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# **(Re)Viewing Queer Diasporas: *Happy Together* and New National Allegories of Hong Kong**

## **ABSTRACT**

This paper examines Hong Kong filmmaker Wong Kar-Wai's 1997 romantic drama *Happy Together* and argues that a reading of the film as a national allegory for Hong Kong's postcolonial status must include an emphasis on the homophobic and patriarchal forces acting upon the queer body. Standard Marxist conceptions of national allegory, most infamously put forth by Fredric Jameson in his 1986 essay, "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," essentialize the textual expression of colonized territories as solely defined by colonial inequality. Such interpretations of postcolonial texts

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demand a more nuanced understanding of the specific varied forms of inequality that result from colonial violence, and these interpretations require attention to the differences in hegemonic colonialism as it operates in each individual territory. In this regard, Gayatri Gopinath's intersectional model of the queer diasporic allegory is a much more useful and relevant tool for understanding the homophobic and patriarchal forces at play during and after colonization. Using Gopinath's technique of reading the colonized queer body as a site of violent homophobic power relations, I will argue that the warring gay Chinese lovers in *Happy Together* make manifest the same uneven power structure of toxic masculinity and homophobia that oppresses them, and I will connect these issues to the problems of masculinity and alienation experienced by the population of Hong Kong after the territory was given back to China in 1997.

**Keywords:** Hong Kong, Marxism, allegory, films, queer theory, Wong Kar-Wai, *Happy Together*

**I**n 1997, Hong Kong, which had been a colony of the British Empire for 156 years, was reincorporated into China. Upon the territory's handover to China, Hong Kong experienced cultural and economic shifts, and these shifts were accompanied by a loss of identity for Hong Kong's formerly colonized population. The handover in 1997 coincided with the release of Wong Kar-Wai's film *Happy Together*, which follows the dysfunctional relationship between two gay Chinese lovers, Lai Yiu-Fai and Ho Po-Wing, who have moved from Hong Kong to live as expatriates in Buenos Aires, Argentina for no clear reason. The impending handover of Hong Kong serves as the film's historical backdrop of the couple's confrontations and informs the ideological difficulties the characters have in coming to terms with their new national identities. Films such as *Happy Together* and Wong Kar-Wai's 2000 romantic drama *In the Mood for Love* chronicle the anxieties of Hong Kong life as the cultural tensions of colonization manifest



themselves in a variety of ways. Wong Kar-Wai, by this point a significant Hong Kong filmmaker, uses *Happy Together* to comment on Hong Kong despite its Argentinian setting. Wong Kar-Wai has indicated that the film is at once about Hong Kong and about postcolonial nationhood in general, stating, “[W]e wanted to escape but the more we wanted to escape the more we became inseparable from Hong Kong. No matter where we went, Hong Kong was always with us.”<sup>1</sup>

The transition from capitalism to communism and the lasting effects of colonial capitalism invite a Marxist investigation of these cultural readjustments. Marxist theory, a framework that is used to diagnose and explain inequality resulting from the capitalist economic system, lends itself well to an interpretation of the alienation experienced by Hong Kong that results from the onslaught of global imperialism. The social relations of capitalism, Marxism aims to explain, are not merely physical conditions but ideological circumstances as well. Unfortunately, despite Marxism’s relevance to the viewpoints that spring from the ideology of colonial capitalism, certain Marxist perspectives on colonialism are not without epistemic obstacles of their own. Marxist theorists such as Fredric Jameson suggest that postcolonial literature can be read allegorically. Jameson’s controversial 1986 article “Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” while admirable due to its investigation of postcolonial criticism from an economic stance, misunderstands the scope of the postcolonial political unconscious due to its homogenous focus. His generalization that, in postcolonial texts, “*the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society*” is problematic because of its

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Stephen Teo, *Wong Kar-Wai* (London: BFI Publishing, 2005), 99.

argument that the colonizing apparatus that used to occupy an author's landscape ultimately defines a work of postcolonial fiction.<sup>2</sup> Allegorical readings of texts can certainly be useful when one wishes to move past formalism and conduct a historical or political analysis, but economic readings such as Jameson's can ignore other kinds of allegories involving structures of oppression that exist alongside capitalist globalization.

In her book *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*, Gayatri Gopinath argues that postcolonial queer narratives must inevitably grapple with "the logic of blood, patrilineality, and patriarchal authority" that Jameson's totalizing thesis fails to consider.<sup>3</sup> There are, according to Gopinath, homophobic and patriarchal forces brought on by colonial capitalism that we must read by studying the violence done to the queer body, which acts as an allegorical space representing the queer colonized condition, a queerness that is "inextricable from prior and continuing histories of colonialism, nationalism, racism, and migration."<sup>4</sup> An adequate and conscientious exploration of national allegory must move beyond Jameson's impulse to link "queer desire to an index of geopolitical change."<sup>5</sup>

Relying on Gopinath's model of investigating diaspora in a queer context, I will analyze the queer body and its role in "hegemonic

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<sup>2</sup> Fredric Jameson, "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," *Social Text* 15 (Autumn 1986): 69. Italics Jameson's.

<sup>3</sup> Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 178.

<sup>4</sup> Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*, 3.

<sup>5</sup> Karl Schoonover and Rosalind Galt, *Queer Cinema, World Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 164.



colonial, national, and diasporic framings of sexuality” in *Happy Together*.<sup>6</sup> The postcolonial condition in *Happy Together* does not fit into the specific South Asian paradigm that Gopinath explores in her book, but the film is still useful in exploring the ways diaspora has direct implications for queer people. I argue that the damage exacted upon the queer bodies of Wong Kar-Wai’s film is representative of postcolonial homophobic marginalization. The control of the queer body in *Happy Together* is not merely a representation of colonialism in miniature but rather a queering of the Jamesonian national allegory—a manifestation of the homophobia inherent in colonial patriarchal power relations. I will show that, even though “Jameson assumes that sexuality goes into the private sphere and politics goes into the public sphere,” the marginalization of queer people and colonized people are both of importance in considering the postcolonial text as a national allegory.<sup>7</sup> In doing so, I hope to gain some insights into how Marxism can be applied to the queer condition and to understand the way the concepts of Marxist allegory and diasporic queerness interact.

## Reassessing National Allegory

Gopinath’s model as she outlines it in *Impossible Desires* adds the crucial dimension of diaspora studies to Jameson’s writings on national identity. Diaspora studies focuses on the varied impacts of colonization, with special attention paid to transnationality. The important addition that studies of diaspora bring to discussions of colonization is the discipline’s intersectional approach. Diasporic cultures are characterized by issues of loss and questions of belonging, and such issues of

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<sup>6</sup> Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*, 179.

<sup>7</sup> Jeremy Tambling, *Wong Kar-Wai’s “Happy Together”* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003), 11.

homelessness and alienation cannot be fully examined without an understanding of the way national categories become more mixed and complicated after the migration and forced relocation brought about by colonialism. Such an understanding of national identity problematizes the ethnocentric viewpoint that national boundaries are rigid and fixed. Gopinath emphasizes the national hybridity inherent to postcolonial migration, and Jameson's writings on national allegory are limited by a lack of attention to this nuanced understanding of the complexities of diasporic populations. Other scholars of global diasporas such as Anna Amelina and Karolina Barglowski similarly argue, "Because understandings of ethnicity vary across time and space, people by no means agree on ethnic sameness and otherness and, although diasporas may bring together individuals and offer them sources of community feeling, not all migrants from the same country of origin are equally included in diasporic life."<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, Wong Kar-Wai's decision to set his film in Buenos Aires rather than Hong Kong complicates standardized national allegories and draws our attention to the specificity of each nation's specific status in the global hierarchy. At the start of the film, Lai Yiu-Fai's statement, "So we left Hong Kong to start over. We hit the road and ended up in Argentina" is presented so matter-of-factly that it completely glosses over any explanation as to why the couple has left Hong Kong. Such a random and unexplained catalyst for the start of the film betrays the more complex reasons that lie behind postcolonial migration and the pressures that often drive the colonized subject from their native land. In his 2000 essay "Postmodernism and Hong Kong

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<sup>8</sup> Anna Amelina and Karolina Barglowski, "Key Methodological Tools for Diaspora Studies: Combining the Transnational and Intersectional Approaches," in *The Routledge Handbook of Diaspora Studies*, ed. Robin Cohen and Carolin Fischer (New York: Routledge, 2019), 31.



Cinema,” filmmaker Evans Chan writes, “The handover itself, exacerbated by the 1989 Tiananmen horror, has triggered some of the most astounding spread of Chinese diaspora in recent times. Presently, close to half of Hong Kong’s population have foreign residences—what locals call their ‘fire exit.’”<sup>9</sup> We might imagine that the couple has left Hong Kong in an attempt to avoid the territory’s impending reterritorialization, complicating the standard idea of national allegory and thereby reinventing it.

Wong Kar-Wai’s film is also consistent with the other necessary change in allegorical readings of decolonization according to Gopinath, namely the addition of queer theoretical perspectives to diaspora studies. In the introduction to *Impossible Desires*, Gopinath argues that diaspora studies are not as intersectional as they could be and stresses the need for the queer experience to be added to theories of oppression after colonization. Queer theory acts as a means of representing LGBTQ+ voices not merely by way of paying attention to depictions of queerness in texts but also by way of undermining standard heteronormative reading practices. The queering of allegory necessitates an alternative paradigm to use when viewing issues presented in a text. As Sara Ahmed points out in *Queer Phenomenology: Objects, Orientations, Others*, queerness means “‘not following’ this line” of heterosexuality and heteronormative ways of being “and hence being ‘off line’ in the very direction of their desire.”<sup>10</sup> Instead of fitting the queer subject solely into the binary of first world capitalist colonizer vs. third world colonized subject, *Happy Together* demands a

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<sup>9</sup> Evans Chan, “Postmodernism and Hong Kong Cinema,” in *Postmodernism and China*, ed. Arif Dirlik and Xudong Zhang (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 304–305.

<sup>10</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Objects, Orientations, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 70. See also Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*, 22.

more nuanced, complex understanding of the relationship between the nation and queerness. Wong Kar-Wai's film does not use queerness "only as a means to an end, the visible part of an allegorical text that actually aims to speak about the nation."<sup>11</sup> The violence enacted upon the queer subject's body in *Happy Together* does not equate strictly to nationalist violence imposed upon the colonized but rather speaks to the concepts of nationhood that give rise to discourses of heteronormativity, homophobia, and anti-queer violence.

How do we see a specifically nationalistic brand of homophobia made manifest in *Happy Together*? Masculinity and strong male bodies, Kwai-Cheung Lo argues, are central to Hong Kong's national identity and have been throughout its colonial history. Kwai-Cheung Lo finds that, in an attempt to transcend its status as a British colony, the territory has striven for a "complex cultural formation of Chinese identity through the Hong Kong muscular body."<sup>12</sup> Additionally, one could almost certainly argue that the subordinated colony occupies a kind of submissive, "feminized" spot in the global hierarchy.<sup>13</sup> The 1991 legalization of homosexuality in Hong Kong would likely have been viewed by the colonized bourgeoisie as a threat to this national masculinity, especially since gay Asian men have long been "doubly a minority and doubly fragmented from the vantage point of dominant culture."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Schoonover and Galt, *Queer Cinema, World Cinema*, 134.

<sup>12</sup> Kwai-Cheung Lo, *Chinese Face/Off: The Transnational Popular Culture of Hong Kong* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 82.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>14</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 92. See also



Figure 1: Lai-Yiu Fai and the stained mirror. Source: The Big Picture.  
<http://thebigpicturemagazine.com/lost-classic-happy-together-wong-kar-wai-1997/>

In spite of an attempt to legitimize itself in terms of Chinese national identity, Hong Kong has merely reinforced western colonial values of dominance, since “the bodies are basically created and trained by the rules of the dominant colonial system.”<sup>15</sup> The toxic masculinity of nationalism is inextricable from Hong Kong’s growing interest in “Western styles, images of which were widely diffused by the new mass-media.”<sup>16</sup> Jeremy Tambling sees the categorization of *Happy Together* within the road movie genre itself as embodying a “North American version of macho behavior.”<sup>17</sup> The appearance and placement of the queer body in *Happy Together* is representative of the specter of

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Rozanna Lilley, *Staging Hong Kong: Gender and Performance in Transition* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1998), 213.

<sup>15</sup> Kwai-Cheung Lo, *Chinese Face/Off*, 83.

<sup>16</sup> Matthew Turner, “Hong Kong Sixties/Nineties: Dissolving the People,” in *Hong Kong Sixties: Designing Identity*, ed. Matthew Turner and Irene Ngan (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Arts Center, 1995), 15.

<sup>17</sup> Tambling, *Wong Kar-Wai’s “Happy Together,”* 33.

nationalist homophobia, brought on by diasporic attempts to construct a national sense of self by way of a reliance on toxic masculinity. As we shall see, Wong Kar-Wai's film perfectly captures this constant desire for dominance and the continuous capability for nationalist violence that is an important component for our reading of the movie as a national allegory.

## The Logic of Blood

After decolonization, the queer body becomes a casualty of what Gopinath calls "the logic of blood."<sup>18</sup> In Wong Kar-Wai's film, blood acts as a symbol of the violence enacted on the queer body but also of the pressure to conform to a particular heritage as a result of nationalist ideology. The violent externality of blood as well as the internal lineage with which the colonized subject must grapple are problems for queer diaspora. The mirrored function of blood as a both internal and external factor of oppression shows the difficulty of conforming to nationalist heteronormative categories. *Happy Together* opens with Lai Yiu-Fai looking at himself in the mirror, his body almost resembling a clean slate. There are marks on the mirror, however, that look like a large blood spatter (Figure 1). The clean slate of Lai Yiu-Fai's body would suggest a return to some idealized past between the two lovers, but the bloodlike stain on the mirror suggests otherwise. As Ackbar Abbas states in his history of Hong Kong, "Hong Kong has no precolonial past to speak of."<sup>19</sup> Abbas's statement relies on a definition of an absent "precolonial past" that is not technically accurate, since "Hong Kong did have a history before 1841, when it was

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<sup>18</sup> Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*, 178.

<sup>19</sup> Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 2.



ceded to the British,” but one could argue that colonialism has shaped Hong Kong in such a lasting way that there is no historical memory of a Hong Kong landscape that is free from the logic of colonization.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, there is no starting over for the queer body due to the threat of violence against the queer subject. Queer subjects are always already marked by difference and violence, and any attempt to break free from the homophobic discourses of colonialism that control them, Wong Kar-Wai’s film suggests here, is impossible.

The question of who is dominant and who is submissive in Lai Yiu-Fai’s and Ho Po-Wing’s abusive relationship is not so easy to answer.<sup>21</sup> This lack of a clearly definable allegory is a result of the “queering” of national allegory once issues of sexuality are considered alongside nationality. Lai Yiu-Fai’s dominance during the film’s opening sex scene would seem to imply a similar mode of dominance in the couple’s power dynamic, but, in the following scene, Ho Po-Wing exerts a control over the placement of Lai Yiu-Fai’s body by forcing Lai Yiu-Fai to stand with him while the two attempt to hitchhike after their car breaks down. This synchronous placement of the queer bodies in relation to their surroundings offsets Lai Yiu-Fai’s voice-over, which informs us that the couple soon splits up again following a defunct road trip in Buenos Aires.

The power dynamic in the film is constantly shifting between who is more successful in intimidating the other, which allegorically represents the tensions between China and the reincorporated territory

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>21</sup> See Chung Chin-Yi, “Wong Kar-Wai’s Treatment of Love in *Happy Together*, *Chungking Express*, and *In the Mood for Love*,” *LangLit* 4, no. 2 (November 2017): 64, [https://www.academia.edu/35391318/WONG\\_KAR\\_WAIS\\_TREATMENT\\_OF\\_LOVE\\_IN\\_HAPPY\\_TOGETHER\\_CHUNGKING\\_EXPRESS\\_AND\\_IN\\_THE\\_MOOD\\_FOR\\_LOVE](https://www.academia.edu/35391318/WONG_KAR_WAIS_TREATMENT_OF_LOVE_IN_HAPPY_TOGETHER_CHUNGKING_EXPRESS_AND_IN_THE_MOOD_FOR_LOVE).

of Hong Kong following British colonization. Hong Kong is typically seen as subordinate to China, yet it “is in many other crucial respects *not* in a dependent subaltern position but is in fact more advanced—in terms of education, technology, access to international networks, and so forth—than the colonizing state.”<sup>22</sup> Due to the dual identity of postcolonial Hong Kong, “there is a desperate attempt to clutch at images of identity, however alien or clichéd these images are.”<sup>23</sup> The same issue of identity can be found within the sphere of postcolonial sexuality. To move beyond a mere allegory of nations, we must also read this scene as representative of the various ways discourses of masculinity have led to an unstable power dynamic between Lai Yiu-Fai and Ho Po-Wing. Ho Po-Wing controls Lai Yiu-Fai’s reliance on the relationship by forcing him to be physically present even when efforts at hitchhiking are going nowhere. Their attempts at dominance over each other indicate a symbiotic relationship and both men’s simultaneous efforts to be sovereign. Their identities are centered around typical practices of hegemonic masculinity, even though at the same time their relationship should run counter to such practices. In these circumstances, a queer relationship cannot survive (or, at the very least, can only survive uneasily and precariously) since queer “desire, practices, and subjectivities...are rendered impossible and unimaginable within conventional diasporic and nationalist imaginaries.”<sup>24</sup>

Following the road trip scene, we see Lai Yiu-Fai in his underwear, staring at himself in a mirror. He punches the mirror,

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<sup>22</sup> Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong*, 6.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 69.

<sup>24</sup> Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*, 11.



resulting in him breaking the glass and bloodying his fist. Unlike the previous introspective scene wherein Lai Yiu-Fai inspects his body in the mirror, the blood here is real rather than imaginary. Lai Yiu-Fai has internalized the notions of strength and masculinity that are so central to Ho Po-Wing's methods of control. The abuse that Ho Po-Wing has brought upon Lai Yiu-Fai during the previous phase of their relationship has suddenly manifested itself in a self-inflicted act of violence. Lai Yiu-Fai's turning point from passivity to an actively violent, aggressive personality foreshadows the physical violence he will use against Ho Po-Wing later on in the film, and the realization of Lai Yiu-Fai's agency comes at the cost of doing damage to his own body. If we are to understand this scene as constitutive of an alienated colonized queer mindset, Lai Yiu-Fai's confusion about how to embody queer male sexuality leads him to resort to the same brand of violence that has been a part of his relationship for so long. In the same way that the colonized mimic their oppressors in order to gain dominance in the colonial hierarchy, Lai Yiu-Fai is learning to mimic Ho Po-Wing's dominant brand of masculinity. As Gopinath argues, "The 'mimic' masculinities of colonized men are not so much desperate attempts to become real as they are the only forms of identification available to them."<sup>25</sup> Lai Yiu-Fai's enactment of the logic of bloody conflict and physical control is reminiscent of postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha's insights on "mimicry," the concept by which the colonized can at best be "almost the same, *but not quite*" in their attempts to replicate the same forms of domination that oppress them.<sup>26</sup> Such a difficulty in attaining an identity is the result of

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 73.

<sup>26</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge 1994), 86. Italics Bhabha's.

overlapping structures of oppression—one cannot inhabit one dominant nationalist masculine identity without suppressing one's own queer identity.

This dormant potential for violence comes to a head in the next scene, when Lai Yiu-Fai shows up at Ho Po-Wing's apartment. Ho Po-Wing pulls Lai Yiu-Fai into the domestic setting and forces kisses on him aggressively. The two begin to beat each other up, leading to a scuffle on Ho Po-Wing's bed that is akin to sex due to their intertwining bodies as they flail around horizontally with each other. The masculine, dominant undertones of such a forceful approach to a relationship suggest an inextricable link between sexual acts and homophobic violence when the queer subject attempts to assert their patriarchal dominance. Ho Po-Wing sobs silently after Lai Yiu-Fai leaves the apartment. If Gopinath is correct when she states that audibility is a way for the queer subject to demonstrate their representation and their visibility, then this moment of vulnerability for Ho Po-Wing is marked by an *absence* of this subversive brand of queer representation.<sup>27</sup> The colonized queer subject is shown here to be alienated and fragmented, serving as an image of their sexual orientation or their national community while being denied a voice.

Soon after, Ho Po-Wing gets beaten up by an unseen figure, necessitating a reliance on Lai Yiu-Fai. "Let's start over," he tells Lai Yiu-Fai in the hallway of a hospital after getting treatment for his wounds. The bloody injuries Ho Po-Wing sustains are representative of the violence against the queer subject, and seeing Ho Po-Wing in pain leads to Lai Yiu-Fai's agreement to take in his abusive former lover. At this point in the film, both Lai Yiu-Fai and Ho Po-Wing have had their blood appear externally on their respective bodies. This external

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<sup>27</sup> See Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*, 49.



placement of blood disrupts the internal logic of blood that is a part of the heterosexual domesticity and kinship upon which diasporic communities depend in the postcolonial world. Their blood acts here as a representation of their pain and inability to settle comfortably into a heteronormative postcolonial landscape rather than a means of continuing their familial lineage.

These moments act as precursors to the scenes in the section of the movie wherein Lai Yiu-Fai and Ho Po-Wing live together in an apartment, a site in which their toxic dialogue with one another frequently escalates into domestic violence. As we will see, the pressures and tensions of domesticity are further means by which colonized queer subjects are oppressed. In the case of the couple's cohabitation, the logic of blood further forces the characters into ever more narrow categories of living, and the pressure to conform to domestic roles creates a kind of unlivable living space, demonstrating the way the logic of blood is part of the same field of oppression as the logic of heteronormativity.

## **Uninhabitable Cohabitations**

"Migration," writes Johanna L. Waters, "has enabled Hong Kong Chinese families to maximize the potential accumulation of different forms of capital at different geographical sites."<sup>28</sup> Migrant families, Waters argues, are pressured to gain cultural capital "whilst espousing both traditional familial values *and* principles of free market capitalism."<sup>29</sup> As Xioaying Wang states, under colonial capitalism's dissolution of immigrants' traditional values, "traditions and customs

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<sup>28</sup> Johanna L. Waters, "Transnational Family Strategies and Education in the Cotemporary Chinese Diaspora," *Global Networks* 5, no. 4 (2005): 363.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 360.

are left to live or die according to circumstances, or more precisely, according to their degree of affinity with the capitalist market.”<sup>30</sup> Indeed, the family unit, as memorably outlined by Friedrich Engels in his writings on the problems of “the dominance of the man, [and] [...] the indissolubility of marriage,” acts as a means of replicating the very power relations that fuel capitalism, since the domestic division of labor translates into the division of labor of society at large.<sup>31</sup> As a result, the colonized queer subject is triply oppressed by the living standards under capitalism, the assignment of domestic roles, and the alienation of diasporic homelessness.

The couple attempts to live together and to enact domestic roles that only lead to further turbulence in their lives. Rather than merely representing a territory over which the colonized fight, the war for dominance of the living space between Ho Po-Wing and Lai Yiu-Fai also represents the queer alienation within the heteronormative home. Gopinath states that “For queer racialized migrant subjects, ‘staying put’ becomes a way of remaining within the oppressive structures of the home—as domestic space, racialized community space, and national space—while imaginatively working to dislodge its heteronormative logic.”<sup>32</sup> The scenes in the film wherein Lai Yiu-Fai and Ho Po-Wing uncomfortably attempt to sleep next to each other in a cramped living space “dislodge [the] heteronormative logic” of the home, but they do so by portraying the heteronormative norms of

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<sup>30</sup> Xioaying Wang, “Hong Kong, China, and the Question of Postcoloniality,” in *Postmodernism and China*, ed. Arif Dirlik and Xudong Zhang (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 99.

<sup>31</sup> Friedrich Engels, “The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1978), 750.

<sup>32</sup> Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*, 14–15.



domesticity as harmful for the two lovers as they attempt to work through their doomed, dysfunctional relationship.<sup>33</sup>

Upon cohabitating, Lai Yiu-Fai washes and cleans Ho Po-Wing's body, getting rid of the blood from his face and legs, yet not erasing the specter of dominance that is implicated by Ho Po-Wing's intrusive presence in his home. Patriarchal forces have damaged Ho Po-Wing and Lai Yiu-Fai literally and figuratively, but the lovers continue to attempt an unconventional kinship, trying to carve out a domestic relationship in a heteronormative postcolonial world. The vigorous fashion in which Lai Yiu-Fai cleans Ho Po-Wing's body ("Be gentle," Ho Po-Wing grumbles) equates to a desperate attempt to erase evidence of the patriarchal forces that have brought both lovers to this point.

Despite the initial appearance of their closeness during these moments, the interactions between Ho Po-Wing and Lai Yiu-Fai during Ho Po-Wing's recovery are fraught with acts of dominance and, at times, more physical violence. These moments of violence within the quintessential sphere of domesticity itself—the shared living space of the home—are perhaps the most telling exchanges in the whole movie, since they sum up the lovers' dependence upon one another despite the danger such dependence poses to their individual well-being. Both lovers have become reliant on each other in such a way as to fail to recognize the toxicity of their ongoing partnership. The almost masochistic nature of their partnership reflects the impossibility of a living arrangement wherein both figures are on equal footing and no dominance or resentment occurs between the two. Gopinath's notion of "staying put" in the subversive queer domestic space is shown to be an inadequate concept for this particular postcolonial queer text, since

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 15.

reinventing domesticity in a diasporic queer context does not necessarily always prevent masculinity from pervading the home.<sup>34</sup> Sites of liberation can always become permeated by the specter of domination.



Figure 2: Lai Yiu-Fai and Ho Po-Wing tango. Source: The Film Sufi. <http://www.filmsufi.com/2012/09/happy-together-wong-kar-wai-1997.html>

The melancholic tones of the couple's domestic disputes increase as the film progresses. Chris Berry explains that, in East Asian societies, "the hierarchy of blood family roles formed the archetypal model for these roles throughout society," which results in a recurring trope that Berry identifies in his article "Happy Alone? Sad Young Men in East Asian Gay Cinema."<sup>35</sup> This trope is the result of the fact that "the only place of the individual outside family roles is that of the outcast, the exile, the social derelict."<sup>36</sup> Nowhere is the feeling of exile

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>35</sup> Chris Berry, "Happy Alone? Sad Young Men in East Asian Gay Cinema," *Journal of Homosexuality* 39, nos. 3-4 (2000): 190.

<sup>36</sup> Berry, "Happy Alone?," 190.



more palpable than the film's tango scene featuring Lai Yiu-Fai and Ho Po-Wing in their apartment (Figure 2). It is important to keep in mind that, for Gopinath, the queer diasporic body, a locus upon which "legacies are imaginatively contested and transformed," can become a site of resistance in queer texts.<sup>37</sup> The tango scene, however, suggests an overall pessimistic tone and serves as the centerpiece of what is overall a text about the failures of belonging within a landscape of homophobic, patriarchal nationalism.

Unlike the heterosexual tango seen in the club where Lai Yiu-Fai works at the beginning of the movie, this tango takes place in the midst of squalor, with an awkward sense of rhythm, and it is far from spectacular. This moment subverts heterosexual discourses due to its disruption of standard heteronormative practices of togetherness and bonding, but, on the other hand, the pessimism implied by such a setting and such an uneven power dynamic is hard not to notice. Ho Po-Wing leans on Lai Yiu-Fai (echoing an earlier scene when Ho Po-Wing lays his head on Lai Yiu-Fai's in the back of a taxicab) while Lai Yiu-Fai leads. Their interlocked hands draw attention to the bandages wrapped around Ho Po-Wing's hands. The ideal fluidity and beauty of the tango are disrupted by Ho Po-Wing's incongruous, blatantly injured hands, stifling any semblance of a peaceful queer relationship due to the looming presence of violence against the queer subject. Eventually, the couple begins kissing and embracing passionately, stumbling and wobbling while doing so. Barbara Mennel notes the scene's "stark setting [which] [...] captures an alienating cold quality in contrast to the erotic warmth associated with the family," as well as

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<sup>37</sup> Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*, 4.

the characters' dance style, which is "less upright and precise than the movements that traditionally characterize the tango."<sup>38</sup>

In addition to the clumsy movements of the physically and psychologically damaged lovers, the scene also features the couple's impoverished surroundings, which display the capitalist underpinnings of colonized queer life. Both the unclean apartment as well as the desolate kitchen in which they dance together are settings that indicate that their tango (i.e. the metaphor for how they navigate their relationship) can only take place in spaces marked by poverty. The lovers rely on each other to be able to thrive in a world that requires work and financial success in order for survival. Despite the fact that Ho Po-Wing has just won money on a horse race, he still clings to Lai Yiu-Fai for financial reasons, asking Lai Yiu-Fai why he quit his job and not attempting to help get the couple out of their dingy living space. The lovers uncomfortably dance in their unglamorous surroundings as they cling to each other in order to survive, relying on each other in an uninhabitable relationship.

The couple may share an aestheticized, romantic moment here, but it is one moment in a long trajectory of abuse and dominance. Similarly, there is a kind of ironic beauty in the couple's attempt to survive in the midst of capitalist inequality, but a perimeter of darkness surrounds the scene's soft lighting, representing the damaging forces from which the queer colonized subject cannot escape. The transnationality implied by the Argentinian music that plays during this moment sets up a contrast between the "proper" tango and the couple's imperfect tango, to say nothing of the implied contrast between Hong Kong and Argentina, which is indicative of the couple's postcolonial dislocation and their loss of national identity due to their

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<sup>38</sup> Barbara Mennel, *Cities and Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 98.



queerness. Any romantic implications of this tender moment are undercut by “the backdrop to the poverty and unhappiness brought on by neoliberal reform [which] functions as a critique of the colonial fantasy.”<sup>39</sup> Even though this scene operates as a powerful critique of “the logic and dominance of these regimes,” the scene also paints resistance as ultimately an exercise in futility, necessitating an eking out of a meager existence within the uninhabitable yet inescapable forces of postcolonial queer life.<sup>40</sup>

## Conclusion

*Happy Together* demonstrates a variety of different ways that the queer subject is oppressed after colonization, which in turn illustrates the limits of standard Marxist national allegorical readings of texts. The national concerns of Wong Kar-Wai’s film cannot be discounted, but the national concerns are clearly connected to the film’s queer concerns. By enacting roles of masculinity and dominance, Ho Po-Wing and Lai Yiu-Fai create a desperate attempt to recapture the past, despite the physical harm this involves as well as the alienating harm this causes for their relationship. The duo’s nostalgia is a desire for the long-absent sense of happiness that they once experienced, even though this happiness likely never existed for them in the first place. As Rey Chow points out, “Nostalgia [...] is no longer an emotion attached to a concretely experienced, chronological past; rather it is

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<sup>39</sup> Jinah Kim and Neda Atanasoski, “Unhappy Desires and Queer Postsocialist Futures: Hong Kong and Buenos Aires in Wong Kar-Wai’s *Happy Together*,” *American Quarterly* 69, no. 3 (September 2017): 709.

<sup>40</sup> Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*, 28.

attached to a fantasized state of oneness.”<sup>41</sup> Nowhere in the postcolonial fragmented world can we go back to some ideal pre-colonial utopia, nor can the queer subject escape their specific brand of oppressive alienation.

We can see, then, that reading a postcolonial text purely along national lines does disservice to discourses of patriarchal masculinity and homophobia that are elided in Jameson's theoretical framework. Gopinath's work, too, while powerful in its analysis of postcolonial queer resistance through subversive filmmaking, at times does not give adequate attention to the inevitable reinforcement of postcolonial alienation in some of these rebellious cinematic moments. At times, as Gopinath successfully shows in *Impossible Desires*, queer colonized subjects can escape these norms, but films such as *Happy Together* illustrate the queer colonized condition as an ultimately doomed one.

Wong Kar-Wai's film shows the pitfalls of socially constructed paradigms of national belonging and gender, but it also implies that resistance is inseparable from domineering discourses of domesticity, blood, and nationalist heteronormative masculinity. *Happy Together* calls for a new conception of gender and sexuality that breaks free of these discourses. To quote Judith Butler, “multiple identifications can constitute a nonhierarchical configuration of shifting and overlapping identifications that call into question any primacy of univocal gender identification.”<sup>42</sup> Butler's poststructuralist attitude toward gender, which would reveal Lai Yiu-Fai's and Ho Po-Wing's toxic masculinity and dominance to be an arbitrary set of characteristics brought about

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<sup>41</sup> Rey Chow, “Nostalgia of the New Wave: Structure in Wong Kar-Wai's *Happy Together*,” *Camera Obscura: A Journal of Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 42 (September 1999): 35.

<sup>42</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 89.



by oppressive gender roles, can also be applied to the postcolonial condition, wherein certain behaviors are said to constitute a national identity. *Happy Together* is a film that presents the urgency of imagining “‘other ways of being in the world’ that resist the reduction of complex lives and histories to ‘living labor.’”<sup>43</sup> To imagine a better world, we must keep Marxism and postcolonialism in mind while also studying specifically queer dispossession in order to make our analyses of queer diaspora sufficiently intersectional. We must also be aware of the ways that these discourses can control attempts at queer colonized resistance.

### ***Note on the Author***

**Ryan Kerr** is an English PhD student at the University of Florida. He holds an MA in English from the University of Virginia and a BA in English with a minor in political science from the University of Arkansas. His research concerns the intersection of modernism, postmodernism, global politics, and media. Kerr uses a blend of Marxist theory and postcolonial theory to investigate the political implications and ideological underpinnings of various forms of media. His current dissertation work focuses on periodizing capitalist realism from high British modernism to post-WWII Britain. Kerr’s article “Empathy, Decolonization, and the Oppressed in *Ulysses*” has appeared in *Joyce Studies Annual*, and his article “Keeping Up the Good Work: Depictions of Class, Economics, and Capitalism in ‘Frank’s Return’” has appeared in *Arkansas Review: A Journal of Delta Studies*. He has a book review published in *ImageText: Interdisciplinary Comics Studies*, and he has work forthcoming in *James Joyce Quarterly*. He is currently the president of the Marxist Reading Group at the University of Florida, and

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<sup>43</sup> Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*, 55.

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