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Being and Belonging: Identity and Community among Gay Asian-Canadians in Toronto

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by

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Abstract

This thesis examines the concepts of identity, community and belonging among gay and Queer Asian-Canadian men and women who live in the Greater Toronto Area. Most of these persons emigrated from East Asia with their families through the late 1970s to 1990s and subsequently came of age in Canada. I look at the ways in which ethnicity and sexuality converge in the life histories of these individuals through a range of topics that demonstrate how individuals conceptualize themselves and each other, as well as how social networks are formed and maintained. I argue that ethnic and sexual boundaries are not always static but are rather subject to negotiation and dialectical processes in various scenarios. These life experiences are often set in the context of heterocentric and white-privileged environments in the city that do not acknowledge the challenges faced by minority groups.

Keywords

For Robert Elkerbout

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Chapter 1: Introduction

> ...Although as a white college professor who knows mostly other white
> intellectuals, my social world is more class and race segregated than I would like,
> lesbians of other races and classes are part of my conceptual model of the lesbian
> universe. Yet I have been forming a disturbing impression that new social science
> writing about lesbians is describing only white, middle-class women and asserting
> or implying that they are *the* lesbian community.
> (Newton 2000:155-156)

> Just at the moment that we attempt to rectify our ignorance by adding say, the
> lesbian, to Asian American history, we arrive at a stumbling block, an ignorance
> of how to add her.
> (Takagi 1996:22)

As the colourful floats and marchers in the 2007 Toronto Pride parade made their way past the crowds, spectators could view participants that seemed to represent every colour of the rainbow. From my own cramped spot on a Yonge Street sidewalk, I watched the usual suspects go by - Dykes on Bikes, drag queens, leather-clad cowboys, body-painted women and queer community groups- as well as more recent additions of marchers representing gay pilots, gay accountants, gay TTC drivers, gay comic book fans and gay police officers. In the spirit of an ethnically diverse city such as Toronto, there were also groups of Latino gays, Caribbean gays, black gays, and South and East Asian gays to name but a few. This diversity of 'gayness' makes Esther Newton's quote from above appear to be not only an issue of concern for scholars in its implications of homonormativity, but also leads us to Dana Takagi's problem of how to write and think about ethnicity and sexuality, an issue that I attempt to explore in the context of this thesis on identity and community among gay Asian-Canadian men and women.

David Eng and Alice Hom (1998:1) ask:

So how do we consider race, gender and homosexuality for Asian Americans? It is important to emphasize that this theoretical issue has yet to be broadly interrogated in either Asian American Studies or lesbian/gay studies...the intersection of racial and (homo)sexual difference produces a set of unsettling representations and curious misreadings notably divergent from those normally associated with mainstream lesbians and gays.

Ethnicity and sexuality have been until recently, mutually exclusive fields (Hall and Kauanui 1996; Sullivan and Jackson 1999; Nagel 2003). The assumed subject in early Asian American Studies was a heterosexual English-speaking and American-born working male (Eng and Hom 1998:3) while Ruth Goldman (1996:173) accuses queer studies of "construct[ing] a discourse of silence around race". However, significant work has been completed in the last twenty years that has charted the connections between these aspects of identity without essentializing one over the other.

For example, Joane Nagel writes about "the power of sex to shape ideas and feelings about race, ethnicity, and the national...and how sexual images, fears and desires shape racial, ethnic, national stereotypes, differences and conflicts" (2003:1). With *ethnosexual* contact comes both the possibility of hybrid communities, as well as volatility and aversion (Nagel 2003:1). Nagel (2003:14) continues:

Ethnicity and sexuality are strained, but not strange bedfellows. The territories that lie at the intersections of racial, ethnic or national boundaries are ethnosexual frontiers...that are surveilled and supervised, patrolled and policed, regulated and restricted, but that are constantly penetrated by individuals forging sexual links with ethnic Others across ethnic borders

In line with Nagel's research, much of the literature regarding queer Asians in Canada follows on themes of intercultural sexual relationships, a pertinent issue for minority groups within white-dominant societies. Specifically, attention is given to desire and power inequalities within the trend of de-sexualizing the Asian male while

hypersexualizing the Asian female. Some authors have explored this topic by examining the role of visual imagery in perpetuating stereotyping and ethnic fetishization (Fung 1998; Lee 2002; Yoshikawa 1998) while others have discussed the nature of intercultural relationships themselves (Kibria 1997; McCaskell 1998). My research has continued in this line of investigation by looking at how Asian Canadians conceptualize their own roles as ethnic and sexual minorities in regards to relationships with others as well as perceptions about intercultural relations in an urban context.

Significant research has also been completed in the areas of community and belonging, both in regards to specific nationalities (Manalansan 1996; Lee 1998) and the queer pan-Asian community in general (Ayres 1999). Although each culture is clearly unique unto itself, popular culture and discourse have a tendency to lump together various nationalities into a single visceral social group. Authors have both addressed the problems of pan-ethnicity (Ridge et al 1999) and well as lauded its political and social effectiveness (Cornell 1979). I expand on these ideas by looking at how individuals create social ties and community in specific contexts. In particular, I look at geographical sites and environments where young queer Asians congregate and socialize as well as the creation of community and social networking through online mediums.

Lastly, Trinh T. Minh-Ha (1989:28) poses the question, "How do you inscribe difference without bursting into a series of euphoric narcissistic accounts of yourself and your own kind?" Although it is tempting to examine race and sexuality in terms of the rallying categorical calls found in identity politics, the short time I spent working with gay and queer Asian men and women in Toronto reveals a more complex experience than what Takagi (1996:3) calls, the 'counting' of hyphenated marginalities. Although by no

means does this text represent a comprehensive account of the experience of being gay and Asian in Canada, I have attempted to reflect *some* of the narratives related to identity and belonging as experienced in everyday life[1].

Life Histories as method

> ...the anthropologist is obliged to let the reader know...just what the micropolitics of the situation was in which the life history was obtained and the ways in which the anthropologist was personally involved in, and even transformed by, the intense one-to-one relationship of telling and listening
> Ruth Behar (1995:149)

I obtained most of my data through the collection of life histories from participants. According to Charlotte Linde, in its most simple definition, "a life story means something like 'what events have made me what I am,' or more precisely, 'what you must know about me to know me' " (1993:20). In this case, participants shared their stories knowing my interest in identity and community issues so that I could make sense of who they were in this context. Linde continues (1993:31):

> We change a given story for a given addressee as our relation to that addressee changes; we reshape stories as new events occur and as we acquire new values that change our understanding of past events; and we change our stories as our point of view, our ideology or our overall understanding changes and reshapes our history.

The life histories I collected represent a jointly told tale due to my own interlocutory participation through my questions and interests and also through the evolving nature of the relationship between the interviewee and myself.

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[1] see also compilations by Russell Long 1996; David L. Eng and Alice Y. Hom 1998 which explores Asian American sexual identities in personal narrative pieces

My own representation of the stories of participants is also filtered through my need to represent certain narratives at the expense of others for the purposes of this thesis. Although I collected a mosaic of stories that were both fascinating and useful in my understanding of these individuals, the narratives I present in this text have been edited to suit the themes I choose to discuss.

I conducted my fieldwork from May to August of 2007 in the Greater Toronto Area, a city of 5 million inhabitants (Statistics Canada 2001) and a traditional destination for immigrants and queer persons in general. I recorded life narratives during very loosely structured interviews that took place at the location of the interviewee's choice. This was usually a private home, café or at various locations on the University of Toronto St. George downtown campus. Most of these interviews were conducted on evenings and weekends outside of busy work and school schedules. Interviewees read and signed their consent forms detailing the study before proceeding and most participants opted to choose their own pseudonyms. These interviews lasted anywhere from forty-five minutes to two hours and I followed-up most interviews with a second session.

While I did not have a set of questions prepared, I generally followed a chronological account of people's lives while giving the interviewee free reign to discuss whatever they felt comfortable speaking to me about or what they felt was most important. With some sessions, the chronological format quickly fell apart as diversions were taken and we both forgot exactly where we left off. Some also chose to retell in detail an earlier moment they had mentioned once they became more comfortable in the interview. While I noticed that certain themes and issues were addressed in almost every narrative, this 'free-style' method of interviewing allowed me to gain insight as to what

was most important to each participant. For example, one individual interpreted my expressed interest in important moments in his life by giving me a play-by-play account into each of his serious relationships. Someone else in turn, took a lot of time to talk about her academic and professional pursuits and accomplishments.

Recruiting Methods and Interviewing Processes

My method of finding informants began with sending out general requests to people in my social circles announcing my intentions and asking for contributions. I attempted to contact individuals via phone, email or through social networking sites in order to provide a formal explanation as to what I was trying to accomplish. Unlike psychologists or market researchers who are often able to offer monetary compensation for people's time, I had nothing material to offer and I was hesitant to make people I knew feel obligated to participant. However, most people seemed pleased to talk about themselves and seemed to be genuinely interested in the project. In addition, many participants were graduate students themselves who were familiar with and interested in the research process; one woman even wanted to discuss my theoretical leanings before we proceeded.

I chose to begin interviews early in the summer with the people I knew best and to work 'outwards' within the community based on referrals. In a time-constrained fieldwork season, I believe that this was the ideal way to build rapport with strangers. Those who may have been hesitant to speak with me would likely know someone whom I had already interviewed. Although I kept all the names of informants confidential,

participants themselves who were acquainted with one another appeared to have an accurate idea about whom else I had interviewed.

A meeting of strangers on a train

"Do you want to hear what I *tell* people happened, or what *really* happened?"

One of my informants that I had interviewed early in my fieldwork surprised me with this question. Firstly, because I had naively taken it for granted that people would never try to purposefully deceive me, and secondly, because this individual was a relative stranger who was about to tell me a story that deviated from his 'official' version of a coming-out narrative that he normally shared when asked. As I conducted other interviews and as I got to know people better, more people began to share aspects of their lives that I thought revealed a surprising level of trust. Equally surprisingly to me, these 'secrets' began to surface with much greater frequency with people, and especially men, that I had known for the least amount of time or that I did not know well.

I believe that there are several reasons for this phenomenon. As a 'non-player' in gay male social and dating spheres due to my gender, it is probable that I was viewed as not having a vested interested in 'getting the dirt' on anyone or in exposing anyone's secrets since my presence was viewed as peripheral and temporary. Like people who may find themselves chatting to strangers seated next to them on a long train or plane ride, participants who told me their life stories may have felt that the impact of revealing more intimate details about their lives was limited. In addition, personal disclosure is an

integral part of building and maintaining relationships. By sharing details about themselves with me (and vice versa) we were in effect developing a working relationship. This could be more important with people I did not know very well and with whom I did not yet have a steady rapport. In contrast, I had to urge informants that I already knew to repeat relevant stories that I had previously heard outside the context of the interview.

Experiences of a (sort of) Native Anthropologist

The paradigm that places 'real' and 'native' anthropologists in a polarizing spectrum has roots in the colonial aspects of anthropology; the trained anthropologist, armed with his academic degree and notebooks, sets out to collect data from 'genuine' natives with the aim of attaining a view of life through the eyes of the native. This emphasis on the viewpoint of 'the native' suggests that the viewpoint of the native is singular, unified and 'authentic', rather than accounting for various factors such as gender, race, class, socio-economic status or age. The viewpoint of the 'native anthropologist' then, with the benefit of 'insider' knowledge and formal Westernized training, is assumed to represent a more authentic view of the culture in his or her work (Narayan 1993:676).

Kirin Narayan suggests that the fact that anthropologists of 'mixed' ethnic backgrounds such as herself, Alphonso Ortiz, Renato Rosaldo and Lila Abu-Lughod are known for their 'darker' backgrounds of Indian, Tewa, Chicano and Arab respectively exemplifies how the more exotic aspects of ethnic backgrounds are emphasized over the 'lighter' halves with or without complicity (1993:677). Furthermore, despite various factors differentiating 'native' anthropologists from the societies studied such as

education, class, or emigration, these researchers are still perceived as insiders to their 'communities' while those on the 'outside' who engage in long-term fieldwork are often not regarded as having the same level of credibility (Narayan 1993:677).

Due to these problematic issues with authenticity and who exactly is deserving of 'native anthropologist' status, Narayan suggests that, "it is more rewarding to examine the ways in which each one of us is situated in relation to the people we study" (1993:678).

In regards to Narayan's suggestion, it should be known that I knew all of my female informants to some extent before starting fieldwork. As an undergraduate, I had met other queer women that I formed friendships with over computer games and beer in my early twenties. However, the women who consented to be interviewed explicitly rejected the term '*lesbian*'[2], despite the fact that most people would and do place these individuals under its parameters according to their gender preferences in partners. In addition, while my informants and friends within these social circles consider me to be queer, I have met other people who have made it clear that they do not consider me to be gay at all since my current partner is male. After explaining my history, most of the gay men I worked with considered me to be straight and adopted me as a 'fag hag', while others jested that I was in denial and that I would eventually become a lesbian. Otherwise, people I meet usually read me as heterosexual based on my appearance as well as heteronomative and racially based stereotypical views. In addition, people often assume me to be Chinese before I reveal my more obvious last name due to the large Chinese demographic in Toronto as well as simple cultural ignorance of other East Asian

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[2] women cited that the word 'lesbian' is too limiting in its social, behavioural and gendered implications, and preferring Q/queer or bisexual.

nationalities. Unlike many of my immigrant informants, I was born and raised in Southern Ontario while my parents migrated from Hong Kong.

Whether or not I present an 'inside' or 'outside' view to gay Asian women's life is a poorly conceived argument; rather, like other anthropologists who are assumed to be 'native' to the societies they study (Narayan 1993:682), it is my own shifting identity in relation to the people that I work with that should be of interest in this thesis.

Who are my informants?

Before I began fieldwork, I was hoping for a diverse representation of men and women from various ethnic groups, ages and social classes. Despite the fact that my own parents are upper middle-class Hong Kong migrants, I initially did not believe that either my ethnicity or familial socio-economic status would be a constraining factor in the participants I would work with. However, the snowball method of recruitment tends to produce a group of people of similar ages who run in similar social circles, attend the same schools or have similar interests. Given my short period of fieldwork, I found it difficult to both meet and gain the trust of strangers with whom I did not any share social connections and who may have interpreted my attempts to recruit them as blatant self-interest for a homework assignment.

In the end, my research focus narrowed to working with a group of young women and men between the ages of eighteen to twenty-eight and who made up a privileged section of society. Most participants had family roots in Hong Kong and were upper-middle class or were obviously affluent. Two individuals were from South Korea and Vietnam and described their families as working-class, however both were pursuing

doctoral or professional degrees at the time of research. Although this thesis appears to be about a very specific group of people, I believe that these individuals have nonetheless contributed experiences to this text that demonstrates a diverse degree and depth of experiences.

An Overview

In this chapter I describe my research goals and provide a brief background on the literature relating to ethnicity and sexuality. I also discuss life history interviews as a method in anthropology as well as my own processes. Chapter two provides an overview of participant's family histories and a context as to how they arrived in the Greater Toronto Area area. In particular, I look at various themes in migration narratives and patterns of settlement among the Hong Kong Chinese. In chapter three, I discuss how Asian ethnicity and sexuality are used as categories of identity. I attempt to examine how men and women navigate various stereotypes and how these facets interact and affect inter-racial relationships. Chapter four details social networks among queer Asian-Canadians through the use of computer mediated communication (CMC) technology. I attempt to demonstrate how identity is embodied through online mediums of communication and how community and identity are constructed in online and offline environments. In chapter five, I discuss ways in which men and women create and use queer and ethnic spaces in environments set against hetereonormative and white-privileged landscapes. In this chapter I look at specific examples of queer and Asian spaces in the city. Lastly, I conclude in chapter six with suggestions for further directions in research with respect to the broad issues of community and identity.

Chapter 2: Stories of Migration

To understand the Asian-Canadian experience, it is important to review the circumstances of how these individuals and their families arrived in a country that has traditionally been associated with a white European heritage. With a couple of exceptions, my informants were from the families of economic migrants fleeing the 1997 handover of the British colony of Hong Kong to the People's Republic of China. In this chapter I will be reviewing the policies of early Asian immigration to Canada, Chinese and Hong Kong immigration prior to 1997, and patterns of settlement in Canada. I will be concluding with some of the experiences of my informants.

Early Immigration Policies

Early migrants from Asia to North America faced numerous challenges. The first wave of migrants to arrive on the continent came to the Pacific coast during the gold rush starting in 1858. These were mostly Chinese men who took over digging spots abandoned by white prospectors (Andracki 1978:1-2). A second major wave of migration occurred when the Canadian Pacific Railway brought in Chinese workers from 1880 to 1885 as a source of cheap labour to construct the railway linking the provinces. However, fear that the Chinese were crowding out work for white men after the completion of the railway led to legislative restrictions. The Chinese Immigration Act in 1885 included a head tax of $50 and then $500 that was imposed on every Chinese upon landing (Andracki 1978:59-60). The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1923, while abolishing the Head Tax, excluded any Chinese person that was not a diplomat, government official, student or merchant from landing (Andracki 1978:91).

It was not until 1966 that Prime Minister Lester Pearson issued a statement declaring that immigrants were key to the economic growth of Canada. A year later in 1967 a new points-based system of immigration replaced the country quotas, and thereby removed discriminatory barriers for Asian migrants. The Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration Canada allowed entry based on the number of points accumulated in an application system that evaluated age, language ability, skills, education, family ties and employment opportunities in Canada, as well as establishing a refugee category of entry (Lingen 2004:52). In 1976, the Immigration Act was further revised and immigration categories were expanded into categories of family reunification, humanitarian grounds, independent skilled workers, assisted relatives and business migrants (Lingen 2004:52). The families of my informants arrived in Canada under this 1976 legislation.

Hong Kong and Chinese Migrants

As a British colony, Hong Kong consisted of Hong Kong Island, the Kowloon Peninsula and the New Territories. These were ceded from Chinese to British rule under three treaties in 1842, 1860 and 1899. The New Territories comprised 92% of the total land area and were leased for a 99-year period (Menski 1995:18). After lengthy negotiations, the governments of Britain and the People's Republic of China signed the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984 that would return the whole of Hong Kong to the PRC on July 1, 1997. However, in the period before the transfer of sovereignty, many residents of the colony became nervous about both the loss of their *laissez-faire* capitalist economy as well as the loss of their personal freedoms and rights. The Tiananmen Square massacres in 1989 did little to quell the suspicions of residents that the PRC would not

live up to its promises of governing Hong Kong as a mostly autonomous Special

Administrative Region with a capitalist system for 50 years (Skeldon 1994:3, 128).

In light of the impending handover, there was a mass migration out of the colony

in the 1980s and 1990s. Emigration from Hong Kong increased from about 22,300

people leaving per year in 1982 to 66,000 emigrants in 1992 (Skeldon 1994: 30).

Canada, followed by Australia and the United States, became the most popular

destination for Hong Kong emigrants who sought residence in a country that offered

political and economic stability, an internationally recognized education system and an

English speaking setting compatible with the Anglo-Chinese culture of Hong Kong

(Smart 1994:103).

Hong Kong migrants during this period tended to be better off financially than

previous immigrant groups. Before the 1960s, the strongest predictor of immigration to

Canada from Hong Kong was having relatives already living in Canada (Johnson and

Lary 1994:94). However, by 1987, the desire of families to emigrate was directly

proportional to income levels. While thirty percent of households having a monthly

income of HK$15,000 expected to emigrate by 1997, only six percent of households

earning less than $10,000 expected to leave the colony (Smart 1994:103) The changing

economy and burgeoning industries in Hong Kong from the 1960s onward meant that

those with a higher educational background and ample financial resources were more

likely to have the means to relocate in times of stress (Johnson and Lary 1994:94). Much

of the literature on recent Asian immigration, in fact, places a heavy emphasis on this

upwardly mobile segment of society and the transnational mobility of these families

(Hsing 1997; Mitchell 1995, 2997; Nonini and Ong 1997).

Household Settlement Patterns in Canada

Within Canada, migrants settled in the major cities of Vancouver, Toronto and

Montreal (Johnson and Lary 1993:94). In Ontario, the vast majority of Hong Kong

immigrants settled in the Greater Toronto Area. Areas of concentration included Central

Chinatown, Eastern Chinatown (Broadview and Gerrard) Willowdale, Agincourt,

Pickering, Markham, Richmond Hill and Mississauga. Unlike earlier patterns of

immigrant settlement, these new migrants did not settle first in downtown districts, but

most rather moved directly into the outer suburbs. It has been suggested that this was

partly due to the housing boom in the 1980s that made older urban areas too expensive; in

contrast, the outer edges of the city were being developed and larger properties could be

acquired for less capital (Lary and Luk 1994:145-146).

Relocation to Canada did not always involve permanent settlement for the whole

family. In truth, some families did not intend to make Canada their final home at all;

rather, the goal was to obtain a passport and citizenship that would act as an 'insurance

policy' or escape route should the political or economic situation take a turn for the worse

in Hong Kong after 1997 (Hardie 1994:60). A common pattern of settlement included

the creation of an *astronaut family*- a solution to the problem of finding acceptable

employment, especially in the 1990s (Seckyee 2002). This arrangement meant that adult

family members (usually the fathers) would return to Asia or his region of business to

work and maintain the living standards in which the family was accustomed. He would

send regular remittances to his wife and children who were residing in Canada, and

would return every few months to fulfill citizenship requirements or to visit his family

(Waters 2002; Hamilton 1999)

This arrangement could be planned or could be a result of a failed employment search in Canada. Despite having gained points for skills on immigration applications, individuals continually noted the difficulties of finding similar work and pay conditions in Canada. One frequently cited complaint was that foreign educational credentials and work experiences were not recognized as being equivalent to Canadian standards. The literature has confirmed that visible minorities from Asia and Africa working in Canada also earn less than their white immigrant counterparts from the United States and Western Europe (Abella 1984; Li 2001, 2000; Reitz and Breton 1994; Satzewich and Li 1987).

Some scholars have considered this *astronaut* household settlement pattern of the Chinese to be an example of the flexibility in modern Asian capitalist business practices (Ong 1999; Hamilton 1999). Others have extolled the success of 'Confucian Capitalism'[3] and commented on the 'guanxi'[4] involved in global capitalist networks (Hamilton 1999, Ong and Nonini 1997). *Astronaut* families can also be examined as a product of transnationalsm- "a condition in which, despite great distances and notwithstanding the presence of international borders (and all the laws, regulations and national narratives they represent), certain kinds of relationships have been globally intensified and now take place paradoxically in a planet-spanning yet common -however virtual- arena of activity" (Vertovec 1999:447).

However, other scholars of the Asian diaspora are critical such views as being overly optimistic. They note that the resettlement of a family by a single parent is

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[3] The contested belief that Confucian beliefs are responsible for the success of migrant entrepreneurs, comparable to the theory of the Protestant work ethic. See Yao 2002.
[4] Non-familial social connections based on an understanding of cooperation

particularly difficult for the mother and that these paradigms gloss over familial

difficulties (Halfacree and Boyle 1999; Silvey and Lawson 1999; Waters 2002). The

transnational nature of some modern Asian families means that while the male head is

mobile and has access to both continents, the adult female in the family becomes

immobilized and localized within this frame. In the process of immigration, she sacrifices

her social support networks, personal financial security and personal freedoms (Waters

2002).

<u>Participant Experiences</u>

The literature on recent Chinese and Asian immigration to Canada has focused on

the experiences of adult migrants. I worked with the now-adult children of the families

that immigrated in the 1970s through the 1990s and who were able to provide a unique

viewpoint to the events of this time period. These accounts however, also ranged

extensively. Some informants were Canadian-born or were young children when they

immigrated and had only a vague idea of the motives and experiences of their parents.

Other informants similarly lacked many first-hand recollections about immigration to

Canada, but related the stories told to them by their parents. Fewer were able to more

vividly remember the political scene at the time and have primary accounts of the

immigration process itself. In general, their experiences seem to coincide with the

descriptions in the literature.

Kayla was twenty-eight and was the oldest of my informants. Accordingly, she

most lucidly sums up the political nature of her immigration:

> We came to Canada in 1992, when I was twelve. After Tiananmen my parents
> were worried about what would happen in 1997. We had a pretty comfortable life

in Hong Kong and we had what we needed, but we didn't know what would happen. After Tiananmen, I think people realized that anything could happen... And the British, you know... every other British colony gained independence, except for Hong Kong, which went back to China. And we couldn't go to Britain because they wouldn't give us citizenship, even though everyone in Hong Kong was a British subject, which I thought was unfair...

The perceived "unfairness" of the situation was something Kayla remembered was common amongst her friends whose parents were also in the process of trying to secure an escape route from Hong Kong. When our conversation steered towards Markham where her family eventually settled, she made clear her resentment for the attitude among some of the residents at the time. Specifically, when our conversation steered towards the racial tensions in our shared hometown in the mid 1990s[5], she offered an insight:

> They [the white population of Markham] don't want poor immigrants coming into their neighborhoods, leeching off their welfare, devaluing their property and you know, causing crime...But they don't want rich immigrants either who buy homes and start businesses and drive nice cars...they just don't want racial minorities around, and they'll find any reason they can to complain.

It was the period of adjustment in Canada that most participants remembered most vividly. In particular, the *astronaut* experience was common and many individuals had fathers who lived separately for most of the year and thus grew up in single-parent households. Although they enjoyed the financial luxuries of a stable high income, this

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[5] In 1995 Carole Bell, a town councilor in Markham, claimed that the Chinese were driving the "back bone of Markham away...the [white] people who run festivals, coach our kids, organize our business communities, Brownies, Guides, Scouts" (Chinese Canadian National Council 2007). Specifically, Bell lamented the proliferation of Asian retail stores and large-scale malls in the once predominantly Anglo-Saxon bedroom community that she claimed were alienating existing white residents.

often came at the price of family relationships. Mike explained his family's reasoning in

deciding to separate the family:

> Making money here is impossible, compared to what my dad used to make in
> Hong Kong. My dad was an electrical engineer ...He was one of the higher up
> people. And when he came here, he didn't do very much... he went back and
> worked in Hong Kong while we were here. And then he came back. It was
> weird...obviously it wasn't that great. Apparently you get a lot more money in
> Hong Kong than here. From what I've heard from other people recently, you can
> make five times the amount of money you make here in Canada. Plus you don't
> have as much tax deductions. I ended up not being close with my father, but really
> close with my mother. I kind of lost the whole father image thing...

However, Mike later added, "In a way, it made our lives better now"

Phil also had a father also worked as an *astronaut*, although as a successful

Chinese chef, he spent most of his time in Los Angeles. Phil noted that since the

restaurant business required long evening hours, he never had the opportunity to develop

a close relationship with his father even when he was not abroad:

> It wasn't that much of a difference to me whether he was in L.A or not because I
> was used to not seeing him or talking to him anyway. So I think one of the
> reasons why we don't see eye to eye or we don't have such a strong relationship is
> that we've never really communicated... [My mom] didn't realize that I caught on
> to a lot of problems, issues that she and my family were having.

Problems between spouses seemed to be a common theme, as witnessed by the

children. Mia was another informant who explained the strain caused by having an

astronaut father:

> I think coming to Canada was a good thing for me and my sister. We were young
> enough that we adjusted really quickly. But it was a bad decision for our family.
> My mom worked as an accountant in Hong Kong and when she came here she
> became a homemaker. But she wasn't used to it because we had a housekeeper in
> Hong Kong. I feel bad now because we used to complain about [our mom's]
> cooking when we first got here. And then my dad went back to Hong Kong and
> started having an affair- [my parents] divorced when I was 14. I was upset about

it at the time, even though I wasn't close to my dad, but now I understand why it happened...he was lonely and so was my mom.

Settlement patterns also varied in that although Canada was the final destination for all the migrants I spoke with, it was not the first country of re-settlement for two families. Alejandro was born in Argentina, where his family had moved in preparation for the 1997 handover– however, the economic and political situation there at the time soon made Canada a more alluring haven and they left shortly his birth. Cedric came from a family where his father worked in a plastics company that required them to be mobile. Instead of becoming an *astronaut* unit, his family opted to travel together. Cedric subsequently attended various private schools in Beijing, Hong Kong, Toronto, and Paris.

While I did not inquire about family income levels and participants did not directly bring up the subject, most of the participants with roots in Hong Kong appeared to be economically successful as supported by the literature. Although 'wealth' is a relative term, the circumstances of the individuals suggests at least a middle-class background; Our discussions included narratives about private schools, hired help, condominiums and cars. In addition, although economic status cannot be correlated exactly with educational levels, the fact that all participants held or were working towards at least a bachelor's degree suggests that as a whole, these Hong Kong migrant families were relatively well-off.

Two participants however, did not immigrate in Canada due to the Hong Kong exodus and have unique stories. Sarah was a 24-year-old graduate student whose family emigrated from Korea in 1979. Before arriving in Canada her parents first became

migrant workers in Germany, the European country with the highest Korean immigrant population (Hary 2006:2). However, she claimed that Germany was "more interested in cheap labour than in creating new citizens". After realizing that they would not be welcomed as German citizens in Europe, the family set their sights on Toronto, Canada. Sarah's parents, "like all good Koreans", she joked, ran a convenience store in Toronto. Unlike many of the participants I worked with, she described growing up in relative poverty and discussed the problems that come with both economic scarcity and being new immigrants. Compared to the Hong Kong *astronaut* families, Sarah revealed a much more turbulent home life that included neglect and domestic abuse.

Keana was a 21-year-old student who moved to Canada with her parents and her brother when she was five from the Philippines; She describes herself as coming from a "working class background". Her parents, like others in the study, had difficulty finding suitable employment upon arrival. Unlike Hong Kong migrants, both parents stayed and worked in Canada. Although her mother was a nurse in Vietnam and was the qualifying parent in the Canadian immigration point-system, she instead found work in a car parts factory where her sister was already employed. Keana's father passed away three years after arriving in Canada, which made the transition more difficult for her mother. She struggles to remember her reaction to the move to Canada: "I missed my cousins, and I remember not speaking English and no one understanding me! But I learned somehow".

Conclusion

Although it has been argued that because of their outward appearances both immigrant and Canadian-born Asian-Canadians will be considered as "forever foreign"

(Lee and Zhou 2004) citizens no matter how long they reside in the country, the individuals I spoke with seemed to be skilled at negotiating between Eastern and Western social spheres with relative ease. However, in these migration stories, there were various problems associated with the transition period after arrival in Canada. Many of these involved the separation of the family when the adult male would seek a living elsewhere. For others who did not have the benefits of financial stability, low incomes and poverty became a problem once in Canada. While this chapter has discussed the backgrounds of participants and the context in which their families arrived from their homelands, the next chapter will look at Asian experiences in a Canadian context through its intersection with issues of sexuality.

Chapter 3: Ethnicity and Sex

For gay Asian-Canadian men and women living in the city of Toronto, its diverse

population presents a host of benefits and challenges while navigating through

stereotypes, sexual encounters and relationships. This chapter examines the articulation

of 'race' and sexuality and the various issues that participants contend with as a result. I

will discuss the construction of ethnicity and pan-ethnicity and will conclude with a

discussion of male and female Asian sexuality and desire.

Race as a visual category

The concept of 'race' as a way of classifying humans into discrete biological

categories has largely been abandoned in anthropology (Relethford 2005:133, Graves

2001). However, in popular culture, 'race' is still commonly employed and assumed to

be a biological fact based on perceived morphological and anatomical differences such as

skin colour, hair texture or facial features. Robyn Wiegman notes that "race has been

constituted as a visual phenomenon, with all the political and ideological force that the

seemingly naturalness of the body as the locus of difference can claim" (1995:22). The

process of racialization occurs when meaning is assigned to certain biological features

that are reproduced within an assigned category of persons (Miles 1989:76). In this way,

the body becomes a text for interpretation as the eye not only sees, but learns how and

what to see (Wiegman 1995:22).

For Asian-Canadians, the unique morphological features that are thought to be

shared by this group of people- the epicanthic eyelid fold, the shape of facial features, the

texture and colour of hair and skin tone, among others- are the words in the text of a

particular kind of human body. These features render the individuals who embody them as a 'race' despite the vast differences in culture, language, philosophies, cuisine and physical characteristics.

A brief history of Asian pan-ethnicity

Immigrants from Asian countries do not identify as 'Asians', but rather as politically and cultural distinct groups from one another. Historically, hostilities from mother countries spilled over into North America upon arrival and various groups were quick to practice ethnic dis-identification when North American discriminatory policies imposed measures such as exclusion acts and quotas. For example, the Chinese and Japanese both claimed superiority and difference over each other at various points in the twentieth century and Korean distrust of the Japanese united various groups of Koreans in America (Espiritu 2003:81-84).

The period following World War II resulted in a shift of demographics; for the first time, second and third-born generations outnumbered Asian migrants born abroad. In California in 1960, approximately two-thirds of the Asian population had been born in the United States. These individuals were able to communicate with one another in the shared language of English, and unlike their parents, had fewer loyalties to old national rivalries (Espiritu 2003:85). Residential segregation in ethnic enclaves also began to decline as groups moved out of the Chinatowns and Little Tokyo's. However, the greatest inter-Asian contacts occurred on North American college campuses (Wong 1972:33-34) and most early pan-Asian organizations arose in this context (Espiritu 2005:87).

Interactions both within Asian groups and mainstream 'white' society led to a feeling that Asian-Americans were both fundamentally different and excluded from the latter, as well as a sentiment of alienation from traditional immigrant communities (Espiritu 2005:86). Today, while political and official means of discrimination have been eliminated, Asian-Canadians still harbour a shared experience in which they deal with various preconceptions, stereotypes and assumptions that are externally imposed upon this diverse population. It is due to these reasons that I have chosen a pan-ethnic approach in a Canadian context.

However, pan-ethnicity among Asian-Canadians has its limitations in applicability. For example, the ideology has been embraced primarily by native-born or educated middle-class Asians (Chan 1991:175). A question of 'who counts' in the 'community' also exists since there remains a division between East Asians (for example, the Chinese, Korean, Japanese) and South Asians (for example, Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshi) who tend to cluster pan-ethnically within their respective groups but not between them (Gap 2006; Dave et al 2000; Gupta 1998; Kibria 1996, 1997). In my own recruitment efforts, I did not specify which nationalities I was seeking, however, 'Asian' was interpreted to mean only *East* Asians.

Asian male sexuality

> Blacks are sexually active at an earlier age than Whites. Whites, in turn, are sexually active earlier than Orientals…A Canadian study found Orientals to be more restrained, even in fantasy and masturbation. Orientals born in Canada were just as restrained as recent Asian immigrants (Rushton 2000:18).

Of the various unsettling stereotypes concerning Asians, the topic of sexuality is most relevant to this study. Philippe Rushton's controversial work is an example of how

Western discourses about race and sexuality are often expressed. His writing has consistently espoused the idea that the degree of 'sexuality' in humans can be measured though such means as penis and vagina size, frequency of intercourse, buttock and lip size, all of which he claims correlate positively with criminality and sociopathic tendencies and inversely with intelligence, health and longevity (Fung 1996:181). Rushton's view places 'Blacks' in the over sexualized end of the spectrum 'Orientals' on the under sexualized end, and 'Whites' in the normalized middle position (and therefore requiring no further explanation or study). While criticized for questionable scientific methods and obvious racist overtones, Rushton's thesis is nonetheless still reflected in popular culture.

This intersection between ethnicity and sexuality places homosexual ethnic minorities, and particularly men, in a marginalized position. Richard Fung suggests that this totalizing stereotype of the hypo-sexualized 'Oriental' is in tension with and only recently eclipses previous depictions of Asians of having undisciplined and sinister sexualities -For example, Canadian antimiscegenation laws aiming to protect the white female population barred Chinese-owned businesses from employing white women (Fung 1996:182). Asian men can thus be deemed as being simultaneously "effeminate and emasculated on the one hand, but inscrutable, sneaky, stoic, and sometimes wise on the other" (Prasso 2005:xiii), and almost always bearing a "desexualized Zen asceticism" (Fung 1996:183)- sentiments echoed by other authors (Ayres 1999; Sullivan and Jackson 1999). Fung poses the question, if Asian men are characterized by having no sexuality, how then can they have homosexuality? (1996:183).

Despite the racist expectations imposed on Asian men, the male participants in my study regarded themselves and each other with all the complexities, problems, emotions and behaviours that embody any *normal* (often read as 'white') person, and their use of language reflects this- just as the Chinese do not refer to eating a meal as having 'Chinese' food, participants never talked about their lives as 'Asian sexual beings' since this concept exists only as an external colonial fantasy. However, discourse about one's desirability and acceptance among non-Asians and one's place in mainstream gay culture was commonly expressed.

Many of the twenty-something's I spent time with claimed to be at the height of their dating 'careers' and thus cultivated a sense of self-consciousness about their desirability and aesthetics. Despite its cosmopolitan status, Toronto has no shortage of media catering to white standards of beauty and desire. For young Asian-Canadians who for the most part grew up with these images as ethnic minorities, figuring out desire amongst these representations is an on-going process.

Informants recognized that the ethnic minority male has little place in gay media outside of a fetishistic context. Cedric was a 21-year old student who was obviously troubled by the topics of 'race' and desire. We spent much of our time discussing race relations, beauty, and how these elements fit together in relationships. He explained why he thought that *potato queens* (Asian men who prefer white partners) were so common:

> I am firm believer that it's the media. They're responsible. Yeah, like, if you watch any movie, commercial, or anything, Caucasian males are at the top of attractiveness. When you think of a man, who do you think of? You think of someone who is tall and big, and whatever...immigrant countries, like Canada, U.S, Australia have had negative connotations [about Asian men], probably through propaganda... We never see hot Asian guys. Its always Jackie Chan or whoever when they're actors. ...There's this exotic allure. The ones you *do* see

have certain features, like they're tall… etc. I think it's how society has defined beauty [emphasis added].

Cedric believed that this exclusion of Asian aesthetics in representations of male beauty resulted in a preference among some Asian men for (white) partners that did reflect the images depicted in media.

Like some other informants with whom I discussed this topic, Cedric never revealed to me if he had any racial preferences for partners. I suspect that for some people who preferred partners outside of their 'race', they did not want to be suspected of harbouring internal racism and therefore decided not to share this information. However, on occasion, partner preferences could be easily deduced through observation. Despite the 'potato queen' phenomenon I have discussed, there was an abundance of men who choose Asians partners. Others were more open about their desire for non-Asians, while still experiencing difficulty in reconciling their indignation at being 'fetishized' with their own preferences. Mike, who at one point in a conversation ranted against older white men who thought they could take advantage of him, began to back-pedal when it came to his own choice of partners:

> You can't help who you are attracted to. Everyone has their preferences. I happen to like white guys more myself. Not always, but it happens more often. It doesn't mean that I'm racist. People make too big a deal out of it…not everything needs a label.

The notion that "you can't help who you are attracted to", or that "everyone has their preferences" was often repeated. There was a general agreement amongst informants about a claim made by Tim McCaskell- that desire is impenetrable (1998).

Rice Queens

One of my most helpful informants was Emmett, a 24-year old accountant of German-French ancestry who had 'gone native'. He grew up in a Chinese area of the city, surrounded himself with Asian friends, took Mandarin lessons, ate with chopsticks and had been a devoted boyfriend to various Asian men for the past five years. Emmett was what is known as, and is sometimes disparagingly called a *rice queen*- a (usually) white man who prefers Asian partners.

From what I could tell, Emmett was a popular and well-connected figure in Toronto's gay scene. Extroverted and affable, he took an immediate and exceptional interest in my project. He came to be of great assistance over the summer, acting as a social nexus and making useful introductions to various people as well as going out of his way to make sure I was comfortable. I speculated that he was interested in my thesis and endeavors because he could empathize with my efforts in participant-observation, since he was an outsider himself on a visual level and had already experienced the 'integration' process. I also believed that in taking an active role as an unofficial ambassador for the 'community', it is possible that he was looking to further legitimize his role within his various Asian social circles. The label of *rice queen* after all, is not generally a favourable term and is viewed with a certain amount of suspicion.

An analysis of what McCaskell calls 'rice queenery' utilizes concepts of power to examine the dynamics of this type of inter-racial relationship (1998:46). He argues that power is embodied within the physiological characteristic of race, giving whites control of a normative beauty standard that places their own bodies in the idealized position. Rice queens are anomalies in that they desire physical traits outside of this standard.

Since there are fewer Asians than whites, the sexual economy favours the rice queen who

has his choice from the outnumbered "Other" race who are in turn searching for a white

partner (1998:46-47).

Those Caucasians who desire Asians are perceived to be either possessing a

fetish, or as being unable to find a suitable white partner (McCaskell 1998:45). Just as

Rushton places 'white' sexuality in a normative frame, there is not a name for a white

man who desires other white men, since this is assumed to be 'normal'. It is only the

minority of individuals who experience desire outside this 'normality' that receive a

special label because it is requires further explanation -even Asian men who prefer other

Asian men are sometimes given the ridiculous moniker, 'sticky rice'. While this view of

power dictating the rules of desire can seem simplistic, it nevertheless illustrates some

common perceptions of race relations. The fact that the vast majority of talk that I

listened to seemed to exclude any ethnicities not covered by the terms 'white' or 'Asian',

appeared to confirm the normative view of who was desirable or suitable as a partner.

McCaskell claims that because of the stigma associated with the white-Asian

relationship, most rice queens are quick to assert their differences from others who have

the same racial preferences and choose not associate with other rice queens. Emmett, for

one, was adamant in pointing out repeatedly that even though he described himself as a

rice queen, he was "not one of them" ("them", being what he perceived to be the typical

rice queen) and whole-heartedly condemned their motives:

> I don't go for Asians so I can dominate them or because I think they're an inferior
> guy or because I'm ugly and they're easy to get. There are a lot of guys like that
> out there. A lot. But I get hit on by white guys all the time. Everyone I knew was
> Asian since I was a kid. I have nothing in common with white people. I don't
> even know what to talk about with them. Like your white friends, I don't know
> what to say to them...

I found his rationalization of differences in Asian and white culture to be jarring at first; His Asian friends that I had met and my white friends with whom he claimed he had trouble conversing with largely shared the same conversation topics, style and English language. I later realized that he was greatly exaggerating when he said he didn't know how to relate to other whites, however it was clear that he had made a distinction about where he belonged, as well as his affection and preference for 'Asian culture'.

McCaskell, however, insists that it is the Asian body, not Asian culture that is being fetishized. He argues that what appears to be fascinations with culture do not usually extend beyond a penchant for Chinese decorations in one's apartment (1999:47). Cedric disagreed and validated Emmett's immersion in culture:

> You'll find that with most Caucasian men who are interested in Asian men, it comes with the entire package. They're interested in Asian music, Asian culture, the languages, everything. Including their partners. It's the whole package. …Most rice queens will want everything Asian.

Rice queens could be viewed with indulgence, skepticism or indifference depending on the context and individuals involved. While men openly scorned the 'typical' older, unattractive and predator-type of rice queen that often comes to mind with the term, others such as Emmett were accepted into the fold. Having a white partner was also a common occurrence among my participants.

McCaskell has noted that relationships between whites and Asian men can mimic the power patterns found in male-female relationships in their patronizing and sexist/racist dynamics (1998:47). While the subject of racial preferences seemed to be an important consideration for men in part because of this, the relationship between ethnicity and desire amongst women operated on a different level.

Asian female sexuality

Like their male counterparts, East Asian and other minority females occupy positions that require explanation or fetishization in heteronormative representations. However, unlike the ideologically castrated Asian male, Asian women are placed at the opposite end of the spectrum in a hyper-sexualized context. In what Sheridan Prasso calls, "the Asian Mystique", the women of the east are viewed "as gentle geishas or China Dolls- servile, submissive, exotic, sexually available, mysterious, and guiding; or as Dragon Ladies-steely and as cold as Cruella de Vil, lacking in the emotions or the neuroses of real women" (2005:xiii) or as temptresses who use their 'exotic' seduction to manipulate men (Tator et al 1998:148).

One theory on the origin of Western discourses about the Asian woman as a 'lotus blossom' claims that the image has roots in American military experiences in countries such as Vietnam, the Philippines and Japan after World War II. Contact between soldiers and local women existed primarily through venues of prostitution and through the acquisition of mail-order brides (Tator 1998:148). Because this first North American contact with Asian women on a large-scale occurred in a context associated with sex and the availability of sex as a service, Western ideology has since depicted the Asian woman as being inherently sexual in nature and subservient to the needs of men. While I do not believe that Western military excursions are the sole cause for the Orientalizing effect of Asian women, the reproduction of this experience can still be see in popular European and American narratives such as the Broadway musical *Miss Saigon* and the best-selling novel *Memoirs of a Geisha* by Arthur Golden- both of which eroticize the racial identity of a woman for a foreign audience.

For Asian women who do not desire men, let alone white men, their position within heterosexual discourses nonetheless has an impact on their identities as queer/bisexual/lesbian women. Since it is commonly regarded that Asian women are acceptable objects for male attention and that they eagerly reciprocate male sexual advances, these women are thus precluded from the possibility of having sexual relationships with other females. Among gay women, the physical appearances of Asians can be enough to trigger limiting perceptions and expectations that fulfill heterosexual Orientalist desires (Lee 1996 120-123).

I met one informant, Kayla a 28 year-old professional, several years ago. With her long hair and stylish wardrobe, she has never been associated with being a gay woman. Over the years, I've had many opportunities to observe various men propositioning her only to be dismissed with the explanation, "I'm a lesbian". A common reaction to this is one of surprise, followed either by an assumption of coyness on her part in which case they attempt in vain to persue the matter further, or it is taken as an excuse to reject them rather than fact. Kayla's problem of being recognized as a woman who desires other women is grounded in part by this Orientalizing effect on Asian females.

As demonstrated in this example, certain visual cues are thought to identify a lesbian woman. Firstly, lesbianism is often thought of as a white phenomenon and therefore places ethnic minorities in a position in which they are not immediately recognized as being gay (Lee 1996:123). In addition, appearing 'butch' or displaying a more rugged demeanor has traditionally been associated with gay women (Lee 1996). Several layers of difficulty are then added for gay Asian women like Kayla who are

'femme-looking' and who also embody the specific colonial discourses about Asian females.

The women I worked with handled the issue of recognition in different ways. Some individuals like Kayla took it in stride and chose to ignore any reactions of incredulity, no matter how churlish. However, another informant, Min, was conscious in making a choice about her appearance and behaviour as a way to identify herself as someone unavailable to men and to confirm her identity as a gay woman:

> [looking butch] is a nice way of saying to boys, 'stay away or I'll kick your ass! I guess some Asian girls have to deal with the whole *yellow fever* thing from guys, but it's not an issue for me

In contrast to the problems in dealing with mainstream society, the social groups of gay women that I interacted with were generally tolerant and inclusive of ethnic minorities. This is not to say that social networks were always harmonious, only that the ethnic tensions and segregation that were more apparent among men were notably lacking among the women with whom I had contact. Kayla concurred:

> It's easy to say, 'oh, lesbians don't like me because I'm bi or because I'm Chinese, or because I'm femme', or whatever. But lesbians are just cliquey. That's what it comes down to, really... It's easy to see discrimination where there is none. I have lots of lesbian friends. The fact that I choose to call myself Queer instead of lesbian is a personal choice and I don't think it's got anything to do with them rejecting me because of who I am.

I believe that the patterns of socializing and the 'clique-ish' nature described by some women were more dependent on interpersonal factors such as relational alliances and gossip than ethnic issues.

While it would be naïve to assume that racial preferences do not exist for gay women, at least the female equivalent for the *word* 'rice queen', as someone who eroticizes a racial identity, does not exist. Instead, conversations about 'race' and sexuality pertained mostly to interactions with straight men and women.

Why is there a difference between men and women?

I argue that the cultural differences between gay men and women in regards to ethnicity and desire result in differences in attitudes towards sexuality. Just as heterosexual mediums catering to straight men often feature the objectification of the female body, there exists a phenomenon in gay media where the desired body is displayed as a sexual object in conjunction with an emphasis on physical attractiveness as an important factor in choosing a partner. The white male body as an object of desire is prominently displayed in mediums such as advertising, pornography and art, thereby setting clear standards of who/what is attractive. While I cannot evaluate the theory voiced by some informants that men are more biologically inclined to value aesthetics in sexual relationships, I suggest that the consistent display of white male beauty and the discourse surrounding it help to create both racial tension and fetishization among men.

In contrast, desire for women as expressed by women is facilitated on less of a visual level. With the exception of venues and events that are organized explicitly for the purpose of sexual socializing, the obvious visual components of desire that characterize the gay male realm are absent. This could be due in part to the fact that gay women have less of a corporate stake in beauty than their male counterparts; There is not nearly as much industry built around lesbian life in Toronto, and in turn, there are less

advertisements and images in which (white) female sexuality is put on a pedestal. Methods of choosing and meeting partners among women are also not so reliant on the club and bar scene, where physical standards of beauty are more likely to be the dominating aspect in partner choice. In addition, gay women may be more likely to be aware of the chauvinistic effects of male desire and make a conscious effort to avoid mimicking this in their own affairs. In any case, I argue that the fetishization and eroticization of the female body according to 'race' may be absent among women without the reinforcement and proliferation of visual cues in sexual attractiveness or the cultural norms that place an emphasis on physical desirability.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the some of the key points that link ethnicity and sexuality for gay Asian Canadians. While ethnicity is a socially constructed phenomenon, it is a factor that unites individuals who fall under a visceral category of ascribed physical features. The preconceptions that are associated with 'race' are entangled with those discourses in sexuality for participants. Men and women navigate very different issues and handle different problems that stem from this articulation, however, both genders deal with (albeit opposing) stereotypes that place them at extreme points in the sexual continuum and outside of white heteronormative discourse. To contrast with this chapter's focus of the Asian body, the next section of this thesis will elaborate on themes of desire and relationships from a different perspective; I will be looking at how participants connect with each other and seek out companionship through

computer-mediated communications- a medium traditionally associated with

disembodiment.

Chapter 4: Social Networks and Computer-Mediated Communication

This chapter explores how queer Asian-Canadians use computer-mediated communication (CMC) to create, negotiate and facilitate social relationships and experiences. I provide an overview of research on modern and early internet usage, and discuss how participants navigate online interactions on social network sites, dating sites and online gaming, as well as some of the issues that arise out of CMC interactions.

The Living Web

The internet has experienced rapid changes since its inception. When online communication necessitated the garbled tone of a dial-up modem, the internet was the 'information superhighway' where users could log on and seek out information. Webmasters usually retained the sole ability to alter web content, rendering users of the site passive viewers (O' Reilly 2005). However, over time, and following the shock of the dot com collapse in 2001, the nature of the internet began to experience more rapid changes. Tim O'Reilly suggested the term 'Web 2.0' to describe this phenomenon (2005) during a now famous brainstorming meeting with MediaLive International to indicate that the internet had become a new 'improved' version of its predecessor. Its most notable features were a user controlled environment where people had direct methods to express themselves and to connect directly with others online, and the inclusion of platforms where users are able to input, own, and modify data on software applications functioning entirely through internet browsers (O'Reilly 2005). End users now operated as collaborators in uploading as well as downloading data. This has eliminated the power and mystique formerly held by web programmers and domain holders to a large degree.

Hogg et al (2006) describes the 'web 2.0' as:

> ...The philosophy of mutually maximizing collective intelligence and added value for each participant by formalized and dynamic information sharing and creation.

Some popular mediums to arise out of this philosophy include such cultural phenomenon as wikis, weblogging (blogs), YouTube, BitTorrent, and social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace.

Since many web 2.0 enterprises improve and build on, rather than replace 'web 1.0' applications (For example, Usenet-→Web Forums), it would be more appropriate to consider the term 'web 2.0' as more of a marketing catch phrase than a tangibly defined phenomenon. However, the increased interactivity of the internet has produced improved social networking and collaborative tools for users on a widespread scale that has implications on ideas such as community, identity and social relationships.

Early CMC Research

Science fiction writer William Gibson first coined the term 'cyberspace' (Heim 2001:72) in the novel *Neuromancer* (1984), describing it as a state of mind that people can 'jack into' via their computers and thereby leave the physical body behind as an irrelevant barrier. Early CMC theorists in the 1990s supported such a utopian view, claiming that cyberspace would in fact circumvent all corporeal aspects of humanity such as race, gender, sexuality and age that would otherwise prevent the formation of community (Bury 2005:1). Howard Rheingold (1993) proclaimed that users would not be able to "form prejudices about others before [they] read what they have to say..." thereby creating communities without the physical limitations that would restrict our essential

selves (Bury 2005:1). In a famous cartoon that appeared in the New Yorker, (Steiner

1993) one dog at his keyboard says to another, "On the internet, no one knows you're a

dog!"

In addition to the perception of disembodied identities, early research on CMC

based communities focused on the formation of communities that liberated individuals

from geographical constraints. An assumption was made that users would go online to

seek out relationships outside of offline social circles, rather than to enhance offline ties

(Wellman et al. 1996; Rheingold 1993).

According to these early theories about the disembodied and de-geographized

nature of CMC, cyberspaces based on corporeal identities such 'queer' and 'Asian' as

well as uniting people within a geographical territory (in this case, the GTA) should

never have come into existence (Bury 2005:1). However, this has proved to be far from

the case as the internet has since become a significant tool for young queer Asian-

Canadians in community formation and social networking. Studies of the online

communities that mirror Real Life corporeal identities are now numerous and include

those based on 'race' (Rodman et al 2000) sexual orientation (Case 1996) and gender

(Bury 2005).

An example in embodiment: Gay Elves and Orcs

> I was part of a guild [in World of Warcraft]. You know how people who play that
> game [are].... a large proportion are teenagers who don't know anything about the
> world. I was getting sick of people using derogatory jargon all the time. Like, oh,
> 'fag, why didn't you sheep him?' When people say things like that I find it kind
> of offensive...so I decided to switch servers where I knew there was a GLBT
> friendly guild. So I have a [character at] level 57. It's a big deal to switch

servers[6]... and my brother was like, why did you switch. And I said, "truth is..." and I told him everything. But it's funny because it was because of this game that I told him.
        -Cedric

In university, when [a friend] just got on WoW, he asked if he could join the guild I was in... Only I play with a gay guild and obviously he didn't know that at the time. So I told him, he was like, 'I knew it!'
        -Min

World of Warcraft (WoW) is a massive multiplayer online role-playing game

(MMORG) that encourages online player interaction through avatars or characters.

Blizzard, the company behind WoW, banned GLBT-friendly guilds (play groups) in 2006

in an attempt to prevent harassment[7] and keep offline identity issues out of the game

(original statement removed from Blizzard's website. See reproductions by Sliwinski

2006a; Turdimen 2006; Edge-online 2006). This attempt to separate offline corporeal

identity from a high fantasy online environment ultimately resulted in a discrimination

lawsuit and controversy from both within and outside of the gaming community

(Sliwinski 2006a). Blizzard CEO Paul Sams eventually issued a retraction and apology

(Sliwinski 2006b):

> It is expected and accepted that players will discuss a wide variety of topics, based on both the game world and the real world. Players are free to discuss personal characteristics if they wish, [and] to include their sexual orientations and gender identities.

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[6] Transference of a built-up 'character' to another 'realm' or server usually requires a transfer fee, or else users must create a new character. Significantly, server transfers may also mean losing a social network built-up on the original server.

[7] GLBT friendly guilds often have coded queer themed names (such as Stonewall Champions, Oz, Spectrum Rage, Friends of Dorothy) to signal the nature of the group without incurring outright harassment from players unfamiliar with the language.

Min and Cedric's decisions to bring to bring aspects of offline identity to digital avatars is an example of how offline identities matter on the internet. In addition, the fact that their 'coming out' stories had catalysts in an online fantasy world suggests that these in turn can have very real impacts when the monitor is turned off.

However, not all participants desired this congruency. Another player Phil protested that offline identities should be kept out of online gaming experiences: "There are no humans in WoW. Um...Except for [character] 'humans'. There are no gays, no races." This tended to mirror his offline preference to save these topics of conversation for close company. I suspect that for players like Phil, the de-politicized environment of certain MMORPGs is one of the attractions of gaming. Role-playing servers, where real life is almost never discussed, are specifically available for those players who prefer a stricter form of separation from real life issues.

A *Real* Online Community

A central concern during the formative years of the internet and which still exists to an extent today, is the 'realness' of social interactions and community online. In conjunction with disembodied ideas of identity online, a question arose as to how 'real' or authentic online interactions and identities actually were, since these took place entirely in front of an inanimate computer monitor. More recent research (Bargh et al 2002; Herring et all 2004) as well as my own fieldwork experiences demonstrates that the binary framing of online/offline community and social networks are somewhat superfluous and that the supposed lack of authenticity of online experiences is framed upon archaic definitions.

Despite the commonly used online acronym 'RL' (Real Life), Annette Markham suggests that this term does not actually mean that CMC interactions are 'not real' and are inauthentic or lacking genuine sentiments (1998:115). Rather, it is used to denote "that which is experienced offline" (1998:115). In her study of online mailing lists, internet experiences were as lived and experienced as any offline experiences. She similarly dismisses the term 'virtual', defined as something *nearly real,* to describe the internet since it also implicates these false binary connotations (2998:116).

The 'realness' of online communities has also been questioned in early CMC research. However, several scholars have written about community in ways that can be applied to online group interaction. While intended to be a treatise on nationalism and not cyberspace, Benedict Anderson, in his concept of the *imagined community,* posits that communities are actually imagined entities, since members of a community such as a nation will never actually meet one another, but rather "in the minds of each [member] lives the image of their communion" (Anderson 1983:15). Anthony Cohen (1985) has written about community as a symbolic construct of flexible but conglomerated codes and values that is able to "infuse its culture with vitality, and to construct a symbolic community which provides meaning and identity" (1985:9) to its members. In addition, James Carey notes that the words 'communication' and 'community' share similar etymological roods, underlining the importance and interdependence of the two (Carey 1989).

Howard Rheingold expands on this intersection with his definition of a cybercommunity as being "social aggregations that emerge from the [internet] when enough people carry on…public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling,

to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace (1993:5). Using these philosophies, CMC based groups can be said to be consisting of 'communities' since they are given meaning by their participants through their experiences, whether through an imagined shared affinity, or through a spatial metaphor of connected machines.

For these reasons, I challenge the assumption that offline and online social networks are mutually exclusive as well as the distinction between real and virtual communities. Rather, the participants I interviewed used modern online social networking practices to compliment disclosed RL identities and relationships.

Early Participant Experiences

Participants usually first mentioned their online experiences when recounting initial curiosity over sexuality in youth. Due to the perceived anonymity and convenience of online interactions, most informants noted that they began to seek out queer companionship over mediums such as Internet Relay Chat (IRC) in the 1990s and more recently, dating sites. Various participants commented on the ease which they employed these mediums to establish new relationships:

> Its how everyone makes contact. [The internet] made it really easy for me. For my generation.
> (Alejandro)

> How else [other than online] are you going to meet people? If you're underage, you're not going out...
> (Min)

> ...it's the only means that I used until I found more people who knew other people. Otherwise it's hard to just meet up with someone and be like, hi, I'm gay, let's be friends.
> (Mike)

Participants also noted that that online contact eventually moved into Real Life. Kevin

explained that as he established more relationships offline, he became less reliant on

online contact:

> From the first day, I didn't really know that many gay people in person at all. I
> met one of my very few gay friends online, and through them I slowly expanded
> my network. And I met more people online so that expanded my network more.
> People who go online are looking to meet in person. I honestly doubt that anyone
> is wanting to chat online for no other reason.

The motivations of meeting people off the internet varied. Some men suggested

that internet encounters were often sexually motivated. Mike commented:

> The whole idea [of going online] is really sexual though. Mostly driven through
> lust or physical attraction. Until you get into a deep conversation and find out
> similar interests, it's all about sex. That's how it usually happens.

However, Kevin pointed out that he did not engage in the practice of actively seeking out

sexual partners, and only reciprocated:

> I don't look for sex. They may ask me, and if I feel like it then maybe I may do it.
> They're usually pretty direct.

Women stated that they were interested in 'dating' or were 'curious' but none

mentioned sexual encounters as a motivation for online contact. According to Kim,

meetings could be an awkward experience:

> [meeting off the internet] in high school was weird. I think for two girls it's
> different too, because we grow up waiting for the guy to make the first move. So
> you have two girls who just sit there staring at each other. Yeah, real exciting
> stuff. People get more normal in university but at first, no one knows what
> they're doing.

Despite wide-spread media coverage concerning the dangers of meeting strangers off the

internet, this did not seem to be a great factor of concern. Only Kim mentioned arranging

meetings in a public place as a precaution. However, one male participant recounted an

experience with that resulted in sexual assault:

> One guy I met up was the one that took things too far. He was like 29-30 and I
> think I was still 17…I brought this guy to my house and I guess I was naïve
> because I thought that if you told a guy you just wanted to make out or wanted to
> fool around, that's it. They wouldn't push you. But this guy just didn't care what
> I had to say… and I was so upset I didn't hook up anymore…I blocked everyone
> from my MSN who was gay, and I didn't go online [to hook up] for another year.

While I was appalled at hearing this account, I was particularly concerned upon

hearing that he did not report the incident due to his reluctance about both 'coming out'

as gay to family, friends and authorities as well as having to reveal his (self-described)

'promiscuous' activities online. I wonder whether online predators take these factors into

account and target those individuals who are less likely to report them. Although this

example of assault appears to be rare, his expression of surprise at the incident as well the

casual attitudes of other participants leaves me concerned that young people, and

particularly young men, may not be taking adequate safety precautions when navigating

these offline encounters.

Self-Representation online

> Did I tell you this one time…I met up with this guy, younger by a year and he
> looked nothing like his pictures. Like, okay he did, but uglier. You know how
> you can have angles and stuff that make yourself look good? Yeah. He looked
> horrible. So I texted my friend, and said call me now in Chinese! So I just talked
> to her about random shit. And I told the guy that it was my mom, I have to go
> home!
> (Alejandro)

Scholars have established in offline situations that self-disclosure and self-presentation are important aspects in developing relationships (Taylor and Altman 1987) and are especially important during the initial stages of contact, since this provides cues as to whether that relationship is worth pursuing (Derlega et al 1987). However, this desire to present the ideal self is tempered by the need to present one's 'true' self in order that the individual feel 'understood'. This reconciliation of impression management and authenticity operate to control the level and 'correctness' of self-disclosure (Ellison et al. 2006).

Excluding instances where there is intentional misrepresentation, or when a congruent offline/online identity can be inconsequential (such fantasy based role-playing games), online presentation of the self follows the offline model of tension between image control and disclosure (Ellison 2006). However, due to the asynchronous nature of CMC, online presentation allows for a more sophisticated level of image manipulation since users are able to highlight aspects of personality, intelligence and physical appearance that others will find most attractive through self-censorship. In this way, expressions of the self are 'given' more so than 'given off' by individuals (Ellison 2006:418).

In a study of internet dating, Ellison et al. (2006) concluded that while the majority of people claim to be truthful in their profiles, complaints about fabrication from *others*, such as the physical discrepancies in Alejandro's date, were common. However, they suggest that this can be explained in several ways. Firstly, users may present an ideal self which they hope to become in the future. For example, a person who enjoys scuba diving but has not actually done this in many years may still list it as a favourite activity

hoping to take it up again. Secondly, users may see themselves in a 'foggy mirror', viewing themselves in a more positive light than others. In this way, textual self-disclosure reveals discrepancies between what the poster and reader see. In addition, people may have different interpretations of textual information provided. For example, the parameters of an 'average' body type may vary widely according to each user. These unintentional and 'idealized truths' may explain how online interactions have acquired a reputation for subterfuge.

Social Networking Sites (SNSs): Facebook and Friending patterns

Social networking sites (SNSs) where users "write themselves into being" (boyd 2008:13) demonstrate this potential for image management and online identity performance. The primary purpose of using SNSs is the engagement of communication for its own sake (boyd 2008; Pew Research Center for the People & the Press 2007) with others on the network and with friends[8] who also use the SNS. These applications allow users to post profiles that typically consist of personal information such as age, education level, interests, religion, location and relationship status as well as pictures, videos, and various allegiances to causes and celebrities. SNSs also typically provide various methods in which users may interact with one another through public postings, private messaging, forums and games. Various privacy controls allow users to maintain a public, private or semi-private account.

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[8] 'Friend' is the term used by SNSs such as Facebook, MySpace and Friendster to indicate an individual on one's public contact list. In offline terms, a more appropriate term may be "acquaintance" (Thelwall. 2006).

Different SNSs usually have varying cultures to reflect their roots. For example, MySpace began as a music interest and promotion site, LiveJournal is primarily a blogging tool, Asian Avenue is for those of Asian descent and Downelink caters to gays and lesbians. However, the most popular SNS among participants was Facebook, with all participants maintaining a profile. This particular SNS began as a college project and its users are still predominantly college educated (boyd, 2007; 2008).

The literature demonstrates that most Facebook interaction occurs between students at the same college (Golder, Wilkinson, & Huberman, 2007) and that its users employ Facebook primarily to cement and maintain offline contacts (Ellison et al. 2006). While there is little data pertaining to its users who have finished college, those informants who have graduated noted that they apply this same strategy of cementing and maintaining relationships via Facebook with new offline contacts rather than using it to seek out new relationships.

Mia expressed this preference for offline contacts and concern over strangers attempting to 'friend' her:

> I usually only add people I know in real life. I mean, if a girl sends a message... and if I like her profile, then I'll message them first. But random dudes trying to add me and who use Facebook as a dating service, I don't add.

I suspect that Mia, who glamour models in her free time and regularly uses photographs from her portfolio as her profile picture, likely incurs more requests from 'random dudes' than most women. While she did not specify if the 'girls' trying to 'friend' her were romantic interests, it seems that her friending strategy is to set up her profile to be as attractive as possible to a wide audience and then weed out requests according to her preferences.

In contrast to more casual users of SNSs, other informants such as Keana and Emmett were prolific internet users with exceptionally visible online presences. These individuals maintained profiles on several SNSs (Keana used Facebook, MySpace, and Asian Avenue. Emmett used Facebook, MySpace, Friendster, and Asian Avenue) as well as blog oriented SNSs (Emmett and Keana preferred Xanga and LiveJournal respectively), dating sites and chat rooms (Emmett used gay.com, and downelink.com, while Keana used downelink.com). Keana also spent time at the computer playing MMORGs. Contrary to more casual user patterns, Keana and Emmett said that they frequently initiated and reciprocated contact with people they did not know offline and the number of Facebook friends they had- over 800 each at the time of research- indicate this pattern of friending.

Online Privacy Concerns

> I found out that my dad was actually reading my Facebook, looking at my pictures and stuff. This is back when I had an open profile. And you know how there's the 'interested in' [gender] part? I think I said 'women' at the time. Then I get this phone call, and oh my god, its my dad asking me, 'are you one of the gays?'
> (Mia)

Jeff Howe describes the spirit of SNSs as independent, immediate and rebellious (2005: 218)- a medium that seemingly allows users the freedom to communicate spontaneously and in a world away from the consequences of public knowledge. However, Susan Barnes (2006) more accurately describes SNSs as "a central repository of personal information... [whose] archives are persistent and cumulative".

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However, Susan Barnes (2006) more accurately describes SNSs as "a central repository

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She suggests that the blurring of private and public spaces on the internet is complicated by the use of spatial metaphors and face-to-face descriptions in discourse about the internet (for example, cyberspace, rooms, getting online, chatting, meeting) by contributing to the perception that "online messages are exchanged through private interpersonal exchanges rather than a public system that is accessible by others" (2004:206). CMC may further contribute to the illusion of privacy since people cannot physically see others reading their conversations and may assume that their dialogues involve fewer readers or a different audience than in reality. Online in general, the number of non-contributing 'lurkers' outnumbers visible contributors by far, concealing the true nature and numbers of readers (Barnes 2004:207).

As Mia realized with her open Facebook profile, posting personal information online makes it available to anyone savvy enough to access the site. While she had no problems with revealing her sexual orientation to her 'friends' and peers on Facebook, she did not intend for others such as certain family members to be viewing her page. When I asked why she (at first) chose to keep a public profile, she gave the response, "What's the point of having Facebook if people can't see you?" This tension between the desire for privacy and self-promotion seem to be the guiding factors in deciding if or what parts a blog or SNS profile is accessible and to whom.

In addition to this oversight in accessibility, overlaps between Real Life and online relationships and activities may present various opportunities for being 'found out'. For example, Kevin was outed when his sister recognized a gay man she knew on her brother's instant messenger list and inquired to confirm her suspicions.

Reasons for the proliferation of CMC

I suggest that there are several reasons for the popularity of CMC among participants for use in social networking. Firstly, of the seven informants living independently from their families, only one had a land-line telephone; Instead, individuals chose to use mobile phones and/or voice-over internet protocols as communication tools. The costs associated with extended cell phone conversations may have been a deterrent to extensive phone usage. Secondly, since many participants spent the majority of their time in front a computer for school or work, CMC provides a convenient venue for interacting with others during breaks from other desktop duties. Finally, the non-invasive nature of CMC facilitates both synchronous and asynchronous communication while allowing for the interruptions of real life and work. For example, users can perform work-related tasks on their computers while entering text into an instant messaging chat window intermittently. Users are able then able to control the speed at which the conversation progresses.

The high levels of education and familial socio-economic statuses of participants also likely contributed to the initial use of computers and the internet, particularly during the 1990s when online social mediums were not ubiquitous. These participants likely had greater access to computers and the technological knowledge to encourage their use and integration into everyday life.

Conclusion

The participants in this project employed computer mediated communication to establish and maintain social connections in a variety of ways. Despite early protests that

corporeal facets of identity such as ethnicity or sexuality would have no place in a disembodied internet, these aspects have become important factors in online community building and social networking online. The nature of the modern internet in fact encourages the blurred boundaries between offline/online activities through such diverse mediums as blogging, dating websites, gaming and social networking sites. Informants used these to as a means to reinforce and supplement offline connections as well as to form new connections. Importantly, for many informants the internet acted as a 'gateway' into forming connections with other gay individuals.

CMC mediums allow for self-representation of online identity to be manipulated and controlled through textual self-censorship and promotion while conversely presenting privacy concerns for users. I suggest that these privacy issues usually stem from in the lack of control or insight one has in regards to what information is accessible and to whom. Despite these concerns, the end goal of CMC is ultimately to connect and interact with others in an online environment. The next chapter will explore issues social networking in the corporeal form through a discussion of space and place.

Chapter 5: Queer and Asian Spaces

Place is generally known as a location that is formed, but whose 'meaning-potential' has not yet been developed, while space is a place that is occupied, either cognitively or physically and given meaning through practices (Desert 1997:20; Leap 1999:7). In this chapter I will discuss how queer and racialized space is created in a heteronormative and largely white-Anglophone landscape. The first half of this chapter consists of a brief literature review of relevant theories on space and place formation and the second half discusses how informants use spaces to enact identity and create community.

Queer Minorities and Landscapes

Recent scholars have been critical of a previous focus in queer geography on territoriality and visibility, noting that these factors are over emphasized (Podmore 2001; Peace 2002) and that this model renders individuals such as women, minorities and those who do not participant in the commercial or political queer scene invisible. The result of this focus has been that certain minorities have a history of being written out of queer geography.

For example, Castells has suggested that women do not posses the innate need experienced by men to claim and possess space (1983) while Knopp (1990) has suggested that women were less likely to have the financial means to concentrate homes in a neighbourhood and were less likely to achieve local political power. However, 'lesbian landscapes' (Valentine 1993) mean more than just the appropriation of space, but rather include "complex time-space relations where different places [take] on different

meanings over time" (Brown et al. 2007:7). In order to understand the ways in which gay

women utilize space and make themselves known to each other, researchers must

(re)integrate the domestic sphere into interpretations of urban space as well as look into

social networks and patterns of participation (Brown et all 2007:7; Podmore 2001).

For Asian queers, this concept may also be relevant given the limited resources

and space available to ethnic minorities. With the exception of the Asian Canadian AIDS

services (ACAS) office, no explicitly gay Asian space in Toronto exists as a permanent

place of congregation. Like women's spaces, temporary gay Asian spaces are often

created against a 'mainstream' background, dismantled and then created again as needed.

Gender and Public/Private Spaces

Like the deconstruction of territoriality in geography, scholars also have been

successful at deconstructing the binary ideas of public and private spaces that are

encoded in law and popular discourse (Duncan 1996: 128). The ideal private arena is

conflated with ideals such as the domestic, the embodied, the natural, the family,

intimacy, reproduction and the feminine. In contrast, the public is associated with the

disembodied, the cultural, rationality, public discourse, citizenship, the state and the

masculine (Duncan 1996:128). Nancy Duncan suggests that the binary distinction

between public and private is used to "construct, control, discipline, confine, exclude and

suppress gender and sexual difference preserving traditional patriarchal and heterosexist

power structures" (1996:128). However, public and private spaces are constructed, fluid

and site-specific, subject to reclassification and contestation (Ingram 1997:27).

My fieldwork both confirms and challenges this duality. Most of the male spaces I

visited were of a public nature and conversely, most of the female spaces were private

and I attended by invitation. In addition, despite a search by Ingram, Bouthilette and

Retter to find authors who challenged the binary idea of "women forging communality in

space and men having sex in it" (Ingram et al. 1997:10), most of the contributors to their

anthology instead corroborated this dichotomy. However, I agree with these editors that

this is not because women are innately more sexually repressed or because men have no

interest in community formation, but rather because sex and desire are still largely

(mostly) associated with maleness while community is still (mostly) associated with the

female; this is subsequently reproduced by both participants and authors (Ingram et al.

1997:10).

Sexuality and Race in Space

     The heteronormative aspects of society leave most people ignorant of how it

pervades space (Myslik 1996:159). The normalization of heterosexuality renders

heterosexuality in public spaces unacceptable, often leaving deviation of this norm to

private spheres (Duncan 1996:137; Valentine 1993). Herek (1986) quotes Gill Valentine

(1993:396):

> [it is] based on the *false* premise that heterosexuality is also defined by private
> sexual acts and is not expressed in the public arena… this therefore highlights the
> error of drawing a simple polar distinction between public and private activities,
> for heterosexuality is clearly the dominant sexuality in most everyday
> environments, not just private spaces, with all interactions taking place between
> sexed actors.

Duncan (1996: 138) also notes that,

Naturalizing one's own heterosexuality means imposing one's own inability to see him or herself as Other on one's surroundings. Failing to notice your own difference as heterosexual is an act with significance. It leads to the heterosexing of space.

Like Judith Butler's claim that gender is created through the stylized and repeated acts of the body within a regulatory framework (1990:33), the heterosexing of space is made possible through performative acts normalized through repetition and regulation (Bell et al. 1994; Bell and Valentine 1995). These include such various displays such as advertisements, images of 'nuclear' and heterosexual couples, music, and acts such as holding hands on a public street (Valentine 1993). The appearance of a same-sex couple attempting to produce their own equivalent acts is conversely abnormal. While a heterosexual couple embracing on a TTC bus would generally not provoke comment, Phil and his boyfriend Tim discovered that this act could be interpreted as 'flaunting' and subsequently generate admonishment from some riders about what constitutes appropriate public behaviour.

Similarly, the use of the term 'ethnic' to describe non-white ethnicities would logically dictate that whites, and traditionally privileged WASPs in particular, have no ethnicities at all. Peggy McIntosh suggests that whites are hesitant to unpack this 'invisible backpack' (1998) of privilege by acknowledging white dominance in society and space. While non-minorities regularly learn about how racism puts others at a disadvantage, the collorary idea of white privilege in society is more difficult to recognize and acknowledge (McIntosh1998:147-148). Like the heteronormative dominance of space in Canada, white privilege allows little space for deviation from the 'normal' in visible arenas such as politics and advertising.

'Safe' Spaces in Toronto

For most visitors to the city, the most obvious queering of space in Toronto is the neighbourhood of Church and Wellesley whose boundaries are very loosely defined by Bloor St. to the north, Carlton St. to the south, and Yonge St. and Jarvis St to the west and east. An area most visibly associated with Asian culture is Chinatown[9], an area of businesses and homes that surround the Dundas St. and Spadina Ave. intersection.

Mark Casey suggests that commercial gay spaces in urban centers function to "[provide] places of shelter from a hostile and violent heteronormalized society and [to provide] sites of consumption, community and political action" (2007:125). Similarly, Chinatowns in North America have historically been spaces in which Chinese migrants congregated by choice or coercion in response to hostility from the host nation (Anderson 1987). However, attesting in part to the flexibility of space construction, younger queer Asians today do not generally consider either of these areas to be essential areas to frequent and both of these locations are seeing a decline in youth participation (DeMara 2006; Margulis1992). While I believe that the need to create safe spaces is still relevant and I will discuss examples of this phenomenon, the method of production and use of space is changing to encompass more than such static territoriality.

Women and Sexual Spaces

Sarah was a member of the Toronto Women's Bathhouse Committee (TWBC) and invited me to attend Pussy Palace, an irregularly held event for women at a men's bathhouse. I had never attended a bath before, and Sarah was helpful in providing me

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[9] Now increasingly associated with a Sino-Vietnamese presence as opposed to the Chinese as its name would suggest. See Luk and Phan 2005; Phan and Luk 2008

with a set of instructions: I should wear 'something hot' but that I was still comfortable with, that I should be prepared to see her having sex in public, and she also suggested that I bring marijuana because it was a dry event. As an attendee in a both research position and as someone in a monogamous relationship, I decided on a modest outfit of a tank top and a skirt and to bring only a of bottle water to avoid being evicted from the premises.

I arrived at Pussy Palace fairly early as Sarah had suggested with two companions. I had met Janice, a woman in her thirties of Chinese descent, at a women's sexuality workshop earlier in the summer. She had approached me saying that she was excited to meet another Asian at these workshops, which normally had a very small number of minority women present. With somewhat limited success, Janice was looking to find an Asian lesbian 'crew' with whom to socialize after her recent divorce from her husband of seven years. We set out to the bathhouse with her friend Marla, a Caucasian 'veteran' who had attended many past events. After paying our entrance fees behind large barred doors, a volunteer gave us a tour of the four-story Victorian house. The house was outfitted with saunas, a pool, locker rooms and private rooms. Volunteers working at the bath provided various 'services' such as lap dances, Polaroid pornography pictures, massages, showers and other activities designed to encourage sexual interaction. I found that while the narrow corridors, the dim lighting, and the mirrored ceilings made the space disorienting to navigate, the labyrinthine setup was conducive to random encounters with potential partners. After walking about, the pool deck at the back of the house appeared to be the place for non-sexual socializing and my companions and I made this our 'home base' for most of the evening.

The Pussy Palace is a political project designed to 'reclaim raunch' and challenge

ideas about gender and sex (Nash and Bain 2007:49). The organizers of the event,

> ...Take issue with what they regard as the deleterious impact of a particularly inflexible and restrictive version of lesbian feminist ideologies on the ability of women, and lesbians in particular, to experience the full range of sexual and gender expression...the committee seeks to undo the perceived 'damage' wrought by these ideologies through the 'queering' of spaces... (Nash and Bain 2007:49).

The TWBC uses the word 'queer' as opposed to 'lesbian' to express these ideals of

inclusiveness and subjective identities as well as the de-sexualization they see in lesbian

feminism. Catherine Nash and Alison Bain (2007:51) suggest that by appropriating gay

male space and sexual norms of casual anonymous sex, Pussy Palace effectively

challenges the 'lesbian feminist ideologies' that fix gendered and sexualized selves.

However, the TWBC's goals, while laudable, were difficult to impose in practice.

One woman by the pool explained that while Pussy Palace used to be much more

'hardcore' to compete with gay men by proving that women could also engage in raunchy

casual sex, she stressed that women were very different from gay men; while women

appropriated a traditionally male space and its sexual activities, 'fun' social activities

such as games were needed to get people in the mood. Other discussions by the poolside

also highlighted the perceived essential differences between men's and women's

sexuality, with most of these involving a perception of higher sophistication among

women. Marla explained: "Men's baths are all about sex. Suck me, fuck me. There's no

talking, except between friends, but women are social creatures".

The gendering of individuals in a space designated to be for 'women' but that

included both male-to-female and female-to-male transsexual participants also seemed to

be problematic. Despite emphatic instructions by the doorwoman to respect any

transpeople present, areas seemed to suspiciously empty whenever a nude transperson appeared and transphobia was openly expressed. Nash and Bain 2007 (2007:57) note that in order to create a genuine 'queer space' espoused by the committee, desire must be multi-directional and multi-faceted. However, it was the traditional construction of lesbian desire by biologically female women that was most prevalent.

Attempts at inclusiveness also seemed to falter significantly in terms of ethnic diversity. The same woman who suggested that the event was an improved female-version of male bathhouse activity was proud to say that they had mostly eradicated the 'tension' between ethnicities that had been present at former events. However, if ethnic tensions at Pussy Palace had been eradicated, it appeared that this was only because non-white women were notably lacking in attendance. Despite Janice's enthusiastic search for other Asians at the bath, the vast majority of patrons appeared to be white. In a later conversation with Sarah, she confirmed that the lack of ethnic diversity was a cause of concern:

> I think there are many reasons for that and it's something that needs to be addressed. There may be things like cultural taboos with hygiene, or perceptions that they might not be welcomed at the baths. They may view it as a place that they will not be comfortable in, that everyone else will be white...

In the past, the TWBC had organized a successful event called The Sugar Shack to provide a space specifically for women and trans people of colour. Sarah explained that attendance was high at this event and that it demonstrated that women of colour were interested in attending bathhouses given the right circumstances. However, some individuals ironically protested the exclusive nature of the space, to which she argued:

> I've got this feeling that these are probably the same people who object to race clubs at school and try to get restaurants to take down signs they can't read. I just

> want to smack them....you go eat your burgers at Harvey's and drink your beer and speak your English but whenever we want to our own party its still got to be about you...

Sarah hoped for another Sugar Shack event, but there were no plans for a sequel at the time of the interview.

Other attempts at inclusiveness at Pussy Palace were ironically restrictive. While Marla pointed out that anonymous sexual activity and nudity functioned to erase socio-economic divisions normally found in society, the twenty-dollar entrance fee suggested that in practice the space was inaccessible to lower-class women. I propose that for women who embody the 'homonormative' standards espoused by white middle-class biologically female lesbians, Pussy Palace is indeed a safe space in which to explore sexuality and identity in a society that otherwise is restrictive in these regards. However, the TWBC, while commendably attempting to challenge the essentialist identities traditionally assigned to lesbian women through the 'queering' of space, may unintentionally be reproducing in part what it seeks to dismantle.

Men and Community Spaces

Throughout my interviews, several informants had mentioned their past participation in Queer Asian Youth (QAY), an initiative by the Asian Community AIDS Services to provide safe social spaces for gay, lesbian and queer Asians aged twenty-five and under to reduce rates of HIV infection among youth through peer support. Although I was in contact with the organization, my request to attend their events and meetings was refused due to privacy concerns. However, participants who had been involved in QAY were willing to share their insights with me as well as put me in contact with other people

with ties to the organization. I was also able to visit the building when meetings were not

in session.

The ACAS office is located on the first floor of a high-rise apartment building in

Toronto's gay village. People are buzzed in and greeted at a reception area in front of an

office and counseling rooms. QAY 'meetings' take place in a lounge resembling a living

room with the space set up to suggest a private home-like atmosphere. The room is filled

with couches, artwork and posters as well as a television and sound system. Social events

sponsored by QAY include movie nights, Karaoke parties, dances, and bubble tea

lounges with the purpose of helping young people get to know each other in a supportive

environment (QAY 2008). Although QAY is not specifically a support group, facilitators

lead discussions about issues relevant to queer Asian youth and provide counseling and

mentoring services.

Kevin spoke positively about the environment:

> They try to make everyone comfortable. Facilitators will get people to talk to
> each other and get to know each other. And its usually fun stuff, like we play
> Cranium or whatever depending on the night... I got to know some of the other
> people and eventually hung out with some of them outside the sessions too.

Phil explained why he became involved with the group:

> ...I didn't know anybody that was gay, so maybe I could learn more about the
> culture. It was more people I could relate to. So then I started going to more of
> their sessions, parties, events. I think QAY is a really strong tool just because, not
> only are we similar in that fact that we're gay. It's also the fact that we're Asian.
> There are more similarities...

Valentine and Skelton (2003:853) suggest that since most young people grow up

in heterosexual families and are expected to emulate heterosexual patterns of family

formation, such spaces and support groups help to foster alternative frameworks of

identity, social allegiances and support. Socializing with other people who face similar issues and challenges helps to build confidence and skills to deal with personal challenges unique to the subset of the group (Valentine and Skelton 2003:853).

One of QAY's mandates is to reduce HIV transmission among youth. Valentine and Skelton (2003) write that gay support groups provide valuable resources specifically for underage teenagers and young men to deal with social pressures associated with the commercial bar scene which they will likely be introduced to or are currently beginning to navigate. Rivers and Duncan (2002) suggest that since the sexually charged nature of gay nightlife places a premium on youthful bodies, young men are more prone to sexual advances and may lack the experience and self-esteem to say 'no' and to employ safer sex practices (Rivers 2001; Rivers and Duncan 2002 as quoted by Valentine and Skelton 2003:857). The use of drugs and alcohol at parties can be health hazards unto themselves, but inebriants also affect judgment that could potentially lead to risky behaviour (Valentine and Skelton 2003:858). In addition, men who may feel that they do not 'fit in' with heterocentric environments may feel more pressure to conform to social pressures among gay peers (Valentine and Skelton 2003:857). Given these factors, young people are better equipped to handle drug taking and sexual coercion if given the opportunity to explore issues of sexuality and identity in safe spaces away from the social pressures of the commercial gay scene (Valentine and Skelton 2003).

Despite efforts by QAY organizers to make the space inviting to women, members are predominantly male. The focus on commonality and belonging as well as the general theme of HIV prevention likely contributes to a male dominance over an ostensibly multi-gendered space. Phil explained:

> They try really hard to get females. But its mostly men. One of the facilitators was a lesbian but there were very few girls there in general...I just feel that girls are lot stronger at this point. They don't really need a group to self-identify with.

Cedric suggested a cyclic reason why women did not participate to the extent of men:

> [discussions are] about stuff that happens to everyone. We'd talk about things and even though it's not meant to be just for guys, some of it ends up being very gender specific. So then the girls are less interested and less likely to come.

Another notable aspect of QAY is its transitory nature as participants outgrow the space and new members appropriate it. Phil eventually realized that at twenty-three, he was starting to feel out of sync with the group:

> ...As the name says, it's for Asian *youth*, and half of them were in high school and the start of university. So I felt like there was a huge gap between us. I remember one specific time when these 13 year olds and 14 year olds came and it really hit me, like, wow, I think I'm too old for this group. And it's not my space anymore. It's theirs.

Kevin also expressed how his frustration with what he perceived were its shortcomings after spending a couple of years as a participant:

> [QAY] can get incestuous after a while because everyone knows each other and people end up dating each other. Towards the end, I just wanted to party and live this glamourous life that I saw other people having instead of talking about what it felt like to be gay with high school people...

The temporary aspect of QAY allows (male) youth who desire social contact and support from their peers to easily find a space to call their own, and then to leave it when they are ready or when they move out of the age demographic. However, like Pussy Palace, its official goals of inclusiveness seem to fail at creating an equally safe space for all its intended patrons- namely for young men *and* women.

<u>Aboard the Asian Xpress</u>

Despite their 'outgrowing' of QAY, Kevin, Phil and Cedric maintained their

connection to gay Asian peers both in the program and outside of it through commercial

venues. They regularly brought me along to Asian Xpress (AX), a monthly gay Asian

party at a mainstream gay nightclub in the village, which aside from ACAS, is the only

example of "Asian-ing" queer space available in the city. I felt apprehensive in the

beginning about being one of the only females in a space intended for men and I

wondered if the general crowd would consider my presence intrusive. However, I

eventually learned that people were the most relaxed and jovial at 'party' spaces and that

these were the most enjoyable and easiest places to meet people. AX became one of the

best places to initiate and solidify many of my contact relationships. I found myself

looking forward to the monthly parties later in the summer since it was guaranteed that

there would be acquaintances there with whom to socialize.

Phil explained the appeal in the space:

> I like [AX] because it's like QAY sort of in that you get to know the regulars, and
> you feel like you fit in, only its much more fun. I don't like to go clubbing
> anymore much, but when I do it's usually at AX... At other clubs sometimes you
> get suspicious of people's intentions, or if people are ignoring you, whereas when
> you go to something like this, you know everyone is cool.

Other informants also cited the comfort level associated with being at AX as one

of its appeals. Although I still suspect that some patrons may have preferred it to be more

'exclusive' to its target market, I never experienced any open hostility to my presence.

As far as I could tell, unwanted patrons such as certain rice queens were simply ignored.

Emmett, who was a regular at the parties, expressed little sympathy for these individuals:

Obviously, if you are looking for an Asian guy, there's always someone to hit on at AX, so lots of rice queens show up...usually [they are] standing up against the wall and they aren't talking to anyone, not dancing, they're just staring and its *so* annoying.

Although Emmett himself was white and therefore did not fit one of the unofficial 'entrance criterion', he demonstrated that ethnicity alone did not determine acceptance at AX. Rather a rapport with others present and a willingness to participate and contribute to the scene (as opposed to 'staring') played a part in how much one could potentially be welcomed into the space. I suspect that my own willingness to participant in activities such as dancing, drinking and gossip, no matter how frivolous, contributed to my own comfort level and rapport with patrons. I do not know whether the 'other' rice queens whom Emmett spoke of in fact wanted to be participants at all or whether they were simply content to stay on the sidelines to meet a partner, but they validated their perceived status as 'not-belonging' in the space through their actions of not mingling and congregating together at the back of the room.

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed various ways in which through the awareness of difference and dominance, gay and racialized space is created. The need to create 'safe' and separate places is due to the fact that places in the city maintain a heteronormative and white-privileged atmosphere- something that much of the general population is unaware of and thus contributes to. Despite the inclusive goals of some of these spaces as a response to exclusion, there still remain boundaries within these that isolate or exclude those who do not fit the new standards of normativity. However, the questions of who belongs, who is welcomed, and who is rejected or isolated in certain spaces is

subject to negotiation. As seen in the last example of a gay Asian bar night, these

boundaries are not as always as defined or static as they appears at first glance.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This thesis is a collection of ideas and concepts that are both broad in scope and provide a heterogeneous representation of the experiences of a group of young gay/queer Asian Canadians. However, I hope that these diverse topics have conveyed a sense of how sexuality and ethnicity are entwined in the life experiences of a set of individuals whose main point of connection to each other is through a counter normative expression of desire and through a visual presentation of ethnic difference.

To return to Dana Takagi's question at the beginning of this thesis of how to add the queer to the racial, we should consider how ethnicity and sexuality are related as well as how they are different. Although both 'being gay' and 'being Asian' can be said to be social constructions of categories rather that essential features of identity, this text has demonstrated that sexuality is "performed, acted out, and produced, often in individual routines, whereas the [ethnicity] tends to be more obviously "written" on the body" (Tagaki 2004:356). People who are both queer/gay and Asian can be said to have more control over the interpretation of the former by means of disclosure as well as choices in behaviour modification. Many participants do attempt to 'pass' as heterosexual in various scenarios while presenting different aspects of themselves in different company. In contrast, ethnic minorities often have no control over how they are seen by the world since difference is more obviously inscribed through the ascribed physical characteristics or 'race'. Being queer and being Asian can thus be separated if one so chooses.

Sex and ethnicity however, are also related in complicated and binary ways. For one, there is the connection between 'race' and desire and desirability in the sexual economy and the implications of these connections. Nagel writes (2003:1):

Ethnicity and sexuality join together to form a barrier to hold some people in and keep others out, to define who is pure and who is impure, to shape our view of ourselves and others, to fashion feelings of sexual desire and notions of sexual desirability, to provide us with seemingly "natural" sexual references for some partners and "intuitive" aversions to others...

In a society that gives privileges of assumed normalcy to 'white' individuals, the inability to construct and manipulate ethnic codes 'written' onto the body renders minorities as sexual Others.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

I may have kids one day, but I'll still be polyamourous and [the child's] family will be poly...instead of a mommy and daddy they'll have lots of aunties and uncles.
        (Sarah)

At Spadina and Bloor there's this supermarket, there's this old, fat, bald guy. And I know one day I'm going to end up working the midnight shift at some supermarket- fat, ugly and single. That's my ultimate nightmare.
        (Cedric)

In taking life histories during fieldwork interviews, I usually concluded the sessions by encouraging participants to look ahead in the timeline by posing the question, 'where do you see yourself in the future?" This question allowed for a large degree of speculation and produced a variety of answers. Some people, like Sarah, expressed a desire for a family in various forms ranging from the traditional nuclear unit to the wholly unconventional. Others like Cedric alluded to the uncertain nature of the future by referring to fears of being alone or of personal failure. Given the transitory stage of their lives at present, it would be of interest to follow up on how this group of individuals fares in the near or distant future- whether their goals were fulfilled, or if their outlooks on the various topics discussed in this thesis evolve. While this project is unique in providing a

window into the experiences of young adults, an alternate study using an older subject group would also be of interest to elucidate concerns of a more established group of individuals.

The specific demographics of this group also highlight other limitations. This study was conducted with a group of individuals who were either born in Canada or have settled in the country for an extended period of time. As such, all of the individuals were well-integrated into Canadian society and were fluent in English and in most cases, a second language. To extrapolate from research conducted in Australia, Ridge et al. (1999) have found significant disconnects in the experiences between assimilated Asian migrants and those who are unable or unwilling to integrate into to their new homelands. Although this thesis provides a sound base for the experiences of established migrant and native born Asian-Canadians, the cultural experiences of more recent migrants and those who have retained a closer connection to their (ancestral) homelands may offer a different view into the connections between ethnicity and sexuality.

In my initial intention to work with both men and women, I had hoped to have a broad range of experiences from which to draw for this text. I believe that one of the strengths of this study has been the ability to compare the very different experiences of men and women to see illuminate how gender affects issues of identity. As I have hopefully demonstrated, being male or female is one the determining factors of difference in the experiences of my participants. In this respect, I would be interested in further research that focuses on men or women separately in order to provide a more comprehensive and in depth-study.

Lastly, expanding on my broad subject inclusion criteria, a further limitation is the pan-ethnic aspect of this thesis. Although I maintain that this is a relevant method of exploring identity in a context where nationality takes a backseat to visceral categories of 'race', there exists an unquestionable amount of heterogeneity both within and between cultures. Future lines of investigation may take a more in-depth look at migrants or their descendants from a specific geographical area.

Implications of this study

I am aware of the fact that most academic theses are relegated to library stacks after completion and are usually only of interest to a very specific group of academics. And while this short master's thesis cannot be considered to be a piece of ground breaking literature, I hope that it has contributed to the understanding of the some of the relevant issues concerning young gay Asian Canadians- a topic that I believe would be of interest both to the academic community and Canadians in general. Currently, 58% of the 1.8 million immigrants who immigrated to Canada between 1991 and 2001 arrived from Asia and this large influx of migrants must be maintained in the future to support Canada's low birth rate (Statistics Canada 2005). An understanding of some of the relevant issues for this growing population would be beneficial to a variety of groups ranging from social policy writers to community groups to formal institutions such as schools and health care centers as well as functioning to form bridges of understanding between cultures.

A Canadian context also provides a unique setting for this study as a nation with an official national agenda of multiculturalism and diversity as well as a reputation for

tolerance for those presenting alternative sexualities. In comparing this official discourse

with the actual experiences of Queer Asian Canadians, both discrepancies and

corroborations with respect to these policies can be seen.

Lastly, in presenting some of the ways in which people are both gay and also

Asian in everyday life, this thesis demonstrates a way in which the controversial topic of

'race and sex' as a whole can be discussed without bifurcation or sensationalized

reporting.

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Use of Human Subjects - Ethics Approval Notice

Principal Investigator: Dr. D. St.Christian
Review Number: 13126S   **Review Date:** March 02, 2007   **Revision Number:**
Protocol Title: Social Networks and Identity Among Gay Asians in the Greater Toronto Area
Department and Institution: Anthropology, University of Western Ontario
Sponsor:
Ethics Approval Date: April 12, 2007   **Expiry Date:** December 31, 2007
Documents Reviewed and Approved: UWO Protocol, Letter of Information and Consent
Documents Received for Information:

This is to notify you that The University of Western Ontario Research Ethics Board for Non-Medical Research Involving Human Subjects (REB) which is organized and operates according to the Tri-Council Policy Statementand the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario has granted full board approval to the above named research study on the approval date noted above.

This approval shall remain valid until the expiry date noted above assuming timely and acceptable responses to the REB's periodic requests for surveillance and monitoring information. If you require an updated approval notice prior to that time you must request it using the UWO Updated Approval Request Form.

During the course of the research, no deviations from, or changes to, the protocol or consent form may be initiated without prior written approval from the REB except when necessary to eliminate immediate hazards to the subject or when the change(s) involve only logistical or administrative aspects of the study (e.g. change of monitor, telephone number). Expedited review of minor change(s) in ongoing studies will be considered. Subjects must receive a copy of the signed information/consent documentation.

Investigators must promptly also report to the REB:
a) changes increasing the risk to the participant(s) and/or affecting significantly the conduct of the study;
b) all adverse and unexpected experiences or events that are both serious and unexpected;
c) new information that may adversely affect the safety of the subjects or the conduct of the study.

If these changes/adverse events require a change to the information/consent documentation, and/or recruitment advertisement, the newly revised information/consent documentation, and/or advertisement, must be submitted to this office for approval.

Members of the REB who are named as investigators in research studies, or declare a conflict of interest, do not participate in discussion related to, nor vote on, such studies when they are presented to the REB.

Chair of REB: Dr. Julie McMullin
Deputy Chair: Susan Hoddinott

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UWO REB Ethics Approval
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