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A talk with Carol Yinghua Lu & Liu Ding

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Letters Against Separation + Let Individuals Represent Individuals: A reflection

Liu Ding, Liu Qingshuo, and Carol Yinghua Lu's family social distancing journal from Beijing (Letters Against Separation, e-flux conversations) gives a face and a heart, so to speak, to individuals in China. The family's introspective, compassionate voice is antithetical to the swirl of entitlement that the pandemic has provoked in some. Many around the world looking for someone to blame for COVID-19 have defaulted to the de-humanizing trope of characterizing Chinese people as the "yellow peril". Within the same vein of thinking is the broad stroke used to paint the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and individuals as one. As a citizen of "Canada", this strikes me as a particularly flawed outlook on identity considering that world-wide, Canadians are branded as being polite—yet our longstanding human rights issues encompass countless violations, including the Mercury poisoning that has lasted over three generations at the Grassy Narrows Indigenous community among other deadly water atrocities, an apathy towards missing and murdered Indigenous women, anti-black racism in all organizational tiers, confinement of immigration detainees in jails, and the imposed impoverishment and isolation of disabled people through "social assistance" rules. Our devastating involvements reach abroad through overseas operations of Canadian extractive companies and persistent exports of military equipment to countries with a record of human rights violations. This is a world where you can be considered polite without being caring, and you can be excluded from empathy under pandemic because you are considered "yellow".

During the pandemic, in addition to worrying about physical and financial health and the state of life as I knew it, I had to take on the task of defending China. China is my *lǎojiā*, but not exactly. How do you defend a place where you have never lived? On April 25th, I watched a talk by political analyst Nicolas Eberstadt, broadcast by Philippines media outlet Rappler and hosted by journalism hero Maria Ressa. Eberstadt, who was speaking on China's role in the pandemic, paused to make the distinction that when he is speaking about China, he is speaking about the CCP. This framing has since been useful. Now, when I refer to government actions, I use "CCP". From this side of the world, the wholesale vilification of China wears on me. How do you defend a place where you have never lived and why are you made to do so? When I am in China, my experiences are more discovery than not. Everything is foreign—everything is familiar. To speak Mandarin is to pull from a vocabulary that I stopped developing at age 12 and now ebbs more than it flows. I can't read. I have to mention this fact frequently so that I can ask people to read signs and menus to me. People are regularly mystified by this revelation of identity as though a river suddenly appeared between us. "You're Canadian? But aren't you Chinese?" "But you speak Chinese. How?" "Nǐ de pǔtōnghuà hěn biāo zhǔn." I love it there. I'm impatient to go back. Will I ever be able to go back? Huí jiā.

Under the hostile social conditions of COVID-19, my Chinese-Canadian friends and I group together tightly, though virtually. We share art events, news stories, images, movies, and we miss eating together in Chinatown. My first home outside of Taipei was in Toronto's Chinatown.

My father's last home was in Toronto's Chinatown. Huí jiā. We attend video talks about anti-Asian racism and the practices of Asian North American yìshùjiā, the threat to Chinatowns and more. We seem to be writing continuously, fueled by inquiries into identity in the time of COVID-19. We recognize the many ways that North American exceptionalism fuels attacks on Chinese culture, particularly on shìchǎng. The fictitious depictions being spread about shìchǎng are also projected onto tángrénjiē. I feel so emotionally close to Chinatown that when I am asked to write about it, it feels intrusive.

I did not expect to connect as I did with the sensibilities of Liu Ding and Carol Yinghua Lu as expressed through both their pandemic journal and their Pacific Crossings talk. I admire their recognition of the place that patience, humbleness and self-reflection have in both art practice and life. It is rare that children make an appearance in the art-world, so the acknowledgement of their son, Liu Qingshuo, as a person whose formation spans the pandemic feels exceptional. I know that after reading the journal many attendees at the talk will want to ask indelicately about free speech under the CCP. An interesting query, but questions like these are often asked with presuppositions, and posed in a way that feels voyeuristic or fails to recognize the range of possible valid answers and options. As Liu Ding will in-part answer, "What are the predetermined value systems?". Under the conditions of the CCP, individuals have developed many creative, coded and poetic ways of communicating. To both ask a valuable question and perceive the answer, nuance is required. In formulating questions about free speech, one ought to consider their depth of engagement with issues of freedom in their own context—particularly, learning about the surveillance of Canadians, especially those that are Black, Indigenous, activists and organizers.

I have been thinking regularly about the imperialism of the English language because of my work in Hong Kong, Mexico and the Philippines. At an event I curated in Mexico City in June 2019, I apologized to the attendees for not speaking Spanish. A fellow Canadian pointed out that I was apologizing for speaking one colonial language rather than another. Regardless, I recognize, out loud, that English speakers can arrogantly expect to be catered to. A woman thanks me for this acknowledgement. At the same time, Spain attempts to impose continuing dialectical authority over the 20 countries where Spanish is an official language, as well as the communities of their diasporas. Carolina Magis Weinberg, an artist living in Mexico City, creates work that pushes against language imperialism. The *Diccionario Panhispánico de Dudas* is published by the Real Academia de la Lengua Española in Spain. This particular dictionary sets out to resolve questions regarding the "proper" use of the Spanish language through linguistic prescription. Entries are dedicated to reaffirm and preserve the unity of Spanish through an established norm for readers who may encounter doubt about words, as they are used in Latin America. In Magis Weinberg's work *Ñ*, the *Diccionario Panhispánico de Dudas* is encased in a clear box—Mexican textiles bookmark sections of the Diccionario. The textiles represent and insert the Mexican accent asserting that the evolution and development of a language does not illegitimate it. The artist interrogates "doubt" as a mechanism of authority to consider the propagative possibilities of sharing language and eliminating hierarchy.

Due to my own thoughts on language, I am appreciative of the decision made by Carol and Liu Ding to live translate their talk, explaining that because "English is a dominant currency in the international art world", many meaningful concepts produced in China have been excluded from wider discourse. Ideas produced in China have received limited translation. The ability to speak English as an additional language may open some doors, but also perpetuates the expectation of the language as universal. But of course, their talk is translated into English and something will inevitably be differently conveyed in remittance. Exact one to one translations are impossible due to the many differences in languages, which also reflect cultural ways of being. I

take their talk as an invitation to trouble and complicate translation as the vehicle of the talk, but also a concept that is greater. Liu Ding speaks in Mandarin and Carol in English. Liu Ding has a discursive way of speaking. His responses are a web of relations. Yun-Jou Chang translates and the simpatico relationship between the three comes across as an integrated part of the talk. Yun-Jou speaks beautifully in both languages, her tones enhancing the pleasure of being present. “Clear as a bell” is a phrase that could have been coined in her honour.

Clearly and precisely are what I mean by speaking beautifully. But I believe that speaking without precision can also be beautiful, and generative. When people for whom English is an additional language use words that a native speaker might not—coming across a little oddly or slightly askew—I don’t correct them unless they ask me to. I don’t believe in rigidity and if you give consideration to the “mistakes” you can learn about that person’s mother tongue. For example, if a native Spanish speaker mixes up genders in English, I am reminded that in Spanish nouns are gendered words. When native Chinese speakers mix up genders in English, it is because “she” or “he” are not part of the Chinese language—everyone is “they”. Observation will reward you with insight into the rules of languages, and the beliefs and values of the societies that formed them. Within Canadian speech, we share well-worn phrases, collective habits that dull exact meaning. When English is not a speaker’s primary language, the selection of peculiar words achieves precision by breaking the spell of language complacency.

The title of their talk, *Let Individuals Represent Individuals* (June 18th, 2020) describes the artist/curator duo’s approach to exhibitions and documentation of Chinese contemporary art histories (since 1949). With an attentiveness to care, they open up space for the expressions and experiences of artists that they describe as “weak signals” méiyǒu tīng dào de shēngyīn, meaning those that were drowned out by a popular story about market success—artists who were not written into a heroic, universalized idea of avant-garde and contemporary art as defined in Europe and North America. Their curatorial practice foregrounds self-initiated, self-reflexive practice such as the activities of individuals Qian Weikang and Chen Shaoping, Gu Dexin, Wang Luy-an (Chen, Gu and Wang were members of the Beijing artist collective *New Measurement Group*) who stopped making art in the mid 1990s. Their exhibition *Little Movements: Self-practice in Contemporary Art* was “founded on the belief that the equality of practice is based solely on the practice itself, not on the hierarchical nature of the art system, not on geographical politics, not on length of existence, not on historic remoteness or proximity, not on ideological stance, and not on its position within the structure of art as perceived by popular opinion.” It is an integrated view of practice.

Our time with the couple has let us into their pandemic era world, one that is slightly ahead of ours. Carol is Director of Beijing Inside-Out Art Museum and observed the public’s eagerness to return to cultural institutions. I can relate to her wishes for social conditions revealed by pandemic to bring forth change. Against hope, she has viewed behaviour during the return as reactive versus reflective, and notes that invisible supports continue to be taken for granted. We are looking into the future. Not only is China 12 hours ahead of Toronto, where I reside, but China, stricken with COVID-19 before us, has advanced through its stages. As such, Liu Ding’s words can be taken as advice: “We should take the opportunities that unfold in the moment instead of waiting for the pandemic to end. New things will always emerge to distract us.” *Let Individuals Represent Individuals* is a statement against art world hegemony and circumscription, but also more. I am troubled that certain voices could overwhelm to represent the pandemic for posterity and find *Let Individuals Represent Individuals* also works as a simple declaration for guiding us in this matter. In a Brooklyn Rail article titled “Everyone Wants to Be Subaltern” written by artist Simone Yvette Leigh (February 2013), she writes about one of the first viable antidotes to colonial anthropology that she has encountered: “I imagine a future

where auto-ethnographic initiatives documenting 'local forms' of craft and vernacular knowledge would exist across the world. This archive would be accessible to artists." This brings to mind a work by Patrick Cruz titled *Kitchen Codex*. The work, which has been presented in Berlin, Mexico City, Malmö and Guelph (Canada) consists of a Filipino meal cooked by Cruz. He asks anyone who wishes to join the meal to provide him with a recipe, in any language. In this project I find a coalescence of ideas presented in the talk. Participants represent their ideas in the language that is their preferred means of expression—not necessarily one that caters to the artist. Cruz, whose languages are Tagalog and English, aims to create a collective social sculpture akin to Leigh's idea of "auto-ethnography" where individuals represent themselves to inform subsequent researchers.

I was speaking to a friend last night about how all news is now coronavirus news whether directly, or in that all stories acknowledge our current condition to render unrelated events more poignant. Every recorded story is the archive of the pandemic in the making. Can we eliminate the gatekeepers? I would like to see the "auto-ethnographic" emerge to reflect the value of representing all of humanity's individuals. Likewise the gatekeepers of language. What is the opposite of a gatekeeper? Maybe if we listen carefully, we can find the phrase within the moments of "doubt".

Fānyì/translation in order of appearance:

lǎojiā - old home, ancestral home, family home

Nǐ de pǔtōnghuà hěn biāo zhǔn – Your Mandarin is very standard

huí jiā – go home

yìshùjiā – artist

shìchǎng- wet market, similar to a local market, community market or farmer's market

táng rénjiē – Chinatown

Diccionario Panhispánico de Dudas - Panhispanic Dictionary of Doubt

Real Academia de la Lengua Española - Royal Academy of Spanish Language

simpatico – A Spanish and Italian word for sympathy. Used as an expression to indicate affinity

Guǎngdōng huà - Cantonese

Pǔtōnghuà - Mandarin

Yīngyǔ – English

Méiyǒu tīng dào de shēngyīn – Sounds that were not heard