

Shih-wei Wang

Professor Cheung

ACAM 320 B

18 April 2023

### Queer Asians' Multicultural Identity Construction as Human Subjects

The burden of representation is detrimental as it does not account for racialized people's individual and complex characters. In the paper, "Goodbye Ohbijou: Notes on music, queer affect and the impossibility of satisfying multicultural ideals in Canada", Casey Mecjia, a queer Filipino woman, problematizes how the Western world see her music as an authentic representation of Asianness, despite being in a modern pop band that has rather Western influences due to the members' shared background of growing up in Canada. Mecjia notes "I continue to be frustrated by the ways in which my Asianness is often conflated with notions of an 'inclusive' multiculturalism" (Mecjia 123), where strangers "understood that I played Asian-influenced music because my body was read as Asian, not because of the sound, or the melody or the instruments. My Asian body was collapsed into a particular sound and mode of expression" (Mecjia 125). Here, Mecjia is angry that as a person of color, her work is reduced to representing notions of an inclusive multiculturalism. To the Western audience, her works are first and foremost recognized by her Asian body, with limited ways to express her artistic endeavors outside of this racialized representation. Mecjia, as an unrecognized complex, nuanced and individual character, finds tragedy in this situation. In this essay, I center on the queer Asian experience to argue that the burden of being read through one's racialized body discounts queer people of color from constructing their unique identities as human subjects. Moreover, I assert that essentializing the different aspects of queer racialized peoples' identities disregards how

they choose to embody their intersectional identity. Lastly, I focus on how queer diasporic Asians aim to create a social reality where they can bridge the intersections of their identity to create a positive multicultural identity.

The burden of only being recognized by one's racialized body extends to the queer and Asian experience, and it is deeply problematic how objectifying the racialized body disregards queer people of color's agency to construct their identity. In "Brown girls can't be gay": Racism experienced by queer South Asian women in the Toronto LGBTQ community", Sonali Patel notes of Parvati's experience as a queer South Asian woman. Parvati "contextualizes the 1990s as 'an era where if you didn't shave your head, you weren't out' to position her experience of being aggressively denied of [her] lesbian identity by a White butch woman who asserted, 'when I look at [Parvati] all I see is a woman of color.' Parvati's queerness is erased by her race, as well as a shaved/long hair dualism, which continues to be used as a colonial tool of measuring credible queer sexualities of South Asian women" (Patel 417). Later Ganga, another queer South Asian woman, says "the way we understand passing and non-passing as masculine and feminine is coded through white notions of sexuality. Me not passing doesn't have to do with me wearing makeup but more like them understanding the white queer body" (Patel 417). In these circumstances, these South Asian women were only being read and objectified through their racialized bodies, which disregards the ways in which they hold personal agency in self-meaning making as human subjects. Gayatri Spivak in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" discusses how the subaltern are objectified by being silenced and assimilated into Western thought:

To render thought or the thinking subject transparent or invisible seems, by contrast, to hide the relentless recognition of the Other by assimilation. It is in the interest of such cautions that Derrida does not invoke 'letting the other(s) speak for himself' but rather

invokes an 'appeal' to or 'call' to the 'quite-other' (*tout-autre* as opposed to a self-consolidating other), of 'rendering *delirious* that interior voice that is the voice of the other in us'. (Spivak, 89)

Spivak mentions here that by making the subaltern subject's thoughts invisible, societal perceptions assimilate them into Western hegemonic perspectives. Derrida's work, an example of Eurocentric processes in representing the subaltern, does not allow the subaltern subject to "speak for themselves", but rather the Eurocentric processes invoke an "appeal" to or "call" to the subaltern as an authentic Other (Spivak, 89). This relates to Parvati's experience, where Parvati loses her power to speak for herself when the "white butch" speaks for her, and Parvati is rendered the "invisible" object (Patel 417). As both Parvati and Ganga succinctly argues, because others defined queerness based on "white queer bodies" and "white notions of sexuality", these queer women of color's queerness are unrecognized because others assimilate into Western thoughts of queerness to categorize them, on seeing whether they have a "shaved head", or dress in masculine clothes. For these women, they have long hair due to cultural significance, yet that should not bar them from identifying as queer, and Patel's article eloquently highlights how intersections of racialization and queerness need to be analyzed in order to provide representation for others.

Moreover, I assert that essentializing the different aspects of queer racialized peoples' identities disregards how they choose to embody their intersectional identity. In Patel's work, "Brown girls can't be gay": Racism experienced by queer South Asian women in the Toronto LGBTQ community", she discusses the significance of *izzat* too:

Within South Asian culture, individuals are responsible for maintaining *izzat*, which is the family's honor, within a dualism of honor/shame... It is understood that the 'coming

out' rhetoric of Western LGBTQ culture threatens izzat, which may lead to ostracization from the family. Bacchus' (2017) study on South Asian premarital sexuality reveals that [Queer South Asian Women] are unwilling to sacrifice their lesbian relationships or parents' social ties in South Asian communities, and thus perform queerness in culturally conducive ways, such as rejecting identity labels, presenting as feminine, engaging in clandestine lesbian encounters, and/or conforming to familial expectations of heterosexuality. (Patel 412)

Indeed, Patel finds Durga to illustrate this example, who says:

[O]nce a year or something I just date a man for a few weeks to make [my parents] happy. ... I don't actually like men ... I still identify as gay the few times I've been with a man. I know other lesbians ... talk shit about me for saying one [label] and performing another ... but I just don't care anymore. (Patel 415)

To the other, presumably Western, lesbians, they "talk shit" about Durga because they think she chose South Asian family values of tradition over living freely as a lesbian woman. But in this instance, the Western audience is objectifying the intersectionalist reality which Durga exists in by essentializing that Durga *has* to make an absolute choice between her queerness and family; for them, there is no existence in between. Gail Mason in *The Spectacle of Violence* asserts that this intersectionality may not always be the most adequate strategy of analysis in comprehending queer peoples of color. She notes how "Intersectionality has difficulty with acknowledging the question of embodiment", and may sometimes "reproduce the very essentialist assumptions it is designed to avoid" (Mason 59). Thus when Durga dates a few men while labeling herself as a lesbian, she is not choosing her family values over her identity as a queer woman, because as Mason's theory argues, fixating on this intersectionality may cause Durga to be seen as an

essentialized product of marginalized identities. Rather it is pertinent to recognize racialized peoples have complexity as peoples, that the marginalized identities they embody can exist in the same social reality. This is proven when Patel, through Durga's example, provides that South Asian women hold onto their queerness and family ties, and they "perform queerness in culturally conducive ways, such as rejecting identity labels, presenting as feminine, engaging in clandestine lesbian encounters, and/or conforming to familial expectations of heterosexuality" (Patel 415).

After discussing the ways in which queer Asians understand their identity through interactions with others, I now center the discussion on how queer diasporic Asians aim to create a social reality where they can bridge the different aspects of their identity. In "Multicultural Identity Processes", Ying-yi Hong et al. posits that "Asian American participants who held a social constructivist view of race increased their American identification significantly after recalling a large (vs. small) number of positive encounters with American culture, but those who held a racial essentialism did not" (Hong et al. 52). This is to say that racially essentialist ways of understanding multicultural identities restricts how diasporic people understand their existence in multicultural spaces, because they simply do not think this multicultural reality exists for them as a subject. Conversely, in order for multicultural identities to be positively constructed, Hong et al. makes a case here that they need to create a social reality where intersections can be bridged so they understand their multicultural identity can happily exist in different situations.

I argue this social constructivist view of finding positive multicultural identification is apparent in Kendell Yan's documentary called "Yellow Peril: Queer Destiny". This is a short documentary on how Kendell, an Asian drag performer named "Maiden China", finds self-meaning making by performing in drag. Like Patel presents in her paper where South Asian queer women's identity construction is controlled by colonial powers of what is "acceptable"

queer appearance, Kendell, the artist behind Maiden China, resists this colonial reinforcement that Asian men have to be “cool” and “masculinized” to be validated. Instead, they embrace this effeminate version of the Asian male through seductive and empowering drag performances. Maiden China also creates an alien character through drag to comment on the alienation of their racialized body. Furthermore, Kendell with their peers from lion-dancing narrates how in the Chinese community, people have said “you’re not Chinese enough” (Yan 13:25) to tell them they should not use sacred aspects of Chinese culture, such as lion-dancing, in their drag performances. This is an essentialist way of defining Chinese-Canadians, as if diasporic peoples do not have access to their Chinese identity, as if their queerness was influenced by Western liberalism and this makes them less Chinese. Maiden China rejects these essentialist notions and instead uses Chinese influences in their drag performances to bridge these intersections between Chineseness, and queerness. They bring representation to showcase that it is okay to be Chinese in a queer space, and it is okay to queer in a Chinese space. Ultimately, Maiden China adopts social constructivist views of creating a positive multicultural identification; through drag, they create a social reality where their multicultural identity of being queer, Chinese, and Canadian can be celebrated. Yan reflects: “a lot of people come up to me afterwards [who] were queer Chinese people, [and they are] in tears about the fact that [my performance] happened in a space...that they never even knew they wanted to see happen. [Especially] in a space that they frequent, and they never see themselves reflected in that stage” (Yan 13:00-13:18). Thus, Maiden China’s performance can also provide an inclusive and diverse representation to multicultural others in his community.

Ultimately, I posit that the burden of being read through one’s racialized body disregards queer people of color from constructing their individual and unique identities as human subjects.

Moreover, I argue that essentializing the different aspects of queer racialized peoples' identities ignores how they choose to express and embody their intersectional identity. Lastly, I discuss how queer diasporic Asians, through a social constructivist view, construct a social reality where they can bridge the intersections of their identity to find self happiness.

## Works Cited

Hong, Ying-yi, et al. "Multicultural Identity Processes." *Current Opinion in Psychology*, vol. 8, 2016, pp. 49–53., <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2015.09.020>.

Mason, Gail. *The Spectacle Of Violence*. Taylor & Francis, 2001.

Mecija, Casey. "Goodbye Ohbijou: Notes on Music, Queer Affect and the Impossibility of Satisfying Multicultural Ideals in Canada." *Diasporic Intimacies*, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv47wd88.13>.

Patel, Sonali. "'Brown Girls Can't Be Gay': Racism Experienced by Queer South Asian Women in the Toronto LGBTQ Community." *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 2019, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/10894160.2019.1585174>.

Spivak, Gayatri. "Can the Subaltern Speak." *Colonial discourse and postcolonial theory: A reader*, Harvester Press, 1993.

Yan, Kendell, director. *Yellow Peril: Queer Destiny*. Youtube, Storyhive, 2019, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P4LvRXTtrq4&ab\\_channel=STORYHIVE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P4LvRXTtrq4&ab_channel=STORYHIVE). Accessed 18 Apr. 2023.