NO ARRIVALS: THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF MOBILITIES IN QUEER ASIAN DIASPORAS IN CANADA

by

DAI KOJIMA

B.A., Keio University, 2001

M.A., Columbia University, 2004

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Abstract

This dissertation project examines the cultural politics of mobilities for the organization of counterpublics and oral histories in and across marginalized communities within a transnational migration frame. I conducted a three-year, interview-based and media-centered ethnography in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia with fourteen queer migrant men and a transgender migrant woman with a wide range of intersectional identifications and residence statuses, who were originally from multiple countries and regions across Pacific Asia. The purpose of this fieldwork was to trace the translocal movements of queer Asian migrants with a critical attention to how their encounters with national discourses, histories and knowledges of race and sexuality shaped the trajectories of their life narratives. Drawing on these embodied accounts, my analyses illustrate how these migrant, racial strangers and sexual others manage to negotiate multiple displacing forces through tactical practices of representation, space-making, and diasporic networks of kinship and care with and through media. This interdisciplinary project significantly contributes to several areas of theorizing. First, this study revises theories of agency in mobilities research by introducing the concept of *mobility as problematic* to highlight the cultural dynamics between displacement and movement, and foregrounds the everyday, mediated practices of mobility as various forms of survival that often remain invisible to structural analysis and theory. Second, this project advances queer critiques of race by analyzing how queer Asian migrants do and perform racialized identity. This research theorizes how transnational subjects actively participate in global processes of racialization, which departs significantly from traditional scholarship that underscores national frames and histories of race and sexuality. Finally, this project contributes to postcolonial feminist methodologies by introducing a queer historiography method I call *enigma as...*
evidence. This innovative framework argues for elusive meanings, identities and silences as a productive site for ethically charged research practices that evidence the experiences of oppression, survival and everyday intimacies of cultural others.
Preface

This dissertation is an original intellectual product of the author, Dai Kojima. The research program is designed as an interview-based, media-centered ethnography conducted by the author between 2010 and 2012 in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia, Canada. The collected data was analyzed using the frameworks of queer archival reading and critical historiography. Interviews conducted in Japanese were transcribed and translated by the author.

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All photographs in this dissertation were taken and are used with permission of the author except for the following: Figure 10 provided courtesy of Julien Powell, Figure 28 and 29 provided courtesy of Kenny Park. Figure 11 retrieved from creative commons: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vancouver_Pride_Parade_2006.jpg. Figure 15 retrieved from creative commons: https://www.flickr.com/photos/rickie22/2144480818/in/photolist-caY4TQ-caY5xj-caY67L-bwgpJj-4oFguJ-bwgsaf-b15tji-9mrUDC-4gqVpX-4gqU8p-75JHud-4gv2rd-oNk1KV-bu2vvK-bwgX99-bfFntv-76j7iN-dQC9ns-bbA13v-bbzZJ8.

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Dedication

To the 14 queer men and woman in this project who responded to my questions with mutual curiosity, helpful scepticism and unsolicited, and much appreciated, kindness.

To my parents, who taught me to ask questions.
Prologue

A man on a train

Imagine a scene: You are on a commuter train. It is an early afternoon on a weekday. There are a few other riders around you minding their own business. You notice a middle-aged brown man sitting across from you. His right hand is moving with a rhythmic precision while his left hand holds up a small pink garment. Judging from its pastel colour and size, you guess that he is knitting a baby sock. Something intrigues you about this frail looking, dark-
skinned man who seems perfectly content with what he is doing. You start to create plausible stories about the man. But he never looks up.

Why is this man knitting on the train?

Is it for his grandchild? Did his wife teach him how to knit? Whatever the reason, it is strange in a way you cannot quite pin down. And you cannot quite look into his dark eyes to see a glimpse of his soul. A few minutes pass and your mind goes elsewhere. The suburban landscape quietly passes outside the window. Your stop is coming up. By the time you make it to work or to your meeting with friends, the sight of the brown man knitting is no longer in your memory.

The man’s name is Maty. He is a 57-year-old immigrant who was raised a Christian in an Indian diaspora in Uganda before his whole family relocated to Canada 30 years ago. Maty lives with manic depression and depends on the government for disability assistance. He lives with his aging mother, who takes care of him when he cannot, in a South Asian ethnic community adjacent to the city of Vancouver. During the week, he gets on the Skytrain, the rapid transportation system that links downtown Vancouver to the surrounding suburbs, with his knitting kit, and while he rides the train, creates socks and blankets for local orphanages. “I’m not gay,” Maty would tell you. He claims he has never touched another man in his life. Yet, he also admits, “when I knit . . . I feel gay, yes.”¹

With Maty’s biographical information, the initially obscure—strange, but not necessarily significant—anecdotal scene begins to form new meanings. We may start to identify the multiple displacing forces of race/ethnicity, sexuality, age, dis/ability and migrant conditions—that emplace his body in an adjective space and time of not-belonging. But, there is something else here. Maty’s shuffle between “I’m not gay” and his practice of “feeling gay” resists a hurried rendering or reduction of his act of knitting in a public space into something “meaningful” in any straightforward sense, culturally or politically. Yet, something about this scene moves me in a certain way; between the critical urgency to speak for the suffering in Maty’s life and a hesitant acknowledge-

¹ A more detailed analysis of the elusive narrative of queer performance is included in Chapter 4.
ment of not knowing the whole story. Maty’s narration demands me to imagine something “otherwise” (Muñoz, 2009).

A man on a train. A brown man on a train, knitting and feeling gay. What does this sentence and the story it contains mean? More importantly, within the space of imagination, how do we respond to it?

This is the question and tension with which I began the writing of this dissertation, and to which I kept returning. The narratives I archive and re/present in the following pages estrange us from what we think we already know about the conventions and politics of race, sex and immigration in North America. I hope that you, the reader, will join me in this journey into the messy, vibrant, everyday rhythms of mobility and geographies of intimacy in the life narratives of 14 queer migrants with a shared curiosity and yearning for meaning that can only be glimpsed through an engaged imagination and a willingness to be implicated by what we may find there.
Chapter 1: Points of Entry: Context, Concepts and Research Questions

Itineraries of the dissertation

When we make travel plans, we usually know in advance where we are headed. We draw up an itinerary to locate a line of movement from the point of departure to the destination, as well as the method of getting there. Travel itineraries create a map of a world. They are, however, only a partial map of the world that represents what we think we already know about the places and the kinds of experience we will have along the way and once we get to where we are going. As such, there is a temporal dimension to any itinerary; it is always already pre-mediated and imagined before we go on our trip. As imagined documents, our itineraries are vulnerable to unexpected accidents and contingencies once they are put into motion (even simply walking down to a corner store can be full of contingent encounters—sudden rain, road construction or an unfriendly dog—which may lead to a detour in our plan). These interruptions can possibly change the experience of travel as a whole. And even if we make it to our destinations, often such arrivals show us that our expectations turn out to be not what we thought they were, for better or worse.

Because itineraries are without guarantee, they are as much about absence as what is visible on paper. Read closer, there emerge traces of the distance between the imagined geography of travel and the lived experience of movements. For, as interruptions in travel plans do not always end up with people being stuck in place, itineraries can also be used as a tool of narrativization for back stories about how travelers managed to seek out alternative routes, make provisional plans and draw up lines of deviation when the original itineraries no longer worked. To examine itineraries not as the representation of travel as a whole, but as a struc-
ture of encounter with foreign terrains, habits and strangers, is to take seriously the possibility of interruption and survival as part of every travel story, and not as an exception to it. Many travels stories are, then, also narratives of *no arrivals*.

I offer the notion of the itinerary here as a useful metaphor that not only exemplifies the strange movements and travels documented in this dissertation, but also as a structuring framework that best represents the twists and turns that this project has taken as it sought places of landing. Parallel to the narratives of *no arrivals* in the queer migrations archived in this dissertation, I began this journey with a set of research plans— theoretical questions, methods of data collection, and analytical procedures—that were intended to assist me in navigating fieldwork and in writing this thesis. Clearly, the journey of this dissertation could not have happened the way it did without these original questions and plans. With the metaphor of itineraries in mind, this chapter outlines my dissertation “travel plans”; it begins with the original context and theoretical frameworks in which the research questions were conceived in order to explicate the further points of departure, alternative methods of documentation and evidencing, and the ethics of representation and theorization that became critical necessities along the way.

The points of theoretical entry in this chapter map out the context in which I formulated the research questions and conceptual frameworks of this dissertation concerning the cultural politics of mobilities in the lives of queer Asian migrants. As I discuss later, however, this project did not arrive at the original, planned destination. Maty’s story, which began this dissertation, represents the analytical and methodological challenges I encountered as I put my research plans into motion, and how such an encounter with the unexpected transformed my thinking from what this dissertation is (meant to be) into what it does (to critical theorizing
itself). I begin here with a retelling of the location from which I originally embarked for this dissertation project, and the questions and knowledge that were at hand. Without the original itinerary that I began with, my efforts to document and examine the many everyday locations and scenes of queer world-making would not have occurred in the first place.

I have organized this chapter into two sections. In the first section, I explicate the geopolitical consideration and imaginary construction of post-queer Canada as the context in which to examine totalizing narratives of the mobilities and immobilities of queer, Asian, migrant subjects. Next, I offer three conceptual frameworks: Mobilities as Problematic, Queer Migrations, and, Transnational Mediascapes. By attending to these interrelated theoretical discourses and the gaps in knowledge in existing research they evidence, I further describe how I conceptualized and formulated the research questions concerning embodied difference, migrancy and mediation that put this dissertation into motion. That is, this chapter provides an account of the queer utopic map in which I imagined my journey and dissertation would take place.
Context: “Post-queer” Canada and the narrative of double-displacement

Figure 2. Gay Canada.

The 2005 nation-wide legalization of same-sex marriage in Canada transformed sexual citizenship into the emblem of civility and progress of a liberal nation on the global stage. Consider, for example, the rhetoric of “exceptionality” (Puar, 2007) in the following statement found on a same-sex immigration information and consulting website (http://www.borderconnections.com/same-sex-immigration.html):

Canada has some of the most gay and lesbian friendly immigration laws in the world. Many gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transsexual/transgender singles and couples move to
Canada every year to enjoy improved civil rights, benefits, and the protection of a tolerant society. Same-sex marriage is legal in Canada. (“Same-sex Immigration for Gay and Lesbian”, 2013)

With its much celebrated multiculturalism, immigration and humanitarian refugee policies, the ideation of Canada—and Vancouver in particular, for its historical presence in the “Pacific World” (Yu, 2009)—as a new promised land of sexual liberation circulates globally. At the same time, this rights-based, neoliberal discourse renders increasingly difficult, if not entirely irrelevant, the politicization and making visible of racism and other exclusionary practices against queers of colour and queer immigrants in the general public sphere at large, and within local, mainstream LGBT communities in particular (Wong, 2013).

The centrality of same-sex marriage in wider, contemporary North American politics is undeniable, and some queer theorists, predominantly US-based, have produced a critique of its complicity with neoliberal ideologies (Duggan, 2004; Weiner & Young, 2011). While many of these works lead the conversation, there are important historical, social and cultural, as well as geopolitical differences between the US and Canadian nation-states that must be considered. It is timely, then, to engage with this seemingly post-queer time and place of Canada—a “time after” the popular queer politics of recognition (i.e. “gay liberation”)—to further examine the entanglement of sexual citizenship with multicultural discourses, immigration policies, and nationalism (Murray, 2014). That is, the idea of a post-queer Canada is a map without a queer utopia.
Homonationalist imaginaries and migrant conditions in Canada

The “post” in “post-queer,” in this context, is understood as a marker of the temporalization and spatialization of the present form of sexual citizenship (e.g., gay marriage), combined with neoliberal politics whose goal is to actively “depoliticize” contesting and antagonistic voices and actions (Dean, 2009; Žižek, 1999). When critically read, celebratory discourses concerning sexual citizenship via the legal recognition of same-sex marriage are an insidious element of Canadian liberal nationalism and its quest for a perpetual and stable national identity. Celebratory discourses of this nature represent a nationalist fantasy in which Canada sees itself as a “more” progressive, multicultural, liberal society than other countries. As some scholars note, this movement is associated with Canada’s cultural and geographic proximities to the US (Pinar, 2011; Sumara, Davis & Laidlaw, 2001). For example, Suzanne Lenon’s (2008) critical analysis of activist and legislative discourses in Canada prior to 2005 demonstrates that the legalization of same-sex marriage was deeply implicated in the nationalist desire of the Canadian state to imagine itself as a liberated country in a global context, while the same discourses of concern for sexual minorities ignored the racialized, gendered and class differentials which also make up the category of sexual minorities (Lenon, 2008). At the same time, however, the social, legal, and economic significance of marriage for same-sex couples is undeniable, and more importantly, the attachment to such an institution is a vital part of the practice of ordinary life and even survival (Berlant, 2011). The legaliza-

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2 For comprehensive examinations of the post-polity of neoliberal LGBT and queer cultures, see: Bryson & MacIntosh, 2010; Halley & Parker, 2011.

3 See also Chapter 5 of this dissertation for a consideration of this attachment in the context of queer kinship practices.
tion of same-sex marriage as a temporal marker of the “after” to queer politics leaves out a sustained and essential consideration of the differences in any sort of unified queer politics and public cultures in Canada. Such a move as “post-queer” masks over the fact that queer communities are also made up of people of colour, indigenous populations, disabled bodies, immigrants, migrant workers and those who practice non-conventional forms of kinship, those to whom access to symbolic or legal recognitions of same-sex marriage is only of partial importance to their on-going, day-to-day struggles and modes of survival against other forms of oppression in a white-dominated settler-colonialist society.

On the danger of focusing on sexual citizenship alone as evidential of the exceptionality of the liberal nation-state, Jasbir Puar (2007) writes:

> The politics of recognition and incorporation entail that certain—but certainly not most—homosexual, gay, and queer bodies may be the temporary recipients of the “measures of benevolence” that are afforded by liberal discourses of multicultural tolerance and diversity. This benevolence toward sexual others is contingent upon ever-narrowing parameters of white racial privilege, consumption capabilities, gender and kinship normativity, and bodily integrity. (p. xii)

Formulated as such, the exclusion of those who fall out of the narrowly defined category of “sexual other” is at the heart of North American queer politics that operate within the logics of visibility, recognition and cultural economy exclusive to a single category of sexuality. This gap between the contingent “measures of benevolence” in the nation-based imaginary (and an imagined itinerary and pattern of migration for all queers elsewhere in the world), and how such measures are actually materialized is indicated in recent controversies surrounding the reform of immigration and refugee court systems under Prime Minister Stephen
Harper’s conservative government—ironically named Bill C-31: Protecting Canada’s Immigration System.

Such a bill indicates how the mobility (physical and legal) of non-citizen, immigrant, queer subjects operates under increasingly strict conditions of entrance that have nothing to do with sexuality and sexual citizenship. That is, contrary to the notions of sexual liberation and benevolence informing a term like “gay immigration” in Canada, there is no such category that includes sexuality as a basis for immigration into the country—except for asylum applications, which are a separate process from existing immigration programs. Many queer immigrants, therefore, enter the country “under the radar” as economic migrants, or spouses to Canadian citizens. To be eligible for economic migration, many single queer immigrating subjects must document and prove their “skilled worker” status, including educational credibility, economic reliability, professional skills and experiences, employment status, language abilities, future earning power and adherence to the heterosexual model of family kinship, all of which are squarely implemented in immigration policies that regulate the admissibility and intelligibility of migrants, queer or otherwise.

In this so-called post-queer Canada (Noble, 2006), there continues to exists a deep disjuncture between state’s contingent performance of liberal sensitivity on the global stage and the domestic desire of conserving reproductive heteronormativity—white-racialized notions of sexual citizenship—and neoliberal economization of migrant workers and entrance regul-

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4 For extensive studies of Canadian queer refugee politics, see: Jordan, 2012; Murray, 2014.

tions as the foundation of nation-building in the new millennium (Lenon, 2008). Thus construed, to return to the utopic statement about gay immigration and Canadian exceptionality in the beginning of this section, the promised journey from a place of gay oppression elsewhere to the arrival of gay liberation in Canada for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender/sexual (LGB &T) immigrants remains precarious and without guarantees at best; queer utopia definitely exits, but it is increasingly difficult to catch a glimpse of.

This problematic of “post queer Canada” also takes on a spatial form particular to sexual modernities in Canada and Asia. Queer complicity in a national politics of assimilation also entails a geographical demarcation that graphs queer visibility, possibility, and modernity onto the nation through a developmental and comparative rhetoric of progress and civility in a global space. This “homonationalist” (Puar, 2007) spatial imaginary ignores, for its unquestioned exceptionality, existing knowledge about how non-normative sexualities and counter-public cultures may be actually and actively organized and practiced in the vast historical and cultural landscape of Asia and Asian diasporas (Berry, Martin & Yue, 2003; Leung, 2009; Shimizu, 2010). The homonationalist discourse in Canada, in its totality, renders invisible the location of belonging for queer Asian migrants twice-over: First, by imagining Asia (its internal differences notwithstanding) as backward, the abject of Canadian queer modernity (Canada becomes not only better than the US, but better than all Asian countries as well); then, secondly, by obscuring the privileges and conditions of neoliberal sexual citizenship in the white-dominant nation. It is through this process of double-displacement in which the aspiration for sexual liberation falters under the weight of histories of race and immigration, which generates an ironic story about queer migrants of colour, that is, they can no longer go back, yet they struggle to find belonging in their new homeland.
A way forward: beyond totality and into the everyday

So far, I have sketched out the geopolitical context in which the examination of cultural exclusions, struggles for belonging, and the process of double-displacement of queer Asian migrants is located. Given that the lived experiences of racialized queer migrants are indeed haunted by the force of double-displacement, this project is interested in documenting and making visible queer migrants’ alternative acts and tactics of sociality, public-making and belonging, and how these activities relate to various forms of mobilities.

It is important to note here that structural and genealogical frameworks have the potential to reproduce, despite their intention to identify the conditions of structural inequality, another universal narrative of victimization that fixates solely on examples of oppression, which in turn denies any possibility of counter agency and the power of marginalized people in general, and racialized queer subjects in particular (Eng, 2001; Nguyen, 2009). Moreover, critically charged ideological engagements with the condition and status of sexual citizenship, nationalism and immigration often create a moralizing discourse, in which the figure of the queer migrant shuffles between a complicity with the policies, ideologies and desires of the settler-colony nation on the one hand and perpetual oppression and exploitation as immigrants and temporary workers by that state on the other. Of course, that is if they manage to cross national borders under-the-radar. For many non-Canadian queers, inadmissibility based on a lack of economic, social and cultural capital and other privileges is often the most insurmountable hurdle they must negotiate before any journey towards liberation can begin.

To be blunt, my argument is that both the celebratory discourse of post-queer Canada and the macro-focus of an anti-homonationalist critique are too narrow, limiting and uncaring of the physical bodies, everyday materialities and individual subjectivities of actual queer migrants.
As Heather Love (2012) saliently argues, in the midst of the “crisis” of late-capitalism that threatens any possibility of politicization, there is more work to be done by making a “descriptive turn” in queer critique. She writes:

I want to recall a queer tradition that focuses on the lived experience of structural inequality . . . [that has] less to say about crisis than about making do and getting by. Because of its emphasis on everyday life and intimate experience, the tradition I am pointing to can seem to lack a revolutionary horizon. But for me this refusal of the choice between revolution and capitulation is what makes this tradition queer. (p. 131)

Following Love, I want to begin this project with an argument that demands that we contemplate which voices, urgencies and lived experiences must be heard and witnessed before a critical judgment and politicization can be imagined for contemporary queer politics and scholarship in Canada. My goal in this project, then, is to offer descriptive accounts of the negotiations of survival, making do and getting by in order to complicate totalizing accounts of both the mobilities and immobilities of queer subjects—the “conventions of genre” in modern queer migration narratives (Gopinath, 2003, p. 137)—by privileging the microcosmic powers and tactics that may not count as political (or revolutionary) as such, and which have been left out of the theoretical renderings of present queer politics in North America in general, and in Canada in particular.

With this context and contention in mind, in the following sections I explicate the set of frameworks that I chose to employ in order to conceptualize my specific research questions that attempt to locate the everyday dimensions of these practices and their relationships to mobilities, embodied difference, border crossings, mediation and finally, to imagination.
Forces
Mobilities
(Urry, Shelly, Knopp)

“Subjects”
Queer Migrations
(Manalansan, Alexander)

“Enigma as Evidence”:
The Ethics of Imagination

Assemblages
Mediascapes
(Appadurai, de Certeau)

Representation/Embodiment

Difference/Displacement

Mediations/ Imaginaries

Research Question #1: How does the idea of mobilities as problematic describe the ways in which culturally produced and embodied differences come to take hold of bodies, and how is such movement restrained, afforded or negotiated bodily, spatially and affectively in a given cultural context and space?

Research Question #2: How does a queer migration pedagogies framework and a focus on the “gaysian figure” offer an alternative object lesson about race and racism, sexual citizenship, gender relations and the economics of belonging? How do migrant subjects encounter, learn and adapt to various ways of doing the complex, intersectional identity of gaysian across national borders and within cultural borderlands?

Research Question #3: How do ordinary queer migrant subjects consume, organize and remEDIATE cultural meanings and socialities with mediums and technologies that are less obvious in their cultural significance and sophistication, and how do these imaginative practices relate to mobilities and tactics?

Figure 3. A Research Map: Conceptual Frameworks and Questions of the Cultural Politics of Mobilities
Mobilities as problematic

How does the idea of mobilities as problematic describe the ways in which culturally produced and embodied differences come to take hold of bodies, and how is such movement restrained, afforded or negotiated bodily, spatially and affectively in a given cultural context and space?

Conceptually, the everyday dimensions of mobility in this project are located at the nexus of sexuality, race and transnational migration. With critical attention to the workings of embodied differences, I offer a consideration of mobilities not as the object of study, but as the problematic, so as to use the concept of mobilities itself as a more culturally situated and nuanced framework of inquiry for political analysis.

Mobilities paradigm

Faced with the unprecedented scale and flow of global capital, technologies of travel, transnational migrations and networked communications, current social relations and practices in many societies have come to be marked by the notion of movement, the arrival of which John Urry (2007) describes as the “mobilities paradigm” (p. 44) (see also Sheller & Urry, 2006). The concept of mobilities—multimodal capacities for movement, including the imaginative, communicative and physical sorts, in and through different boundaries, infrastructures, and systems—offers a productive framework of analysis in consideration of the shifting structures of modern social worlds and globalization processes (Sheller & Urry, 2006; Urry, 2007).

While its conceptual scope undoubtedly informs this project, I was equally compelled to question the paradigm’s tendency to conflate the expansion of mobility systems with global
modernity, a tendency which sorely lacks a commitment to political analysis. More specifically, the paradigm’s universalizing discourses (e.g., “modern society,” “global phenomena,” “rights to movement”) both explicitly and implicitly omit a careful consideration of difference—including those of geography, class, gender, or race—erased by developmental rhetoric in late capitalism. Such an omission leaves the conversation of mobilities with an abstract and decontextualized idealization only to shuffle between celebratory discourses of cosmopolitan imaginaries on the one hand, and a teleology of global capitalism that feeds off of increased circulations, flows and transactions across the planet on the other.

**Mobilities as problematic**

The macro, modernist and sociological conceptualization of the mobilities paradigm does not take us much further in grappling with mobilities as a social phenomenon as lived and practiced differently by different subjects. The imperative for social research, then, is to start from a critical position as regards the assumptions underlying these conversations and enter the mobilities conversation differently by way of attending critically to the “ideology of movement” (Urry, 2007, p.18).

As an institutionalized and increasingly globalized discourse, the idealization of movement often privileges itself as a sign of agency, self-actualization, and emancipation from localized constraints. This ideology of movement goes hand in hand with the individualist, neoliberal fantasy, which forgets the condition of possibility from which today’s ideas about mobile cultures and global citizens emerged (Ahmed, 2000; da Silva, 2007). Given that those who live within/between developed societies (in North America, Europe and other regional economic powers in Asia and elsewhere) are now living life on the move with/through multiple and multiscalar mobility systems, it becomes essential to question the explanatory power of
this deterministic planetary vision for examining mobilities-in-practice and its cultural and political implications (Morley, 2000; Wesling, 2008).

As a critical intervention to mobilities research, I propose a theoretical position that argues for mobilities as problematic, rather than as the object of study, which also argues against participating in both the romanticizing of mobile subjects and the ontology of movement as necessarily liberatory (Ahmed, 2000). In taking up this position, I employ the concept as a framework of critique that simultaneously reads for interactions between the personal and the social as they collide in everyday scenes of mobilities and immobilities; a kind of “friction” (Tsing, 2007, p. 9) that enables movements and maneuvers of queer Asian bodies situated within specific cultural spaces and social relations concerning sexual public cultures, racialization and transnational migration networks. In doing so, I turn to an existing body of interdisciplinary research in Transnational Feminism, Cultural Geography, Migration and Diaspora Studies, Critical Race Theory, and Cultural and Media Studies that underpins the problematization of mobilities. These critical works offer genealogical readings of structures of movements against the legacies of colonization, global capitalism and neoliberal biopolitics that haunt present day mobile worlds and subjects. For example, in her ethnography of flexible citizenship in Singapore, an emblematic city of transnational flows and global capitalism in Asia, Aihwa Ong (2006) convincingly argues that translocal structures of mobilities are dictated by logics of economies and technologies of neoliberalism that afford social mobility

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to some, but certainly not all, subjects as “exceptions.” The notion of exception here suggests that an accumulation and capitalization of skills, abilities and class privileges (globally defined) is what enables movement of an exceptional group of subjects from local to transnational playfields, which is far from the universal reality of a democratic project for all.

Researchers such as Ong and others begin their examinations with the fact of displacement in a post-colonial organization of time and place. This critical perspective argues “against mobility as opportunity, focusing instead on displacement” (Silvery, 2007, p. 142). As I discuss in more detail in Chapter 4, approaching mobilities as problematic does not necessarily begin with either side of the binary of mobilities-as-agency or mobilities-as-displacement, as both perspectives are too limiting for a consideration of the forms of mobilities despite and because of displacement, which I seek to argue for in this project. Instead, I mobilize the idea of mobilities-in-difference as a double-edged critique, which focuses upon the tension between microcosmic movements and maneuvers as pragmatic tactics of survival, at the same time problematizing the structural determinations, displacements and predicaments shaping the queer migrant’s negotiations for mobilities.

Queerness, migrant pedagogies and the gaysian figure

How does a queer migration pedagogies framework and a focus on the “gaysian figure” offer an alternative object lesson about race and racism, sexual citizenship, gender relations and the economics of belonging? How do migrant subjects encounter, learn and adapt to various ways of doing the complex, intersectional identity of gaysian across national borders and within cultural borderlands?
The second conceptual framework that guides this project is a queer theorization of migration. The “transnational turn” in queer studies since the mid 90s has shifted critical attention to various systems and technologies of normalization and the regulation of non-normative sexualities beyond the boundary of a single nation-state and history. In particular, the recent development of queer migrations research addresses (a) the politics of the sexual mobility of transnational migrants with/against multiple axes of normativity, (b) the systemic racism and heteronormativity of the nation, sexual modernity and developmentalism, and (c) the complicity of dominant queer politics in nationalism and exploitive immigration policies (Chávez, 2013; Luibheid, 2008; Luibheid & Cantú, 2005; Manalansan, 2003; Malave & Manalansan, 2002; Yue, 2008).

Importantly for this study, this body of work makes a critical intervention to the normative historicization and modernist understandings of post-Stonewall queer politics in the US and Canada by displacing universal claims of inclusivity and benevolence in Anglo-centric sexual liberalism. These works argue that migrant and racialized bodies are nonetheless “minoritized in multiple ways [in which they] not only have to face cultural, political, and economic displacements as newcomers to the country, but they also confront another set of oppressive regimes . . . in mainstream and gay communities” (Manalansan, 2003, p. 185).

What’s queer about queer migrations?

In the emergent field of queer migration studies, some scholars have focused upon the specific aspects of displacement that Manalansan identifies, including, but not limited to: economic and material considerations of immigration and settlement (Cantú, 2009); legal issues, recognition and sexual identity (Jordan, 2012; Luibheid, 2008; Murray, 2014); activism, counter-
publics and media (Chávez, 2013; Kuntsman, 2009); and kinship and intimacy (Weston, 1997; Yue, 2008). While this research importantly informs the multiplicity of the structures and types of displacements that queer migrants must negotiate, the central question I examine in this project focuses instead upon a consideration of various modes of counter power and agency of migrant subjects that are more quotidian and less visible.

More specifically, my conceptual approach advances the “queer” in “queer migrations” as a transformative area of knowledge-making, rather than simply referring to a group of migrants who practice non-normative sexualities and gender expressions and who move from one place to another. That is to say, my focus investigates what the queerness—or queer effects (Muñoz, 1999)—of transnational migration, border crossing, and inhabiting cultural borderlands does to these axes of displacement and immobility. This dissertation offers stories from “the other side” that must accompany the conversation of how migrant bodies are undone by these conditions of displacement. For example, Martin F. Malanansan IV’s (2003) Global Divas begins with a critical contextualization of the oppressive regimes of American imperialism and culture that a group of Filipino gay men faced after they migrated to New York City. In addition to this important critique of these structures, the greater productive insight that Manalansan’s work offers, however, is how diasporic queer subjects perform the ongoing work of belonging in a new homeland by drawing upon their own resources and repertoires—not just the accepted cultural codes of mainstream gay communities, but of transnational queer Filipino public culture: “Cultural citizenship, therefore, is constituted by the unofficial or vernacular scripts . . . [and] Filipino gay men’s attempts to write or rewrite scripts and modes of behavior and attachments” (Manalansan, 2003, p. 14).
Too often, the lived experiences of migrating subjects—their subjectivities, genealogies and cultural affiliations—are treated indifferently within the established frameworks of local history and national politics of difference. Despite the tendency in critical theories and politics of race, gender and sexuality to privilege commonality instead of difference in a marginalized community’s quests for recognition and citizenship in the nation, there exists antagonistic tensions between newly landed or temporarily settled migrant subjects and diasporic, ethnic communities. In the effort to locate migrant subjects who may seem like other differentiated subjects already known to the nation (e.g., “Asian,” “gay”) the boundedness of recognition (Markell, 2003) is often forgotten, which then facilitates the treatment of migrants’ lived experiences as irrelevant to the universal narrative of oppression or simply as an exception to it.

The gaysian figure and migrant pedagogies

I employ the concept of queer migration not to merely critique structural and social determinants in explaining queer Asian migrants’ experiences and subjectivities, but also to consider the educative potentiality of migrant knowledge, knowledge in the making, and on the move, for theories and politics of difference in general. Here, I draw on M. Jacqui Alexander’s (2005) Pedagogies of Crossing as an approach to the concept of queer migration that per-

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7 See Chapter 3 for different relationalities to “Fresh Off the Boat” politics between Asian Canadian communities and queer Asian migrants. See also: Ferguson, 2011; Macharia, 2013.

8 It is important to note that while intensively interdisciplinary in its theoretical and methodological travels, this dissertation ultimately begins in and returns to the realm of Education—concerning critical public pedagogies, a sociocultural approach to learning and identity, and theories of knowledge—in which my primary scholarly training and praxis are situated.

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forms teaching. As Alexander notes, the pedagogical approach to queerness that transnational migrations engender is a strategic move. She writes:

> Pedagogies is intended to intervene in the multiple spaces where knowledge is produced . . . to interrupt inherited boundaries of geography, nation, episteme, and identity that distort vision so that they can be replaced with frameworks and modes of being that enable an understanding of the dialectics of history, enough to assist in navigating the terms of learning and the fundamentally pedagogic imperative at its heart: the imperative of making the world in which we live intelligible to ourselves and to each other—in other words, teaching ourselves. (p. 6)

Here, Alexander takes issue with not only the structural inequality and violence that the marginal migrant subject (e.g., Afro-Caribbean, queer, woman) experiences throughout migrations and border-crossings, but also with the established “episteme”—the conventions of ways of knowing—in the nation of landing and settlement that refuse to learn from the strange migrancy of identity, belonging and desire beyond nation-based frameworks and subjects.

Following Alexander and Manalansan, my use of the concept of queer migration—both as movement and a framework of knowledge that does something in its “crossing”—in this project attempts to problematize a theory of figuration in both academic and public conversations concerning im/migration, strangers, and national culture, a normative structure of encounter and recognition of the nation that enables a “‘cutting off’ of figures from the social and material relations which overdetermine their existence” (Ahmed, 2000, p. 5). As I discuss in detail in Chapter 3 and in other chapters, such a normative structure of encounter and recognition for queer Asian migrants takes the form of what I call the gaysian figure—an as-
semblage of discourses and representations of racialized desire, cultural assumptions and
gendered performativity about Asian subjects that intersects and crystallizes in the everyday
sphere of queer intimacy and the local public sexual and social landscape of Vancouver and
the Lower Mainland of British Columbia, Canada.

As a universalizing and displacing force, the imposition of the gaysian figure does not dis-
 criminate among different subjectivities, embodiments, gender expressions and national be-
 longings between Asian, male queer subjects. It is an objectification in which “people from
very different countries and cultures tend to be lumped together . . . homogenized and dis-
 missed under the umbrella of otherness” (Ridge, Hee & Minichiello, 1999, p. 48). Focusing
on the processes of figuration, firstly, presents an opportunity for a close examination of the
gaysian figure’s classed, gendered, sexualized and national dimensions for a critique of social
relations and history. Secondly, and to return to Alexander’s (2005) model of critique, a shift
in perspective from politics to pedagogy in queer migration frameworks can offer a different
kind of object lesson (Wiegman, 2012) about race and racism, sexual citizenship, gender re-
lations and the economics of belonging by emphasizing how migrant subjects encounter,
learn and adapt to various ways of doing the complex, intersectional identity work and per-
formance of and against the gaysian figure across national borders and within cultural bor-
derlands.

As I discuss more thoroughly in Chapter 3, this approach differs significantly from the cor-
rective politics of representation and visibility concerning the racialization and gendering of
the Asian figure mobilized by queer Asian American/Canadian nationals (see also Nguyen,
2008), whose “vision” may be limited by “inherited boundaries of geography, nation, epis-
teme, and identity,” as Alexander (2005, p. 6) would put it. To be clear, I do not intend to
suggest here that there is an ontological superiority to queer migration knowledge production or that these subjects are “queerer than thou” in shifting political landscapes in a globalized world. Rather, my turn to a queer migrations framework is informed by the fact that there are many forms of politics, and consequently, multiple ways in which oppressive structures, discourses and representations of racialized, queer others can be taken up, put into use, and made different.

Queer migration’s pedagogies—with an optimistic focus on producing knowledge for action—offer an opportunity to broaden and estrange the boundaries of our critical knowledge—what we think we already know—about identity and difference, and consider alternative methods of doing politics differently by demonstrating how instability and migrancy already corrupt the seemingly static and totalizing forces of figuration in the nation, which differently situated, racialized, gendered and sexualized bodies and subjects commonly struggle against, and attempt to displace collectively.

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9 Here, I am thinking along Sharon P. Holland’s (2012) polemic in *The Erotic Life of Racism* in which she argues that the recent transnational turn in queer studies renders the tradition of black feminist and queer critique of the persistent, Black/White “color line” obsolete. I will return and respond to her important critique of transnationalism in the politics of race by considering a “critical regionalism” framework and affinities among differently located racialized communities in the Conclusions chapter.

**Everyday transnational mediascapes**

How do ordinary queer migrant subjects consume, organize and remediate cultural meanings and socialities with mediums and technologies that are less obvious in their cultural significance and sophistication, and how do these imaginative practices relate to mobilities and tactics?

The third approach in my conceptual framework that triangulates the cultural politics of mobilities with queer migration is the notion of mediaspaces (Appadurai, 1996). Arjun Appadurai (1996) observes that transnational flows and circuits of meditation and cultural representations are constitutive of disjunctive modernity, in which dispersed subjects inhabit differing and often competing epistemologies of belonging in their “imagined communities” (Anderson, 1983, p. 1) across national boundaries. While imagination through print media was the basis of national belonging for Anderson’s citizens, Appadurai (1996) extends the boundary of mediated imagination to transnational mediascapes, where migrant and diasporic subjects maintain a simultaneous relationship to their original homes as well as a belonging to other multiple, often transnational, social worlds. By extension, this dissertation project examines exactly how such imaginative practices through transnational mediascapes extend “globally defined fields of possibility” (Appadurai, 1996, p. 31) into the microsphere of everyday queer lives, and critically, how these everyday mediascapes translate into the mobilities of the seemingly displaced and bounded bodies of queer Asian migrants.

My conceptual approach to media is organized around the scale and location of the everyday (de Certeau, 1984; Smith, 1987), in which I relate the decidedly globalized notion of mediascape to the culturally and geographically situated domain of quotidian, private life spaces. This focus on the everyday relates specifically to two main concerns in critical media studies
research, namely (a) the problem of celebratory discourses of media as a location of empowerment and agency, and (b) the importance of valuing seemingly banal media practices and ordinary media objects.

**Celebratory media discourses as problematic**

Firstly, as many media and communications scholars note, “mobilities of the media is a key characteristic of the increasingly digitised global communication ecology” in which “the media and communication contra-flows can share cultural identities, energise disempowered groups, and help create political coalitions and new transnational private and public spheres” (Thussu, 2007, p. 1-4). While the unprecedented expansion of media networks and circulation in a global space and time is obvious, there is a tendency in this line of research to claim the presence of the ever-ubiquitous access and presence of “ethnic” media as unquestionable evidence of the democratization of media consumption for transnational subjects. Relatedly, media and communications research often discusses mobilities of media in terms of form (e.g., ethnic newspapers and TV programming, satellite and cable channels, blogs, portal websites, social networks and other Internet-based platforms), yielding their analysis and conclusions on the political possibilities of media within the boundary of the form and not in terms of the practice of media consumption and production.

The problematic assumption that underlines these issues is, much like mobilities, the uncritical and disembodied thesis of media itself as a site of political possibility in a global context. As Hermida and Bryson (2010) saliently argue in their review of research into the politics of democratization through media in a global context, the increased mediatization of social worlds is not itself convincing evidence of the ultimate good of participation in mediated publics—local and global—but only an indication of “lines of flight for thinking very care-
fully about the complexities of media within the transitive spheres of globalization” (p. 860).

To return to the notion of mediacape as a site of imaginative practice, Anderson (1983) has made explicit in his political analyses that media and mediated imaginations are often a normative site of subjection and subject formation in which the exclusionary boundary of belonging, citizenship and nationalism is established. Appadurai (1996) also posits that the emergence of transnational mediascapes was an occasion for the rise of ethnic nationalism within diasporic communities in the West. He argues that non-Western cultural values and epistemologies are in fact invented, essentialized and remediated in a form of identity politics in the diaspora, which struggles against the erasure of ethnic and cultural differences as a reaction to white-racialized national cultures and mass media representations. These theoretical insights argue for media research to critically engage with the overly-simplistic idea that media is a vehicle of democratization and the de facto tool of mobility for all displaced subjects and transnational public cultures in a time of communicative capitalism (Dean, 2009).

The importance of ordinary media objects and practices

The second concern in my conceptualization of everyday mediascapes relates more specifically to the use of media artifacts and practices in transnational queer public cultures research. Although undoubtedly generative, much of the existing research concerning transnational queer public cultures often privileges proper archives of literature, cinema, theatre and other works of cultural producers, and takes the assumption of access to cultural capital and the conditions of production and consumption of culture and media among queer subjects as a given. While I do not discount the importance of these works that focus on more culturally established and accepted archives, my aim in this project is to insist upon the value of more mundane, ordinary and banal instances of media, mediation, and their related usages (Wil-
liams, 1989). This project takes up the concept of mediascape to examine how ordinary queer migrant subjects consume, organize and remediate cultural meanings and socialities with mediums and technologies that are less obvious in their cultural significance and sophistication.

Situated in the complex realities and messy materialities of quotidian life contexts, research on everyday media reminds us how the marginal subject’s quests for sociality and belonging are in fact the labour of intense and daily negotiations around ordinary, yet haunting, homophobia, sexism, racism, and other exclusions (Bryson, MacIntosh, et al., 2008; Gray, 2009). The emphasis of the everyday therefore takes a cautious approach to the political possibilities of media, where both utopic and dystopic conceptualizations are put into question alongside the reality and importance of everyday struggles, concerns and purposes of people’s media practices and cultural activities (Berry, Martin & Yue, 2003). The everyday approach begins not with presupposed ideas about the political value and importance of media, but rather begins with an examination of the meaning and value participants themselves attach to their mediative activities and practices. Such descriptive work attends to the valuing of participants’ media practices, where the rearticulation of alternative meanings, identifications and belongings may be put into practice and embodied towards uncertain effects that are not often visible if we only attend to proper media forms within standard archives.

The everyday mediaspace framework is not interested in media as the object of analysis per se, but how it stitches together quotidian city landscapes and imaginations as queer Asian migrants navigate cultural borderlands and border crossings in Vancouver. With a focus on the everyday dimension of media and imagination, my aim in this study is to take the risk of producing mundane accounts of mediascapes and practices (Bryson, 2006) in order to exam-
ine what the critical relation between political possibilities and ordinary media objects and practices may be in transnational migrant lives and for embodied queer mobilities.

**Summary**

These research questions, woven across and among important conversations concerning mobilities, queer migration, and media, deeply informed both my theoretical and methodological approaches to this project. Taken together, these questions and the theoretical frameworks that invigorated them offered me my first glimpses of a queer utopia, that exists somewhere between the boundaries of seemingly incommensurate, bifurcated conversations on displaced abjection and mobile agency, between the celebration of sexual citizenship and the reality of exclusionary migratory policies, and between the glorification of media and the everyday dimension of media practices. As I discuss in Chapter 2 and seek to address in further chapters, such glimpses of a queer utopia are often only to be found within the enigmatic and imaginative practices of everyday life of the queer Asian migrants in this study.
Chapter 2: Twists and Turns: Methodology and Writing

There is a silence that cannot speak. There is a silence that will not speak. . . .
If I could follow the stream down and down to the hidden voice, would I come
at last to the freeing word? I ask the night sky but the silence is steadfast.
There is no reply. —Joy Kogawa, Obasan

This chapter examines the specific methodological choices and the set of analytics I em-
ployed for reading and writing in this dissertation project. It is worth contemplating how the
original itinerary—my imagined methodological plan preceding the actual fieldwork—was
transformed within the structure of interview encounters with participants, this project’s trav-
el, as it were, through foreign terrains and customs, and its meetings with the strangers there.
Put simply, the twists and turns I encountered during data collection and the reading of and
writing about that data were the product of my struggle against the tension between a critical
urgency to tell the truth and do justice to the participants’ lived experiences of oppression on
the one hand, and the undecidability of the meaning of those narratives that could not easily
be apprehended by theory on the other.

In Queer Methods and Methodologies, Browne and Nash (2010) argue that while queer theo-
ry has performed a powerful critique of reductive, social scientific methods of evidencing,
we must carefully examine the seemingly incommensurate relationship between queer
theory’s deconstructive position towards individual, subjective experiences and the commit-
ment of other critical, qualitative research projects, which value such empirically grounded
work. They write:

We also need to engage overtly with questions that intersect these workings of
“queer” together with (social science) methodologies, that is, those sets of logical or-
ganising principles that link our ontological and epistemological perspectives with the actual methods we use to gather data. (p. 2)

Mobilizing queer theory’s densely theoretical tendency (perhaps due to its psychoanalytic origin) to focus on fluidity, impermanency and contingent formations of desire and identity, alongside other critical social science methodologies (e.g., ethnography and interviewing), which attempt to fix subjects, subjectivities and experiences in a matrix of social locations and relations for genealogical analysis, is no simple or easily achievable task (Bryson & Stacie, 2013).

Easy or not, during the field work, analysis and writing of this project, I encountered three significant moments in which I turned to alternative methods out of a practical necessity to navigate this particular tension. This need for flexible and reflexive methodological practices arose from the many intimate, sustained, and long-term interviews and conversations I had with fourteen queer migrants. These interviews elicited a wide range of narratives, memories and imaginations that could not easily be separated from their everyday, idiosyncratic, nuanced, material and singular lives, and which refused to be explained away by simple theoretical reduction. My purpose in this chapter is to chronicle, methodologically speaking, what I did, how I did it and why I did it as it pertains to my fieldwork, analysis of data, and writing. Through these descriptive accounts, I aim to enliven the process of the twists and turns of my methodological approaches as I sought the theoretical and ethical ground from which to retell participants’ stories—not to “speak about” or “speak for” them, but instead to find the ethical position from which to “speak nearby” (Trinh as cited in Chen, 1992, p. 82).

In this chapter I describe three specific methodological turns, including: (a) a relational turn in interviewing and fieldwork; (b) an archival turn in my reading practices and; (c) a reflex-
ive turn in writing, each followed by engagements with related scholarly conversations concerning queer archival methods, the analytics of queer performance and acts, and the ethics of re/presentation. Altogether, these considerations ask what it means for this project to *queer* critically engaged, empirically grounded research methods as an ethically charged move towards the co-production of knowledge. In summary, this chapter offers a set of tools to assist the reader to navigate and journey through the participants’ queer, migratory life-worlds in the chapters that follow.

**The relational turn: data collection and interviewing**

**Original plans**

This dissertation draws from interview-based, media-centered, ethnographic fieldwork I conducted in Vancouver and the surrounding suburban communities in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia between 2010 and 2012. Research posters and flyers were posted in local LGBTQ centres, public spaces including cafes and shops in Davie Village (Vancouver’s downtown gay district), libraries, and on sign posts. The call for participation was also posted on several online discussion boards, forums, listservs and social networking sites that catered to local and transnational queer Asian communities (e.g., Fridae.net, Mixi.jp, JguyUS-guy.org, Facebook and Craigslist). As I started to receive emails and phone calls and began conducting initial meetings, some of the first participants introduced me to their friends and acquaintances from their social circles in the manner of “snowballing” (Marshall, 1998). Within a month, I received expressions of interest in participation from about twenty gay/bisexual men and one transgender woman. Of the twenty initial participants, two of them withdrew from the research for personal reasons and four were excluded for reasons includ-
ing language issues, privacy concerns, and the difficulty of committing to the long-term nature of the study.

The participants

The fourteen participants in this project included subjects with diverse intersectional identifications, including gay and bisexual men and a transgender woman. Participants also employed both western and non-western sexual and gender identificatory terms\(^{11}\) such as “オカマ/okama (Japanese),” “同志/tongzhi (Chinese),” “동성애자/doseiaisha (Korean)” and “lady-boy.” The participants were originally from many Asia Pacific regions, including Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Vietnam and China. Ages ranged between 25 and 56 years old at the start of fieldwork. All were living in the Metro Vancouver area at the time of this research, with varying visa and citizenship statuses, including: naturalized citizen, permanent resident, temporary worker, international student, and undocumented worker. In addition, two participants identified themselves as “living with HIV,” one participant identified as “deaf” and two participants identified as “mentally disabled\(^{12}\).”

The decision to work with a relatively small group of subjects with a wide range of differences, including nationality, language, and socio-economic and legal statuses, was intentional

\(^{11}\) These non-English terms are included for some participants as they identified most closely with them in my initial conversations with them.

\(^{12}\) The two participants who employed this identifactory term did so at least partially because they received disability benefits. The actual everyday reality of their “mental disability” was specifically related to their experiences of mild to severe depression. While I was unable to fully attend to participants’ experiences of dis/ability (physical, mental, or sensory) and the social, medical, and other related impacts of such experiences in this dissertation, I plan to address these important elements in future publications.
in my methodological approach. As a tradition of queer Asian scholarship demonstrates (Eng, 2001), dispersed migrant subjects with multiple genealogies and identifications are often problematically grouped through universalizing forces of racialization and objectification in North American queer social relations (i.e., the “thingification” of the gaysian figure that I touched upon in Chapter 1 and which I discuss in extensive detail in Chapter 3). However, as Hoang Tan Nguyen (2008) argues, such a seemingly totalizing force can at the same time be experienced and negotiated in widely different ways by different Asian subjects. It is thus no surprise that there were vast differences in the subjectivities, identifications, experiences and life trajectories as much as similarities among participants in this project. As such, my emphasis in participant recruitment was on multiplicity, rather than uniformity, to make legible participants’ innumerable and complex ways of doing and not simply being queer and Asian in Vancouver.

What follows below is a kind of legend” to offer a brief, alphabetical introduction to each of the 14 participants.13

**Bruce:** Bruce first came to Canada from Hong Kong as an international student in 2006 and then immigrated as a permanent resident through family sponsorship in 2010. Bruce studied textile technology at a college in Hong Kong, but did not find a job in Vancouver that matched his skills and education.

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13 All demographic and biographical information is as of the date of initial interviews. Participants’ demographic information is organized in terms of: age/sexuality/gender/ethnicity/country of origin/status in Canada. Additional identification terms that participants used to describe themselves are also included. Please note that some identifying information (e.g., names) has been altered in order to protect participants’ privacy except for Kenny, who requested that his actual name to be used in this research.
He currently works at a noodle shop that his friend owns in Richmond—a suburb south of Vancouver in which he also lives. He is active in both Vancouver’s and Hong Kong’s queer scenes between which he often travels throughout the year. (28/gay/male/Asian/Hong Kong/ permanent resident; working-class gaysian)

**Hikaru:** Hikaru works as a sales person for a small Japanese trading company in downtown Vancouver. He moved from Osaka to Vancouver on a working holiday at the age of 29. After a series of long-term relationships with local white men, Hikaru decided that he wanted to exclusively date younger Asian men. Hikaru is active in Asian queer social groups in Vancouver and lives in downtown Vancouver with a roommate. (42/Japanese/gay/male/ Japan/naturalized Canadian citizen; rice queen)

**Jin:** Jin immigrated to Vancouver with his family when he was 15 years old. He comes from an upper-class household and spent his teenage years in a private boarding school in Vancouver. He has traveled and lived around the world extensively and considers Canada a “stop over” in his life. Jin lives in a luxury condo in the West End. Soon after the completion of fieldwork, Jin returned to South Korea to help with his father’s business in Seoul. (26/gay/male/ “Corean”\(^{14}\)/ South Korea/naturalized Canadian citizen with dual citizenship)

\(^{14}\) Some Korean/Corean subjects use “Corea” as the correct spelling in English. The name of the country was spelled as such prior to the colonization by Japan in 1905. The use of “Corea” is considered an act of colonial resistance and politicization of the East Asian
Jo: Jo came to Vancouver from a small town in southern Taiwan as an international student in 2009. After his diploma program ended, he switched his visa to working holiday status. He hopes to find a Taiwanese company that might sponsor his work visa application. He currently works at multiple restaurants in downtown Vancouver. Jo lives with 4 other Taiwanese students in a one bedroom apartment near downtown Vancouver. At the time of the initial interview, Jo was in a relationship with Tay (they have since separated). (26/gay/male/Asian/Taiwan/working-holiday visa)

Jun: Jun came to Canada in 2009, first as a student at a local English language school. He then switched his visa to working holiday status. Jun is legally deaf and fluent in Japanese Sign Language. Jun studied counseling psychology in college and worked as a counselor at several youth correction facilities in Japan. Jun works at a local Asian market and lives with a Chinese host family who rent him a bedroom in their East Vancouver house. Soon after the completion of this fieldwork, Jun returned to Japan as his hometown was badly damaged by the Tohoku Great Earthquake in March 2011. (34/バイ (bisexual)/male/Japanese/Japan/ working-holiday visa; gay and deaf)

Kaz: Kaz immigrated to Canada in 2008 as a permanent resident through a family sponsorship with a Canadian common law-partner who he met in Japan regional history and its modernization processes. For a contemporary debate on the use of the term, see: http://goldsea.com/Air/Issues/Corea/corea.html
(they separated in 2009). Kaz lives with HIV, which he contracted in Japan, and identifies as “positive”—referring both to his HIV status and sexual politics. Kaz studied fine arts in college and worked as a public servant in a municipal government in Japan prior to his immigration to Canada. He works as a bartender at a local Japanese restaurant in Vancouver and lives just outside of downtown. (37/gay/male/Japanese/ Japan/permanent resident; (HIV) positive, potato queen)

Kenny:  Kenny is a professional storyboard artist and works with local film and video studios. After an initial interview session, Kenny agreed to participate in this project by producing a graphic storyboard that engages with the questions and discussions of this dissertation. Kenny’s father was Zainichi (an ethnic Korean-Japanese subject), which complicates his ethnic identification. Born in Toronto, Kenny moved to Vancouver with his family when he was a child. Kenny lives in Vancouver’s west side, with his boyfriend who is from West Vancouver. (32/gay/male/Asian Canadian/Canadian citizen)

Maty:  Maty was raised as Christian in a South Asian diaspora in Uganda. After his community was deported by the then nationalist Ugandan government in the 1970s, Maty and his family immigrated to Canada as refugees. Maty does not identify with any term of sexual identification (e.g., gay, homosexual, or queer etc.). Maty suffers from manic depression and depends on disability benefits from the government. He claims that he has never touched a computer and does not own a digital communication device.
Maty lives in Surrey with his 90-year-old mother and his sisters’ families. (57/male/Uganda/Indian/naturalized Canadian citizen; mentally disabled)

**Mickey:** Mickey was born in Hong Kong and moved to Canada with his mother and sister as a small child. He grew up and lived in a suburban town outside of Vancouver until he entered a local university. He studies critical race theory and gender, is active in student activism and anti-racist education on campus, and lives in the student residency. (24/gay/male/Asian Canadian/Hong Kong/naturalized Canadian citizen)

**Salt:** Salt moved to Vancouver in 2004 as an international student at an English language school. He now studies marketing at a local college. He comes from a family in Shanghai, who purchased a condo in downtown Vancouver in which he currently lives. As a self-identified hipster, he helps out at his friends’ clothing store located in a shopping mall in Richmond. (25/gay/male/Chinese/China/student; gaysian hipster, potato queen)

**Sky:** Sky came to Vancouver in 2007 as an international student to study literature in a master’s program at a local university. He lives in Burnaby with a housemate who used to be his lover. Sky is from a rural southern province in China and both of his parents are teachers. Sky was active in the local queer community in the first few years after he moved to Vancouver, however, he no longer considers himself part of “the scene.” (25/queer/male/Chinese/Chinese/naturalized Canadian citizen; amateur poet)
Shin: Shin waits tables at local Japanese restaurants. He first came to Vancouver in his early twenties as a working holiday worker for one year while he was still a nurse aide student in his rural hometown in western Japan. He returned to Japan until he came back to Vancouver in 2008 on a short-term working visa, which expired after 6 months. He decided to stay in Canada and be “undocumented” to live with his current boyfriend from the US. Shin and his boyfriend live in downtown Vancouver. (33/gay/male/ Japanese/ Japan/undocumented; potato queen, survivor)

Song: Song self-identifies as a “lady boy,” a borrowed English term often used in Asian cultures to refer to a range of sexual and gender identities, not identical to the negative connotation of its Western meaning. Song is in the process of transitioning and receives hormone treatments in order to “become a transsexual woman.” Song came to Vancouver on a working holiday visa and is active in transgender and sexual communities in Vancouver. She writes on her Korean blog, which contains a mix of trans educational information and a daily chronicle of her life in Vancouver. Her blog has attracted many trans readers in South Korea and Song hopes to start a support group upon returning to her hometown in Seoul after one year in Vancouver. Song has since returned to Seoul and started a café business with her sister. (25/asexual/transgender/South Korean/South Korea/working holiday visa; lady boy)

Tay: Tay immigrated to Toronto with his family from Vietnam as a refugee during the Vietnamese war in the early 70s. After college, Tay relocated to
Vancouver to work as a draftsman at a local architecture firm. Tay self-identifies as a “BCA (Big Chested Asian)” and a body builder, and works out at a gym in downtown Vancouver where he also lives. Tay was in a relationship with Jo at the time of his initial interview, but they separated “due to a language barrier” soon after. Towards the end of this fieldwork, Tay moved back to Toronto to be closer to his family and his ill father.

(37/gay/male/ Vietnamese-Chinese Canadian/naturalized Canadian citizen; BCA (Big Chested Asian))

Yasu: Yasu moved to Vancouver from a small town in Western Japan in his mid-20s as a holiday worker. He then studied tourism at a local college, and now works at a travel agency in East Vancouver. He lives in a studio apartment he purchased in the mid-90’s. Yasu identifies as “Asian Bear,” as well as “デブ (debu/chubby).” Yasu is one of the senior and founding members of 大奥バンクーバー/Ooku Vancouver (The Ooku Vancouver social group is discussed in detail in Chapter 5). (45/オカマ/okama)/gay/male/Japanese/permanent resident; Asian Bear/デブ (debu)

Victor: Victor immigrated to Canada as a university student and then became a naturalized citizen in 1999. His family lives in a town adjacent to Shanghai, which he frequently visits. He works as a sales agent at an insurance company in Richmond. Victor is married to a white Canadian man and is an active member at a local Asian cultural society. (37/gay/male/Chinese Canadian/naturalized Canadian citizen)
Interviews

Initial, semi-structured interviews (lasting 90 to 120 minutes) focused on eliciting life narratives of migration to and settlement in Canada, as well as participants’ sexual, gender, ethnic and other cultural identifications and practices. I employed ethnographic interviewing (Fontana & Frey, 2000; Fontana & Prokos, 2007; Gubrium & Holstein, 2012) along with a documentation of life history narratives (Devault, 1990) as my primary methods of data collection. I chose the ethnographic interview technique for its emphasis on capturing cultural meanings, practices and experiences as they are enacted and put into use in the everyday sphere (Fontana & Frey, 2000; Fontana & Prokos, 2007). These documented meanings and narrated practices can then be reconstructed discursively (or visually, in the case of visual ethnography) to describe and explain the organization of a cultural world.

To attempt to apprehend the cultural worlds of participants, I designed and prepared a set of interview questions informed by the conceptual frameworks with which I started this project. These questions aimed to elicit meanings and practices related to the intersectional experiences of (a) race and racism (e.g., “What meanings do you associate with ‘Asian’ and/or being Asian in Vancouver?”); (b) sexuality (e.g., “What does it mean to be ‘gay’ (or any other sexual identity term employed by participants), “what sort of activities are related to your sexual identity?”); and, (c) immigration (e.g., “Tell me about your ‘immigration story’; where did you come from and how did you end up in Vancouver?”). The original purpose of my fieldwork was to identify and document the existence of “unique” cultural meanings, practices, locations and artifacts (especially mediational objects) that queer Asian migrants used to organize their everyday, private and public lives and show how such meanings and practices may be markedly different from mainstream, white, national queer public cultures.
in North America at large, and in Vancouver in particular. Additionally, in order to engage with as many aspects of participants’ complex life narratives and the changes in their life trajectories over time as possible, I designed the interview sessions to be conducted over the course of roughly two years, including at least two to three follow up interviews with each participant after the initial meeting.

Productive failures: silences, translations and intentions
As often as interview questions yielded a significant variety of responses in terms of depth, length, or scope, many questions were often met with silence. For example, here is an excerpt from an initial interview in which silence and uncertainty prevailed:

Figure 4. A closed-door interview
(00:10:12)

**Dai:** So, can you tell me what being “Asian and gay” means to you?

(00:10:15)

**Participant:** What that means . . .

(00:10:17)

Dai: Yeah

(00:10:18 to 00:10:47) [silence]

(00:10:48)

**Participant:** Um, that, I am Asian . . . and gay?

(00:10:50)

Dai: Ok.

(00:10:51 to 00:11:11) [silence]

(00:11:12)

**Participant:** Well, I don’t know what you want me to say.

As I reflect on these moments of silence, I recognize that I could have asked certain questions better, that perhaps if I had only used a better way of framing or phrasing, a better explanation of my intention behind the question(s), the conversation could have been more dynamic and productive. However, these examples are also about the “politics of translation” (Spivak, 1993) twice over, both at the level of language used during most of the interviews (English), and at the level of theory and practice.
More than half of the interviews were conducted in English. For both the participants and me this is not our native language. The inability to pose a question and narrate an account with all of the cultural nuances with which participants (and even myself) were familiar sometimes created a particularly challenging interview space. Such challenges of language resulted in the participants and me spending a considerable amount of our time clarifying and explaining what we meant by our questions and answers. Conversations were riddled with anxiety, which generated many possibilities for misunderstanding. However, while my decision to include such participants (of which the majority were non-English native speakers) presented a unique set of problems, it also became an opportunity to question and rework the neatly juxtaposed relationship between the researched and the researcher that may have been otherwise overlooked. Despite and because of the struggle to meet in a (linguistic) middle helped to establish multiple relationalities between the participants and myself, for, as we could not take the transparency of language and meanings for granted, the language and meanings shared between us had to be laboured upon together.

The issue of translation was equally evident even when the interview was conducted in Japanese (I am a native speaker). While the difficult work of establishing a mutual language to discuss personal experiences and stories was less onerous when the participant and I were using our native language, it was not any less daunting a task to translate the theoretical (English) origins of my questions to the participants into Japanese. In order to have any con-

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15 While it was possible that the issue of language may have been resolvable by using a translator, which I sometimes suggested, all participants declined the option, stating that including another body in the interview space could become more disruptive for privacy concerns, fear of judgment and misunderstanding due to the explicitly personal and queer nature of my questions.
versation at all, we had to establish a relationship in which I had to learn how to speak like them in the first place.\textsuperscript{16} In this sense the labour of double-translation that the participants and I collectively carried out meant that theory had to be treated as a Second Language (SL) for all of us, where the primacy of the English language and of theory (as foreign as English was to many of the participants) was suspended and transformed into our own constructs and grammars that we mutually found meaningful. Inevitably, some questions had to be tossed out altogether.\textsuperscript{17}

\textbf{Researcher identity and participant intentions}

Interviews and conversations sometimes became an occasion for disidentification (Muñoz, 1999). In addition to the participants’ power to decide not to speak to me on certain topics or questions, or in a language that was foreign to them, my positionality and perceived identities could be a source of complication. For example, one participant who was originally from South Korea made it explicit that while he agreed to sit with me and be interviewed, his participation did not warrant a friendly relationship, stating: “Just so you know, I don’t forgive you for what you did to our grandmothers . . . I don’t generally trust Japanese people.” Here, he was referring to the legacy of Japanese imperialism and the Japanese government’s ongoing failure to acknowledge its responsibilities of past violence in the late nineteenth and

\footnotetext{16}{Additionally, my lack of “gay education” in Japan (my first exposure and engagement with queer sexual cultures and practices all took place after I relocated to New York City at the age of 23) lead the Japanese participants to express their disappointment and sometimes frustration at my inability to speak in the “オカマ/okama” (fag) style of speech.}

\footnotetext{17}{For a more thorough critique of Euro-Anglo-centricism in the critical work of documenting linguistic and cultural Others, which reproduces the relation of “the Master and the Native” in language and knowledge, see Gayatri Spivak’s (1993) essay \textit{The Politics of Translation}.}
early twentieth centuries in many East Asian regions during which the Japanese regime used local Korean females as “comfort women” for the occupying Japanese soldiers.

On a separate occasion, when I was invited to participate in an event hosted by the Ooku Vancouver social group organized by Japanese gay men as I discuss in Chapter 5, I was denied full membership to the organization because of my many privileges: as a graduate student at an elite national university, as a permanent residency card-holder (a skilled-worker class immigrant proven to be beneficial for the Canadian economy with my education, academic skills and future earning power) and for the fact that I was with a long-term, white partner at the time.¹⁸ As one member from the group made it clear to me: “You are not really one of us . . . you are more of a mainstream person that we wish we were, but can’t ever be.”

Still yet, there were other participants who related to the interview sessions unlike the clear ambivalence some subjects showed. A few months into the fieldwork, I began to receive phone calls from gay Asian men in the city who had heard about my project they mentioned how the interviews were “therapeutic” for those who had already participated. Many insisted that I extend my “service” to them as they disclosed to me during the initial talks on the phone their traumas, secrets and struggles, as well as their desire to be recorded and documented in this project. “I want to be part of your research and see myself mentioned,” one person stated. I explained to them that this research was not for therapeutic purposes and that their participation in the interview was not meant to be a psychological service. However, regardless of my intention to keep my fieldwork away from the perception of it being thera-

¹⁸ The Ooku Vancouver social group and its conditions of participation and membership are discussed in detail in Chapter 5.
peutic, participants came in with their own intentions anyway—some perhaps for therapy, some for the reason of being included and documented—and related to and used the interview session the way they understood it to be useful to them.

Taken together, these three examples (of which I could have included many more) point to the importance of participant agency—both concerning why and for how long they chose to come to the interviews and how they perceived my role and how much, if at all, they chose to tell me about themselves through the interview process. Too often, reflexivity in research ends up being reduced to navel-gazing conversations about how to improve research methods without considering the dynamic between the researcher and the researched as a multi-directional activity (Trinh, as cited Chen 1992). The form of reflexivity demanded by participants in this study highlights how we cannot—and must not—avoid our own involvement in the first place. We do not exist outside of our own research. We must be attentive to participant agency, to who the researcher is for them, and how researcher identity may or may not fit participants’ intentions.

Revisions: Interviewing as a relational activity

The various tensions and interruptions I encountered while conducting fieldwork demonstrate participants’ power to engage in the construction of knowledge as mutual “participants.” In my fieldwork, it became apparent that participants might sometimes choose not to speak to me about certain topics or not at all, and when and if they did speak, it had to be done in a language that worked for them and myself, with their intentions and desires to be heard in ways that they saw appropriate. The agency of participants destabilized the “insider/outsider” relationalities I had assumed and more critically, attempting to honour their intentions came with the impossibility of simply resorting to coding and decoding their narrations with a pre-
existing scheme of signification (e.g., discourse analysis) for the purpose of ethnographic descriptions for an outsider audience.

To paraphrase Spivak’s (1988) notion of the agency of the subaltern; It is not simply that the subaltern cannot speak, but perhaps more precisely, it is that the subaltern may choose not to speak to you, in your language, for any other purposes than their own intentions. Indeed, I noticed that many participants would speak more freely and without prompting about the topics we had been covering once the audio recorder stopped. Upon seeing the difference in the mode of narration and the richness of their stories and anecdotes without clear directions in an off-the-record context, I came to a realization that part of my task was to foster the condition of speaking for the participants, as much as to recognize the critical necessity for me to develop the skill to listen differently.

The participants brought to the interview table (literally and figuratively) their own sets of meanings, languages, desires and intentions to speak to me of their lived experiences, memories and practices of the everyday, regardless of my initial theoretical questions and concerns. This is not to say that my search for some cultural meanings, traces of counter power and practices of resistance that I hoped to document through ethnographic and life history interviewing failed to materialize completely. Instead, it meant that I needed to change the way I understood the method of interview from what it is (or ought to be) to what it does (or can do). Out of necessity, my fieldwork became a long-term, sustained process of establishing a relationship with each participant over the years.

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19 This reformulation of Spivak’s argument concerning the unrepresentability of the subaltern is discussed in detail by Ian Baucome (2005).
In order to meet the participants where and how they saw fit, and to further create the condition of speaking and listening more explicitly as a relational activity, I made the decision to position myself as a queer Asian migrant that I am, which enabled me to use my own experiences, life stories and memories as tools of narrativization to communicate where my questions were situated and coming from. Importantly, my positionality as, categorically speaking, “one of them” was not simply about modeling and structuring their narrations to mine with a false sense of sameness (as I have stated above, I had no illusions about participants’ impression of me as not being one of them). Rather, it produced a kind of public reflexivity—though seemingly isolated and dispersed—in which the participants and I engaged in considerations of differences, as much as commonalities, of our life stories.

Taken together, these reflections and revisions in my fieldwork and the interview methods in this project became an on-going effort to mutually engage and understand what was being discussed in the moment, with all its limits and impossibilities, where the participants had the equal right and time to ask, interrogate, and indeed “interview” me on topics they deemed important (e.g., my identifications, sexual practices, dating successes and failures, struggles for belonging, academic and personal lives, and above all, what this research was for and what they might gain from their participation).
Walkthroughs: Interviewing and "walking in the city"

Figure 5. A Walkthrough in Chinatown.

The shift in my approach to interviewing, from strictly ethnographic to relational, also shifted the spatiality of interviewing, which took me out of closed meeting rooms and offices onto the street. Too often, speaking in an isolated space relying solely on language became unproductive for both the participants and myself, especially when participants discussed social locations, cultural events and their treading across the city landscape through language. As much as we made great efforts to establish unique cultural terminologies and vocabularies for our conversations, the limitation of having no visual and embodied examples at hand was also obvious.
This became most apparent to me when I decided to open up the location of interviews to wherever the participants saw appropriate. At their invitation, I visited their homes as well as other locations in the Lower Mainland that they identified as important to their lives—gay bars, karaoke lounges, Pride parades, the public library, the Vancouver airport, a night market, and various websites. In these meetings, participants led me on “walkthroughs” of their everyday cultural landscapes as my travel guides, where their expert knowledge about the practices, significance and bodies that were associated with these places was explained to me. We also created media maps, where participants and I established a visual representation of the local and transnational cultural networks and points of mediation in which particular social practices took place, and which were demonstrated to me when possible (see Figures 5 and 6).

20 For an excellent example of media mapping, see Koen Leurs’ study of visual maps of diasporic Moroccan-Dutch youths’ digital media usages. He states: “The Internet map was useful for structuring the interview and eliciting personal narratives of passages, belonging and identification across digital space, and at the same time, the map enabled the informant to seize control over the directions the conversation would take” (Leurs, 2012, p. 99).
Figure 6. Media Map

Figure 7. The Basue Map from Chapter 7. Photograph copyright 2014, Dai Kojima.
These physical and media-based walkthroughs greatly assisted in the documentation of the practices that constituted their everyday lives but which were not easily articulated or considered relevant previously in regular interviews. Perhaps more importantly, these participant-led walkthroughs in city streets and mediascapes provided the rich visual, spatial and affective elements in the stories that we were co-constructing and witnessing “below the threshold of visibility” (de Certau, 1994, p. 93), and equally important, these walkthroughs created the conditions of possibility in which participants’ stories could be best told through the body in space.

**The archival turn: a queer “archive story” and enigma as evidence**

Having offered reflections from my fieldwork, it seems important that I ask: What is the archive of this research project? And what difference does it make to call this set of interview transcripts, field notes, and other artifacts and documents I gathered “an archive,” rather than simply “data”?

Indeed, the methods of data collection and analysis of this project were not always called archival. As Antoinette Burton (2005) notes, when we engage in an archival work, we must attend to “the need for archive stories—narratives about how archives are created, drawn upon, and experienced by those who use them to write history . . . to recognize that all archives are ‘figured’” (p. 6). Following Burton, I explicate the necessity of turning to a queer archival method in my data analysis and how this archive was figured and put into use in my reading and writing for queer acts and performances in the everyday.
The double-labour: creation and reading of a queer archive

The notion and figure of archives take multiple forms. An archive, as conventionally defined, is a collection of documents that the reader can use to make accounts of past events, experiences and subjects, or in other words, to write history. However, as Walter Benjamin (1969) famously notes, history is always written by the victor and archival practices—the creation and accumulation of documents, and the decisions about which documents are un/worthy of the purpose of the archive—are never neutral as they are squarely situated in relations of power and knowledge that dictate historicity (Burton, 2005, Mbembe, 2002; Schwartz & Cook, 2002). Archives’ intrinsic link to regimes of power and dominance—ultimately that of nation and empire—is most clearly described by Achille Mbembe (2002):

The archive is primarily the product of a judgment, the result of the exercise of a specific power and authority, which involves placing certain documents in an archive at the same time as others are discarded . . . [t]he archive is, therefore, not a piece of data, but a status. (p. 20)

In opposition to archives and histories of the victorious, the purpose of critical historiography work is to question and displace the power of the nation or the empire that confers legitimacy to the archive as “a status” of the official space in which historical facts and records can be found. It begins with a critical position that any inclusion of documents (about the lives of relevant subjects/citizens) entails exclusions of accounts of dispossessions and deaths of archival/national Others. It is both a necessity and possibility, as Mbembe (2002) further notes, to use archival documents for political analysis, for “archives have no meaning outside the subjective experience of those individuals who, at a given moment, come to use them” (p. 23). In other words, the history and the historicity of an event or experience, and the status of
archived documents and subjects, all operate under the relation of knowledge/power (Foucault, 2003). However, because archives are also a space of the “imaginary” and not the site of retrieval of factual data, each archival reading constitutes and/or threatens the monumentalized history of the nation and empire, for history itself is a product of imagination and vulnerable to different interpretations (Mbembe, 2002, p. 23).

With the “paradoxical” functions of an archive—that it can be used both to stabilize the history and the status of official accounts and/or become a source of destabilization through radical and imaginative reading practices—many scholars have produced a rich body of “counter” archival projects to recover and refigure the absent bodies, voices and experiences of racialized, gendered and sexual Others (just to name a few) in national histories and imperial memories (see also Baucome, 2005; Cvetkovich, 2003; Halberstam, 2005; Lowe, 2006; Morris, 2013; Muñoz, 1999, 2009; Shah, 2011; Stoler, 2006; Tongson, 2011; Yu, 2001). For some scholars, employing archival documents as a basis for the political analysis of erased and absent bodies and experiences requires an approach to existing archives, as Lisa Lowe (2006) argues, “not as a site of knowledge retrieval but a site of knowledge production” (p. 203). For others and specifically those queer studies scholars I draw upon in this project, a critical historiography of sexual cultures and practices requires the double-labour of creating and reading an archive, for, as minoritarian experiences and memories must first come into existence, or be given a “status” of a public record.

On the method of queer archival work that puts the researcher in the double-role of archivist/reader, Judith Halberstam (2005) writes:
The archive is not simply a repository; it is also a theory of cultural relevance, a *construction of collective memory*, and a complex record of queer activity. In order for the archive to function, it requires users, interpreters, and cultural historians to wade through the material and piece together the jigsaw puzzle of queer history in the making. (p. 169-70, emphasis added)

These multiple roles that queer archives can perform, not only for theory, but also for the making of a public record and history, relates directly to the second turn in my analysis of data: *queer archival methods*.

**The archival turn and the right to memory**

Out of the mobile, walkthrough interviews—during which the participants generously performed as travel guides and experts in the local scenes—emerged stories about places, memories, everyday rhythms and purposes, and affective ways in which the participants inhabited them that would not make sense in any other way if they had not been told and heard in those spaces, and would vanish easily if not heard and documented in the time and place in which they were told. Taken together with the earlier consideration that some participants not only responded to the call for participants but actually demanded that they be included in this project, I often wondered what compelled them to be so generous in taking me through their everyday worlds for hours on end, especially when many of them struggled to maintain a modest lifestyle with multiple low-paying jobs while constantly battling against cultural, social, and legal hardships as immigrants and temporary workers in Canada. These bodily struggles and psychic precarity, many confessed, were exhausting.

When I asked Yasu, a gay man from Japan who spent more time with me than perhaps any of the other participants (he became a sort of guide—a Virgil—in my fieldwork into everyday
queer migrant lives) about what all the talking and walking with me through the city meant for him, speaking in Japanese he told me:

Well, to think that my silly オカマ [okama/“fag”] life stories are shared with total strangers . . . that’s kinda scary, but I like the idea . . . . Before meeting you here [at my home], I was thinking how I want to be remembered after I’m gone. Being “closeted” and away from home [Japan], I could die tomorrow and no one would ever know how I lived or who I really was. I made the decision not to share this part of me with my family or friends there [in Japan] a long time ago. I hope that you find something important in them [my stories], I don’t know what they are, it’s not like my stories are glorious [laughs]. But I’m happy that they matter to you. And I hope that many people will read your paper. So, 頑張ってね [work hard]!

As I spent countless hours transcribing and listening to the audio recordings from the walkthrough interviews, as well as going over my observational notes and research journals, the weight of expectation and sense of responsibility that I was given and that I had given to myself began to feel crushing. It was the kind of complex relationality that interviewing produces, that which Ann Cvetkovich (2003) calls the “burden of intimacy, of encouraging people to talk about their emotional experience” (p.167). How does one go about the task of honouring another’s singular experiences of life and death while maintaining the integrity of scholarly distance and purposes (granted they are not mutually exclusive)? How should one choose and pursue which stories to read and retell, and how to make any choice when the very act of choosing could potentially betray the intention of the teller of the story?
In and through getting lost in the twists and turns that my fieldwork took (Lather, 2006) and that I chronicled above, I kept returning to Yasu’s statement about the temporality of hopefulness generated by the idea of being publicly recorded and the possibility of his life stories being read by and mattering to strangers in the future (“how I want to be remembered after I’m gone”)—a sentiment that was echoed by many other participants. The initial relational turn in my fieldwork became another turning point at which I approached the organization and reading of the participants’ narrations of their lived experiences and memories differently. It was a matter of revising the objectives of this project in a manner that respects the fourteen queer Asian migrants’ right to history and right to memory—the documentation of oral histories as “a construction of collective memory” (Halberstam, 2005)—as Yasu conveyed to me so eloquently.

Following Mbembe (2002), Cvetkovich (2003), Halberstam (2005), Lowe (2006) and others, my engagement with the narratives and accounts of experience shared by participants took the form of reading practices, rather than simply coding for ethnographic realism (Trinh, 1990). In making an archival turn, I make explicit my intentions both as the archivist and the reader. That is, I recognize that as much as the production of critique and knowledge is the central purpose of this project, I am also called into responsibility as an archivist who gives the participants’ narrations and accounts of lived experience the status of collective memory and emergent history, a kind of hidden “oral history [that] can capture something, [which offers], if nothing else, testimony to the fact that it existed” (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 166).
Enigma as evidence: Reading for queer acts and performance in the everyday

The turn to a queer archival framework comes with a question of reading practice; what is queer about these stories? What reading strategies and analytics allow me to read political possibilities and a destabilization of meanings into them?

Unlike conventional archives—queer or otherwise—the archive of this research is not made up from the existing documents and artifacts that are publicly accepted as, or given the status of relevance to, accounts of historical events (e.g., ACT UP activism, the Stonewall riot, etc.) or the visible works of cultural producers (e.g., comparative and ethnic literatures, cinema and documentaries, visual or performing arts). The archives of these more institutionalized documents and cultural artifacts, by virtue of being endorsed as archives, are made available to theoretical interpretations and public disseminations, whereas the atypical, “queer ethnography” (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 165) nature of the collection of narratives and testimonials in this project required an atypical and carefully considered set of reading strategies for evidencing and analysis.

Experience as evidence

Joan Scott’s (1991) critique in “The Evidence of Experience” provides a useful opening here. Scott argues that the tendency in historical and social research to use documented accounts of experience as evidence for explanation must be questioned. On the danger of alluding to individual experience as an uncontestable form of evidence outside of social relations and history, she asks: “When the evidence offered is the evidence of ‘experience,’ the claim for referentiality is further buttressed—what could be truer, after all, than a subject’s own account of what he or she has lived through?” (p. 777). The emphasis placed on the individual subject’s account of experience as a basis for explanation, for Scott, hides the performative as-
pect of experience; a question of what could have been said and what remained unspoken within the semantic field of language. In other words, to take documented accounts of experience simply as a basis of knowledge-making and an origin of subjectivity risks shutting down “a way of exploring how difference is established, how it operates, how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world” (p. 777). However, to question experience as evidence by pointing out its linguistic limits does not necessarily mean that we must abandon the project of critical historiography based on narratives of lived experience by historically disenfranchised and differentiated subjects. Scott further writes:

Subjects are constituted discursively and experience is a linguistic event (it doesn’t happen outside of established meanings), but neither is it confined to fixed orders of meaning. . . . Experience can both confirm what is already known (we see what we have learned to see) and upset what has been taken for granted. (p. 793)

As experience must be narrated, with language and in a mode of storytelling, Scott (1991) suggests, we learn better from others’ experiences by reading them as literary objects that are “at once always already an interpretation and something that needs to be interpreted” (p. 797, emphasis in original). This interpretive approach is not interested in fetishizing experience as the transparent evidence of reality and the evidence for explanation, but rather, it is an engaged reading for traces of absent meanings and silent knowledge that could not be documented as experience in the first place—both in the language and “conventions of the genre” in narrative construction (Gopinath, 2003, p. 137).

Ephemera as evidence and living archives

In following Scott’s interpretive approach to experience I am also aware that the question of embodiment must be taken into account in reading participants’ narratives in this project, for
experience is as constructed by language as it is organized and performed through the body (Ramirez, 2005). While Scott’s focus is on opening up an account of experience to the possibility of different meanings as strictly a discursive matter, the questions of difference, embodiment and mobilities I seek to address in my reading of archived transcripts and testimonials cannot be simply resolved at the level of discourse.

As I previously discussed, the burden of language and lack of a system of meaning lead to constant struggle in interview sessions and walkthroughs. As I kept listening to the recorded conversations, which included the noise of the street and other conversations by other bodies and spaces around us, as well as going over the transcribed words and statements and the photos of different scenes in the city, screenshots of websites and sketches I had taken for later analysis, I realized that the most productive moments often emerged when the participants were taking me through a social location or a cultural event relevant to their daily activities and demonstrating to me what they do, with what means and how—without struggling overmunch about what these activities meant.

As Karen Barad (2003) saliently argues, the discourse of difference and the logocentrism in the conversation of human experience has been “granted too much power” in critical social theory (p. 801). This polemic resonates with the multi-modal/sensory textuality of the data I describe above. That is to say, the kind of evidence I traced in the participants’ narratives was sometimes not about the meaning of their speech, but the significance, “the mattering” (Barad, 2003, p. 817), of their actions, their navigations and extensions of bodily movements in space and with meditative objects, which signaled the need for a framework of reading beyond linguistic representations and meanings. It is here that I further draw upon the analytics of queer performance and acts as another reading practice for evidence. My interest is not so
much in reading for and discussing how mobilities are dispersed and organized beyond the
body of the human, but to seek a way to understand the differences that the participants’ ac-
tivities in spaces and through media make, for their negotiation of mobilities, socialites and
belongings.

José Esteban Muñoz’s (1996) notion of “Ephemera as Evidence” and Horacio N. R. Ramirez’s (2005) work in “Living Archive of Desire” provide incredibly useful models for my reading practice as it pertains to embodiment and queer acts and performance in addition to the interpretive approach to experience offered by Scott (1991). Both Ramirez and Muñoz foreground queer performance and acts as evidence for queer world-making projects. In creating an archive of Latino/a queer and transgendered oral history in San Francisco, Ramirez (2005) questions what counts as evidence of experience, memory and political subjectivities of brown queer public cultures. As Ramirez argues, brown diasporic queer experiences are often under the double-erasure of white-racialized queer archival practices and the virulent heteronormativity in Latino immigrant communities. Teresita, the subject of Ramirez’s ar-

chive, finds the act of narration with conventional language of (white)queer cultural politics and homophobic Spanish both inadequate for telling a life history of the brown, transgender self. Ramirez (2005) writes:

Public about her HIV-positive status, Teresita took her singing seriously. She reminded her audience that she was not only still living despite the toll of AIDS, but that she was an artist . . . . She demanded attention and respect not only for her craft but also for what she felt she represented for queer generations. For Teresita, her living testi-
mony spoke to queer survival despite great odds, a complex narrative of past condi-

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tions and struggles and the present need for action—all dramatized through her singing and live narrations. (p. 116)

To use performance as a mode of narrativity (or as a reading practice) is a sign of how the demand for political articulation through an accepted form of speech fails the disenfranchised and diasporic subject because “for marginalized communities constantly involved in struggles for visibility, political identity, and space—the business of ‘cultural citizenship’—testimonios about their existence are critical acts of documentation” (Ramirez, 2005, p. 116).

In a turn to embodied performance and performative acts, as Remirez and Teresita remind us, we must pay close attention to how the dramatization of one’s life is a different mode of “giving an account of oneself” (Butler, 2006, p. 3) that opens up analysis to a different kind of evidentiary work than a strictly discursive one (see Chapter 5 for a consideration of queer karaoke performance by queer Japanese men as a bodily mode of conveying oral history, memory and pedagogy for collective survival, which grants primacy to singing rather than speech).

Further, in his article “Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts,” Muñoz (1996) offers us a framework of analysis that takes seriously queer acts as a basis for the documentation of unspoken histories and the existence of queer world-making practices and testimonials. For Muñoz, queer acts, and particularly those by queers of colour, do not always hold status as evidence in conventional methods of documentation and archiving. The kinds of public and social acts in question, including drag performance, gossiping, and sex in public bathrooms, are constitutive of queer sociality and intimacy insofar as they are secluded and hidden from the sight of a wider public sphere, “below the threshold of visibility,” as de Certeau (1994, p. 93) would put it.
The act of a queer body does something through its performative rearticulation and resignification that uncouples, for a moment and during the time of the performance, the rigid alignment of space, identity and the relations of power. In making an effort to document political possibilities while grappling with the impermanency and invisibility of queer acts, Muñoz (1996) calls for a different method of documentation and evidencing in which he asks us to consider ephemera as evidence. He writes that ephemera:

is linked to alternate modes of textuality and narrativity like memory and performance: it is all of those things that remain after a performance, a kind of evidence of what has transpired but certainly not the thing itself. It does not rest on epistemological foundations but is instead interested in following traces, glimmers, residues, and specks of things. (p. 10)

Here, the evidentiality of queer acts becomes not so much about a struggle over meanings of experience, but about the residual “queer effect” that the movement and performance of the body generates and indexes. However ephemeral it may be, it does happen and exist as part of a collective memory and communal oral history.

My reading practice in this project, then, is informed by both Ramirez and Muñoz’s arguments about what counts as evidence and what this alternative method of evidencing through bodily acts can be used for in the context of queer analysis and historiography. I take up their performance/action-based notions of the “living archive” and “ephemera as evidence” as the second element that extends the scope of my analytics to the consideration of embodiment which were discussed, observed and demonstrated by the participants during fieldwork.
Enigma as evidence

In taking up the alternative strategies of reading participants’ lived experiences, oral histories and queer acts and performances offered by Scott, Ramirez and Muñoz, I understand and frame the focus of my reading strategy for this project overall as attending to enigma as evidence. By drawing on these different methods of evidencing—the interpretive approach to the meanings of experience, and the documentation of embodied queer acts and performances—I am not suggesting that one is better than the other. Rather, as most of my conversations with participants were indeed mediated by language and I did still read the interview transcripts and other artifacts as a kind of literal object as Scott (1991) formulates, I must recognize that what I read them for—the effects of queer acts and performances through the body and in space—was always combined with my reading for alternative meanings, the “whys and hows” of the actions and activities that the participants discussed and demonstrated to me.

An enigma and its obtuse meanings has been discussed in many literary theories in relation to aesthetic objects before (see Barthes, 1978). However, I first arrived at the consideration of enigma not via theory but as the lived tactic of a queer act and as a political mode of narration (see, for example, Sky’s use of enigma in his narration in Chapter 3). The kind of enigma and its evidential function can be found, to return to the anecdotal scene I began this dissertation with, in Maty’s story. On the one hand, it is possible to trace the figure of a displaced man in this narrative through the multiple critical lenses available to us: that he was a brown man; that he struggled with his disability; that he had never touched another man in his life; and that he did not identify as gay in a straightforward manner. Ethnographic interviewing and description could, at best, take his narrative as the symptom of larger social rela-
tions, historical circumstances and cultural forces; a basis on which I could have built a cri-
tique of racialization, migrant conditions, ageism in local communities and other forms of
oppression in the queer diaspora. On the other hand, the resolute singularity that surrounds
his narrative breaks down a coherent, conventional mode of storytelling and retelling which
is so often the basis for critique.

While Maty did—for over six hours in total—talk to me about his life, and the everyday
rhythms, habits and locations that he occupied, he often misapprehended, or simply ignored,
my carefully structured and designed questions. Maty’s silences (or refusal to explain his si-
lences) and his story itself, were not interested in whatever theoretical concerns, forms of ev-
idence or the utility of his story as data for my research. Between the singularity of Maty’s
story about his solitary practice of knitting on the train and the set of theoretical frameworks
of explanation and abstraction at hand, I felt hesitant to include Maty in my analysis. It
seemed like an exception to the larger narrative that I set out to describe about queer Asian
migrants’ experiences of oppression and resistance. At the same time, what enabled and sus-
tained the coming together of this dissertation was the enigmatic figure of Maty himself that
his elusive narrative of knitting both reveals and hides from our view. Theoretical language
and concepts locate Maty as a multiply displaced subject, an unfortunate product of oppres-
sive society and history, but none of them explain what his elusive, queer act means to Maty
and to the questions of displacement, agency and mobility I attempted to address through my
engagement with his story. It is in the moment that we think we have figured out what Maty
and his life story represents that he escapes the predicaments we impose upon him. With my
ethical commitment to dwelling on the elusive, “third meaning” (Barthes, 1978, p. 52) behind
the story that cannot be spoken of, or easily made legible to us as significant (politically or as
a narrative genre), I was, and continue to be, haunted by the enigmatic meaning of his act and performance of knitting, and what it does.

In addition to Maty, many narratives I encountered during fieldwork and which I have decided to re/present in this dissertation signal something more than we think we already know about structures of oppression, displacement and history and how they are lived and challenged. Reading for enigma compelled me to engage in what Eve Sedgwick (2003) calls a “reparative reading” (p. 123): a mode of knowledge-making that hesitates to reduce singular experiences of queer life and survival into legible and consumable meanings with theory and instead engages critically with the conventions of genre of narrative, the limits of explanation and the kind of epistemological violence we may visit upon individuals in a rush to explain, rescue or add meaning to their actions and lives.

Of course, there is nothing that objectively says some stories are enigmatic and others are not. Instead, enigma is a subjective experience felt only through the act of reading (or, originally, listening); it is the moment of unknowing produced by individual accounts of experiences and actions—struggles over meanings (experiences) and the uncertainty of effects (actions). Ultimately, then, enigma turns knowledge against itself in the time and space of narration and reading. Enigma as evidence draws attention to the evidence of a failure of knowledge and recognition, “the necessary blind spots in our understanding” (Lather, 2006, p.1) that challenges the ways of knowing, seeing and listening that we as readers are taught to acquire through theory. Importantly, reading for enigma does not mean evacuating politics and abandoning the effort of understanding. Rather, it is a strategy that suspends an over-determination of meaning so as to open up new fields of inquiry, and thus, new fields for writing, and ultimately, imagination.
The reflexive turn: Writing and “speaking nearby”

As one reads, of course, one writes. How did the considerations of the relational turn in interviewing and data collection, and the archival turn in reading and analytical methods of evidencing inform my writing practice? The intimate relationality of interviewing and archival reading produced a sense that the original itinerary I mapped out for myself prior to fieldwork did not quite work any longer. This is not to say that I did not know what to read for or what to write about, but that it was the richness of the archived documents with which I struggled to make decisions about how best to re/present the life narratives of participants while holding onto the ambiguity, uncertainty and enigma that these narratives contain. Out of these struggles, I made a reflexive turn in my writing process—a set of editorial and representational decisions including (a) consulting with participants and (b) taking seriously the imperative of “speaking nearby”—the ethical proximity and distance from participants’ descriptions and narratives in my writing and re/presentations of their stories.

Consulting the participants for collective reflections

Even before my analyses were organized thematically and put into separate chapters, I began to write “thick descriptions” (Geertz, 1973, p. 3) about what I observed in the interviews, walkthroughs, and enigmatic moments in the narratives and experiences as they were shared with me. Some of this writing took the form of analytical notes and further questions some was often explicitly descriptive, mapping out relations between locations, cultural practices and the temporality of the experiences identified in participants’ narrations. My writing was in fact a kind of travel journal about what I had seen, heard and witnessed during fieldwork, which I initially used to make sense of the many interviews and walkthroughs for later reflection and writing.
Participants often noticed how I busily scribbled on my notebook during fieldwork and asked what I was writing down. For example, one participant demanded to know the purpose of my note taking:

**Participant:** What are you saying there? That makes me kinda nervous.

**Dai:** Oh, just some thoughts about what you just told me.

**Participant:** Can I see that? Are you judging me?

This concern about secret judgment, that I was saying something about them out of their sight, was repeated by different participants in initial meetings. Since interviews and the participant-led walkthroughs had increasingly become, on many occasions, a process of public witnessing and collective reflection between the participants and me, being attentive to the issue of reflexivity became an important principle in my writing about and re/presentation of their accounts, experiences, memories and activities for analysis.

As Trinh Minh-Ha (1990) polemically argues, ethnographic, scholarly writing—itself a textual genre—cannot fully remedy the epistemological violence and the politics of representation of cultural Others through prescribed methods of reflexivity. However, Trinh also posits that the question of how reflexivity is “understood and materialized . . . in each enterprise” must persist, so as “to carry out critical work in such a way that there is room for people to reflect on their own struggle and to use the tools offered so as to further it on their own terms” (p. 85). Following Trinh, I made a pragmatic decision to open up my writing process by asking for participants’ involvement in how their narratives and my analyses of them would be presented in this dissertation. As demonstrated in the following data chapters, I began to often follow up with participants regarding my reading and reflection upon and writing about their narratives through conversations with them in which I shared the texts I was
in the process of producing. Through this cyclic process, the participants were given opportunities to dispute, question or further elaborate upon their accounts and actions, which I had rendered textually through my analytics.

This process was particularly important, because part of this dissertation’s role was to produce a public record of lived experiences, collective memories and oral histories—an archive. Importantly, most participants, including Yasu and even more so Maty, were less interested in the accuracy of their stories and experiences (the content) than what my writing did with their narratives (the form and effect), for which one participant poignantly noted as he recounted our previous conversation, “that seems close enough. Yeah, [my story] went something like that.”21 It is through this important distinction, that the telling of the stories was more important than the factual content of the them, by which I was placed in the position of responsibility to, as Maty put it, “do what you need to do”22 with participants’ narratives and to “work hard,” as Yasu encouraged me, in order to ensure that the stories were told and read. That is to say, my role was not simply to record and present whatever the fourteen queer Asian migrants had to say about their lives and experiences and act as their ultimate

21 Another point of consideration in terms of my editorial decisions had to do with honouring the integrity of the participants and the stories they shared by reducing the ESL qualities and accents in their speech in my writing unless it was necessary to keep them. Many found the unedited interview transcripts which represented their grammatical errors, stutters and struggles for words “demeaning,” as noted by one participant. Contrary to the conventional, social scientific approach to representation of spoken speech (e.g., discourse analysis), which advocates its dissemination as raw data, I decided that the inclusion of ESL speech patterns was more infantilizing and distracting than helpful in this project. For a further, ethical consideration of the affective politics of ESL, accented speech and public shame, see The Parched Tongue by Hosu Kim (in Clough & Halley, 2007).

22 See Chapter 4 in which the original comment by Maty is discussed.
decoder” or voice-giver (Trinh, 1990), but to take seriously the act of “response” in the word “responsibility” as the ethical task of a researcher, an archivist, and as a reader/writer.

My purpose for consulting with participants was also an attempt to avoid the idea of a final or authoritative rendering of their narratives through writing that would only be available to an outside audience (though this was partially inevitable as these writings were to be mastered and formatted into the form of a dissertation). Moreover, I was compelled to communicate with participants about my writing and re/presentation to explain why I chose to write about particular stories they had shared with me as I did. These conversations gave me the opportunity to further and more thoughtfully engage participants so that we might reflect together about their necessarily fragmented and partial narratives and ultimately, to create a condition in which they might choose to respond further or decide to speak no more.

“Speaking nearby”

Finally, my contradictory approach to writing about the life narratives and experiences of the participants—on the one hand, writing as an on-going effort to get as close to their truths as possible for critique, and on the other hand, maintaining a reflexive position which struggles to avoid exhausting these stories to the last possible meaning—comes with an intimate, yet ethical distance of re/presentation which Trinh (1990) calls “speaking nearby.” While speaking nearby was a strategy Trinh employed in her ethnographic film-making, I find the notion equally imperative to a textual re/presentation practice such as this dissertation. Speaking

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23 See Chapter 5 where I return to this notion of responsibility and discuss the ethical relationship between writing and responsibility concerning a Japanese participant’s letter exchanges with his mother. See also Derrida, 1987; Trinh, 1990.
nearby involves intimate proximity and a reflexive, (and as I shall argue) ethical distance—it is a method with which to encourage a hesitation or a reluctance to name or foreclose the outcome of a narrative. It is an ethically charged move that turns to the reader and his or her ability to respond to the stories presented here. As much as possible, the format of each chapter employs long block quotes or field notes. While alongside these quotations and narrative segments I eventually attempt to relate and unpack participants’ stories via a set of pre-chosen theoretical tools, I chose the format of the block quote and narrative field note in order to let the stories, as much as possible, also speak on their own and for themselves. Literally and figuratively my aim has been to speak nearby the stories of the participants.

**Chapter organization**

As much as the importance of speaking nearby is indisputable, one must begin a story, a conversation, or an itinerary from somewhere. After the extensive process of interviewing participants and reviewing transcripts, as well as field notes, I decided to focus on three areas of thematic organization: embodiment, space-making, and family and kinships.

In Chapter 3, Gaysian Figures: DIY Techniques of Race and Sex in Transnational Queer Lives, I discuss how enigma, in/visibility and subcultural stylizations of the self are very much at the centre of queer Asian migrants’ quests for sexual intimacy and encounter. I argue that these elusive practices also take a tactical form that can destabilize and open up a space of difference within the universalizing effects of racialization and objectification within the dominant local sexual economy.

Following these embodied accounts, in Chapter 4, Migrant Intimacies: Mobilities, Difference, and Spatial Life of Queer Basue Tactics, I trace the gaysian body’s movements be-
tween social locations within the local urban landscape. Within these narratives, I argue for the important function of basue sociality that proves to be critical for queer Asian migrants’ negotiations of belonging. Basue sociality can also disrupt the normative topologies of the centre/margin, national/diasporic and Asia/Canada binaries and shape queer possibilities and modernities as they intersect and mutate in seemingly displaced and bounded everyday landscapes. The unruly stories of space-making I include in this chapter are testaments to how the proliferation of marginal spaces are enabled through technologies of mediation and travel, as well as the participants’ imagined communities and intimacies that defy local confinements and extend across the Pacific Ocean.

In Chapter 5, The Consideration of Family: Practices of Care and Responsibility in Queer Asian Homing Narratives, I take seriously practices of care that constitute relations of family and kinship in queer Asian diasporas in Canada. These accounts invite us into the intimate distances produced by queer Asian migrants’ on-going attachments to and considerations of Asian family values and homing desires. This chapter also attends to the economic labour and performance of care of the Ooku Vancouver (the Hidden Palace group) and how such labours and performances sustain and renew the collective survival of a group of Japanese queer men. These are examples of the many ways in which queer kinships are made “resolutely corporeal” (Freeman, 2007, p. 298), where migrant bodies are placed in ethical relations of responsibility for and dependency on each other, and with their own cultural logics and collectivities.

Taken together, the following three chapters represent both my theoretical engagement with and attempt to archive the important and often enigmatic narratives of the fourteen queer, Asian, migrant participants who shared their time, stories, and worlds with me. While read-
ing them, I invite the reader to hold tightly to the navigational tools I have outlined in these first two chapters. I encourage readers to be aware and open to enigma, read for and be attentive to the performances of difference in the everyday, and imagine how to respond to these narratives without overly rushing to decide what they mean. These stories do indeed take us places, as I will revisit in the Conclusions chapter, but that does not mean that we will necessarily arrive where we expect to.
Chapter 3: Gaysian Figures: DIY Techniques of Race and Sex in Transnational Queer Lives

A setting

In September 2005, a book entitled The Rice Queen Diaries: A Memoir was published by Vancouver’s Arsenal Pulp Press. Authored by Vancouver-based writer Daniel Gawthrop, the book traces a white, gay man’s life-long quest for Asian lovers in Canada and Asia. The following summer, Andy Quan, another Canadian-born writer and an activist/educator on the Sexual Racism Sux forum, penned a critical review of the book.

The review was posted on Fridae.asia, a popular website with “a mission to ‘Empower Gay Asia’ . . . provid[ing] a platform that bridges cultures, transcends borders, and unites the diverse groups to form Asia’s largest gay and lesbian community.” Quan prefaced his critique by asking the reader to “please view this piece as a political commentary rather than a book review.” Quan further wrote:

The book’s jacket said it would explore the "politics and pleasures" of being a Rice Queen and that the author "articulates the manners and contradictions of his desires." So, I was looking forward to reading this book, assuming that it would deal with issues I’ve been interested in as a writer, a community activist, and a gay Asian man in the 21st century. . . . Meanwhile I was reminded that racism is not always obvious: it can be acted out by the simple act of white people speaking all the time and taking up space (virtual or otherwise) which precludes dialogue and discussion by others.

. . . But with dozens and dozens of Asian lovers that pass through these pages, do we ever get a hint of how they might feel about him as a Rice Queen, about this particular sexual dynamic? . . . How these patterns

24 http://www.fridae.asia/about/

of desire and attraction affect Asian men beyond offering them up as sexual delights and commodities is absent. The Asian men in Rice Queen Diaries are observed, categorised, and recorded.

. . . Becoming a stereotype is not the worst of treating a race of people as your playpen. It is much more than that, it’s morally questionable. It robs people of their personalities and dignity. It treats people, on the basis of their race, as interchangeable. . . . In terms of this racial dynamic, it exploits white privilege and power whether economic or social to get one’s rocks off, as a little social experiment. Saying this does not imply that the Asian partners are victims in all of this - we all make our choices, some of the men in the book seemed to be using Gawthrop as much as he was using them.

Arriving at this conversation late (one of my research participants forwarded me the link to the article during my fieldwork in 2009), I was astounded by the number of user comments, over 100, on a site which usually hovers at single digits for other articles. What follows below are some excerpts of the many, lengthy comments:

[Comment #5] It makes me angry to think about how people can objectify others, and consciously or subconsciously subjugate, victimise, patronise or demean others.

[#10] He gives us an indulgent wander through his many and varied affairs and sexual encounters, which occur so frequently that you wonder how he manages to learn so little at each turn.

[#9] I am not strictly a rice queen, but primarily one. I enjoy other men of other races. But while I prefer Asian men, I would hesitate to say my desire is pure objectification.

[#18] This is a debate/discussion afterall [sic], and the comments so far are generally (if not all) lean towards anti-Gawthrop views, yet I’m interested hear comments from people who lean on the other side of the fence. Anyone?

[#19] Why don’t we applaud the author for his honesty? Why are we so squeamish about the existence of gay prostitutes in places like
Bangkok? Why are some so threatened by the idea of rice queens, when a large number of Asian men go exclusively for Westerners?

[#21] sticky rice [Asian man who exclusively date Asian men] to me is the best . . . we too can have different cultural experience and identity difference by dating with different asian races (even same race from different countries). not to discriminate but rice queens and potato queens alike are really over the top. sometimes, when i pass such couple, i choose to be ignorant.

[#26] Oh I just read "playboy's” comments. How cogent they are and how challenging. I have printed them out and plan to re-read them and think about all that he says. His words pose questions I must consider. I wonder if my interest in asian culture which started at age 7 is a form of rampant racism? I must think about this.

[#52] I hope that Rice Queen does not mean simply . . . a white man who is attracted to Asian men as a preference. That is too dismissive and generalising.

The modes of these reflexive comments range from monologue to navel-gazing to politically and emotionally charged disputes concerning the book, the review and the profusion of comments. Many agreements and disagreements appear to be based on personal accounts and anecdotes that commentators intimately connect to their sexual practices. Most striking—both while I reviewed this digital archive when I was first introduced to it, and rereading the comments as I write this prose now—is the multiplicity of voices, passions, affects and identifications that the initial tensions between Gawthrop’s book and Quan’s critique provoked. As these multiple arguments demonstrate, there are no clear and definitive answers to Quan’s provocation that White/Asian relations are inherently exploitative, but as one commentator notes, “[#109] I’m loving the comments [sic] here - extremely contradictory, but there’s at least a little insight in all of them.”

These passionate comments and diverse talking points evidence that, given that racial dynamics in queer sex are so diverse and so politically and emotionally charged, there is still much to be studied and said, and that both these directions, at the level of research and at the level of what is at stake in the everyday lived encounter of race and sex, is nowhere near “post-racial.” As Jo, the research participant who introduced me to the article noted in his
email that accompanied it, “I agree with some of Andy’s points, but it’s still just one perspective . . . I’m learning more from reading these comments.” If a generous reading of Gawthrop’s (failed) attempt to get to the bottom of racialized desires invites us, as Quan argues, to seek what the silent Asian men in Gawthrop’s book have to say about the “politics and pleasures” of queer love, my work in this chapter begins with statements and testimonies from the observed, categorised, and recorded “but seemingly silent Asian men in The Rice Queen Diaries, which may surprise us with other narratives and memoirs yet to be told.

I am not sure whether to call this a kind of perpetual self-invention or a constant restlessness. Either way, I’ve long since learned to cherish it. Identity as such is about as boring as a subject as one can imagine.

Edward W. Said, No Reconciliation Allowed in Letters of Transit

**Unpacking the gaysian figure**

This chapter examines the multiple and often contradictory experiences of race and sexuality from the perspective of the queer, Asian, migrant men who participated in this project. In particular, I focus upon the idea of gaysian figure—a force that both marginalizes and mobilizes as it attempts (and often fails) to make legible these migratory, diasporic, queer subjects within Canadian, queer relations of desire. I explore the gaysian figure as not only a figuration, but also as an encounter, and as a technique. That is, the gaysian figure can be witnessed, emplaced, but also performed. In order to more closely examine the sophisticated techniques of participants, I pay careful attention to the ways in which they articulate their negotiations of, with and against the gaysian figure as a space and as a performance of embodied tactics.

In the first analysis, which I label In/visibility as Possibility, I unpack how two participants learned, understood, and engaged with racialized logics of the desirability afforded to the gaysian figure in the space of online media. By paying careful attention to their narratives of
pursuing their desires in an online world, I outline the mediated figure of the “headless torso”—a tactical deployment of in/visibility. In the second analysis, Un/doing Gaysian, I examine two particular manifestations of the gaysian figure—the embodied figures of the BCA (Big Chested Asian) and the FOB (Fresh Of the Boat)—in order to demonstrate how participants fashion themselves with their own particular styles of embodiment. These narratives articulate the national and transnational dimensions of race and sexuality that inform the multiplicity of the gaysian figure and importantly complicate nation-based formulations of gaysian politics. Overall, this chapter is invested in evidencing tactics and techniques which provide diverse, agentive, complex and ultimately mobilizing relations to race and sexuality.

**Genealogy of gaysian politics**

A tradition of queer Asian scholarship has grappled with the relations of race, gender and sexuality that mediate the gaysian figure. What follows in this section is an analytic engagement with the figuration and the phenomenon of the gaysian figure, spanning roughly the last two decades. I map out the political implications and lessons that shifts and turns in these works have produced, culminating in our arrival at the contemporary situation of *gaysian* politics in Vancouver that I explore in this chapter.

Richard Fung’s (1991) classic essay, “Looking for My Penis,” marked an important shift in the previously colour-blind theorization of queer erotics toward a critical investigation of the codes and grammars of racialized desire in gay male pornography. Utilizing porn imageries as cultural texts and a Fanonian analytics of “thingification,” Fung identifies a reverse process of racialization in dominant erotic scripts where interracial penetration is concerned. Whereas Fanon’s black colonial subject is marked by his excess in animalistic sexuality, a neurotic obsession over the white skin (of a woman), and the “monstrous” penis of the black
man, for Fung, the Asian male body is marked by the “absence” of his penis, which symbolizes the structural dynamics between dominant/white/top and submissive/yellow/bottom. At the level of representation, Fung’s argument suggests that the sexual economy and legibility of the gaysian male body hinges on its use value for the white male subject whose masculinity is maintained through repeated penetration of the racial Other.

A decade later, a landmark work by David Eng (2001) takes up Fung’s politicization of the penis as a symbolic marker of Asian (non)masculinity and its abject relation to White masculinity. Calling the racialization of Asian American male bodies a psychical process of racial castration, Eng traces the construction of Asian masculinity/femininity in the historical context and colonial management of immigration, kinship, domesticity, sexuality and gender relations in Asian communities in the US. Shifting the analysis to the intersection of race and gender in the consideration of Asian male sexuality, Eng locates contemporary Asian American male subjectivity and the penis in the relentless psychic shuffle between abjection (castration) and hypermasculinity (dick wagging), through which White masculinity is reinforced. Given these historical and psychical relations that precede any notion of Asian male subjectivity Eng argues that Asian American politics of masculinity ought to embrace its fundamental queerness where the loss of the penis and of a diasporic origin can be reimagined as a condition of possibility for undoing reproductive heteronormativity and patriarchal nationalism.

In the latest intervention in gaysian scholarship and politics, Hoang Tan Nguyen (2008) returns to the racialized script in queer cinema and pornography. Drawing on both Fung and Eng’s formulations of Asian masculinity and the lost/castrated penis, Nguyen takes issue with the phallo-centrism and reactionary politics that animate these previous debates, point-
ing out how dangerously close they orbit an anti-feminist pedagogy. It is important to note, as Nguyen (2008) does, that these teachings from previous critical works are part of the collective effort to centre the dominant historical-racial schema of Asian bodies, through the politicization of the invisibility of the penis and the humiliation of bottomhood.

For Nguyen (2008), however, the rejection of what he terms *bottomhood* (a passive sexual position) and castration in dominant sexual imaginaries is often replaced by a moralizing discourse aimed at the reclaiming of gender integrity through legislation of politically correct sexual act—including choosing “partners of the ‘right’ race,” and an “equal-time” policy of topping/bottoming (p. 173). This turn to sex as an idea, or “reeducation . . . of our deviant desires” under the banner of “decolonization” (Rodriguez, 2011, p. 337), deems femininity, bottoming and interracial sex (always imagined to be between White tops and Yellow bottoms) as something to be overcome in resolving the gaysian problem. It follows then, that these decolonizing teachings translate agency in such sexual play and fantasies into a sign of complicity at best and ignorant submission or outright exploitation at worst. Such a preoccupation with the gender-based binary of power relations in gaysian politics forecloses any possibility of power and pleasure through the management of a spoiled identity and its stigma (Goffman, 1963).

Nguyen’s (2008) critique of “the unhelpful binary of emasculation and remasculinization frequently mobilized” (p. 6) in such corrective politics and scholarship offers important insights into the necessity of rethinking the possibility of gaysian politics that I aim to advance in this chapter based on the narratives participants shared with me. Nguyen (2008) further writes:
[W]e must complicate the common-sense linkage of topness with absolute domination and bottomhood with total humiliation. A shift in perspective afforded by a view from the bottom makes available a potential for mutual pleasure and recognition between bottom and top, as well as a rewriting of bottomhood as a mode of accessing sexual and social power. (p. 14, emphasis in original).

To be clear, by drawing on Nguyen’s redefinition of bottomhood, I do not aim to erect another identity politics for all queer Asian bottoms; after all, many participants did not identify themselves as bottoms at all (some even declined any definition of sexual positionality). Rather, I take up Nguyen’s (2008) argument for the power of the bottom subject as one of the many ways in which sexual acts and fantasies can perform “a critical undoing of normative, patriarchal masculinity” through and beyond the active embodiment of the gaysian figure (p. 6).

This chapter responds to Nguyen's urgent call for an alternative political imagination, which enables “a more radical lesson…to endorse a politics that enables a multiplicity of desires and identifications” (p. 173) in the embodied practices of gaysian sex and intimacy. In contributing to this productive area of examination opened up by Fung (1991), Eng (2001), and Nguyen(2008), I am acutely aware that much of the existing analyses are drawn from archives of literary and cinematic artifacts with little consideration for how these mediative objects are consumed, put into use, or disregarded in the messy materiality of everyday queer diasporas. I am also acutely aware that the predominant frame of analysis in these conversations has been vague regarding the distinction between Asian migrants in transnational spaces and borderlands, and Asian American (or Canadian) bodies as ultimately national subjects, which tends to overlook the consideration of geographic and temporal differences that inform
other forms of im/mobilities between national histories in, across, and between Asia and North America. This chapter aims to fill these gaps in knowledge by emphasizing the everyday and practical dimensions of gaysian intimacies and their transnational formations, focusing on the multiplicity of desire, visibility and embodiment drawn from ethnographic interviews. The central questions I explore in this chapter are: (1) What does the gaysian figure mobilize and foreclose in participants’ practices of pursuing their desires and intimate encounters? (2) How did participants learn about the gaysian figure and what did they do with what they learned? (3) What does the multiplicity of their practices, identifications and embodiments tell us about mobilities beyond the binary framework of complicity/exploitation in gaysian politics?

My approach in this chapter is to consider the practical dimensions of the gaysian figure. With an emphasis on multiplicity, I am interested in reading how the participants talked about gaysian as both a figure and as a technique, and of examining what may be the difference and distance between this seemingly monolithic figure (at the level of public visibility and representation) and the tactics of doing (at the level of embodiments and action). My analyses then discuss where and how the queer Asian migrants negotiated the normative and racialized logics of visibility and desirability through idiosyncratic and multiple embodiments of the gaysian figure.

Gaysian as encounter

Race, like other embodied differences such as gender and dis/ability, challenges the autonomy of queer desire with its stubborn attachment to social relations that keep us returning to the scene of the intimate encounter (Holland, 2012). In Black Skin, White Masks, Frantz Fanon (1952) famously observed that race is subjectively experienced by a non-white subject
first as an encounter with racial knowledge through the process of migration. Knowledge about racial difference, or what Fanon (1952) calls “historic-racial schema,” is external to the arrival of the “pre-racialized” subject, yet it intimately mediates the act and experience of racialization (p. 128). Specifically taking up the experience of Asian subjects encountering nationalized racial knowledge, Henry Yu (2001) situates his examination of these subjects in a US national space within the emergence of global modernity saturated by “movement, contact and change” (p. 8). Yu (2001) traces the historical emergence of Asian and Asian American subjects in the Chicago School’s sociological categorization of the arrival of Orientals in America. The critical insight Yu (2001) offers is that modern understandings and discussions of race were produced to both create and manage the domestic “Oriental problem” in modern North America. I wish to contribute to Holland, Fanon, and Yu’s formulations in order to consider the gaysian figure as a powerfully informing encounter for participants. Thus, the question I consider here is: How do race and sexuality come into play in this process of encounter?

In interview sessions, I asked participants how they understood their racial identities in the context of their everyday sexual practices. My interest in posing this question was to cast a wide net to capture a range of meanings, knowledge and relationalities that the participants associated with racialization. In the following instance, Hikaru underscores the complex dynamics of race, sexuality and national belonging that facilitate the implicit yet intersubjective moment of recognition of the gaysian figure in local queer sociality.
**Hikaru:** I guess I had a big investment in gay life in Canada, because my ゲイライフ (gay life) started here [in Vancouver]. Everything was new and exciting at first. . . . Little did I know that my being Asian would create problems.

**Dai:** Problems?

**Hikaru:** It’s not really a racist thing. I mean, most people in Canada aren’t racist I think. But, what people see when I’m at a gay bar or online, I feel like I’m always a ゲイのアジア人 (gay Asian) because I look Asian, and I hang out in gay spaces. There’s an expectation that I look young, smooth, and that I am a bottom in that kind of space . . . and other people can dismiss us for that, too. That’s different from, say, I’m at a restaurant or on the street and someone goes ‘oh, Asian’ and someone goes [in a lower voice] “oooooh, Asian . . .” at a gay bar. (42/Japanese/gay/male/ Japan/naturalized Canadian citizen; rice queen)

Similar to Hikaru, many participants spoke eloquently about their theories of how race works in their sexual experiences to different degrees. It is important to note that their narrations persistently indicated their awareness of the dynamics of gaysian subjectification and that the process of becoming the gaysian figure was also a process of knowing its marginalizing force. When I further asked participants about the relation between gaysian identity and marginality, Mickey had this to say:

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26 This conversation took place in Japanese. I have translated it into English.
The status quo is the white body. It’s the centre of desirability in terms of, I guess, mate selection. It is based on a white norm, an unquestioned white norm, unless people pursue what they think is exotic or whatever. Then they’ll look beyond that, but even then that exotic label is in relation to a norm that’s unquestioned. Do you know what I mean? So in that sense, I always felt like you were either looked past or upon, like people just looked past you, or they had an ulterior motive in which to why they would go for you, so I never felt like I belonged to that unquestioned norm. . . . . Of course that was a disappointment because I thought ‘oh I could find a space that I’m comfortable in’, but that never materialized. But I’m fine with that. (24/gay/male/Asian Canadian/Hong Kong/naturalized Canadian citizen)

Mickey’s complex understandings of encountering the gaysian figure exemplify the common themes I consistently encountered in my conversations with participants. These themes included: (a) that the experience of racialization takes many forms and these experiences differ in context and effect, against the backdrop of a Canadian multicultural sensibility; (b) within the intimacy of queer spaces, the logic of desirability becomes heightened and generates particular forms of subjectivity (“what I am”) and visibility/embodiment (“how I look and speak”), and; (c) ambivalent engagements with the gaysian figure, both as a marginal position to white norms and as a given condition of participation and access to sexual possibilities (“I’m fine with that”).

It is important to note that these are not by any means neatly contained formations. I was particularly struck by the matter-of-fact way in which Hikaru, Mickey and other participants ob-
served the complex relations of race, gender, sexuality and national belonging that they were subjected to and navigated in their everyday lives. Such a business-as-usual attitude, however, does not necessarily indicate the totality of racialization. Rather, I want to emphasize that these responses are, first of all, an acknowledgement of the deterministic force of racial knowledge in queer society in Vancouver that participants were compelled to engage with one way or another. Critical attention should be paid, then, to consider how participants take up these imposing knowledges in their negotiations of, as Hikaru pointed out, the gaysian “problem.”

**Gaysian as technique**

The gaysian figure is not only a relationality that can be observed or felt, but a space and an embodiment that queer Asian men can inhabit or, more importantly, be forced into performing. A telling example of this encounter from my own lived experience that comes to mind was when, one night at a mid-town gay club in New York City, a white man approached me as soon as I entered the door. As our eyes met, the man smiled and yelled at my face, “Ni Hao Ma-Konnichiwa-Annyeonghaseyo!” (“Hello” in Chinese, Japanese and Korean screamed in one breath). Mickey reflects on his encounters with racialization on first dates in Vancouver, where his dates—usually white men, he noted—complimented his “Asian beauty” and found his “boyishness” attractive. Reflecting on these experiences, Mickey offers his critical theory of race in gay male sociality in Vancouver:

[His date] never had to think twice about how racist he was being. He might have thought that he was being a good guy by showing an interest in me, because let’s be honest, most white men don’t even see us in their spaces. That’s what’s so fucked up about this. Like “oh my god, am I just
Asian to you?” I know I’m Asian, but unless you lived my life, [know] where I came from and how I grew up, you don’t know who I am . . . trying to get past this race thing is, I don’t know, impossible. Because again, they, um, he thinks he knows you and actually refusing to learn anything.

Other participants similarly mentioned the realization that they were already known” by random (queer) interpellators, and how that assumed knowledge about them seemed so pervasive and often came as a surprise for them when first encountered. As Sara Ahmed (2000) reminds us, it is not that a (racial) stranger is simply Othered by the colonial memories and historic-racial schemas. The force of racialization lies in the intimate discourses and over-representation of race as such which works together to render dispersed strangers and their irreducible differences into the known, singular figure of the stranger: the process of objectification that “turns the stranger into something that simply is” (p. 5, emphasis in original).

I contend that if a racial stranger often cannot escape the imposition of a known figure within a national space and colonial history, the gaysian figure takes a particular form that emerges out of the intersection of racial and sexual knowledge. Put simply, the term gaysian is used to refer to the meeting of sexuality (gay) and race (Asian) in scholarly conversations and North American queer cultural grammars. To return to Mickey’s recounting of a scene of racialization, the gaysian figure emerges out of the imposition of particular forms of knowledge and exoticized characteristics such as “Asian beauty” and “boyishness.”

Even more so than an understanding of the encounter of race and sexuality through the gaysian figure, exactly how participants inhabited or performed this figure, that is, a focus upon the multiple ways of doing the gaysian figure is important. Throughout my fieldwork and interview sessions with participants, I was repeatedly reminded of the different ways in
which these migratory queer subjects arrived at, related to, and came to dis/identify with the gaysian figure in Canada through their migration experiences. Too often, queer Asian subjects are problematically squeezed into the “interchangeable” (Quan, 2007) and universal category of gaysian. My conversations with the fourteen queer migrants who participated in this research reveal the existing multiplicity of subjectivities, identifications and embodiments—the ways, or techniques, of “doing” gaysian—that are rendered invisible under the totalizing force of the gaysian figure.

In their provocative anthology Race as Technology, Wendy Chun (2009) asks: “Could race be not simply an object of representation and portrayal, of knowledge or truth, but also a technique that one uses, even as one is used by it—a carefully crafted, historically inflected system of tools, mediation, or enframing that builds history and identity?” (p. 7-8). The shift in emphasis from what a gaysian is to how participants do gaysian—a parallel move to “from the what of race to the how of race, from knowing race to doing race” (Chun, 2009, p. 8)—opens up the arena to an examination of sexual mobilities that an obsession with structuralism in critical race analysis often overlooks.

In the following discussions and engagements with the examples and articulations that participants shared with me, I do not aim to offer any kind of exhaustive, and thus ultimately foreclosed, account of the structural experience of racialization. Rather, my reading of interview transcripts focuses on the multiplicity of embodied techniques of doing gaysian as a political possibility enabled by normative impositions. In such a reading I speculate on what kinds of mobilities such techniques engender that might undo the gaysian figure without leading to an erasure of the agency of the racialized subject.
In/visibility as possibility: Headless gaysian profiles and the enigmatic stranger

The Internet has fast become a popular cultural tool for socializing, mingling and hooking up in queer cultures across industrialized societies (Berry, Martin & Yue, 2003; Mowlabocus, 2010). Given the prominence of online connectivity and networked sociality in queer cultures, many participants told me how they learned about what gaysian looks like through online media and visual representations of Asian bodies. In this section, I offer an examination of two seemingly opposite narratives told by two participants, Sky and Kaz. I focus on how racialized logics of desirability commonly shape online practices of visibility and performativity to different effects, as well as how individual and embodied differences are managed and negotiated through an active employment of what I term the invisible face found in the stories that they shared with me.

Mediated visibility and the racialized logics of desirability

Sky highlighted the importance of access to digital media upon his arrival in Canada:

Sky: Back in China, you know, I really didn’t have, I didn’t do anything gay. I knew there were, you know, gay scenes in big cities, but where I came from [a provincial town in southern China], it wasn’t really possible for me . . . so I just kind of kept it to myself, I think.

Dai: I see. And it changed when you came to Canada [in 2004]?

Sky: Yeah, yeah, I think so. I mean, I had no idea what, like, gay thing was all about, and you know like the Davie Village [Vancouver’s queer district] was . . . it was like distant, like I wasn’t ready to just go there yet. So I kinda like researched it first.

Dai: Researched it?
Sky: [Laughs]. Yeah, yeah. You know, the gay stuff. I got a computer for school, and like I googled like “gay Vancouver” or something like that.

Dai: What did you find?

Sky: There were like, you know, many stuff about like how gay friendly Vancouver was and also like Pride [parade] stuff (25/queer/male/Chinese/Chinese/naturalized Canadian citizen; amateur poet)

Online connectivity and discursive and visual mediations provided Sky with a “safe” infrastructure—in terms of relative privacy (his own computer) and unfixed spatiality (his online explorations of online communities without the need to access their physical locations)—to experiment with the counter/public sexual knowledges and practices for both new comers and other active participants. Sky continued:

Sky: Then, like, of course, I found online hookup sites. Lots of it! [Laughs]

Dai: Oh yeah?

Sky: Yeah, so like you just kinda have to figure out, you know? How to meet other gay people. So like, I looked at many [other user’s] profiles on those site . . . I think [I used] Manhunt.com, Gay.com . . . yeah also Fridae. I learned how to like use, um, sexual language and culture there.

While these online spaces offer an important self-educative location for DIY “queer world-making” (Warner, 2001), these publicly mediated knowledges are not simply disembodied, virtual possibilities detached from the logics of desirability in the local sexual landscape. Sky and other participants told me how, in a fairly short time, they came to realize that learning to
do the “gay thing” in Canada also entailed their becoming the “Asian thing” upon their entry into Vancouver’s queer scene on/offline. Another participant, Kaz, also recalled this process:

**Kaz:** I think I first realized how [race] works by looking at filters.

**Dai:** Filters?

**Kaz:** Yeah, here [shows me a search page on manhunt.com]. These filters in the search menu. Like age, sexual position, body type. I noticed that these sites always had a 人種 (race/ethnicity) filter (figure 8). That got me thinking, “Oh, people use race to find someone.”

[Figure 8. Manhunt.com search page.]

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27 This conversation took place in Japanese. I have translated it into English.
Kaz: So first of all, I have to choose “Asian” as my category, because, you know, that’s what I am. Then I searched for the profiles of other Asian men to see what they wrote in their profiles and their photos.

Dai: Why was it important to see other Asian men’s profiles?

Kaz: I guess I needed to know how to “sell myself” to other guys and I wanted to look appropriate.

Dai: What did you find to be the “appropriate” look and sound [in the profile]?

Kaz: [Laughs] Well, I guess there were lots of naked bodies. The ones that really captured my attention were kind of super sexy ones . . . where people are posing in all kinds of suggestive positions. My general feeling, and also reading the texts [in their profiles], was that they were into white guys and many were bottoms. Not all of them, of course, but that’s how I saw the popular image of Asian gay profiles . . . it’s about making yourself “hot” for the type of guys you want.

(37/gay/male/Japanese/ Japan/permanent resident; (HIV) positive, potato queen)

For Kaz, a self-proclaimed potato queen (an Asian man who exclusively seeks white men as sexual partners), these visual and textual representations were the basis of his “hot” gaysian performativity online. When I asked him how this online performativity translated into his offline activities, he commented, “That’s how this game works for me. You have to find your game, and make your game plan. It doesn’t always work, but you try.” The racialized logic of desirability between White/Top and Asian/Bottom, again, dictates such mediated performances. This logic structured his interactions with other queer men online and, consequently,
how he made himself available, whom he met offline, and what he would do with his body in bed through trial and error. Through his “game plan,” Kaz learned to become, and make use of, the sexual economy of the gaysian figure in his quests for pleasure. Practice makes perfect gaysian.

However, as Kaz also noted, such seemingly dominant interracial desires surrounding the online presence of the gaysian figure is not the only path to a queer “game” of pleasures. For example, Sky, after discussing with me his excitement at discovering the online hookup scene, offered a different story. Sky also learned the performativity of the gaysian figure through viewing other Asian men’s profiles, but his comparative study led to a different mode of identification. Sky explained:

**Sky:** You know, I’m a shy person. And maybe it’s, um, my upbringing or cultural thing, growing up in China you know. I find it very hard to show my skin, you know, like, as many guys do here.

**Dai:** Do you think that’s expected online?

**Sky:** Yeah, like, there’s this expectation to present yourself, like [in a] very sexualized way. If you look at like people’s profiles, many Asian people do that.

**Dai:** I see. Why does that bother you?

**Sky:** Well, I want to be sexy and all, too. But like, there’s, like, some standard that says you have look in a certain way. . . . Like, so, for example, when I go onto [a website] like Craigslist, I see many Asian guys looking for white men. They, you know, make sure that they have “Asian” somewhere in the
heading you know? And then there are like photos of them being super
slim or at least like stereotypically smooth and all.

**Dai:** Why do you think that’s stereotypical?

**Sky:** Well you know, that’s what these guys, white guys want. Slim, smooth,
young, cute, submissive... that kinda stuff. I could do it, and I tried it be-
fore, too. Like I took my clothes off and like took pictures [of myself].

**Dai:** Did it work?

**Sky:** Oh yes, I got way more replies. More than like when I had like you know
just my face and clothes on. But you know that’s just not me. I don’t, like,
only look for white men, so.

This may read (and stories like this often are misread), as a kind of anti-sex statement made
by a queer-of-colour subject. Sky’s disidentification with the over-representation of stereo-
typical gaysian profile imagery must be situated within his refusal to be categorized and re-
duced to the gaysian figure, a refusal to be digitally observed, categorized, and recorded by
white men—to paraphrase Quan (2007).

**Headless gaysian profiles**

We may ask, what connects these contrasting narratives of online gaysian visibility and rela-
tions of race? Can there be more than the familiar judgments of complicity (Kaz’s active par-
ticipation) or exploitation (which Sky identifies yet refuses)? When I asked both Sky and Kaz
to show me their own online profiles, I noticed that both of them had no headshots. In popular queer conversations, the term “headless torsos” in online spaces is well-known.\(^{28}\)

In relation to race, “headless torso” photos were often discussed by participants. They described how there is an assumption that, unlike their white, modern counterparts, queer Asian subjects are considered to be more concerned about their privacy and not wanting to be visibly “out” (due to homophobia in their ethnic communities and family relations).

However, their explanations were slightly different when I asked why they chose to use headless self-portraits. For instance, Kaz explained:

> Well, this may sound crazy, but I want to trick them into thinking that I may be white. It’s hard to see if someone is Asian or not just by looking at photos without a face. They will eventually find out that I’m Asian, but . . . I often look at other faceless photos and if the person doesn’t state his race in his profile, I’d have to press my face against the screen to figure out what his race is. [Laughs]\(^{29}\)

Confused by the contradiction between his initial narrative about using gaysian visibility as a strategy in his “game plan” and this seeming retreat to a non-racial (or white-like) representation of himself, I asked him what significance the face holds as a racial marker in his online encounters. Kaz responded, “That’s actually my other profile. I have the main one here

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\(^{29}\) This conversation took place in Japanese. I have translated it into English.
[opens up a new browser window where he has his headshot and his naked body]. I use this one so that more white people would also talk to me.” Kaz continued:

Here’s the thing. I’m HIV positive. It’s true that white men are more accepting of “positive” people than Asians. I guess because it’s more open and less stigmatized here. My family [in Japan] would die if they found out. I’m not “out” [about my HIV status] to my friends here either. That’s the main reason I seek white sexual partners. If I could get them to get past the race part, showing that I have a nice body, maybe I have a chance of them getting past my HIV status.

. . . [Being HIV positive] is a deal breaker for many guys I encounter online. But you know, there are some out and “positive” white guys, too. They say that in their profiles. I feel close to them, like I want to be like them, you know? So, I guess I use separate profiles [one with a face, the other without] to increase my chances.

There’s much to be said about the politics of positive identity and its cultural and national formations embedded in Kaz’s story. A sustained examination of stigma, bodily integrity and their relations to “positive” bodies in the context of migration and diaspora is urgently needed (McRuer, 2006). In this research context, however, I pay attention to Kaz’s intricate, in-and-out movements around the visibility and invisibility of the Asian face that may open up further avenues of inquiry concerning mobilities.

The face as a visible marker of race seems totalizing and is not easily turned into a technique of mobility. In his critical autoethnographic study of the Australian gay scene of racism
where face becomes the sign of race—and nothing else—Gilbert Caluya (2006) cautions against an investment in the logic of visibility that animates much queer of colour politics as the single solution to racial objectification and/or abjection. Drawing upon theories of shame and its intersubjective relation between the White and Asian faces that precedes any racial encounter in the present, Caluya argues that “within a framework of visibility . . . we concede to the terms of ‘Asianness’ that are pre-given by western regimes of racial representation” (p. 14). Instead, Caluya argues:

In short, we’re stuck between a rock and a hard place. In this way for the Asian male on the gay scene racial intelligibility is inextricably linked with sexual desirability . . . . In other words, I think we should begin to think through how we might be otherwise than Asian and thus how we might connect (sexually or otherwise) with others outside of the sign Asian. (p. 14)

In my reading, Kaz’s story signals both the split from and the attachment to his racialized identifications; one with the stereotypical gaysian figure that enables his access to sexual possibilities, and the other with the whiteness of the “positive” gay male figure that may provide him with a connection to the sociality and belonging produced by the collective trauma of HIV/AIDS (Cvetkovich, 2003). The fact that Kaz had to create and maintain two separate profiles on a popular gay social network site suggests that his split and attachments along the racial line cannot be easily resolved. However, by listening closely to Kaz’s story over the course of two years, I learned how such racialized immobilities, “between a rock and a hard place” in each of his identificatory terms, could be actively disarticulated and negotiated by his tactical employment of the in/visible Asian “face.” The technique of making himself visible or invisible depended upon a present opportunity and the existing logics of desirability.
Such tactics and logics enabled Kaz’s micropolitics of mobilities and we must be careful not to reduce them to a complete rejection of any intelligibility however misrecognized they may seem. For many queer Asian migrants I spoke with, to step outside of any system of “signs” is not a viable option.

I end this analysis with Sky’s (a self-proclaimed amateur poet) words through which he articulates an imagined possibility of invisibility that neither rejects sexual autonomy, nor un-critically accepts the existing terms of visibility that the mediated and racialized logic of desirability demands of him:

I find it more, you know, sexy to be like mysterious to people. That’s more interesting, I think. It gets old . . . these images. Like, I want to ask, when I see these the same profiles over and over, you know, like is this all we have? I think, it gives too much power to, you know, this race thing.

. . . By hiding my face sometimes, I want, I don’t know, I want to be like one odd thing, among a million same things. Like an enigma . . . I love poetry. I write my own, and I read a lot of English poetry books. And oh like, you know, it’s exciting to read a piece, that has like this, this enigmatic feeling. Like you know what you are reading about, but just when you thought you got it, you know, it kinda escapes . . . so you want more, keep reading again and again. That’s a special relationship, and I don’t know, I think that’s kinda sexy.
While these testimonies about the scenes of racialization do not lead to a political action as such, we must insist on imagining a collective ethics of witnessing that accounts for what race does to sexuality, and what sexuality does to race in practice. Kaz and the other participants’ stories show us that visibility and representation with/through digital media hold great significance for carving out an intelligible self in the queer diaspora, where participants must work with what they have in order to pursue sexual possibilities. However, to recite Judith Butler’s famous notion, the field of performativity can be transformed through “repetition with difference” beyond the polarizing binary of exploitation/complicity. The invisibility of the gaysian face, in this sense, can be a sign of an enigmatic Asian who returns to the scene of sexual encounter through representation as a stranger, and not the stranger already known.

**Un/doing gaysian: BCA, FOB and styles of embodiment**

The previous analysis specifically examined how two participants reworked the racialized logic of desirability in mediated queer social spaces for themselves, by privileging the embodied technique of in/visibility. In this second analysis, I turn to an examination of a more immediate sense of embodiment by considering how the imposition of the gaysian figure produces multiple forms of body politics discussed by participants.

Some of my interview questions asked about the meanings and images the participants associated with the gaysian figure, and how they related to them. Many of them were aware of the common discourses and representations of the gaysian and saw themselves as sometimes fitting into the space of that figure. However, these acknowledgements were almost always countered by statements that they also fell outside of it. For example, Jo stated:
It’s like, um, saying that I’m human and that I look the same [as everyone else]. Like [in case of] Asian, so, you and me are Asian. But, you know, you don’t look like me in many ways.

(26/gay/male/Asian/Taiwan/working-holiday visa)

Adding to Jo’s idea of the internal difference of a categorical external appearance (of human, Asian), Jin was more explicit about how the gaysian figure is imposed and reproduced through the body while other indentifications are erased.

Jin: Yeah the gaysian stereotype, I have a problem with that . . . I don’t associate myself with it. It’s a stereotype loaded with bad meanings. Like, we are inferior to white men.

Dai: Do you feel that you can be outside of it, by disassociating yourself from it?

Jin: No, not really [laughs]. I mean, I’m still a gaysian if you just look at me, so I guess I’m part of it, whether I like it or not.

. . . But, like, I’m actually [a] top, and I’m really not into white men, so I don’t really fit the, you know what they think I am. I’m like really careful how I dress when I go out, because it’s a way for me to say like, ‘I’m not your sex toy!’ you know what I mean? I definitely dress for other Asian men . . . I want to like send a message to them [Asian bottoms], you know, like “hey, I’m into you!”

(26/gay/male/Corean/South Korea/naturalized Canadian citizen with dual citizenship)
Listening to these statements, and seeing the physicality of the participants’ bodies, accents, fashions and mannerisms during interview sessions, it was difficult for me to know what exactly the gaysian figure looked like, even though we had been discussing it at great length. While the mere existence of the discourse on the gaysian figure does not mean that these participants would identify with it, I was interested to know the ambivalent relationality (or as Jin said, “I guess I am part of it, whether I like it or not”) between the bodily meanings of the gaysian and their other identifications and body politics.

Central to my discussion in this analysis is the concept of style. The term “style” is often understood to be an individual consumption of commodities, such as clothing, music, and other commercial artifacts, fed by dominant cultural producers and industries. However, as a tradition of British Cultural Studies scholarship argues, the production of cultural values and meanings by a marginal class of subjects through their style must not be mistaken as mere difference in taste or preference. Emphasizing the significance of style as a collective negotiation of dominant culture and representation through subcultural “fashioning of the self,” Hebdige (1999) writes that “we must seek to recreate the dialectic between action and reaction which renders these objects meaningful” (p. 2).

Drawing on this dynamic notion of style as a medium between the objects of the dominant class and political action through disarticulation of the original meaning of those objects by marginal groups, I consider how the object (the gaysian figure) can be “worn” differently by different queer Asian subjects, and I create a catalogue of how these embodied styles enable multiple forms of identification and desire against the static meanings of the gaysian figure.
Big Chested Asian (BCA)

The gaysian figure has many manifestations, one of them is the BCA. BCA was explained to me by Tay as follows:

**Tay:** I think I’m what people call a “BCA.”
**Dai:** A what?
**Tay:** Big. Chested. Asian. BCA. It’s a new term.

![Image of a person with red boxing gloves and a muscular build.](image)

*Figure 9. The Asian men redefined campaign by the Asian & Pacific Islander Wellness Center.*

**Dai:** Wow. After 10 years in North America, I’ve never heard that.
**Tay:** [Laughs.] Yeah I know.
Dai: So you see yourself as BCA. What does that mean to you?

Tay: Well you know, I’m pretty big and I work out. I like my body. And I think I like the attention I get.

. . . I like Asian guys. I always did. Never cared for white boys. I’m like, dominant, so.

Dai: You mean you are a top?

Tay: Yeah, yeah. So like, I have to be, you know, I look tough so that I show I’m dominant. . . . Also, you know, I’m not handsome. I need to compensate that with my body. I felt, like for a long time, I felt I wasn’t attractive, in like gay in a culture in Canada. Because of my look . . . It helps to feel good about, like, myself. Working out stuff. I’m really gentle and nice, but I guess like at least my body, like how it looks, masculine, helps.

(37/gay/male/ Vietnamese-Chinese Canadian/naturalized Canadian citizen; BCA (Big Chested Asian))

I employ BCA here as an entry point to style and embodiment. Tay is a naturalized citizen. His understanding of BCA is framed in relation to both the gazes of white men he desires to repel and the gazes of Asian men he seeks to attract—BCA is a sort of “sticky rice” tactic for Tay. While I cannot fully unpack the gendered politics or (seeming) politics of nationalism behind BCA within the space of this chapter, I want to highlight here that BCA begins to show the fault lines between Asian North American and Asian Asian understandings, encounters and tactics surrounding the gaysian figure as well as the inherent gendered investments that a figure such as the BCA invokes. These gendered and nationalistic investments are understood more fully in an articulation of the FOB and what I term FOB techniques—
another highly flexible and sophisticated manifestation of the tactics surrounding the gaysian figure.

**Fresh Off the Boat (FOB)**

An important theme repeated during interview sessions was an anxiety around being read as a FOB in local queer spaces, such as gay bars, or on the streets of Davie Village. A FOB is an abbreviation of “Fresh Off the Boat,” and is generally considered a derogatory term against people of colour, immigrants and migrant workers and implies that those individuals who are labelled as a FOB have not been properly assimilated into the culture of the location they have migrated to (Jiwani, 2005). Tay identified a shared fear of being labeled as FOB in Vancouver’s queer scene:

> Walking through streets, going to gay clubs, um, just even walking past other groups of gay Asian men um I don’t know if this sounds paranoid and people think I’m over thinking it, but it’s always like that look, that glance but it was the glance of acknowledging that I was Asian and it was almost like a competition kind of glance. Like if you are too FOB-ish looking, they would cringe. Like, “you are bringing us all down!” . . . I grew up with that.

When I asked what he thought this “competition” was about, Tay stated:

> It’s again, the gaysian thing. I think stakes are higher for Asian people because, um, we are already kind of a lower class in the gay hierarchy. So, like we want to, we have to try harder to look acceptable to the white aesthetics. We can’t just walk out of the house—we have to dress up to like
compensate. So, I think it creates this really toxic environment for Asian people to kinda monitor and judge each other. So, it goes to show, if you are, like, um, FOB, or FOB looking, you are totally not acceptable.

Tay’s explanation of FOB politics highlights a larger issue concerning assimilative politics in Canadian multiculturalism. This nation-wide practice of assimilation dictates that the figure of the acceptable citizen is understood through a White racialized notion of Canadian enough immigrants (Mitchell, 2004). Queer spaces and streets in Vancouver are not outside of such an ideology. In 2007, Fresh Off the Boat, an Asian theme night event, was organized at Celebrities, a local gay club in Vancouver (figure 10).
Following the announcement and circulation of advertisements, the event sparked controversy as the choice of the name was considered culturally insensitive by members of the queer community. After admitting to initially “wincing” at the choice of the name, Nelson Wong (2007) from Xtra West wrote on its news website:

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30 Copyright 2007, Julien Powell. Reprinted with permission from the artist.
But then I had to laugh at how lame and cheesy these expressions really are. And I enjoyed the idea that other “gay-sian” boys would get the joke and appreciate the sarcasm.

. . . . Hoping to show my support to Celebrities, to my friend and event promoter Blue Satittammanoon, and to ASIA [The Asian Society for the Intervention of AIDS—the event was supposed to be a monthly fundraiser], I posted the FOB promo items online. The reaction was quite instant. “It seems a bit wrong . . . posting a promotion with 100% racial terms . . . I’m a bit offended,” wrote one respondent. “If I was you, I’d be offended!” said another. Interestingly, all of those who wrote to say they took offense were white. (“Fresh-off-the-boat”)

As suggested by Tay’s statements and Wong’s opinion piece on the FOB incident, an anxiety around the figure of the FOB haunts Canadian, or naturalized Canadian, citizens across racial lines. Indeed, faced with the backlash and criticism of local queer communities, ASIA pulled out of the FOB event, citing the racist perception of Asian communities in Vancouver that such a theme would reproduce. Michael Kwag, a senior board member of ASIA at the time (the organization disbanded in 2011), wrote a public letter in response to Wong’s article in Xtra West stating:

For approximately a year and a half Celebrities hosted a monthly fundraiser called Silk’n’Spice. With waning attendance, Celebrities proceeded to rebrand the event. As soon as Celebrities launched the event, ASIA received a number of complaints. These concerns were related to the negative connotations associated with slang terms used in the promotional materials circulated for the event. More than be-
ing “lame and cheesy” many felt that the use of such stereotypes as “Luv u long time,” fresh off the boat and “It’s the night to eat RICE!!!” were inappropriate and contributed to racist conceptions of the Asian community.

When ASIA presented these concerns to Celebrities, the negative feedback received was not seen as sufficient reason to change the name of the new event. While the specific meaning behind the F.O.B. acronym has changed from Fresh Off the Boat to Fabulous Oriental Beings, ASIA did not agree this change would be effective in removing the negativity surrounding the title. As such, we felt compelled to remove our name from the event. (2007, “ASIA pulls out of FOB”)

While the internal and behind-the-scenes conversations that took place between ASIA, the party organizer (a queer Asian migrant himself) and Celebrities are not documented, these public communications and the resulting fallout indicate the overdetermined and figurative meaning of FOB as racist, demeaning and injurious to Asian subjects and as a term out of place in the multicultural sensibility and promotion of racial awareness within the local queer scene. The questions that were never addressed by Wong or Kwag (though they were subtly alluded to in their writing) but were asked by many attendees and those who refused to attend the event were: What could possibly compel them to name this event as such? How could any Asian migrants or other queer people of colour find anything positive or appropriate about this injurious word?

This haunting anxiety FOB produces can be quite diverse in its effects when considered at the level of the everyday. The ways in which participants described how they engaged with the gaysian figure often depended upon their relation to the Canadian nation state. Some par-
participants were somewhat unaware, yet also implicated by, the historical meanings of the term FOB. In my interviews, a sign of FOB-ness was discussed as an issue of language. Jun had relocated to Vancouver first as an ESL student to study at a local language school for a year. He then became a working holiday resident. He had never lived outside of Japan before coming to Canada and, due to his limited ability with English and a significant hearing impairment, communication was, Jun said, “a daily struggle.” Jun told me:

Yeah, it’s brutal. Especially when meeting someone for the first time on a date or at a gay bar. It’s very hard to hear what people are saying in a public space even with [my hearing aid].

Dai: Do you use sign language with other people with hearing impairments?

Jun: I’m learning ASL [American Sign Language], but that’s also different from Japanese sign language, so it’s hard. I usually read lips, but you know, it’s not 100% accurate.

. . . . The thing is though, it is not that I can’t hear well . . . It’s when people write me off, because I can’t communicate. I do fine in online chats, but face-to-face is hard. And I know what people think when a simple conversation fails: Did you arrive here yesterday or something?

(34/バイ (bisexual)/male/Japanese/Japan/ working-holiday visa; gay and deaf)

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31 This conversation took place in Japanese. I have translated it into English.
The issue of communication associated with the FOB stigma was also raised by another participant, Jo, who had been in Canada for less than 2 years as an international student:

**Jo:** I, I really try hard to speak English without, you know, accent. People get, um how do you say, [writes in Chinese characters] “impatient.” So making friends, um, is hard. Dating was hard, too.

Clearly, these statements indicate a broad range of, mostly negative, feelings associated with the FOB stigma and its intractable link to language ability. However, like the in/visibility as possibility framework that I previously traced, this language barrier that may have prevented Jun’s full participation in local queer culture as a proper gay subject was also re-negotiated by Jun’s active incorporation of FOB-ness in an unexpected way. Here I offer a field note that I made after one evening I spent with Jun, who invited me to join him to hang out at a newly opened gay bar in downtown Vancouver.\(^{32}\)

*He showed up dressed head to toe in tight black clothing and knee high boots. The words “ラジングサン/Rising Sun” were written across his ripped T-shirt both in Japanese and in English. We arrived, and after we surveyed the dance floor, we went up to the bar to order drinks. The space was getting more crowded by the minute and people had to practically yell their orders to get the bartenders’ attention. As we got closer to the bar counter, I asked whether Jun wanted me to order a drink for him, as I remembered his discomfort for having to communicate in English in a public space. He shook his head and pulled out his iPhone, where he had already typed his drink order: “one vodka soda.” After we sat down, he told me how he “blames” the loud music and noises of the club for not being able to hear, to cover up his deafness.

. . . . His tactics, using the iPhone screen as a primary mode of communication, was a way for him to get past the challenge of having to speak and not be*

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\(^{32}\) This field note was written in Japanese. I translated it into English.
heard. Jun told me when we stepped outside for a cigarette that he’d rather be treated as an Asian, possibly a Japanese boy who speaks little English, than feeling alienated—a feeling that he said was “like [being] an alien”( "宇宙人みたいな気分 ”).

All night, he danced to the rhythm of the vibrating air and the shaking dance floor with a drink in his hand. When a few men approached him, he would write on his phone screen and tell them, “I can’t hear you,” followed by “Want to dance with me?” At about 1:30 AM, I asked if we should go home. He wrote “the night is young old man!” ("まだまだこれからじゃん、おっさん！") then, “Go home, I’ll be fine” (“大丈夫だから先帰っていいよ")! . . . . Although I hesitate to call this an example of mobility that could be generalized in any sense, I am struck with how vibrant he makes his life, at least temporarily, by tactically using technology, race and stereotypes to get around possibly immobilizing conditions. [Research journal entry, October 30, 2010]

Reflecting on these field notes in the present, I am struck by the “FOB tactics” Jun employed that night in a highly flexible, creative way to pursue various pleasures and possibilities. In fact, Jun later verified this. I had a follow up interview with Jun to discuss changes in his life and to also ask him for his opinion about my interpretation of that night and his use of the iPhone as a tactics of mobility. Jun responded:

I didn’t think you were watching me that closely [laughs]. It’s true, I guess,

I use these things to get what I want. This FOB wants to have fun, too!

. . . . This FOB thing that you mention, that’s a bad word for like immigrant people, right? I guess, I’d be hesitant to say that I’m an FOB, because, you know, I don’t suffer like those people who do terrible cheap labour here [in Canada].
Jun was cognizant of the class dimension of FOB’s negative meanings—lack of education, professional skills and cultural capital—originally associated with the term (Gosine, 2012). However, he also identified with the term through his own inadmissibility as a proper gay subject which the gaysian figure orbits. Jun continued:

I don’t think this will ever get easier, because I’m deaf. I’m hopeful, but I have like this double-hardship [non-Canadian and deaf]. I won’t be like you [points at Dai]

. . . I will always be on a boat because I don’t feel like I ever got off of it.
. . . Or I will just get back on it and go back to Japan [laughs] . . . But yeah, we are a new group of people.

Jun’s identification with FOB as a condition of collectivity strikes a similar chord with Wong’s meditation on the use of the term, which he deems politically incorrect and potentially injurious to many gaysians if not carefully used. However, Wong (2007) also notes:

Amongst each other, queer Asian kids use these expressions with the shared understanding that they are lame and ridiculous. "Luv u long time," in particular, is used sarcastically as a comment on how far from us these pop culture stereotypes really are.

As such, FOB can be another possible term of identification for Jun, and for other queer Asian subjects in the city. Jun articulated such a possibility as follows:

I was just thinking this is kind of similar to my friends who are also new here and, how do I say, “total Asian”[in English]. They don’t have my dis-
ability . . . and also I don’t always see myself [as] just gay, because I like girls too, but we connect because we have to support each other [despite our differences].

Reminiscent of how the active appropriation of injurious words such as “fag” have been an important condition of possibility for reparative queer politics, the negative associations of FOB can be reworked to accommodate embodied differences and racialized queerness with a subcultural spin, which in turn can undo assimilative multiculturalism in the local queer culture amid gaysian anxiety.

As I end this analysis of Jun’s FOB tactics and techniques, it is important to briefly return to Tay and his BCA formulation with which I started this section. If we compare Tay to Jun, we notice that Jun does not express the gendered anxiety that Tay does. Tay’s embodiment as a BCA is always already linked to the fraught masculinity of Asian male subjects, which Fung (1991) and Eng (2001) elucidated. I do not wish to pit participants against one another here; I merely wish to put these two formulations and embodiments of the gaysian figure alongside one another, so that we may pay more careful attention to the importance of arrivals and departures. By this I mean the temporality, transnationality im/permanence of Canadian residency as experienced through the intersection of race and sexuality. As I pointed out before, much of the theoretical considerations of queer Asian men fail to account for their lived experiences and fail to attend to the possible differences experienced by North American born Asian subjects and Asian migrants who arrived in Canada for any number of reasons. Tay and Jun, of course, cannot be made to fill in these conversations for us, but they do make us highly aware of the perception that the figure of the FOB “brings down” the nationalistic aspirations and desires for upward mobility signaled by the figure of BCA. As Nguyen (2008)
does, I wish to avoid a layering of moralizing political correctness onto either the figure of the BCA or the FOB. Instead I would like to privilege the nuances of these tactics of self-stylization as mobilities that exceed simplistic either/or notions of complicity/exploitation afforded queer, Asian, migrant men through the seemingly static, yet obviously always shifting, figure of the gaysian.

**Discussion and concluding notes**

The multiplicity of techniques, tactics, and mobilities produced by the imposition of the gaysian figure that I explore through participants’ narratives defy straightforward notions of political action concerning visibility, recognition and equal opportunity in Vancouver’s queer social relations. The examples and discussions offered in this chapter are meant to provide new departure points alongside the preexisting theoretical conversations concerning queer Asian subjects across borders and diasporas.

The Participants’ stories expertly map the movements and trajectories of the gaysian figure in the context of North American queer sociality. Again, by paying careful attention to these narratives, we are reminded not only about what the gaysian figure limits in their lives, but what it also sometimes enables (Hayles, 2001). These investments and attachments are often contradictory, but not easily dismissed, and these embodied tactics and techniques are the modern condition of survival and pleasure in the queer Asian diaspora.

As Jun asserted, “This FOB wants to have fun, too!” To claim that these participants are either trapped by the gaysian figure entirely or that they are able to completely escape the figure, would be to deny the fun that Jun and other participants seek to afford themselves. By privileging the “fun” made possible and sustained by participants’ practices of active embodi-
iment of the gaysian figure, I do not intend to suspend an ethical consideration of the existing social relations and struggles against racialization also evident in participants’ narratives and statements. However, as Denise da Silva (2007) saliently reminds us, the human subject—and his rights to universality and self-determination established by post-Enlightenment continental thought—is a product of the abjection of the racial Other. For as “the racial subaltern is always already inscribed as a historical subject” (da Silva, 2007, p. xxiv), the argument for corrective, “just” politics of visibility and representation risks the reproduction of the condition of emergence of a universal human figure that racial politics aims to displace (da Silva, 2007, p. 263). The unruly “fun” and the tactics I trace in this chapter are evidence of the social primacy and historicity of racial knowledge and de/sexualized Asian figures. However, and in a Spivakian sense, the fun and pleasure of sexual intimacy in Canada, despite its racist subjections, is also something that queer Asian migrants cannot not want. Put differently, while critically investigating the “analytics of raciality” (da Silva, 2007, p. 253) that transpires in Vancouver’s queer cultural landscape, we ought not to place these subjects in the impossible position of either being inhuman or in the position of being radical political dissenters.

In this sense, I return to the question of racial knowledge by rethinking the space of possibility opened up by participants’ imaginative practices of embodiment, which signal the distance between the level of racial knowledge and representation, and the movements and maneuvers of the body. Drawing on the narratives of encounters, DIY education and the doing/performance of gaysian figures shared by participants, I argue that the historical determinacy and predicament of racialized bodies in a national space can be challenged in terms of adaptation, rather than rejection, of racial knowledge. As Eve Sedgwick (2003) argues, new
knowledge and politics can be imagined “by focusing on pedagogy both as topic and relation” as knowledge travels and encounters differently situated bodies (p. 156). Such a re-thinking must attend to people’s adaptive practices of making knowledge a lived experience. Sedgwick writes: “Adaptation emphasizes how an original is being altered, modified, fitted for a different use, maybe even decentered, drawing out of an earlier orbit by the gravitational pull of an alien body” (p. 156).

Enigma, invisibility and adaptation are at the very centre of participants’ embodied experiences of race in the space of queer desire in Vancouver, and in North America at large. I would like to hold on to the contingent and elusive qualities of these narratives and practices as concrete evidence of how racial knowledge circulates and produces the gaysian figure and how they multiply, mutate and travel to unexpected effects in a space of globality (da Silva, 2007). The narratives of participants in this chapter testify to the power of adaptation through a process of learning what gaysian is in order to make calculated decisions about how they want to do gaysian. The multiple techniques through media, embodiment, and style I showcase in this chapter are by no means an exhaustive cataloguing of the tactics participants shared with me. As much as the gaysian figure represents forces of racism and racialization in the context of queer, North American social relations, these techniques and tactics also demonstrate how these men manage to animate and mobilize the gaysian figure from its original stasis and, in doing so, destabilize its fixity and historicity as new comers to Canada.
Chapter 4: Migrant Intimacies: Mobilities, Difference and the Spatial Life of Queer Basue Tactics

A setting

Figure 11. Picnic at the Pride Festival. It was Pride weekend, and a perfect summer day in Vancouver. Countless people had gathered along the tree-lined street bordering English Bay: young and old, men and women, gay and straight, and everyone in between. Many spectators had digital cameras in hand, anticipating the beautifully toned

33 Joe Boyce, "Pride Festival" August 6, 2006 via Flickr, Creative Commons Attribution.
bodies, the outrageous costumes, and other memorable moments representing this public expression of pride and the celebration of difference. Under the clear blue sky, we had gathered together in this public spectacle. Happy Pride, Vancouver!

That same night, I watched a local TV news report that stated that the Pride Parade had yet another record number of attendees—over 500,000 people. The reporter noted that this fact represented a good example of how Vancouver was one of the most gay-friendly cities in the world. Later, I logged onto my Facebook page and found pictures and comments about the parade uploaded by my friends. “Happy Pride!” was everywhere. Scrolling further down, I discovered a post by my friend, Sabba, a former war refugee child from Iran:

so parts of the vancouver gay parade thing looks like a white supremacy parade- lots of cops, national flags, crosses, real estate companies, pit bull and hound dog advocacy groups . . . and very few non white people . . . got away quickly.

I was not sure whether I viewed the parade in exactly the same way Sabba did, but I understood his feeling. However, the idea of simply pushing the “Like” button (a feature on Facebook) as a sign of my agreement with him would not have quite signaled the nuances of my identification with his sentiments, his “party-pooper attitude,” as his Facebook friends had put it.

A few days after the close of Pride Week, I was sitting in a local coffee shop with Shin, a 33-year-old gay Japanese man and an undocumented worker, to discuss how he had participated in the recent festivities. Having lived in the city since 2000, however, Shin had never actually walked in the parade himself. Instead, he narrated how he and other gay Asian men (most of them also immigrants) have a gathering of their own:

We usually have a small picnic on the green hill area that looks over the festival site. We go there every year . . . it’s our spot. A place for 場末 (basue) people like us.34

34 This conversation took place in Japanese. I have translated it into English.
Literally, the Japanese term basue (場 = place; 末 = the end) means “the outskirts.” Listening to Shin, I couldn’t help but think of Sabba’s urging to “get away” from the Parade as a very different tactic than that of Shin and his friends who make their own “spot “alongside it.

Sabba and Shin’s related yet different accounts of their peripheral participation (or “non-participation as participation”) at the scene of celebratory and mainstream queer public culture highlights a spatial relation of the centre and its multiple margins within. If, as José Esteban Muñoz (1999) teaches us, “disidentification” creates a space of sociality for those who are displaced from the public sphere—queer or otherwise—what collectivity and relationalities do these spaces transpire? In the act of “getting away” from the Parade, what kind of space did Sabba constitute beyond his simply walking away? What does Shin’s and other gay Asian migrants’ claim of their own basue space on the margin tell us about the tactics and possibilities of intimacy that are produced out of displacements in a cultural space? [Research journal entry, August 6, 2010]

The ordinary practitioners of the city live “down below,” below the thresholds at which visibility begins.
—Michel de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life

**Mobilities-in-difference and the location of basue**

In this chapter, my analyses focus on the formations and experiences of basue, both as a space of sociality and as a set of tactics for the queer Asian migrants I spoke with. While not all participants used this exact term, it is after all a specifically Japanese idiom, many of them discussed the marginality of their participation, identifications and experiences in spatial terms concerning their engagements with public queer culture in Vancouver. The narratives presented in this chapter offer intimate examples of the ways in which participants navigate the dynamics of Vancouver’s cultural landscape in their daily lives. On the one hand, participants index downtown’s Davie Village—historically considered Vancouver’s gay district—
as the central location of modernity, possibility and belonging for queer subjects in Metro Vancouver; on the other hand, the participants’ narratives also demonstrate their felt sense of displacement from Davie Village’s social institutions (gay bars, saunas etc.) due to racism and other marginalizing forces. Importantly, as Sabba and Shin’s statements imply, the participants’ bodies and their felt sense of belonging do not simply vanish from the centre of gay possibilities. Many of them spoke about how they persistently attempted to seek out, create, and transform existing social places—however marginal—as significant locations for their negotiation of sexual sociality and encounter.

**Basue and its spatial relationality**

The spatial life of queer mobilities explored in this chapter is a relational one. This relationality is attributed to both existing and imagined socialities in seemingly invisible and bounded spaces where the negotiation of belonging occurs despite, and because of, experiences of cultural, social and political displacement within the dominant landscape of queer public cultures in the city. Within its original meaning and usage in Japanese popular culture, basue occupies a space of displacement such as a dingy bar, a run-down motel or a dirty eatery where the poor gather and secret lovers meet, hiding from the bright city lights and the noise of modern prosperity. These spaces, however, also become public locations and infrastructures in which different socialities and intimacies are organized among displaced subjects and strangers as Shin’s reference to the annual picnic adjacent to the main Pride festival site suggests. Such “boundary publics,” as Mary Gray (2009) notes, emerge out of “iterative, ephemeral experiences of belonging that happen both on the outskirts and at the centre(s) of the more traditionally recognized and validated public sphere of civic deliberation” (p. 53). With an emphasis on the productive tensions that difference and displacement produce, I trace the
mobile processes and boundary formations of basue in the everyday—from a small apartment, to a public train, to a night market—through the analytics of what I call *mobilities-in-difference*.

De Certeau (1994) reminds us in the quotation which begins this chapter that the question of how “the ordinary practitioners of the city” occupy and move about the urban cultural landscape can only be understood when we know where to look and how to get “down below.” The analytics of mobilities-in-difference is a method of documenting and evidencing of ephemeral experiences and narratives of sociality and belonging on the move. In what follows, I briefly turn to a theoretical discussion of the politics of space and displacement for queer, diasporic and racialized subjects in North America in order to arrive at the framework of mobilities-in-difference. With this framework, I offer a reading of the cultural significance of the spaciality of basue that disarticulates the imagined relations and binaries between the centre and the margins of queer possibilities. As a practice of reading, mobilities-in-difference is dedicated to making more legible the everyday survival of queer Asian subjects in Vancouver.

Throughout my fieldwork, I was reminded of the harsh realities of cultural, social and political displacements that participants confronted in relation to racism, migrant conditions and other exclusionary processes within mainstream queer communities and the wider public sphere. However, equally compelling were the creative, urgent and often hilarious tactics and stories of survival amid the materiality of “making do and getting by” (Love, as cited in Crosby, Dugan, Ferguson, Floyd, Joseph, Love, McRuer, Moten, Nyong'o, Rofel, Rosenberg, Salamon, Spade, and Villarejo, 2012, p. 131) related to me by participants. As such, I seek to establish a framework that performs both a critique of social relations and a speculative read-
ing for the power of marginalized subjects through their everyday practices of space-making, travel and sociality across and in the corners of Metro Vancouver’s cultural landscape.

The cultural politics of mobilities

As sociologist John Urry (2007) argues, the unprecedented scale and flow of global capital, technologies of travel, transnational migrations and networked communications have made mobilities—multimodal capacity for movement, including imaginative, communicative and physical forms—the central characteristic of the shifting structures of modern social worlds and experiences. Critically, Urry also points out that “there is an ideology of movement” coinciding with the paradigmatic turn to mobilities that assumes the capacity for movement as “a right” of people and societies in a modern, globalized world (p. 17-18). As an institutionalized and increasingly transnationalized discourse, the idealization of movement—of people, commodities, capitals, and cultural representations—often privileges movement itself as a sign of agency, self-actualization, and emancipation from localized restraints.

This idealization also invokes a “neoliberal fantasy” (Dean, 2009, p. 49), which forgets the condition of possibility from which today’s mobile cultures and global citizens emerged. As Aihwa Ong (2006) and other scholars concerned with the economization of structures of social mobility and the widening inequality in global capitalism have demonstrated, the neoliberal ideology of movement masks the existing technologies of “exception” that limit access to capital and citizenship to “properly” classed, gendered, and sexed subjects (Ong, 2006; Spivak, 2005; Tsing, 2007; Wesling, 2008). At cultural and subjective levels, contemporary literature on mobilities tends to employ postmodern theories (frequently the Deluzian theory of nomadology) which prioritizes the notions of both deterritorialization and placelessness over cultural struggles for identity and collective belonging produced by translocal move-
ments (Morley, 2000). Such a post-political approach deems the passion for identity in global times as an obsolete territorial scheme that hinders unbounded mobilities of the postmodern subject (Yon, 2000).

Within this context, sexuality creates another vexed space of mobilities and political analysis. As Michael Warner (2000) summarizes on the back cover of *Queer Diasporas*, queer theory has always cherished mobilities as a form of resistance and a practice of alternative world-making; the negotiation of non-normative sexualities entails a movement that is “aslan, sideways . . . generally enabled by displacements of culture.” Queer studies scholars commonly understand that such movements and migrations of sexual subjects are propelled by displacements within national cultures and a stasis of citizenship situated in reproductive institutions (Ahmed, 2006; Berlant, 1997; Berlant & Warner, 2000; Edelman, 2004). While the notions of queerness as movement, and the possibilities for alternative lifeworlds that such movements create, remains an urgent motivation for employing sexuality as a critical category of analysis for a critique of heterosexist citizenship and the public sphere, much of the queer theorization of mobilities suffers from abstraction, similar to conversations concerning the general concept of mobilities itself. For instance, Larry Knopp’s (2004) theorization of queer mobilities argues that “the idea of movement, flux, and flows are important ontological sites in and of themselves, for both queer people and geographic thought” for the examination of queer “quests for identity” (p. 121-124). It is this quest for alternative identifications and an imagination for elsewhere that propels queer bodies on the move, where “we see, in a sense, a natural alliance between mobile persons and fluid and multiple sexual identities” as “both queerness and mobility can be considered as liminal states and practices, since both, in
their own fashion, constitute peripheral and borderline spaces and identities” (Mai & King, 2009, p. 297-298).

As much as the affective force of queer desires and imaginaries motivate scholars, including me, to engage in a speculative analysis of sexual migration narratives, such an intimation between queerness and mobility, in part, elides the multiplicity and embodied differences in experiences, practices, and trajectories of movement for different people in different contexts. For instance, the problem of generalization in queering mobilities is indicated by Knopp (2004) when he argues that “clearly, these sorts of mobility practices are common for many people in contemporary individualistic societies and cultures, especially those with the means to be physically mobile, such as those with class, race, and/or gender privilege” (2004, p. 124). After noting the conditions of difference that may hinder the capacity to become mobile, Knopp claims, “the fact is that being simultaneously in and out of place, and seeking comfort as well as pleasure in movement, displacement, and placelessness, are commonly sought after experiences for many people” (p. 124, emphasis in original).

The casualness of this gesture which sets aside differences and privileges, and upholds the experiences of many gay subjects over their others—namely, those with class, race, gender, dis/ability and geographical differentials—in this iteration of queer mobilities, both implicitly and explicitly invokes a narrow urban/white/gay/male/able-bodied/legal-citizen position. This position considers itself the exemplar of modern queer life on the move for which sexuality is the only reason for displacement and movement without any consideration of those who stay, or who are emplaced in a perceived stasis (Gray, 2009; Herring, 2010; McRuer, 2006; Tongson, 2011). As Juana María Rodoríguez (2011) reminds us, “the inability to rec-
ognize the alternative sexual practices, intimacies, logics, and politics that exist outside the sightlines of cosmopolitan gay white male urban culture is never benign” (p. 333).

This is by no means to discredit the unique contribution made by existing queer interventions, which have added the much needed considerations of both desire and intimacy to the study of mobilities and the phenomenology of movement (Ahmed, 2006; Bryson & MacIntosh, 2010; Bryson & Stacey, 2013; Mai & King, 2009). However, when the queering of the concept of mobilities is achieved in such an abstract manner as evidenced in Knopp’s theorization, it is critical to question an erasure which enables a perspective that finds displacement and placelessness as sources of pleasure and comfort for some, but certainly not all, people. Moreover, we are left to wonder what becomes of those Othered bodies, marked by their messy and intersectional differences, which are deemed immobile, and for whom such experiences may lead to further struggles against displacement, and importantly, their differently imagined pleasures and comforts.

In this chapter, I argue for a theoretical position that advocates for embodiment, difference, and multiplicity, which confronts the abstract and romanticized notion that non-normative sexualities and desires are inherently transgressive in their movements. The insistence on the embodied difference of migratory bodies and their cultural struggles moves research “toward a deeper appreciation of the everyday, material, sexed, and socially differentiated dimensions of mobility” (Silvery, 2007, p. 144). In the past few decades, extensive interdisciplinary research in Transnational Feminism, Postcolonial Studies, and Migration and Diaspora Studies has collectively addressed how cultural identities and displacements are mutually produced for, and negotiated by, people faced with stubborn logics of gendered, racialized, and otherwise differentiated power relations and displacements in cultural spaces that are increasingly
in flux. Rachel Silver claims—following Hyndman and the feminist theorization of gender in transnational migrations—that the insistence on embodied difference would argue “against mobility as opportunity, focusing instead on displacement” (2007, p. 142). She further writes:

[T]his work puts forth a complex reading of power in and through bodies that refuses dualistic, structure/agency polarizations, and it insists that migration be viewed through embodied cultural struggles of both migrants themselves and the forces that control migrant bodies and their mobility. (p. 142)

Such a politically and empirically informed framework focuses on the messy particularities that surround the relationship between space, the body, and cultural processes of differentiation beyond the existing structures of movement.

**Mobilities-in-difference**

So far, the theoretical discourses I map out above suggest an urgent need for culturally situated accounts of mobilities in practice that exceed the totality of structural determination and destined locations of migrant lives. In taking up the call for a cultural analysis of mobilities, my contention is that between a disembodied, abstract theorizing of mobilities that equates movement with agency and a critical theoretical approach concerning structures of oppression that centralizes displacement, any hope of apprehending the vibrant possibilities for everyday (and often queer) tactics of movement between these two positions are lost.

The analyses in this chapter consider the politics of displacement in relation to mobilities, not so much as an opportunity but as a tactic for multiply differentiated, therefore displaced, subjects. This tactical approach attempts to evade the foreclosed endgames that both mobilities-
as-agency and mobilities-as-displacement offer. That is, queer Asian migrants’ negotiations do not always, or necessarily, follow along institutionalized lines of upward mobility. Instead, this study aims to show the critical necessity of insisting upon the legibility of tactics for some mobility for the survival of queer diasporic subjects for whom remaining in the stasis and abjection that displacement produces is not an option (Patton & Sánchez-Eppler, 2000).

Martin F. Manalansan IV’s (2010) focus upon the temporality of survival through the concept of the “unsecure life” provides a useful opening here. The temporality of survival—moving on—is more invested in immediate, day-to-day negotiations of making do in the everyday lives of queer, racialized, minorities rather than sustained, future-oriented political projects. Through this focus on survival, for such displaced subjects, “one can argue, it is *one more day*” (Manalansan, 2010, p. 226)—without, of course, a guarantee of another tomorrow. By placing critical attention upon the modality of survival and its uncertain temporality for queer subjects in the diaspora, it is important to make a distinction between “tactics” and acts of agency.

Given that diasporic subjects often lack the sociocultural capital to claim a political position in a new nation-state, Gayatri Spivak’s (2005) definition of agency and its exclusive logic becomes salient. Spivak states that agency refers to an “institutionally validated action, assuming collectivity, distinguished from the formation of the subject, which exceeds the outlines of individual intention” that requires political consciousness and a recognition of structural inequality that one’s class, or the lack thereof, is exposed to (p. 476). In other words, for agency to be legible, it must always already be institutionalized. Alongside Spivak’s formula-
tion I want to employ Michel de Certeau’s concept of “tactics.” De Certeau (1984) explains tactics as the “art of the weak” and states:

What it wins it cannot keep. This nowhere gives a tactic mobility . . . a mobility that must accept the chance offerings of the moment and seize on the wing the possibilities that offer themselves at any given moment . . . It creates surprises in them. It can be where it is least expected. It is a guileful ruse. (p. 37)

Such opportunistic tactics that enable provisional mobility in a given cultural space are what I call mobilities-in-difference. Situated in the temporality of survival, getting by and making do, mobilities-in-difference is a framework that investigates the relationality between displacements and movements in the everyday lives of queer Asian subjects, as a focus solely upon the global narratives of either agentive mobilities or displacements is inadequate to capture the nuances and idiosyncrasies of participants’ often elusive tactics of maneuver—tactics that may disarticulate the existing logics of belonging, citizenship and predicament in a new homeland. As a “double articulation” (Massey, 1994, p. 110), mobilities-in-difference focuses on describing how different queer Asian subjects make use of existing systems, means and locations of mobilities for their own cultural purposes and needs, as demonstrated in the narratives and discussions in the following sections.
Yasu identifies himself as “gay” and “chubby.” Yasu has been living in Vancouver for the past 16 years, first as a temporary worker on a working holiday visa and now as a booking agent at a small, downtown travel agency. When I visited him for an interview in his studio apartment just a few blocks away from Davie Village, Yasu was busy confirming his flights and train tickets and reading some travel pamphlets for an upcoming two-week vacation in Japan.
These look like some obscure places in Tohoku [the northern region of Honshu Island]. What do you plan to do there?

Yasu looked down at his travel itineraries and responded:

**Yasu:** Oh, that’s because I’m not going back for sightseeing or visiting my family. I’ve actually never been to these places... takes me 20 hours on the train to get there from the airport [in Osaka]. I’m going there to meet my online fans for the first time.

**Dai:** Online fans?

**Yasu:** Yeah, my デブ専 (debusen) friends.

Debusen (デブ/Debu = chubby, 専/sen = exclusive) can be roughly translated as Chubby-chaser, which is a gay man who pursues chubby/fat gay men as sexual partners. Because Yasu is chubby himself and also identifies himself as an “Asian Bear” debusen boys are integral to his intimate community-making. However, Yasu’s shuffles and identifications between these identity terms across languages—デブ, Chubby, Asian Bear, デブ専, Chubby-chaser—is by no means straightforward, and Yasu’s struggles around the body politics and white norms within the local Bear subculture ought not be lost in translation. Yasu noted that his

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35 This conversation took place in Japanese. I have translated it into English.

36 For more detailed descriptions of the embodied practices of Bear/Chubby-chaser gay subculture see Campbell, 2004 and Monaghan, 2005.
participation in the Vancouver gay scene has been, as he puts it, “non-existent, not in demand.” He continued:

As for one reason, the gay scene [in Vancouver] in general is really catered to those gorgeous white boys. I mean, look at how many gyms there are around Davie Street! Being fat is like the worst thing you can do to yourself as a gay person [Laughs].

. . . . I never felt, I still don’t feel, like, good about my body. I still feel like that chubby kid no [one] wanted to play with on the playground. So, it’s great that there’s a scene, you know, like Bear and Chubby-chaser culture here, where my body is appreciated. But you know, that’s not because I’m proud of my fatness. I find myself in [the Bear/Chubby-chaser culture] by accident, because, I’m fat, but I never felt that it is where I belong.

He elaborated on his ambivalent identification with the predominantly white, racialized physicality that dictates the embodied relations of desirability of the gay Bear figure:

**Yasu:** I’m not really part of the Bear community here, because . . . well, I don’t think I’m actually a Bear.

**Dai:** What is a “Bear” for you? Why do think you are, but not really, a Bear?

**Yasu:** Um, so a gay Bear would be someone who looks like a Bear, the animal, you know? Big and hairy. But I’m not big enough like those white guys who are the ideal image of the gay Bear. A Bear for me is basically a white Bear. That’s different from, say, Debu, where I don’t know, race isn’t part of the image. Or that a Debu gay man is already a Japanese person.
Yasu further narrated how the racialized logics of desirability shape Bear/Chubby-chaser relations:

> And you know, guys who go for Bears, like the Chubby-chasers in Vancouver, they are usually twinky white boys who want big white daddies. I actually want an Asian Chubby-chaser who can appreciate an Asian Bear, but that’s just too specific, isn’t it? Where would I find that? [Laughs.]

While Yasu told me that his age does not matter so much in the Bear community, as Bear/Chubby-chaser relations are often structured around a Daddy/Twink age binary of mutual desire, queer spaces and streets in Vancouver—especially those frequented by the Bear community and their admirers—are not at all free from racialized logics of desirability for queer Asian Bear subjects. Yasu recalled:

> Every time I went down to the Pumpjack [a local gay bar frequented by many Bear-identified gay men], I felt totally out of place and unwanted. It didn’t take me long to figure out that it was nothing but a white space. No one said anything racist, no. It’s just that no one said anything to me.

Faced with the difficulty of finding a lover at local bars and clubs, Yasu, like many modern gay men before him, turned to gay social network sites online. However, much to his disappointment, Yasu soon discovered that the online Bear scene was not much different from his offline experiences, of which he noted:

> I don’t think the Net can really solve the problem, you know? It’s just a more convenient way to hook up with people, but that doesn’t mean it’s
somehow a totally different situation [than offline]. You see the same people looking for the same thing.

Figure 13. Inside the Pumpjack

Yasu’s similar experiences of racialization and his felt invisibility in both offline and online worlds are not uncommon. Instead, they reflect a common experience concerning the embodied politics of race that continues to structure gay male sociality online—with the usual dis-
clamer of “No Asians—it’s a preference, no offense” that constitutes an insidious and disorientating space of desire for racialized subjects, as I discuss in Chapter 3 (see also, Lee, 2008; Raj, 2011). However, when I further asked Yasu how he negotiates possible encounters with people with similar preferences to his own, he opened a small window on his IBM desktop computer and turned on a web camera and said, “This is how—I broadcast my fat belly to the world!” The following are my observational field notes from our meeting in his apartment that night:

Yasu has an account on a website for video streaming. He found the site as he was searching for social networks catering to “debusen” and their admirers, as well as the transnational Bear/Chubby-chaser community. On the screen, there were multiple video images—most of them blank. Yasu explained that, because it was still around 5:00 a.m. in Asia, his fans were in bed. When I asked him how he used the site to connect with his buddies, he offered a description of his daily routine.

He would leave the camera on 24/7 (or as long as the Internet connection would hold). Due to the time difference, when he gets up in the morning, it is the evening of the same day in Asia. “They usually ask me to hang out with them, so I have a small chat, but I’d have to go to work. When I come home from work, I’d take off my clothes and sit in front of the computer for a chat. Or I’ll watch a movie naked with a camera facing [my] way, so that they can still see me. [Chuckling.] Sometimes I chat with my friends for hours, sometimes I look for a new buddy. Then I go to bed.” [Research journal entry, February 21, 2011]
Figure 14. Yasu’s media map.

In this way, Yasu found his online fans. As he started to experiment with the site and a new webcam, he gradually met Asian Chubby-chasers. Yasu remembered the surprise and exhilarating sensation of these encounters: “It’s the sense of relief, and maybe a little assurance. It took me some time and this weird technology, but I was able to find my people.”

After learning about his online tactics for finding Asian Chubby-chasers, I conducted a follow-up interview with Yasu that elicited the conversation above about his trips to “meet and greet” his fans in Japan. Once a year, Yasu plans a trip to Asia (usually Japan, but some years he has travelled to Thailand) where he also knows some users from the same site. Yasu maintained that, while a possibility, his visits to Asia are not for the chance that he may “get laid.” He stated, “It’s not about sex. I mean, it could happen, but it’s not the goal.” Yasu further explained how these travels cost him a year of savings that he saves up for each month:
I put in $150 or $200 each month. I stay at the cheapest hotels or sometimes even sleep at the train station or on a bench in a park to save money. Not really a glamorous vacation . . . not what you think it is! [Laughs.]

As he was showing me the profiles of some of his online buddies, Yasu quietly said,

They think I have this fabulous gay life in Canada. They don’t know that they make my gay life happen . . . I live here [in Vancouver], but part of my life is over there [in Asia]. I’m just happy to see them offline whenever possible, if only once a year.

Yasu’s spatial tactics to seek mediated and immediate intimacy with his fans on a video channel is enabled by his experiences of disappointment and displacement in the white, racialized Bear community in which he struggled and failed to claim a sense of belonging and which refused to claim him. His queer world-making through basue sociality stretches and travels across the Pacific Ocean and is constituted through displacements in Vancouver as well as online video technology; the remote presence of others, even when the cameras were off and the windows blank, adds a layer of intimacy into his everyday home environment. It may seem like his notion of gay life is not much of a life when judged against an upper-middle-class lifestyle—the fabulous gay life in Canada—that the modern gay culture in Vancouver seemingly offers yet fails to afford him.

However, Yasu is engaged in a serious work—though perhaps seemingly peculiar to an outsider—of reconstituting a space of queer possibility that confronts the negation of any gay or queer life. The complex intersections in Yasu’s desire for Asian/Chubby-chaser/Bear/Debusen relations treads the outskirts of both dominant gay public culture and the local Bear subcultural community where the racialization of Asian bodies makes his
quest for intimacy difficult if not outright impossible. Yasu’s ritual of video broadcasting and his annual travels to Asia are ways of negotiating and extending the boundary of his belonging through both basue relations and basue spaces. Yasu’s tactics exceed the normative confinement of his not-belonging that the city’s racialized and thus limiting homosociality produces. His basue tactics emanate from a small apartment, just outside of the buzz of the urban gay village, from a tiny, flickering video screen. And, as Yasu says, echoing Manalansan’s notion of the temporality of survival, “this is all I get . . . and good enough for now.”

The Skytrain: Knitting and “feeling gay”

![Skytrain station](image-url)

Figure 15. Skytrain station.37

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37 Ricki22, "Surrey Central Station" December 26, 2007 via Flickr, Creative Commons Attribution.
Maty does not identify with any term of sexual identification (e.g., gay, homosexual, queer). He claims that he has never touched a computer. The only means of contact I had with Maty, before and after interview sessions, was through the landline telephone in his home in Surrey (a predominantly South Asian suburb adjacent to Vancouver), over which his 90-year-old mother and his sisters’ families frequently eavesdropped. Consequently, Maty asked me not to disclose who I was or why I was calling him, and we had to devise certain codes of communication to hide his participation in the study from his family.

Maty was raised as Christian in a South Asian diaspora in Uganda. After the entire community was seized and deported by the then nationalist Ugandan government’s Indophobic ethnic cleansing movement in 1972 (Patel, 1972), Maty and his family immigrated to Canada as refugees. Being Christian and Indian, settlement in Surrey was not easy for him and his parents. He stated, “We have [a] few people like us there, but most are Sikhs and Muslims. We are not the same.” A similar predominance within ethno-religious relations in Surrey carries over to South Asian queer organizations in Metro Vancouver at large. When I asked Maty about his explorations of local LGBTQ groups and organizations in Vancouver and if there were any with which he identified, he had this to say:

**Maty:** I went to a meeting once at [a local community centre]. They were young. And Muslims.

**Dai:** How about . . . was there any Christian support group?

**Maty:** I do not know how to find them . . . my church doesn’t [have one].

(57/male/Uganda/Indian/naturalized Canadian citizen; mentally disabled)

In addition to such diaspora within a diaspora marginality, age difference and a lack of access to the Internet and mediated connectivity—the seemingly de facto platform for commu-
nity organizing for queers of colour and immigrants in the city—meant that Maty’s participation in many existing queer social spaces seems liminal at best. Upon my first interview session with Maty, I contacted several local social and activist groups which specifically catered to the South Asian queer population in Metro Vancouver (with Maty’s permission, as he expressed an interest in making “gay friends”). In emails and on the phone, I explained how I came to know Maty and his general background, and inquired about how it might be possible for them to reach out to him. Among those who responded, it was suggested that he join their Facebook group or listserv for information about on/offline social activities or else there was not much more they could do. It is pointless to criticize these groups’ methods of communication and community outreach—these volunteer-driven groups face many struggles—however, my interactions with them reminded me of the critical issues of age, generational and material differences and access to technology that shape a particular experience of alienation for someone like Maty.

Additionally, disability was another reason Maty’s access to and experiences of queer sociability both in Canada and elsewhere were complicated. “You know [the cell phone] is bad for your brain. My brain,” he said, pointing to his head, as he sat across the table from me in a small meeting room at a public library in downtown Vancouver. Maty suffers from manic depression and depends on disability benefits from the government. When he is not able to leave his house, sometimes for months on end, his aging mother looks after him. He does not know or does not wish to know where his depression comes from. As I took notes during our first meeting, Maty glanced over my note book and said,
I see [my psychiatrist] at the university hospital once a month. He writes me a prescription. He gives me a [doctor’s] note. No questions. I want you to know, it’s not because I’m gay. I’m not gay.

His self-identified “mental problems” started in his mid-20s in Canada, which was “a big trouble for my family. I was going to become a lawyer.” After years of unemployment and isolation in his family home in Surrey, his parents sent Maty to Bombay where they lived before they moved to Uganda. Maty recalled his daily routine during his time there as follows:

I sat on a chair by a busy street. Every morning. I saw young men. I liked [watching them]. They were naked and sweaty. Watching them, I felt, um, safe. These were my people. I wouldn’t do that in Vancouver, for sure.

[Laughs.]

After this trip, it became a yearly vacation for Maty, during which he avoids Vancouver’s rainy winter months by visiting India with the money he saves from his government disability cheques. When I asked Maty whether he likes to do more than just watch the young Indian men and whether or not watching would make him “gay,” he contemplated for a good minute before responding:

Maty: I never touched another man. I don’t know how to be intimate [with men]. I’m old, and like this [points at his head implying his mental disability]. I know the gays, the young ones, don’t want me.

. . . I only watch, and so no one knows [about my desire]. Sometimes I watch men here [in Vancouver]. I also buy magazines [of Bollywood cin-
ema] at a corner store near my house, [where] they sell Indian goods. I look at the men [the actors]. So, I’m not gay, because I never have sex with another man.

Dai: . . . I’m curious. What made you respond to my call for participation? It says “Are you a gay, bisexual, transgendered man/woman and Asian?”

Maty: I saw your [recruitment] poster at “Qmunity” [Vancouver’s LGBTQ community centre]. I was knitting there. When I knit, I feel gay, yes.

Figure 16. Outside the Qmunity office.
Maty is a member of a knitting club at a local church, where people—“mostly old white women,” he said—knit socks and blankets for orphaned children every Sunday. During the week, he gets on the Skytrain, Vancouver’s rapid transit system, which links many surrounding suburban communities to downtown Vancouver, with his knitting kit and balls of pastel-coloured wool. Maty explained:

I come to the library, to see if they have new books [for knitting]. Sometimes I try to knit here [at the library], but I like to do it on the train. So I go back and forth [between Surrey and downtown Vancouver] sometimes all day.

. . . . When I feel well, I want to leave my house. My mother worries about that. She would ask me where I’m going and doing what. I just tell her that I’m going to the church. I bring my knitting kit [so that] I have something to do while I’m out and about. [Knitting] is an outing for me; I meet so many people because I don’t go out much. I have no friends so I like to go out and feel like, um, I’m part of the city.
The displacements in Maty’s life are overwhelmingly obvious—having been born into and then chased out of an Indian diaspora in Uganda, living with a disability, the difficulty of settlement due to heterosexism and his double-marginality as an ethno-religious minority within an immigrant community, his age, his lack of privacy at home, his lack of access to communicative technologies. The list goes on. We can perhaps read his circular travel between two homes—one in the heterosexual, ethnic diaspora in suburbia and the other in the urban queer
utopia, unforgiving of his differences, both of which turn out to be locations of estrangement—as a doubly “displaced sphere of queer diaspora” (Gopinath, 2005). This queer diaspora’s displaced location, the marginal relationality of basue, however, also comes from Maty’s struggles around disability, unemployment and religious affiliation, beyond the conventional intersection of race/ethnicity and sexuality. With this acknowledgement, I would be very hesitant to call Maty a gay or queer subject in any straightforward sense.

Maty makes and donates his creations to the church’s knitting club. However, knitting on the train and sometimes in other public spaces (such as at Qmunity and the public library) is something he does alone. Asked why that makes him feel like he is gay, Maty said, choosing his words carefully:

Maty: Because . . . I know it looks strange. An old Indian man knitting . . . sometimes people stare. But some people smile or nod. I don’t know who they are but I think I know what they are thinking. And I like it . . . it feels . . . gay . . . My bag is always beside me when I’m on the train. I’m knitting and some people find it weird that a man is making it. They ask me if I’m gay sometimes.

Dai: Do you usually say yes when people ask you?

Maty: Yeah.

As José Estaban Muñoz (1996) argues, to privilege ephemera as an important site of lived knowledge and reality is to engage in a different method of evidencing, one that is “linked to alternate modes of textuality and narrativity like memory and performance: it is all those things that remain after a performance, a kind of evidence of what has transpired but certainly not the thing itself” (p. 10). With Muñoz, I would argue that Maty’s knitting practice tran-
spires his queer sentiment of “feeling gay,” an ephemeral sentiment which emerges out of the “performative contradiction” (Butler & Spivak, 2007, p. 66) of knitting that betrays the assumed heterosexuality of a brown immigrant man and surprises us with the possibility for an affective practice of feeling gay. A practice outside of the obvious institutions of modern queer public cultures—gay bars, sex shops and bathhouses, online social networks and so on—and without the residents of downtown.

While attempting to avoid a reductive and authoritative reading, I would argue that, for Maty, his ambivalent identification that moves between “I’m not gay” and “I feel gay” is a result of an “impossible desire” (Gopinath, 2005, p. 1) that is caught in the complex and intersectional axis of immobilities and displacements in the diaspora. All Maty is capable of, in his own words, is to “just watch” and to “feel” the gayness that transpires—on the streets of the city in southern India, on the Skytrain, on magazine pages—without touching or claiming the objects of his desire. However, despite and because of his displacements, knitting offers Maty an important space within basue and its spatiality outside of both the confinement of his home and his isolation in the city. Knitting on the Skytrain gives Maty access to mobility that takes him to an entirely different and much more subtle, public sociality than the quest for body sex and its radical dissent that queer studies often privileges.

At this particular interview, I was also reminded by Maty that there is an opportunity to argue for a displaced subject’s power to negotiate queer possibilities out of negation. As an example of this possibility through negation, I offer an account of how such an opportunity was given to me, after an interview session with Maty, in the following field note.

As soon as our interview session came to an end, Maty picked up his knitting bag and started to quietly leave the room. I did not know how to properly end
the conversation we had been having for the last two hours. “Done? Okay, good-bye,” he said. I shook his hand and simply replied “Thank you for your time,” wondering exactly what I was thanking him for. I felt overwhelmed by the narrative of displacements and bodily struggles that Maty had just shared with me. I was not sure whether I should include his interview in my data, and if I did, what I would do with it. I was mostly disturbed by my own desire to offer help to Maty, for, as I was keenly aware that it was my own privilege as a “proper” modern queer subject in Canada to feel the pain in his life in terms of what he was “lacking.” But, Maty’s stories, and his mannerism and quiet disposition, spoke loudly against such a pitying gaze as he was relating to me the rich nuances and possibilities in his life with the rhythm of the everyday. After a few more minutes of contemplation, I ran after him, remembering how he usually checks out the craft book section whenever he comes to this library. I found him there, standing in front of a bookshelf taking notes from knitting books. I went over and started speaking quickly, rambling and eventually choking up, telling him how I didn’t want to “impose” anything, “But if there is anything I could do for you . . .” Maty studied my face with a blank stare. What he did next quieted my ramble: He raised his hand, touched my face, rubbed my cheek with his thumb and said quietly; “You are a sweet boy. I made you sad. You do what you need to do with [my story].” [Research journal entry, October 27, 2010]
Maty’s generous offer to me to “do what you need to do” with his story provoked my argu-
ment for his power to recreate public spaces such a Qmunity and the Skytrain as stages for
his queer performances. From the outset, Maty’s individual practices of watching and knit-
ting may not seem enough to imagine a queer world-making in action; however, the fleeting
sense of public recognition narrated by Maty—of “feeling gay”—finds itself as central to his
negotiation of belonging in the city, and his access to a queer world, however ephemeral or
prone to the forces of negation that they may be.

As strangers on the train, we would not know why, or perhaps not even notice that a frail-
looking, quiet Indian man was knitting near us. However, Maty’s active enactment of basue
space by knitting on the train can and does enable moments of intimacy and connection with
strangers in its literally moving space of belonging that has no name. This fleeting intimacy
on a commuter train is felt in a series of knowing looks, nods and other small gestures of
recognition (or perhaps, in other instances, bewilderment or disgust—such are the relational
costs of intimacy). Such a displaced intimacy of basue, enacted by his queer performativity
of knitting, offers Maty shifting, affective moments and ephemeral spaces of belonging that
can emerge unexpectedly without the declarative act of coming out that modern gay politics
of visibility and recognition demand and deprive of him.
The Night Market: A diasporic homecoming

Figure 19. The Night Market.

The previous two case studies traced participants’ active negotiations of the boundaries of intimacy in the everyday locations of a small apartment and public transportation. In this analysis of the third location of basue, I turn to an examination of an Asian night market and how some queer Asian subjects make use of the festival site as a space of both diasporic homecoming and queer possibilities.

When I asked participants to identify the important social locations where their felt senses of belonging were associated, queer or otherwise, some of them mentioned how trips to the night market were an annual event. One participant, Tay, described his ritual as follows:

It’s, like, just something I do every year with friends. It’s, like, on my calendar every summer . . . It’s actually super cheesy. I bet most white folks
go there once thinking it’s exotic or something, and, like, have enough of a ghetto Asian explosion! [Laughs.]

Since 2000, the summer night market, or simply “the night market” as many local residents call it, is held every summer in the city of Richmond, a suburb just south of Vancouver. It is often promoted as a “tourist destination” where “thousands converge on this nine-acre site in an industrial area, where 175 booths and their energetic merchants evoke images of night markets in Hong Kong, Taipei and other Asian cities” (Broom, 2009, n.p.).

The night market’s location and the “ghetto” relationality that Tay invokes epitomize Richmond as one of the largest East Asian immigrant communities in Metro Vancouver—a sprawling suburbia adjacent to the modern North American modernity of the city of Vancouver. Another participant, Salt, narrates his dis-identification with and attachment to the space of the night market as a resident of downtown Vancouver and a self-proclaimed “gay hipster.” Salt describes his ambivalent relationship to the strongly ethnicized annual festival.

Salt: It does remind me of home. But, oh my god, it’s something I want to get rid of, too . . . I know how Asians or Chinese people are talked about here. We are like low-class, not civilized, parasites in Canada . . . that kinda stuff. I want to stay away from it.

Dai: But you still go. What does the night market mean to you?

Salt: So, like, every day, I’m trying to prove that I can be a cultured and civilized person. Like catching up to, you know, the “Canadian way of life” [Salt made finger-quotes to emphasize his point]. The night market . . . it’s almost like I go there to get a refill, you know? Kinda like, you know, a
break from [my usual life]. But it’s something I left behind.

(25/gay/male/Chinese/China/student; gaysian hipster, potato queen)

In Chapter 3, I discuss how many participants invoked what I call the “FOB (Fresh Off the Boat) anxiety” that haunts queer Asian subjects in the city. FOB anxiety is the stigma of being perceived as an unassimilated, low-class, uneducated, racialized, immigrant Other. The FOB stigma shapes participants’ subjectivities in dominant queer culture and modernity, while it also enables their diverse styles of embodiment as active disarticulations of the negating meanings of FOB. Tay’s and Salt’s accounts signal how such an anxiety—a shuffle between “cultured” and “civilized” Vancouver and the suburban, ethnic, diasporic festival in an industrial “no man’s land”—can be felt and articulated spatially. Given these seemingly contradictory accounts, that the night market is a location of both familiarity and estrangement for some participants, I became interested in knowing how their trips to the market, away from their daily lives in Vancouver’s downtown core, might provide opportunities for their basue tactics and other queer possibilities of survival on the margin.

One summer night in 2010, Salt invited me to hang out with him at the night market. What follows are my field notes from that night:

We got off of Highway 99 and turned onto a narrow side street, then arrived at a large, make-shift parking lot surrounded by large box stores and warehouses along the muddy water of the Fraser River. As we were getting out of the rented car, Salt pulled out his iPhone. He turned the phone toward me and said, “Just checking in.” He had opened the Grindr app [a popular, location-based smartphone application for queer men to find each other]. “Who knows, right?” he said with a grin.
We entered the market and felt a chaotic surge of garish bright lights, the noise of people and power generators and music blasting from the stage behind lines of small white tents. Jumbled signage shouted at us in Chinese and Korean, as well as some misspelled English. Many vendors also displayed Japanese phrases that did not make any sense. I lost count of the food vendors and carts; Chinese dim sum, Takoyaki, grilled squid, bubble tea, “Japadogs” and other street foods more commonly found across East Asia. There were also merchants selling cheap electronic gadgets and accessories that were covered in dust and looked already broken. Other tents sold “I ♥ 溫哥華 (Vancouver)” and Hello Kitty t-shirts. We wandered into a DVD booth, where hundreds of (apparently) pirated movies and Chinese, Korean and Japanese TV shows were on display—we were chased away as soon as I tried to take a photo of the place.
After strolling around for an hour, we sat down in the back of the stage area with bubble teas in our hands. A band made up of white performers played some kind of indie-pop music, to which old men and women, mostly Asian-looking, quietly swayed their bodies slightly off-beat. Salt and I discussed how the space reminded us of our homes and memories of summer night markets from our childhoods in China and Japan. It was not that the night market was any kind of authentic space of Asian-ness. As Salt reminded me, “This is kinda grotesque . . . immigrants trying to sell anything Asian. Not the same thing as what I know back home.” However, we both agreed that it was quite a familiar experience to “feel Asian” in Canada and that we had come to accept as immigrants; the mixture of strange food, cheap products and cultural and national genealogies thrown together in the diaspora.

The whole time we were at the night market, Salt kept checking his iPhone to see if he had received any messages from other Grindr users. I asked why he would use the gay app where there was no sign of queer bodies as such. He explained to me it was not so much that he may find a date there. For Salt, the space of the night market is not necessarily a place for hooking up: “Do you see gay sex happening here?” he said jokingly. But, he quickly added, “Like I said, you never know.” [Research journal entry, August 16, 2010]
I was particularly struck by the notion of “you never know” as a means by which to open up a space of imagined possibilities—uncertain, but not foreclosed—of a queer encounter in an unexpected location, as opposed to the concrete expectation of gay institutions in downtown Vancouver. As Karen Tongson (2011) argues in Relocations: Queer Suburban Imaginaries, ethnicized, immigrant suburban locations and diasporas may seem like a complete void of modern, urban queer possibilities. However, a shift in gaze and attention to what Tongson calls the “immigrant baroque” aesthetic of suburbia can potentially accommodate different forms of queer sociality and possibility that white racialized spaces of urban queer culture foreclose for racialized subjects.

In a follow-up interview, I asked Salt what he thought of my interpretation of our time at the night market together and his use of Grindr. Salt’s reflections concerning his own practices testify to this spatial dynamic:

**Salt:** Well, it is true that Grindr has become something of a survey tool for me [Laughs.] . . . because, like, at the night market, there’s nothing that really, you know, says that you are gay. It’s, for sure, not Davie Village.

**Dai:** But you use it in downtown, too, correct?

**Salt:** Yeah, for sure. But you know, there’s not, not really anything new there. I see the same profiles all the time. Like, oh my god, do gay people ever leave downtown!? [Laughs.] So, I guess, in a way, I look for something else, you know, like what kind of gay people show up in, like, a super non-gay place, you know what I mean? That’s . . . that’s more interesting than, you know, just staying in one place.
Salt’s use of the location-based mobile app, in this sense, is a tool for rendering a physical location, explicitly queer or not, as an imagined space of possibility. This mobile possibility, I speculate, is not tied to a fixed location; rather, it only emerges out of Salt’s travels between the urban queer centre and the marginal, basue space of the night market. Such tactics offer us an opportunity to consider how queer Asian subjects tactically disarticulate the normative boundaries of intimacy and pleasure beyond the logics of visibility and conditions of belonging associated with Davie Street and the “Gay Village” in downtown Vancouver. Importantly, the invisible mobilities that Salt affords himself are an embodied process, through which the seemingly dispersed locations and competing modernities between urban, white queer culture and ethnic diasporas intersect and mutate. Salt continued:

There was this one time, you know, I left my straight friends, Chinese friends [at the night market], and, like, took the bus and went to [a local gay bar]. This white guy came up to me and, like, started chatting and stuff. Then like, he said, “Eew, what’s that smell? You smell like Chinese food.” [Laughs.] I was, like, dressed up and all, you know, like totally cool hipster looking. But guess what, I was, like, just at the night market! That’s not, um, gay, right? [Laughs.] So I said, “I’m Chinese.”

. . . . Yup, I am Chinese, gay, and I eat bad food.

Discussion and concluding notes

What do the ephemeral notions of “good enough for now,” “feeling gay” or “that’s more interesting than just staying in one place” in these narratives of mobilities and space-making tell us? What political possibilities do they offer in rethinking mobilities beyond the binary of structural displacement/abstract agency at the level of everyday queer diasporas? With the
spatial relation of centre and margin in mind, my analyses of mobilities-in-difference are meant to map out the relational dynamics of movements and travels between locations—those of the more established, yet, white racialized downtown/Davie Village and the multiple, more elusive spaces of basue—where queer possibilities are differently imagined and negotiated with different logics of visibility and legibility.

Figure 22. The Basue Map

Understanding these everyday micropolitics of movement as tactics positions the notion of basue as an important site of the negotiation of displacements associated with racism and other marginalizing forces that intersect and are felt through space and the body, individually and collectively. These examples of mobilities and ephemeral socialities importantly show how movements and maneuvers do not simply lead to elsewhere but, (as Salt demonstrates by impossibly and hilariously bringing the ghostly whiff of the night market back with him to the bar) to return and revisit seemingly foreclosed locations with different possibilities. As Angelika Bammer notes, “what is displaced is . . . still there: Displaced, but not replaced” (1994, p. xiii, emphasis in original). The basue tactics under consideration here are evidence of queer methods of space-making that may not register as taking up a dominant space. Shin,
Yasu, Maty and Salt do not find possibility in fixed or permanent claims to space and belonging but in their transient relations to and travels between locations of displacement. Their tactics are makeshift and provisional—a contingent “squatting” upon otherwise exclusionary social locations, queer or otherwise.

A tradition of queer-of-colour critique demonstrates the critical function of marginal spaces as significant sources of possibility for racialized queer subjects’ survival, both culturally and politically. The work of José Esteban Muñoz’s (1999) *Disidentifications*, teaches us how the “dis” in disidentification not only indicates a rejection of the normative and white racialized terms of sexual identity but also represents a psychic process and movement of “dissing” through which queers of colour afford themselves an alternative space of sociality in which existing meanings and representations of dominant sexual cultures can be disarticulated through performance. Sara Ahmed (2006) takes a similar spatial turn in *Queer Phenomenology*, wherein she demonstrates how queerness is felt as disorientation. Ahmed argues disorientation is not simply a non-orientation but that such a deviation from the normative lines of bodily alignment—those of heteronormativity and whiteness—creates a new space of movement for queered bodies against the fixating force of normative interpellations.

Alongside these spatial considerations of racialized, diasporic and queer subjects’ quests for alternative socialities and critical intimacies, I consider the “dis” in displacement as a process in which the displaced subjects I interviewed dwell upon and make anew the normative logics of belonging within a cultural space. Such a focus on racialized marginality and space-making argues for a reconsideration of the much celebrated notion of queerness as movement. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, for instance, Larry Knopp (2004) argues that there is something queer about the ontology of movement driven by desire (p. 121–124).
While I agree with this aspiration for alternative identifications and the imaginative elsewhere that propel queer bodies on the move, the critical modality of basue that I want to hold onto here counters an ontologizing of mobilities that tells us nothing about how displaced and racialized queer migrant subjects confront the conditions of displacements—even from a space they never left, even when their lives seem suspended. Basue in this sense is both a set of embodied tactics and a method of space-making, and both are dedicated to the ongoing work of reconstituting one’s world through dwelling in and attachment to concrete, existing social locations despite their marginality.

The fact that these queer Asian men’s experiences and locations of basue—the picnic, an apartment, the Skytrain, the night market—do not take place outside the centre but exist alongside, on the edge of, and beneath it signals the fallacy of any clearly defined boundary and topology of queer possibility. On the radical openness that marginal spaces can enable, bell hooks (1989) states that “our survival depend[s] on an ongoing public awareness of the separation between margin and centre and an ongoing private acknowledgement that we were a necessary, vital part of that whole” (p. 20). It is worth contemplating how the marginality of basue not only illuminates the displacing force of social relations and material conditions experienced by participants, but also how basue can enable a more careful reading of the conditions of critical awareness, negation of the norm and possibilities of joy and comfort despite/because of displacements in a cultural space. The narratives of mobilities-in-difference and intimacies of basue discussed in this chapter escape a definitive conclusion.

As Shin said, analogizing his life in the queer diaspora as a game of pin-ball:
There are many obstacles that get in the way. But, if you see your life as a pin-ball machine and you as the ball: if you stop, you are dead. Game over. I still want to play this game.
Chapter 5: The Consideration of Family: Practices of Care and Responsibility in Queer Asian Homing Narratives

A setting

As I stood below the front steps of New Westminster’s City Hall, as a participant in the city’s inaugural Pride Parade, I felt a familiar sense of dread, similar to feelings that I often experienced while attending Pride events in Vancouver and New York City. It was raining heavily and the city’s deputy mayor was saying something along the lines of “New West is a family-oriented neighborhood that celebrates diversity. I appreciate your doing this [celebration] while keeping it ‘family-oriented.’”

In New Westminster, “family” was not only a theme but was also the condition of organizing the Pride Parade in this suburban town, a mere 20 minutes by train from Vancouver’s downtown core. [Added noted: According to the
event archive on the organizer’s website; “The First annual Pride Week Celebration for The Royal City Pride Society in 2010 was called Diversity and the year’s theme was Celebrating Our Chosen Families.” (http://www.royalcitypridesociety.com/assets/2010-Pride-Diversity.asp)

Prior to the parade, about 40 participants (by my count) were told, “no nudity, no sex stuff, please” by the organizers. We walked the streets in one group, wearing rain jackets and plain clothes, murmuring to each other about the weather. Without the usual signs of Gay Pride, such as floats, dance music or naked bodies and drag queens, I wondered whether people looking out through the foggy windows of a café or restaurant would even notice what was taking place or recognize it as a Pride Parade. The most animated moment of the entire event was when an angry group of Christian people representing a local church greeted us as we arrived at City Hall. There were a few Asian women in the group, one of which pulled me aside and demanded; “Are you Korean? Do your parents know you are here?” I shook my head “No.” As invasive as her questions were, I oddly felt more recognized by her than by the city of New West and the organizers who were hosting the event.

After the deputy mayor finished his speech, one of the Pride organizers took the podium. People were already leaving as rain started falling heavier by the second. Calling out to those who were walking away and to those of us who stood there shivering in the cold, unsure of what was going to happen next, he cried out that it was time for the party to begin. Suddenly, “We Are Family” by Sister Sledge started playing from a small, tinny speaker that had been placed in front of the microphone. On cue, a few people with matching sailor’s costumes began dancing on stage.

As the music and dancing failed to warm my cold, wet body, I began to question my initial assumption that the choice of “We Are Family” was a means by which to resist the de-politicization of queer public-making and visibility under the auspices of a “family-orientated” celebration. The familiar dread I was experiencing had to do with both a sense of identification with what the statement “we are family” once might have meant—the distant memories of queer struggles in North America (though not my own) in which the organization of collectivity, care and intimacy were a matter of life or death to many during the HIV/AIDS pandemic—and a certain disidentification with the empty echoes in much queer organizing today, which not only fails to articulate exactly what or who the “we” is in “we are family,” but also how the notion
of family all too often flattens or erases the existing differences and antagonisms among strangers gathered under rainbow flags.

Akiko, a friend of mine and a local resident who had invited me to come out to New West, was more explicit in her dismissal of the event. After we stood in silence for a few minutes, she turned to me and said\(^{38}\); “Let’s go. Enough with this crap. We have our own party to get to.” As we walked back through the rain to Akiko’s apartment to have a “pizza and sushi” party (she is Japan-born Japanese and her lover is Italian-Canadian), we discussed what exactly family and home meant for us. Akiko said:

>You know, maybe it’s the Asian thing, but I find it kind of silly to say that we have to abandon our own families first to join a gay family. I never left my family behind. Sure, I’m not in Japan anymore, but that’s my family. You know, I will have to introduce [my lover] to them first, so that she can be included in my family. It’s not a separate one, it just grows, you know what I mean?

It’s not so much the event as a singularity but how that singularity compounds on things that happen all the time.

— Binyavanga Wainaina, “What He Couldn’t Tell His ‘Mum’”

Family, kinship and the “diasporic dilemma” in queer homing narratives

Family and kinship are important yet often obscured sites through which common narratives of migration, sexuality, and home-making are produced (Bernstein & Reinmann, 2001; Brown, 2000; Cantú, 2001; Fortier, 2003; Freeman, 2007; Gorman-Murray, 2009; Knopp, 2004; Lewis, 2013; Manalansan, 2003; Weston, 1997; Wong, 2013). Within public imaginaries and everyday conversations, the notion of family takes on polarized forms and discursive functions through which sociality and belonging for sexual subjects are articulated. At

\(^{38}\) This conversation took place in Japanese and translated into English by the author.
the scene of the New Westminster Pride Parade described above, the notion of “a family-oriented neighborhood” as articulated by a city official establishes the suburban city and family as fundamentally intolerant of, or at least requiring protection from, public expressions and visibilities of sexuality, whereas the performance of the song “We Are Family” attempts to call those present into relation with historically specific forms of imagined kinship in North American queer public cultures. Put simply, within the conventions of genres that structure modern queer migration narratives (Gopinath, 2003), biological families and queer kinships are mapped onto the two trajectories of moving-out-as-coming-out and sexual exile. More importantly, these trajectories are described through a set of binary relations concerning the notion of family. These binary relations include tensions between original/chosen (genealogical), estrangement/familiar (affective), points of departure/arrival (spatial), and past/future (temporal).

**The binaries of home and family**

I arrived at the questions of family and queer kinship in this project informed by participants’ “homing narratives” (Fortier, 2003)—the stories, experiences, and practices of “doing” family and “making” home away from home—which signal far more complex and various considerations of family and kinship than what the established narrative frameworks of sexual exile and moving-out-as-coming-out offer. Akiko’s assessment of the New Westminster Pride event as “crap” in its performative failure to address her as a part of an imagined family, as well as her evocation of “the Asian thing” in her understanding of the family that she never left behind, directly speaks against the flattening of the complexities and dynamics of migration, homing and kinship practices for queer Asian subjects in Canada. A few weeks after the New Westminster Pride Celebration, I had a meeting with one participant, Bruce,
who worked at a local Chinese restaurant. We were discussing the letter he had received from his mother who lived in Hong Kong. According to Bruce, it was a “regular family newsletter,” in which his mother chronicled “every stupid detail about my family, cousins and neighbors.” When I brought up the idea of “the Asian thing” concerning his mother’s efforts to maintain his connection to their family, Bruce nodded quietly and waved his hand towards a section of the restaurant:

**Bruce:** Look around. It’s even built into the architecture of Chinese food culture. Do you see these big 10-person tables at other places? No. The idea is that you have to sit with your families and relatives for breakfast on weekends. That’s what you do. . . . If you are gay, and want to start a family by, I don’t know, like marriage, you HAVE TO bring him to the table. Can you imagine how insanely uncomfortable that would be for everyone? But that’s just how we do family. “Family” [Bruce says this in Chinese] is not called 大家 (dàjiā) for no reason [laughs]. Literally, it means “Big House.”

(28/gay/male/Asian/Hong Kong/ permanent resident; working-class gaysian)

Bruce’s comment that “how we do family” through the rituals of private newsletters and eating together with parents and relatives along with the discomfort that may come with it, exemplifies the notion of family and its specificities in Asian cultures, and it is articulated and reworked through distance and diaspora for many participants.

In this chapter, my approach to participants’ narratives of family and queer kinship considers the practical and everyday dimensions of their practices of “doing” family and home in the
diaspora. My goal is to map out how the participants negotiate the competing geographies and temporalities found in the pursuit of queer life in Canada (marked by progressive modernity and individualism) and in the sense of “family duty” back home (understood as the communal kinship and reproductive obligations of Asian tradition), and to examine how the meanings and notions of family and home are invoked, transformed and put into motion through migrations and sexuality.

**The diasporic dilemma**

In the post-Stonewall tradition of queer liberalism, the act of leaving the original, heterosexual home continues to animate the aspirational force of liberation and self-actualization elsewhere, simultaneously constituting families that occupy the space of home as fundamentally homophobic, incommensurate with non-normative sexual practices and identities, and as the primary location of estrangement and displacement (Brown, 2000; Fortier, 2003). Yet, as David Eng (1997) notes, “despite frequent and trenchant queer dismissals of home and its discontents, it would be a mistake to underestimate [the] enduring queer affiliations to this concept” (p. 32). Eng (2010) further argues that modern subjects’—queer or otherwise—“attachments” to conventional family and kinship relations also “took on increasing significance as an ‘affective unit,’ a social institution . . . [s]anctified as the source of love, affection, and emotional security, family became defined against the heartlessness of a capitalist system” (p. 27).

Several ethnographic accounts underscore Eng’s argument concerning the ongoing significance of kinship in queer home-making. For example, Kath Westson’s (1997) seminal work in *Families We Choose* challenges the prevailing conceptualization of queerness as entailing a rejection of family and exile from any sense of kinship. Weston poses the now famous
question: Is “straight” to “gay” as “family” is to “no family”? (p. 22). Weston’s ethnographic accounts of ordinary queer subjects’ negotiations of belonging away from home demonstrate that ideas of family and home continue to be invoked throughout relocations and migrations. The idea of choice, put simply, represents a sign of agency against displacement and invisibility, and mobility towards a collectivity and community outside of heterosexual culture and the reproductive institution of the nation (Bernstein & Reinmann, 2001).

While these theoretical considerations foreground the ongoing significance of family and its reconfigurations in queer homing narratives, these frameworks presuppose the binary dynamics of biological family (heterosexual) and alternative kinships (queer) as the cause and effect of queer migrations, yet fail to consider how such oppositional figurations of family and kinship through sexuality may be actually negotiated or challenged in practice. During the interview process of this project, a significant portion of each session was devoted to a discussion of participants' understandings of their relations to family, kinship and sexuality. In these conversations, many participants were highly aware of the commonly accepted discursive functions of family that appear in narratives of migration and self-realization for queer subjects in North America which they often resisted. For example, Salt stated:

You see, people, once they learn that I’m gay, I can see a light bulb [going on] in their heads. Like, you know, they go “Ah, of course, that’s why you came to Canada!” . . . There is a belief that I had to leave because, you know, like I was gay and was unhappy there [back in China]. It’s weird that they think all the stories [of migration] are like that.
My story is not that fantastic as they assume [laughs]. I didn’t even know I was gay ‘till I got here. I had feelings of, you know, like I liked guy friends and like, I fancied them, maybe. But, like, I didn’t leave because I was gay and I hated my family. I came here for education and a better job…so that I can maybe settle here and get my parents to come live with me someday.

Salt’s statement points out the problems of the overdetermining frameworks of queer migrations, which Gayatri Gopinath (2003) refers to as the “conventions of genres” that reduces narrations of singularity into ontologies of sexual “exile” and the common journey of “coming out” (p. 137). This is not to say that Salt and other participants simply transcend the binary notions of family that structure their attachments and negotiations of “how to do gay” in Canada. Another participant, Jin, noted:

I’m living here [in Canada], and like, I want to explore the gay life here. . . finding a husband and, like, start my own family and stuff. I feel very strongly about that. But that doesn’t, um, work well with my life plan, for my family. So coming here [to Canada] really complicated things for me. I was given this, you know, idea about what’s possible [as a gay person] in Canada. But I’m still Korean, and like, I have to think about my life [in relation to] what my family thinks of it.

These statements testify to the danger of abstraction in popular imaginations and queer theory that emplace queer migrant subjects in a linear developmental movement from an initial displacement from the original family towards the promise of queer kinship that they can choose to settle into as a final home. While such a tension between displacement and choice
certainly can be felt and experienced affectively, spatially and temporally, as participants’ statements clearly indicate, what it means to “do gay” while being attentive to one’s attachments and affiliations to family and familial expectations, cannot be understood without a more nuanced and culturally situated analysis of how considerations of gender, race and national belonging may complicate and produce different sexual subjectivities and needs of kinship (Cantú, 2001; Eng, 2010; Leung, 2009; Lewis, 2013; Manalansan, 2003; Rodriguez, 2011; Scott, 2010; Tongson, 2010; Yue, 2008).

In intimately reading the narratives shared by participants against conventional assumptions about the mobility of queer subjects, I contend that binary notions of family in relocation and homing narratives central to modern sexual subjectivity in North America must be complicated through the examination of sexuality and kinship practices within the diaspora—a space of multiple cultural affinities, attachments and modernities. Martin F. Manalansan IV (1995) calls the particular challenges and struggles of homing away from home faced by queer migrants the “diasporic dilemma” (p. 425). This diasporic dilemma takes on multiple forms, including gendered ones. As critical feminist theorists have argued, nation-states are founded upon the idealization of family and the private sphere of the home, in which female bodies are made to both represent and take on the role of reproductive futurity and prosperity (McClintock, 1995; Spivak, 2005). Extending this analysis of the idealization and foreclosed figuration of female bodies as the shrine of nationalism, Gayatri Gopinath (2005) argues that sexuality, like gender, is central to metaphors of home and family in relation to the nation. Critical of South Asian diasporic nationalism in which ethnic communities place the racialized female body in the double-role of home-maker and bearer of ethnic tradition, Gopinath
(2005) sees South Asian female queer desires as impossible in either (white racialized) queer homes or their ethnic homes of origin.

In his consideration of Asian male subjects’ negotiations of kinship, family and home-making, Chris Berry (2001) considers the appearance of “Asian value” (p. 211) in narratives of contemporary queer Asian cinemas. Whereas South Asian female bodies are placed in the space of reproduction and home-making, Berry observes that East Asian male figures are constructed as representatives of the house and its lineage in the regional and cultural contexts of East Asia. By focusing on an analysis of the inevitable tension between family duty to get married and produce the next male heir for the house and the pursuit of queer kinships, Berry suggests that contrary to Western, individualistic notions of queer kinship outside of families of origin, Asian male subjects must live with an irreconcilable split between heterosexual gender roles and expectations and the hidden life of same-sex desires.

Throughout the fieldwork for this project, participants repeatedly discussed the difficulty of carrying out the labour of dis/articulating the meaning of family and home alongside the ongoing practice of kinship through sexualized sociality in Canada, suggesting that the notions of dilemmas, impossibilities and duties were indeed central to their experiences. However, participants also eloquently spoke back to these seemingly immobilizing conditions by sharing a wide range of tactics of homing—creating a space of family and kinship—against such foreclosures. This chapter documents and examines participants’ ongoing quests for a home not explicitly located in either the modernity of Canada or the tradition of Asia. In doing so, my analytical approach to participants’ narratives and practices of kinship is informed by Nathaniel Lewis’ (2013) call for a more culturally situated, descriptive engagement with “the complexity of challenges and concerns that drive” queer migration and homing narratives out
of the “social dynamics of place” (p. 305). Similarly, Anne-Marie Fortier (2003) identifies evocations of home and family in narratives of queer migration and relocation as “homing desires” (p. 129) and argues that these desires do not end with the finality of arrival at a queer home but instead compel queer bodies to leave, create, and return to multiple homes. Fortier (2003) thus instructs us to pay closer attention to the cultural complexities, patterns and paths of “motions of attachment” (p. 129) in migratory queer subjects’ labours of creating life-worlds beyond the clear break between homes of origin and chosen (queer) families. Such a shift in gaze and attention moves us away from the abstract “what” of queer kinship to the “how” of possibilities and tactics of survival that practices of kinship afford.

Such a move offers an understanding of the possibility of unexpected tactics and mobilities that may be illegible in dominant genres of queer migration and homing narratives. As such, the questions that I address in this chapter are: (1) How do notions of “Asian value” and “family duty” appear in and complicate participants’ life narratives and meanings of kinship? (2) What are the multiple and different ways in which the notion of family is invoked, signified and practiced by queer Asian migrant subjects? (3) How does migration and distance, including movements of leaving, settling and returning, complicate and reproduce the significance of family in the reconstitution of kinship between multiple homes in the diaspora?

In the following analyses and discussions of interview data and field notes I address these questions by tracing the practical and everyday dimensions of participants’ “doing” family and “making” home by focusing on the central and interrelated notions and forms of family in the homing narratives: the original family and a chosen queer family. My analyses are organized around the recurring themes of consideration of family, care and dependency through which the cultural specificities to do with Asian family relations as both constraints
and possibilities are articulated and how these constraints and possibilities inform participants’ practices of kinship in cultural borderlands and across distances.

Families we never left: Intimate distances and consideration of family

During multiple interview sessions, participants repeatedly narrated their struggles to deal with the split between their queer life in Canada and family relations back home in Asia (or in some cases, their extended families in ethnic diasporas in Canada). Many also emphasized the importance of maintaining, as some participants called it, “a safe distance” from their homes of origin in order to convince their families that they had relatively successful and seemingly heterosexual lives in Canada. In this section, I examine how distance becomes a significant condition of reworking family relations through migration and sexuality, which I call consideration of family. By tracing the ways participants showed various considerations for their families, I delineate how the participants negotiate their sense of home. They achieve this not by simply jettisoning their original families for a queer life in Canada, but by making distance an opportunity for a practice of care towards a tactic of queering their familial affiliations.

Contested closets

The notion of family was mentioned frequently during my conversations with participants concerning their settlement in Canada partly due to the conscious design of the interview questions, but also due to the active contributions and return to this theme by the participants themselves in the interview process. Initial interview questions were designed to yield biographic and demographic information such as socioeconomic class, education, location of residence, and financial in/dependency (as some participants were working in Canada to send money back home). Early on in the fieldwork, however, I also noticed that participants would
mention their relationships with family in terms of their decisions and paths concerning their migration to Canada and sexual identifications. More specifically, many participants used metaphors of the closet and of coming out, which are commonly found in North American queer vocabulary, to explain how their life trajectories were complicated by their considerations of family. To what extent the meaning of coming out was central to their narratives differed, however. For example, Bruce stated:

The funny thing about talking about myself like this, is that, you know, it makes me think [about] how I come in and out of the closet depending on the situation. In a way, now that I think about it, I wasn’t really in a closet ‘till I came here [to Canada]. Like, yeah, I was gay back there. I was kind of active [in gay life] in Hong Kong. But, it’s different, you know? Like, I don’t really need to “come out” to my family like that . . . and still be like, um, do gay stuff. Why mix the family and sex, you know?

. . . So like, yeah, I guess I’m an out gay person here, because I don’t really need to think about anyone else, but, um, I don’t know, it would be different if you ask me in Hong Kong.

Here, Bruce is invoking the idea of the closet and using discourse to do with coming out not simply to refer to a public status and visibility of his sexuality, but also to point out how he “does” gay differently in Canada/Vancouver and in Hong Kong. Importantly, Bruce identifies what has been termed the “epistemology of [the] closet” (Sedgwick, 2008) as specifically a North American cultural construct. Bruce further explained how, in his experience, his fami-
ily’s perception of him and his active pursuit of alternative sexuality could co-exist through carefully considered silence about his activities outside the family home. Bruce notes:

**Bruce:** So, I guess what I’m saying is that I didn’t think of coming out, like, what people do here, when I was there. I’ve been thinking about it a lot lately, like how to do it, and when.

**Dai:** Do you feel like you should?

**Bruce:** That’s what everybody says! [laughs]

Others, like Jin, responded in a more explicitly disidentificatory way to the question of coming out, which he recognized as inherently oppressive. At one particular interview session, Jin and I were discussing the possibility that he may have to move back to Seoul where his parents returned to after the entire family immigrated to Vancouver 10 years ago. Jin expressed both excitement and anxiety of starting a new life in his “home country” after living in Canada as an immigrant, for, as he explained to me, he viewed the last ten years as “terrible for my self-esteem.” He was also concerned about his lack of knowledge about the queer lifestyle in Korea and how to maintain “that part of [his] life” in his home country.

**Jin:** I guess I need to make friends first. You know, someone to guide me through the local scene. I’m really worried about having to adjust to, like, changing my behaviour and expectation to what’s appropriate there. I’ve gone back many times before, but I don’t know any gay people.

**Dai:** Are you out to anyone in Korea?

**Jin:** You mean did I tell my parents or brothers that I’m gay? Wait, [he put his hands up], I know what that [term] means. I’m wondering . . . like, why you would ask me this?
As I began to remind him that he did not need to answer any questions he felt uncomfortable with, he waved his hand in my face impatiently, stating that he already knew that. Jin then continued; “I don’t know . . . Don’t you hate that question? It’s rude, and judgmental.”

The mode of address in Jin’s frustrated response—“Don’t you hate that question?”—included me, if only momentarily, in the position of himself and the other participants with his recognition that I ought to know better about the complex issues of coming out that are shared among queer, Asian, migrant subjects. The notion of “judgment,” and the resentment that it produces, was echoed by other participants. For instance, Victor said:

I think one of the most frustrating things [about] being Asian is that people assume that you must hate your family. Like, you are Asian, so you have to stay in the closet. If I say I’m out to my family, friends, or co-workers, it comes with this surprised look [followed by]; “Are they ok with that?” or “Wow, you are brave!”

Dai: And that’s frustrating?

Victor: Oh yeah. Because, you know, it means, it’s like saying, if you are gay, you should be “out.” If not, like you are ashamed [of your sexuality] or weak. The other thing is, in my experience, many people think Asians must hate gays.

. . . . I guess I’m reacting to, I don’t know, like this idea that I should hate my own culture and like stand up to my family, you know? Like then I become some kind of a hero.

(37/gay/male/Chinese Canadian/naturalized Canadian citizen)
The resentment elicited by the question of “are you out?” seems to signal a classic case among queer of color struggles around the tug-of-war between the racialized closet and the queer home (Gopinath, 2005; Kumashiro, 2003; Manalansan, 2003; Murray, 2009). In mainstream queer cultures in North America, the concepts of the closet and of coming out are fundamental to a politics of visibility and a public recognition of sexual citizenship. Eve Sedgwick (1990) famously observed that the act of non-disclosure of one’s sexuality, or more specifically, the performativity of silence structures the epistemology of the closet, thereby constituting a spatial containment of shame in public spaces. The affective force of shame in mainstream, Western sexual subjectivities and politics is so central that gay shame—bad feelings and memories—are relegated to the privatized and invisible sphere of the closet, while narratives of gay pride and public recognition establish the compulsory discourse of being “out and proud” (Halperin & Traub, 2009).

This is the historical and cultural context that the queer Asian subjects I spoke with acutely experienced as they were subjected to moral judgments concerning their out/closeted status, which in effect positioned the affiliations and attachments they had with their ethnic families in juxtaposition with contemporary notions of positive sexual citizenship. Such a judgment, which calls all queer subjects to come out of spaces of shame and silence, celebrates the queer-of-colour subjects’ acts of coming out as particularly courageous, because to be out and proud puts a ban on the relation of shame and sexuality publicly. Moreover, such an act demonstrates the need for ethnic and racial communities to be educated on their backwardness and updated on the treatment of queer sexuality based on unquestioned ideas of acceptance, civility and progressive modernity. While progress in sexual politics in North America has universalized the idea that queer subjects’ should be “out and proud” for the
sake of their social, political, and psychological well-being, the participants’ consideration of family as a practice of care produces both indeterminacy and disruption within the linear developmental framework of queer becoming in dominant coming out narratives.

**Intimate distances**

In addition to paying attention to the ways in which participants’ frustrations concerning how dominant perceptions of ethnicized homophobia are simply racist (Davis, 2010), further conversations revealed another point of contestation. Victor continued:

> You know, it’s not that my family would be super accepting or like be happy that I’m gay, if I told them. It will be a crazy family drama for sure. My mother would, like, die. She likes to say that when I bring her bad news [Laughs]. I’m just saying, you know, they don’t know any better. Like they didn’t grow up with, or like [haven’t been] exposed to this idea that being gay is not a bad thing.

> . . . I know some friends who have super conservative, you know, Asian parents and they came out to them. Seriously, it’s so fucked up, you know, the reaction. They don’t talk to their families or like [their families] simply act like it didn’t happen at all. I kinda wonder, like, so this coming out stuff, isn’t it like actually a selfish thing to do? It makes everyone upset and angry.

I was particularly struck by the notion of “selfishness” that Victor highlighted in relation to the compulsory coming out narrative that paints over participants’ voices. Too often their decision not to discuss their sexuality with their parents was read as simply due to shame.
However, Victor and other queer Asian men conveyed an entirely different consideration and decision-making process, one that is not so much about resolving the endgame of shame/pride that the North American constructs of the closet, compulsory coming out, and the logics of visibility have created, but rather, an affective gesture of care. This is a gesture of care for and about their families that they are pressured to leave behind and pass judgment upon for being “backward.”

To return to the initial moment in which Jin resisted and resented the question regarding coming out, below is what he had to say about how the consideration of his family informs his decision-making process:

**Jin:** No, I’m not out to my parents. You know, because I don’t think they can take it. Like, you know, Asian families, we are so big on, like, maintaining the family reputation. Like, we have big families, [beyond] just the parents and children. My mother talks to my aunts, cousins and other relatives all the time. Like, ALL THE TIME. They want to know who’s doing what and like, you know, compare who has the better life, job or wives. She lives her life through me. What I do, or, like, what I am, matters to her, because her reputation and pride kinda depends on me. I’m her son.

. . . . I say I am Asian and I love my family, but it doesn’t mean that it’s all happy and great back home. Asian, or at least Korean, families are a source of many, many pain, and like ugly stories that no one wants to remember, but [that they] keep talking [about].

**Dai:** So, you feel that your sexuality becomes another ugly story?
Jin: That’s how I see it. Being the oldest son, my life represents the honor of my family. So like, you know, the idea that like my mother has to tell them, like say that “oh my son is gay and I’m happy for him” is just ridiculous. Not just me, but like my aging parents HAVE TO deal with it, too, you know? Like they have to feel ashamed, because of me. It can be devastating.

... Yeah, so, that’s the reason I don’t think I want to come out to them, yet. Not when, like, I’m here [in Canada] and they are there [in South Korea]. If I’m back there, I don’t know, maybe, someday.

Concerning the understanding of coming out as a selfish act in relation to the consideration of family, Victor similarly noted:

Victor: By selfish I mean, like, if you move out [of the family home], like have a gay life out there, and one day you come home to tell your parents that you are gay, well, good for you if that makes you feel good. I’m sure it does. But, you know, I have to also think; what about the family, who now have to like live with that information?

Dai: Is there, say, a support group for parents in China?

Victor: Well, I don’t think there’s PFLAG in my parents’ [town outside of the city of Shanghai] 39. They might know something about homosexuality, but I’m sure it’s seen as a disease or something.

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39 Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG).
I’m more worried about what happens after I told them . . . [than the possibility that] they won’t accept me. Thanks to the “One Child Policy” by the [Chinese] government, I’m all they got as the next of kin. Once they know [about my sexuality], whom do they turn to? It’s like I come out of the closet, then my parents have to go into theirs. That’s kind of selfish, isn’t it?

For transnational subjects, the felt sense of geographic, cultural, and temporal distances concerning sexual modernity and visibility become heightened. Angela Davis’ (2010) caution that racialized communities’ “backwardness” is often constructed through the idea that ethnicity and tradition are inherently homophobic compared to their white counterparts, enables us to better understand how the participants’ resentment of questions about coming out signals a double-working of shame. On the one hand, such a question is often associated with the imperative of a queer person (and more so for queers of colour) to be the crusader of corrective, modern sexual politics who educates misguided publics, including their families and communities, through visibility and pride. On the other hand, such a question produces a dis-identification with and resistance to the shaming effects of racism in Western sexual liberalism.

To be clear, this is not to claim that queer Asian migrants become courageous and “queerer-than-thou” figures in their negotiation and refusal of the shaming effects of the politics of coming out. As Shin reflected, the distances and competing affiliations between different homes creates a particular sense of alienation:

It’s tough. Like the other day, my mother called me on the phone and started asking me how my life was [in Canada]. I just told her that everything is
great, and that I have a great job as a manager at a trading company. She then wanted to know if I met someone, and if I’m bringing home a blue-eyed wife [laughs]. I know it sounds silly, but the whole time I was talking to her, I was trying so hard not to cry. It’s all lies, the life she thinks I have here . . . I work as an “illegal” waiting tables [at several local restaurants]. I don’t want a wife. I don’t know if I will get out of this situation ever.

. . . . She wanted to know when I was coming “home.” I said I am home, or at least I want to make home here. She cried. She kept asking; “Why? Why do you have to be so far away? What about us?”

(33/gay/male/ Japanese/ Japan/ undocumented; potato queen, survivor)

Shin then told me how he is from a rural farming town in western Japan where “traditional family values still run deep. That’s just the way of life there.” Being the only child and male, Shin feels that the expectations of family duty—marriage, kids and taking over his father’s farming business—are solely upon on his shoulders. Shin explained:

That’s the thing. I feel like I’m in a double-bind. If I’m away from them, they don’t need to know I’m gay. I don’t have to shutter their dreams and life plans. Then again, if I went back to get married to a woman and give them grandchildren, what about my life?

. . . . Sometimes it feels like my life doesn’t belong to me at all . . . you know, my friends and boyfriend say [my family] are homophobic and I

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40 This conversation took place in Japanese. Translation to English provided by the author.
should just get rid of them. But really, they [my family] don’t know any better, and who can blame them? Cutting them out of my life like that, that’s just too cruel.

If, as Lauren Berlant (2009) argues in Cruel Optimism, the heightened economic and social precarities in late capitalist societies compel children to perform the lie of a “good life” for the sake of their parents’ attachments to the idea of the happy family and a secure future, then Shin’s choice to stay in the closet is indeed out of care for his family. While distance from his original home enables Shin's performance of living the good life for his parents, what he finds cruel is that attachment to his family is partially the source of his struggles, that is, in his own words, “[of] my own making.”

Since the common experience of queer Asian migrants’ split lives are the product of larger social, cultural, and historical circumstances concerning sexuality, reproduction, and family, the only tactics many of the participants could afford themselves were to get by and move on day by day. To revisit the notion of the temporality of survival that I discussed in Chapter 4, Shin’s consideration of his family defies both the permanency and the individualistic idea of coming out as self-actualization, and the ultimate resolution of the split by choosing his queer life in Canada over his duty as a son in Japan. In that sense, his consideration of family creates distance—and not a closet—as a particular necessity for his practice of care, where his decision and desire to remain as a family member and to protect that family from difficult knowledge are enabled.

Further, the intimacy of distance I want to argue for here is not simply achieved through geographical remoteness and silence. Rather, it is an ongoing process of mediation and care—or care-ful mediation—as Shin explained:
Shin: This is why I hate phone calls from my mother. Like, it’s too immediate, you know? One moment we are talking about regular stuff, then the next moment my mother starts crying and asking me these difficult questions. There’s no room for escape. She expects, I think somewhere in her head, she knows, that I may be gay. When we talk on the phone like that, it gets too close to the “truth.”

Dai: You want to delay that.

Shin: Yeah, yeah. Because, you know, then what would you do? How would she cope? It’s too instant.

. . . . I don’t know why, maybe it’s a Japanese thing, but in my family, we write letters when we want to communicate with each other about important things. Like, feelings. My god, if I really piss off my mother, I can expect a letter sitting on my desk the next morning [Laughs]. It’s an official statement that she is mad, and now I have to respond. So, it’s different from like Canadian way, right? Like talking things out, heart to heart . . . we don’t do that casually in my family.

Dai: Ah, the letter from mother, yes, I’ve gotten those. But for you, what is different about communicating through letters, from, say, email or skype?

Shin: I think, first of all, like talking through letters takes a lot of effort on both sides. Mom would sit down and think about what to say. I have to sit down and think about what she is saying. It doesn’t have to be about big stuff,
like “Are you gay!?” [Laughs]. But you know, it creates a sense that we are connected, at a safe distance.

**Dai:** Safe distance?

**Shin:** Yeah, we are talking to each other, not in a physical sense, but like, each other in our heads. I do dread reading her letters, because it’s usually when she’s upset about something. It can feel like she’s just rambling and getting stuff off of her chest…it usually is that. But it’s the fact that she writes to me and sometimes I respond with my own letter…that’s important to us.

Here, Shin is conjuring eloquently what Jacques Derrida (1987) calls the possibilities of failure that enable the writing and reading of a letter in the first place. As elaborated quite concretely by Shin, and also earlier by Bruce about his mother’s family newsletters, the care and responsibility that the letter exchange both entails and enables, unlike more instantaneous modes of communication such as the telephone or video chat, is not based so much on the belief that the content of the letter can be safely delivered to the reader. Rather, it is the very possibility that what is actually said or written may never arrive at its destination that compels the interlocutors to communicate, out of which a sense of responsibility is born.

Such a practice of care, framed by Shin as a matter of responsibility—“I have to respond”—is not dedicated to the resolution of distance, but rather, it is a way to maintain the distance in order to keep open a space of intimacy and possibility, a space mutual imagination, that could be otherwise shut down by the “truth” of his sexuality. The delayed time and uncertain space that the medium of letter writing creates, is another method or tactic in which distance can be intimated without the demand for full disclosure or the heart-to-heart coming out talk that Shin evades out of care for his family, and his mother in particular.
Queering of the family home

So far I have argued that the refusal of coming out “like that” that Jin, Victor, Shin and the other participants spoke of must be situated in their ambivalent, yet continued relationship to what Berry (2001) defines as an Asian value: a culturally specific process in which the male child of the family becomes the figure who mediates the present moment in which the ancestry, the past, the blood-line, and the collective future of the family are maintained. However, whether the diasporic dilemma between sexual modernity and family tradition is permanently lodged in the space of impossibility is another point of reexamination.

Here, I want to offer a close reading of a narrative of family, migration and sexuality shared by one participant, Mickey, who tells us about how a family home can be, or already is, queer. Mickey is originally from Hong Kong, he came to Canada as a child with his mother and sister. At the time of my fieldwork, Mickey was an honours student in Sociology at a local university. Well versed in the language of queer and critical race theory, Mickey was articulate in terms of, in his own words, “making the personal political” as a queer Asian subject. However, when the question of family came up in our conversation, Mickey paused and stated:

I feel a little embarrassed when it comes to talking about my family. . . .

Because, well, it’s about my mom. I’m out here [he gestured at the study room in the campus library we were in] studying about queer politics and racism in Canada. I am very active in that kinda stuff and totally “out,” because I do public speeches about queer Asian stuff. But, then, at home [in a suburban town outside of Vancouver] my sexuality is a big secret. My sis-
ter knows. She’s totally fine with that. But, you know, mom . . . I don’t know how she would take it.

Recently divorced and with two young children Mickey’s mother immigrated to Canada when she was in her early twenties. Mickey explains:

She is not from a rich family, like other business immigrants from Hong Kong in this city. Back then, immigration to Canada was becoming a trend [in Hong Kong] and it was still possible to come in even if you don’t really have any value as an economic immigrant.

Without a college degree, and lacking in any professional experience or English fluency, many members of her family were doubtful that she would be able to settle in Canada permanently. But as a “natural born entrepreneur,” Mickey’s mother’s strategy was to start a community-based service business that did not require that kind of social capital. Mickey explained:

So she joined a local church. I still think she’s not really into Christian teachings, but you know, she needed a social group that would accept her. She went to the local church and did a lot of community work. She made enough connections and saw that in [our area], interior decoration was a good business. She met my future step-dad who owned a small design business and they started working together. So she invested all her money, maybe borrowed some from her family in Hong Kong, hired some contractors and started a interior decoration company. She started with almost nothing. I remember the tiny one-bedroom apartment we used to live in . . . three of us in extremely hard living conditions. She had to be the father and
mother to us. She was never a house-wife type of mother like my friends’
[had] you know, like baking cookies and stuff. She couldn’t afford that.
Mickey then described his household as “a little queer in a way. . . [because] we deviated
from the standard Canadian way of family, or my mother as an Asian woman.” He clarifies:

It’s not that she was, um, lesbian. But you know, like she had to perform a
very tough businessman mentality as a woman. She already had us, and no
time for dating or marriage back then, you know? I don’t remember her
having, you know, any romantic relationships. She was always working till
she was absolutely exhausted. Me and my sister had to rely on each other
for many things.

. . . . For an Asian woman, I’d say she was kind of weird, like, a mix of fa-
ther/mother/business owner/fake Christian. So, at least from the gender
perspective, she was queer that way. She’d kill me if she finds out I talk
about her like this, by the way [Laughs].

Mickey’s father did not make much effort to stay connected with him and his sister, until re-
cently. Mickey went to visit his father’s side of the family in Hong Kong in his late teens, to
“revisit my ‘roots,’ you might say.” While Mickey was glad to see the place where both of
his parents were born and raised, there was no concrete sense of discovery of his true self. He
observes:
People wanted to know how my life in Canada was. Or what I thought of Hong Kong. As if my experience in both places was any more meaningful than before because I have a root in two countries.

. . . . I had to hide that I was gay the whole time in Hong Kong, because, well, they don’t need to know. And really, what I knew about Canada is the small town where I grew up as a poor immigrant kid. I guess I was more afraid that they would judge my mother, you know? She was a single mother, a reckless woman who just took off to another country. And the son comes back as gay. I was afraid they would say shit like I turned gay because I didn’t have a father. Or that I was influenced by the Canadian gay culture. I wanted to protect and honour my mom’s hard work, you know, how she made a home for herself and raised us all by herself.

It was precisely Mickey’s desire to protect and honour his mother’s life and the home she created for herself and her children that compelled Mickey not to come out to his mother—yet. Mickey’s mother recently married a man whom she met through her business. After decades of hard labour and dedicating her life to her children, Mickey saw his mother finally finding time to “live her life.” Accordingly to Mickey, it also meant increased interest in his life choices:

The other day, I was back home [from my university residency], and she really pushed me to talk about what I plan to do after college, and like, if I had a girlfriend that I would marry. I felt like, “oh now’s the good time” to, you know, come out to her. But I, I just didn’t want to bring another thing
for her to worry about. She’s happy. She found a husband, like, we never thought she would. And I’m afraid that she would think that it’s her fault. That somehow the way she raised me has anything to do with how I am. You know, they, my mom’s generation of Chinese people, just don’t know any better. They would worry to no end. That like being gay, in Canada or Hong Kong, is some kind of social death.

. . . . But then, out of nowhere, she asked me if I liked girls. I mean, what the hell, right?? It’s basically saying “Are you gay?” right? I panicked. And, so, I said something like, “Yeah, I will bring home a big muscled boyfriend for next Christmas. Now that I have a Canadian step-dad, we will cover all the racial and sexual issues in this family.” She just laughed and didn’t ask me anymore, but you know, she knows I avoided the question.

Mickey regretted that it might have been a cheap shot to bring up his mother’s husband in his response. However, I want to relate this scene Mickey shared with me to the notion of his family being “a little queer” already in order to contemplate how his consideration of his mother, and his imagining of his family, render the space of home not simply as a place of displacement, but as accommodating of differences based on estrangement and care.

Drawing on Mary Cappelo’s memoir of her queer becoming out of her Italian immigrant family in the US, Fortier (2003) argues that queerness can be employed as a conceptual tool of narrativization, through which ethnicity and migration create the betweenness of gender roles, performativities and identifications in a diasporic home. Mickey’s poignant observa-
tion about the queerness of his mother is not about her sexuality (“it’s not that she was lesbian”) but how she had to perform many gendered roles and social expectations (“a mix of father/mother/business owner/fake Christian”) to survive in Canada as an immigrant single mother with no social capital. In Mickey’s family narrative, the figure of the mother and the home she built are “already constrained by wider social injunctions and definitions of ‘home’ and family” (Fortier, 2003, p. 127) in Canada and in Hong Kong. In response to his mother’s question about his sexuality, however, Mickey renders his home as being already unconventional, for his mother’s queerness throughout his childhood and the unexpected marriage in recent times. At the intersection of immigration and queerness that the material conditions of a diasporic household produces, Mickey’s family home is already a place of both estrangement and an on-going process of homing that does not orbit his sexuality.

Put this way, Mickey tactically employs queerness, or the original queerness of his family home, not to simply avoid the question of his sexuality, but to disrupt the expectation of Asian values and family traditions from within. The anxiety of sexuality indeed runs deep throughout his Canadian and Hong Kong family narratives. As Mickey and other participants observed, the stigma of homosexuality in Chinese culture (that he had encountered) is often equated with social death. However, contrary to the common ethnicization of homophobia that I discuss above, Mickey is not concerned with how homophobic his mother or relatives would be if he came out, but rather he wishes to protect and honour his mother’s queerness from the heteronormative ethos of Chinese (and Canadian) family traditions and expectations. Such consideration of family constitutes Mickey’s practice of care which is achieved by relieving anxiety about “who is at fault” for his gayness that his mother suspects by stag-
ing his home as a space of possibility that “will cover all the racial and sexual issues in this family.”

Later in our interview session, I shared with Mickey my reading of his family story and his practice of care. Mickey had this to say:

Well, I know it would be a difficult thing for her to process for sure. All her life she was working and making friends at church, so [she was] not really exposed to gay issues in Canada. But yeah, as long as she doesn’t blame herself, we will have that conversation someday. She’s old school, in a way, that she expects me to have a good job, and like, you know, find a respectable partner. Even if it’s a guy. I want to bring a boyfriend home someday, you know, to show her that I’m happy and she doesn’t have to worry about me, that I’m gay. And if she freaks out, I can tell her, you know, that we are kinda wacky as a family to begin with, so there’s no reason to hold onto the ideal of, I don’t know, a good Chinese family. Who cares, right? [Laughs]

. . . I like the image, you know, where my big hairy boyfriend, my stepdad, mom, and my sister celebrat[e] Christmas together. It’s a weird picture, but kinda fitting for us, I think.

Mickey’s family story, though highly singular, invites us to reconsider the taken-for-granted meanings of family in the conventional “moving out as coming out” narrative. Mickey’s consideration of his family and his practice of care defy the binary of displacement and choice in
this instance by taking his mother into consideration while also dealing with his own struggles and negotiations with his sexuality as a diasporic subject. In doing so, Mickey reconstitutes his family home as already a space of estrangement through which he imagines concretely a queer home that traverses both the tradition of Asian family values and modern tropes of queer visibility that points toward different possibilities of queer homing that disrupt the static meanings and locations of belonging.

**The Hidden Palace: The labour and performance of the chosen diasporic family**

In the previous section, I trace both the tensions and possibilities that consideration of family produces in participants’ reflections on and struggles with their ongoing attachment to their original families and the limitations of the convention of the “moving-out-as-coming-out” narrative. In this section, I turn to the other central notion of family in queer migration and homing narratives: the socialities and intimacies of the chosen family. I focus on practices of care evident in a group of gay Japanese migrants by describing and analyzing the everyday dimensions and materiality of care and kinship, particularly the labour, performance and social relations out of which particular forms of kinship and feelings of home are negotiated.

**Queer kinship in practice**

In order to approach the practices of care and to describe the cultural significance and material possibilities that kinship affords a group of gay Japanese men in the diaspora, I utilize Elizabeth Freeman’s (2007) formulation of kinship. In *Queer Belongings*, Freeman (2007) foregrounds the “practical” dimensions of kinship that resist “attempts to abstract the governing principles of relationality—sometimes across cultures—from the practices of intimacy observed in a given culture” often seen in both kinship and queer theories (p. 295). With an
explicit focus on practicality, Freeman provides us a useful analytic of kinship through the body:

For as a practice, kinship is resolutely corporeal. Its meanings and functions draw from a repertoire of understandings about the body, from a set of strategies oriented around the body’s limitations and possibilities. Kinship “matters” in the way that bodies “matter”: it may be produced or constructed, but is no less urgent or tangible for that . . . this terrain lies in its status as a set of representational and practical strategies for accommodating all the possible ways one human being’s body can be vulnerable and hence dependent upon that of another, and for mobilizing all the possible resources one body has for taking care of another. (p. 298)

By drawing on this quotation in length, my interest here is to further expand Freeman’s concept of kinship and its bodily dependency and tactics of care from a sexuality-based unit to an everyday sphere and a community of ethnicized, diasporic queer subjects. The necessity and urgency of a “chosen family” in the diaspora was a theme mentioned by some participants. For example, Yasu stated:

Many of us are far away from home, and live as immigrants in this country. The friends I have here, who are one way or another living the same life as I do, they are the closest thing I have to a family—although we would never call each other that! [laughs] There are things we have to rely on each other for, like finding a place to live, a job, immigration issues, or you know, simply introducing a newcomer to the group. Many of us are roommates, too….It’s not just about socializing, although that’s part of the regu-
lar thing that we do as a group, I think there’s a lot of supporting each other
going on, at least between individuals.

The intimacy of a chosen family as described by Yasu does not simply mean familiarity, comfort or erotic relations, rather it encompasses a network of care that entails arrangements for co-habitation, employment, knowledge of immigration and law, and other day-to-day businesses of life in the diaspora. If, as Freeman suggests, kinship enables “the technique of renewal . . . the process by which bodies and the potential for physical and emotional attachment are created, transformed, and sustained over time” (2007, p. 298), my goal in this analysis is to consider how the figure of the chosen family is actually lived and made into corporeal relations of care out of dependency, and finally, to consider what is being sustained and renewed for this particular group of gay Japanese men.

大奥バンクーバー/Ooku Vancouver

Early on in my fieldwork, I was invited by two participants, Shin and Yasu, to join a group called 大奥バンクーバー/Ooku Vancouver (OV) on the Japanese online social network Mixi. The official membership count is 17, however many of the former members had moved away or back to Japan, so at the time of fieldwork, the number of active members hovered around 8. Members’ ages ranged from 23 to 47, and implicitly or explicitly, it was expected that all members were gay. In weaving through different aspects of the OV’s kinship function in this analysis, I mostly rely upon Yasu and Shin to help navigate the complex and interrelated forms of dependency and care in the social world of the gay Japanese mi-

41 http://www.mixi.jp
grants in Vancouver. Yasu and Shin both identified as Japanese and gay yet their ages (Shin, 33 and Yasu, 45), their relationship to OV (Shin was a younger, relatively new member while Yasu was a senior, founding member of OV), and their general life circumstances differed significantly, which greatly assists in mapping out the intimate terrain of OV from multiple perspectives and relationalities as well as my own participation and fieldwork observations with the group.

Figure 24. OV membership page on Mixi.com.
Ooku was the name given to the living quarters in the castle in Edo (now Tokyo) where the wives and concubines of the Shogun (the ruler of feudal Japan from the 16th to 19th centuries during the national unification period) resided. In Japanese literary studies, Ooku is often translated into English, roughly, as “harem” (McAuley, 2009). In contemporary Japanese usage of the term, Ooku is also referred to as a space of drama, politics, and tragedy between the noble women and their servants who fought for the affection of the Shogun and for the prestige and duty of producing an heir. The gendered drama and tragedy of the Ooku remains a cultural reference point in modern Japanese popular culture and imagination. The place and duty of women in relation to male dominance and societal expectations (e.g., a women-only workplace or household) is often referred to as an Ooku situation (Sasano, 2010).

OV’s function is to create a space that actively takes up this Ooku situation. According to its invitation-only online group description, OV’s purpose is first and foremost:

パンクーパーに在住するゲイの娘たちの悲しい愛と幸せの物語の場。訪れるはずもなき幸せと殿方の愛顧を巡って日本古来のしきたりと伝統をカナダに伝える格調高き花嫁修行に今日も姫たちは集う。

Translated using a pseudo classical Japanese style this means:

A place where the stories of happiness and tragedy of gay “girls” in Vancouver unfold. The princesses gather here to train to become noble ladies and traditional “brides-to-be” and to prepare in vain for the day that their princes and happiness will visit them.
As a social group closed to the public, each request from a joining member must be approved by its moderators, one of whom was Yasu. I asked Yasu how and why the OV was formed and what the rules of participation were:

**Yasu:** Back when I first came to Vancouver [in 1994], there really wasn’t any social group for Japanese gay men in Vancouver. A few of us found each other at a gay bar or through friends. We often watched *The Ooku* [a Japanese TV soap opera that ran for over a decade] at home when we got together. I guess there was this running joke that we were like these women [in Ooku].

**Dai:** How so?

**Yasu:** Like when we get together, all we do is talk about relationship stuff, you know, dating and heartbreak and stuff. And let’s just say, it’s not pretty, right? [Laughs.] We support each other, but in a way, we are also competition to each other. We can be so awful towards each other . . . like kindness and jealousy totally co-exist in this group. I guess we kind of identified with the messy drama that these characters were constantly going through.

**Dai:** I learned in English, sometimes Ooku is called “Hidden Palace.” Do you think Ooku Vancouver is a hidden palace?

**Yasu:** Oh yeah, totally. You know, most of us are single, middle-aged and like we are not “out” to families or co-workers. It had to be a hidden group, you know, because we are not hanging out in public, like that? So, I guess, we don’t really care for people who are happy in their lives, like those with boyfriends or husbands . . . and like young and pretty. If you are doing
well, there’s no need for you to come here. OV is where we get together and gossip and make fun of each other. It’s very catty, you know?

. . . . In fact, when we approved your joining the group, we gave you a different name . . . because you are not quite what this group is about.42 We now call you 紫式部/Lady Murasaki.43

As I participated over time, I learned that both the implicit and explicit conditions of participation and membership in OV were maintained based on age (senior members have more authority), relationship status (being single is commonly expected, and coupled-members were asked not to bring their partners—especially non-Japanese partners), and time spent in Canada. These conditions created particular tensions between the members, especially in physical meetings such as at potluck parties and dinners at local Japanese restaurants.

On one occasion, at a dinner party to which I was invited, Shin shared his desire to come out to his parents at the urging of his white, American boyfriend with whom he was considering marriage. Shin went on, however, to complain that his family would not understand his life choices. One member, 正室様 (The First Wife in the OV’s ranking system) one of the founding members and also the most senior in the group, was quick to chastise and call out Shin’s breach of the rules of the OV stating: “What gives you the right to expect that they should

42 I had a white partner at the time and was a graduate student at the university.

43 Lady Murasaki is a popular female literary figure from 12th century Japan who authored The Tale of Genji, which chronicles the love affairs among nobles in the court culture.
accept you? You left them to be gay here, and now they should forgive you for what you have become?” As the table fell quiet, The First Wife continued, “And seriously, if you think we are here to listen to your boyfriend stuff or whining, you need to leave now.”

As I followed up on what some members would eventually call 正室のご乱心事件 (The First Wife’s Wrath Incident) with Yasu and Shin later, they both had different and similar understandings of the sociality that OV produces. Shin’s reflection of the night was, understandably, full of resentment:

That was just embarrassing, for me and for him [The First Wife]. It’s the jealousy, you know? That I’m younger, found a white boyfriend, and I may get married before he does—if he ever will, that is. Why can’t we just be happy for each other like friends, instead of always talking about the depressing stuff like dying alone in a foreign land and being dignified about it? I don’t think I will return to the group meeting again.

While sympathetic to Shin’s embarrassment, Yasu had this to say:

Well, [Shin] should have known better, you know? The First Wife can’t stand when someone like Shin skip’s rank and gets married. I mean, I personally think there’s nothing wrong to want to get married and be happy. But he shouldn’t have done that there. We are not good friends, the OV people. OV is not a support group either. I think it has a specific function; to vent about our lives and feel ok doing that, you know?
We don’t share much about our life struggles or bad feelings elsewhere. It’s kind of a playful thing that we perform. We come to OV meetings, just like those TV characters sometimes meet in their wings [of the Ooku quarters]. Those women feel the same pain and hardships, but they are definitely NOT friends! [Laughs]. There’s a reason you get assigned an Ooku name [e.g., 揚羽 (Lady Butterfly), 桜 (Lady Cherry Blossom), 阿婆汚れ (Lady Bitch)].

By insisting on the performativity of tragedy and melancholia of popularized “women trouble” seen in TV shows, OV, a strange hidden place far from its original time and location, is a re-enactment of the tragic drama of powerless women and the yearning of the OV members for happiness elsewhere while at the same time acknowledging their unsecured and displaced futures.

In the seminal text Against the Romance of Community, Miranda Joseph (2002) identifies the problematic idealization of the concept of community. Critically examining the invocations and forms of community mobilized in the contemporary politics of identity and belonging, Joseph argues that community as an unquestioned good and source of care and sameness erases the performative aspect of community building and participation that entails the reproduction of norms. Following Joseph, the performativity and norms of OV seem unforgiving of internal differences that are inevitably contested, managed, and expelled. On such establishing of norms, Yasu noted:

The usual business of gay life, like marriage and how to come out are outside of the purposes of OV. It’s a given fact that these are things we strug-
gle with. But when we meet, we just watch Japanese movies, TV shows, talk about music. It’s a break from the cold-hearted life outside. We go there to feel at home. It’s not perfect, but then again, that’s just the way with any home, you know?

I was struck by Yasu’s invocation of the homing desire with its imperfections that signal a function of OV different from the romanticized notion of community that often gets privileged in queer of colour activism and counterpublics. The prohibition to discuss one’s hardship or struggles against the social relations in a diasporic life at OV gatherings raises a number of questions. How does this feeling of home relate to the notions of bodily dependency and care that are central to the kinship relations in this group? What “practical consciousness” and material conditions “structure” this elusive feeling of home (Williams, 1973)?

**OV as a diasporic business network: The gay immigrant entrepreneur ethos**

One way to examine OV as a relation and space of kinship is to consider its practical function of assisting the members’ economic activities. While attending to such material aspects of life may seem to be contradictory to the purposes and rules of OV as described above, for many members, OV provides a means by which to sustain their financial and vocational lives. Yasu explained:

> Now that I think about it, I guess that’s the rule that’s not explicit when you first join the group. The way we connected with each other and how some of us are still in this group is actually through business. I run my own small travel agency, and other guys run a nail salon, shiatsu clinic, café, or a restaurant. There are these long-standing business relations that help us
get by, and, like, the time and effort you invest definitely matters and influences how you are perceived within this group.

At the time of initial fieldwork, many of these businesses were housed above a Japanese market in downtown Vancouver (Figure 25).

![Figure 25. The Japanese Market.](image)

Behind the market was a staircase to the second floor of a strip mall building. As the building was old, at least a few decades in my estimate, the atmosphere of the floor was dusty and in need of renovation. Judging from the steel lamps and bare concrete walls it was obvious that this floor was a makeshift space in what used to be a warehouse. A narrow corridor wove
past a karaoke bar, hair salon, nail salon, cell phone vendor, language school service, and a travel shop, each occupying a small space no larger than 15ft x 15ft.

For many customers—most of them also Japanese—coming to this arcade was not simply to receive the services the shops provided as there were other places in town with “more flashy stores, salons and whatnot.” Rather, Yasu told me; “Customers were friends of the shop owners, and there was a kind of consensus among the downtown Japanese residents to spend money with us to support our businesses.” Such support from Japanese customers was crucial to the financial well-being of the businesses and their owners. Yasu remembers the particularly formative time for the gay entrepreneurs in the mid-90’s, when Vancouver was still a popular destination for those temporary Japanese visitors on working holidays or studying abroad, a trend which slowly died off while the Japanese economy went into a decade of depression. “Businesses were doing OK, and we had a good reason to stay together back then,” Yasu recalled.

According to Yasu, it was a total coincidence that many of the owners of these small businesses were gay. Yasu described:

I think it’s no coincidence that we were all Japanese. [The Japanese market] is kind of a little Tokyo in this city, where Japanese people come to buy groceries, spices, magazines, and other stuff that they can’t get at Safeway. But it wasn’t until we ran into each other at gay bars that we realized that we were all gay. Isn’t that funny?
. . . . We wanted to stay together there, not because we were gay. It was because we couldn’t compete with bigger, Canadian-owned businesses out there. We came to this country with just ourselves, with some skills as hairdressers, aestheticians and whatnot. We referred customers to each other a lot, and helped other people set up their own business, even if they were competition. And you know, being part of that complex, I think we felt that we were also part of the Japanese community in Vancouver. By that I mean our businesses contributed to the society.

Culturally, Yasu also looks back on the time and space of the arcade with a utopic feeling:

There was a sense of commemoration. We were service providers, but also therapists to some female customers with love problems [Laughs.] We also hired people with temporary visas so that they could stay and work in Canada. We recruited other people with new business ideas and helped them set up their stores elsewhere. Many gay boys and girls came to us because they heard somewhere that we were gay [laughs] and wanted an introduction to the local gay scene. We became a node for many Japanese people, gay or straight. This is a city of immigrants and visitors; things are so fleeting. I think that kind of space really helped to connect people and their sense of belonging here.

Soon after my second interview with Yasu in 2010, the arcade was closed due to increased rent and declining revenue. Some businesses found new locations elsewhere, but others had to close their businesses for good. Many former business owners and their employees went back to working as waiters in Japanese restaurants in the city. Although Yasu’s business
stayed open, economic uncertainty casts doubt on whether or not a diasporic business network and cultural community such as the arcade will ever return to what it was. Yasu explained: “Things are not the same compared to 15, 20 years ago. Rents are crazy high and there’s not a big enough Japanese population to support our businesses anymore.”

However, the immigrant entrepreneurship “ethos” remains in OV, which was founded by some of these business owners who stayed in Canada after the closure of the arcade. Yasu maintained:

So there is this mentality in this group, among the older members at least, that you need to take care of yourself, work hard, and don’t complain. The First Wife or other “elders” get annoyed by new members when they complain about their life; because they went through all that on their own.

This is not to say that OV members do not assist each other in terms of material labour and support any longer. In mid-2010, one of the OV members who had worked for years as a waiter at local Japanese restaurants saved up enough money to open a café near the city’s southern border adjacent to Richmond. I was invited to the opening party of the café via Mixi, but arrived late at the location. As I walked into the cafe, I was stopped by another OV member, who was collecting the $15 party fee by the door. He recognized me as a newly added member to OV and said; “Didn’t you get the message? You were supposed to be here early to help out . . . look at the kitchen.” As I poked my head behind the counter, I saw some of the senior OV members preparing food and serving customers on the floor. The OV member continued: “働くもの食うべからずよ (Those who don’t work shall not eat). You can give me the money, and perhaps go ask if they need your help.” As I reflected on this
moment with Yasu, where I failed to fulfill my duty as an (honorary) OV member, he had
this to say:

Well, there you go. The thing about OV is that you help out each other
without being asked. That’s how you earn your trust or reputation in this
group. It’s not your fault that you didn’t know. But you should know that
there’s this obligation that we offer our help. Even if it’s a little thing like
helping someone move. You just show up and do it. No questions asked.
We do that kind of individually, and not publicly, though. Because it’s not
about making yourself look good.

. . . That kind of unspoken kindness, if I can call it that, is what we started
this group with, and still want to preserve. That’s what makes us, like I
said, kind of a family.

As Yasu’s story about OV’s origins and its immigrant entrepreneur ethos demonstrates, la-
bour and economic ties are also central to the making of OV. The care its members are asked
to perform, however, is not based on the abstract idea of belonging or community, but rather,
it emerges out of shared social dependency. Such a sense of dependency comes out of an
acknowledgement that the members rely on each other to sustain their economic activities
and help them forge relationships with the larger ethnic community in Vancouver. The story
about the arcade and its remaining impact on OV echoes what Freeman (2007) calls “the
technique of renewal” (p. 298), enabled by the resources available and the economics of sur-
vival. However, beyond the strategic calculation of give and take, what is renewed here does
not end with the maintenance of the kinship itself. Instead, the making of OV as a kinship
network shows us how kinship calls the members of OV into a relation of responsibility with each other and a wider social world. The feeling of home produced by OV emerges out of the materiality of immigration and economic hardship where one’s entry into kinship must be laboured for, earned and performed through care, not simply by the entitlement of shared identity.

**OV as a performed space: Pedagogy of a lost Ooku girl**

Another function of OV that establishes the felt sense of home and kinship is found in the regular karaoke parties that they hold. During my fieldwork, I was invited by some OV members to participate in a series of karaoke parties that they organized, where I witnessed an impressive performance of 演歌 (enka), which means 演 = to perform, 歌 = song), a traditional and popular form of Japanese music mostly from the 1960s and 70s. Enka, or in literal translation, “performance song,” is a specifically gendered and formalized musical genre that emerged out of post-war, industrial Japan (Kosakai, 2011; Hosokawa, 1995). Generally speaking, enka lyrics describe common themes of lost home, poverty, hard labour, and the everyday melodrama resulting from the mass migration of factory laborers from rural Japan to the urban centres and suburban outskirts, a massive population that experienced a profound sense of displacement through the process of national modernization in Japan.
The *enka* songs are often sung from the perspective of women who are overwhelmed by sorrow and despair. For instance, the lyrics of a well-known *enka* song, 津軽海峡・冬景色 (“Tsugaru Strait—Winterscape”),\(^\text{44}\) describes the sentiments of a woman’s lost love and longing for home against the desolate winter landscape. The lyrics are as follows:

上野発の夜行列車 おりた時から 青森駅は 雪の中

The midnight train from Ueno\(^\text{45}\) arrived at the snow covered Aomori\(^\text{46}\) station

北へ帰る人の群れは 誰も無口で 海鳴りだけを きいている

The northbound passengers quietly listen to the sound of stormy winter seas

\(^{44}\) To see this performed live go to http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Dmg9jwsOkQ

\(^{45}\) The central terminal station in Tokyo.

\(^{46}\) The northernmost city on the main island of Japan.
On the ferry, heading further north, alone

I was sobbing and watching the freezing sea gulls

Ah, Tsugaru Strait . . . winterscape.

Songs such as this are said to convey what the OV members call “場末感” (basue) — a literal translation would be “a feeling at dead-end.” Shin notes how the performances of enka are intimately connected to the active process of making the space of karaoke a basue place:

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47 See Chapter 4 for a spatial consideration of basue formations in queer Asian diasporas.
Shin: It’s not all that we sing at the party, we also do J-pop [Japanese pop music] and Top 40. It’s a mix of many different genres, really. But, enka songs are just over the top, you know? And when we sing those songs . . .

I appreciate it more when the professional singers perform it, but a bunch of middle-aged Japanese men singing it . . . it’s really hysterical, but there’s a certain seriousness to it, too.
Dai: Seriousness?

Shin: I think there’s a sense of, um, taking seriously each other’s performance [of enka]. Like, other pop songs, they are just like warming up. Just to be silly. But towards the end, when we choose our own personal enka songs, I don’t think we ever talked about why we do this actually, it just happens every time, but it feels different.

Dai: How does it feel different?

Shin: It’s like a diva moment. With a stage and a spotlight, although there are no such things in that shitty room [laughs]. I think it matters that it’s not like the regular karaoke bar. We rent that room so that it’s closed to the public. We want it to be separated from other customers who were there to just get drunk and be silly. That’s different from what we do in that room. That’s what I mean by seriousness.

To further convey how OV members create the space of basue through karaoke, and how such a “sacred” space of kinship (Alexander, 2006) emerges out of highly stylized practices of performing and listening, I offer here my field notes from one of the parties:

Unlike other times when I went to karaoke in Vancouver, OV’s karaoke parties are always held at a small rented room in the basement of a commercial building. Run by a Korean owner with whom some members are friends with, OV members make sure that they will get the same room each time they make a reservation. At night, the building, which houses office spaces in the upper floors, feels deserted. Even the front desk and bar counter near the entrance are dimly lit and the whole premises feel dumpy and empty.

As many members work double-shifts at local Japanese restaurants on weekends, the meetings are limited to weeknights. When I arrived at the location around 10 p.m., three members were already there, including Yasu and the First Wife. The First Wife suggested that we start singing without waiting for
the others, stating: “I’ll die before they get here. Let’s start!” Yasu then turned to me and said; “You go first. I’m curious.” This was the first time Yasu saw me at the karaoke party, as he was missing from the previous two times. By now, I had learned that these parties were highly performative with a strict set of rules that must be followed for one’s participation to be appreciated by others. By “curious,” Yasu was pointing out how the event is structured by a set of expectations, and how I would perform in relation to those rules and considerations which are the choice of song, the order in which I sing, and the singing style. (From a research journal entry, February 21, 2011.)

The choice of song is important, as it sets the tone for the series of performances by other members who follow, from the beginning of the party, during and finally when you declare your “last song.” This is a collective event, not simply a bunch of good singers performing their favourite songs randomly. It matters how your song (its message, genre, the singer and the era it represents) makes sense in relation to the previously performed song. This practice requires a nuanced cultural knowledge, as well as being attuned to the group’s dynamics. At one karaoke party, someone sang a Britney Spear’s song. This set the following performances into a particular sequence as it is expected that you follow the same genre of the person who sang before you (the person after him sang a song by Christina Aguilera), or, like another singer did, you can add a different twist. In this case, another member chose a song by a Japanese pop singer and told the group: “This is Japanese Britney; she’s better.” Generally, there is a pattern of movement in which members start with more contemporary pop songs or English songs, until the group arrives at a series of enka songs at the close of the evening.

The order also matters in the culture of OV. It is expected that we show our respect to the senior members by allowing them the freedom to step out of the order of singing. Generally, the performers take turns in the same order; you usually have to wait until your turn comes again after a full circle. It is considered rude to flip through the song book while others are
singing, so members come prepared with their repertoires, and efficiently browse through the song book to find their song numbers and quickly punch them into the karaoke machine. However, on some occasions, someone’s performance invokes a song that you did not think of singing. When that happens, you can insist that you jump the queue and insert a new song, so that the flow and sequence of “meaning making” can be maintained. Often times, members are told to simply wait for their turn, but senior members’ requests are usually respected.

The singing style is another way in which the performance is structured within the group. This does not necessarily mean who can sing the best, but rather, the emphasis is on how one’s singing fits the individual style and the choice of song. For instance, Shin is a good singer by any standard, and he prefers power ballads. After each performance, members would comment how he should be on Canadian Idol or start his own YouTube channel to share his singing. Yasu, who occasionally skips his turn, as he claims he is “not a good singer. I’d rather listen to others,” is considered a “lyrical” singer by many. Yasu often chooses slow, sweet love songs by female “idols” of his teenage era which he sings with a shaky high pitched voice. Members often request that he perform them. In this way, just like the assigned OV character names, each member’s singing style is appreciated as a unique voice and has a place in the sequence of performances within the group.

Given the highly stylized nature and ritualized structure of the collective karaoke performance at OV meetings, it is understandable that members prefer to rent a room rather than perform in the more public space of “open mic” style karaoke bars. As Shin reminds us, “there’s a certain seriousness to it” different from the common perception of karaoke as an opportunity to “just get drunk and be silly.” My participation in OV’s karaoke parties taught
me what this karaoke-as-a-serious-business means to its members. Here is another field note from the last party I attended during my fieldwork:

As the First Wife took the microphone, the room fell silent. As the party was coming to an end, I knew this was going to be his last song. Each member has claim over “THE song” that they sing to end their performance for the night. The First Wife closed his eyes as the dramatic string sounds began to come out of the cheap speakers; it was 津軽海峡・冬景色 (“Tsugaru Strait—Winterscape”). Other members began yelling so as to recreate the scene of enka performances seen on TV shows and concert halls; “サユリちゃん！待ってました！Sayuri-chan!!! We were waiting!”

Another member took the other microphone and started to introduce Sayuri/First Wife to the imagined audience mimicking the MC:

“幸薄き女の心を歌い上げたら一番、ご正室様の登場です。津軽の冬景色に思いを託して、歌っていただきましょう、津軽海峡・冬景色！” (“Who could sing the sadness of unfortunate women better than he? Singing the Tsugaru Strait and taking us to the winterscape . . . the one and only, First Wife!”

The First Wife, with his eyes closed, bowed to us. He then lifted his head up, stared into the distance in a dramatic manner, and started singing the first line of the song. Yasu whispered into my ear; “We can’t end the party without this one, you know?” (From a research journal entry, June 2, 2011)

Earlier, I discussed how the rules of OV’s karaoke parties structure the sequence of who sings what song at which time as a process of meaning making. The progressive movement of genres and styles—from contemporary pop and Top 40 songs to the dramatic, yet obsolete enka songs—and Yasu’s notion that they “can’t end the party” without a particular song, suggests that there is a larger story at play, and in my reading, it is a pedagogical one.

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48 Sayuri-chan refers to the singer Sayuri Ishikawa who originally and famously recorded the song in 1977.
While The First Wife declined my request for a formal interview session, jokingly stating that he prefers to “be in the depths of the Ooku, controlling the order of the quarters from behind the ‘never lifted curtains,’” he candidly shared his opinion about what makes OV a meaningful space for himself and the other members during a brief conversation at one of the karaoke parties. He stated:\footnote{49 This conversation took place in Japanese and translated into English by the author.}: 

You know, these young girls, they really need to be told that as time goes by in Canada, they will have a hard time dealing with depression and like, a general sense of loss. They come here, thinking they would just snatch up a gorgeous white boyfriend and get married and stuff.

\ldots The thing is, the illusion of the good life [in Canada] takes its toll. It’s never ours to dream of. They get carried away with the excitement and try hard to fit in. But oh my, the surprise is, they are still just okamas [“homoś” in Japanese] who were lost at home [in Japan] and still are lost here [in Canada]. I know they think I’m this miserable bitch, but you know what, I’m honest about what we really are.

When I asked him whether his insistence on reminding OV members that they are lost souls in the queer diaspora had anything to do with the way he performed at karaoke parties, the First Wife, who was keenly aware of his place in the group in general and at karaoke parties specifically, commented:
That’s interesting, to think of our karaoke as education. It’s like we spend all night to cover a life of an Ooku girl. Like these girls start with pop songs, that, my God I’m old, I don’t even know any of them anymore. So it’s like the beginning of the journey [of an Ooku girl]. Then slowly we move into the enka section. There are reasons for that, I think. So for one, I always sing Tsugaru Strait because, well, it’s my song. You know, [other members] must know why I choose that song every time. And it’s about this pathetic woman weeping in the snow. I know how that’s fitting to my life, you know, at least the sentiments of the song.

. . . . It’s a mix of silliness and seriousness like you said, but I do tell my story through that song. It’s for myself, first of all, because it feels liberating in a way. But, why I end the night with that song . . . I’m just thinking what happens after. After we say good night and walk back home, the song stays in your head, no?

To meditate on exactly what kind of care and dependency—the function of kinship that I started this analysis with—there may be in the pedagogic story performed by the First Wife is by no means straightforward. However, I want to hold onto the particular sense of kinship—with its internal differences, dissonances and dissents—that emerges out of the rituals of karaoke performance, which OV members continue to plan and attend. To return to the scene of the fall-out between the First Wife and Shin, the First Wife became a figure that is “always talking about the depressing stuff like dying alone in a foreign land and being dignified about
it.” Later on, Shin did return to OV’s meetings, despite his frustrations with the First Wife and other senior members. Shin shared with me that:

Well, they can be a bunch of nagging hags. But I think they care a lot about this group, and whatever happens to its members. They only know what they went through, and try to tell me it would be the same for me as a warning. I get that.

I speculate that the story of a lost Ooku girl told through karaoke and the performativity of the Ooku gatherings and membership takes on a pedagogical tone, in the same way that the enka songs can tell stories of trauma and loss across generations in Japan and Japanese diasporas around the globe (see also Hosokawa, 1995; Kosakai, 2011). I argue that it is within the performance of singing these overtly sentimental and gendered songs, songs that are part of deep cultural and national memories, and through the act of listening, that enka sets an ephemeral stage for the dramatization of a transnational life and an articulation of melancholy—common loss, unspoken ironies and collective trauma—without the act of speech (Cvetkovich, 2003).

If melancholy is a political mode of not forgetting (Flately, 2008), the pedagogy of OV insists on remembering and circulating knowledge about “what we really are” and a “warning” to new members of what they might become; a figure of Japanese queer immigrant life split between an unattainable modern sexual liberation in Canada and an attachment to the lost home in Japan. The tension between the First Wife and Shin, and the other members’ reflections on the necessity of remembering and re-enacting the sentiments and tragedy of displaced women in Ooku performances, though strange from the outset, are evidence of the
serious labour of claiming queer Japanese men’s own history and genealogy of loss of home and queer becoming.

Such a sharing of practical consciousness, subjectivity and genealogy across generations indeed suggests what Freeman (2007) refers to as the practice of kinship: “a set of representational and practical strategies for accommodating all the possible ways one human being’s body can be vulnerable” (p. 298). But in practice, and at OV’s karaoke parties, the vulnerability is not equally shared across the generations. As the First Wife and other senior members admit, “the young girls” may have it better than they did at their earlier time in Canada. As such, the First Wife’s performance of karaoke can be seen as a way in which he makes himself vulnerable to the audience time and again out of care, and with the aid of Tsugaru Strait’s affective force, to strip away the mundane numbness of their shared struggles against displacements in the queer diaspora, and to make available and sustain imaginations for different paths to a future home for a younger generation.

**Discussion and concluding notes**

What do these considerations of family and practices of kinship tell us about queer homing narratives in a transnational space? What can be said about the possibilities and limits of the notion of family that the participants engaged with, resist against, and make anew, in their everyday queer diasporas?

The recent publication of GLQ’s special issue, *Queer Bonds* (Weiner & Young, 2011) highlights the intense debates and diverse considerations of the notion of family, kinship and other socialities within sexual politics in North America. As the editors of the issue note, much of the existing theories of queer kinships are located in either one of the two trajectories of
the possibilities and socialities that queerness and sexuality produce. The divide emerges out of the binary between the queer anti-social thesis, which locates sexuality in a domain of desire and outside of the symbolic relation of the self and social order; while the consideration of gender and race (among other differences) introduces the irreducible sociality within sexuality for “other” queers, to whom the organization of collectivity is a matter of life or death within the social order beyond sexuality. In mentioning these theoretical debates, I do not intend to participate in the extremes of queerness solely as a negation of the heterosexual social order or simply to produce an alternative form of collectivity. I started my fieldwork and writing of this chapter with the question: How do queer Asian migrants “do” family and home in the diaspora? If anything, the shift in our gaze and attention from the “what” of family and home for queer subjects to the “how” of the practices of care and kinship teaches us the limits of the presupposed notions of family and the function of home that continue to animate these debates.

Participants’ considerations for their families show us that attachments and dilemmas are central to their on-going experiences of belonging, homing and settlement in Canada. Their ambivalent attachments to the aspiration of modern sexual citizenship in Canada and their sense of family duty back home cannot be easily dismissed or reconciled through the reductive framework of “moving out as coming out.” Despite, and because of, this dilemma, they make use of distance and ambiguity as a means by which to create a space of intimacy out of care for their families who occupy different cultural landscapes where queer sexuality means and does different things to the idea of family, home and futurity. Their sophisticated maneuvers around the ideology of “compulsory coming out” in North America resist the narrative of arrival and finality of queer migration, for they insist on maintaining the diasporic dilem-
ma as a resource for reconstituting a home based on responsibility and care. Such an ethical consideration, I contend, reveals the instability of the meaning and location of family and home in queer life, and the “motions of attachments” (Fortier, 2003, p. 129) that defy geographic and temporal fixations of sexual possibilities and citizenship within a national framework.

The kinship of OV instructs us about the limits of restricting queerness and its sociality to the singular axis of sexuality or the sexual act. By considering kinship as a bodily relation of dependency, the socialities of OV shared with me by its members demonstrate how the queer “chosen family” must be laboured upon, performed, taught, and felt for sustaining collective survival. The modality of survival that structures OV’s sociality compels us to expand our understandings of what counts as kinship beyond abstract ideas of choice and privacy, for, as I have described, these subjects’ struggles for home also intersect with the material conditions of immigration, economics, and settlement in Canada. Such a kinship is not interested in the narratives of how they made it, or the legitimacy of the relationship, but is instead oriented towards the salient acknowledgement of shared vulnerabilities and dependencies, out of which the practice of care emerges as an on-going process of opening a space for homing and for developing a vocabulary of belonging on the margin.

In concluding my analyses of these various forms and the evidence of consideration of family and diasporic queer kinship, I end this chapter with Victor’s statement about what may be at stake for migrant subjects when they have to defend their families and homes:

> The way we talk about home, it’s just some ideas that we grew up with hearing. What is it really, right? I think we can have multiple homes. But you
know, these are made up with places and people. So I think, there can be many homes and, like, no home. Does that make sense to you? I think that’s what this is all about; I don’t own a home, like that, but [people and places] make one for me. That’s humbling.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

A setting

Figure 28. “The Man on the Train” by K. Park, 2014. ⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Copyright 2014, Kenny Park. Reprinted with permission from the artist.
This drawing was created by Kenny Park, a local storyboard artist in Vancouver. I approached Kenny to create illustrations for some sections of this dissertation as I felt I needed visual representations that could communicate participants’ narratives better than my words alone. At our initial meeting, Kenny suggested that I interview him just like the other participants, and he offered to read each data chapter to “get a sense of what you collected over the years . . . [as] obviously there’s a lot going on.” Through this initial meeting, I agreed to let Kenny choose which “scenes” he would work on as “responses” to some of the participants’ narratives and my engagements with them, instead of commissioning him directly for particular images.

Kenny explained his interest as follows:

This is a great challenge for me as a storyboard artist. Things that are already prescribed and expected . . . it’s easy to draw them. That’s how I usually work [for the film and gaming companies who hire me]. But it takes a lot of imagination to draw something out of a story that’s so unique or not complete. I still have to tell, visually, what it is about, and why I chose to draw it this way or that way.

Flipping through the hardcopy of chapter drafts, Kenny continued:

I can see why it took so long for you to write about these stories . . . they are strange and obscure . . . I can help you. But, I also would like to participate in that process as a gay Asian man myself. I think it’d be great for me to think about my own life, too.
About a month later, I received the illustration from Kenny as I was taking a break from writing and away from my office. An email from Kenny showed up on my iPhone and I eagerly opened the attachment while walking down the street. -Full stop- Although clearly evocative and amazingly crafted, my initial reaction to his illustration was of confusion and slight panic. The drawing obviously was a representation of Maty and his story of knitting on the Skytrain. I turned my phone to my boyfriend who was with me and asked him whether or not it was “too literal.” He laughed at me and asked what I had been expecting.

On reflection, I realize that I had been expecting something more abstract or perhaps more in the style of political cartoons—something that was removed from the physicality of the stories I had re/presented through my writing. The power of this visual rendering and the obviously careful attention to the details of Maty’s story—his body, as well as those of strangers, the moving space of the train, the vivid, pink yarn that illustrates an imagined queer sense of yearning on the floor of the train—caught me off guard. It looked and felt too close to the truth of the story. Of course, the real Maty does not resemble the man in the illustration. Parts of the personal information that Maty chose to share with me in relation to his life and to this story were also altered to protect his privacy. And we can never know what Maty’s sense of “feeling gay” that transpires through the act of knitting in public actually looks like (even to Maty himself). After all, this is a product of imagination thrice-over: Maty’s, mine, and Kenny’s. However, the unsettling feeling I experienced had to do with the impossibility of distancing myself from the elusive truth of
Maty’s story, my involvement in the documentation and circulation of the narrative, and the concrete, visual representation produced by another reader. Would Maty recognize himself in this visual story? Who is the owner of the truth of this story? Whatever meaning we may find in this illustration, is that really what Maty meant? \footnote{The evocative power of Maty’s story and Kenny’s drawing are felt beyond the space of this dissertation. After Kenny posted the drawing on his online portfolio (http://parkkennypark.tumblr.com), “The Man on the Train” elicited over 11,000 responses and comments from viewers.}

To this day, I am not free from these haunting questions and their implications. I might probably never find the answers to them. Towards the end of my fieldwork, I lost contact with Maty. As I explained in Chapter 4, Maty and I never had a direct or secure line of communication. One day I found out that the landline at his family home was disconnected and I never heard from him again. On the Skytrain and at the public library, I often catch myself scanning the train car or the spaces between bookshelves, hoping that I may see Maty again—to no avail each time. And even if I found him again, he may choose not to speak to me anymore. His absence refuses to grant me an easy validation or reconciliation.

It is here, in my consideration of Maty’s enigmatic story and Kenny’s rendering of it, that I must make the idea of responsibility do a different kind of work for this project. As I study this illustration, and the working sketches that Kenny shared with me, I am reminded of Maty’s words: “you do what you need to do.” Throughout this dissertation, my writings are my “responses” to the life narratives and oral histories (including those that did not make it to the final version of this dissertation) of the fourteen queer Asian migrants who offered them to me. But my responses are by no means the final word on what they mean. As Derrida taught us, the “response” in responsibility can take many different forms in “speaking nearby” (Trinh, as cited in Chen, 1992) and offers us a keen awareness of the possibility for either misapprehension or perhaps never really being heard at all. It is the moment in which we think we know what the story means that the story stops speaking for itself. If meaning and truth are indisputably evident in the representation of a story, there would be no struggle over responsibility, only an exchange of information and data.
Kenny and his illustration showed me, concretely, how an ethically committed imagination implicates us all as readers. Lived realities and experiences must be told in the form of story-telling: we cannot help but yearn for meaning as we engage with them. What this dissertation attempted to “do,” then, is make the reader responsible in their interpretations and, finally, in their imaginations. What does this story mean? What is your response?

Our responsibility begins with our power to imagine . . . . Where there is no imagination, there would be no responsibility.

—Haruki Murakami, Kafka on the Shore

. . . however, for practical purposes, in a hopelessly practical world

—Arundhati Roy, The God of Small Things

Discussion: Places of landing

Every journey must begin somewhere amid a partial map of the world (Haraway, 1988). In arguing for queer world-making as both a critique of the present and a utopic vision for the future, José Esteban Muñoz (2009) recites a line by Oscar Wilde, which goes: “A map of the world that does not include utopia is not worth glancing at” (p. 18). In invitation to you, the reader, as we descend into some points of landing in this dissertation, I begin this chapter by rephrasing Wilde and Munoz to state that: a journey begun without a map of a queer utopia is not worth embarking upon.

Throughout this dissertation, with my map of a queer utopia at hand and paying particular attention to embodiment, spatial practices, and consideration of family and kinship, I have examined how queer Asian migrants negotiate the everyday tactics of mobilities and intimacies. When these chapters are read together, we witness how the gaysian figure follows,
shapes and complicates participants’ practices of mobility across the different yet interrelated aspects of their trans/national migrant queer lives. Engagement with the life stories, experiences, and the unexpected twists of the conventional genres and assumptions concerning queer migration narratives, led me to certain points of landing—but not arrival—where I share my concluding thoughts. My argument for enigma as evidence and the ultimate undecidability of meanings and implications that each narrative withholds complicates what may be the ethical manner in which to draw a conclusion about these necessarily obscure and incomplete narratives and lived realities—the uncertain implications to the question of political possibilities and limits to which I shall return. However, I would like to begin this chapter by revisiting the theoretical conversations that began this project, and demonstrate where my critical praxis of listening, witnessing, reading, and writing have brought me in order to draw up further points of departure. After all, as I note in the section titled “A Setting” (above), it is my responsibility as the archivist, reader, and writer of the life narratives, experiences, and oral histories of the fourteen queer migrants to respond to the stories in concrete terms, to demonstrate what I learned from the journey of this project, and to argue for the relevance of these narratives in current critical social research.

I address three themes that run through my previous conversations and analyses—the body on the move, a rethinking of trans/national frameworks, and demystifying media effects. These thematized discussions are meant to perform “pedagogies of crossing” (Alexander, 2006, p. 187) to emphasize emergent forms of knowledge in queer migration narratives that index the gaps in existing ways of knowing within disciplinary and national frameworks, and which reinvigorate new areas of inquiry in the conventions of critical research concerning
race, gender, sexuality, and immigration from the perspectives of transnationalism and mobilities.

**The body on the move**

This dissertation began with a set of theoretical points of entry into the life worlds of queer Asian migrants. One of which asked how the idea of mobilities as problematic (an attention to the micropolitics of movement surrounding the body in a cultural space) might tell us more than the deterministic binary of displacement/liberation in queer Asian migrant subjects. By focusing on participants’ embodied practices of mobility at the nexus of race and sexuality through transnational migrations, we learn about the social and historical primacy of racial-sexual knowledge in Canada, which I termed the gaysian figure, and how these pre-existing national formations shape structures of sexual encounters, cultural logics of recognition, and the spatiality of belonging for queer Asian migrant subjects. Through these accounts, we are reminded that the lived experiences and realities of racialization for queer migrants are most heightened and profoundly felt through the body and its movements—encountering, dwelling in, and trespassing through the normative conditions and grammars of racialization and sexual intimacy that cannot be separated from each other. These narratives have powerfully demonstrated how participants’ mobilities—tactical engagements, adaptations of knowledge and performances of racialized sexual identity—must also be laboured upon through the body.

As I discussed throughout this dissertation, participants’ narratives about their techniques for doing “Asian” and learning how to do “gay” in Canada, compellingly reveal that despite multiple and often competing subjectivities and epistemologies among queer Asian subjects, the physicality of race is squarely lodged in the pervasive logics and meanings of visibility,
belonging, and homing. I want us to recall, for example, how some participants taught themselves how to play the “game” of queer sex in online spaces by embodying the gaysian figure as a given condition of participation. While keenly aware of the reductive and objectifying forces of racialized and gendered stereotypes that pre-mediated their sexual encounters with other local queer men, participants also acknowledged that these were the given conditions of performativity and participation in local sexual landscapes. In other accounts, queer Asian migrants negotiated their spatial belonging by seeking out opportunities and possibilities for sociality in marginal and displaced locations of basue. By tracing participants’ travel through different social places and cultural events—from websites to public transportation to the Night Market—we are asked to consider how normative topologies of centre/margin, modernity/backwardness, and (gay) downtown/(ethnic) suburbs are disarticulated through a migrancy of the body that ignores neatly demarcated locations of queer possibilities. We also heard testimonials about the corporeal functions of queer kinships that emerged out of mutual dependency, economics of immigration, labour and settlement, and on-going reconstitutions of multiple homes not through individualistic ideas of self-actualization, but by way of communal practices of care with Asian sensibilities and collectivities. Seen together, these are a few of the many ways in which queer Asian migrants encounter, negotiate, and manage to exceed the otherwise immobilizing forces of the gaysian figure—the manifestations of the Foucauldian productive power (Foucault, 2003) found in discourses and representations that both emplace and produce a subject in the field of movement.

This careful attention to phenomenological, individual experiences of movements and the multiple yet elusive negotiations of mobilities through the body, however, also complicates the political implications or significance that can be argued. As de Certeau (1984) reminds
us, to recognize tactics as the “art of the weak” is to pay attention to “a mobility that must accept the chance offerings of the moment and seize on the wing the possibilities that offer themselves at any given moment” (p. 37). I want to hold on to, and argue for, this notion of tactics that enables us to consider a different form of mobility—one that is temporary, opportunistic, and contingent—rather than explicitly political acts of agency (as I discussed in Chapter 4). That is to say, many participants articulated that their engagements with these normative discourses, representations, and assumptions about gaysian identity do not necessarily lead to acts of resistance as such, but they nonetheless engage in a self-educative process and labour of embodying the gaysian figure in ways they saw fit within the given cultural contexts, spaces, and scripts.

Of course, to recognize the social primacy of the racialization of desire does not mean that queer Asian migrants have no choice but to succumb to the totality of racial representation and subjection in local queer sociality. Such a narrow perspective is only possible, as Karen Barad (2003) reminds us, if we assign all the possibilities and powers of political action solely to a capacity to create changes in normative representational fields and discursive practices—the logo-centric notion that remains central to modern political thought—and by implication, when we forget the material dimensions of the body and the space it inhabits, invades, and transforms beyond struggle over meaning. For example, the DIY, adaptive practices and techniques of doing gaysian that the participants demonstrated compel us to pay close attention to the space/distance between representation and embodiment that these tactics open up. To recall Sky and Kaz’s use of the “headless torso” in Chapter 3, adaptation of original knowledge/representation in order to make an action is one of many unexpected twists in story in which we witness how the representational politics of gaysian figure can be played out
through active, multiple, and different employment of the body. The differing individual subjectivities of the queer migrants in this project speak loudly against the taken-for-granted ideas about what race does and the overly prescribed notions of how we may undo racism’s negative effects through political action. For many queer migrants, embodying the gaysian figure entails understanding the logics of legibility and desirability that migrant subjects simply cannot turn away from, as being in an abjective stasis is not an option they can entertain in their everyday survival—by making do and getting by with the material and strategic resources they have access to at a given moment and place. Eve Sedgwick (2003) posits that adaptation is not the same as assimilation or appropriation: The seemingly totalizing knowledge (e.g., expectations and assumptions of the gaysian figure) can be “altered, modified, fitted for a different use . . . [by] an alien body” with critically informed learning and through actions which may not yet register as political (p. 45).

Emphasis on the micropolitics of embodiment by displaced, migrant subjects complicates the unquestioned imperative of anti-racist projects mobilized by Asian communities (queer or otherwise) that often centralizes increased visibility or circulation of a more just representation as a remedy for the reclamation of bodily integrity of Asian subjects in national contexts (Caluya, 2006; Lee, 2008; Ngyuen, 2008; Raj, 2011; Wong, 2013). While I too advocate for the on-going work of visibility and a militant critique of racial stereotypes that remain detrimental psychically, culturally and politically to queer Asian communities in North America, my argument here is that we must be very careful not to create a moralizing discourse in which migrant tactics of adapting to the gaysian stereotype become viewed merely as a sign of exploitation or another case of complicity because the actions of queer Asian migrants may not seem explicitly political or revolutionary as such.
Whichever narrative we choose to engage with, each story and scene of movement, travel, and border-crossing in this dissertation makes clear that for these queer Asian migrants, mobilities is not an idea or meaning, but instead, it is an affective labour to negotiate an assemblage of representation, meaning, space and other bodies—somatic negotiations of a capacity for moving and being moved through cultural forces desires and sensations (Massumi, 2002). However, I want to suggest that we engage with this labouring towards further movement as a matter of survival, a tactical modality of “moving on” (Manalansan, 2010, p. 226), from which we can produce a critique of the original displacements and foreclosures that set certain bodies into motion, instead of resorting to the abstract and depoliticized philosophizing that saturates contemporary conversations about affects and movements that tell us nothing about the actual body. Mobilities as such, to paraphrase Edward Said, are “about as boring a subject as one can imagine” (1999, p. 111) for they omit a critical investigation of the socially and historically constructed and experienced nature of affects, emotions, and desires that mobilize and align bodies in a cultural space (Ahmed, 2004; Rodriguez, 2012). As I have argued in this dissertation, a body on the move is a social body navigating through unsecure lands and blockages often propelled only by the imagination.

As a gesture towards future research, I encourage more descriptive works in mobilities thinking and queer theorizing that begin with a critical attention to the body and its corporeal tactics, and not the fact of movement as a sign of agency, for we must first acknowledge the presence of racial, queer, and migrant strangers that share our social worlds and cosmopolitan imaginaries that have been so far limited by the language of race and other exclusionary knowledges in the nation. The mobilities as problematic framework that the unruly travels and strange stumblings of queer Asian bodies inspired me to advance in this project, as well
as the intimate narratives, imaginings, and possibilities that the framework enabled me to
document and describe, enables a perspective that movement itself cannot (no matter which
theoretical explanation we employ) stand in for the persistent work of inventing new forms of
politics and the imperative to imagine, concretely, for social change.

**Trans/national tensions and queer “Pacific Canada” regionalism**

The critical attention to embodied tactics of movement that privileges ephemeral acts and
performances of migrant bodies calls for a more culturally, geographically, and historically
situated regional framework. One of my initial research questions explicitly asked how mi-
gration narratives queer the boundaries and epistemologies of identity and difference as they
cross them. As the participants’ life narratives and trajectories index, both transnational and
national frameworks afford primacy to a nation as the boundaries of knowledge production
and the politics of race and sexuality. Regionalism, then, becomes essential in order to ade-
quately address the acts and performances of participants who play with such national
boundaries in the name of queer possibilities.

As discussed throughout this dissertation, there was an identifiable tension between queer
Asian Canadian subjects on the one hand and on the other, recently arrived queer Asian mi-
grants who found political subjectivities concerning cultural citizenship and national belonging
among Asian Canadian communities alienating rather than inclusive. Additionally, for
many queer migrants who lack cultural and social capital as newcomers and who struggle to
survive harsh economic and material realities as low-skilled labourers in a new homeland, the
kinds of empowered queer-of-colour resistance and politics expected of them are not easily
available, if not outright unattainable. Also, as I noted at the beginning of this dissertation,
much of the existing research concerning the politics of race in North American queer public
cultures and social relations privileges work by cultural producers as archival resources for excavating political subjectivities and other queer possibilities. These works are vast and include historical events and records of queer activism in North America, and publicly and commercially available artifacts such as cinema, literature, visual and performance arts. The fact that many queer Asian migrants cannot speak of their conditions of struggle and displacement in a publicly recognizable and political form of speech, or more accurately, that they will not take up the political-artistic forms of articulation of their experiences, raises the question of whose figure and subjectivity can be located in existing queer archives, especially those based on national frameworks and which privilege shared experiences and cultural knowledges specific to national, however diasporic, subjects.

The tension between established ethnic communities, that struggle for cultural citizenship and recognition in the nation, and newly arrived migrants who do not share the same historical narratives of suffering, has been already addressed by some scholars. For example, Rod Ferguson (2009) notes in the context of African American studies’ disinterest in the unique struggles of belonging faced by African migrants, that:

Inasmuch as the canonical story of African American history marginalizes the histories and experiences of new African Americans who are formed out of histories of international migration, that plotline risks unwittingly deploying the hegemonies of comparative ideologies by canonizing a plotline that would pertain to some but not to all. (p. 123)

Admittedly there are significant national and racial differences between Ferguson’s critique of African American studies and the context of this research concerning similar issues within the Asian Canadian field. However, I find Ferguson’s notion of the dangers of a “plotline”
that excludes consideration of migrant experiences relevant to my own project. By revisiting the tension between national Asian subjects and Asian migrant subjects, as well as the uncertain location of migrant subjectivities and bodies in the space of national politics of race and sexuality, my interest is not in essentializing the differences in experiences of racialization and belonging between the two groups if, in fact, such definitive and tidy differences even hold. Rather, I suggest that we take this tension as a productive place in which to consider how a regional framework, a perspective of “Pacific Canada” (Yu, 2009), may enable “an alternative mapping of sexual geographies that links disparate transnational locations and that allow[s] new models of sexual subjectivity to come into focus” (Gopinath, 2008, p. 343). Such a mode of alternative mapping offers, I believe, a more useful perspective on this important tension.

To situate this conversation in the context of this project, it is useful to recall the tensions that the FOB incident evidenced, which unfolded in Chapter 3. In the space of multicultural Canada, the idea of FOB represents an injurious history of racism against the Asian immigrants who arrived on Canada’s western shores by boat.52 Taken up as a derogatory term, the Fresh Off the Boat theme party at a local gay club was met with intense reactions over its political incorrectness and was boycotted by many from the wider queer communities and Asian Canadian advocacy groups despite the fact that the party had been organized by a person who self-identified as a FOB. Certainly, the term is intensely problematic in nature. FOB invokes the figure of Asian immigrants that are not proper Canadian subjects and marks them as lacking in cultural knowledge, codes of bodily and aesthetic appearance, and (English/French)

52 See for example “Komagata Maru incident” (Ward, 1990).
linguistic abilities. In other words, the term FOB signals the migrant body as being too much of an unassimilated “stranger.” However, Jun’s tactical engagement with and use of his FOB-ness reveals an entirely different relationship to the term. As Jun noted, “I will always be on the boat because I don’t feel like I ever got off of it.” This signals something different from simply “national abjection” (Shimikawa, 2002) at the hands of the term.

Drawing on Jun’s reflections about always being “on the boat,” I want to consider how the normative narrative that FOB invokes, which assumes that queer Asian migrants forever leave behind their homes for settlement in Canada, is in fact rendered obsolete. Jun and many other participants in this study did not necessarily consider Canada their permanent home, rather their geographies of belonging stretched across the Pacific Ocean and may remain closely tied to their home countries despite the fact that they have settled and reside in Canada. As Henry Yu (2009) notes:

> the term “migration”—denoting the movements of people in multiple directions and with multiple journeys throughout a person's life—is a much more useful framework than the term “immigration” for analyzing the way that people move. (p. 1017)

Like Yu, Jun’s understanding of remaining “on the boat” as a legitimate mode of belonging reflects such an important distinction. To be clear, this is not to suggest that Jun and other participants represent the twenty-first century’s sexual vagabond who simply travels wherever his desire may take him. As this dissertation closely documents, participants’ movements and travels are characterized by displacement; they do not simply or easily transcend the serious labour of leaving, finding, and possibly returning “home.”
What I want to emphasize here, however, is that the negating quality of the figure of the FOB only makes sense if understood as representing the abandonment of one’s home country and the full attempt to embrace the new homeland (and, as a FOB, to fail to do so). But, as Jun demonstrated, remaining on the boat operates as a double refusal to emplace oneself and one’s sense of belonging in a single nation. Indeed, Jun rejects both his home country and Canada as his only possibilities of belonging. His belonging “on the boat” makes more sense if we consider such a belonging as being a regional one—a belonging that refuses to arrive upon either shore.

Gayatri Gopinath (2009) eloquently captures the importance of regionality in the particularities and movements of queer Asian migrants:

> When we use region, rather than the nation or the global, as the starting point of our theorizing . . . [r]egionality can be a useful concept through which to explore the particularities of gender and sexual logics in spaces that exist in a tangential relation to the nation, but that are simultaneously and irreducibly marked by complex national and global processes. (p. 343)

Following Gopinath, I also want to argue that rather than simply focusing on trans/national dimensions, we should consider the movements and imaginings that this dissertation catalogues as particular to histories of migration, exchange, and contact in Pacific Rim regions. As Yu (2009) argues, contemporary migration narratives—queer or otherwise—invite us to shift of attention from seeing Canada not only in terms of its relationship to “the Atlantic” but also in terms of its long-standing relationship to Asia through the emergent, yet always existed, “Pacific Canada” regionalism.
I want to hold onto the idea of regionality and the way in which it prioritizes “the space of the region as a way of decentering and destabilizing dominant nationalist narratives, and of foregrounding ‘other’ narratives” (Gopinath, 2009, p. 343). More specifically, in *Stranger Intimacy*, Nayan Shah (2011) demonstrates how regionalism in the Pacific world can better describe such “other” narratives—the strange contacts and minglings (including queer sex between migrant (brown) bodies, national (white) subjects under the regulative Canadian laws which prohibited such encounters) that enable us to imagine different forms and possibilities of the politics of race and sexuality beyond singular, national frames.

To be clear, endorsing regionalism does not mean abandoning the legacy of racism and ethnicized violence in a nation, rather, it offers a productive move to consider how the seemingly nationalized histories and knowledge of race, gender, and sexuality can be rethought in terms of “plurality” (Spivak, 2008). Here, I am responding to the important polemic presented by Sharon P. Holland (2012) in which she argues that the recent transnational turn in queer studies was too quick to abandon the legacy of black feminism and queer theorizing as it is often seen as an obsolete mode of identity politics trapped in past histories of slavery in the US. Her concern that the figure of the black lesbian vanishes from a sustained, critical examination of the intersectionality of gender, race, and sexuality in the rush to catch up to the new, and hence more exciting, field of transnationalism is unquestionably astute. Colonization, racism, and oppression in national history and memory, particularly when it concerns indigenous populations and Asian indentured labourers in the context of the colonial-settler histories of Canada, continue to facilitate the figuration of racial/sexual Others. However, it must also be acknowledged that racialized structures of encounter and recognition in the nation do not discriminate who stands in for its racial subjection—as it is said, race is only skin deep,
and racism does not, funnily enough, discriminate between “Asian” Asians and Asian Canadians, much less Africans from Africa and African Americans. Thus, the figure of the FOB must not simply be jettisoned from conversations of race in Pacific Canada as simply politically incorrect discourse. To erase the FOB erases the important and particular temporalities and experiences of migration of “other” Asians and, equally importantly, erases the always already shifting reality of racism that cannot simply be confined within nationalized forms of historicity and “raciality”—the plotline of politics of race—in the context of globalization (da Silva, 2007, p. 175).

Judith Butler (1993) makes clear the importance of alternative approaches, such as regionalism, that complicates and importantly contributes to conversations concerning the location of politics of race in queer theorizing. In her classic essay, “Critically Queer,” Butler (1993) writes:

Indeed, it may be that the critique of the term [queer] will initiate a resurgence of both feminist and anti-racist mobilization within lesbian and gay politics or open up new possibilities for coalitional alliances that do not presume that these constituencies are radically distinct from one another. The term will be revised, dispelled, rendered obsolete to the extent that it yields to the demands which resist the term precisely because of the exclusions by which it is mobilized . . . If “queer” politics postures independently of these other modalities of power, it will lose its democratizing force. (p. 20)

My turn to transnationalism, followed by a more explicitly regional frame through my engagements with participants’ narratives was informed by Alexander’s (2006) notion of “ped-
agogies of crossing.” Informed by lived realities of queer migrants, the turn to regional thinking enables production of knowledge, as Butler argues for, that extends the scope of queer conversations and theorizing to include cross-border movements and strategies for resistance in the politics of race, gender, and sexuality. By virtue of inhabiting and struggling upon the same ground, racialized subjects can create “affinities” (Hong & Ferguson, 2011, p. 19)—different, but comparable experiences of racialization and racism—amidst the multiplicity of genealogies, subjectivities, and experiences in a national space. Rather than overwriting who is at the front line of struggles and political authority, regionalism begins the conversation of race in the nation in terms of multiplicity. Canada is not singular, therefore there can be many “Canadas” including Pacific Canada in which we retrace a regional imaginary and a concrete geography emerging out of waves of migration, strange bodies, and unruly affinities beyond the history and narrative of the nation and race.

**Beyond the real/virtual: Demystifying “media effects” and imagination**

Following on the ideas of embodiment and mobilities and the importance of attending to regionality, another point of entry with which I began this dissertation was the question of the critical relationship between media and political possibilities in the domestic sphere of everyday, transnational, queer migrations. By privileging the notion of the “ordinary” (Williams, 1958, p. 3) in the documention and examination of media objects and mediational practices in the cultural worlds of queer Asian migrants, I argue that the presupposed fantastical effects of media turn out to be not so extraordinary against the banality of the everyday. This is not to say that the organization of mediascapes by the queer Asian migrants in this project had no significance in terms of their negotiations for mobilities. However, the more urgent argument would be to call for a continued conversation on the political significance of media through a
rethinking of the binary of virtual/real by insisting on embodiment and actions beyond media itself (Campbell, 2003; Grosz, 2001; Hayles, 1999).

To return to the story of Yasu’s online video channel and his “fan” community across the Pacific Ocean, it may seem as though the Internet and video streaming technology afford Yasu a different “gay” life online that is somehow outside of the physical limits and predicaments of his displaced life as a racialized, middle-aged, and chubby man deemed undesirable in local sexual economies at large, and in the white-racialized Bear scene in particular. Indeed, Yasu finds alternative sociality and a sense of belonging through the Chubby-chaser fans who are afforded a glimpse into the mediated stage of his “naked” performance of the “fabulous gay life in Canada” that would be otherwise impossible without digital media connectivity. However, we also need to be attentive to the subtlety of Yasu’s remark about the queer possibilities that this mediated public can produce when he says, “it’s good enough, for now.” In engaging with and thinking about Yasu’s story, we are asked to bear witness to the insidious body politics and offline relations of race and sexuality that continue to complicate the finality of his quest for the “gay life” in Canada (of which he noted was “not much of a life”). We must take seriously the layers of sociality and “remote intimacy” (Tongson, 2011, p. 23) that the media and technology of video broadcast add to Yasu’s solitary domestic life, but we cannot lose sight of the fact that his body remains suspended in the materiality of displacement, in Canada and back in Asia, that produced this strange story in the first place.

Similarly, Salt’s use of Grindr in different social locations and cultural events in and out of Vancouver’s downtown gay village, as discussed in Chapter 4, resists easy conflation of the ubiquity of media with the disembodied, unbounded possibilities of sexual encounter. As Salt reminds us, the space of intimacy that Grindr opens up is also a location in which the existing
relations of race and sexuality are remediated. The body follows and persistently returns to the scenes of encounter in which Salt must admit, “I am Chinese and I eat bad food.” In a more elusive narrative, Jun’s use of his iPhone screen to navigate the local gay club, which is also a potentially injurious space of misrecognition (in terms of his dis/ability and FOB-ness as described in Chapter 3) demonstrates how the use of media is not an escape from material realities. Taken together, the mobile interface of Grindr and the iPhone are part of Salt and Jun’s tactics of movement and maneuvers in the local sexual landscapes. However, the actual effects of these practices and objects must be considered by questioning the extent to which media actually displaces or disrupts the entanglement of the queer Asian migrant’s body within local relations of race and sexuality.

My initial intention was to foreground media as the space in which to carry out an analysis of the practices of mobilities by the queer Asian migrants in this study. However, the participant-led walkthroughs revealed the daily usage and locations of media practices convincingly demonstrated that everyday mediaspaces are mobile assemblages of spaces, bodies, and mediative objects organized and mediated by new and not-so-new communicative technologies, social locations, and partial participation in publics and counterpublics. Put differently, in the fieldwork and writing of this dissertation, media became less of a central point for the consideration of politics of mobilities, and instead proved itself to be woven into the social fabric stitched together by the participants’ imaginations and physical lives where their negotiations of immobilities and their struggles against displacement continue.

Given this more nuanced consideration of media practices, it is important to respond to the question posed by queer media ethnographer John Edward Campbell (2004): “The vital question that refuses a definitive answer is to what degree, if at all, will these seditious online ex-
periences inform offline political practices” (p. 192)? Drawing on this archive of life narratives and experiences, the more urgent question I want to pose, in response to Campbell, is: Does the distinction between virtual (online) and real (offline) worlds actually hold up when we do not study media as the boundary space or the text through which to read the political possibilities in people’s lived experiences? That is, what can really be said about political practices when we only document what people say and do in the space of media and not what happens when the computer screen switches off at the end of the day?

Elizabeth Grosz (2001) argues that it is essential to think about how conceptualizations of the virtual “transform our understanding of the real, matter, space, the body, and the world” (p. 76). Similarly, Katherine Hayles (1999) addresses the notion of embodied virtuality, in which she argues that the virtuality of media is not contained within the medium nor is it somehow disembodied, rather it is given new materiality through practices of imagination. She writes:

> Information, like humanity, cannot exist apart from the embodiment that brings it into being as a material entity in the world; and embodiment is always instantiated, local, and specific. Embodiment can be destroyed, but it cannot be replicated (p. 49).

While Grosz and Hayles’ concern here is on the relationship between technology and posthumanism, I want to take their insights in a slightly different direction to summarize the function of the mediated imagination that mobilizes queer Asian migrants within the more concrete and private spheres of the everyday. This dissertation has demonstrated the uses of media that are not limited to the Internet and digital networks—or any media as such. For example, Shin, Bruce, and their mothers’ letter writing offer a scene of mediation outside the hype—both utopic and dystopic—of so called new media. In particular, Shin’s letter writing
practice is informed by the embodied reality of a queer, undocumented, migrant life that is characterized by his split attachments to the family he did not quite leave behind and his yearning for a queer home in Canada. The content of the letters written by Shin and his mother may never state what they really want to say to each other, but letters can be the medium of care—through the separation in time and space of the act of writing—that sustains, instead of resolves, a livable reality for Shin and his mother.

Taken together, these narratives and discussions demonstrate the necessity of acknowledging the mundane in order to demystify the so-called media effects of political possibilities and actions and the universalizing perspective that media alone is the cause and effect of social change (Bryson, 2005; Bryson et al., 2008; Dean, 2009; Gray, 2009). The narratives and accounts of media engagement shared by queer Asian migrants in this project do not endorse that media can magically solve the lived realities of body politics, the spatiality of non/belonging, and the other immobilizing forces that are encountered in queer migrations. As I argued above, media does not create a disembodied space outside of social relations, locations and institutions. Everyday mediascapes are assemblages of these things that bodies navigate in their material lives. At the same time, we must also take seriously the ways in which queer Asian migrants’ tactics unfold within everyday mediascapes by ignoring the boundaries of socialities and geographies of mobilities with active employment of their imaginations in order to render unforgiving, material realities more livable.

As Hayles (1999) notes, “embodiment can be destroyed, but it cannot be replicated” (p. 49). I want to hold onto this notion in suggesting that, for the critical work of media and difference, we must begin research not with an ever-evolving replicability of media and media technologies. Rather, we should focus upon the power of imagination to materialize what can
only be described as virtual (or a daydream) against overwhelming present reality, while being cautious that not every imagination is necessarily political or liberatory, in order to keep asking how these imaginative practices can transform material worlds. The modest modality of “good enough, for now” that Yasu conveys in relation to the kind of material life that media of the everyday offers, which also runs through other participants’ mediascapes, instructs us to take a moment and consider the critical insights that queer Asian migrants’ imaginings and embodiments can offer us in terms of what is still “not enough” about the present reality. To rush off to celebrate or lament the increased mediatization of the world forecloses imagination, often the only resource and basis for political possibilities available to participants, that is yet to be recognized as such.

Every real story is a never ending story.
—Michael Ende, The Neverending Story

Concluding thoughts

On the seductive “truth” that emanates from the body in space through filmic representation, Trinh Minh-Ha (1990) enigmatically posits: “Reality is more fabulous, more maddening, more strangely manipulative than fiction” (p. 88). Such a statement can signify two seemingly oppositional trajectories in our engagement with the lived realities of Others. On the one hand, it means that reality always returns as a surprise with all its complexities, differences, and urgencies that exceeds our wildest imaginations about the world and the lives out there, while on the other hand, reality represented as such discourages our further imaginings once its meanings are fully understood and explained.
As I study Kenny’s Man on the Train illustration, I am reminded yet again how the story of Maty takes on a life of its own precisely through its enigmatic meanings and the absence of finality that we expect from stories of reality, of experience, and life. In other words, the visual story of Maty knitting on the train slows things down. It demands that we ask of ourselves, what am I looking at? What does this mean? Dina Al-Kassim (2013) formulates that:

> Queer reading practices in some sense proceed through forms of hesitation—through a caution to name or decide in advance what an archive of absences or a rhetorical entanglement will yield up in the time of reflection. This too is a queer temporality; it is the slow time of critique. (p. 345, emphasis added)

As a conclusion to this dissertation, I want to turn to the ethical dimension of using others’ stories for theorizing using Al-Kassim’s (2013) eloquent notion of the “slow time of critique” (p. 345) as it helps us to respond to those persistent questions above.

Through the framework of enigma as evidence as a limit of knowledge, as well as an occasion for a reflexive representational practice, I chose a formulaic style of writing in this dissertation. As demonstrated in previous chapters, my engagement with each narrative began with identifying the unhelpful binaries—the conventional and expected explanations or readings that polarize each narratives’ meanings, in/significance, and political implications.53

This was necessary because my goal in this project was to offer both a critique of the materi-

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53 I thank Dr. Teresa Dobson for raising a vital question about my writing strategy when she asked why I would go back to situating participants’ enigmatic stories within binary frameworks of explanation. The kind of deconstructive writing I ended up employing was understood as such in hindsight, but her question gave me an opportunity to think about how this approach was a crucial structure of re/presentation in this dissertation as a whole.
al conditions and social relations that structure participants’ narratives of displacement and survival, while at the same time to privilege the impermanency, contingency, and open-endedness of participants’ memories and actions, for participants’ enigmatic narratives escape the tyranny of meanings that we, as readers and spectators, inadvertently demand of them (Trinh, 1990).

Archived documents, testimonials, and experiences are open to subjective meaning-making and vulnerable to imaginative reading by future readers (Mbembe, 2002). Since there can be no objective claims of the truth or ownership of these experiences within an archival framework, and more critically, since there can be no ultimate certainty for what they might mean for our knowledge-making, my writing took a hesitant and speculative turn. That is to say, in writing this dissertation, my task was to resist the concretization of, or actively putting into motion, the meanings of these narratives beyond the illusion of finality so that these stories might continue speaking on their own. And more critically, my task was also to know when not to re/tell certain stories at all. We must not forget that the true power of the enigmatic stranger may lay in the act of withholding secrets from our sight and our speculations (Bau-combe, 2005, Spivak, 1988).

The three places of landing and further points of departure I mapped out above in this chapter are the result of my speaking nearby and my concrete responses to the necessarily partial, incomplete, and enigmatic stories of queer migration. Each narrative and its strange twists in the conventions of narrativity demand a hesitant slowing down of time in my listening, reading, and writing about them so that any critique I might make would be as close to the elusive truths they signal as possible. While at the same time, such critiques and theorizing must not shut down the space for the stories to continue speaking on their own. What does it mean,
finally, to argue for enigma as evidence as a sign of not knowing in one’s own textual re/presentation of the lived reality of Others? And more importantly, why should we attempt to preserve a “third meaning” (Barthes, 1977, p. 52) for political analysis in critical, empirically grounded research?

With these questions in mind, I turn to Roland Barthes’ (1977) political analysis of the third meaning in a still image of a film—suspended moments, objects and bodies, such as an obscure face of an “extra” character in the background—in the representational space of movies. Barthes (1977) notes that the first two levels of meaning in an image belong to the plot of the film and to cultural referentiality. But, the third meaning of a seemingly insignificant image escapes the medium and the system of meaning within the space and time of the film, for as Barthes (1977) argues, such “obtuse meaning is not situated structurally” (p. 60). These images would not even capture the viewer’s attention in the linear progression of the film, but they do indeed emerge when we pause the projector and take a moment to study such still images individually. Such a practice of minding the third, “excessive” meanings of images, by slowing down, taking a moment, and pausing in the time of regular life, Barthes (1977) admits, “appears necessarily as luxury, an expenditure with no exchange” (p. 62). However, Barthes (1977) continues, “This luxury does not yet belong to today’s politics but nevertheless already tomorrow’s” (p. 63, emphasis in original).

Following Barthes, I ask the reader to consider how Kenny’s illustration and my own engagements with enigmatic stories re/presented in this dissertation are not merely about mus-

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54 I thank Dr. Mary Bryson for recommending this insightful text, which greatly helped me make this final argument.
ing on strange stories for their unexpected natures, but that these are products of ethically committed, future-oriented labours of imagining that were only possible through appreciating the slow time of critique, rather than marching on at the regular time and pace of larger narrative structures and (neoliberal) concepts of linear, time-is-money progress. Such imaginings belong to “already tomorrow’s [politics],” (Barthes, 1977, p. 63) emerging out of bearing witness to concrete, lived realities and yearning for political possibilities in the future; they are the domain of what José Esteban Muñoz (2009) called queer utopia. Muñoz (2009) writes:

> Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future. . . . Often we can glimpse the worlds proposed and promised by queerness in the real of the aesthetic. The aesthetic, especially the queer aesthetic, frequently contains blueprints and schemata of a forward-dawning futurity. Both the ornamental and the quotidian can contain a map of the utopia that is queerness. (p. 1)

As I write these last passages, the 2014 Pride Parade is taking place in downtown Vancouver. Many summers ago, I began fieldwork for this dissertation precisely at the site of the Pride Parade. It was my third summer in Vancouver, and I was still hopeful that I would find materializations of utopia under the banner of Queer Canada. I was convinced that all I had to do was look harder and maybe sideways to find queer Asian bodies in the space of pride and celebration. Years later, and after all the twists and turns that this dissertation has taken as I traveled through the everyday lives of queer Asian migrants, I am sitting at my desk with the
image of Maty knitting on the train that Kenny offered me, as well as my own imaginings of that scene in my mind. And I keep returning to Muñoz’s passionate call for us to keep on imagining and to “never settle for that minimal transport” (2009, p. 1) of what is in the here and now, to never settle for that which presents itself as the only possibility for queer belongings and pleasures.

Following Muñoz’ queer-of-colour manifesto, I conclude that we must let imagination persist if we are to understand concretely the paths we must take towards the utopia mapped out by the participants’ narratives archived in this dissertation. Queer utopia’s contours and locations are yet to be fully understood. I keep returning to the narratives in this dissertation searching, feeling and yearning for the destinations at which we have yet to have arrive. For these stories and their meanings belong to the future, but because that futurity can only be glimpsed at through collective imagination, I conclude, then, by asking the reader to take part in this work of imagining for “otherwise” seriously, and to consider the responsibility—even non-response as a response—of your own imaginations, for without taking the time to slow down, without carefully holding the image before our eyes, without persistently searching for meanings that are not of today’s politics, we will never know where we might get to and how to get there together.
Epilogue

It was an exceptionally beautiful sunny day in the midst of the usually rainy winter season in Vancouver. The air was cold but dry and crisp. We could see all the way to the North Shore mountains. The delta landscape we were facing was flat and expansive. The space extended in all directions without any tall buildings to block our view, and the sun was still high in the blue sky. As we walked out of Templeton Skytrain station and started heading towards the airplane-spotting point at the end of Airport Road, Yasu noted how the weather reminded him of a winter day in Japan.

Earlier in my fieldwork, Yasu mentioned his obsession with airplanes, and after I admitted that I found them fascinating to watch, he lent me his DVD collection about passenger airplanes. We discussed whether we preferred Boeing over Airbus as the airplane maker, and how we missed the “TriStar” jetliners that Lockheed used to make. We both confessed how our obsessions started early in our lives and how we were both secretly disappointed that we did not become airplane pilots. Sometime after this conversation, I received an email from Yasu asking me to join him for airplane-spotting that Sunday.

Every 15 minutes or so, a jetliner flew over our heads. We had to stop talking because of the deafening noise of jet engines that vibrated the air and touched our skins. Whatever we were talking about, we would have to pause and just look up into the sky. After we stood at the intersection for about 20 minutes, Yasu asked me whether I liked departure gates or arrival gates at the airport. Puzzled by his question, I asked him if I was traveling, because, I added, I am usually exhausted by the last minute packing and anxious about missing my flight before my travel even started. Yasu laughed, and repeated his question: as a passenger, which gate I like to go through. “Departure, because I am going somewhere and it is exciting, I suppose,” I said. Yasu quietly nodded, and said: “I see. You like traveling.” Turning his attention to the next plane that was settling at the end of a runway for takeoff, he continued: “I like arrival gates. I like watching people hugging, families reunited, lovers kissing, a boyfriend picking up and carrying away his girlfriend’s luggage without being asked. That kind of stuff.”

The airplane started moving full throttle. We could hear the engines creating a high-pitched sound that was fast increasing. I imagined who was on the plane and where they were headed. Vacation, an important business meeting, or home, maybe. After the plane ascended into the eastern sky, I asked Yasu why he liked watching these people at the arrival gate. He shrugged his shoulders and said: “Because they came home. And there was someone waiting for them. It makes me happy to see that. It is ordinary, but something I long for. I like traveling. But maybe I travel, so that I can come back somewhere at the end, and imagine that there will be someone there for me, too. A home, you know?”
I continue to think about this day with Yasu, along with the image of Maty. And each time, I feel convinced of the reason I had to call the stories and experiences I catalogued in this project “narratives of no arrival.” To say that these people have arrived at somewhere or something, that their journeys are now complete, is to deny their yearnings for home, here and elsewhere. No arrival is a way to keep open, even just as a possibility, a future space of arrival that continues to be delayed. We can say, then, these narratives are also about future homecomings. Lok Siu (2005) called migration narratives of the Chinese in Panama “memories of a future home.” Queer temporality of future homecomings in this project indexes such memories not merely in terms of failure, but certain hopefulness (a melancholic, realistic hope). Their journeys are not yet over, and they cannot stop now, because the arrival of a future home hinges on their moving on and getting by in the present. They are always coming home.
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