

Confronting Ambiguity: The Intersection of Racial and Sexual Marginalisation
and Repression in *Rex vs Singh* (2008) and *Seeking Single White Male* (2010)

By

Yilong (Louie) Liu

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Abstract

This MRP examines how Canadian filmmakers and artists explore racial and sexual marginalisation in Canada. Two films in particular exemplify different forms of racism towards South Asian immigrants. The first, *Rex vs Singh* (2008), an experimental documentary produced by John Greyson, Richard Fung, and Ali Kazimi, showcases the ambiguous application of immigration policies to repress South Asian immigration. Through different reconstructed montages, the film confronts these ambiguities in relation to the court case. The second, *Seeking Single White Male* (2010), a performance-video work by Toronto-based artist Vivek Shraya—South Asian descent, demonstrates not only the dominant racial norms and white normativity in queer communities in Toronto, but also the ambivalence in performing racial identification. I identify ambiguity as the distinct contribution to understanding first: i) how state policies are used for racial and sexual repression, ii) the ways in which identification of racial norms are unstable, iii) and how these norms have been translated into sexual (un)/desirability. The ambiguities evoked by these works provide critical insights to investigate the complexity of racial marginalisation and their intersection with gender/sex normativity.

Keywords: queer, gender and sexuality, film, ethnic studies, ambiguity

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Introduction

The year 2014 marked the one-hundred-year anniversary of Komagata Maru. Komagata Maru was a ship that carried three-hundred and seventy-six passengers, and it departed on May 23rd in 1914, from Hong Kong to Vancouver. Most of the passengers on board were Punjabi workers originally from British India. The incident occurred when the passengers on the ship were denied entry by the Canadian government under the Continuous Journey regulation¹ and Immigration Act 1910². These two regulations allowed custom officers to turn away any immigrants who did not carry more than two-hundred dollars at arrival.³ Komagata Maru stayed in Victoria harbour in Vancouver for two months and was eventually forced to sail back to India. The denial of Komagata Maru exemplified the government's hope to build Canada as a White nation, excluding and suppressing further increase of non-European population in the early twentieth-century. In addition to South Asian immigrants, other non-European groups were affected by the rising anti-Asian sentiment at the time. For instance, the Chinese Head Tax in 1885 aimed to reduce the numbers of Chinese workers entering Canada, Japanese Internment Camp in 1942

¹ The regulation was used to repeal the *Immigration Act* in 1908, which decreed that immigrants need to come directly from their country of origin/birth on a continuous journey.

Library and Archives Canada. Statutes of Canada. An Act to Amend the Immigration Act, 1908. Ottawa: SC 7-8 Edward VII, Chapter 33.

"Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21." Continuous Journey Regulation, 1908 | Pier 21. <https://www.pier21.ca/research/immigration-history/continuous-journey-regulation-1908>.

² Valerie Knowles, *Strangers at Our Gates: Canadian Immigration and Immigration Policy, 1540-1997* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1997), 86.

This Act decreed that immigrants from Asiatic region needed to have 200 dollars in possession before being admitted to Canada.

³ Hugh, Johnston, "Komagata Maru." The Canadian Encyclopedia.

detained Japanese immigrants living in British Columbia for the rest of World War II, and the list went on.

As a commemoration of the Komagata Maru incident, an event entitled: “In the Wake of the Komagata Maru, Transpacific Migration, Race, and Contemporary Art” was organised by Surrey Art Gallery in Vancouver in 2014. This event was comprised of an exhibition “Rupture in Arrival: Art in the Wake of the Komagata Maru” which included works by visual artists such as Roy Arden, Avantika Bawa, Ali Kazimi, Evan Lee, Haris Sheikh, Jarnail Singh, Paul Wong, Mass Raghavendra Rao, and Ken Lum. Following the exhibition which included paintings, archive images, photographs of, and installation works related to the catastrophe of Komagata Maru, the event proceeded with a symposium entitled: “Disfiguring Identity: Art, Migration and Exile” wherein five short films were selected for screening: i) Ayesha Hameed’s *Fire Fences and Flight* (2007), ii) Karin Lee’s *Shattered: The anti-Asian Riots of 1907* (2007), iii) John Greyson, Richard Fung, and Ali Kazimi’s *Rex vs Singh* (2008), iv) Vivek Shraya’s *Seeking Single White Male* (2010), and v) Divya Merhra’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* (2009). All five films “go against the grain of traditional narratives about migration and exile”.⁴ This research paper focusses specifically on the experimental documentary *Rex vs Singh* and performance-video *Seeking Single White Male*. Through the analysis of the two short films, the paper argues how they confront the ambiguities in the intersection of sexual and

⁴ Paul Wong and Kira Wu, “Introduction”, in *Disfiguring Identities: Art, Migration and Exile Symposium*, (Surrey: Surrey Art Gallery, 2014), 78.

racial marginalisation of South Asian subjects in Canadian society, both in the past and now. Moreover, the analysis concerns external and internalised modes of repression.⁵

Rex vs Singh is a short experimental documentary film (28 mins) commissioned by the Queer History Project of Out on Screen for the Vancouver Queer Film Festival in 2008. The film re-creates the legal trial against Dalip Singh and Naina Singh who were both mill-workers in Vancouver and were arrested allegedly for sodomy under the ‘Gross Indecency Law’.⁶ The accusation made against the two Sikh immigrants in 1915, after denying Komagata Maru (1914), was exemplary of how homophobia and racism were intertwined in early twentieth-century Canada. Through various modes of reconstruction of the court case, the experimental documentary sheds light on the unsettled truth and the ambiguities in the court case. Precisely, I look into how this film makes us revisit the inconsistent application of immigration policies/regulations which led to Komagata Maru, and the relationship this had to the Canadian Indecency Law, which was unjustifiably used as an excuse for the arrest of Naina and Dalip Singh. That is, the film explores ambiguities with regard to the truth of the case itself as a way to question the supposed “facts” of the arrest.

⁵ I will be using “repression”—in lieu of “oppression” throughout the discussions on racial and sexual marginalisation to be consistent with Althusser’s Repressive and Ideological State Apparatuses. To Althusser, repressive state apparatuses function predominantly through latent and (or) actual violence, whereas ideological state apparatuses function primarily through ideologies.

⁶ “Criminal Code was a federal statute enacted by Canadian Parliament to s91 (27) of the Constitution Act 1867, which provided the federal government exclusive jurisdiction to legislate criminal offences in Canada”.

The short performance-video *Seeking Single White Male* (SSWM) was inspired by comments Shraya overheard in a gay bar in Edmonton years before it was made. In 2010, Shraya—of south Asian decent—juxtaposes gay bar comments in the video with photographs of herself⁷ embarking on a “transition” to whiteness with blonde hair and blue contact lenses. Throughout her transformation into a white-passing queer man each photograph demonstrates how racialised desire manifests corporeally in correspondence to comments she receives from members in queer communities. Through the performance, the artist enacts a mode of internalisation of racial norms within queer communities in twentieth-century Canada, and reveals the ambivalent effect of her performance in relation to dominant ideologies.⁸ Namely, the performance-video evokes the question: does Shraya’s race-crossing transformation conform or subvert white normativity? As part of her project, Shraya wrote and published an Open Letter two years later on her website, in which she stated the original intention(s) of the work and how viewers reacted to the short piece. This Open Letter provides important materials to study the diverse interpretations of her performance-video, generated from queer communities so as to take account of the awareness raised in this performance.

As a queer of colour living in Toronto, my embodied experience with racism in and outside of queer communities, has led me to explore how racial marginalisation has shifted its form from one-hundred years ago to the present, namely from physical

⁷ The video was made prior to Shraya embarked on her transgender journey and adapted the current pronoun: she/her.

⁸ I use ‘ideology’ specifically in alignment with Louis Althusser’s notion of ‘ideological state apparatuses’ and his argument that all humans are ‘already-subjects of ideologies’ which I will explore further later.

exclusion and repression to functions of ideological apparatuses, where racial discourse is often intersected with discourse of sexuality and (un)/desirability. I specifically chose film as the medium to look into these matters. For instance, *Rex vs Singh* explores modes of repression that operates through physical violence in the form of criminalising homosexuality and curbing South Asian immigration in early-twentieth-century Canada; *Seeking Single White Male* speaks to the internalisation of white normativity in queer communities in contemporary Canada, a form of repression that works predominantly through ideologies. By studying the two films, I want to emphasise the importance of filmmaking as a powerful practice for “disenfranchised sectors of the public sphere” where artists recount un-concluded, forgotten, repressed, and silenced histories.⁹ The films prompt the audiences to critically rethink these histories, subjects, and histories that otherwise “would not be able to be recalled at will”.¹⁰

I: *Rex vs Singh* (2008)—John Greyson, Richard Fung, Ali Kazimi

1.1 Racial and Sexual Exclusion in Early Twentieth-Century Canada

Rex vs Singh primarily explores the legal trial between the Supreme Court of Vancouver and two South Asian Sikh men: Dalip Singh and Naina Singh who lived in Vancouver, British Columbia in 1915 when they were both arrested by the Italian-Canadian undercover detective Joseph Ricci and detective Donald Sinclair for alleged sodomy. The

⁹ José Esteban Muñoz "The Autoethnographic Performance: Reading Richard Fung's Queer Hybridity. In *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, 77-92 (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 82.

¹⁰ Philip S., and Piers B. Rawson. “Lived Time” in *Art and Time* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2005), 50.

film reconstructs the case of legal dispute based on court transcripts recorded during the first twenty-year period of the twentieth-century, when a large number of Sikh men living in Vancouver were detained for the same reasons.¹¹ At large, the film portrays the incessant anti-Asian sentiment in Vancouver that not only reflected but also informed the repression of (South) Asian immigrants around the 1920s, through law enforcement. This chapter argues that the arrest of the Sikh men exemplifies the modes of control that the state deploys through immigration regulations and the Gross Indecency Laws, policing, and urban segregation.¹²

The film reconstructs the court case of Naina and Dalip Singh that took place with the backdrop of the new immigration policies in early twentieth-century Canada. Immigration policies such as the “Immigration Act 1910” and “Continuous Journey Policy of 1908” are part of a Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) that Althusser noted as

¹¹ Heather Keung, “Maintaining an Artistic Direction: From Representation to Professionalization”, in *Disfiguring Identities: Art, Migration and Exile Symposium* (Surrey: Surrey Art Gallery, 2014), 78.

¹²Hugh, Johnston, "Komagata Maru." The Canadian Encyclopedia.

An Act to Prevent Chinese from Acquiring Crown Land, February 18th, 1884, Session 2, Ch 2.

http://learning.royalbcmuseum.bc.ca/wpcontent/uploads/2015/10/act_to_preventcrown.pdf

Although there are no specific polices or/and regulations recorded explicitly segregating Asian immigrants from European immigrants, legislation such as *An Act to Prevent Chinese from Acquiring Crown Land* that restricted Chinese immigrants to purchase land from the government, instead they could only acquire properties through private means. Such policy had significant impact as to where Chinese immigrants could purchase property—mostly from other Chinese residences in particular areas.

¹²Louis Althusser, *On The Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, translated by Goshgarian, G. M (London:Verso Press, original work published in 1970), 243.

being the ways in which the state/*ruling class* controls the mass/*working class* “massively and predominantly *by repression* (including physical repression), which function secondarily by ideology” (1970, p. 244);¹³ Repressive State Apparatuses contain “the Government, the Administration, the Army, the Police, the Courts, the Prisons, etc”.¹⁴ The Immigration Act of 1910 declared that Canadian immigration officers could turn back any immigrants who possessed less than 200 dollars upon arrival (roughly \$4400 today). The “Continuous Journey Policy” (1908) decreed that any immigrant must come directly from their place of origin.¹⁵ The “Continuous Journey Policy” is directly linked to the Komagata Maru incident in which 376 South Asian immigrants who travelled from British Hong Kong to Vancouver in 1914 were turned away by the Customs officers and soldiers under this policy.¹⁶

Before the event, and by 1907, the fear of economic and labour competition was already rising amongst European immigrants in Vancouver. The deportation of 376 Punjabis workers in Komagata Maru and the urban segregation of non-European immigrants elucidates the anti-Asian sentiment at the time. As indicated in *Rex vs Singh*,

¹³ Althusser’s Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA) functions predominantly through ideologies within the private domain such as family, school, church, and so forth to ensure the power of the dominant ideologies. Althusser argues that there are no individuals, only subjects that come into being through interpellation or ‘hailing’ of ideologies, ideologies that are internalised by the subjects in the private domain such as school, families etc.

Louis Althusser, *On The Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, translated by Goshgarian, G. M, (London: Verso Press, original work published in 1970), 244.

¹⁴ Ibid,

¹⁵ Hugh, Johnston, "Komagata Maru." The Canadian Encyclopedia.

¹⁶ “The Incident”, Komagata Maru Journey, Accessed October 1, 2017, <http://komagatamarujourney.ca/incident>.

racist sentiment was rising against Chinese and Japanese immigrants amongst European Canadians since the beginning of the 20th-century. For instance, The Asiatic Exclusion League¹⁷ was headed and formed by Mayor Alexander Bethune in 1907 and supported by a “non-union conservative labour party named ‘Knights of Labour’” to exclude all Asiatics from Canada. In the same year, the group destroyed many properties in Chinatown and Japantown in Vancouver (i.e. grocery stores on Powell street) whilst singing “White Canada Forever.”¹⁸ As explored in the film, Anti-Asian sentiment also led to urban segregation. Namely, South Asians were restricted from accessing certain public facilities and removed from their original residences, which can be seen as a form of Repressive State Apparatuses legitimised by the state. As queer urban historian and commentator Gordon Ingram notes in the film: “Carrol Street in Vancouver was the original line between the so-called white city behind it and the Oriental city on the other side. Those *apartheid-like* lines shifted every five to ten years and often involved a riot”.¹⁹

After the issuing of the “Continuous Journey Regulation” and “Immigration Act 1910” against South Asian immigrants, one perplexing event occurred when a government department order was issued to deport thirty-eight Punjabi workers who

¹⁷ *Asiatic Exclusion League (AEL) was an organisation in both the United States of America and Canada in early-twentieth century. The organisation aimed to curb immigrants into the U.S. and Canada from the region of Asia. AEL in Canada started on August 12th, 1907.

¹⁸ *Rex vs Singh*. Directed by Richard Fung, Ali Kazimi, and John Greyson. Canada: Queer History Project of Out on screen, 2008. DVD.

¹⁹ *Rex vs Singh*. Directed by Richard Fung, Ali Kazimi, and John Greyson. Canada: Queer History Project of Out on screen, 2008. DVD. (10:56)

travelled from Japan on the ship Panama Maru in 1913—one year before Komagata Maru. The thirty-eight Sikh men failed to follow the Continuous Journey policy and possessed less than 200 dollars. However, on November, 1913, a Canadian judge overruled the order and claimed it to be invalid. As a result, the thirty-eight workers were permitted to stay. Encouraged by the success of Panama Maru, passengers were assembled and prepared for sailing on the Komagata Maru in 1914, but their entry was denied through such a devastating process. The case demonstrates how immigration policies were applied with such inconsistency which led to human atrocities like the Komagata Maru Incident.

1.2 Ambiguity

The alleged legal charge of “attempted buggery” against Naina and Dalip Singh explored by the film is based on the 1915 trial whose verdict is unknown. This legal charge can be understood as the state’s means to override the inconsistent application of the immigration policies in question. For instance, the policies did not require the officers to turn away all immigrants who did not carry more than 200 dollars, or/and did not travel from their country of origin; rather, officers could choose when to apply these policies and whom would be punished. Specifically, the Immigration Act of 1906 declared that all immigrants from Asiatic region ought to be checked for their possession and must follow the Continuous Journey regulation. However, the application of both policies was almost exclusively applied to South Asian immigrants.²⁰ In this way, the British officials in India could deny the Canadian government’s prejudice and/or the existence of any law set

²⁰ The Chinese and Japanese immigrants at the time were subject to other policies that curbed their immigration: Chinese Head Tax (1886), Provincial Election Act 1905 (for Chinese, Japanese and Indian)

against South Asian immigrants. Recognising the inconsistent wording in the regulations, a Canadian judge overruled the immigration department order against Panama Maru. As a result of the judge's overruling, the Canadian government revised the regulations to meet the objections that temporarily invalidated them, and re-instated the policies on January, 1914—before Komagata Maru left British Hong Kong. The leaders for Komagata Maru were aware of the reissued regulations and they nevertheless believed that they could petition for residency. However, the ship was denied entry upon arrival and forced to return to Hong Kong after waiting by the port for *two months*.

The film demonstrates how Naina Singh and Dalip Singh's arrest is unavoidably entangled with Komagata Maru and underlying anti-Asian sentiments. During the time when Komagata Maru was stranded at the port of Vancouver, the South Asian community challenged the Supreme Court for a repeal. However, the court upheld the deportation of the 376 passengers. The film suggests that Bela Singh, a mole and an informant for the immigration department in Vancouver who helped the government turn away Komagata Maru, might have been related to the arrest of Dalip Singh and Naina Singh. As the film indicates that Detective Joseph Ricci and detective Donald Sinclair arrested Naina Singh and Dalip Singh on the basis of "attempted buggery" three months after Bela Singh was cleared of murder charges.²¹ In Naina Singh's testimony, he states that he first knew detective Ricci at the legal trial of Bela Singh who killed Bhag Singh and Battan Singh and wounded five others in Khalsa Diwan Society in Vancouver, and had many

²¹ *Rex vs Singh*. Directed by Richard Fung, Ali Kazimi, and John Greyson. Canada: Queer History Project of Out on screen, 2008. DVD.

conversations with him. However, without clear evidence, the exact relationship between Dalip and Naina Singh and Bela Singh remains unknown.

Attempting buggery was the stated reason to why Naina Singh and Dalip Singh were arrested, but the validity of this charge is questionable. As mentioned above, the immigration policies were largely informed by the colonial relations between the Punjabi workers and Canada (British Empire). As British subjects, the Sikh workers who were already residing in Canada could not be discriminated against through racist laws.²² Thus, it might be through the “Gross Indecency” law, that the municipal government tried to criminalise the Sikh men. The law in the original Canadian Criminal Code defined “indecent” as acts between two men, it did not, nevertheless, specify what kind of acts were considered gross.²³ Starting in 1890, the Criminal Code was applied primarily to imprisoned men who “engaged” in homosexual activity. The municipal government imprisoned South Asian immigrants based on suspicion of “solicitation” for homosexual engagements.

The Gross Indecency law was applied to Naina and Dalip Singh and is itself deeply discriminatory and used for racial repression. As the immigration law functions through policy application and policing, the Gross Indecency law works in similar ways. The Canadian government criminalised homosexuality from 1890 to 1969 through

²² Scott MacKenzie, “And Now for Something Completely Dissident: The ‘Parodic Historical’ and ‘archival Necrology’ of John Greyson”, in *The Perils of Pedagogy: The Works of John Greyson*, edited by Brenda Longfellow, Scott MacKenzie, and Thomas Waugh (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2013), 160.

²³ Namely, the law didn’t specify the level of ‘grossness’—kiss, touch, glare, solicitation for sex, or sexual activities.

homophobic Indecency laws and deemed homosexuality as “deviant behaviours that could not be tolerated.”²⁴ South Asian immigrants became the target of this law due to the hatred that existed in terms of “racial difference” that, as Ingram argued, also fascinated the white sexual imagination, yet threatened their homophobic self-identity.

The police—detective Ricci and Sinclair—used the Gross Indecency Law in the 1920s to arrest subjects on the grounds of homosexuality, which attest to how the policing as a key method of Repressive State Apparatuses also functions as an Ideological State Apparatuses. As previously noted, Repressive State Apparatuses “functions massively and predominantly by repression, while functioning secondarily by ideology (ISA)”.²⁵ That is to say, homophobia as an ideology required repressive criminalization and policing to implement it as reality. The police also function by ideology both to ensure their cohesion with and reproduction of the “values” they propound externally.²⁶ By arresting “homosexual” subjects, the police not only physically excluded the subjects, but also reproduced the ideological value of the state by criminalising them. In doing so, the police became agents of the law to not only repress homosexuality but also to force subjects to internalise an ideology that through fear and punishment would serve as a method to stop homosexuality from “spreading”. The policing body used the arrest of Naina and Dalip Singh as “test cases” in consensual homosexual activity between

²⁴ Alec Fadel, *Homosexual Offenses in Ottawa 1950 to 1967: the medicalization of the legal process*. Ottawa: National Library of Canada = Bibliothèque nationale du Canada, 1995. p.2.

²⁵ Louis Althusser, *On The Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, translated by Goshgarian, G. M (London: Verso Press, original work published in 1970), 244.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

adults.²⁷ However, due to incomplete documentation of the case, it is uncertain whether or not the arrested Sikh workers did, in fact, engage in homosexual acts.

Intersection of Sexuality and Race

Despite the fact that the case is un-concluded, the film poses questions on the possibility that the police had a sexual curiosity, and the arrest of Naina and Dalip could be a self-deceptive act while conforming to the state law and ideologies, thus demonstrating the ironic intersection of racial repression and sexual fascination. As Ingram notes in his interview, the case of “Rex vs Singh” showcases the “convergence of xenophobia and racism with a kind of homophobia that involves at the same time a sexual fascination for the bodies of these well-built labouring males.”²⁸ The film delves into the ambiguous relationship between the police and Sikh men in early twentieth-century Canada. Although the lack of evidence and incomplete documentation fails to provide definitive answers to the questions raised by the film, these ambiguities in relation to the truthfulness of the arrest are key in considering the case of “Rex vs Singh”.

The Sikh workers’ “well-built bodies” and the fascination of the police is tied to colonialism because the Sikh workers’ country of origin—Punjab—was under British rule (1849-1947). During British ruling in India, the second-class Punjabi workers found the work wages in Canada to be higher than their home country. As a result, they began to seek economic opportunities as labourers in Vancouver. During colonisation, as literary

²⁷ *Rex vs Singh*. Directed by Richard Fung, Ali Kazimi, and John Greyson. Canada: Queer History Project of Out on screen, 2008. DVD. (09: 15)

²⁸ *Ibid.* (15:20)

studies professor Gabrielle McIntire contends, that “not only has the white imagination (of the colonised) surcharged black and brown bodies with an excess of uncontrollable sexuality, but, such an imagination has also rendered this projected Otherness as bordering on homosexuality”.²⁹ McIntire’s arguments demonstrate first, the sexualisation of brown and black bodies. Secondly, McIntire points out the possibility of homoerotic desire of the white-European towards racialised bodies.

Secondly, race and labour relation in early twentieth-century Canada also played a critical role in shaping the Sikh men’s “well-built bodies”. The placement of non-European workers in low-wage and labour-intensive sectors was directly linked with race. Professor Grace-Edward Galabuzi who specialises in police and race relations contends that in Canada, “racialised immigrants were incorporated into the economy in a way that posed the least risk to the character of the nation.”³⁰ The risk that Galabuzi speaks of here refers to the presumed danger associated with Black and Asian immigrants and their potential interference in constructing a White-settler Canadian nation.³¹ As the film indicates, by 1915, there were more than six thousand South Asian men working in

²⁹ Gabrielle McIntire, *Modernism, Memory, and Desire: T.S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 20.

³⁰ Galabuzi, Grace-Edward. *Canadas creeping economic apartheid: the economic segregation and social marginalisation of racialised groups* (Toronto: CSJ Foundation for Research and Education, 2001), 77.

³¹ For instance, the Chinese workers—once they finished their railroad construction work—were placed into economic sectors such as “farming, fishing, logging, or the sawmill and canning industries”.

Audrey Kobayashi and Peter Jackson, “Japanese Canadians and the Racialization of Labour in the British Columbia Sawmill Industry”, in *Labour in British Columbia: Law, Race and Women* (Vancouver, B.C.: BC Studies, 1994), 37.

Vancouver, most of them worked in lumber mills.³² The male Sikh bodies that had been shaped through low-wage work and physical labour indeed might have fascinated the police.

Cinematic Device

By questioning the truth of the arrest, the experimental documentary explores issues of various ambiguities through four different methods of cinematic construction of the court case as an un-concluded history. Each of the four cinematic reconstructions has its own take on “*Rex vs Singh*” case, and is produced by different directors except for the opening montage, which is a collective production. The first montage (8mins and 30 seconds) is produced in the form of a classical Hollywood courtroom drama with a direct reference to Billy Wilder’s *Witness for the Prosecution* (1957).³³ In order to reconstruct the trial proceeded in 1915, this montage is based on the remaining legal documents and court transcripts. In the second montage (9 mins), Ali Kazimi utilises the conventional interview format with Gordon Ingram, the commentator, which provides historical context for the case of “*Rex vs Singh*”. John Greyson in the third montage (5 mins and 17 seconds) uses cinematic fantasy, parodying the court narrative, using the elephant

³² *Rex vs Singh*. Directed by Richard Fung, Ali Kazimi, and John Greyson. Canada: Queer History Project of Out on screen, 2008. DVD.

Scott MacKenzie, “And Now for Something Completely Dissident: The ‘Parodic Historical’ and ‘archival Necrology’ of John Greyson”, in *The Perils of Pedagogy: The Works of John Greyson*, edited by Brenda Longfellow, Scott MacKenzie, and Thomas Waugh (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2013), 153.

³³ Directed by Bill Wilder, and adapted from a short story by Agatha Christie, *Witness for the Prosecution* is a court-room drama that depicts a murder case.

parable³⁴ and the pockets as metaphors to confront the contested relationship between the police and the accused with a touch of humour. In the fourth montage (5 mins), Richard Fung reconstructs the narrative through B-roll images of archival documents and dialogues in the same but now empty court-room from the first montage.

In details, the first montage follows a convention of courtroom drama, and is set in a court room where truth is contested through the conflicting testimonies between the defendants and their crown attorney, Detective Ricci and his friend Pierce. For instance, Detective Ricci claims that Dalip Singh took him to meet Naina Singh who then suggested he pay him and his friend Pierce, seventy-five cents each for sex near a rail road station. Both Naina Singh and Dalip Singh denied making solicitations for non-consensual sex as Naina Singh was fully aware that Ricci was an undercover police officer. Following Ricci, Pierce testified against the defendants by claiming that Dalip Singh indeed asked him: “would you like to fuck?”.³⁵ Intriguingly, the Crown Attorney questions Pierce for the validity of his statement by stating that Dalip Singh, does not speak English. The attorney then interrogates Pierce by asking: “so he learned English just for this occasion?”, leaving Pierce flustered. The conflicting realities with regard to Dalip’s (in)/ability to speak English prompts the viewer to think about the legitimacy of Pierce’s story.

³⁴ The elephant parable, or the story of “the blind men and an elephant” is usually seen in Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, and Sufi traditions, it is often used to demonstrate limits of perception due to partial knowledge, thus highlighting the criticality of complete context.

³⁵ *Rex vs Singh*. Directed by Richard Fung, Ali Kazimi, and John Greyson. Canada: Queer History Project of Out on screen, 2008. DVD. (05:36)

Greyson in the third montage constructed a cinematic fantasy—a parodied reality of the court-room proceeding, distinguishing itself from conventional courtroom drama. This fantasy prompts humour, creating an engaging effect on the viewer in an unconventional way. As film scholar Scott MacKenzie argues, “humour produces affect in a way that the audience cannot passively spectate, forcing the viewer to actively engage with the content”.³⁶ To produce humour, the parodist needs to observe and acquire critical readings of the original work in order to deconstruct it. The use of elephant parable plays a key role in creating this humorous effect. The reconstructed courtroom drama at the beginning of the film turns into a cinematic music video in the form of a fantasy-reality here that provokes further critical engagement with the stories.

Greyson employs and utilises a diagrammatic presentation at the beginning of the cinematic fantasy. The demonstration is accompanied by captions and drawings of an elephant: “four blind men were presented with an elephant and asked to describe it. One felt the trunk, another the leg, a third the ear, a fourth the tail.”³⁷ The film then explains the parable as a “story of misconception”, that the elephant parts are mistaken for different things as they are touched in isolation: the nose becomes misidentified as a water cannon, the leg as a pillar, the ear as a purse, and the tail as a whip. The parable and

³⁶ Scott MacKenzie, “And Now for Something Completely Dissident: The ‘Parodic Historical’ and ‘archival Necrology’ of John Greyson”, in *The Perils of Pedagogy: The Works of John Greyson*, edited by Brenda Longfellow, Scott MacKenzie, and Thomas Waugh (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2013), 158.

³⁷ *Rex vs Singh*. Directed by Richard Fung, Ali Kazimi, and John Greyson. Canada: Queer History Project of Out on screen, 2008. DVD.

how the elephant parts are misidentified when felt in isolation is constructed as metaphor highlighting the failure of acquiring the truth about the arrest due to partial knowledge.

Greyson's fantasy-scene also includes parodies of the first montage, through which Greyson explores the metaphors of the "pockets" as a way to reveal the ambiguities of the truth regarding the arrest. The particular excerpt of the conventional courtroom scene Greyson includes in his reconstruction is the conversation between Naina Singh and the Crown attorney regarding what was in Naina's pockets. Naina states that he had no money in response to Ricci's questioning, contradicting detective Ricci's accusation that Naina offered to pay his friend and him for sex. The attorney then asks Naina: "what did detective Ricci do?" Naina responds: "he looked into my pocket." Greyson returns to this conversation between the attorney and Naina Singh, with a touch of humour. Namely, when the attorney asks Naina: "what did you have in your pockets", after Naina told him that Ricci looked into his pocket. Greyson added his imaginary fantasy forging an unexpected turn where Naina pulls out a roll of threads and says: "got proof... in pocket."³⁸

The pockets with no money may symbolise the economic conditions of cheap labour and the state's exploitation of South Asian workers. The cinematic fantasy and imaginary scene continues: after the judge tries to take back control of the courtroom, Naina takes out a gravel—a ceremonial mallet often used by the judge—and starts to bang on a roll of threads, thus acting as the judge. Greyson makes the connection between

³⁸ *Rex vs Singh*. Directed by Richard Fung, Ali Kazimi, and John Greyson. Canada: Queer History Project of Out on screen, 2008. DVD. (18:39).

the pockets and one's wealth in the scene in which Dalip Singh pulls out a pair of scissors and walks towards Naina. During this scene, the song *Ballad of the Pocketed Life* (enacted by Dalip Singh, lyrics parodied by Greyson) plays in the background: "...the bulging pockets make the easy life" (Greyson & Kazimi & Fung, 2008).³⁹ Subsequently, the song *Pocket of the State* (enacted by Naina Singh, lyrics parodied by Greyson) plays: "regimes of power keep men straight, inside the pocket of the state",⁴⁰ thus establishing the connection between the pocket, wealth, and the state. Greyson then quickly cuts to the song *Catch a Falling Pocket* (enacted by Naina Singh, parodied by Greyson): "take your weekly wages, put it in your pocket, buy a place in the crowd".⁴¹ When Dalip picks up a glass bowl and begins to collect coins from the attorney and the judge, the contrast of wealth as a result of labour exploitation is seen as Dalip and Naina's pockets are empty, whereas the attorney, the judge, and Chauffer Pierce and Ricci's pockets are full of coins.

The cutting and reconstruction of pockets bear not only economic but also sexual connotation, commenting on the fear of yet and fascination with the racialised Sikh bodies, echoing how racial issues intersect with issues of sexuality in the context of this

³⁹ The song *Ballad of the Pocketed Life* is inspired and in reference to Berthold Brecht and Kurt Weill's co-creation of *The Ballad of the Easy Life* (1932). In the original version the lyrics go:

"...Decided to continue being earthy... where is the percentage? Asks Mack the Knife, The Bulging pocket makes the easy life".

In Greyson's parodied version, the song goes:

"The needles sharp the scissors swift and long, where is the advantage? Asks Mack the Knife, the bulging pocket makes the easy life".

⁴⁰ Inspired by Dwight Yoakam's song entitled *Pocket of a clown* (1993), in which the lyrics are written as: "Just watching smiles turn into frowns, inside the pocket of a clown".

⁴¹ Inspired by Perry Como's song entitled *Catch a Falling Star* (1958), in which the song goes:

Catch a falling star and put it in your pocket never let it fade away...".

historical event. Once the Crown Attorney, detective Ricci, the judge, and Pierce have cleared out their pockets, Naina and Dalip start to cut their pockets. Detective Ricci is the last figure whose pockets are cut. During this scene, Greyson juxtaposes Ricci's confused and shocked facial reactions on the right side of the screen with his naked body on the left. The left side of the screen shows a brown hand—arguably that of Naina's and/or Dalip's—first reaching into the trousers' front and then back “pockets”, a channel to erogenous zones. Instead of an actual pocket, Greyson replaces a supposedly fully clothed Ricci with his nude body. The hand gradually disappears the same way it would if the ‘pocket’ was really there. Through the creation of a fantasy-scene, Greyson visualises the intersection of racial exclusion and sexual fantasy that might have been involved with the arrest, questioning the validity of the alleged charge of “attempted buggery”.

Greyson reveals the metaphorical thread between the pockets and the elephant parable at the end of the montage with a touch of humour. Namely, after the pockets are cut, Dalip and Naina sew the pockets and place them back on the bodies of the authority figures. The Chauffer wears the pocket in his rear as a tail; the bottom half of the attorney's face is covered by the pocket resembling an elephant's nose; the pocket is sewed onto Ricci's groin area symbolising an enormously enlarged penis—substituting the pillar or the leg of the elephant; and the pockets are attached to the judge's ears. During this scene, a sound of elephants' trumpet is played in the background. In doing so, the four figures literally embody the parable itself and their embodiment echoes what the

parable represents: “failure of partial knowledge”.⁴² In other words, the four figures personify the elephant parable in their inability to see the truth due to situated and limited knowledge of the arrest.

Fung continues to confront the ambiguity in the final montage of *Rex vs Singh*. Fung’s cinematic reconstruction of the trial uses both visual and audial signifiers to create an effect of haunting, differentiating itself from the previous montages. For instance, the B-roll images of the actual documents and notes on the trial from the 1920s are attended by the sound of a typewriter, light music, as well as conversations played in the background, evoking a ghostly presence of the Court Reporter, the Defendants, the Witness and the Detective. In the empty court-room scenes, the simultaneous occurrence of court transcript-cut-ups along with dialogues recorded from the first montage in the background, produce, once again, a spectral presence of aforementioned figures. Associated with the un-concluded historical event, their ghostly presence can be interpreted in two ways: a) the arrested subjects haunt the courts for their unjustified treatments as subjects of repression from both racist immigration policies and the Criminal Code of Canada in the original Constitution Act in 1867; b) they haunt the court as a contested space of truth in which ambiguities of truth still persist. Ultimately, Fung’s cinematic reconstruction of the trial offers an avenue for perceiving racial and sexual

⁴² Scott MacKenzie, “And Now for Something Completely Dissident: The ‘Parodic Historical’ and ‘archival Necrology’ of John Greyson”, in *The Perils of Pedagogy: The Works of John Greyson*, edited by Brenda Longfellow, Scott MacKenzie, and Thomas Waugh (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2013), 157.

repression of South Asian immigrants not merely as part of an episode frozen in time, but as a haunting matter that lingers into a present consciousness.⁴³

The metaphor of haunting addresses the loss of particular cultural representations, rectifying this through the act of recounting stories and subjectivities of marginalised groups that are otherwise lost or erased. Sociologist Avery Gordon argues that “in a culture seemingly ruled by technologies of hypervisibility, we are led to believe that neither repression nor the return of the repressed... occurs with any meaningful result” (Gordon, 2011, p. 16). Haunting breaks the illusion of hypervisibility—as if nothing is repressed and unseen because everything is visualised. The meaning of the film lies precisely to counter this hypervisibility with its ability to visualise and represent neglected histories of sexual and racial repression in early twentieth-century Canada. *Rex vs Singh* haunts contemporary consciousness, urging viewers to confront hypervisibility and the lingering presence of sexual and racial marginalisation in contemporary Canada—as I’ll discuss through in Shraya’s performance video-work , *Seeking Single White Male* by Vivek Shraya.

II: *Seeking Single White Male* (2010)—Vivek Shraya

“Where are you from”

“you are so exotic”

⁴³ Distinct from the notion of “identity” and “ideology” I use throughout the essay, and by evoking the concept of “consciousness”, I’m explicitly referring to the ways in which the filmmakers, artists, and viewers are or/and become not only aware but also alert of issues addressed by the video-works. Consciousness aligns with Chela Sandoval’s idea of “Differential Consciousness”.

“I’m not attracted to brown boys”
“You are too attractive to be Indian”
“You must be mixed”
“You tan too much”
“What colour is your penis”
“Is that what you really looking like”
“You look better before”

(texts from *Seeking Single White Male*, Shraya, 2010, arranged in accordance to the sequence in the performance-video)

If *Rex vs Singh* provides a historical context for racial and sexual repression of South Asian immigrants in early twentieth-century Canada, I argue that Vivek Shraya’s performance-video work *Seeking Single White Male* (SSWM), produced in 2010, confronts the contemporary issues of racial and sexual marginalisation in relation to the internalisation of racialised norm of seduction within queer communities in multicultural Canada. Through an analysis of the visual and textual element in the performance-video, and the discussions in the subsequent Open Letter (2012) Shraya published on her website, this chapter will discuss how contemporary racial ideologies—love for whiteness, namely, *white normativity*—have been internalised by queer subjects, perhaps as the effect of the contemporary state that continues to build on such white normativity. Shraya’s body-altering performance is also discussed in the context of ambiguities, and its potential impact for subverting dominant racial and sexual norms or just reproducing them.

2.1: White Normativity

Prejudice and Racism

Overlapped with images, texts and electronic beats, the first half of the performance-video shows her transformation into a white-*passing* queer man, and the second half displays her return to a brown man of South Asian descent. This film runs two minutes and twenty seconds. The transformation through altering her hair colour and wearing blue contact lenses, symbols of white racial phenotypes, is gradual and documented in 9 sequential photographs. Inserted in the video, Shraya juxtaposes each photograph with comments she overheard in Edmonton gay bars (listed at the beginning of the chapter) when she first came out as a gay man. Throughout the performance-video, a rhythmic beat is incorporated. From the third image wherein Shraya is seen with a mix of blonde hair and brown eyes, which corresponds with the text “I’m not attracted to brown boys” (00:26), the rhythmic beat is added with a layer of electronic beat that runs for 1 minute and 10 seconds. The beat fades out towards the end of the video when Shraya *returns* to her brown self. The viewers are presented with a photograph first, and the text/comment will subsequently appear covering the photograph. The photographs disappear into black-coloured texts on a white background, the lingering texts confront and provoke the audience to think about what is at stake in this seemingly voluntary incorporation of the “racializing and sexualising imperatives innate in these comments”.⁴⁴

⁴⁴Soyang Park, Supervisory comments. OCAD University, Toronto. April 10th, 2018.

The video opened up conversations amongst viewers on whiteness, white normativity, and the intersection of race and sexuality. Not long after the video was published, Shraya received abundant feedback from queers and non-queers alike. Shraya compiled some of the comments alongside conversations she had with her queer friends, and wrote an Open Letter. The letter is published on her personal website, with a link attached to the original performance-video. By responding to comments, she draws attention to the intersection of race and sexuality and sexual (un)/desirability, and the power of white normativity in twenty-first century queer communities in Toronto.

More specifically, Shraya's physical transition and the discussions contained in the Open Letter addresses the issue of internalisation of white normativity within LGBTQ/queer communities in Toronto. The comment Shraya includes in her performance-video: "I'm not attracted to brown boys", demonstrates the relationship between one's internalised sexual desire and the colour of one's skin. This can also be seen in another comment: "you tan too much".⁴⁵ This remark reflects one's internalised sexual attraction for paler skin, thus shaming bodies with darker skin that have been deemed undesirable. Shraya contends that racial prejudice is often trivialised as a matter of preference. A response cited in the Open Letter states, "I don't get how not being attracted to certain racial phenotypes is bad...It is a physical ideal. We all have one".⁴⁶ This response reflects not only the commentator's insistence that racial preference is not

⁴⁵ Vivek Shraya. "*Seeking Single White Male: Two Years Later & An Open Letter.*" Vivek Shraya. August 07, 2012. Accessed January 21, 2018.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

racism in that everyone has an “ideal type”, but also the widespread denial of the existence of racism among queers.

To discuss racism and white normativity in male gay communities is particularly difficult. Professor in Human Sexuality Studies, Niels Teunis argues that because sexual freedom has been the locus of LGBTQ resistance since the 1970s, and in the post-HIV epidemic era, struggles against white normativity within gay communities are often seen “to undermine the sexual freedom that is the foundation of the gay communities”.⁴⁷ And sexual freedom is “precisely what allows white gay men to turn a blind eye towards problems of racism.”⁴⁸ Although writing particularly in the context of San Francisco, Teunis’s argument reflects Shraya’s sentiment written in her Open Letter. She contends that many white men view the undesirability of racialised bodies as solely a matter of preference, “like one’s height, one’s weight, one’s body size and shape, eye colours, and so forth”.⁴⁹ Thus, Shraya urges the viewer to think about how desire for specific physical attributes is constructed and merits a deeper reflexivity.

Ideologies and Ideological State Apparatuses

The exposé of white normativity in everyday practice in Shraya’s performance-video demonstrates how racial ideologies have been internalised by (queer) subjects in

⁴⁷ Teunis, Niels. "Sexual Objectification and the Construction of Whiteness in the Gay Male Community." *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 9, no. 3 (2007): 263-75. doi:10.1080/13691050601035597, 266.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Vivek Shraya. "*Seeking Single White Male: Two Years Later & An Open Letter.*" Vivek Shraya. August 07, 2012. Accessed January 21, 2018. <https://vivekshraya.com/essays/seeking-single-white-male-two-years-later/>.

their practice of affection, seduction and love. Althusser argues that “all individuals are always-already subjects”.⁵⁰ He contends that all individuals are interpellated or hailed by ideologies, in which the individual becomes a subject of ideology. To explain this, Althusser uses the example of what happens when the police call out: “hey, you there!”. At this precise moment, the sought-out individual becomes a subject (of the state and its dominant norms and ideals). To this end, an individual may also realise that they are the subject of racism the moment they receive a racist response/comment and therefore recognises that such a comment is hailed at them. Instead of the example of “hey you there” used by Althusser, texts included in the performance-video such as “I am not attracted to brown boys” calls out to the racialised subject and they in turn recognise their racialised selves.

Along these lines, another striking text in the performance-video is: “you are too attractive to be Indian.”⁵¹ The underlying message of this statement could be: I did not know Indians can be attractive/ I was not expecting to find you—an Indian—attractive. Thus, the comment affirms “existence of racial and discourse of seduction and beauty in queer communities”, perhaps, as the result of “racial ideologies” that prevail in society. Secondly, these ideologies have been internalised and normalised by those who make such comments, which are reflected through their conscious reduction of subjects to the colour of one’s skin and racial phenotypes, namely, one’s assumed Indian(ness).

⁵⁰ Louis Althusser, *On The Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, translated by Goshgarian, G. M (London: Verso Press, original work published in 1970), 243.

⁵¹ Vivek Shraya. "*Seeking Single White Male: Two Years Later & An Open Letter.*" Vivek Shraya. August 07, 2012. Accessed January 21, 2018.

SSWM demonstrates how white normativity finds its prevalence in contemporary queer communities in Toronto. Returning to the conversation (shown above), one can see the dissatisfaction of the man with the answer: “I’m from Toronto”, by his follow up question: “where are you *really* from?”. White normativity is reflected in the ways in which South Asian immigrants have not been, and still are not, considered to be part of the national imaginary of a white Canada. Echoing the song chanted by European immigrants in 1910s Vancouver: “White Canada Forever”, Shraya’s work illustrates the continued fantasy of an imagined white space.

2.2: Ambivalence/Ambiguity

The effect of Shraya’s physical transformation into a white-*passing* gay man comes with some ambiguities. In particular, her performance lies in the unstable result this trans-racial performance may cause as well as the different interpretations and impact of this performance. Judith Butler’s theory of ambivalence highlights the performativity and instability of gender identities, in which she argues that the imitation of heterosexuality will not be perfect in that heterosexual norms are socially constructed ideals that need constant re-affirmation. I argue that Shraya’s cross-racial performance as a so-to-speak “brown” person mimicking whiteness, is destined to result in an imperfect imitation of whiteness.

Gender identification is performative as Butler notes, and the result of mimicry of dominant norms can be both affirming and subversive.⁵² In *Bodies that Matter* (1993), Butler argues that gender is performative because “this ‘being a man’ and this ‘being a woman’ are internally unstable affairs.”⁵³ For instance, in drag performance, heterosexuality is imitated as in reality, constantly mimicked by subjects. The effects of performance are ambivalent, for which performance affirms as well as subverts the dominant norms through alteration, where a “slippage” between the ideal of heterosexuality and the articulation/mimicry/imitation of it occurs.

Shraya performs to engage in the mimicry of whiteness. If normative-gender identities, such as heterosexuality, needs constant and repetitive imitation of its ideal, I argue that white normativity—the normalisation of whiteness as the superior, desired, and idealised—works in a similar fashion. To unpack this, one needs to understand the instability of the idealisation and naturalisation of whiteness. Butler in her chapter: “Passing, Queering” in *Bodies that Matter* (1993), argues that “it is only through that disavowal that whiteness is constituted, and through the institutionalisation of that disavowal that one’s whiteness is perpetually—but anxiously—reconstituted”.⁵⁴ Similar to heterosexuality, white normativity requires constant reaffirmation—the “disavowal” of one’s association with the non-white—to upkeep its power.

⁵² I distinguish ‘ambivalence’ from ‘ambiguities’. I use ‘ambivalence’ specifically to refer to Judith Butler’s performance theory of ambivalence, i.e the ambivalence of the drag.

⁵³ Judith Butler, "Passing, Queering." In *Bodies that Matter: On The Discursive Limits of "Sex"*, 121-42. New York: Routledge, 1993. P. 126.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 171.

Shraya's performative physical alteration into whiteness engages in an imperfect mimicry of it, and already ambivalent in its race-crossing performance. The response "what colour is your penis" corresponds to a picture of Shraya in which she has a mix of blonde and dark hair—like that of South Asian decent—with blue eyes. By materialising two key racial phenotypes—light eyes and hair colour—associated with whiteness, and having her skin colour unchanged, Shraya's imitation becomes, to a degree, an imperfect *passing*. The question at stake is: does Shraya's performance reaffirm or challenge racial norms?

Shraya's mimicry first affirms the dominant racial norms and identities. To unpack this, I want to first turn to Butler in her discussion on power and identities. Butler contends that "power that at first appears external, pressed upon the subject into subordination, assume a psychic form that constitutes the subject's self-identity".⁵⁵ In other words, subordinated identities, whether gendered, raced, or both, are dependent on dominant norms for which these identities exist in relation to power. In particular, racialised bodies are constantly subject to the power of whiteness and white normativity. For instance, the comment: "you are too attractive to be Indian", one can see the commentator's disassociation, yet simultaneously, his association with the internalised ideologies about Indians. Furthermore, Shraya's exploration of racism and white normativity takes place in a so-called white space. Shraya's identity as South Asian and

⁵⁵ Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1997), 3.

her brown and trans physicality, speaks from a perspective that these identity markers are shaped by white normativity.

The potential for subversion of white normativity lies in the various interpretations of Shraya's performance. Her performance can be understood not only as a love for whiteness, but also a fascination with the *interracial body*. Comments such as "you tan too much", demonstrates one's internalised desire and love for a paler and whiter skin colour. This is also reflected in another response "you look better before" that is juxtaposed to a post-transition photograph of Shraya—when she is in the process of returning to a brown queer man. And comments such as "you are so exotic" and "you must be mixed" can be interpreted as a love for interraciality—exotified and/or fetishized by other queer men. The ambivalence in the interpretations of Shraya's transformation demonstrates the potential of her performance for subverting the power of dominant racial norms and ideologies of queer desire. Shraya effectively destabilises internalised white normativity and its power by blurring the binary of white/non-white, and by altering her physical appearance with easily available and accessed props (i.e. contact lenses, wigs, or/and hair dye). Shraya's imperfect mimicry of whiteness can function as a tactic of resistance against white normativity which evidently needs constant maintenance.

Thus far, I have demonstrated the power of white normativity within queer communities explored by Shraya's performance-video, as well as her performance as the site of affirming or/and subverting white normativity. The following section will argue that although racialised bodies are "always-already subjects of racism", both experimental documentary film-making by Richard Fung, John Greyson, and Ali Kazimi, and

performance-video by Vivek Shraya, affords artists and filmmakers working and creating in white dominant space, a critical method to question and subvert racial norms or/and heteronormativity.

III: Differential Consciousness

Rex vs Singh recounts what is left out in current understandings of Canada's past. To do so, the experimental documentary brings the past into present consciousness by shedding light on the racial repression of South Asian immigrants combined with the criminalisation of homosexuality used against them, in early twentieth-century Vancouver, Canada. *Seeking Single White Male* comments on the internalisation of white normativity and how it is manifested as the (un)/desirability of racialised queer subjects. Through this medium of expressing and recounting history and everyday experience, these artists bring together their oppositional ideological positionings against white and heteronormative hegemony.

The importance of bridging embodied consciousness to subvert power of white hegemony, is explored by feminist theorist Chela Sandoval in her critical text, "U.S Third World Feminism- Differential Social Movement I." Here, she outlines the pitfalls and limitations of understanding white feminist social movements as linear and exclusionary, of non-white feminist oppositional ideologies who opposed the hegemony of North American white feminism. For instance, prior to 1968, feminist agenda in oppositional social-movements in the United States, superseded all other oppositional marginal

positionalities. Thus, women of colour had to put aside their experiences of racial oppression. Echoing the limitation of Althusser's idea of already made-subjects of ideologies, Sandoval argues that Althusser acknowledges the possibilities that subjects of ideologies could challenge dominant ideologies.⁵⁶ Sandoval recognises also that Althusser does not specify the "means and occasions" for such transformation. She then contends that subjects of ideologies—i.e. women of colour—can "learn to identify, develop and control the means of ideology" through the application of "differential consciousness."⁵⁷

Sandoval terms "differential consciousness" as a theory and method for subjects with multiple marginalised identities who are confronted with racial and gendered hegemonies, to deploy tactics across social and political movements that have differing aims and agendas.⁵⁸ Specifically, Sandoval notes the four different forms of oppositional social movements in U.S. Second Wave Feminism: "equal rights", "revolutionary", "supremacist", and "separatist". Differential consciousness is "this kind of kinetic and self-conscious mobility of consciousness utilised by U.S. third world feminists when they identified oppositional subject positions and enacted them differentially".⁵⁹ It is the fifth form of oppositional consciousness that does not separate itself from the previous four

⁵⁶ Chela Sandoval, "U.S Third World Feminism: Differential Social Movement I." In *Methodologies of the Oppressed*, 41-66. Vol. 18. Theory Out of Bounds (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 42.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, p. 43.

⁵⁸ By using "tactics", I evoke Sandoval's argument that tactics allow constant merging and disengaging of one or multiple ideologies in social movements. In other words, tactics are always changing, used, put aside, and reused, thus can avoid the pitfall of excluding other ideological positionings in long-term strategies.

⁵⁹ Chela Sandoval, "U.S Third World Feminism: Differential Social Movement I." In *Methodologies of the Oppressed*, 41-66. Vol. 18. Theory Out of Bounds (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 53.

modes, it is rather a *site* in which self-conscious subjects of ideologies weave between ideologies kinetically depending on need. Similar to a kaleidoscope that functions through movements of two or more glass which generate new imageries with each movement, each montage of the experimental documentary reflects the film-makers' different identities as marginalised subjectivity.

Rex vs Singh exemplifies the differential mode of intervention into “neglected issues of the intersection of racial and sexual repression in history and the contemporary”.⁶⁰ The experimental documentary is a way to direct the audience to questions that they would otherwise not ask, and the film-makers do this with a kaleidoscopic narrative approach. Like a piece of glass in a kaleidoscope, each montage in the experimental documentary produced by John Greyson, Ali Kazimi, and Richard Fung, represents the film-maker's difference. For instance, John Greyson is a Canadian queer director, writer, artist, curator, and film producer whose work often engages with queer politics and activism. Richard Fung is a queer Asian Canadian artist and writer whose work explores racism, identity politics, colonialism, immigration, and gay pornography. Ali Kazimi is an artist, writer, and a filmmaker whose work engages with race, migration, social justice, archive and memory. The various subjectivities and identities of the film-makers are kaleidoscopic pieces of the film, in which their differences work together not against each other. In other words, when it comes to the intersections of race and sexuality, the ambiguities of implementing immigration policies,

⁶⁰ Soyang Park, Supervisory comments. OCAD University, Toronto. April 12th, 2018.

and the repressive state regulations, the queer identities of Fung and Greyson, the racialised identities of Kazimi and Fung, coalesce in the production of *Rex vs Singh*.

Shraya's body-altering transformation into whiteness demonstrates the mobility and performativity of "differential consciousness". Sandoval contends that "...the differential depends on a form of agency that is self-consciously mobilised in order to enlist and secure influence; the differential is thus *performative*"⁶¹ because it does not adhere to static identities. Sandoval pays particular attention to the mobility of tactics, namely tactics that allow the subject to move from deploying one ideology to another depending on need. In other words, the subject(s) will not be tied to a singular oppositional approach such as racial or gender equality, or citizenship rights, for example. Instead, subjects utilise a range of tactics that reflect their multiple "lived realities when experiencing overlapping repressions such as racism, misogyny and homophobia."⁶² Through the usage of blue contact lenses, the change of hair colour and make up, Shraya's mimicry of whiteness exemplifies precisely the performativity of identities. Her performance reflects a self-conscious collage of oppositional ideologies—race and sexuality—as a tactic against white normativity in queer communities.

Conclusion

⁶¹ Chela Sandoval, "U.S Third World Feminism: Differential Social Movement I." In *Methodologies of the Oppressed*, 41-66. Vol. 18. Theory Out of Bounds (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 57.

⁶² Maria-Belen Ordóñez, Supervisory comments. OCAD University, Toronto. April 2nd, 2018.

Film enables subjugated groups to challenge racial and gender normativity through critical and creative means of narrating and enacting marginalised voices, identities, and histories. *Rex vs Singh* confronts how the racial and sexual marginalisation of South Asian Sikh workers took place in early twentieth-century Vancouver through four interconnected montages. Each montage has its own take on the inconclusive truth of the case in relation to Canada's immigration policy and the Gross Indecency Law that was utilised by the state and the police. Starting with a conventional courtroom-drama approach, the first montage of the film reconstructs the legal case of the Supreme Court of Vancouver versus Naina and Dalip Singh—the truth of arrest is unknown due to lack of documentation. Segueing into an interview with Ingram produced by Kazimi, the second montage provides not only the context for the arrest of Naina and Dalip, shedding light on the intersection of a racism and homophobia against the Sikh men, but also the anti-Asian immigration environment in which the event of Komagata Maru and racial segregation unfolded. Through a parody of the courtroom drama, Greyson's parody creates a humorous fantasy through music, use of the elephant parable, and the metaphors of the pockets. Fung's evocation of a haunting effect in the last montage invites the viewer to think about the haunting and inconclusive nature of the court case from 1915. The truth of the police's arrest of Naina and Dalip remains unknown, while the ambiguous position of the police is still in question which alludes to hidden homoerotic desires that were ideologically abhorred and criminalised via the state. The case and its documentation is itself fragmented and incomplete, and the film confronts this unsettled end, to open up a new conversation on the intersectionality of race, gender and labour.

Seeking Single White Male exemplifies contemporary forms of racism that function predominantly through internalisation of white normativity and ideologies that are carried out and translated onto codes of seduction. Shraya aims to evoke the neglected and seemingly spectral forms of racial repression as a result of the internalisation of white normativity amongst some queers, particularly gay males, in Toronto. To do so, Shraya performs a body-altering transformation into a ‘white-passing’ gay man, transgressing the constructed boundaries of racial norms. The texts and her photographed-self, reflect how ideologies surrounding racial identities have been constructed and internalised by queer men. Her imperfect mimicry of whiteness contests the power of racial categorisation by evoking the ambivalence of racial identifications. The ambivalence of her performance bears the potential to subvert the stable working of white normativity and constructed racial norms, by breaking the binaries of whiteness and non-whiteness.

By evoking Sandoval’s “differential Consciousness”, I argue that *Rex vs Singh* and *Seeking Single White Male* exemplifies an effective mode of resistance towards racial and gender normativity in contemporary Canada. Both short films confront the concept of “ambiguity” innate in the case and the performance. This ambiguity, I argue, is itself a critical cue to examine the intersecting issues of race and sexuality in Canadian society. In short, *Rex vs Singh* demonstrates how racial exclusions were predominantly exercised through explicitly repressive means such as immigration policies, the criminalisation of homosexuality, urban segregation, and labour exploitation in the twentieth century; Shraya’s work reveals an ideological mode of racial marginalisation, namely, white normativity in queer communities in contemporary Canada.

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