

PUTTING ON WHITE FACE: NAVIGATING WHITENESS IN THE QUEER SOUTHEAST ASIAN
COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

Putting on white face: Navigating whiteness in the queer Southeast Asian community

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In this research study, I engage in the process of autoethnography to make visible the processes by which the marginalization of Southeast Asian queers are produced. The practice of Whiteness, why and how Southeast Asian queers engage with Whiteness and its implications on the queer Southeast Asian community are the main tenets of this study. By exploring these processes of marginalization, a space is created to discuss the ways in which Southeast Asian queers resist racism and colonialism.

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Introduction

Born and raised in Vancouver, British Columbia's inner city, a stone's throw away from the infamous Downtown Eastside, I was witness to and a member of an eclectic and socio-economically diverse community. Being the child of two Vietnamese Boat People, my upbringing experienced a clash of cultures. Living amongst other refugee, immigrant and low-income families provided a sense of safety and comfort for my parents who recently landed on a foreign territory not speaking the language, knowing the culture or expressing any comfort or interest for immersing into the larger community. However, thinking back, perhaps it wasn't the fact they weren't comfortable in the larger community, but rather they were denied access to that space. Reflecting on my experiences now, being a mere baby, but born in the country, I was perhaps granted access to spaces and privileges that my parents were not.

As I grew and changed, so did my neighbourhood. Houses became nicer. The colours of buildings became cleaner and brighter – as did the people. As rents increased, the families I grew up with left and young urban professionals, typically with White identity markers attached to them, moved in. My family, once insiders of the community, is now on the outside looking in. Or were we always outsiders? Outsiders who were forced into enclaves then forced to find ways to remain. Remembered and relearned from an entry found in my journal, this is a story that was often shared with me from my dad.

Over time, I have attached my own experiences and learnings to this story. As a queer man of colour being bombarded by mainstream images of what I should strive for, I quickly realized that I could never be White. I sought refuge in the advertised welcoming and diverse queer community. However, I quickly learned that the queer community has so

many rules, subgroups, and worked on a hierarchy with White hard-bodied men on top. I then turned to my body as a site of control in my quest for perfection and acceptance. However, no matter what level of fitness I attained, how well I dressed or how I spoke, I would hear, “not into Asians.” Seeking approval by the queer community, forced a disgust of my own body upon me and a further disconnect from my Asian identity. A growing discomfort and distaste for other Asian men enraptured me. Then one day, I heard “You’re really good looking for an Asian.” I was ecstatic.

It wasn’t until years later when I reread that experience in my journal that I realized that not only did I have an immense hate for my body, but also an extreme privileging of the White body thus marking my realization that the queer community only has one colour – White.

By exploring my own experiences as a queer Southeast Asian man, this research study will explore how I as a queer man of colour navigate ideas of whiteness within the queer community. My experiences reveal the idea of sexual racism and how the Asian identity is sexualized, fetishized or rendered invisible by dominant bodies within the queer men’s community. However, there is a dearth in research around how marginalized populations within the queer community marginalize each other.

In exploring personal journal entries and other life artefacts through an autoethnography, I will explore the practice of whiteness as a process in the queer identified Southeast Asian population and its implications within the queer Asian community. The specific experience I will explore is why and how queer identified Asian men do not perceive other queer identified Asian men as attractive or as suitable intimate partners. Ideals of attraction, the act of “passing” and how this impacts relationships within

the queer Southeast Asian community will be the main themes discussed in this research study. This experience will be grounded in critical race, critical whiteness and queer theory.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

The literature for this research study was found through using the Ryerson Library databases and the Australian Journal of Critical Race and Whiteness. The *LGBT Life with Full Text* database was used and keyword searches were: queer and racism; queer and racism and Asian; queer and masculinity; queer and whiteness; Asian and white*. Reference lists from the articles found through this database were also looked at for additional sources. Canadian databases *Canada Info Desk* and *Canadian Research Index* were also explored with the same keyword searches; however, no results were yielded. Finally, the Australian Journal of Critical Race and Whiteness was also explored. Different issues of the journal were scoured for relevant articles on the whiteness, queer communities and whiteness within Asian communities. It was determined that the Asian practice of whiteness and racism towards and within Asian communities was an overarching phenomenon in western societies; therefore, this resource from an Australian perspective was utilized.

Queer theory has been dominated by white male experiences and queer spaces continue to be a perpetual reflection of this phenomenon (Perez, 2008; Poon, 1999; Poon & Sin, 2008;). Racialized individuals within the queer community have traditionally been seen to accept a subordinate role in the community and therefore have been fetishized or rendered invisible (Caluya, 2006; Fung, 1996; Han, 2006; Keung, 1999; Poon, 1999). Within the existing literature, dominant themes that have arose include how the queer community is constructed into a white space, overt racism is a very apparent within the queer community, and racialized men are fetishized, sexualized or rendered invisible within the queer men's community (Badrudjoja, 2008; Cayula, 2006; El-Tayeb, 2012; Fung,

1996; Garvey, 2011; Giwa & Greensmith, 2012; Han 2006; Kumashiro, 1999; Nakamura & Chan, 2013; Nast, 2002; Nadal & Corpus, 2012; Perez, 2005; Poon, 1999; Poon, 2000; Poon & Ho, 2008; Poon & Sin, 2008; Tucker, 2010). Additional themes relating to the Asian experience within queer Asian communities also arose, but there was much less literature in this area.

The existing literature highlights why the practice of whiteness can manifest amongst racialized men within the queer community. A study by Giwa and Greensmith (2012) indicate that intergroup and broader systemic racism infiltrate the queer community and render invisible the lived experiences of many queer people of colour. El-Tayeb (2012) gives the example of how marginalization occurs within the queer community due to differences in cultural values and practices. White western cultural values are the hegemonic discourse and those that oppose it are thus rendered invalid. In western cultures, the individual whereas racialized cultures emphasize the collective (Warner, 2008). However, it may be more appropriate to view the dominance of Western cultures emphasis in the creation of a global culture that transform racialized cultures by forcing adherence or assimilation (Thobani, 2007). For example, the normative “coming out” narrative is seen to be one that impacts the individual in the western societies and thus more common in practice whereas “coming out” in racialized communities has further implications on many social networks and thus not highly practiced but is emerging as a necessary practice (El-Tayeb, 2012). This culture clash of discourses, Western/non-Western, erases the presence of people of colour. The intersectionality of identity within the queer community undermines binaries of western/non-western to the normative “coming out” narrative which positions queers of colour as not properly gay – thus giving

queer spaces only one colour (Caluya, 2006; El-Tayeb, 2012; Han, 2006; Kumashiro, 1999; Perez, 2008; Poon, 1999; Poon & Ho, 2008).

Overt racism within the queer community is another theme that was found in the literature (Cayula, 2006; Fung, 1996; Han, 2006; Nadal & Corpus, 2013; Poon, 1999). This may be a reflection of how contributions of people of colour in queer theory and qualitative research methodologies have been overlooked despite being featured in mainstream queer theory (Martinez, 2003). The power that exists in the creation and framing of essentialistic White and “coloured” queers in theory and within the queer community is something that is explored in the literature. In order to challenge these mainstream ideas of superiority, Tucker (2008) suggests that we need to draw on historical inequalities and reimagine these inequalities in contemporary settings to reinscribe perceptions of classed and gendered difference. This idea of constructing inequitable subjects helps us understand how exclusion can be real and normalized within spaces like the queer community that draws on a history of material inequality and discursive perceptions of race (El-Tayeb, 2012; Garvey 2011; Kumashiro, 1999; Nast, 2002).

The notion that racialized men are sexualized, fetishized or rendered invisible in the queer community is the final theme that was identified in the literature (Warner, 2008; Poon, 1999; Poon & Sin, 2008; Poon & Ho, 2008; Poon, 2000; Fung, 1996; Sin, 1994). The culture of aesthetics in the queer community creates a hierarchy of idealized looks, cultures and experiences that place Asian men at the bottom (Warner, 2008). Because of this, the Asian identity is treated as exotic and thus sexualized and fetishized. Furthermore, gay male Asian couples have expressed discomfort as “white men tended to look at [them] with lust in their eyes, reminding [them] of the crude comments that straight men make when

they see two lesbians together” (Bose, 2006, D7). This idea of how queer Asian men are sexualized, fetishized or rendered invisible is something that is quite well documented in the popular press in gay interest magazines and newspapers; however, there is a lack of research on this within the academy.

Within the literature, there is an emphasis on the relationship between queer Asian men with queer White men. However, what is lacking in comparison is a focus on why and how queer Asian men marginalize each other and how this impacts the queer Asian community. Three themes that have been identified in the literature in regards to this issue include how queer Asian bodies become dissociated from Asian culture and communities, a developed distaste and devaluation for other Asian bodies, and a sense of “(un)belonging” by queer Asian men in the queer, Asian and queer Asian communities (Cayula, 2006; Garvey, 2011; Han, 2006; El-Tayeb, 2012; Poon, 1999; Poon, 2000; Poon & Sin, 2008; Poon & Ho, 2008; Nadal & Corpus, 2013).

As discussed by El Tayeb (2012), marginalization occurs within the queer community due to differences in cultural values and practices. Cultural practices that deviate from the dominant White western values are rendered invalid. This affect may be due to the fact that there is no queer homeland and thus dominant groups claim the queer identity (Garvey, 2011). Thus Asian immigration into the queer community creates exclusion based on race, gender and queer nationality

Garvey (2011) discusses a forced assimilation into a culture for first generation immigrants. Being a “border crosser” and possessing both a queer identity and Asian identity, there is immense pressure to choose a cultural identity or end up belonging nowhere. As El Tayeb (2012) mentions, the “coming out” process is inherently a western

White concept and when queers of colour “come out”, they become dissociated with their culture. Thus for many queers of colour, coming out is like the Amish process of Rumspringa – once you make the conscious decision of leaving your culture, you are ostracized from your family and can never return (Amish America, 2010).

Furthermore, Arts and Nabah (2001) emphasize how the normative coming out story signifies mobility and progress in the larger discourse around racialized minorities in the neoliberal city as both present communities of colour as spaces of oppression that need to be permanently left in order to enter the domain of the liberated consumer-citizen. “Being out” becomes increasingly visible in forms of commercialized mobility that neatly tie into creative city models in which race and class are the true signifiers of who can be properly gay (Florida, 2002). Thus due to culture, the mobility that the modern gay identity requires is not universally available because in racialized communities, the risk of expulsion from family and community that results from “coming out” may be far too high for some to pursue (Eng, 1997). However, for those that do “come out”, a resulting dissociation from their culture and community may occur.

In addition to this dissociation, queer Asian bodies continue their disconnect from Asian culture through the development of a distaste and devaluation of other Asian bodies. Poon (2000) describes the dominant idea of male beauty in Western countries as tall, physically fit, muscular, manly, blue eyes, blonde and White. Asian bodies in comparison are usually with smaller bone structure, look softer, effeminate and thus considered less attractive in the mainstream gay community (Sin, 1994). Fung (1996) discusses this portrayal in gay mainstream media, particularly in gay pornography where gay Asian men are predominantly portrayed as passive, submissive, exotic and even sometimes portrayed

as a servant. These images negatively impact gay Asian men's self-worth which may lead to internalized racist attitudes from the queer Asian community and thus alienating Asian bodies from their own cultural identities for fear of being seen as passive, submissive and exotic.

Moreover, this dominant ideal of male beauty in combination with the distaste for being associated with the socially constructed queer Asian identity has influenced how Asian bodies perceive themselves and who they see as suitable intimate partners (Poon, 2000). In a newspaper article in the *Toronto Star*, journalist Norman Keung (1999, June 21) interviewed a participant who shared, "he bleached his hair to blondish orange, wore coloured contact lenses and did everything he could to distance himself from his Asian heritage" (D5). These dominant ideals in the queer community have devalued the way in which queer Asian men perceive themselves and their valuation of Asian culture and community.

Finally, these themes that have been discussed have created an overall sense of (un)belonging, a term used by Garvey (2011). This idea of (un)belonging refers to forced membership into a community through default, but the membership can be undone or membership can be chosen to be revoked without leading to the destructive erasure of not-belonging. For example, queer Asians belong to the queer community, but the constructed ideals of what a queer man is can (un)belong the Asian from the queer community. Furthermore, the queer Asian can consciously make the decision to (un)belong from their cultural community. As Asian bodies resist and (un)belong to the constructed idea of the submissive, passive and effeminate by dissociating with the Asian community, these participants of resistance simply maintain the binary structure of racial stereotyping that

reproduces the “other” rather than challenge it (Poon & Ho, 2008). Thus as Foucault (1988) suggests, “maybe the target...is not to *discover* what we are, but to *refuse* what we are” (as quoted by Rabinow, 1984, p.22). In determining what the queer Asian body constitutes and where the queer Asian body belongs, this idea of (un)belonging leaves queer Asian bodies in interstitial spaces.

Gaps in the Literature

The reviewed literature identified an array of themes around the way Asian bodies experience marginalization within the queer men’s community (Arts & Nabah, 2001; Badruddoja, 2008; Cayula, 2006; El-Tayeb, 2012; Fung, 1996; Garvey, 2011; Giwa & Greensmith, 2012; Han, 2006; Keung, 1999; Kumashiro, 1999; Martinez, 2003; Nadal & Corpus, 2013; Nakamura & Chan, 2013; Nast, 2002; Perez, 2005; Poon & Ho, 2008; Poon, 2000; Poon & Sin, 2008; Poon, 1999; Sin, 1994; Tucker, 2008; Warner, 2008). However, a number of limitations in the literature have been identified. Most remarkably is the homogenization of the queer Asian community. The queer Asian community seems to be addressed as a whole without recognizing the diversity within this community. As a result, there is no literature that focuses on the experience of queer Southeast Asian men and very limited literature from a Canadian context. This is a reflection of how racialized voices are continually marginalized in literature and queer literature. As minorities within a minority, twice removed from mainstream western culture, it becomes increasingly difficult to have voices be legitimized within academic literature. As a queer Southeast Asian man, I hope to begin filling this gap by voicing my experiences within the queer community in a critical contemporary queer Canadian context by engaging in an autoethnography.

There is also a lack of recent academic research on the sexualization, fetishization and invisibility of queer Asian bodies in the queer community. Furthermore, there is no research on how these phenomena lead to internalized racism and the impact the relationship queer Asian men develop with other Asian men. This gap in the research is the main focus on this research study. Looking at the issue of racism and whiteness within the queer community through queer, critical whiteness and critical race theory frameworks will provide insights into the intersectionality of identity. This research study will recognize the multi-layering oppressions encountered by queer Southeast Asian men and attempt to understand how and why they cope with it. Furthermore, through this research study, the need to explore the multiple, interrelated, historical and contemporary factors that can lead to exclusion and exploitation within communities will also be made apparent. Finally, in understanding the intersectionality of identity and the historical contexts of marginalization, we begin to understand why and how marginalized communities cope with, and resist, discrimination. Furthermore, we begin to understand the factors underpinning social discrimination in a contemporary Canadian queer context and attempt to rebuild communities, because “without community, there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression. But community must not mean a shedding of our difference, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist” (Lorde, 1984, p. 112).

Theoretical Frameworks

a. Critical Race Theory

“We are there because under the Providence of God we are a Christian people that have given to the subject races of the world the only kind of decent government they have ever known [applause] and you and I must carry out portion of that responsibility if

we are to be the true imperialists we should be. [...] An imperialist, to me, means a man who accepts gladly and bears proudly the responsibilities of his race and breed."
(Prime Minister Bennett, R.B., 1914 as cited by Coleby, M., El-Halabi, L., Hefti-Rossier, K., & Jarda, O., 2013)

"We also have no history of colonialism. So we have all of the things that many people admire about the great powers but none of the things that threaten or bother them."
(Prime Minister Harper, S., 2009 as cited by Coleby et al., 2013)

Despite our country's overt denial of our legacy of colonialism, Canada has a rich history of legitimizing social relations involving the exploitation, domination and annihilation of non-Western people and socially constructs the supremacy of the White race (Dei, 1996 as cited in Pon, Gosine & Phillips, 2011). The theft of Aboriginal lands, residential schools in Canada and development of policies like the Indian Act and Chinese Head Tax are just a few examples of Canada's history of colonialism. However, as evident by Prime Minister Stephen Harper's recent declaration that Canada has *no* history of colonialism, we still live in a colour-blind society that positions the White race as superior and perpetuates colonialism.

The Southeast Asian history in Canada presents many marginalizing accounts. The refugee-sponsor system during the time of the Vietnam War saw many Chinese-Vietnamese refugees treated poorly by Canadian government workers. This was facilitated by a lack of understanding of the ethnic and cultural background of the refugees. What government workers initially knew about these refugees was based on stereotyped mass media presentations of the country and its peoples (Chan & Lam, 1987). These stereotypes and assumptions of Southeast Asian peoples continue today.

It becomes difficult to envision a racism-free jurisprudence when the law relies upon concepts derived from a time when slavery existed, women were not persons, and colonization was in full force (Alyward, 1999). The fact that we cannot transcend this racist

history is one of the primary, yet invisible obstacles within the legal system. Emerging in the 1980s and led by scholars of colour, critical race theory recognizes the racial gaps in the legal system and how issues of racism were ignored in critical legal studies (Alyward, 1999). Critical race theory seeks to retain a commitment to treating the social construction of race as central to the way that people of colour are ordered and constrained in society (Trevino, Harris, & Wallace, 2008). This core value of critical race theory thus seeks not only to name, but also to be a tool for rooting out inequality and injustice by advocating for justice for people who find themselves occupying marginal positions.

Critical race theory values the “voice of colour”. Critical race theorists have turned to writing in the form of narrative to convey personal racialized experiences and to counter metanarratives that have been propagated by the dominant culture of hegemonic Whiteness that seeks to maintain racial inequality (Trevino et al., 2008). In addition, this framework facilitates the exploration of new questions and helps foster unexplored views of race within research (Ladson-Billings & Donner, 2005). The interplay of race and citizenship, both nationally and within communities, is emphasized by critical race theory as it highlights the normative assumptions of racialized bodies that prevail in Canadian society.

Finally, in understanding critical race, it is important to understand Edward Said’s work on Orientalism and the creation and hierarchizing of the other. The connection between imperial politics and culture is very direct (Said, 1993). The Aboriginal experience in Canada is indicative of this relationship between politics and culture in which Canadian White western values deny Aboriginal sovereignty and thus hierarchizing race and culture. Furthermore, understanding the historical context of Asians of the Orient and how the

people of the Orient were out of reach of everyone except for the Western expert, it is understood that the Orient could not represent itself. Evidence and civilization of the Orient was credible only after it had passed through and been made real by the refining work of the Orientalist (Said, 1978). Thus, this historical phenomenon emphasizes a hierarchy where the White Western expert is on top. Understanding this phenomenon of hierarchy can be seen to be vital in the efforts to address racial inequities in the Canadian legal system as by understanding the history of racial disparities, “we can...fight for our rights and our history as well as future...with weapons of criticism and dedicated consciousness” (Said, 1978, p. 258)

In relation to this research study, these core principles of critical race theory will ground an understanding that the exclusion of queer Southeast Asian men’s experience within the queer community is an endemic, lasting aspect of society. My personal “voice of colour” will be used to explore this phenomenon.

b. Critical Whiteness

“Whiteness has nothing to do with me. I’m not White.”
(Frankenburg, 1996, p.6)

In continuing with the endemic and institutionalized understanding of racism, it is understood that whiteness is the crux of this phenomenon. Whiteness is a location of structural advantage from which White people look at themselves, others and at society (Frankenburg, 1993). From this location of racial privilege, white bodies personify cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed, yet significantly impact their position in society and those around them.

With its roots stemming from white feminism, critical whiteness emerged from an understanding that experience constructs identity thus creating a direct relationship

between experience and worldview such that any system of domination can be seen most clearly from the subject positions of those oppressed by it (Frankenburg, 1993). Thus, in relation to the historically lasting impacts of racism, the cultural practice of whiteness noticeably subjugates people of colour and emphasizes the social construction and superiority of whiteness.

In understanding whiteness in Canada, it is important to draw attention to the power of whiteness in claiming possession of Aboriginal peoples' lands. The celebrated values of Canadian national identity serve the White project of denying Aboriginal sovereignty to claim Canada as White possession. In understanding that whiteness in Canada is a process, it is important to understand that whiteness operates within a system; a system that endows upon those deemed to be White Canadians the privileges through which Canada is claimed as a White possession (Hage, 1998). Inheriting whiteness thus means inheriting a system of privileges. Through this history of exploitation of the racialized other, whiteness can be defined as the characteristic, the attribute and the property of free human beings (Harris, 1993)

The social construction of whiteness creates discourses and material relations to which the term whiteness applies. However, naming the process of whiteness displaces it from its normativity and structured invisibility (Frankenburg, 1993). In order to deconstruct the idea of whiteness, we must look at a site of dominance and I argue that this site be our very own body. As every body has a place in relation to racism, even, racialized bodies become actors in the social construction of whiteness. Living in locations that are historically, socially, politically and culturally produced that are intrinsically linked to unfolding relations of dominance have rendered the coloured body complicit in and dominated into

reproducing the cultural practices of whiteness. Thus, the quote at the beginning of this section, “*whiteness has nothing to do with me. I’m not White*” is refuted, as any body can be complicit in the embodiment and performance of whiteness.

c. Queer Theory

“What bodies tend to do are effects of histories rather than being originary”
(Butler, 1993, p.406)

Queer theory seeks to understand the historical, political and systemic productions of what is seen as normal or deviant (MacKinnon, 2010). Queer does not refer to an identity or a sexual practice, but rather refers to whatever is at odds with the “normal”. Queer is a site of collective contestation. It is the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and future imaginings. It remains in the present and never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, and queered from a prior usage thus leaving it in constant flux (Butler, 1993).

Although queer theory challenges the norms, it obscures the material conditions that underpin discourse (Edwards, 1998). In doing so, it ignores the social and institutional conditions within which queer bodies live. For example, queer theory dismantles social contingency in homosexual subject positions while recuperating social contingency in racialized subject positions. Thus queer theory ignores the intersectionality of identity and experience and must be approached from a critical perspective that challenges normative understandings of queer by including racialized voices.

However, what Butler (1993) explores in queer theory is the formation, performativity and performance of identity. This exploration renders queer theory as the crux to understanding how bodies can assume multiple identities through discursive formation and subversive repetition (Butler, 1993; Foucault, 1972). Butler’s (1993) idea of

performativity will be the central theme that will be revisited throughout this research study. The idea that racialized bodies can perform the cultural practices of whiteness through a reiteration of norms that precede, constrain and exceed the performer will be emphasized. Understanding this reiteration of norms emphasizes the idea that the performer's will to the performance of whiteness is in fact not a contrived phenomenon, but rather one that is forced upon racialized bodies for conformity and survival.

Critical race, critical whiteness and queer theory will be the fundamental basis of understanding for the purpose of this research study. Understanding that the normative assumptions of racialized bodies that prevail in Canadian society are perpetuated by an inheritance of a system of privileges that is brought on by the forced performance of whiteness will be emphasized throughout this study.

Chapter 2. Methodology

I have been met with resistance by both professors and the scholarship about my chosen method of data collection and analysis. However, I see autoethnography as imperative to social justice. Autoethnography is more than a reflection on personal experiences. Rather, it is a critical reflection that reaches progressive and anti-oppressive conclusions by constructing new meanings of social phenomena through the deconstruction of society's expectations (Merriam, 1998). Throughout my studies, experiences and interactions with the world, I fail to see how research can participate in social justice without a method such as autoethnography. It is becoming popular within qualitative research. Although I privilege the use of autoethnography in qualitative research, I realize autoethnography and critical reflexivity is not a means towards an end, but rather a means towards making a point that contributes to a goal of social justice by exploring and knowing the experiences of those who are marginalized and silenced and excite an inner investigation of our own assumptions, experiences, privileges, and oppressions (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

I find it ironic, however, that my voice is now privileged enough as a graduate student to be heard as one that is marginalized. It sounds self-indulgent of me to think that my voice is marginalized and silenced when I have been afforded so many privileges in my life – being born in Canada, a cis-gendered male, able-bodied, able-minded, and now being a graduate student at a western institution. However, as a queer person of colour, I am currently exploring how all these privileges and experiences continue to shape my being and how I can use my now privileged voice to advocate for those who continue to be silenced.

This method is the strongest way for me to address my research question of why and how queer identified Southeast Asian men do not perceive other queer identified Asian men as attractive or as suitable intimate partners. Through autoethnography, I hope to understand the social, cultural and political contexts of this phenomenon, how they have informed my stories and experiences as a queer Southeast Asian man and how they have impacted the community to which I belong. Autoethnography will enrich and add credibility to the research and exploration of a marginalized and very specialized population.

a. What is Autoethnography?

Autoethnography is about personal text as critical intervention in social, political and cultural life (Jones, 2005). Through autoethnography, we explore how culture has informed self and in doing so, how it can create charged moments of clarity, connection and change. The researcher is the participant and creates a self-narrative that critiques the situation of self with others in social contexts. It further questions the readers' emotions and personal experiences and thoughts in order to analyze ideas (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Autoethnography is a unique experience. It is more than a method to research. It invites exploration of moments of discomfort through an intricate process of self-reflection. Through autoethnography, we examine theory, culture, performance and the experiences of self and of others.

My recollected personal experiences are the main source of data. Artefacts from my life will be used to explore how the social, cultural and political have informed my performance as a queer Southeast Asian man. Personal journal entries will be extracted from my life and explored. However, I am not the sole participant in this research study. Throughout my life

experiences, others around me have influenced my understandings and thus will be implicated in this study, but will not be identified. Furthermore, the reader is also a participant in this study. In order for autoethnographies to have meaning, readers must be ready to confront situations where emotion is central to the ideas being explored. Readers must also be ready to embrace their own emotional and gut reactions to this autoethnographic narrative (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). In this sense, the reader is a vital participant because their investment in the study will aid in the process of analyzing ideas.

b. Analysis

In reviewing my journal entries dating back to April 2004, existing narratives from my journal entries as well as narratives that have been attached to my journal entries will be coded and thematically organized and analyzed. The identified themes will be treated with critical, analytical and interpretive eyes to detect social, cultural and political undertones to decipher meanings of events, behaviours, and thoughts. Throughout the analysis process, a journal will be kept to engage with the artefact both emotionally and academically.

Theories will be applied to the stories attached to the journal entries, which then will be re-presented through interweaving stories with academic text to bring the reader closer to experiencing these situations. The presentation and interpretation of my personal stories will aim to draw in the reader to experience and feel the emotions I have felt as a queer racialized man and also to encourage the confrontation of the ideas and emotions that create these narratives.

c. Limitations

Perhaps the most limiting aspect of autoethnography is that the author's anecdotal evidence is the subject for analysis. Furthermore, the same author is the one analyzing the

experiences being explored. This research study will be doing just that. I will be interrogating my own experiences for the sake of analysis, which may lead to me only reporting on what I wish to see (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Therefore, subjectivity is a major concern in autoethnography. However, all research is reported through the experiences of imperfect humans. Thus making all research in some form, subjective.

Chapter 3. Findings

In this chapter, I present the findings as I engage with the process of autoethnography. I reviewed my personal journals from the past eleven years of my life. Journals from 2005-2007 were misplaced and thus excluded from my findings. There were periods of time where I would write in my journal every day, sometimes sporadically throughout a month, sometimes not for a few months, then begin writing again every day. This made it difficult to draw continuity in my thoughts, feelings and experiences and connect them to the social, political and cultural that autoethnography strives for. However, upon reviewing past journal entries, I was able to re-encounter and re-live the emotion behind each word and recount what I was feeling in that very moment.

This was not an enjoyable experience. Re-living, re-interpreting and re-understanding moments of satisfaction and gratitude as moments of self-hate, violence and assimilation was very difficult to engage with. I encountered many incidences of disbelief with what I had experienced and what I once believed. As a result, there were days where I disengaged and removed myself from this process entirely. I was dumbfounded by my lack of insight and awareness of the social, political and cultural underpinnings that can be so destructive towards my identity as a queer racialized man. What got me through this experience was believing that I must experience discomfort to experience change and to understand how to move beyond what holds me back.

What I present in my findings is a progression of how I have come to understand my identity as a queer racialized man living in a White western society. The forced position in society I have taken and the ways in which I have been able to circumvent that position will be highlighted through exploring my ideals of attraction and the notion of passing. How

these social actions impact relationships between queer Asian communities will be explored in the discussion. In exploring my ideals of attraction, three major themes arose: hierarchy and privileging; internalized racism; and hierarchy of “Asianess”. While exploring the idea of passing, two major themes were identified: image and appearance through practice and access.

Ideals of Attraction

Hierarchy and Privileging

My formal and informal education as well as media and popular culture have had an immense impact on my life. From learning about right and wrong to keeping on trend, my understanding of who I am has been learned and constructed from a very young age. Reflecting back on my life, the racial hierarchy and privileging of the White race has been something that has been engrained in me for as long as I can remember. Upon reviewing my journals, this theme has been very evident from my time in secondary school until present day. However, my views on this hierarchy and privileging have changed over time.

Today in [one of my classes, my teacher] said to me, “Ah, I see you’ve made new friends and your [English] is improving.” I didn’t know my writing was that bad...A few weeks ago, [he] recommended that I sit on the other side of the [classroom]. I didn’t know why, but I did it. I guess I did the right thing. [He] seems to think I’m doing better in class. – April 12, 2004

This experience in one of my high school classes was monumental to my understanding of racial hierarchy. It remains so vividly in my mind to this very day. I brought this experience up again in one of my Masters of Social Work classes.

In class today, I talked about this time in grade 11. We were talking about our complicity in the practice of Whiteness...I began to boil on the inside. I shared with the class that [one of my teachers in high school] targeted me because he thought I was a good writer, but felt I could be even better if I hung out

with other people, which I later understood to be White people. I would always sit in the corner of his class where all the newcomer Asian students would sit. Everyone around me would speak Mandarin whenever they didn't have to speak English. [My teacher] recommended I move to the other side of the class to, I guess soak in more English. I didn't realize this was what was going on so I blindly listened and I was commended for it. – November 18, 2013

At this point in my life, I was being taught that what was going to move me ahead was to surround myself in White. I was being told White is attractive. Strive for it. Without it, I would not succeed.

As I progressed through life, these understandings and images I continually see in my everyday life began to influence my ideals of physical attraction. I saw and understood that to be attractive, I needed to be White. Going through my journals, so many quotes from throughout the years were identified that privileged White beauty and put it at the top of the hierarchy:

“I need to look like that” – referring to a cover of queer magazine, July 2, 2008

“I’ll never be as hot as those guys. White guys just get more attention. Ugh, and I just learned that Asians pack on more fat around their waist. Nothing’s workin’ for me.” - July 9, 2008

“When people see me, they think I’m weak” – December 8, 2009

“My life would be so different if I didn’t have to worry about racism. I know people stare and reject me” – February 10, 2010

Just fuckin do it. Push yourself. You don’t want to be second rate the rest of your life. You don’t want to be that guy that gets shafted at the bar.” – referring to the time I wanted to quit a varsity sports team, but remained because I didn’t want to lose the physically fit body I developed through varsity sport – April 6, 2012

These moments in my life describe the hatred I experienced with my body. The way I looked could never satisfy the criteria necessary for being free of judgment, assumptions

and stereotyping. A journal entry about my experience on a varsity sports team on January 12, 2012 captured my desire to strive for this criteria and an understanding of how I can never attain it.

I feel like I'm going to die. Everything hurts. I've never worked my body this hard before. Getting up out of bed at 4AM again made me want to slit my wrists, but I can't stop doing this...throwing up almost every week [during the fitness test] doesn't even phase me anymore. My body hurts, but it looks so good. I'm not gonna give it up...Wearing this jacket, being on [this team], looking this good has moved me up the ladder...but is it worth the pain? I finally look the part...I know I'm performing better than half the [guys] but why are those guys getting more pats on the back than I am? I think I'm pretty friendly. Is it something more than that? Am I never going to be able to reach the top of the chain? - January 12, 2012

This period of my life was also when I started the first year of my Bachelor of Social Work degree. Critical reflection and whiteness were new to me. It's something I was always aware of, but never able to name until I engaged with this program. I began to make sense of my feelings and attempted to understand what my barriers were. Exploring these processes was monumental to this particular journal entry and the moment in my life when I began to articulate my understanding of hierarchy and White privilege and why and what I need to look like if I want people to be attracted to me.

With this awareness, I grew a heightened sense of racism in the media and popular culture.

I was watching RuPaul's Drag Race tonight and every time they pick teams, all the White people get picked first, then Asians, then Black...when you see this on TV and see that White comes in first, it just reinforces the reality that White is on top...There's such a huge push now in the media to promote ethnic diversity. This just highlights the fact that White has always been on top. - March 12, 2014

Exploring these moments in my life with this critical whiteness lens emphasizes my reality as a queer Southeast Asian man and the reality that other racialized people live within. This hierarchy and privileging of what is considered attractive has left me questioning my position in society and ultimately my worth.

Why don't I ever feel like I can win? I don't know why I'm constantly trying so hard for everything. Why do I feel like I have to fight for everything? – September 11, 2012

Understanding these processes emphasized the next subtheme I identified in my journals – internalized racism.

Internalized Racism

Sitting around with [friends] today, we were just chatting. [One of my friends] asked us, “do you ever wish you weren’t Asian?” I said I did all the time. I think White people just have more variety in their faces. Asians really do all look alike. – June 2, 2004

Living in a society that emphasized over and over again the importance of being White really impacted my ability to love my own body. Years of self-hate became apparent while reviewing my journals. In 2004 at 16 years old, I told my friends that I didn’t want to be Asian. I hated my identity from such a young age. This heavily impacted who I thought was attractive enough to date, what type of relationship I could have with others and myself and my engagement with internalized racism.

In 2008, I moved to Australia to study, work and travel. What I experienced in Australia was a really negative attitude towards Asians. I lived in a community of students from around the world as well as students from around Australia. I wanted the “real Aussie” experience so I wanted to befriend as many Australians as I could. Consequently, every Australian I met was White and I was more than OK with this. As I began to build a

relationship with these people, they started voicing the way I felt about being Asian. It was like they were reading my mind. However, they would always follow up their comments by saying that I was the exception – I was a “cool” Asian.

This experience in Australia cemented an understanding that there was disconnect between my body and myself. The colour of my skin made living very uncomfortable. My time in Australia and the experiences I had, shaped my understanding of my identity and emphasized the belief that I should not be living in this body. These understandings translated into significant self-hate and an immense privileging of my first boyfriend because of what he possessed – White.

My first relationship emphasized how much I hated myself. I wrote many journal entries following the break up with my first partner detailing everything that was wrong with me and justifying all his actions:

“I probably deserved it. I’d do the same if I were him.” – September 2, 2010

“I wouldn’t want to date an Asian either...He’s better than me” – September 3, 2010

“When I was with [him], people didn’t think I was a real Asian... Now that he’s gone, I’m back to being so Asian.” – September 5, 2010

“I’m losing more than just him.” – September 6, 2010

“I guess [he] did help build my confidence a bit. [He] and his friends would always tell me that I’m good looking for an Asian.” – September 12, 2010

These excerpts tell a story of my desire of being accepted and an idea that my partner was better than I was due to his White skin. This internalized racism was particularly detrimental to my recovery from this break up as by privileging my ex-partner, I was drawing a conclusion that in order to be accepted, I needed to adopt White skin.

In 2011, when I started the Bachelor of Social Work program at a critical social work school, I began to engage more and more with the process of critical reflection. I began thinking about where these feelings of internalized racism stemmed from. I hated the fact that I couldn't gain access to spaces, needed a chaperone to gain access and couldn't go places without judgment based on my appearance. As I progressed through this program, I began questioning the concept of race and addressed my own internalized racism.

Last night, after the bar, we went to McDonald's. This guy calmly came up to us and looked at me and said, "Hey, can you fix my computer? Your eyes are slanted. You fix computers." I wanted to punch him out, but it was like I wasn't even angry. His words, even though they were delivered so calmly and gently and almost innocently, really cut into my soul. I wasn't angry, but I was definitely hurt. Ugh, once again, I ruined everyone's night. We had so much fun then everyone had to deal with my overreaction. While we were walking home, I was silent. Teary. Angry. Sad. Everyone kept wanting to check in with me, but I was pushing them away... [my friend] slept over that night. In the morning, we talked about what happened. He asked if I was OK...I told [him] that I wish I weren't Asian. I've never found myself attractive and I don't think I can be good looking being Asian. I guess it's nice talking to another social worker about stuff like this. [He] told me that I was beautiful blah blah blah, then we also got into a discussion about race and racism at the micro, meso and macro levels. I think this was really helpful in terms of me learning that you know, there probably isn't a problem with me. The problem isn't inside me. It's outside of me... - June 23, 2012

This entry reflected an understanding that I can't escape racism as it is all around me, throughout the world, and in order to address the concept of internalized racism, we must redress the concept of race and explore the social, political and cultural contexts of the phenomenon.

The Hierarchy of Asianness

Another theme that arose from reviewing my journals was the idea of a hierarchy of "Asianness". I first began to understand Asianness as how far one deviates from the Asian

stereotype of being a newcomer, recent immigrant or refugee who has not assimilated to the accepted Canadian White culture. This was a very Eurocentric and positivist understanding. However, as I engaged with the literature, I now understand that racialization and the process of Asianness is neither pathological or permanent, but involve the fluid negotiation and non-essentialist understanding of identity (Eng & Han, 2000; Lowe, 1996). In understanding Asianness in this perspective, the different ways in which bodies are marked as Asian are recognized. In my own queer reality growing up in Vancouver, this equated to not being a tall, physically fit, White male. The further you deviate from this norm, the more Asian and different you are. For myself, the further I removed myself from perceived Asianness, the better. I understood that I could never remove my Asian skin, therefore, I created my own hierarchy of Asianness in order to classify myself as White as possible. Upon reviewing my journal entries, I realized that this hierarchy existed outside of my head as well.

Throughout my first relationship, I lacked an insight into what perceived compliments about my identity directed towards me really meant. One of the first things that was said to me in that relationship was, “you’re the first Asian I’ve ever kissed.” What a privilege it was for me to be his first! Then the “compliments” kept coming from him and his friends:

“You’re a really good looking Asian” – March 3, 2008

“You’re not a real Asian. You’re way too cool” – July 10, 2008

“You’re one of few hot Asians” – August 2, 2008

“You’re better than other Asians” – February 10, 2009

“I would date an Asian if he were like you” – April 7, 2010

“You’re really good looking for an Asian” – said multiple times to me over my life

The more and more I heard these remarks, the more I began to accept them and believe that all my efforts to become White were paying off as I was chosen and placed on the top of the Asian hierarchy.

My friends would always talk about how much they don't like Asians, but then turn to me and say they don't mean me. I guess I'm not really that Asian. – March 4, 2008

I really began to believe that I was able to surpass my marginalized Asian race. People didn't include me when they spoke poorly of Asians. However, as I began to engage in the important process of critical reflection with the start of the Bachelor of Social Work program in 2011, I became aware of the mainstream queer Asian symbols. These symbols would signify what was acceptable in mainstream queer Asian culture.

The Asians that get chosen to be part of pride floats, GQ, covers of agency pamphlets, magazines all look like any other White guy. They're all big, buff, meat heads...That seems to be what I should be striving for if I want to be accepted into the mainstream...But really campy Asian [characters] are chosen to be on TV shows and they're ridiculed on the show. Its (sic) like Asians are known to be gay and soft and on TV, they're trying to portray the real Asian. That or they're super serious doctors or gangsters or Kung Fu masters and that idea of Asians seem to be accepted. So it's like gay Asians are at the bottom of the rung because they're the ones that get ridiculed. – January 5, 2012

This idea of an Asian hierarchy seemed to be quite visible in society and the practice of whiteness seemed to be what impacted it. While I was working at a migrant rights organization in India, the director of the organization told me about the hierarchy of domestic work. This hierarchy reinforces my understanding of an Asian hierarchy.

It's a practice. My boss in India was telling me about the hierarchy of domestic work. At the bottom are Bangladeshi workers and the top are Filipino workers because they speak English. Bangladesh has one of the world's lowest GDPs and because of American colonization, a lot of Filipino culture has adopted western culture, making Filipino workers more desirable. – February 2, 2013

This process of hierarchy and othering creates divides and segregation within this already marginalized population. What drives this segregation seems to be the practice of Whiteness to pass into the White world. This idea of passing is the next major theme that was identified within my journal entries.

Passing

This idea of passing is somewhat of a new concept for me. I have been practicing the act of passing my whole life, but it was only recently when I was able to name this process. Passing is a term that I use to describe how I have been able to be accepted into a world where I would not have access to if I did not assimilate and adopt practices that are not indicative to my cultural background. Within a queer context, I have felt a necessity to exude a hyper-masculine persona supplemented by an innate desire to practice what I see attached to dominant White bodies in the queer community. While reviewing my journals, within this theme of passing, two subthemes emerged: image, appearance and practice and access.

Image, Appearance and Practice

The earliest incident in my life where I was able to recognize my complicity in the practice of whiteness was in 2012.

I think sometimes people receive me better because I'm tall, broad shouldered and don't fit the typical stereotype of what Asians look like. I still think people avoid me or think I'm a certain way because of my skin, but I think I get treated better than new immigrants or people not speaking English when in public. – April 24, 2012

My physicality and my privilege of being born in Canada greatly impacted my experience in a western society, particularly within the queer community. The queer community is so small that I feel an immense pressure to be and look like the dominant group.

I play tennis and I row. The two most [WASP-y] sports there are. There's definitely more behind my choice of sports than just fun. I always joke about wanting to be a stay at home dad and just hanging at the country club all day. Its (sic) like I just want people to think I'm rich. I want to be that successful rich gay dad that buys art. – September 9, 2012

This desire to adhere to a certain image and appearance was facilitated by the practice of whiteness. I was adhering to what was accepted in the queer mainstream community. I had an immense desire to be perceived as the white middle class gay man. Although I grew up in a poor family, the longer my family settled in Canada, the businesses they started here began to thrive and some of my relatives grew up with Filipino domestic workers – a trademark of the successful White middle class family. While in one of my classes during my Masters in Social Work, we were discussing the practice of whiteness.

In class the other day, I brought up the point of how anyone can practice being White. It's a process. An understanding of what properties give you dominance. [Our professor] brought up the idea of wealthy Asian families with domestic workers and how this is an example of how racialized people can pass into another world. Then I thought about how my cousins grew up with a Filipino domestic worker. Is my family White? White isn't just a colour. It really is a practice of dominance. – November 16, 2013

My family has been complicit in many ways of practicing whiteness. In consequence, I have learned these practices and exercise them in my daily life.

While living in India, I was witness to the stark realization that White was incredibly privileged and this reinforced my understanding that the image of whiteness was crucial to power.

I heard the weirdest thing today. I was walking home with [my coworker] and she was talking about how she wanted to stay out of the sun because she didn't want to be black. Her skin is really dark and she told me that I should really stay out of the sun because people will think I'm poor. She was dressed in a traditional sari like most of the women we saw on the streets while we were walking. We caught up to some girls that were wearing jeans and t-shirts and who were speaking English. Their skin tone was maybe a bit lighter than [my coworker's]. She then said to me, "look at those White girls over there". She said it with such envy, almost as if she were fawning over them. I asked her why she called them White and she said, "because they're rich". I wonder if she thinks I'm White. Probably. Am I White? – May 26, 2013

It's true what they say. Appearance is everything; however, only if your appearance fits the dominant image. While I was in India, just by being me made me White. My standard of living in Canada, my lighter skin, the fact I spoke English. All these things gave me power and made me White. The stark reality is that many racialized bodies, including myself, strive for this image in order to gain access to space.

Access

Throughout my journals, there have been many entries in which I emphasize my exclusion from spaces due to my identity and identity markers. In many situations, I have been targeted as "Asian" and assumptions are made about my ability to speak English, my eating habits, or even my smell. These assumptions prevent me from gaining access to certain spaces. However, I have learned how to pass and gain access into these spaces particularly through language and affiliation.

This guy came up to me tonight and shouted in my face. I didn't really understand what he said so I didn't say anything and just kept walking. He [] followed me and it was kind [of] like he was waiting for my reply. Then he shouted again. But this time I heard and understood exactly what he said. "What? No English?" I wanted to cry. – December 31st, 2008

The way I looked caused a reaction that made me feel like I didn't belong in a public space. What was even worst at the time was that I felt like Vancouver was a city with such a high Asian immigrant population and thus would feel like I always belonged. However, I felt like that sense of belonging was so quickly taken away from me. To circumvent this, I stifled and silenced my culture.

I get so embarrassed when people hear me speak Cantonese or Vietnamese. I want people to know that I speak English. [I want them] to know that I'm like them. – January 12, 2008

This hate for my culture and necessity to speak Cantonese and Vietnamese with my family brought such resentment towards who I am. I would go to many lengths to compensate for this perceived deficiency.

I'd rather date a White guy. I just kind of feel more comfortable with White guys. People will know I speak English. It makes it easier to meet people, easier to go places without feeling like everyone is wondering why I'm there. It's almost like [my boyfriend] was my ticket into clubs, bars, and a new set of friends. [He's] done so much for me. – March 4, 2009

However, as I began engaging with the process of critical reflection, I began to understand the destructive process I was engaging in. As I continued to engage in the practice of whiteness, I continued to alienate myself from my Southeast Asian culture and tried to force my way into a White queer culture where I will never belong. I realized that the deeper I engaged with this process, I would soon lose access to all spaces and not belong anywhere.

In 2012, I began to feel and realize the impacts of my desire to remove myself from my cultural community.

[My aunts and uncles] keep telling me how tall I am. They've been saying the same thing for the past 10 years every time I see them. Now they've started asking if I speak Vietnamese anymore. Like

what? Have I ever spoke another language to them before? And they keep telling me not to marry a White girl...a girl. Well, that's another story. – October 1, 2012

My family began to see me as if I were becoming White. In reality, I was. My immediate family and my younger cousins know that I'm queer and also call me White. If I were to come out to my aunts and uncles, I would definitely lose any status I had left of being Chinese-Vietnamese.

Holy fuck. I just did it...I told [my parents] I'm gay. I've never felt so attacked and isolated. Why are they making it about them? I'm the one that's hurt. They've lived with me while I was gay for the last 21 years. Why are they angry now? ... Dad told me in Vietnam, there are no gay people..." – February 2, 2009

In my dad's eyes, Asians are not gay. Coming out to my parents was the biggest move I could make towards my quest for being White.

However, even with my coming out, I have realized that I cannot gain full access to the queer White world. Thus, I began to repair the broken bonds in my own cultural relationships.

I've made more of a conscious effort to speak more Cantonese and Vietnamese at home and while I'm out and about. I shouldn't be ashamed of it. I'm not ashamed. Culture is so important. The world would be incredibly boring if everyone was the same. As much as I've assimilated to the norms...[through] the clothes I wear, the people I hang with, the way I speak, the things I do, the things I don't do...I need to make a change. I've wanted to be this way for so long so I could have more of a presence on the streets, in the bars, especially in gay spaces. Now that I feel like I'm "almost" there, I know this is when I need to turn back. I've burnt so many bridges within my own community. I'm not sure if they're repairable... - March 2, 2014

Engaging with this process of autoethnography has been an immense struggle. Revealing layers of myself and exploring the emotions, experiences and understandings at specific periods of my life have been both a constructive and destructive experience. As my

position on race, culture and whiteness have evolved over my life, I found it particularly painful to rediscover the hate I had towards my roots and both my biological and constructed identities. Compiling the findings from my journal entries and identifying the major themes that exposed my own internalized racism drew tears from my eyes and ignited a deeper understanding of the social, cultural and political influences on my life. Engaging with autoethnography has pushed me to analyze the ways in which as a queer Southeast Asian man I have negotiated and reframed social stigma associated with my body and desire for White men.

The practice of whiteness has had many destructive impacts on myself as a member of the queer Southeast Asian community. In the next chapter, these findings will be analyzed and a discussion will develop around the impacts whiteness has on relationships within the queer Asian community by exploring the social, cultural and political underpinnings that influenced the experiences of the identified themes in my findings.

Chapter 4. Discussion: Impacts of Whiteness on the Queer Asian Community

Within my findings, I identified two major themes: ideals of attraction and passing. Within these themes, hierarchy and privileging, internalized racism, the hierarchy of “Asianess”, image, appearance and practice and access were identified as subthemes. In the discussion, I discuss the themes and subthemes collectively in relation to the literature. I will conclude by drawing conclusions about the impact these processes have on relationships within the queer Asian community.

Within my findings, everyday dominant bodies, the media, an understanding that there is no queer homeland and historical, cultural and political contexts of Asian immigration and education have influenced the practices that are considered attractive and acceptable within the queer community. One of the first experiences I explored was of a high school teacher telling me whom I should engage with. From his perspective of a White straight professional male in an educational setting, he exercised immense power over me. My willingness to accept his advice is a reflection of my subordinate role as a young queer racialized body within a heteronormative institution. Through this subordination, I accepted his frame of how authoritative White bodies are above mine. This acceptance at a young age strongly influenced my understanding of a racial hierarchy that privileged the White body.

Furthermore, in my example of forcing myself to push through pain to maintain my body, keep pace with White bodies and feeling as if I could never amount to the strong, solid White body places the physical White body on a pedestal. In these experiences, the mental and physical capacities of the White body are immensely privileged and bodies that deviate from these norms are thus rendered queer. In this sense, queer does not solely

refer to sexuality, but rather to a multitude of differences bodies exude that challenge the norm (MacKinon, 2010).

It is limiting to regard queer as only referring to sexuality. Queer theory addresses the “abnormal” and thus must include other marginalizing identity markers like race, gender, and class (Kumashiro, 2001). Queer theory suggests distinct queer discourses that highlight potential possibilities for affirming differences and making room for diversity within the queer community. Some key concepts stemming from queer theory include: abnormalizing the normal, dissolving boundaries and forming alliances (Quinlivan & Town, 1999). Many agree that to bring a queer discourse to practice is to learn, unlearn and relearn through critical, personal, political, cultural, and social critique and analysis to ensure that all bodies matter (Butler, 1993; Wells, 2003; Britzman, 1998; Bryson & de Castell, 1993). However, within queer literature, there is an immense privileging of the White gay male voice thus producing queer as a White, western concept (Kumashiro, 2001).

As queer is a western concept, Hegel’s (1991) philosophy of history describes this East to West queer transition (El-Taybe, 2012; Han, 2006; Poon & Sin, 2008; Perez, 2005; Bonnett, 2005). Hegel (1991) dictates that the world moves from East to West – from archaic and uncultured to civilized and modern. Thus as history dictates, it is a natural progression for queer Asian bodies from the East to adapt to western/White ideals to become fully queer and gain access to modernity (Thobani, 2007). Being the case, a racial hierarchy is enforced within the queer community and racialized and “unqueer” bodies alike understand that to be queer, one must possess White male identity markers or otherwise be subject to marginal positions within the queer community. Thus the queer

community reflects the regulatory privileging and hierarchical discourse of queer theory that is exhibited within queer literature and everyday racial interactions.

Audre Lorde (1984) states, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never bring genuine change” (p.112). Therefore, to dismantle this hierarchy and privileging of whiteness within the queer community, racialized, marginalized, and “abnormal” bodies and voices need to be included in the literature. This inclusion of racialized voices seeks to challenge the preferential treatment of White bodies that is not only mandated by law, but also upheld by many governmental, cultural and religious institutions (hooks, 1996; Perez, 2008; Sakamoto, 2010). These forms of oppression silently mitigate ways in which White and racialized bodies coexist in society. It is apparent that marginalized groups often struggle with and are deeply affected by this oppression and thus seek out survival strategies (Perez, 2005). These forced strategies for survival have positive, but also many negative impacts on the queer Southeast Asian community.

Desire for Attraction and the Loss of Culture

In exploring queer as sexuality and how this racial hierarchy impacts the queer Southeast Asian community, the impacts of media must be discussed. As seen in gay pride parades and covers of mainstream heterosexual and queer oriented magazines, the dominant idea of male beauty is generally tall, physically fit, muscular, masculine, blue eyes, blonde hair and White (Poon, 2000). From observing my own family and extended family, Southeast Asian men do not possess these markers. However, I see myself as an anomaly to this claim being over six feet tall, physically fit, and broad. Southeast Asian men who do not fit the ideals of male beauty are considered less attractive or effeminate in the

mainstream gay community (Poon, 2000). These images of Southeast Asian men are thus objectified and exoticized, however, not often included in the mainstream gay media.

Richard Fung's (1996) article titled *Looking for My Penis*, was integral to my understanding of the subordination of the Asian identity within the queer community. Fung (1996) studied gay video pornography where Asian men are portrayed as passive, submissive, exotic bottoms with soft bodies that are prepared to receive their White partners. This phenomenon of viewing queer Asian men as submissive receptacles of White men emphasizes their fetishization that is so rampant within the queer community. This portrayal of queer Asian men creates a visible lack of a penis on the Asian body. As Fanon (1967) describes Black men metaphorically being turned into a penis due to their stereotype of being highly sexual, the Asian man is defined by a striking absence of a penis (Eng, 2001; Fung, 1996). Thus if Asian men have no sexuality, how can they have queerness?

With the National Coalition (2004) stating that 77% of North Americans watch pornography at least once per month, such images certainly will have a negative impact on the position gay Southeast Asian men have within the queer community. Furthermore, the absence of Southeast Asian bodies in pride parades, magazines and other mainstream media outlets reinforce the idea of passivity and invisibility of queer Southeast Asian communities as well as queerness within the Southeast Asian communities. These images, and lack thereof, may lead to the internalization of racist attitudes from the queer community by queer Southeast Asian men thus alienating themselves from their own cultural identities and privileging the dominant White gay male.

Garvey (2011) plays with the idea of queer being a race. Queer is not only about sexuality. It is a culture. It is a culture of difference and challenging of the historical, political, and systemic productions of what is seen as normal or deviant (MacKinon, 2010; Butler, 1993). However, unlike other races, there is no queer homeland and no queer nationality (Garvey, 2011). Thus dominant groups claim the queer identity, become the “universal queer subject” and create economies of exclusion based on race, gender and nationality (Ahmed, 2000). These groups then create hierarchies that decide who is attractive enough to be included in this culture. When dominant groups settle and different bodies seek access into the queer community, preconceived ideas of who they are, prevent full access as they are demoted to lower echelons of the hierarchy (Walcott, 2005). This phenomenon may even further alienate the queer Southeast Asian community from their own cultural identities by creating the desire to move up the hierarchy.

This privileging and hierarchy is exhibited by a practice exemplified by Keung (1999 as cited in Poon 2000) in an interview he facilitated. A participant noted that he bleached his hair blonde, wore coloured contacts and did everything he could to distance himself from his Asian heritage (Poon, 2000). This example is indicative to how I reacted on the men’s rowing team where I was singled out as the only racialized and Southeast Asian man. Reflecting on this experience and the historical context of Asian education in America, the participant in Keung’s (1999) research study and myself were practicing to become the model minority in attempts to progress through the hierarchy as we have determined that our identity does not amount to whatever that is perceived to be on top (Hartlep, 2013).

This concept evolved from the perceived ability of Japanese-Americans to excel in education post WWII compared to African-Americans thus creating the notion that Asians

are successful immigrant who do not need governmental support or civil rights legislation to succeed (Hartlep, 2013). The model minority functions to prevent cross-racial coalition and to create struggle in the Asian community in their claims to the people-of-colour-political identity. This concept of the model minority is directly tied to the act of passing which signifies the assumption of racial identities reviled by the mainstream yet collectively revalorized through historical processes of community based struggle (Roshanravan, 2010).

This process of becoming the model minority stresses the importance of becoming a citizen that adheres to the desires of the mainstream dominant society and the governmental, cultural and religious institutions that privilege the universal subject. Thus as queer and racialized minorities, queer Southeast Asian bodies must detach themselves from their cultural heritage in order pass into dominant queer society. This comes as a great loss to the queer Southeast Asian community. As more bodies attempt to leave the community, a competition and hierarchy amongst the community develops.

Competition and the Loss of Allyship

As the universal subject is the white middle class male, the “queer universal subject” would then be the white middle class gay male, thus Southeast Asian queer men strive to achieve the passing markers to become the model minority of the queer community. By way of image and appearance through the practice of whiteness, the queer Southeast Asian body entails a twofold sense of internalized racism and shame over its ethnic origin and the concealment of that origin by mimicking or attaching itself to White identity markers or even physically to a White body by engaging in a relationship (Sasson-Levy & Shoshana, 2013). In my personal experience, during that moment of gaining access to the queer

community by attaching myself to a White body, I felt superior to other Asian men who did not have this privilege of passing. This complex creates a competition within the queer Asian community and a hierarchy of “Asianness” (Poon, 1999; Fung, 1996; Sin, 1998; Eng, 2001).

As Southeast Asian queer bodies feed into the racial hierarchy and western standards of beauty, there is a potential to develop negative views of each other as potential partners (Sullivan & Jackson, 1999; Chu & Sue, 1984 as cited in Poon, 1999). Thus as Poon (1999) states, it is not surprising that many gay Asian men prefer, and some even obsessively look for White partners. Ridge et al (1999) reports that there are far fewer White men that seek Asian men. Therefore, a competition amongst queer Asian men may develop in the search for a White male partner and create divides within the queer Asian community (Han, 2005; Ayres, 1999; Kong, 2002; Fung, 1999; Sin, 1998). Poon (2010) reports that Asian men who choose White partners find that their own racial group do not fit their ideals of masculine attractiveness as they prefer men who possess physical traits less common in Asian men.

This idea that Asian men do not possess markers of masculine attractiveness can be related back to the Canadian historical context of Asians immigration and federal elections. Women were granted the right to vote in 1918, but the right to vote was not extended to Canadians of Asian origin until 1948 (Elections Canada, 2010; Pon, 2013). This action asserts that the Asian body does not belong within male or female “normal” spaces and thus renders the Asian body as queer and not belonging to any masculine or even feminine spaces. Such unbelonging forces the Asian body to seek ways in which to navigate this and even more so since the queer Asian body does not belong in the queer community either.

Through the practice of whiteness, there are ways in which the queer Asian body mitigates their unbelonging to the queer community. However, not all these bodies are in the privileged position of being able to practice this phenomenon. Issues of safety, culture, and desire all stand in the way (Ahmed, 2000). In my personal experience, the simple act of engaging in an intimate relationship with a White partner granted my access into the queer community. However, this relationship was an act of violence against other queer Southeast Asian men that have not or cannot engage in intimate relationships with White men (Garvey, 2011). My relationship forced an unbelonging onto other queer Southeast Asian bodies and created a barrier to their access to the queer community and a further “us vs. them” power imbalance (Eng, 1997).

Gay Shame and the Loss of Access and Space

Perhaps the notion of gay shame even further dissociates the queer Asian body from the queer community. Halberstam (2005) suggests that early childhood experiences of sexual shame and cultural shaming heavily impact the outcomes of queer belonging in adulthood. Poon (2011; 1999) and El-Tayeb (2012) stress the forced necessity for queers of colour to engage with the western modernity to be accepted. This requires a break with or coming out of a community by expressing gratitude for being saved by their “host society” (Poon 2011; El-Tayeb, 2012). However, upon entering this “host society”, the racialized queer body is thus rendered only a guest as the Asian body is merely a “marked queer” as opposed to the “proper queer” that the dominant White bodies are.

The process of “coming out” is often what sparks the process of western modernity. In my own experience, “coming out” in a Southeast Asian culture results in the expulsion from that culture and into the western White modernity (Kumashiro, 1999; El-Tayeb, 2012;

Poon & Ho, 2008). This process of identifying and performing sexuality signifies the coming out of Asian culture and into the modern queer culture to seek refuge (El-Tayeb, 2012; Butler, 1993). This transference into the queer community stresses the tenets of Said's (1978) orientalism where "others" are seen as lacking individuality and agency because their collective actions are determined by an archaic religion and culture that dictates their every move. As queer Asian bodies enter this "host society", an understanding that the queer Asian body cannot make the necessary transition into modernity without adopting western White ideals is constructed (Bonnett, 2005; El-Tayeb, 2012; Nadal & Corpus, 2013; Perez, 2008; Thobani, 2007). Those who do not adopt the western ideals are thus rendered not queer. The ability to gain normalcy and access as opposed to otherness is by way of image and appearance through practice (Butler, 1993; Fung, 1996; Kumashiro, 1999; Poon, 1999).

However, as queer Southeast Asian bodies are forcibly removed from their Southeast Asian communities through the shame they face by "coming out", they also remain outsiders within the queer community (Caluya, 2006; Han, 2006). In my experience, my identities as a Southeast Asian man and as a queer man force conflicting prescriptions for how to belong and with whom. Thus my desire to belong destroys my ties to access and space in both the Southeast Asian and queer communities and renders me lost and unable to occupy my identities.

Throughout this study, processes that produce the marginalization of Southeast Asian queers have been discussed. However, this is not to emphasize the idea that Southeast Asian queers only occupy marginalized spaces. This is quite the contrary. The aim of this paper was to highlight ways in which Southeast Asian queers have been marginalized in

order to open the space to discuss ways in which we have resisted. An example of this is the “Sticky Rice” movement in which queer Asian men only engage in intimate relationships and encounters with other Asian men. Gordon Pon (2012) describes this phenomenon as a counter-hegemonic move toward solidarity and Asian pride that is attentive to global dynamics of sexuality, colonialism and racism. This is only one example of the number of ways Asian bodies have resisted the plague of Whiteness in its many forms and spaces.

There are many ways in which the queer Asian body seeks refuge and acceptance within the queer community. The findings in my journal entries illustrate ways in which the Asian body privileges and practices whiteness in order to circumvent the perceived deficiencies of being a marginalized body. It is important to understand that whiteness and White does not simply refer to skin colour, but rather to processes and a state of being that are influenced by the social, cultural, political, and historical contexts of society. As a queer Southeast Asian man, I have experienced first hand the disposition marginalized bodies experience. I have walked in heteronormative, racialized, queer, and White spaces and felt that I never belonged in any of these spaces. As outlined in the discussion, the process of whiteness has many negative impacts on the queer Southeast Asian community. In an adaptation of the words of Fanon (1967), we should not focus on the constructions of the Asian man, but rather explore how the White man constructs his whiteness through his constructions of the Asian man. Within a queer context, there also needs to be a focus on how the Asian man constructs his whiteness in the face of queerness.

Chapter 5. Implications for Social Work

Within dominant society, we forget the historical contexts of racism, but reproduce them every day. From the desire for the ideal queer male body to the institutionalized forms of racism, the acts of forgetting and passing have been utilized to obscure the act of racism and render experiences free of racial disparities. However, in my queer Asian body, I remain aware that despite my own practice of whiteness, racial disparity can never be detached from my body regardless of intersecting identities.

As we understand that whiteness becomes the invisible standard by which we measure desirability of racialized queer men, this stresses that the separation of desire into racial categories indicates an institutionalized racism that informs micro level forms of oppression. Thus understanding the social, cultural, political and historical impacts of whiteness in a contemporary Canadian queer context facilitates ways in which the queer Southeast Asian community can challenge dominant society by preserving culture, promoting allyship and occupying space.

These responses and survival strategies to the dominant queer White society need to be used as opportunities to strategically challenge oppressions. Understanding the crux of queerness may be crucial to the ways in which social workers can advocate for the queer Southeast Asian community. By understanding that queer refers to the challenging and questioning of norms, social workers can then begin to question and challenge why Asian bodies face processes of exclusion within the queer community even though racialized bodies challenge essentialist notions of mainstream society. Further research needs to be done to determine ways in which queer Southeast Asian bodies can challenge these oppressions to develop tools for its elimination.

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