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**THE INTIMACIES OF QUEER SUBJECTS:  
TT TAKEMOTO'S *LOOKING FOR JIRO* (2011), *SEMIOTICS OF SAB* (2016),  
AND *EVER WANTING (FOR MARGARET CHUNG)* (2021)**

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

VISUAL STUDIES

by

Kate Korroch

December 2023

The Dissertation of Kate Korroch is

approved:

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Professor Derek Conrad Murray

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Peter Biehl  
Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

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2023

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## ABSTRACT

THE INTIMACIES OF QUEER SUBJECTS:  
TT TAKEMOTO'S *LOOKING FOR JIRO* (2011), *SEMIOTICS OF SAB* (2016),  
AND *EVER WANTING (FOR MARGARET CHUNG)* (2021)

Kate Korroch

This dissertation analyzes three projects by artist TT Takemoto: *Looking for Jiro* (2011), *Semiotics of Sab* (2016), and *Ever Wanting (for Margaret Chung)* (2021). Each chapter parses the distinct visual vocabularies and methodologies created by Takemoto for the artworks in relation to Jiro Onuma (1904-1990), Sab Shimono (b. 1937), and Margaret Chung (1889-1959). In chapter one, I explore how *Looking for Jiro* takes up Japanese American incarceration and queer sexuality with artistic methods based in performance and film. I contend that within the slippages of queer failure, *Looking for Jiro* sutures these histories from the past to create relationality with the present and future. Chapter two examines how *Semiotics of Sab* takes up visual and aural stereotyping perpetuated by Hollywood films by drawing from the film archive of gay Asian American actor, Sab Shimono. In conversation with genre-shaping methods from structuralist and feminist experimental film, the chapter shows how *Semiotics of Sab* offers a queer and Asian American intervention to grapple with stereotyping in the US. Lastly, in the final chapter, I discuss *Ever Wanting (for Margaret Chung)* to explore the implicit policing of identity as tied to homophobia and racism in the early twentieth century. The chapter shows how the artwork's contrasting filmic techniques create a visual vocabulary that reflect the complexities of American heroism.

The analyses in this dissertation show how Takemoto's methods have historical implications for US visual culture and art history. The past is an impetus for each project and the artworks deftly reveal the visual culture redactions and misrepresentations of queer Asian Americans and how those patterns persist in the present. Ultimately, I argue that Takemoto's artworks critique US history, not to complete the picture, which is dynamic and incomplete, but to disrupt what exists and present space for asking questions of sedimented histories that are foundational to present US ideologies.



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## INTRODUCTION

### HISTORIES NOT FORGOTTEN

Over Fourth of July weekend in 2020, “Not Forgotten #xmap” was written in the sky over Terminal Island off the coast of Southern California (Figure 1).<sup>1</sup> Today the island houses detention facilities and immigration courts. In 1942, Terminal Island was a Japanese fishing village; this was also the year that President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, making it legal to send people of Japanese descent in the United States to concentration camps.<sup>2</sup> Etched into the bright-blue sky on a weekend celebrating the “birth” of the United States, this commemorative script hovered ephemerally over people incarcerated by the US government. *Not Forgotten* was TT Takemoto’s contribution to *In Plain Sight* (2020), a project led by Cassils and rafa esparza, “dedicated to the abolition of immigrant detention and the United States culture of incarceration.”<sup>3</sup> Over eighty artists contributed words written with skywriting paired with significant sites, transmitting messages in the “borderless sky.”<sup>4</sup> For example, Maria Gaspar chose poetic and popular song lyrics, “Soy Pan, Soy Paz, Soy Más,” positioned over a Texas detention facility; Mary Kelly wrote “Let Live” over a family detention center in South Texas; and Dread Scott wrote the name

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<sup>1</sup> TT Takemoto’s pronouns are they/them, which will be used in all original material written for this dissertation. Any quoted material written before their pronouns changed to they/them will be left in the original form.

<sup>2</sup> “Tina Takemoto - #XMAP: In Plain Sight,” Tina Takemoto - #XMAP: In Plain Sight, accessed July 6, 2023, <https://xmap.us/artists/tina-takemoto/>.

<sup>3</sup> “Artists - #XMAP: In Plain Sight,” Artists - #XMAP: In Plain Sight, accessed August 1, 2023, <https://xmap.us/artists/>; “About - #XMAP: In Plain Sight,” About - #XMAP: In Plain Sight, accessed July 6, 2023, <https://xmap.us/about>.

<sup>4</sup> “Artists - #XMAP”; “About - #XMAP.”

of the first immigrant to die from Covid-19 while in a US detention center, “Carlos Ernesto Escobar Mejia,” over the Statue of Liberty in New York City.<sup>5</sup> In photographs of the project, words and phrases are backed by a bright-blue sky; the pairings of the messages and the site-specific histories push against the dangerous exclusionary violence that is embedded in US immigration and incarceration systems.



**Figure 1. TT Takemoto, *Not Forgotten #XMAP*, 2020 for *In Plain Sight* co-led by Cassils and rafa esparza. Photo by Mark Von Holden. Image courtesy of *In Plain Sight* co-director rafa esparza.**

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<sup>5</sup> “Maria Gaspar - #XMAP: In Plain Sight,” Maria Gaspar - #XMAP: In Plain Sight, accessed August 20, 2023, <https://xmap.us/artists/maria-gaspar/>; “Mary Kelly - #XMAP: In Plain Sight,” Mary Kelly - #XMAP: In Plain Sight, accessed August 20, 2023, <https://xmap.us/artists/mary-kelly/>; “Dread Scott - #XMAP: In Plain Sight,” Dread Scott - #XMAP: In Plain Sight, accessed August 20, 2023, <https://xmap.us/artists/dread-scott/>.

As with many sites of incarceration, as Dread Scott highlights, during the Covid-19 pandemic, Terminal Island was deeply affected. As of April 29, 2020, Richard Winton of the *Los Angeles Times* reported that 443 of the 1,055 people imprisoned at Terminal Island had tested positive for Covid-19, and two had lost their lives, while thirty others had died from the virus nationwide.<sup>6</sup> Takemoto's dispatch, *Not Forgotten*, referred to those who were presently incarcerated at the site and to the Japanese Americans who were displaced from the fishing village; there is a historical precedent and lineage of continual systems of oppression ingrained in this location. Takemoto's words stake a claim: at least one person is thinking of the incarcerated people. And, with these borderless words, many others are reminded of their presence behind the walls. This strategy of evoking aesthetic remembrance and visualized memory, an acknowledgment to the still-living importance of those being remembered, is an essential theme in Takemoto's artworks. Takemoto's contribution to *In Plain Sight* is large in scale. The sociocultural impacts and methodologies Takemoto employs for their piece in *#XMAP* are similar to those of the works analyzed in this dissertation. The difference is that the works selected for analysis in each chapter are visual methods inspired by intimate dedications to specific queer Asian American figures from US history.

This dissertation analyzes three projects by artist TT Takemoto: *Looking for Jiro* (2011), *Semiotics of Sab* (2016), and *Ever Wanting (for Margaret Chung)*

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<sup>6</sup> Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 23.

(2021).<sup>7</sup> Queer Asian American people from US history inspire each work—Jiro Onuma (1904–1990), a Japanese American incarcerated by the United States during World War II; Sab Shimono (b. 1937), a Japanese American actor; and Margaret Chung (1889–1959), a Chinese American physician. Each chapter parses the distinct visual vocabularies and methodologies created by Takemoto for each artwork in relation to the inspiring subject’s visual culture history. The analyses in this dissertation show how Takemoto’s methods have historical implications for US visual culture and art history. Although the historical past is an impetus for each project, the artworks reveal the redactions and misshaping of visual culture surrounding queer Asian Americans and how those patterns persist today in the United States. TT Takemoto’s work deftly reflects on histories that are critically relatable in the present, and this dissertation demonstrates the need to grapple with art, visual cultural, and historical discourses because, unfortunately, wrongful incarceration, racism inflected by stereotyping, and racist and anti-queer sentiments persist in the United States—and around the world. To disrupt the repeating patterns and suffocating systems that perpetuate this violence, we must understand their histories and foundations so that we can create new modes of interaction and engagement.

I first delved deeply into TT Takemoto’s work in a pedagogical context. When I began this project, I was preparing to teach a course I created, *Queer Visual Culture*, with a focus on East Asia and its diasporas, and a colleague suggested I include

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<sup>7</sup> Sound designer and artist Kadet Kuhne collaborated with Takemoto for the sound design of these projects. I write about their collaboration in Chapter Three.

Takemoto's *Looking for Jiro* (2016) on the syllabus.<sup>8</sup> After procuring access to the film from Takemoto, I studied the work in preparation for presenting it to my students. As will be described in Chapter One, the *filmformance* energetically invites the viewer in, with ABBA's and Madonna's upbeat pop music playing as the soundtrack, dancing, and a performance satirically fisting loaves of freshly baked bread.

In addition to these enticing components, what struck me most as a viewer and instructor was the film's didactic insistence on disrupting violent, hegemonic US histories perpetuated by visual culture. For example, I was familiar with the War Relocation Authority's (WRA's) film propaganda of Japanese Americans making homes out of horse stalls, in line waiting for food at the mess hall, and training to serve in the US military, all narrated by a man's calm voice, framing the imagery of incarceration as willing democratic commitment and duty.<sup>9</sup> When those films were presented to me as a child in school they were shown without critique, and the calm tone of the narrator was allowed to reassure me that this history was acceptable.

Before seeing *Looking for Jiro* I had never revisited these archival films with a critical lens. The WRA films produced during World War II may have been made over half a century ago, but the ideologies they developed remain palpable through racism and erasure in the United States. In *Looking for Jiro*, when the same imagery

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<sup>8</sup> I am grateful to my colleague Ellen Takata for this suggestion and for facilitating the initial connection between me and TT Takemoto.

<sup>9</sup> The referenced films War Relocation Authority's films *Japanese Relocation* (1942) and *A Challenge to Democracy* (1944) and I provide more information about them and their presentation in *Looking for Jiro* in Chapter One.



is represented, it establishes a foundation of troubling what we see and problematizing United States history. A man spoons food into his mouth, and then the film is edited, replayed, and rewound; he spits the food back out. An armed guard watches over an expanse of barracks, and then is edited to mirror himself, two versions facing each other, self-surveying. As an educator, I find that *Looking for Jiro* is a masterclass in learning how to think critically about what we visually consume. As a visual culture scholar who was raised and educated in the United States, the artwork invited me into TT Takemoto's artistic practice to study the methods they utilize to crumble violent frameworks of US histories.

This Introduction begins by grounding the project in the idea of intimacy and its relationship to community. Following that, I offer literature reviews of power and visibility in visual studies, contemporary Asian American art history, and queer studies and methods. Finally, I describe my methodology and offer chapter summaries and concluding thoughts.

### **Intimacy Frameworks**

When I began studying art history, I was trained in Heinrich Wölfflin's formal analysis approach to look closely at the visual elements of any given work—line, color, texture, open and closed form, and so on.<sup>10</sup> As my critical eye developed, I applied these concepts of close examination to myriad media. Trained in painting, as I began to write about other artists' works, I would attach butcher-block paper to the

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<sup>10</sup> Heinrich Wölfflin, *The Principles of Art History* (Dover Publications, 1929).

walls of my kitchen and draw sketches of what I was studying while simultaneously scribbling notes off to the side, creating a written map of the intricacies I noticed and the ideas percolating from that intimate process of examining the art. My evolution as a maker and scholar has always relied on this practice of close exploration and intimate observation.<sup>11</sup>

The title of this dissertation, *The Intimacies of Queer Subjects*, encompasses Takemoto's artistic method, the subjects of their artworks, and the artworks' impacts. Colloquially, intimacy is about privacy, closeness, and can be extended as a euphemism for sexual interactions. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines intimacy

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<sup>11</sup> Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag both write about photography in the context of relationality of photographer, viewer, or the photograph. For Sontag, to take a photograph is about putting oneself in relationship to that which is photographed and thinking about how it shapes self-positioning. Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, Pearson Always Learning (London: Penguin, 1979), 174. Barthes, with his *punctum*, thinks about the unique individual reaction a person may have to an image. He writes, "to give examples of *punctum* is, in a certain fashion, to *give myself up*." Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (London: Vintage, 2000), 43. (Emphasis original.) Revealing our personal and private relationship to the photograph is in a sense exposing an otherwise private aspect of oneself.

W.J.T. Mitchell in his playful question giving images subjectivity asks in his title question, "What do pictures "really" want?" Mitchell considers, "pictures don't know what they want; they have to be helped to recollect it through a dialogue with others". W. J. T. Mitchell, "What Do Pictures 'Really' Want?," *October* 77 (1996): 81. Thinking about the social subject, Jennifer Doyle writes about difficult artworks reflecting that, "they are productive and important kinds of difficulty—not because they expand our ideas of what constitutes Art but because they speak to quite fundamental aspects of the social subject." Jennifer Doyle, *Hold It against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* (Durham ; London: Duke University Press, 2013), 20. Thinking with Ron Athey's notable blood-work pieces, created during the height of the AIDS crisis, Doyle describes is "hard because it forces us to keep company with vulnerability, intimacy, and desire." Doyle, 20. These thinkers consider the proximity and closeness of the subject and the viewer and how the intermingle together shaping each other's intake of the world.

as, “the state of being personally intimate; intimate friendship or acquaintance; familiar intercourse; close familiarity.”<sup>12</sup> Lauren Berlant describes the more granular characteristics: “To be intimate is to communicate with the sparest of signs and gestures, and at its root intimacy has the quality of eloquence and brevity.”<sup>13</sup> The closeness, the privacy, is not just proximal but also a kind of attention that captures ephemeral details. Berlant continues, intimacy also “involves an aspiration for a narrative,” and here, through relationships, intimacy moves into the public. When Berlant says that “intimacy builds worlds,” Takemoto’s artworks come to mind. Studying “spare signs” and creating “aspirational narratives,” Takemoto imagines and expands the histories of incarceration, stereotyping, racism, and homophobia. Although the artworks were made in dedication *to* Onuma, Shimono, and Chung, I read them as an expansion of queer generations and an excavation of what could have been and what can be through speculative imagining. This dissertation follows Berlant and views intimacy as an approach that “creates spaces and usurps places meant for other kinds of relation”; it is kinetic, vulnerable, unstable, and shows how history is malleable.<sup>14</sup> *Looking for Jiro*, *Semiotics of Sab*, and *Ever Wanting (for Margaret Chung)* are Takemoto’s artistic interventions that do not allow history to rest.

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<sup>12</sup> “Intimacy,” Oxford English Dictionary, accessed August 12, 2023, <https://www.oed.com/search/dictionary/?scope=Entries&q=intimacy>.

<sup>13</sup> Lauren Berlant, “Intimacy: A Special Issue,” *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (1998): 281, <http://www.jstor.org.oqa.ucsc.edu/stable/1344169>.

<sup>14</sup> Berlant, “Intimacy: A Special Issue,” 282 (emphasis in original).

Putting intimacy in conversation with relationality, I follow scholars such as Lisa Lowe, Ara Wilson, Maria Stehle, and Beverly M. Weber.<sup>15</sup> Stehle and Weber use “precarious intimacy” as a way to read British film: “to think about *how* we read intimacy and touch in film politically.”<sup>16</sup> Ara Wilson brings together intimacy and infrastructure to reveal the systems that undergird and “enable or hinder” networks of intimacy.<sup>17</sup> Building on intimacy as closeness, for these scholars, functions as a dynamic heuristic. Wilson, Weber, and Stehle show how the minutiae of closeness undergirds relationality and can often be overlooked as sites that help generate ideas or sites of unexpected interconnectedness.

Lisa Lowe holds internal or private intimacy as “inseparable from the imperial projects of conquest, slavery, labor, and government.”<sup>18</sup> Nodding to the similar concepts of scholars such as Ann Laura Stoler, Amy Kaplan, Laura Wexler, Phillipa

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<sup>15</sup> Scholars Lauren Berlant, Kareem Khubchandani, and Phillip L. Hammack, David M. Frost, and Sam D. Hughes write about intimacy in queer contexts. Berlant, “Intimacy: A Special Issue”; Kareem Khubchandani, “Intimacies,” *Amerasia Journal* 46, no. 2 (May 3, 2020): 236–37; Phillip L. Hammack, David M. Frost, and Sam D. Hughes, “Queer Intimacies: A New Paradigm for the Study of Relationship Diversity,” *The Journal of Sex Research* 56, no. 4–5 (June 13, 2019): 556–92.

<sup>16</sup> Maria Stehle and Beverly M. Weber, *Precarious Intimacies: The Politics of Touch in Contemporary Western European Cinema* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2020), 149.

<sup>17</sup> Ara Wilson, “The Infrastructure of Intimacy,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 41, no. 2 (January 2016): 248.

<sup>18</sup> Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, 17. Ann Laura Stoler, Lauren Berlant, David Eng, and Lowe in additional texts all contribute to this. Ann Laura Stoler, Gilbert M. Joseph, and Emily S. Rosenberg, eds., *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History* (Duke University Press, 2006); Berlant, “Intimacy: A Special Issue”; David L. Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy* (Durham [NC]: Duke University Press, 2010); Lisa Lowe, “The Worldliness of Intimacy” (Carlton Vic: Melbourne University Press, 2007), 121–51.

Levine, Peggy Pascoe, and Nayan Shah, Lowe takes this analytic further.<sup>19</sup> In her book *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, Lowe uses intimacy as “a manner of reading and interpretation.”<sup>20</sup> She contests the historical separation of liberalism and colonial archives through research that indicates an inherent intertwining of supposedly disparate narratives by reading *across* several archival forms.<sup>21</sup> Lowe explains, “the practice of reading across archives unsettles the discreetly bounded objects, methods, and temporal frameworks canonized by a national history invested in isolated origins and independent progressive development.”<sup>22</sup> Berlant’s above characterization of intimacy as defined through the “sparest of signs and gestures” based in intimate personal relationships is the methodological technique Lowe applies to the archives;

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<sup>19</sup> Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents*; Stoler, Joseph, and Rosenberg, *Haunted by Empire*; Amy. Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture*, *Convergences* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2002); Laura. Wexler, *Tender Violence: Domestic Visions in an Age of U.S. Imperialism*, *Cultural Studies of the United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Antoinette M. Burton, *Dwelling in the Archive Women Writing House, Home, and History in Late Colonial India*, *ACLS Fellows’ Publications*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Philippa Levine, *Prostitution, Race, and Politics: Policing Venereal Disease in the British Empire* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Peggy Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally: Miscegenation Law and the Making of Race in America*, *Miscegenation Law and the Making of Race in America* (Oxford, England ; Oxford University Press, 2009); Nayan Shah, *Stranger Intimacy Contesting Race, Sexuality, and the Law in the North American West*, *American Crossroads* 31 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

<sup>20</sup> Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, 21.

<sup>21</sup> Lowe, 137. For example, Lowe highlights the tendency of historians to humanize the abolition of slavery as an act against immorality. Instead, through studying archival records of Britain, China, and Africa, Lowe shows how the end of slavery was at least in part, economically motivated. The British empire sought to experiment with a new kind of labor, Chinese labor, “as a solution to both the colonial need to suppress Black slave rebellion and the capitalist desire to expand production,” motivations based in economics rather than humanity.

<sup>22</sup> Lowe, 6.

she digs into the minutiae of these resources to find new patterns and connections. Her method disrupts the past in the present to reshape readings of histories for the future formation of culture. The author uses intimate readings across putatively disparate materials to build relationships and make connections, and the result is the disruption of fixed histories. Lowe's strategy provides a lens through which this dissertation understands Takemoto's approach to creating their artworks.

In Takemoto's process, they deeply study each subject's life and surrounding histories through archival traces and historical narratives. Intimacy in this dissertation begins with the initial and necessary intimate knowledge of the artworks' subjects' gay and lesbian sexualities and queer gender identities. As Lowe's method investigates previously unmade connections between archives, I elucidate in each chapter how Takemoto's praxis recasts visual cultural histories of the United States. Through this dissertation's title, I suggest that Takemoto's artworks analyzed here coalesce through intimate methods of closeness and connection-building achieved through research and the making of deep care. In their artistic process, Takemoto dives into biographical and historical research; intricate nuances of the subjects' lives are the inspiration for Takemoto's artistic outcomes. From there, they create a formal approach that is distinctly dedicated to the inspiring subject.

On a personal level, Takemoto has an intimate connection to each artwork's subject. Takemoto discusses their relationship to them and how they function in the artist's own life. Onuma is their "role model, queer accomplice, and friend"; Shimono has a role in Takemoto's relationship to their parents and queer identity with their

family of origin; and Chung's life forces Takemoto to grapple with the deeply personal complexities and violence of Asian American history.<sup>23</sup> Inspired by these queer connections, intimacy in this project has a specifically queer valence.

In organizing *Queer Communion: Ron Athey*, an exhibition and accompanying catalog of Athey's archive, Amelia Jones suggests "queer community and intimacy as the organizing logic of Athey's career."<sup>24</sup> Jones describes Athey's work, her personal closeness to him, and her intimate entanglements with his archives, reflecting that "researching an artist can be—often is—an intensely intimate act."<sup>25</sup> Citing the deep art historical work done by Dominic Johnson in *Pleading in the Blood: The Art and Performance of Ron Athey* (2013), Jones and her coeditor, Andy Campbell, sought contributions to the catalog "that focus on the intimacies and intensities of 'queer communion' generated through Athey's performances."<sup>26</sup> Dozens of Athey's interlocutors and friends contributed to the volume. Though not addressing Athey's artistic method, per se, the coeditors and the contributors to the catalog come together to show "queer communion" through "Athey's extensive network of friendships, love

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<sup>23</sup> Tirza True Latimer, "Life in the Archives," Open Space, January 27, 2012, <https://openspace.sfmoma.org/2012/01/life-in-the-archives/>; TT Takemoto, interview by Kate Korroch, Zoom, April 28, 2021; S/F Arts Monthly, "Queer Feminist Identity Takes the Spotlight in New Chinese Culture Center Exhibit - 7x7 Bay Area," 7x7 Bay Area, accessed May 9, 2023, <https://www.7x7.com/chinese-culture-center-women-exhibit-2650625432.html>.

<sup>24</sup> Amelia Jones and Andy Campbell, eds., *Queer Communion: Ron Athey* (Intellect Books, 2020), xv.

<sup>25</sup> Jones and Campbell, 7.

<sup>26</sup> Jones and Campbell, 7; Dominic Johnson, *Pleading in the Blood: The Art and Performances of Ron Athey*, Intellect Live (Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2013).

relationships, and collaborative connections.”<sup>27</sup> The coeditors’ approach to the text as a community-building practice reflects their description of the artist’s career as rooted in “queer community and intimacy.”<sup>28</sup>

Athey and Takemoto’s artworks do not invite immediate formal or thematic comparison, but their parallels of community-making are notable. Both artists connect generations of queer people across time through research, mentorship, and artistic practice. Both artists visualize and create space for queer subcultures—through intense and explicit performance in the case of Athey, and with counter visual histories of incarceration, homophobia, racism, and sexism in US history for Takemoto.

Each chapter in this dissertation touches on different community outcomes of Takemoto’s artworks: inspired projects, familial ties, and creative collaboration. In Chapter One, Takemoto builds kinship with Jiro Onuma through dedicated research and object making. These extend to the artist performing the subject as a way to further connect with their queer elder, which shapes their mash-up performance of a character inspired by Onuma. For Chapter Two, the research for *Semiotics of Sab* begins with archives but evolves into a friendship between Takemoto, Shimono, and their partners.<sup>29</sup> The time and care needed to nurture this relationship deeply inflects Takemoto’s “love letter” to Shimono.<sup>30</sup> In Chapter Three, intimacy is achieved

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<sup>27</sup> Jones and Campbell, *Queer Communion: Ron Athey*, 410.

<sup>28</sup> Jones and Campbell, xv.

<sup>29</sup> TT Takemoto, interview by Kate Korroch, Zoom, November 20, 2023.

<sup>30</sup> Takemoto.



through Takemoto's collaboration with Kadet Kuhne, their deep knowledge of Chung's history, and their kinship with Chung of navigating intersectional identities as queer Asian Americans.<sup>31</sup> Overall, I suggest that, seen together, these projects imagine a queer Asian American community that defies generational differences and time. As the works exist together, they are distinct in their formal presentation, but the depth of each outcome relies on Takemoto's particular intimacies with the histories of Jiro Onuma, Sab Shimono, and Margaret Chung.

### **Visual Studies: Visibility and Power**

Interdisciplinarity is a defining characteristic of visual studies. In this particular project, the intersections of art history, film studies, gender studies, and antiracist studies are pertinent. Visual studies also serves as a platform for interdisciplinary reach outside academia. In 2020, as the Covid-19 pandemic began and anti-Asian hate was escalating, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art organized a panel: Racism is a Public Health Issue: Addressing Prejudices Against Asian Americans during the COVID-19 Pandemic (May 7, 2020). The speakers on the panel discussed being made invisible by visual culture and media (actor and comedian, Bowen Yang), how power operates undetected and unacknowledged (historian and hip hop critic, Jeff Chang, and artist, Anicka Yi), and the layers of

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<sup>31</sup> Takemoto.

privilege that function based on race in the United States.<sup>32</sup> The panel was especially excited about author Cathy Park Hong's book *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning* (2020).

The first essay in the book frames Hong's perspective on the way visibility of Asian Americans operates in the United States. Hong writes, "When I hear the phrase 'Asians are next in line to be white,' I replace the word 'white' with 'disappear.'"<sup>33</sup> Hong insinuates that visibility and power are enmeshed. Although they do not explicitly describe visual culture, Hong's words show how the language of visibility is inherently connected to power and therefore requires an interrogation of the intertwining of visibility and race. The suggestion that visibility often yields to power is correct but complicated.<sup>34</sup> I follow seminal scholars such as Michelle Foucault, Homi K. Bhabha, Franz Fanon, and Louis Althusser and suggest that visibility can cause harm or perpetuate violence as much as it can facilitate empowerment.<sup>35</sup> A key

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<sup>32</sup> The speakers included Jeff Chang, Cathy Park Hong, Russell Jeung, Bowen Yang, and Anicka Yi and was introduced by Christine Y. Kim and moderated by Kibum Kim.

<sup>33</sup> Cathy Park Hong, *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning* (New York: One World, 2020), 35.

<sup>34</sup> Debates about selfie culture are useful in thinking through the power at work in visibility. See Derek Conrad Murray, ed., *Visual Culture Approaches to the Selfie*, Routledge History of Photography (New York, NY: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2022); Ace Lehner, "From Self-Portrait to Selfie: Contemporary Art and Self-Representation in the Social Media Age," in *Self-Representation in an Expanded Field*, ed. Ace Lehner (MDPI, 2016); Henry A Giroux, "Selfie Culture in the Age of Corporate and State Surveillance," *Third Text* 29, no. 3 (May 4, 2015): 155–64.

<sup>35</sup> For more on visibility and power see Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 2nd Vintage Books ed (New York: Vintage Books, 1995); Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge Classics (London ; New York: Routledge, 2004); Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 1st ed., new ed (New York : [Berkeley, Calif.]: Grove Press ; Distributed by Publishers Group West, 2008);

piece of this question relates to how visibility is created and framed. Who is making the choices about if and how a subject is viewed? How is that which is visible circulated, and what ideologies does it perpetuate? One problem in answering these questions is that we are so inundated with the visual that it can be difficult to view it with a critical eye.

In 1993, feminist scholar Peggy Phelan lamented, “if representational visibility equals power, then almost-naked young white women should be running Western culture.”<sup>36</sup> Amusing and truthful, Phelan’s statement indicates that the visual is not “real.” Representation fails to reproduce the real exactly; it is the resulting surpluses and ruptures that are opportunities for multiple registers of meaning making. The visible is not necessarily connected to authenticity or holistic representation. To be visible does not necessarily win a person power or form a whole or truthful version of an individual.<sup>37</sup> The practice of creating visibility—for example, in US government propaganda, as discussed in Chapter One—can also be an act of racist, sexist, or homophobic violence enacted through what is imaged and what is intentionally excluded. The analysis of artworks in this dissertation takes up this

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Louis Althusser, “Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses,” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (Monthly Review press, 2001).

<sup>36</sup> Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London; New York: Routledge, 1993), 10.

<sup>37</sup> In conversation with Alexis Boylan, Derek Conrad Murray discusses this point, which I elaborate upon in Chapter Three. Derek Conrad Murray, “The Cost of That Revealing,” interview by Alexis L. Boylan, January 1, 2022, <https://read.dukeupress.edu/radical-history-review/article/2022/142/152/293695/The-Cost-of-That-Revealing-Interview-with-Derek>. [you might look also at my *Seeing Differently* book on this key theme]

question of visibility and power through Takemoto's imaging of queer Asian American subjects from a different perspective. A key question guides my analysis: How does Takemoto use their art practice to create and reclaim visual culture and historical narratives of queer Asian American people?

The slippage between visibility and invisibility and how this relates to power is a key focus for this dissertation. Discussing undocumented migrants using Frantz Fanon's ideas as a framework, Francisco J. Villegas writes that, for Fanon, "processes of visibility and invisibility are steeped with notions of power."<sup>38</sup> Similarly, David Theo Goldberg argues that "contexts change, and with them strategies of response."<sup>39</sup> Overall, this dissertation shows how the contexts of these artworks grapple with and generate alternative visibility to disrupt formations of power for subjects that were originally part of a different visual culture legacy. Each chapter explores the relevant art historical and visual cultural contexts through archival research, performance theory, feminist theory, queer theory, art history, and film theory.

Writing recently about contemporary transgender representation in "The Transgender Flipping Point," Ace Lehner exemplifies the need for the relationship of contextual analysis to visibility and power. Beginning with a *Time Magazine* cover featuring esteemed transgender actor Laverne Cox, Lehner points out that the full-

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<sup>38</sup> Francisco J. Villegas, "Strategic In/Visibility and Undocumented Migrants," *Counterpoints* 368 (2010): 148, <http://www.jstor.org.oqa.ucsc.edu/stable/42980670>.

<sup>39</sup> David Theo Goldberg, "In/Visibility and Super/Vision: Fanon and Racial Formation," in *Fanon: A Critical Reader*, ed. Lewis R. (Lewis Ricardo) Gordon, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, and Renée T. White, Blackwell Critical Readers (Oxford; Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 200.

body photo of Cox is captioned with the words “Transgender Tipping Point,” which suggests a new, more inclusive moment for transgender people. But Lehner articulates concern “that the notion of the ‘Tipping Point’ is not only a reductive and problematic misconception, but it occludes diverse forms of trans visual culture.”<sup>40</sup> Like Goldberg suggests, context is key. If Cox is the “it” moment, then what about all of those who are not seen? Or those who are imaged without consent? Grappling with this, Lehner analyzes transgender, genderqueer, and Black British writer and performer Travis Albanza’s Instagram page to argue that Albanza’s feed is a “timely and necessary intervention into Western visual culture.”<sup>41</sup> Following this, my analysis shifts this consideration to queer Asian American representations. This dissertation shows how Takemoto’s artworks disrupt the hegemonic and historically white, upper-class, patriarchy-centered narratives within the United States for queer Asian Americans.

The subjects of Takemoto’s three major works discussed here—Jiro Onuma, Sab Shimono, and Margaret Chung—all mark US visual culture in different ways. Onuma’s trace survives in a sparse archive; he was otherwise unknown. His resurrected presence through Takemoto’s works reflects an entire community—gay men in Japanese concentration camps—that is unacknowledged in most historical

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<sup>40</sup> Ace Lehner, “The Transgender Flipping Point: How Trans Instagrammers Flip the Script on Identity,” *Journal of Cultural Analysis and Social Change* 7, no. 2 (December 30, 2022): 1. Albanza and Lehner also discuss the importance of context in a roundtable organized by Lehner. Ace Lehner, “Critical Questions and Embodied Reflections: Trans Visual Culture Today—A Roundtable,” *Art Journal* 80, no. 4 (October 2, 2021): 38–52.

<sup>41</sup> Lehner, “The Transgender Flipping Point,” 13.

accounts. Shimono is a Hollywood movie star who was cast in several roles that perpetuated Asian American stereotypes. His image is abundant in US cinema but limited by stereotype-laden scripts performed by the actor. Chung's high-profile visage and life story were described in newspapers, a graphic novel, and a Hollywood film. She was used to exemplify a "hero" and model minority, an ideal Asian American during World War II, at a critically violent moment in US history for Asian Americans. I argue that Takemoto's artworks reclaim the harmful ideology forming visual culture not to complete the picture, which is dynamic and incomplete, but to disrupt what exists and present ruptures for asking questions of sedimented ideas.

The question of visibility's relationship to power, identity, and representation is paramount in this dissertation. On the one hand, being imaged is linked with power, suggesting that to be seen is to have power and influence. On the other hand, how images are produced, and for whom they create power, complicates this.<sup>42</sup> This

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<sup>42</sup> In the early 1970s Jon Berger clearly described the power dynamics in art and the viewer, "To be naked is to be oneself; to be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself. A nude has to be seen as an object in order to be a nude." Being viewed by someone else takes away your autonomy to self-define. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 37. pr., 1. publ. 1972 by British Broadcasting Corp. and 1977 by Penguin Books (London: British Broadcasting Corp, 1997), 54. Three years later, visibility and power are put in terms of imprisonment by Michel Foucault who shows through Jeremy Bentham's panopticon's invisible surveillance that being visible can be connected to the absence of power for those who are seen. Again, power is not attributed to the one who is visible. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*. Similarly, in the realm of the screen, for Laura Mulvey, being seen in classic cinema is entrenched in "the pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive female." Women in these films are designed to be looked at and displayed for male pleasure--"they connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*." Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 5th ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 19. The power in Mulvey's reading is the one doing the looking, not the one being seen. bell hooks though, shows how the "oppositional gaze" can be an opportunity to take back the power through a

dissertation shows how Takemoto's art practice engages with the unfixed nexus of the intermingling of visibility and power. Takemoto's materials and artworks expose and imagine narratives of history to disrupt sedimented ideas and critique structures that perpetrate racism, sexism, and homophobia in the United States.

### **Contemporary Asian American Art History**

Asian American art historical scholarly conversations were developing at the same time as those in visual studies as a response to exclusionary academic practices. Cultivating the discourse, several Asian American artist groups were established beginning in the 1970s: the Kearny Street Workshop (established in 1972 in San Francisco, CA), the Asian American Women Artists Association (established in 1989 in New York City), the Asian American Arts Center (established in 1974 in New York), and Godzilla: Asian American Arts Network (established in 1990 in New York). With its central aim to be "a forum that fosters communication and support among Asian American artists," in 1991, Godzilla wrote a letter articulating their frustrations about Asian American artists being left out of the Whitney Biennial.<sup>43</sup> The result was the inclusion of work by multiple Asian Americans in the groundbreaking

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critical gaze. bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992).

<sup>43</sup> Alice Yang, "Godzilla: The Anarchistic Lizard," in *Why Asia? Essays on Contemporary Asian and Asian American Art* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 89.

1993 iteration, including Shu Lea Cheang, Byron Kim, Trinh T. Minh-Ha, Simon Leung, Bruce Yonemoto, and Norman Yonemoto.<sup>44</sup>

In 1994 Margo Machida’s crucial essay “Out of Asia: Negotiating Asian American Identities” was published in the catalog for the exhibition, *Asia/America: Identities in Contemporary Asian American Art*.<sup>45</sup> *Asia/America* offered an unprecedented look at artists who (or whose families) had come to the United States from Asia.<sup>46</sup> Working from Machida’s foundation, in *Unnamable: The End of Asian American Art* (2018), Susette Min built on strategic essentialism.<sup>47</sup> Exploring these groundbreaking exhibitions, such as the 1993 Whitney Biennial and *Asia/America*, Min argues that exhibitions including Asian American artists should allow for Asian American artworks to operate on a “liminal stage of a politics of becoming.”<sup>48</sup> Min does not promote excluding race as an organizing category but rather urges organizers

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<sup>44</sup> “Whitney Biennial 1993,” accessed August 23, 2023, <https://whitney.org/exhibitions/biennial-1993>.

<sup>45</sup> Margo Machida et al., eds., *Asia/America: Identities in Contemporary Asian American Art* (New York, N.Y: Asia Society Galleries: New Press, 1994).

<sup>46</sup> Aleesa Pitcharman Alexander, “Asian American Art and the Obligation of Museums,” *Panorama* 7, no. 1 (Spring 2021).

<sup>47</sup> Conceptualized by Gayatri Spivak, strategic essentialism is a political tactic in which diverse groups come together under one shared identity to represent themselves. Citing Spivak Min writes, “And while I employ strategic essentialism—a “negotiat[ion] between identities, essentialisms, positions through which to speak, strategies through which to act”—in my exclusive selection and analysis of work by artists who are of Asian American decent, I do so as a means to show that we don’t have to look very far for such art, and to hint at this process of politics of becoming already at work.” Min builds upon the work done by strategic essentialism and urges forward to disassemble it. Susette S. Min, *Unnamable: The Ends of Asian American Art* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 29; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Sarah Harasym, *The Post-Colonial Critic*, 0 ed. (Routledge, 2014), 1–16.

<sup>48</sup> Min, *Unnamable*, 28.



to expand the previously essentialist approaches to Asian American artwork. In 2006, Min, along with Karen Higa and Melissa Chiu, curated *One Way or Another: Asian American Art Now* at the Asia Society, a follow-up exhibition to Machida's *Asia/America*. Nodding to Blondie's famous lyric, and in line with Min's book, the curators sought to make room for the artists to claim (or not claim) the term "Asian American" for themselves.<sup>49</sup> In 2011, the landmark publication *Asian American Art: A History, 1850–1970* was published. The editors selected essays that challenged static notions of what is and is not "Asian American Art," and instead situated the work within "the global network of transnational culture that is among the principal hallmarks of much art since the nineteenth century."<sup>50</sup>

Asian American representation in museum collections continues to be limited. Aleesa Pitcharman Alexander points out that, even if museums own Asian American artwork, this does not guarantee equal visibility within exhibitions, as the work can sit in storage. As a notable exception, the Smithsonian American Art Museum has a substantial collection of Asian American art that inspired six exhibitions of works from their collection from 2013 to 2019.<sup>51</sup> This is a step toward visibility, but it is unclear whether those exhibitions perpetuated or critiqued racial stereotypes. In additional developments, in 2020, the Asian Art Museum (AAM) in San Francisco

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<sup>49</sup> See "Asia Society | One Way or Another: Asian American Art Now," accessed January 13, 2023, <https://sites.asiasociety.org/arts/onewayoranother/index.html>.

<sup>50</sup> Gordon H. Chang et al., eds., *Asian American Art, a History 1850-1970* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2008), xx.

<sup>51</sup> Alexander, "Asian American Art and the Obligation of Museums."

changed its mission statement to include Asian *and* Asian American artists.<sup>52</sup> AAM Curator of Contemporary Art Abby Chen aims to focus on underappreciated artists of Asian descent, including Takemoto.<sup>53</sup> In 2021, the museum acquired five of Takemoto's artworks: *Ever Wanting (for Margaret Chung)* (2021), *HK Uprising* (2021), *May 35* (2019), *On the Line* (2018), and *Looking for Jiro* (2011).<sup>54</sup> They exhibited *Looking for Jiro* in 2021 at Documenta15 and a film that they did not acquire, *After Bed* (2023), in the exhibition *Bernice Bing: Open Call* (2023).

Concentrating on Asian American queer identities, editors Laura Kina and Jan Christian Bernabe published a collection of essays and interviews of queer-specific materials in *Queering Contemporary Asian American Art* (2017). As with Golden and Min, the editors are concerned about systemic norms in the United States. Writing against heightened racialized violence, especially since September 11, 2001, Kina and Bernabe use “queering” “to advance critical visions and new modalities that perhaps stand amiss in current discussion and scholarship of contemporary art.”<sup>55</sup> They seek to exemplify and imagine a queer futurity for Asian American contemporary art and to reveal how these artists untether themselves from normativity through queer

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<sup>52</sup> Carol Pogash, “Ignored in Life, Bernice Bing Is Discovered as Museums Rewrite History,” *The New York Times*, October 12, 2022, sec. Arts, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/12/arts/design/bernice-bing-asian-americans-museum.html>.

<sup>53</sup> Pogash.

<sup>54</sup> Abby Chen, interview by Kate Korroch, Zoom, February 21, 2023.

<sup>55</sup> Laura Kina and Jan Christian Bernabe, eds., *Queering Contemporary Asian American Art*, The Jacob Lawrence Series on American Artists (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2017), 12.

practices.<sup>56</sup> Kina and Bernabe illustrate the need for deep engagement with questions of identity and visual studies and their inextricable pairing. The authors feature an interview from 2016 with Takemoto about *Looking for Jiro* and *Warning Shot* (2016).<sup>57</sup> Takemoto shares about their practice: “even before I identified as queer, gender queer, gender nonconforming, or as an Asian American dyke, my art practice was engaged with notions of difference and non-normativity.”<sup>58</sup> Historically, Takemoto’s approach has always challenged the problematic norms that they encountered.<sup>59</sup>

### **Queer Theory and Methods**

In a 2022 lecture, Christopher Vitale discussed the interconnectedness of queer studies and antiracist studies, arguing that gender and sexuality are points of entry into race and class and approaches to analysis that critique structures of oppression.<sup>60</sup> Following that line of thinking, “queer” in this dissertation begins with

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<sup>56</sup> Kina and Bernabe, 3.

<sup>57</sup> Laura Kina and Jan Christian Bernabe, “Muscles, Mash-Ups, and Warning Shots: Queering Japanese American History: An Interview with Tina Takemoto,” in *Queering Contemporary Asian American Art*, The Jacob Lawrence Series on American Artists (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017); Takemoto, interview, April 28, 2021.

<sup>58</sup> Kina and Bernabe, “Muscles, Mash-Ups, and Warning Shots: Queering Japanese American History: An Interview with Tina Takemoto,” 179.

<sup>59</sup> In the interview Takemoto explicitly mentions *Memoirs of Bjork-Geisha* and alludes to their projects with Angela Ellsworth. These collaborative works are discussed in chapter one of this project; Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Vitale, Chris, “Queering the White Male Gaze: From Mulvey to the Age of Networks via Watchmen” (Visual Media Cultures Colloquium, Santa Cruz, California, USA, February 9, 2022).

gender and sexuality but expands into disruptive possibilities, showing how Takemoto's artworks reject sexist, queer-phobic, racist ideologies. Like visual studies and art history, queer theory follows feminism and contemplates hierarchies of visual culture.<sup>61</sup> Leading thinkers in the field have developed several vocabularies to think

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<sup>61</sup> The following footnote provides a collection of the art historical text that use queer frameworks. Several scholars use art historical and queer frameworks to look at the recent past including Gavin Butt, David Getsy, Jonathan Katz, Tirza True Latimer, and Derek Conrad Murray. See Gavin Butt, *Between You and Me: Queer Disclosures in the New York Art World, 1948-1963* (Durham: Duke university press, 2005); David Getsy, *Queer Behavior: Scott Burton and Performance Art* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2022); David Getsy, *Abstract Bodies: Sixties Sculpture in the Expanded Field of Gender* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015); Jonathan D. Katz, David C. Ward, and National Portrait Gallery, eds., *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture; [Companion Volume to the Exhibition of the Same Name Opening at the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, October 2010]*, Nachdr. (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2011); Tirza True Latimer, *Eccentric Modernisms: Making Differences in the History of American Art* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2017); Derek Conrad Murray, *Mapplethorpe and the Flower: Radical Sexuality and the Limits of Control*. (I B TAURIS, 2018).

Amelia Jones and Erin Silver take a queer feminist approach in their texts Erin Silver, *Taking Place: Building Histories of Queer and Feminist Art in North America* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2023); Amelia Jones, *In between Subjects: A Critical Genealogy of Queer Performance* (London; New York: Routledge, 2021); Amelia Jones and Erin Silver, eds., *Otherwise: Imagining Queer Feminist Art Histories*, Rethinking Art's Histories (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2016); Amelia Jones, *Seeing Differently: A History and Theory Identification and the Visual Arts*, 1st ed. (Abingdon, Oxon [England] ; New York: Routledge, 2012); Amelia Jones, *Self/Image: Technology, Representation, and the Contemporary Subject* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2006); Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

Derek Conrad Murray, Alpesh Patel, C. Riley Snorton and Hentyle Yapp write about intersections of race and art history. Derek Conrad Murray, *Queering Post-Black Art: Artists Transforming African-American Identity after Civil Rights* (United Kingdom: I.B.Tauris, 2015); Alpesh Kantilal Patel, *Productive Failure: Writing Queer Transnational South Asian Art Histories*, 2017; C. Riley Snorton and Hentyle Yapp, eds., *Saturation: Race, Art, and the Circulation of Value*, Critical Anthologies in Art and Culture (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2020).

through queer visual culture and methods.<sup>62</sup> Scholars working in collaboration, such as David Eng, Jack Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz; Howard Chiang and Alvin K. Wong; and Anjali Arondekar and Geeta Patel have co-authored important essays regarding queer studies' intersectionality and Western-centrism.<sup>63</sup> I like to think that the theories inspired by queer methods are dynamic, constantly evolving, and self-

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<sup>62</sup> For seminal texts centered in North American and European contexts see Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, 2nd ed. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, "What Does Queer Theory Teach Us About X?," *PMLA*, 1995; Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York ; London: Routledge, 2004); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 1993); Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Series Q (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); David L. Eng, *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America*, Perverse Modernities (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001); Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2011); Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1998); E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2003); E. Patrick Johnson, "'Quare' Studies, or (Almost) Everything I Know about Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (January 2001): 1–25; José Esteban Muñoz, "Feeling Brown, Feeling Down: Latina Affect, the Performativity of Race, and the Depressive Position," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 31, no. 3 (March 2006): 675–88; José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, Sexual Cultures (New York London: New York University Press, 2009); José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, Cultural Studies of the Americas, v. 2 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, Updated with a new preface (Berkeley Los Angeles London: University of California Press, 2008).

<sup>63</sup> Howard Chiang and Alvin K. Wong, "Asia Is Burning: Queer Asia as Critique," *Culture, Theory and Critique* 58, no. 2 (April 3, 2017): 121–26; Anjali Arondekar and Geeta Patel, "Area Impossible," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 22, no. 2 (2016): 151–71; David L. Eng, Jack Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz, "What's Queer about Queer Studies Now?," *Social Text* 23, no. 3–4 (2005).

reflexive.<sup>64</sup> Slippery and often overlapping with one another, these strategies of thinking help frame my analysis of Takemoto's artwork in this project.

Sara Ahmed and José Esteban Muñoz's scholarship sits at the intersection of antiracist and queer studies. Ahmed shows that "orientation" recognizes where we are when we turn in a new direction, to be disoriented in order to recognize what is normative.<sup>65</sup> Ahmed's method elucidates the urgency of reorienting away from dominant ideologies. Muñoz proposes disidentification, which he explains through analyses of brown and queer people in visual culture.<sup>66</sup> The author explains, "disidentification focuses on the way in which dominant signs and symbols, often ones that are toxic to minoritarian subjects, can be reimagined through an engaged and animated mode of performance or spectatorship."<sup>67</sup> Muñoz speaks of sites of identification that impose restrictions on the kinds of disidentification that can occur: "normalizing protocols keep subjects from accessing [queer] identities."<sup>68</sup> Muñoz's analysis examines artworks that fluctuate between spaces of high and low visual culture, exposing slippages in the hierarchy and demonstrating the prominence of queer and racialized bodies within the discourse of disidentification.

The queer methods in this dissertation take inspiration from the above scholars, their interlocuters, and Takemoto's own statements and strategies.

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<sup>64</sup> A seminal example of this is Kobena Mercer's essay revising his previous writing on Robert Mapplethorpe. Kobena Mercer, "Looking for Trouble," *Transition*, no. 51 (1991).

<sup>65</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 1.

<sup>66</sup> Muñoz, *Disidentifications*.

<sup>67</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 169.

<sup>68</sup> Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 8.

Beginning with Chapter One, the text uses queer time and queer failure as useful and necessary frameworks to analyze Takemoto's artwork as the artist revisits queer histories to imagine potential queer futures.<sup>69</sup> The use of queer time as asynchronous, and queer to modify failure as resistance, are distinct themes in Takemoto's work that are carried in the lineage of queer methods of understanding. The thinkers above use the language of change in space, direction, and the presumed order of things. These vocabularies are crucial to my analysis of Takemoto's method and artworks; they provide a framework for close analysis and contextualization.<sup>70</sup>

Thinking alongside Muñoz and Jack Halberstam, Takemoto also writes of queer failures as radical acts and "successful failures . . . [that] simultaneously fail to succeed and succeed in failing to comply with dominant cultural scripts."<sup>71</sup> Takemoto describes queer failure as a component of their work: "I embrace the language of 'queer' and 'feminist' as ways of describing my art practice, which uses strategies of

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<sup>69</sup> Theories on queer time and queer failure include Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, Perverse Modernities (Durham London: Duke University Press, 2010); Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*; Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, Sexual Cultures (New York London: New York University Press, 2005); Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*; Muñoz, *Disidentifications*; Patel, *Productive Failure*; TT Takemoto, "Queer Art / Queer Failure," *Art Journal* 75, no. 1 (January 2, 2016): 85–88.

<sup>70</sup> In their own writing, Takemoto also references Muñoz's ideas both to discuss other artists' work and to discuss their own. TT Takemoto, "Drawing Complaint: Orientalism, Disidentification, Performance," *Asian Diasporic Visual Cultures and the Americas* 1, no. 1–2 (2015): 84–107; Takemoto, "Queer Art / Queer Failure."

<sup>71</sup> Takemoto, "Queer Art / Queer Failure," 86–87.

camp, drag, and queer failure to work against the grain of popular culture and to present non-normative perspectives on intimacy, mortality, kinship, and desire.”<sup>72</sup>

In this dissertation I show how Takemoto’s art practice is queer not just because the artist and the subjects of their artworks identify or identified as LGBTQIA+, but because of the deep methods of resistance through which they rewrite the historical, cultural, and social narratives that inform ideologies of US history. Vitale says that gender and sexuality are points of entry into liberatory practices. Takemoto’s works analyzed in the coming pages dislodge and problematize hegemonic visual cultures that frame Asian American histories that influence the present and future.

## **Methodology**

My methodology consists of three main tactics: theoretical analysis, primary research, and historical archival research. To study Takemoto’s artworks I use intellectual frameworks from visual studies, contemporary Asian American art history, and queer theories and methods. As established in the preceding sections, each chapter expands on those frameworks, drawing from performance theory, structuralist film theory, and lesbian film theory.

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<sup>72</sup> TT Takemoto and Jennifer A. González, “Triple Threat: Queer Feminist of Color Performance,” in *Otherwise: Imagining Queer Feminist Art Histories*, ed. Amelia Jones and Erin Silver, Rethinking Art’s Histories (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 297.



The primary for this dissertation includes multiple extended interviews with Takemoto and several individuals connected to their artworks and practice. I interviewed Takemoto four times between 2021 and 2023; each interview lasted about two hours. I also interviewed two curators about Takemoto's artwork: Abby Chen, Head of Contemporary Art at the AAM, and Megan Merritt, Exhibitions Curator at the San Francisco Public Library and former Project Manager for Contemporary Art at the AAM. Chen has worked with Takemoto for several years and most recently they traveled together to Documenta15 (2022) in Kassel, Germany, where Takemoto's work was presented. Merritt worked specifically with Takemoto on the exhibition *Seeing Gender* (2021–2022); Takemoto served as an advisor for the exhibition, and Merritt coordinated a supplementary program featuring Takemoto and Việt Lê on a panel about queer histories. I also interviewed illustrator Kiku Hughes, who wrote a graphic novel, *Displacement* (2020), which was influenced by Takemoto's work on Jiro Onuma, the subject of the work I discuss in Chapter One. Judy Tzu-Chun Wu wrote a biography about Margaret Chung, who inspired the artwork I address in Chapter Three. During the interview, Wu shared her own short documentary on Chung. Finally, I also corresponded with Kadet Khune, the sound designer for each of Takemoto's artworks written about here.

In addition to the interviews, Takemoto generously shared lesser-known artworks, process sketches, and examples of collaborative mapping. These materials have not been analyzed by any scholars, and access to them allows for a deeper analysis and contextualization of the works. Chapter One presents stills from two

unfinished experimental films that relate to Takemoto's performance process and the history of their art making. In Chapter Two, analysis of a rarely screened documentary by Takemoto and Amy Sueyoshi about Sab Shimono provides a deeper understanding of the artist's perspective on their subject matter. Preparatory sketches also show how Takemoto planned *Semiotics of Sab*, enriching my breakdown of the artwork's relationship to structuralist film. Chapter Three includes analysis of mapping of Takemoto's sound and image collaborations with Kadet Kuhne, as well as preparatory sketches that highlight the patterning of imagery in the film.

To understand the visual cultural significance of *Looking for Jiro*, *Semiotics of Sab*, and *Ever Wanting (for Margaret Chung)*, it is imperative to grasp the historical and contemporary contexts of each subject's life. Each chapter analyzes the absent or incomplete visual cultural framing related to the imagery of each project using a combination of visual analysis and analysis of scholarship. Therefore, historical research and visual cultural archival research were imperative for this project. In Chapter One, in addition to art historical contexts, research into popular culture icons and US government propaganda around Japanese incarceration enriches my analysis of *Looking for Jiro*. In Chapter Two I study the excerpted Hollywood films and articles that ground the productions in film history. Chapter Three includes archival analysis of a comic book, Hollywood film, documentary film, and biography that show the carefully crafted narratives of Margaret Chung, which contrast with Takemoto's *Ever Wanting*.

## Chapter Summaries

The three chapters that comprise the dissertation explore the formal strategies and conceptual outcomes of Takemoto's practice. Intimacy as method is the framework I employ and the thread that ties together Takemoto's approach to this collection of artworks; each chapter encompasses a different facet. The summaries in the Introduction are by no means exhaustive but exemplify how Takemoto's artworks are embedded in deep conversations of US visual culture and art history.

Chapter One, "*Looking for Jiro: 'Enacting Others' to Find Jiro Onuma,*" examines Takemoto's performance and film *Looking for Jiro* (2011). In the artwork, Takemoto performs as Jiro Onuma through embodying several different personas—pop culture icon, Madonna; early-twentieth-century bodybuilder, Earl Sandow; and incarcerated Japanese American, John Iyamuri. Intimacy in this chapter comes through Takemoto's visual-cultural and archival research, reading across and editing the intricacies of the materials to create an imaginary portrait. Following a close analysis of the artwork, the chapter also examines works by the artists Toyo Miyatake, Patrick Nagatani, Emiko Omori, Roger Shimomura, and Ruth Asawa to show how *Looking for Jiro* is part of an intervention into the visual history of Japanese concentration camps and how Takemoto offers a fresh perspective that is tethered to both documented history and the imaginary. In addition, I connect *Looking for Jiro* to contemporary performance art, especially in relation to Nao Bustamante's and Adrien Piper's performances of personas connected to but not directly referencing their own identities. Takemoto's artistic method for *Looking for Jiro* takes up an

unacknowledged person from US history and envisages their past while making room for future imaginings. I argue that the multi-persona performance mash-up paired with the montage film is a strategy that allows Onuma to exist as a complex and dynamic individual rather than someone redacted from history. Through a discussion of *Looking for Jiro* and the work's context within US history and visual culture, this chapter exposes threads of wrongful incarceration that persist in the US today.

Chapter Two, "*Semiotics of Sab: Recoding Asian American Stereotypes on Screen with Care and Kinship*," takes up the film *Semiotics of Sab* (2016), which is deeply influenced by the history of structuralist film. Re-edited footage and clips of Shimono performing in films reposition the visual culture legacy of the well-known actor. Here, the method of intimacy is shown through personal connection and the lens of kinship and care. The chapter asks: What semiotic work is being done by reframing Shimono's presence on screen? This question is answered through close visual analysis and historical framing. I demonstrate how Hollis Frampton's and Martha Rosler's interventions in the structuralist film movement shape Takemoto's own contribution, creating a form that is both queer and Asian American. I also show how Takemoto uses coded visual signifiers to tell Shimono's story while respecting his wish for privacy. Gay painting, photography, and film are also part of the visual culture history that Takemoto enters with the artwork, inviting comparison with Robert Rauschenberg's and Hal Fischer's queer coded artworks. The chapter argues that *Semiotics of Sab* dislocates Shimono's vast filmic trace from stereotype-based casting and commemorates Shimono in a new light. In doing so, the chapter

highlights nuances of visual culture's role in perpetuating stereotypes connected to speech and how those formations can be reenforced or challenged.

Chapter Three, "*Ever Wanting (for Margaret Chung): Visual Vocabularies for an American Hero*," examines *Ever Wanting (for Margaret Chung)* (2021), a montage-style film that creates an immersive experience for the viewer. The artwork draws from various visual culture ephemera and never depicts Chung's likeness, despite the plethora of available imagery. To situate this artwork, I provide a historical analysis of Chung's past visual culture representations. Chapter Three shows how the artwork's method grapples with the implicit policing of Margaret Chung's identities through visual cultural representations. I ask how Takemoto builds a new visual vocabulary for Chung that reflects on the redacted elements of her past. *Ever Wanting (for Margaret Chung)* has two distinct formal approaches and therefore is in visual dialogue with two groups of artists. First, Felix González Torres's and Paul Chan's artworks provide an entry point into the discussion of vast empty space as visualizing an intermingling of hope, loss, mourning, and claiming of space. Acting as a prelude to *Ever Wanting*, Takemoto uses these techniques to counter historical visual culture. Second, Barbara Hammer's, Wu Tsang's, and Cheryl Dunye's artworks exemplify how cinema about queer subjects and archival intervention can straddle historical record and mythical imaginings. Through disincorporate, object-centered imaging, *Ever Wanting* expands the genre's filmic language. The chapter argues that the contrast of filmic techniques reflects the split of Chung's persona and simultaneously makes room for Chung to be represented in ways divorced from the racist, sexist, and

homophobic histories of the United States. Takemoto's approach to *Ever Wanting* offers a view into dealing with complexities of characters within the often-black-and-white approach to leading figures who shape contemporary discourse.

## **Conclusion**

This dissertation is an in-depth study of artworks by TT Takemoto that takes up the individual lives of queer Asian American subjects. Each subject has a distinct visual culture history in the United States that is reflected in the artist's imagining of and dedication to each subject through the artwork. The chapters parse the nuance of each work's art historical and visual cultural implications and suggest ways to articulate each distinct method. Takemoto's intimacy as artistic praxis forms community connections that counteract linear time. The dissertation asks: How does each artwork imagine history and dislodge it from harmful ideologies that are shaping visual culture to create new patterns and connection? What are the visual culture interventions needed to do this work? What are the visual vocabularies Takemoto creates for each subject?

## CHAPTER ONE

### ***LOOKING FOR JIRO: “ENACTING OTHERS” TO FIND JIRO ONUMA***

“Jiro Onuma is my gay Japanese American role model, queer accomplice, and friend.”

—TT Takemoto<sup>73</sup>

#### **Introduction**

On an almost empty stage, a gender-nonconforming Asian American individual stands with a counter-height table (Figure 2). Dressed in dark pants and a cuffed, short-sleeved, button-down shirt, they unfold an apron; the rustle of the fabric is audible to the viewer. A tick-tock sound begins rapidly beating, and the performer shakes out their apron preparing to tie it around their body. As the title, *Looking for Jiro*, fills the black screen in bold, white text, the pop singer Madonna’s voice, lower and slower than her usual peppy croon, sings “Time goes by so slowly.”

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<sup>73</sup> Latimer, “Life in the Archives.”



**Figure 2. Jiro Onuma and TT Takemoto. Photograph by E.G. Crichton for *Lineage: Matchmaking in the Archive*. Image courtesy of E.G. Crichton.**

TT Takemoto performs the role of the title character, Jiro Onuma, choreographed with an experimental documentary-style film projected behind them, set to a soundtrack mash-up of ABBA’s “Gimme! Gimme! Gimme! (A Man After Midnight)” (1979) and Madonna’s “Hung Up” (2005).<sup>74</sup> Jiro Onuma (1904–1990) was a gay Japanese American man who was incarcerated by the United States in a Japanese concentration camp during World War II.<sup>75</sup> This chapter explores how

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<sup>74</sup> As I conducted research TT Takemoto’s name changed from Tina Takemoto to TT Takemoto. For all publication authored by Takemoto, I have changed their first name to TT. In references wherein the name “Tina Takemoto” is included, I have left the title as is.

<sup>75</sup> Based on conversations with Takemoto and reflecting on Takemoto’s practice, I use the term “incarceration” rather than “internment,” and “concentration camps” rather



Takemoto demonstrates the complexity of representation by satirically embodying a version of Onuma that draws from the pop icon Madonna, incarcerated person John Iyamuri, the bodybuilder Earl Sandow, and Asian American backup dancers in Madonna's music video for "Hung Up." In this chapter, I consider the following questions: How does Takemoto build a nuanced representation queerness in Japanese concentration camps using the performative embodiment of different personas from history and popular culture? And how does Takemoto's combination of performance and film situate this artwork in the canon of contemporary art history in the United States? I argue that Takemoto's performance, paired with the synced film mash-up, is a multi-pronged formal intervention that imagines a complexity for individuals sparsely acknowledged within US history.

*Looking for Jiro* is a playful and critical imagining of Jiro Onuma's life, which was commemorated by little more than a few sparse belongings in an archive. This chapter shows how Takemoto ushers Onuma's story into a dynamic space of queer time by weaving together performance and film methods to challenge ideology forming visual cultures. The following pages begin with a description and brief history of the artwork to provide contextual starting points within art history and US

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than "relocation centers" or "assembly centers." In an email exchange between the author and Tina Takemoto on April 27, 2021, Takemoto shared the following reference as a guide to terminology. Densho, "Terminology," *Densho: Japanese American Incarceration and Japanese Internment* (blog), accessed June 14, 2021, <https://densho.org/terminology/>. Their source, Densho.org, is an organization whose mission is "to preserve and share history of the WWII incarceration for Japanese Americans to promote equity and justice today." Densho, "About Us," *Densho: Japanese American Incarceration and Japanese Internment*, accessed July 9, 2022, <https://densho.org/about-densho/>.

history. Following that, I discuss Takemoto's evolving practice of collaboration and performance art, and I connect these to their performance of Onuma and their artistic method through an analysis of Takemoto's source material. Queer methods of time and failure serve as theoretical lenses to demonstrate the historical and visual cultural undertakings of *Looking for Jiro*. At the end of the chapter, I examine the cultural reverberations resulting from the artwork.

### **Experiencing *Looking for Jiro***

After Takemoto as Onuma is outfitted as described above, the artwork is broken into three main activities performed on the stage (Figure 3). (For clarity, in the description of Takemoto performing as Onuma, I refer to Takemoto and use they and them pronouns when the description is about the performance elements of the artwork.) The activities are synchronized with archival footage from US propaganda, clips of Earl Sandow, and Madonna's "Hung Up" music video. First, Takemoto dances on the dark stage, lip syncing along with the edited music. The sound remains upbeat, but it is at a lower register, deepening and queering Madonna's female voice. This is the first disruption into visual cultural sedimentation. By changing the pop star's vocal register, Takemoto takes up the sound as their own and marks it as something with multiple meaning making possibilities.



**Figure 3. TT Takemoto, *Looking for Jiro* (2011). Film still of the opening credits captured by the author. Image courtesy of the artist.**

Takemoto sweeps, sings along, and dances with their broom. While this happens, the artwork toggles between the performance and historic clips of people in concentration camps—barracks, people walking, a soldier standing guard, a camp in the distance glittering at night, a man of Asian descent lounging on a porch, the bodybuilder Earl Sandow posing. The latter clips, from *Sandow, the Modern Hercules* by W.K.-L. Dickson (1894), are overlaid on the screen at the top-right, like a thought bubble, suggesting Onuma’s desire and dreams of the bodybuilder.<sup>76</sup> With instrumental music setting the upbeat tone, the artwork switches back and forth between footage of Sandow flexing his muscles and clenching his buttocks, and Takemoto as Onuma dancing with their broom (Figure 4). Takemoto keeps the beat, tapping the handle on the ground; they hold it close, spin with it, and do a quick

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<sup>76</sup> Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. 20540 USA. “Sandow.” Image. Accessed December 3, 2023. <https://www.loc.gov/item/00694298/>.

squat, similar to a pole dance. Their dance moves are broken up by intermittent sweeping, refocusing on the prescribed task. The broom stands in for a dance partner that Takemoto holds closely; they dip the broom and bring it back up, pressing it against their own body.



**Figure 4. TT Takemoto, *Looking for Jiro* (2011). Film stills of Sandow (top) and Takemoto as Onuma (bottom) captured by the author. Images courtesy of the artist.**

A ticking sound fades in as the second action begins. The performance cuts to Takemoto who, standing behind a makeshift kitchen island, tosses a dishcloth to the floor and begins baking two loaves of bread. Takemoto taps the sifter, kneads, roles, flips, and shapes the dough. It is thick, squishy, and white, recalling Sandow's skin. When they knead the dough, the film zooms in to just their fingers manipulating the dough as they poke and prod. First, this view is from above, with the preparation surface, dough, and Takemoto well framed, making the activity clear. Then, the camera moves closer still, from the side, showing hands slapping flesh-like dough, foreplay for the activity ahead. The bread goes into the faux oven and then Takemoto lifts the finished product, a large and glossy loaf of bread.

During the clips of baking bread, clips of Japanese Americans in concertation break up the performance camps, living, working, and training—a group waits in line at the mess hall, they are served by their fellow incarcerated people, soldiers train. A subtle change happens at this point in the artwork; the clips are explicitly manipulated. In slow motion, an elderly man eats next to a young girl; he spoons food into his mouth, but then the clip reverses and he spits it back out. In another, we see the surveying soldier again, but this time he appears as two, mirroring himself; his head movements are edited to nod along to the beat of the film's music. These simple edits disrupt the complacency suggested in the original clips.

Finally, the bread is ready, and the third action begins. Takemoto lifts a loaf from below, setting it on the island. Next, a container of Crisco is seen up close, like product placement in a cooking show advertisement, and Takemoto begins to smother

it on their arm. They place the Crisco below, extend one hand to touch the top of the bread loaf, and stretch the other arm in the opposite direction. Arms splayed, they pause briefly, hand in position; they then slide their arm into the bread, stopping when their shoulder reaches the loaf. The bread becomes a prosthetic bicep (Figure 5). The film replays the clip of this insertion. Takemoto wears both loaves and begins to pose like Sandow, flexing their new makeshift muscles. Then they dance like Madonna's dancers, thrusting their hips and moving their arms. Performance clips of the Crisco and fisting replay. The very last dance move of the performance is a kick, slightly unsteady but determinedly held in place.



**Figure 5. TT Takemoto, *Looking for Jiro* (2011). Production still taken by Maxwell Leung. Image courtesy of Maxwell Leung.**

## Filmformance

“I’m not trained in filmmaking, and in the kind of performance art that I do, I am typically performing the activities alone or in collaboration with others. So I don’t direct other people to perform.”

—TT Takemoto<sup>77</sup>

When *Looking for Jiro* was first conceived as a performance, Takemoto was invited to participate in Guillermo Galindo’s art festival Pow! Pow! Action Art Festival in San Francisco. They were given a set amount of time for the act, and this was their first foray into solo performance.<sup>78</sup> Due to the unpredictable nature of synchronizing the film and the performance during a live event, *Looking for Jiro* (2011) transformed from a live performance with a film projected in the background to an intentionally synchronization of film and performance documentation.

Takemoto reflects on the evolution of the project:

Initially, I was using live performance to convey physical humor and the joy of performing various activities against the backdrop of film. But I became increasingly interested in what could be conveyed through the process of film editing itself. That’s when I started building passages that created meaning through juxtaposition and matching imagery with other imagery.<sup>79</sup>

When *Looking for Jiro* existed as a live performance backed by a film, the combination did not allow for the nuanced relationship between the performative body and edited film that was necessary for the project. After multiple performances

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<sup>77</sup> Takemoto, interview by Kate Korroch, Zoom, April 14, 2021.

<sup>78</sup> TT Takemoto, interview by Kate Korroch, Zoom, February 6, 2023.

<sup>79</sup> Takemoto, interview, April 14, 2021.



of *Looking for Jiro*, Takemoto decided it would live on as a filmed production edited with the video and soundtrack. They stated: “I really started thinking about what is it that video can do that live performance can’t do.”<sup>80</sup> With a specific message to convey, Takemoto meticulously paired the film and performance to clearly articulate their embodied and historical redirection of the inspiring sources.

A combination of performance and film, Takemoto describes *Looking for Jiro* as a *filmformance*, a term used by Nao Bustamante to describe her work *Silver & Gold* (2010).<sup>81</sup> Bustamante states, “*Silver & Gold* combines film, live performance, and original costumes into a self-proclaimed ‘filmformance’ . . . in a magical and joyfully twisted exploration of race, glamour, sexuality, and the silver screen.”<sup>82</sup> Dedicated to filmmaker Jack Smith’s performance of movie starlet Maria Montez, Bustamante mimics the muse dressed in a diva-inspired sequins gown accented with garish accessories.<sup>83</sup> The antagonist of the film is a white-skinned dildo that eventually glows a perky pink and is bedazzled. As Laura Gutiérrez has described the work: “In our viewing of *Silver & Gold* we are brought into an exotic and camped-up

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<sup>80</sup> Takemoto.

<sup>81</sup> Takemoto.

<sup>82</sup> Nao Bustamante, “Silver & Gold,” Nao Bustamante, accessed April 19, 2022, <http://naobustamante.com/archive/silver-gold/>.

<sup>83</sup> Jack Smith’s tribute to Maria Montez, *Flaming Creatures* (1963) is a nonnarrative film in which the actors dress in drag. There are scenes of genitals and was considered pornographic by some; *Flaming Creatures* was banned according to New York’s obscenity laws. Smith’s film is not unique in its relationship to censorship. In a similar vein, the Langston Hughes estate tried to censor Isaac Julien’s *Looking for Langston* (1989) via the guise of copyright infringement, although there is speculation that this case was due to exposing Hughes’s sexuality. Robert Mapplethorpe’s obscenity trials (1991) came on the heels of these accusations against Julien’s art.

orientalized ‘Montez-land’, one with layered citations of past performances.”<sup>84</sup> In other words, Smith draws from Montez, and Bustamante draws from Smith’s portrayal of Montez.<sup>85</sup>

In its simplest form, filmformance is the pairing of an edited film with a performance, but the intersections of *Silver & Gold* and *Looking for Jiro* far exceed that shared structure. Both artworks use archival material, gender play, and sound to frame the visual materials with humorous tones, and they feature absurd sexualized prosthetic appendages (which I describe below). I am not suggesting that all filmformance must incorporate each of these elements, but the parallels between Bustamante’s and Takemoto’s works are noteworthy. Bustamante’s once-removed imaginings of Maria Montez and Takemoto’s imaginings of Jiro Onuma performing as gay icons have formal and thematic similarities used to construct personal narratives with absurdist cues.

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<sup>84</sup> Laura Gutiérrez, “Divas, Exoticism, and Freakery in Nao Bustamante’s Filmformance *Silver and Gold* (2009),” in *Performance Studies Caucus: Nao Bustamante’s Always Already Emerging Art* (American Studies Association Annual Meeting, Atlanta, Georgia, 2018), 4.

<sup>85</sup> Jill Casid writes about *Silver & Gold* highlighting the absurdity of the artwork, “[*Silver and Gold*] inhabit[s] and explode[s] devastating absurdity.” Noting that “the techno-artificial vibrator dildo, the decorative and superficial accessory...” disrupts the visual landscape. Jill H. Casid, “Epilogue: Landscape in, around, and under the Performative,” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 21, no. 1 (March 2011): 104. Adding a layer to the artwork, Bustamante provides a voice over for the person on the screen within her live performance on stage, what Laura G. Gutiérrez explains as ventriloquism. Gutiérrez, “Divas, Exoticism, and Freakery,” 2.

### ***Looking for Jiro, 2011 to Present***

The impetus for Takemoto's work on Onuma was artist and curator E.G. Crichton's project *Lineage: Matchmaking in the Archive* (2012–present).<sup>86</sup> Using the Gay Lesbian Bisexual Transgender Historical Society collection in San Francisco, Crichton paired artists with archived individuals, an archival matchmaking and queer history making. In published essays, Takemoto describes their journey with Crichton's project while meticulously researching Onuma's life and the incarceration camps.<sup>87</sup> Takemoto has screened the film over two dozen times at film festivals in the US and abroad, and at the time of writing the artwork has been included in eleven art exhibitions.<sup>88</sup>

Crichton's well-matched pair have much in common. Takemoto is a genderqueer fourth-generation Japanese American whose family was incarcerated by the US government. They are an artist and scholar based in the California Bay area. Onuma was a gay, first-generation Japanese American man who was incarcerated at the Japanese concentration camp, Topaz, in Utah, from 1942 to 1944.<sup>89</sup> Onuma was

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<sup>86</sup> E. G. Crichton, "Lineage: Matchmaking in the Archive," accessed August 26, 2023, <https://egcrichton.sites.ucsc.edu/projects/matchmaking-in-the-archive/>.

<sup>87</sup> TT Takemoto, "Looking for Jiro and Gentleman's Gaman," *The Radical Teacher*, no. 92 (January 12, 2012): 20–25; TT Takemoto, "Looking for Jiro Onuma: A Queer Meditation on the Incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 20, no. 3 (January 1, 2014): 241–75.

<sup>88</sup> TT Takemoto, "TT Takemoto - Looking for Jiro," accessed July 8, 2022, <http://www.ttakemoto.com/lookingforjiro/index.html#>; TT Takemoto, interview by Kate Korroch, Zoom, July 12, 2023.

<sup>89</sup> Onuma was part of the Nikkei community, "Japanese emigrants and their descendants living outside (and sometimes inside) Japan . . . it has come to be used as an alternative to "Japanese American" by some." "Nikkei," *Densho Encyclopedia*, accessed February 26, 2023, <https://encyclopedia.densho.org/Nikkei/>.

born in Japan in 1904 and moved to the United States in 1923, where he remained for the duration of his life. Based on his limited possessions stored in the archive, including ephemera such as personal photographs, fashionable accessories, and pamphlets from a mail-in bodybuilding regimen, Takemoto builds a story of Onuma's life as a queer, Japanese American man during his time in the camp during World War II (1939–1945). As they perform as Jiro Onuma and screen the remixed footage, what Takemoto projects behind themselves and embodies in their performance is a recuperation of a history that directly impacts their lived experience. The artwork creates queer community across life and death by drawing from and manipulating the visual culture archive with film and performance.

*Looking for Jiro* is discussed in multiple interviews with scholars and critics, and in dozens of online magazines, websites, newspapers, and reviews.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Some intersect with the publications listed in the previous footnote, and additional references are listed here. Interviews include Kina and Bernabe, "Muscles, Mash-Ups, and Warning Shots: Queering Japanese American History: An Interview with Tina Takemoto"; Takemoto and González, "Triple Threat: Queer Feminist of Color Performance"; Will Dai, "Following Her Following Her Passion - An Interview With Tina Takemoto," *cinemq*, April 22, 2019, <https://www.cinemq.com/post/2019/04/22/tina-takemoto>; "Thought Leader: A Conversation with Tina Takemoto," *Inside/Out: Magazine of Oakland Museum of California*, 2017; Lacey Jane Roberts, "Online Exclusive: Looking for Jiro | Hyphen Magazine," accessed October 19, 2019, <https://hyphenmagazine.com/magazine/issue-25-generation-spring-2012/online-exclusive-looking-jiro>; Roberts; Nia King, Jessica Glennon-Zukoff, and Terra Mikalson, eds., *Queer and Trans Artists of Color: Stories of Some of Our Lives* (Delaware: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014).

*Looking for Jiro* is mentioned in several reviews. See Emily Wilson, "'Looking for Hope and Clinging to Hope': Short Films for Our Times," *Hyperallergic*, February 22, 2021, <http://hyperallergic.com/623421/looking-for-hope-and-clinging-to-hope-short-films-for-our-times/>; Brian Hearn, "Loving After Lifetimes of All This at La Esquina | Temporary Art Review," accessed October 19,

Additionally, Takemoto has written extensively about the history of the artwork, their research, and about Onuma himself. They discuss the lack of visibility of LGBTQIA+ people in Japanese concertation camps and Onuma's life story before, after, and during his time at Topaz.<sup>91</sup> In an article written for *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, Takemoto details their research and search for Onuma within the archive. They describe finding a figure in an archival photograph that they thought was Onuma, only to learn later that it was not him. This moment fed a hopeful aspiration for the artist that concertation camps could have "offered a haven for same-sex intimacy."<sup>92</sup> Instead, Onuma's absence from this photograph perpetuates the layered traumatic impact that concertation camps had on queer lives. Takemoto

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2019, <http://temporaryartreview.com/loving-after-lifetimes-of-all-this-at-la-esquina/>; Liz Cook, "Danny Orendorff's Last Charlotte Street Show Favors Text over Texture," *The Pitch*, accessed May 12, 2020, <https://www.thepitchkc.com/danny-orendorffs-last-charlotte-street-show-favors-text-over-texture/>; Third Person Limited, "REVIEW: La Esquina's 'Loving After Lifetimes of All This,'" accessed October 19, 2019, <https://medium.com/@3ltd/review-la-esquinas-loving-after-lifetimes-of-all-this-9e4c4c6db9f2>; Adrienne Skye Roberts, "What We Leave Behind: New Narratives in a Queer Archive," *Open Space*, July 8, 2009, <https://openspace.sfmoma.org/2009/07/what-we-leave-behind-new-narratives-in-a-queer-archive/>; Victoria Gannon, "Lineage: Matchmaking in the Archive," *KQED Arts*, June 29, 2009, [https://www.kqed.org/arts/24944/lineage\\_matchmaking\\_in\\_the\\_archive](https://www.kqed.org/arts/24944/lineage_matchmaking_in_the_archive).

<sup>91</sup> TT Takemoto, "Queer Exhaustion, Speculation, Despair," in *Saturation: Race, Art, and the Circulation of Value*, ed. C. Riley Snorton and Hentyle Yapp, *Critical Anthologies in Art and Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2020); Takemoto, "Looking for Jiro Onuma"; TT Takemoto, "Notes on Internment Camp," *Art Journal* 72, no. 2 (June 1, 2013): 54–57; Takemoto, "Looking for Jiro and Gentleman's Gaman"; TT Takemoto, "Jiro Onuma," *Densho Encyclopedia*, accessed January 23, 2023, <https://encyclopedia.densho.org/Jiro%20Onuma/>; TT Takemoto, "Desperately Seeking LGBT Memories of World War II Incarceration," accessed January 23, 2023, <https://www.nichibei.org/2011/05/desperately-seeking-lgbt-memories-of-world-war-ii-incarceration/>.

<sup>92</sup> Takemoto, "Looking for Jiro Onuma," 264.

continues the search for queer hope, sharing that “Onuma’s archival collection fills me with a sense of awe and grief.”<sup>93</sup> The artist concludes,

From the vantage point of the present, we are left to speculate about Onuma’s silent remnants from a past that cannot be fully reanimated or revived, yet nevertheless inspire us to keep looking and thinking more capaciously about utopian and sometimes cruel dimensions of our queer past, present, and future.<sup>94</sup>

Scholarly discussions of *Looking for Jiro* highlight the artwork’s disruption of linear historical time by relating different cultural and historical reference points interpreted in performance by one body. Various authors have analyzed the climax of the film, a sensational and pleasurable moment when Takemoto fists a loaf of freshly baked bread; an action layered with subtexts that are discussed later in the chapter.<sup>95</sup> Elizabeth Freeman’s notion of erotohistoriography is an anchor for Jenni Sorkin’s and Vivian Huang’s arguments concerning time and history in relation to Takemoto’s work.<sup>96</sup> Sorkin describes Freeman’s idea, showing the problematics of single-narrative histories and arguing, “the construction of time is a bureaucratic

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<sup>93</sup> Takemoto, 266.

<sup>94</sup> Takemoto, 267.

<sup>95</sup> Jenni Sorkin, “Time Goes By, So Slowly: Tina Takemoto’s Queer Futurity,” *Panorama*, 2021; Vivian L. Huang, “Sparkling Joy, Serving Mess: The Drag of Asian/American History,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 53, no. 6 (December 2020): 1373–92; Alpesh Kantilal Patel, “Artistic Responses to LGBTQI Gaps in Archives,” in *Globalizing East European Art Histories: Past and Present*, ed. Beáta Hock and Anu Allas, 1st ed., Routledge Research in Art History (New York London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis group, 2018); Julian Wong-Nelson, “Fisting for Freedom: Queer Gesture as Temporal Liberatory Practice” (Master of Arts Thesis, San Francisco, California, USA, The San Francisco Art Institute, 2016).

<sup>96</sup> Sorkin, “Time Goes By, So Slowly,” 3; Huang, “Sparkling Joy, Serving Mess,” 1384; Elizabeth Freeman, “Time Binds, or, Erotohistoriography,” *Social Text* 23, no. 3-4 (84-85) (December 1, 2005): 57–68.

framing that cannot possibly contain or speak to the tenuous social contracts or formations of queer time.”<sup>97</sup> Shifting to notions of space and academic discipline, Alpesh Kantilal Patel uses Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih’s “minor transnationalism” and Piotr Pitrowski’s “horizontal art history” as a framework to bring together Takemoto’s film and Jannaus Samma’s installation *Not Suitable for Work: A Chairman’s Tale* (2016).<sup>98</sup> The artists’ practices disrupt vertical art history “through, considerations beyond vertical power dynamics within systems of thought that can be crucial to realizing entanglements beyond the region.”<sup>99</sup> Julian Wong-Nelson suggests that *Looking for Jiro* “mobilizes genealogies of Asian queer diasporas . . . to create a new past for Onuma and a new future for ourselves.”<sup>100</sup>

Takemoto’s performance challenges accepted histories by using sensual play and messiness as conduits for radical political, historical, and sexual justice. In their thoughtful and elucidating considerations of the work, the above-mentioned scholars do not analyze the embodiments of characters beyond mimicking bodybuilder Earl Sandow’s muscle display and the subsequent bread-fisting scene. Considering the mash-up of performed embodiments in *Looking for Jiro*, I argue

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<sup>97</sup> Sorkin, “Time Goes By, So Slowly,” 3.

<sup>98</sup> Takemoto and Samma’s artworks are both about gay subjects from historical moments in the 1940s—Japanese incarceration in the United States and the criminalization of male sodomy in Estonia (via Russian occupation). Patel, “Artistic Responses to LGBTQI Gaps in Archives”; Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih, eds., *Minor Transnationalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); Piotr Pitrowski, “Towards a Horizontal History of Modern Art,” *Writing Central European Art History: PATTERNS--Travelling Lecture Set 2008/2009 4* (2008)..

<sup>99</sup> Patel, “Artistic Responses to LGBTQI Gaps in Archives,” 213.

<sup>100</sup> Wong-Nelson, “Fisting For Freedom,” 55–56.

that Takemoto strategically recasts the original sources in the pairing of performance and experimental film. Takemoto draws together culturally and historically disparate personas for the embodiment of Onuma, and the performance is intentionally imperfect. That is, rather than attempting to perfectly embody the cast of characters, Takemoto performs an exaggerated and satirical mode, highlighting the source personas' idiosyncrasies. The accompanying film backing the performance accentuates the characteristics of each performed embodiment. The slippages inherent in enacting others are where Onuma escapes into the present through Takemoto as their proxy.<sup>101</sup> To imagine Onuma, Takemoto creates a performance of queer temporal dysregulation. In other words, *Looking for Jiro* shows the temporal expansiveness of queer histories; queer existence in Japanese concentration camps does not sit statically in the mid-twentieth century but reaches to the early (Sandow) and late (Madonna) histories of the period as well. As the filmformance is a mash-up of personas and film excerpts, folded together asynchronously, *Looking for Jiro* shows the historical reach of visual culture's embodied impact on individuals.

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<sup>101</sup> *Look for Jiro* is briefly discussed in the following scholarly works: Amy Sueyoshi, "Queer Asian American Historiography," in *The Oxford Handbook of Asian American History*, ed. David K. Yoo and Eiichiro Azuma (Oxford University Press, 2016); Takemoto and González, "Triple Threat: Queer Feminist of Color Performance"; E. G. Crichton, "Migrating Archives," *Art Journal* 72, no. 2 (June 2013): 50–53; Latimer, "Life in the Archives"; Nayan Shah, "Race-Ing Sex," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 35, no. 1 (2014): 26; Don Romesburg, "Presenting the Queer Past: A Case for the GLBT History Museum," *Radical History Review* 2014, no. 120 (October 1, 2014): 131–44; Kina and Bernabe, "Muscles, Mash-Ups, and Warning Shots: Queering Japanese American History: An Interview with Tina Takemoto."



“*Looking for...*”

Takemoto’s search for Jiro Onuma and those like him inspired the “looking for” element of the work’s title, but the phrasing also has a lineage encircled by queer, Black, Asian, and white folks in the United States. For example, Isaac Julien’s seminal film, *Looking for Langston* (1989), “is a lyrical exploration—and recreation—of the private world . . . of Langston Hughes.”<sup>102</sup> Julien’s historical and conceptual approach inspires Takemoto’s mix of black-and-white archival materials and photographs with popular culture references.<sup>103</sup> Two years after the release of Julien’s film, video artist and academic Richard Fung published his essay “Looking for My Penis” (1991) in which he breaks down the representation of Asian men through the study of gay pornography, building his analysis by juxtaposing the threatening hypersexualization of Black men, the undersexedness of Asian men, and the market-enforced neutrality of white men.<sup>104</sup> His critique culminates by recognizing and analyzing a clear pattern in which the Asian male subjects are objectified for the pleasure of the white male viewer. Fung asks, “and if Asian men have no sexuality, how can we have homosexuality?”<sup>105</sup> As with queer stories within

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<sup>102</sup> *Looking for Langston*, 1989.[unclear what you’re citing here]

<sup>103</sup> B. Ruby Rich, *New Queer Cinema: The Director’s Cut* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2013), 9. [unclear what you’re citing from the Rich; clarity]

<sup>104</sup> Richard Fung, “Looking for My Penis (1991): Richard Fung,” accessed September 3, 2020, <http://www.richardfung.ca/index.php?/articles/looking-for-my-penis-1991/>.

<sup>105</sup> Fung.

Japanese American concentration camps, sexuality is simply absent. Takemoto cites Julien's and Fung's work in interviews.<sup>106</sup>

Although not explicitly referenced by Takemoto, Kobena Mercer was contemporaneous to Julien and Fung and also “looks for” something in his essay on Robert Mapplethorpe's nude photographs of Black men. In “Looking for Trouble” (1991), Mercer reflects on his initially critical reading of the photographs and takes a more nuanced approach that emphasizes how the meaning of the image is located in the viewing subject:

The risky business of ambivalence by which [Mapplethorpe's] images can elicit a homophobic reading as easily as a homoerotic one, can confirm a racist reading as much as produce an antiracist one, suggests that indeterminacy doesn't happen “inside” the text, but in the social relations of difference that different readers bring to bear on the text, in the worldly relations “between.”<sup>107</sup>

Mercer revises his own position, in part nodding to Mapplethorpe's own precarious position as a gay man. In doing so, Mercer models a scholarly example of allowing set ideologies to have dynamic and flexible potentials, encouraging new readings and understandings.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Roberts, “Online Exclusive: Looking for Jiro | Hyphen Magazine”; Takemoto, interview, April 14, 2021.

<sup>107</sup> Mercer, “Looking for Trouble,” 197.

<sup>108</sup> In *Mapplethorpe and the Flower*, Derek Conrad Murray discusses the tensions between Mapplethorpe's interest in the classical form and the racist readings of the photographs. Murray, *MAPPLETHORPE AND THE FLOWER*, 68–69. Murray also uses “Looking for” in a chapter title, “Looking for Ligon: Towards an Aesthetic Theory of Blackness,” with reference to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952).

Mapplethorpe's photographs were a component of the visual inspiration for *Looking for Langston*, and both Julien's film and Mapplethorpe's artworks experienced censorship—by the Langston Hughes Estate and the National Endowment for the Arts, respectively. B. Ruby Rich remembers *Looking for Langston*: “Today it's such a classic that it's hard to recall the controversies set off in the 1980s or the bravery that produced it.”<sup>109</sup> Although not explicitly about censored material, Fung's research on gay pornography also explores the cultural margin.<sup>110</sup>

While *Looking for Jiro* has not experienced explicit censorship, the artwork rewinds time and revisits materials that were originally censored by intentional omission. These omissions are modes of historical violence and continue to shape US history in the present. As Takemoto reframes the personas and US propaganda, they insist on a need for reexamining putatively stable historical narratives. But, instead of the original intention of the propaganda, Takemoto manipulates the material to create queerness.

### *Japanese American Concentration Camps*

At the beginning of *Looking for Jiro*, as Madonna repeats “Time goes by so slowly,” a description follows the title screen: “A queer meditation on Japanese Americans incarcerated during World War II.” It then succinctly frames the upcoming

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<sup>109</sup> Rich, *New Queer Cinema*, 9.

<sup>110</sup> Around the time Julien, Fung, and Mercer's works were published, the Pornography Victims Act was a bill sponsored by Senator Mitch McConnell that was presented several times from 1984 to 1993. The bill never passed but points to the zeitgeist surrounding the works discussed in this section.

iconography: “Inspired by Jiro Onuma (1904–1990): A gay inmate who worked in the mess hall and liked muscular men.” The film cuts to a clip from the WRA’s propaganda film *A Challenge to Democracy* (1944), which slowly pans over a vast, barren expanse of makeshift housing, with text underneath added by Takemoto (Figure 6): “WWII Japanese American Incarceration Camp.”<sup>111</sup> The endless array of barracks, almost completely devoid of human presence, paired with the didactic text signify the innumerable unrecognized lives impacted by this deliberate and avoidable travesty. If a viewer has any question about what they are seeing, Takemoto answers it in advance with their introductory texts to ensure a knowing framework for the audience—this person was gay, this person was Japanese American, and the United States wrongfully incarcerated him.

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<sup>111</sup> *Looking for Jiro* draws from two government propaganda films the United States government used during Japanese incarceration: *A Challenge to Democracy* (1944), produced by the War Relocation Authority in 1944 and *Japanese Relocation* produced by the Office of War Information (c. 1943).



**Figure 6. TT Takemoto, *Looking for Jiro* (2011). Film still of Japanese American incarceration camp captured by the author. Image courtesy of the artist.**

In the performance, Takemoto, as Onuma, lip syncs: “Half past twelve and I’m watching the late show in my flat all alone. How I hate to spend the evening on my own.” At the end of this line, as Onuma sings, a new view of the concentration camp appears: an evening scene with glistening lights, a glow surrounded by vast emptiness, heightening a feeling of isolation, even among thousands of other bodies. The image projected behind this part of the performance is *Evening Falls Over Heart Mountain Relocation Center* (1942), taken by Tom W. Parker. The image is one of thousands of WRA photographs of Japanese American camps.<sup>112</sup> Parker was the

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<sup>112</sup> The full title of the photograph is “Evening falls over the Heart Mountain Relocation Center where nearly 11,000 persons of Japanese ancestry reside. One by one, lights dim out in the barracks and Wyoming’s third largest city dozes off to sleep. Photographer: Parker, Tom Heart Mountain, Wyoming.” *Evening Falls over the Heart Mountain Relocation Center Where Nearly 11,000 Persons of Japanese Ancestry Reside. One by One, Lights Dim out in the Barracks and Wyoming’s Third Largest City Dozes off to Sleep. Photographer: Parker, Tom Heart Mountain, Wyoming,*

director of the WRA's photographic section and was also charged with creating the WRA films.<sup>113</sup> This photograph serves as part of the backdrop of the performance, reimagining the violent histories taking place within those walls into a glittering dance performance (Figure 7).



**Figure 7. TT Takemoto, *Looking for Jiro* (2011). Film still of the performance captured by the author. Image courtesy of the artist.**

Fewer than twenty years after Jiro came to the United States, the nation entered World War II in December 1941, when Pearl Harbor was bombed by the Japanese national military.<sup>114</sup> Shortly thereafter, in February 1942, President Franklin

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September 19, 1942, September 19, 1942, War Relocation Authority Photographs of Japanese-American Evacuation and Resettlement, <https://calisphere.org/item/ark:/13030/ft3n39n85q/>.

<sup>113</sup> Lane Ryo Hirabayashi, "Thomas W. Parker," *Densho Encyclopedia*, accessed February 20, 2023, [https://encyclopedia.densho.org/Thomas\\_W.\\_Parker/](https://encyclopedia.densho.org/Thomas_W._Parker/).

<sup>114</sup> The intertwining of gender exclusion and racism is deeply embedded in United States History. In 1875 the Page Act restricted Chinese women from coming into the United States and short time later, the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed in 1882, banning all Chinese save for businessmen and students. The Chinese Exclusion Act

D. Roosevelt established Executive Order 9066, sending Japanese Americans, including Takemoto's father, who was a child at the time, and Jiro Onuma, to concentration camps.<sup>115</sup> Over 120,000 Japanese Americans were transported to holding centers and eventually transferred to one of ten camps. The temporary centers were on fairgrounds or horse-racing tracks, and the camps were in isolated, desolate areas. While incarcerated, the WRA administered a loyalty questionnaire to determine if individual Japanese Americans could be released from incarceration. The final two questions read as follows: "Are you willing to serve in the armed forces of the United States on combat duty, whenever ordered?" and "Will you swear unqualified allegiance to the United States of America and faithfully defend the United States from any or all attack by foreign or domestic forces, and forswear any form of allegiances or obedience to the Japanese emperor, or any other foreign government, power, or organization?"<sup>116</sup> If a person answered "no" to these questions, they were

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was the first law in the United States targeting the immigration of a specific group of people based on nationality or race. During the seven-year period between 1875 and 1882, male Chinese laborers were forced to do domestic tasks in addition to their manual labor. This intersection of gender, sexuality, and race depicts a long-standing misogynist queering of gender norms that set the foundation for Asian Americans in the United States. Expanding on that, a year before Onuma came to the United States, the 1924 Immigration Act (or the Oriental Exclusion Act) banned almost all immigration from Asia, limiting the number of immigrants allowed into the United States per country. The Immigration Act was upheld just after WWII in 1952 and then the discriminatory policies were removed in 1965.

<sup>115</sup> Takemoto, interview, April 14, 2021.

<sup>116</sup> Natasha Varner, "The 'Loyalty Questionnaire' of 1943 Opened a Wound That Has Yet to Heal," *Densho: Japanese American Incarceration and Japanese Internment*, July 19, 2019, <https://densho.org/catalyst/the-loyalty-questionnaire-of-1943-opened-a-wound-that-has-yet-to-heal/>; "Questions 27 and 28 | *Densho Encyclopedia*," accessed October 23, 2023, [https://encyclopedia.densho.org/Questions\\_27\\_and\\_28/](https://encyclopedia.densho.org/Questions_27_and_28/).

dubbed a “no-no boy” and sent to another incarceration center, Tule Lake. Jiro Onuma was separated from his companions after they answered “no” on the infamous questionnaire.

In contrast to questioning loyalty, after a year of incarceration, Roosevelt established a special combat group comprised of Japanese Americans, the 442<sup>nd</sup> Regimental Combat Team (1944–1946). The 442<sup>nd</sup> had an astonishing combat record but was not decorated for their service until 2010, sixty-four years later. Referencing these facets of history, in the film component of *Looking for Jiro*, Takemoto uses footage from *A Challenge to Democracy* to depict the 442<sup>nd</sup> soldiers and edits the solemn clips to highlight amusing moments, such as a soldier bumping their head during training. This edit, among many others, shows how *Looking for Jiro* takes up violent history, shaping visual cultures and editing them to refocus that history. The original film was meant to prop up the government’s racist tactics of incarcerating Japanese Americans during World War II. For example, the training footage frames Japanese Americans as eager to participate in the war effort against Japan. Takemoto’s work divorces this imagery from the propaganda, and the film is manipulated to show the bumps, to upset the picture the US government sought to portray. By doing so, the new footage disrupts the linearity of history to allow for space to tease out the absurdity and violence packaged within the government-sanctioned messages.

In making *Looking for Jiro*, Takemoto joins a cohort of artists grappling with Japanese incarceration in their works; several of these artists are learning about their



family history.<sup>117</sup> For example, while incarcerated from 1942 to 1945, Toyo Miyatake (1895–1979) secretly took photographs of the concentration camps. Fifty years later, in 1994, Patrick Nagatani (1945–2017) returned to the sites of the camps to make images of their current landscape, emphasizing the overgrown and desolate terrain. Although decades apart, both artists strive to counter the WRA imagery that dominates the visual culture of the Japanese incarceration. Filmmaker Emiko Omori (b. 1940) was incarcerated as a young girl with her family. Trying to make sense of their time there, Omori and her sister created *Rabbit in the Moon* (1999), a film collage that combines incarceration camp footage with first-person accounts of experience in the camps. The AAM calls the film an “elegiac video poem.”<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Several incarcerated people made artworks during their time in the incarceration camps. Karen Higa curated *The View From Within* in 1992, featuring 135 works by such artists. “The View From Within | Japanese American National Museum,” accessed February 20, 2023, <https://www.janm.org/exhibits/view>. Jenni Sorokin criticizes another interpretation of art made during incarceration, Allen H. Eaton published a book about artworks made during incarceration in his book *Beauty Behind Barbed Wire* (1952). Similar to the neutralizing, propagandistic tone in *A Challenge to Democracy*’s, Sorokin notes that Allen H. Eaton’s “book fosters a fated quality to incarceration, as though their oppression held broad spiritual significance that was appropriately channeled into exceptional material production.” Sorokin, “Time Goes By, So Slowly,” 10. In 2018, the Japanese American National Museum debuted an exhibition contesting Eaton’s work. “Contested Histories: Art and Artifacts from the Allen Hendershott Eaton Collection,” Japanese American National Museum, accessed February 20, 2023, <https://www.janm.org/exhibits/contested-histories>.

<sup>118</sup> “When Rabbit Left the Moon: A Video Poem by Emiko Omori,” Asian Art Museum Exhibitions, accessed February 20, 2023, <https://exhibitions.asianart.org/exhibitions/when-rabbit-left-the-moon-a-video-poem-by-emiko-omori/>; Bogart Court, “When Rabbit Left the Moon - Exhibitions - Asian Art Museum,” Exhibitions, accessed February 20, 2023, <https://exhibitions.asianart.org/exhibitions/when-rabbit-left-the-moon/>. Recognition of this film extends to Sundance and the Museum of Modern Art. “Emiko Omori

Likewise, Roger Shimomura (b. 1939) created *Seven Kabuki Plays* (198-) based on his grandmother's time in a camp. The performance references traditional Japanese kabuki and incorporates segments of his grandmother reading from her diaries, poetry, music, and choreography.<sup>119</sup> Ruth Asawa was also incarcerated at a young age and learned her famous weaving techniques while in a camp.<sup>120</sup> Working in bronze in 1994, Asawa deviated from her renowned wire sculptures to create a memorial of Japanese incarceration for the City of San Jose Public Art Program.<sup>121</sup> The mural is a timeline, beginning before incarceration and moving to 1988, when the US government apologized for the lasting trauma they imparted.<sup>122</sup> Curators Genji Amino and Christina Hiromi Hobbs commemorated the eightieth anniversary of Executive Order 9066 in their exhibition *No Monument: In the Wake of Japanese American Incarceration*.<sup>123</sup> The intimate exhibition, at The Noguchi Museum in 2022, featured

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Retrospective: Rabbit in the Moon | MoMA," The Museum of Modern Art, accessed February 20, 2023, <https://www.moma.org/calendar/events/2831>.

<sup>119</sup> Jung Min (Kevin) Kim, "Roger Shimomura's Seven Kabuki Plays and the Diaries of Toku Shimomura at Minidoka," Text, Smithsonian Archives of American Art, May 8, 2018, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/blog/2018/05/roger-shimomuras-seven-kabuki-plays-and-the-diaries-of-toku-shimomura-at-minidoka>.

<sup>120</sup> Natasha Varner, "Visionary Sculptress Ruth Asawa," Densho: Japanese American Incarceration and Japanese Internment, March 28, 2016, <https://densho.org/catalyst/ruthasawa/>.

<sup>121</sup> City of San Jose Public Art Program, "Japanese American Internment Memorial: Ruth Asawa," July 1994, <https://www.sanjoseca.gov/home/showpublisheddocument/32365/636716031532730000>.

<sup>122</sup> "Internment," *Ruth Asawa* (blog), accessed February 20, 2023, <https://ruthasawa.com/life/internment/>.

<sup>123</sup> Genji Amino and Christina Hiromi Hobbs, "No Monument: In the Wake of the Japanese American Incarceration," The Noguchi Museum, Spring 2022, <https://www.noguchi.org/museum/exhibitions/view/no-monument-in-the-wake-of-the-japanese-american-incarceration/>.

representational works, such as Miyatake's and Nagatani's photographs, but also included abstract sculptures by Japanese Americans affected by incarceration.

As with several of the artists above, Takemoto's connection to Japanese American concentration camps is multigenerational and personal. Unlike these artists, however, Takemoto's *Looking for Jiro* introduces a queer line of history that was otherwise neglected.<sup>124</sup>

### **Performance, Queer Relationality, and Drag**

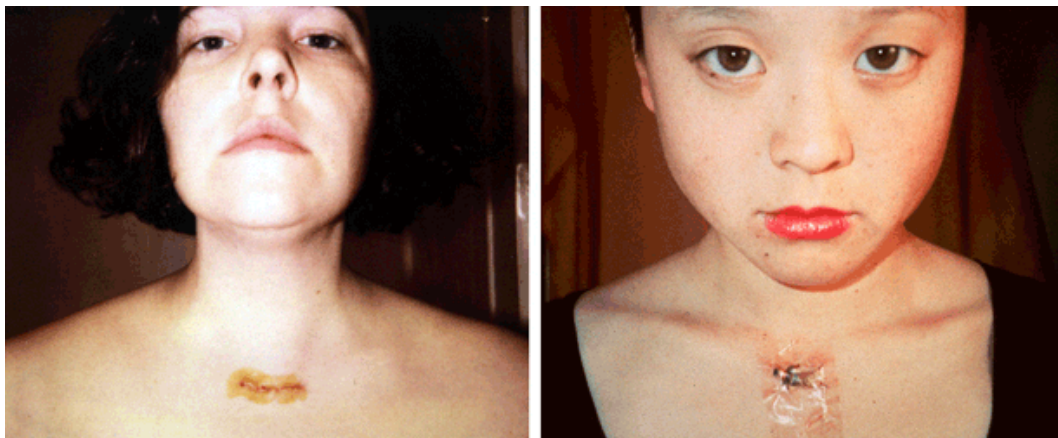
#### *Takemoto's Performance Art, 1990–2010s*

Takemoto's oeuvre demonstrates a sustained interest and growing expertise in the medium of performance. The artist began working with performance in the early 1990s and collaboration was a key aspect of their art. Takemoto, Angela Ellsworth, and Jennifer Parker performed together as Her/She Senses, a performance group they founded during their time together at Rutgers during graduate school. After Parker graduated, Takemoto and Ellsworth continued as a duo at Rutgers and then long distance as they moved to different parts of the United States. During this time, Ellsworth was diagnosed with Hodgkin's lymphoma and, as their partnership continued, Takemoto took on a deeply empathetic role; they experimented with materials to perform Ellsworth's experiences. In *Her/She Senses: Imag(in)ed Malady*

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<sup>124</sup> Maintaining a study in representational, experimental films, Takemoto continues their exploration of Japanese Americans in concentration camps with their project *Warning Shot* (2015), about queer Japanese American James H. Wakasa, who was shot and killed weeks before his release from Topaz.

(1993), Ellsworth documented their physical experiences with cancer and sent stacks of photographs to Takemoto, who would then attempt to model themselves as Ellsworth in the photographs (Figure 8). Photographs from *Imag(in)ed Malady* show Ellsworth's biopsy scar, which Takemoto emulated with "an eyebrow pencil, an office clip, a worry doll and scotch tape, and a live leech."<sup>125</sup> Collaboration and documentation were key for the progress and record of this project. This work also shows Takemoto's sustained interest in relationality and performance.



**Figure 8. Angela Ellsworth and TT Takemoto, *Her/She Senses: Imag(in)ed Malady* (1993). Images courtesy of TT Takemoto.**

What Takemoto does with Ellsworth resonates with their performance as Onuma. Both projects experiment with experimental methods of generating intimate interpersonal connections, but *Imag(in)ed Malady* was produced in real time with a person Takemoto knew, while *Looking for Jiro* is an instance of queer generational relationality. Following Carla Freccero's comment in a roundtable and in her writing

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<sup>125</sup> TT Takemoto, "Performativity and Difference: The Politics of Illness and Collaboration," *The Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society* 27, no. 1 (January 1997): 17.

about Zachary Drucker's *At Least You Know You Exist* (2011), Amelia Jones explains queer relationality as "a relationality that binds queers across temporal experience."<sup>126</sup> In the film, Drucker explores her relationship with trans elder Flawless Sabrina. Drucker's artwork is a dedication to their friend, acknowledging that Flawless Sabrina's life and experiences shaped Drucker's present. The film concludes with the statement "because of you I know I exist," which connects generations beyond present time.<sup>127</sup> Takemoto brings Onuma into the present and, simultaneously, Onuma's generation of gay Japanese Americans shapes Takemoto's experiences.

While *Her/She Senses* was performing, a key scholarly debate centered on the fleetingness of performance art and the role of documentation.<sup>128</sup> Describing the

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<sup>126</sup> Jones, *In between Subjects*, 87; Carolyn Dinshaw et al., "Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion," *GLQ* 13, no. 2–3 (2007): 187.

<sup>127</sup> Jones, *In between Subjects*, 87; Dinshaw et al., "Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion," 187.

<sup>128</sup> In 1980 Graduate studies Department of Performance Studies was co-founded at Tisch by Richard Schechner (theater) and Victor Turner (anthropology). Peggy Phelan joined the department in 1985. José Esteban Muñoz is also a notable person connected to the department. Phelan remembers the founding of the department, as a debate of terms: Amelia Jones, "Live Art in Art History: A Paradox?," in *The Cambridge Companion to Performance Studies*, ed. Tracy C. Davis, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 6; Peggy Phelan, "Introduction: The Ends of Performance," in *The Ends of Performance*, ed. Peggy Phelan and Jill Lane (New York: New York University Press, 1998). When the department was established Phelan suggested, "Their questions are about terms, theatricality, performance, and how they are applicable to different acts in different cultures." Phelan, 3. Schechner says that performance is getting more and more difficult to define and that thinking of performance as a continuum might be helpful. Still concerned with definitions though, Schechner stipulates in his regularly re-released text which was first published in 2002, "'Performance studies is "inter"—in between. It is intergenic, interdisciplinary, intercultural—and therefore inherently unstable. Performance studies resists or rejects definition.'" Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, Fourth edition (London ; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2020), 22 and 360.

ontology of performance, Peggy Phelan suggests that the live event of performance is how one must experience as such.<sup>129</sup> Thinking about the record of performance, Amelia Jones argues that documentation is a legitimate form of record; being present for the performance and experiencing it through archives are different encounters, but one should not be privileged over the other as more likely to convey the “truth.”<sup>130</sup> Phillip Auslander asserts that documentation is key to producing performance; Rebecca Schneider explicitly rejects Phelan’s characterization of performance as short-lived, arguing that it is a mode of conveying knowledge body to body.<sup>131</sup> Documentation is key in allowing performances to live on, grow anew, and eventually expand the bounds of the medium.<sup>132</sup> *Looking for Jiro* relies on documentation to

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<sup>129</sup> Responding to Rosalind Krauss’s suggestion that there is no original until there is a copy Phelan asks, “What then do we mean when we move from the behavior of the rehearsal room to the behavior of the performance?” Concerned by this fleeting moment, Phelan suggests that performance tries to access, that moment before the copy, or a space between mimicry and first behavior. Phelan, “Introduction: The Ends of Performance,” 9–10.

<sup>130</sup> Amelia Jones, “‘Presence’ in Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation,” *Art Journal* 56, no. 4 (December 1997): 11.

<sup>131</sup> Tancredi Gusman, “Between Evidence and Representation: A New Methodological Approach to the History of Performance Art and Its Documentation,” *Contemporary Theatre Review* 29, no. 4 (October 2, 2019): 443–45; Phelan, *Unmarked*, 146; Jones, “‘Presence’ in Absentia,” 11–18; Philip Auslander, “The Performativity of Performance Documentation,” *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 28, no. 3 (2006): 1–10, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4140006>; Rebecca Schneider, “Performance Remains,” *Performance Research* 6, no. 2 (January 2001): 100–108.

<sup>132</sup> The United States is where the formalization of the term “performance art began” but it quickly spread internationally. Later other terms arose such as body art, bodyworks, and live art. Gusman, “Between Evidence and Representation,” 441. For example, Amelia Jones uses “body art” rather than “performance art” to highlight the implication of the body which comes with (racism, sexism, class, etc.). Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject*.

create the filmformance and, as such, values it as a rich component of temporal dysregulation and a tool for queer historical imagining.

Continuing this focus on collaboration, in 2002 Takemoto completed a doctoral dissertation on artistic collaborations in performance art. The artist states: “I argue that one of the strengths of collaborative performance is its intimate and direct insistence on the materiality of bodies as the site of intersubjective identification and difference.”<sup>133</sup> Takemoto’s dissertation subjects were four pairs of collaborators: Jo Spence and Rosy Martin; Hannah Wilke and Selma Butter; Bob Flanagan and Sheree Rose; and Takemoto and Ellsworth. Later in the 2000s, Takemoto collaborated with Elizabeth Stephens to perform *Lusty Dusters* (2003), which was organized by Jennifer Parker of Her/She Senses.<sup>134</sup> Three years later, Takemoto and Parker performed for *Drawing Complaint: Memoirs of Björk-Geisha* (2006), which was inspired by a vignette Takemoto performed for Stephens and Annie Sprinkles’ theater show, *Love, Sex, Death, and Art*. *Drawing Complaint* exists through its sparse documentation, the costume ephemera, memory, and retelling of the artists, audience, and writers.<sup>135</sup>

Along with its quality of ephemerality, performance art has dynamic potential and can excavate documentations of the past. The archive in *Looking for Jiro* plays multiple and conflicting roles as it is both the impetus for the project, through

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<sup>133</sup> TT Takemoto, “Traumatic Repetition: Mimicry, Melancholia, Performance” (Rochester, 2002).

<sup>134</sup> TT Takemoto, “TT Takemoto - Lusty Dusters,” accessed February 6, 2023, <https://www.ttakemoto.com/lustydusters/index.html>; Elizabeth Stephens, “Elizabeth Stephens Performance,” Art Sites UCSC, accessed February 6, 2023, [http://artsites.ucsc.edu/faculty/stephens/performance\\_index.html](http://artsites.ucsc.edu/faculty/stephens/performance_index.html).

<sup>135</sup> Takemoto, interview, February 6, 2023.

Onuma's sparse records, and the site of violent exclusion through the propaganda. Without an inclusive archive like the Gay Lesbian Bisexual Transgender Historical Society in San Francisco, we may not have a trace of Onuma at all. At the same time, propaganda videos like *A Challenge to Democracy*, which frame racist violence as ordinary dealings, literally replay the messaging of World War II's racism over and over again. The archive allows both Jiro Onuma and *A Challenge to Democracy* to bleed into the present. In the performance, Takemoto embodies both of these iterations of the archive and also makes use of more removed materials relating to visual culture, such as queer icon Madonna's popular music and early-twentieth-century bodybuilding, though both of these forms carry queer connotations. In the trajectory of her studies, Jones's concerns move from documentation of performance to the performing body's role as a repository of memory.<sup>136</sup> Jones says, "some of the most interesting artists today are those who crisscross the live and the archival, troubling our tendency to think of the archive as something final and fixed . . . The body itself is an archive. The archive can be reanimated in future artworks and performances."<sup>137</sup> Performative rethinking of the archive can be creative and imaginative and does not need to be beholden to ideological versions of the archive. In a more recent book, Jones mobilizes her own memories as "interpretive rupture[s]" within an academically genealogical text.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Amelia Jones, Swen Steinhäuser, and Neil Macdonald, "Performative Afterlife: An Interview with Amelia Jones," *Parallax* 24, no. 1 (January 2, 2018): 11–18.

<sup>137</sup> Jones, Steinhäuser, and Macdonald, 11.

<sup>138</sup> Jones, *In between Subjects*, xv.



The founder of PERFORMA, RoseLee Goldberg, sees the expansiveness of performance art in the breadth of material and the potential of making information, ideas, and subjects more accessible.<sup>139</sup> I show later in this chapter how access in *Looking for Jiro* comes through recognizability. Familiar materials, such as Madonna's music, invite viewers to think about histories of which they may otherwise be unaware or uncritical.<sup>140</sup> I argue that *Looking for Jiro* dislodges the previous suturing of the music and introduces a new connection through its reframing.

### *Drag Performance*

Takemoto's performances as Björk-Geisha and Jiro Onuma both use drag, but Takemoto's relationship to each persona varies greatly.<sup>141</sup> With the Björk-Geisha,

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<sup>139</sup> "These new areas of study are shifting understandings of 'the live' as a significant visual art form, emphasizing, among other facets: the ways in which performance allows for the layering of ideas and commentary, to reflect the multi-tasking ethos of our times; how it incorporated fast-paced new technologies that are available to most; and its potential for reaching ever broader audiences as a result of interactive engagement and communal viewing experience that are in this work's very nature." RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance Now* (London; New York: Thames & Hudson, 2018), 7.

<sup>140</sup> Revisiting past engagements and reliant on documentation and history, Oriana Fox writes of her performance event remaking feminist performance art from the 1960s-1990s, *Once More with Feeling*, at the Tate Modern in 2009. For example, Fox remade Judy Chicago's infamous piece *Cock and Cunt Play* (1972) from Womanhouse. The original parody ends in a spoof of domestic violence, but Fox took the historical performance and shifted the conversation, remaking the original so that it ended in orgasmic pleasure. Oriana Fox, "Once More with Feeling: An Abbreviated History of Feminist Performance Art," *Feminist Review*, no. 96 (2010): 116, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40928099>.

<sup>141</sup> In this chapter drag performance is understood as play with embodiments of gender signifiers. Monica Baroni defines drag as "ironically playing up imitations of

Takemoto performs José Esteban Muñoz's disidentification, "'recycling and rethinking' dominant cultural representations and transforming them into modes of resistance."<sup>142</sup> Takemoto recalls, "I envisioned the character of Björk-Geisha as an 'Orientalist faux queen' to the extent that it involved performing as a female Icelandic Pop icon dressed up as a Japanese geisha."<sup>143</sup> As a genderqueer Japanese American, Takemoto describes how embodying this persona was personally challenging:

For me, performing Björk-Geisha required putting on yellowface by applying white geisha makeup. The act of covering my genderqueer self in order to embody this exaggerated stereotype of Asian femininity was more painful than I had imagined it would be. Unlike other personas that I have taken on for the sake of performance art, this role tapped into my deepest personal struggles with Asian femininity and forced me to recall many grim moments of racial and sexual misrecognition.<sup>144</sup>

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the opposite sex, drag is a complex, diversified phenomenon that defies a single, all-encompassing definition." I agree with Baroni's emphasis on the lack of a single description of drag but I take issue with her "opposite sex" limitation because it suggests binary gender identification of the performer. Monica Baroni, "Drag," in *Routledge International Encyclopedia of Queer Culture*, ed. David A. Gerstner, International Encyclopedia of Queer Culture (London: Routledge, 2006), 191. Bell hooks and Judith Butler take distinctly different approaches to discussions of drag culture. Responding to Jennie Livingston's film on house ball culture, *Paris is Burning* (1990), hooks is deeply concerned by Livingston's avoidance of her own positionality as a white woman in relation to drag culture of LGBT black and brown people. Hooks says, "in many ways the film was a graphic documentary portrait of the way in which colonized black people . . . worship at the shrine of whiteness." bell hooks, "Is Paris Burning?," in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992), 149. Although I agree with hooks' critique of the film, she characterizes drag in a limited way. Butler takes a different approach to drag, concerned by reductive feminist critiques of drag as misogynistic, Butler says that "*In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency.*"<sup>141</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 175. Emphasis original.

<sup>142</sup> Takemoto, "Drawing Complaint: Orientalism, Disidentification, Performance," 99; Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 31.

<sup>143</sup> Takemoto, "Drawing Complaint: Orientalism, Disidentification, Performance," 99.

<sup>144</sup> Takemoto, 102.

Takemoto's descriptions of their performances highlight the intertwining of race and gender within their art-making practice. Their works demonstrate the matrix of identities called upon with drag performance and the deeply intimate relationship performers can have to their performed identities.

While the Björk-Geisha enacts a hyper-femme drag, *Looking for Jiro* is described as a “drag king performance” by Takemoto and in descriptions of the artwork.<sup>145</sup> In short, drag king performance challenges established notions of essentialized masculinity.<sup>146</sup> J. Jack Halberstam describes a drag king as “a performer who pinpoints and exploits the (often obscured) theatricality of masculinity.”<sup>147</sup> In part reflecting the era, some definitions suggest binary language for drag

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<sup>145</sup> Takemoto, “Looking for Jiro and Gentleman’s Gaman,” 20; Lacey Jane Roberts, “Camp in the Camps,” *Hyphen Magazine*, May 16, 2012, <https://hyphenmagazine.com/magazine/issue-25-generation-spring-2012/camp-camps>; “Camp Resistance: Tina Takemoto’s Video Looking for Jiro Explores the Queer Experience during Japanese Internment,” *The Art Newspaper*, June 3, 2021, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2021/06/03/camp-resistance-tina-takemotos-video-looking-for-jiro-explores-the-queer-experience-during-japanese-internment>; “After Hope: Videos of Resistance,” *After Hope: Videos of Resistance*, accessed February 8, 2023, <http://www.caareviews.org/reviews/3880>.

<sup>146</sup> Subverting essentialized gender is key for several scholars writing about drag. See Marlon M. Bailey, *Butch Queens up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit*, *Triangulations: Lesbian / Gay/Queer Theater/Drama/Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 37; Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 174; Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body*, 6. pr, *Theory out of Bounds 2* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 226–27; Jennifer Doyle, “Tricks of the Trade: Pop Art/Pop Sex,” in *Pop out: Queer Warhol [Papers of a Conference ... Organized at Duke University, Durham, NC in January 1993 Called “Re-Reading Warhol”]*, ed. Jennifer Doyle, Jonathan Flatley, and José Esteban Muñoz, 2. printing, Series Q (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 204.

<sup>147</sup> Jack Halberstam, “Mackdaddy, Superfly, Rapper: Gender, Race, and Masculinity in the Drag King Scene,” *Social Text*, no. 52/53 (1997): 104.

performance.<sup>148</sup> Kathryn Rosenfeld also describes drag king performance as a challenge to mainstream maleness: “By performing maleness, drag kings expand and redraw the definitional boundaries of the male, interested with the cultural power of mainstream males, and simultaneously transfer some of this power to themselves as queer women.”<sup>149</sup> The concept of performing maleness often reads as implying heterosexual maleness; countering that tendency, I suggest that Takemoto’s performance as Onuma is a nonbinary drag performance.<sup>150</sup> To an extent, drag performance relies on the perceived difference of the performer. This is complicated when the performer potentially identifies more with the person they are performing

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<sup>148</sup> Halberstam nods to a drag binary in their definition in *Female Masculinity*: ““A drag king is a female (usually) who dresses up in recognizably male costume and performs theatrically in that costume. . . . the drag king performs masculinity (often parodically) and makes the exposure of the theatricality of masculinity into the mainstay of her act.” Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 232. For other examples see Gabriele Griffin, “Drag King,” in *A Dictionary of Gender Studies*, 1st ed. (Oxford University Press, 2017); Kerryn Drysdale, “When Scenes Fade: Methodological Lessons from Sydney’s Drag King Culture,” *Cultural Studies* 29, no. 3 (May 4, 2015): 345–62. The *Drag King Anthology* addresses this problematic aiming “to complicate the easy understanding of drag kings as “female-to-male” performers or as simple women doing drag.” Donna Jean Troka, Jean Bobby Noble, and Kathleen Lebesco, “Introduction [to the Drag King Anthology],” *Journal of Homosexuality* 43, no. 3–4 (April 1, 2003): 1.

<sup>149</sup> Kathryn Rosenfeld, “Drag King Magic: Performing/Becoming the Other,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 43, no. 3–4 (April 1, 2003): 201.

<sup>150</sup> Derek Conrad Murray thinks alongside Richard’s Dyer writing on camp to discuss Kalup Linzy’s performances and their relationship to drag. “The crossing over and remixing of identities, combined with racial fluidity, is arguably more about creating a world defined by a quality of whimsical strangeness, than by a desire to make a coherent political statement about gay rights.” Derek Conrad Murray, “We’re All Kalup’s Churen,” in *Queering Post-Black Art: Artists Transforming African-American Identity after Civil Rights* (United Kingdom: I.B.Tauris, 2015), 179–80; Richard Dyer, *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representations*, 2. ed (London: Routledge, 2002).

than the identities society places on them. For Takemoto, performing Jiro Onuma was a combination of research and pleasure. They recall:

The experience of performing as Jiro was one that I found not only enjoyable, but it was moving and important to me. This was especially true in light of the previous work I had done performing as Björk-Geisha, an exaggerated faux-queen representation of Asian femininity that ended up being an emotionally debilitating experience for me. As a genderqueer person who also identifies more with queer masculinity, performing as Jiro spoke to my own positionality and desires.<sup>151</sup>

Jiro Onuma's imagined desires lead the unlikely group of personas that Takemoto embodies through mimicked gestures and expressions in the artist's performance of Onuma.

### *Bread and Brawn*

In *Looking for Jiro*, when Takemoto as Onuma shifts into the second action of the performance, from dancing to getting down to the business of baking bread, as they sift flour, the banging on the side of the sifter reverberates audibly. The artwork toggles between Onuma preparing the bread for baking—kneading, rolling, flipping, folding—and concentration camp footage—Japanese Americans lining up for meals, serving food in the mess hall, 442<sup>nd</sup> regiment training, and people eating. At the end of this back-and-forth montage, the film portion begins to have clear disruptive edits, rupturing and making a mess of the US propaganda. The clip of an elderly man eating a spoonful of soup is shown in its original form and then reversed to look like he is spitting out the food. Next, we see Japanese American incarcerated person John

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<sup>151</sup> Takemoto, interview, April 14, 2021.

Iyamuri, who worked in the laundry. Takemoto's attire for their performance as Onuma reflects Iyamuri's simple uniform, a hat and short-sleeved white shirt. We see him pouring laundry from a bucket into a huge basin; he is young, attractive, and smiling. As he pours, the footage is edited from the original clip, zooming in on his bicep (Figure 9).



**Figure 9. TT Takemoto, *Looking for Jiro* (2011). Film still of bicep captured by the author. Image courtesy of the artist.**

These deceptively simple edits disrupt the hegemonic narratives of US history that are perpetuated by visual-culture propaganda. In the original footage of *A Challenge to Democracy*, Iyamuri's moment on screen is flanked by other concentration camp workers and a chipper narrator, who frames the subjects depicted as being pleased to do their jobs and fitting within the camp order. With Takemoto's edits, Iyamuri's image begins as he was depicted in the original 1944 film to project a sanitized version of Japanese American incarceration. But, in *Looking for Jiro*,

Iyamuri becomes the embodiment and object of queer desire.<sup>152</sup> This move queers the US government’s innocuous yet destructive framing of concentration camp culture and, at the same time, it is playful and light, a kind of teasing. Vivian Huang points out that “Takemoto’s drag performance of Onuma . . . inhabits the messiness of queer and Asian American historiography, gesturing to the difficulty of its surfacing in dominant historicism.”<sup>153</sup> Even historical, supposedly fixed, records of the past are slippery, dynamic, and can carry the vestiges of negligence. The original material was built through careful selection that resulted in the erasure of innumerable identities and perspectives that were blatantly present. In one simple example, 20,000 people answered “no” to the two key items on the loyalty questionnaire; this suggests that people were not simply sitting by, complacent and content.<sup>154</sup> Playful queering of the footage is an important reclamation of the original material.

What begins as a thought bubble occupied by Sandow and Iyamuri—a space dedicated to visualizing inner thoughts—becomes Onuma as envisaged in Takemoto’s performance. Takemoto places the shaped dough into their imaginary oven. As the bread bakes, Sandow’s chiseled physique fills the background. The bodybuilder stretches to show his sculpted, rippling muscles and his flexed buttocks. As Sandow performs his brawn on screen, the loaf finishes baking, and Takemoto smears Crisco

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<sup>152</sup> This scene is immediately followed by a bell ringing, with Madonna’s lyrics about a telephone ringing, and the mountain in the background eventually gets photographed with the bicep. After that, the soldier who was ominously standing guard, now mirrors himself and is edited to nod his head along with Madonna lyrics, “The lights are on but no one is home,” poking fun at the soldier.

<sup>153</sup> Huang, “Sparkling Joy, Serving Mess,” 1388.

<sup>154</sup> “Questions 27 and 28 | Densho Encyclopedia.”

on their arms as lubrication to smoothly fist the bread. In fisting the loaf, the bread becomes biceps that are an intentionally failed attempt at mimicking Sandow's muscles *and* at anal fisting (see Figure 5). All the while, extending the queering of source materials, Madonna's voice continues to project in a lower register, a form of aural drag performance. She croons: "I can't keep on waiting for you. I know that you're still hesitating. Don't cry for me, 'cause I'll find my way. You'll wake up one day. But it will be too late."

### **Queer Methods for Performing Jiro Onuma**

"Although I am a great admirer of dance, I'm actually a terrible dancer. So my attempt to follow Madonna's dance moves is really an exercise in hope and failure."

—TT Takemoto<sup>155</sup>

#### *Divisive Structure in "Hung Up"*

Biceps in place, Takemoto as Onuma tries out Sandow's classic muscleman moves (Figure 10). Quickly though, they shift into another borrowed performance drawing from Madonna's "Hung Up" (2005). The original music video moves back and forth between Madonna dancing in an empty dance studio to people dancing together on the street. Most of the performers have brown or black skin, contrasting with Madonna's white skin. The juxtaposition of the two spaces creates tension

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<sup>155</sup> Takemoto cited in Roberts, "Online Exclusive: Looking for Jiro | Hyphen Magazine."



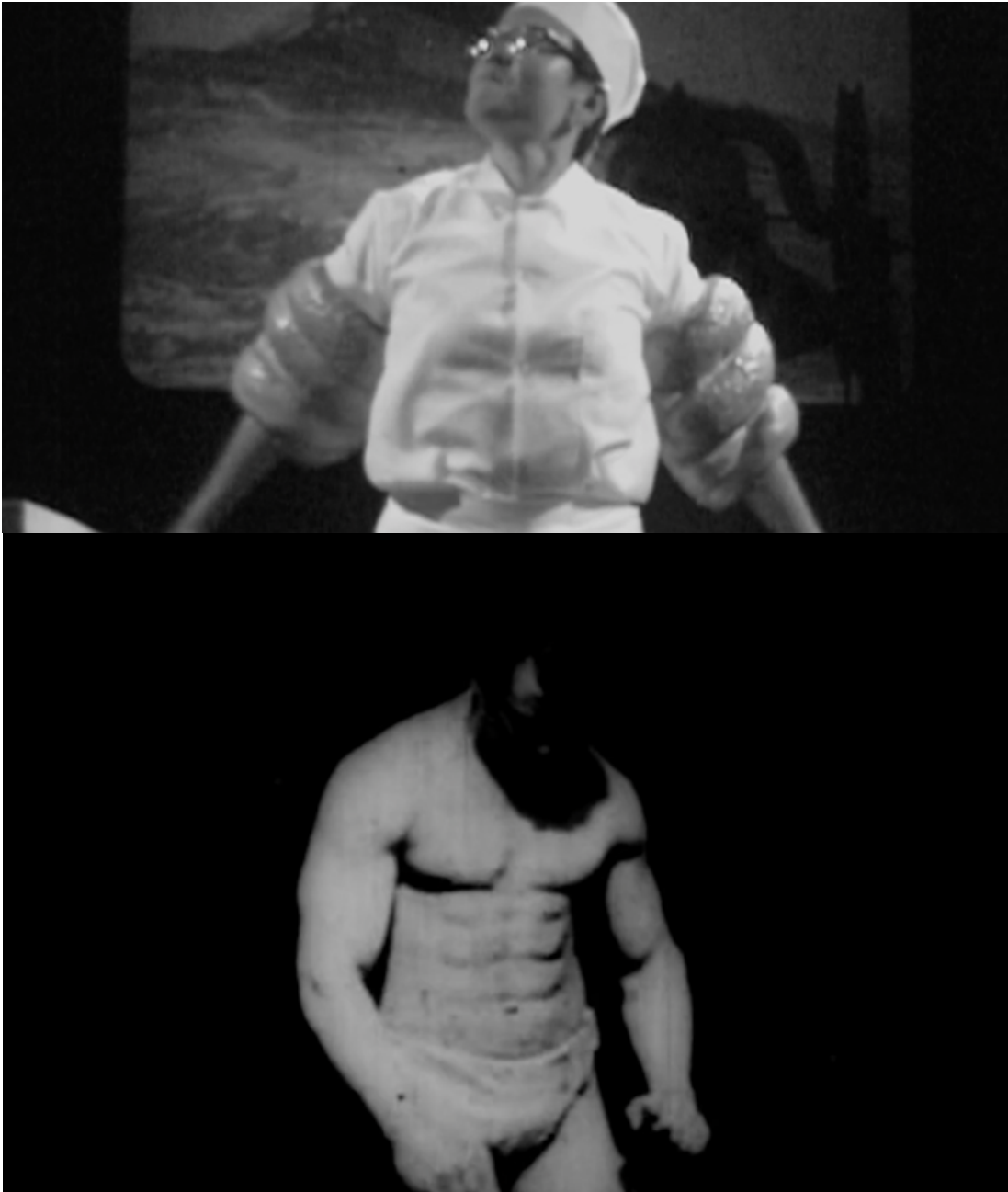
between Madonna's isolated, culturally revered body and the unnamed people. As "Hung Up" progresses, Madonna's dance moves proceed from ballet to a hip-hop style. The music video culminates in a dance club—lights flashing, Madonna glowing—with the people from the street filling the space surrounding her. Madonna is seen by many as a gay icon, but at the same time, a foundation of her accomplishments is reverently appropriative at best and exploitative at worst.<sup>156</sup> In her video for the hit song "Vogue" (1990) she uses and popularizes the dance style of the same name based in house ball culture created by Black and Brown queer people who are often economically marginalized. Madonna takes advantage of Black, Latinx, queer community-making and in doing so props up her own white, celebrated image. This pattern continues in "Hung Up."<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> See more on controversy surrounding Madonna in bell hooks, "Madonna," in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992); Jones, *In Between Subjects*, 19.

<sup>157</sup> Madonna is no stranger to appropriating dance culture. Fifteen years prior to "Hung Up," in 1990 her hit music video and song "Vogue" was released the same year as Jenny Livingston's noted documentary, *Paris is Burning* (1990) about house balls in New York City. Livingston's film was named for a famous house ball hosted by Paris Dupree, one of the film's participants. The ball performers were predominately gay and transgender, Black and Latinx people. These dancers are the inventors of voguing which Livingston put into popular consciousness and Madonna made globally famous. Putting it succinctly at the time, Jim Farber, a film critic for *Mother Jones*, said in his review of Livingston's film, that Madonna's vogue was "poached for the masses." J. Farber, "Clothes Make the Man," *Mother Jones* 16, no. 2 (April 3, 1991): 75, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=9104290733&site=ehost-live>.

Nodding to Muñoz, E Patrick Johnson emphasizes the importance of house balls as sites where "the black gay man engages in 'disidentification' by working on and against impressive forces while at the same time remaining in the system." Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness*, 84; hooks, "Is Paris Burning?"; hooks, "Madonna"; Jones, *In between Subjects*; Judith Butler, "Gender Is Burning: Questions of Appropriation



**Figure 10. TT Takemoto, *Looking for Jiro* (2011). Film stills of Takemoto's (top) and Sandow's (bottom) flexing stances captured by the author. Images courtesy of the artist.**

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and Subversion,” in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 1993). [see my *In Between Subjects* on critiques of Madonna and Butler’s appropriation also]

The structure of *Looking for Jiro* reflects Madonna's divisive arrangement, switching between the isolated performance of Onuma and selected scenes from the concentration camps. Although the patterns are similar, the implications are very different. Where Madonna's juxtaposition is stark, even as she moves into the same venue as the people from the street, Takemoto presents their own heritage. Although Takemoto never enters their body into the historic film excerpts, the imagery from the camps is projected behind and synced with their bread-making performance. Therefore, within Takemoto's insertion of themselves into the filmformance format, rather than the division of race, we see Takemoto staking a claim in history and situating themselves in relation to an important figure from history. *Looking for Jiro's* use of "Hung Up" investigates Madonna's cultural appropriation.

Prosthetic biceps secured and tested, the film component of *Looking for Jiro* cuts to a clip of Madonna's dancers in a nondescript Asian café. The café has a counter and kitchen in the back, with tables and chairs flanking the center of the room, serving as a stage. The footage is grainy, but it is clear that the space is decorated with paraphernalia associated with Asian cultures—several lanterns hang from the ceiling, there is a dragon-shaped lamp, and menus and signs are plastered all over the walls. In the original music video, one of the dancers grabs a large raw fish and uses it as a sword. In the clips excerpted for *Looking for Jiro*, an Asian woman dressed in a schoolgirl's uniform joins the quartet of dancers, all performing Madonna's dance together. In an interview, Takemoto contrasts seeing documentation of the live performance of "Hung Up" on stage with the music video: "Even in the

music video that shows Madonna engaging with all the richness of the city, when it gets to the quote 'Asian restaurant scene,' it becomes a mashup of Asian stereotypes.’<sup>158</sup>

Within *Looking for Jiro*, Madonna’s Asian diner scene is interspersed among footage of Takemoto’s ultimate performance as Onuma and more scenes from camp propaganda. After methodically preparing the space throughout the film—making the dough, baking the bread, and affixing the loaves to their arms—the moment of donning the biceps is drawn out and replayed, slowly and deliberately (Figure 11). These edits of the performance make the parody of anal fisting explicit. The accompanying camp footage also suggests fisting and Takemoto’s speculative imagining of Onuma’s desire for bottoms—a train zooms through a tunnel, soldiers crawl through a chain of low fences, and Sandow actively flexes his buttocks. These clips play faster and faster until the climax of the artwork. I contend that the filmformance’s pairing edited clips and Takemoto’s actions insist on an anal fisting interpretation. In doing so, the film is a queer undermining of the visual culture source’s original propaganda and a claiming of a gay sex space for Onuma.

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<sup>158</sup> Takemoto, interview, April 14, 2021.



**Figure 11. TT Takemoto, *Looking for Jiro* (2011). Film still of Takemoto dancing as Onuma captured by the author. Image courtesy of the artist.**

In the original clips of “Hung Up,” which Takemoto excerpts for *Looking for Jiro* to back their performance, at the end of their synchronized mimicking of Madonna’s dance, the dancers in the Asian café break off at the very last second with their own unique moves. The dancer in the center produces a martial arts kick and then the music video cuts away, back to the city. The restaurant worker’s kick is not performed by Madonna and is his own act within the music video choreography. As Takemoto as Onuma dances along with the café dancers projected behind them, they also perform the kick. Instead of cutting away, the camera stays on Takemoto as Onuma for a beat, as they hold the kick pose for an extended duration. Unsteady, they waiver slightly, leg extended midair, but Takemoto holds their stance. This is the end of the artwork.

## *Queer Failure and Queer Time*

In *Looking for Jiro* the mash-up of characters Takemoto performs are all queerly failed impersonations intentionally creating space for exploring Onuma. In the previous pages, I have shown that Takemoto's queer performance strategies draw upon historically disparate visual culture embodied in different personas. In the following section, I suggest that the imperfect performance of these personas and the adaptation of their idiosyncrasy are where Takemoto makes space for Jiro Onuma in history.

In his seminal text, *The Queer Art of Failure*, J. Jack Halberstam "dismantles the logics of success and failure with which we currently live," rooted in rejection of capitalism and heteronormativity.<sup>159</sup> Several scholars, including Takemoto, take up queer failure as a productive mode of intentionally rejecting various norms and pressures of so-called success.<sup>160</sup> Incongruencies persist in queer performances of failure. From a scholarly perspective, Takemoto writes of the dynamic quality of queer failure, discussing the trajectory of Xandra Ibarra's character La Chica Boom. The performance audience continually failed to understand or acknowledge La Chica

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<sup>159</sup> Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*.

<sup>160</sup> Roberts, "Online Exclusive: Looking for Jiro | Hyphen Magazine." Muñoz, writes of Bustamante's inspiration, Jack Smith's art practice alongside analysis of performances by Dynasty Handbag and Kalup Linzy, the latter two influence Takemoto's work. Describing Linzy's performance in *Members Only* (2008), Muñoz notes that despite Linzy's "tall and formidable presence," in the wake of performers such as Vaginal Davis, Linzy "performs the vulnerable and sometimes sassy little lady." José Esteban Muñoz, "After Jack: Queer Failure, Queer Virtuosity," in *Cruising Utopia, 10th Anniversary Edition* (New York University Press, 2020), 169–81..

Boom's "[interrogation of] overtly sexualized racial tropes," so the artist changed their performance, shedding their skin in *Ecdysis: The Molting of a Cucarachica (Swimming Pool)* (2014).<sup>161</sup> Takemoto writes, "Ibarra's experience attests to the precarity of queer failure and the psychic exhaustion that accompanies the embodiment of racial and sexual abjection."<sup>162</sup> Erin Kaplan also describes Ibarra's experience and the evolution of their artworks: "Ibarra's 'failure' creates a space for what Muñoz calls 'a kernel of possibility,' which could create the potentiality for a queer utopian future. Ibarra does not want to make us comfortable; she does not want to make it easy—she wants to make us think."<sup>163</sup> Also noting the prodigious potential of queer failure, Alpesh Patel brings to our attention the Western-centric views on failure; stemming from "queer failure," Patel focuses on the productive side of failure.<sup>164</sup> In Takemoto's satirical performance as Madonna, Iyamuri, Sandow, and the café dancers, imperfection is embraced to create that "kernel of possibility."<sup>165</sup> Although the notion of possibility is future facing, Takemoto's performances reach

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<sup>161</sup> Takemoto, "Queer Art / Queer Failure," 88.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>163</sup> Erin Kaplan, "La Chica Boom and the Pedagogy of Queer Failure," *Theatre Topics* 30, no. 2 (2020): 95; Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 183.

<sup>164</sup> Patel, *Productive Failure*, xv. Queer studies as a discipline has also failed to deeply and extensively grapple with racial privilege, fat phobia, and disability studies. Johnson, "'Quare' Studies, or (Almost) Everything I Know about Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother," 95; Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz, "What's Queer about Queer Studies Now?"; Francis Ray White, "Fucking Failures: The Future of Fat Sex," *Sexualities* 19, no. 8 (December 2016): 962–79; Merri Lisa Johnson, "Bad Romance: A Crip Feminist Critique of Queer Failure," *Hypatia* 30, no. 1 (2015): 251–67, <http://www.jstor.org/oca.ucsc.edu/stable/24542070>.

<sup>165</sup> Kaplan, "La Chica Boom and the Pedagogy of Queer Failure," 95; Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 183.

back and grab signifiers from visual histories to reform them for reparative and future-facing approaches to visual history.

In 2013, two years after Takemoto made *Looking for Jiro*, they gave a talk titled “The Precarity of Queer Failure: From Orientalism to Incarceration” at the Center for the Study of Sexual Culture at the University of California, Berkeley.<sup>166</sup> The talk included analysis of queer failure in regard to *Memoirs of Björk-Geisha* and *Looking for Jiro*. A decade later in an interview in 2023, Takemoto reflects:

There were a lot of white queer artists who were embracing this idea of queer failure, and there are different stakes involved when queers of color also fail. I was thinking about the complexities of what it means to fail and who has the opportunity or "luxury" to fail. Often when queers of color try to use failure as a strategy of resistance, it doesn't quite register with certain white audiences who are eager to enjoy the spectacle of seeing folks of color "fail" without registering the critical aspect.<sup>167</sup>

Takemoto’s concern with queer failure extends from sexuality and gender into race and a concern that queer failure is a critical opportunity that is only extended to some. When the anal-fisting parody slows and repeats over again, Takemoto insists on understanding. The only conventional failure they want to facilitate in *Looking for Jiro* is the failure of history to stay alive and dynamic, rather than existing as fixed and unmoving. The other failures in the work, the queer failures, are failures to fit into molds that are not made for Onuma or Takemoto. They are failures to perfectly

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<sup>166</sup> TT Takemoto, “The Precarity of Queer Failure: From Orientalism to Incarceration: Center for the Study of Sexual Culture” (Center for the Study of Sexual Culture, 2013), <https://cssc.berkeley.edu/events/event/the-precarity-of-queer-failure-from-orientalism-to-incarceration/>.

<sup>167</sup> Takemoto, interview, July 12, 2023.



impersonate in order to create fissures in our understanding of history and to make room for individuals like Onuma.

Judith Butler reminds us that gender performance comes from reiteration; queer failure also connects to repetition and practice.<sup>168</sup> In preparing to perform *Looking for Jiro*, Takemoto made fifteen loaves of bread to determine how to shove their arms through the loaves and then wear them as prosthetic muscles. In the first performance, they were freshly baked loaves, then Takemoto tried several other methods. Once they found the best strategy (a cardboard core wrapped in foil and Crisco for baking), they used shellac to hold them together.<sup>169</sup> A theme in the history of Takemoto's artworks is practice and failure. They are drawn to the practice aspect of Madonna's performance in "Hung Up" and their performance of Onuma is a mashed-up failure of embodiment.<sup>170</sup> This approach expands beyond their embodied performances, into the performance of failure through process.

In two work-in-progress experimental films initiated in 2020, Takemoto takes up Samuel Beckett's final poem, which was published posthumously. Dedicated to Takemoto's mentor, Douglas Crimp (who had passed away the previous year, in 2019), *Stirrings Still (for D.C.), Part I and Part II* (2020) harkens back to Takemoto's

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<sup>168</sup> Judith Butler, "Critically Queer," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1, no. 1 (November 1, 1993): 22.

<sup>169</sup> Takemoto, interview, April 14, 2021.

<sup>170</sup> Takemoto explains practice in "Hung Up," "Madonna's video is interesting because the concept of it is about her practicing. It starts off as she's practicing in the studio, then she goes out into the street, and then she is sort of encountering all these different folks who are also doing different kinds of dance, or movement, in relation to her lyrics." Takemoto.

graduate school performances (Figure 12).<sup>171</sup> They would practice poems “that were challenging to recite” and would respond to the punctuation of the poems with physical actions: “Every time there was a comma, I’d step onto or off of a stool. And then when there was a colon, I would lift one toe, and then if it was a period, I’d lift another toe. If I messed up, I would start over.”<sup>172</sup> Continuing this process-focused method of making with *Stirrings Still*, Takemoto enacts a similar process but, in this case, with typing. Takemoto characterizes this as a grieving piece, in honor of Crimp. With these works the artist revises their typing, stopping, and starting over at every detected mistake until they reach the end of the passage. For the film documentation, the sepia-tinted background color fades from light to dark. Takemoto says, “I just kept typing it and starting over until I was able to get through the first full paragraph.”<sup>173</sup> Transparency of practice and process is inherent in these artworks. In *Looking for Jiro*, Takemoto performs as Onuma, embracing failure as a component to ward off any suggestion of simulacra. The significance is to make space for imagining, and I suggest that the parodic approach utilizing failure helps others access that space of imagination.

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<sup>171</sup> TT Takemoto and Marc Siegel, “For Douglas Crimp,” *Art Journal* 79, no. 3 (July 2, 2020): 8–9.

<sup>172</sup> Takemoto, interview, April 14, 2021.

<sup>173</sup> Takemoto, 14.

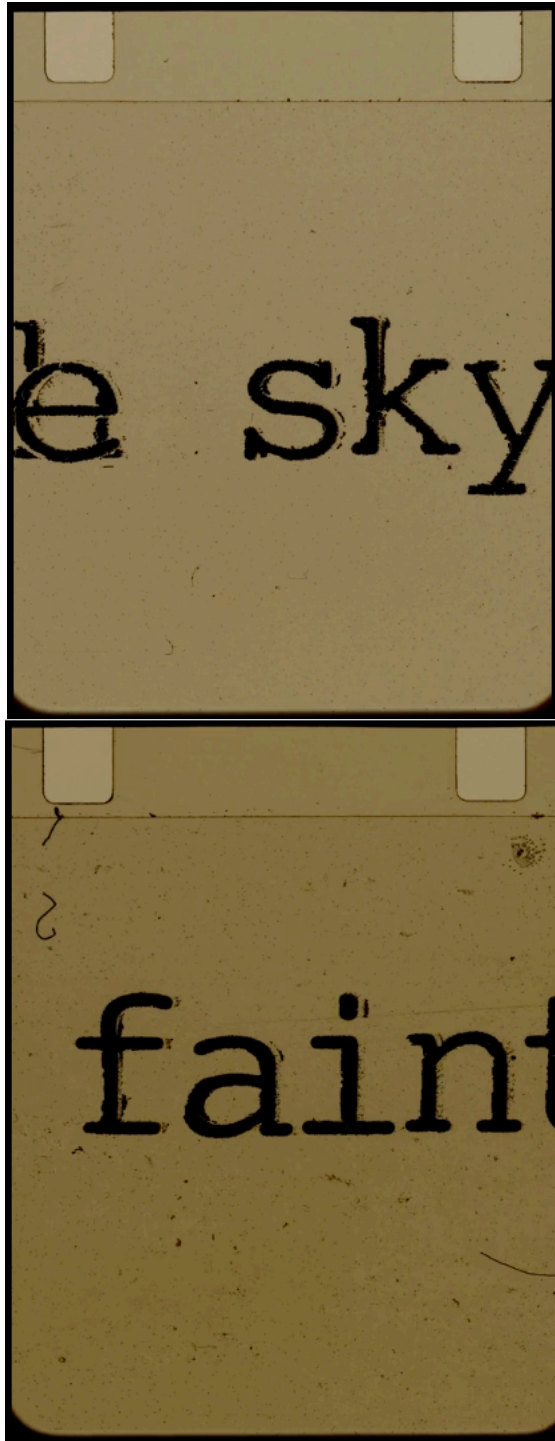


Figure 12. TT Takemoto, *Stirrings (for D.C.)*, work-in-progress. Film stills captured by the author. Image courtesy of the artist.

Time in the performance of *Looking for Jiro* is nebulous and layered. The artist is performing a person from history, but that person is directly connected to Takemoto's paternal lineage, which informs their lived experience in the present. The performed subject, Jiro Onuma, is enacted by someone in the present, but the character embodies references to Onuma's life (himself, John Iyamuri, and Earl Sandow) and to the future (Takemoto, Madonna, and the Asian café dancers). I suggest that, as these figures are brought together in one incarnation, they carry along traces of their time stamps, troubling the linearity and stability of past, present, and future.

Kara Keeling brings together the tensions of thinking through queer temporality in her book *Queer Times, Black Futures*. Concerned by rhetoric that is overly reliant on the future, Keeling argues, "the temporal logics undergirding this project as consistent with the political praxes that insist upon presently impossible possibilities issues from collectively forged racial imaginations such as 'liberation' or the coexistence of 'another world' within the presently perceptible one."<sup>174</sup> Analyzing works such as *Looking for Langston*, Keeling challenges the persistent push toward the future and asks about the present.<sup>175</sup>

Thinking about the flow of time, Muñoz suggests, "queerness's time is a stepping out of the linearity of straight time . . . Queerness's ecstatic and horizontal

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<sup>174</sup> Kara Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 85.

<sup>175</sup> Keeling, 85.

temporality is a path and a movement to a greater openness to the world.”<sup>176</sup> As Keeling reflects, questioning if the future and present have to exist as a binary, Muñoz proposes “an anticipatory illumination of a queer world, a sign of an actually existing queer reality, a kernel of political possibility within a stultifying heterosexual present.”<sup>177</sup> Using moments of disruption to describe queer time in films, Halberstam describes a “rewind mode” when the viewer of a film sees a transgender character, realizes they are transgender, and literally rewinds a film to rewatch and shift their initial understandings.<sup>178</sup>

In this dissertation, heterosexual or normative time is linear, unwavering, and offers a narrow narrative of history and limited visions of the future. In contrast, queer time is an asynchronous matrix, linking unlikely histories, presents, and futures. I argue that by straddling different moments in history and bringing them together, Takemoto’s performance of Onuma shakes loose the temporal structures that concern these thinkers and that suggest possible portals for Onuma to experience unanchored time beyond his corporeal existence.

### **Imagining Others**

Madonna, Iyamuri, Sandow, and the café dancers are enacted in different ways throughout *Looking for Jiro*. Iyamuri, Sandow, and the dancers are all reproduced on screen, edited to feature their potential for historical dysregulation and

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<sup>176</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 25.

<sup>177</sup> Muñoz, 49.

<sup>178</sup> Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 78.

queerness. In service of the same goal, their mannerisms and select physical features are appropriated on stage in Takemoto's performance. In performing Onuma, Takemoto states that the best way to learn and do research was to try to act out Onuma.<sup>179</sup> I argue that, as Takemoto performs Onuma, they merge and mix different personas, trying on these identities and their combinations rather than seamlessly embodying them.

In *Enacting Others*, Cherise Smith brings together artists who use performance to cross boundaries of race, gender, sexuality, age, and class, "enacting identifications other than their own."<sup>180</sup> Smith shows that artists Eleanor Antin, Nikki S. Lee, Adrian Piper, and Anna Deavere Smith occupy their own bodies in their performances with visual markers and mannerisms that connect to inherent identity-forming signals. When performing others, the artists attempt to dislodge themselves or layer their performance upon their inherent identities; "their bodies are the objects that disrupt the smooth running of the ideological cogs."<sup>181</sup> For example, Piper's *The Mythic Being: I Am the Locus #1-5* (1975) shows Piper dressed in her young Black man persona, wearing all black and an afro, sunglasses, cigar, and mustache, as he walks across a busy crosswalk toward the viewer. In each frame, he passes through the crowd, moving ever closer to the camera. In the culminating photographs, the artist inserts a text cloud above the character's head: (1) "I am the locus of

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<sup>179</sup> Takemoto, interview, April 14, 2021.

<sup>180</sup> Cherise Smith, *Enacting Others: Politics of Identity in Eleanor Antin, Nikki S. Lee, Adrian Piper, and Anna Deavere Smith* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), x.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, 18–19.

consciousness”; (2) “Surrounded and constrained”; (3) by animate objects”; (4) with moist, fleshy, pulsating surfaces” ; (5) “get out of the way, asshole.”<sup>182</sup> Smith reads “ambivalent interpretations” because “the project mapped out the overdetermined iconographies of the young Black man, while at the same time avoiding reification of the stereotype itself.”<sup>183</sup> The exaggerated stereotypical markers merge, forcing the viewer to acknowledge and address the forced stereotypes used for Piper’s costume, and therefore disrupting their preconceived ideologies. Studying Piper’s work in this way lays a conceptual foundation to how one might further unpack Takemoto’s art. That is, one could argue that, by over exaggerating Onuma’s gay sexuality through Madonna and Sandow, Takemoto explicitly marks the stereotypes that are bound up with hegemonic visual culture in the United States.

Takemoto’s unexpected convergences of identities dislocate the US narratives of Japanese concentration camps and those who were forced to occupy them. Piper’s performance of one stereotyped persona is simultaneously an entire group of people and no one in particular; Takemoto enacts one “other” by enacting several others. In the final moment of *Looking for Jiro*, Takemoto is performing in Iyamuri’s attire and wearing prosthetic and parodic biceps that are inspired by Earl Sandow. Costumed this way, Takemoto as Onuma performs Sandow’s muscle display and then joins Madonna’s Asian American backup dancers who parody the diva’s dance moves. In this moment, these personas are collapsed into one body creating a lineage of

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<sup>182</sup> Smith, 75.

<sup>183</sup> Smith, 76.

movement, mannerism, and costume for the performance of Onuma. In merging these identities, we find Onuma. Piper and Takemoto's projects both challenge how we read and respond to visual markers in costume and body language. But Takemoto's filmformance dislodges those markers from historical understandings and shows a queer temporal understanding of the influence of visual culture.

I argue that the performance of queer failure might help prevent some of the risk of over-essentializing narratives. In *Looking for Jiro*, each mimicry is a failure, but perfect performance or embodiment is not the goal. Saidiya Hartman's essay "Venus in Two Acts" considers how to remove a person, a Black enslaved woman she names Venus, from an abject narrative without doubling down on that narrative.<sup>184</sup> Her concerns bleed into the nuance of fact and fiction within the responsibility of speculative representation: "What has been said and what can be said about Venus *take for granted* the traffic between fact, fantasy, desire, and violence."<sup>185</sup> In her writing and research practice, Hartman grapples with the risk of representation and unearthing histories in a speculative, albeit caring, fashion. In their performance and with queer failure, Takemoto makes space for bringing Onuma out of the sanitized visualization of Japanese American individuals during the World War II era. But in the same movements, they leave room for Onuma to exist in other ways, ways that even Takemoto has yet to imagine.

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<sup>184</sup> Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 4.

<sup>185</sup> Hartman, 5, emphasis in original.



## Conclusion: Finding Jiro Onuma

*Looking for Jiro* depicts wrongful incarceration of Japanese American people during World War II and imagines the unconsidered potential for queer people's lives in the camps. Wrongful incarceration persists in the United States and disproportionately affects Brown and Black people. These histories are not disparate but are a continuum that persists; in addition, there is dangerous complacency within the United States that contributes to perpetuating wrongful incarceration. Although Japanese American incarceration is one of many instances, the World War II era was also a moment when the American public's complacency was coerced by the government. As *Looking for Jiro* draws inspiration from the past, it reverberates in the present and future.

In February 2023, AAM Curator of Contemporary Art Abby Chen spoke to me about screening *Looking for Jiro* at Documenta15 in 2022. The film was included in a panel about "Asian Diaspora/American . . . gender, humor, and solidarity."<sup>186</sup> Chen described the event; it was in the basement of a building, below a huge offering of contemporary art. She emphasized the less accessible location because, when *Looking for Jiro* was screened, people heard the familiar pop music, reaching up toward them from below, and they flocked to the film.<sup>187</sup> With Madonna as the hook, the audience stayed and heard from Takemoto about histories of the United States

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<sup>186</sup> "Practice Institute at Asian Art Museum and Chinese Culture Center of San Francisco: Gender, Humor, Solidarity!," Documenta Fifteen, accessed February 23, 2023, <https://documenta-fifteen.de/en/calendar/practice-institute-at-asian-art-museum-and-chinese-culture-center-of-san-francisco-gender-humor-solidarity/>.

<sup>187</sup> Chen, interview.

they were likely not aware of.<sup>188</sup> Takemoto’s imagining of Jiro Onuma’s story continues to expand, calling people into narratives that are rarely explored in mainstream visual culture arenas.

Jiro Onuma’s impact now expands past Takemoto’s projects and beyond the grand contemporary art stage into the realms of poetry, folk music, and graphic novels. Award-winning poet Kenji C. Liu wrote a poem commemorating Jiro Onuma, directly citing the connection to Takemoto’s film in the heading “After Tina Takemoto,” which is placed before the start of the poem.<sup>189</sup> The poem reflects Jiro Onuma’s circumstances in camp but also points to the current moment, in conversation with the desolation, isolation, racism, and nationalism that people imprisoned on the US–Mexico border are facing.<sup>190</sup> Musician Julian Saporiti of the No-No Boy Project wrote “A Century Out of Reach” (2020), “dedicated to the queer lives history has forgotten.”<sup>191</sup> Like Liu, Saporiti directly cites Takemoto’s work in the song’s description and in the lyrics themselves. Kiku Hughes’s award-winning graphic novel *Displacement* (2020) is about a teenager in our present who travels back in time to see her family in Japanese American concentration camps. There is a queer storyline, and when the publisher was curious about the historical context,

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<sup>188</sup> Chen.

<sup>189</sup> Kenji C. Liu, “Gaman: Topaz Concentration Camp, Utah,” accessed February 26, 2023, <https://poets.org/poem/gaman-topaz-concentration-camp-utah>.

<sup>190</sup> Liu.

<sup>191</sup> “*A Century Out of Reach*” - *No-No Boy* (Lyric Video), 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7aYp5QHlnHk>; Julian Saporiti, “No-No Boy: Music and History,” No-No Boy, accessed February 26, 2023, <https://www.nonoboyproject.com>.

Hughes dove into Takemoto's prolific research on Jiro Onuma and queerness in the concentration camps to provide discussions of queer Asian American histories.<sup>192</sup> When asked about the impact of *Looking for Jiro*, Takemoto says, "I am so excited that queer, nonbinary, and trans creative folks who are Japanese American or who identify as Nikkei are seeing another way into thinking about their own histories. The idea that an emerging artist or practitioner can see themselves reflected in camp history is a moving thing."<sup>193</sup> Writing about Bustamante's *Silver & Gold*, Gutiérrez explains, "I want to think about how Bustamante and her performance in some way helps to suture a circuit of relationships and further potentializes that which is transformative."<sup>194</sup> This is exactly what *Looking for Jiro* has done since the project's inception in 2011. By illuminating histories, Takemoto's artwork sutures Jiro Onuma's story from the past to the present and future and, by doing so, creates a circuit of relationships for thinkers and makers for whom Jiro Onuma's life and story are a buoy in the United States.

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<sup>192</sup> Kiku Hughes, interview by Kate Korroch, February 25, 2023.

<sup>193</sup> Takemoto, interview, February 6, 2023.

Nikkei are "Japanese emigrants and their descendants living outside (and sometimes inside) Japan." "Nikkei."

<sup>194</sup> Gutiérrez, "Divas, Exoticism, and Freakery," 5.

## CHAPTER TWO

### ***SEMIOTICS OF SAB: RECODING ASIAN AMERICAN STEREOTYPES ON SCREEN WITH CARE AND KINSHIP***

An elderly man lays on the ground, he looks above, with a calm wistful expression. Mouth slightly agape, his face is restful (Figure 13). How he came to arrive in this place, and in this pose, we do not know.



**Figure 13. TT Takemoto, *Semiotics of Sab* (2011). Film still captured by the author. Image courtesy of the artist.**

The face described above is the first and last visage in *Semiotics of Sab* (2016), TT Takemoto's experimental film about gay Asian American actor Sab Shimono. This chapter analyzes the visual, aural, cultural, and historical components of the film. I argue that Takemoto's portrayal of Sab Shimono is an act of dedication, kinship making, and a reckoning with Asian American stereotypes conveyed through speech perpetuated through Hollywood film and television. The inquiry in this chapter relies on close visual analysis of *Semiotics of Sab* and a comparison of the

film's relationship to structuralist films and contemporary artworks. The scholarly frameworks include structuralist film theory, Asian American representation in film and visual culture, and theories and histories of Asian American masculinity.

Sab Shimono is the only member of Takemoto's cast of characters addressed in this dissertation who is still living. He is also the only subject featured in this dissertation who is depicted through explicit footage of himself. That is, Jiro Onuma in Chapter One and Margaret Chung in Chapter Three are implied through pertinent imagery, but their true faces and bodies are not portrayed in the respective artworks. In addition to depictions of his body and face, in *Semiotics of Sab*, Shimono is visually represented with signage and objects. In the embodied representations of Shimono, he is acting, captured as performing a prescribed character. Takemoto pushes against Shimono's original performances with two strategies. First, they elaborate on representations of Shimono beyond his own likeness with object-based signifiers. Second, for corporeal representation, Takemoto seeks moments of pause and rest within Shimono's acting, in hopes that those moments are more representative of the actor as himself.

I argue that Takemoto uses this combination of signs and symbols, a private conversation between themselves and Shimono, to imagine a characterization of Shimono that disrupts the scripted caricatures he often portrays. By taking excerpts of Shimono's roles, Takemoto builds a film that shakes loose the stereotypes the actor was hired to portray. Takemoto's representation of Shimono is embedded within signs (literally) that are unique to Shimono's biography. I argue that this intimate

conversation between Takemoto and Shimono is an act of exclusive invitation that is a method of kinship making. This chapter asks: How does Takemoto reimagine filmic representations of Sab Shimono? And in doing so, how do they expand the visual archive of the actor? What happens when excerpts of Shimono’s various roles are removed from their original contexts and brought together? And within this process of adding and resituating, what does Takemoto’s modified structuralist approach accomplish for their art making? Finally, what kind of portrait of gay Asian American masculinity is this? And what are the stakes in Asian American and US visual cultural contexts?

*Semiotics of Sab* has been screened in North America and the United Kingdom at nearly a dozen film festivals with a queer or Asian focus.<sup>195</sup> As a more recent artwork, little writing has extensively considered the film. Situating the production within queer contemporary art discourse, curator and artist Rudy Lemcke included *Semiotics of Sab* in the exhibition *From Self to #Selfie* (2017) at the SOMArts Cultural Center in San Francisco. *Semiotics of Sab* was featured alongside films by artists such as Cassils and boychild, as Lemcke’s exhibition aims to “reframe the idea of looking at identity using the exhibition as a fluid system within which a queer self

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<sup>195</sup> San Diego Asian Film Festival; Austin Asian American Film Festival; Toronto Reel Asian International Film Festival; Fringe Queer Film and Arts Festival, London; MIX NYC: 29th New York Queer Experimental Film Festival; OUTsider Fest, Austin; Festival of (In)Appropriation, Los Angeles; CAAMfest: 35th Center for Asian American Media Film Festival, San Francisco; Glitch Film Festival, Glasgow, Scotland; 33rd Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film Festival; and Silicon Valley Asian Pacific Film Festival. “Tina Takemoto - Semiotics of Sab,” accessed September 28, 2022, <http://www.ttakemoto.com/sab/index.html>.

might be known.”<sup>196</sup> In a brief description, Lemcke says of the work, “building on this experimental [film] lineage, Takemoto introduces an expanded horizon of postcolonial thought that moves the question of identity and subjectivity to a deeper and a more profoundly beautiful experience.”<sup>197</sup> Race is added to Lemcke’s queer situating of the film in Fréhel Vince’s critique of “white normativity” in the London BFI Flare LGBTQ+ film festival from 2018. Vince suggests that festivals like BFI Flare participate “in homonationalist discourse that replicate historical in/exclusion and construct racialized arenas.”<sup>198</sup> Noting that the festival’s lineup was predominately white, Vince mentions *Semiotics of Sab* as one of the few exceptions.<sup>199</sup> Lemcke and Vince’s inclusion of *Semiotics of Sab* within the broader contexts of a contemporary art exhibition and a film festival show the critical breadth of the experimental film but also that there is a lack of deep critical analysis.<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>196</sup> Rudy Lemcke, “From Self to #Selfie: An Introduction,” in *Self-Representation in an Expanded Field: Self-Representation in an Expanded Field*, ed. Ace Lehner (MDPI, 2021), 59, <https://doi.org/10.3390/books978-3-03897-565-6>.

<sup>197</sup> Lemcke, 66.

<sup>198</sup> Fréhel Vince, “The London BFI Flare LGBTQ+ Film Festival: ‘A Celebration of Difference and Diversity’ or Normative Hegemony?,” *Feminist Media Studies*, February 22, 2022, 1, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2022.2030384>.

<sup>199</sup> Vince, 7.

<sup>200</sup> In addition to Vince and Lemcke’s considerations of the film, Jana Rišková also mentions *Semiotics of Sab* in her doctoral dissertation written in Czech. In one sentence Rišková references Takemoto’s queer film work about Japanese concentration camps and uses a still from *Semiotics of Sab* to illustrate that. The title of the film is not referenced in the body text. Jana Rišková, “Umenie inakosti. Slovenské a české queer umenie v kontexte galerijného priestoru [The art of otherness. Slovak and Czech queer art in the context of gallery space]” (Doctoral dissertation, Masarykova univerzita, 2019), 37, [https://is.muni.cz/th/fhsam/462107\\_Umenie\\_inakosti\\_ceske\\_a\\_slovenske\\_queer\\_umenie.pdf](https://is.muni.cz/th/fhsam/462107_Umenie_inakosti_ceske_a_slovenske_queer_umenie.pdf).

This chapter examines another artwork by Takemoto inspired by a queer Asian American person from US history. Where *Looking for Jiro* imagines and creates representational visual culture of its subject who was essentially invisible in the historical archive, *Semiotics of Sab* draws from a multitude of highly accessible and widely viewed content that is excerpted and edited to reshape the messages conveyed. Takemoto does this by joining structuralist and feminist art-historical conversations to create a queer and Asian American intervention.

### **Key Frameworks for *Semiotics of Sab***

#### *Sab in Three Acts*

*Semiotics of Sab* is broken into three distinct sections. First, roles from Shimono's career as an actor are listed individually and alphabetically in a simple white font against a black background. Second, signs, objects, and film clips appear in rapid alphabetical succession, progressively disrupted with images of Shimono. The third section is aurally framed with a countdown to hypnosis and samples ten clips of an assortment of Shimono's roles and their spoken lines. The sections are distinguished with a brief visual pause marked by a blank black screen. This format recalls the experience of attending a play or the narrative arc of classical film.<sup>201</sup>

Generally speaking, the first act is the exposition or set-up, the second act presents the

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<sup>201</sup> Notable three-part plays include Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879), Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Ernest* (1895), Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* (1938), and Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* (1947).



conflict or a disruption, and the third act provides a resolution.<sup>202</sup> Syd Field argues that the three-part structure is key to writing epic narrative tales.<sup>203</sup> While in Hollywood films, the three parts are not always clearly distinguished, in plays, the stage goes dark, signaling to the audience that something new is about to happen. *Semiotics of Sab* is a nonnarrative film, but within its aim to “[explore] the poetics of identity through an oblique portrait,” the three parts are clearly distinguished by different approaches to film; each act loosely follows a pattern—context is set (somewhat opaquely), the framework is disrupted and confused, and then there is a resolution (with death).<sup>204</sup> The approach accentuates the excerpted filmic content and Shimono’s history as an actor.

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<sup>202</sup> Daniel Chandler and Rod Munday, “Classical Narrative Structure,” in *A Dictionary of Media and Communication*, Third edition, Oxford Quick Reference (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

<sup>203</sup> Syd Field, *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting*, Rev. ed (New York, N.Y: Delta Trade Paperbacks, 2005), 2–21. Originally written in 1979, Field uses examples from the 1970s such as *Harold and Maude* (dir. Hal Ashby, 1971); *Chinatown* (dir. Jack Nicholson and Roman Polanski, 1974); and *Days of the Condor* (dir. Sydney Pollack, 1975). When this edition was printed in the mid-aughts, Field also discusses films such as *American Beauty* (dir. Sam Mendes, 1999); *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (dir. Peter Jackson, 2001–2003); and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (dir. Michael Gondry, 2004).

At the time of writing this chapter, the *Film Everything Everywhere All at Once* (dir. Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert), won ten Oscars, including Best Picture 2022. The epic and absurdist sci-fi dramedy is about a Chinese American her family is divided into three distinct acts.

<sup>204</sup> “Tina Takemoto - Semiotics of Sab.”

The three-part structure is also prevalent in art history with triptychs used to distinguish the sequences of a story. For example, Hieronymus Bosch’s *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1490 – 1510) and Hugo van der Goes’s *Portinari Altarpiece* (c. 1476). At the time of Bosch and van der Goes’s paintings, the Christian idea of holy trinity played a part in the form. More recently the format has been used by Francis Bacon in *Three Studies of Lucien Freud* (1969) and Ai Weiwei *Dropping a Han*

When I first watched *Semiotics of Sab* as a viewer unacquainted with the subject, I was struck by the pace of the imagery in the first two sections. The roles and then the signs move by rapidly, as though there is too much to fit in the time allowed or as though the images are rushing away so as to not be fully graspable; it suggests that not everyone has access to the whole picture. My initial attempts at understanding the various sequences and specific references were almost completely useless as an unknowing viewer. Nevertheless, context is not necessary for one to grasp the vital message of the film. As the remainder of this chapter reveals, this visual pacing reflects the exploration of making in code and the interplay of private and public for the artwork, the artist, and the subject.

### *Structuralist Film*

“Structuralism” is often associated with the basic structural building blocks of language and their ability to shape (or not shape) our culture and lives. But in this instance, structuralism is about formal templates and parameters for making. Writing about structuralist theater, Michael Kirby points out that one word can mean many things; for Kirby, structuralism is about the relationships of parts.<sup>205</sup> Similarly, structuralist film does not seek complexity of ideas but strenuous, meticulous composition via formal sets of rules. The person who officially named the

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*Dynasty Urn* (1995) to show various perspectives of a subject be it in angle (Bacon) or time (Ai).

<sup>205</sup> Michael Kirby, *A Formalist Theatre* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), 109–10.

“structuralist” film genre, P. Adams Sitney, described structuralist filmmakers’ oeuvre: “theirs is a cinema of structure in which the shape of the whole film is predetermined and simplified, and it is that shape which is the primal impression of the film.”<sup>206</sup> Hollis Frampton’s *Zorns Lemma* (1970) is a foundational structuralist film and key to shaping the genre; it also partially inspired *Semiotics of Sab*.<sup>207</sup> Frampton’s genre-shaping, nonnarrative film uses the three-part structure and relies on the Latin alphabet to organize visual experimentation in his film’s second act.<sup>208</sup> For structuralist film, content and context are secondary; Takemoto’s films use structuralist visual methods, but the manipulation of visual signifiers plays a leading role.

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<sup>206</sup> P. Adams. Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943-2000*, 3rd ed. (Oxford ; Oxford University Press, 2002), 348.

Understood in contrast to “lyrical film,” Sitney suggests four characteristics of structuralist film: fixed camera position, flicker effect, looping, and rephotography. In lyrical film, “we see what the film-maker sees; the reactions of the camera and the montage reveal his responses to his vision.” Stan Brakhage’s films are categorized as such by Sitney and others. Sitney, 348.

<sup>207</sup> Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943-2000*, 347; Clint Enns, “Frampton’s Demon: A Mathematical Interpretation of Hollis Frampton’s *Zorns Lemma*,” *Leonardo* 49, no. 2 (April 2016): 157, [https://doi.org/10.1162/LEON\\_a\\_00807](https://doi.org/10.1162/LEON_a_00807).

Tony Conrad’s *The Flicker* (1966), Michael Snow’s *Wavelength* (1967) are also cited as key examples. TT Takemoto, interview by Kate Korroch, *Zoom*, April 28, 2021.

<sup>208</sup> *Zorn’s Lemma* is divided into three distinct parts. The first section is just a few minutes long and is focused on sound with a blank screen as the visual anchor. A woman’s voice recites sentences from *The New England Primer*. The second section, about forty minutes and the bulk of the film, is a series of visual iterations of the Latin alphabet. The final section, shorter like the first, depicts a couple walking into the distance with a soundtrack of six people reciting texts from Robert Grosseteste’s *De luce* from the thirteenth century.

### *Alphabetical Organization*

The first two acts of *Semiotics of Sab* use the order of the Latin alphabet as a key framework. In employing that fundamental tool, the film exists within a conversation and lineage of experimental art and filmmaking. The second and longest section of *Zorns Lemma* uses alphabetical ordering. Frampton's simple form shaped the genre of experimental film, influencing artists such as Martha Rosler, Peter Greenaway, and Su Friedrich, all of whom are explored later in the chapter. Frampton was inspired by the method in Dada's and Surrealist artist Marcel Duchamp's only complete film, *Anemic Cinema* (1926). He collected images that eventually became the prime middle section of *Zorns Lemma*.<sup>209</sup> Frampton was drawn to "the possibility of reading the words and the puns they make."<sup>210</sup> As for his artistic contemporaries, Frampton's work had similar aims to those of artists associated with Minimalism, including Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Robert Smithson, Dan Flavin, Carl Andre, and Frank Stella.<sup>211</sup> Collectively haunted by Greenbergian art history of the 1960s, Luke A. Fidler notes, "together with his peers, [Frampton] was forced to confront pointed

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<sup>209</sup> Duchamp's *Anemic Cinema* (1926) was credit to his female alter ego Rose Sélavy, and "features fixed camera shots of spinning disks, alternating between disks featuring optical illusions and others inscribed with French puns and spoonerisms (the title itself is a punning anagram). "Alexander Kauffman, "The Anemic Cinemas of Marcel Duchamp," *The Art Bulletin* 99, no. 1 (2017): 27. Scott MacDonald, "Interview with Hollis Frampton: 'Zorns Lemma,'" *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 4, no. 1 (January 1979): 25–26, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10509207909360975>; Annette Michelson, "Frampton's Sieve," *October* 32 (1985): 160, <https://doi.org/10.2307/778291>.

<sup>210</sup> Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943-2000*; Annette Michelson, "Poesis/Mathesis," *October* 32 (1985): 4–6; Barry Goldensohn, "Memoir of Hollis Frampton," *October* 32 (1985): 7–16.

<sup>211</sup> Michelson, "Frampton's Sieve," 160; Michelson, "Poesis/Mathesis," 6.

questions about what it meant to work in, or against, a medium.”<sup>212</sup> In a dedication written after Frampton’s death, Annette Michelson states that “Frampton, embracing film in the late 1960s, did so as a member of a generation with an intense interest in the systemic, a fresh confidence in the uses of generative mechanisms and decision of artistic practice.”<sup>213</sup> This group of artists was “a generation which worked to suspend the consecrated disjunction of theory from practice.”<sup>214</sup> The forthcoming pages show how *Semiotics of Sab* enters this dialogue and pushes it into different terrain. Takemoto uses structuralist methods for the organization of the film, but the content of *Semiotics of Sab* diverges significantly by creating a queer Asian American perspective and critique within the structuralist format.

### **Act I: Sab’s Alphabet**

A black screen greets the viewer (Figure 14). They hear keys jingle and a heavy door open. Electronic music subtly fades in. A faint sigh, then a plucky electronic twang.

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<sup>212</sup> Luke A. Fidler, “The Praxis of the Tractrix,” *Postmedieval: A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies* 7, no. 1 (March 2016): 99–101, <https://doi.org/10.1057/pmed.2015.44>.

Art critic and staunch formalist Clement Greenberg argued that avant-garde art was pandering to declining taste. Greenberg advocated for the formalist (and American, and masculinist) movement Abstract Expressionism.

<sup>213</sup> Michelson, “Frampton’s Sieve,” 160.

<sup>214</sup> Michelson, “Poesis/Mathesis,” 6.



**Figure 14. TT Takemoto, *Semiotics of Sab* (2011). Film stills captured by the author. Images courtesy of the artist.**

Words begin flashing on the screen, each in bright white and in capital letters, so swift, they are almost illegible. An alphabetical list of the roles Sab Shimono played flashes by. Over 1 minute 23 seconds, 140 roles from Shimono’s five-decade career are listed<sup>215</sup>:

ANCIENT MAN, ARCHIE TAN, BEN, BOBBY WONG, BOMBER  
COMMANDER, BYRON, CAO, CARETAKER, CHARLIE MOURA,  
CHINESE LEADER, CHOIR MEMBER, CHOW LO, CLOWN, COLONEL  
HIROTA, COMMANDANT NATSUME, COMMISSIONER, COOK,  
CORPORAL KYOMO, CUNNINGHAM, DESIGNER, DIEM, DR. MAX  
SHINODA, DR. OKIDA, DR. ROY TAM, DRIVING RANGE MAN,  
ELDER, EMPEROR, EXECUTIVE #1, FATHER CHEN, FIRST ELDER,  
FRANCIS IGAWA, GENERAL ANAGO, GONGSUN CHOJIU,  
GOVERNOR TOKAMA, GRANDPA HARRY, GUNG BITUEN, HARRY  
SOTO, HEAD MASTER, HENRY, HIDEO, HIDEO TAKAHASHI, HIRO,

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<sup>215</sup> On the International Movie Data Base, Shimono’s first appearance on screen is listed in 1962 with the role Father Chen in the series *Armstrong Circle Theater*. His most recent role listed was in 2021, playing Dr. Dye in the television series *Ave. 43*. “Sab Shimono,” IMDb, accessed April 13, 2023, <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0793634/>.

HIROSHI, HIROSHI KAWANMURA, HITO OSAKA, HOW, HUA, HULI, HYH, ICHIRO KAMURA, INSPECTOR JAMES MATSUOKA, ITO, JIN, JIRO NISHI, JOHN, JOHN LEE, JONO, K3NT, KAN OGAWA, KAORU KAWAGUCHI, KARTEEZ A. RUMLA, KAZUO, KENJI, KENJI ITO, KO, KOGA, KOJI, KWAN, KWANG, LORD NORINAGA, LIEUTENANT TOMONAGA, LU'S FATHER, MANJIRO, MASTER CHEF, MASTER YU, MICHAEL, MIKE, MONK GYATSU, MOTO, MR. CHEN, MR. KEORA, MR. KOICHI ASANO, MR. KOYOSAKA, MR. LONG DOU, MR. MURAKAMI, MR. NAKADA, MR. OSHIRA, MR. SAITO, MR. SPARKLE, MR. TANAGAWA, MR. TANAKA, MR. WANG, MR. YAKAMOTO, MURATA, NAKAMOTO, NARRATOR, NOBU MATSUMOTO, NORIYUKI, NORTH KOREAN OFFICER, OKINAWAN/AMERICAN, OLD MAN, OLD PEDDLER, OPERATING ROOM STAFF, ORIENTAL BUS BOY, ORIENTAL RESTAURANT WORKER, P.K., "PAINLESS" KUMAGAI, PAPA, PARAMEDIC, PAT ZEN, PHARMACIST, RAY'S FATHER, SADAO, SAM, SAM KUROMATSU, SAMMY, SHAITO, STUDENT, SUBOTOI, SUNATRA, TAK, TAKAHASHI "TEX" HOSOUME, TAKAHIRO, TAKI NAKANO, TEIJO, TOGO, TOI, TOSHIO YOSHIDA, UNCLE, UNCLE CHAN, UNCLE KEAKO, VETERINARAIN, WANG, WANG TA, WEED DOCTOR, WENG, WOOD DING, YAMANDA, YOUNG UNCLE.

As the list plays, the music continues, an ambient, almost breathy sound, like wind moving through a tunnel. Infrequent percussion and string instruments punctuate the persistent baseline. The electronic strings lead the composition, eerie and metallic. A string is plucked, resonates, and fades out before another is played. An occasional drumbeat breaks up the sound. The composition is somber, sober, and contemplative. The final role, YOUNG UNCLE, zips by, synchronized with the sound of a door closing. The screen is briefly black and then the film moves to the second act.

### *Asian American Stereotypes on Screen*

Reading like a poem, the list above demonstrates abundance and multiplicity. Act I simply and effectively exemplifies the profusion of roles in Shimono's career

and the persistent racial stereotyping that accompanied them. By listing the roles alphabetically, patterns emerge that even the first-time viewer who is unfamiliar with Shimono's work can observe. Some can be read as potentially prestigious, or in reference to the model minority trope—DR. MAX SHINODA, DR. OKIDA, DR. ROY TAM—and others are outright bigoted nomenclatures—ORIENTAL BUS BOY, ORIENTAL RESTAURANT WORKER. Others, still, demonstrate the collapsing of national affiliations into one body—MR. CHEN, MR. KEORA, MR. KOICHI ASANO, MR. KOYOSAKA, MR. LONG DOU, MR. MURAKAMI, MR. NAKADA, MR. OSHIRA, MR. SAITO, MR. SPARKLE, MR. TANAGAWA, MR. TANAKA, MR. WANG, MR. YAKAMOTO.

This list is a small case study that illustrates the long tradition of typecasting Asian Americans in Hollywood. In 2004, filmmaker Minh-Ha T. Pham observed, “Asian actors and filmmakers are not invading Hollywood as much as they are finally being admitted into Hollywood—under very specific conditions and for very specific roles.”<sup>216</sup> Fifteen years later, a study conducted in 2019 analyzed films that included Asian Americans over the last twenty-five years—beginning with *Mortal Kombat* (1995) and ending with *The Princess Switch* (2018). The researchers discovered that “Stereotype-resisting representations were present (e.g., brave, loyal, mischievous), especially in more recent films. However, stereotype-confirming representations remained prevalent (e.g., emasculate, timid, nerdy), which affirms the historic trend

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<sup>216</sup> Minh-Ha T. Pham, “The Asian Invasion (of Multiculturalism) in Hollywood,” *The Journal of Popular Film and Television* 32, no. 3 (2004): 122, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01956051.2004.10662057>.



of misrepresentation of Asian Americans in film.”<sup>217</sup> Scholars have linked stereotyping roles to racism and the insecurities of whiteness in Hollywood. Kent Ono and Vincent N. Pham note that “yellow peril” is the longest-standing stereotype encompassing the World War II-inspired trope of “Japanese as barbarians.”<sup>218</sup> Additional stereotypes include the “Oriental Monk,” *okatu* (the symbiosis of man and machine), Asian American buddy films, “rice boy,” and martial arts actors. Jane Chi Hyun Park suggests that, often, “Oriental imagery” is “reduced to decorative flourishes.”<sup>219</sup> Studying the “Oriental Monk,” Jane Iwamura suggests the trope

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<sup>217</sup> Tiffany Besana, Dalal Katsiaficas, and Aerika Brittian Loyd, “Asian American Media Representation: A Film Analysis and Implications for Identity Development,” *Research in Human Development* 16, no. 3–4 (October 2, 2019): 201, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15427609.2020.1711680>.

<sup>218</sup> Kent A. Ono and Vincent N. Pham, “The Persistence of Yellow Peril Discourse,” in *Asian Americans and the Media*, The Media and Minorities (Cambridge, UK ; Malden, MA: Polity, 2009), 36. “By yellow peril, we mean representations of Asian and Asian American as threatening to take over, invade, or otherwise negatively Asianize the US nation and its society and culture.” Ono and Pham, 25. Leilani Nishime writes about this, similarly, calling this trope the “angry Asian man”. LeiLani Nishime, “Reviving Bruce: Negotiating Asian Masculinity through Bruce Lee Paratexts in *Giant Robot* and *Angry Asian Man*,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 34, no. 2 (March 15, 2017): 120–29, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2017.1285420>.

<sup>219</sup> Jane Naomi Iwamura, “The Oriental Monk in American Popular Culture,” in *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, ed. Bruce David Forbes and Jeffrey H. Mahan (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 2000), 27; Jane Chi Hyun Park, *Yellow Future: Oriental Style in Hollywood Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), ix, x, 84–85; Allen Walzem, “Asian Masculinity and Contemporary Hollywood Film,” *Asian Journal of Literature, Culture and Society* 1, no. 2 (2007): 17; Crystal Parikh, “‘The Most Outrageous Masquerade’: Queering Asian-American Masculinity,” *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 48, no. 4 (2002): 859, <https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.2002.0079>.

collapses diverse and individual representations to fit into a “homogenized [version in] American popular consciousness and culture.”<sup>220</sup>

Act I’s structure and method in *Semiotics of Sab* highlights Shimono’s prolific career and speaks to the abundance of potential stereotype-based representations and how Hollywood shapes US ideologies. This list effectively sets the stage for Acts II and III, creating a poetic, didactic text that begins to tease out the nuances of the project and the problems with Hollywood representations of Asian Americans.<sup>221</sup>

### *Alphabet and Ideologies*

In *Semiotics of Sab*, the alphabet offers unobtrusive order, a method used by other experimental filmmakers. Following Frampton, director and filmmaker Peter Greenaway’s film *H is for House* (1973), described by Seung-hoon Jeong as a “buoyant pastoral home movie,” uses the alphabet to exhaustively catalog words beginning with H.<sup>222</sup> The film is shot on a bucolic farm, featuring snippets inspired by

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<sup>220</sup> Iwamura, “The Oriental Monk in American Popular Culture,” 27.

“The Oriental Monk . . . includes within its iconic scope a wide range of religious figures (gurus, sages, swamis, masters, teachers) from a variety of ethnic backgrounds (South Asian, Japanese, Vietnamese, Chinese).”

<sup>221</sup> Writing along what she deems a hopeful transformation within representation of Asian Americans in Hollywood, Park suggests that martial arts actors like Jet Li, Jackie Chan, and Chow Yun-Fat may be shifting the dialogue from abject to desirable through their performances in Hollywood action films. Park, *Yellow Future: Oriental Style in Hollywood Cinema*, x.

<sup>222</sup> Seung-hoon Jeong, “Systems on the Verge of Becoming Birds: Peter Greenaway’s Early Experimental Films,” *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 9, no. 2 (2011): 176, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17400309.2011.556940>; Maria Esther Maciel, “Peter Greenaway’s Encyclopaedism,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 23, no. 4 (July 1, 2006): 54, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276406065113>.

the filmmaker's domestic life and family. Also looking to familial connections, avant-garde cinematographer and director Su Friedrich's film *Sink or Swim* (1990) is a classic in its own right. Critics suggest that *Zorns Lemma* also influenced Friedrich's structuralist film.<sup>223</sup> *Sink or Swim* is composed of twenty-six vignettes, presented in reverse alphabetical order, about the filmmaker, her parents' divorce, and her father's abusive behavior.<sup>224</sup> Both Greenaway's and Friedrich's films are autobiographical and about parent-child relationships and heterosexual kinship. There are some similar themes in *Semiotics of Sab* but the kinship is queer, intergenerational, and not tied to a developmental parent-child connection. Takemoto looks up to Sab Shimono, who is of a Japanese American generation that preceded Takemoto's. I read Takemoto's work as queer community building, generating and seeking connections with a multigenerational heritage.<sup>225</sup>

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Greenaway explicitly references Frampton's *Zorns Lemma* as influential on his work: "because it showed how you could structure a film without necessarily using narrative." Peter Greenaway and Charles Hagen, "Peter Greenaway and the Erotics of Form: An Interview by Charles Hagen," *Aperture*, no. 121 (1990): 74; Greenaway and Hagen, "Peter Greenaway and the Erotics of Form: An Interview by Charles Hagen."

<sup>223</sup> Janet Cutler, "Su Friedrich: Breaking the Rules," in *Women's Experimental Cinema*, ed. Robin Blaetz (Duke University Press, 2007), 314, 336, <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822392088-015>; Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943-2000*, 400; Scott MacDonald, "From Zygote to Global Cinema via Su Friedrich's Films," *Journal of Film and Video* 44, no. 1/2 (1992): 34.

<sup>224</sup> Ian Bryce Jones, "Lesson Plan: Su Friedrich's *Sink or Swim*," *Intermittent Mechanism* (blog), November 24, 2016, <https://intermittentmechanism.blog/2016/11/24/lesson-plan-su-friedrichs-sink-or-swim/>.

<sup>225</sup> Cutler, "Su Friedrich," 314.

*Semiotic Troublemaking and Identity Emancipation*

*Semiotics of Sab*'s namesake, Martha Rosler's seminal and "classic second-wave feminist text" *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975), utilizes the alphabet as an organizational device.<sup>226</sup> As the central protagonist of the six-and-a-half-minute film, Rosler stands in a kitchen, Julia Child-style, straight faced, donning an apron. Rosler alphabetically lists and demonstrates the use of kitchen utensils in her vicinity. As she names the object, she picks it up and uses it, though unconventionally. "Fork" is accompanied by Rosler jabbing the air, stoic and aggressive; "knife" is followed by several stabs at an invisible chest standing in front of her. Rosler's simple actions displace the expected uses of these objects, suggesting a questioning of the viewer's knowledge and understanding of the items and, in parallel, their understanding of roles in a domestic kitchen.<sup>227</sup>

In 1976 Rosalind Kraus argued that video and television create two consciousnesses for artists working in the medium. There is the real self and the one that exists in "video feedback"; using video and television in artwork can be an opportunity for those two states of existence to be explored.<sup>228</sup> Timothy Ridlen suggests that, through her critique, Krauss essentially offers a resolution for the

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<sup>226</sup> Brundson notes anger and Rosler's unmade-up appearance in the film as classic second-wave feminist tropes. Charlotte Brundson, "Feminism, Postfeminism, Martha, Martha, and Nigella," *Cinema Journal* 44, no. 2 (Winter 2005): 112; Takemoto, interview, 28.

<sup>227</sup> Martha Rosler and Jane Weinstock, "Interview with Martha Rosler," *October* 17 (1981): 78, <https://doi.org/10.2307/778252>.

<sup>228</sup> Rosalind Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," *October* 1 (1976): 59, <https://doi.org/10.2307/778507>.

subjectivity and form dilemma of postmodernism: “[Kraus] effectively resolves an emerging postmodernism with a Greenbergian modernist framework, focusing, in this case, not on the status of the art object or the mode of studio production but on the production of subjectivity as the outer limit of the medium’s capability.”<sup>229</sup> While I disagree that consciousness created through video is less valuable, the insistence that form and subject coexist is a key element of modified structuralist projects. Thinking about *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, Rosler uses video precisely because of its ideology-influencing potential; she mashes together identity issues with form.<sup>230</sup> As a feminist, Rosler insists on content in order to obstruct the sexist and misogynist nature of formalism. As Ridlen argues, *Semiotics of the Kitchen* “speaks not only to its named subject matter, the construction of gendered domesticity through semiotic systems, but also to the construction of public consciousness through popular media.”<sup>231</sup> Takemoto’s film follows Rosler’s precedent in co-producing a film typology that breaks apart the visual semantics that influence the fabrication of existing structures of Asian American stereotypes and racism.

Scholars situate Rosler’s video within feminist performance and video art and institutional critique from the late 1960s and 1970s.<sup>232</sup> The recording provides a

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<sup>229</sup> Timothy Ridlen, “Early Video Art, Educational Television, and the Positivity of Practice,” *ASAP/Journal* 5, no. 1 (2020).

<sup>230</sup> Ridlen, “Early Video Art, Educational Television, and the Positivity of Practice”; Helen Molesworth, “House Work and Art Work,” *October* 92 (2000): 71.

<sup>231</sup> Ridlen, “Early Video Art, Educational Television, and the Positivity of Practice,” 108.

<sup>232</sup> Helen Molesworth situates *Semiotics of the Kitchen* with works like Judy Chicago’s *The Dinner Party* (1974) and Martha Kelly’s *Post Partum Document* (1973) because each works binds institutional critique with feminist critique.

counterview to television viewers' consumption of domesticity through celebrities like Julia Child. August Jordan Davis suggests that Rosler's character seizes the tools of her entrapment to "counter-perform her own eventual emancipation."<sup>233</sup> Writing as a fellow feminist, Davis suggests that "in seizing that which had previously bound us, we will find ourselves equipped with the very tool required to transcend our barred subjectivity in pursuit of our own *human* enlargement."<sup>234</sup> Miram Felton-Dansky posits a similar emancipatory approach. Analyzing Anne Juren and Annie Dorsen's restaging of *Semiotics of the Kitchen* in the performance *Magical* (2010), Felton-Dansky indicates that, instead of "adhering to new identities, [*Semiotics of the Kitchen* rejects] identities, refusing stable relationships of the signifier to sign."<sup>235</sup> A fork might be nicely set on a delicately laid table, but it can also be used for aggressive stabbing.

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Molesworth, "House Work and Art Work," 82. In 2010 Anne Juren and Annie Dorsen made *Magical*, a forty-five minute restaging of feminist performances from the 1960s and 1970s including Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* (1964), VALIE EXPORT's *Genital Panic* (1969), Carolee Schneemann's *Meat Joy* (1964) and *Interior Scroll* (1975), Marina Abramovich's *Freeing the Body* (1976), and Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, all performed and "staged in the register of the classic magic show." Miriam Felton-Dansky, "Anonymous Is a Woman: The New Politics of Identification in *Magical* and Untitled Feminist Show," *Theatre Journal* 67, no. 2 (2015): 257, <https://doi.org/10.1353/tj.2015.0066>. Charlotte Mullins puts Rosler's performance in conversation with artists who use their own bodies, including Abramovich, Schneemann, and adding Ana Mendieta. Charlotte Mullins, *A Little History of Art* (Yale University Press, 2022), 283, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2g591d1>.

<sup>233</sup> August Jordan Davis, "Reading the Strange Case of Woman-as-Appliance: On Transfigurations, Cyborgs, Domestic Labour and the Megamachine," *Third Text* 29, no. 4–5 (September 3, 2015): 375, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2016.1152091>.

<sup>234</sup> Davis, 376.

<sup>235</sup> Felton-Dansky, "Anonymous Is a Woman," 260.

Along with second-wave feminism, semiotics was a key intellectual framework of the mid-1970s, when Rosler made this piece.<sup>236</sup> Brundson notes that “the science of signs was seen as a way of proving the veracity of radical readings of film and popular culture texts.”<sup>237</sup> Semiotics studies how signs create meaning making and what meanings signs communicate to the interpreter.<sup>238</sup> In *The Subject of Semiotics* Kaja Silverman demonstrates the inextricability of the human subject and study of signs: “Semiotics involves the study of signification, but signification cannot be isolated from the human subject who uses it and is defined by means of it, or from the cultural system which generates it.”<sup>239</sup> In other words, Silverman argues that psychoanalysis, the study of the unconscious, and semiotics, the study of signification, are intertwined; both examine human expression and meaning making. Susan Petrilli and Augusto Ponzio break down semiotics into two meanings: “We can approach signs as objects of interpretation indistinguishable from our response to them. But we can also approach signs in such a way that we suspend our response to

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<sup>236</sup> Rosler and Weinstock, “Interview with Martha Rosler,” 78.

<sup>237</sup> Brundson, “Feminism, Postfeminism, Martha, Martha, and Nigella,” 111.

<sup>238</sup> Structuralism and semiotics are closely linked. Structuralism rose in the wake of existentialism and was concerned with understanding the systems that undergird what humans do. Along with Saussure, prominent structuralist thinkers include Claude Levi-Strauss, Roman Jakobson, and Jacques Lacan. Poststructuralism came into being with French intellectuals in the 1960s who rerouted structuralist tenets, led by Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Louis Althusser, Roland Barthes. Post structuralism is a continuation of structuralist thinking.

Daniel Chandler, *Semiotics: The Basics*, Fourth edition, The Basics (New York: Routledge, 2022), introduction.

<sup>239</sup> Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics*, 16. print. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1984), 3.

them so that deliberation is possible.”<sup>240</sup> The first centers on humans’ engagement with signs, and the second allows for fresh readings and alternative significations of signs.<sup>241</sup> As Davis says of Rosler’s video, echoing Silverman’s concern with the reach and impact of semiotics, Petrilli and Ponzio suggest that meaning can be made anew.<sup>242</sup>

The three acts of *Semiotics of Sab* take up these methods and offer a queer Asian American intervention, creating potential new significations of already established signs. I suggest that *Semiotics of Sab* offers an interpretation of semiotics that joins Rosler’s reshaping of sociocultural signs and Frampton’s formulaic organization. In the following two acts, Takemoto takes signs laden with cultural sediment, extracts them from their original contexts, and reassigns signification, creating a new story.

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<sup>240</sup> Susan Petrilli and Augusto Ponzio, *Semiotics Unbounded: Interpretive Routes through the Open Network of Signs* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 3.

<sup>241</sup> Petrilli and Ponzio, 3.

<sup>242</sup> Silverman notes that semiotics reaches centuries back into history but that the “self-conscious theory” emerged in the twentieth century with linguist and structuralists Ferdinand de Saussure and philosopher and “father of pragmatism,” Charles Sanders Peirce. Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics*, 3. Robert Stam, Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, and Robert Stam, *New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics: Structuralism, Post-Structuralism and Beyond* (London, United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis Group, 1992), 4, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ucsc/detail.action?docID=237423>. Saussure suggests that language and society are a system of relations; a sign is composed of a signified (abstract) and a signifier (how that abstract signifier is understood). Signs gain meaning through difference, comparisons, and contrasts, with other signs. Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics*, 4–14. Jacques Derrida suggests that Saussure’s signifier and signified are not fixed (this is Derrida’s *différance*, the endless deferral of meaning). For Silverman, Peirce’s semiotic systems “include the connections the system establishes between signification and subjectivity.” Silverman, 25.



## Act II: Signs of Sab

Storefront signs fill the screen one by one, alphabetically: a corner of a sign with “a.m.” at the bottom; “BEE” in all capital letters in bold font; “cookie” in neon, glowing in a window; “Dreams” dilapidated and in cursive, and so on (Figure 15). As signs continue to appear, a voice begins: “How is it that we know who we are? We might wake up in the night disoriented and wonder where we are.” As the monologue continues, the words appear consistently paced in alphabetical succession.



**Figure 15.** TT Takemoto, *Semiotics of Sab* (2011). Film stills of alphabetized words captured by the author. Images courtesy of the artist.

*Semiotics of Sab*'s second section continues the sequence described above for about two-thirds of the experimental film. The monologue is Shimono's true speaking voice from the film *Suture* (dir. David Siegel and Scott McGhee 1994), in which

Shimono plays a psychiatrist to a Black man with amnesia.<sup>243</sup> Each iteration of the alphabet presents new signage, variations, and substitutions, replacing storefront signs with symbols. Some of the imagery draws from Shimono's roles, and others are related to Shimono's personal life.<sup>244</sup> Others still are a nod to the structuralist and conceptual inspiration, *Zorns Lemma*. In this section, I argue that ,within this structuralist framework, Takemoto breaks down and rebuilds Shimono's persona. Reflecting Shimono's public life and Takemoto's respectful and thoughtful art practice and scholarship, the biographical depth of this film is personal, and some of it is only accessible to Takemoto and Shimono. Respecting those boundaries, this section parses the art historical legacies that work in code and explores how *Semiotics of Sab* fits within that dialogue and how those codes are communicated through art.

Hollis Frampton's organizational building blocks for the second section of *Zorns Lemma* are Takemoto's structural inspiration.<sup>245</sup> Frampton's film is a series of visual iterations of the Latin alphabet (Figure 16). This section of *Zorns Lemma* begins with a simple golden colored font on a black screen, with only a few alterations—the “Y” flipped upside down, for example. This is what P. Adams Sitney calls “substitution practice”: as the sequence progresses, the letters are represented by various signage and are gradually replaced with objects or scenes.<sup>246</sup> For example, X

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<sup>243</sup> *Sab Shimono: Acting “As If,”* unreleased; TT Takemoto, “Interview with Sab Shimono | Hyphen Magazine,” accessed October 19, 2019, <https://hyphenmagazine.com/blog/2017/05/interview-sab-shimono>.

<sup>244</sup> Takemoto, interview.

<sup>245</sup> Takemoto.

<sup>246</sup> Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943-2000*, 367; MacDonald, “Interview with Hollis Frampton,” 30.

becomes fire; B becomes an egg frying, a reference to breakfast.<sup>247</sup> This goes on for about forty minutes and is the bulk of Frampton's film.



**Figure 16. Hollis Frampton, *Zorns Lemma*, 1962–1970. Film stills captured by the author.**

While Frampton's goal was to experiment with nonnarrative possibilities for film using an arbitrary structure, Takemoto's use of the format is directly coded to Sab Shimono's life and career. Takemoto uses Frampton's structure and follows Martha Rosler in reassigning the ideological meanings of the signs. In Rosler's case, the gendered reading of the signs is recoded. In this section of *Semiotics of Sab*, the allocation of signs is personal, private, only accessible to those "in the know." By

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<sup>247</sup> Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943-2000*, 367; MacDonald, "Interview with Hollis Frampton," 30.

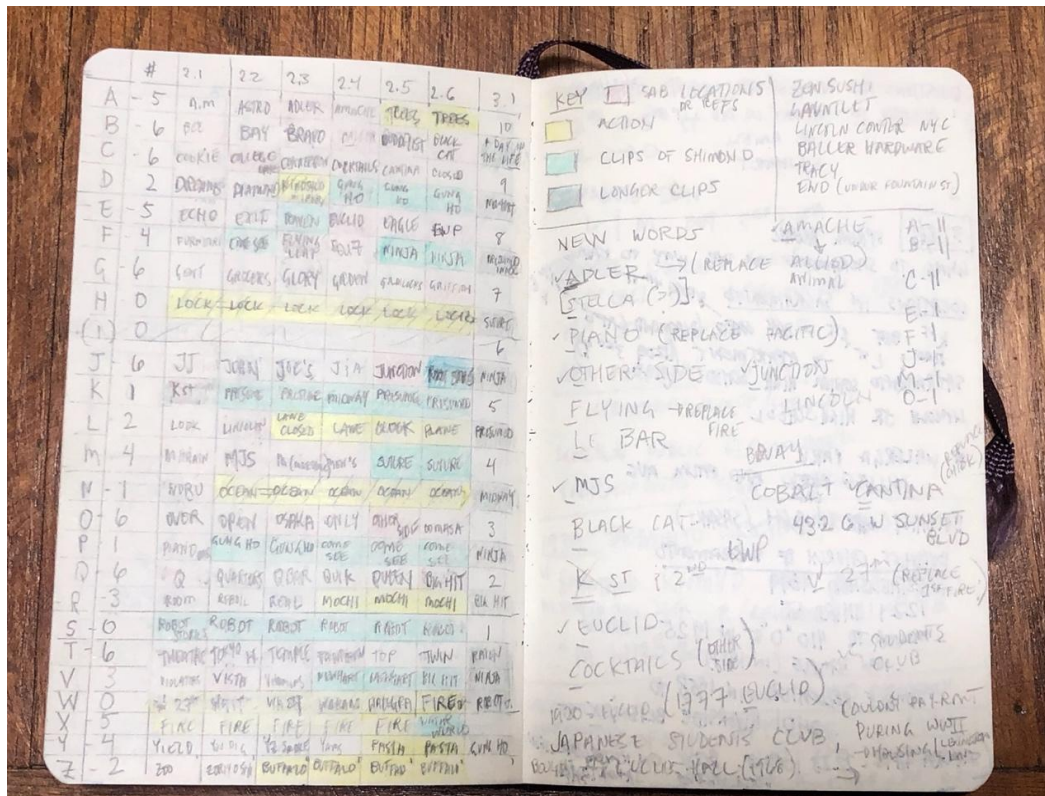
extricating and rearranging information that is or can be easily known, Takemoto reshapes the viewer's intake of these materials.

Figure 17 shows an image from Takemoto's sketchbook, as they meticulously puzzled together the placement of each frame. The left-hand column displays the alphabet, from A to Z, and the top row shows their different version of the alphabet in order—2.1, 2.2, 2.3, and so on.<sup>248</sup> There is a color-coded key on the top-right page: pink is a location or reference specific to Shimono; yellow is an action; turquoise is a clip of Shimono; and blue is a longer clip.<sup>249</sup> These notes show how Takemoto took up the structure and meticulously choreographed it to recode imagery of the actor.

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<sup>248</sup> The final version of *Semiotics of Sab* is not perfectly represented in this sketch. For example, the alphabet is run through five times instead of six in the final version. Additionally, in the section noted as 2.1 “W” is “W. 27<sup>th</sup>” street sign. It is coded in yellow in the sketch, but I believe it as erased and was not changed until later in the line of sequences.

<sup>249</sup> Takemoto, interview.



**Figure 17. TT Takemoto, Sketchbook images from developing *Semiotics of Sab* provided to the author courtesy of the artist. Image courtesy of the artist.**

For example, throughout Act II, images of Sab Shimono stand in for the letter “S” (Figure 18). These brief moments are when the actor is still, relaxed, and silent. The first “S” is the image described at the beginning of this chapter (see Figure 13). Second, Shimono is laying down again, but this time in the fetal position. The following three images depict Shimono sitting while riding on a bus; taking a sip from a glass bottle and resting his head; and looking down and smiling. Takemoto says in an interview:

I tried to find images of him not performing. In other words, images of him at rest or on the bus or lying back. He’s not performing and he’s not speaking, he’s not performing a stereotype. Even within the found footage, finding

moments, really brief moments, where he might not be a stereotyped character.<sup>250</sup>

These moments of rest, extrapolated from Shimono's film and television performances, evince a fight for stillness and silence, escaping active moments of stereotyping.



**Figure 18. TT Takemoto, *Semiotics of Sab* (2011). Film stills of the actor at rest captured by the author. Images courtesy of the artist.**

In editing footage for this section of *Semiotics of Sab*, Takemoto chose to place moments of stillness among the cacophony of signage rapidly passing by. I argue that these extrapolated moments of rest in *Semiotics of Sab* are a tactic of vulnerability and resistance that tease out points when Shimono could be imagined as not acting for the script but allowing glimmers of himself to be present, even in roles of embodied stereotyping. At the same time, as in Ono's piece, do Takemoto's edits of Shimono in *Semiotics of Sab* invite complicity for the viewer?

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<sup>250</sup> Takemoto.

*Public–Private Messages and Writing in Code*

As the signs and objects continue to move on and off the screen, words such as “Theater,” “Lincoln,” “Adler,” and “Amache” pop up (Figure 19). Theater is a connection to Shimono’s career as a stage and screen actor. “Lincoln” connects to the Repertory Theater of Lincoln Center, but not because of a performance there. Quite the contrary, this sign refers to Shimono’s and others’ 1972 legal suit against the theater because of their discriminatory hiring practices.<sup>251</sup> “Adler” refers to Stella Adler, who trained Shimono as an actor.<sup>252</sup> Amache references the concentration camp where Sab Shimono was held as a child and, in more recent news, the Podcast *Order 9066* (named for the executive order) and narrated by Shimono and fellow actor and former incarcerated person Pat Suzuki.

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<sup>251</sup> Takemoto, “Interview with Sab Shimono | Hyphen Magazine”; “Sab Shimono, Etc. v. Repertory Theater of Lincoln Center, Page 1” (University of Southern California Digital Library (USC.DL), 2013), <https://doi.org/10.25549/KADA-C126-18733>.

<sup>252</sup> *Sab Shimono: Acting “As If.”*





**Figure 19. TT Takemoto, *Semiotics of Sab* (2011). Film stills of key words captured by the author. Images courtesy of the artist.**

As a researcher, I have access to some of this information through public record, and some of it is based on my conversations with Takemoto, who has spoken with Shimono.<sup>253</sup> Describing their interactions, Takemoto said that Shimono only wanted to do a verbal interview with the artist and that this interview was published in *Hyphen* magazine. Takemoto showed *Semiotics of Sab* in Los Angeles, and Shimono attended the screening but left before the start of the question-and-answer period. Takemoto brought their sketchbook to the event to show Shimono the structure of the film in a concrete way (Figure 20). For example, “the diner, ‘d’ for diner, [Shimono’s] parents had [a] diner in Sacramento.”<sup>254</sup> Takemoto speaks of the conundrum they faced, asking “How does one create a piece that is specifically about and for someone that also respects their privacy? [...] Even if Sab didn't get all of the

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<sup>253</sup> Takemoto, “Interview with Sab Shimono | Hyphen Magazine.”

<sup>254</sup> Takemoto, interview.



references that I was making to his life, it was a way of trying to gesture very specifically towards him while putting something in public that also maintains his privacy.”<sup>255</sup> This is a balance that, I argue, Takemoto achieves. The artist embeds specific biographical details with Shimono’s own images, while allowing for those images to be understood in new contexts that Takemoto facilitates through editing.

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<sup>255</sup> Takemoto.



Figure 20. TT Takemoto, Sketchbook images from developing *Semiotics of Sab*, Image courtesy of the artist.

Citing Marsden Hartley, Charles Demuth, Jasper Johns, and Robert Rauschenberg, Takemoto talks about “needing a ‘queer decoder ring’ to understand some of the queer coded imagery” in art history.<sup>256</sup> Rauschenberg’s piece *Yoicks* (1954) is a thickly layered painting of newsprint, fabric, and oil paint. Underneath the layers of paint, there are barely legible lines from comic strips with phrases peeking through such as “five foot ten, hair sandy, eyes blue, 160 lbs. You are not as guilty as you think.”<sup>257</sup> Jonathan Katz writes, “Rauschenberg [appropriates] a wide range of public texts and causes them to bear private codes and personal meanings alongside their ‘public’ ones.”<sup>258</sup> Famous now for their code making, Rauschenberg’s and Jasper Johns’s artworks operated on several levels of knowingness and intimacy: the general audience, who can see a flag is a flag, for example; the queer audience, who may glean sexually queer content; and each other, an intimate dialogue of two.<sup>259</sup>

Bandannas can also be used as private–public code for gay men, as seen in Hal Fischer’s project *Gay Semiotics* (1977) and William Friedkin’s film *Cruising* (1980). Fischer translates coded imagery of men in the Castro district of San Francisco in the 1970s. As Julia Bryan-Wilson describes, “*Gay Semiotics* is an

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<sup>256</sup> Jordana Moore Saggese et al., “Beyond the Numbers Game: Diversity in Theory and Practice,” *Art Journal* 75, no. 1 (January 2, 2016): 102, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043249.2016.1171552>.

<sup>257</sup> Jonathan D. Katz, David C. Ward, and Jennifer. Sichel, *Hide/Seek : Difference and Desire in American Portraiture*, Difference and Desire in American Portraiture (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, in association with the National Portrait Gallery, 2010), 41.

<sup>258</sup> Jonathan Katz, “Lovers and Divers: Interpictorial Dialog in the Work of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg,” *Frauen Kunst Wissenschaft* 25 (June 1998): 23.

<sup>259</sup> Katz, Ward, and Sichel, *Hide/Seek : Difference and Desire in American Portraiture*, 42.

attempt to map some of the discourse of structuralism onto the visual codes of male queer life in the Castro.”<sup>260</sup> Fischer’s project is a collection of black-and-white portraits with texts annotating the signs conveyed through posture, dress, and accessories. For example, a photograph framing two buttocks in jeans side by side, is partially overlaid with text that decodes the placement and color of handkerchiefs placed in back pockets (Figure 21).<sup>261</sup> *Cruising* is a horror film about a police officer, played by Al Pacino, who is investigating a murder in the Bondage Discipline/Domination Sadism Masochism (BDSM) club scene.<sup>262</sup> As Pacino’s character, Steve Burns, attempts to acclimate to gay club culture, he enters a convenience store and asks the clerk to describe the meanings of the different bandannas, for example, “a light-blue hanky in your left-back pockets means you want a blow job, right pocket means you give one.”<sup>263</sup> Burns is not part of the culture and needs a person with insider knowledge to decode the signs for him.

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<sup>260</sup> Julia Bryan-Wilson, “Gay Semiotics Revisited,” *Aperture*, no. 218 (2015): 34.

<sup>261</sup> Wendy Red Star also provides symbolic interpretations in her series *1880 Crow Peace Delegation* (2014). Julia Bryan-Wilson, “Wendy Red Star: Crow Hands, Crow Objects,” *Aperture* 240 (Fall 2020); Wendy Red Star and Emily Moazami, “People of the Earth: Wendy Red Star in Conversation with Emily Moazami,” *Aperture (San Francisco, Calif.)*, no. 240 (2020): 22–31; Wendy Red Star, “1880 Crow Peace Delegation,” Wendy Red Star, accessed April 29, 2023, <https://www.wendyredstar.com/1880-crow-peace-delegation>.

<sup>262</sup> Eugenio Ercolani and Marcus Stiglegger, *Cruising* (Place of publication not identified: Liverpool University Press, 2020).

<sup>263</sup> *Cruising (1980) Al Pacino Learns about Handkerchiefs*, 2021, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_9p26ZkoQIg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_9p26ZkoQIg).



Figure 21. Hal Fischer, *Gay Semiotics* (1977). © Hal Fischer. Image courtesy of the artist.

*Semiotics of Sab* sits among the works of Rauschenberg, Johns, Fischer, and Friedkin, but although Shimono is gay, the thematic annotations and private references in the film are most explicitly about his biography and role as an Asian American actor. Additionally, the references are not all salacious or taboo; some are simply thoughtful, showing care and attention. I argue that making private spaces does not have to be exclusively done in the face of explicit phobias or racism, but can also be a practice of care, respect, community building, and kinship creation. Takemoto suggests that the piece is a kind of love letter: “For me, it’s also a love letter to Sab that is also coded language. I think of it as coded language in that some

of the things I'm showing might resonate for him, or at least, I think I'm sending little smoke signals to him over there; it's a poem to him."<sup>264</sup>

*Creating Kinships*

"There is no one law of kinship, no one structure of kinship, no one language of kinship, and no one prospect of kinship. Rather, the feeling of kinship belongs to everyone."

—David Eng<sup>265</sup>

Soon after Takemoto came out as queer to their parents, their family went to dinner at a restaurant called The Flying Leap. If you arrive early for dinner, you can go to a bar called The Other Side, a piano bar in the gay part of Silver Lake in Los Angeles, a bar frequented by Sab Shimono. That evening, some of Takemoto's friends joined them, and as they sat together, Takemoto's father noticed someone he recognized. The artist quotes their father: "Oh, that guy over there. I think I recognize him; I went to school with him, and I think he's a movie star. Yeah, he went to Cal, he was a few years older than me."<sup>266</sup> Later, Takemoto was writing credits for a film and called their father to confirm whether the man in the bar was Sab Shimono. Indeed, it was, and the coincidences continued. While Takemoto made the film *Warning Shot*

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<sup>264</sup> Takemoto.

<sup>265</sup> David L. Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy* (Durham [NC]: Duke University Press, 2010), 198.

<sup>266</sup> Takemoto, interview.

(2016), they visited their family in Southern California and asked their father to participate in the making of the film, to play the subject, James H. Wakasa. For the filmed performance, some of the images Takemoto's father played were based on Shimono's role in *Come See the Paradise* (dir. Alan Parker, 199).<sup>267</sup> Eventually, Takemoto interviewed Shimono, and Takemoto's father was able to meet him. Sab Shimono is folded into Takemoto family history.

I suggest that Takemoto's dedicated and meticulous art-making practice is an act of care, community building, and queer kinship making. *Semiotics of Sab* builds intergenerational legacies for queer Asian American kinship that stretches the bounds of heteronormative generational frameworks. As Julianne Pidduck writes, "kinship describes a powerful, provisional, and affectively charged tissue of relations connecting subjects across time and space."<sup>268</sup> Like Pidduck, David Eng describes "the feeling of kinship—the collective, communal, and consensual affiliation as well as the psychic, affective, and visceral bonds."<sup>269</sup> Both writing within queer and

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<sup>267</sup> *Warning Shot* (2016) grapples with the murder of Japanese American, James H. Wakasa, days before he was released from being incarcerated in the United States internment camps. Takemoto uses the Rashomon effect to imagine different and conflicting records and memories of the event. *Come See the Paradise* (dir. Alan Parker, 1990) is a feature film about Japanese incarceration during WWII. Shimono plays a grandfather figure.

<sup>268</sup> Julianne Pidduck, "Queer Kinship and Ambivalence: Video Autoethnographies by Jean Carlomusto and Richard Fung," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 15, no. 3 (January 1, 2009): 441.

<sup>269</sup> Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship*, 2.

David Eng writes about queer liberalism and global capital's effect on queer and racial kinship structures. Introducing the text through a discussion of teaching an Asian American literature class and several students "coming out" to him not as queer, but as adoptees.

racialized contexts, Pidduck and Eng divorce kinship from heterosexual familial models, suggesting that the queer form is a much more expansive network of finding each other and connecting.<sup>270</sup> Noting how traditional and heterosexual family structures often are sites of policing sexuality, Pidduck argues “that queer theory, activism, [and] everyday life . . . make strange the grammar of kinship, potentially rearticulating the membership of family.”<sup>271</sup> Long Bui expands this to home or membership, both to domestic spaces and nation, encompassing the complexities of citizenship.<sup>272</sup> Queer kinship offers the potential for dynamic approaches and understandings of support systems in social-cultural bonds. Takemoto’s making of *Semiotics of Sab* creates another kinship connection through shared queer and Japanese American identities.

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<sup>270</sup> Concerned by the “erasure of queer difference” in the film *The Kids Are All Right* (dir. Lisa Cholodenko, 2010), Walters suggests: “We need to insist that our families might just be radically different . . . in ways that upend heterosexist business as usual and provide a template for imagining kinship in the future tense.” Suzanna Danuta Walters, “The Kids Are All Right but the Lesbians Aren’t: Queer Kinship in US Culture,” *Sexualities* 15, no. 8 (2012): 930, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460712459311>.

Analyzing data about trans\* students in college, authors study “kinship as a strategy for . . . success” and conclude that there is a deep need for universities to make space for this. Z Nicolazzo et al., “An Exploration of Trans\* Kinship as a Strategy for Student Success,” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 30, no. 3 (March 16, 2017): 305, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2016.1254300>.

<sup>271</sup> Julianne Pidduck, “Queer Kinship and Ambivalence: Video Autoethnographies by Jean Carlomusto and Richard Fung,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 15, no. 3 (January 1, 2009): 441, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-2008-031>.

<sup>272</sup> Long T Bui, “Breaking into the Closet: Negotiating the Queer Boundaries of Asian American Masculinity and Domesticity,” *Culture, Society and Masculinities* 6, no. 2 (2014): 146.



### Act III: Sab's Asian American Masculinity

“We were still put into a pocket of foreigners or aliens, or victims or victimizers, we were rarely the hero.”

—Sab Shimono<sup>273</sup>

The countdown at the end of *Semiotics of Sab* draws on the scene in *Suture* when the psychiatrist tries to hypnotize the protagonist to retrieve his memories. The footage in Act III proceeds from Shimono's earliest characters to the most recent, emulating the arc of his career (Figure 22).<sup>274</sup> What the characters say and how they say it begins with exaggerated Asian accents and culminates with scenes on the brink of death. The calming countdown contrasts with lines from various roles, several of which embody Asian stereotypes in film. The first of the ten clips presents a man in a tie and cardigan, whose line is difficult to understand. Then, a man in a bowler hat and suit throws his head back and says, “Ah ha ha, I laugh.” Next, a disgruntled worker in medical scrubs says to someone slightly off screen, “Read the fucking report.” Following that, a well-groomed man in a suit says, “Dodge. Dodgy.” Out of their original contexts, these first four clips show a fluctuation of language use—a menagerie of accents and speech patterns in the first three clips, and then vocabulary practice in the fourth.

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<sup>273</sup> Sab Shimono: *Acting “As If.”*

<sup>274</sup> Takemoto, interview.



**Figure 22. TT Takemoto, *Semiotics of Sab* (2011). Film stills from various scenes captured by the author. Images courtesy of the artist.**

### *Performing Accents*

*Sab Shimono: Acting ‘As If’* (2017) is a recently released and rarely screened documentary Takemoto made on the eve of Shimono’s eightieth birthday in which Amy Sueyoshi and TT Takemoto interviewed Shimono about his life and career.<sup>275</sup> Shimono discusses going to New York in 1961 and training with Stella Adler, who also worked with Warren Beatty and Marlon Brando. Following intensive training with Adler, before his first performance, singing “Get Me to the Church on Time”

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<sup>275</sup> When I began interviewing Takemoto for this dissertation in 2021 *Sab Shimono: Acting ‘As If’* (2017) was an unreleased documentary that Takemoto shared with me privately. In 2023, it was uploaded to Takemoto’s list of available work on the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre as available to purchase. At the time of writing, the film has only been screened twice, at Reelout Queer Film and Video Festival, Kingston, Ontario (2023) and Japanese American National Museum, Los Angeles (2017). Takemoto, interview, July 12, 2023; TT Takemoto, “Sab Shimono: Acting ‘As If,’” CFMDC Collections, 2017, <https://collections.cfmcdc.org/titles/5193>.

from *My Fair Lady*, Adler asked Shimono to perform the song with a Japanese accent. Shimono recalls in the documentary film, “the song has nothing to do with being an Asian, you’re throwing me back into being a stereotype!” He continues, “the reason I was going to Stella Adler is because I wanted to be an actor so well trained that I would be cast in Shakespeare, and all of the American great pieces.”<sup>276</sup>

Relenting, Shimono called his father, who was born in Japan, and asked him to say “get me to the church on time” so that Shimono could learn the accent. Then, pushing the typecasting even further, Adler asked Shimono to wear kabuki makeup for the performance as well.<sup>277</sup> Shimono was infuriated, but for this, his first public performance, he used the requested accent and wore the makeup. The production was a huge success, foreshadowing Shimono’s career. The actor reflects, “my papa’s accent has been in a lot of things. I could count on my fingers how many times I didn’t have an accent.”<sup>278</sup>

A linguistics study conducted in 2013 comparing audience responses to American, Asian, and Brazilian accents concluded that Asian accents were rated lowest in all assessment categories, even intelligence, which works against the model minority or nerd stereotype.<sup>279</sup> To accent or not to accent is a theme in Aziz Ansari’s

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<sup>276</sup> *Sab Shimono: Acting “As If.”*

<sup>277</sup> Takemoto grapples with this costumed stereotype with their character *Björk - Geisha*.

<sup>278</sup> *Sab Shimono: Acting “As If.”*

<sup>279</sup> Carina Bauman, “Social Evaluation of Asian Accented English,” *Selected Papers from NWAV 41* 19, no. 2 (2013). The categories were attractiveness (friendly/unfriendly, dishonest/honest, rude/polite), status (organized/disorganized, lower class/upper class, intelligent/unintelligent), and dynamism (shy/talkative, unsure/confident, energetic/lazy).

Netflix series, *Master of None* (created by Ansari and Alan Yang in 2015), which centers on the life of an Indian American actor in New York City. Ansari's character's experience is like Shimono's in this way. Shilpa Davé says, "to perform the accent means success and recognition in standard Hollywood narratives, but it also denies the individuality, variety of experiences, and diversity of the actors who long to challenge the preexisting character stereotype."<sup>280</sup> To perform an accent is to get the job and the career, but in doing so, the actor is participating in a self-Orientalizing lexicon. Writing about Indian American actors, Davé names this performed accent "brown voice": "The practice of brown voice is a form of cultural inflection: a variation of cultural citizenship that reinforces a static, racialized position for South Asian Americans regardless of their status or occupation in the United States."<sup>281</sup> Davé discusses this as a fixed representation of South Asian people on screen. Though Davé's focus is Indian American accents, the idea can be extended to the accents of Asian Americans generally.<sup>282</sup>

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<sup>280</sup> Shilpa Davé, "Racial Accents, Hollywood Casting, and Asian American Studies," *Cinema Journal* 56, no. 3 (2017): 142, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2017.0030>.

<sup>281</sup> Shilpa. Davé, *Indian Accents Brown Voice and Racial Performance in American Television and Film*, Asian American Experience (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 41.

<sup>282</sup> Sheng-mei Ma writes about Gong Li's character in *Hannibal Rising* (dir. Peter Webber, 2007), rousing Hannibal Lecter saying, "It's All Light!", "the proverbial transposition of "r" and "l" for the sake of stereotyping. Ma says, "Gong Li's one-liner recalls the painful memory of Asian Americans born and raised in the USA filling in the Asian charters who "Speekee Engrishee," who, in racist jokes, repeat the order of fried rice as "flied lice." "Sheng-mei Ma, *Sinophone-Anglophone Cultural Duet* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017), 87–89, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-58033-3>.

Rey Chow shows how the dialectic of “accent” is used to situate the native speaker as especially natural or the default:

Because the native speaker is taught to occupy an uncorrupted origination point, learning a language as a nonnative speaker can only be an exercise in woeful approximation. The failure to sound completely like the native speaker is thus given a pejorative name: “(foreign) accent.” Having an accent is, in other words, the symptom precisely of discontinuity—an incomplete assimilation, a botched attempt at eliminating another tongue’s competing co-presence.<sup>283</sup>

Embodying discontinuity is key; the accented speaker’s performance props up the “native speaker” and, in my reading, the native speaker stands in for the intended or presumed viewer. *Semiotics of Sab* presents additional discontinuity. By divorcing Shimono’s performances from their original contexts, Takemoto creates a supplementary embodied representation of the actor. By removing the complete contexts of the source media, the scripted racism and stereotyping are more jolting and alarming; they are no longer naturalized or accepted by the surrounding characters and settings. In the same stroke, we see numerous personas, all coming from one body, collapsing into one person, showing both dynamic individualism and the far reach of racist stereotypes. Shimono becomes the focus, not simply for his accents and costumes, but for his face, his movements, and the sound of his voice.

Glen Mimura suggests that there is a fluctuation within Asian representation, “vacillating between threatening foreigner or immigrant and conciliatory model

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<sup>283</sup> Rey Chow, *Not Like a Native Speaker: On Language as a Postcolonial Experience* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 58.

minority.”<sup>284</sup> The next three clips in Act III demonstrate the former, continuing to review stereotypes Shimono played (Figure 23). The next character is a man with long hair loosely falling onto his shoulders, a dark mustache, and a grave expression saying, “I want her to suffer,” followed by drumbeats in the distance. Next, a man in a suit and wearing glasses speaks under oath in a courtroom and says passionately, “You accuse me Mr. Stern!” Next, Shimono sits in a flying airplane wearing an aviator hat, speaking into the radio, “Attack in squadron order!” Although Mimura’s analysis isn’t explicitly associated with masculinity, I suggest that this oscillation between threatening and conciliatory connects to Asian American masculinity.

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<sup>284</sup> Glen M. Mimura, *Ghostlife of Third Cinema: Asian American Film and Video* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), xvii.



**Figure 23. TT Takemoto, *Semiotics of Sab* (2011). Film stills from the countdown in the third section captured by the author. Images courtesy of the artist.**

*Asian American Masculinity*

In the aforementioned linguistic study of Asian accents, male-voiced people with Asian accents ranked lower than their female Asian-accented counterparts,

situating the male Asian voice at the lowest rung of reception.<sup>285</sup> Allen Walzem notes that the years leading up to the new millennium saw more Asian American representation on screen: “to varying degrees and through various means, Hollywood has denied these genuine box-office stars something that it never denies body-action heroes: full blown masculine virility, especially in relation to European American women.”<sup>286</sup> Nishime writes about Bruce Lee’s famed Asian male persona: “Bruce Lee’s films occupy an iconic but deeply ambivalent place for many Asian American audiences . . . the figure of Bruce Lee frequently moves from icon to stereotype.”<sup>287</sup> Echoing this characteristic of oscillation described by Mimura and Nishime, Richard Fung writes of the Asian American gay man: “he is sometimes dangerous, sometimes friendly, but almost always characterized by a desexualized Zen asceticism.”<sup>288</sup> On one hand, this oscillation could be read as expansive, but it occurs within specifically constructed tropes largely prescribed through roles played by Asian actors in Hollywood.

In *Semiotics of Sab*, Shimono reads as a masculine person of East Asian descent. His identity as a gay man is private and not explicitly visualized in the original sources or in Takemoto’s film. In other projects, Takemoto queers the source imagery with editing. This is something they do in *Looking for Jiro* (2011), zooming

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<sup>285</sup> Bauman, “Social Evaluation of Asian Accented English.”

<sup>286</sup> Walzem, “Asian Masculinity and Contemporary Hollywood Film,” 1.

<sup>287</sup> Nishime, “Reviving Bruce,” 121.

<sup>288</sup> Richard Fung, “Looking for My Penis: The Eroticized Asian in Gay Video Porn,” in *A Companion to Asian American Studies*, ed. Kent A. Ono (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2007), 235–53, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470996928.ch15>.



in on a man's bicep, for example. Similarly, in *Sworded Love* (2018), Takemoto employs a montage technique to create an imagined romantic narrative between two male protagonists. The edits are explicitly queer—for example, cropping the footage to focus on a nude and sweaty upper body. In *Semiotics of Sab* the absence of explicit queerness or sexuality nods back to code making and access for different viewers.

Writing about Chinese men immigrating to the United States, Lisa Lowe explains that, because of racist and sexist laws in their new country, these immigrants were unable to form family units and they worked in “feminized” jobs.<sup>289</sup> This history is at the root of the emasculating of Asian American men in US culture.<sup>290</sup> Asian men in Hollywood are often paired with a white male counterpart, causing the former to serve as the “other,” which also results in their emasculation. Although emasculation and being feminized are two different statuses, they both push a person labeled as such out of the gendered and sexual societal norms. Fung's analysis shows a clear pattern that the Asian male subjects are objectified for the pleasure of the white male viewer, and he connects the lack of sexuality to the lack of virile masculinity.<sup>291</sup>

Several of Shimono's highlighted roles are troubling in their first iterations. By moving them into the present and remixing them, Takemoto disrupts the original

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<sup>289</sup> Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 11.

<sup>290</sup> Notably, in *A View from the Bottom*, Tan Hoang Nguyen separates emasculation from women and femininity. Tan Hoang Nguyen, *A View from the Bottom: Asian American Masculinity and Sexual Representation*, Perverse Modernities (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

<sup>291</sup> Fung, “Looking for My Penis.”

attempt at normalization to highlight the problematic contexts. They put them back together to create a profound and multifaceted portrait of Shimono. Crystal Parikh writes about queer Asian American masculinity:

in considering the incommensurability of race, gender, nation, and sexuality, we find the axes of difference that forestalls the suturing of the Asian-American masculine self. [I reread] this incomplete suturing, not as a failure, but rather as an opening—as a possible site for emergent agency and identification.<sup>292</sup>

Citing Bruce's Lee untimely death, Nishime suggests that Lee's image became a "fixed stereotype reifying an opposition between the masculine hard body of the Asian martial artist and the abjected ambiguously gendered body of the Asian male lead."<sup>293</sup> Like Davis's and Felton-Dansky's readings of Rosler's feminist semiotics, this cultural fixity that Nishime suggests is exactly what *Semiotics of Sab* disrupts for Sab Shimono. In Takemoto's film, Shimono's final moments on screen are that of performed death, which is preceded by disturbances of social-cultural imagery.

As the countdown from ten continues, the images move from violence in the previous set to a sequence of moments just before death. The character seen a few clips back, with long hair, a mustache, and dressed in a decorative robe, reverses roles; rather than serving as a threat, he is threatened (Figure 24). On the ground with a fearful expression, he says, "Go ahead, finish me." This is followed by a view of a man, almost completely disrobed and in a church, singing, and poised to shove a knife into his own chest. Lastly, the character points a gun at the screen and pulls the

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<sup>292</sup> Parikh, Crystal. "'The Most Outrageous Masquerade': Queering Asian-American Masculinity." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 48, no. 4 (2002): 860.

<sup>293</sup> Nishime, "Reviving Bruce," 121.

trigger while saying, “the days and hours I’ve spent wondering what would happen to me.” This collection of phrases encapsulates performances of perilous moments in which the characters teeter on the precipice death. The viewer does not see the moment of death but is asked to imagine it.



**Figure 24.** TT Takemoto, *Semiotics of Sab* (2011). Film stills from the countdown in the third section captured by the author. Images courtesy of the artist.

As the countdown ends, a gunshot sound ricochets through the soundtrack. There is a fuzzy, chaotic clip, and then the long-haired man with the mustache returns. We view him from above, screaming, looking up, arms outstretched above his

head, toward the viewer. As the sound of his scream reverberates, there is a moment of cloudiness on the screen, and then the film settles on an elderly man who lies on a slab of rock in a river, perfectly still. The film zooms in on his face. This is the same face of the film's beginning, first "S" for Sab Shimono. Filling the screen, his features move a bit, then his eyes close and his head drops to the side, suggesting perpetual stillness, death. The screen goes white and a dedication to Shimono appears on a black screen.

Writing about death in film, Asbjørn Grønstad notes the inherent fiction of these scenes: "the representation of death and violence is what makes us most easily aware of the amimetic ontology of film fiction. Why this is the case has to do with the inaccessibility of the phenomena in question."<sup>294</sup> Anyone living, watching a film, has not experienced firsthand the completion of death, nor has the actor performing these moments. Grouping these climactic moments together highlights the fiction of performance. This framing of film can be extended to representations of personas, especially those conveying stereotypes. As with representations of death, film is fiction, a simulacrum, when it comes to representations of people.

Sab Shimono is still very much alive, but his characters will outlive him. A sought-after actor, working alongside people like Angela Lansbury, Harrison Ford, and Dennis Quaid, his visage has played a significant part in shaping US visual culture's intake of Asian American men. *Semiotics of Sab* captures a complexity—it

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<sup>294</sup> Asbjørn Grønstad, *Transfigurations : Violence, Death and Masculinity in American Cinema*, Film Culture in Transition (Amsterdam, Netherlands: Amsterdam University Press, 2008), 16.

celebrates this successful and prolific Asian American actor while simultaneously critiquing the typecasting perpetuated in these performances. Bringing these performances together dislodges their representational weight, making room to imagine beyond what we are presented. Seeing Shimono side by side with himself shows that he is acting, often as caricatures, and hopefully dislodges the roles from their impact on shaping our perceived reality.

### **Conclusion**

Today Sab Shimono continues his career as an actor. If Takemoto were to make Act I of *Semiotics of Sab* now, they would add eight roles: DANIEL NAKAMOTO, DR. DYE, EMPEROR, GRANDPA PARK, ICHIRO YAMASHIRO, KAZU, WEDNELL, and WILD BILL. Creating this list made me pause and ask: Does *Semiotics of Sab* run the risk of being reductive? As individual sections, each act could independently be read as reenforcing the very stereotypes that the film disarms and rejects. But, instead, the three acts work together, setting the stage, providing context, and then reformulating that context to make something personal, private, and individual. Sab Shimono, an Asian American born and raised in California, began his stage career in 1966, just two years after the Civil Rights Act was passed in the United States. Although this was over half a century ago, discrimination based on race (and myriad other identities and characteristics) continues to proliferate today.

My dissertation prospectus was approved in May 2020, just months after the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. Led by the president at the time, the spread of Covid-19 was accompanied by racist violence against Asian Americans in the United States, violence that continues to be fueled by a dark political climate. This violence based on perceived identities is happening at the same time as Asian American (and Canadian) actors are finally be hired in leading roles.

Although these were not Shimono's roles, I would like to add three more names to the list: HOWIE, SHANG-CHI/SHUAN, and WAYMOND WONG. These names are from films made in 2021 and 2022, and in them, male Asian actors played characters who are breaking stereotypes in their own right. "Howie" is comedian Bowen Yang's character in *Fire Island* (dir. Andrew Ahn, 2022), a romantic comedy about gay friends who go on vacation together. "Shang-Chi/Shuan" is Simu Lee's leading role as a Marvel superhero in *Shang-Chi and the Legend of Ten Rings* (dir. Destin Daniel Creton, 2021). "Waymond Wong" is Ke Huy Quan's character in *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (dir. Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert, 2022). Quan's Oscar-winning portrayal of Wong depicts him as a father who is goofy, affable, family focused, and a sci-fi character who hops between universes. These characters are not in a supporting "buddy" role, nor are they given limited and simplified qualities—the martial arts guy, the spiritual guy, the angry guy. Instead, these characters are dynamic and multilayered, and they are not included simply to serve others.

In this chapter I have argued that *Semiotics of Sab* dislodges Sab Shimono's past performances from the lexicon of Hollywood stereotypes assigned to Asian American male actors. Through analysis of art-historical and sociocultural situating, I show how TT Takemoto formally positions *Semiotics of Sab* within the dialectic of structuralist film, communicating through code and kinship making. Three sets of fragments of the actor create a visual culture archive amid the Hollywood record. This visual record strives to commemorate Sab Shimono the person.



## CHAPTER THREE

### *EVER WANTING (FOR MARGARET CHUNG): VISUAL VOCABULARIES*

#### FOR AN AMERICAN HERO

##### **Introduction**

Projected onto the wall of the Montalvo Arts Center in Saratoga, California, two female figures overlay a blank white surface, spanning almost two stories (Figure 25). Adjacent to archways and balconies, in the film, a woman with long dark hair and a closely cropped fringe looks downward. Behind her, a woman with blonde, tightly curled hair walks up and nestles in close. Seconds later, enormous poppies quickly emerge from the ground, defying time. Next, a shark swims away, ominous. A montage of densely layered and colored images changes rapidly, revealing patterns punctuated by bright-white cuts and culminating in an explosion, followed by a calm of layered imagery.



**Figure 25. TT Takemoto, *Ever Wanting (for Margaret Chung)*, 2021, 5 min. 55 sec., Loop hand-processed 16 mm, 35 mm film emulsion, ink, paint, glue, tape, found footage, digital video, dimensions variable. Installation view of the film projected on Villa Montalvo on July 15, 2022, during the Marcus Festival on the opening night of *Claiming Space: Refiguring the Body in Landscape* outdoor exhibition at Montalvo Arts Center. Image courtesy of the artist.**

On this evening in Summer 2022, TT Takemoto's *Ever Wanting (for Margaret Chung)* (2021) was projected onto Villa Montalvo during Takemoto's time as an artist in residence at the Montalvo Arts Center.<sup>295</sup> This experimental film is dedicated to Margaret Chung (1889–1959), the first Chinese American female doctor, a staunch

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<sup>295</sup> At this screening in addition to *Ever Wanting (for Margaret Chung)* (2021), Takemoto also screened *On the Line* (2018).

US patriot, and adopted “mother” to over 1,000 soldiers. As an unmarried, lesbian, Chinese American, Chung never quite “fit” in her various social circles.<sup>296</sup> Originally constructed as part of James Duval Phelan’s (1861–1930) estate, the building was donated to the California state parks system when Phelan died. A US senator and Mayor of San Francisco, Phelan actively and unabashedly propagated anti-Asian and anti-Asian American hate in the United States.<sup>297</sup> In a failed 1920 reelection campaign, his slogan was “Keep California White.”<sup>298</sup> Pushing against this legacy is a central tenet of the Montalvo Arts Center artists’ residency. As a case in point, in Summer 2022 the art center organized *Claiming Space: Refiguring the Body in Landscape*, a sculptural exhibition that grappled with the site’s history.<sup>299</sup> Though not

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<sup>296</sup> Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, “Was Mom Chung A Sister Lesbian? Asian American Gender Experimentation and Interracial Homoeroticism,” *Journal of Women’s History* 13, no. 1 (2001): 58–82; Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, *Doctor Mom Chung of the Fair-Haired Bastards: The Life of a Wartime Celebrity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, interview by Kate Korroch, Zoom, May 24, 2023.

<sup>297</sup> Brian Niiya, “James D. Phelan | Densho Encyclopedia,” Densho Encyclopedia, accessed May 5, 2023, <https://encyclopedia.densho.org/James%20D.%20Phelan/>; James D. Phelan, “Why the Chinese Should Be Excluded,” *The American Yawp Reader*, 1901, <https://www.americanyawp.com/reader/19-american-empire/james-d-phelan-why-the-chinese-should-be-excluded-1901/#:~:text=The%20Chinese%20may%20be%20good,%5BSource%3A%20James%20D.;> Robert E. Hennings, “James D. Phelan and the Woodrow Wilson Anti-Oriental Statement of May 3, 1912,” *California Historical Society Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (December 1, 1963): 291–300.

<sup>298</sup> Montalvo Arts Center, “Claiming Space: Refiguring the Body in Landscape,” *Montalvo Arts Center* (blog), accessed May 8, 2023, <https://montalvoarts.org/experience/arts/art-on-the-grounds/claiming-space/>.

<sup>299</sup> *Claiming Space: Refiguring the Body in Landscape* was at Montalvo Arts Center from July 15, 2022, to January 15, 2023. Artists included Wanxin Zhang, Gertrude Farquharson Boyle Kanno, Alison Saar, Hank Willis Thomas, Artist Unknown, Stephen De Staebler, Oliver Lee Jackson, and Francesco Fabi-Altini. Montalvo Arts Center; Takemoto, interview, February 6, 2023.

part of the original programming, Takemoto's *Ever Wanting* was projected onto the estate for the opening evening of the exhibition.<sup>300</sup>

Complexities abound within this display. As stated, Phelan was anti-Asian American and especially prejudiced against people of Japanese descent.<sup>301</sup> Chung likewise held disdain for Japanese nationals, mirroring the xenophobia in the United States that was perpetuated by people like Phelan—racism veiled in patriotism. In a short documentary in 2019 about facets of Chung's life, Judy Tzu-Chun Wu pairs an image of the atomic bomb with a quotation of Chung speaking to one of her adopted-son soldiers: "Bring me back seven Jap scalps. Get seven for yourself" (Figure 26).<sup>302</sup> With the invocation of the derogatory term for Japanese people and murder through scalping, this short quotation extends the parlance of American violence beyond Chung's political and cultural moment. By using language specific to violence perpetrated on Indigenous and Native American people in the United States by white people, Chung's language exhibits not just her contemporary moment of American international conflict but also a long history of vicious racism. This thread of violence and exclusion in America is a history that directly impacted Chung as a lesbian Chinese American woman.<sup>303</sup>

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<sup>300</sup>Takemoto, interview, February 6, 2023.

<sup>301</sup> Raymond Leslie Buell, "The Development of the Anti-Japanese Agitation in the United States," *Political Science Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (1922): 605–38; *Dr. Mom Chung of the Fair-Haired Bastards*, 2019, <https://vimeo.com/351300578>.

<sup>302</sup> *Dr. Mom Chung of the Fair-Haired Bastards*, 1:38.

<sup>303</sup> Chung never explicitly claims lesbian sexuality or queer gender for herself but I follow Takemoto and Judy Tzu-Chung Wu, who have both extensively researched Chung's biography, and deduce Chung's lesbian sexuality and queer gender play based on evidence in Chung's archives as well as that of her friends and family.



**Figure 26. Judy Tzu-Chung Wu, *Dr. Mom Chung of the Fair-Haired Bastards*, 2019, 5 mins. 21 secs., digital video, dimensions variable. Still from the film captured by the author. Source: Judy Wu's Vimeo page, film provided by the filmmaker (<https://vimeo.com/351300578>).**

The stories of Margaret Chung's life hold traces of this complexity, a toggling between inclusion and exclusion, with a backstory that complicates the mass media and visual culture portrayals of the doctor.<sup>304</sup> I suggest that Takemoto's strategy of projecting the film about Chung onto Phelan's villa positions the two figures for contrast and consideration as completely disparate—a white US politician and a queer Chinese American woman—but also culpable.<sup>305</sup> Chung occupies many identities that

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<sup>304</sup> Although TT Takemoto is fourth-generation Japanese, this piece is not a personal vendetta. S/F Arts Monthly, "Queer Feminist Identity Takes the Spotlight in New Chinese Culture Center Exhibit - 7x7 Bay Area."

<sup>305</sup> Phelan's racism is explicitly documents in historical records and scholarly articles, several of which are cited in an above footnote. In addition, the exhibition curatorial statement for *Claiming Space* calls out the history of the art center's founding. "A historic property, Montalvo was originally home to politician and patron of the arts James Duval Phelan. Phelan was the first popularly elected Senator of California,

coexist in her life's story but were disparate in the sociocultural moment of her time, shifting in and out of focus.

At almost six minutes in length, the experimental film grapples with Chung's multiple identities that fade in and out of focus. TT Takemoto is a fourth-generation Japanese American, but this piece is not a personal vendetta against Chung.<sup>306</sup> The artist explains:

It's her darker side that strangely made me more empathetic to Chung as someone who is super complicated. I understand her . . . in relationship to how hard it would have been to be an Asian American queer person who wanted to do extraordinary things, but was always an outsider. She was very motivated by her desire to fit in, to be seen and celebrated, but she never gets what she wants.<sup>307</sup>

Takemoto says the artwork is not a portrait, per se, but a film from the artist's perspective made in dedication to her.<sup>308</sup> The resulting project brings forward previously ignored aspects of Chung's complexity as an individual: her lesbian sexual longing, her potential participation in drug trading, and her relationship to racism in the United States.

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active in the movement to restrict Japanese and Chinese immigration to the United States. His failed reelection campaign featured the racist slogan, "Keep California White." Montalvo's 175-acre park contains a number of neo-classical figurative allegorical sculptures and portrait busts. These works were part of Phelan's original art collection . . . *Claiming Space* is part of Montalvo Arts Center's broader institutional mission to take an honest and direct look at the ways in which it has perpetuated exclusionary practices in the past, as it works toward fostering a more inclusive, welcoming space for all." Montalvo Arts Center, "Claiming Space: Refiguring the Body in Landscape."

<sup>306</sup> S/F Arts Monthly, "Queer Feminist Identity Takes the Spotlight in New Chinese Culture Center Exhibit - 7x7 Bay Area"; Takemoto, interview, July 12, 2023.

<sup>307</sup> S/F Arts Monthly, "Queer Feminist Identity Takes the Spotlight in New Chinese Culture Center Exhibit - 7x7 Bay Area."

<sup>308</sup> Takemoto, interview, July 12, 2023.

This chapter analyzes how *Ever Wanting (for Margaret Chung)* expands upon and deviates from existing archives and visual culture presentations of Chung's life. Takemoto's approach to the video composition depicts objects and figures that build a representation of Chung through characteristics of less celebrated themes. I show how Takemoto dismantles the sanitized version of Chung's story and reveals the racist, sexist, and homophobic biases that persist in US historical narratives. Takemoto weaves representative themes of Chung's story into the fabric of twentieth-century American visual culture, history, and art, drawing out and allowing for nuance within Asian American history. I argue that *Ever Wanting* builds a counter visual vocabulary of American history that takes up previously redacted aspects of homophobia and racism in the United States. Takemoto imagines a never-ending, pent-up explosiveness that may have percolated in the lived experience of the renowned persona, Margaret Chung. The visual strategies create a language for the persistent and unyielding conflicts in relation to Chung: she was praised for being a doctor and was under investigation for being involved in drug smuggling; she was a patriotic supporter of US troops, but also wanted to enlist and was rejected; she was framed as a sexually inactive adoptive mother to over 1,000 US troops in visual culture, but archives show she desired other women; she was Chinese American, and also explicitly racist against Japanese nationals.<sup>309</sup>

In this chapter I ask the following questions: What is *Ever Wanting's* intervention in the visual culture of lesbian Asian American representations from mid-

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<sup>309</sup> Wu, interview.

twentieth-century US history? What does the piece accomplish for queer Asian American visual-culture representations? How do Takemoto's artistic methods in *Ever Wanting* grapple with the tension between what exists in the visual-culture archive and what has been ignored?

As with the previous two chapters, this chapter analyzes an artwork focused on critiquing US histories. Similar to Sab Shimono, a plethora of visual material surrounding Chung is available. But, like Jiro Onuma, parts of the story are not accounted for. *Ever Wanting (for Margaret Chung)* is a dedication to Chung's complexities, and creates a visual culture record that critiques versions of history that do not allow for complexities of individuals.

This chapter begins with a description of the artwork, which is followed by a short history of the visual culture of Margaret Chung. An understanding of depictions of Chung in visual culture is integral to explaining the full impact of *Ever Wanting* and Takemoto's refiguring of specific social contexts as such. Following that foundation, the film is analyzed according to visual strategies and historical contextualization. Two distinct formal approaches are used in the film—one light, airy, and ominous, and the other dense, layered, and cacophonous; both approaches are tied together with sound. I examine the prelude's art historical references and then describe the importance of the soundtrack and the work it does for the film. After that, I analyze how the meticulous sequencing of the film and the evolution of imagery build a dedication to the redacted aspects of Chung's persona. This is followed by an



examination of texture and color and the historical intertwining of racism and experimental films by lesbian and queer makers.

### **Experiencing *Ever Wanting (for Margaret Chung)***

*Ever Wanting* was first shown at the Chinese Culture Center (CCC) in San Francisco and was acquired by the AAM shortly thereafter (Figure 27).<sup>310</sup> At CCC the film was part of *Women: From Her to Here* (2021) and it traveled with that exhibition to WMA in Hong Kong later that year.<sup>311</sup> In 2022, *Ever Wanting* was part of an exhibition screening at Documenta15 in Kassel, Germany, a component of the AAM collection.<sup>312</sup> The film has been widely distributed and screened since it was made in 2021.<sup>313</sup> In spite of this exposure, at the time of this writing, there is no academic or in-depth critical engagement with *Ever Wanting (for Margaret Chung)*.<sup>314</sup>

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<sup>310</sup> “WOMEN 我們: From Her to Here,” CCC San Francisco, accessed June 18, 2021, <https://www.cccsf.us/women-from-her-to-here>; Chen, interview.

<sup>311</sup> “WOMEN 我們”; WMA, “Curatorial Statement – WOMEN: From Her to Here,” 2021, <http://wma.hk/women-from-her-to-here-curatorial-statment/>.

<sup>312</sup> “Practice Institute at Asian Art Museum and Chinese Culture Center of San Francisco.”

<sup>313</sup> Screenings include OUTFEST Fusion QTBIPOC Film Festival, Los Angeles; Florida Film Festival; San Francisco International Film Festival; CAAMfest, San Francisco; XPOSED Queer Film Festival, Berlin; Queer City Cinema’s Kaleidoscope: Queer Film and Performance on Tour (UK/Ireland); Central Saint Martins, London, England; Alchemy Film and Moving Image Festival, Hawick, Scotland; Queer Women of Color Film Festival, San Francisco; Festival Mix Mexico: Cine y Diversidad Sexual, Mexico City; WNDX Festival of Moving Image, Winnipeg; Festival International Signes de Nuit, Paris; Queer City Cinema’s Kaleidoscope: Queer Film and Performance on Tour (Canada); Marseille Underground Film & Music Festival; Paris College of Art; and Treize Galerie, Paris.

<sup>314</sup> A handful of sources mention *Ever Wanting* at film festivals and in the context of art exhibitions. Emily Wilson, “In This Show, ‘Queerness Becomes Something You Cannot Ignore,’” Hyperallergic, May 23, 2021,



**Figure 27. Left: TT Takemoto, *Ever Wanting (for Margaret Chung)*, 2021, dimensions variable. Right: Chen Han Sheng, *When I was a Child*, 2020. Exhibition images of *Ever Wanting* in *WOMEN 我們: From Her to Here*, at the**

<https://hyperallergic.com/645959/from-her-to-here-chinese-culture-center/>; S/F Arts Monthly, “Queer Feminist Identity Takes the Spotlight in New Chinese Culture Center Exhibit - 7x7 Bay Area”; EDGE Media Network, “Sandra Oh and Stephanie Beatriz to Be Honorees as 2022 Outfest Fusion QTBIPOC Film Festival Kicks Off,” EDGE Media Network, April 5, 2022, <https://www.edgemedianetwork.com/story.php?314406>; Queer Women of Color Media Arts Project, “Ever Wanting (For Margaret Chung) TT Takemoto,” *18th Annual International Queer Women of Color Film Festival* (blog), accessed May 9, 2023, <https://festival2022.qwocmap.org/films/ever-wanting-for-margaret-chung-tt-takemoto/>.

**Chinese Culture Center in San Francisco. Images courtesy of Chinese Culture Center of San Francisco.**

There are two versions of *Ever Wanting*, one meant to be shown on a loop in a gallery, and one intended for screenings at film festivals. The festival version has credits and does not loop; otherwise, the contents of the films are the same. While taking both iterations into account, for close analysis of the material, I use the version for festival screening. Set to an ominous electronic soundtrack, the imagery is found footage that draws on themes from Chung's life.<sup>315</sup>

The film begins with a distinct prelude; a bright-white sky is sporadically dotted by birds high above. A single bird dots a blank screen (Figure 28).<sup>316</sup> Absent for a beat, the bird circles back, flying from bottom-right to top-left. In black and white, the bird is blurry, far away, as if partially obscured by fog. The film progresses, the bird circles; vast space is intermittently interrupted by the flight trajectory crossing the screen. Eventually, other birds join in, subtly at first, then as a small, distant chorus, far above the viewer's head.

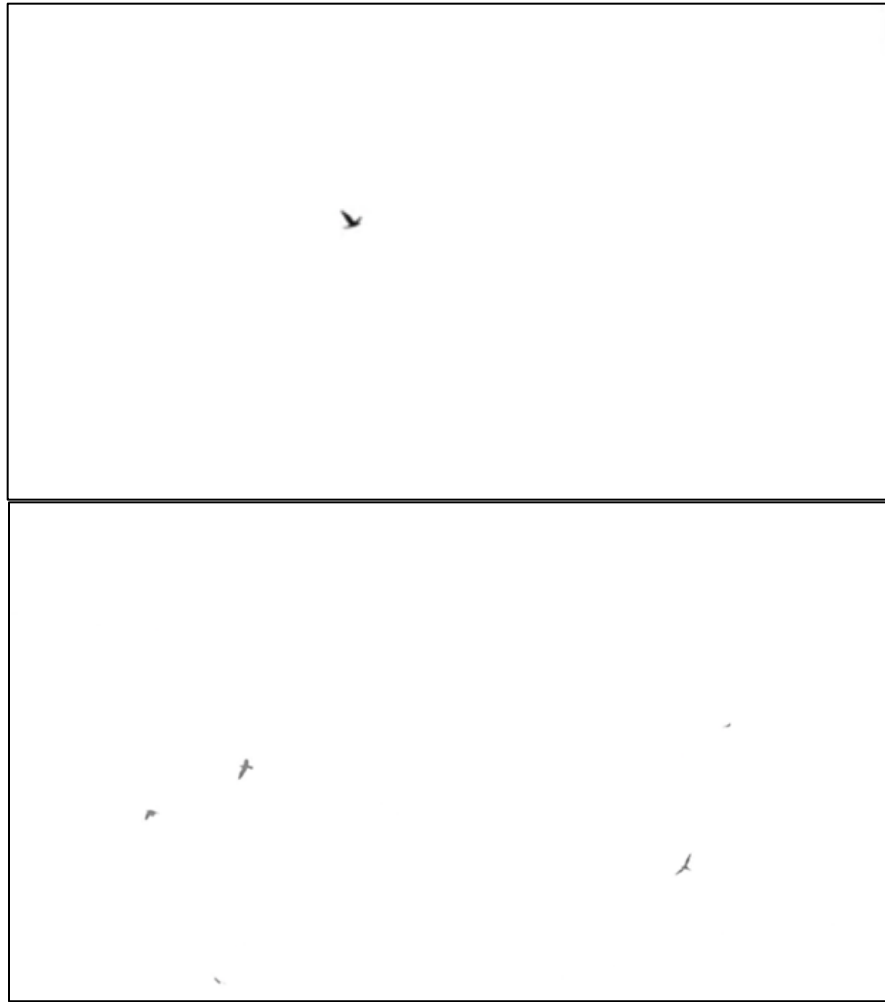
Sound enriches the vastness of the birds' surroundings. Created in collaboration with Kadet Kuhne, the experimental soundtrack in the prelude consists

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<sup>315</sup> The footage for *Ever Wanting* is from the Prelinger Archives, a collection of over 60,000 "ephemeral" films. Founded in 1983 by Rick Prelinger, the collection includes United States based home movies, advertisements, industrial films, and more, the archive is continuously uploading their film materials to their digital space. In 2002 the collection was acquired by the Library of Congress. Prelinger Archives, "Prelinger Archives: About," accessed May 9, 2023, <https://archive.org/details/prelinger?tab=about>; "Library Acquires Rare Films (October 2002) - Library of Congress Information Bulletin," accessed May 9, 2023, <https://www.loc.gov/loc/lcib/0210/prelinger.html?loclr=blognsh>.

<sup>316</sup> The footage is from the Prelinger archive.

of digitally manipulated electronic sounds. One can hear ambient layers, a light consistent tone that occasionally warbles. It is full and vibrating, but the sound stays on pitch. Mixed with that, subtle sounds of wind swirl beneath the dominant track. As the birds convene, the music builds in tension, both audio threads become stronger, and eventually the first tone changes pitch, lower, and the wind-like sounds become fuller, stronger, almost like a manipulated crashing of waves matched to the birds swooping. The sound is light but immense and emulates the ambient noise of being high in the sky.



**Figure 28. TT Takemoto, *Ever Wanting (for Margaret Chung)*, 2021. Film stills of birds in prelude captured by the author. Images courtesy of the artist.**

When *Ever Wanting* begins, it is characterized by vastness and emptiness. The space is expansive, full of possibility, but there is also very little to anchor one's eye, catalyzing impatience or anxiety. The vastness can be unsettling and disorienting, or it can be expansive and full of potential. The sound—light, airy, but full—engulfs the space. Takemoto's visual strategy allows for these two distinct readings and follows the juxtapositions that characterize *Ever Wanting*; dissonant characteristics can coexist, which is the crux of the production. As a viewer of the film, for me the

tension is palpable; the tenor of the work is unsettling and intriguing. Takemoto creates a visual vocabulary to imagine and make space for Margaret Chung's complexities as a person and as a historical American figure whose impact continues to resonate today. The visual methods create discomfort and allow for a speculative imagining of sociocultural tensions in the early twentieth century.

When the prelude ends, there are distinct shifts in texture, pace, color, subject matter, and sound. Instead of airy, light, and distant, the visual materials are heavily textured and enlarged to an intimate perspective. Instead of black and white, saturated colors tint the film. The subject matter shifts from distant, indistinct birds to imagery of hospitals, drug paraphernalia, war planes, and women. Some of these elements are addressed later in the chapter.<sup>317</sup>

Contrasting with the prelude of birds in the distance—light, airy, and calm—layers of dense imagery crowd the remaining content of the film. Where the birds are out of reach, the montage is zoomed in, and clips are so close that one might imagine clutching some of them. Instead of high in the sky above, the sequences convey a more immersive space, where one could sniff the flowers, walk up and grasp a medical instrument, and look through a microscope to view the cells. In addition, the imagery is always moving, not every layer at once, but there is always something

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<sup>317</sup> *Ever Wanting* is rich in subject matter in themes which are enmeshed in one another. To allow for deep analysis, I focus on the lesbian and narcotics themes to make my argument. The imagery of military planes and women in uniform tie into both lesbian and narcotics and will organically be part of those discussions.

percolating or panning. Wiggling amoeba-like silhouettes surround planes flying in the sky; irregular and flashing shapes overlay two women getting out of a car.

Takemoto's training in painting is evident in their approach to the visual montage of *Ever Wanting*, which was edited directly on the film strips. They used "nail polish, glue, scotch tape or images from found slides . . . to create texture, lending the film an ethereal dream-like quality."<sup>318</sup> In the final production, each moment of the film is composed of several visual layers: a color layer, a handmade texture layer, and a found-footage layer (Figure 29).<sup>319</sup>

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<sup>318</sup> Jenny Jedeikin, "Rendering Visible: WOMEN 我們," accessed June 25, 2023, <https://www.sfarts.org/story/rendering-visible-women-4dgIsoXT9181agHWRbga0v>. This collage and painting inspired approach to film recalls experimental filmmaker Stan Brakhage's films such as *Mothlight* (1963) and *Dante's Quartet* (1987) and Carolee Schneemann also experimented with altering film in her film made with James Tenney, *Fuses* (1974). David Sterritt, "Seeking (and Finding) Brakhage," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 40, no. 3 (April 3, 2023): 275–78; B. Ruby Rich, "Carolee Schneemann's Fuses" (New York, USA: Duke University Press, 2020), 27–28; Stan Brakhage and Bruce R. McPherson, *Essential Brakhage: Selected Writings on Filmmaking* (Kingston, N.Y: Documentext, 2001); Scott MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema* 5, 1st ed. (University of California Press, 2006), <http://www.jstor.org.oa.ucsc.edu/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1pnrwg>; Carolee Schneemann and Kate Haug, "An Interview with Carolee Schneemann," *Wide Angle* 20, no. 1 (1998): 20–49.

<sup>319</sup> Takemoto, interview, April 28, 2021.



**Figure 29.** TT Takemoto, *Ever Wanting (for Margaret Chung)*, 2021, dimensions variable. Film stills of the layers captured by the author. Images courtesy of the artist.

A collection of motifs comprises the montage, tinted to be color coded and coordinated. Never repeating an image, the montage creates relationships among the different themes. Acting as a brief reprieve from the barrage of dense imagery, the sequences are punctuated with a return to new and more focused views of the birds, recalling the prelude. Although not a narrative film, the careful editing builds in intensity, creating the experience of a beginning with an introduction, exploration, foreshadowing, climax, and resolution. In a gallery setting, the experience is continuous, looping, unending, and unyielding.

As the film changes from bright white to a heavy sepia red, the sound also evolves. The foundational sounds are still there but they are layered with a slightly more melodic tone that is accompanied by aural textures that enrich the visual materials—a plane flying closely overhead is paired with the roaring of an engine,



blood molecules are paired with the sound of a beating heart. As the visual tension builds, the sounds reflect the effects.

At the climax, an atomic bomb explodes into the horrific and infamous mushroom cloud. Mirroring the upward blast and downward fall after an explosion, planes shoot upward and then a woman dives into a pool. Pure, bright white momentarily fills the screen, and then images return, pixilated, scratched, and tinted in a warm sepia red. People jump out of a plane in the distance, a heart pulsates, an individual falls from the plane, a parachute opens. Behind the parachute another layer appears, bubbles, scratches; shapes emulate the parachute. More parachutes fill the sky, dark blobs bobbing downward, little figures dangling. The parachutes and the bubbles of cells are the same size and shape, blending into each other. They sink slowly, but the background continues to change, flashing back and forth between subtle lights and darks.

### **Margaret Chung Depicted in Visual Culture: *King of Chinatown* and *Real Heroes***

If they had desired to do so, Takemoto could have relied entirely on images drawn from Margaret Chung's legacy in visual culture. In *Looking for Jiro* (2011), Takemoto imagines Jiro Onuma through various other performative embodiments because Onuma's archives are sparse. *Semiotic of Sab* (2016), on the contrary, had a vast array of depictions of the subject from which to draw and Takemoto made use of this archive. In *Ever Wanting*, instead of imaging Chung as herself from the documented possibilities, the film is made without Chung's direct likeness. As a

popular public figure in the mid-twentieth century, Chung inspired mass media intrigue and imaginings, including a Hollywood feature film, comic books, and archives. She gained notoriety and respect among the American public for her work as a doctor and in her role supporting US troops financially and socially in the war effort as “Mom Chung.”

Inspired by Chung’s life, the feature film *King of Chinatown* (dir. Nick Grinde, 1939) centers on a young, Chinese American woman who is a doctor (Figure 30). Actor Anna May Wong, a friend of Chung, played Chung’s character.<sup>320</sup> Deviating from the actual Dr. Chung’s physical likeness, Wong’s portrayal of the character is a conventionally beautiful, levelheaded, highly moral Chinese American doctor who puts others before herself.<sup>321</sup> Wong’s film character has dark hair and is tidily dressed; the character is personable, a peacemaker, and smart, reflecting a growing trend at the time of increasing support for China in the United States.<sup>322</sup> For

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<sup>320</sup> Wu, *Doctor Mom Chung of the Fair-Haired Bastards*, 189.

<sup>321</sup> Throughout her life Chung experimented with different presentations of herself through dress. Documentation shows her in a Victorian styled white dress, a masculine suit and glasses, in fashionably women’s clothing, in a military uniform, and clad in a glamorous ermine. *Dr. Mom Chung of the Fair-Haired Bastards*.

<sup>322</sup> Wu, *Doctor Mom Chung of the Fair-Haired Bastards*, 189. Dr. Wu mentions the increased support for China in the United States in contrast to the explicitly racist legislation that preceded this moment. Although China joined the Allied forces for World War I and World War II beginning to curry more favor in the United States, anti-Chinese and anti-Asian legislation was prevalent in the United States. Most notably, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 wasn’t repealed until 1943. The Chinese Exclusion Act is unfortunately not an outlier. The Naturalization Act of 1790 excluded all non-white people from citizenship; the Anti-Coolie Act of 1862 taxed Chinese laborers for their work on the railroads; the Page Act of 1875 prevented Chinese women from entering the United States; the California Alien Land Law Act of 1913, prevented “aliens” from holding land; the Immigration Act of 1917 extended the Immigration Act of 1882, creating a barred zone, outlining the majority of Asia,

the US military and Hollywood stars, Chung filled the role of the Chinese American patriot.<sup>323</sup>

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from where people were prohibited from entering the United States; the Immigration Act of 1924 limited the number of immigrants coming into the United States; and Executive Order 9066 in 1942 which led to the incarceration of Japanese Americans. Additionally, in 1945, Frank Capra released the propagandistic film, *Know Your Enemy: Japan*. For a more detail list see Stanford University Libraries, “Timeline of Systemic Racism Against AAPI,” Rise Up for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders - Spotlight at Stanford, April 6, 2021, <https://exhibits.stanford.edu/riseup/feature/timeline-of-systemic-racism-against-aapi>.

<sup>323</sup> Where Chung served as the token Chinese person in different groups, Anna May Wong was often cast in roles because of her Chineseness. “To her fans and film critics in the United States, Europe, and much of the rest of the world she personified Chinese womanhood.” Graham Russell Hodges, *Anna May Wong: From Laundryman’s Daughter to Hollywood Legend*, [2nd ed.]. (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, HKU, 2012), xv. Within Wong’s accolades, Yiman Wang notes a “conundrum;” “[Anna May Wong] is alternatively tokenized as an embodiment of Oriental appeal, disavowed as a painful reminder of Asian American subjugation in the American film industry, and recuperated as a resistant minority cosmopolitan figure of the early twentieth century.” Yiman Wang, “Anna May Wong: Toward Janus-Faced, Border-Crossing, ‘Minor’ Stardom,” in *Idols of Modernity Movie Stars of the 1920s*, ed. Patrice Petro, Star Decades: American Culture/American (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 159. This, among other things, is something Wong and Chung have in common—embraced as the token Chinese person and subjugated into a feminized ideal (although Wong is sexualized and Chung is cast as a asexual maternal figure). Diana Selig, “World Friendship in Children, Parents, and Peace Education in America between the Wars,” in *Children and War: A Historical Anthology*, ed. James Alan Marten (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 136.



**Figure 30. Film still from *King of Chinatown* (dir. Nick Grinde, 1939), Paramount Pictures, captured by the author.**

In 1943, at the height of Chung's career and in the middle of her impactful war efforts, Chung was featured in a *Real Heroes* comic titled "Mom Chung and Her 509 'Fair-Haired Foster Sons'" (Figure 31).<sup>324</sup> The issue displays four white men on

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<sup>324</sup> Bert Hansen, "Medical History for the Masses: How American Comic Books Celebrated Heroes of Medicine in the 1940s," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 78, no. 1 (2004): 175, <http://www.jstor.org.oqa.ucsc.edu/stable/44447955>. Initiated by *Parents Magazine*, the comic series aimed to "instruct and uplift" children through "color and action-pictures demanded by the youth of America." "Comics and Comic Books Are No Longer Comical," *The New World*, November 20, 1942, 555; Dale Jacobs, *Graphic Encounters: Comics and the Sponsorship of Multimodal Literacy* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 85–87. Reaching a large swath of the public, *Parents' Magazine*, founded in 1926 had 200,000 subscribers after five years, a figure that doubled by 1936. Selig, "World Friendship in Children, Parents, and Peace Education in America between the Wars," 136. Other notable people featured in the *Real Heroes* series include Franklin D. Roosevelt (1942, No. 1), Sitting Bull (1942, No. 3), Winston Churchill (1942, No. 4), and dozens of others.

the cover and boasts “7 full length true war stories and 6 other true comic features.”<sup>325</sup> Chung’s comic begins with her background in a poor Chinese family in the United States. It depicts her going to college and gaining recognition for her work as a doctor. Midway through, the comic shows young men approaching Chung to thank her for supporting them as they fought for China against Japan.<sup>326</sup> Uplifting this history, the narrative of the comic builds to the network and family she created as “Mom Chung.” Despite her role in supporting aviators’ efforts, Chung was prevented from fulfilling her own desire to become a pilot.<sup>327</sup>

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<sup>325</sup> The men on the cover of this issue include Navy’s Ace Raider, Admiral William Halsey; Army Miracle Man, Gen. Brehon Somervell; Panda Man, Floyd Tangier-Smith; and Ship Builder No. 1, Henry J. Kaiser *Real Heroes*, vol. 9 (Chicago: Parents’ Magazine Press, 1943).

<sup>326</sup> She held a key role in recruiting and caring for pilots for the Flying Tigers (1941-1942), a volunteer brigade formed specifically to support China against Japanese attack. The Flying Tiger “brothers” also received small jade Buddhas from Chung, depicted in the comic, and would forge connections on the battlefield through their bond to Chung.

<sup>327</sup> “The First American-Born Chinese Woman Doctor | American Masters | PBS,” American Masters, May 27, 2020, <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/first-american-born-chinese-woman-doctor-ysk233/14464/>; Wu, interview; “Homepage,” UNLADYLIKE2020, accessed September 6, 2023, <https://unladylike2020.com/>; “Margaret Chung,” UNLADYLIKE2020 (blog), accessed April 16, 2021, <https://unladylike2020.com/profile/margaret-chung/>. Chung’s biographer, Judy Tzu-Chung Wu, was one of the consultants for the PBS documentary for the *Unladylike* series in 2020. Chung was also a founder of Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service (WAVES, 1942–1946) but was not allowed to join. Officially, her exclusion from WAVES was due to age, unofficially Judy Tzu-Chun Wu speculates her exclusion was connected to her presumed sexuality. Wu, interview.



**Figure 31. *Real Heroes* #9, March 1943, *Parents Magazine*. First page of the comic about Dr. Margaret Chung.**

Chung’s figure fills one-quarter of the first page of the comic. Not unlike Anna May Wong’s portrayal of the doctor in *King of Chinatown*, in *Real Heroes* Chung smiles. She has a slim physique with dark hair, her arms swinging to suggest a march. Chung wears a green jumpsuit with a mandarin or standing collar. Above her, several airplanes fly in formation, and beside her, overlapping part of her body, the words “Mom Chung” in bold script emulate the brushstrokes of Chinese calligraphy.

Floating above her name, a jade Buddha sits in a circular yellow frame.<sup>328</sup> This issue of *Real Heroes* emphasizes symbols of Chung's Chinese heritage, an image the US public craved as sympathy for China, and people perceived as Chinese gained public favor while the United States and China fought together against Japan.

*King of Chinatown* and *Real Heroes* exaggerate Chung's Chinese background and cast her as an idealized feminine symbol, asexual (though caring and maternal), and steadfastly patriotic. Films and comics often portray exaggerated or stereotyped versions of their subjects and based on her sociocultural positioning; Chung may have enjoyed these portrayals of herself.

In addition to visual-cultural imaginings of Chung's persona, several photographs of her likeness are available in archives from newspapers, documentaries, and in Wu's book (**Error! Reference source not found.**).<sup>329</sup> These

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<sup>328</sup> Judy Tzu-Chun Wu points out that, in reality, Chung wore Western clothing, not Chinese styled attire; although depicting her childhood, the comic strategically avoids stating that she was, in fact, born in the United States. In her biography about Chung, Wu critiques the comic: "Although Chung adopted self-Orientalizing strategies to enhance her value to white America, the comic book version exceeded her actual practices." Wu, *Doctor Mom Chung of the Fair-Haired Bastards*, 191. Wu describes, "Published before the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act, the comic book chose not to include information that would clearly mark Chung as an American citizen. Instead, the publication created a version of Chung that evoked stereotypical tropes associated with the Orient for its intended mainstream audience." Wu, 191.

<sup>329</sup> Showing the presence of Chung in archives, Wu features twenty-four figures of Chung and related people from eleven archives, including Wu's own. The additional archives include California Historical Society, FN-31714; California Historical Society, FN-31715; Chinese American Museum Collection at El Pueblo de Los Angeles Historical Monument, Dorothy Siu Collection; Siu Family Collection; USC University Archives; Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society, Elsa Gidlow Collection; Security Pacific Collection, Shades of L.A. Archives, Los Angeles Public Library; Doheny Memorial Library, University of Southern California, Regional Historical Collection. AP/World Wide Photos; Private Collection of Betsy

images range from depicting Chung dressing in masculine attire, to portraying her arrayed in clothing signifying Hollywood glamour. In one photograph she is surrounded by medical school classmates, and in another she sits in front of a backdrop of framed, white, male, American military personnel. Although photographs are still a coded, planned, filtered presentation, these are her likeness; she is presenting her true self, and these images capture that.<sup>330</sup> This array of imagery is dynamic and shows some of Chung's experimentation in gender presentation and social relations.

As is evident in Chung's visual culture archives, explicit visibility is not always an advantage or a sign of power or achievement. In conversation with Alexis Boylan, Derek Conrad Murray grapples with power's relationship to visibility. Murray says, "I'm not certain that having visibility is the same thing as being seen. . . . To be exposed, in representation, is not always fueled by a desire for understanding, or an acknowledgment of worth. In actuality, it's often motivated by a need to expose, objectify, to willfully mischaracterize forms of difference, or simply be entertained."<sup>331</sup> Being seen does not inherently equate to more power for those who are imaged.

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Bingham Davis; Private Collection of Rodney Low; U.S. Army Photograph; and Judy Tzu-Chun Wu's private collection.

<sup>330</sup> Amelia Jones in her book *Self/Image* writes, "technology not only *mediates* but *produces* subjectivities, deeply inflecting how we experience ourselves in the contemporary world." Over her lifetime Chung experimented with how herself presentation would be captured and the popular culture versions of her contrast these self-representations. Jones, *Self Image*, 44.

<sup>331</sup> Murray, "The Cost of That Revealing," 155.



Before *Ever Wanting*, Chung was imaged and remembered through specific roles that served her own self framing and conveniently met the needs and desires of those surrounding her. The racist idea that is lightly veiled in the compliment “model minority” comes to mind here. Just after Chung’s death in 1959, in the 1960s, the phrase “model minority” came into use to describe Asian Americans.<sup>332</sup> Following Chih-Chih Chou, Jessica Walton, and Mandy Troung, I employ the idea to illustrate how *Ever Wanting* contrasts and expands how Chung was made visible.<sup>333</sup> The aural and visual textures of Takemoto’s film are a protest against the neatly polished and tied-up iterations of visual culture inspired by Chung. Even if Chung did fill the role

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<sup>332</sup> Nicholas D. Hartlep, “Special Issue: 50 Years of Model Minority Stereotype Research,” *Journal of Southeast Asian American Education & Advancement* 12, no. 2 (2017): 1–8. For additional information and history on the model minority myth see Jacqueline Yi et al., “Internalization of the Model Minority Myth and Sociodemographic Factors Shaping Asians/Asian Americans’ Experiences of Discrimination during COVID-19,” *American Journal of Community Psychology* 71, no. 1–2 (March 2023): 123–35; Madeline Yuan-yin. Hsu, *The Good Immigrants: How the Yellow Peril Became the Model Minority*, Politics and Society in Twentieth-Century America (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2015); Nicholas D. Hartlep, “Asian (American) Model Minorities,” *Studies on Asia (East Lansing, Mich.)* Series IV, 4, no. 1 (2014): 1; Thy Phu, *Picturing Model Citizens: Civility in Asian American Visual Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012).

<sup>333</sup> Chih-Chieh Chou explains, model minority “refers to an ethnic minority whose members are more likely to achieve higher success than other minority groups, especially in economic advantage, academic success, family stability, low crime involvement, etc.” Chih-Chieh Chou, “Critique on the Notion of Model Minority: An Alternative Racism to Asian American?,” *Asian Ethnicity* 9, no. 3 (October 2008): 219. Writing about Asian Americans, Chou explains that, in the 1960s, the measurement of success was based on assimilation but at the time of writing in 2008, success was based on survival in capitalist systems. Jessica Walton and Mandy Troung add to the definition, emphasizing assimilation into “white dominant society.” Jessica Walton and Mandy Truong, “A Review of the Model Minority Myth: Understanding the Social, Educational and Health Impacts,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 46, no. 3 (February 17, 2023): 391.

required of her happily, she was also used as an example in a practice that circulated widely in the United States, shaping a dangerous formula for success and cooperation. *Ever Wanting* works against this trope, pulling forward a new imagining of a queer Asian American woman from US history that does not fit neatly into society's imagining of her.

In his groundbreaking text, *Orientalism*, Edward Said shows how the "West" needs the "Orient" as a way to stabilize its own image through contrast.<sup>334</sup> In Chung's case, the "West" is the United States government, military, and Hollywood, and Chung is the "Orient," who was needed to reify the "West's" status to the American public and world as supportive of China during World War II. Chung was used to reverse the hierarchies. Importantly though, Chung was a willing and active participant.

In *Ever Wanting*, Takemoto refuses this Orientalist juxtaposition and brings forward the characteristics and mystique of Chung that were not tied to her popular mid-twentieth-century image. Further, in contrast to the limited and unexpansive likenesses of Chung in the past, *Ever Wanting* is a visual dedication to her. Takemoto takes up visual materiality of Chung's biography that is disconnected from her corporeal form. This is an important choice to highlight because of the way Takemoto has built other similar works addressed in this dissertation, *Looking for Jiro* and

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<sup>334</sup> "Orientalism depends for its strategy on this flexible *positional* superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand" (emphasis original). Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, 1st Vintage Books ed (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 7.

*Semiotics of Sab*. Both of those artworks have a more direct engagement with the closely connected archives of the inspiring subjects. With *Ever Wanting*, Takemoto explicitly rejects the visual archives of Chung. The film is composed of imagery related *to* her but not *of* her. By not depicting Chung with visual archives of the doctor, I argue that in *Ever Wanting* Takemoto imagines Chung through a dynamic, irregular strategy of self-reinvention, a process that is often excluded from her biographical history.

## **Visual Vocabularies**

### *Building Narrative with Absence*

The prelude introduces *Ever Wanting* by setting a calm and foreboding tone. The birds soar above and are barely visible. The sparsity of the prelude requires stillness and patience from the viewer. *Ever Wanting*'s prelude is a divergent aesthetic among Takemoto's moving artworks, which tend to be visually dense and fast. *Ever Wanting* experiments with the viewer's engagement, creating an environment of longing for "what's next" within the viewing space. After previously showing their films *On the Line* (2018) and *May 35* (2019) at the CCC, Takemoto made *Ever Wanting* with this gallery space and installation scale in mind.<sup>335</sup> The artist wanted to design the film to be an immersive experience for the viewer, experimenting with the audience's possible disinterest or boredom when they encounter an almost completely

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<sup>335</sup> Takemoto, interview, April 28, 2021.

blank screen.<sup>336</sup> Takemoto intentionally tests the viewer's patience for encountering non-representational bright-white light in the gallery space.<sup>337</sup> At the same time, they aimed to hook their viewer's attention, which will soon become clear. Takemoto states:

This piece is the first piece that I made for installation that I was really thinking about the scale of installation and being in front of a screen that was really big . . . The circling birds are a visual hook to draw in the viewer. First just seeing white space, the risk is that they may be dismissive, but the film lures them in . . . You might catch a glimpse of the bird going across. It might catch your attention, so, you might pay attention. I wanted that experience, and I was trying to figure out how long I could make that section so that it would feel boring, but it would keep you there long enough to hang in, to get to the next part.<sup>338</sup>

Cuing patience and frustration for the viewer's experience, *Ever Wanting* imagines an artistic rendering of Margaret Chung's embodied wanting.<sup>339</sup>

Takemoto's prelude recalls the long-distance photographic shot in Felix Gonzalez-Torres's *Untitled* (1992; Figure 32), depicting an image of a solitary bird in the sky. Gonzalez-Torres's (1957–1996) was a Cuban-born American artist, and his artworks appear in museums and galleries as take-away stacks of posters and piles of candy. Conceived as participatory art and as a form of "relational aesthetics," many of Gonzalez-Torres's works create political and social connections for the audience, drawing their attention to relations between gay lovers during the AIDS epidemic.<sup>340</sup>

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<sup>336</sup> Takemoto.

<sup>337</sup> Takemoto.

<sup>338</sup> Takemoto.

<sup>339</sup> Takemoto.

<sup>340</sup> Stewart Martin, "Critique of Relational Aesthetics," *Third Text* 21, no. 4 (2007): 369–80. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance, Fronza Woods, and M Copeland (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2002), 39. Mónica Amor, "Félix

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Gonzalez-Torres: Towards a Postmodern Sublimity,” *Third Text* 9, no. 30 (March 1995): 67.

Nancy Spector observes that Gonzalez-Torres’s work also acts as a virus because of the way the artworks permeate and spread through their distribution to museum visitors who are allowed to take them home. Spector curated the United States Pavilion in the 2007 Venice Biennale with Gonzalez-Torres’s work a decade after his death. The distribution of his work was rarely limited to gallery space: Gonzalez-Torres has had numerous billboard projects spread across cities during his life and posthumously, several featuring a bird motif. Billboards of birds have had life since González-Torres passed away. They were shown in Venice (2007), Texas (2010), and Miami (permanent). Adair Rounthwaite, “Split Witness: Metaphorical Extensions of Life in the Art of Felix Gonzalez-Torres,” *Representations (Berkeley, Calif.)* 109, no. 1 (2010): 52; Julie Ault, “Joseph Kosuth and Felix Gonzalez-Torres, ‘A Conversation,’” in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, 2nd edition (Göttingen: Steidl, 2016), 349. The original interview published in Ault’s text was published in A. Reinhardt, J. Kosuth, F. Gonzalez-Torres: Symptoms of Interference, Conditions of Possibility, ed. Clare Farrow (London, 1994), 76–81. “‘Untitled’ - Works - Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation,” accessed June 19, 2023, <https://www.felixgonzalez-torresfoundation.org/works/untitled71>.



**Figure 32. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, “Untitled,” 1992, billboard dimensions vary with installation. © Estate Felix Gonzalez-Torres, courtesy of the Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation.**

“*Untitled*” could be a still from the first minute of *Ever Wanting*. A light background is punctuated with a tiny bird in flight. Instead of being in motion, these birds are perpetually static. Almost all of Gonzalez-Torres’s birds (including Figure 33), are designated “*Untitled*” but two have parenthetical delineations as “Strange Birds” and “Vultures.”<sup>341</sup> These still shots show the avian creatures in the vast sky as “small specks [and] barely recognizable.”<sup>342</sup> As Mónica Amor describes Gonzalez-

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<sup>341</sup> Amor, “Félix González-Torres,” 60 and 77; Jonathan Mullins, “Queer Ecology: Shared Horizons after Disturbance,” *Italianist* 40, no. 2 (2020): 77. Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation. “Birds in the Sky.” Accessed December 1, 2023. <https://www.felixgonzalez-torresfoundation.org/works/c/birds-in-sky>.

<sup>342</sup> Mullins, “Queer Ecology: Shared Horizons after Disturbance,” 236.

Torres's work, "the artist reproduces fragments of these canonical images of the sublime and through the use of the cheapest possible techniques, offset, transfers them into paper stacks, into immense posters that cover walls or advertising billboards distributed around the city."<sup>343</sup> Jonathan Mullins also suggests a form of spirituality through a darker reading. Writing about the work in an exhibition context, he says, "González-Torres makes a world, and does so in part by imbuing a negative sign—the vulture, a *memento mori*—with a sense of beauty, serenity, and even hope."<sup>344</sup> Both scholars frame the birds through the lens of death and mourning; the birds are symbols of loss and absence.

Employing similarly portentous imagery, Paul Chan's installation *The 7 Lights* casts images on a gallery floor, mimicking the passage of light from dawn to dusk **(Error! Reference source not found.)**.<sup>345</sup> While shifting hues and shadows of objects rise up, figures float down. Takemoto recalls the experience of encountering Chan's work, which they describe as an influence for *Ever Wanting*:

It looks like light coming from a high window. And then, you see these shadows of things, you'll see a telephone wire waving and you'll see birds. As you start to see the objects floating upwards, like a cell phone, but then, a car.

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<sup>343</sup> Amor, "Félix González-Torres," 69.

<sup>344</sup> Mullins, "Queer Ecology: Shared Horizons after Disturbance," 236.

<sup>345</sup> Chan also considers the possibility of relational aesthetic in his work. In an interview in 2010, he acknowledges the historical precedent of relational aesthetics and in an interview, Chan shifts the conversation to the question of community: "this idea of community, and I think the idea of community is an important one—everyone wants it but no-one knows how to get it. It's like love—everyone wants it, no-one thinks what they have is it, and you always want more of it." Beth Capper, "The Pedagogy of Artist Paul Chan," *F Newsmagazine* (blog), January 26, 2010, <https://fnewsmagazine.com/2010/01/the-pedagogy-of-artist-paul-chan/>.

And then, the car bursts into pieces and starts floating upwards. It's really, really slow.<sup>346</sup>

In our conversation, Takemoto noted that, at first encounter, *The 7 Lights* could come across as a minimalist project experimenting with swaths of light. As objects float, the viewer becomes disoriented. Takemoto continued: "And then, these bodies start falling really quickly, and then, you realize it's about 9/11. It's about suicide. It's about people who jumped out of the buildings."<sup>347</sup> Masimiliano Gioni, Curator at the New Museum in New York, says the artwork is "like a dream deteriorating into a nightmare."<sup>348</sup>

Along with terror and death, absence is a key theme of Chan's project; it creates a different visualization of the victims of the attacks on the Twin Towers in 2001. Gioni notes of Chan's piece, "in the title, the word 'light' has been struck through, drawing attention to its dramatic absence."<sup>349</sup> In *Ever Wanting* there is also a sense of mourning, mourning for what cannot be. Takemoto describes the prelude for *Ever Wanting*, imagining it from Chung's perspective:

Margaret Chung is looking up at the sky, and she sees birds, and she thinks, "I want to fly," because she wanted to be an aviator. She wants to fly, and then, she wants to be among the birds. And then, to me, it's also about how she doesn't get what she wants. The whole film is about wanting and not fully getting. Or wanting, and then, getting caught up in this cycle of desire that becomes really intense, and then, brings you back down because it's a loop.<sup>350</sup>

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<sup>346</sup> Takemoto, interview, April 28, 2021.

<sup>347</sup> Takemoto.

<sup>348</sup> Massimiliano Gioni, "Paul Chan: The 7 Lights," New Museum Digital Archive, accessed June 17, 2023, <https://archive.newmuseum.org/exhibitions/914>.

<sup>349</sup> Gioni.

<sup>350</sup> Takemoto, interview, April 28, 2021.



Gonzalez-Torres and Chan's use of light, open space, and minimally perceptible objects convey aspects of death, mourning, and loss. Using similar techniques, Takemoto's prelude in *Ever Wanting* conveys a formal parallel. *Ever Wanting* is not about explicit death, but it is a form of meditation and invites a sense of mourning, a kind of death of possibilities. For Gonzalez-Torres this possibility is still, stuck, framed, and fixed. Freedom is disrupted and captured, to be fixed in midair. The motifs in *Ever Wanting* and *The 7 Lights* both loop, suggesting a Sisyphean repetition that doesn't change, but within that repetition, unending potential for new beginnings acts as an invitation to disrupt the loop.

### *Sound and Sequencing*

About halfway through *Ever Wanting*, a heavy beat, like a slow throb of a heart pounding, matches the rhythm of the visuals. A group of the volunteer women in uniform exercise together. Their legs crisscross as they bounce up and down; their arms move in time, from outstretched to the side to overlaid on their bellies—graceful, energetic, and synchronized. Every time they hit the floor, the beat thuds. The rhythm serves as a metronome for a haunting operatic voice that is layered onto a pulsating electronic baseline soundtrack. Textured with smooth and clear vibrato, the operatic notes build. At the same time, the silhouette of an airplane zooms overhead, and then we see a person singing, surrounded by an orchestra—the opera star, Lily

Pons (1898–1976).<sup>351</sup> The camera scans up her body, clothed in full operatic regalia, singing, poised, hands clasped. Her notes continue to rise, and she demonstrates her famed vocal range.<sup>352</sup> At the top of her range, Pons’s voice begins to diminish; the film cuts away from the singer to lungs, tinted red, pulsating, and then back to women in uniform, this time a close shot of them doing mechanical work on an airplane. As Pons’s voice fades away, the electronic beat becomes heavier and more intense. Pons’s voice leads to the building of an erotic intensity, and her figure signifies Chung’s interest in opera and is a nod to Chung’s desire for women.<sup>353</sup>

Sound and visual artist Kadet Kuhne has collaborated on several projects with TT Takemoto, including all the artworks featured in this dissertation.<sup>354</sup> In

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<sup>351</sup> Lily Pons played opposite Henry Fonda in *I Dream Too Much* (1935, dir. John Cromwell.) Pons performs “The Bell Song” in *I Dream Too Much* in the clips excerpted for *Ever Wanting (for Margaret Chung)* (2021).

<sup>352</sup> When Lily Pons debuted at the Met Opera in 1931 she performed “Lucia” and achieved a sustained high F, a marked moment in music history. Zachary Woolfe, “At the Met Opera, a Note So High, It’s Never Been Sung Before,” *The New York Times*, November 7, 2017, sec. Arts, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/07/arts/music/metropolitan-opera-high-note-exterminating-angel.html>.

<sup>353</sup> Wu, interview; Wu, “Was Mom Chung “A Sister Lesbian?””

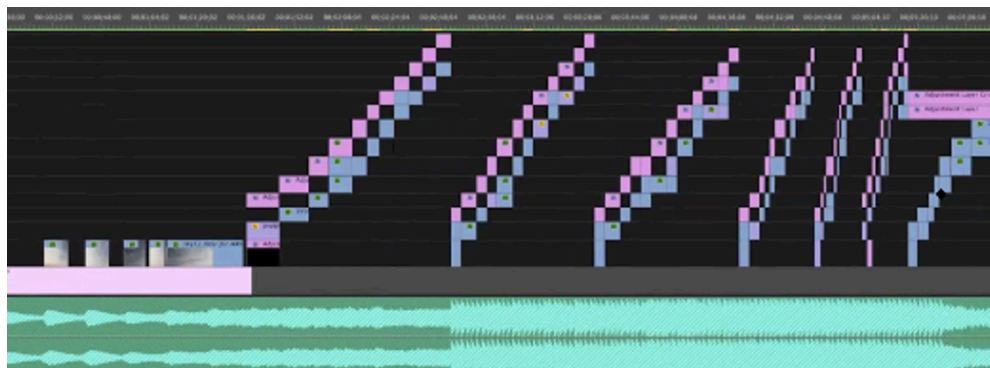
<sup>354</sup> Kadet Kuhne and TT Takemoto collaborated on the sound elements for projects such as *Looking for Jiro* (2011), *Semiotics of Sab* (2016), *Wayward Emulsions* (2018), *Sworded Love* (2018), and *On the Line* (2018). For *Ever Wanting* Takemoto began by referencing one of Kuhne’s previous collaborations with Edward J. Avila and then took the piece to Kuhne to begin work on it together. Avila and Kuhne worked together on the soundtrack *Sedimentary Noise* (December 2020) for Kuhne’s video/installation piece of the same name. After discussing the content and imagery of *Ever Wanting*, Takemoto and Kuhne used the driving tempo and aesthetic direction of the original work as a framework, and developed a new soundtrack aligned with Takemoto’s theme and pacing. *Sedimentary Noise*, 2020, <https://soundcloud.com/kadetkuhne/sets/sedimentary-noise>.

correspondence with the author, Kuhne described the experience of working with

Takemoto:

The process of collaborating as the sound designer with TT Takemoto is akin to a trust fall into an enigmatic destination, where the coordinates are known, but the temporal intricacies remain elusive, ensuring the thrill of the spontaneous. . . . They give me crystal-clear direction on how audio can bring these themes and story points to life, and simultaneously creative freedom to explore ideas I'm inspired to try out during the design process.<sup>355</sup>

In an interview with the author, Takemoto shared a visualization of the two artists' collaborative process. In Figure 33, the bottom, green-tinted oscillations are the sound, and visual clips shown in purple and blue are layered to match the sounds. As the imprint of the trace image becomes shorter, it translates to a more intense, quicker presentation in the film. This visualization demonstrates how the imagery and sound build together, increase in intensity, climax, and coda, matched to loop back to the beginning.



**Figure 33. Screen capture of Adobe Premier Pro video and sound editing project timeline that TT Takemoto and Kadet Kuhne used to collaborate on the sound for *Ever Wanting*. Shared by TT Takemoto with the author on April 28, 2021. Image courtesy of TT Takemoto.**

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<sup>355</sup> Kadet Kuhne, interview by Kate Korroch, Email, June 27, 2023.

Specifically regarding *Ever Wanting*, Kuhne reflects:

TT Takemoto's films are a captivating exploration of sound, ranging from the precise synchronization of sound effects to enhance on-screen actions, to the intricate layering of manipulated environmental and synthesized sounds that amplify the underlying themes and narratives. In *Ever Wanting*, we witness this rich spectrum in action. Manipulated sound effects punctuate the visual elements, such as the circling aircraft, shark, and dancers, while a pulsating musical score builds in layers and intensity.<sup>356</sup>

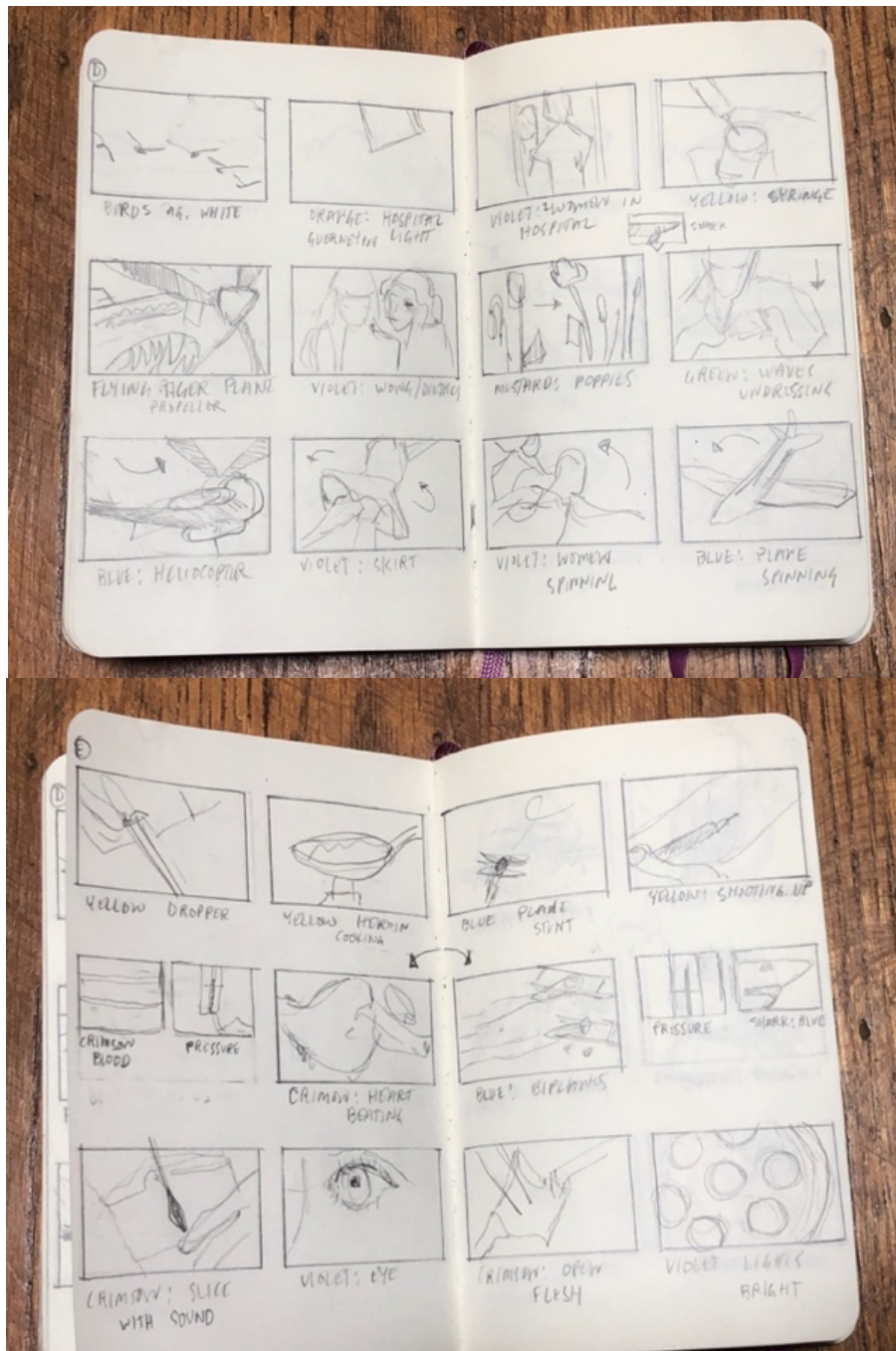
Paired with a suspenseful electronic soundtrack and fast-paced imagery, the film is difficult to grasp at first. It is not meant to soothe and pacify the viewer but to ignite and insight them. The aural scaffold Takemoto and Kuhne built together serves as a guide to the imagery. Layers of sounds and images build in intensity as they work in concert.

Sequencing of the imagery is carefully planned in Takemoto's sketchbook (Figure 34). The bottom row of the pages illustrates preparatory sketches from about three-quarters of the way through the film; gestures and movement create patterns, indicated by arrows in the drawings. The film cuts to a spinning propeller; a helicopter whirls out of control; a woman twirls in a short skirt, and the viewer is placed in a peeping-Tom vantage point; women in a field synchronously wave their arms above their heads; a plane spins, nose at the center pointing down. Spinning builds pressure, emphasized with visualizations: opium simmers in a spoon, pressure rises on a gauge, a heart thumps, planes race, the gauge continues to build. Connecting the imagery through mirrored patterns, *Ever Wanting* twists together the themes of Chung's life that are accentuated in the film. Although *Ever Wanting* is

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<sup>356</sup> Kuhne.

composed of “ever wanted” desires, the patterning encapsulates a message that multiple things can be true at once. A patriot can also be rejected by their country. A publicly asexual figure can have private sexual desires that fit outside of heterosexual norms. A successful and acclaimed doctor is also tied up with illicit substance smuggling. These specific tensions are discussed in more details in the sections that follow.



**Figure 34. TT Takemoto, Sketchbook images for *Ever Wanting* (for Margaret Chung), 2021. Images courtesy of the artist.**

The result of this layering creates a sense of unified discombobulation.

Bubbly, scratched textures and a constant, brisk visual rhythm coalesce in disparate

imagery. The effect of these techniques is as if one is looking through a mask or a pair of muddied glasses creating distancing, even if these clips are predominately in reach. The effect is dream-like at best and claustrophobic and suffocating at worst. As with Chan's falling objects and figures layered with light and silhouette, *Ever Wanting's* layers and rapidly changing imagery obscure the narrative, creating the experience of a fever dream merged with lived experience.

The contrast, movement, and rapid pace give a sense of unyielding anxiety. Visuals move so quickly that at times it is difficult for the viewer to make sense of what they are seeing. I argue that this strategy of contrasting filmic styles is emblematic of Dr. Chung's disparate characteristics, the push and pull of inner turmoil. One holds a sense of calm, "acceptable" but ominous and unreachable (and in black and white), and the other is inundated with a chromatically saturated mash-up.

### *Color Coding*

The visual themes and color schemes of *Ever Wanting* are loosely organized into four categories (Figure 35). Warm red and sepia tones are used for objects related to medical procedures and organic items (like blood cells and poppies). Blues are used for sharks in the water and airplanes in the sky, drawing together their vast

openness. Violet is used for depictions of famous women as individuals, and green is used for military imagery, namely, WAVES.<sup>357</sup>

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<sup>357</sup> Chung was an advisor to the WAVES (1942–1946) but was rejected from serving alongside the women. Emulating the 1941 policies adopted by the United States Navy which forbade gay people from serving in the military. Allan Bérubé, *Coming out under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War Two* (New York: The Free Press, 1990), 12. In 1944 the Women’s Army Core established a screening process based on gender conformity and appearance with the intention of excluding lesbians and same-sex relationships. Leisa D. Meyer, *Creating GI Jane : Sexuality and Power in the Women’s Army Corps during World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996). Decades later, the United States military implemented “Don’t ask, don’t tell” in 1993, forbidding discrimination but at the same time insisting queer people from being open. It was repealed in 2011. Although over a decade since, it wasn’t until 2021 that those discharged due to the policy would begin to receive benefits. “Statement by President Joe Biden on the Tenth Anniversary of the Repeal of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” The White House, September 20, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/09/20/statement-by-president-joe-biden-on-the-tenth-anniversary-of-the-repeal-of-dont-ask-dont-tell/>. Despite this gesture, there is much to be repaired and thousands of veterans are still seeking justice. Daniel Wiessner and Daniel Wiessner, “LGBTQ Veterans Sue US Military over Biased Discharges,” *Reuters*, August 9, 2023, sec. United States, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/lgbtq-veterans-sue-us-military-over-biased-discharges-2023-08-09/>; Quil Lawrence, “Discharged over Sexual Orientation, Military Still Owes Thousands of Vets,” *NPR*, July 2, 2023, sec. National, <https://www.npr.org/2023/07/02/1183871299/dont-ask-dont-tell-gay-lesbian-military>.





**Figure 35. TT Takemoto, *Ever Wanting (for Margaret Chung)*, 2021, dimensions variable. Film stills of the four color categories captured by the author. Images courtesy of the artist.**

Hong Kong director Wong Kar-Wai’s film *In the Mood for Love* (*Hua yang nianhua*, or “When Flowers Were in Full Bloom,” 2000) inspired Takemoto’s color choices.<sup>358</sup> To achieve a similar chromatic quality, Takemoto emulates his color palette.<sup>359</sup> In his film about unrequited love, writes Shohini Chaudhuri, Wong uses “colored ‘mood lights,’” for example, “where tensions between desire and social conformity . . . erupt in intense colors.”<sup>360</sup> Rey Chow describes Wong’s film as “colorful recollections of the two young people falling in love.”<sup>361</sup> Art Director

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<sup>358</sup> Rey Chow, “Sentimental Returns: On the Uses of the Everyday in the Recent Films of Zhang Yimou and Wong Kar-Wai,” *New Literary History* 33, no. 4 (2002): 641.

<sup>359</sup> Takemoto, interview, April 28, 2021, 28.

<sup>360</sup> Chaudhuri, Shohini. “Color Design in the Cinema of Wong Kar-Wai.” In *A Companion to Wong Kar-Wai*, edited by Martha P. Nochimson. Wiley Blackwell Companions to Film Directors. Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2016, 175.

<sup>361</sup> Chow, “Sentimental Returns,” 642.

William Chang Suk-Ping explains that the “vivid” colors of Wong’s film serve “to contrast with the characters’ restrained emotions.”<sup>362</sup> Leslie Cami further describes Art Director Chang’s aesthetic choices, “using overlapping textures and luminous colors to create an intense concentration of sensation and experience and controlling every visual detail.”<sup>363</sup> Although a loose framework, the color palette from which *Ever Wanting* draws references iconic themes: lust and foreboding, socially induced restraint, and wanting and never having.

In *Ever Wanting* the colors inform how the viewer organizes the visual signifiers they are fed through the film. For example, imagery of actor Anna May Wong and opera star Lily Pons are tinted violet, grouping them to indicate they are women who represent Chung’s lesbian desire. Other photos of women, cadres of WAVES, are tinted green, nodding to a position Chung coveted and was banned from pursuing. Through their chromatic strategy, Takemoto draws on film history saturated with racism and sexism that existed during Chung’s life and persists today. Historically, the saturated monochromatic colors in the clips of *Ever Wanting* also recall century-old archival imagery of color tinting testing strips in early color-film technology.<sup>364</sup>

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<sup>362</sup> Leslie Cami, “Setting His Tale of Love Found in a City Long Lost,” *The New York Times*, January 28, 2001, sec. Movies, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/01/28/movies/film-setting-his-tale-of-love-found-in-a-city-long-lost.html>; Nochimson, *A Companion to Wong Kar-Wai*, 183.

<sup>363</sup> Cami, “Setting His Tale of Love Found in a City Long Lost.”

<sup>364</sup> The Eastman Kodak guidebook, for example, offered different examples of tinting and toning using medium-length shots from classic films.

Figure 36 shows various test tints from the Eastman Kodak Company in 1927. The film stills are tinted to show the chromatic possibilities available at the time. The saturated hues “color” our reading of the imagery—shrubbery is tinted with an aberrant green; a man and woman grasp hands and are overlaid with a ripe pink. The colors are overdone and unconvincing but influence our readings nonetheless. Notably, all the people in the tinting samples present as white, showing the racial bias baked into the format.



**Figure 36. Detail of tinting and toning of Eastman Positive Motion Picture Film from Eastman Kodak Company (1927), photographed by Barbara Fluekiger. From the personal collection of Ulrich Ruedel. Image licensed under Creative Commons.**

The connection to Takemoto's film gains historical complexity through Anna May Wong's likeness in *Ever Wanting*.<sup>365</sup> The film uses clips of Wong from *King of Chinatown* (dir. Nick Grinde, 1939) in which the actor, as noted, plays a character based on Chung. Sarah Street and Joshua Youmibe point out that, in an early Technicolor film, *The Toll of the Sea* (dir. Chester M. Franklin, 1922), in which Wong plays a young Chinese woman who falls in love with an American soldier, the colors for Wong's character's clothing are often tinted in greens and reds.<sup>366</sup> They observe, "these colors are also associated with the lush, verdant garden where [the character] is frequently shot, particularly the red flowers that equate her with nature, exoticism, and the East."<sup>367</sup> The authors insinuate that the color tinting is used for Orientalist and racist ends.

Stuart Hall reminds us that race is a construction, rather than a scientific category. Without scientific basis, race, then, is a sociocultural or historical category.<sup>368</sup> Following Hall, Jennifer González explains, "arguing that race is a discursive formation, rather than an essential, biological, or ontological category,

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<sup>365</sup> Anna May Wong, "one of the pioneering Chinese American actresses in Hollywood" and "the first major Asian American movie star," launched her career at seventeen in the *The Toll of the Sea* (dir. Chester M. Franklin, 1922), an early full-length feature Technicolor film. "Wang, "Anna May Wong: Toward Janus-Faced, Border-Crossing, 'Minor' Stardom," 159; Homay King, "Anna May Wong and the Color Image," *Liquid Blackness* 5, no. 2 (2021): 61; Hodges, *Anna May Wong: From Laundryman's Daughter to Hollywood Legend*, xv.

<sup>366</sup> The film is based on *Madame Butterfly* (Puccini, 1904) but is set in China rather than Japan.

<sup>367</sup> Sarah Street and Joshua Yumibe, *Chromatic Modernity, Color, Cinema, and Media of the 1920s* (Columbia University Press, 2019), 96.

<sup>368</sup> *Race, the Floating Signifier: Featuring Stuart Hall*, 2006, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bMo2uiRAf30>.

entails recognizing that the concept necessarily changes with the shifting currents of culture and language, techniques and methods or representation, and scientific imperatives.”<sup>369</sup> González discusses James Luna’s *The Sacred Colors, 1992–1994* in which the artist and three friends wore the colors with which they are associated—a white woman in a long white dress, a Black man wearing all black, an Asian woman in yellow, and Luna, a Native American man, in bright red. González argues that “the work was pointedly antiracist, deconstructing historical labels applied to racial types (“yellow peril,” “red skin,” etc.).”<sup>370</sup> As with Luna’s project, in *The Toll of the Sea* the treatment of color exemplifies the treatment of race within cultural formations; Anna May Wong is specifically coded through the color tinting process.

Color alters our perception and adds a filter through which we take in and process visual information; this can be harmful or helpful. Writing more explicitly about the racialized weight of color in *The Toll of the Sea*, Homay King states, “Like color-images, racial categories have an absorbent, seizing quality. They assert ‘color’ at the expense of the figure or person being depicted.”<sup>371</sup> Alternatively, “[color] has the potential to loosen the strictures of the black–white binary opposition, to liquefy frozen categories, or to provide a reminder that the idealized marble white of classical art and architecture is a retroactive fiction.”<sup>372</sup>

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<sup>369</sup> Jennifer A. González, *Subject to Display: Reframing Race in Contemporary Installation Art* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2008), 3; Stuart Hall, “Subjects in History: Making Diasporic Identities,” in *The House That Race Built*, ed. Wahneema Lubiano and Toni Morrison, 1. Vintage books ed (New York: Vintage Books, 1998).

<sup>370</sup> González, *Subject to Display*, 33.

<sup>371</sup> King, “Anna May Wong and the Color Image,” 61.

<sup>372</sup> King, 62.

Playing with color and changing the lens through which imagery is viewed by invoking color-saturated and monochromatic techniques divorces local color from object. *Ever Wanting* dislodges explicit openings for racist readings. Takemoto's use of color challenges racist visual signifiers of Chung as a representative Chinese American person at the behest of the United States' visual culture stars and invites new readings and interpretations for Chung.

In addition to antiracist artistic methodologies, color tinting also serves as a technique to organize themes. *Ever Wanting*'s themes evolve as the film builds. For example, when read together, imagery shaded in gold and yellow tones generate a story that is otherwise more subtle in the chronology of the film (Figure 37). Each short sequence is bookended by a return to material from the prelude: the birds. Beginning with gold-tinted, prepared surgical tools and surgery in the first sequence, the second sequence progresses to an operating table and poppies. In the third sequence, these motifs are different but repeated. Read together, opium drug use is implied.



**Figure 37. TT Takemoto, *Ever Wanting (for Margaret Chung)*, 2021, dimensions variable. Film stills of gold and yellow tones captured by the author. Image courtesy of the artist.**

Contrasting her public persona, Margaret Chung’s alleged participation in drug trafficking is evident in documentation within the archives, including a multi-year investigation by the Federal Bureau of Narcotics.<sup>373</sup> Despite evidence of Chung’s affiliation with drug trafficking, these potential traces are barely acknowledged in writing about Chung and are completely absent in any visual representations.<sup>374</sup>

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<sup>373</sup> Takemoto, interview, July 12, 2023. Peter Dale Scott, “Operation Paper” (United States: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Incorporated, 2010), 224. Douglas Valentine, *The Strength of the Wolf: The Secret History of America’s War on Drugs* (London ; Verso, 2004), 70–71.

<sup>374</sup> Author of *Doctor Mom Chung and the Fair-Haired Bastards*, Judy Tzu-Chun Wu writes about an accusation of Chung made through a formal letter in 1927 sent to California State Board of Medical Examiners and through her association with gangster Virginia Hill. Wu explains that the letter has inconsistencies, for example, suggesting Chung was in cahoots with her husband (when she was not married). Wu contextualizes the written allegation, “accusing her of selling narcotics, clearly an illegal act, would evoke popular perceptions of Chinese as opium smokers and dealers. Condemning Chung for lying about her marital status, not necessarily a

During World War II, Chung said “she could supply specific information” from some “smugglers in San Francisco.”<sup>375</sup> Nevertheless, *Ever Wanting* urges history to consider that calling out Chung’s likely participation in the drug trade was simply not convenient for the discursive narrative at the time, given Chung’s status as a US “Real Hero” (1943). Both her adjacency to narcotics trafficking and her comic book feature took place during the World War II era.

In another example of chromatic evolution, warm rust and red-toned materials progress from poppies and blood cells in the first sequence, to hospital views and pulsing lungs in the second sequence, to an outstretched bare arm and pressure building in a beaker. In these first three sequences the sets of imagery are interspersed among the other themes. In the fourth sequence, there is an onslaught of content. A fluorescent light above, a close shot of internal workings of the body. Then a pressure gauge ticking upward, a heart muscle throbbing, and the pressure gauge continuing to rise. After that, there are three closely curated images from the same source, a surgical cut (Figure 38). A knife slices the flesh, deep, wet, squishy, and dark in the center, creating a vulva-like image. The slit is separated, prodded, and manipulated. Without

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criminal or profession matter, would impugn her character by implying personal impropriety.” Wu suggests these accusations are couched in competition between the doctors and racism. *Dr. Mom Chung of the Fair-Haired Bastards*, 94–98.

Peter Dale Scott writes about Chung’s relationship with drug-trafficking-affiliated Virginia Hill, who was the mistress of Bugsy Siegel, an American mobster; Hill was also under investigation by the Federal Bureau of Narcotics. Peter Dale Scott, “Operation Paper: The United States and Drugs in Thailand and Burma,” *The Asia Pacific Journal | Japan Focus* 8, no. 44 (November 1, 2010): 49.

During World War II (1939-1945), Chung said “she could supply specific information...’from some smugglers in San Francisco.” Scott, 71 and 218.

<sup>375</sup> Scott, “Operation Paper,” 71 and 218.



explicitly depicting female genitals, these cuts imitate intimate prodding and fondling of a vulva, inviting a reading of sex with a person with a vulva, and, related to Chung, lesbian sex. In this move, the imagery draws on one of Chung's lauded qualities—her status as the first Chinese American female surgeon—to depict one of her historically redacted characteristics—her identity as a lesbian. Drawing on somewhat grotesque and vivid surgical footage, Takemoto uses vulva-like condoned materials, bringing together Chung's unsanctioned queer sexuality and her sanctioned professional status.



**Figure 38. TT Takemoto, *Ever Wanting (for Margaret Chung)*, 2021, dimensions variable. Film stills of the vulva-like surgical cut captured by the author. Images courtesy of the artist.**

Interspersed between images of the slits, the violet-coded imagery of lesbian desire in *Ever Wanting* is extended from Anna May Wong and Lily Pons earlier in the film to a wide-open eye, bright lights, and imagery of the atomic bomb (Figure 39). The atomic bomb blasts on August 6 and 9 of 1945 in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan, killed or injured hundreds of thousands of people, predominately Japanese nationals. This was part of the war effort that Chung avidly supported and in which she participated. At the same time, viewed from high above in the sky, the explosion symbolizes what the film has built to, the climax of a drug-induced fervor and an orgasm; it is a resolution of the tensions that build throughout the film, which crash down and then relax into the coda.



**Figure 39. TT Takemoto, *Ever Wanting (for Margaret Chung)*, 2021, dimensions variable. Film stills of the violet imagery captured by the author. Images courtesy of the artist.**

Chung's sexuality and her involvement with drugs was pushed out of visual culture depictions of her. Previously, she was too old, too asexual, too maternal, or too Asian to be imagined in a lexicon of law breaking, sexuality, or the erotic. Although each clip taken individually cannot be read as sexual coding or as indicating

a drug-induced state, I contend that when edited together, *Ever Wanting's* message is clear: imagery scanning the bodies of the WAVES while they exercise might be patriotic, gazing at Lily Pons as she performs can be understood as supporting the arts, a close working relationships between a doctor and her nurse is collegial, but all of this imagery is also suggestive of unsanctioned queer sexual desire.

Notably, during Chung's life, gay and lesbian sexuality and interracial marriage were concerns of the US government. Queer sexuality was investigated under the leadership of J. Edgar Hoover, the head of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) from 1924 to 1972; Hoover systematically collected information about gay people in 1937. In 1950–1951, he created the “Sex Deviates” program and led the attack constituting the Lavender Scare.<sup>376</sup> Chung's lesbianism was investigated in a 1940 FBI report.<sup>377</sup> At the end of Chung's life, in 1953, President Eisenhower signed Executive Order 10450, which disallowed queer individuals from obtaining federal government employment.<sup>378</sup> The government was also concerned by interracial marriages and it was not until six years after Chung's death in 1959 that the US Supreme Court decided in *Loving v. Virginia* (1967) that antimiscegenation laws were unconstitutional. This exemplifies the zeitgeist surrounding Chung's life

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<sup>376</sup> Christopher Michael Elias and Douglas M. Charles, “J. Edgar Hoover, the FBI, and the ‘Sex Deviates’ Program,” *NOTCHES* (blog), June 21, 2016, <https://notchesblog.com/2016/06/21/j-edgar-hoover-the-fbi-and-the-sex-deviates-program/>; Douglas M. Charles, *Hoover's War on Gays: Exposing the FBI's “Sex Deviates” Program* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2015).

<sup>377</sup> Wu, *Doctor Mom Chung of the Fair-Haired Bastards*, 96; Department of Justice, “Federal Bureau of Investigation File on ‘Dr. Margaret Jesse Chung,’” October 9, 1940.

<sup>378</sup> Bérubé, *Coming out under Fire*, 269.

and the layered difficulties she would have faced to requite her love interests. At least two of Chung's potential lovers, Sophie Tucker and Elsa Gidlow, were white women.<sup>379</sup> Gay and lesbian sex was not decriminalized nationally until 2003 with *Lawrence v. Texas*. Even if she had been public about her private wanting, lesbian relationships *and* interracial relationships would have been considered illegal by federal and state governments.

### **Lesbian Experimental Film and New Queer Cinema**

*Ever Wanting* enters a history in queer and lesbian experimental film that engages historically, culturally, sexually, and politically marginalized voices with unconventional methods. Film scholar B. Ruby Rich christened the term "new queer cinema" (NQC) in 1992, marking a significant moment in time for film history. NQC coincides with the coining of the term "queer theory."<sup>380</sup> Reflecting on the genre,

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<sup>379</sup> Wu, "Was Mom Chung &quot;A Sister Lesbian&quot;?"

<sup>380</sup> Queer theory was coined, "as urgency and rage began to collapse into despair and frustration for the ACT UP generation, the new queer cinema created a space of reflection, nourishment, and renewed engagement." Rich, *New Queer Cinema*, xv–xix. Rich explains cultural catalysts for this moment were the AIDS epidemic, the Regan administration's blunders handling of AIDS, and access to the camcorder, and cheap rent. For more on the intertwining of AIDS and New Queer Cinema see Monica B. Pearl's essay wherein the author contends "New Queer Cinema *is* AIDS cinema: not only because the films . . . emerge out of the time of and the preoccupation with AIDS, but also because their narratives and also the formal discontinuities and disruptions, are AIDS related." Monica B. Pearl, "AIDS and New Queer Cinema," in *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader*, ed. Michele Aaron (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2004), 23.

Michele Aaron describes the qualities of NQC films which fit films into an “‘irreverent’ and ‘energetic’” and “‘proudly assertive’” category.<sup>381</sup>

For a while, there were concerns that lesbian film would come to be misogynistically collapsed into NQC. Specifically, Rich and Amy Villarejo expressed concerns that lesbian cinema could be taken over by “‘queer cinema.’”<sup>382</sup> Reflecting on the 1990s, Sarah Keller cites Clara Bradbury-Rance, who shows that, at the end of the 1990s, in part due to Barbara Hammer’s work, lesbian cinema was less rare, and with the rise of queer theory, lesbian cinema became subsumed into queer cinema. Following Bradbury-Rance, Karl Schoonover, and Rosalind Galt, Keller suggests that “‘radical openness’” is crucial in Barbara Hammer’s practice.<sup>383</sup>

Hammer has been credited with having used experimental film to produce “‘the largest body of lesbian cultural feminist work.’”<sup>384</sup> Some of Hammer’s works are

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<sup>381</sup> J. Hoberman, “Out and Inner Mongolia,” *Premiere*, October 1992, 31; Michele Aaron, “New Queer Cinema: An Introduction,” in *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader*, ed. Michele Aaron (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2004), 3. Michele Aaron describes five qualities: films that “‘give voice to the marginalized,’” are “‘unapologetic about their characters’ faults,’” they “‘defy the sanctity of the past, especially homophobia,’” they also “‘defy cinematic convention in terms of form, content and genre,’” and, with the AIDS epidemic as a crucial cultural framing, New Queer Cinema films “‘defy death.’” Aaron, 3–5.

<sup>382</sup> Rich, *New Queer Cinema*, 30; Amy Villarejo, *Lesbian Rule: Cultural Criticism and the Value of Desire*, Next Wave (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 7.

<sup>383</sup> Sarah Keller, *Barbara Hammer: Pushing out of the Frame* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2021), 5; Clara Bradbury-Rance, *Lesbian Cinema after Queer Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021); Karl Schoonover and Rosalind Galt, *Queer Cinema in the World* (Naperville: Duke University Press, 2016).

<sup>384</sup> Richard Dyer and Julianne Pidduck, *Now You See It: Studies in Lesbian and Gay Film*, Second edition. (London ; Routledge, 2003), 348. Jenni Olson, “Hammer’s Herstory,” *The Advocate*, no. 814 (2000): 103; Sarah Keller, “Women’s Answer: Agnès Varda and Barbara Hammer,” *philoSOPHIA* 10, no. 1 (2020): 108.

visually explicit, with direct, unencumbered, close shots of vulvas (e.g., *Multiple Orgasm* in 1976 and *Dyketactics* in 1974).<sup>385</sup> Others are famous for resurrecting and making visible queer stories from history. What Jenni Olson deems a “gorgeous history triptych”—*Nitrate Kisses* (1992), *Tender Fictions* (1995), and *History Lessons* (2000)—make up Hammer’s *Invisible History Trilogy*.<sup>386</sup>

Reflecting the legacy of avant-garde pioneer Maya Deren’s approach to filmmaking, Hammer’s films employ a “vertical” (nonnarrative) and poetic approach to storytelling “in order to recompose—or, more precisely, to ‘re-edit’—the ‘unwritten stories’ of those who have been excluded from historical institutional memory.”<sup>387</sup> Alessandra Chiarini expands on the strategy by discussing Deren’s work. She says that vertical cinema produces “indivisible units of images, ideas, intuitions, and sensations,” likened to poetry, in contrast to “horizontal cinema,” which would be a linear plotline.<sup>388</sup> Like Hammer and Deren, *Ever Wanting* resists explicit narrative, creating poetic visual prose that focuses on building a heuristic experience for the viewer through edits, cuts, color, pace, and sound.

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<sup>385</sup> In the 1970s there was a lesbian and feminist group in Philadelphia called *Dyketactics* that sued the city of Philadelphia for use of excessive force. The defendant was found not guilty. “*Dyketactics Sues*,” *Sister Courage* 1, no. 6 (1976): 11. Tommi, “*Dyketactics Trial*,” *Gayzette: The Weekly Philadelphia Gayzette (Philadelphia, PA)* 3, no. 24 (1976). Betti Watts, “*Dyketactics! Loses*,” *Philadelphia Gay News*, no. 2 (1976): 2.

<sup>386</sup> Olson, “*Hammer’s Herstory*.”

<sup>387</sup> Alessandra Chiarini, “‘Feeling-Images’: Montage, Body, and Historical Memory in Barbara Hammer’s *Nitrate Kisses*,” *Feminist Media Histories* 2, no. 3 (2016): 92; Barbara Hammer, *Hammer! Making Movies out of Life and Sex* (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2010), 168.

<sup>388</sup> Chiarini, “‘Feeling-Images’: Montage, Body, and Historical Memory in Barbara Hammer’s *Nitrate Kisses*,” 91.



Hammer's *Nitrate Kisses* (1992) is a full-length film that tells the history of four gay, lesbian, and/or multi-race couples (

Figure 40).<sup>389</sup> Shaking up putatively fixed histories was key for Hammer, as was experimental filmmaking. Hammer says, "I made *Nitrate Kisses* (1992) because lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgendered people have been left out of history."<sup>390</sup> The film is a montage of materials and footage accumulated over time.<sup>391</sup> Chiarini analyzes the formal tools in *Nitrate Kisses*, suggesting that montage has an erotic energy.<sup>392</sup> The fragments that make up the collection serve to disrupt official historiography's linearity and, I would add, supposed finality. Chiarini argues, "Hammer employs a method of fragmentary reuse of the past in which the use of archival documents and the exploration of naked bodies performed by the movie camera interpenetrate to reveal in 'tactile' terms the lost history of homosexuality."<sup>393</sup> Hammer's employment of this technique obscures the image and therefore disrupts the potential of voyeurism.<sup>394</sup> Although *Nitrate Kisses* is four distinct stories, like

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<sup>389</sup> Keller, *Barbara Hammer: Pushing out of the Frame*, 114.

*Nitrate Kisses* was a target of censorship, coinciding with NEA controversies surrounding Andre Serrano's *Piss Christ* and Robert Mapplethorpe's *The Perfect Moment* in 1989—vetoed by chairman John Frumayer in 1990. Keller, 194.

<sup>390</sup> Hammer, *Hammer! Making Movies out of Life and Sex*, 204.

<sup>391</sup> Keller, *Barbara Hammer: Pushing out of the Frame*, 107.

<sup>392</sup> Chiarini describes, "arousing in the viewer tactile impressions and sensations, and involving her or him in new and revelatory forms of knowledge." Chiarini, "'Feeling-Images': Montage, Body, and Historical Memory in Barbara Hammer's *Nitrate Kisses*," 98.

<sup>393</sup> Chiarini, 99.

<sup>394</sup> Keller, *Barbara Hammer: Pushing out of the Frame*, 93.

*Ever Wanting*'s texture and movement, the visual choices Hammer makes create cohesion among the vast imagery with black-and-white film and grainy textures.



**Figure 40. Barbara Hammer, *Nitrate Kisses*, 1993, 67 min., 16 mm film. Film stills courtesy of the Estate of Barbara Hammer, New York and Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York.**

There are parallels between *Ever Wanting* and *Nitrate Kisses*—the rewritten histories, the consistency through color and texture, and the montage techniques that draw together disparate visual histories. Chiarini’s suggestion that Hammer creates an “erotic energy” with the fragmentation of montage to convey the loss of queer history can be similarly considered for *Ever Wanting*. Takemoto’s montage also creates an “erotic energy” through fragmentation, but the fragmentation does not occur because of a dearth of archival material. Chung left a well-represented historical trace, but that record is incomplete. Takemoto goes back into Chung’s history and breaks apart her biographical narrative to bring different imagery forward. In her historical visual archives, Chung was represented predominately through the lens of white patriarchal heterosexuality.

Hammer and Takemoto are joined by artists such as Cheryl Dunye, Wu Tsang, Isaac Julien, Richard Fung, and Tourmaline in creating or reimagining representations of historical queer people. With all these projects, there are aspects of creativity and imagination that reject linear history writing. At times, this approach can be perceptually experimental. Analyzing Dunye’s *The Watermelon Woman* (1996), Ann Cvetkovich and George Derk declare the film an ambiguous genre “that [melds] both myth and history.”<sup>395</sup> For the film, Dunye fabricates a history based on an imagined persona, Fae Richards, a Black woman actor from the golden age of Hollywood

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<sup>395</sup> Ann Cvetkovich, “In the Archive of Lesbian Feelings” (New York, USA: Duke University Press, 2020), 112; George Derk, “Inverting Hollywood from the Outside in: The Films within Cheryl Dunye’s *The Watermelon Woman*,” *Screen (London)* 59, no. 3 (2018): 295.

cinema in the 1940s. Pushing the archival mystique, Dunye collaborated with Zoe Leonard to create a fictional archive in *Fae Richard Photo Archive* (1993–1996). Julia Bryan-Wilson describes Dunye’s straddling of fact and fiction and calls into question the limited scope of all archives: “[Dunye] has consistently explored the affective potency that lies with historical records—and the gaps in those records—to explore how fictional archives might be necessary for queer lives in the present as well as for imagined futures.”<sup>396</sup> Creating new kinds of fictions disrupts the limited framework of culturally narrow versions of history. While Takemoto creates new archives for someone who leaves a significant trace, their meticulous poetic visual prose creates an impression for Chung that counteracts the weight of her well-recorded past.<sup>397</sup>

Similarly, Wu’s project *Duilian* (2016) is about the life of revolutionary, Chinese, lesbian poet Qiu Jin (1875–1907). As Bailey argues, “the film . . . portrays a side of Qiu Jin that is rarely seen in the mainstream, focusing on her private life and community of strong women who surrounded her.”<sup>398</sup> Filmed on a boat in the middle of the ocean, the film conveys a sense of unmooring from “space-time and geography,” as Wu describes the hoped-for effect.<sup>399</sup> Wu says of *Duilian*: “My film

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<sup>396</sup> Julia Bryan-Wilson and Cheryl Dunye, “Imaginary Archives: A Dialogue,” *Art Journal* 72, no. 2 (June 2013): 83.

<sup>397</sup> Other artists engage the recuperation of histories through biography and autobiography such as Richard Fung (*Blood in the Sea* (2000) and *Nang by Nang* (2018)), Susan Stryker (*Christine in the Cutting Room* (2012)) and Tourmaline (*Happy Birthday, Marsha!* (2018)).

<sup>398</sup> Stephanie Bailey, “Real Human: Wu Tsang in Conversation,” *Yishu* 15, no. 3 (May 1, 2016): 60, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1938829042/>.

<sup>399</sup> Fred Moten and Wu Tsang, “All Terror, All Beauty: Wu Tsang and Fred Moten in Conversation,” in *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*,

decodes and deliberately ‘mistranslates’ official narratives about Qiu Jin as a way to question the role that language and storytelling play in the construction of history.”<sup>400</sup> However, there are concerns within this project about the “speculative queering” of Qiu Jin.<sup>401</sup> As Wu’s project, like those of Hammer and Takemoto, seeks to reclaim a queer historical record for queer narratives, *Duilian* also reminds us of the precarity of these representations, and the risk of merging fact and fiction. I agree with Bryan Wilson that attending to queer histories is necessary for reimagining the past to open up the future.

*Ever Wanting* and *Duilian* both reenvision the lives of famous people who are already etched into discursive history. Wu and their partner, boychild, are the love interests in *Duilian*; therefore, their bodies are foregrounded within their speculative imagining of Qiu Jin’s life. By centering their bodies, they are offering an image of Qiu Jin, albeit fictional; nevertheless, it is one that can make this image of Qiu Jin more imaginable. Centering queer and Brown bodies in essential.<sup>402</sup> Holding space

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ed. Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, *Critical Anthologies in Art and Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2017), 340.

<sup>400</sup> Bailey, “Real Human: Wu Tsang in Conversation,” 60.

<sup>401</sup> David Xu Borgonjon, “The Ancestral Turn,” *Art and AsiaPacific*, no. 115 (2019): 65–66.

For more on Wu Tsang’s projects see Summer Kim Lee, “Borrowed Speech: Giving an Account of Another with Wu Tsang’s Full Body Quotation,” *ASAP/Journal* 6, no. 3 (2021): 679–706; Jack Halberstam, “Wildness, Loss, Death,” *Social Text* 32, no. 4 (121) (December 1, 2014): 137–48; Finn Jackson Ballard, “Wu Tsang’s Wildness and the Quest for Queer Utopia,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 3 (August 1, 2014): 461–65.

<sup>402</sup> Amelia Jones reminds us that performance theory and history is still formed by “US-based, most often normatively white, cosmopolitan and urban, often male, and clearly linked to late capitalist and postcolonial formations in European-dominant culture.” Jones, *In between Subjects*, 2.

for that, I suggest that this kind of embodied and corporeal imaging makes the imaginary part feel more concrete, more finished. Bodies give us a face, something to hold on to and fix in our memory. For *Ever Wanting*, by avoiding a corporeal representation of Chung, Takemoto's creation is helpfully distant from Chung's likeness and makes the imaginary part of the film more explicit. The visual vocabulary for Chung is liminal and not attached to one likeness, but instead rejects the possibility of making a visual image of Chung that is fixed. Takemoto's disembodied approach to Chung importantly allows for Chung's history to be porous, liminal, and continually evolving, letting history remain alive rather than sedimented in the past.

### **The End and Beginning Again**

This final section of the film is monochromatic, presented all in the same warm, brownish red that tinted the poppies and the blood vessels in other parts of the production. The consistency in color for these last few seconds disjoins the imagery from its expected tinting—blue sky, red blood, for example—and focuses the viewer on forms, shape, and light.<sup>403</sup> The images in this section begin to bleed together, blended to erase distinct borders of categorical assignment. Giant bubble-like cells float behind parachutes. Zooming out farther, silhouettes of dark parachutes and airplanes coexist, scaled to the same size in the distance. As the objects become smaller, the soundtrack similarly slows; occasionally, plunks of sound reverberate like an infrequent drip. Designed as a looped artwork in situ, the prelude of intermittent

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<sup>403</sup> Takemoto, interview, July 12, 2023.

birds follows, backed with the soundtrack that conveys vastness and openness. The parachutes dot the sky and drift downward, echoing the small black birds in the prelude that speck the sky. Coming down from the climax of the film, visual resolution is temporary, as the loop begins again.

In one sense, the looping pattern, with highs and lows and contrasting visual themes, emulates the pattern of drug use, the continual loop of addiction. Though documentation of Chung's connection to narcotics implied smuggling and not ingestion, the unending pattern of addiction relates to other aspects of her life, of almost having but never obtaining. The looping structure of *Ever Wanting* also emulates these patterns—of wanting, getting close, but never quite having—qualities that repeated in her relationships, in social structures, and in her desire to fly. Taking a step back, I also suggest that the looping of *Ever Wanting* reflects a cultural purgatory of how the past narratives of history affect the present for queer and Asian American people, a history Chung took part in shaping.

## **Conclusion**

As I began work on this chapter, Asian American comedian and actor Ali Wong's new television series *Beef* (April 6, 2023) had just been released on Netflix. Boasting a predominantly Asian American cast of darkly flawed characters, the series challenges monolithic views of Asian Americans. *Seattle Times* writer Naomi Ishisaka

said, “‘Beef’ drives the model minority myth off a cliff.”<sup>404</sup> But, days after the release, allegations of sexual assault were made against one of the show’s actors, David Choe. The positive attention *Beef* received quickly shifted. Soleil Ho of the *San Francisco Chronicle* titled an opinion piece, “We’re in Asian America’s Peak Media Moment. But ‘Beef’ Has Poisoned the Well.”<sup>405</sup> Although hyperbolic, Ho’s headline encapsulates the persistent lack of nuance that permeates the reception of visual culture in the United States. One of my contentions in this chapter is that Takemoto’s contribution to Chung’s visual histories permits multiple narratives to be true at once, allowing for tensions and asynchronicity. It is more productive to excavate history with a complex, dynamic, and multidimensional approach. This chapter’s examination of *Ever Wanting* is crucial to simultaneously trace and refuse limited representations of Asian American people in the public eye, and it demonstrates the need to reduce essentialist narratives about individuals.

This chapter analyzes TT Takemoto’s looping film *Ever Wanting (for Margaret Chung)* (2021) to examine the visual vocabularies Takemoto created to build a new, historically divergent imagining of Chung. The parenthetical of the title, *(for Margaret Chung)*, can be read in multiple ways. In one view, the film is a

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<sup>404</sup> Naomi Ishisaka, “‘Beef’ Is a Rare Treat: A Fresh Take on Asian American Representation,” *The Seattle Times*, April 17, 2023, <https://www.seattletimes.com/entertainment/tv/beef-is-a-rare-treat-a-fresh-take-on-asian-american-representation/>.

<sup>405</sup> Soleil Ho, “We’re in Asian America’s Peak Media Moment. But ‘Beef’ Has Poisoned the Well,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 18, 2023, <https://www.sfchronicle.com/opinion/article/beef-netflix-asian-american-media-17902085.php>.



wanting *of* or *for* Chung, positioning Chung as the wanted object. Another perspective could be Chung's, encapsulating what *she* wants, a visualization on her behalf, imagining from her perspective. Further still, Takemoto made this film as a dedication to Chung. How it is read, longing and not fully having, drives the sensorial and emotional force of the film. Rather than "either/or," this chapter suggests a messier approach that intentionally conflates these possibilities, producing a tangle of wanted and wanting. Analyzing the film as an array of themes allows for subtleties and makes room for discontentment and lack of fulfillment, a mode of representation that has not been considered or explored in the prevalent visual culture interpretations of Chung.

Through *Ever Wanting*, Takemoto responds to historical and contemporary systems of violence that frame individuals' lives. I argue that, through contrasts of experimental filmic techniques and entanglement with visual histories, *Ever Wanting* eschews historical representations of Chung to make room for understanding the patriotic doctor as a fragmented but whole individual—lauded and illicit, praised and rejected—setting precedents for queer histories to be complex and to subvert the linearity of racist, sexist, and homophobic historical narratives of the United States.

## CONCLUSION

“The intimate relationships I try to forge with the subjects often happens during the time of making.”

-TT Takemoto<sup>406</sup>

*Looking for Jiro, Semiotics of Sab, and Ever Wanting (for Margaret Chung)* are interconnected by their criticisms of systemic oppression in the United States, thoughtful engagement with archival materials, and critical conversations with visual vocabularies of US art history and visual culture. In the introduction, this dissertation uses intimacy to frame Takemoto’s artistic practice to reflect their research and artmaking processes and outcomes, as well as their connections to the inspiring subjects of each work. I contend that exploring Takemoto’s artworks offers an opportunity to unpack creative critiques of the past and to suggest new patterns and connections.

*Looking for Jiro, Semiotics of Sab, and Ever Wanting (for Margaret Chung)* offer a radical rethinking of the histories of incarceration, stereotyping, homophobia, and racism in the United States. These artworks expose threads of violence, allowing the viewers to draw connections between the past and present. The artworks together are also an opportunity to see the interconnectedness of seemingly disparate histories. For example, United States propaganda from WWII about Japanese incarceration also shapes how Hollywood casts Asian American actors.

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<sup>406</sup> TT Takemoto, interview by Kate Korroch, Zoom, November 20, 2023.

On November 20, 2023, Takemoto and I spoke about “intimacy” explicitly for the first time.<sup>407</sup> Takemoto reflected on their relationship to Jiro Onuma, Sab Shimono, and Margaret Chung, using terms like “gay uncle,” “gay ancestor,” “love letter,” and “kinship.”<sup>408</sup> These terms are often familial but also gesture towards closeness, longing, and even romance. In our concluding conversation, Takemoto reflected: “The intimate relationships I try to forge with the subjects often happens during the time of making.”<sup>409</sup> The artist takes time with the histories that have been disregarded and makes something for them.

Takemoto intentionally integrates time, slowness, and care to explore the history and archives of their artworks, crucial strategies to counteract our late capitalist society and build queer kinship across time. In *At Least You Know You Exist* (2011), Zachary Drucker comments in their film with trans elder, Flawless Sabina: “Because of you I know I exist.”<sup>410</sup> Drucker sees how Flawless Sabina’s life forged a path for her own. This queer generational relationality is what Takemoto fosters in their process and the visual methods communicated through the artworks. Though several of the queer elders are no longer alive, their histories and the threads they helped shape are present today. Takemoto’s artworks revive and imagine these histories through critiquing the historical erasures from the past and into the present

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<sup>407</sup> A transcription of this conversation is in the appendix of this document.

<sup>408</sup> TT Takemoto, interview by Kate Korroch, Zoom, November 20, 2023.

<sup>409</sup> TT Takemoto, interview by Kate Korroch, Zoom, November 20, 2023.

<sup>410</sup> Jones, *In Between Subjects*, 87; Dinshaw et al., “Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion,” 187.

and in doing so they create queer relationality and an expansion of art historical and visual cultural history.

For next steps, I plan to expand *The Intimacies of Queer Subjects* into a book project that encompasses more of Takemoto's artworks and additional interviews and archival research. *Looking for Jiro* was a turning point for TT Takemoto's art practice: their first foray into solo performance and their initial work with film. Before 2011, Takemoto had a rich collaborative performance practice, one I discuss in the first chapter. Collaboration and process are vital aspects in Takemoto's practice that are persistent and evolve as their works shift into different forms. I want to expand that section of Chapter One into a full chapter. For a second additional chapter, I plan to explore *On the Line* (2018), a film based on the life of Isa Shimoda (1876-1959), a gender non-conforming person who owned a restaurant adjacent to a tuna cannery in San Diego, which serves as a community hub for the Japanese American women working in the factory. This film has a montage quality similar to *Ever Wanting*, but it is more abstracted.<sup>[1]</sup> In 2024, Takemoto will have two exhibitions that will include *On the Line* but will also expand upon the material with sculptures and installations.<sup>[2]</sup> The first exhibition is a group exhibition dedicated to Ruth Asawa, reflecting on *Ruth Asawa and the Garden of Remembrance* (February 24, 2024 to April 6, 2024) and then a solo exhibition including new work at the Cantor Arts Center at Stanford University in the spring of 2024. Takemoto has multiple installation projects underway for these exhibitions—one new artwork is in conversation with Ruth Asawa's famous wire sculpture technique, and another is

made using *dorodango* a Japanese method of shaping raw earth, polishing it with bare hands. I am eager to incorporate analysis of the sculptural works to show the breadth of Takemoto's practice and to expand upon the material dimensions of the themes and arguments I have made here. This project aims to mirror the long-term care and engagement that are persistent in Takemoto's art practice.

## **APPENDIX: INTERVIEW WITH TT TAKEMOTO AND KATE KORROCH**

TT Takemoto and Kate Korroch spoke on November 20, 2023, to conclude Korroch's dissertation research. This document is an edited transcript of the conversation.

**KATE KORROCH:** I entitled my dissertation *The Intimacies of Queer Subjects* to describe an integral component of your artistic method and the intersections that exist between *Looking for Jiro* (2011), *Semiotics of Sab* (2016), and *Ever Wanting (for Margaret Chung)* (2021). I was wondering if you could tell me how you characterize your relationship to your subjects that inspired these works?

**TT TAKEMOTO:** It's a wonderful title. I think I have very different relationships with all three of those subjects. As you know, I was introduced to Jiro Onuma through a project that I was invited into, the *Lineage: Matchmaking in the Archive* project (E.G. Crichton, 2009–Present). When I was first paired with Jiro Onuma, I learned that his collection was one of the few personal collections of an Asian American at the GLBT Historical Society. I felt a little bit hesitant because I thought it might be a somewhat superficial matching of two gay Japanese Americans. But as soon as I saw the archival material, I felt immediately excited just about how Jiro Onuma was presenting himself in his photographs as a dandyish gay man. The more I dug into his archive, I tried to follow the threads of information that he left because he didn't leave any personal letters. I was following traces of names that he had written on backs of photographs and examining how he put his photo albums

together. I admired the care in which he had done those things, and I imagined what it meant for him to bring some of these photo albums into the incarceration camps and what some of his worries might have been. I think that process helped me feel even closer to him. When I discovered that he was in the incarceration camps, it occurred to me that he could have been imprisoned alongside my grandparents since he was similar in age. So, I started to think of him more as a gay uncle or a gay ancestor.

When I did the performance and decided to present myself as Onuma or as a character based on him, that's when I developed more emotional intimacy with him. I was thinking about what his psychological state might have been in camp as someone who had had a somewhat vibrant queer life in San Francisco before the war. I thought about what kind of cultural capital he might have had in the future, and how that was taken away when he was incarcerated. I was thinking about what his internal life might have been like in camp. I also gained more insight into him when I was able to interview some of his friends, including a gay couple who donated his collection to the GLBT Historical Society. It was great hearing snippets of impressions of Onuma as an older person who was never explicitly out to these folks, but clearly, they were out to him. This couple also described him as a kind of “gay uncle.”

**KATE KORROCH:** Thank you for that. I'll also ask the same question about Sab Shimono and Margaret Chung.

**TT TAKEMOTO:** With Sab Shimono, in a previous conversation, you and I went through the whole trajectory of my familiarity with his work, and I told you the story about seeing him in a gay bar shortly after I had come out to my parents, and how my father had recognized him in the bar as someone that he had gone to college with. When I learned that his personal collection was going to be archived by the Smithsonian, that's when I thought, "oh, I always wanted to meet him and have some kind of relationship with him. I knew I would be "meeting" his archive before I would ever have a chance to meet him. My first interview with him was after I visited his archive for the first time.

It was already clear to me that, on the one hand, he had lived a vibrant gay life and didn't consider himself closeted. At the same time, he was somewhat private about his queerness professionally. I think my desire to respect the way that he chose to be public or not public informed how I made the work, especially with *Semiotics of Sab*. Sometimes I call it "a love letter to Sab," that has a coded language that relates to his life but would not be necessarily at all legible to a viewer. Even after he saw the film and attended one of the screenings, he didn't want to be part of the Q&A and continued to signal to me his level of privacy.

He did agree to do a documentary with me (*Acting "As If"*, 2017) which I had hoped might become a feature-length documentary, but it exists as a shorter documentary. I never submitted it to film festivals or was aggressively public with that, partly



because I feel like he hasn't wanted to be in the public arena in that way. Although I do have the film in distribution with my two distributors, so it can serve an educational purpose, and I feel like he is open to that, as well. On a personal level, Sab and I are quite friendly. My partner Amy Sueyoshi and I have had dinner with Sab and his husband on several occasions.

**KATE KORROCH:** That's lovely.

**TT TAKEMOTO:** Yes, that's been really great. I was trying to think, is he my gay uncle? He might be the older gay uncle that lives far away who you're trying to be really respectful of. When I spend time with him, he feels really familiar, and there are ways in which he's actually like my father or kind of like my grandfather in his mannerisms, and even his speech patterns. I hope to continue to have a personal relationship with him, even though I have a feeling it will always be at a little bit of a distance.

**KATE KORROCH:** Before you spoke about your ongoing friendship or relationship with Shimono, I was thinking about how in *Acting "As If"*, it's so clear you have a wonderful rapport because of the way he speaks with you and Amy. I don't know who's asking the questions, but he's at ease with you, despite all of the privacy. He has shared that intimacy with you.

**TT TAKEMOTO:** Yes. In *Acting "As If"*, Amy asked many of the questions about his background, and I asked questions about his career, both in theater and in film. He was clearly much more excited to talk about his practice. It took us days to get into the stuff about some of his first encounters with men and why he joined the military, etc.. Then he would get a little bit tired and ask, "Why do you keep asking these questions? I want to talk about my practice." He would get a little bit impatient, so we had to be really careful about how we approach some of those topics. But I do feel like if I was able to spend more time with him on a regular basis, then different kinds of stories would come out.

**KATE KORROCH:** Thank you for sharing that. How would you characterize your relationship with Margaret Chung?

**TT TAKEMOTO:** Margaret Chung, I feel like I have a very different relationship with her as a subject. I was introduced to her story through Amy Sueyoshi, my partner, so it was much more from a historical perspective. Also, there's much more writing that exists about her, including a biography that discusses her queerness and her involvement with the military. I think I talked to you about this after visiting her archive at UC Berkeley, where there were some materials that were kind of problematic and raised further questions. My visits to the archive were limited because it was right before COVID, so I wasn't able to go back and dig in, but I was already committed to make a film for the Chinese Culture Center. I had to figure out a

way to develop some kind of intimacy with her in order to make the work. I felt like I had gotten to a point where I wasn't sure she was completely likable to me. You know what I mean? I wondered, would we be friends? I didn't know.

**KATE KORROCH:** Especially after you have such a fondness for some of the inspiring subjects for other artworks.

**TT TAKEMOTO:** Yes. The initial title for my film was “The Insatiable Margaret Chung.” I was thinking about how her desires and aspirations were always out of reach for her. But then I also was really struck by what I perceived as her desire for belonging and the way that she never quite fit in, either in the Asian American community because of her queerness or in the queer community because of her Asianness. That's the thing that resonated with me in terms of the Asian American experience and also intersectional identity. What does it mean to be a queer person of color? I admired her for everything that she had achieved and for her complexity. I don't know if I feel a kinship with her in the same way. Well, maybe I feel a kinship. I think she reminds me of the complexity of people.

**KATE KORROCH:** Before *Semiotics of Sab*, two of your projects that focused on specific people--*Looking for Jiro* and *Warning Shot*--were inspired by people who had passed away, Jiro Onuma (1904–1990) and James H. Wakasa (1880–1943). Sab Shimono is alive. How did making a film about a living person impact the project?

We've discussed this a bit already but please elaborate if there's anything you'd like to add.

**TT TAKEMOTO:** Making work about a living person who also has expressed their queerness in really specific ways, it made me think more about how to be respectful and caring and honoring of his perspectives. Well, and also, there was a lot more worry. When I think back to the process, I made the first draft of *Semiotics of Sab* kind of as an exercise that came out of my initial research, and then I made a second version after I visited his archive. When I sent him a link to the film, I was really nervous. I was nervous both about the form, because he's not someone who seems involved in experimental work, also because I was using a mashup of his various roles. I think there is a kind of sense of humor to the work, and I wasn't sure how he would respond to that, but he has a great sense of humor.

I don't know if he picked up on all of the humorous things that I was trying to achieve, and at that point, I wasn't sure how he felt about all of the different stereotypical roles that he had had to play in those 50 years. It wasn't until I was interviewing him, and he talked about having to develop a toolbox of several different voices, including the speaking voice of a person from Japan, China, and even a Chinese person playing a Japanese person. (During the war, it was Chinese folks who had to play the roles of Japanese characters.) If he was playing a historical figure that was based on a Chinese person playing a Japanese character, he had to refine that

voice. Sab told me that he taught himself those “accents” by listening to the speech patterns of his father. It struck me that there were only a handful of roles that Shimono had been able to play up to that point using his own natural speaking voice.

In theater, because a lot of the directors were Asian American, and specifically Japanese American, the mandate to perform “accents” was less of an issue, and Shimono was able to play a different range of Asian American characters. In one of our previous conversations, you asked me, "How come this film didn't get circulated more?" I realized when I was putting together my website that the film did circulate quite a bit, but I didn't travel with it very much, and I didn't involve him in that. It was more important for me to honor his mode of being in the world, and I also feel like my piece lives adjacently.

**KATE KORROCH:** I say in my chapter, that I think you do that really beautifully. You don't shy away from making a work about Shimono, but you respect his privacy. It comes through, and honestly, in some ways makes the work more interesting because it is really distinct formally within your body of work.

*Looking for Jiro* is the work that brought me to your art practice, and I am not unique in that. It is your most studied and circulated work, and it plays a key role in the contemporary conversations around queer Japanese Americans and Japanese incarceration in the United States. *Looking for Jiro* is also pivotal in your art practice

because it marks your foray into incorporating film in your works. Looking back, how has *Looking for Jiro* shaped your artistic practice?

**TT TAKEMOTO:** Thank you for that question. Yes, it was pivotal in terms of form, and in terms of thinking about film and film editing as a means of conveying content on its own that is different from the documentation of performance. It was also pivotal because the work I had been doing, especially in performance art, up until that point was really more in relation to interrogating stereotypes of Asian femininity and orientalist appropriation. I would say I was using disidentificatory practices of engagement, and feeling the limits or exhaustion of that practice, even though I still believe it's a critical practice. I love the humor in that practice, and I think it's incredibly valuable. For me, it also represents a certain moment in time when a lot of folks that I admired were engaging in that kind of work.

But it did feel emotionally different to engage in work that was about honoring legacies of queer Japanese Americans, and trying to create spaces for fantasy and desire and longing, in order to restore those kinds of emotional qualities. Rather than just pointing to or proving that, yes, queer JAs exist, I was thinking about opening spaces for emotional things to happen and realizing that for me there is more pleasure in that kind of work. I feel like I can spend more time with that work; it allows me to do more labor-intensive work. Even the sculptural *Gentleman's Gaman* (2009) work was partly about engaging in practices that took a lot of time as a way of spending

time with the subjects. Regarding the theme of intimacy, the intimate relationships I try to forge with the subjects often happen during the time of making.

*Looking for Jiro* definitely opened a portal for me to look for other queer Asian American stories from the past. It sparked my interest in the archives. I hadn't done that kind of extensive archival research before, so it opened me to the joy of the archive. I also had recently received tenure. Because I was hired in art history and visual culture and theory, there was an emphasis on publishing. After receiving tenure, I felt like I could take a moment or some moments, especially during that first sabbatical after tenure, to work on my creative practice. Up to that point, I had only allowed myself to do collaborative work, because somehow I felt like it was my practice, but was also adjacent to my practice. The invitation to be part of the Lineage project helped me give permission to myself to do work that I was individually interested in, and that's carried me into my future.

**KATE KORROCH:** *Ever Wanting (for Margaret Chung)* (2021) was made with the Chinese Culture Center in San Francisco in mind for installation. Can you tell me about the connections of your research on Chung and the choices you made for the installation?

**TT TAKEMOTO:** This was probably the first film that I made with installation in mind. I knew that the film was going to be projected large in the gallery. I was

already familiar with the gallery space because I had shown *On the Line* (2018) there in a previous exhibition. I had decided that I wanted it to be a looping film, and I was thinking a lot more about the length of the film in relation to gallery viewing versus festival or theatrical viewing. I knew that I wanted to create a bodily relationship between the screen and the viewer. For the opening passage, I envisioned someone standing relatively close to the screen, because the galleries are not huge, and then being enveloped by this white sky, and having their eyes follow those birds as they're crossing across the screen. I wanted to create space for looking up and having it feel really slow.

It's a little bit hard to build slowness into a piece that you know is ultimately going to be less than seven minutes, so I was trying to figure out how to make the first part as slow as possible while still being engaging. I also thought about pacing a lot more, in terms of how it would go through the cycles of imagery, with those cycles increasing in pace until the climax of the piece, before it drops back down to what I think of as zero. I thought about building a connection between the ending of the piece (with the parachutes falling from the sky) and the beginning of the piece where the sky opens up again. The imagery was also going from an orange red sky to a white sky. Those kinds of things were really exciting for me to think about.

I was also aware of what it meant for me as a Japanese American person to make a film about a Chinese American woman for the Chinese Culture Center, which is



centrally based in Chinatown in San Francisco, in proximity to where Margaret Chung lived. I think that probably informed my relationship to the found footage that was mostly from the public domain. Somehow to me that emphasized my distanced and historical relationship to her as a subject.

**KATE KORROCH:** *Ever Wanting* is engulfing when I watch it, and you just used that word to describe the visual elements. Is that effect also achieved with the sound components when the artwork is installed?

**TT TAKEMOTO:** The sound design was intended to create a feeling of immersion. But the sound system was probably not what my sound designer, Kadet Kuhne, would say would be the most ideal. I think a more ideal sound situation would include two or four speakers so that when you see the flying birds, you would actually feel the sound move across the space. If I were to show this film in a space where speakers could be a consideration, I would probably go back to Kadet so that we could make more deliberate sound choices, especially if the sound could move from front to back, side to side.

Kadet and I got to see the piece presented at Gray Area, which is a gallery in San Francisco in the Mission District, and they have a beautiful screen and a really good sound system. That was the first time that we were both like, wow. We were sitting

close to the really big screen with the most excellent sound situation that we could have.

**KATE KORROCH:** That sounds like a wonderful experience. The artworks I explore in this dissertation and some of your other recent works such as *On the Line* (2018) and *After Bed* (2023), begin with Asian Americans of the present or recent past. How is this trajectory evolving in your forthcoming projects?

**TT TAKEMOTO:** *On the Line* was initially inspired by Isa Shimoda, who was born in the 1870s and was a first-generation immigrant from Japan, so she's not so much from the recent past. *After Bed* is certainly inspired by someone who is still living and who appeared in the film *The Bed* (1968 dir. James Broughton).

I have a few different projects that I'm working on. I'm getting ready for some exhibitions that have installation elements in conversation with *Looking for Jiro* and *On the Line*. I've been working on a piece called *Stirrings*, which is a piece using text from Samuel Beckett. It's exciting because Kadet is trying to develop a strategy for the sound, which would be based on chance operations. Kadet is creating a program that would interact with the imagery on the film itself to trigger different sound inputs.

Kadet is working on the technical piece of that, and then we're going to discuss the input sounds. That's probably going to lend itself more to multichannel installation than an individual theatrical type film. But in terms of people, that film is based on Samuel Beckett, and is dedicated to the legacy of Douglas Crimp, who was my former dissertation advisor.

Moving forward, I plan to work on a project about Rosalie Bamberger, who was one of the founding members of the Daughters of Bilitis (D.O.B.), which was one of the first lesbian political organizations. She was a Filipina from the Philippines of mixed heritage. She was a skilled tradesperson who worked in a paintbrush factory and later worked in a lock-making factory. Most of the women involved in D.O.B. were white-collar workers. It's interesting to me that many of the working class women who were initially involved left the organization pretty early on.

D.O.B.'s first publication was called *The Ladder*. It was widely circulated in the US, and it had to be circulated in a brown envelope to protect people who were receiving it. It's a very interesting dynamic history, but I would like to focus on the different goals, lives, and considerations of queer working-class women of color who were looking for safe spaces for women to dance, hang out, party, and build community. I've been eager to work on this project for several years, and I've been collecting footage and creating some draft imagery. Conceptually and aesthetically, it might be

similar to *On the Line*, and it will be one of the big projects I hope to work on during my upcoming sabbatical in 2025.

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