



Queer(N) Asian Im/Migrants' Connectedness

An Inter-Contextual Decolonial Reading of Wong Kar-Wai's

Happy Together

Hugo Córdova Quero

Graduate Theological Union



Resumen

Este artículo aborda los dilemas y las complejas consecuencias de viajeros-queer como locus donde discursos sexuales, corporales, y coloniales se interceptan en movimiento inter-contextual. Los im/migrantes Queer(Y)Asiáticos se desplazan en la interacción de negociaciones identitarias envolviendo historias personales/sociales, cultura, expectativas género, y demarcaciones corporales. La película *Happy Together* constituye la fuente para este análisis. El artículo explora la condición de interludio de las historias de sus personajes para arrojar luz sobre el ámbito de la sexualidad y el colonialismo en la vida cotidiana de im/migrantes Queer(Y)Asiáticos. Luego, se centra en el tono inter-contextual de dicha película través de la consideración de huellas coloniales que afectan a la vida de im/migrantes.

Palabras claves: In/migrantes Queer(Y)Asiáticos, Vida cotidiana, Estudios decoloniales, Migraciones queer, Intercontextualidad, Estudios queer.

Resumo

Este artigo aborda os dilemas e as complexas consequências de viajantes-queer como locus onde discursos sexuais, corporais e coloniais se interceptam em movimento intercontextual. Os im/migrantes Queer(Y)Asiáticos se deslocam na interação de negociações identitárias envolvendo histórias pessoais/sociais, cultura, expectativas de gênero e demarcações corporais. O filme *Happy Together* é uma fonte de análise. O artigo explora a condição de interlúdio das histórias de seus personagens para lançar luz sobre o campo da sexualidade e do colonialismo na vida cotidiana de im/migrantes Queer (Y) Asiáticos. Em seguida, se concentra no tom intercontextual do filme através da consideração de traços coloniais que afetam a vida de im/migrantes.

Palavras-chave: Imigrantes Queer(e)Asiáticos, Vida cotidiana, Estudos descoloniais, Migrações queer, Intercontextualidade, Estudos queer.



Abstract

This article addresses the dilemmas and complex consequences of queer-sojourners as the locus where sexual, bodily, and colonial discourses transect each other in an inter-contextual movement. Queer(N)Asian im/migrants move through the interplay of identity negotiations entailing personal/societal histories, culture, gender-role expectations, and bodily demarcations. The film *Happy Together* constitutes a source for the analysis. The article explores first the condition of in-betweenness of the stories of its characters by shedding light on the realm of sexuality and colonialism in the everyday lives of Queer(N)Asian im/migrants. It then focuses on the inter-contextual tone of the film *Happy Together* through consideration of colonial traces affecting the lives of im/migrants.

Keywords: Queer(N)Asian Im/migrants, Everyday life, Decolonial studies, Queer migrations, Intercontextuality, Queer studies..

About Hugo Córdova Quero

Adjunct Faculty and Director of Online Education at Starr King School, Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California. He holds a Ph.D. in Interdisciplinary Studies in Religion, Migration, and Ethnic Studies (2009) and an MA in Systematic Theology and Critical Theories (Feminist, Queer, and Postcolonial) (2003) both from the Graduate Theological Union, in Berkeley, California; as well as an M.Div. (1998) from ISEDET University in Buenos Aires, Argentina. He is member of the research groups Emerging Queer Asian & Pacific Islander Religion Scholars (EQARS), Multidisciplinary Study Group on Religion and Public Incidence (GEMRIP) and the Queer Migrations Research Network. He is also a fellow at the Institute for Theological Partnerships, The University of Winchester (UK) and at the Institute for the Study of Asian Religions (CERAL), Pontifical University of São Paulo (Brasil).

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Introduction

Like a spatial and temporal loop, the diegetic emergence of Buenos Aires is a point of transition that produces the cultural emergence of Hong Kong, but on the other side. In its virtuality, Hong Kong highlights the shared space of Buenos Aires as an everyday world, evident in the diegesis, where events happen and engage people with physical and material consequences.

Audrey Yue

In the present global era, contexts seem to reproduce sameness by intertwining virtual monochromes. Buildings, streets, or even individuals are constantly (re)shaped into global trends that almost always entice homogenization. Even with the pressure of globalization, contextuality is never erased. On the contrary, context becomes a locus of resistance and the seedbed for change. Diasporic im/migrants always carry with them their context, and reproduce it wherever they go, while resisting assimilation. Paraphrasing Gloria Anzaldúa (1987: 87), im/migrants are like «turtles» carrying «home» on their «backs wherever they go.» Queer Asian im/migrants move along similar dynamic paths while adding «local specificities and indigenous discourses» (Dasgupta, 2006) to those contexts. How do we make sense of that process in postcolonial times? Particularly, is there an implicit decolonization in diasporic im/migrants that is not always perceived or named but nonetheless displayed in everyday life?

This article addresses the dilemmas and complex consequences of queer-sojourners as the *locus* where sexual, bodily, and colonial discourses transect each other in an inter-contextual movement. Cultural *artifacts*, such as the film *Happy Together* (Wong, 1997), constitute a source for the



analysis, with attention trained on the lives and stories of the characters therein. I begin the analysis by focusing on the condition of the character's *in-betweenness* in order to shed light on the realm of sexuality and coloniality in the everyday lives of Queer(N)Asian im/migrants. The second part focuses on the inter-contextual tone of the film *Happy Together* through consideration of the stories of their main characters by tracing events that have «physical and material consequences» (Yue, 2000: 261) for the lives of Queer(N)Asian im/migrants.

Queer(N)Asians Im/migrants in (Post)Colonial Times

Audrey Yue (2000) coined the term *Queer(N)Asian* to name a connectedness which is an «emergent horizon that critically deploys the instabilities of 'queer' and 'Asian'» (252). Three features characterize this term: (a) It «contests the orthodoxy of East and West» while (b) supporting an «Asian queer connectedness» (252). Furthermore, the term (c) «suggests that a transnational Asian queer connectedness produces an identity that disrupts the post-Stonewall, Anglo-Saxon model of coming out as a narration of sexual identity» (253). It is perhaps this latter characteristic that most profoundly influences the Queer(N)Asian tone of *Happy Together*. The inter-contextuality of the film as well as the lives of real im/migrants depicted in it resist the commodification of pink-ending films so particularly ingrained in Anglo-Saxon queer communities. Queer(N)Asian im/migrants' identities may be crudely challenged by the irony of the film's title.

Queer(N)Asian im/migrants move through the constant interplay of identity negotiations that must take into account personal and societal histories, family traditions, ethnicity, religious beliefs, cultural values, sexual and gender-role



expectations, and bodily demarcations. They *be/come*, as opposed to *being*, undermining the implication of a fixed state of selfhood. It is not possible to frame the discussion into *either/or* choices —binary oppositions— as *identity* resides at the intersection of multiple (re)negotiations particular to each individual. Gary Taylor and Steve Spencer (2004: 4) understand this process «a work in progress.» That intersection, that *interstitial space*, is the womb where agency gestates, giving birth to ever-negotiated, *be/coming* identities. Those identities are born into a new world, a third space where they are able to thrive.

Aware of the interstitiality of Queer(N)Asian im/migrants, I explore the film's life narratives recognized as neither innocent nor neutral. These portrayals carry the complexity of power dynamics, colonialism, and identity representations that emerge within the broader political, economic, and social context, a location where mass media plays an important role. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam (1994), while deconstructing the notion of Eurocentrism and its implications, have identified media as a central point of identity (re)fashioning:

The contemporary media shape identity; indeed, many argue that they now exist close to the very core of identity production. In a transnational world typified by the global circulation of images and sounds, goods and peoples, media spectatorship impacts complexly on national identity and communal belonging. By facilitating an engagement with distant peoples, the media “deterritorialize” the process of imagining communities. And while media can destroy community and fashion solitude by turning spectators into atomized consumers of self-entertaining monads, they can also fashion community and alternative affiliations. Just as the media can “otherize” cultures ..., they can also promote multicultural coalitions ... (7)



By complexifying the (de)/(re)production of identities and communities, mass media contributes to particular enactments of Queer(N)Asian individuals and communities in everyday life. My chosen term *everyday life* refers to the practices, experiences and situations related to daily existence or everydayness. Peter Brooker (2003: 96-97) identifies two notions of everydayness. On the one hand, he recalls a notion more related to «a general purpose» dealing with habitual demonstrations in ordinary life, a notion articulated by Michel de Certeau in his book *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1988). On the other hand, Brooker evokes the notion of a «more precise provenance» as a contribution to the political and urban, a space-oriented understanding of everyday life represented by Henri Lefebvre in his book *Critique of Everyday Life* (1991 [1947]). Taking into account the contribution of Brooker engagements with de Certeau and Lefebvre, I encounter «everydayness» through the ordinary, everyday life performances of Queer(N)Asian im/migrants who sojourn into inter-contextual interstitial spaces. Those spaces are situated at the crossroads of intricate social networks, seducing us to unpack their political and economic performances. Ordinary quotidian performances *per se* are innocuous when disconnected from their social framework; however, when interrelated, they make evident the interconnected performances of power and their subsequent political/colonial connotations.

While exploring Queer(N)Asian im/migrants' everyday lives, my assumption is that sexuality and corporality in colonial discourses have traditionally been portrayed as apparently exogenous to one another. A consequence of this is the reiteration of the illusion that sexuality and corporality cumbersomely intersect. I affirm that Queer(N)Asian interconnectedness serves as the *locus* for film plots and everyday life. My analysis exposes the multilayered aspects of core inter-contextuality that operates from within those



characters and stories. At the same time, it remains aware that consciousness of that operation may or may not be visibly discernible in the lives of either the film characters or Queer(N)Asian im/migrants' everyday lives.

Bound to particular contexts, Queer(N)Asian im/migrants encounter multiple negotiations of sexuality. *Happy Together* strongly re/connects two important realms: the characters' context and their corporality. The plot of the film and the depiction of its characters relates everydayness to the same struggles that Queer(N)Asian im/migrants confront to embody and assume their corporality. In fact, by *re-connecting* context and sexuality, one re-enacts (post)colonial struggles for self-identity and corporality. Bodies are not ethereal; rather, they feel, suffer, and have an incredible ability to feel pleasure, to enjoy their corporality, to experience the passions of desire.

Desire and pleasure are therefore important in the struggle for justice; in fact, the recovery of desire is in itself an act of justice. Sexuality, pleasure, and even orgasms are often absent from what is considered the «struggles» of daily-lived experiences of im/migrants. When we introduce the different ways in which cultures construct bodies, everything becomes more and more «closeted.» This has terrible consequences for the daily life of queer individuals—for their be/coming, their bodies, their sexualities, and their relationships. The «closeting» of both bodies and desire, in a sense, scaffolds mechanisms of exclusion and discrimination. To put it bluntly, the *selective* communion that implicitly thrives in (post)colonial practice becomes a tool for producing outcasts. As films and other cultural artifacts will continue to expose the complex and diverse issues of human lives, Queer(N)Asian im/migrants will also continue to (re)create inter-contextual and interstitial spaces that could



nurture dialogue, sharing, and mutual enrichment among outcasts.

On Que(e)r(y)ing Films and Everyday Life

Queer theory is an important tool to help destabilize heteropatriarchy and its power dynamics within colonial discourses while challenging the ways through which heteronormativity constructs Queer(N)Asian individuals and their daily-lived experiences. Looking at cultural artifacts through queer theory lens affords an opportunity for these artifacts to both be and be/come destabilizing agents. Consequently, when tracing hetero-normativity in films, we have to queer the film text—as a process of *queering* everyday life—in order to expose implicit aspects of hetero-normativity, to persuade them to «come out» of their cultural closets. Doing this entails looking at these stories with another gaze, seeing what is not obviously seen, or illuminating those which have been purposely occluded.

Films and cultural artifacts represent reality by *imitation* and their function is twofold:

On the one hand, they frame and re-produce stories or characters that combine diverse elements from everydayness. In this sense, film plots can be similar to the everyday experiences that people might live. This closeness to everyday life allows the viewer to see one's self reflected, mirrored back, re/membering of experiences previously lived. In other words, there unfolds a dramatic catharsis in the viewer that keeps one inter-related with the film device and its plot. This resembles what Aristotle (1981) in his *Poetics* stated:



Tragedy is, then, an imitation of a noble and complete action, having the proper magnitude; it employs language that has been artistically enhanced by each of the kinds of linguistic adornment, applied separately in the various parts of the play; it is presented in dramatic, not narrative form, and achieves, through the representation of pitiable and fearful incidents, the catharsis of such pitiable and fearful incidents (11).

Thus, representations enhance the experiences of everyday life by way of producing catharsis. In the same way, the film *Happy Together* allows for the extrapolations of the everyday life performances of two Queer(N)Asian im/migrants. It is through these extrapolations and enhancements that diasporic viewers cathartically identify with the plot.

On the other hand, this examining of cultural artifacts such as films cannot be done as an act of mere opposition. Rather, examination must aim towards a deconstruction that re-constructs alternatives to the traditional colonial contexts. It is noteworthy that, in mainstream film productions, Queer(N)Asian im/migrants may not be sources for audience self-reflection or mirroring of audiences in the West. Richard Fung (1998) has argued that within the queer communities «Asians are largely absent from the images produced by both the political and the commercial sectors of the mainstream gay and lesbian communities» (118-119). Patrick S. Cheng (2011) has also noted that in the era of the internet «Gay Asian men frequently experience rejection in cyberspace simply on the basis of [...] race and ethnicity» (4). Thus, a process of dis-identification is necessary to break away from the illusion of complete coherent narratives between the film plots and the daily lived experiences of individuals as commonly dictated by colonial Western films.



From this perspective, *Happy Together* be/comes a countercultural discourse that decolonizes Western assumptions of hetero-normativity through the insertion of Queer(N)Asian characters in a transcultural film text. *Happy Together* dismantles the assumed homonormativity of gay and lesbian films produced in the West, and questions their concomitant cultural innuendos and stereotypes. If catharsis is part of the process through which viewers engaged visual productions, the ingrained hetero/homo-normativity of the Western films may limit this likelihood in the lives of Queer(N)Asian im/migrants.

Inter-contextual Sexual Connectedness

Fragmented Ties: Yiu-Fai and Po-Wing

The first time I watched *Happy Together*, I could not escape its magnetism. The music and the richness of the images captivated me, especially for its portrayal of my home city, Buenos Aires. In the film, we witness the difficulties that Lai Yiu-Fai —played by Tony Leung Chiu-Wai— and Ho Po-Wing —played by Leslie Cheung— confront as a gay couple from Hong Kong who live as expatriates in Buenos Aires. The movie is a collage of different situations and contexts, a mosaic of pieces that somehow come together but are never quite the same. The first part focuses on the ending of the couple's relationship. In the second half, a new character is introduced: Chang —played by Chang Chen—, who becomes friends with Yiu-Fai. While Yiu-Fai works at different jobs to save enough money to return to Hong Kong, Po-Wing prostitutes himself as a gay escort in an attempt to support himself in the streets of Buenos Aires.



The landscape of a melancholic Buenos Aires, speckled with images of Iguazú falls, of a lighthouse in Ushuaia, a Taipei food-market, and a peculiar Hong Kong, cultivates a dialogue of contexts that resists the homogenization of global film industries. In the middle of this dynamic, the stories of Yiu-Fai, Po-Wing, and Chang intermingle in different and specific ways, especially when they defy the predominant heterosexual framework of a *machista* Buenos Aires.¹

Located in Buenos Aires yet constantly recalling other locations, the film dialogues with multiple contexts while confronting the threat of cultural and political colonization or homogenization. Jeremy Tambling (2003) asserts that the film «could be regarded as a tale of two cities [Buenos Aires and Hong Kong], putting them together and almost asking them if they could be happy together» (23). He bases his argument on the fact that both Buenos Aires and Hong Kong share similar histories of colonialism: Argentina was a former colony of Spain and Hong Kong a former colony of Great Britain. In fact, Argentina resisted to become a British colony in 1806. Although the British troops disembarked in

¹ *Machismo* is a hetero-normative ideology that encompasses a set of attitudes, behaviors, social practices, and beliefs to promote the denial of women as individuals and, therefore, legitimate their oppression. This ideology reifies cultural, traditional, and contextual misogynist attitudes that degrade women by exerting a presumed superiority of males. It translates into subservient attitudes of females towards males through a strict enforcement of the sexual division of labor and by lessening of opportunities of women in society, among other situations. However, hetero-normativity is being contested amidst the everyday life of Argentineans. For example, in July 22, 2010, same-sex marriage became legal nationwide (*Boletín Oficial de la República Argentina* 2010) and in May 24, 2012, the gender identity law was sanctioned by the Congress (*Boletín Oficial de la República Argentina* 2012). Both laws challenge the assumed notions of masculinity and femininity and the heterosexual hegemony in society, thus bringing into the public arena contested identities barely enclosing into heteronormative tones.



its shores and conquered the city of Buenos Aires for a short time, the inhabitants aided by troops led by French navy officer Santiago de Liniers —sent by the Spanish crown from Montevideo— expelled the garrisons, thus preventing new attempts of British colonization (Halperin Donghi, 1992: 88-89). The inter-contextuality of both cities is further shown through the images and the languages —Cantonese, Mandarin, Spanish, and English— imbued in the film's characters. Wong Kar-Wai audaciously brings diverse fragments into dialogue, exposing the pitfalls of «coming home» (Poljski, 2011: 15) that attend the experiences of transnational and sexual displacements in the lives of Yiu-Fai, Po-Wing, and Chang.

While *Happy Together* mostly deals with the meta-narrative of homosexuality and homoeroticism in Hong Kong via Argentina, its release of the movie in 1997 coincided with two major political events. On the one hand, on July 1, Great Britain handed-over Hong Kong to China. Wong Kar-Wai affirmed that —as any other queer Hongkongese— the more he wanted to «escape» from Hong Kong and that event, the more he would found himself «inseparable» from it (Pang 1997: 41; quoted by Teo, 2005: 99). On the other hand, as the year 1997 approached, queer Hongkongese

(...) adopted the most sacred term in communist China as their identity, signifying both a desire to indigenize sexual politics and to reclaim their cultural identity. *Tongzhi* symbolizes a strong sentiment for integrating the *sexual* (legitimizing same-sex love), *political* (sharing the goals of combating heterosexism), and *cultural* (reappropriating Chinese identity) (Chou, 2000: 3; emphasis mine).

The road-trip to Iguazú Falls in Argentina, punctuated by Tango music, could be seen as the moment through which two *Tongzhi* Queer(N)Asian males escaped Hong Kong



wishing to start their lives over. Rather than freedom, the escape unfolded to being stranded in Buenos Aires. Indeed, at the beginning of the movie, we find a dialogue where Po-Wing asks Yiu-Fai to «start over» their relationship, ending with Yiu-Fai's voiceover speaking to the viewer:

Ho Po-Wing always says, "Let's start over," and it gets to me every time. We've been together for a while and break up often, but whenever he says, "Let's start over," I find myself back with him. So we left Hong Kong to start over. We hit the road and ended up in Argentina.

Unfortunately, this new start finally distances each from the other categorically, first emotionally and then physically. The film traces the characters' internal journey that parallels to their sojourn through Argentina. Their internal issue is not about being queer, but how to relate with their queerness, with each other, and with Argentina's cultural, linguistic, and economic context in everyday life. When the movie was filmed in 2001, Argentina had already embarked into what woefully constituted one of its major economic crises. Its roots dwell deep in the 1990s, with the increasing privatization of companies and the globalization of capital. The relatively wealthier context of Hong Kong, with its concomitant social hetero-normativities, sets in relief the lives of Yiu-Fai and Po-Wing — who then struggle economically in a foreign society that itself was challenging the roots of ingrained homophobia. The film lives in and mirrors the *in-betweenness* of these economic and sexual processes, as an interstitial space in which the lives, desires, and relational navigations of Yiu-Fan and Po-Wing, are simultaneously challenged and dismantled.

Thus, while Yiu-Fai makes effort to pass as a straight man in his multiple working environments, Po-Wing takes the road of open confrontation by engaging in gay prostitution.



Po-Wing's lifestyle directly clashes with Buenos Aires's long history of homophobia, while Yiu-Fai aligns himself along the city's subtle and privatized exercises of homoerotic relationships. Gayle Rubin (1993: 13-14) offers a perspective that sees non-normative sexual practices as *inherent to the system* requiring everyone to adjust to its mandate to promote normality. Homophobia as «part of the system» does not allow for diversity. However, the performance of homophobia in the Argentinean context reveals itself to be ambiguous: While in the public domain, it exerts censorship in regard to same-sex eroticism raging from total rejection to the subtle profiting of homoerotic pleasures in the sexual market. Strictly speaking, while many heterosexual males would verbally degrade queer activities in everyday life, the film's allusion to public sex—in dark alleys, public restrooms, or porn theatres—calls us to pay attention to the extended yet subtle world of homoerotic activities in Buenos Aires. Indeed, the performance of those activities includes those of vociferously homophobic men who enjoy anonymous sex with «other» men they degrade in public performances of *machismo*. Daniel Jones (2004) explains:

We can affirm that (...) further remains (...) the predominant mode of social interaction on homosexuality, which generates what Sullivan (1995) calls a “hypocrite” system. This system presupposes and reproduces a double moral standard view of space depending on whether it is private or public space: sexual activity is tolerated in the shelter of a room (preferably dark), while it is more difficult to deal with public expressions of homosexuality (like walking down the street arm-in-arm, for example) (8-9, translation mine).

Along with these ambivalent engagements with public homophobia, racism persists. As the fruit of a long history of European colonialism and, later, immigration, Argentina



prides itself as closest to being a European country, translating to a self-ascribe image of being a «white country.» Discourses and stereotypes based on racist ideologies are not uncommon in Argentine everyday life. And yet, the presence of Po-Wing on the sexual market in the public restrooms and porn theaters along with his customers testifies to this double-standard of racism. In other words, while nationalistic discourse deprives Asian im/migrants of worth, the private and subtle zones of privatized/publicized sex expose the (homo)erotic capital (Green, 2008: 27) of Queer(N)Asian im/migrants from the perspective by local males.

Indeed, the presence of homosexual figures in Argentine society and the consequent resistance to them dates from the nineteenth century and persists today. Jorge Salessi (1995) traces the origin of contemporary homophobia through an analysis of medical and legal evidence concerning the treatment of homoerotic activity. He states that homophobia is associated with the identity formation of male Italian im/migrants who travelled to Argentina in innumerable waves and who brought with them a notorious prejudice against the Mediterranean category of «pederasty» (1995: 87). At the same time, the emergence of Tango music —with the mixing of different social classes, and cultures— created a place where gender was displayed in controversial ways, blurring the binary categories of sexuality precisely by enforcing what Sullivan (1995) has called an «hypocrite system.» In its origins, tango was only engaged by men; it was not until well into the twentieth century that women were allowed to participate, as its lyrics were originally not considered proper for them. Indeed, those first women who were allowed to dance the tango were themselves sex workers (Córdova Quero, 2003: 11).



Tango's evocative power was portrayed exquisitely in a scene where Yiu-Fai and Po-Wing dance soon after a panoramic gaze of La Boca, the iconic working class im/migrant neighbourhood by the harbour's edge, burdened by nostalgic poverty. Veritably, La Boca was the home of the very Italian im/migrants who disembarked in Buenos Aires at the beginning of the twentieth century seeking economic opportunities. Tango emerged from these people's second generation. It is their memories of pleasure and belonging, mixed with their feelings of nostalgia, that imbued Tango to the core. Thus, it is Tango music, played and danced with its intensity, that leads us from the intimacy of that deserted street of La Boca at dusk, into the meeting of two stranded Queer(N)Asian lovers. In the ramshackle kitchen of a cheap pension-hotel, in the slums of what was once one of the wealthy sections of Buenos Aires —the «Paris of South America»—,² Yiu-Fai and Po-Wing let their bodies embrace

² La Boca —located in the south of Buenos Aires— was originally one of the neighbourhoods —along with San Telmo— that allocated the houses of wealthy families. The houses —built in colonial style— featured a central patio with all the rooms surrounding it. In 1871 a deadly outbreak of yellow fever —beginning in the neighbourhood of San Telmo— killed 14,000 citizens in a period of four months. The affluent families took refuge in-land, close to the monastery of the *Padres Recoletos*, a Franciscan order, whose church —Our Lady of *El Pilar*— became an iconic place of the privileged families who settled next to the Recoleta Cemetery (Gardner, 2015). Many of the wealthy people who died from the yellow fever were, in fact, buried in that cemetery, however not on graves dug on the soil but on underground vaults (Wilson, 2007: 122) . On the other hand, their abandoned houses in La Boca became part of the emerging *conventillos*, collective urban tenement housing for im/migrants —mostly Italians— and low-class workers (Schneider, 2000: 14), many of the latter descendants of the struggling shoemaker and silversmith from the late colonial period (Johnson, 2011). Each family lived in one room and would share the patio, the kitchen, and the bathroom with the other families. Along with Tango, Italian im/migrants and their descendants in La Boca played in important role in the development of another distinctive aspect of Argentinean' identity: soccer (Richey, 2007).



another history, an/other's narrative. They cuddle and rotate in a passionate dance, in sweet and tender movements, complicit smiles exploding into an intense kiss. The scene, their dance, their passions, situate Yiu-Fai and Po-Wing in another realm, one where Tango possesses their bodies and feelings, momentarily reaching happiness. The scene's ecstasy not only captures the sensuality and passion of the music, but also (re)lives its commonly «hidden» homo(erotic) social origins. If Tango has become the popular icon of maleness in Argentina, *Happy Together* exquisitely queered the underside of this iconography in the encounter of two men captivated by the spirit of its past. In the inter-contextuality of Yiu-Fai and Po-Wing — simultaneously in Hong Kong and Buenos Aires— *Happy Together* exposes the profound connectedness and queerness of its plot.

By doing this, the film does indeed «invite us in» (Poljski, 2011: 15) to witness multiple notions of maleness and queerness that are constitutive elements of the cultural subtext of its story, mimicking what José Quiroga (2000) reads in his study of 1993 Pride Parade in Buenos Aires. There, every participant wore a mask, leading Quiroga to interrogate the common notion of *identity* among queer folks. He suggests that, «[t]he mask spoke of broader circuits that did not necessarily end with an “outing,” or an identity as conclusion. It was part of a complex dynamic of individual and identity, and the closet was one element among many» (2000: 1). Furthermore, Quiroga (2000) suggests that this creative act of wearing masks also queered those who were *watching* the parade:

The mask entailed a liberatory act in its own right. It destroyed the dialectical opposition between the visible and the invisible, between the visibility of homosexuals and their invisibility in the population at large. It turned the actors in the public drama into representations. By allowing the invisible to incarnate,



as a presence, the social polity in itself construed its own public rite (2).

Following Quiroga, queering the social space through the performance of a mask-wearing march, Argentinean queers embodied an alternative notion of selfhood against the reified, essentialist, (North)American paradigm of «coming out» as a totem for «authentic» gay identity. Similarly, *Happy Together* allows for multiple readings of queer identities in its engagement of localized homophobia in Argentina alongside the international/global contexts that intersect Asia with Latin America. Quiroga's analysis of the «visible» and «invisible» provides a helpful paradigm to recognize the overt and covert tones of colonial discourses that frame sexuality and corporality in Wong's *Happy Together*.

Although *Happy Together* is subtle in depicting the issue of homophobia, its presence is pervasive. In another scene, we see Po-Wing being beaten up in a public bathroom; his hands and face bleeding, his bones broken. Yiu-Fai takes Po-Wing to the hospital and later to his home. The scene of the attack is short but one easily recognizes that one of Po-Wing's clients has beaten him up and now he has to hide at Yiu-Fai's place for safety. Physical aggressions against queer folks are not so uncommon in Buenos Aires; most of the time, hate crimes and assaults result in death, and the culprits are almost always never identified by the police. *Happy Together* deviates from traditional *vanilla* films in that it is a constant re-negotiation of transnational identities in an age of globalization, positing a different narrative of queer life moving away from «happy endings.» In light of Yue's contribution (2000), it is important to notice that *Happy Together* situates Asia —Hong Kong, Taipei— and Latin America —Buenos Aires, Iguazú Falls, Ushuaia— in an intricate network of connectedness, reflecting the migration



pattern of individuals and communities from one geographical location to another.³

Consequently, Yiu-Fai and Po-Wing mirror the daily-lived experiences of many Queer(N)Asian im/migrants currently living in Buenos Aires or elsewhere as their experiences «inflect the politics of identity mobilized by different modes of address, reflecting different subject-positions and self-definitions» (Yue, 2000: 253). In fact, Chinese im/migrants are carving their way into Argentinean society in more visible ways than in previous decades. The recent creation of Chinatown in the upper middle-class neighborhood of Belgrano attests to this increasing visibility. There are more than 12,000 Chinese im/migrants and their descendants currently living in Buenos Aires and other provinces. These descendants are not counted as im/migrants, as children born in the country bear Argentinean nationality through *jus solis* and are not required to provide information of ethnicity in the national census. However, while the Chinese communities are becoming more visible, their queer members are still invisible. It is, however, noteworthy that many of these Chinese im/migrants come, in fact, from Taiwan (Córdova Quero, 2016). It is here where *Happy Together* also offers an opportunity for catharsis and identification of diasporic queer Taiwanese in Argentina.

Healing Connectedness: Yiu-Fan and Chang

It is, in fact, within the context of Taiwanese migration to Argentina that Chang is introduced in the film. Identified as a Taiwanese im/migrant, he befriends Yiu-Fan at work. It is Chang who, through his easy-going mood and

³ Even this connection is present in Wong's life, as his passion for Latin America literature led him to base the film *Happy Together* on Manuel Puig's work *The Buenos Aires Affair* (1973) (Brunette, 2005: 72).



straightforward stability, helps Yiu-Fan to overcome his depression after the break up with Po-Wing. In subtle ways we witness how Chang desires Yiu-Fan although his desire never materializes. At different points of the films we hear Chang stating in a voiceover that he likes «deep, low voices»; some scenes later we see him rejecting the sensual advances from a female coworker. Before departing to Ushuaia — where the city's iconic lighthouse supposedly bears the power to take sorrows away— Chang takes Yiu-Fan for drinks. If the melancholic tones of Tango contour the onscreen encounters of Yiu-Fan and Po-Wing, those between Yiu-Fan and Chang are marked by Cumbia. Tango and Cumbia are similar, both rooted in the intertwining of class, race, im/migration, and sexuality. Cumbia is the heir of Argentina's many regional rhythms originating in diverse im/migrant and african musical heritages as well as folkloric traditions —such as the case of the *Cuarteto* in the province of Córdoba (Barei, 1993: 34)—, having replaced Tango as the popular music of the masses. In fact,

In Buenos Aires, all these regional rhythms that make up the *movimiento tropical* were mixed in new dancing clubs or *bailantas*, as they are called. There, bricklayers, truck drivers, domestic employees, teenagers from the neighbourhoods of Greater Buenos Aires, together with Paraguayan, Bolivian, Chilean, Peruvian, and Uruguayan immigrants, intermingled with other migrants coming from all over Argentina. Whether they were single adults, widowers, or divorced, they represented the mixture of different social classes, local cultures, and even the wide ethnic plurality of the country, especially Greater Buenos Aires (Córdova Quero, 2003: 10).

Cumbian's quotidian engagement has allowed it to be exported to East Asia. It is now sung in Japanese, Chinese and Korean. Its ability to be «translatable» lends Cumbia



flexibility, bending normativities, sexualities, and gender. In Argentina, there are gay clubs that feature Cumbia as the music to which queer individuals dance, and even music bands, such as the Mexican-Argentinean group *Kumbia Queers*, whose lyrics visibilize the realities of the lives of Argentinean queers. In fact, from its inception, Cumbia has been queer-friendly towards the display of sexual diversity by its fans. In this context, the scene of Yiu-Fan's and Chang's dance bears the unmistakable marks of homo-desire. Chang expresses that he does not like photographs, so he asks Yiu-Fan to record a message for him on a tape recorder. While Chang dances to Cumbia, Yiu-Fan begins to record a message that ends up in tears. After that, Chang accompanies Yiu-Fan to his room. Chang seeks a quiet place where to say his goodbyes to Yiu-Fan. Contrary to the festive tone of the *bailanta* [Cumbia club] of their last encounter, Yiu-Fan's room is sad. This sadness, however, has nothing to do with the manipulative frustration of Yiu-Fan and Po-Wing's broken relationship.

On the contrary, the scene in Yiu-Fan's room respectfully focuses on the sadness of the separation and the end of the transitory happiness that he experienced in Chang's (homo-erotic?) friendship. Although the men try to joke and say a «detached» goodbye, Yiu-Fan ends up pulling Chang into a long and sweet embrace, in which the camera rotates to show Chang with his eyes closed while being embraced by his desired Yiu-Fan. As Chang crosses the threshold for a last time, Yiu-Fan's voiceover states a veiled recognition of their mutual desire and inter-connectedness: «Was it because we had become close? When I held him all I could hear was my own heart beating. Did he hear it, too?» Further in the film, we assist to the moment when Yiu-Fan arrives to a food court in downtown Taipei. There, while ordering a bowl of noodles at Chang's family business, Yiu-fan sees a picture of Chang. After paying for his food, Yiu-Fan steals the picture in



what seems to constitute his only opportunity for a memento of his (lost?) happiness with Chang. The cliffhanger ending of the film may seem to invite us to hope for a future encounter—a happy ending—, although the reluctance of Wong Kar-Wai to step into that direction may also be indicative of further layers of destabilization of the pink-oriented Western plots.

In another lever, the irruption of Chang in *Happy Together's* story may also question whether Yiu-Fan—from Mainland China—and Chang—from Taiwan— could be transitorily or permanently happy together. The inter-contextuality of Yiu-Fan and Chang—transposed onto the political struggle between mainland China and Taiwan— adds yet another layer to the manifold (re)presentations of the film, further queering the unilateral pink-movements so cliché in Anglo-Saxon queer films.

Diasporic (In)Visibilizations

It could also be said that *Happy Together* is a counter-narrative to the sexual invisibilization of Queer(N)Asian individuals in the diaspora, silenced by the heteropatriarchal dicta of gender and sexuality. Yue (2000) states that «from the construction of the three male protagonists, it can be concluded that both Yiu-Fai and Chang are 'rewarded' in their quests through the neo-Confucian 'values' of decent hard work, thrift and normativity» (255). Furthermore, a particular contribution of this film is that it locates queer subculture(s) at the intersections of moments and places that may or may not be so *happy together*, accentuating the diasporic and fluid daily lived experiences of Queer(N)Asian im/migrants in Argentina. As Yue (2000) further states:



As an emergent cultural formation constituted in mobility and belonging, Queer (N)Asian disrupts dominant (Asian, mainstream, diasporic and heteronormative) representations to highlight the practice of identity constituted in the politics of self-enactment and self-representation (253).

This counter-narrative reveals and interrogates the Western *storia sexualis* vis-à-vis the Chinese *ars erotica* (Foucault, 1990: 57) which surfaces in the emergent *Tongzhi* movement in Hong Kong. This background is latent amidst Chinese Queer(N)Asian im/migrants. In a similar way to the word *queer* in the Anglo-West, the word *tongzhi* has moved from being a term of exclusion to one of cultural—and contextual—resistance. For this reason, one of the main technologies of *tongzhi* resistance is transgression through the recovery of elements already present in the culture but which have been concealed in everyday life. Wah-Shan Chou (2000) also affirms that, «[t]he term *tongzhi* was appropriated by a Hong Kong gay activist in 1989 for the first Lesbian and Gay Film Festival in Hong Kong» (2). As aforementioned, it was not until 1997 that the term became completely associated with queer communities. It is true that the emergence of the internet in China in 1994 helped people connect with each other, but two other events helped to create an awareness of queer dignity and sexuality. In 1997 the figure of «offensive behavior» with which police pursued and criminalized queer people in China was removed. Then, in 2001, the term «homosexuality» was removed as a mental illness from the list of criteria for the classification and diagnosis of mental disorders by the Psychiatric Association of China (Wong, 2005).

However, Hongwei Bao (2012) reports that there exists a hierarchy within queer communities in China. For example, he states that in Shanghai this hierarchy is erected around three concepts that build and structure the queer



communities along the lines of class, ethnicity, and age within the ever present influenced of the wider world-system. These three concepts are: (i) *gay*, with a sense of cosmopolitanism and based on the high-income of those who alternate between the internationally-oriented fashionable places in the gentrified areas of the city, (ii) *Tongzhi*, as an official and «decent» feature of what implies queerness, such as militancy and culture, especially through the concept of *suzhi* [quality] which «effectively distinguishes people by location, class, and education» (Bao, 2012: 111), in the more nationally-oriented areas of the city, and (iii) *Tongxinglian* or the old term to designate «homosexual» and which in the context of Shanghai implies stigmatized older males who pursue anonymous sex in public spaces and relates to sex workers and low class internal migrant workers from the countryside. In following Bao (2012), we can conclude that those three concepts demarcate the boundaries of queer interactions and the constructions of social status among the different individuals within the Chinese queer communities, as he affirms:

the difference between 'gay', *tongzhi* and *tongxinglian* is not simply linguistic, but social and cultural as well. It unveils a multiplicity of differences and social disparities. It also points to the impact of such factors as globalisation, nationalism, and commercialisation on people's daily lives and individual experiences (114).

All of these contextually rooted demarcations in China get queered with the transnational sojourn of Queer(N)Asian im/migrants while maintaining their anti-colonial resistance to Western categorizations of queerness and masculinity. This is not an exclusive feature of Queer(N)Asian im/migrants but also of heterosexual Asian im/migrants. Although modern masculinity in China could be seen from the West as more «feminized» —implying an «Orientalist gaze» (Said, 1978)— males still exercise power over females.



In the same way, queer individuals are bound to the expectations of society, especially those surrounding marriage and procreation. It is not uncommon for many «gay» men to get married while maintaining satellite sporadic relationships with other men. One could possibly identify these men as «bisexual,» although the categories «gay» and «bisexual» may not be completely accurate to describe the situation of queer individuals in China. These performances of gender and sexuality —deeply ingrained in the socio-cultural Anglo-Saxon context— greatly differ from the gender-role expectations in Chinese societies. Queer(N)Asian im/migrants travel with their context (Anzaldúa, 1987: 87) or more accurately, their context travels among Queer(N)Asian im/migrants. To the colonizing mind, these inter-contextual dis/placements undermine its attempts at homogeneization the queer populations of the world while denouncing the assimilation of hegemonic hierarchies reproduced at the micro-level amidst Queer(N)Asian communities.

The film concurrently exemplifies what Muslim queer scholar Ibrahim Abdurrahman Farajajé (2000) called «Queer-in-intersection» or the intermingling of different categories in the constitution, (in)formation, and (de)construction of bodies and identities:

Queer-in-intersection [as the place] where we acknowledge that race and class and gender and sexuality and spirituality and embodiment are not monolithic, distinct categories, where we as queers can see notions of race that must include an understanding of the elements of class, gender, sexuality, geography, embodiment, spirituality, that go into the shaping of notions of race, how race and gender and sexuality and geography and embodiment and spirituality go into the shaping of notions of class, how race and sexuality and



geography and embodiment and spirituality are factors and facets of the shaping of gender (20-21).

It is in these intersections that everyday life resides and grows, changes and transforms. *Happy Together* shows the many aspects of these intersections in both pleasant and unpleasant situations. The existential (syn)energy that runs underneath the plot of the film calls us to open our eyes to these intersections and to incarnate them in, through, and for our queerness.

Throughout the film, we see contemporary examples of the *disruption* of the dicta of hetero-normativity in the context of oppressive narratives that mould the everyday life of Queer(N)Asian im/migrants in the diaspora. Identifying where such disruptions occur is never clear-cut. More often than not, these disruptions occur in the *in-betweenness* of everyday life (re)presented by inter-contextual hybridity. Reflecting on the experiences of displaced migrants, Juana María Rodríguez (2003: 35) defines their situationality as the «Interstitial space of the Refugee.» Like the characters Yiu-Fai, Po-Wing, and Chang, individuals and communities — especially Queer(N)Asian im/migrants— reside at the *intersectionality* of many layers, in constant engagement with movement, modification and re-accommodation. As such, they are discursive subjects that interlace with other subjects to produce a dialogue that brings flavour to and enriches everyday life. The bottom line is that,

Discursive spaces are not autonomous; they are permeable and heteroglossic. They seep into one another, contaminating and enriching ideas and disciplines. There is a continual movement as individuals, texts, and ideas migrate across spaces, informing and transforming knowledge production (Rodríguez, 2003: 35).



Yiu-Fai, Po-Wing, and Chang are trapped in the interstitial spaces of daily lived experiences that sometimes script everydayness in asphyxiating ways. Their heteroglossic narratives in the virtual world of the film text mirror — especially in the multilingual script of the film—, debunk, and challenge the same heteroglossic narratives of Queer(N)Asian im/migrants in the life-text of their interstitial realities. As Rodríguez (2003) further asserts, that is a «place that is neither here nor there but is nevertheless mired in narratives of North and South» (35), or in our case, East and West. In this liminal situation, they (re)present the constant struggle that every human being confronts in order to live, sometimes to survive.

Conclusion

The everydayness of Queer(N)Asian im/migrants highly stress the connection of bodies with material lives; with economies that alienate them; with political structures that deny their dignity; with cultures that closet them into limiting expectations; even with faith experiences that trap them into ready-made recipes that fail to liberate the multiple possibilities of love and creativity. In the everyday lives of the characters Yiu-Fai, Po-Wing, and Chang we find knowledge that could encourage and strengthen our own daily lived experiences.

Through the interlacing of sexuality and corporality with colonial discourses, one discerns the importance of everyday life for transformative reflection and for connectedness for the many Queer(N)Asian im/migrants who may see themselves reflected in those discourses. The connectedness of Queer(N)Asian im/migrants denunciate the dicta of the hetero-patriarchal matrix that aims to mould and monitor the daily lived experiences of human beings. At the same time, their experiences, brilliantly visibilized in the film



Happy Together, juxtapose and interlace decolonial conversations to the hegemonic colonial discourse, thus embedding kernels of resistance and hope for a better world.

Through the analysis of the film *Happy Together*, we have seen how discourses of sexuality, corporality, and migration must be challenged to respond and inter-relate at the level of everyday life experiences. This film modifies our gaze, reorienting the way that cultural artifacts destabilize colonial discourses. Embodying the relationship between Asia and Latin America, film characters help us discern the parallel ways through which decolonization subverts the homogenizing Westernization of sexuality and corporality. As shown in the everyday lives of Yiu-Fai, Po-Wing, and Chang, although bodies, sexuality, and relationships are complex and even problematic, their connectedness—or lack thereof—also point to the event of inter-contextuality.

Even operating through a cultural artefact, the situations incarnated by Yiu-Fan and Po-Wing at first and by Yiu-Fan and Chang towards the end, question the individual's relationship to gender constructions, performances of the expectations of gender roles and sexuality, and the materiality of the interstitial spaces of Queer(N)Asian im/migrants. Queer theory—although a Western tool—could help Queer(N)Asian im/migrants to embrace materiality by embodying it and incarnating sexuality and corporality while queering Western Queer theory itself. In doing this, the hetero-normative matrix would be finally queered in order to produce liberation and to offer new paradigms for Queer(N)Asian im/migrants connectedness in everyday life. Maybe after this process, our nomadic Queer(N)Asian fluid identity negotiations, daily lived experiences, and contexts of insertion into diasporic movements could finally be/come, «happy together.»



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