

Momus

Finding One Another in Misrecognition: Summer Kim Lee Meets Catalina Ouyang

2023-04-28 01:04:23 Summer Kim Lee and Catalina Ouyang

While I had followed their work for some time, I did not meet Catalina Ouyang until last fall, at a symposium at Stanford University called *IMU UR2: Art, Aesthetics, and Asian America*. We were assigned to the "Gender and Sexuality" panel, and I had been tasked with responding to presenters. Ouyang included. We had not yet been in direct contact, and Ouyang had belatedly provided only a single image of their sculptural work.

As I prepared my written comments, I worried that my thoughts would not align with Ouyang's own. So I decided to address the risk of misreading that comes with the desire to know. Maybe misreading is the point, especially when talking about Asian American art—should we hazard to call it that—as the monolith it is not. There are possibilities in the violation that comes with error and failure.

Serendipitously, Ouyang's presentation, like their sculptural works, refused context. They read a composition of their own writing and others', greeting the chance of error by using citations as an associative cascade of cuts arranged together, eschewing linear narrative or argumentation. Ouyang addressed their relationships to their collaborators in their artistic practice, to their lovers in their personal life, as well as to their clients in what they describe as the "desire industry." Why try to parse one relationship out from the other? Why not attend to how they collide?

I did not see Ouyang again until the opening of their solo exhibition *forgive everything* at Night Gallery in Los Angeles this past winter. The work was a follow-up to a previous exhibition, *THREE BETRAYALS*, and continued to investigate the [three-body problem](#), which presents itself when trying to predict the movements of three bodies mutually attracted by gravity, given their respective positions and velocities. Ouyang engages the three-body problem—which lacks any general analytic solution—to understand motion as disturbance, as the volatility of bodies relating to each other.

While *THREE BETRAYALS* had featured a single-channel eponymous film, *forgive everything* comprised *Syzygy*, a spectral, choreographic video installation of three dancers (some cannibalized from *THREE BETRAYALS*), and three sculptures made of salvaged materials like retired tools, clothing, and bone, with semifigurative elements sculpted in wood, stone, and papier-mâché. The exhibition also included a single-channel film, *Sympathy for the Devil*, which shows a conversation between Ouyang and their mother, Lilly, in which Ouyang roguishly coaxes out details about Lilly's upbringing in and emigration from China. Intermittently throughout the film, Ouyang reads aloud from Roland Barthes's *A Lover's Discourse*. Barthes, in his own iteration of three, says that while his lover X "was certainly the most impenetrable," his other lover, Y, "was obvious to me, and I was inclined to love him no longer in a state of terror, but indulgently, the way a mother loves her child."

Ouyang arrives at a love that shuttles between resistant, impenetrable terror and unconditional, obvious indulgence. To me, Ouyang's art practice touches on these two iterations of love, welcoming descriptions of the violently grotesque, monstrous, and dark, but also evoking the sensuous, soft, protective, and luminous. These iterations guide our conversation here, where we hoped that our misreadings would find a way to meet.



Catalina Ouyang, *pronoun of love (I HATED THE MOUNTAINS AND THE HILLS, THE RIVERS AND THE RAIN)*, 2021. Courtesy of the artist and Lyles & King.

Summer Kim Lee: When I showed up to Stanford for the symposium, I was nervous. I had not spoken at an in-person event in a while, and I was very intimidated by the writers, scholars, artists, and critics in attendance. I was wondering when you and I would be introduced to each other. Then we didn't actually cross paths until we were waiting in the green room to go onstage for our panel.

Catalina Ouyang: And I was conspicuously absent at first, right? [Laughs.] I was waiting in an urgent care center that whole morning. Fifteen minutes before we were supposed to be on stage, I ran out of my exam room half-clothed and flagged down a doctor, threatening to leave. "I have to give a talk at Stanford!" He finished examining me in the hallway. Then I sprinted to our panel.

I was also very nervous about attending the conference. I have a bad history with academia. Self-sabotage is my way of dealing with insecurity, and I am so practiced that I psychosomatically summon physiological afflictions that then require treatment. Chaos of my own making makes everything else seem manageable.

SKL: I had heard you were racing to make it in time! Although I'm glad you did, some part of me had thought, "Well, maybe everyone will go home; what a relief." Whenever I present or speak in front of people, a part of me hopes that no one will show up. I'm working on that, because all I'm doing is creating this fantasy that I can manage other people's expectations of me, rather than just my own. Not that I endorse self-sabotage, but I guess I need to focus on making my own chaos instead.

CO: Honestly, I had not read any of your work before the panel. But I loved the response you followed our presentations with—your phrase "capaciousness of misrecognition" stuck with me—and it made me want to talk to you more.

SKL: I was flattered when you reached out after the conference and am grateful that you continue to be in touch. I retreat easily, so I need nudging. I sent a dramatically long draft of my book to you for this exchange, and, obviously, I was anxious again because I engage with your work there, too. But in talking and writing with you, I'm learning how to be less self-conscious of whatever corrections and adjustments might come with misreading and misrecognition.

CO: No shame in either.

SKL: Right. Even when editing this conversation and seeing which cuts you were ready to make that I wasn't and vice versa, it was clear that some chaos is meant to be shared with someone else, otherwise you're just spiraling alone, no gravity or ground. In your work in particular, what comes out of the chaos of three?

CO: Ten years ago, I wrote a failed autofiction titled *Syzygy*, which refers to a straight-line configuration of three celestial bodies. I was trying to wrangle planetary eclipse and conjunction into a coherent index for alignment and interference among three bodies, three generations, three members of a nuclear family, or three players in a love triangle.

In 2016, I pulled two all-nighters reading Cixin Liu's novel *The Three-Body Problem*, which introduced me to the physics problem. I was moved by the novel's proposal that the horrors of the Cultural Revolution in China so disillusioned the protagonist that she sold the fate of humanity and Earth to colonizing aliens.

A few years later, my father disclosed to me a family secret, which my mother does not know that I now know, that had to do with my parents' coming of age and sexual awakening during the Cultural Revolution, as well as conflicts around reproductive health access in China. It also dealt with my maternal grandmother's history of performing illegal abortions for unmarried women—of which my grandmother does not know that I know—and the lingering reality of my parents' still-extant marriage, which they did not know that I, as a child, knew to be violently dysfunctional. In taking up the intractable three-body problem, I was thinking about what kinds of stories emerge from withholding, redaction, and removal of context.

SKL: In *forgive everything* and *THREE BETRAYALS*, it feels like you're not just recovering access to a lost context—because that recovery is futile—but instead, interrogating what that sense of violation generates in its wake. Do you see it this way?

CO: When I began work on *THREE BETRAYALS*, I was thinking about inherited trauma, and writing a lot through a volatile drug addiction and a doomed love affair sustained mainly by my death drive. That writing took the form of an extended correspondence with the three performers and [Dorothy Carlos](#), a sound artist who one year later helped create *Syzygy's* score. These letters eventually gave language to the film. I instigated the correspondence by inviting responses to "No Name Woman," the first chapter of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*.

SKL: I see the resonances between the disclosure of your family's secret and Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, which begins with the narrator relating to the reader her mother's warning: "You must not tell anyone . . . what I am about to tell you." The narrator proceeds to tell her mother's "talk-story" of how the narrator's aunt, who was shunned by her family and her village in China for giving birth to a child that was not her husband's, then drowned herself and her child in the village well. The narrator asserts the possibility that her aunt was raped, giving another context that remains unverifiable. In opening with a story that should not be told, the book tells on itself, becoming an invitation and an intrusion: to be told a secret is a violation of trust, but it is also the kind of disturbance of inheritance you talk about.

CO: In the writing and choreography of *THREE BETRAYALS*, I echoed the anaphora of Kingston's narrator: *Perhaps, this happened . . . Perhaps, they met here . . . Perhaps, she did this . . .* I was drawn to the structure of the repeated attempt, of wanting so much to know that you imagine answers into being. My process of developing a project often takes a permutational form. I return to the same investigations because I am not done trying to know.

In creating the score for *Syzygy*, Dorothy and I took up the musical loop as a contemporary fugue, a composition technique predicated on permutation. We recorded loop-based cello and vocal improvisations based on audio excerpts from Jean-Luc Godard's film *One Plus One*, a Marxist project that documents the Rolling Stones' 1968 recording sessions for "Sympathy for the Devil." I was drawn to the fact that Godard originally wanted to make the film about abortion and the fact that while he was making this film, my mother was growing up in Maoist China, and, a couple decades later, would meet the Rolling Stones herself in Chicago.

SKL: I've been thinking and writing about how citation is taken up in varying aesthetic practices, particularly, for instance, in Xandra Ibarra's [installation](#) *Ashes of Five Feminist of Color Texts* (2020), where Ibarra burned five of the most cited texts written by feminists of color (*This Bridge Called My Back*, co-edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa; "Mapping the Margins" by Kimberlé Crenshaw; *Sister Outsider* by Audre Lorde; *Borderlands/La Frontera* by Gloria Anzaldúa; *Black Feminist Thought* by Patricia Hill Collins).

Ibarra's book burning speaks to the exigency of the present moment, in the midst of book banning in schools, except Ibarra makes clear that, in her work, book burning is not about censorship. For Ibarra, to burn is to cremate, as a practice of mourning. For me, her critique of citation enacts an alternative citational practice of and as destruction. Usually, we want our citations to enable a reciprocal relationship with another—a relationship founded upon mutual understanding—but I want to think of how citation can also be nonreciprocal and asymmetrical, how it can often feel like an imposition or betrayal. There are limits to thinking of citation as care and preservation; we might do well to think about citation as that which can do a little damage, too.

CO: I like thinking about citation as both homage and perversion. It challenges the ego.

At one point in *Syzygy's* score, a masculine voice tearfully and repeatedly exclaims, "I'm sorry." I took that audio recording of my ex-lover and rapist when I was in the process of leaving him. This context is not disclosed in the work, but rather gives way to a sensory experience of sound, tactility, movement, and light. The voiding of context embodies a kind of refusal that is not an attack on or indictment of the audience but a concession coming from a place of humility, acknowledging: I could not make sense of this, I could not master this material or event or narrative.

SKL: In the score, the context of your ex-lover and rapist's utterance, "I'm sorry," is destroyed by way of the loop, like a stutter, causing the sound of his voice to degrade and corrode over time. The antagonistic yet humble use of that banal, empty utterance creates something like the possibility of forgiveness.

CO: Part of my impetus behind the exhibition title, *forgive everything*, followed Anne Dufourmantelle's [assertion](#) that "forgiveness is a violent act. It promises to set right time itself." In an Orphic sense, when we turn around and embrace the partner we have repudiated (as with Eurydice, or my ex-lover), all the vanished people and possibilities of the past arise anew.

When creating the garments for the film work, [Brandon Wen](#) and I looked at medieval European illustrations of mandrakes—which carry violent associations to both fertility and death—and schoolgirl uniforms. The pleating in the uniforms led us to work on extending, distorting, and obscuring the body, following Gilles Deleuze's [conception of the fold](#) as a way of encompassing multiplicity, mutability, and complication.



Catalina Ouyang, *THREE BETRAYALS*, 2021 (film still). Courtesy of the artist and No Place Gallery.

SKL: There is a section in *THREE BETRAYALS* where you talk about Deleuze's essay on the fold with one of your clients. The conversation is candid and exploratory—you ask questions in hopes of clarifying the text's meaning. You ask your client for something that he may or may not be equipped to give. This is not a practice of citation per se, but I want to know more about what, for you, went into this part of the film.

CO: Early on in my erotic work, I was studying the poetry of classical Chinese courtesans. Back then, many of the women in China who could read, write, and paint (a true minority) were courtesans, nuns, or both. The erotic client—the Temple and Church included therein—has always been the originary patron of artistic production. So there is a historical precedent for how erotic labor is intertwined with not just socioeconomic mobility but artistic agency as well.

The client in the scene you mention is an astrophysicist, and we serendipitously met right when I was beginning to work with the three-body problem. On past projects, I had enlisted the cooperation of specialists—engineers, marine biologists, musicians, architects, historians, my bilingual mother—but with the astrophysicist, I wanted fully to contaminate interdisciplinary study with the haptic, intimate, transactional, and amateur. Our discussion of Deleuze is clumsy and elliptical. Neither of us is a philosopher. In *Strange Attractor*, the second film we worked on together, we spend all night in his car driving around the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Alternately, he lectures me on chaotic systems and drives while I sleep in the back. In this scenario, he multitasks as professor, chauffeur, john, and durational performer, thus rearranging our power differential.

SKL: Perhaps this other way of relating, which is not removed from the possibility of extraction or appropriation, yet not wholly reducible to it either, emerges within and between the fragmented structure of your films and what they withhold.

CO: In both films, the astrophysicist is visibly old, white, and male, while I am visibly young, Asian, and femme. But these axiomatic facts are not made topical. I am committed to errant forms that elude the recognizable. The courtesans of classical China often left their poems untitled if they were addressing a conspicuous person or risky politics, which speaks to the uses of abstraction and opacity. Contingency has to do with the tenderness of care work (and sex work), but it also has to do with the risk of false promise. As a false promise, when is a text or a scene precisely what it does not appear to be?

SKL: In terms of a scene, I want to ask you about *otherwise, spite: 1. whores at the end of the world / 2. from every drop of his blood another demon arose (1829-1840)* (2020). When I first saw it, standing from above, I felt like I was implicated in a scene of violence. I felt predatory. Looking into the well, I wondered if I was the spiteful one here.

CO: I made that piece for a show titled *cunt waifu* in fall of 2020. Back then, every time I took the mostly empty subway, I absently imagined being pushed onto the tracks. Amidst this elevated atmosphere of anti-Asian violence—both real and wildly sensationalized by social media and the news cycle—I was searching through historical images of a racialized Other.

SKL: After researching *otherwise, spite*, I learned that you had recreated the scene from [a nineteenth-century British political cartoon](#) of a supposed gang of Indian "Thugs" murdering innocent travelers. The cartoon asserts the Empire as a benevolent entity that must protect India from itself, suffusing the scene with the terror of misrepresentation. For me, this image of a racialized Other drudges up the feeling of being captured by an image, and feeling spiteful because of it. In 2020, images of violence against Asian women and elders circulated with comments like, "This could have been me," or, "This could have been my mother/aunt/grandmother." These were crucial gestures of intimacy and solidarity, yet to me, they created another cycle of capture that didn't leave ample room for that spiteful feeling. It's not that I object to being represented in that way, or in that context. But I do want to squarely face the queasy ambivalence that comes with claiming that experience of violence as one's own, particularly as a demand for authority, recognition, and something like care.



Catalina Ouyang, *otherwise, spite: 1. whores at the end of the world / 2. from every drop of his blood another demon arose (1829-1840)*, 2020. Courtesy of the artist and Lyles & King.

CO: As with circulating an image, recreating a scene, however torqued, puts a work at risk of reifying the subject of its critique. I also felt ambivalent about those images. I was living then as a kept woman to a difficult client in the middle of lockdown, Orientalizing myself every day. Feeling ruled by scarcity and instability while making that work, I ran headlong into the risks of self-implication—as if the only way out was through this well into hell.

SKL: I am thinking about the figures in *otherwise, spite*, in relation to the “no name woman” and the “kept woman.” They remind me of Anne Anlin Cheng’s book, *Ornamentalism*, insofar as I’ve been interested in how the aesthetics of Asiatic femininity speak to a racialized, gendered violence obfuscated by its own beauty. To my mind, that obfuscation affords an aesthetic encounter that does not carry the expectation to represent an injured Asian woman in need of redress and repair.

CO: Boy, do I have mixed feelings about *Ornamentalism*. But yes—how do you get away from that duty toward legibility and repair?

When I was in grad school, Amanda Ross-Ho came to critique an overburdened installation I made. I told her that my penchant for over-explication and maximalism stemmed from a compulsion to be “generous.” As a BIPOC person, I did not want misrecognition; I wanted to be understood. And she said simply that sometimes real generosity comes with unknowing.

SKL: That shift from over-explication to unknowing brings to mind the work you presented at Stanford: *pronoun of love* (2021). In the work, fetal canine figures are contorting with a back bend or sliced in half at the torso with cold precision. Their puppy skull heads face mirrors on a wall, where a viewer might catch a glimpse of themselves alongside the skulls that gaze into their own reflection, alluding to an interiority we cannot access. These warped bodies uneasily recall the violence they must have suffered to become so misshapen in the first place.

CO: 2021 was difficult. I was an open wound moving through the world in unending freefall. The drug addiction I narrate from in *THREE BETRAYALS* threatened to derail my life, but it was also the primary physical and emotional crutch that made possible the body of work that included *pronoun of love*.

All the mess of living is unavoidably embodied in the work, but, without becoming its subject, how instead can it be metabolized? Integral? With *pronoun of love* I was thinking about the contorted body casts from Pompeii, and how Jean Baudrillard [apprehends them](#) “in the very heat where death caught them.” What I felt was no longer the heat of anger, but its calcified aftermath.

SKL: In an Instagram post from this past December, you write about a sculpture titled *debt* in relation to your father, who you did not grow up with, but whose things—objects, tchotchkes—had surrounded you. They were your father’s belongings, not yours, and yet they had become objects populating your own memory, arising for years as unknown citations in your work. I feel like this is where debt emerges—between these materials in the work that you are owed, or that you owe to another, not just your father. It feels like a return, but not a homecoming.

CO: It was the first time I had visited a residence of my father’s—he moves around—in almost a decade. Northern Florida. A very weird place. I let him feed me, and I slept all day. It was a month after *forgive everything* opened. I was totally depleted.

Last April, I was hospitalized for exhaustion and related sudden hearing loss. I was trying to meet a deadline. I had tendonitis in both arms. I couldn’t feel my pinkies or thumbs. I am still half-deaf in my right ear. Everything sounds like old radio. I went to the ear doctor and they gave me steroids to help mitigate the hearing loss, and warned me that the steroids might cause insomnia. I used the steroids to pull a week of all-nighters and move my wooden sculptures unassisted. It was deranged, and it ruined me.

Months after that, my assignment to myself in making *debt* was to guide my process with curiosity rather than hypercapitalist machismo. The title *debt* is dense and fraught, with ties to gendered and racialized dispossession. But if ransom is the capsized dream of atonement, what are you left with in its wake? Forgiveness. Inviting the generosity of unknowing, permitting myself abandon with materials, processes, and memories that pleasure and confound me. Now, I am taking this year off to recover. Where most debts are philosophically unpayable, I am proud of being able to honor a debt to my own body and spirit.