
Migrant Intimacies: Mobilities-in-Difference and *Basue* Tactics in Queer Asian Diasporas

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Abstract: With a focus on the productive tensions of displacements and agency, this article discusses archival traces of intimacy and tactics of space-making that mobilize queer Asian men in the diaspora. The theoretical considerations and ethnographic examples offered highlight how ephemeral experiences of sociality and belonging reveal the persistent labour of reconstituting the lifeworlds of queer Asian migrant subjects against displacements—from city streets, to a video website, to a commuter train, to a night market—and argues for a rethinking of the meaning of politics in mobilities research through the modalities of survival and mobilities-in-difference.

Keywords: queer diaspora, mobilities, displacement, belonging, racialization, intimacy

Résumé : Avec une attention particulière pour les tensions productives liées aux déplacements et à l'agencéité, cet article porte sur les traces de l'intimité et les tactiques de production de l'espace qui mobilisent les hommes *queer* de la diaspora asiatique. Les propos ethnographiques et théoriques illustrent comment des expériences éphémères de socialité et d'appartenance révèlent le travail continu nécessaire pour reconstituer les mondes vécus de sujets immigrants asiatiques *queer*, face aux formes de déplacements. Celles-ci s'actualisent aussi bien dans les rues de la ville que sur un site web de vidéos, dans un train de banlieue ou dans un marché de nuit. Ainsi ce texte plaide en faveur d'une reconsidération de la signification du politique dans les recherches sur les mobilités au travers des modalités de survie et de mobilités-dans-la-différence.

Mots-clés : diaspora queer, mobilités, déplacements, appartenance, racialisation, intimité

Introduction: Belonging in *Basue*

The ordinary practitioners of the city live “down below,” below the thresholds at which visibility begins.
Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*

A few days after the close of Pride Week, I was sitting in a local coffee shop with Shin, a 33-year-old gay Japanese man and an undocumented worker, to discuss how he had participated in the recent festivities. Vancouver Pride 2010 had been another success. It had attracted well over 500,000 attendees, a record number, which local news media claimed as an excellent example of how Vancouver had become one of the most gay-friendly cities in the world (Luk 2010). Shin is one of many queer migrants who relocate to Canada from Asia to have a chance at the “gay life” that Vancouver—the largest urban centre in western Canada and the gateway to Pacific Asia—has to offer. Having lived in the city since 2000, however, Shin had never actually walked in the parade himself. Instead, he narrates how he and other gay Asian men (most of them also immigrants) have a gathering of their own:

We usually have a small picnic on the green hill area that looks over the festival site. We go there every year ... it's our spot. A place for 場末 (*basue*) people like us.¹ [my translation from Japanese]

Literally, the Japanese term *basue* (場 = place; 末 = the end) means “the outskirts.” In a more colloquial sense, the term's usage is often found in popular Japanese music and literature to refer to a certain depressed aesthetic and melancholia of a social place, such as a dingy bar, a run-down motel or a dirty eatery, where the poor gather and secret lovers meet, hiding from the bright city lights and the noise of modern prosperity. This account of diasporic Asian gay men's peripheral belonging at a scene of celebratory and mainstream queer public culture, a relation of the centre and its multiple margins within, is where I begin my exploration of the productive

tensions among displacement, marginality and spatial tactics in queer Asian diasporas.

In this article,² I specifically focus on the spatial dimensions and forms of *basue*—both as a space of sociality and a set of tactics—discussed by my research participants to examine how the dynamic relation of displacements, associated with racism, immigrant conditions and other marginalizing forces in everyday queer diasporas, and the active production of alternative socialities are negotiated by diasporic queer subjects. With an emphasis on the productive tensions that displacement produces, I offer three case studies that trace the mobile processes and formations of *basue* in the everyday—from a small apartment, to a public train, to a night market—that mobilize the queer Asian subjects I interviewed.

In what follows, I briefly turn to a theoretical discussion of the politics of space and displacement for queer, diasporic and racialized subjects in North America to arrive at the framework of *mobilities-in-difference*. With this framework, I offer a reading of the cultural significance of *basue* tactics that disarticulates the imagined relations and binaries between the centre and margins of queer possibilities, which are dedicated to making more legible the everyday survival of queer Asian subjects in Vancouver.

Points of Entry: Mobilities-in-Difference and the Location of *Basue*

My scholarly concerns in this study emerged out of my dissatisfaction with the often polarized and totalizing accounts of mobility and immobility of queer subjects in the diaspora. I arrived at the question of mobilities, in part, led by my autobiographical knowledge about the negotiation of belonging and sociality in the diaspora as a gay immigrant man from Japan and as a community worker and researcher in the United States and Canada for the past 12 years. Throughout my fieldwork, I was importantly reminded of the harsh realities of cultural, social and political displacements that my participants confront in relation to racism, migrant conditions and other exclusionary processes within mainstream queer communities and the wider public sphere. However, equally compelling were the creative, urgent and often hilarious tactics and stories of survival, and the materiality of “making do and getting by” (Crosby et al. 2012:131), related to me by the queer Asian participants in this study. As such, I contend that there is a need for a framework that not only identifies the cultural and material conditions of displacement but also elucidates the relations of power and the evidence of possibilities

demonstrated by queer Asian migrants’ manoeuvres concerning such displacements.

As sociologist John Urry (2007) argues, the unprecedented scale and flows of global capital, technologies of travel, transnational migrations and networked communications have made *mobilities*—multimodal capacities for movement, including imaginative, communicative and physical forms—the central characteristic of the shifting structures of modern social worlds and experiences. Critically, Urry (2007:17–18) also points out that “there is an ideology of movement” coinciding with the paradigmatic turn to mobilities that assumes the capacity for movement as “a right” of people and societies in a modern, globalized world. Other theorists concerned with embodied difference have argued that the ideology of movement invokes the neoliberalist idealization of movement itself as a sign of agency, self-actualization and emancipation from local restraints (Bryson and MacIntosh 2010; Tsing 2007). As a biopolitical ideology, this critique maintains that the capacity for movement is afforded to some “exceptional” subjects with social capital and means, while classed, gendered and sexed differences continue to foreclose full access to systems of movement for “othered” bodies (Morley 2000; Ong 2006). The critical investigation of the relation of movement and difference, then, contrary to Urry’s formulation, deems displacement as the modern condition and experience of mobile worlds and argues “against mobility as opportunity, focusing instead on displacement” (Silvery 2007:142; see also, Bammer 1994).

My argument is that between, on the one hand, a disembodied, abstract theorizing of mobilities that equates movement with agency and, on the other hand, a critical approach concerning structures of oppression that centralizes displacement, any hope of apprehending the vibrant possibilities for everyday (and often queer) tactics of movement are lost. This article considers the politics of displacement in relation to mobilities, not so much as an opportunity but as a tactic for multiply differentiated, therefore displaced, subjects. This tactical approach attempts to evade the foreclosed endgames that both mobilities-as-agency and mobilities-as-displacement offer. That is, in this study, queer Asian migrants’ negotiations do not necessarily follow along institutionalized lines of upward mobility. Instead, this study aims to show the critical necessity of insisting upon the legibility of tactics for *some* mobility for the survival of queer diasporic subjects for whom remaining in the stasis and abjection that displacement produces is not an option (Patton and Sánchez-Eppler 2000).

Martin Manalansan’s (2010) focus upon the temporality of survival through the concept of “unsecure life”

provides a useful opening here. The temporality of survival—“moving on”—is more invested in immediate, day-to-day negotiations of making do in the everyday lives of queer, racialized, minorities rather than sustained, future-oriented political projects. Through this focus on survival, for such displaced subjects, “one can argue, it is *one more day*”—without, of course, a guarantee of another tomorrow (226). By placing critical attention upon the modality of survival and its uncertain temporality for queer subjects in the diaspora, it is important to make a distinction between “tactics” and acts of agency.

Given that diasporic subjects often lack the sociocultural capital to claim a political position in a new nation-state, Gayatri Spivak’s (2005) definition of agency and its exclusive logic is salient. Spivak states that agency refers to an “institutionally validated action, assuming collectivity, distinguished from the formation of the subject, which exceeds the outlines of individual intention” that requires political consciousness and a recognition of structural inequality that one’s class, or the lack thereof, is exposed to (476). In other words, for agency to be legible, it must always already be institutionalized. Alongside Spivak’s formulation I want to employ Michel de Certeau’s concept of “tactics.” De Certeau explains this “art of the weak” as follows:

What [tactics] wins it cannot keep. This nowhere gives a tactic mobility ... a mobility that must accept the chance offerings of the moment and seize on the wing of the possibilities that offer themselves at any given moment ... It creates surprises in them. It can be where it is least expected. It is a guileful ruse. [de Certeau 1984:37]

Such opportunistic tactics that enable provisional mobility in a given cultural space are what I call *mobilities-in-difference*. Situated in the temporality of survival, getting by and making do, mobilities-in-difference is a framework that investigates the relationality between displacements and movements in the everyday lives of queer Asian subjects, as a focus solely upon the global narratives of either agentive mobilities or displacements is inadequate to capture the nuances and idiosyncrasies of my participants’ often elusive tactics of manoeuvre—tactics that may disarticulate the existing logics of belonging, citizenship and predicament in a new homeland. As a “double articulation” (Massey 1994), mobilities-in-difference focuses on describing *how* different queer Asian subjects make use of existing systems, means and locations of mobilities for their own cultural purposes and needs.

Specifically, I examine the spatial dimensions of mobilities-in-difference through the analytic of *basue* and the “queer effects” it produces. The spatial life of queer mobilities explored in this article is a relational one. This relationality is attributed to the boundary formation of racialized sociality for migrant subjects that exists within the dominant landscape of white, queer, public cultures. Such “boundary publics,” as Mary Gray (2009:53) notes, emerge out of “iterative, ephemeral experiences of belonging that happen both on the outskirts and at the centre(s) of the more traditionally recognized and validated public sphere of civic deliberation.” The analytics of *basue* invite our attention to the publicness—constituted through bodies and collective experiences—that signals existing and imagined socialities in seemingly invisible spaces where the negotiation of displacements occurs.

As de Certeau reminds us, in the quotation which begins this article, the question of how “the ordinary practitioners of the city” occupy and move about the urban cultural landscape can only be understood when we know where to look and how to get “down below.” An attention to *basue* tactics necessitates different methods of documenting and evidencing out of individual and ephemeral experiences and narratives on the margin. In what follows, I explicate my methodological approach to the everyday, privatized sphere of queer intimacy and its relation to wider social fields through ethnographic interviews and on-site observations.

Everyday Queer Diasporas and an Archive of Intimacies

The data for this article came from ethnographic fieldwork I carried out in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia between 2009 and 2012. My 14 participants included subjects with diverse intersectional identifications, including gay and bisexual men and a transgendered woman, who employed both western and non-westernized sexual and gender identificatory terms such as “オカマ/okama,” “同志/tongzhi,” “同性愛/doseiaisha” and “lady-boy.” The participants were originally from Asia-Pacific regions, including Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Vietnam and China. Ages ranged between 25 and 56 years old at the time of my fieldwork. All were living in the Metro Vancouver area at the time of research, with varying visa and citizenship statuses, including naturalized citizen, permanent resident, temporary worker, international student and “undocumented” worker. Of the 14 participants, two people identified as “living with HIV,” one person as “deaf” and two people as “mentally disabled.”

I employed ethnographic interviews as my primary method of data collection. Initial, semi-structured interviews (lasting 90–120 minutes) focused on eliciting life narratives of migration and settlement into Canada, as well as their sexual and other cultural identifications and practices. I conducted two to three follow-up, in-depth interviews with each participant over the course of three years to further document their social practices in the local and transnational queer communities in which they participated in Vancouver, in Canada and in Asia.

In addition to the regular interviews, I also initiated more open-ended meetings and conversations with participants. These were located, by invitation, at their homes, as well as other locations in the Lower Mainland that they identified as important to their lives—gay bars, karaoke lounges, the public library, a night market, websites. In these meetings, participants led me in “walkthroughs” of both their everyday cultural landscapes, as well as their “mediascapes” (Appadurai 1996). These physical and media-based walkthroughs assisted in the documentation of the geographical, cultural and ethnic relations and practices that constituted their everyday lives.

The decision to work with a relatively small group of subjects with a range of differences, including nationality, language, and socio-economic and legal statuses, was intentional in my methodological approach. As a tradition of queer Asian scholarship demonstrates, dispersed migrant subjects with multiple genealogies and identifications are often problematically grouped through universalizing forces of racialization and objectification in North American queer social relations (Eng 2001). However, as Nguyen (2008) argues, such a seemingly totalizing force can at the same time be experienced and negotiated in widely different ways by different Asian subjects. As such, I align my larger methodological framework with multiplicity, rather than uniformity, to make legible my participants’ innumerable and complex ways of *doing* and not simply *being* “queer” and “Asian” in Vancouver.

My approach to data collection and interpretation is informed by the notion of intimacy as a privatized zone of practice, where the individual and the social collide (Berlant 2000; Lowe 2006). Importantly in queer, diasporic lives, Martin Manalansan notes,

if home, privacy and domesticity are vexed locations for queer subjects, particularly those in the diaspora, then it follows that queers’ struggles toward finding, building, remembering and settling into a home, as well as the displacements brought about by migration creates a sphere of . . . diasporic intimacy. [Manalansan 2005:148]

As I suggest in the following case studies, narratives of diasporic queer intimacy are often ephemeral and elusive and resist systemic frameworks of documentation and evidencing due to their displaced and alienated nature. As one participant noted, “I never had to think much about what happened to me since I came here [to Canada]. After all this talking with you, now I see another Asian guy at a bar or something and I go, ‘what’s his story?’”

I understand my methods of data collection and analysis to have been an engaged co-production of an archive of intimacies where the researcher is at once an archivist and a reader of necessarily fragmented knowledge across differences and implicit collectivity. The sustained and long-term interviews I conducted, as well as my reading of that data, were dedicated to a “public witnessing” of my participants’ lived experiences of trauma, pleasures and socialities in queer lives (Bryson and Stacey 2013; Cvetkovich 2003). The narratives and analyses I archived and represent here are by no means an exhaustive account of all queer, diasporic Asian subjects. Rather, they are inevitably partial and situated accounts and testimonies that speak to the common experiences of marginality and the unexpected tactics that such marginality engenders.

An Apartment: The “Fabulous Gay Life in Canada” Revisited

Yasu, a 45-year-old Japanese man, identifies as “gay” and “chubby.” Yasu has been living in Vancouver for the past 16 years, first as a temporary worker on a working holiday visa and now as a booking agent at a small, downtown travel agency. When I visited him for an interview (conducted in Japanese; my translations) in his studio apartment just a few blocks away from Davie Village—known as Vancouver’s gay district—Yasu was busy confirming his flights and train tickets and reading some travel pamphlets for an upcoming two-week vacation in Japan.

Dai: These look like some obscure places in Tohoku [the northern region of Honshu Island]. What do you plan to do there?

Yasu looked down at his travel itineraries and responded.

Yasu: Oh, that’s because I’m not going back for sightseeing or visiting my family. I’ve actually never been to these places . . . takes me 20 hours on the train to get there from the airport [in Osaka]. I’m going there to meet my online fans for the first time.

Dai: Online fans?

Yasu: Yeah, my デブ専 (*debusen*) friends.

Debusen can be roughly translated as chubby-chaser: a gay man who pursues chubby/fat gay men as sexual partners. Because Yasu is chubby himself, debusen are integral to his intimate community-making; however, as a self-identified “Asian Bear,” Yasu’s participation in the Vancouver gay scene has been, as he puts it, “non-existent, not in demand.” He elaborated on his ambivalent identification with the predominantly white, racialized physicality that dictates the embodied relations of desirability of the gay bear figure.

Yasu: I’m not really part of the bear community here, because ... well, I don’t think I’m actually a bear.

Dai: What is a “bear” for you? Why do think you are, but not really, a bear?

Yasu: Um, so a gay bear would be someone who looks like a bear, the animal, you know? Big and hairy. But I’m not big enough like those white guys who are the ideal image of the gay bear.

Yasu further narrated how the racialized logics of desirability shape bear/chubby-chaser relations.

Yasu: And you know, guys who go for Bears, like the chubby-chasers in Vancouver, they are usually twinkly white boys who want big white daddies. I actually want an Asian chubby-chaser who can appreciate an Asian bear, but that’s just too specific, isn’t it? Where would I find that? [Laughs.]

While Yasu’s age does not matter so much in the bear community, as bear/chubby-chaser relations are often structured around a “daddy”/“twink” age binary of mutual desire, queer spaces and streets in Vancouver—especially those frequented by the bear community and their admirers—are not at all free from racialized logics of desirability for queer Asian Bear subjects. Yasu recalled:

Every time I went down to [a local gay bar frequented by many bear-identified gay men], I felt totally out of place and unwanted. It didn’t take me long to figure out that it was nothing but a white space. No one said anything racist, no. It’s just that no one said anything to me.

Faced with the difficulty of finding a lover at local bars and clubs, Yasu, like many modern gay men before him, turned to gay social network sites online. However, much to his disappointment, Yasu soon discovered that the online bear scene was not much different from his offline experiences, of which he noted:

I don’t think the net can really solve the problem, you know? It’s just a more convenient way to hook up

with people but that doesn’t mean it’s somehow a totally different situation [than offline]. You see the same people looking for the same thing.

Yasu’s similar experiences of racialization and his felt invisibility in both offline and online worlds are not uncommon. Instead, they reflect a common experience with the politics of race that continues to structure gay male sociality online—with the usual disclaimer of “it’s a preference, no offense” that constitutes an insidious and disorientating space of sexuality for racialized subjects (Lee 2008; Raj 2011). However, when I further asked Yasu how he negotiates possible encounters with people with similar preferences to his own, he opened a small window on his IBM desktop computer and turned on a web camera: “This is how—I broadcast my fat belly to the world!” The following are my observational field notes from our meeting in his apartment that night:

Yasu has an account on a website for video streaming. He found the site as he was searching for social networks catering to “debusen” and their admirers, as well as the transnational bear/chubby-chaser community. On the screen, there were multiple video images—most of them blank. Yasu explained that, because it was still around 5:00 a.m. in Asia, his fans were in bed. When I asked him how he used the site to connect with his buddies, he offered a description of his daily routine.

He would leave the camera on 24/7 (or as long as the Internet connection would hold). Due to the time difference, when he gets up in the morning, it is the evening of the same day in Asia. “They usually ask me to hang out with them, so I have a small chat, but I’d have to go to work. When I come home from work, I’d take off my clothes and sit in front of the computer for a chat. Or I’ll watch a movie naked with a camera facing [my] way, so that they can still see me. [Chuckling.] Sometimes I chat with my friends for hours, sometimes I look for a new buddy. Then I go to bed.” [Research journal entry, 21 February 2011]

In this way, Yasu found his “online fans.” As he started to experiment with the site and a new webcam, he gradually met Asian chubby-chasers. Yasu remembered the surprise and exhilarating sensation of these encounters: “It’s the sense of relief, and maybe a little assurance. It took me some time and this weird technology, but I was able to find my people.”

After learning about his online tactics for finding Asian chubby-chasers, I conducted a follow-up interview with Yasu that elicited the conversation above about his trips to “meet and greet” his fans in Japan. Once a year, Yasu plans a trip to Asia, usually Japan, but some years

he has travelled to Thailand, where he also knows some users from the same site. Yasu maintained that, while a possibility, his visits to Asia are not for the chance that he may “get laid”; thus, he states, “it’s not about sex. I mean, it could happen, but it’s not the goal.” Yasu further explained how the travel costs him a year of savings that he puts aside each month:

I put in \$150 or \$200 each month. I stay at the cheapest hotels or sometimes even sleep at the train station or on a bench in a park to save money. Not really a glamorous vacation ... not what you think it is! [Laughs.]

As he was showing me the profiles of some of his online buddies, Yasu quietly said,

They think I have this fabulous gay life in Canada. They don’t know that they make my gay life happen ... I live here [in Vancouver], but part of my life is over there [in Asia]. I’m just happy to see them offline whenever possible, if only once a year.

Yasu’s spatial tactics to seek mediated and immediate intimacy with his fans on a video channel is enabled by his experiences of disappointment and displacement in the white, racialized bear community in which he struggled and failed to claim a sense of belonging and which refused to claim him. His queer world-making through *basue* sociality stretches and travels across the Pacific Ocean and is constituted through displacements in Vancouver as well as online video technology; the remote presence of others, even when the cameras were off and the windows blank, adds a layer of intimacy into his everyday home environment. It may seem like his notion of “gay life” is not much of a life when judged against an upper-middle-class lifestyle—the “fabulous gay life in Canada”—that the modern gay culture in Vancouver seemingly offers yet fails to afford him.

However, Yasu is engaged in a serious work—though perhaps seemingly peculiar to an outsider—of reconstituting a space of queer possibility that confronts the negation of *any* gay or queer life. The complex intersections in Yasu’s desire for Asian/chubby-chaser/bear/*debusen* relations treads the outskirts of both dominant gay public culture and the local bear subcultural community where the racialization of Asian bodies makes his quest for intimacy difficult if not outright impossible. Yasu’s ritual of video broadcasting and his annual travels to Asia are ways of negotiating and extending the boundary of his belonging through both *basue* relations and *basue* spaces. Yasu’s tactics exceed the normative confinement of his not-belonging that the city’s racialized and thus limiting homosociality produces. His *basue*

tactics emanate from a small apartment, just outside of the buzz of the urban gay village, from a tiny, flickering video screen. And, as he says, echoing Manalansan’s notion of the temporality of survival, “this is all I get ... and good enough for now.”

Skytrain: Knitting and “Feeling Gay”

Maty, a 57-year-old South Asian man, does not identify with any term of sexual identification (i.e., gay, homosexual, queer). He claims that he has never touched a computer (or touched another man). The only means of contact I had with Maty, before and after interview sessions, was by means of the landline telephone in his home in Surrey (a predominantly South Asian suburb adjacent to Vancouver), over which his 90-year-old mother and his sisters’ families frequently eavesdropped. Consequently, Maty asked me not to disclose who I was or why I was calling him, and we had to devise certain codes of communication to hide his participation in the study from his family.

“You know it [the cell phone] is bad for your brain. My brain,” he said, pointing to his head, as he sat across the table from me in a small meeting room at a public library in downtown Vancouver. Maty suffers from manic depression and depends on disability benefits from the government. When he is not able to leave his house, sometimes for months on end, his aging mother looks after him. He does not know or does not wish to know, where his depression comes from. As I took notes during our first meeting, Maty glanced over my note book and said,

I see [my psychiatrist] at the university hospital once a month. He writes me a prescription. He gives me a [doctor’s] note. No questions. I want you to know, it’s not because I’m gay. I’m not gay.

Maty was raised as Christian in a South Asian diaspora in Uganda. After the entire community was seized and deported by the then nationalist Ugandan government’s Indophobic “ethnic cleansing” movement in the 1970s (Patel 1972), Maty and his family immigrated to Canada as refugees. Being Christian and Indian, settlement in Surrey was not easy for him and his parents: “We have [a] few people like us there, but most are Sikhs and Muslims. We are not the same.” A similar predominance within ethno-religious relations in Surrey carries over to South Asian queer organizations in Metro Vancouver to varying degrees.

Maty: I went to a meeting once at [a local community centre]. They were young. And Muslims.

Dai: How about ... was there any Christian support group?

Maty: I do not know how to find them ... my church doesn't [have one].

In addition to such "diaspora within a diaspora" marginality, age differences and a lack of access to the Internet and mediated connectivity—the seemingly de facto platform for community organizing for queers of colour and immigrants in the city—meant that Maty's participation in many existing queer social spaces seems liminal at best.

His self-identified "mental problems" started in his mid-20s in Canada, which was "a big trouble for my family. I was going to become a lawyer." After years of unemployment and isolation in his family home in Surrey, his parents sent Maty to the city in southern India where they lived before they moved to Uganda. Maty recalled his daily routine during his time there as follows:

I sat on a chair by a busy street. Every morning. I saw young men. I liked [watching them]. They were naked and sweaty. Watching them, I felt, um, safe. These were my people. I wouldn't do that in Vancouver, for sure. [Laughs.]

After this trip, it became a yearly vacation for Maty, during which he avoids Vancouver's rainy winter months by visiting India with the money he saves from his government disability cheques. When asked whether he likes to just watch the young Indian men and if doing so would make him "gay," he contemplated for a good minute before responding.

Maty: I never touched another man. I don't know how to be intimate [with men]. I only watch, and so no one knows [about my desire]. Sometimes I watch men here [in Vancouver]. I also buy magazines [of Bollywood cinema] at a corner store near my house, [where] they sell Indian goods. I look at the men [the actors]. So, I'm not gay, because I never have sex with another man.

Dai: Ok, so, no sex, no gay. I don't want to impose anything here, but I'm curious. What made you respond to my call for participation? It says "Are you a gay, bisexual, transgendered man/woman and Asian?"

Maty: I saw your [recruitment] poster at "Qmmunity" [Vancouver's LGBTQ community centre]. I was knitting there. When I knit, I feel gay, yes.

Maty is a member of a knitting club at a local church, where people—"mostly old white women," he said—knit socks and blankets for orphaned babies every Sunday. During the week, he gets on the Skytrain rapid transportation system, which links many surrounding suburban communities to downtown Vancouver, with his

knitting kit and balls of pastel-coloured wool. Maty explained,

I come to the library, to see if they have new books [for knitting]. Sometimes I try to knit here [at the library], but I like to do it on the train. So I go back and forth [between Surrey and downtown Vancouver] sometimes all day.

Maty makes and donates his creations to the church's knitting club. However, knitting on the train and sometimes in other public spaces (such as Qmmunity and the library) is something he does alone. Asked why that makes him feel like he is gay, Maty said, choosing his words carefully,

Because ... I know it looks strange. An old Indian man knitting ... sometimes people stare. But some people smile or nod. I don't know who they are but I think I know what they are thinking. And I like it ... it feels ... gay.

The displacements in Maty's life are overwhelmingly obvious—having been born into and then chased out of an Indian diaspora in Uganda; living with a disability; the difficulty of settlement due to heterosexism and his double-marginality as an ethno-religious minority within an immigrant community; his age; his lack of privacy at home; his lack of access to communicative technologies—the list goes on. In that sense, I would be very hesitant to call Maty a gay subject in any straightforward sense. However, I contend that there is an opportunity to ask what Maty's everyday tactics of knitting and "feeling gay" on public transit can tell us about ephemeral forms of queerness beyond institutionalized forms of gay visibility and legibility.

We can perhaps read his circular travel between two homes—one in the heterosexual, ethnic diaspora in suburbia and the other in the urban queer utopia, unforgiving of his differences, both of which turn out to be locations of estrangement—as a doubly displaced sphere of what Gayatri Gopinath (2005) calls "queer diaspora." This queer diaspora's displaced location, the marginal relationality of *basue*, however, also comes from Maty's struggles around disability, unemployment and religious affiliation, beyond the conventional intersection of race/ethnicity and sexuality. While attempting to avoid a reductive and authoritative reading, I would argue that, for Maty, his ambivalent identification that moves between "I'm not gay" and "I feel gay" is a result of an "impossible desire" (Gopinath 2005) that is caught in the complex and intersectional axis of immobilities and displacements in his diasporic queer life. All Maty is capable of, in his own words, is to "just watch" and to

“feel” the gayness that transpires—on the streets of the city in southern Indian, on the Skytrain, on magazine pages—without touching or claiming the object of his desire.

Despite and *because* of his displacements, knitting offers Maty an important space within *basue* and its spatiality outside of both the confinement of his home and his isolation in the city. Knitting on the Skytrain gives Maty access to mobility that takes him to an entirely different and much more subtle, public sociality than the quest for body sex and its radical dissent that queer studies often privileges. As strangers on the train, we would not know why, or perhaps not even notice that, a frail-looking, quiet Indian man is knitting near us. However, Maty’s active enactment of *basue* space through knitting on the train can and does enable moments of intimacy and connection with strangers in its literally moving space of belonging that has no name. This fleeting intimacy on a commuter train is felt in a series of knowing looks, nods and other small gestures of recognition (or perhaps, in other instances, bewilderment or disgust—such are the relational costs of intimacy).

The fleeting sense of public intimacy felt by Maty—of “feeling gay”—is what José Esteban Muñoz (1996:10) describes as the “ephemeral evidence” of queerness, a sign of transgression “linked to alternate modes of textuality and narrativity like memory and performance: it is all those things that remain after a performance, a kind of evidence of what has transpired but certainly not the thing itself.” What has transpired, Maty’s queerness, emerges out of the “performative contradiction” (Butler and Spivak 2007) of knitting that betrays the assumed heterosexuality of a racialized immigrant man and surprises us with the possibility for an affective practice of “feeling gay” outside of the obvious institutions of modern queer public cultures—gay bars, sex shops and bathhouses, online social networks and so on—and without the residents of downtown. Such a displaced intimacy of *basue*, enacted by his queer performativity of knitting, offers Maty shifting, affective moments and ephemeral spaces of belonging that can emerge unexpectedly, without the declarative act of coming out that modern gay politics of visibility and recognition demand and deprive him of.

The Night Market: Diasporic Homecoming

The previous two case studies traced my participants’ active negotiations of the boundaries of intimacy in the everyday locations of a small apartment and public transportation. In this third case study, I turn to an examination of an Asian night market and how some queer Asian

subjects make use of the festival site as a space of both diasporic homecoming and queer possibilities.

When I asked my participants to identify the important social locations where their felt senses of belonging were associated, queer or otherwise, some of them mentioned how trips to the night market were an annual event. One participant, Tay, a 37-year-old, gay, Vietnamese-Chinese-Canadian man, described his ritual as follows:

It’s, like, just something I do every year with friends. It’s, like, on my calendar every summer ... It’s actually super cheesy. I bet most white folks go there once thinking it’s exotic or something and, like, have enough of a ghetto Asian explosion! [Laughs.]

Since 2000, the summer night market, or simply “the night market” as many local residents call it, is held every summer in the city of Richmond, a suburb just south of Vancouver. It is often promoted as a “tourist destination” where “thousands converge on this nine-acre site in an industrial area, where 175 booths and their energetic merchants evoke images of night markets in Hong Kong, Taipei and other Asian cities” (Broom 2009:n.p.).

The night market’s location and the “ghetto” relationality that Tay invokes epitomize Richmond as one of the largest settling neighbourhoods in Metro Vancouver for predominantly East Asian immigrant communities—a sprawling, diasporic suburbia adjacent to the modern North American modernity of the city of Vancouver. Another participant, Salt, a 25-year-old gay man from China, narrates his dis-identification with and attachment to the space of the night market as a resident of downtown Vancouver and a self-proclaimed “gay hipster.” Salt describes his ambivalent relationship to the strongly ethnicized annual festival.

Salt: It does remind me of home. But, oh my god, it’s something I want to get rid of, too ... I know how Asians or Chinese people are talked about here. We are like low-class, not civilized, parasites in Canada ... that kinda stuff. I want to stay away from it.

Dai: But you still go. What does the night market mean to you?

Salt: So, like, everyday, I’m trying to prove that I can be a cultured and civilized person. Like catching up to, you know, the “Canadian way of life” [Salt made finger-quotes to emphasize his point]. The night market ... it’s almost like I go there to get a refill, you know? Kinda like, you know, a break from [my usual life]. But it’s something I left behind.

Elsewhere in my research project, many participants discussed what I call the “FOB (Fresh Off the Boat)

anxiety” that haunts queer Asian subjects in the city. FOB anxiety is the stigma of being perceived as an unassimilated, low-class, uneducated, racialized, immigrant Other. The FOB stigma shapes my participants’ subjectivities in dominant queer culture and modernity, while it also enables their diverse styles of embodiment as active disarticulations of the negating meanings of FOB. Tay’s and Salt’s accounts signal how such an anxiety—a shuffle between “cultured and civilized” Vancouver and the suburban, ethnic, diasporic festival in an industrial “no man’s land”—can be felt and articulated spatially. Given these seemingly contradictory accounts, that the night market is a location of both familiarity and estrangement for some participants, I became interested to know how their trips to the festival, away from their daily lives in Vancouver’s downtown core, might provide opportunities for their *basue* tactics and other queer possibilities of survival on the margin.

One summer night in 2010, Salt invited me to hang out with him at the night market. What follows are my field notes from that night:

We got off of Highway 99 and turned onto a narrow side street, then arrived at a large, make-shift parking lot surrounded by large box stores and warehouses along the muddy water of the Fraser River. As we were getting out of the rented car, Salt pulled out his iPhone. He turned the phone toward me and said, “Just checking in.” He had opened the Grindr app [a popular, location-based smartphone application for queer men to find each other]. “Who knows, right?” he said with a grin.

We entered the market and felt a chaotic surge of garish bright lights, the noises of people and power generators and music blasting from the stage behind the lines of small white tents. Jumbled signage shouted at us in Chinese and Korean, as well as some misspelled English. Many vendors also displayed Japanese phrases that did not make any sense. I lost count of the food vendors and carts; Chinese dim sum, Takoyaki, grilled squid, bubble tea, “Japadogs” and other street foods more commonly found across East Asia. There were also merchants selling cheap electronic gadgets and accessories that were covered in dust and looked already broken. Other tents sold “I ♥ 溫哥華 (Vancouver)” and Hello Kitty t-shirts. We wandered into a DVD shop, where hundreds of (apparently) pirated movies and Chinese, Korean and Japanese TV shows were on display—we were chased away as soon as I tried to take a photo of the place.

After strolling around for an hour, we sat down in the back of the stage area with bubble teas in our hands.

A band made up of white performers played some kind of indie-pop music, to which old men and women, mostly Asian-looking, quietly swayed their bodies slightly off-beat. Salt and I discussed how the space reminded us of our homes and memories of summer night markets from our childhoods in China and Japan. It was not that the night market was any kind of authentic space of Asian-ness. As Salt reminded me, “This is kinda grotesque ... immigrants trying to sell anything Asian. Not the same thing as what I know back home.” However, we both agreed that it was quite a familiar experience of “feeling Asian” in Canada that we had come to accept as immigrants; a mixture of strange food, cheap products and cultural and national genealogies thrown together in the diaspora.

The whole time we were at the night market, Salt kept checking his iPhone to see if he had received any messages from other Grindr users. I asked why he would use the gay app where there was no sign of queer bodies as such. He explained to me it was not so much that he may find a date there. For Salt, the space of the night market is not necessarily a place for hooking up: “Do you see gay sex happening here?” he said jokingly. But, he quickly added, “Like I said, you never know.” [Research journal entry, 16 August 2010]

I was particularly struck by the notion of “you never know” as a means by which to open up a space of imagined possibilities—uncertain, but not foreclosed—of a queer encounter in an unexpected location, as opposed to the concrete expectation of gay institutions in downtown Vancouver. As Karen Tongson (2011) argues in *Relocations*, ethnicized, immigrant suburban locations and diasporas may seem like a complete void of modern, urban queer possibilities. However, a shift in gaze and attention to what Tongson calls the “immigrant baroque” aesthetic of suburbia can potentially accommodate different forms of queer sociality and possibility that white racialized spaces of urban queer culture foreclose for racialized subjects.

In a follow-up interview, I asked Salt what he thought of my interpretation of our time at the night market together and his use of Grindr. Salt’s reflections concerning his own practices testify to this spatial dynamic.

Salt: Well, it is true that Grindr has become something of a survey tool for me [Laughs.] ... because, like, at the night market, there’s nothing that really, you know, says that you are gay. It’s, for sure, not Davie Village.

Dai: But you use it in downtown, too, correct?

Salt: Yeah, for sure. But you know, there’s not, not

really anything new there. I see the same profiles all the time. Like, oh my god, do gay people ever leave downtown!? [Laughs.] So, I guess, in a way, I look for something else, you know, like what kind of gay people show up in, like, a super non-gay place, you know what I mean? That's ... that's more interesting than, you know, just staying in one place.

Salt's use of the location-based mobile app, in this sense, is a tool for rendering a physical location, explicitly queer or not, as an imagined space of possibility. This mobile possibility, I speculate, is not tied to a fixed location; rather, it only emerges out of Salt's travels between the urban queer centre and the marginal, *basue* space of the night market. Such tactics offer us an opportunity to consider how queer Asian subjects tactically disarticulate the normative boundaries of intimacy and pleasure beyond the logics of visibility and conditions of belonging associated with Davie Street and the "Gay Village" in downtown Vancouver. Importantly, the invisible mobilities that Salt affords himself are an embodied process, through which the seemingly dispersed locations and competing modernities between urban, white queer culture and ethnic diasporas intersect and mutate. Salt continued:

There was this one time, you know, I left my straight friends, Chinese friends [at the night market], and like took the bus and went to [a local gay bar]. This white guy came up to me and, like, started chatting and stuff. Then like, he said, "Eew, what's that smell? You smell like Chinese food." [Laughs.] I was, like, dressed up and all, you know, like totally cool hipster looking. But guess what, I was, like, just at the night market! That's not, um, gay, right? [Laughs.] So I said, "I'm Chinese." Yup, I am Chinese, gay, and I eat bad food.

Discussion and Concluding Notes

What do the ephemeral notions of "good enough for now," "feeling gay" or "that's more interesting than just staying in one place" in these examples offer us? What political possibilities do they offer in rethinking mobilities beyond the binary of structural displacement/abstract agency at the level of everyday queer diasporas? With the spatial relation of centre and margin in mind, my analyses of mobilities-in-difference are meant to map out the relational dynamics of movements and travels between locations—those of more established, yet, white racialized downtown/Davie Village and the multiple, more elusive spaces of *basue*—where queer possibilities are differently imagined and negotiated with different logics of visibility and legibility.

Through an understanding of these everyday micro-politics of movement as tactics, *basue* becomes an important site of the negotiation of displacements associated with racism and other marginalizing forces that intersect and are felt through space and the body, individually and collectively. These examples of mobilities and ephemeral socialities importantly show how movements and manoeuvres do not simply lead to *elsewhere* but, as Salt demonstrates by impossibly and hilariously bringing the ghostly whiff of the night market back with him to the bar, always return and revisit seemingly foreclosed locations with different possibilities. As Angelika Bammer notes, "what is displaced is ... still there: *Displaced, but not replaced*" (1994:xiii). The *basue* tactics under consideration here are evidence of queer methods of space-making that may not register as "taking up" a dominant space. Shin, Yasu, Maty and Salt do not find possibility in fixed or permanent claims to space and belonging but in their transient relations to and travels between locations of displacement. Their tactics are makeshift and provisional—a contingent "squatting" upon otherwise exclusionary social locations, queer or otherwise.

A tradition of queer-of-colour critique demonstrates the critical function of marginal spaces as significant sources of possibility for racialized queer subjects' survival, both culturally and politically. The work of José Esteban Muñoz's (1999), *Disidentifications*, teaches us how the "dis" in *disidentification* not only indicates a rejection of the normative and white racialized terms of sexual identity but also represents a psychic process and movement of "dissing," through which queers of colour afford themselves an alternative space of sociality in which existing meanings and representations of dominant sexual cultures can be disarticulated through performance. Sara Ahmed (2006) similarly makes a spatial turn in *Queer Phenomenology*, in which she demonstrates how queerness is felt as disorientation. Ahmed argues disorientation is not simply a "non-orientation" but that such a deviation from the normative lines of bodily alignment—those of heteronormativity and whiteness—creates a new space of movement for queered bodies against the fixating force of normative interpellations.

Alongside these spatial considerations of racialized, diasporic and queer subjects' quests for alternative socialities and critical intimacies, I consider the "dis" in *displacement* as a process in which the displaced subjects I interviewed dwell upon and make anew, the normative logics of belonging within a cultural space. Such a focus on racialized marginality and space-making argues for a reconsideration of the much celebrated

notion of queerness as movement. For instance, Larry Knopp (2004:121–124) argues that “the idea of movement, flux and flows are important ontological sites in and of themselves” for what he calls queer “quests for identity.” While I agree with this aspiration for alternative identifications and the imaginative *elsewhere* that propel queer bodies on the move, the critical modality of *basue* that I want to hold onto here counters an ontologizing of mobilities that tells us nothing about how displaced and racialized queer migrant subjects confront the conditions of displacements—even from a space they never left, even when their lives seem suspended. *Basue* in this sense is both a set of embodied tactics and a method of space-making, and both are dedicated to the ongoing work of a reconstitution of one’s world through dwelling in and attachment to concrete, existing social locations despite their marginality.

The fact that these queer Asian men’s experiences and locations of *basue*—the picnic, an apartment, the Skytrain, the night market—do not take place outside the centre but exist alongside, on the edge of and beneath it signals the fallacy of any clearly defined boundary and topology of queer possibility. On “the radical openness” that marginal spaces can enable, bell hooks (1989:20) states that “our survival depended on an ongoing public awareness of the separation between margin and centre and an ongoing private acknowledgement that we were a necessary, vital part of that whole.” It is worth contemplating how the marginality of *basue* not only illuminates the displacing force of social relations and material conditions experienced by my participants, but also how *basue* can enable a more careful reading of the conditions of critical awareness, negation of the norm and possibilities of joy and comfort despite/because of displacements in a cultural space. The narratives of mobilities-in-difference and intimacies of *basue* discussed in this article escape a definitive conclusion. As Shin said, analogizing his life in the queer diaspora as a game of pin-ball, “There are many obstacles that get in the way. But, if you see your life as a pin-ball machine and you as the ball: if you stop, you are dead. Game over. I still want to play this game.”

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Notes

- 1 Japanese transcripts were translated by the author. All the given names are pseudonyms and some participants’

biographical information has been altered to protect their anonymity.

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