

RYERSON UNIVERSITY

**NO FATS, NO FEMMES, NO ASIANS:
REIMAGINING SEXUAL AND ETHNIC IDENTITIES OF QUEER ASIAN MEN**

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Abstract

There is a common belief in the queer community that the oppressed cannot oppress others. In many ways, this support paper will document the meandering paths I took to create the short documentary *No Fats, No Femmes, No Asians*. But more than that, it addresses how such blatant racism and discrimination is accepted in the queer community. It is a discussion of how queers and Asians are portrayed in the media, and how the early representation of these two groups has created trauma and has become ingrained in the larger queer community. I will be borrowing from important questions raised by neocolonialists, critical race and queer theorists, as I make references to popular and queer culture. These will be my guides for a theoretical investigation of identity politics in Canada, specifically identities of queer Asian men. Using experimental, auto-ethnographic, and performative documentary tactics, I will offer alternative images and different ways of presenting those images so that they cannot be taken up as another form of subjugating queer Asian men into stereotypical discourse.

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It is true that there are those who don't want to deal with us because we are gay Asians. It's also true that there are those who want to deal with us precisely because we are gay Asians. However, there is a third situation. There are those who deal with us because we are interesting human beings. Ethnicity may or may not be an interesting aspect of us in this regard. Every time I make a contact with this third type of person, I always felt a personal break-through. It felt good.

**– Ralph, *The Invisible Visibles*
(1983)**

Introduction

“No Fats, No Femmes, No Asians” is an infamous phrase that has migrated from the bar scene to social networks, apps, and dating sites. This “axiom” has allowed queer men to mask their discrimination and sexual racism as a form of sexual preference. Recently, with the help of websites like *Douchebags of Grindr* and the screen-capturing of derogatory and discriminatory comments on these platforms, online communities can identify and publicly shame these individuals for such behaviours. Unfortunately, this has taught many of these same men to avoid appearing to be politically incorrect and their “no statements” inform viewers of their preferences instead. For these men, stating their preferences allows them to deflect confrontations and maintain a hegemonizing racial structure without questioning why and how their negative biases toward Asian race came to be. In a recent study *The Gay Community is Racist* (2017) from *The Fact Site*, published by the *Health Equity and Rights Organization*, 81 percent of South East Asian and 86 percent of South Asian gay men have stated that they experienced racism in the gay scene.¹ In order to address this issue of how such blatant racism is accepted in the queer community — members of a group to have themselves experienced discrimination — I will be borrowing important questions from studies in neocolonialism, critical race theory and queer theory, as well as references from popular and queer culture. These will act as guidelines for an intersectional analysis of identity politics in Canada, specifically identities of queer Asian men and how we can reimagine our portrayal in the media. But more than discussing the racial issues of this specific epithet “no fats, no femmes, no Asians,” I will unpack the two elements often not dealt with in this discourse—the silencing of fatness and femininity.

¹ The Fact Site. *The Gay Community is Racist*. 2017. <https://www.thefactsite.org.uk/fs159-the-gay-community-is-racist> (accessed April 2017)

In the 1995 documentary adaptation of the *Celluloid Closet*, narrator Lily Tomlin asserts that gays have often been presented in films “as something to laugh at, something to pity, or something to fear.”² Although this sentiment is no longer wholly true for the larger queer community because of the availability of strong queer characters portrayed in the media, the pressure to create counter images as markers of acceptance is still prevalent in the queer Asian community. Asian men are still something to laugh at; queer Asian men are still something to pity; and Asian men who dare to show their sexuality are still something to fear. This leads to the dominant practice that if we increase the visibility of counter images, we will diffuse these stereotypes—without thinking about the meaning that is imposed on our community and the perpetuating of cultural codes imposed on our bodies. A counter image of queer Asian masculinity puts us in a position of needing to be muscular, straight-acting, and sexually dominant to counter our all too familiar portrayal as smooth, passive, and effeminate. In *The Other Question*, Homi Bhabha suggests that we shift our site of resistance:

My reading of colonial discourse suggests that the point of intervention should shift from the *identification of the images* as positive or negative, to an understanding of the *process of subjectification* made possible (and plausible) through stereotypical discourse.³

In my short documentary film, I want to create this shift from images identified as positive or negative to the questioning of social systems and their constraints on individuals that help to perpetuate these kinds of images. In particular, I want to highlight through my three participants that their struggles while dealing with the undercurrents of fatphobia, hypermasculinity, and racism they face are unique to them, but also part of a greater problem that affects many Asian men. I also want to celebrate their sense of uninhibited, make-believe play and the construction

² The Celluloid Closet. DVD. Directed by Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman. Sony Pictures Classics, 1995.

³ Homi K. Bhabha, “The Other Question: Difference, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism”, *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1990), 71.

of identities through their involvement with performance and drag. Ultimately, I am offering alternative images and different ways of presenting those images so that they cannot be taken up as another form of subjugating queer Asian men into stereotypical discourse. By using different kinds of discursive strategies, I am presenting the complexity, multiplicity, and intersections of my participants' identities. It is through my treatment of these images, that I will add to the visual discourse.

In many ways, this support paper will document the meandering path I took to create this film. But more important than that, I hope it also gives the reader a sense of my exploration of queer and Asian portrayal in the media. I will discuss how the early representation of these two groups created trauma that has perpetuated stereotypes and become ingrained in the larger queer community, and ultimately how these ideologies continue to cascade down and affect the queer Asian community. Some may argue that there is a coherency issue when I am analyzing the queer Asian community and using references from the larger queer community or tracing the representation of queer men from Hollywood. But it is impossible to discuss the queer Asian community on its own within this “no fats, no femmes, no Asians” context. For example, I became a visible minority two weeks after my birthday in 1997—that was the day that I landed in Canada. Discussing visible minorities without discussing the larger cultural climate of Canada would not provide a holistic perspective of how this intersection exists within immigrant societies in Canada and elsewhere. Similarly, looking at the representation of queer Asian men alone will only highlight the challenges of this community. But by including representations of queer and the representations of Asian men, it allows us additional insight

into the parallels and contrasts in popular portrayal of these two groups: as one group improves its representation in the media, the other remains stuck in a retrograde, stagnant ideological situation, which creates representational issues for queer Asian men. In this paper, I will discuss some of the documentary and creative approaches that I have taken to arrive at my final thesis film—a project that I hope can undercut and disrupt some of the issues my community is facing. In Chapter 1, I will outline the history and challenges of queer and Asian representation and discuss the knee-jerk response of creating binary counter images and their limitations. In Chapter 2, I will describe my process of making the film and my participants' process in drag performance. Lastly, in Chapter 3, I will discuss the various documentary approaches that have inspired and shaped this film.

Chapter 1: Queer & Asian Representation

1.1 On the Screens and in the Streets

In *The Work of Representation*, Stuart Hall observes that the word representation has a kind of double meaning: on one hand, it means to present, to image, to depict; while on the other hand, the word representation, or *re*-presentation, carries the notion that something was already there, and through mediation, it is being *re*-presented.⁴ Hall argues that along with these notions, representation has another understanding, similar to when we say a politician represents us—it takes the place of or stands in for us. This is the process not only of depicting images but also giving meaning to depicted images, which stands for what we are talking about; and it is often through this depiction that gaps in representation arise. As a minority, I often find my experiences narrowed into a few tropes, which are echoed and reproduced repeatedly as shorthands for ‘the queer experience’ or ‘the Asian experience.’ I even find myself using these tropes sometimes. As Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie warns us, the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, the problem is that they are incomplete.⁵ When incomplete stories, through repetition and persistence, solidify stereotypes, they mute all hope for variety or complexity.

In Hollywood cinema, queer characters have populated the silver screen throughout its history; however, this tells us more about those doing the representing than those being represented. In early films, gay men were never explicitly acknowledged as such. They were depicted as reference points for the more masculine, heroic characters. They were the sissies who existed to

⁴ Stuart Hall, “The Work of Representation.” In *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (California: Sage Publication Inc, 1997), 13.

⁵ TED Talk. “The Danger of a Single Story.” TEDGlobal 2009

be ridiculed for their effeminate mannerism. They were sexless deviants, serving as comedic relief—who were undeniably foreign. As Vito Russo famously claims in the opening chapter of *The Celluloid Closet*: “Nobody likes a sissy.”⁶ Russo argues that the sissy occupied a middle ground between masculinity and femininity and was not a threatening representation of homosexuality. However, when given a sexual identity, the homosexual suddenly becomes the psychopath, such as Norman Bates from Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960). When given a sexuality identity, the comedic aspect ends and the character turns to the same cinematic scope as the monster in the horror genre. In *Gay New York*, historian George Chauncey argues that the policing of homosexuality in the 1930’s, 40’s and 50’s was due to fear that the ‘other’ threatens public order and has the potential to disrupt the reproduction of normative gendered and sexual arrangements.⁷ Resisting these narratives, the gay community adopted a counter image, Adonis, which became a means to showcase that gay men can be masculine and straight-acting and that we are not always the ‘sissy.’ Inadvertently, over the years, this idealization of often tall, masculine, young, white, cisgender, and able-bodied counter images created new cultural codes imposed on queer bodies. And critics began to refer to this new image as a form of compensation, a form of obsession; an indicator not of the diversity of gay masculinity but emblematic of gay self-loathing.⁸ Thus, the Adonis complex was born.

Similarly, portrayals of Asians in early Hollywood cinema have reduced them to the alien, the polluter of social and cultural norms. They play the role of the Orient, where the world is

⁶ Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 4.

⁷ George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 9.

⁸ Duncan Duane. "Out of the Closet and into the Gym: Gay Men and Body Image in Melbourne, Australia." *The Journal of Men's Studies*, 2008: 333.

historically divided into West and East, the occident and the orient, and the orient's role was to "orient" the occident. Edward Said discusses in *Orientalism* how Western culture has had a long history of perceiving the East as characteristically backward, a trait used to justify European imperialism in Asia and in the Middle East during the nineteenth century.⁹ Where the West was masculine, the East was feminine. Where the West was orderly, active, cerebral, and progressive, the East was chaotic, passive, sensual and barbaric.

Developing Said's concepts for the popular imagination, in *Orientalists: Asian Americans in Popular Culture*, Robert G. Lee defines the 'other' as outsiders who are inside, disrupting the internal structure of a cultural formation. Lee identifies six faces of the oriental: the pollutant, the deviant, the model minority, the coolie, the yellow peril, and the gook—explaining that each portrays the oriental as an alien body and a threat to the American national family.¹⁰ This threat is found in several early films depicting the oriental as the antagonist, such as the 1915 film *The Cheat* by Cecil B. DeMille, where a young, single, wealthy, conniving Japanese man, played by Sessue Hayakawa, preys on the misfortune of the financially distressed and married Edith Hardy. Similarly, in the film *The Mask of Fu Manchu*, the character of Doctor Fu Manchu, played by Boris Karloff in yellow face, is seductive, diabolical—the yellow peril personified as sexually ambiguous and thus morally dangerous. Lee argues that sexuality like race is a socially constructed category of power.¹¹ This means that by giving sexuality to characters, we give them power, and if we give characters belonging to the realm of the 'other' sexuality, we make them simultaneously powerful and threatening. Such portrayals of Asian men in Hollywood as occupying positions of power, especially sexual power, have been few, if not nonexistent.

⁹ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 8.

¹⁰ Robert G. Lee, *Orientalists: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), 3.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 15.

Between the 1930s and the 1950s, religious and women's groups criticized Hollywood films for contributing to immorality. In response, the Motion Picture Production code, or "Hays Code" was introduced, a system of self-censorship by which indecent or immoral content would be restricted. As a result, many queer characters in films of the era were either obscured or written out completely. Since the code allows for "sexual perversion" to be depicted in a negative light, queer characters that remained in films were now no longer the sissy but the villain, the rebel, the deviant. It was not until the 1990s—when the Stonewall riots were a thing of history, and the second-wave feminist and civil rights movements had long ago paved the way for gay liberation—that a new queer cinema independence movement emerged. This movement not only introduced queer themes, but also introduced queer filmmakers to cinematic audiences. Films such as *Philadelphia* (1993) by Jonathan Demme were among the first to tackle homophobia and the AIDS crisis. This demonstrates that Hollywood began paying attention to the queer community; however, at the same time, it also reduced the queer community to the AIDS crisis. During this period, new queer cinema presents identity and sexuality as fluid and changeable; it unapologetically depicts same-sex relationships and same-sex sexual activity to reconfigure the heteronormative notions of family and marriage.¹² It celebrates the pleasures of homosexual desires without making the homosexuals pay¹³. By 1993, aligned with the new queer cinema movement, Ang Lee's ground-breaking comedy *The Wedding Banquet* tells the story of a gay Taiwanese-American man who must partake in an elaborate wedding ceremony with a female acquaintance when his parents unexpectedly visit. It was the first cinematic depiction of a

¹² Mathew Anand, *Sexed Celluloid: Queering the Heterosexual Malayalam Cinema* (Cambridge: Unicorn & Pegasus Books, 2013), 5.

¹³ Bruce, Jean. *A Melodramatic Imagined Nation: The Unruly Subject of Canadian Cinemas*. (Dissertation. Concordia University, 2003), 197.

homosexual Asian American man in a positive leading role.

While over the last three decades there have been great strides in social progress and the representation of queer men in the media, racialized groups within the queer community, however, are still underrepresented. Aside from the recent film *Moonlight* (2016), which won the Academy Award for Best Picture, there have been few films with racialized queer main characters that have had such impact in the North American sphere. Since *The Wedding Banquet*, the most notable, and perhaps the only other, portrayal of a queer Asian man as a main character would be Andrew Ahn's *Spa Night* (2016). The representational imbalance of queer white men and queer racialized men begs the questions: How much of this “no fats, no femmes, no Asians” epithet is purely racial? How much of it is a direct consequence of one group's social progress while another is left behind, or others are left behind? How much of it is because the queer male community no longer wants to be associated with the image of the sissy, while representation of Asian men is still hovering around the effeminate, sexless stereotype?

1.2 On Being Queer Asian

In this section, there are two aspects of the queer Asian situation that I want to acknowledge. First is the shared sentiment that as queer Asians, we are too queer for Asian spaces and too Asian for queer spaces. One of the challenges of our community has always been to find resources and spaces where the community can gather, share, and celebrate. The second challenge is that the term “queer Asian community” is problematic since it discusses the community as a single entity without the recognition of ethnicities, cultural differences, and the many communities and conflicts within these groups. It is, however, a term of convenience, a

necessary evil to unite community members—by common cultural codes, common language, or common lived experience—who have been ignored and trivialized by the larger queer community. My discussion of these two topics is limited because there is comprehensive material and lively discussions ‘out there’ in the community. Here, I want to address the issues that are not often dealt with: our focus on racial experience, and queer films produced in Asia.

When we speak of queer Asian representation in North America, or in Canada specifically, often Richard Fung’s seminal 1986 documentary, *Orientations*, comes to mind. What most people may not know is that this work draws from a line of conversation in Gerald Chan’s article “Out of the Shadows” in 1979, and Jonas Ma’s multimedia documentary performance/slideshow *The Invisible Visibles* in 1983. What all three projects have in common is their focus on race—in particular, what it means to be a racialized queer individual in Canada. Gerald Chan writes:

Oppression is often a two-way affair. For example, stemming out of ignorance, some white folks needed to act out their prejudice to safeguard their own interest. On the other hand, the insecurity which arose from language problems and cultural differences have made some members of ethnic groups retreat into their own ghettos, accompanied by strong resentment against their ‘oppressors’. The interplay of oppression both inflicted by others and ourselves, underlies the relationships between racial groups, as well as the relationships between men and women, the mainstream and the ‘deviant’. What surprises me, however, is the lack of understanding and mutual support between oppressed minority groups. Busy dealing with their own problems they seldom get together to fight back against the common sources of oppression.¹⁴

Chan’s article remains the earliest document of the queer Asian community in Canada. Since then, there have been anthologies, articles and documentaries, in particular Richard Fung’s film *Re:Orientations* in 2016 that have captured more stories from the community. However, this discussion within the community continues to revolve around ethnicity and race, and the two aspects of body image, mainly the silencing of fatness and hypermasculinity, are given less

¹⁴ Gerald Chan, “Out of the Shadows,” *The Asianadian (An Asian Canadian Magazine)*, Vol.2 No.1, 1979

focus. These are the two areas that I will be exploring in Chapter 3 and in my thesis film, mainly with the goal of balancing some of the discussion within the community without trivializing the racial experience of my participants.

Although there is no documentation on this subject, one of the popular arguments against queer Asian representation in North America is that there are many wonderful films produced in Asia that show beautiful, powerful portrayals of Asian men, so similar media produced in North America for a small population are “not necessary,” or deemed “frivolous.” To address this issue, I will borrow a few recent cases of Hollywood’s portrayal of Asians on film. In the last few years, there have been a slew of projects that have been attacked for whitewashing. Some of the most recent are *Aloha* (2015), *Doctor Strange* (2016), *Iron Fist* (2017), *Death Note* (2017), and many more. However, the most interesting situation was when the producers of *Ghost in the Shell* (2016) went to Japan to create videos of the audience explaining that they do not have any issues with Scarlett Johansson chosen as the lead character, Motoko Kusanagi. To placate the angry Asian- American crowd, these producers may have missed in their logic the fact that the people they interviewed do not deal with the identity politics of being a minority—it is outside of their lived reality. Similarly, queer films from Asia cannot fully represent queer Asian men elsewhere; they cannot touch upon some of the representational issues or the challenges that queer Asian men face in North America, or anywhere else outside of Asia. This is precisely the reason why my film exists—to address the issues and challenges that can only be understood from the perspective of the queer Asian diaspora.

1.3 *Awareness and Imageries*

In his article “Looking for My Penis,” Richard Fung observes that Asian men in films are “sometimes dangerous, sometimes friendly, but almost always characterized by a desexualized Zen aestheticism.”¹⁵ Fung asks the question, if Asian men have no sexuality, how can we have homosexuality? By studying a dream sequence in *Below the Belt*, a porn video directed by Philip St. John in 1985, Fung exposes how Asian representation in porn exists for the pleasure of white viewers. In the scene, Greg lays down Robbie, who ‘turns Japanese,’ and proceeds to fuck him—literalizing the metaphor that by being passive, Robbie becomes oriental.¹⁶ Fung further investigates *Asian Knights*, directed by Ed Sung in 1985, where two Asian men—Brad and Rick—are seeing a white psychiatrist because they are unable to have sex with each other. After minimal counseling, Rick and Brad begin to make love as the camera pans to the psychiatrist suggesting his point of view. Soon the psychiatrist strips off his clothes, joins in, and takes a position “center of the action – and at the center of the frame.”¹⁷

Fung notes that the race of the producer is no automatic guarantee of consciousness about these issues. He argues that the difference depends on who is the constructed audience. Although I agree with Fung’s observation, there is an element still missing: the race of the constructed audience is also no guarantee of consciousness about these issues. As we have seen from the *Ghost in the Shell* case, not all Asians will understand representational issues if they have not experienced being a visible minority. Likewise, not all Asians living in Canada, America, or elsewhere outside of Asia feel that they have been racialized, so having an Asian-Canadian or

¹⁵ Richard Fung. “Looking for my Penis: The Eroticized Asian in Gay Video Porn,” *Asian American Sexualities: Dimensions of the Gay and Lesbian Experience* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 181.

¹⁶ Ibid, 6.

¹⁷ Ibid, 7.

Asian-American crowd also does not guarantee this awareness. What is important is not the race of the producer or the constructed viewer; what is important is the mutual awareness that both the producer and the viewer must share regardless of race, gender, or sexuality.

Here, I want to pivot our discussion away from producers and intended audiences to the actual imaginaries created to tackle representational issues. In 2008, a website called *Peter Fever* set out to change the portrayal of gay Asians in North American porn. It features many Asian porn actors alongside white, black, Latino actors in different scenarios—often with black-white, Asian-white, or Latino-white mixing, which continues to perpetuate a white-centeredness. The website does include a few videos of Asian models topping Caucasians—apparently to suggest that the oppressed is now the oppressor—but even if the site only showcases Asians as dominant, the question remains: what fundamental shift in ideology will that contribute to the questioning of Asian men’s subjectification? Contrary to our beliefs, having an awareness of the dominant narrative and constructing an Asian audience is not enough. While it encourages the production of a counter image, we are still forced into the binary structure of stereotyping, of those who are and those who are not, which *re*-produces a system of ‘othering’. For example, to combat the stereotype of Asian men being docile and subservient, we have created “counter” images of muscular, straight-acting Asian men. Unfortunately, this tends to further isolate queer Asian men who do not fit into either camp.

The process of living up to white-centered homonormativity, or being measured against the Adonis complex, rejects the ambiguity and complexity of lived experiences of queer Asian men. It further disparages characteristics that are deemed feminine, passive, and submissive. And men

who embody these characteristics are often vilified. Asian men who date white men, especially young men who date older white men, are deemed as the ‘bad’ gays because they are seen to perpetuate the stereotype of the Asian ‘house boy’, and maligns white men as ‘rice queens’, predators lurking in the dark, waiting to pounce on Asian boys with low self-esteem or self-worth. To indicate how prevalent this myth is, consider that there is an entire sub-cultural language devoted to describing such liaisons; ‘sticky rice’, ‘potato queen’, and ‘curry queen’ are used to label sexual preferences, but often, these are terms with negative connotations and perpetuate stereotypes in the community.

If mutual awareness is not enough and creating binary counter imageries is not enough, how can we address these issues? As suggested by Homi Bhabha, we need to shift our site of resistance from the identification of the images to an understanding of the process of subjectification.¹⁸ It is not only the producer’s role in understanding this process, but it is also a requirement for creative projects to act as engagement points for audiences to understand this process as well. We need to engage in conscious discussion of how cultures enforce and police our identities and bodies. Over the next two chapters, I will explore the convoluted path and experiments I undertook as an attempt to create this engagement point.

¹⁸ Homi K. Bhabha, “The Other Question: Difference, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism”, *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1990), 71.

Chapter 2: No Fats, No Femmes, No Asians

2.1 Filmmaker's Journey: Process & Methodology

Initially, I came to the program with two ideas for my final project: one was about queer movements and their social progress in Viet Nam, and the other was an intergenerational documentary on queer Asian communities in Toronto. As I made my way through the program, I realized that going back to Viet Nam was out of the question and that it would place me in a position of compromising the project due to time and budgetary constraints. As a result, I pursued my second option with the goal of uncovering persistent, recurring challenges that multigenerational queer Asian in Toronto face and the multitude of strategies people engage to overcome these challenges. The first of these involved issues surrounding mental health. I was intrigued by a preliminary statistic given by *Strength in Unity*, a network promoting awareness of mental health issues in Canadian Asian communities that noted Asian men are at a much higher risk for depression. Although I didn't end up focusing on mental health, that preliminary statistic gave me a reference point to begin my project. My plan included the thirteen men featured in an anthology published in 1996 entitled *Celebration: Shared Lives*; and twelve youths, some were the participants of the 2006 anthology *Telling Our Own Stories*; along with eight community members who would act as an advisory committee. But I quickly realized that this too provided obstacles, particularly the time constraints of the MFA program and the length best suited for the final thesis would not fit with my over-enthused, grandiose ideas. I was left finishing the first year of my program without a clear thesis project.

Over the next few months, I sifted through countless project ideas. The only thing I knew was that I wanted to make a film and it would feature queer Asian men. I began to reflect on my three

earlier projects I had. completed and that in various ways I was attempting to deal with my sense of frustration at having to explain my ethnic experience in Canada. The first project was a short video called *Douchebags of Grindr*, created in summer of 2013, featuring queer Asian men reading out and re-enacting racist and discriminatory comments written on the popular gay hookup app Grindr. My second project, a short video entitled *Voices of Rice Queens* features six non-Asian individuals who identify their preference for Asian men as sexual partners. It was an exercise intended to question the ideas of fetishism and how much introspection these men engage in when it comes to questioning sexual racism/objectification and sexual preference. My third project is an unfinished photobook, which plays on the idea of photo weaving inspired by Dinh Q. Lê's woven photographs of the Viet Nam war. In each chapter of my book, I use two portraits in a progression of weaving, moving from a two-page weave to three, to four, showing the fragility of the weave, the cuts, the idea of what is gained when we assimilate and what is lost. This project challenges heteronormative and homonormative ideals, and more specifically the queer Asian community notions of desirability. These three projects eventually built the foundation for *No Fats, No Femmes, No Asians*. In this new work, I strive for new ways of representing queer Asianness by tackling fatphobia, masculinity, and racism through personal stories and experiences. It is a way to confront the moving-image history representation of Asian men, or should I say its mis-representing of gay Asian men, and trans-Asian men.

I started by interviewing Aries Cheung as a test run for the intergenerational project. I knew that I wanted him in the film, and when my project shifted, Aries's experience became the building block for everything else. While starting work on another project,¹⁹ I unearthed old material,

¹⁹ While solidifying the plans for my thesis project, I decided to go ahead with my original plan, but instead, I would do it outside of this program. The project now has evolved to three major components, all entitled "Invisible

interviews, and personal stories that have helped in part to guided me on how to interact with my three participants for my thesis project—Aries, Patrick, and Dento. In his book *Blurred*

Boundaries, Bill Nichols writes:

Documentary has suggested fullness, and completion, knowledge and fact, explanations of the social world and its motivating mechanisms. More recently, though, documentary has come to suggest incompleteness and uncertainty, recollection and impression, images of personal worlds and their subjective construction.²⁰

It is through this attitude of subjective construction; that is, through the work of drag, that I want to explore the personal stories of my participants. This is far more than what Nichols suggests, however, as their subjective constructions not only speak to the matter if their fullness or incompleteness, but they also highlight other possibilities outside of their realities. For example, all three participants borrow identities, imagery, and experiences from on-line sources²¹ and bring them into their work as a way of resisting cultural expectations imposed on them.

Production & Post-Production

During the production stage, there were recurring challenges that Aries, Patrick, and Dento would rather not talk about. And my process would require me to nudge them or put them in a position where they might have to relive their trauma. There is violence in the documentary process, and I wanted to highlight this in the film. For example, there is a sequence of Patrick stuttering or trying to decline my questioning, or when Dento mentions that it was much easier to

Footprints”: one focuses on collecting the printed materials, artworks, and oral history in order to create a digital archive accessible for the community; the second portion focuses on a curated exhibition that highlights the key movements in queer Asian history while engaging a new generation of young queer Asian artists, which is funded and supported by the Toronto Arts Council and ArtReach; and the third portion would be the filming of oral histories from aging community members.

²⁰ Bill Nichols, *Blurred Boundaries: Question of Meaning in Contemporary Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 1.

²¹Dento’s latest inspiration for drag is 2NE1, a female Korean-pop group, who Dento has been following religiously through Youtube.

read the letter, which he has taken months to write to his mom, on his own rather than to me on camera. These moments are not meant to show these participants struggling, but rather to highlight my forcefulness, perhaps, in getting them to share difficult intimate moments. Most of my life I have avoided sharing intimate thoughts even with close friends and family members, and so with these three participants, I can recognize when they are doing so during the filming process. At times, when coming home from a shoot, I would often ask myself what kind of impact I was making on their lives. When they are reliving trauma, when they share their stories with me, what kind of support can I provide? Most often, following a shoot, I would spend a day or two off-camera debriefing with my participants. We would talk about things that happened in the previous shoot or about things that do not relate to this project at all. In *Crafting Truth*, Vinicius Navarro and Louise Spence refer to director João Moreira Salles's observation, "People don't immediately realize what it means to speak to the camera They believe they are talking to a friend, but when they speak to the camera they are speaking to an audience, to perfect strangers."²² As a filmmaker, I feel more informed that these shared, intimate moments will be shown to perfect strangers who have no qualms about passing judgment on the experiences and decisions of my participants, my friends, my chosen family. It is with this knowledge that I must expose the personal challenges of my participants and the in-fighting within the queer community that has produced such anxiety and is tearing me apart.

For queer individuals, the coming-out process is a major milestone, and one that is so potentially painful that not all of us take it. It involves breaking down barriers or constructing new ones. The knee-jerk response of the queer communities has been negating horror stories and creating

²² João Moreira Salles in Vinicius Navarro and Louise Spence, "Responsibility," *Crafting Truth: Documentary Form and Meaning* (London: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 91.

campaigns like “it gets better” without realizing how it trivializes the current struggles of those whose lives do not get better. While it is important to show the possibility that it can get better, we should not shy away from negative experiences and outcomes. We must be able to acknowledge both, to showcase both, but more importantly, to reposition how we see these possibilities—it is important to provide strategies on how to be resilient, on how to weather the negative scenarios. It is with these goals in mind that I structure and edit my film. In the post-production stage I gave myself one question as the guiding principle: can we hold complexity, contradictions, and incompleteness in identities and stories about identities?

To begin to answer this question, I went through some old photos. It was here that I realized that I have been playing with the triptych format to represent the multiplicity of identities since early 2008. Later, when I came across Candice Brietz’s work, the things that I have only felt by intuition became actualized, vivid with meaning and purpose. In her works *Factum* (2009) and *The Woods* (2012), she shows the possibilities of the concept of multiples to build, deconstruct, suggest, and negate identities. This is an extremely powerful tool for showcasing possibilities or exploration. These remind me of Michel Foucault’s discussion of technologies of context.

Foucault notes:

As a context, we must understand that there are four major types of these “technologies,” each a matrix of practical reason: (1) technologies of production, which permit us to produce, transform or manipulate things; (2) technologies of sign systems, which permit us to use signs, meanings symbols, or signification; (3) technologies of power, which determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination, an objectivizing of the subject; (4) technologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and a way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.²³

²³ Michel Foucault, “Technologies of the Self,” *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth* (New York: The Other Press, 1997), 225.

It is this exploration of technologies and the self that led me to think about the cell phone aspect ratio that I employed in Dento's segment where he is reading his letter (Figure 1.1). The cell phone aspect ratio excludes most of his setting and allows viewers to solely focus on Dento.

Since he moves so little within the frame, all we are left with, and all we are requested to do, is to pay attention to what he has to share. The frame not only limits our view of his surroundings, but it also mirrors the constriction/limitation of identity building. Similar to how we move within our city; we think we are free to move where we like, but our movements are always within the constraints of how the city is constructed. Likewise, the cell phone aspect ratio, and the repetition of it later in the film adds an additional frame restriction that I want to address when it comes to individuals living at "intersections" of identity. In this case, I want to foreground the many restrictions and limitations they may face. Also, what is shown within these frames are their personal movements—how they navigate, question, or build resilient strategies while dealing with identity issues. The cellphone aspect ratio is also placed in a direct contrast to the filmmaking style of the first half of the documentary, where I take a more traditional approach with interviews and the use of the observational camera (Figure 1.2). This observational style creates an expectation in the viewer that is challenged by the single shot of Dento reading his letter with minimal cuts.

The cell phone aspect ratio also harkens back to the popular phrase "no fats, no femmes, no Asians" that is often used on smart phones apps to access social media networks and dating sites. It is through these restricted visual panels that we are provided access to personal stories that have become restrictive—issues of sexual racism masking as sexual preference, body image, and

acceptance—without this moment in the film turning into a preaching session. In addition, the interplay between on-stage and on-line and drag identities and the digital identities reveals a rich playground for these individuals to discover and develop the multiplicity of themselves that perhaps neither the observational doc alone nor the single shot can fully capture. There is an element of fulfillment in drag and how we present ourselves on the digital platform that may not be apparent in our day-to-day activities. There's an uninhabited element of play, of make-believe, and reinvention that allows us to explore and discover new dimensions of perceiving the self.

At a certain point in the editing process, I could not detach myself from the participants, my communities, or my sense of being a filmmaker within the ideals of activist work. I became paralyzed by my work, not knowing how to proceed. To others, they may attribute it to procrastination, laziness, unwillingness to cooperate, arrogance, and so forth—all of which are true, if only partially. After months of struggling and trying to identify the crux of my resistance, I have pinpointed it to fear: it is the fear of losing a support network, a community that I have worked for years to again acceptance within. Any critique or exposure of issues that the community does not want to address or in-fighting that may result from my film could leave me exposed and my so-called club membership could be revoked as I am thrown into exile. As a filmmaker, I want to highlight areas where the community does not necessarily have to be defensive about coming up with solutions, but can be open for further discussions. For example, since the earliest texts of queer Asian discourse have been overly focused on issues of race, we have ignored the damage done by silencing fatness and femininity. But this shift comes at the expense of confronting some of the demons within our communities: that as queer Asian gay

men, we too are guilty of silencing or excluding fatness and femininity. And similar to the larger queer communities, we too hold the belief that the oppressed cannot oppress; in other words, we too are guilty of silencing other groups within our own communities.

2.2 Drag on Identity Creation

A major aspect of the film focuses on drag performance. From the three participants, we see a spectrum of involvement with drag performance—Aries Cheung, who is in his mid-50s; Patrick Salvani, who is in his mid-30s; and Dento, who is in his mid-20s. Aries is a visual artist who has been training his voice for many years. Being shy and even-tempered, Aries looks towards theatre, especially drag performance, as a way to step out of his comfort zone and explore his sexuality. In his early years, Aries began creating drag personae with the goal of ‘passing’; in other words, he wanted to embody a convincing image of femininity—which often required him to shave his beard and many parts of his body. Over the course of his journey, however, Aries has grown to reject this notion. He now keeps his beard and retains what is called ‘skag drag’ instead. By contrast, Patrick knew early in his experiments that he did not want ‘to pass’, and rejected idealized femininity almost immediately. In his performances, he accentuates his male features, often by dousing his beard with glitter or by wearing a waist-length fake beard. On the other hand, Dento, a female-to-male trans individual, disrupts this by embracing being a drag queen with the goal to pass (a perspective often not shared by the community as many female-to-male trans individuals often perform as drag kings). Whether these participants came to their practices as a counter-image to drag, or more generally as Asian queer men, or even perhaps simply as a means of coming to terms with their identity, both on-stage and off-stage, what is

important is that we get a glimpse of how they disrupt the process of culture imposing itself on conventional or restrictive identities.

The film itself only hints at how these participants play with the notion of becoming feminine, becoming androgynous, and becoming masculine. Their drag experience can play with notions of sex, empowerment, memories, self, and gender-related investigations, while the film captures their personal stories. Each participant demonstrates how one can explore alternative identities that, well beyond a mode of self-discovery and self-development, can be a way of understanding our upbringing and cultural heritage. In her book *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler observes:

Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis; the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fiction is obscured by the credibility of those productions—and the punishments that attend not agreeing to believe in them; the construction “compels” our belief in its necessity and naturalness.²⁴

It is this notion of an agreement to perform that allows drag performers to reimagine, reconstruct and challenge the dominant beliefs of “necessity and naturalness”. If identity is made up of performances, then drag performance is an ideal site for exploring identity; drag functions by taking practices that are culturally encoded as feminine or masculine or as heterosexual and homosexual, and combining these in ways to create new gender and sexual meanings. With Dento, in particular, his narrative challenges the thought that the body equals sex, which equals gender. More than just disrupting sexuality and gender performance, Dento exhibits the notion that the physical body can be transformed by hormones and surgeries, and an act of femininity by a man who used to be a woman makes the disruption explicit and adds

²⁴ Judith Butler, “Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions,” *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2006), 190.

another layer of complexity. This challenges drag-habituated patterns of being, or habituated performance of being. It is through their uninhibited play, their make-believe, and their reinventions that the dominant ideology is challenged. Arguably, these layers of play allow them to discover new dimensions and different ways of relating to their senses of self.

The three participants effectively challenge how images create meaning and structure our sense of reality, and how these in turn influence our self-perception. By confronting the stereotype of “Asian as feminine,” instead of shying away from it, the participants get past such stereotypes in order to express their own distinctive identities. Drag allows them an extended opportunity to create new images and other realities, altering their perceptions of self, and perhaps influencing other perceptions of the self in the process. This process is destabilizing; by showing that identities are not fixed, they cannot be categorized or labeled. What these three participants have shown is the ability to play—to incorporate influences abroad, from Korean pop to Mandarin pop to Filipino horror films—while dealing with challenges at home.²⁵ In addition, they assist in the creation of new narratives that challenge the conventional notions of the body, race, and identity. Through their drag work, they bring forth the following questions: How can drag be a part of queer subculture? How might they move in the larger world? How does the world respond to their inventions? Or how else might the world respond to them?

²⁵ In Patrick’s drag horror cooking show entitled “Sarap,” which means tasty, he reimagines the origin story of the Filipino Vampire, the Manananggal, as a migrant worker. The stories that the Manananggal tells during the show are pulled directly pulled from experiences of family member or other community members.

Chapter 3: Documentary Practice

3.1 Documentary Approach

During the process of working on this thesis, I received many suggestions to focus on an individual character—better to tell one in-depth story than to have multiple rough sketches. Although I acknowledge this advice, my concerns lie not with the individual story, but the limitation of the traditional narrative structure, namely the emphasis of the ‘hero’s journey.’ This structure revolves around a character who must solve his or her problems through sheer individual effort. This premise reinforces the concept that life’s problems are individual; it fails to acknowledge the larger social, economic, and historic forces at work, which are imposed on groups and which require collective efforts to correct.

As we have seen, stories—whether narrative or documentary—play a major role in telling us what it means to be heroic or villainous, masculine or feminine, heterosexual or homosexual. However, what is presented in lens-based culture is often an incomplete story. These gaps in representation arise not because of what is shown, but because of what is excluded. As I argued in chapter 1, while it encourages us to address our blind spots, the production of binary counter images, to balance the imagery we feel that portrays us negatively, fails to address our gaps in our knowledge—and does nothing to teach us how to shift our efforts away from the images identified as positive or negative and fails to capture how we live with the actual contradictions of being neither villainous nor classically heroic. Documentary approaches provide possible solutions, for they unconsciously invite viewers to an intellectual engagement with the possibility of alternatives—stories of ambiguity, stories that look at the process of creation rather than simply at the image. As noted by Jill Godmillow, however, the paradox with contemporary

mass-market documentary is its inadequacy as a form, “which on the one hand promises edification and enlightenment and on the other expects to deliver satisfaction and closure.”²⁶

Below I will look at documentary approaches not aimed at the mass market, and three approaches in particular—performative, auto-ethnographic, and experimental and I will explore what they have done historically and what approach they can offer for elucidating my film *No Fats, No Femmes, No Asians*.

Performative Documentaries

Bill Nichols notes that performative documentaries add “emphasis to the subjective qualities of experience and memory that depart from factual recounting.”²⁷ He suggests that the performative moves the audience into a subjective alignment or an affinity with its specific perspective on the world. Performative documentaries are less concerned with objective realities. They document the emotional reality of the subject’s experience while making simultaneous connection to the world where the subject is situated—whether socially, culturally or politically. Aries, Patrick, and Dento all highlight how their on-stage identities are created; these are desired images that are situated within social constructs and social constraints. Nichols states that for underrepresented or misrepresented groups such as ethnic minorities, gays and lesbians, “performative documentary can act as a corrective to those films where ‘we speak about them to us.’ They proclaim, instead, that ‘we speak about ourselves to you,’ or ‘we speak about ourselves to us.’”²⁸ That corrective nature is evident in *Forbidden*

²⁶ Jill Godmillow, “What’s Wrong with Liberal Documentary,” <http://nd.edu/~jgodmilo/liberal.html> (accessed Jan 2016)

²⁷ Bill Nichols. “What types of Documentary Are There?” In *Introduction to Documentary*. (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001), 99.

²⁸ Ibid, 138.

Love (1992), directed by Lynne Fernie and Aerlyn Weissman. Although the documentary segments are conventional in their use of talking heads and compilation footage, the fictional segments exude a sultry sensuality that celebrates a hunger for fantasy and that is reiterated at the beginning of each chapter. As Jean Bruce notes, the happy ending in the film “addresses the fact that none of the options provided by the real novels were satisfactory to the lesbian reader herself. The daily struggle of keeping body and soul together was not often accurately reflected in the popular culture of the period.”²⁹ Similarly, drag performance can fulfill this tension between reality and fantasy; it is a platform where participants can live out the endings not readily available to them. However, as Nichols warns, the performative element of this genre of documentary may deemphasize objectivity over excessive use of style³⁰—or may simply suggest that the film is regarded as avant-garde. At the end of my film, Aries, who is in drag, can live out a moment not available to him, saying goodbye to his mother (Figure 1.3).³¹

Auto-Ethnographic Documentaries

Other frameworks that I have explored and borrowed are from autobiographical, ethnographical, but most importantly from the auto-ethnographical approaches. In the autobiographical documentaries, filmmakers often center on personal narratives, where they focus on their own lives. Filmmakers often place home movies within autobiographical settings that can offer valuable traces for their identity search. Some autobiographical works focus on the mundane everyday tasks, which allows the filmmakers to eschew an exotic “othering” by

²⁹ Jean Bruce and Gerda Cammaer. “Queer Visibility and the Archive.” In *Forbidden Love: A Queer Film Classic*, (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2015) 144.

³⁰ Nichols, 138.

³¹ It is also worth noting that Aries also shared after watching an earlier assembly of my film that his mother never had the opportunity to see him in drag, and that partially through this ending, a burning desire is fulfilled.

pointing instead to the preciousness of everyday experience. Autobiographical documentary approaches are useful for filmmakers to understand themselves, especially for those who want to return to their origins. But it is auto-ethnography, the form of qualitative empirical research where the author explores their personal lives to understand and connect to a wider, social, political and cultural experience, is the framework that directly influenced my work. Although autoethnography has traditionally been linked to either autobiography or ethnography, Heewon Chang argues in “Autoethnography as Method” that autoethnography “should be ethnographic in its methodological orientation, cultural in its interpretive orientation, and autobiographical in its content orientation.”³² It is through an autoethnographic framework that I showcase how my participants are influenced by multiple cultural dimensions and relationships and how they use it as a way for personal and cultural critique.

In *No Fats, No Femmes, No Asians*, I want to present moments of observation of the everyday, allowing the complexity of the participants to unfold naturally. This is also the main reason I use footage of participants doing mundane tasks and home videos shot by the participants themselves as disruptions to some of the documentary conventions in the first half of my film. Works like the short film *Me and Rubyfruit*, a 1989 “dyke doc” that chronicles the enchantment of lesbian love while serving as a coming out story for creator, Sadie Benning, help raises a critical question: By describing them as “merely” autobiographical, will it prompt viewers to think of them as the unique, the singular, or the exception? And by being singular, is it then easier to dismiss? This is a question that I have used as my guiding light. By contrast, I often

³² Heewon Chang. *Autoethnography as Method: Developing Qualitative Inquiry*. (New York: Routledge, 2008), 48.

question whether my rejection of the singular experience runs the risk of my work being discarded as the outlier, but it is my conviction that singularity runs the risk of promoting the individual hero's journey, and why my thesis is not a single-character film. Furthermore, it precisely why I used an autoethnographic approach for three participants instead of using a purely autobiographical or ethnographical approach.

In Catherine Russell's discussion of the autoethnographic subject, personal and cultural memory, she argues that the audiovisual medium can be used as a means to intervene into the discourse of ethnography. She notes, "If 'ethnicity refers to an inherited identity, a fixed history of the self, autoethnography in film and video destabilizes and disperses that history across a range of discursive selves'"³³ Similarly, Michael Renov observes that domestic ethnography can also be used as an expansion of autobiography and traditional ethnography. He notes that domestic ethnography calls attention to the dynamic of the family "as the most fundamental crucible of psychosexual identity."³⁴ He identifies that the domestic has undergone significant changes over the past decades, especially with the emergence of gay and lesbian families as our chosen families. He observes that although domestic ethnography engages in the documentation of family members or of people with whom the maker has maintained long-standing relations, it is really a vehicle of self-interrogation, where one can construct self-knowledge—which is the main reason for the domestic scenes in my film.

³³ Russell, Catherine. *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video* (London: Duke University Press, 1999), 313.

³⁴ Michael Renov. "Domestic Ethnography and the Construction of the "Other" Self." In *The Subject of Documentary*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 216.

Renov also points out that, in a limited way, “domestic ethnography occasions a kind of intersubjective reciprocity in which the representation of self and other are simultaneously if unequally at stake.”³⁵ For example, in his 2015 film *Say Amen!* David Deri documents the response of his family to his homosexuality over the course of five years. At one point in the film, Deri’s mother, disappointed at his refusal to pray in order to change, tells him that she will disown him. Kath Weston contends that “coming-out stories restructure the past to accord with the present and reformulate the present as an advancement over the past to counter the implication that being gay transforms a person into something alien, deviant, or monstrous.”³⁶ For my documentary film, I want to show the trajectory of drag performances by Aries, Patrick, and Dento as a form of autoethnographical documentation. Many of the aspects of their stories and characters are pulled directly from their lives, highlighting self-interrogation, self-knowledge, and identity creation. We can see this most clearly when Patrick’s performance is juxtaposed with another interview clip explaining the sources for his drag material; his drag performance then is not only for entertainment value, but it also an autobiographical and domestic ethnographic document (Figure 1.4).

Experimental Documentaries

When asked why she works in the experimental documentary sphere, Michelle Citron replies that she wants to capture internal experience—moments “that are felt, dreamt, inchoate—along with the nonphysical and non-verbal textures of life.”³⁷ She looks for ways that the personal and

³⁵ Ibid, 219.

³⁶ Kath Weston. *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 26.

³⁷ Hilderbrand, L., & Sachs, L. *Experimental Documentary Questionnaire/Responses*. (Millennium Film Journal, 2009), 11.

the psychological can intersect with the social and the political. Likewise, she recounts that when she does interviews, stories are never in a straight line. They are narratives constructed from fragments at the moment of remembering; they are often associative, not linear. In the second half of my film, I want to use the strengths of experimental documentary tactics, where ironies of subjectivity, affectivity, and representation merge. These have the ability to question the relation of the medium and the relation of the subject to the whole project. By clearly separating the film into halves, an experimental approach can present the complexities and contradictions involved in the construction of identity, embodying myriad possibilities for representational tactics. Through this approach to form, the theoretical and ethical issues often tied to standard documentary film criticism play less importance. Here, experimental ideas can highlight the process and constraints that participants face without putting the undue importance on the image, and more specifically, on the necessity for a counter image.

For example, in his 1989 film *Tongues United*, Marlon Riggs captures racism, homophobia, and desire through a blend of documentary with an experimental style of poetic, autographical and historical discourse. Riggs' experimental approach suggests that by drawing on "gay and lesbian iconographies, personal stories, histories and sexual identities, gays and lesbians can begin to acknowledge, to analyze, to affirm, and to celebrate each subcultural identity for itself, for its allies, and more importantly, for new constituents."³⁸ Similarly, in using an experimental style, I aim to put my film directly in front of the same challenges while opening up the same type of opportunities.

³⁸ Chris Holmlund and Cynthia Fuchs. "*Between the Sheets in the Streets: Queer, Lesbian, Gay Documentary*". (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 59.

By using performative approaches, I could address the emotional reality of my subjects' experience as well as addressing realities not available for my participants. In addition, by using auto-ethnographic approaches, I highlight the process of my participants and their involvement with drag. Finally, by using experimental approaches, I can intervene in my own film and both provide alternative images of queer, Asian men as well as different ways of presenting those images.

Conclusion

By following three queer Asian men in *No Fats, No Femmes, No Asians*, I want to highlight the construction of identities through drag performances and the constraints available within stereotypical narratives. Through their personal stories, I want to see how class, gender, age, body type, religion, race, and other social constructs affect their on-stage and off-stage identities. Furthermore, by using non-traditional story structure and experimental documentary approaches, I want to shift the community's focus away from the image and address some of the questions outstanding in our community: Mainly, how do we discuss representational issues and the intersections of queer Asian men? I believe the three participants have provided a glimpse of what I would like to call “strategies of disruption”—mainly through the idea of play.

Although I recognize that the representation of queer Asian men is intricately linked to the portrayal of Asian men in general, which still needs repositioning in the North American context, I believe the three participants have provided some complexities on stories that are often reduced to stereotypes. Alongside their drag performances, I want to show the playfulness in their lives and the resilient strategies they adopt against adversity. These stories show us the intricacy and ambiguity of building identities, especially through the resistance of the imposing of dominant cultural codes. In addition, their stories shift us away from stories enduring to stories of resiliency, while also highlight the helping hands of chosen families and other community members when we face adversities.

No Fat, No Femmes, No Asians is about three queer men's involvement with drag, but underneath that, it is also a process of my own identity creation. Including me, all three of my

participants were born outside of Canada, a fact that is not explicitly stated in this film.

Ultimately, the project is about the immigration experience without utilizing all the tropes of the conventional immigrant story. As a Vietnamese who came to Canada in my teens, I see myself in Patrick, Aries, and Dento—the frustration and anger that so easily come when identities similar to theirs are reduced and caricatured, the skill set they must acquire to manage racism and daily micro aggressions, and the realization that out there is a community that will forever see you as an alien. But from them, I also learned how to be resilient, how to channel my frustration to more productive means, and ultimately how to surround myself with people who will love and accept me without conditions—through a chosen family, and a self-built network of support.

Using moments of experimental, auto-ethnographic, and performative tactics, I not only want to highlight Patrick, Aries, and Dento’s process, but I also want to illustrate the heavy construction and editing involved in the documentary process, which helps to foreground my process of understanding my identity. The film will tell the audience more about me than the people who are presented. It is my process of finding my own resiliency in community where the epithet “no fats, no femmes, no Asians” is thriving.

Word Count: 10,248

Appendix



Figure 1.1 (Second half of the film)
Screen grab of Dento reading his letter.



Figure 1.2 (First half of the film)
Screen grab of Dento in his kitchen cooking.

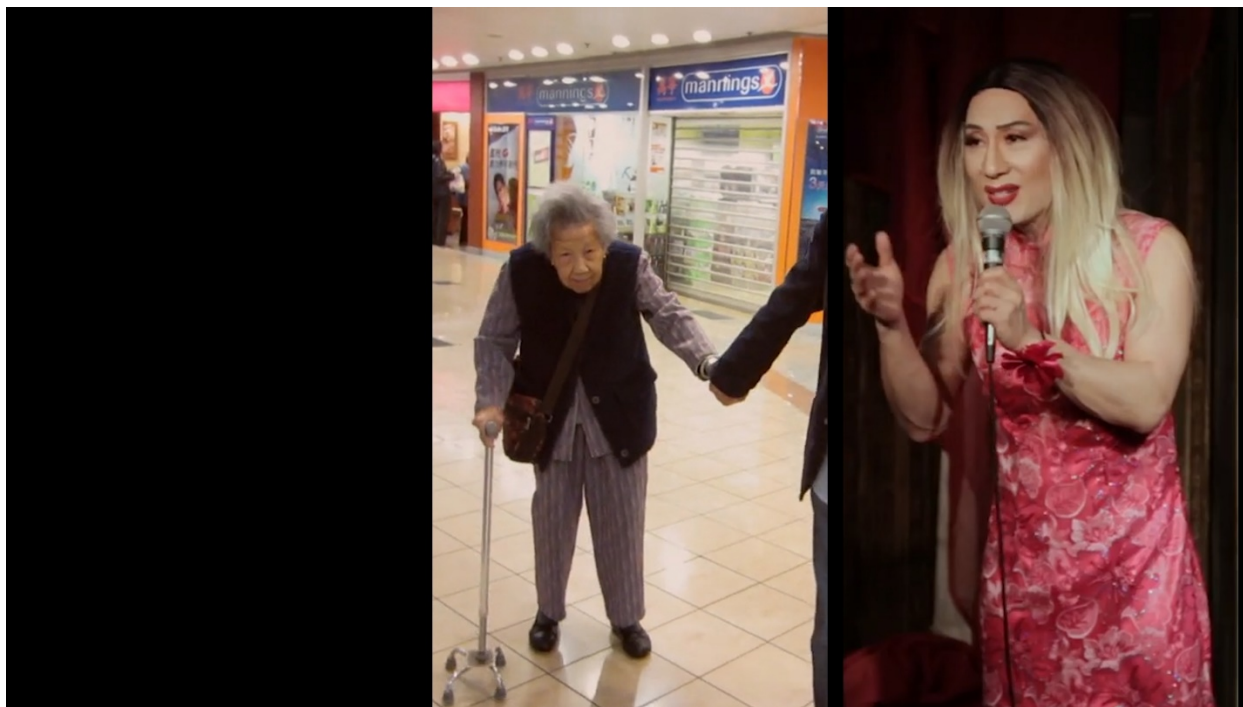


Figure 1.3 (Ending sequence of the film)
Screen grab of Aries singing goodbye to his mother.



Figure 1.4 (Second half of the film)
Screen grab of Patrick performing and explaining his process.

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