SEXUAL HYBRIDS

From Oriental Exotic to Postcolonial Grotesque

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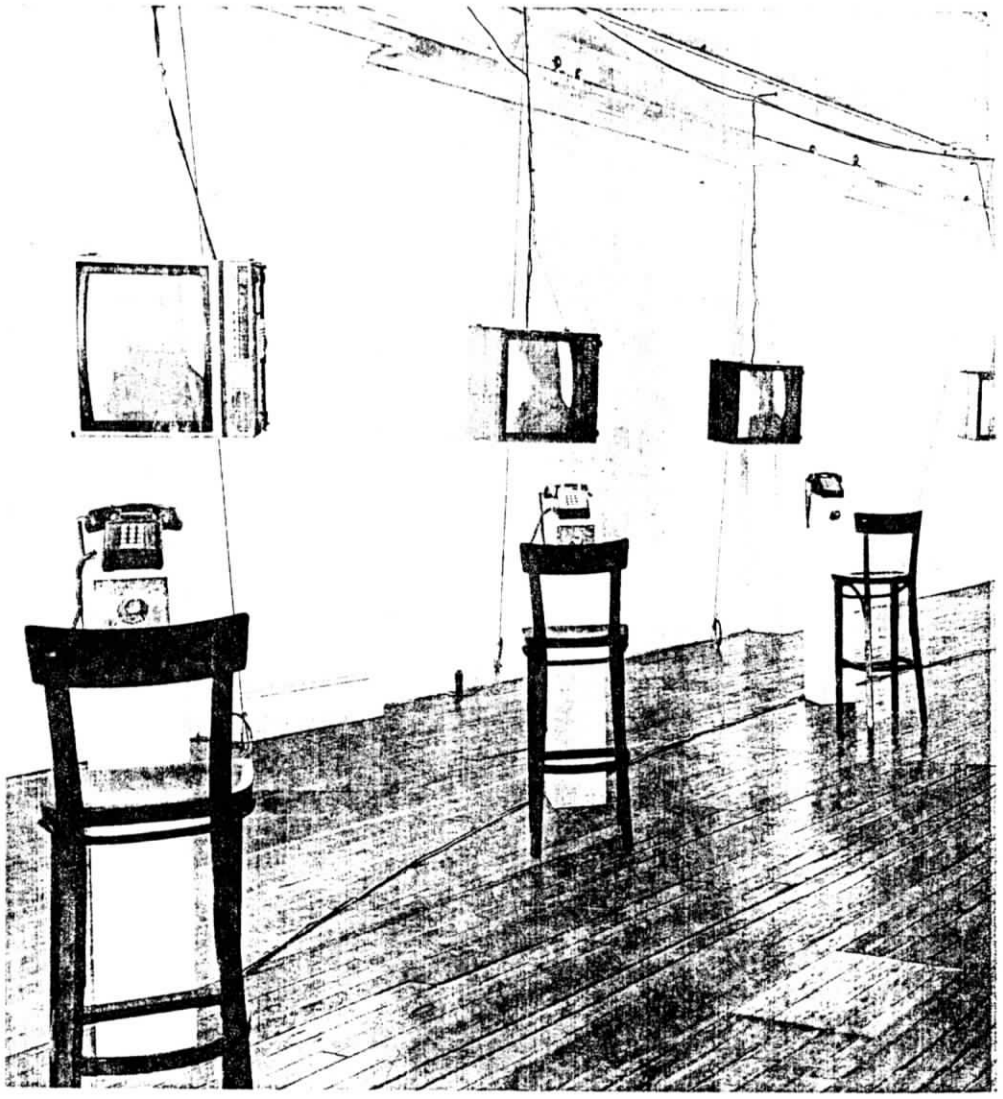


SHU LEA CHEANG, THOSE FLUTTERING OBJECTS OF DESIRE, 1992, INSTALLATION VIEW, PHOTO: LARY LAMÉ, COURTESY OF EXIT ART

What happens when "others," whose faraway exoticism has thrilled white people, arrive within North American borders – when, in other words, the colonial situation becomes postcolonial?

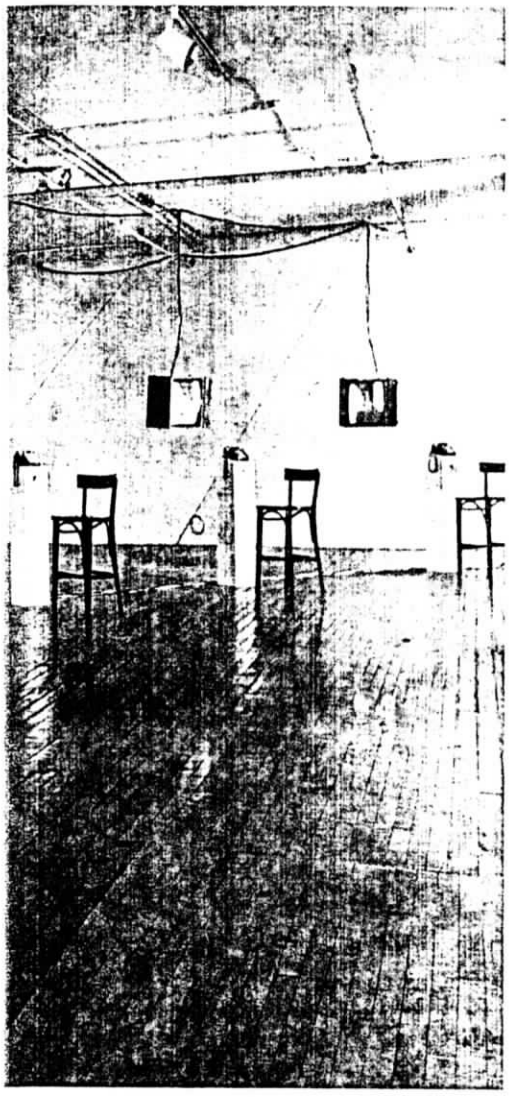
In the shifting power relations of our postcolonial times, interloping sexual cultures are eroding norms in the sexual nation of North America. Politically powerful entities – identified as "the nation," "the West," "white," etc. – define themselves through exclusion. The fact of their existence must appear neutral, natural, timeless, and incontestable. Such identities are naturalized by denying any historical connection with others, defining others as the opposite of themselves. Sexuality is a prime arena in which this process of identification through exclusion takes place. Certain sexual conventions are taken for granted as part of being Western, middle-class, and white; these include those surrounding masculinity and femininity, heterosexuality, procreative sex, and genetic selection. Other forms of sexuality are relegated to exceptions, which define – in a titillating, never-ending, and rigged contest – the norms.

But as Freud told us, our libidinal organizations are not at all inevitable, in fact quite arbitrary. There *is* no normal sexuality. All sexual expression is neurotic – it's just that some of these neuroses (such as those of men who have extramarital affairs or women who are attracted to blonds) are more acceptable in our culture. If genital-centered, heterosexual, procreative sex is the norm, it is one built on an edifice of convention that, though it has proven durable over the centuries, is nevertheless endlessly in need of shoring up. The process of coming up with an identity, sexual and otherwise, is a constant struggle, and there is always the threat of failure. Hence the need to set up notions of sexual deviance, to reassure oneself that one's sexuality is relatively normal.

A similar process of exclusion, "Orientalism," describes the way colonizing nations (or the first world) construct an idea of their colonies (or the third world). Orientalism is a way of consolidating the identity and power of the West by constructing the so-called East as an object of Western knowledge, a place that is both threateningly other and reassuringly comprehensible.[1] Yet as well as a form of knowledge, Orientalism is a form of desire. It reflects the colonizer's simultaneous fear of and fascination with the objects of cultural difference. This combination of distrust and longing is, of course, heavily charged with sexuality. Ever since there began to be an idea of "the West," Western representations have stereotyped, fetishized, and appropriated "Oriental" sexuality. These images are, ultimately, a dark

mirror, which speaks to the West only about itself and the exclusive identities it is so eager to retain.

This article will look at a handful of videos that, by putting forward alternative sexual representations in the context of postcolonial culture, are in a position to disconnect



the entire uneasy constellation of "race," nationalism, and sexuality. The characters in these films and tapes, women and men exiled or emigrated to North America, may resist North American sexual conventions by persevering in their original culture's forms of sexual expression. Or they may attempt to make local conventions of sex and sexuality their own. Since many of these conventions were predicated on the subjugation and objectification of colonized people, either the individual or the convention must change in the process.

Disruptions at the sexual level can create a little breathing space for different forms of sexuality and different ways of thinking of sexual experience. But above all, like a decoder key, they threaten to undo the whole appearance of naturalness and inevitability upon which Western cultural and political norms rest. This can only be an ongoing struggle, because in the anxiety to maintain a coherent identity, the nation will work hard to contain and neutralize these disruptions.

The formidable project of deconstructing North American sexual norms is not something that can be accomplished by simply theorizing a "better" sexual politics with which to replace them. Desire will not respond to lectures. The films and tapes I have chosen to talk about are sexy, pleasurable ones that work by engaging desire, rather than attempting to reform it. To use an "oriental" metaphor, this process is like the martial art *aikido*: you do not fight your opponent's energy but align it with yours – and before they know it, your opponent is flat on the floor. It is only to the degree that the films and tapes reclaim sexual pleasure on their own terms, that their characters become sexual subjects rather than passive objects, that they succeed. Conversely, when a film tries to meet desire with words rather than engage it, the lesson fails, at both the erotic and the political level.

Those Fluttering Objects of Desire (1992) is a multi-channel installation by Shu Lea Cheang based on twenty short video pieces by women, mostly women of colour, about their interracial sexual relationships. By representing those relationships from within, Cheang writes in gallery notes, they combat the fantasized, one-sided stories of Hollywood films; "we reject being labelled 'exotic' and attempt to re-define the term 'erotic.'" The installation seeks to replace an object of desire that is obscure – a fetish object, to be contained, investigated, and finally known – with a fluttering object, one that is changeable, polymorphous, and resistant.

In the gallery space at Exit Art, seven TV monitors were suspended, in a graceful arc, from the ceiling. In front of each was a stool and a coin-operated telephone on a pedestal. It's a cross between a peep show and 900-number paid sex. The viewer, armed with a roll of quarters, inserts one and dials "1-900-DESIRES" to get the tape loop going. Once it's on, you can watch the hour-long tape uninterruptedly, or use the touch-ton phone to randomly switch channels. To d the latter is, ideally, to tailor the voyeuris tic experience to your individual desire. found myself frantically channel surfing t try to keep an erotic edge to the experienc abandoning images that didn't "do it" fo me, or perversely switching to an unknow spot on the tape just when the viewing ex perience had become particularly luxurious Even though neither I nor anyone else wa masturbating in the gallery, the viewing pat terns that *Those Fluttering Objects* encourage in me were the same as pornography's meth ods of provoking and prolonging arousal.

Cheang's video format emphasizes th peep-show feel. Each woman shot her im ages using a stationary camera, but was abl to manipulate the framing with a remot control. The resulting video images were re processed to appear like a vertical film strip The framed images look like self-portrait in an instant photo booth; the framing give a sense of frontality and intimacy that in creases the viewer's feeling of voyeurism.

However one ends up watching the in stallation, the impetus to keep putting coin in the phone combines the fear of losing one's hard-on with feminist indignation - because when your money runs out, the im age that replaces the tape loop is of a man' naked, hairy, white buttocks, pumping awa as though fucking someone/thing not visi ble to the camera. It is as though the wome who were on the screen a moment before engaged in the tentative process of estab lishing some sort of sexual subjecthood, ar rudely returned to the status of object in re lation to an anonymous, white, male viewer However, the process that would naturaliz him as viewer is itself ruptured. We're be hind him, as it were, and though we don' see what he sees we see him looking/we se him fucking. So even as the moment wher our quarter runs out shows how tentative i the exploration of other sexualities, return ing us to the state in which the hegemoni gaze affording sexual pleasure is the whit man's, still that gaze no longer appears in evitable and invisible. We see him, and h doesn't see us seeing him. What a feeling o power to put another quarter in the machin and get his butt off the screen.

Some of the segments take advantage o Cheang's framing technique to crop the im ages provocatively, so that a good part of the sensual pleasure is purely visual. In Adrien

in a kitchen show the two women's bodies just from breast to thigh level, scantily clad in white bustiers. Voice-overs discuss the difference between yams and sweet potatoes, a confusion that encapsulates the cultural differences that complicate a black/white American relationship. The two kinds of tubers, they also suggest, represent the values African Americans place on different skin tones. The kitchen gets hot: black hand grabs white butt; big thighs press together; and a scrolling recipe for "sweet potato pie and yam jam" advises us to take "handfuls of flour, a taste of honey" and "stir, beat, poke, knead." The very composition of these shots generalizes sensuality throughout the frame, comparing body parts and vegetables in a way that eroticizes both.

RICHARD FUNG, CHINESE CHARACTERS (STILL FROM VIDEO), 1986; PHOTO COURTESY OF V TAPE

Another segment that explores the sensuality of framing is Gloria Miguel's reminiscences of a visit to her family on San Blas island, trying to reconcile her Indian identity with having moved north and married a Jewish man. As Miguel's throaty voice reads from her twenty-year-old diaries, the camera she operates explores her face in close-ups so intimate as to be almost unrecognizable. Large parts of the diaries have been crossed out, it seems, shortly after she wrote them, and the sense of loss is agonizing in contrast to the richness of the fragments that were left – like "I have beads, beads on my wrist. I went swimming. I watched them dance." Her pleasure in and longing for San Blas, and for the men of her culture, bubble through her own self-censorship. The close-ups of Miguel's beautiful, deeply furrowed face and dark, wet eyes become like a landscape, as though to substitute for photographs of the island she left behind. It is as though by leaving her culture for white North American culture, Miguel has sacrificed a language for her sensuality and must express it by displacing it onto the landscape, or in significant silences. "Still waiting for some sort of fulfillment . . . I tried, not hard enough. Why is it that it isn't easy for me to cross out, cross out, cross out . . . ."

"Let's miscegenate," a fragmentary title in Mary Ann Toman's tape says, as the camera caresses her naked and pregnant body. Toman's close-up framing transforms her pregnant figure into forms both abstract and visceral, completely different from shot to shot. She eroticizes her pregnancy, glorying in the fact that the life moving inside her came from sex, a "double erotic fuck gift." By sexualizing the processes of conception, waiting, and wondering how her mixed-race Caucasian-Asian child will look, Toman makes uncertainty into an erotic possibility. The "vertiginous womb" holds a "perfect question"; the tumescent belly becomes an "X-rated yearning zone."

Those Fluttering Objects is full of sexual pairings and practices that seem inappropriate, excessive – grotesque: yam thighs, pregnancy, a Korean-Black couple eating flowers, a "Miss Saigon" poster projected on a Vietnamese woman's naked body. I'd like to take a detour into the meaning of "grotesque" to show how deep are the interconnections between desire and exclusion, sexual expression and colonization. Broadly speaking, the grotesque is the otherness that a closed and classical form – a body, a culture – must repress in order to constitute itself. The grotesque body confronts the classical body with all that it wishes to forget about – excrement and blood, pregnancy and age, anything that suggests that the body might become something other than it is. In pre-Enlightenment Europe, Peter Stallybrass and Allon White write, it had been possible to give expression to the community's "other," openly and communally, through the contained madness of carnival.[2] In that pre-Lenten celebration all sorts of behaviour that was beyond the pale of everyday society, from cross-dressing to cursing at priests, became permissible for a day. Such overt transgression, however, was unacceptable to the growing European bourgeoisie, which used legal and other pressures to eradicate or sanitize carnival.

The making of the bourgeoisie was a process of projecting what was unacceptable in its culture onto others. Ideally, the product of this series of projections and displacements would be a neutral, contentless citizen, the universal norm against which all others vary. The shifting location of the grotesque during the colonial period followed the same trade routes as the vicissitudes of forbidden desire – one to the other classes and ultimately the colonies, one to the inner reaches of the self. Stallybrass and White note that the bourgeois rejection of carnival in the nineteenth century was marked by "a compensatory plundering of ethnographic material . . . from colonized cultures."[3] As the unclean carnivalesque was eliminated from European life, it was moved further away, so that "primitives" and the colonized came to embody the opposite of European bourgeois culture.

Yet at the same time, in repressing carnival's conventional outlet, the bourgeoisie made itself susceptible to unexpected and uncontrollable eruptions of the grotesque. What was socially repressed returned at an individual level. "Disgust," Stallybrass and White write, "always bears the imprint of desire."[4] Thus, if it is not somehow contained, sexual contact with "foreign" culture is especially likely to produce the grotesque, to denaturalize all that bourgeois Westerners hold as self-evident. Where we find the grotesque, there is a social tension about to spin out of control.

It is important to recognize that "transgression" is not necessarily politically progressive. Like the tradition of carnival, it can be a way to point to difference in order to contain it, to isolate what is threatening by making a spectacle of it. In the age of Benetton, the neutral citizen of the West can flirt with difference with impunity. By throwing together elements of other cultures, we can experiment safely with the foreign bodies that threaten our separate identity. Think of slumming; or postmodernist pastiche. The challenge is to transgress in a way that reveals how the very repression that constituted the identity of the colonized, also made possible the separate identity of the colonizer. Then the borders lose their definition, and the other erupts right at the heart of home.

In a segment of *Those Fluttering Objects of Desire* by Yong Soon Min, who is of Korean descent, and Allan de Souza, who is of Indian descent, the theoretical underpinnings of Cheang's project are more explicit. In unison voice-over the two declare: "Our union is a tale of discovering amid displacement . . . . We revolve and evolve within a sea of signs and metaphors, of allusions and illusions." Accompanying shots of the two lovers, separated by rolls of barbed wire, the words allude to the colonial histories that have brought them to the U.S., and to the need to overcome stigma that have shaped "Asians" from without and to remake themselves from within. They show how the term "Asian" already encompasses a multitude of differences: "Your yellow body. Our brown eyes. Your brown body. Our black hair." Within the dark frames of the video strip the lovers enact a healing ritual, for which the text is like a litany. She puts makeup on his face, and they speak of overcoming the bounds of masculine and feminine, of coming to a power of their own definition "where once the occupier sought to emasculate us"; they

embrace, and voices chant, "From the ashen lands of the past, together we seek new territories which as yet are unnamed, making a map for each other to follow."

When all the video monitors in the installation of *Those Fluttering Objects of Desire* are playing at once, and usually at different points on the tape loop, the result is a thrilling visual hubbub, as the many artists endlessly (or as long as the quarters keep coming) tell the stories of their unique desires. Their competing voices and images come together in a great multiplicity even as they destroy a grand unity, the unity of the North American sexual nation. The sight could be a metaphor for a theory of nation building that Homi K. Bhabha has elaborated. Bhabha sees the construction of national identity as a twofold process. On one hand, national identity is created through official teachings and histories, laws, national anthems, and sedimented customs. Sanctioned sexual representations would find a place among these. On the other hand, Bhabha writes, the people themselves carry out the continual process of inscribing the nation. One would hope (if one were nationalistic) that their many individual performances would reiterate what they learned from the grand narratives, thus reinscribing the nation as it is at present: "The scraps, patches, and rags of daily life must be repeatedly turned into the signs of a national culture, while the very act of the narrative performance interpellates a growing circle of national subjects."[5]

However, between the official and the local processes of narrating the nation, we can see that there is definitely a weak link in the process of national identity building. When people turn the scraps of their daily life into the fabric of national culture, you can be sure that some of the official objects of national teachings will become denaturalized. Like Stallybrass and White's cultural grotesque, Bhabha's postcolonial subject threatens to burst through the forms that would contain it, redefining the nation through his or her own daily performances. As we have seen, sexuality is the realm of culture especially susceptible to this Trojan-horse phenomenon. Thus in the process of sexual destabilization, the very foundations of national self-definition are rocked as well. This, then, is the appeal of the unruly sexual citizens in *Those Fluttering Objects of Desire*. Cheang appropriates a form of hegemonic sexual expression, the peep-show format, and makes it speak with many different, non-hegemonic voices.

But appropriation alone is perilously apt to slide over into uncritical mimicry. This is a problem in some of the segments of Cheang's video installation. I believe it is because some of the artists do not become the *subjects* of the forms they have taken over, but simply upend them and use them as soapboxes. To be a Trojan horse you have to get *into* the thing you're subverting. Some of the segments are so concerned to cover all the bases of racial and sexual politics, while still retaining a sexual edge, that they satisfy none of these goals. Especially given the intimate access to the audience that the telephone format affords, the best use of this medium is not to lecture. The segments that succeed in eroticizing politics and at the same time politicizing sex are the ones that take the assignment lightly: these are the ones that transform the voyeuristic format into a truly participatory space.

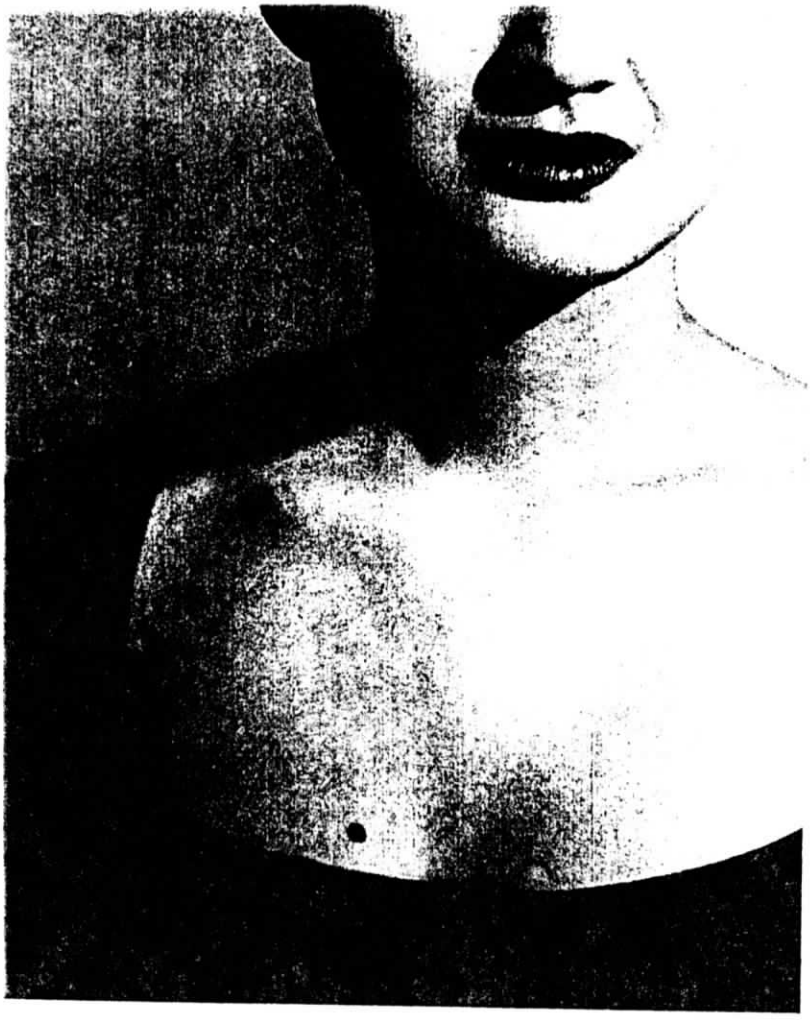
RICHARD FUNG, CHINESE CHARACTERS (STILL FROM VIDEO), 1986. PHOTO COURTESY OF V TAPE.

In a different way, Richard Fung's 1986 videotape *Chinese Characters* explores the difference between appropriating a mainstream porn format and transforming it. Fung's tape works with two sets of clichéd imagery: an "Oriental" mise-en-scène of flute music, cool ponds, and tastefully off-center shots of cherry blossoms, willow trees and magnolias; and clips from gay porn featuring blond and bronzed young men. The tape takes both sets of imagery on journeys: one is the journey of Chinese mythical explorer Wai Jin to find the source of the Yellow River; the other is for Fung's semi-fictional gay Asian protagonists to find images that speak to them of their desires.

In a series of interviews, gay men of Asian backgrounds talk to the camera about the pleasure of first finding gay pornography, images that allowed them to identify with the desiring gaze. For the first time they found their sexuality affirmed. But, they explain, these images they found to identify with were invariably of white men. Thus in trying to express themselves as gay, they had to express themselves as white. One tells how his lovers are surprised that he drops his Malaysian accent when he talks dirty – he learned it from gay white porn. Another man tells how "I moved myself closer and closer to the image the GWM magazines are selling" – taking on the dress style, the walk, the requisite body ("I started going to the gym"), and all the other attributes that come with mainstream gay images, in order to be found attractive by other men. Pornography, in short, although initially liberatory for these men, became normative. With a straight face, Fung plays back an array of racist stereotypes as they structure our heroes' unsatisfying encounters: "Are you a foreign student?"; "I was once stationed in Singapore"; "You're so gentle"; "You've got a nice cock – for an Oriental."

These lines touch on stereotypes of Asian male sexuality that Fung explores in his article "Looking for My Penis: The Eroticized Asian in Gay Video Porn."[6] In the few North American gay pornographic videos that do employ Asian actors, he finds, the Asian men are feminized, desireless, and invariably the passive sexual objects of white men.

The gay Asian viewer is not constructed as sexual subject in any of this work – not on the screen, not as a



HELEN LEE,
SALLY'S BEAUTY SPOT
(STILL FROM VIDEO), 1990.
PHOTO: RICK MCGINNIS,
COURTESY OF CFMDC

viewer. I may find [the Asian actor] Sum Yung Mahn attractive, I may desire his body, but I am always aware that he is not meant for me. I may lust after [the Caucasian actor] Eric Stryker and imagine myself as the Asian who is having sex with him, but the role the Asian plays in the scene with him is demeaning.'

The frustration of a desire without an object – or without a pleasing object – plays out in the images on monitors behind the interviewees. These alternate between bits of the "Chinese" garden that began the tape and shots of an Asian man masturbating alone with simple props – a cock ring, a sock, underwear. The "Oriental landscape" scenes – shot, I suspect, in a Toronto park – frame the man in a sexuality-as-nature cliché. The cumulative effect of the masturbation scenes, especially in the context of the crowded orgies in the commercial porn clips, is isolated and depressing: there is no image for the masturbating man's desire.

Just as the women of colour in Cheang's installation must displace the white male in order to become subjects of their desire, so Fung's characters must push aside the hegemonic gay spectator, who is also white. Thus in another strategy, Fung's clever porn montages try to force gay white porn to admit Asian men as sexual protagonists and viewing subjects. His Chinese character, dressed up for cruising, heads for the park. As he walks into the woods and begins to undress, Fung's crosscutting makes the bearded white hero from a gay porn video seem to advance toward him, undoing his jeans. Superimposed on the video image, his back to us, our man beckons invitingly to the bearded fellow – they come face to face – the white man bends down – and there the encounter must stop. Mainstream porn can only be pushed so far before the Asian viewer must again make himself conform to the image.

Fung's solution in this tape seems to be to turn away from the white-centered narratives of conventional porn altogether. In a final scene, a voice-over reads a porn fantasy, familiar but altered – "Everyone was asleep on the plane. I was bored. Suddenly my phone rang. 'Hey Li, it's Captain Leung. Remember I said, if there's anything I can do to make your flight more comfortable . . . ?'" – while, in a long shot, we see two Asian men kissing in the "Chinese" garden. Meanwhile, at the end of the voyage of Wai Jin, the source of the Yellow River turns out to be the Milky Way.

The men frolicking in the porn videos of *Chinese Characters* are not only white but invariably young, athletic, handsome by Hol-

the agendas for Asian gay men are uniqu
insofar as they respond to particular histc
ries of oppression, still a frustration like tha
of the Asian protagonists can be felt by an
number of North American gay men wh
do not see themselves in the picture. Thi
points to a mission that Fung's character i
well placed to carry out, the mission to de
naturalize gay sexuality. Faced itself witl
invisibility from the vantage point of th
dominant culture, gay culture has struc
tured itself quite self-consciously aroun
certain signifiers of gay identity and desir
ability. Yet paradoxically, once these sig
nifiers have been established they becom
naturalized, so that a man will internaliz
certain standards of attractiveness to othe
gay men, including the standard of white
ness. Fung made this tape in 1986; his work
is an important part of a movement to mul
tiply and denaturalize gay, as well as ethnic
imagery.

Fung's characters, like some of the artists
characters in *Those Fluttering Objects of Desire*
exemplify Bhabha's notion of the postcolo
nial object who, by resisting comprehension
or containment, threatens to become a sub
ject. Another is the protagonist of *Sally's
Beauty Spot* (1990) by Helen Lee, a fast-paced,
high-theory film that explicitly challenges
fetishistic and colonialist forms of represen
tation and acknowledges Homi Bhabha
among the ending credits. Sally, Lee's con
temporary protagonist/narrator, struggles
with the figure of a fetishized "Oriental"
woman, the eponymous character of the
American 1950 B movie *The World of Suzie
Wong*. This movie, about the relationship be
tween an American painter living in Hong
Kong and a Chinese prostitute who models
for him, rehearses all the clichés that Sally
must confront. Throughout the film dialogue
between painter and model overlaps images
of Sally trying to get rid of a black mole on
her breast. She anxiously scrubs at the spot
in the shower; she tries to cover it with
makeup. She frets about it to a friend, who
reassures her that she is beautiful in other
(typically "Oriental") ways: "Your skin is so
smooth. And your hair, so silky and black."

"Beauty spots" are prized on white skin.
There, these localized melanomas are a sort
of contained grotesque, erotic because they
suggest corruption. Sally's anxiety suggests,
however, that they are less desirable in some
one who is not-white, who is sullied to be
gin with.

A complex series of crosscuts sets up the
parallels between the fetishistic love affair
in *Suzie Wong* and the contemporary version.
Sally gets a haircut, and she reports to her
friend that her boyfriend, a white Canadian
man, "said he liked it – still shiny and black.

"And that I looked different." "Different from what?" A scene from the movie gives us the answer: Suzie Wong, wearing a smart Western dress and hat, primps and admires herself as she waits expectantly for her American boyfriend. But when he arrives he flies into a rage – "Take that terrible dress off! You look like a cheap European streetwalker." Clearly the "European" is what gets him. Suzie Wong's exotic Oriental image overwhelms the fact that his consort is an ordinary prostitute, but when she blurs the outlines of her exotic stereotype by wearing Western dress, the American feels threatened. She reminds him that their relation is the sordid one familiar to him from "home"; she dares to impose her own desiring subjectivity on his ideal image. In Bhabha's term, Suzie Wong becomes a hybrid (like her name), reinvesting the images of both prostitute and Oriental with discomfiting content. In Lee's parallel, Sally's boyfriend, in desiring Sally's long hair, shows his need for a stereotypical Asian woman – feminine, submissive, and traditional. Her haircut emphasizes the difference between his desires and her subjectivity.

As the montage sequence continues, Sally's friend asks, "Have you considered having it surgically removed?," while the painter continues to shout at Suzie Wong, "Why don't you put a ring in your nose too?" He strips her and pushes her onto the bed. Whether minor surgery and nose rings are self-mutilation, or just ways to take charge of your life and your looks, depends upon how you interpret the notion of naturalness. Here the parallel underlines the American painter's fury that Suzie Wong might do something "unnatural" – that is, something that doesn't fall within his image of what an Oriental woman should be like. It also alludes to his fear of specifying their colonial relationship, since brass rings traditionally signify slavery. By contrast, the friend's reference to surgery seems to refer to Sally's fear of the grotesque in herself. Sally sees herself, through her boyfriend's eyes and through the lens of North American culture of which she is a part, as other. The temptation is to cut off the offending part and to suppress the difference she poses: more perfectly to inhabit the stereotype.

Several times throughout the tape we see a sentence haltingly being typed on a typewriter: "bl"; "blac"; "black"; "black i"; "black is"; "black is b." That's as far as it gets, as though to stress how difficult it is for Sally, the narrator, to accept her black beauty spot? Or perhaps the sentence never gets finished because it turns out to be irrelevant – suggested when three overlapping voices, of Sally, her friend, and a white man, read this sentence from Bhabha's essay "The Other Question"): "They will always conceive of difference as that between the preconstituted poles of black and white." As they speak we see Sally's painted lips in close-up, then a black man's lips, slowly smiling. Dizzyingly, the scene in which the American painter strips Suzie Wong of her Western clothes rushes by, played upside down and backwards, returning her to the hybrid identity she desired that so threatened her white lover. Sally crosses over to the black man, and they kiss. The bottle of makeup she used to cover her beauty spot falls to the floor, and the "skin-coloured" liquid spills.

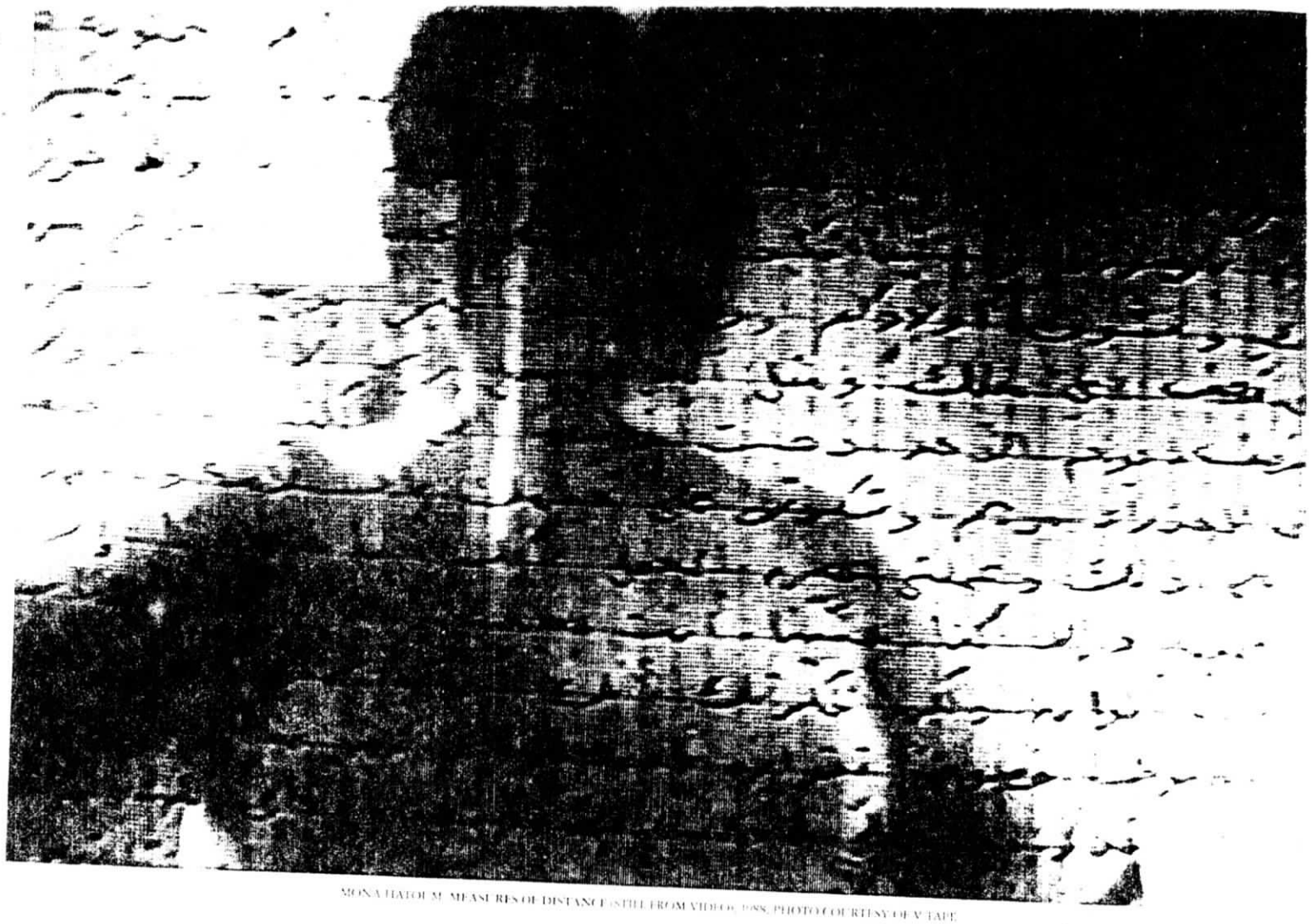
Moving beyond "the poles of black and white," Sally embarks on a sexual relationship that is not built on a Western Oriental dyad. At the same time, instead of seeing herself as the object of another's erotic gaze, she takes her desire into her own hands.

I have been arguing that the sexual experiences of postcolonial subjects can enable a critique of Western culture. However, this is not at all to suggest that there was more sexual freedom "back home." On the contrary, when someone who is a cultural hybrid takes desire into her own hands, her experience can also destabilize the sexual culture from which she came. A dramatic example is Mona Hatoum's *Measures of Distance* (1988). This experimental video traces the relationship between Hatoum, a Palestinian-born woman living in Vancouver, and her mother who is now in Lebanon. The imagery of *Measures of Distance* consists entirely of photographs of Hatoum's mother's naked body. These were taken several years before the tape was made, the last time Hatoum visited her family. The images begin as details from these photographs, enlarged to fill the screen, and gradually the scale is reduced until we recognize that they are of a woman, with ample breasts, limbs and belly, bathing. At first, though, the shots are so abstract that they look more like landscapes than like a body – the mother's body is conflated with the land, with home. The images are partially obscured by the Arabic script of letters from mother to daughter, which looks like a barbed wire fence, making a return home impossible.

On the sound track is the light, desultory conversation between the two women in Arabic, punctuated by laughter. Over this, Hatoum reads her mother's letters, translating them into English. It becomes clear that their conversations on that long-ago visit were about sexuality, and that the letters are as well. The text of the letters is all about how much her mother enjoyed the intimate conversations that Hatoum, as a Western-educated woman, was able to initiate. This could not have happened without Hatoum being enough of an outsider to observe things that would have gone unnoticed. The "measure of distance" is the degree to which Hatoum can assert her similarity to her mother, while at the same time making strange the old context of home.

Hatoum's mother admits that some of the questions her daughter asks never occurred to her. The immediacy and unself-consciousness of the images of the mother's body contrasts strikingly with the letters' tone of mixed eagerness and diffidence. She is both delighted and discomfited to be asked all these intimate questions – "I have enjoyed thinking about the questions you ask me, even though some of them make me uncomfortable." As they continue we realize that her sexuality is being constructed differently through these conversations with her Westernized daughter. From this perspective, things that she had taken for granted become objects of investigation. She responds to her daughter's recollection of what she said when the girl began menstruating – "At least you only have to think about it once a month. Men have to shave every day." – with new irony. "I suppose that was a strange thing to say, but I didn't know you took it so hard that you'd remember it to this day. I was just trying to cheer you up." In the

PRATIBHA PARMAR, KHUSHTIL (FROM VIDEO), 1991. PHOTO COURTESY OF WOMEN MAKE MOVIES.



MONA HATOUM, MEASURES OF DISTANCE (STILL FROM VIDEO), 1988, PHOTO COURTESY OF V TAPE

interim, it seems, Hatoum has discovered that sexual difference consists in entirely other things. She also urges her daughter to get married – "You need to have some fun. Life's not all hard work." – assuming that marriage is the only context for sexual activity.

But the main point to which Hatoum's mother returns again and again is the pleasure of their conversations and their photo session in the shower, and her husband's hurt and angry reaction when he discovered them together. "Your father seems to think that only he should see me naked," she says. Although, as she says, her husband considers their exchanges "silly women's talk," he is still jealous. One gathers he feels that his patriarchal right in the family is being eroded, that his wife is enjoying an intimacy with their daughter that should be reserved for him alone. Again and again she implores Hatoum not to breathe a word of their conversations to her father. The constraints of the traditional culture prevented her from thinking about herself in these ways, made her think of her body as belonging to her husband rather than to herself. Thus it is only in interactions with her Westernized daughter, who has learned a different vocabulary with which to express these things, that the mother discovers – in fact, constructs – her own sexuality. Hatoum's hybrid identity here serves to critique the sexual culture of Arab women, in particular Palestinian women living in exile in Lebanon. Hatoum's postcolonial sexual experience thus changes the image of her home culture, denaturalizing what were considered sexual facts there as much as the characters in *Those Fluttering Objects of Desire*, *Chinese Characters*, and *Sally's Beauty Spot* do "here."

The final work I want to look at shows how sexual national denaturalization can indeed work both ways. Pratibha Parmar's film *Khush* (1991) is a documentary about South Asian gays and lesbians in India, England and Canada. Like other films from Sankofa, the workshop on Britain's Channel 4 that Parmar belongs to, *Khush* presents its facts in a lush and eroticized mise-en-scène. Interviews about the harsh confluence of racism and homophobia are set against rich, jewel-like backgrounds and interspersed with opulent sexual tableaux. Parmar's camera returns again and again to painted mandalas that are actually stylized vaginas and clitorises, and to stylized encounters between young lovers meeting behind carved wooden screens.

The people who speak in *Khush* constitute a rift between worlds, a rift that, like a river delta carving out islands, promises to eventually redefine the contours of those worlds. Like Fung's protagonist, they struggle to live a sexuality sanctioned by the West, but to transform that sexuality by passing it through the filter of their experience as Asians. Those who live in Vancouver, Toronto or London tell how solidarity with their ethnic communities, in the face of discrimination and hatred, had to take precedence over their sexual identity. The community's insularity protects them – as long as they conform to traditional expectations, including marriage. One lesbian tells how she worked herself into the "schizophrenia" of contemplating marriage as a cover: "We'd work out some kind of deal. He'd have his girlfriends and I'd have mine."

While they cannot affirm their sexuality in their ethnic communities, *khush* (Hindi for "happy," slang for homosexual) people discover that they have to sacrifice their cul-

lesbian and gay communities. "We have to have one identity at a time," one woman realizes. The white queer community, she finds, either doesn't recognize Asians or dismisses them as not political. Or they are fetishized – "You're an exotic Oriental."

Khush tells how people who are caught between communities that cannot acknowledge them in fullness of their identity – communities of ethnicity, sexuality, and class – break down those communities' borders. Not having a community to return to, they create a hybrid. In a steamy gay/lesbian nightclub, people in saris and baseball caps dance to *bhangra*, a mix of reggæ, hip-hop and Indian pop. Their very presence at the margins makes the centers wobble. Not belonging in any nation, they have the difficult task of carving a place for themselves. Far from being a separate niche, the place they carve out reveals the histories of exclusions that allowed the separate nations to come into existence in the first place.

For example, a young and eager woman tells how she came out in a white lesbian-separatist context. While she was able finally to live her sexuality, the community "never answered my questions about India, global issues, multinational corporations, etc." But going back to Delhi, after her U.S. education, did not restore some sort of authenticity that was lacking in her Western experiences. Instead she found that the Indian traditions of homosexuality have been effaced by years of colonialism. Strangely, *Khush* suggests, the more "Westernized" Indians are, the less homosexuality is sanctioned. As temple architecture shows, homoeroticism has an honoured place in Indian tradition and Hindu religion. But the sacred sculptures of amorous same-sex couples were defaced and decapitated by British colonizers, intent in recasting as a sin what was an integral aspect of Indian culture. Modern homophobia is, in many ways, a product of colonialism. Interestingly, the *hijda* subculture, a para-religious community of transvestites/eunuchs, remains but it is associated with a lower class than that of the Western-educated, bourgeois, urban gays and lesbians of *khush*. It may be this that one man refers to when he says that there are hundreds of thousands of gay people in India, but that the caste system remains powerful enough that gay people of different classes do not mix. Just as *khush* people intrude global politics into Western lesbian feminism, so do they bring a Western notion of a gay community that crosses traditional Indian class structures.

In the process, one might think a Western notion of what it means to be gay will colonize Indian notions of sexuality. But *Khush* works to suggest that Parmar's community is also redefining homosexuality, by borrowing traditional Hindu erotic imagery to transform their Western-learned sexual consciousness. At several points in the film a man in an elaborate, polka-dotted phallus costume dances seductively. His significance is unclear to a white Western viewer like myself who is unfamiliar with Hindu iconography. However, his very unfamiliarity suggests that there are sexualities that transform all the cultures that produced them, coming up with a new hybrid that resists assimilation. The dancer is not illustrating but actually *performing* those sexualities, creating significance where there was none. Elsewhere, two women lounge sybaritically on cushions, in front of an old black-and-white Bombay musical projected on the wall in which about a hundred women dance and blow trumpets. Here too the meanings are ambiguous. The women, rather than lend their eroticism to the camera, seem absorbed in each other. It is the dancing women behind them who seem to proclaim their sexuality as they, in turn, are reclaimed as an army of *khush*.

The desire that underpins the construction of the West and its Orientalist exclusion of the other is ultimately what will undo them. As postcolonial subjects ask questions of the dominant culture, they reveal the fears and longings that constructed them as its binary complements. They do not just insert their culture in the place of the dominant one, but criticize the closed identity of culture in the first place. With sexual culture, this means not substituting one form of sexism or definition of sexuality for another but seeing both in relief. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick suggests, just because you've deconstructed a binary term doesn't mean you've loosened up a free play of infinite meanings: "A deconstructive understanding of these binarisms makes it possible to identify them as sites that are peculiarly densely charged with lasting potentials for powerful manipulation."[8] It is terrifyingly easy to substitute new fetishes and set up new polarities. Yet in that space where naturalized identities briefly come undone, the neutral and the general dissolve into a myriad of desires, dangers, and possibilities.[9]

NOTES

1. Most of these works are made by North Americans who come from nations that have a long history of colonization by Europe and North America, such as China, Africa, First Nations, and Korea – many from "the Orient" proper, or what is now called Asia (although Edward Said used the term to apply mainly to the Middle East). All face a discourse that is Orientalist in the way I have described. These discourses are so dense and conflate different nations to such a degree that it doesn't make sense here to try to distinguish the particular stereotypes of "Chinese," "Indian," etc. – indeed it would reproduce the sort of categorization that they work to dismantle. Yet it's important to acknowledge that what I am still calling Orientalism works differently in different postcolonial relations.
2. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986).
3. *Ibid.*, p. 172.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 191.
5. Homi K. Bhabha, "DissemiNation," in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 297.
6. Richard Fung, "Looking for My Penis: The Eroticized Asian in Gay Video Porn," in *How Do I Look? Queer Film and Video*, ed. Bad Object-Choices (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991), pp. 145-168.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 158.
8. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California, 1990), p. 9.
9. *Those Flattering Objects of Desire* was exhibited at Exit Art in New York City, May 2-30, 1992, and will be in the 1993 Whitney Biennial. *Chinese Characters* is distributed by V-Tape in Toronto and Video Data Bank in Chicago. *Sally's Beauty Spot* and *Khush* are distributed by Women Make Movies in New York City. *Measures of Distance* is distributed by V-Tape, Video Data Bank and Women Make Movies.

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L'exotisme, dans la tradition colonialiste, était chargé d'un attrait spécifiquement sexuel, traduisant aussi bien la peur que le désir ressentis par le colonisateur face à des êtres culturellement différents. L'auteure examine ici des vidéos et des films postcolonialistes récents qui déstabilisent les conventions culturelles, politiques et sexuelles de l'occident. Les œuvres de Shu Lea Cheang, de Richard Fung, de Mona Hatoum, d'Helen Lee et de Pratibha Parmar contestent les définitions normatives de «nation», de «race» et d'«hétérosexualité», en donnant la parole aux identités alternatives et hybrides qui, conclut l'auteure, «se dissolvent dans une myriade de désirs, de dangers et de possibilités».