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Negotiating Sissyphobia: A Critical/Interpretive Analysis of One “Femme” Gay Asian Body in the Heteronormative World

A selection of literature suggests that gay Asian men are considered unattractive and undesirable, because they are socially positioned as “feminine” in the gendered hierarchy of White centered hegemonic masculinity among gay men. However, the author questions why the discourse of oppression is the only way to interpret performative aspects of gay Asian cultural identity constructions in this multicultural and globalized era. In identifying with such labeling, he perceives multiple “realities” of performative aspects of its cultural identity constructions, since the perception of Asians in the West has been in constant change. Thus, this analysis utilizes performance autoethnography to explicate the author’s personal text; the process of negotiating performative aspects of gay Asian cultural identity construction in the heteronormative world.

Keywords: autoethnography, identity negotiation, gender performativity, gay Asian man, sissyphobia

Heterosexuality is the “necessary” communicative element for men to conform to the hegemonic masculinity (Chesebro, 2001). If a man is not heterosexual, people will repeatedly challenge his masculinity (Franklin, 1984). Some gay men are pressured to achieve their hegemonic masculine body images to compensate for the social perception of gay men as effeminate (Kimmel & Mahalik, 2005).

These gay men who conform to the heteronormative masculine image are called *straight-acting*. Straight-acting gay men do not perform what Madon (1997) finds

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stereotypical gay male traits, such as being outspoken, sociable, talkative, and concerned about appearance. The attributes of straight-acting gay men are associated with terms such as “manly” and “butch” (Payne, 2007). Thus, straight-acting gay masculinity appears as similar to the cultural norm of strong, tough, and outdoors-type working-class men—the notion of frontiersmanship (Clarkson, 2006).

The discourse of straight-acting produces and reproduces anti-femininity and homophobia (Clarkson, 2006). For example, feminine gay men are often labeled “fem,” “bitchy,” “pissy,” “sissy,” or “queen” (e.g., Christian, 2005; Clarkson, 2006; Payne, 2007). They are perceived as if they perform like “women,” spurring straight-acting gay men to have negative attitudes toward gay feminine men (Clarkson, 2006; Payne, 2007; Ward, 2000). This is called *sissyphobia* (Bergling, 2001). Kimmel (1996) supports that “masculinity has been (historically) defined as the flight from women and the repudiation of femininity” (p. 123). Thus, sissyphobia plays as the communication strategy for straight-acting gay men to justify and empower their masculinity.

Whiteness is another normative masculine frame that dominates other ethnic groups in the U.S. (Chesebro, 2001; Connell, 1995, 2000). In this power structure of masculinity, Asian men are emasculated as “asexual” or “feminine” (Chen, 1996; Chesebro, 2001; Mok, 1999). This racialized image about Asian men can clearly translate into the everyday experiences of gay Asian men in the West. Han (2008) analyzes the situation by saying that “because gay White men make an ‘investment in Whiteness,’ they eradicate whatever male privilege gay Asian men may have by relegating to the feminine position” (p. 20). In this view, gay Asian men are socially positioned as “feminine” in the Western heteronormative masculine power structure (Ayres, 1999; Chesebro, 2001; Cho, 1998; Han, 2006, 2008, 2009, 2010; Phua, 2007; Poon, 2006; Wat, 1996).

In the societal condition, gay Asian men are generally perceived as *unattractive* and *undesirable* across mainstream gay communities in the West (e.g., Ayres, 1999; Cho, 1998; Drummond, 2005; Han, 2006, 2008, 2009, 2010; Phua, 2002, 2007). In particular, the “feminized” perception of gay Asian men and the communicative manifestation of sissyphobia are considered to construct racial stigmatizations toward gay Asian men. In this view, gay Asian men may have the limited choices of selecting their mates (Han, 2008; Phua, 2007). Thus, the discourse of oppression characterizes the current understanding of gay Asian cultural identity constructions.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

I negotiate and renegotiate my performative presentations of gay Asian cultural identity constructions in social locations; people that I came across generally perceive me as “skinny little Asian boy” (Han, 2010, p. 83). However, I do not interpret that my everyday communicative life is fully characterized by the discourse of oppression or that I am the only victim of racism in interactions with other gay and bisexual men. Poon (2006) also asserts the following:

Together with a discourse of multiculturalism that promotes ethnic-racial diversity, global capitalism has transformed this (Asian racial) identity from being stigmatized to being celebrated, turning into a commodity—an Asian “lifestyle.” This commodification has not only changed the perception of Asians in the West, but also created new possibilities. (p. 47)

He continues to observe that “today, gay Asians (in the west) have become increasingly diverse not only ethnically, but also ideologically, and do not necessarily share common interests or even experiences of being gay and Asian” (Poon, p. 48). Given these statements, the question that the discourse of oppression in gay Asian-American male identity construction cannot be the only interpretation of performative presentations of its multiple identities grew stronger within myself.

PREVIEW OF THIS ANALYSIS

The major critical question that I asked myself was what alternative interpretations of the performative presentations of gay Asian cultural identity construction are possible to the one offered by the current state of research? In order to answer this research question, I utilize performance autoethnography to explicate my personal text; my “femme” gay Asian body experience. Denzin (2003) asserts the following:

For performance ethnography is more than a tool of liberation. It is a way of being moral and political in the world. Performance ethnography is moral discourse. In the discursive spaces of performativity there is no distance between the performance and the politics that the performance enacts. The two are intertwined, each nourishing the other, opposite sides of the same coin, one and the same thing. (p. 258)

Thus, this analysis intends to illustrate a link between my personal narrative and the socio-cultural, political, and historical aspects of the gay Asian cultural identity constructions.

Before moving on to the next section, it is important to address that I interchangeably use two identity labels—Asian and Asian American—to refer to my identity negotiation processes. For example, a couple of communication scholars (e.g., Chen, 2004; Kawai, 2005; Nakayama, 2004) see that Asian Americans are marginalized by both mainstream and Asian co-cultural members due to their *hyphenated identity*. However, my performance autoethnography of negotiating my “femme” gay Asian identity occurs in a particular relational context in which I interact with mostly gay and bisexual men who do not identify as Asian and/or Asian American. Hegde (2002) asserts that “identity is enacted and negotiated in the everyday world of relationships” (p. 262). Thus, my Asian body appearance plays a role in my everyday communication experiences in which I negotiate and renegotiate my multiple identities. The theoretical frameworks that are very important to this analysis are first introduced in the following section.

HOMOPHOBIA AND INTERNALIZED HOMOPHOBIA

The discourse of homosexuality signifies homophobia. George Weinberg (1972) defines that homophobia is the irrational fear and/or hatred of gay men and women. Kimmel (1996) further suggests that “homophobia is a central organizing principle of our cultural definition of manhood” (p. 127). Kimmel continues to assert that “homophobia is the fear that other men will unmask us, emasculate us, reveal to us and the world that we do not measure up, that we are not real men” (p. 127). In this view, the societal discourse of oppression in homosexuality plays a role in normalizing hegemonic masculinity. Thus, the discourse of homophobia forces men to negotiate their performative aspects of heteronormative masculinity to conform to the hegemonic masculinity (Stein, 2005). Therefore, internalizing the discourse of oppression in homosexuality plays a role in how men negotiate who they are in society’s eyes.

Gay men also internalize homophobia, since they live in a heteronormative society. Ross and Simon Rosser (1996) define internalized homophobia as “dissatisfaction with being (gay) and as being associated with low self-esteem and self-hatred” (p. 15). Internalized homophobia is a source of conflict for gay men in negotiating their sexual identities. This is particularly so, according to Simon and Gagnon (1967), when one considers how the societal discourse of sin and societal discourse of mental health have historically characterized homosexuality. Thus, negotiating non-heterosexual identities is very complicated in a society that stigmatizes homosexuality (Plummer, 1981).

BECOMING GAY IN THE HETERONORMATIVE WORLD

“Becoming gay” means that an individual adopts homosexuality as a part of their social life (Plummer, 1975). Importantly, Dank (1971) asserts that the process of becoming gay occurs in a cultural condition in which the cognitive labeling of gay must be present. For example, prior to coming out, individuals must have access to information about homosexuality and gay identity. The social stigmatization of homosexuality is a barrier for individuals in the process of adopting homosexuality as a way of life. Therefore, the current increasing circulation of gay visibility develops gay communities in which one will declare his gay identity membership to himself and to others.

Specifically, the process of becoming gay “involves the decision to define oneself as homosexual, the learning of homosexual roles, and the decision to live one’s adult life as a practicing homosexual” (Troiden, 1998, p. 262). According to Vivienne Cass (1979, 1984), a gay identity formation consists of six stages. The *identity confusion* is the first stage that individuals wonder whether or not they may be attracted to same-sex individuals. Then, the *identity comparison* stage takes place, when individuals compare themselves to other heterosexuals and realize that they are probably gay. Even though individuals may not be fully comfortable with their non-heterosexuality, they engage in self-identifying themselves as gay. This is called the *identity tolerance* stage. Accordingly, the *identity acceptance* stage occurs when individuals adopt gay as a way of life. Communicating with other gays plays a role in this stage. Then, as gays start to em-

brace their identity membership, the *identity pride* stage takes place. Lastly, *identity synthesis* stage occurs, when gays have no problem disclosing their sexual identity to anyone. Importantly, in this stage they see that sexual identity is just one dimension of their multiple identities.

PRESENTING IDENTITIES IN SOCIAL INTERACTIONS

Individuals are thought to present and to perform their self-concepts of who they are in their everyday interactions. For instance, Erving Goffman (1959) discusses a sociological understanding of dramaturgy as a way to explore the presentation of identity as performance. Goffman views that social agents present who they are in a particular communicative setting that consists of a front stage and a back stage. The front stage is represented by social agents who present who they are in the way that they intend to communicate with their particular audience. In other words, a front stage can be considered a mask that social agents wear. In a backstage, social agents only exist while their audiences do not. The identity presentations that the social agents perform are directed by either a front or a backstage prop. The social agents who are performing become the audience for their viewers' play; at the same time, the audience members watch them. Given this perspective, it is important to note that "access to the back and front regions of a performance is controlled not only by the performers but by the others" (Goffman, p. 229). In this view, Goffman views that social agents have their own abilities to present their identities in social interactions according to social values and norms that are embedded in a particular cultural setting. Thus, Goffman highlights psychological processes that social agents negotiate their personal experiences of social values and norms to perform who they are.

NEGOTIATING PERFORMATIVE ASPECTS OF GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND BODY

Unlike Goffman (1959), Judith Butler (1990, 1993a, 1993b, 1997) rejects any concepts of inner-self in performing identities. Michel Foucault's (1978) notion of power, knowledge, and discourse has greatly influenced Judith Butler's thoughts on gender, sexuality, and body. Butler (1993a) asserts that "performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate 'act,' but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names" (Butler, 1993a, p. 2). Gender performativity is a process that social agents repetitively engage in a performative aspect of gender to represent the "cultural authenticity" of gendered bodies.

To exemplify her notion of gender performativity, Butler (1990) talks about drag (cross-dressing) performance as a way of understanding gender. In particular, the drag performativity reflects the imitation of "doing" gender, because the drag's outside appearance and expression are clearly an illusion of gender that human agents intend to communicate their gender identity. However, body matters. The anatomy of a drag performer clearly distinguishes the performance of gender in the reproductive heterosexual framework. Gender is yet constantly constructed by the repetition of imitating

gender through human agency's body as similar to drag performance. Thus, "gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original; in fact, it is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an effect and consequence of the imitation itself" (Butler, 1993b, p. 313).

Butler believes that gender, sexuality, and body are intersected to construct the social reality of gender. Butler rejects the "traditional" feminist understanding of gender as culture and sex as biology. Butler (1990) asserts the following:

If the incest taboo regulates the production of gender identities, and if that production requires the prohibition and sanction of heterosexuality, then homosexuality emerges as a desire which must be produced in order to remain repressed. In other words, for heterosexuality to remain intact as a distinct social form, it requires an intelligible conception of homosexuality, and also requires the prohibition of that conception in rendering it culturally unintelligible. (p. 104)

In this sense, the binary between heterosexuality and homosexuality is necessary to define the normative gender, because we live in a society in which one must desire a different gender in the heterosexual reproductive framework. Butler (1993b) continues to maintain that "the 'reality' of heterosexual identities is performatively constituted through an imitation that sets itself up as the origin and ground of all imitations" (p. 313). Thus, the visual inscription of homosexuality is a necessary discursive effect of constructing and defining heteronormative gender.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND PROCEDURE

In this section, I would like to justify the use of autoethnography. Then, the research procedure of this analysis will be discussed.

Autoethnography

Ellis and Bochner (2000) assert that autoethnography is "an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (p. 739). Autoethnography involves that "researchers focus on the use of self as a starting point for data collection and analysis, and from which broader sociocultural issues can be explored" (Foster, McAllister, & O'Brien, 2006, p. 47). In particular, autoethnographers must utilize three methodological elements of research inquiry (i.e., *auto* [self], *ethno* [the sociological connection], and *graphy* [the research application] to illustrate their personal accounts [Reed-Danahay, 1997]). In so doing, researchers aim that their autoethnographic texts will play as the inter-subjective space between the self and others and between individual and community to search for uncertain possibilities in our human lives (Holman-Jones, 2008).

Autoethnography has emerged out of the postmodern philosophy of traditional science and research that began in the mid-1980s (Wall, 2008). The supporters of autoethnography strongly questioned the dominant discourse of the male-orientated

“positivist” method (Wall, 2006). They view that the traditional writing conventions reproduce scientific knowledge that validate power attached to empirical studies. They aim to deconstruct power, discourse, and knowledge in the research community to seek new possibilities in approaching unanswered questions. Thus, this methodology has been derived from a triple crisis of representation, legitimation, and praxis (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, 2008; Holman-Jones, 2008; Wall, 2006).

Autoethnography is a subject of ongoing criticism. Some researchers (e.g., Atkinson, 1997; Burnard, 2007; Coffery, 1999) condemn that autoethnography is self-indulgent, narcissistic, introspective, and individualized. Atkinson (1997) asserts that “the narratives seem to float in a social vacuum. The voices echo in an otherwise empty world. There is an extraordinary absence of social context, social action, and social interaction” (p. 339). Thus, autoethnography is yet searching to establish its space as a method (Tillmann, 2009).

Autoethnography, on the other hand, is a progressively radical way for epistemology (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Autoethnographers can genuinely position their own self-reflexivities in their writings through their voices and emotions (Wall, 2006). Also, researchers can utilize autoethnography to deconstruct the boundary embedded in the ethnographic tradition (i.e., researcher vs. research participants and/or an outsider versus an insider) (Gergen & Gergen, 2001). Thus, Wall (2006) sees that “(autoethnography) allow(s) for the production of new knowledge by a unique and uniquely situated researcher, and offer (s) small-scale knowledge that can inform specific problems and specific situations” (p. 148). Therefore, autoethnography is the future of ethnography, since the boundary between ethnography and autoethnography began to be minimized at the seventh moment of inquiry (Denzin, 2003).

Procedure

This analysis emerged out of another autoethnographic analysis (see Eguchi, 2011). The research question posed in the original analysis was “How did I first learn about a socially constructed racial category?” Following Denzin’s (1997) essential elements of conducting in autoethnography, I first examine how I view who I am. Then, I analyze how I perceive my identity negotiation process take place in my relationships with others. Importantly, I consider the larger social, cultural, historical, and political setting where the process of negotiating who I am takes place. To assist this research procedure, I utilize my personal writing and reflection (i.e., my diaries and photographs) to elucidate my memories of negotiating identities. I also talk with certain individuals (e.g., my relationship partners and close friends) to remember some incidents that played a role in my identity negotiation. Then, specific narratives about my identity negotiation processes are coded.

From the research procedure noted above, a diverse range of data emerges since I negotiate what Ting-Toomey (1999) says both primary (i.e., cultural, ethnic, gender, and personal) and situational (e.g., role, relational, face work, and symbolic interaction) identities. For the purpose for this analysis, my performative presentations of gender

emerge as one of the major communication elements that I negotiate and renegotiate my gay Asian American male identity. To further highlight this variable, I raise a couple of specific questions, including: 1) What particular characteristics, roles, actions, or ways of seeing gender does my identity negotiation reveal? 2) What gendered normative values and conceptions of what is and what is not good are suggested in my identity negotiation? 3) What alternative interpretations of the world are possible to the one offered by the gender ideology embedded in my identity negotiation? 4) What does my identity negotiation suggest is unacceptable, negative, undesirable, marginal, or insignificant?

By answering these questions, I was able to articulate how I negotiate and renegotiate my “feminine” performative presentations of gay Asian American cultural identity constructions.

A CRITICAL/INTERPRETIVE ANALYSIS OF ONE “FEMME” GAY ASIAN BODY

Through everyday interactions with others, I came to learn that my performative presentations of gender are more “feminine” than “masculine.” While growing up near Tokyo, Japan, I never liked playing typically masculine sports that boys were encouraged to play. Also, I am more an indoor rather than an outdoor-type person; I did not enjoy any outdoor activities (e.g., camping, hiking, and fishing). Moreover, as I came out as gay during high school, I was not trying to conform to the performative aspects of heteronormative masculinity in Japan.

My intercultural transition to Southern California in 2001 to attend a university put me in an environment that is framed by the White normative masculinity. Since then, I have strongly been aware of how others perceive my performative presentations of gender as “feminine” in cities I lived in (i.e., New York; Orange County, CA; San Francisco; and Washington, D.C.). For example, my Asian racialized body image puts me into the social location in which my performative presentations of gender are perceived as “feminine.” In addition, others perceive that my performative presentations of gender conform to the stereotypical effeminate gay images that are circulated by mass media. Thus, my “feminine” performative presentations of gender have been the major discursive site in which I must refine and modify my multiple identities in my particular intercultural settings.

PUBLIC BATHROOM AS ARCHITECTURE OF GENDER SURVEILLANCE

The public bathroom has been the contested discursive site in which I negotiate others’ perceptions of my performative aspects of gender. Judith Halberstam (1998) asserts that the gendered public bathroom produces and reproduces the binary normative gender system (i.e., male vs. female), since the public bathroom discursively plays as an architecture of gender surveillance in the public sphere. She talks about her experience of being mistaken as a man in the female bathroom, since her performative presentations of gender communicates female masculinity.

A similar situation has happened to me on a number of occasions. In public restrooms in airports, rail stations, movie theaters, and schools, some men often nonverbally look at me as if they are questioning my gender. Most of them realize that I am male soon after they carefully “sum me up.” There have also been some instances in which I needed to explain my gender, especially when I had a medium-length hairstyle. For example, this conversation that I had in a hotel in Washington, DC in 2008:

A (Caucasian-mid 40s-looking] man: I think your bathroom is the other one.

Me: Oh, I am male.

A: (Looking at me carefully) Right. I am sorry that I made a mistake.

The men who assumed I am a female of course realized that I am male due to my tone of voice. However, I think their mistakes occur at their first impression of me due to my nonverbal performative aspects of gender (i.e., physical appearance, fashion style, and kinetics). This analysis became clear when I shared the “bathroom experience” with my close female friend who is about 30 years old and identifies as African American in Washington, DC. She said the following:

Well, I talked to my mother and boyfriend about your “bathroom experience,” as I was really shocked to hear about it. My mother and I do not understand why you are mistaken for a woman in the bathroom, because you look like a typical gay man. However, after my boyfriend met you, he said that he did not expect (the author) is that small and like a woman though he knew you are gay. Maybe, the male gaze is a little different.

Chesebro (2001) makes a point about performative aspects of hegemonic masculinity. He says the following:

Certain physiological characteristics are consistently associated with manliness and men, such as more facial hair, a deeper voice, certain genitals, larger body sizes, a higher ratio of muscle to fat, and a greater upper-body strength. (p. 41)

Thus, I am often mistaken for not being a “man” in the bathroom because my nonverbal performative presentations of gender do not conform to the hegemonic form of masculinity.

In this view, the institutional bathroom plays a site in which my performative aspects of gender are verbally and nonverbally being evaluated. Halberstam (1998) maintains that “the men’s bathroom signifies as the extension of the public nature of masculinity” (p. 24). As a result, I often feel uncomfortable with going to the “male” bathroom, because I will be evaluated. When I go there, I try to finish what I have to do as quickly as possible. Also, I try not to look at anybody while I am in the bathroom. Perhaps, I am naturally protecting myself from the possible punishment of not being a “manly” man.

THE REINFORCEMENT OF STEREOTYPICAL GAY EFFEMINACY IN SOCIAL CONVERSATIONS

Social conversations also become the discursive site in which I constantly negotiate my performative presentations of gender as being equated to the effeminate stereotypes about gay men. Helen Shugart (2008) maintains that “gay men and effeminacy were assigned very clearly defined roles, as drawn sharply against “authentic”—heterosexual—masculinity” (p. 292). The U.S. popular media clearly locates the gay male flamboyant effeminacy within “fashion and image industries” (Shugart, 2008, p. 286) for the purpose of commercial consumption. This media image of gay men and effeminacy clearly defines my interactions. People generally assume that I am a part of fashion and image industry even today. For example, one day when my friend and I went to a restaurant in Soho, New York City, in 2007, we became acquainted with people sitting next to us. The conversation unfolded as such:

A (Caucasian mid-30s-looking) lady: Where are you originally from?

Me: I am from Japan.

A: What do you do?

Me: Oh, I am a graduate student.

A: Oh really? I thought that you are a fashion designer from Japan or something.

You look like that. Since I am a part of the industry, I thought that it would be nice to network.

Then, clearly, she lost an interest in communicating with us since I am not who she thought I was. Around the same time, in addition, I had a situation in which a late 20s Asian-looking female assumed I worked for a particular designer’s retail store in New York City that I never worked for. Although these are vivid situations that I clearly remember, I constantly negotiate and renegotiate the social perception of gay effeminacy as “fashion divas.”

The aforementioned experiences remind me that my performative presentations of gender are “unnatural” in the hegemonic masculine framework. For instance, my ex-partner “Luis” told me that “since you express your femininity, people will be automatically thinking that you are the part of fashion and image industries.” “Luis,” who conforms to the straight-acting masculinity, never experiences what I experience, even though he is also gay. He is very good at imitating the performative aspects of normative masculinity. His performative aspects of gender are normalized as it is his natural, his normally perceived image. In this sense, he can pass as a straight man. However, my performative presentations of gender are not natural, because “men” are not supposed to be like me. Thus, others’ assumption of my occupational roles communicates how others perceive my performative presentations of gender.

PERFORMATIVE PRESENTATIONS OF GAY ASIAN AMERICAN IDENTITY CONSTRUCTIONS

Interacting with other gay and bisexual men, I have learned that gay Asian American men are generally stereotyped as “being smooth,” “subservient,” “passive,” and “exotic.” For example, Chong-suk Han (2006) asserts the following:

Because gay Asian men are racialized and gendered, their predicted role performance involves becoming “feminine” counterpart to the “masculine” gay White male. Much like the way that women are rewarded for playing the feminine role, gay Asian men are “rewarded” by the dominant gay community for performing their prescribed gender roles. (p. 17)

These nonverbal stereotypes clearly emerge out of the emasculated Asian American male representation. Ayres (1999) also asserts that “the focus in (western gay media) photos of Asian men is the curve of the body, a typically feminine emphasis” (p. 94). In this sense, some non-Asian men objectify that gay Asian men are just like women (Cho, 1998; Han, 2006, 2008, 2009; Phua, 2007; Wat, 1996).

This feminine representation of gay Asian men clearly plays a role in how I negotiate my multiple identities. For instance, at a home party in Washington, DC, in 2010, my acquaintance, “B,” who is an openly gay Caucasian American man in his early 30s recently had a conversation with me:

B: You are so tiny.

Me: Well, I know, especially so in the U.S. But I think I am the normal body size in Japan.

B: Oh yeah? But, most Asians guys are small like you anyways. I also notice that most of Asian guys are so smooth. Are you naturally smooth? Or do you actually shave?

Me: I actually have to shave most parts. Recently, I started my laser hair removal though.

B: Oh, I did not know that. But it is good that you are smooth like a woman.

At a different occasion in a gay bar in Washington, DC, another acquaintance who is a Caucasian male in his early 30’s reinforced the feminine image of Asian men by saying that “Why do gay Asian men seem to be ‘wanna-be’ housewives?” These conversations reveal the idea that “gay Asian American men and Asian American women could easily share the stereotype of being submissive and passive in character” (Phua, 2007, p. 917). Thus, the feminized representation of gay Asian American men clearly appears in my daily interactions with other gay and bisexual men. This type of conversation is always the reminder that I must negotiate my performative aspects of gender as it relates to my cultural and ethnic identities.

The feminine image of gay Asian American men creates another perception that gay Asian American men seek Whiteness in their mate selection (Ayres, 1999; Chesebro, 2001; Cho, 1998; Han, 2006, 2008, 2010; Phua, 2007; Phua & Kaufman, 2003; Poon, 2006). Gay Asian men are often perceived as only seeking White, older, wealthy, and sexually active men (Ayres 1999; Chesebro, 2001). For example, Phua (2007) asserts, “What is interesting is that some gay Asian American men’s preference for masculinity relates only to White American men but rarely to other racial groups” (p. 915). The racialized pattern of Asian-White mate selection occurs because Asian men struggle presenting and positioning their masculinities within the Western societal structure

(Drummond, 2005). In this sense, Whiteness is the way for gay Asian men for the purpose of social mobility to compensate their social locations constructed by co-cultural multiple identities (Phua, 2007).

This gay Asian-White relational image is also the discursive site in which I must negotiate and renegotiate my performative presentations of gender. For instance, most gay and bisexual men who I come across assume that I am only interested in Whiteness for a mate selection. They perceive that I appear to be a “fem” who is looking for a White man to protect me. Recently, I had a conversation with one of my new friends, “Jo,” who is an openly gay biracial man of Black and White Americans in his late 20’s in Washington, DC. Our discussion went as follows:

Jo: Why do Asian men like White men only?

Me: It appears that Asian men are attracted to White men only. But I do not think so. I have seen many Asian men who date outside of Whiteness. In fact, I have a couple of Asian friends who are dating African Americans and Latinos. I have seen many gay Asian intra-racial relationships in California (i.e., Los Angeles and San Francisco) as well.

Jo: Are you for real? Maybe, I need to visit California to see. But, I have seen many gay Asian men like you who are more feminine side dating rich and old White men.

Me: Oh please. All partners that I had serious relationships with happen to be African Americans or multicultural individuals.

Jo: What! I have never met Asian boys who like black men in person.

I was very surprised every time when others ascribe who I am according to the normative Asian/White relational image. My shock was especially a result of my participant-observational gaze. I have observed that a number of Asian men dating non-White men (e.g., Asians, African Americans, Latino, and multiculturals) across the major cities I lived. I have also participated in serious relationships that do not include White men. Thus, the gay Asian-White interracial relationship image becomes a communicative element that people perceive my performative presentations of gender as a gay Asian man.

PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH GAY AND BISEXUAL MEN

Gender (i.e., masculinity vs. femininity) has been strongly embedded in my same-sex intimate relationships especially, because I, as a “femme” gay Asian, have been with “straight-acting” gay or bisexual men of color. For example, Jay Clarkson (2006) mentions that straight-acting or masculine gay men are mostly attracted to someone masculine, because they are gay men who are attracted to men and not someone like women. In addition, Ayres (1999) observes that many gay men possibly may say “no fats, femmes, or Asians” (p. 89) in their personal classifieds for their mate selections. I have observed those similar classifieds in cyberspace for gay men. I have also heard some of my straight-acting gay friends make such comments. Though I am not trying

to be narcissistic, however, I have not had problems meeting straight-acting gay men of different ethnic and cultural groups either at bars or online. Rather, my problem was that I needed to negotiate and renegotiate the enactment of gender ideology in my relationships with straight-acting gay and/or bisexual men of color.

I constantly need to maintain my look that fits into the typical feminine image, because straight-acting gay men of color that I have met expected me to do so. For instance, my ex-partner of African American and Latino heritage who is six feet in height and 200 pounds, "Luis," kept telling me that he would not be with me if I gained 10 more pounds. Often, he suggested that I should not eat so much, because otherwise I would become fat. In this view, he constantly indicated that I should keep up working on my small-framed body, which is 5-foot-7 and 125 pounds. In another instance, another ex-partner of mine, "Damian," who is one year older than me and of African-American decent, often said, "I only date someone who has an 'up to date' fashion style. I like Japanese from Tokyo, because they know how to dress." I still remember that he seemed to be happier when I "dressed up." In this way, I came to learn that I must keep up with the fashion trends, as these men expect me to do so. Thus, being "femme" is celebrated as long as the social agent presents his performative aspects of gender to conform to the effeminate gay normativity. Particularly, a hyper-feminine presentation becomes a communication strategy for gay Asian men to successfully manage their racial stigma in gay communities (Han, 2009).

The notion of domesticating "femininity" is another gender theme that has emerged from my personal interactions with these straight-acting gay men. A number of straight-acting gay and bisexual men whom I went on dates with asked me questions like "Do you like cooking? What do you like to cook? Do you like children? Do you think of adopting and raising children?" In this sense, they normally ascribed me as wanting to be the "houseboy" based on my performative aspects of gay Asian cultural identity constructions. However, some of those men are very surprised that my personality is not really passive and submissive, though my appearance is feminine. My ex-partner, "Luis," also frankly expressed his imagination of racialized and gendered gay Asian roles. He often said "Why don't you cook?" and/or "Why don't you clean my room?" I did not mind if I helped with his "domestic" chores. However, I was not comfortable with me doing all aspects of domestic chores, especially when I did not live with him. When I questioned this idea, he said, "Because you are femme." On the other hand, "Damian" indirectly expressed this gendered concept. When we were talking about our future, he implicitly expressed that he wanted to be the one who would be the "breadwinner" while he wanted "someone" to take more of the domestic role. Thus, gender discursively plays a role in constructing unique and particular relational cultures in my relationships with them. Gay men may be also subjected to internalize the material reality of heteronormative gendered communication.

ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETATIONS OF SISSYPHOBIA

In my relationships, I have occasionally observed the discursive manifestation of "sissyphobia"—straight-acting or masculine gay men's negative attitudes toward fem-

inine gay men (Bergling, 2001). For example, I was thinking of exclusively dating “Kyle,” who is a two years younger of African American descent in Washington, D.C. In the process of making a decision, he wanted to introduce me to his parents, since he is an openly bisexual man. However, he said that “you are so feminine that I am not sure whether my mother will like you or not, although my father would be okay with you.” As being anxious about this, he did not even introduce me to his parents when my friend and I went to see his basketball game. I was very sad and frustrated with how he made our relationship on the “down-low.” This incident became the deal-breaker for me not to pursue a relationship with him, because I perceived that he was not fully comfortable with my performative presentations of gender. However, at the same time, I learned that his mother is still not comfortable with his bisexuality and hoping for a change. In this situation, I interpret that he was uncomfortable presenting a discursive text that communicates outside of heteronormativity to his parents.

In another instance, “Luis” sometimes emphasized in daily conversations with me that he is generally attracted to straight-acting gay men. However, having known him since 2003, he has only had serious relationships with “femme” guys, including myself, one African American, and another Japanese guy. All of us have also met his family members (e.g., his mother and cousins). When I pointed out my perception about his preference, he could not say anything to defend his argument, because he does not want to “openly” admit what he likes.

Observing these situations, however, I began to see that the discursive manifestation of sissyphobia is not that feminine gay men are unattractive and undesirable. Rather, these straight-acting gay men would like to present their “heteronormative” masculine faces in their social interactions with others. Ting-Toomey and Kurogi (1998) assert that face is “a claimed sense of favorable social self-worth that a person wants others to have of her or him” (p. 187). Given this idea, I have begun to wonder if sissyphobia may be *activated* when an agent’s masculine face is being threatened in their processes of negotiating their multiple identities.

Particularly, I observe that the notion of internalized heterosexism or homophobia may be the source of activating sissyphobia. Just like Clarkson (2006) suggests, I have seen some acquaintances saying that “I would rather be with women if I have to be with a femme.” They often made fun of femme gay men by calling them bitchy or sissy. At the same time, however, I know that they actually *sleep* with femme guys. I have also encountered a number of gay and bisexual men saying that, “I am not usually attracted to ‘femme’ guys. But I am attracted to you.” Participating in these interactions, I observe that they just do not want to disclose their “secret” attraction toward femme guys in public, because the performative aspects of male femininity are stigmatized as a failure in the heteronormative gendered world. Borisoff and Victor (1998) assert that “gender-based conflicts often arise when individuals attempt to alter or extend the boundaries of the prescribed (heteronormative) scripts that have become embedded in the U.S. cultural psyche” (p. 107). Thus, the communication strategy of sissyphobia appears as a tool for some straight-acting gay men to imitate the heteronormative masculine script to evaluate their performative aspects of gender in public sphere.

Particularly, some gay or bisexual men desire for assimilation into mainstream culture prompts them to normalize their sexuality as similar to heterosexuality (Yep, Lovaas, & Elia, 2003). In this view, imitating the heteronormative performative aspects of gender that eradicate male femininity is the communication strategy for straight-acting gay men to compensate for their sexuality.

The aforementioned belief strongly exists within me because I observe some straight-acting gay men who are comfortable with their performative aspects of gender do not discriminate against feminine gay men. In other words, they do not need to justify their performative aspects of gender by rejecting feminine gay men. Also, some of them date feminine guys, because they believe that “you like what you like” whether their partners are straight-acting or feminine. One of my ex-partners, whom I lived with for two years in California, “Mark,” dates anybody regardless of their performative aspects of gender. Thus, I strongly question if the sissyphobia as a discourse of oppression can be the only single interpretation. Rather, I observe that multiple “realities” of sissyphobia are embedded in social interactions among gay and bisexual men.

FRAMING MY PERFORMATIVE ASPECTS OF RACIALIZED AND GENDERED BODY CONSTRUCTION

In everyday communications with others, my communication strategy of negotiating my performative aspects of gender is to celebrate, emphasize, embrace, and present my “femininity.” Phua (2007) asserts that “some gay Asian American men actively acknowledge their feminine roles” (p. 914). He continues to say that “these gay Asian Americans tend to reject their masculinity and emphasize their femininity as marketable traits in mate selection” (p. 914). Han (2009) reasons the situation by saying that some gay Asian men emphasize on highlighting “a hyperfeminine presentation to trade a more-stigmatized status for one that is less stigmatizing” (p. 106) to manage their racial stigma. My social location in which I negotiate who I am is socially constructed as a result of my co-cultural identities in the U.S. mainstream culture that “attaches privileges to being White and male and heterosexual regardless of your social class” (Johnson, 2001, p. 10). As Butler (1993a) says that body matters, breaking the social and political barrier seems very difficult for me in this materialized reality of culture, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. Thus, what I can do to successfully manage this racialized and gendered body is to celebrate, emphasize, embrace, and present my feminine performative aspects of gender. Thus, I believe speaking about the multiplicity of my social location is the first step to deconstruct the heteronormative ideology.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This autoethnographic analysis has offered the alternative interpretations of performative aspects of gay Asian cultural identity constructions. For example, gay Asian men are perceived as seeking out Whiteness in their mate selections (Ayles, 1999; Chesebro, 2001; Cho, 1998; Han, 2006, 2008, 2010; Phua, 2007; Phua & Kaufman,

2003; Poon, 2006). If they have the alternative choice, they prefer dating the fellow Asian American men (Phua, 2007). Because of this perception, they are called sticky rice (Han, 2006). However, this analysis suggests the possibility that there are a number of gay Asians who date “others” (e.g., African Americans and Latinos). In this sense, it is very inaccurate that the current state of research about gay Asian men omits the occurrence of “color to color” same-sex relationship arrangement. It is very critical, since the US’s color line is changing every day to be more multi-cultural than ever before (Smith & Edmonston, 1997).

I am not comfortable saying that gay Asian men are simply considered unattractive and/or undesirable through my participant observations. According to Phua (2007), in most instances, “gay Asian American men are stereotyped collectively and categorized into less desirable group and in some cases, not even within the consideration group in mate selection” (p. 916). However, Poon (2006) maintains that “it is also inaccurate to consider that there is nothing positive about being gay and Asian” (p. 51). In my interactions, I have met various gay and bisexual men of different ethnic and cultural groups who admire the *beauty* in Asian men. I observe that the number of this population is increasing among younger generation because the increased celebrations of Asian popular culture in general and Japanese pop culture in particular (e.g., animation, arts, cuisine, fashion, and music) change their attitudes toward Asians.

Perhaps, in some instances, some Asian American men make sense of their reality by projecting their perceptions of their own body as inferior on others due to their internalized racism—adaptive response to “justify the oppression of their group with a belief in their own inferiority” (Pyke & Dang, 2003, p. 151). To exemplify this, in San Francisco and New York City, I have been acquainted with a couple of the Western hegemonic masculine body framed Asian gay men who successfully broke the glass ceiling and dated whomever they liked. Thus, the idea of equating Asian body and unattractiveness is very questionable from the way I see the social world. Therefore, examining the performative aspects of gay Asian cultural identity constructions beyond the discourse of oppression is very critical.

Although sissyphobia is pervasive in this gendered society, this analysis has looked at the multiple realities of sissyphobia. There are some “straight-acting” gay men who show hatred toward “effeminate” gay men, simply because of internalizing sissyphobia and/or internalized homophobia. However, some of their sissyphobic communicative expressions may not correlate with what they may actually do behind the doors, according to my autoethnography. I equate this phenomenon to the situation that some gay and bisexual men in the closet deny their sexuality in public. Thus, considering the dialectic of public vs. private into account may be necessary in further understanding the communication processes of sissyphobia.

Lastly, I wonder how sissyphobia may be activated in personal relationships between straight-acting and effeminate-acting gay men. For example, Poon (2000) asserts that gay Asian men are more vulnerable to experience same-sex violence in their Asian-White relationships as a result of power differences (e.g., socio-economic differences, age differences, domesticated images of Asian beauty, homophobia in Asian cultures,

and cultural differences). He further mentions that “similar to women who are vulnerable to intimate violence as a result of their socio-economic factors, gay Asian men may be more susceptible to abuse” (2000, p. 40). I have also heard about the occurrences of various forms of domestic violence (e.g., beatings, emotional damage, and social/financial isolation) in male same-sex relationships, particularly among gay Asian men. Though domestic violence can happen to any gay couples, I wonder how “sissyphobia” particularly plays into the dynamic of domestic violence processes in the straight-acting and effeminate-acting male same-sex coupling pattern. Thus, sissyphobia is the communication concept that the scholarly community must further investigate.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the purpose of writing this autoethnographic exploration is to provide an alternative way to make sense of the multiple realities of gay Asian cultural identity constructions in this globalized and multicultural period. For example, Baxter and Montgomery (1996) maintain that “social life is a dynamic knot of contradictions, a ceaseless interplay between contrary or opposing tendencies” (p. 3). Given this perceptive, focusing on the discourse of oppression in performative aspects of gay Asian cultural identity constructions may be too limited. Particularly, gay Asian men in the West experience social life under the dialectical tensions of something positive and negative about their multiple identities. Thus, beginning to examine multiple realities of gay Asian men is the way to critically interpret “unfinalizable, open, and varied nature of social life” (Baxter, 2005, p. 131) about such identity labeling. Importantly, each personal relationship is being developed through an unpredictable and indeterminate dynamic communication process in a particular context (Baxter & Montgomery, 1997). Therefore, I hope that this autoethnographic text will play as a point of departure to create a space to further dialogue about “multiple” realities of gay Asian American men and their performative presentations of gender.

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