

# CRITICAL ETHNIC STUDIES

A READER

Critical Ethnic Studies Editorial Collective

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Arts and Crafts, Elsewhere and Home, *Mama & Me*:  
 Defying Transnormativity through Bobby Cheung's Creative  
 Modalities of Resignification

BO LUENGSURASWAT

I wanted this because, once I finished the piece, I wanted to be able to say that my relationship with my mother is okay. It's fine. We love each other. And this is the public statement that I want to make to the transgender community.—BOBBY CHEUNG, November 13, 2009

Rather than evoking an imaginary homeland frozen in an idyllic moment outside history, what is remembered through queer diasporic desire and the queer diasporic body is a past time and place riven with contradictions and the violences of multiple uprootings, displacements, and exiles.—GAYATRI GOPINATH, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*

*Mama & Me*

In the summer of 2009 I attended *Fresh Meat in the Gallery*, the annual visual art exhibition of transgender and gender-variant artists in San Francisco. Organized by Fresh Meat Productions, the nation's first transgender and queer art organization, *Fresh Meat in the Gallery* celebrated its sixth annual exhibition at the San Francisco LGBT Community Center under the theme "Defying Gravities."<sup>1</sup> As I entered the gallery my eyes went directly to Bobby Cheung's work *Mama & Me*, a small, natural-color, beaded curtain arranged in the

image of the artist and his mother (figs. 13.1 and 13.2). According to Cheung, an FTM-identified Hong Kong immigrant, this meticulous, labor-intensive work of art represents his effort to rebuild a relationship with his mother.

What does it mean for an Asian immigrant transman to feature himself in an art piece, particularly in the context of a “transgender” and “queer” art exhibition, with his mother? Can a connection be made between the appearance of the work—the sepia color tone and the pixilated visual effect—and the discourses of race, immigration, and globalization? Moreover what are the political implications of craft production techniques in the context of a “white-cube,” or the art world? These complex and provocative issues urge me to explore the ways that *Mama & Me*, as an articulation of Asian American transgender masculinity, defies the hegemonic narratives of identity formation central to the discourses of Asian American racialization and transgender identity.

Through my visual analysis of *Mama & Me*, I contend that Cheung engages in the practice of *resignification* as he transforms cultural signifiers of femininity into an articulation of Asian American transgender maleness. Cheung’s act of rebuilding a relationship with his mother—more specifically “reestablishing” a connection with womanhood and family—subverts the transnormative logic of “leaving home” or a “female past” as a prerequisite for gender self-determination. In fact the home-elsewhere binary at the core of the teleological coming-out narrative, that which posits “elsewhere”—the new country or corporeal embodiment—as a site of liberation, is irrelevant to subjects whose conditions of existence are implicated in the processes of racialization. If, for Asian American cisgender men, being racialized as Asian American means becoming feminized, then for Asian American transmen, being racialized as Asian American implies a “failed” journey to manhood. In light of this formulation, *Mama & Me* illustrates the impossibility for Asian American transmen to escape the condition of racialization—namely feminization—by conforming to the normative version of transgender masculinity that insists on the possibility of “leaving home” and “leaving one’s past behind.”

As Cheung’s experience of migration from Hong Kong to the United States illustrates, the move from one’s home to elsewhere entails less liberation than a confrontation with new conditions of marginalization. Cheung’s struggle with cultural difference and declining class status as consequences of immigration astutely undermines the American Dream myth. This reversal of the liberatory narrative of immigrant emancipation that Cheung experiences, I insist, must be understood in relation to queer of color critiques of the teleological coming-out narrative trope through the lens of diaspora studies. As

FIGURE 13.1. Bobby Cheung, *Mama & Me*, 2009. Coco beads and metal wires. 14 × 14 inches. *Fresh Meat in the Gallery VI: Defying Gravities*, San Francisco LGBT Community Center, San Francisco, 2009. Photograph courtesy of artist.

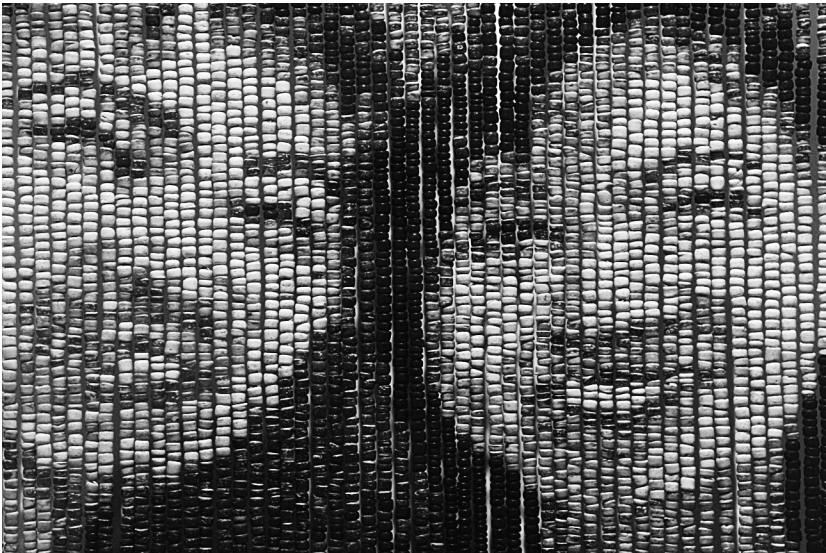


FIGURE 13.2. Bobby Cheung, *Mama & Me*, details. Photograph courtesy of artist.

such it is through critical ruptures and connections among various disciplines of knowledge production that Asian American transmale subjectivity can be adequately conceptualized.

In theorizing Asian American transmasculinity through artistic production, it is crucial to perceive this subject position not as an object of inquiry but as a methodology of decolonization. Cheung's artwork and artistic process underscore that racialization is the process of gendering, thereby transforming the limits of gender construction within Asian American studies as well as reorienting ethnic studies' focus on a single nation-state to transnational critiques of global capital. Critical ethnic studies constitutes a terrain of scholarly activism, where critiques of transnormativity and situated forms of cultural resistance such as Cheung's work translate into world-making methods that are substantively attuned to the effects of racial and economic oppression. Most important, this essay, as a multidisciplinary collaboration between Cheung and me, unsettles the distinctions and hierarchies among knowledge production, artistic practice, and community activism.

#### Troubling the Home-Elsewhere Binary: Cheung's Journey

Born in Hong Kong and emigrating to San Francisco in 1988, Bobby Cheung is a mixed-media and digital artist and a long-term advocate for the transgender and queer community. As an active member of the Bay Area trans and queer art scene, Cheung had served as a *Fresh Meat in the Gallery* curator and a board member of Fresh Meat Productions for many years. According to Cheung, his feeling of invisibility due to the marginalization of trans people of color in the mainstream LGBT community has been the driving force behind his creative process. However, *Mama & Me* is a path-breaking work in which Cheung not only explored new types of medium and worked sculpturally but also developed a different creative process that did not directly channel anger and frustration into the work of art.

In the description of *Mama & Me* at *Fresh Meat in the Gallery*, Cheung explains his creative process as rather therapeutic, whereby he embarked on a journey to rebuild a relationship with his mother (fig. 13.3):

My relationship with my mother defies transphobia that typically tears families apart. I created this beaded curtain in honor of our mother-child relationship even after becoming a FTM transsexual. She cuts my hair, and we enjoy exploring different restaurants for dinner. The image of us was transposed from a photo that I took after one of our meals. This

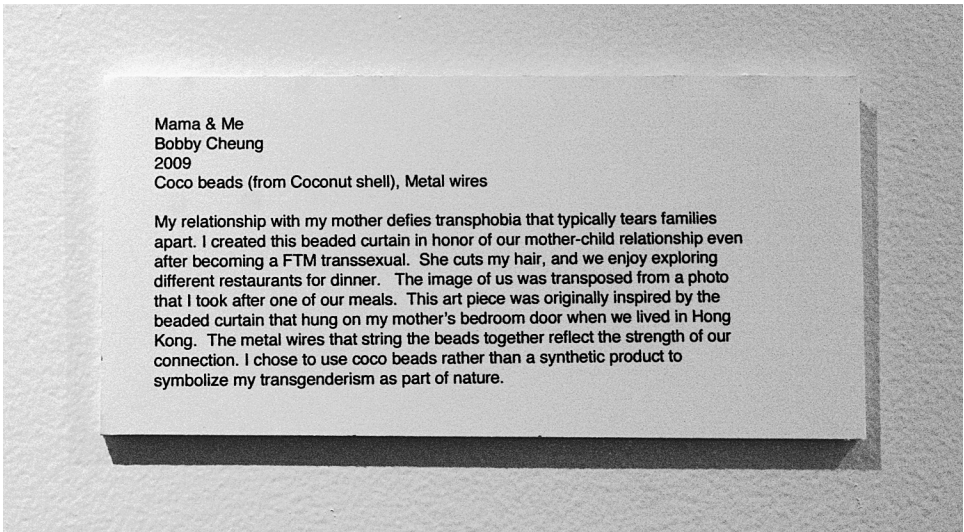


FIGURE 13.3. Bobby Cheung, artwork label, *Mama & Me*. Photograph courtesy of artist.

art piece was originally inspired by the beaded curtain that hung on my mother's bedroom door when we lived in Hong Kong. The metal wires that string the beads together reflect the strength of our connection. I chose to use coco beads rather than a synthetic product to symbolize my transgenerism as part of nature.

Cheung emphasizes his positive, nurturing relationship with his mother. He references the objects and materials that are associated with the memory of his homeland (the beaded curtain), the strength of his relationship with his mother (metal wires), and the “naturalness” of his transgender and queer self (coco beads). Although Cheung’s belief in the naturalness of his gender identity may seem to dangerously align itself with scientific discourses of the biological basis of sexual orientation and gender variance (e.g., the search for a “gay gene”), what he evokes here through the metaphor of nature is the “unexpected” harmony among different aspects of his identity. The fact that Cheung’s mother directly participates in his gender presentation by cutting his hair illustrates that family is a possible site for the production of queerness. Evidently Cheung acknowledges that his transgender identity and queerness cannot be understood as separate from family and cultural belonging. Though not directly conveying the feeling of marginalization and invisibility, *Mama & Me* poses a challenge to the hegemonic coming-out narrative that posits

the act of leaving home—whether it be family, community, or homeland—as essential for the actualization of one’s sexual or gender nonconformity.<sup>2</sup>

The binary of family-home versus freedom-elsewhere is called into question in Cheung’s work. By illustrating the possibility of “being oneself at home,” Cheung inhabits an in-between space where the embodiment of transgender identity and queerness does not necessarily imply the rejection of family and also challenges the belief that Asian immigrant families are inherently conservative and transphobic. Hence in *Mama & Me* Cheung redefines the notion of home and complicates the understanding of family. For many trans and queer immigrants of color, home—albeit constructed as a site for the repudiation of gender and sexual variance by U.S. immigration measures such as the family reunification program, which grants citizenship strictly through biological inheritance and upholds the supremacy of the heteronormative family structure—is nonetheless a site of struggle because, for the most part, trans and queer immigrants of color rely on their biological family for legal existence and cultural survival.<sup>3</sup> For trans and queer subjects who cannot afford to reject their biological family, or to whom the idea of leaving home is irrelevant, survival by no means implies an individualistic journey toward an enlightened space free from social constraints placed on one’s embodiment of identity but rather the complex processes of negotiation and mutual struggle between oneself and one’s family and community.

### Hong Kong, Hybridity, and the Politics of Migration: Diasporic Queer Belonging

The home-elsewhere binary in the discourse of coming out, which positions home as an oppressive place and elsewhere as an anticipated space of liberation, is complicated by Cheung’s relationship to his homeland, Hong Kong, and his experience as a diasporic subject. Interestingly but not surprisingly Cheung describes his move to the United States as “almost like a backward step” due to his encounter with blatant racial discrimination in the United States that he thought never existed in Hong Kong. For Cheung the United States does not stand in for the elsewhere, the American Dream, or that anticipated space of liberation but is rather the site of oppression, as if to reverse the original logic. Thus his experience of migration as a queer diasporic subject reveals the major shortcoming of the developmental narrative of immigrant emancipation—that is, the heteronormatively conceptualized space of the homeland.

Drawing upon Gayatri Gopinath's theorization of diaspora in *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*, I contend that Cheung's queer diasporic subjectivity "reorients the traditionally backward-looking glance of diaspora." The "backward-looking glance of diaspora" implies the nostalgic conceptualization of the space of the nation, or one's homeland, as pure, pristine, and authentic—more specifically as ethnically homogeneous, heteronormative, and free from internal contradictions—in order to align diasporic subjects with nationalist ideology. Inasmuch as queer bodies and desires are central to the construction of dominant nationalist and diasporic historiographies, they remain excluded and forgotten.<sup>4</sup> Cheung's work, as an articulation of diasporic queer memory, in turn remembers the space of the homeland as already riven with possibilities of queerness and gender nonconformity. By revealing the inauthentic potential of the nation—that is, the homeland that is already structured as hybrid and queer—*Mama & Me* undermines the belief that the nation is a sanction of purity, an idealized, homogeneous spatiotemporal entity.

Cheung's homeland has been constructed as hybrid since its earliest days, overturning the belief that homogeneity, unity, and rootedness are necessarily the basis of nation-building. Under British occupation from 1841 through 1997, Hong Kong functioned as a capital of exchange between Asia and the West; hence its image was that of a "city of transients," strongly characterized by speed, change, flexibility, and "borderlessness."<sup>5</sup> Although it may seem like Hong Kong (prior to the 1997 handover) was constituted as a nonnation due to the fact that its cultural identity was not bound by either Chinese or British nationalism, I insist that the qualities of fluidity and transience that framed the identity of Hong Kong are precisely a kind of nationalist definition of identity that is completely in line with globalization's emphasis on flexibility.

The notion of home, or the nation, as hybrid, fluid, and heterogeneous per se could have foregrounded Cheung's feeling of alienation when he first arrived in the United States. In 1988, four years after the Sino-British Joint Declaration and one year prior to the Tiananmen Massacre, Cheung's family left Hong Kong in order to avoid the uncertain future after the handover in 1997. For some Hong Kong residents, migration to a different country implied a change in class status, and this shifting class positionality could in turn affect Hong Kong immigrants' perception of home. That Cheung can recall Hong Kong in a nostalgic way as a nonracist paradise could in fact indicate his position of privilege vis-à-vis Hong Kong. In that sense the blatant racial discrimination that Cheung says he experienced when first arriving in the



United States could also be understood in relation to the loss of financial and social entitlements as a condition of his migration.

The diminishment of social status as part of the process of one's immigration to the United States, though neither absolute nor uniformly experienced, subverts the American Dream myth. Truly enough, according to Cheung, his father went from being a white-collar professional in Hong Kong to working menial service jobs in the United States. Formerly an electronics drafter, Cheung's father became a restaurant sous-chef for some time and, later, an aircraft housekeeper. His struggle for employment in the United States and the family's financial strain point to the fact that issues of language barriers, lack of social connections, and cultural difference are indisputably central to the experiences of immigration, such that they cannot be recklessly subsumed into the euphoric discourses of multiculturalism. Thus Cheung's journey from Hong Kong to the United States as a "backward step" importantly underlines the impracticality of positing the West as naturally liberatory and the East as decisively oppressive. The simplistic home-elsewhere binary in the teleological coming-out narrative—the necessity of leaving home for the actualization of one's subjectivity—unwittingly reiterates the American Dream narrative trope and violently endorses the imperialist notion of freedom.

#### Resignification as Decolonization: Defying Transnormativity and Reconceptualizing Survival

The teleological coming-out narrative can be framed as the temporal colonization of one's being under the guise of liberation. Apparent in the discourse of coming out is the temporal division between *before* and *after*—or the journey from repression to liberation. Coming out is commonly understood as an event in which a trans or queer person begins to acknowledge and embody their gender or sexual nonconformity, and the act is construed as liberatory in contrast to the repressive closet where one had *not yet* become who one *really is*. Since coming out is perceived as a truth-founding instance—the moment when one *begins* to live one's life—the privileging of the post-coming-out self as truthful by all means has material consequences. In the medical discourse, for example, the criteria for hormonal and surgical transition often include proofs of "cross-gender" identification, such as declarations of one's "lifelong" desire to embody the characteristics of the opposite birth sex.<sup>6</sup> Simply put, if becoming recognized as one's chosen gender implies the ontological eradication of one's past, then coming out is the process of dissociating oneself from prior gender socialization and any signifiers of one's assigned sex.

If crossing the gender border equals leaving the past behind—more specifically “becoming a man *equals* dissociating oneself from womanhood”—how can we make sense of the image of Cheung and his mother? Clearly Cheung is not afraid to express his close relationship with his mother, to openly associate himself with the significant female figure in his life, to consider womanhood—motherhood, to be more specific—part of what made him who he is in the present. Not only does Cheung complicate the politics of place and cultural belonging in the discourse of transgender and queer identity, conceptualizing an alternative mode of identity embodiment that does not reference the individualistic, imperialist quest for freedom; he also resignifies what counts as a legitimate expression of transgender maleness. By turning his identification with his mother, womanhood, and femaleness into an articulation of Asian American transmasculinity, he rejects the necessity of renouncing the signifiers associated with one’s past in order to validate one’s present self.

In lieu of the transnormative recourse to rejection and dissociation, *resignification* is a methodology of survival whereby minoritarian subjects engage in the discursive transformation of the systems of misrecognition into empowering critiques. In essence one could say that resignification is a mode of “disidentification,” as José Esteban Muñoz terms it, in the sense that it entails the reconstruction of dominant discursive sites into inhabitable spaces.<sup>7</sup> However, in this context I use the term *resignification* to address the specificity of dealing with hegemonic cultural sources that do not necessarily *pass* as abject or pejorative, yet the circulation of these domains of cultural intelligibility—whether it be within the hetero-, homo-, or transnormative or some women or queer of color systems of signification—contributes to the erasure of certain subjects and positionalities. Amid the conditions of invisibility, resignification is an act of carving out and creating a space within the empire of recognition, laboriously transforming the cultural location within which one’s subjectivity is negated and misrecognized into a site of resistance and survival. Against the socially assigned gender of family, domesticity, and crafts, Cheung *reassigns* the meaning to his transition through the performative processes of reuniting with his mother and resituating himself at home.

### The Photographic Truth-Effect: Family Reunification and the Performative Processes of Self-Building

Cheung’s processes of self-building and reconnection with his family are well illustrated through the medium in which the work *Mama & Me* is made: coco beads. This natural medium notably underscores the performative aspects of

signification. First and foremost the sepia tone of the coco beads toys with the idea of the truth-effect, making *Mama & Me* resemble an antique photograph. This photographic effect eloquently renders the happy faces of Cheung and his mother, and their time together, a segment of memory and family history. In light of this reading *Mama & Me* is visual evidence of Cheung's reunification with his mother. Nevertheless, in contrast to the idea of photographic evidence as a mere reflection of reality, a proof of something that already exists, *Mama & Me* functions as an active agent in the process of reality construction, actualizing the relationship between Cheung and his mother. Accordingly this artwork is essentially a significant part of Cheung's long-term effort to rebuild a relationship with his mother after his periodic absences from her life, one of the reasons being his transgender identity and queerness. For Cheung *Mama & Me* is truly a powerful living record of his psychological transformation and self-building.

Cheung's self-building journey—his two-year-long process of creating *Mama & Me*—was by no means straightforward or simply nurturing but was extremely labor intensive and psychologically daunting. He had to accurately match the color of the coco beads with the sepia-filtered photograph, meticulously lace the beads through individual strands of metal wire, and patiently restring the piece countless of times; he also had to deal with the emotional turmoil of looking at the photograph of himself and his mother. He says:

During the last couple years . . . it was really hard for me to [make] that curtain actually. Sometimes there [were] pieces sitting under a chair for months [because] I wouldn't even touch it. I [couldn't] even do it. . . . Each time I made it I had to look at the photo, the photo of us. That was pretty intense, to do an art piece while I [was] working through all this stuff, processing and [sighing] internally while I was making the piece. Because knowing [that] after it's done . . . I'm going to display this publicly, in front of my friends, in front of my community, talking about my relationship with my mother and that everything's okay. I have to be able to say that, you know, or else I'm lying to the audience.<sup>8</sup>

It is worth noting that Cheung invited his mother to the exhibit, thus officially accomplishing his mission of reuniting with her (fig. 13.4). Particularly remarkable was the fact that the audience of *Fresh Meat in the Gallery* and the San Francisco LGBT Community Center visitors—the mainstream transgender and queer community—were witnesses of Cheung's success in rebuilding a relationship with his family. Through *Mama & Me* Cheung reveals the amount of work, effort, and courage that goes into rebuilding and maintaining



FIGURE 13.4. (From left to right) Bobby Cheung, *Mama & Me*, Cheung's mother. Photograph courtesy of artist.

ties with one's biological family and, most important, highlights the negotiation that trans and queer people of color, particularly those who are immigrants, are dealing with on the daily basis—that is, the pressure to *choose* between one's gender identity and sexuality and one's family and cultural community. By illuminating the inseparability of Cheung's queerness, his familial relations, and his sense of cultural belonging, *Mama & Me* undermines this very notion of choice.

The labor-intensiveness of familial relationship building illustrated through Cheung's artistic process underlines that, for trans and queer immigrants, family reunification entails nothing less than a significant psychological labor and trauma. Since the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act in 1965, family reunification has been promoted as the main route of immigration to the United States. Currently family reunification, whether through blood relations or marriage to U.S. citizens (or green card holders), accounts for the majority of permanent residency granted each year.<sup>9</sup> According to Chandan Reddy, the family reunification program enables the state to construct immigrant communities of color as conservative and homophobic by way of making the formation of heteronormative biological families a mandatory condition for immigration and survival.<sup>10</sup> In reinforcing compulsory hetero-

sexuality and the supremacy of biological inheritance within immigrant communities of color, the state deliberately produces heteronormative conditions for the reproduction and socialization of racialized immigrant labor in order to fulfill the demands of the transnational economy (the production of surplus populations).<sup>11</sup> Although Cheung's story of having to rebuild a relationship with his biological family does not undermine the stereotype that Asian families are ostensibly patriarchally organized and heteronormative per se, it demonstrates the degree of emotional labor a gender-nonconforming Asian immigrant undergoes in order to reunite with his family and be at home.

### Art or Craft? Labor, Globalization, and the Gendering of Creativity

*Mama & Me* embodies within it the traces of physical and emotional labor, which, whether or not Cheung intends it, directly speaks to the conditions of contemporary Asian migration to the United States. After the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 went into effect, we observed the emergence of a substantial Asian American middle class due to transnational capital's demands for managerial, professional, and technical labor. Concurrent with the family reunification program, another aspect of the 1965 immigration reform was the renunciation of all race-based immigration measures in accordance with the U.S. cold war liberal multiculturalist ideal of equality.<sup>12</sup> However, the dismantling of the national origins quota system in U.S. immigration law has in fact paved the way for other immigration restrictions and preferences, predominantly those based on profession and class status. The H-1B work visa in particular authorizes U.S. and multinational corporations and government entities to sponsor overseas college-educated professionals for their residence in the United States.<sup>13</sup> This transformation in immigration law precisely corresponds with shifts in the global economy and the current demands of transnational capital.

From the rise of the info-tech industry in the 1990s to the early 2000s dot-com boom and the continuous evolution of technological empire in the present moment, there has been an uninterrupted influx of professional, managerial, and technical labor from Asian countries, particularly India, Singapore, China, and Hong Kong.<sup>14</sup> The establishment of work visa requirements, which encourages mass migration of professional labor from non-Western countries, and the creation of the family reunification program, which upholds the heteronormative nuclear family ideal as a condition of survival, contribute to the construction of Asian immigrants in the post-1965 era as model minorities.

Unlike Asian immigrants in the era of exclusion, who were seen as “undesirable aliens” due to their lack of capital and “queer” living arrangements (i.e., Chinese bachelors and prostitutes), Asian immigrants in the post-1965 era are commonly regarded as “respectable citizens” because of their perceived upward mobility, economic well-being, and conformity to gender and sexual norms of the American family. Nevertheless, in the midst of global capital development and the rise of the Asian immigrant professional class in the United States, the demands for exploitable, low-wage labor still persist. This bifurcated nature of contemporary Asian migration to the United States illustrates that the U.S. nation-state and economy continue to benefit as much from the affluent labor force as from the low-wage labor force.

In a way *Mama & Me* brings to attention this bifurcated nature of post-1965 Asian immigration. Due to the low ratio between the coco beads and the size of the whole piece, *Mama & Me* appears as a pixilated image, resembling images that are technologically produced. By creating a digital, pixilated image in the most low-tech way possible, Cheung interrogates the idea of Asian immigrants as highly technical workers and calls into question the model minority myth. After all, what are the similarities between software programmers and electronic factory workers in Silicon Valley? Do not both professional technicians and blue-collar workers provide incessant labor for the ever-expanding U.S. info-tech empire? Although college-educated, affluent Asian immigrant professional and technical workers are perceived as desirable subjects of the state, whose image as model minorities has often been deployed to discipline other nonwhite immigrant populations, they nonetheless constitute the new surplus pool of labor for transnational capital. The degree of mobility and agency that Asian immigrant professional workers seem to possess is, in the end, sanctioned through U.S. immigration law. That is, the post-1965 influx of middle-class Asian professionals to the United States by no means indicates the end of racial discrimination but instead implies the effectiveness of the neoliberal regulation of the American citizen body.

What Cheung’s work particularly informs us about the contemporary conditions of Asian American racialization is the continued feminization of Asian men well into the era of advanced capitalism. By using a natural medium (coco beads) and a craft production technique (beading) to create a grainy digital image, Cheung merges the “male” domain of information technology with the “female” domain of crafts. Seen from a technological point of view, the irregularly shaped, unevenly sized coco beads and the hands-on method of production undeniably reduce the clarity and sharpness of the image. In the male-dominated field of information technology, where clarity,

precision, and exactitude are deemed fundamental to the transmission of ideas and knowledge, the uneven shapes and sizes of natural coco beads and the irregularity of manual spacing can easily be understood as factors contributing to the failure of communication—in other words, the condition of impotency in the world of information technology. In composing a digital image by hand—literally by his corporeal digits—Cheung plays with the notion of potency when masculinity has come to be measured by success in colonizing the visual sphere and penetrating global markets.

Cheung's deployment of a craft production technique effectively resists the subsumption of Asian immigrant labor into the uninterrupted flow of transnational capital and intervenes in the totalizing regime of technological globalization. Through his engagement with the "feminine" domain of crafts, he disrupts the paternalistic logic of the info-tech empire that undermines situated, nonstandardized manual labor in favor of universally standardized technological inventions. Moreover his labor-intensive process of creating *Mama & Me*—a digital image produced in the most low-tech way possible—brings to the fore the most invisible labor force behind the growth of transnational capital: Asian immigrants. As a consequence of the state-sanctioned model minority myth, the *labor* and struggle of Asian immigrants, both professional and working classes, remain largely unacknowledged behind the false façade of upward mobility. In restoring the materiality of labor and struggle that has been rendered invisible under the neoliberal multiculturalist regime of global capital, we must consider crafts and other hands-on, process-oriented creative endeavors as crucial means of bottom-up resistance to capitalist exploitation at this temporal juncture.

In order to contextualize the situated resistance of hands-on creative processes, consider Cheung's work in its context of display: the "white-cube" gallery space. The introduction of craft into the space traditionally created for art is, in and of itself, a profound intervention. Since the founding of the art market and the commercial gallery system, the relegation of handiwork, hand-made utilitarian objects, and decorative arts to the category of crafts has been crucial to the maintenance of the capitalistic structure of the art world. Accordingly the situated processes of craft production are reduced to menial, nonintellectual activities and placed in opposition to "intellectually informed" high art.<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, as the intensive production process of *Mama & Me* illustrates, crafts are by no means a mindless activity or a monolithic mode of artistic production but the process in which bodily activity comes to influence one's intellectual and emotional life. Within the context of a white-cube gallery, Cheung's work challenges the meaning of art and,

furthermore, disrupts the problematically gendered logic underlying the distinction between art and craft, the mind and the body.<sup>16</sup>

Cheung's engagement with crafts—the “feminine” domain of creativity—is as much an act of resistance against the totalizing logic of capitalism as a resignification of the meaning of Asian American masculinity in the era of neoliberal globalization. In the post-1965 immigration reform climate, the rapid development of transnational capital, and the reign of liberal multiculturalism, Asian American male potency cannot be measured in relation to the degree of upward mobility and economic success because the sense of agency that Asian immigrants nowadays experience is merely a consequence of the U.S. nation-state's new strategy of population management. Therefore Cheung's insightful portrayal of the labors of global capital undermines the possibility that Asian Americans and immigrants in the globalization era can simply conform to the norms of respectability and leave their bachelor past—their deviant, queer, and gender-nonconforming history—behind.

### The Creative Modalities of Resignification

The work that Asian immigrant professionals and technicians in the post-1965 era do—that is, intellectual and managerial labor—contributes to yet another set of feminized representations of Asian American men as techie, nerd, and computer geek. The fact that Cheung's homeland is one of the technologically advanced countries that provide global supplies of professional and technical labor—the source of Asian geeks and nerds—further emphasizes the impracticality of the immigrant emancipation narrative. The idea of leaving home for freedom elsewhere certainly cannot be applied to post-1965 male-identified Asian immigrants since, for them, coming to the United States implies becoming feminized and regulated as docile subjects of the nation. There is no manhood waiting for them to claim at the end of the journey, whether it be the other side of the world or the gender divide.

By virtue of being female-assigned and racialized as Asian American, Asian American transmen can never successfully escape the processes of feminization. Nevertheless, through the strategy of resignification, *Mama & Me* demonstrates the way Cheung turns this crisis into an opportunity. The impossibility of discursively detaching himself from the gender category in which he was assigned at birth urges Cheung to develop alternative gender expressions and ultimately disidentify with the system that creates and maintains the racially inflected gender distinctions in the first place. In resignifying the markers of femininity—a close relationship with mother and a craft tradition—as



expressions of Asian American transgender masculinity, Cheung makes a courageous decision to stay home and struggle at his social location. His willingness to critically engage with his past and challenge the coming-out protocols of transgender identity—the necessity of leaving home in order to attain freedom elsewhere—certainly defies the gravities of the mainstream transgender and queer communities, immigrant communities, and the art world.

In reconceptualizing the meaning of trans identities, experiences, and embodiment through the history of Asian American racialization and the gendering apparatus of immigration, Cheung's creative process exposes the limits of the logic of visibility underlying the discourses of transnormativity and, most important, decolonizes the racially and class-inflected standards of recognition and belonging. As the Euro-American-centric notion of transgender identity is steadily gaining legibility on a global scale, such as in the domains of popular culture, education, health care, and law, it inevitably comes to regulate and discipline gender-nonconforming subjects in the name of inclusion, negating the experiences and desires that cannot be subsumed into the structures of visibility and respectability, turning them instead into surplus. In this sense Cheung's art practice as an Asian American transman reveals the current Western trans discourses' complicity in the exploitative regimes of globalization and the violence of liberal multicultural inclusion, yet optimistically brings forth the alternative forms of trans representation and critique that powerfully connect the seemingly disparate spheres of marginalization. In the face of the hostile conditions of global capital and the colonization of difference in the language of recognition, Cheung's usage of craft and artistic production as a medium through which he reimagines self, temporal relations, and possible lifeworlds underscores the significance of nonlinear modalities of trans of color cultural intervention in expanding the rapidly diminishing horizons of the present.

#### NOTES

1. Fresh Meat Productions, "Fresh Meat in the Gallery VI."
2. For queer of color critiques of the notion of home, see Gopinath, "Homo-Economics"; Manalansan, *Global Divas*.
3. Reddy, "Asian Diasporas, Neoliberalism, and Family," 110.
4. Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*, 3, 15, 19.
5. Abbas, *Hong Kong*, 4.
6. Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association, "The Standards of Care for Gender Identity Disorders, Sixth Version." Although the seventh version of the Standards of Care, published in 2011, no longer considers such proofs of cross-gender

identification as requirements for accessing medical care, the notion of proof nevertheless continues to haunt mainstream conceptualizations of transgender identities.

7. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 31.

8. Cheung, telephone interview by author, November 13, 2009.

9. McKay, "Family Reunification."

10. Reddy, "Asian Diasporas, Neoliberalism, and Family," 110.

11. Even after the Defense of Marriage Act was struck down in June 2013, allowing same-sex spouses of U.S. citizens and permanent residents to obtain immigration benefits, the heteronormative familial norms still dominate the discourse of U.S. immigration, particularly through the notion of marriage itself. The legalization of same-sex marriage functions as a means to discipline queer citizens and immigrants into docile subjects of the nation via the formation of the nuclear family structure and the performance of normative gender legibility.

12. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 227–28.

13. U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, "H-1B Fiscal Year (FY) 2015 Cap Season."

14. Le, "Asian Immigrants in the Postindustrial Economy."

15. Ioannou, "After the Art/Craft Debate," 26.

16. For more on gender politics and the art world, see Broude and Garrard, "Introduction," 12.