

**Our Shared Experience:
Queer Asian Americans and Their Reckonings**

by

Leo Rose

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Sponsor: Dr. Kerry Manzo

Second Reader: Dr. Paul Megna

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Introduction

Originally, I was going to write about Arnold Lobel's *Frog and Toad* series for my Senior Project. The *Frog and Toad* duo reminded me of childhood nostalgia and currently serves as personal nicknames for my partner and I (he is my Frog; I am his Toad). I wanted to explore Lobel's famous characters because I knew that his stories were a double-edged sword that talked about the importance of friendship and his desire for homosexual love. By writing these children's books, he was able to indulge in his closeted self, a gay man, in his work and provide for his family. However, he was unable to come out to the public and passed away due to a cardiac arrest and the symptoms of AIDS.

But like most Senior Projects, the idea changes, Project advisors are shifted around, and you realize, once the academic preparation is about to start, that you are working during a pandemic. Working during the pandemic has not been an easy challenge for me. Living at home brought a multitude of problems: parents assume you have more time to manage the house, professors assign more written work than creative due to limited supplies, and physical socialization is little to non-existent. In addition to academic work, I was managing the treasurer position in the school's API (Asian Pacific Islander) cultural club, known as HAPA (Humans of Asian and Polynesian Ancestry), and interning at The Wellness Center, the school's hub for promoting wellness and mindfulness. Maintaining these leadership positions while completing work for classes and being a good, attentive son at home brought more than its challenges: it made me reconsider why I wanted to write about a closeted gay man's work and, if I pursued this direction, what would that say about me as an openly transgender, Asian man.

During the pandemic, my relationship with my identity as an Asian American man was challenged. One day, during the summer, a couple of friends and I decided to meet at Ft. Tyron to walk the park. It was a stupidly humid day for a walk but we were desperate for some social interaction; we have not seen each other since March. While our two friends were finding parking, my other friend and I were waiting outside a public bathroom. While we were waiting, a NYC's Department of Park and Recreations jeep pulled over. A white-passing woman in park uniform stepped out. She looked at us and started screaming, from 20 feet away, "Fuck you!" As she screamed-walked from the jeep to the Park's office garage, my friend taunted "What? Say that again?" When she disappeared behind the office door, I looked at her buddy in the driver's seat. He mouthed "sorry, she's crazy" and looked the other way.

For context, my friend and I are five feet zero, queer Asian American young adults. I doubt our clothes attracted any discourse nor did we have any public identification that told strangers of our queer identities. So from that deduction, she was not cursing us out for being queer or offensive. We knew, from watching the increase in anti-Asian crimes reported and from listening to American politicians call COVID-19 "The China Virus" and "Kung Flu," that she felt the need to yell at us because she was afraid of us. And the only way for her to combat her fear was to be openly racist towards us in a public park. She saw my friend and I as the enemy; we were infiltrators who wanted New York to become COVID-19 infested. Or maybe she saw us as virus spewers because she believed all Asian people had the same mouth, the same germs, the same intentions to harm Americans even though we are also Americans. She lacked acuteness, (she did not observe us with our masked-covered faces huddled on the side of the sidewalk so strangers could walk pass us), she was cruel (why would anyone want to curse two young adults

for standing around in a park?), and she was racist (she saw us, identified us as Chinese people, and allowed her hatred to become vocalized).

My incidents with racism have always happened when my parents (who are white) are not around. And they have exponentially increased ever since I gained independence in college. I have no control over people's racist thinking and I have processed, from my conversations with my parents, that people will be mean no matter how nice you are. But what differentiates this kind of meanness is the motivation and the time of when this meanness is done. During this time of fear mongering, I cannot ignore my Asian American identity. I cannot ignore the increased need to stay alert in public in case someone decides to attack me. I also cannot appease the idea of waiting until I am seen as harmless, model minority again.

Last summer's incident influenced me to change my subject because I want to talk about Asian American issues, specifically queer Asian American issues because I face these issues on a daily basis. In my Senior Project, I discuss T Kira Madden's *Long Live the Tribe of Fatherless Girls* and Alexander Chee's *How to Write an Autobiographical Novel* in the main context of how both memoirists explore and engage with queerness. Both novels share a common theme of desire and the idea of closeted spaces. In Chapter I: Desire, I discuss what desire means for Madden and Chee and how they choose to obtain desire in a white, heterosexual world. In Chapter II: Closeted Spaces, I explain how both memoirists conceal parts of themselves to survive their hegemonic society, but simultaneously protect themselves from understanding their own interiority. The long-term, influential goal for this project is to propel Asian American discussion to the forefront of literature academia. The short-term, influential goal is to encourage future humanities students to write about the Asian American experience.

I. Desire

In many queer individuals, there is a constant yearning or desire to obtain pleasure. Pleasure cannot be categorized as simply sexual or sensual; pleasure is a range of feelings that invite security, affirmation, and comfort to themselves and their partner. Their pleasure, however, is forbidden to be expressed publicly because their society punishes those who identify as anything other than heterosexual. As a result, queer individuals are forced to be voyeurs, patiently waiting until they can find someone who seeks the same pleasure. In Madden's and Chee's writing, there is a desire to receive pleasure from same sex individuals. Yet, they are limited to how they obtain and experience this pleasure due to societal pressures. Because it is difficult for Madden and Chee to obtain same sex pleasure, they savor their rare experiences with the same sex and this results in the reader's understanding of why it is validating for queer individuals to experience desire.

Discovering Desire

The role of the television in Madden's *Preface* and chapter "Womanly Things" functions as a physical and symbolic influence that unlocks her desire to act like a white feminine woman while simultaneously revealing her sexual attraction towards women. Her *Preface* serves as an introduction to the common themes that occur in her memoir such as the objectification of women, her complex relationship with her father, and the comfort she receives from watching women, whether on television or in person. In her *Preface*, she recalls the memory of watching a television commercial because the commercial teaches her what kind of woman she should become. She writes,

In the commercial, white women in lime-green bikinis walk barefoot and elegant across the smooth deck of a yacht. Their steps have bounce to them; their thongs are amazing. The women flip their hair at the sun, and beads of seawater drip onto their shoulders, down the creases between their breasts. The droplets roll and glitter over their bodies like mercury from a smashed thermometer. A man sings: “Naturally you’re lookin’ good, you look just like you dreamed you would! ... Florida Center for Cosmetic Surgery: just one look is worth a thousand words!” His girls are so pleased to be beautiful, his. (xxi)

Her attention rests on the women, not the singing man. She notices their elegant forms, their revealing bodies, and their playful attitude. The women in the commercial impose this idea of heterosexual attraction through their association with the man on the boat. The man infantilizes them, saying that they are “his girls [who are] so pleased to be beautiful, his” (xxi). The women appear to consent to this statement, suggesting they know there is societal power in being sexualized by men. Their skinny, white, and feminine complexions give them societal access to be showcased like this. As a result, their lives are acknowledged as precious, delicate, and valuable. By framing these women as objects, the commercial teaches younger Madden that she needs to meet these societal standards for beauty as white feminine beauty. She realizes that if she fails to meet these standards, then her existence as a woman will be ignored by others. Instead of being seen as a unique object that society wants to interact with, she is seen as a disposable object; her societal function to be an appealing woman can be replaced by another woman. Once Madden conforms to these ideals, then she will be accepted by peers, her life will be valued, and she will become happy like the women in the ad.

Madden is also sexually attracted to the women. The quote, “Their steps have bounce to them; their thongs are amazing” (xxi) indicates a shift in perspective from their performance to their sexualized bodies. The way she pays attention to their bodies indicates that she wants more than their complexions; she wants to be with them. Because the women have captured her attention, it means that, in some form, Madden yearns to look similarly to those women.

Madden yearns to look like these women because she is an outsider. As a girl, she struggled to fit into her predominantly-white town, Boca Raton, because of her biracial background. As a Jewish Asian-American, she was only allowed to intermingle with her white peers because of her proximity to whiteness (her half white-identity) and class status (her financial ability to attend private school). Yet, she was alienated by them because of her physicality and mannerisms in middle school. She writes, “I know where I stand: I wear a soup thermos with a strap around my neck, a back brace... I roll a suitcase filled with books because my equestrian posture is still considered *precious* and can’t handle any excess weight. My nose bleeds onto my desk at least twice a day” (54). Being a chronic nosebleeder in a back brace, Madden knows that her physicality gives her a disadvantage in trying to fit in with the popular crowd. The popular crowd, otherwise known as “The A-girls,” are similar to the women in the ad, insofar as both groups use their white feminine beauty to draw attention. She recalls, “[The A-girls] gather under a palm tree, unbutton their skirts, and let them drop to the grass like dead birds. Beneath their uniform skirts, the girls all wear tight, cotton shorts with slits up the sides” (55) whereas the women in the ad wear “light green bikinis” (xxi). The A-girls cotton shorts and the women in the ad’s bikinis both indicate that they have the power to command their desiring spectators through the ability to show off their body in a sexual manner. Because Madden lacks

the ability to look sexy without risking her physical health, Madden yearns to be like the women in the ad, and as a result, also yearns to be recognized by her peers in society.

The women in the ad also unveil Madden's desire to experience homosexual love. By allowing herself to sexualize them, she is allowing herself to be attracted to women, something that was deemed societally wrong during her childhood. In the chapter "Womanly Things," she remembers her friend and herself sneaking down the stairs to get some ice cream. Sitting on the staircase, she witnesses Lee and Paula, her friend's older sister and the older sister's friend, kissing in the dimly lit living room. She recalls,

Lee and Paula are still on the living room couch. Their limbs are interwoven like cat's cradle strings. The television turns their skin deep purples and blues, though we cannot see what it is they are watching. What we see is Lee's heart-shaped face on Paula's shoulders, and then Paula's hand on Lee's head, and then a lift, a look, their two noses coming together, fingers rubbing the baby hairs around their ears. They kiss for a long while, and I think I must be dreaming. (33)

Madden illustrates the scene as a dream because she has never witnessed two girls expressing homosexual desire in person or on television. In addition, she has never seen sexual endeavors performed in a tender, intimate manner. In the past, she has watched boys and girls sexually please themselves on television. Through watching porn on television, Madden assumed the violent acts and vocal demands the boys made such as "*Fuck my face*" or "*I'm going to fuck you stupid until your brains shoots out of your ears*" or "*Get over here, my little fuck toy*" was the normative manner in which sex should be performed (29-30). Similar to the women in the ad, watching porn on television taught Madden whom she should have sex with and how to perform

sexual favors correctly. Witnessing Lee and Paula's relationship reveals to Madden that homosexual relationships do exist and that expressing sexual desire can be done without violence. However, homosexual love must be expressed in secret or else there are societal consequences in being exposed.

Lee and Paula's homosexual love hardly caused Madden to judge them, but caused her friend Misty to judge the situation. After Madden thinks "I must be dreaming," she remembers her friend jerking her hand up to run back into her room and says, "*I want a French boy, in Paris. He'll take me on his scooter and we'll eat fancy bread and cheese and we'll fuck slowly to a Brandy song*" (33-34). Misty's compulsive need to shield Madden away from her sister and her sister's friend was due to her need to be a good friend and due to her upbringing. Her negative reaction to Lee and Paula's love mirrors America's 1990s opinion on homosexual love. Homosexual love, during the rise of the AIDS epidemic, was perceived by many as something disgusting, sinful, and overall immoral because it prevented heterosexual reproduction and, with the connection to AIDS, suggested that homosexuality was a disease. Hence, Misty's reaction to Lee and Paula was the affirmed homophobic norm that would not be overlooked during their time. Misty's urge to shield and protect Madden not only reveals what society has taught them, but reveals Misty's need to consume heterosexual narratives in order to be comforted.

From analyzing Madden's *Preface* and chapter "Womanly Things," the reader knows that Madden's consumption of television taught her many things such as becoming a sexually-appealing woman and how to have heterosexual sex. The television, as a form of media, promotes the heterosexual agenda and denies the existence of homosexuality. However, without the television's presence as a physical illuminating force in "Womanly Things," Madden would have never discovered homosexual love. Because Madden witnessed homosexual love, she

understands that love and sex can be expressed in different forms and that the kind of love she wants to experience is free of societal judgement and filled with intimate moments like Lee and Paula's relationship.

Exploring Desire

In Adam Green's "Gay but Not Queer: Toward a Post-Queer Study of Sexuality," he argues that queer theory is not exactly "queer" but a reformation of the oppressive, sexually marginal, and the institutionalized hegemonical masculine forces of society. He claims that people "arrive at sexual identities and practices not in spite of heteronormativity, but because of it. Hence, scholars of sexuality must not assume that subversive intentions or effects come married to sexual marginality" (Green 540). Instead of defying hegemonic society, queer society parallels it. By paralleling this oppressive society in their own alternative way, queer individuals have a secure and safe way of understanding their own interiority adjacent to society. An example of queer society paralleling their oppressive society in order to understand themselves is through the performance of drag.

In Chee's chapter "Girl," the memoirist discovers the world of drag in 1990 San Francisco. On Halloween night, his friends and he decide to dress up in drag for fun. In Judith Butler's chapter "Subversive Bodily Acts" in her book *Gender Trouble*, she describes drag to be a performance that "plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed" (175). During a drag performance, there is a dissonance between the anatomical sex, the gender identity, and the gender performance of the performer. There is a dissonance between these three states of being because, in most cases, the anatomical sex of the performer does not match with the societal association of its assigned gender identity or gender

performance. Through this dissonance, it reveals to the audience that this performance of a “biological woman” is an interpretation. Butler adds, “As much as drag creates a unified picture of ‘woman’ (what its critics often oppose), it also reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence” (Butler 175). In other words, as much as the performer exhibits ways that convinces the audience that they are “a woman,” their performance also shows how the term “woman” is a gendered construct that has been normalized through the influential presence of heterosexual society. Performing in drag is similar to performing as an actor on a stage. Through the actor’s performance, he is not portraying himself but the character role he was chosen to perform in based on his director’s perception of the role. Although Chee was not an actor, he was part of his high school’s theater department. As the makeup artist, he used to don “fake mustaches and eyelashes then, bruises, wounds, tattoos” on others and would “always being tempted to then to do what I have just done now [putting on drag], and always stopping, always thinking I would do it later” (Chee 59). Chee has this urge to put makeup on himself because he wants to be seen and accepted by his audience (otherwise known as his society). As the makeup artist, he is the unknown illustrator that is concealed behind the curtain. His job is to work behind the scenes, replacing the actor’s true face with a disguise that will trick and entertain the audience. Through this process, he and the actor know that the face he painted on is fake, that when the actor goes on stage he becomes a different person, and that only the makeup artist knows who the actor is despite watching his performance. Chee dresses up in drag that night because he wants to experience what it is like to be accepted by his hegemonic society. By admitting that Chee would rather be the actor than the makeup artist, his novel reveals to the

reader that Chee has a difficult time being his authentic self while simultaneously being acknowledged and valued in his society.

Chee has a hard time being acknowledged and valued in his society because he is an Asian man. He wants to hide the fact that he is an Asian man that night because he wants to feel desirable. “What kind of girl am I?” Chee asks, “With the [blond] wig in place, I understand that it is possible I am not just in drag as a girl, but as a white girl. Or as someone trying to pass as a white girl” (61). Similar to Madden, he also sees the pinnacle of beauty to be a white woman. He knows white women are treated nicely, are more alluring to others, and have the privilege to command a room simply because they are physically beautiful. He also understands this association with beauty and power because, as a biracial man, he is also given certain power for being objectified.

Growing up, his experience with being a biracial (a half white, half Asian) man differed depending on if he was in Korea or in America. In America, he is singled out for being able to pass – a term used to describe a person’s ability to blend into their hegemonic environment – in society. Because he is able to pass in America, he can achieve more socioeconomic privileges than other Asian Americans (AsAms for short). However, his ability to pass negatively impacts his capability to form friendships with other AsAms. When his Filipino hairdresser noticed his biracial identity, he confesses to him, “You could be one of us, but you’re not,” which further alienates Chee from associating himself with the AsAm community (63). He writes, “[Historically, biracial/multiracial people] are allowed neither the privileges of the ruling class nor the community of those who are ruled.... We survive only if we are valued, and we are valued only for strength, or beauty, sometimes for intelligence or cunning.... [These] are the only ways I have survived so far” (63-64). Chee’s reflection on his biracial identity and the

“history of half-breeds hidden in every culture” acknowledges the displacement of his racial identity, but also his community (63). Without a community, the only thing a biracial person can do is rely on their appealing traits, whether physical or mental, to survive their hegemonic society and to preserve their own existence. By participating in drag, Chee is liberated from the strangers who try to trivialize and denounce his biracial identity. In exchange, he will allow others to misidentify and objectify him as a white woman in order to feel accepted by others.

By dressing up in drag, Chee is also concealing the fact that he is a gay man. His drag identity is painted so well that, when his boyfriend and he walk by a heterosexual couple, he notices “the passing men who [treat] me like a woman – and the women who did also” (70). From the strangers’ perspective, Chee holding his boyfriend’s hand is harmless to them because they pass as a heterosexual couple. In his heterosexual-dominated society, there is no consequence in expressing one’s heterosexual identity. However, if Chee was not in drag and they were holding hands in public, he knows some strangers would physically attack them in response. Despite the large queer community that existed in 1990 San Francisco, homophobia – and equally, queerphobia – was still rampant. There were many people that continued to fear queer people, specifically gay men, because it was falsely rumored that gay men were the only kind of people who could spread AIDS. And through fear, there erupts a need to attack queer people based on the attacker’s own blind ignorance. Chee writes,

According to the paper the next day, 400,000 people will come into the Castro tonight to see us. They will all try to drive down this street, and many will succeed. Some will have baseball bats, beer bottles, guns. Some of them hate drag queens, [transgender] women, gender queers. They will tell you they want their

girls to be girls. If they pick you up and find out the truth, they will beat and maybe kill you. (67-68)

Strangers, especially men with unchecked anger, sought out the Castro Halloween night because they knew they could take their insecurities out on drag queens, transgender women, and anyone else that failed to represent themselves in adjacency to heterosexuality. Similar to the advertisement Madden illustrates in her *Preface*, in which the man on the boat relies on the beautiful women to assert his masculinity, the men who infiltrated the Castro sought out women who could affirm their manhood. If the woman failed to please them correctly, either by having an unconvincing mug – a painted face to illustrate a woman’s features – or attire, the man would feel cheated out of having a night with a “real” woman of their choosing and would reassert their masculinity through physical, sometimes sexual, violence. Chee makes it clear that these strangers want to cause physical, mental, and emotional damage to those who make them feel cheated out of their transactional deal. What makes this reality heartbreaking is that no queer person asks to be ridiculed for their way of expressing themselves, they simply ask to be desired by another human being. For Chee, the only way he can feel desirable while protecting his boyfriend and himself from homophobia is through his performance of drag that night.

From analyzing Chee’s night in drag, it is clear that Chee dressed in drag so he could feel accepted by his hegemonic society for a moment. Although he ran the risk of being revealed as a cisgender, gay man in a wig, he took that chance because he wanted to openly express his love for his boyfriend. He writes,

Before Halloween night, I thought I knew some things about being a woman. I’d had women teachers and read women writers; women were my best friends

growing up. But that night was a glimpse into a universe besides my own. Drag is its own world of experiences – a theater of being female more than a reality. It isn't like being [transgender], either. It isn't, the more I think about it, like anything except what it is: costumes, illusion, a spell you cast on others and on yourself. (Chee, 69-70)

There is no transferable way for Chee to empathize with a woman. He can sympathize with a woman on the topic of objectification, but only on a certain level. He knows, from his one night in drag, that men are guaranteed societal respect from others, whereas women have to earn societal respect. And I want to make it clear that I do not support the idea of categorizing and/or measuring different kinds of oppression. At the end of the day, minorities whether on a racial, gender, or sexual basis, are targets. The stranger who attacks a woman does not care if she is a cisgender woman or a transgender woman; their point is to instill fear and lack of control on their victims. But because Chee notices the difference between performing as a woman versus living one's life as a woman willingly, he acknowledges that drag will never embody being a woman in hegemonic society. Drag will always be an act that one can put on or take off whenever they feel like it. And Chee admits that he is addicted to that secure, confident feeling he had while in drag.

Chee is addicted to that feeling he had in drag because he confesses “that night was the first night I felt comfortable with my face” (72). This realization frightens him greatly because before he also confessed, “Real is good. Real is what you want. No one does drag to be a real woman, though” (71). With this information, it ultimately reveals that he struggles to be his genuine self and would rather feed his addictive need to feel good in his body than inspect his own interiority. He knows there is a disconnect from the way he publicly and privately expresses

himself. It is only through examining his other performances, which is discussed fully in the subchapter “Operating within the Closet,” that he unveils why he desires obscurity.

II. Closeted Spaces

In Julie Abraham's review of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*, she credits Sedgwick's extensive academic discussion of the term "the closet." Abraham writes that the closet "becomes a metaphor for social interaction around knowledge of homosexuality, a relation rather than a place. The closet shapes lesbian and gay life, Sedgwick points out, not because it conceals, but because it serves as a means of controlling presence" (17). The closet is not a physical place but a mental headspace in which queer people categorize themselves and others. When a queer person says they are "in the closet," it means that only a select few and/or no acquaintances know about their queerness. Their reason for being "closeted" can vary from avoiding queerphobia to personally experimenting with a different identity. When a queer person says they are "out of the closet," it signals that acquaintances in public and private circles are aware of their queer identity. Most queer people who present themselves outside of the closet want others to know about their identity, regardless of that stranger's supportive or disparaging opinion on the matter. In regards to Chee and Madden, both memoirists weaponize the state of being closeted so they can retain full control over their presence in public and private settings. Although they appear to be competent individuals, their masking abilities reveal their need to be a part of the hegemonic world and, as a result, shows survivorship in order to cope with their traumatic pasts.

Operating within the Closet

In Chee's chapter "Mr. and Mrs. B," he closets his identity as a writer and opts to become a cater-waiter. He opts to become a cater-waiter because he believes that his writing skills are inferior compared to others in his field. He is discouraged from pursuing his writing career

because of past occupational rejections. Chee recalls, “That first summer [after finishing his MFA from the Iowa Writers’ Workshop], I went on interviews for jobs in publishing, but everyone who interviewed me, on seeing that I’d just come from Iowa, assured me I didn’t want to work there“ (115). His friends point out that “writers shouldn’t hear the way publishers talk about them” and that “the pay is crap,” further pushing Chee’s identity as a writer into the closet (115). Through these rejected interviews and his friends’ pessimistic advice, he is convinced that the mind of the writer is different than the mind of the publisher and if he did join the world of publishing, then it would eventually hurt his ego and destroy his dream of becoming a writer. He understands that the kind of criticism that he would discuss with other publishers about a writer’s book would be as harsh and as bitter if his work was the victim of their subjugation. Eventually, he conceals his identity as a writer because he is afraid of other people’s reactions to his dream occupation. He is afraid of the discouragement, the judgement, and the unsolicited advice he might get from revealing his identity as a writer because he has already faced pessimistic feedback from those (such as interviewers and his published friends) who have found out about his writing identity. His hesitation to announce his writing identity mirrors his fear to identify as a victim of child abuse.

As a cater-waiter, he understands the kind of power dynamics that occur within this work environment. He knows that he is the subservient party; his function is to make sure the guests are satisfied. However, what differentiates this kind of humiliation from the humiliation he would experience in the writing field is that there is a fair transaction in becoming the servant to the upper class. There are personal, societal and economical perks of being a waiter that a publishing position could never offer. Firstly, on a personal note, he is allowed to be vain about his presentation because it is required for a cater-waiter to look sharp. This is observed when his

private-client captain demands, “Tuxedo, plain shirt, bow tie. I want a fresh shirt – no stains on the cuffs or collars. And be sure to shine your shoes...” (124). For most publishing positions, most employees can get away with wearing business casual. Because it is demanded that Chee wears a full tuxedo, he feels on a personal and material level, that his identity as a waiter weighs more than being a publishing employee. Secondly, on a societal level, his occupation grants him the opportunity to interact with very different people. For example, because his work requires him to serve at prestigious events, he was able to help “Martha Stewart pick out a favorite petit four in the home of the entertainment lawyer Allen Grubman while the fashion designers Vera Wang and Tommy Hilfiger looked on” (123). Chee confesses that he would be unable to “stand the idea of office work unless it was writing a novel” (122). At least with cater-waiting, every event guarantees a different set of guests and its own set of issues that would preoccupy Chee’s mind for the night. Lastly, on an economic level, being paid \$25 an hour plus tips from rich clients economically assists him with living in New York (122). From overhearing a conversation between an editor and an assistant, he learns that the assistant’s income was half of what Chee earned annually as a waiter (115-116). His experience with serving the upper class also aids him in affirming his aptitude for future, richer clients. Because cater-waiting offers a unique experience with plenty of perks, in comparison to the monotonous work offered in the publishing industry, Chee settles into his identity as a waiter with ease.

In contrast, he is afraid of claiming his identity as a survivor because, similar to his writing identity, his trauma was initially regarded through logical scrutiny than through sympathetic affirmation. The first therapist he discussed this with mentioned that “[he] seemed fine, perhaps a little neurotic, at least not as damaged as others – not in danger” after telling her of his trauma (238). She also confesses that she is unable to help him because she is accustomed

to those who “usually can’t even name what happened to them, much less write a novel about it” (238). Because the therapist judges Chee’s cognitive abilities, as well as physical presentation, to be able to safely express himself to others, she classifies him as a case study that does not need therapeutic help from her. Her futile, curt response to Chee, however, translates as a response that states that he is fine and that he does not need therapy for the childhood trauma that has damaged him for so long. In hindsight, what Chee was looking for from that first therapist is a confirmation that the kind of trauma he experienced as a child constitutes as proof of his identity as a survivor. Because her response lacked strong, direct validation, Chee’s fear of disclosing himself to others exponentially grows. He describes himself as “a tree struck by lightning a long time ago, burning secretly from the inside out, the bark still smooth to the end – the word FINE painted on it” (239). From his metaphor, he illustrates that people may think he is a levelheaded man due to his convincing demeanor in public circles, but he reveals that he is not a levelheaded man since he knows that his trauma continues to cause significant damage that impacts his interpersonal relationships, as well as his ego. Similar to his occupational identity a cater-waiter, Chee conceals his personal identity as a trauma survivor and chooses to act like his trauma never existed in order to avoid being scrutinized by others. Instead, he persuades himself to accept another identity that allows him to blend in his hegemonic society.

Through hiding his writing identity and his trauma survivor identity, Chee is omitting himself from authentically interacting with society because he is afraid of what he might discover from it. To clarify, he is not afraid of identifying as an Asian, homosexual, cisgender man; he is afraid of who he is outside of these terms. His refusal to confront his trauma reflects in his writing, hence his hesitation in pursuing a writing career. He remembers, “[My] sentences were often criticized in writing workshops for being only beautiful, and lacking meaning” which

indicates the dissociation between his exterior self and his interior self (201). In his perspective, he believed that his writing conveyed insightful thought. However, when critiqued, his writing conveyed otherwise, frivolous thought, which proves to the reader that Chee has a warped perception of himself and his writing. Chee lacks the ability to convey profound thought because he actively prevents himself from reflecting about himself. If he chooses to think deeply about his interiority, it might trigger memories about past trauma and depression that would disable him from writing again. He avoids complicating who he is, hence his tendency to write simply, because he believes that no one will believe the complex trauma he faced as a child.

In his chapter, “The Guardians,” Chee recalls his trauma emerging from an unexpected memory of a dream he had as a child. In his dream, a boy he is infatuated with from choir swims with him in a lake and kisses him. When he wakes up, he recalls thinking, “*I’m gay* is the first thought. *And I am in love with him*” (233). For him, this dream represents his sexual awakening as a gay man. However, his attraction to the choir boy is used against him, resulting in his dissociation from his body for twenty-five years. He writes,

The boy from the dream is a part of this, though not entirely.... When I’m invited to go on a section leaders’ camping trip with the [choir] director, I accept eagerly, knowing he’ll be going also....

Soon it is evening and we are all in the tent. We are all still naked [from swimming]. The director has told me he knew about the crush, and he wants us to kiss. That the kiss is something he wants to see. The [choir] boy had told him of my feelings for him, and they had used it to bring me here.... There seems to be no way out, as if something is being cut off from me even as it is offered, and I

can't prevent it. As the kiss happens, I like it and hate it at the same time. This is my first kiss.... (234-235).

Previous to the incident, Chee considered choir to be his "refuge" from the kids at school; a place where the community is "made up of boys like him" that value his friendship (233-234). Because the director was aware of his crush, he used Chee's desire for the choir boy for his own pleasure. What makes the traumatic scene nauseating is how the director knew Chee and his mother trusted him. The director knew Chee was an outcast in school and that being part of the choir was Chee's way of feeling like he belonged somewhere. In addition, the director knew keeping Chee in choir helped alleviate his mother's worries about his wellbeing (234). By forming this trust between Chee and his mother, the director's plan was guaranteed to happen. When Chee writes that, "[The] kiss is something [the director] wants to see," it emphasizes the director's control of the situation (235). At that point, Chee and the boy have lost all agency of their bodies; they have no choice but to submit to the director's wants because they are children, there are no other trusting adults around, and they are afraid. Hence why Chee likes and hates the kiss at the same time. He likes the kiss because he is doing it with the choir boy, but the intimacy of the kiss is ruined because they are objectified throughout the moment. The desire to kiss each other is not theirs to have; their interactions with each other serve to fulfill the director's desire for entertainment. And from this experience, he loses his ability to be his authentic self in front of others. For the longest time, he weaponized his ability to dream in order to escape the depressing life he had. Now that his ability to dream has betrayed him (because the dream became a reality and the reality caused Chee to become depressed) he closets his dreaming identity in order to prevent getting hurt again. Because he stops dreaming, he stops anticipating optimistic opportunities for himself such as becoming a writer.

His despair transforms him from being a boy who deserves to be happy to becoming a boy who does not want to live. Looking back on the memory and the dream he realizes,

I was twelve when I put this memory away. The force exerting itself in my life was the power of pure childhood imagination, unmediated by any sense of my own power to speak, to create understanding and compassion. Instead, there was in me a dream of fear, so powerful I made a doll of myself to stay in my place, and I ran away. The doll woke up, stretched, looked around, and believed it was me.... (237)

The doll is Chee's way of disengaging with reality, while maintaining his position in his society. For most of his childhood, he relied on dreaming and living in his imaginary world because the real world left him a victim of bullying and social alienation. His ability to dream and to imagine gave him an outlet to be himself without judgement. But because the choir director tainted his dream of kissing the choir boy, it ruined his ability to trust in himself. To have a wonderful dream become a horrible reality would traumatized anyone. And for a child to experience this kind of betrayal, convinces Chee that he is unfit to be a part of his hegemonic world, hence the creation of the doll figure.

Similar to the term "the closet," the doll figure was created to closet his authentic self in order to continue operating in his hegemonic society. With the doll figure in place, it convinces others that Chee is a competent man that can live a fulfilling life. However, having this doll figure substitute Chee's experience with living life caused him more grief than comfort. He writes,

I ran from myself by moving across the country [twice]... one out to Los Angeles and then back again, to Maine. I told myself I was making smart decisions, and sometimes I was – selling my second novel, applying to the MacDowell Colony, applying for a job at Amherst College – but that feeling [of paralysis] followed me, the feeling of needing to stop and also to scream, as if I thought I could stop what was freezing me from the inside out by scaring it out of me.... With each move, a raft of boxes followed me, many never unpacked, joined by new ones full of unanswered mail from the previous address. (240-241)

At first, Chee was convinced that the doll figure was the solution to his grief because, with his doll façade, he was able to secure another publishing deal, attend a writing retreat at a well-known creative organization, and apply to teach at a prestigious school. But throughout these successful, momentous changes, he continued to feel paralyzed and uncomfortable with himself, which signals to both the reader and Chee that the doll façade was not a solution, but an appeasement to avoid confronting his trauma until he was ready to confront these peculiar feelings. The paralyzed and uncomfortable feelings he experienced originate from the kiss he shared with the choir boy. The kiss between the choir boy and him was his first experience of what would happen if he pursued something that he desired for himself. Those emotions he felt during and after the situation was what his body was trained to expect from pursuing something positive for himself. From living with unresolved trauma, Chee realized that the only solution to absolving his grief was to confront his trauma directly with another therapist and to discard his dependency on his doll self. He acknowledges that if he continued to live through his doll self, he would continue to live with more “unpacked” boxes and “unanswered” mail, which metaphorically represents the unchecked issues that were created as a result of his unresolved

trauma. By letting go of his dependency on his doll self, Chee is going to have to learn how to operate within his hegemonic society again, but it will be through his authentic self that will allow him to experience joyful, successful moments in his life without worrying about the grief of his past.

The kind of Chee that emerges from this trauma is the Chee that the reader and he equated himself to be the whole time. In his chapter “Girl,” he makes his sexuality as an Asian, homosexual man his personality. However, now that his trauma is known to the reader, it is understood that he made his identity his personality because he was still coping with his unresolved trauma. He writes that dressing in drag was the first night he felt comfortable in body in a long time because, ever since the traumatic incident, he has had issues expressing his interiority through his exterior self (72). In “Mr. and Mrs. B,” his personality changes from being a confident gay man to becoming a subservient closeted man, working in order to survive instead of working for personal fulfillment. His occupation as a cater-waiter gave him time to write, a flexible schedule, and the opportunity to live in Manhattan. But with the benefit of economic security comes the exchange of his previous stereotype (gay man) for another (becoming a blue-collar worker). In both instances, Chee distances himself from his own interiority and does not feel fulfilled in his life. From reading “The Guardians,” it is revealed that Chee has never been an extrovert or a submissive person; he is still a child that fears his own despair. However, through confronting the despair he faced after the incident, he knows that he is a survivor that deserves to live now that he is past it. His therapist advises, “You can’t get rid of the guardians who’ve kept you safe until now... [You] have to give them new jobs” (242) The doll figure that he created should not be disposed of, it should be praised for protecting him from his trauma until he could safely handle it with the right tools. The closet operates in the same way. In order

to grow, there needs to be a space for those who struggle with their identity to reevaluate themselves in a non-judgmental way. This can be done through individual therapy, group meetings, or through journaling. But what is important about Chee's memoir is that it is a story about recovery and self-worth. Everyone deserves to be desired, to be loved, to be happy, and to become the person they want to become. And this will only happen through time, patience, continual reassessment, and perpetual optimism for the future.

Heterosexuality, Homosexuality, and Kinship

In Judith Butler's "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," she argues that gender is not biologically determined but "an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*" (519). A person's gender identity is determined through the constant association of acts that one performs in the past, present, and future. This performance is not similar to the performance of an actor because this performance is done with the intention to conform to society's rigid, cultural norms. If a person's gender performance does not follow society's hegemonic guidelines, then the person is at risk of being alienated and/or punished by their society. By analyzing gender and its function, Butler realizes that gender is a historical concept that embodies multiple possibilities. However, gender is limited by these possibilities because of kinship and social hegemony.

Perceiving gender as a historical concept comes from Merleau-Ponty's *The Phenomenology of Perception* and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. Butler continues this conversation by affirming and adding that the body is an embodiment of possibilities that manifests a style of existence. However, "[the] style is never fully self-styled, for living styles

have a history, and that history conditions and limits possibilities” (Butler 521). An example of this is claiming oneself to be female or woman. “To be female is... a facticity which has no meaning, but to be a woman is to have *become* a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of ‘woman,’ to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself in obedience to an historically delimited possibility, and to do this as a sustained and repeated corporeal project” (522). An example of Butler’s performative gender theory is Madden’s performance as a cisgender, heterosexual woman. Madden’s gendered performance reveals to the reader that becoming a woman is a transactional arrangement made by Madden and society in order to be accepted by her peers. Through her performance as society’s hegemonic version of a woman, it reveals to Madden that if she continues to live as a heterosexual woman, then she will never know what it is like to experience homosexual love outside of society’s enforcement of the male gaze. In addition, if Madden fails to extract herself from this hegemonic performance, then she will be at risk of creating more interpersonal conflicts in her life, which will overall affect her self-esteem in the future.

As a teenager, Madden’s idea of becoming a desirable woman was dictated through her friendship with Harley and Nelly. However, her performance as a hegemonic woman began when she realized, from pubescent growth, that she has the potential to look pretty to others. In her chapter, “Can I Pet Your Back?” she gets rid of her braces, her back brace, and her equestrian wear for a physicality that is more palatable for others to objectify. She finds pretty in wearing “emerald contact lenses”, dying her hair, tanning, wearing “thick foundations that smeared away [her] freckles,” in getting lash perms, in taking birth control “that bloomed [her] chest to a size C,” and so forth (126). She changes her appearance so much because she was raised, through watching television and her peers, that being pretty is to have a white, skinny,

feminine complexion. It causes her to want to change her eye color from brown to green, to get rid of her freckles so she has a cleaner complexion, and to have longer eyelashes to enhance her feminine face. She achieves a standard of high femininity that it causes her to become bulimic and to fail her classes (127-128). But because she has become this stereotypical gorgeous, high feminine, teenage woman, she achieves her long-time goal of fitting in with her peers.

By having friends that affirm her prettiness and keep her company, she increases her desirability in her society. In her chapter, “Long Live the Tribe of Fatherless Girls,” Madden meets Harley and Nelle, two girls that would become her trustworthy friends and her guide in navigating the heterosexual world. Her journey with the girls “is the beginning of a story, a new one” that forges an identity outside of the girl she used to be in middle school. She writes, “This is me without a father or a mother or a best friend, a boat parade bash in a mansion overlooking the Intracoastal, 2003. I’m a sophomore, fifteen years old, my knees cratered and red from sucking off a boy named Brandon in somebody else’s closet” (129). She mentions that she has no parental guidance or supportive best friend during this time because it is true. During this time, her father is in rehab and her mother is suffering from substance abuse (87, 144). Her best friend at the time, Clarissa, betrays her trust by “dry humping” her crush one night (131). Clarissa was friends with Madden because they used to be bullied in middle school together. In the chapter “Cry Baby” Madden writes,

We’re best friends because Clarissa is also tormented and, together, we torment other losers [in middle school]....

Clarissa is my only friend, but she is also trying to move up.... Clarissa grew up with members of the A-crowd, the *most* popular, and when they start on

me she's allowed to join in on the chanting.... It's an arrangement. I understand – a deal I would, and eventually will, gladly take for myself.... (53-54)

The arrangement Madden foreshadows is the switch from being best friends with Clarissa to being best friends with Harley and Nelle. Overall, because she has lost dependency on her parents and best friend, she gravitates towards becoming Harley and Nelle's friend because they are the only people in her life that make the effort to be with her.

When the two girls meet Madden, they are the ones that give her the nickname Kinky Chinky. She writes, "Your name is Kinky Chinky, they say to me, these girls, as they drag on their Parliament Lights. Harley and Nelle – all ass and stomach and lip gloss and tongue rings – they don't belong here at this party, though all of us want them" (129). They give her the nickname Kinky Chinky because it indicates that they want Madden to join their group. However, the affectionate, yet derogative name warns that she needs to adapt a certain persona in order to be with them. They smoke cigarettes, specifically Parliament Lights, to prove to the private school teenagers that they are more rebellious than them. From their piercings, it shows that they are girls who make their own decisions without needing to ask for their parents' approval. From their first impression, their characteristics offer the kind of teenage life every teenager wants, hence why Madden remarks "all of us want them" in physicality, in personality, and in social proximity.

Coincidentally, becoming Harley and Nelle's friend boosts Madden's attractiveness and popularity in relation to her peers. Madden notes that Harley and Nelle do not go to her school but were invited to the boat parade bash because they are childhood friends with the host. She describes Harley with a "short, bob haircut [with a] body of a blade, with nose freckles and a

silver tongue stud that glistens when she speaks to you” (130). Her physical presence tells the reader that she meets the societal expectations of being an attractive woman while also differentiating herself from others in order to compete for her peers’ attention. She is an attractive woman because she meets the standards of looking like a white woman. Her “body of a blade” and pale complexion (even though she is “*one-eighth Bolivian*”) asserts the conventional beauty norms of the early 2000s but her haircut, freckles, and pierced tongue categorizes her as a unique, radical beauty (130, 136). Harley’s figure reminds the reader of the dominant beauty culture of the early 2000s.

In the early 2000s and late 1990s, it was typical for American girls to look thin and pale because many American models were. In many aspects, models pose as the cultural beacon of what the standards of beauty are for women. As a child, Madden used to watch the Miss Florida pageant. She remembers her friend saying, “Miss USA could never be a mixy mutt“ (252) enforcing the idea that in order to be pretty, you must be white. Proving the statement to be true, Madden’s pick, a contestant that looks like her Chinese-Hawaiian complexion, does not win the Miss Florida title. Her mom also comments on the racist standard of pageants, stating “Shocker... Imagine that. A world that chooses white girls!” (252). The societal enforcement of being pretty equates to being racially white is also exemplified in an advertisement Madden watched years ago. She remembers, “In the commercial, white women in lime-green bikinis walk barefoot and elegant across the smooth deck of a yacht.... [Beads] of seawater drip onto their shoulders, down the creases of their breasts.... [They] are pleased to be beautiful...” (xxi). From watching this advertisement, younger Madden is taught that in order to be “pleased” with one’s self while simultaneously being seen as “beautiful,” she needs to look similarly to a skinny, white woman’s complexion (xxi). Similar to the women in the advertisement, the title winner

continues to be representative of the dominant standard of beauty (and a model for girls) because she has the privilege of being what the superior judges want from a woman: a thin body, feminine traits, and racially white.

Madden adds that Harley's real charms are her lips which are full and look nice when wrapped "around a bottle between every sip" (130). Her lips around the bottle gives the intention that she is good at giving fellatio, which is a skill all teenage boys are attracted to, while also giving the impression that she is unaware of this sexual skill. By choosing to look innocent when performing these sexual innuendos, Harley shows her capability in looking alluring and submissive while exhibiting dominance in the act.

"Nelle," Madden notes, "is more understated. She barely wears makeup – she doesn't need it – and her tan skin glows as if it lit up from the inside. She has deep auburn hair, hips and breasts, [and] a tongue ring" (130). Similar to Harley, Nelle's physical presence meets the standards of white womanly beauty but deviates slightly from the societal norm. Although she tans, her skinny body and her beautiful facial features match the expectations of what a white, feminine woman should look like. The tan skin and the auburn hair differentiates herself between Harley's freckled complexion and Madden's emerald contact lenses. In addition, her unique physical characteristics create her own, individual allure in relation to other girls. With the three girls combined, they create their own version of performative womanhood that deviates from the societal norm slightly, but stays within the regulations of being skinny and pretty in order to obtain attention from perverts and rebellious peers.

Madden's introduction to the groups marks another milestone in Madden's book – having friends because they like you, not because they pity your existence. Once her new friends

hear about Clarissa's betrayal, they "[decide] to adopt [her] – File the paperwork, it's official – and they [begin picking her] up from school at three thirty on the days I show" (Madden 132). At least with Harley and Nelle, they acknowledge her existence and make an effort to hang out with her outside of the parties they attend. The trade-off between becoming friends with Harley and Nelle in exchange of being friends with Clarissa is noted when Clarissa shows up to a party Madden hosts. Madden mentions, "Nelle calls her a troll, tells her to leave [Madden] alone" (148). Nelle insults Clarissa to show solidarity with Madden's disgust of her former friend. In addition, Nelle's warning to Clarissa signals that Nelle is there as Madden's friend and as Madden's defense if Clarissa dares to humiliate Madden at the party. This protective kinship Madden inherits was non-existent with Clarissa. For the longest time, Madden yearned to be part of a group that would not humiliate her. With Harley and Nelle, Madden does not need to worry about defending herself from humiliation anymore. However, through her new friends' embrace is the silent obligation to do what they want her to do. If Madden ever disagrees with them, or says something that creates animosity between the three girls, she will lose that kinship that gives her a sense of security and dependency. Similar to Clarissa and the A-crowd situation, Madden needs to do what her friends do, even if it is against her own judgement. In order to stay loyal, she needs to be present for every party they go to as well as keep up with their dangerous nature.

From interacting with the girls, she learns that there is power in conforming to normative society. For example, when she is high for the first time she hears Nelle's remark about how chinky she looks now because she is squinting from smoking. In response, the inebriated Madden asks, "Why do you say white girl shit like that?" (136) Instead of scorning her, the two girls play on the insult and Harley retorts back "Excuse me I'm one-eighth Bolivian" (136). The off-hand comment Madden makes transforms from a serious accusation to a belittling joke. The

girls choose to humor the moment because their conversation is done in a public setting where boys can be eavesdropping their conversation. At the party, it is important for them to keep their playful persona or else their assertiveness can cause them to look unattractive. Because Harley and Nelle would rather avoid conflict in a public place in order to maintain their attractiveness, Madden is exempt from punishment.

In exchange for tolerating their microaggressions, Madden's life is cherished, loved, and accepted. At various times, her loyalty to the girls are tested. And secretly, Madden does not mind. She recalls the moment she smoked weed for the first time. She remembers, "Open your mouth, [Harley] says. [She] sucks the blunt until the burning worm almost reaches her nails. Before I know what's happening, she presses her mouth to mine, exhaling the smoke down my throat. I hold her by the back of her head – I hold her right there – I don't want our faces to part" (135-136). Holding Harley's head like so reminds Madden of the feeling she had when watching Paula and Lee kiss in the dark. The difference between Paula and Lee's kiss versus Madden's and Harley's kiss is that the former's kiss was done with the intention to express homosexual love for each other. Paula and Lee kissed because they feel enamored by each other and wanted to perform this act of love void of society's judgement. In contrast, Madden and Harley's kiss was performed so that they would become more attractive to the boys watching. For some men, watching two girls kiss is an exotic, attractive thing to watch because, similar to how lesbianism is sometimes portrayed in mainstream pornography, it usually leads to the man getting sexually pleased by those two girls. The exotic kiss between Madden and Harley exemplifies how performing homosexuality can cater towards providing heterosexual consumption for the male gaze.

The kiss between Madden and Harley also shows that Madden is not exclusively heterosexual: Madden still desires to have a sexual and romantic relationship with another woman. For Harley, the kiss has no meaning except to attract boys that will eventually do what she wants them to do. For Madden, the kiss is utilized in three different aspects of her life. Her kiss between Harley functions as proof of her devotion to the group, asserts her identity as a kinky Asian girl, and fulfills her desire to be kissed by another girl. Unfortunately, the kiss differs from the kiss between Paula and Lee; her kiss between Haley lacks reciprocating homosexual feelings for each other. However, the kiss grants Madden the ability to kiss her best friends whenever she wants, even if it lacks significance. During this time of self-exploration, Madden is satisfied with the kind of girl kisses she gets as long as she continues to be friends with Harley and Nelle.

Since Madden is impartial to performing homosexuality, the three girls weaponize their unity to perform homosexuality with each other. She notes, “Both girls like to kiss me with their tongue rings. They like the ways guys look at us when they do this.... Disgusting needle-dicked pervs. But we like pervs. We’re good with them. Pervs get us whatever we want if we wear the right clothes, if we act stupid enough” (139). The girls make themselves accessible to “pervs” because they are the ones who will give them whatever they want in exchange to be sexually pleasing to them. This kind of relationship is different than the kind of boys Madden encounters at high school. The boys in high school can only give car rides in exchange for sexual favors. With the “pervs”, Madden has accessibility to drugs and alcohol.

Madden also notes that in order to receive free drugs from these men, the girls and she need to dress and act a certain way. Although the girls perform a type of woman that stays deviant to society, it still consists as “an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts”

(Butler 519). The girls picking up men “in downtown Fort Lauderdale, on the strip, on the beach, outside of [stores, and] at a lot of parties” show that they dress and act repeatedly at these locations to constantly lure men. Madden adds, “The pervs must be old enough to buy us alcohol, and scary enough to make the whole experience worth it” (139-140). The pervs must be old enough because older men have a vaster amount of knowledge and accessibility of obtaining the best kind of drugs and/or alcohol the girls want, in relation to boys their age. In addition, these older men also must make the experience worthwhile because they want the moment to match with the instability in their lives. Similar to Madden, both Harley and Nelle have unstable parents with issues that range from suicide to estrangement to abusive partnerships. What unites the three is their companionship, their loyalty to each other, and their need to continue living chaotic lives to parallel their chaotic households. However, what divides their friendship is Madden’s mother deciding to become a dependent, protective guardian for her.

Her mother’s decision to become a sober adult marks the end of Madden’s kinship with Harley and Nelly. After Madden hosts a house party (to celebrate the last night Madden can live chaotically), their kinship disappears. She mentions Harley, the oldest of the three by a year, moving to New York to pursue an acting career. Madden says, “These days, I watch her on a television drama... she plays the lifesaving teacher inspiring inner-city students to read books and dream big. She’s a stranger now, a married woman – older, slighter, that upward gaze” (150). Nelle was sent to a reform school “in rural North Carolina” where she would eventually find a job at a ski lodge to continue her smoking habits (150). As for Madden, she stays in Boca Raton to take care of her recovering mother and to finish her high school diploma. The friendship that made Madden look unique and attractive has now collapsed, leaving Madden to reexamine the woman she has become from being with them. With the girls, her deviant

personality saved her from feeling alienated by her peers; with the girls, it gave her an excuse to ignore her mother's worsening substance abuse issues. Now, her legacy as Kinky Chinky exiles her from hanging out with other private school girls, she is left to unmask the dangers of her mother's substance abuse alone, without the comfort of her friends, and she admits that she still feels damaged and alone and scared because it is the same feelings she felt when she discovered that she was pretty without a support system to guide her. She asks, "Dear Tribes of Fatherless Girls: I'm still here" signaling her yearning for past comfort, simplicity, and stability.

By conforming to the ideal beauty standards of the early 2000s, in addition to prioritizing her identity as a pretty, sexually promiscuous, unique woman, she was able to form a kinship with girls just like her, be accepted by her peers, and cope with the chaotic life of living with an unstable parent. From being best friends with Harley and Nelle, she is given loyal protection and societal validation. She conforms herself to this stylistic choice of a woman because she was given a result that was consistent and stable enough for Madden to handle. Similar to watching the women in the advertisement, being this kind of woman gave her comfort and security during a time where nothing was certain. But, as Butler says, her style of being a woman will never be a personal style of representation because by being a woman, she must follow the historical rules of performing womanhood. And Madden knows, if she wants to have romantic, homosexual relationship similar to Paula and Lee, that she must present herself honestly, without fear of the unexpected. She must extract herself from this historical performance of womanhood in order to be seen and embrace as another type of woman that deserves the same respect and love a heterosexual woman deserves from her peers.

Conclusion

T Kira Madden and Alexander Chee's respective memoirs engage with themes that encapsulate the queer experience and explore one's identity within society's hegemonic structure. Both memoirists experiment with labels such as heterosexuality and homosexuality when attempting to understand the conflicting nature of being accepted by your peers while simultaneously trying to achieve one's personal desires. Although Madden's heterosexual persona was convincing to strangers, she knew the limitations of projecting herself this way. Because Madden represented herself as an attractive heterosexual during her teenage years, she was able to blend into her hegemonic society successfully, which prevented her from being bullied or alienated by her peers. In exchange, she lost her chance of experiencing her teenage years as a homosexual where she could have had her own intimate, personal experience with kissing another woman. Today, there are places in America that prevent queer individuals from expressing their genuine sexuality and/or gender because of societal pressures. These societal pressures can range from living in a homophobic household to a lack of a support system from peers to living in a state where queer medical/mental resources are inaccessible. To discuss Madden's memoir in academic writing is to document the societal damage 2000s America inflicted on queer teenagers and functions as a lesson to those who try to seek happiness through conforming to societal norms: it does not work.

Chee's memoir also discusses how concealing one's identity through different demeanors fail to reconcile his own fears about his interiority. His various personas as a drag queen, a cater-waiter, a choir boy, and a writer expresses his true identity as a man who is exceptionally creative, a conversationalist, and self-aware of his privilege of being a homosexual man who

lived throughout the AIDS epidemic. Overall, his identity as a biracial, Asian, homosexual man does not erase the fact that he is also human being who struggles to live a simplistic life. This realization derives from his own speculation of the impact of his trauma and why he felt the need to conceal his imaginative self for so long. Chee's memoir distinctly portrays the complexities of having an identity that goes against hegemonic society, living life as a trauma survivor, and struggling to express one's self authentically without being afraid. Thus, his memoir is indispensable when discussing how memoirs could engage and continue queer discussion.

Queer Asian American creatives have influenced me from the beginning of starting college at Purchase to the end of my undergrad career. In 2017, I applied to Purchase College with the hopes of becoming someone like Mitski, a biracial, AsAm artist who graduated from the school with a B.M. in Studio Composition. Her presence as a successful AsAm writing songs that reflect assimilation, abstract feelings of loneliness and belonging, and yearning for a better day, a better lover, or a better way of feeling gives other queer AsAms more than comfort – it becomes a cathartic outlet for those who lack the tools to express themselves freely. Because of Mitski's influence, it prompted me to explore more than just AsAm artists, but AsAm writers, poets, comedians, politicians, and activists. And from my education at Purchase, I hope my Senior Project influences others to think about the queer AsAm experience in relation to academic discussion within and outside the bonds of its own categorization of Asian American literature.

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