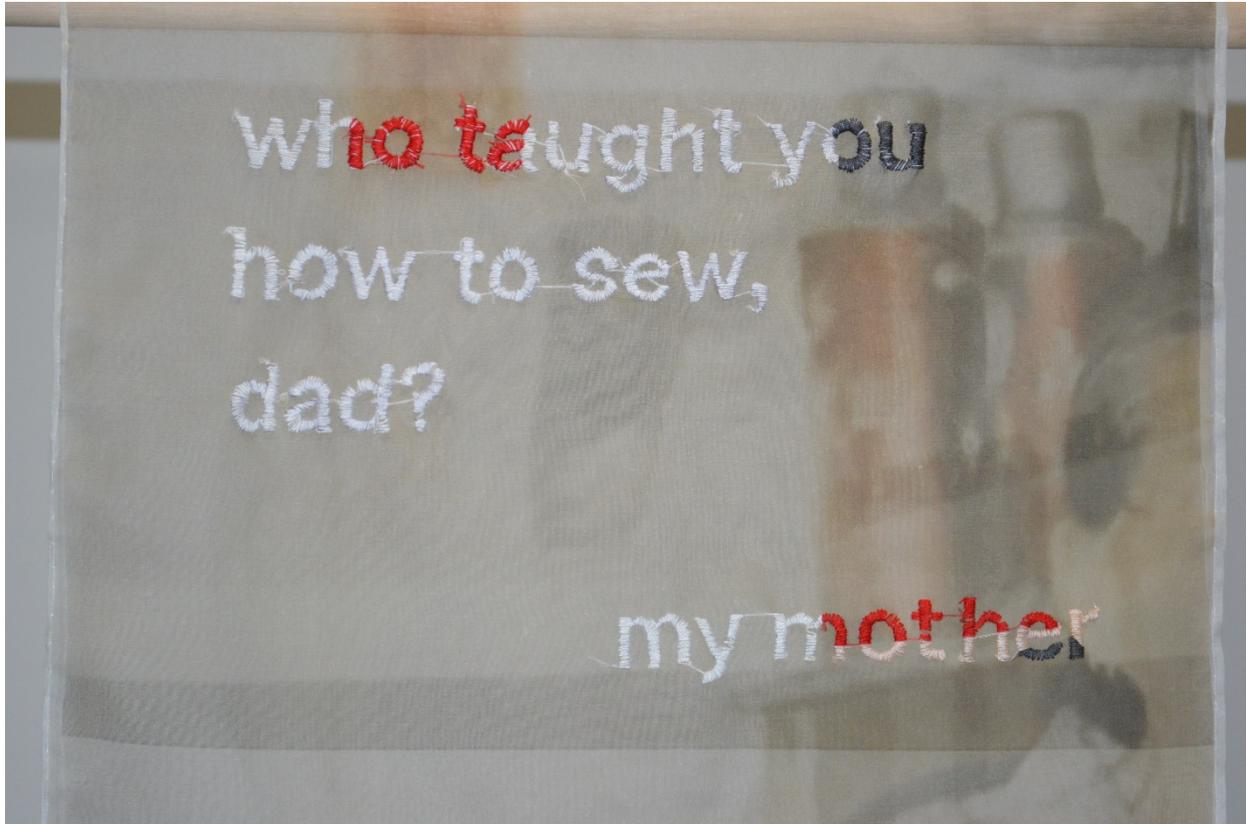


Fig. 10.1. *I tried to interview my dad* (detail), hand embroidered polyester thread on inkjet printed silk organza, hung on wooden structure, 6' x 6', 2019

I was asked by the Koffler Gallery's digital exhibition, titled *Economies of Care*, to write an accompanying text for the work on display, which I decided to change into interviews inspired by the theme of material and affective labour. This interview I attempted with my father is complementary to *A Labour of Labour*. As the feedback and ongoing conversations with my family respond to my practice, their results also transform into new dialogues that shape a constellation of related works. The interdisciplinary nature of the project seeps into historical and ethnographic methods and interests. However, the piece subsumes the typical impetus of archiving that underlies most queer and racialized practices. Instead of a concern for preservation, memorialization, or visibility, it emphasizes a recontextualization of affect and imagery. It encourages a productive displacement.

Unlike documentation and archives, text-based retellings are already a layer of displacement that produce a thick legibility at a safe distance from the vulnerability of

autobiographical work. My work refuses to be read easily. It requires engagement, time and a slight contortion to see fully. The movement of the body around the text delays instant affects, towards a slow burn with no satisfying ending.

CONCLUSION

A thesis is a leaky container. As artist and educator Kameelah Janan Rashad claims, there are no perfect vessels that can encapsulate ideas in their fullness and their potential changes. This project is specific to this time and place, bound to evolve as more voices are added to the process. It is imperfect and incomplete, but still tending its reach towards a comprehension of itself.

My thesis project focuses on the oppressive necessity of labour as a cultural imperative for the Cantonese diaspora, as well as the practices and connections that were abandoned for this assimilation. The historic conditions of labour that brought the first Cantonese people to Canada have shaped their belonging in the country, as one dependent upon their productive value in conjunction with pressures within communities to conform. In problematizing “work,” its conflicting place in the process of contemporary art becomes a difficult reconciliation. This futility builds up the impossible longing for completion.

Embracing uncertainty and skepticism in the tone, structure and content of my work has given me a lens of productive disillusionment from which to engage with the limits of diasporic discourse. Ironic, mundane feelings can resist the heroic legacies put forth by hegemonic narratives. By acknowledging the failings of contemporary art’s systems of production and dissemination, we can pull down the boundaries of cross-disciplinary collaborations, into direct action, public engagement, and personal life.

Given the autobiographical tone of my work, a form of illegibility is necessary as a protective measure. Thick legibility in my text-based work, as a concept and typographic technique, negotiates states of intimacy between the writer and reader. It brings up a (perhaps uncomfortable) vulnerability enmeshed with ironic humour to keep the viewer at arm’s length. Thickness makes tangible some of the immateriality of untold stories. It can

be a tool for self-determination, but can conversely function as a symbol of silence and loss through generations of displacement.

Throughout this process, I want you to know that the most impactful research outcomes of this project have been with myself. I started making and writing about labour and queerness when I was still overworking myself into burnout every few months, and was still closeted from my family. It is certainly not through artwork alone, but it is also certainly not a coincidence that I have worked through (ha!) larger issues in my life while doing my Master's degree. The changes are not so much in what I do, but rather how I do it.

In 2020, I made a resolution to work less. By using labour as my process, I have in turn been processing my attitude towards labour, undoing its ties to self-worth, finding boundaries, and putting my energy into more nourishing relationships. Although this thesis is framed around a history of racialized and feminized labour for the Cantonese diaspora, but I must admit that the concept of work is deeply bound to my mental health (the usual suspect).

My thesis work is an embodiment of how work has failed me, and how I fail it. In keeping with Halberstam's ideas on counter-hegemony, there are mistakes already imbedded in our imperfect systems that can be taken advantage of; perhaps a place where we may begin to queer labour. By embracing what is taken for granted, whimsical approaches to labour can reshape our relationships to it, though it will always be a privilege to be able to do work "wrong."

This thesis paper has been an exploration of limits, including its own. It will not be accessible to everyone, least of all the community involved in my work. It will not be seen outside of academia. And it will not be translated into Cantonese. It will remain a leaky container that will eventually fill other vessels.

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