



**Window  
Space**



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Florence Yee

**New words to describe old things**

September 8th – October 2nd, 2020

**1. A hesitation.**

When Florence Yee and I started chatting, the artist asked me, “Did you read my residency proposal? Maybe it’s best if you hadn’t.” They say, “It’s changed since then.”<sup>1</sup>

Yee had originally pitched a project that sought to unravel the tradition of Chinese knot-making, intentionally re-learning it to make it anew. These traditional knots, I learned during our conversation, are often accompanied by characters for “happiness” and “fortune” that culturally signal heteronormative and capitalist ideas of success. “You may have seen these ornate knots in stores,” Yee added. They are usually red or gold in colour. Perhaps they are marketed as Chinese New Year decorations. Also likely: they are sold or purchased as what the artist calls *ethnic exotica*:<sup>2</sup> a diminished representation of a culture into kitsch.

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<sup>1</sup> Florence Yee, in discussion with the author, August 2020.

<sup>2</sup> The term is borrowed from feminist academic and activist Yasmin Jiwani, in “Framing Culture, Talking Race,” in *Canadian Cultural Poesis*, eds. Garry Sherbert, Annie Gérin, and Sheila Petty (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2006), 101.

Nonetheless, they saturate and adorn commercial, public, and domestic spaces. One by one, they suggest that success equals marriage and wealth. In response, Yee is interested in inserting into the tradition the newly emerging characters that broaden these definitions of success. So, accompanying their own interpretation of the Chinese knots, the artist hand-embroidered the new word combination for gender neutrality: the characters 氵 (water) and 人 (person).

I don't see that the work had diverted too far from the artist's original pitch, but I sense a hesitation that is familiar.

## **2. Success and failure are fluid concepts, right?**

Growing up as a first-generation immigrant, I've interpreted the pressure to succeed as to perform well within cultural norms. The stakes are higher because in "failure" we risk falling further into the realm of otherness. Anyway, the Immigrant Success Story sells. It's the one people want to hear about. Though to be honest, I started feeling the pressure to succeed way before moving here. In Grade 1, I cheated on my exams.

There are failures that I, personally, consider very real. These usually happen when I try to "be" Indonesian. In an introductory email to a famous Chinese-Indonesian artist, I tried writing in Indonesian to sound authentic. I described myself with a word that I thought meant "Indonesian-born," but actually is widely used by right-wing nationalists to express anti-Chinese sentiments. She told me this. I had no idea.

Indonesian is my mother tongue. I used to know the old words. They now seem to describe new things. Or is this me, still unlearning the anti-Chinese racism that I picked up in my childhood?

### 3. Unresolved distance.

How could I know, when I'm so far away?

Yee's *New words to describe old things* builds on an older work titled *Trying*: a series of knots produced during the artist's first attempt at learning the craft. Yee sought to regain linguistic and cultural knowledge following multigenerational loss of knowledge through assimilation. "The knots were a metaphor for being tongue-tied, as my Cantonese was very nursery-level at the time," the artist explained.<sup>3</sup> Their language skills had improved since then – after spending more personal time with other Cantonese-speakers – and with this, Yee gained a sense of agency to work with the language.

But even still, there's always that hesitation that comes with distance. For *Trying*, Yee watched YouTube tutorials with their grandmother, who had moved from China to Vietnam at age six, and then again to Montreal where she now lives. They questioned this distance in relation to the pressure to represent one's cultural tradition accurately, and the authority to queer such tradition. How do you resolve this when you're always geographically, generationally, culturally, linguistically, materially removed?

I am a cliché: a "Western-educated Indigenous elite" living in diaspora who has both a romanticized calling for their homeland in adulthood, and a dose of critique that is conceptualized through a Western framework. Both of them are rooted in a ghostly understanding of my own culture.

I tried to collapse this distance through a one-month trip to meet new art friends in Jakarta. In trying to understand the contemporary art landscape there, I asked questions that are informed by entirely Western experience of the current discourse, bringing up topics like gender-fluidity and feminism. Sometimes, these questions failed. And when I try to elaborate

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<sup>3</sup> Florence Yee, email message to author, September 3, 2020.

on why I'm asking them, I hear myself sounding preachy. *Have I co-opted the saviour complex?*

In the Indonesian national language, there are no gendered pronouns. Traditionally, certain cultures within the Indonesian national borders recognized more than two genders. Still, heteronormative, patriarchal, and capitalist values were the dominant values being promoted when I was growing up. Maybe in asking these questions, I was searching for some sort of signal for a destabilization of the conformity I had witnessed. I wanted to know this distance, between what I remembered and what is.

#### **4. "What authority am I relying on to draw my knowledge?"**

*New words to describe old things* takes on the vocabulary of a commercial storefront. A scrolling digital marquee and three knots are hung within the Xpace Cultural Centre window space. By choosing the traditional Chinese knotting cord, Yee's installation embraces the hyper legible ethnic exotica markers of such decorations. But they introduced a new visual context too, by playing with materials like a mesmerizing shiny spandex, a glittering organza, and fringes made of neon and pink embroidery threads. Of course, those who read Chinese can readily recognize Yee's queering of the tradition to support gender fluidity.

I think of Yee's labour-intensive process in making these works in order to say these two characters. Again, and again, and louder. As if conjuring up a truth that is as old as tradition.

In contrast, the marquee speedily spells out:

*MY GRANDMOTHER AND I LEARNT TO TIE KNOTS FROM A YOUTUBE TUTORIAL.  
WHAT DO WE GAIN AND LOSE FROM USING THE INTERNET AS A SOURCE OF  
TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE? YOU ARE A FUTURE ANCESTOR. HOW ARE YOU  
PREPARING?*

Far from passing thoughts, the artist's questioning of their own stakes in this act of queering lingered throughout the process of making. They asked, "What authority am I relying on to draw my knowledge?"

One time I googled how to say "I speak Indonesian" in Indonesian. You can say this is some sort of preparation.

I learned about my grandmother's weaving tradition as an unpaid intern at the Royal Ontario Museum. Together with a white curator, I went through the collection of a white donor whose floor-to-ceiling cabinets were full of the type of textiles I used to see in family celebrations. I emailed my Mom some photos: "Do they look like tourist trinkets to you?" Should I send my children to the ROM?

Someone recently asked me if I feel comfortable being formally introduced as "an Indonesian curator." "Exactly, right?!" I said. What does that even mean? What authority do I hold in identifying myself as an Indonesian curator when I'm stumbling over the correct words? When I can't distinguish tradition from ethnic exotica?

How am I doing as a future ancestor? These hesitations, ambiguities, uncertainties, untidy narratives, and fragmented stories are inevitably what I'll be passing on. I find comfort in how these also thread through Yee's practice. They may be unresolved, but they are resolute. They are certainly less dangerous than any single story. Less dangerous than the authority. Within the dominant culture, neat endings are preferred. Toronto's multiculturalism diminishes entire cultures into consumable exotic foods and knick-knacks, while making little room for different ways of thinking. Yee's fragments invite me to come in, my own hesitations and all.