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Gut Feelings: Queer Love and Embodiment among Bears in Malaysia

DISSERTATION

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for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Anthropology

by

Sandy Wenger

Dissertation Committee:
Distinguished Professor George Marcus, Chair
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DEDICATION

To

The Real Housebears of Dutamas.
We are all made through love and stories. Thank you for sharing both with me.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my boys—the wonderful brotherhood of men without whom this project would have never even been conceived of. In line with confidentiality agreements and protections, they shall remain unnamed, but this does not lessen my gratitude for their love, friendship, generosity, and support. I thank them for welcoming me into their lives, trusting me with their thoughts and feelings, introducing me to the joys that are Malaysian culture and food, and for making Kuala Lumpur my Asian home.

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VITA

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Gut Feelings: Queer Love and Embodiment among Bears in Malaysia

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Distinguished Professor George Marcus, Chair

In this dissertation, I examine understandings and practices of love among gay men participating in the Malaysian Bear community. Bears are a subculture predominantly composed of gay, bisexual, and queer men who valorize and eroticize fat, hirsute, and aging bodies that tend to be stigmatized in mainstream gay and straight communities. I ethnographically explore how being part of the Malaysian Bear community helps my interlocutors navigate the double marginalization that stems from being gay in a country that criminalizes non-normative expressions of gender and sexuality, and from being fat in a social environment that limits them due to their size. My investigation of how love and romantic relationships are part of, and contribute to, the creation and recognition of these men's lifeworlds—the world as they immediately and subjectively experience it in their everyday lives—has been guided by four research questions: What does love mean to these men, and how is it practiced? What forms do their romantic relationships take and why? How do understandings of love connect to ideas about gender, the body, and sexuality? What are individual and sociocultural implications of gay men's constructions and practices of love?

During my ten-year engagement with queer men in Malaysia and 12 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Kuala Lumpur, I researched how members of the Bear community negotiate masculinity, sexuality, and the body through the lens of love—specifically, queer love. In my work, I conceptualize queer love not simply as a *form of being*, but rather a *form of doing*. Accordingly, I argue that queer love is a relational practice that does not only allow my interlocutors to forge romantic bonds with other men, but also forces them to confront their self-understanding. In other words, it compels them to reconsider the social positions they occupy in relation to their romantic and sexual partners, friends, families, communities, society at large, and the state. Ultimately, I show that their conceptions, experiences, and practices of love shape, and are shaped by, the men's self-perception and are integral to their process of becoming—becoming men, becoming gay men, becoming fat, gay men, becoming fat, gay, male romantic partners.

INTRODUCTION

Prelude

The *buka puasa* (Bahasa Malaysia: breaking of the fast) open house Irfan organized at his condominium in the city of Petaling Jaya was something I looked forward to every year. To mark the end of Ramadan, the holy month of fasting, introspection, and prayer for Muslims around the world, he invited his queer friends and allies for a potluck-style gathering that always brought together an eclectic group of people sharing delicious, mostly homecooked, dishes. One of my closest friends in Malaysia, Ryan, had picked me up, and I was grateful, because it meant that I did not have to rely on a Grab, a Southeast Asian rideshare service, to return to Kuala Lumpur (KL) later that evening. My boys—the somewhat misleading affectionate term I use when talking to, and about, my circle of mostly older, queer, male friends in Malaysia—have always treated me with generosity and kindness. They took turns driving me home after a night out even if it entailed a forty-minute detour for them; if I was unwell, they would bring over *congee* (rice porridge) with steamed fish to help settle my stomach; and during board game or movie nights, they spoiled me with cuddles, snacks, and plenty of tea.

After greeting Irfan with a hug, the three of us walked into the open-plan living area, and I sighed in relief when a cool, air-conditioned breeze touched my face. It was a particularly hot and humid day in June, and the short walk from the car had managed to make my skin feel sticky. I looked around the room that was already busy with the chatter and laughter of men who were mingling in small groups. I was happy to see many familiar faces. Ryan and I added our dishes to the large selection of fragrant food that was already laid out on the dining room table. Putting his arm around my shoulder, Irfan grinned: “So you made potato salad after all.”

I smiled back at him. “Yeah, but it’s only semi-German because it’s *halal* (Arabic: permissible, lawful; food that adheres to Islamic law). I added some beef bacon though, so we’ll have to let Danish know when he gets here.” Whereas Irfan and other Malay men at the party were Muslim and not allowed to eat pork, Danish was an Indian-Malaysian friend whose Hindu faith forbade him from eating beef. The ethnic diversity of our friend group meant that we had to consider many faith-based food restrictions at our potlucks.

Irfan gently squeezed my shoulder. “Danish won’t mind. He started a keto diet to lose some weight,” he said shaking his head. “So, he can’t eat it anyway.” He added that he would attach a sticky note to my bowl to warn others, too. I was not surprised to learn that Danish was trying a new diet. Like many of the men in the room, he was what Irfan called “a proper Bear”—a larger than the average gay man with a soft, full beard. Bears are a queer subculture that valorizes and eroticizes ageing, fat, hirsute men. Most of my friends participated in the Bear community, and those who were able to grow facial hair—which is not always possible for men belonging to different Asian ethnic groups—were seen as especially Bear-like. While Irfan, who also identified as a Bear, was happy with his appearance, Danish had been hopeful to lose a little bit of weight and “look more like a cub.” He had tried several diets, but in all the years I had known him, he had never managed to reduce his body weight.

After adding a small note to my dish, Irfan turned to Ryan, who had just returned from the kitchen with glasses of water for us, to ask if Kevin would join us later. Ryan shook his head and explained that his boyfriend would have to work all evening. Kevin had recently switched industries and spent extra time in the office learning more about his new role to help him settle into his job. “He’s in his fifties, so everything takes a little longer for him,” Ryan joked.

"You're one to talk," I chastised him lightly, though I could not keep myself from laughing, knowing that Kevin's careful manner meant that he, too, needed a little extra time to make decisions or complete a task. He and Ryan had met at a mutual friend's birthday party in 2013. Since that night, Ryan, who was more confident and assertive, had become the main driver in their relationship, initiating milestones such as moving in together and encouraging his boyfriend to take up new challenges. Kevin had been grateful: "I was in my previous job for so many years and I didn't like it. I kind of needed Ryan to tell me to apply for that new job. Working there isn't easy but also, it's not boring."

Irfan raised his eyebrows, but before he was able to add another quip about Ryan's age, the latter quickly asked him about his cats. I smiled at Ryan's genius—he knew exactly how to distract Irfan, who was known among my friends for his love of cats. He had recently adopted a stray kitten, bringing the total number of cats in his household up to four. As Ryan had anticipated, it only took a few seconds for Irfan to take out his phone and show us photos of the little one that was currently hiding with its new siblings in one of the bedrooms. Ryan himself had never been keen on having pets, and I briefly wondered if that had played a role in their breakup. Ryan and Irfan used to be a couple, living together for several years before ending the relationship and moving on to new partners. Despite a painful breakup, the two of them remained very close, and I had only ever known them to support each other.

The ringing of the doorbell interrupted our banter about boyfriends and cats. While Irfan went to greet the new arrivals and Ryan joined a group of men lounging on the floor close to the balcony, I lingered by the dining table trying to decide what to eat first. Irfan's boyfriend of more than twelve years, Yi Wei, gestured for me to join him. He was sitting on a row of dining chairs lining the wall, beside an old man I had never met. After loading a plate with food, I made my

way over to them and sat down. Yi Wei introduced the man as Ming Hee. I later learned that he is "one of the oldest gay guys actually living like a gay guy in KL," referring to the fact that Ming Hee and his late boyfriend moved in together and shared a home for several decades during an era when most gay men lived alone, stayed with family, or decided to start their own family with a woman.

Ming Hee was in his early eighties, but his mind and tongue were as sharp as those of a man half his age. As the three of us chatted, I offered Ming Hee a bite from my plate. Looking me up and down, he took a piece of fruit, swallowed it, and said: "A woman who clearly likes food. No wonder you get along so well with this bunch here." I was taken aback and could feel my face flush with embarrassment, because I assumed he was referring to the size of my body. Although I have spent my adult life as a fat woman, I had yet to learn how to accurately read, and respond to, comments about my body—I automatically presumed that they were intended to be demeaning.

Noticing my discomfort, Ming Hee leaned forward to pat my arm: "Don't be offended, *leng lui* (Cantonese: pretty girl). I wouldn't be here if I didn't like my Bears." He pointedly looked at Yi Wei whose tight fitted shirt empathized his bulky frame and hefty belly. Noticing, Yi Wei chuckled slightly and rolled his eyes—I empathized, having just felt the weight of Ming Hee's gaze myself. Then, Yi Wei got up, collected several used plates and glasses, and made his way to the kitchen.

Ming Hee smirked at me as he leaned back in his chair and folded his hands over his middle. "My partner is big and soft. Kind of like Yi Wei."

"Is he here, too?" I asked.

"No," he sighed. "He's in Houston." Ming Hee went on to tell me more about his boyfriend, an American named Michael, twenty-five years his junior, who lived in Texas. Michael was employed by an oil and gas company that had sent him on a long-term work assignment to Malaysia in 2011, which is where he met Ming Hee. After they spent three years together in Kuala Lumpur, Michael was asked to return to Houston, and from then on, the couple only managed to see each other about twice a year. "Not bad, considering the distance, but maybe foolish." Ming Hee remarked. "When you're as old as me, you don't really have time left to do all this long-distance nonsense."

"Nah," I softly disagreed. "That doesn't sound foolish. And clearly, you're making it work."

Ming Hee smiled at me: "Well, *leng lui*, love makes you do lots of things just to make it work. It'll only look foolish later."

Research Aims and Framework

Three years later, I was in California and in the process of finalizing my dissertation, and my mind kept wandering back to that night. I enjoyed the memory of Ryan sitting cross-legged on the floor, gesturing widely as he was entertaining a small audience of men with one his tales; of Irfan and Yi Wei briefly kissing in the kitchen, probably because they felt hidden from view; of my first, and only, encounter with Ming Hee, whose words still played on my mind. I thought about these moments, not because they were out of the ordinary, but because they precisely captured the everyday essence of what spending time with my friends in Malaysia felt like to me. They invoked some of the sensory and affective threads that connected us, and which were made

visible in our engagement with each other through conversations, gestures, glances, and touch. These moments also pointed to the richly layered relationships the men had built with one another, productive relationships that shifted and changed over time. Of course, these relationships were not void of tension, fissure, or splits. Nevertheless, events such as Irfan's *buka puasa* open house illustrate with how much kindness, generosity, and care the men generally met each other. In a nutshell, these moments call to mind the tremendous amount of love that exists within this community of men.

I share this memory here, at the beginning of this dissertation, to offer a first glimpse of who these men were—to themselves, to me, and to one another—and to give a sense of what kinds of questions might arise from an engagement with them. While I met many of my interlocutors ten years ago, most of them had known each other for decades, and had been fostering relationships, in large parts, through their engagement with the Malaysian Bear community. Bears are a subculture predominantly composed of gay, bisexual, and queer men that originated in the United States. Bear culture started out by valorizing and eroticizing fat, hirsute, and aging bodies that are stigmatized in mainstream straight and gay cultures, but Bear identity has evolved to include attitudes and behavioral characteristics that create a distinct but fluid Bear masculinity (see Barrett 2017; Hennen 2005, 2008; McGlynn 2021).

In Malaysia and elsewhere, Bears are among a range of queer, male subcultural communities that tend to associate different, and sometimes contradictory, forms of masculinity with gay identity. For instance, other queer subcultures that exalt fat male bodies include Chubs, Girth and Mirth, and Affiliated Big Men's Clubs (Pyle & Loewy 2009; Whitesel 2014, 2021). Like Bears, these subcultures arose in the United States and made their way to other parts of the world though I am not aware of them existing in Malaysia. In his work on Bears, Leathermen,

and Circuit Boys in the U.S., Barrett (2019) asserted that the globalization of such subcultures entails the local refashioning of the signs that index subcultural identities, which contributes to the diversity of understandings on global and local levels. In other words, questions like 'what is a Bear' or 'what is a Girth and Mirther' are answered differently by people in different places. In addition, it is important to recognize that while these subcultures overlap in many of their values, their participants' self-understanding can vary both within and across them, meaning that there exists a range of subcultural identities within these communities (see Adam & Berry 2013; Textor 1999).

Noticing how contested ideas around the category Bear were among gay men in and beyond Malaysia, I was intrigued to witness how love and romantic relationships unfolded among my friends participating in the Bear community. Thus, I began to explore how their relationships shaped, or were shaped by, their self-understandings as Bears or Chasers, the latter of whom are men who admire, and are attracted to, Bears. This raised several questions that I grapple with in this project: What does love mean to these men, and how is it practiced? What forms do their romantic relationships take and why? How do understandings of love connect to ideas about gender, the body, and sexuality? What are individual and sociocultural implications of gay men's constructions and practices of love?

In this dissertation, I seek to problematize understandings and practices of love among gay men participating in the Bear community in Malaysia. I argue that love mattered to my interlocutors because, for them, it was essential in the creation of relationships and the becoming of a person. Love contributes to the production of affective relations "that literally make people up (or damage them) mentally, emotionally, physically, and socially," and is thus one of the core elements "through which we make and remake one another" (Cantillon & Lynch 2017, 169-170).

Having said that, it is not my intention to essentialize or pathologize love. Rather, I approach love as a dialogic, multifaceted, and culturally situated social practice. Love can be 'made' and 'unmade,' and is always produced in a specific historical and social context that shapes the ways in which practices of love can be productive. In this dissertation, I pay close attention to the ways in which love intersects with masculinity, sexuality, and the body. I do so because these social categories are particularly relevant when considering the lived experiences of love and relationships among gay men in Malaysia who identify as Bears and those who desire and admire them.

A Note on Identities

When I speak of men who are gay and identify as Bears, I do not view these identity labels as unambiguous and axiomatic. Many of the categories that make up the LGBTQIA+ acronym—referring to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, asexual, and other individuals who self-identify as members of the community—are rooted in Western ideologies. Yet, scholars across disciplines have argued that terms such as *gay, lesbian*, or *transgender* are borrowed on a global scale and their specific meanings are adjusted to different localized contexts (see Boellstorff 2005; Gaudio 2009; Ioannides 2014). For example, in his work on queer activism in Palestine, Ashtan showed that "LGBTQ categories and identities are deployed, internalized, reconfigured, and indigenized by queer Palestinians" (2020, 192). Thus, these categories are "in some ways no longer Western" (ibid) but rather locally specific while, at the same time, they remain transnationally legible. In Malaysia, these categories are also increasingly taken up by members of queer communities, because the "imageries of self-empowerment and self-actualization that 'LGBTIQ' harbor are far more appealing than mostly derogatory local terms" (Goh 2020, 2). Hence, I believe that it is

important to be mindful of specific meanings and connotations when utilizing a particular term and clarify how and why it is applied.

Throughout the dissertation, I use the shortened acronym, LGBTQ, to emphasize my primary engagement with persons self-identifying according to these categories. I will also use this acronym to distinguish my voice from that of some Malaysian scholars, journalists, politicians, and religious leaders who use the more common abbreviation, LGBT, in a derogatory manner. Furthermore, I utilize the term *gay* because this is how my interlocutors described themselves. In Malaysia, there are various local terms and euphemisms for men who have sex with men that I heard my interlocutors employ on occasion—usually when gossiping about others—but in conversations with me, they always referred to themselves as gay. Accordingly, by utilizing this term, I do not mean to reduce my interlocutors' sexual identity to a sign of preexisting hegemonic discourses, but to emphasize that it is central to the men's understandings and expressions of their sexuality.

Similarly, I use the terms *Bear* and *Chasers* because my interlocutors applied them to themselves. Bear subculture was originally confined to the United States but is now a growing, global community. Yet, neither in, nor beyond, the U.S. does the category Bear describe a single type of person. Rather, it incorporates a variety of attributes that are often interpreted in deeply personal ways (Barrett 2017; Hennen 2005, 2008; McGlynn 2020; Quidley-Rodriguez & De Santi 2019; Wright 2013, 2014). Almost all definitions of Bear identity include descriptions of the Bear body "in an attempt either to describe what the typical Bear looks like or to refute the idea that Bears can be defined exclusively by their bodies" (Hennen 2005, 26). While questions around the body, fatness, and hirsuteness are a strong focus in this dissertation, my use of the term *Bear* is not intended to dismiss understandings and experiences of Bear identity that move

beyond corporal manifestations. Rather, I show that while body image concerns often led my interlocutors to the Bear community, their self-image as Bears was varied and involved subjective understandings of what Bears are in addition to what they look like.

Furthermore, in the U.S. and other Western cultures, the term *Chaser* is not exclusively used within Bear subculture but also by other communities of fat, gay men such as the aforementioned Affiliated Big Men's Clubs and the Girth and Mirth network (see Monaghan 2005; Pyle & Loewy 2009; Whitesel 2014). These communities emphasize different aspects of fat embodiment and can be so distinct that they are at odds with one another. For example, Whitesel identified "soft antagonism between Girth and Mirthers and the Bears" (2014, 51) that is the result of divergent imaginings of fat masculinity. Because participating in a particular subculture shapes their personal values and preferences, members of the Bear community tend to be attracted to what a Bear represents and are not necessarily interested in a Girth and Mirther. Accordingly, a Bear Chaser is not the same as a Chubby Chaser. As I focus solely on men participating in the Malaysian Bear community, the men I refer to as Chasers are those who are attracted to Bear bodies and Bear masculinity.

In this dissertation, I intend to provide an emic point of view and relate my interlocutors' lived experiences by employing language they themselves used when they reflected on their lives. In doing so, I acknowledge that social identities—gay, Bear, Chaser—have different connotations in Malaysia compared to when they are lived in other cultural contexts.

Framing Queer Love/ing

Karandashev noted that love is a "fussy and multifaceted concept" (2019, 31), and he is right. Scholars across different disciplines have tried to define love, often complementing each

other as they approach the concept from various—at times, overlapping—perspectives. Philosophers, for instance, have examined the nature of love and produced a range of theories from conceptions of love as a physical phenomenon to understandings of love as a spiritual experience (Singer 1994; Soble 1989; Solomon 1988). Psychologists frequently view love as an attachment process and created typological categorizations attempting to capture the behaviors, feelings, and cognitions that are part of love (Berscheid & Walster 1974; Hatfield & Rapson 1993; Lee 1977; Sternberg 1985). Sociologists also tend to view love as a set of attitudes and have examined these attitudes and the prevalence of love ideas in different communities (Giddens 1992; Goode 1959; Illouz 2012). Cultural anthropologists are similarly invested in understanding how love shows up across communities and have studied how customs, traditions, and norms affect manifestations of love in various cultures (Abu-Lughod 2016; Hirsch & Wardlow 2006; Jankowiak 199; Lindholm 200; Trawick 1990).

The term *love* can denote an emotion, and attitude towards another person, or a relationship between people; it can describe the passionate bond between lovers, the felt sense of affection towards a friend, the attachment between parents and their children, or a person's devotion to humankind. Although scholars have struggled to comprehensively define love, the one thing they tend to agree on is that love is a universal phenomenon. It is universal in that all humans experience the strong attachments and emotional dependency that are at the heart of loving relationships existence. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that the experience of love is predicated on the historical and sociocultural context in which it operates. This means that the notion of love has been changing throughout the history of human cultures, is both a personal construct and a cultural idea, and is always socially situated (Fisher 2004; Dion & Dion 1996; Hatfield, Mo, & Rapson 2015; Jankowiak & Fischer 1992; Karandashev 2017).

In this dissertation, I bring into conversation scholarly work from anthropology, queer studies, and psychology, examining how love was conceived of and practiced among Bears and Chasers in Malaysia. Though I intend to capture the great amount of love that existed among my interlocutors in general, the analytical focus in this dissertation is placed on romantic love. Romantic love is seen as distinct from other forms of love, such as familial, parental, or conjugal love, but a fixed definition for it does not exist. While it is often associated with passionate love and sexual desire, specific meanings of romantic love are culturally bound and vary greatly in their interpretation (Karandashev 2017). I use the term *romantic love* to describe the complex set of emotions, attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs that shaped the romantic relationships of the men I worked with. Love was created and maintained within these relationships, but also afforded for them to exist in the first place and to persist over time.

I argue that, through their dynamic nature, love and romantic relationships were part of, and contributed to, the creation and recognition of my interlocutors' lifeworlds—the world as they immediately and subjectively experienced it in their everyday lives (Schütz & Luckmann 2017). Because love does not exist outside the social reality of people, I view it as a sociocultural construct that is learned through, and manifested in, everyday practices which can vary from one person to the next (see Averill 1985; Beall & Sternberg 1995). In their lifeworlds, my interlocuters were situated in a community. That community was embedded in national and transnational structures, all of which had an impact on the everyday experiences and practices of the men I worked with. In my analysis of romantic relationships among gay men in Malaysia I consider where my interlocutors learned about romantic love practices, how love developed, and how social institutions and cultural discourses influenced this development. In short, I examine what queer love/ing looked like and accomplished for these men.

As love is a social construct, understandings of it are tied to social and political issues and created through narratives that cannot be seen as separate from dominant discourses. A main characteristic of discourse is that it links the individual to a system of power and control (Foucault 1980), which makes questions of power central to my discussion of love among gay Bears in Malaysia. Because discourses are based on existing power structures, it is important to interrogate how they are legitimated, negotiated, reproduced, and subverted through romantic relationships. In the context of queer anthropology, romantic relationships haven often become a locus of debates around the role of the state in the formation and recognition of non-normative forms of gender and sexuality. Several scholars have done the important work of showing not only how queer subjectivities are shaped by nationalist visions of the state, but also how sexual identities are linked to national belonging and reconstitute forms of national identity and citizenship (Boellstorff 2005; Manalansan 2003; Puar 2007; Tan 2021). Although this dissertation does not focus on nationalism, I recognize and examine the central role the Malaysian state and state-sponsored discourses play in the production of gay subjectivities and the creation of queer romantic relationships. Specifically, I concentrate on hegemonic discourses around gender, sexuality, and the body. I explore how these discourses—and thus, the structures of power upon which they are predicated—are both reinforced and undermined by gay men's pursuit of romantic relationships.

I focus on these discourses because they were integral to the everyday lived experience and, hence, self-understanding of my interlocutors. By valorizing and eroticizing fat, hairy, aging queer men, the Bear community is built around people who are reframing dominant understandings of what a gay man should look like and how he should act. Scholars studying Bear culture in the United States have been debating to what extent Bear identity reaffirms or

subverts both heteronormative and homonormative masculine ideals. While Harris (1997) and Sullivan (2003) asserted that Bear identity is predominantly modeled after heteronormative masculinity, Barrett (2017) and Wright (2013) argued that the gender ideology of Bears is more complex and involves gender variance that often reflects homonormative expressions of masculinity. In the context of Malaysia, I observed that my interlocutors transgressed a variety of social codes of masculinity, beauty, and desirability through their participation in, and support of, the local Bear community, regardless of whether they identified as Bears, Chasers, or something else. Romantic relationships provide a particularly salient site for the negotiation of sexual subjectivities because, unlike most other relationship forms, they involve both emotional and physical intimacy. It is within romantic relationships that people are most immediately confronted with competing discourses that shape understandings of their body, their gender, and their sexuality—in short, their person. I examine how my interlocutors contended with different discourses and made sense of who they were to others and themselves through interactions with their romantic partners. That is to say, I analyze how embodied gendered and sexual subjectivities and practices are bound up with various sociocultural discourses and constructed and experienced through romantic relations.

Queer theory is helpful in that regard because it challenges the idea of a fixed normal and allows us to disrupt binaries and think about alternatives to existing hegemonic power structures (see Berlant & Warner 1998; Halberstam 2005; Sedgwick 2008). Queer theory draws on both feminist theory and lesbian and gay studies to critique heterosexuality "by insisting that it is neither a natural basis of social relations nor a stable identity but 'a construction whose meaning is dependent on changing cultural modes'" (Schlichter 2004, 544 quoting Jagose 1996, 17). In other words, queer theory demonstrates how hegemonic discourses essentialize heterosexuality

and define sociocultural norms that determine how different sexual identities are understood and valued. If queerness, then, is looked at as "an outcome of strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices," it is possible to recognize that homosexuality is perceived as a threat because it is about more than sex—it is about an entire way of life that can challenge the supposed stability of existing norms (Halberstam 2005, 1).

I follow this lead by analyzing how the lifeworlds of gay men in Malaysia—that were shaped through their romantic relationships—called into question established social forms of romantic love, including normative romantic narratives, family structures, and sexual identities. Of course, sexuality lay at the heart of these relationships, many of which were the result of the men's identification with the Malaysian Bear community, a sexual subculture. Nevertheless, I extend my focus beyond my interlocutors' sexual desires to practices of love more generally. Honing in on love, rather than sexuality or desire, is important because it allows me to examine how the men dynamically construct attachments that produce their sense of self and reveal the ways in which heteronormative discourses are implicated in this process. This is because the drive to love "bears the weight of much ideological management and pedagogy, defining the normativity of the modern self much more than 'sexuality' as a category does" (Berlant 2001, 440). Honing in on love is also something that queer theorists have routinely neglected (ibid, Halperin 2019).

Halperin (2019) stated that, until recently, queer theory has been preoccupied with issues related to sex and sexual identity and had very little to say about love. He attributed this to the notion that love—romantic love in particular—is linked to normalizing discourses that make it unavailable for 'queering'. Indeed, romantic love is typically associated with traditional social institutions such as marriage or the nuclear family, which indicates that one of love's primary

social functions today is the advancement of "customary forms of personal life by endowing it with affective value and imbuing them with a look and feel of intrinsic normality" (Halperin 2019, 396). Because of this, existing socially sanctioned forms of love are not accessible to queer individuals as they reinforce the supposed abnormality of being queer and deny the queer potential of love.

By pointing to a time, "more than half a century ago when lesbian and gay male love was still irredeemably queer" (ibid, 397), Halperin argued that it is possible to recover queer love as an instance of counter-conduct, and thus, a form of resistance against society's attempts to standardize practices of love and intimacy. Yet, in doing so, he did not want to depict queer love as a variety of love, but bring out the queerness of love itself, "which extends beyond the normal queerness of romance to the radical incommensurability of love with established social forms … its overall lack of fit with the organizing principles or categories of personal and social life" (ibid, 419). In other words, Halperin asserted that its inherent queerness makes it impossible for love to simply be assimilated to the canon of social institutions that determine what romantic practices are either inside or outside a given norm. Instead, recognizing love's queerness means to acknowledge and emphasize features of love that defy forms of standardization and institutionalization—such as monogamy or marriage—that are central to heterosexual relationships.

In this dissertation, I build on Halperin's argument that queer communities do not have a different mode of loving, but practice love in ways which reveal that love is not subordinate to social norms and institutions. By working with gay men in Malaysia, a country where non-normative expressions of gender and sexuality are criminalized and pathologized, I explore how queer love manifests in a context in which it is not supposed to exist. I examine the different

forms romantic relationships took and show that practices of love among gay men were varied and simultaneously reproduced, subverted, and disregarded social norms. As such, this dissertation contributes to the field of queer anthropology—by detailing how my interlocutors created culturally grounded intimate spaces with their boyfriends, I illustrate how queer lifeworlds came to exist not just alongside, but within, the given normative reality of people in Malaysia.

In each chapter of this dissertation, I analyze practices of love at a different stage within a relationship to show that the creation of a queer lifeworld is an iterative process. It entails the ongoing negotiation and renegotiation of the relationship by the two parties involved. Each individual is acting based on his own set of values, beliefs, and desires, and then continues to modify and create a new—oftentimes, shared—understanding of what a relationship should look like, through reciprocal communications and actions. This iterative process also shapes how each man sees himself. Accordingly, I argue that love as a relational practice did not only enable my interlocutors to forge romantic bonds with other men, but also forced them to confront their self-understanding and reconsider the social positions they occupy in relation to their partners, friends, families, communities, society at large, and the state. To put it another way, how they experienced, understood, and practiced love with their boyfriends was integral to the men's process of becoming—becoming men, becoming gay men, becoming fat, gay men, becoming fat, gay, male romantic partners.

Queer Love in Malaysia?

Singaravelu and Cheah (2020) stated that research on queer communities in Malaysia is still relatively scarce, attributing this to the fact that non-normative expressions of gender and sexuality are highly contested from legal, social, and religiopolitical perspectives (see Goh 2017; Peletz 2002). However, this has not always been the case. Scholars like Michael Peletz (2006) noted the diversity in sexual and gender identities that existed in the early modern period in the Malay Archipelago, an extensive group of islands stretching from Indonesia and Malaysia to the Philippines and New Guinea. In different ethnic groups, some gender-diverse individuals were able to hold socially accepted roles in society, such as the Malaysian *sida-sida,* male-born priests who dressed as women and performed tasks that were usually taken on by women (ibid). Similarly, the Bugis in Indonesia recognized five gender categories and had ritual specialist known as Bissu who were neither male nor female but representative of the totality of the gender spectrum (Davies 2007). The permissive attitude towards non-hetero-normative gender and sexual identities in Malaysia—and many parts of the Malay Archipelago—did not persist. To understand the hostile stance towards queer communities that permeates Malaysian politics and society today, it is necessary to look at some of the historical developments that shaped the sociopolitical context of the country and its legal system.

Malaysia is a multiethnic, multicultural, and multi-religious nation comprised of thirteen states and three federal territories with the *Yang di-Pertuan Agong* (he who is made Lord; King) presiding ceremoniously as the head of the country. Malaysia practices a unique form of constitutional monarchy in that the *Yang di-Pertuan Agong* is elected from among the sultans to serve a five-year term. The fact that only adult male Malay Muslims are eligible to be elected as *Yang di-Pertuan Agong* indicates the privileged position of Malays in the political realm in the

country (Tay 2018). Because of its geographical location in Southeast Asia, Malaysia has always been a trade hub. Traders, especially from India and China, moved freely in Southeast Asian waters, and many of them began settling in Peninsular Malaysia from the 1st century CE onwards. During the British colonial period in the late 19th and early 20th century, the number of Chinese and Indian settlers increased dramatically, as they were brought into the country to work on rubber plantations and in tin mines (Lee & Tan 2017). Today, they make up a large percentage of Malaysia's population that is comprised of 179 officially recognized ethnic groups (Harding & Shah 2018), most of whom are collectively referred to as *Bumiputera* (son of the soil), the people considered indigenous to Southeast Asia. According to the Malaysian Department of Statistics (2021), Malays and other *Bumiputera* are the largest ethnic group in the country (69.8%), followed by Chinese Malaysians (22.4 percent) and Indian Malaysians (6.8 percent).

Fig 0.1: Map of Malaysia. Source: University of Texas at Austin. Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection.

It is important to note that before the British arrived in Malaysia, the Portuguese (1511-1641) and Dutch (1641-1786) colonized different parts of the country. Yet, the British years of colonial rule (1786-1957) were the ones that had the most significant long-term effects on the country's sociocultural makeup and local legal traditions (see Andaya & Andaya 2017) and, thus, shaped homonegative discourses in the country. During the British occupation of Malaysia, the colonial administration grouped ethnic communities in different occupational and territorial spaces and propagated racial ideology to protect their political and economic interests (Daniels 2005; Goh 2008). In their view, Chinese and Malays living in British Malaya had distinct racial characteristics that made them fit for a limited number of tasks. Such anthropological imaginings by the British resulted in the erosion of solidarity among precolonial customary communities as well as the institutionalization of cultural, economic, and social pluralism that has lasted to this day. This is not to say that precolonial states did not distinguish between different racial or ethnic groups. However, British colonial administrative policies emphasized the distinctiveness of racial categories to such a degree that previously blurred community boundaries became apparent at the everyday level and were further consolidated by the different ethnic groups as they started to develop their own sense of separateness (Milner 2008; Shamsul 1996).

The ethnic divide has been amplified by religious differences that affect both national and personal ideologies. In Malaysia, religion is linked to ethnicity whereby Malays practice Islam, most Chinese Malaysians are either Buddhist or Christian, and most Indian Malaysians practice Hinduism (Hoffstaedter 2011). Since Malaysian independence in 1957, the government has been propagating Islam as the primary religion. While freedom of religion is a constitutional right, Islam is the only religion enshrined in the Malaysian constitution, and only Muslims are protected from external proselytizing (Kloos and Berenshot 2017). In addition, Sharia law has

been given equal status with civil law regarding jurisprudential concerns affecting Muslims (Liow 2016). These processes ensured that Islam assumed an important place in the country's political psyche. Leading political parties have been drawing on the increased significance of Islam in Malaysia and continue to utilize the religion both to maintain ethnic boundaries enabling Malays to distinguish themselves from non-Malays and to strengthen the idea of Malay-Muslim supremacy. As a result, "two parallel societies – Muslim and non-Muslim – have gradually replaced what was a pluralist, secular Malaysian society" (Liow 2009, 191; see also Tan 2018).

Malaysia's legal system reflects this stratification of ethnoreligious groups. Rooted in colonial legacies, the country follows a mixed legal system that combines English common law, *syariah* (Islamic) law, and *adat* (customary law), the unwritten code governing the conduct of members of indigenous groups in Malaysia. Prior to being colonized by Western nations, different kinds of *adat* existed alongside *syariah* law. The latter had been introduced by Muslim traders from India in the ninth century CE (Ahmad 2012). When the British began to colonize different parts of what is now considered Malaysia, they began to introduce English common, or case, law and to establish courts of justice. They did so to remedy the "state of 'legal chaos', where Malays followed Muslim law and the Chinese and Indian settlers followed their own personal laws" (Ahmad 2012, 178). By the early 20th century, common law was adopted as the general law, resulting in the subordination of *syariah* law and *adat (*Harding 2012). Today, the Malaysian Constitution is considered the supreme law of the federation and all laws must be consistent with provisions of the Constitution. The Constitution recognizes both secular, or general, law and *syariah* law and determines their spheres of influence. All people staying in Malaysia are subject to secular law, which is applied in criminal and civil matters throughout the country. Only persons professing the religion of Islam, however, are additionally subject to

s*yariah* law for family and personal matters and, in some states[1], a limited number of criminal matters that go against the precepts of Islam (Chevalier-Govers 2010; Daniels 2017).

This legal system is one of the institutions through which the Malaysian state is trying to regulate sexual and gender identities of its citizen. The Malaysian Constitution stipulates that, in theory, *syariah* courts can only prosecute criminal offenses that are not already covered by secular law (Shah 2013). Yet, both sets of law criminalize same-sex sexual activities. Malaysia's Penal Code, Section 377A—another legacy of British colonialism—prohibits oral and anal intercourse deeming them "against the order of nature" and punishing them with "imprisonment for a term which may extend to twenty years" and with whipping (The Commissioner of Law Revision 2018, 194-195). Although this law applies to male-female as well as same-sex couples, it has been primarily, if rarely, used to prosecute same-sex relations in Malaysia. In fact, Shah (2013) noted that only seven charges have been brought under Section 377A between 1938 and 2009, four of which were related to former Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, who maintains that the allegations made against him have been politically motivated.

Syariah law is more explicit in its denunciation of same-sex sexual acts specifically[2]. It considers *liwat* (anal sex between men) and *musahaqah* (sexual relations between women) violations of public morality and proper sexual conduct. However, not all states and territories prosecute both offenses, and the severity of punishment for each differs by state (Tan 2018). Nevertheless, while people are rarely charged under Section 377A of the Penal Code, these *syariah* laws are regularly enforced. Recent cases include the conviction of two women for

[1] *Syariah* laws are under the jurisdiction of the different Malaysian states. Thus, they can differ depending on the individual state's interpretation of Islamic law.
[2] In many Malaysian states, *syariah* law also criminalizes gender crossing behavior such as men posing as women and women posing as men (Daniels 2017).

attempted *musahaqah* in the state of Terrenganu and of five men for attempted *liwat* in the state of Selangor. In August 2018, both women were sentenced to a fine and six strokes of the cane to be carried out publicly (Aljazeera 2018). The men were sentenced to a fine, imprisonment, and six strokes of the cane in November 2019 (Powys Maurice 2019). Notably, Malaysian human rights activists claimed that this was the first time Malaysian courts actually imposed caning sentences for same-sex conducts (Human Rights Watch 2021). Previously, they tended to limit their penalty to a prison sentence and a fine.

Such court decisions do not only reflect Malaysia's legal stance on same-sex relations, but, rather, serve as indicators of the general, increasing hostility towards queer communities in the country. Contemporary mainstream discourses label non-normative expressions of gender and sexuality as deviances associated with Western values. These ideas are often perpetuated by leading figures in Malaysian society such as former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad. He has repeatedly reproached Western countries for pressuring Malaysia to welcome the ideologies and lifestyles of LBGTQ communities, which he sees as attempts to force immoral values onto other nations (Bernama 2019). Mahathir stated that "[i]n Malaysia, there are some things we cannot accept, even though it is seen as human rights in the Western countries [such as] LGBT, marriage between men and men, women and women" (Ananthalakshmi 2018). His views have been endorsed by other leading government officials in Malaysia and the increased shift against LGBTQ rights in recent years has been attributed to Mahathir's stance on the issue (Duffy 2019).

The continuation of this hostile trend is made visible by the Malaysian government's endeavor to amend *syariah* law and increase criminal penalties against LGBTQ individuals in the country (Human Rights Watch 2021). Furthermore, Malaysia's Islamic Development

Department, *Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia* (JAKIM), has been working hard to implement the so-called Islamic Social Action Plan (PTSI) 2019-2025. PTSI was developed "to address social problems in the Muslim community such as the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) culture" and other issues, including substance abuse, homelessness, abortion, divorce, and HIV/AIDS (Zainal 2022). As part of PTSI, JAKIM has formulated a special policy that is intended to eradicate the spread of LGBTQ culture, which the government sees as increasingly prevalent and dangerous. In line with this, JAKIM released a conversion therapy app, *Hijrah Diri—Homoseksualiti* (Personal Pilgrimage—Homosexuality), to help users "overcome the problem of homosexuality" (Wakefield 2022), and political leaders have called for more state-sponsored rehabilitation programs for queer individuals in general (Justice for Sisters 2021).

However, the recent crackdown on LGBTQ communities in Malaysia is accompanied by increasingly vocal dissent from less conservative parts of society. For instance, following the sentencing of the five men in Selangor, twenty-eight progressive civil rights organizations and political parties in Malaysia issued a joint statement in which they warned that "[c]ourt decisions like the one yesterday deepen the perception that LGBT people are criminals, which then further sanctions other ways in which this vulnerable, marginalized community experience harm—not only by the state but also at the workplace, by their communities as well as their families" (Queer Lapis 2019). While these words articulate the cruel reality for many members of Malaysian LGBTQ communities, they also speak to growing efforts to publicly advocate for these communities and raise greater awareness on issues related to gender and sexuality. Thus, they indicate a hope for change that exists even beyond the LGBTQ community—the hope that those who are part of the community can become visible and have a voice but will not be harmed for expressing aspects of themselves that defy the norms laid out by Malaysian society.

The contradictory, and oftentimes fraught, approaches to non-normative expressions of gender and sexuality in the country are apparent in the degrees to which queer communities can occupy different spaces. As Boellstorff (2005) has shown on his work on Indonesia, there are no gay or lesbian villages to inhabit or visit. Instead, queer individuals express their gender and sexual identities in fragments, only at certain times and in certain places. Outside my interlocutors' homes, it was not easy to find spaces where they could openly express their desire for one another through acts such as kissing that transgress societal norms of heterosexuality. Yet, such places do exist. Over the years, the men had taken me along to a variety of bars, clubs, restaurants, and music venues that were part of a rich queer scene that was mostly underground but reached into the Malaysian mainstream. Most of these places were fluid in that they explicitly welcomed queer men only at certain times. For example, Marketplace, which closed in 2017, was a restaurant and bar that would host gay, themed parties only on Friday and Saturday nights. Outside these hours, it functioned like any other restaurant providing no clues in decorations or advertisements that indicated their friendly stance towards queer communities. I went to many places throughout Malaysia that operate in a similar manner. However, there are also a small number of places that cater specifically to members of the LGBTQ community. One such venue that my interlocutors and I had been going to for years is BlueBoy, a well-known nightclub in the center of Kuala Lumpur that had been operating since the '80s and featured nightly drag shows. Yet another place we spent time at whenever we traveled to the island of Penang, was a cozy bar co-owned by one of my interlocutors that was opened to provide a safe space for the local LGBTQ community. Several of the men I worked with also told me tales of visiting male-only saunas that are common in many Malaysian cities, and where having sex on the premises is accepted and expected by the establishment.

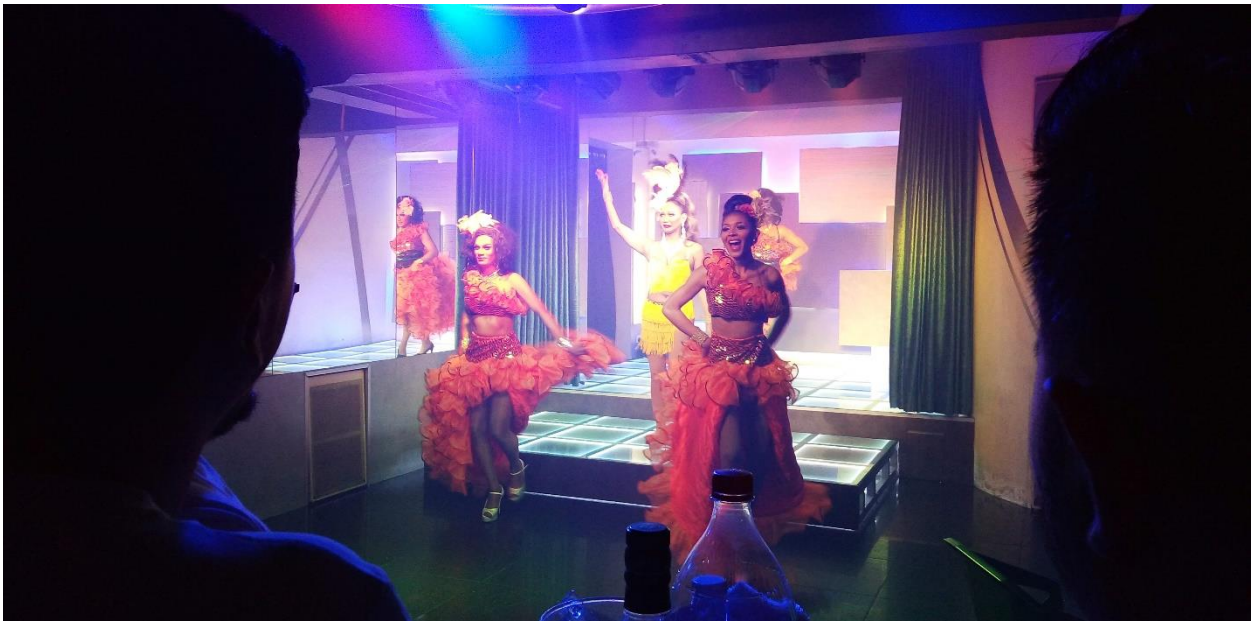

Fig 0.2: Two of my Malaysian interlocutors enjoying the nightly drag show at BlueBoy Discotheque, the only gay dance club that has been surviving in Kuala Lumpur since the 1980s. Source: Author.

To avoid police raids and arrests, such places are usually kept somewhat hidden from the public eye. Their exterior is often subdued, and they rarely flaunt queer associated paraphernalia. Moreover, they primarily advertise on websites and in closed groups on social networking sites run by, and for, members of the LGBTQ community. This makes many of these places hard to find, sometimes even for those who are part of the community. Thus, it might appear as though the system of ideologies and norms that denounces non-normative expressions of gender and sexuality completely dominates the cultural landscape of Malaysia; it might seem as if the LGBTQ community is allowed neither a space nor a voice. However, the existence of places that host events for queer people across the country is an important indicator that there is room for queer life and queer love in Malaysian society. The increasing public outrage against state-sponsored violence against the LGBTQ community further emphasizes this point. It also shows

that there are a multitude of voices regarding this complex issue with parts of society wanting to move towards a future that accepts and includes queer people.

On being with Bears

The findings of this research are based on my long-term engagement with gay men participating in the Malaysian Bear community. I first moved to Malaysia in early 2012 and lived and worked in Petaling Jaya, a satellite city of the Malaysian capital, Kuala Lumpur, for three and a half years. Being eager to meet people in this unfamiliar country, I was glad when a friend of mine came to visit from Japan and introduced me to one of his Malaysian friends, Irfan. Because we developed an almost instant rapport and a liking for each other, Irfan quickly adopted me into one of his friend groups, which consisted of queer—primarily gay—men, all of whom participated in the local Bear community. Most of the men maintained a careful separation between their queer and straight social circles, to protect themselves from harmful reactions to disclosures about their sexuality. Because I initially met Irfan through a queer friend, I was included in that sphere of his life and only got to know other gay men. Like a domino effect, every new person I met introduced me to yet more queer people. It was through my relationships with them that, over the years, I cultivated a network of queer—and predominantly male—friends and acquaintances that was concentrated in Kuala Lumpur but spread across Southeast Asia and Japan.

For that reason, I made Kuala Lumpur my primary research site and returned to the city for six weeks of preliminary research in the summer of 2017 and for twelve months of fieldwork in September 2018. While most of my research activities took place in Kuala Lumpur, I also

traveled to other places on the Malaysian peninsular, such as the city of Malacca or the island of Penang, to spend time with interlocutors living further away. Additionally, some of the men and I went on day trips or holidays together several times during my fieldwork stays—something we had regularly done when I first lived in Malaysia. These trips were particularly meaningful, because sharing a holiday home for days at a time provided me with a better understanding of the types of private moments between couples that are rarer in other contexts. I want to be clear that this dissertation does not only draw on information collected during my research period, but also—and with the consent of my interlocutors—on my archive of memories, journal entries, videos, photographs, and written exchanges with the men that goes back ten years.

Fig 0.3: The city of Kuala Lumpur seen from the condominium of one of my interlocutors in August 2019. Source: Author.

This ethnographic project grew out of my close friendships with Bears and Chasers in Malaysia. In many ways, my research interests are the result of a collaborative process and mirror some of the intellectual and emotional concerns my interlocutors and I shared as we

reflected on friendships, romantic relationships, and sexual desires. For instance, we often talked about what healthy friendships should entail, debated the difference between needs and wants in romantic liaisons, and discussed how body image concerns come up in, and affect, our relationships with others. In addition to ongoing conversations with the men, I was included in many of their activities, Bear themed and otherwise. Over the years, we shared dinners, celebrated birthdays, and pushed through hardships together; some weekends, I would meet their families, while other weekends, I got to join Bear parties in bars, clubs, or people's homes; and every November, I volunteered at an annual Bear beauty pageant taking place in the state of Sabah, Borneo. Through it all, I began to learn about the lives and loves of gay men in Malaysia, especially through their engagement with Bears and Bear culture.

Fig 0.4: After dinner, some of my interlocutors—most of whom identify as Bears—and I are having coffee at a Starbucks in the center of Kuala Lumpur. Source: Author.

By spending time with my friends both in and outside Bear spaces, my personal curiosity developed into a scholarly interest in the subculture and what it affords the men to do, think, and

feel. Specifically, I wanted to understand what it means to be a Bear in Malaysia, and how participating in the Bear community helps men navigate the double marginalization that comes from being gay in heteronormative culture, and from being fat in gay culture. When I returned to Malaysia to conduct fieldwork, I noticed that my interlocutors' involvement in Bear events had abated, though their sense of self remained firmly anchored in the Bear community. Much of their time with friends and romantic partners used to be spent at community events. Now, however, they preferred getting together with just a handful of close friends and dedicated large amounts of time solely to their boyfriends. I believe this change had been occurring for two reasons: one, due to the conservative shift in Malaysia, attending queer events had become more dangerous for the men; two, as they had gotten older, large-scale events had become more exhausting and, thus, less enticing for many of them. In line with this change, I slightly shifted the focus of my research and began to think about Bear subjectivity in the context of romantic relationships. I started to explore how members of the Malaysian Bear community negotiate masculinity, sexuality, and the body through the lens of love.

In the ten years I have been following the Malaysian Bear community, the number of men regularly participating in in-person gatherings and events has been rather small, comprising of 75 to 150 people. Online groups on various social networking sites, however, have many more participants—sometimes in the thousands—from Malaysia and other countries, primarily in Southeast Asia. I attribute this difference to the fact that most Malaysian Bear events take place in Kuala Lumpur and are, thus, not easily accessible to men living in other parts of the country. Furthermore, some men do not feel safe meeting up in physical settings that are at higher risk of being raided by state religious enforcement officials (see Shah 2013) and prefer the privacy that online communities afford. It is unlikely that this will change anytime soon. In fact, because of

the increasingly hostile sociopolitical environment faced by LGBTQ communities in Malaysia, the number of larger-scale in-person events has decreased over the years. By the time I began fieldwork in 2018, many community gatherings took place in private residences, and some of the younger men who had only recently found their way to the community told me that they would avoid public venues for the time being. As for my interlocutors, all of them had been actively participating in Bear events for years, and some of them still routinely organized community gatherings. Most of them were financially well off, which allowed them to travel and attend Bear events and other queer get-togethers in and outside Malaysia, such as Bears on Cruise in Bangkok, Thailand, Taiwan Pride, or Pink Dot Singapore.

Having mentioned virtual Bear groups, I want to note that different forms of online sociality were central to contemporary lifestyles of queer men in Malaysia and firmly embedded in my interlocutors' everyday routines. For most of them, social networking sites and messaging and dating apps were important sites for creating and managing meaningful relationships with others. However, in this dissertation, I am focusing on men's interactions in the physical world because of my interest in body practices and food. While both topics were frequently raised in online conversations, observing them in the physical world allowed for a more immediate and comprehensive examination of how they intersected with questions around love and relationships in the day-to-day lives of my interlocutors. Nevertheless, I discuss the men's involvement in digital spaces at relevant points throughout the dissertation.

The Malaysian Bear community is heterogeneous in its makeup, comprising of men of different ages from various ethnoreligious backgrounds. This is uncommon in a country where friend circles tend to be ethnically homogenous. As Aun (2017) asserted, the Malaysian state's preferential policies targeted at the *Bumiputera* population combined with people's generally

negative attitudes towards other religious groups in the country put a strain on relationships between ethnoreligious communities and solidify divisions. I consider the unique composition of the Bear community a result of the members' marginalized position in Malaysian society. Because queer people in Malaysia live with the constant threat of discrimination, violence, and legal sanctions, they must be careful when building safe and supportive communities. For Bears and Chasers, who tend to be sidelined within mainstream gay communities as well, the number of allies is small. Consequently, they cannot afford to ostracize likeminded people based on their ethnoreligious backgrounds and have created a community that is ethnically diverse.

Most ethnographies of Malaysia focus on one of the different ethnic groups in the country, reflecting the ethnoreligious stratification of Malaysian society (Gomes 2007; Mellström 2017; Ong 2010; Peletz 1996; Shamsul & Kaur 2011; Wilford 2006). My research, on the other hand, involves a community that brings together men from various ethnic backgrounds. More specifically, I worked closely with 27 men—12 couples and 3 single men—and engaged regularly, but more loosely, with about 20 additional men. While most of my interlocutors were from Malaysia, a few of them grew up in other Asian countries but had been living in the country for several years now. By collaborating with such a diverse group, I have been able to consider some of the ways in which gay men in Malaysia grapple with ethnoreligious differences in friendships and romantic relationships. In my dissertation, I show that these differences can affect some of the choices couples make in their everyday lives and with regards to their relationships, but they rarely prevent the men from having fulfilling, long-term relationships.

A side-effect of working with such a diverse group of people is that I was able to conduct my research in English. In Malaysia, Malays usually speak the national language, Bahasa Malaysia, whereas Chinese Malaysians tend to speak one of the Southern Chinese dialects such

as Cantonese of Hokkien, and Indian Malaysians often grow up speaking Tamil. English is widely spoken amongst all ethnic groups and is considered the lingua franca, especially in the urban middle and upper classes (Lee & Tan 2017). My interlocutors—most of whom either lived in Kuala Lumpur or another urban area—primarily used English, not only because of their involvement in the Bear community, but also because many of them were in interethnic romantic relationships. They were accustomed to discussing thoughts and experiences in English, which means that quoted speech in this dissertation is not a translation but an immediate representation of our conversations.

This ethnographic project emerged from long-term friendships and collaborations with men participating in the Malaysian Bear community. Ten years ago, these men welcomed me into their circle. They took pleasure in introducing me to their community and the things they valued about Malaysia, and they put effort into protecting me from people and situations they thought might be hurtful or dangerous. I believe that it was easy for us to build rapport because we faced similar issues in our everyday lives. Despite our obvious differences—I am a white, cis-gendered, heterosexual woman from Germany and my friends are queer men of color from Malaysia and other Asian countries—we had one thing in common: by Malaysian society and beyond, most of us were considered fat. The pervasiveness of anti-fat bias in mainstream society informed many of our everyday experiences and encounters and shaped the nature and structure of our sexual and romantic relationships. Our shared understanding of fatness allowed us to hold intimate conversations about the ways in which we process our respective experiences, and about the difference a social network such as the Bear community can make for a person. These conversations provided a foundation for our long-lasting and trusting friendships, and the exploration of fat embodiment became an important topic in my research. In this dissertation, I

hope to not only capture the love and care that existed between my interlocutors, but also the generosity and affection they extended to me as they made me part of their friend group.

I want to add a final, important note regarding my methodology of writing. Because of the delicate nature of living as a gay man in Malaysia, I am careful to protect my interlocutors' identities by changing their names and some biographical details in this dissertation. In a few instances, I am also creating composite characters—which are developed entirely from data collected over the years—to turn the focus from individual experiences to the larger issues faced by nearly all members of the Malaysian Bear community. Furthermore, the use of composite characters allows me to obscure the men's identities from one another, which helps avoid conflict about sensitive topics between my interlocutors and their romantic partners.

Chapter Outline

The overall structure of this dissertation mirrors consecutive—and oftentimes iterative—phases of romantic relationships: the early phase during which relationships are initiated and built, more mature phases were partners put effort into maintaining their relationship, and phases that are marked by conflict and tension and occur frequently in most relationships. Before I zoom in on these aspects of romantic relationships, I examine the role the Malaysian Bear community plays in my interlocutors' lives. This is important because, for many of the men, their participation in the Bear community laid the foundation for the sexual and romantic attachments they have now.

In Chapter One, Becoming (among) Bears, I outline what it means to be a Bear in Malaysia. I draw on Lave and Wenger's (1991) social learning theory, "Community of Practice,"

to show that my interlocutors' understanding of Bear identity was learned through their engagement with the Malaysian Bear community. Although the men tended to view Bearness as an expression of their inherent natural, or common, masculinity, I illustrate that Bear masculinity is not a given, stable characteristic. Rather, it is continuously produced through a variety of behaviors that allow men to project Bear identity. As such, I argue that Bear identity is fluid and relational—it is socially constructed, enacted, and then validated by men as they participate in the Malaysian Bear community.

In this chapter, I also show the positive effects that being part of the Bear community has had on my interlocutors and their lives. Growing up, most of the men internalized dominant ideas about fatness in and beyond Malaysia that cast fat people as unattractive, undesirable, and of lesser value, which influenced their self-perception. In their adult lives, many of them also experienced the normalized oppression and feelings of shame that come with being fat. Because the Bear community promotes the idea that hairy, oftentimes fat, male bodies are, indeed, desirable, it provides my interlocutors with an environment where they feel safe from harassment. I demonstrate that their participation in the Malaysian Bear community taught them to reframe their understanding of themselves and their bodies. I argue that the Bear community is a space in which the men got to experience and practice different kinds of love—love for themselves, friendship, and romantic love.

In Chapter Two, Making Love: Intimacy, Passion, and the Decision to Commit, I explore how my interlocutors understood, manifested, and practiced love. I also examine how they initiated and built relationships within the cultural context of Malaysia where queer individuals are disenfranchised and marginalized by state apparatuses and social institutions. To be able to access the ambiguous and difficult to grasp concept of love, I apply Sternberg's (1986)

Triangular Theory of Love as a framework. This psychological theory allows me to break the concept of love into three separate but interrelated components—intimacy, passion, and decision/commitment. I show that my interlocutors had different understandings of what these components mean and how they should be practiced in the context of romantic relationships. Building on that, I illustrate that romantic relationships can take many different forms that are shaped by individual approaches to intimacy, passion, and commitment.

Men's understandings of love were influenced by various social norms and discourses, which they learned about through their engagement in different social spheres. They gained knowledge about different sets of romantic norms from their families, peers, queer friends, and the Bear community, to name just a few. In this chapter, I argue that gay couples in Malaysia practiced romantic love in ways that reproduce divergent understandings of love. Because they internalized values and beliefs from the different communities they participated in, their approaches to romantic relationships reflect both dominant and subversive understandings of love. Once again, this shows that relationships can take many different forms that neither entirely contradict nor reinforce hegemonic ideas about love in Malaysian society. Rather, the variety of relationship styles complicates and challenges prevailing ideas that presume naturalized and fixed forms of love, gender, and sexual practice.

In Chapter Three, Nourishing Queer Relationships: Food and Commensality among Gay Men in Malaysia, I examine how commensality—the act of eating together—is an important practice through which my interlocutors were able to create and maintain relationships. Because sharing food with others fosters a wide range of social relations, I look at both friendships and romantic relationships in this chapter. I illustrate that commensality is both a communicative and an interactional practice because it requires people to open up to, and engage with, one another.

The coming together and sharing of food can spark a bond between people and, if done repeatedly, nurtures a sense of closeness between them. I show that this does not only strengthen relationships between individuals but can also fortify the feeling of cohesion within a community.

In this chapter, I pay special attention to the ways in which my interlocutors' food and eating practices intersect with their self-understanding as gay men and romantic partners. I argue that commensality can help reaffirm a person's sense of belonging to a specific social group. For example, I demonstrate that men who identify as Bears were able to live out an important aspect of their identity by sharing meals with likeminded people who share their love of food and understand the challenges that eating with others can present for them. Furthermore, I show that having food with their romantic partners nourished my interlocutors' relationships. The routine of eating together gave couples a sense of stability and closeness. I argue that eating out in public settings is particularly important in that regard, because it is one of the very few heteronormative romantic practices gay couples can enjoy without fear of discovery. It allows them to show, and practice, love that is readily understood as such by their partner.

In Chapter Four, Challenging Love: Disciplining Body Practices in Gay Romantic Relationships, I switch perspectives and look at the ways in which eating practices can also be a source of conflict in romantic relationships. I show that specific food choices and eating habits are often contested among romantic partners, as they come up in conversations about health and the body. In this chapter, I examine how my interlocutors grappled with feelings of tension and insecurity that arose in situations when different body practices—namely eating and exercising—became the subject of disciplining efforts in their relationships. I outline how the

monitoring of body practices in couples can create a negative dynamic that causes one or both partners to question the other's love and commitment to the relationship.

I focus on the romantic relationship between two of my interlocutors, Lee and Edward, to understand how couples negotiate such conflict. I analyze both Edward's motivation to interfere in his boyfriend's eating and exercising habits and Lee's experience of, and response to, Edward's efforts. This allows me to show that, during moments of conflict, both men largely drew on hegemonic discourses on fatness that conflate body size, health, and fitness. I argue that neither Lee nor Edward can work outside the logic of these discourses, which inform different practices of love and dictate behaviors and values that make someone a desirable, responsible, and responsive romantic partner. I demonstrate that both partners had their own strategies to cope with the emotional fallout in such situations, some of which contributed to the deterioration of the relationships.

CHAPTER 1

Becoming (among) Bears

Introduction

"Well, people call me a Bear because I'm fat and I'm hairy." Jason said this to me as we strolled through the underground car park towards the set of lifts that would carry us to our favorite café in this mall. I looked at him and could not help but raise my eyebrows.

"But I mean, you're not fat, right?" My words were not meant to be flattering. I merely stated what I thought when taking in his appearance. Jason is a Chinese Malaysian man in his mid-forties and seemed to be of average height and weight. While his body is not slim and toned, he carries little extra fat and I never noticed much of a tummy underneath the tight-fitting shirts he likes to wear.

"According to some people, I'm not. I'm not fat enough to be a Bear. So, whatever." He chuckled. "I'm hairy enough to be a Cub though. My face is very hairy, so people call me a Bear based on my face. I have a beard. I have a proper beard for a Chinese guy." Jason emphasized his words by smoothing the dark hair covering his chin.

I nodded in agreement. There are differences in the growth and structure of facial and body hair between ethnic groups, and unlike most of my Chinese Malaysian interlocutors, Jason was able to grow a thick beard that covered the bottom half of his face. He often received compliments about his beard from other gay men, especially those who identify as Bears or Chasers. Jason—in fact, nearly all of the men I worked with—participated in the Malaysian Bear community, a queer subculture that originated in the United States but continues to grow on a

global scale. The community consists of men who call themselves Bears and those who desire, or "chase," Bears. Not all Bears are Chasers, and not all Chasers identify as Bears. Yet, regardless of whether they are sexually attracted to Bears, all men socializing in the Malaysian Bear community accept and value what Bear identity represents to them.

As my conversation with Jason indicates, there is no one clear and bounded definition for the term *Bear*, which caused occasional debates among my interlocutors as to whether a person can be too much, or not enough of something to be seen as a Bear. From a conceptual point of view, Tan (2019) argued that definitions of the term are only ever nominal, because they are based on characteristics that are themselves slippery. In practical terms, Wright (2013) attributed the fuzziness of the term to the fact that it is used in a self-identifying manner by men who bring in their own, sometimes contradictory ideas. The original triad of characteristics—men who are large, hairy, and gay—continues to be at the core of Bear identity, but, over time, men included a wide range of attributes in their understanding of the Bear category that go beyond physical appearance and sexual preferences that are often subjective. Having said that, Wright stated that descriptions of Bears in the West commonly conjure up the image of a queer man with a "large or husky body, heavy body hair, a lumbering gait, an attitude of imperturbability, [and] a contented self-acceptance of his own masculinity (however that may be defined)" (2013, 21).

I want to emphasize that the Bear community is not the only gay subculture that celebrates big bodies. In the United States, the big men's movement has produced a variety of clubs and organizations (Textor 1999). One of the oldest groups or networks was the Girth and Mirth group (Whitesel 2014) that predated the emergence of Bear clubs. Hennen suggested that one of the main reasons for the development of a distinct Bear culture was "the more appealing imagery employed by Bears [that] was enormously successful in linking the bigger body with

nature, the wilderness, and more conventional notions of masculinity," (2008, 100) which I discuss in detail in this chapter.

Hennen (2005) argued that Bear culture emerged in San Francisco in the early 1980s as an offshoot of the leather community out of a spirit of resistance to gay cultural norms. Men who felt that they did not fit the stereotypical image of gay men began to emphasize their desire to be part of a community that accepts large, hirsute bodies and promotes camaraderie, warmth, and affection. These men rejected the exaggerated masculinity of the gay leatherman by embracing what they perceived as a more authentic and regular manliness (ibid). They also rebelled against the normative and impersonal nature of the hanky code used predominantly by queer men in the 1970s and into the 1980s. The hanky code involved wearing a bandana in one's back pocket to signal one's preference for the specific sexual practice or fetish associated with the color of the chosen bandana. Instead of bandanas, some gay men began wearing teddy bears in their back pocket to protest the lack of intimacy within the hanky code and indicate a desire for kissing, cuddling, and an emotional involvement with other men (Barrett 2017).

Within the context of my research, recognizing that Bear culture first emerged in the U.S. is important as the vast majority of scholarship on Bears focuses on the U.S. community and shapes scholarly discussions on this topic (for instance, Barrett 2017; Hennen 2008; Wright 2001). Though they continue to make up only a fraction of the existing literature, the number of writings on Bears in other countries, particularly those in the Global South, has grown in recent years (Diniz 2019; Lin 2014; McGlynn 2020; Moussawi 2020). Many of these studies draw out differences that exist between Bear identities, communities, and cultures by contrasting their findings with what is known from U.S. research. Lin (2014), for instance, showed that collectivist values in China encourage Chinese Bears to pursue an identity that is much more

uniform than that of their American counterparts who live in a culture that values individualism. Since studies about U.S. Bears continue to inform scholarly engagements with this subculture across the world, my research benefits from drawing on them.

Furthermore, I am taking into account American Bear culture, because Bears in Malaysia tend to orient themselves to American understandings of Bear identity. My interlocutors often learned about the figure of the Bear by joining queer online communities and by watching gay porn, both of which circulate images of Bears common in the U.S. Consequently, their descriptions of what it means to be a Bear in Malaysia included characteristics that have been adopted from the U.S. and adjusted to the local situation. For instance, they talked about attributes like body size or hair just like American Bears do when they discuss the term *Bear*, as can be seen in my conversation with Jason. In other words, while it is crucial to note that there is no homogeneous, universal Bear identity, manifestations of Bear in Malaysia (and other places) are often an active reworking of U.S. Bear imagery, making it important to take the latter into account.

Jason told me that one of the main reasons he likes being seen as a Bear is that it allows him to be part of a community whose members are not overly concerned with his "kind of meh body, but they really like [his] beard." However, what he perceived as a welcome lack of attention to his body should not be seen as ambivalence about the physical appearance of men within the Malaysian Bear community. Rather, it signals the acceptance of, and even admiration for, body types that do not conform to the homonormative ideal valued in mainstream gay culture, not just in Malaysia but throughout the world (Hennen 2008; Monaghan 2005). Whereas mainstream gay culture has "normalized the ideal male body as one that is lean, muscular, and v-shaped (with broad shoulders, a narrow waist, and a flat but well-defined stomach)," (Moskovitz

et al. 2013, 776), Bear communities in different parts of the world advocate for the acceptance of different body types, and Malaysian Bears are no exception to that.

Conversations with my interlocutors revealed that body aesthetics are central to the idea of the Bear in Malaysia. While responses to the question of what a Bear is differ, all the men I worked with brought up body size and hair when sharing their understanding of the category with me. Yet, Bear identity is representative of more than one body type, and Bear communities positively embrace naturally developing and aging bodies without sticking to one specific form. Scholars have shown that Bears are generally heavier than other gay men (Lin 2014, Moskowitz et. al. 2013), but this extra weight can be due to both increased amounts of either body fat or muscle mass (Quidley-Rodriguez & De Santis 2019). This allows for a variety of body types to be included in the Bear concept. As Raahim, a Malay man in his late thirties, put it, "if you're a big size, or bulky, or beefy, or chubby, and you have hairs on your body, you are a Bear."

It is important to note that this aesthetic variability is also culturally determined. For instance, many Malaysian men who identify as Bears found their way to the community because they felt ostracized in mainstream gay culture due to their body size. In the U.S. and most other Western countries, these men would be seen as averagely sized or, perhaps, slightly large, but in a Southeast Asian context, their bodies are considered fat. This is because fatness is a social construct and, thus, interpreted differently across cultures (Sobal & Maurer 1999; van Amsterdam 2013). Of course, a man's sense of Bearness usually lies at the intersection of several physical attributes, and body size is only one of them. Nevertheless, not only individual but also cultural differences have an impact on the construction and understanding of an identity category and, thus, determine the range of people who get to be included in a specific community.

In this chapter, I analyze how Bear identity is understood and cultivated by gay men in Malaysia. Here—and throughout this dissertation—I do so by reflecting on the Bear community's relationship with mainstream gay culture, the so-called gaystream (Fritscher 2014). Mainstream gay culture is defined by the shared ideas, experiences, and attitudes that are considered normative and conventional by the majority of gay men. It is important to note, however, that mainstream gay culture is not monolithic and there is often a partial ideological overlap with gay subcultures that are nestled within it. This means that mainstream gay culture does not exist in complete opposition to gay subcultures but rather alongside them. In this dissertation, I use the term *gaystream* to denote the dominant collective image of mainstream gay culture in Malaysia and beyond. In doing so, it is not my intention to flatten or essentialize the diversity of beliefs and practices that exists within and across gay communities, but to draw attention to those aspects of Bear culture and identity that contradict and resist hegemonic norms and expectations.

In my analysis, I envision the Malaysian Bear community as a "community of practice," a concept that was first introduced by Lave and Wenger (1991) when discussing learning processes and developing a social theory of leaning. They stated that communities of practice are formed by people who share an idea or a passion for something, and who come together regularly with the intention to learn from one another. They argued that this kind of learning is not an individualized task but "takes place through our participation in multiple social practices, practices which are formed through pursuing any kind of enterprise over time" (Farnsworth, Kleanthous, & Wenger-Trayner 2016, 140). This ongoing process of learning together allows communities of practice to build a group identity around their shared interest. As such, participating in a community of practice is "both a kind of action and a form of belonging [as it]

shapes not only what we do, but also who we are and how we interpret what we do" (Wenger 1998, 4).

By theorizing the Bear community as a community of practice, I emphasize that Bear identity is less about *being* and more about *becoming*. I show that Bears—and Chasers for that matter—develop their identities through their participation in the Bear community, meaning in relation to other men. It is through their engagement with others that Bears come to embody, and get to practice, what it means to be a Bear, and are reinforced in their understanding that they are, indeed, Bears. In other words, viewing the Malaysian Bear community as a community of practice enables me to highlight that Bear identity cannot be reduced to a variety of body types but should be seen as a relational practice.

In the first section of this chapter, I outline why my interlocutors are drawn to the Bear community and come to identify as Bears. I show that many of them are greatly affected by the stigma surrounding their non-normative bodies, and being part of the Bear community allows them to transform that stigma into something positive. I argue that the category Bear is attractive to these men because it eroticized their bodies and, thus, casts the men a desirable. Bearness also denotes that a man possesses a natural, or common, masculinity that is highly valued within the community. While my interlocutors tended to view Bear masculinity as something that is inherent in them, I show in the second part of this chapter that they were continuously working towards becoming the best possible version of a Bear. Building on Butler's (1988) work on gender performativity, I focus on the grooming of facial hair as one of many ways in which these men constructed their Bear selves. I argue that acts such as getting a beard transplant are meant to bring out the kind of masculinity that is specific to Bear identity and helps to distinguish them from other gay or straight communities.

In the last section of the chapter, I examine the effects that being part of the Bear community has had on my interlocutors. The Bear community comes together around a shared belief that inhabiting fat, hairy, aging bodies is valuable and can make men desirable. This contradicts some of the dominant norms of male desirability in most queer and straight communities, norms that the vast majority of my interlocutors internalized as they grew up. By focusing on one of many Bear events taking place in Malaysia, I illustrate that participation in the community teaches its members to reconsider their understanding of themselves and their bodies. I argue that community practices normalize Bear aesthetics and create a safe space for my interlocutors in which they can foster relationships and have experiences that they are often denied by society at large.

The Natural, or Common, Masculinity of Malaysian Bears

In order to understand why being part of Bear subculture is meaningful to my interlocutors, it is important to lay out how different men in Malaysia understand the term Bear and apply it to themselves. It is not my intention to develop a complete or static definition of the term but, rather, focus on how individual approaches to being a Bear aid in sustaining a community that is important to the men. Quidley-Rodriguez and de Santis (2019) mapped out and analyzed Bear as a concept across different cultures, primarily from the Global North. They stated that core characteristics of Bears consist of different attributes, many of which focus on physical appearance and masculine attitudes that are seen to emanate a sense of "natural masculinity." Yet they also noted "the fluid nature of bear identity" which they identified as a limitation of their work as it "creates a lack of a clear and consistent definition of bear identity" (Quidley-Rodriguez and de Santis 2019, 65). To me, the authors' recognition that understandings

of the term Bear are flexible is not a limitation but an acknowledgment that Bear identity is not innate or uniform. Instead—as is true for identity categories in general—the idea of being a Bear is a process of becoming for men, and Bear identity is something that is continuously constructed and always incomplete. Before I analyze how Malaysian Bears groom their identity, I want to outline how men become part of this subculture and how they define the category Bear.

Many of my interlocutors discovered the Bear community by chance while they were searching for fellow queer men who would make them feel accepted and, more importantly, desired. They tended to feel ostracized as they were not able to meet the aesthetic norms within the Malaysian gaystream that privileges lean, taut, and muscular bodies. While heterosexual men tend to get some leeway with regards to fatness, gay men's obsession with fat rivals that of heterosexual women in that those with "imperfect" bodies are marginalized and treated as desexualized and degradable beings (Whitesel 2014). Many of my interlocutors spoke of the numerous occasions on which they were profiled, harassed, degraded, shamed, and rejected because of their body size and weight. They hoped to find a group of people who would not dismiss them based on their appearance.

Fig 1.1: Two self-identified Bears have taken off their shirts and are dancing and showing off their bodies to fellow Bears and Chasers at a Bear themed party in a club in Malaysia. Source: Author.

Ihsan, a Malay man in his late thirties, stumbled across such a community in the early 2000s when online dating services for LGBTQ communities started to become popular. “I’ve always seen myself as fat,” he told me as he dismissed yet another *baju melayu*, the traditional Malay dress worn by men, because the color was not quite right. We were spending the afternoon in a shopping mall in Shah Alam, a city west of Kuala Lumpur, looking for a new *baju* for the upcoming celebration of *Hari Raya Aidilfitri*, the day that marks the end of Ramadan. As usual, his mother and siblings had picked a new color for them to wear together during the holidays, and the two of us were hoping to find a maroon *baju* for Ihsan to match theirs. As a young adult, he did not like the way he looked and worked hard on losing weight. He felt that it

would make him more attractive to other men, many of whom rejected him based on his body size. It was only when he began engaging with queer men on online platforms and dating sites that he began to view himself differently.

"I started getting to know people online. And I got a shock because some of the people I met, or I got to know, told me of their preferences—what kind of guys they like. And some of them actually told me that I was too small for them." Ihsan shook his head at the memory. "I was surprised, like what the fuck? You are telling me I'm not big enough? I couldn't make sense of it at first." While he had had sexual encounters before, he had rarely been made to feel desirable by men he met, which made such online interactions a novel experience for him.

Soon, he started going out with a group of men who appreciated or preferred big guys. They were part of the first fat-accepting community Ihsan participated in, and by regularly engaging with them he became exposed to a different set of values and ideas around fat bodies. Initially, Ihsan was surprised about how vocal these men were about their preferences, but, over time, they helped him to reconsider what he had believed about himself: "I [was] like, wow, I don't need to be thin, right? And I think that was the turnaround, the turning point for me to be more accepting of my body type. Slowly, that need to be thin went away." Being part of a community of men who appreciated and desired Ihsan as he was, and who did not expect him to change and become a "hotter, better guy" before they considered dating him, encouraged him to reinterpret his self-image. Through his continued participation in community get-togethers, he learned to renegotiate for himself what it means to be a desirable man (see Laver & Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998), and started to accept his current—and what he now considers natural—way of being.

It is important to note that the community of men he met in the early 2000s did not call themselves Bears. They referred to their group as a "Chubby community, or Chub for Chub." Ihsan paused for a moment, lost in thought. "I don't think … the term Bear existed yet in the year 2000. Or at the very least not in the community that I was in, because it was all about being chubby." He does not recall when exactly he and his friends came across the term Bear and started to use it to refer to themselves: "It could be 2004, 2005, maybe even 2007 … I started learning about the Bear community after I started growing my beard, or it could be coincidental that the Bear term came up." Eventually, he and his group of friends merged with the growing Malaysian Bear community and joined, as well as organized, events for Bears and Chasers.

While Ihsan could not pinpoint the exact moment he learned about Bears, the fact that he was drawn to a different community is significant, since it suggests that Bears and Chub for Chubs had similar values at their core. Men in both communities were responding to anti-fat bias that is as common in the Malaysian gaystream, as it is in queer communities in other parts of the world (see Foster-Gimpel & Engeln 2016; Robinson 2018) by eroticizing and celebrating large bodies. Yet, Ihsan and his friends moved away from the Chub for Chubs community, reframed their self-understanding, and adopted the label and language of the Bear community. In short, they began to identify as Bears, which allowed them to join a growing subculture that had been spreading around the world. This indicates that the Bear community was able to give them something Chub for Chubs was not. As for Ihsan, he responded to what Bear identity stands for: "It's the right term for me, it fits. I'm a Bear." This indicates that key values inherent in the category Bear and expressed through Bear language resonated with him and encouraged him to participate in Bear events.

When I speak of Bear language, I am primarily referring to Bear slang, which is used by those of my interlocutors who are members of the Bear community, especially in online interactions across different social media groups dedicated to Bears. Bear slang first developed in the U.S. (Barrett 2017) alongside the Bear codes. The latter were introduced by two astronomers in 1989, who were looking for a humorous shorthand to categorize and capture the diversity of Bears, their appearances, mannerism, and sexual practices "because classified ad prices are so expensive" (Donahue & Stoner 2013, 149). The codes are based on the classification system used to describe stars and galaxies, and it allows men to succinctly index their identity as members of the Bear community. For instance, a basic element of the Bear code describes the kind of beard a man has and is marked with a capital B and a number between zero and nine that signal different beard types: "B0—(little/no beard, or incredibly sparse) … B1—(very slight beard) … B9—(belt-buckle-grazing ling beards) The prototype is ZZ Top. Need we say more?" (Donahue & Stoner 2013, 150). Bear codes were taken up by men in the U.S. Bear community but have not been used by any of my interlocutors in Malaysia who adopted Bear slang instead.

Bear slang consists of terms that often build on bear metaphors or puns such as *Panda Bear* to refer to Asian Bears, *Polar Bear* to refer to older Bears or those with gray or white hair, or hus*bear* to refer to a man's partner. My interlocutors also used terms from a subset of Bear slang that refers to other animals and describes men who do not fit the Bear aesthetic but are active participants in the Bear community. Men who are skinnier than most Bears, for example, are referred to as *Otters*, and men who are especially muscular are called *Wolfs*. A Bear slang term that is slightly different in that it is not employed to categorize a man is *woof*, which is often used as a greeting but also to show that a man is seen as sexually attractive.

Bear slang fulfills two main functions: One, its usage identifies men as members of the Bear community and reinforces their sense of belonging (see Barrett 2017; Boellstorff 2004; Kulick 2000; Leap and Boellstorff 2003). Building on the community of practice framework, Bucholtz (1999) argued that linguistic and other social practices jointly produce meaning and identities. She illustrated that people use language to index their identification with, and participation in, a particular social group. Bucholtz stated that the interactional choices individuals make in their engagement with others help them to, on the one hand, "actively construct a chosen identity," and on the other hand, "distance themselves from a rejected [outgroup] identity" (1999, 211). Accordingly, community specific language such as Bear slang enables people within a subculture to express ideas and desires particular to that culture. This enables them to construct and maintain an identity that distinguishes members of that community from those of other communities. Two, Bear slang contributes to the understanding of Bear masculinity as almost innate and essentialist. Barrett (2017) asserted that, because much of the vocabulary that makes up Bear slang invokes images of bears in nature as well as popular images of teddy bears or Care Bears, Bear identity is imagined as something natural and rugged, and, at the same time, soft and caring.

This image of Bear identity as pure and raw is reflected in how my interlocutors defined the category Bear. Although they echoed the aforementioned notion that Bear identity is fluid, they asserted that it is ultimately made up of characteristics and behaviors that create a sense of what they refer to as natural, or common, masculinity. Haissam, a Malay man in his early forties who identified as a Bear, explained to me how he understood this idea of natural masculinity. He stated that, as a Bear, "you have to portray a certain form of masculinity. You have to have hairs on your body to be able to be called a Bear." Not all my interlocutors believed that hair is an

essential aspect of the Bear aesthetic, but others agreed with Haissam, who saw it as a key attribute for Bears. He emphasized that having body hair conveys an image of common masculinity meaning a sense of manliness that is unaffected and unpolished. For a Bear, "[body hair] is really necessary, and what you wear and how you show yourself in public. You want to be as common as possible. You don't want to be a flamboyant gay, you just want to be common." For Haissam, Bear masculinity relied on a man adopting understated and casual manners without exaggerating aspects of his sexual identity that mark him as stereotypically gay.

Haissam went on to clarify: "I don't think you want to be labeled as a straight man. I just I think you just want to be labeled as a normal man. You do not want to stand out as being over the top, or flamboyant, overly gay." This suggests that Bears are perceived as naturally manly and unassuming, because they reject the conscious construction and display of what Haissam considered "overly masculine" or "overly gay" masculinity characterizing other queer subcultures in favor of being "just common, under the radar, everyday [men]." By asserting a kind of unstrained ordinariness, Bear masculinity is reminiscent of the everyday masculinity of straight men. Haissam emphasized, however, that this does not mean that Bears want to be seen as straight. Instead, they want to be recognized for their natural self, meaning for being the men they already are.

This points to an ideological position that is typical for queer subcultures. Many subcultures are perceived as being in explicit opposition to mainstream culture, as they often formed when a group of people organized themselves around of set of shared values or experiences that differ from those of the dominant culture. Barrett (2017) argued that homosexual subcultures, however, are not only opposing the hegemonic norms of heteronormative culture, but also the dominant understandings within the larger gay community.

Bear subculture illustrates that very well. On the one hand, with their rugged appearance, Bears challenge gay male norms about what types of bodies are considered attractive and sexually desirable. On the other hand, Bears' bodies also subvert heteronormative assumptions about masculinity because "fatness is equitable to feminization for a man" (Durgadas 1998, 369). The softness and fullness of their bodies makes Bears appear androgynous, which puts their male status into question within mainstream and gaystream cultures.

In this chapter, I primarily focus on the physical aspects that exemplify the natural, or common, masculinity of Bears because they tend to be at the heart of my interlocutors' marginalizing experiences. Nevertheless, I want to highlight that shared interests and activities are equally important expressions of Bear masculinity, especially during events that bring the community together. While Malaysian Bears appreciate traditionally masculine activities like hiking or working out at the gym, many of them also pursue interests that are linked to femininity, such as having dinner parties, sharing recipes, or attending drag performances. Whereas men participating in other gay subcultures (e.g.: Leathermen, Circuit Boys) tend to avoid activities that are associated with effeminacy, Bears do not view all effeminate behaviors as negative which further indicates that being a Bear challenges both queer and straight hegemonic understandings of gender. Wright (2013) asserted that, with regards to their ideology and social practice, Bears draw on second-wave lesbian feminism. In fact, the notion of "going 'natural'" (Wright 2013, 13) is directly derived from the writings of feminists such as Andrea Dworkin and Mary Daly. Under their intellectual influence, an ideology emerged that causes Bears to place great importance on being natural and accept themselves as they are, even if that includes being effeminate (see Barrett 2017; Manley, Levitt, & Mosher 2007).

For Ihsan, being able to do the things he loves to do without fear of being dismissed was one of the things that drew him to the Bear community. He reflected on what being a Bear meant to him as he was modeling his final *baju* for me, clearly happy with how it fit. For him, identifying as a Bear was about recognizing "how at peace I am with me and my physical attributes" and displaying these qualities in his engagement with others. He explained that being a Bear "you don't have to worry so much, if you're a big size, or you love food so much. You just can be natural." While other gay men might "have to justify themselves or change [their behaviors]," Ihsan said that he was able to express his everyday self: "I'm a Bear so I'm allowed to be me. I love food, and I love to cook. That's it. That's just me, right?" Like Haissam, Ihsan viewed Bear masculinity as natural, or common. It refers to ways of being a man that are always already there even before that man comes to identify as a Bear. In their eyes, Bear masculinity does not need to be acquired or performed. Rather, the viewed it as something that is discovered and then expressed in a variety of actions that speak to a man's basic understanding of himself.

I argue that portraying what they perceive as natural masculinity is important to Malaysian Bears because it allows them to be at peace with how they see themselves. Many men participating in the gaystream or other queer subcultures marginalize Bears because of their appearance or age. For them, Bear bodies fail to fit the normative standard of gay male beauty, and the social and or romantic rejection of men who fall outside the hegemonic norm tends to be seen as acceptable. The idea of natural masculinity implies a pure, original way of being, and possessing it enables Bears to shift their understanding of themselves. It makes it possible for them to view themselves as acceptable and not failing and their bodies as desirable. By emphasizing the 'always already thereness' of Bears' particular way of looking and being,

natural, or common, masculinity legitimizes the Bear body. It normalizes Bear aesthetics and makes being a Bear acceptable, and even desirable, as a form of being oneself.

Butch, Bearded Bears

The notion that gender categories are not fixed and that their meanings are determined by the cultural context within which they come to exist was primarily introduced through the work of Judith Butler (1988, 1990; see also Cameron & Kulick 2003; de Beauvoir 2010; Ochs 1990). She defined gender identities as social roles that are enacted by individuals and validated by society. Because the repeated performance of a gendered identity leads to subtle differences in its meaning, Butler argued that gender is provisional, contingent, and enacted. Of course, Bear identity is no exception. The supposedly natural masculinity of Bears is neither innate nor essential, but the result of what Butler would call "*a corporeal style*, an 'act', as it were, which is both intentional and performative" (1988, 521). For Butler, performative acts of gender achieve two things: one, they allow a person to communicate aspects of gendered identity to others, and two, they are instrumental in constructing that very identity in the first place. In arguing that gender is performative, Butler was drawing from the work of J. L. Austin (1962), a philosopher of language, who asserted that language is not a reflection of a speaker's perception of reality, but rather a means through which a speaker instantiates reality. She also built on de Beauvoir (2010) who argued that gender is not an internal reality, or an essential fact, but something that we become, a phenomenon that is created and reproduced all the time. These ideas are apparent in the ways in which Bear masculinity is produced. When they first encountered the Bear community, many of my interlocutors were able to identify with Bears because the category stands for something they were already recognizing in themselves. Bear identity incorporates

characteristics and behaviors that fit with what they knew about themselves. Hence, becoming part of the community and calling themselves Bears meant giving name to an identity the men largely felt they already inhabited prior to leaning what Bear culture is about.

However, becoming a Bear was not something that could be completed simply by joining a community and adopting a label. For my interlocutors, becoming a Bear was part of an ongoing process that involved grooming and performing aspects associated with Bear identity. Importantly, Butler's concept of performativity should not be mistaken for performance in a theatrical sense. Bear identity was not a costume that my interlocutors chose to wear only on special occasions. Rather, they modified their bodily appearance and adjusted behaviors that allowed them to embrace the ideal Bear subject as it is understood within a Malaysian queer context. For instance, they worked on enhancing physical traits such as their body shape as well as body and facial hair through regular activities, including working out at a gym or visiting a barber. In this section, I will focus on the significance of facial hair among Bears to show how the natural, or common, masculinity of Bears is constructed and performed.

Having facial hair had always been important to those of my interlocutors who identify as Bears. Ihsan attributed this to the belief that "a lot of people like guys, or are attracted to guys, with facial hair." That is true for most of the men I worked with. Whether we would sip drinks at a bar or dance at the club, they would usually point out one or two men whom they found attractive, and, for the most part, these men sported some amount of facial hair. My interlocutors also commented on each other's appearance and often complimented different styles of beards, like Jia Hui, who once teasingly told his boyfriend that he was "scruffy and yet kind of attractive". Accordingly, those who were able to grow facial hair, took pride in it and often spent time and money on maintaining a well-groomed beard. Haziq, for instance, went to an upscale

barber shop about once a month to have his full beard massaged, conditioned, shaped, and trimmed, and he washed, brushed, and moisturized his beard on a daily basis. I heard him talk with his friends about their preferred grooming products, and I know that he introduced some of them to his barber as well.

The importance of facial hair for many of the men I worked with is further exemplified by the extremes to which some of the men would go to in order to sport a beard. Several of my interlocutors received a beard transplant, while others were in the process of getting one. Unsurprisingly, beard transplants were particularly popular among my Chinese Malaysian interlocutors, as people of East Asian descent tend to have less facial hair than other ethnic groups (Watson, Bouknight, & Alguire 1995). One of them was Xi Yuan, a successful aesthetic doctor who owned and ran a chain of aesthetic clinics in Malaysia. In his clinic, he offered hair and beard transplants, which were among the top three procedures for his male patients. Xi Yuan explained to me that beard transplants work like other hair transplants. Hair follicles are taken from other parts of the body, usually the back of the head, and transplanted to a person's jawline and parts of the face where they want a beard to grow. The success rate for beard transplants is lower than that for scalp hair transplants, which is why Xi Yuan decided to travel to Turkey and undergo the procedure there, because "they have more experience in this than we do here, and maybe I can learn something new."

In early 2019, just before Chinese New Year, we had dinner and then went to a Starbucks at an upscale mall in the center of Kuala Lumpur, because, as Xi Yuan put it, "that's the best place to watch men." "I suppose it's also the best place to be watched by said men," I teased him, and he laughed, loudly exclaiming that he was a visual treat for anyone passing by, never afraid of any attention. When we had settled in with large cups of iced tea, one of his boyfriends, Sean,

joined us. Xi Yuan was in his early forties, while Sean was ten years younger, but their age gap was barely noticeable. This was, in part, because Sean was the calmer and more thoughtful of the two making him appear mature beyond his years. At the time of our get-together, they had been in an open relationship for less than six months and had moved in together two months after meeting. Having known Xi Yuan for many years, I had expected their relationship to move at such a fast pace. He is a man who does nothing by halves, and often acts on a whim taking any consequences in stride.

Hence, I was not surprised to learn that Xi Yuan had decided to get a beard transplant. "I like trying new things," he told me. "Plus, Sean likes it. He wanted to get one, too, but he is not a good candidate for the procedure." Because Sean's scalp hair is already thinning, removing follicles for a beard transplant is not a good idea, especially if the desired result is a full beard. Xi Yuan stated that they had both been interested in him getting a full beard before Sean changed his mind. "First, he wanted me to get a full beard but now he says, no, no, just get a mustache and a goatee." He looked at Sean who nodded and reached for Xi Yuan's tea. Xi Yuan playfully swatted Sean's hand away. "You say that because you're just jealous," he told Sean before relenting and offering him his drink. "Because I will look very cool. And I will look better. People will think I'm a hot daddy and lots of people will chase after me. You don't want that, right?" Sean only raised an eyebrow in response and took a long sip of Xi Yuan's tea.

Their discussion indicates that Xi Yuan and Sean believed having facial hair adds to the beauty of a man and helps him to get the attention of other men, especially in the Bear community that both engaged in. This made me wonder what it was about facial hair that made a man more attractive to others. I later posed this question to Ihsan, who had been able to grow a beard since he was a teenager. He spent a moment reflecting on it before he spoke: "The Bear

community has been given a lot of positive attention [with regards to facial hair]. The look of having beards and all, it adds a certain level of masculinity, like an impression of masculinity." In other words, facial hair increases a man's attractiveness because it makes him appear manly.

Ihsan was not the only one to link the attractiveness of beards to manliness. Many of my interlocutors used the term *masculinity* when we discussed what facial hair, and body hair in general, evoke for them. I asked Ihsan what he means when he speaks of masculinity in that context. He responded with a caveat, stating that facial hair signifies masculinity only on a superficial level, but does not reflect its "true essence [which] lies in a person's character and a person's outlook on life." He asserted, however, that attributes conveyed at the surface level are still important, especially when first engaging with someone, because they provide a first glimpse of what that person might be like.

Happy to elaborate, Ihsan looked at me questioningly: "If we are out together and you see a guy with body hair or facial hair, the impression you get is that he's a bit more butch, right?" I nodded slowly surprised by his choice of the word *butch,* which I had only heard used by my interlocutors when describing women, never men. As Ihsan continued talking, I realized that he was using the word to highlight the queer masculinity of gay men whose behaviors are evaluated through the lens of a male/female binary. The word also helps to contrast queer masculinity with the heteronormative masculinity of straight men that is established alongside that same binary. Ihsan believed that, in the gay community, "masculinity is looked at as the opposite of being feminine" and that "if you're a little bit more feminine, you're being seen as a lower level, as not as desirable." For Ihsan, this was particularly apparent in the meanings attached to men's sexual roles—their preference for being tops (the insertive partner during anal intercourse) or bottoms (the receptive partner during anal intercourse): "Some prefer to be top, some prefer to be bottom,

and there is still the notion that bottoms are a little bit more effeminate than the tops. The tops are like butch, masculine, and real men."

Ihsan's words point to a clear hierarchy within the Malaysian gay community, one that places men who are seen as masculine above those who are considered effeminate. As I have shown previously, this is especially true within the Bear community that asserts a "natural" masculinity akin to hegemonic heteronormative masculinity. Gay men who can fulfill masculine expectations through their behaviors and actions avoid being seen as feminine by others in their circle. By describing these men's masculinity as butch, Ihsan emphasized the contrast between masculine and effeminate behaviors among gay men, while simultaneously highlighting the assumed difference between gay and straight masculinities. For him, being butch meant to assert a queer kind of masculinity that classes butch gay men as "real men," implying that these men live up to heteronormative expectations regarding manliness that are seen as desirable by many in the Malaysian gay community. At the same time, describing them as butch indicates that even "masculine, and real men" who identify as gay demonstrate ways of being masculine outside heteronormative constructions of masculinity because their sexual orientation disrupts traditional images of hegemonic heterosexual masculinity. In short, by calling a man butch, Ihsan characterized this man as both normatively masculine and gay.

According to Ihsan, facial hair helps gay men convey butch, or "real", masculinity: "I think when you have facial hair, when you have beards or a mustache, it adds the level of masculinity in the appearance sense. I think that's what attracts people to want to have facial hair." In other words, among Bears and other gay men in Malaysia, having facial hair is desirable because it denotes manliness, which they consider attractive in others and themselves. Xi Yuan echoed Ihsan's sentiment: "I find facial hair attractive on people because it makes them look

manly and confident. I also find it attractive on me, but it is not as important for me because I am already confident. I'm confident about my looks, my job, my status, my financials, so there are a lot of people chasing after me already." I could not help but tease him again: "What you're saying is that you're already a manly man who can get whomever he wants." Yi Xuan grinned at me answering in a mostly serious tone: "I don't need this beard, but the mission is to try [getting a transplant] and see what happens with other men. Like I said, I like trying new things."

Research has shown that facial hair has always played an important role in establishing and asserting hegemonic ideas about masculinity, and that it is also instrumental in communicating social and ideological identities (Oldstone-Moore 2018). Whether a man chooses to groom or remove his facial hair, his actions embody the dominant masculine ideals he is exposed to within his community and aspires to fulfill. Among my interlocutors, these ideals included the rugged and supposedly natural masculinity of Bears that is demonstrated, in part, by having facial hair. Thus, in addition to making them feel more masculine and attractive, receiving a beard transplant made my interlocutors feel more accepted by the Bear community. Kenny, a Chinese Malaysian man in his early thirties who underwent the procedure in Turkey three years before I started my fieldwork, told me that being able to grow a beard made a difference in how he was perceived by other men in the community. Gesturing to his chubby tummy he said: "I mean, I probably looked like a Bear before, but now I *really* look like a Bear. Everyone likes [the beard]." He told me that getting the transplant has had a positive effect on his social life in that he had been participating in more Bear events and gone on more dates.

Kenny acknowledged that he did not simply become more attractive to others due to being able to grow a beard, but also because getting the transplant affected how he conducted himself as he engaged with men: "I feel more confident. And I'm more comfortable when we go

out, all of us. It's easier." In other words, upon getting a beard transplant, Kenny began to feel more at ease among his gay friends and within the Bear community. I suggest that this is because having facial hair made him feel more accepted by the community, as it is seen as an important part of the Bear aesthetic. While he already identified as a Bear, being able to have a beard became an important part in performing that identity and making it more legible to himself and others. By being more visible as a Bear, Kenny fit in better with the community and started to feel a greater sense of belonging. This, in turn, gave him confidence, because his Bear identity is important to him, and he values having that identity recognized by others around him.

Actions like getting a beard transplant show that my interlocutors carefully groom and enhance characteristics that they see vital to Bear identity. While they viewed themselves as Bears with or without facial hair—they believed that the essence of Bear identity is within them—they were deliberate in their attempts to bring out and perform aspects of that identity. They did so to become the best version of what they imagine to be the ideal Bear both for themselves and others.

Celebrating Bear Identities and Bodies

In previous sections, I have outlined what it means to be a Bear and how Bear identity is constructed and enacted by gay men in Malaysia. In this section, I want to focus on what participating in the Bear community looks like in practical terms, and how doing so has shaped my interlocutors' understanding of their place in the world. As I have mentioned earlier, men's desire to become part of the Bear community is driven by the need to feel a sense of belonging and acceptance. Within both gaystream and mainstream cultures, large people are stigmatized

and marginalized as the shape and weight of their bodies defy societal norms. The emergence of the idea of the obesity pandemic in the late 1990s was particularly detrimental to fat persons, as the construction of fatness as a global health crisis and social problem reconfigured them as "'diseased' on an individual level, and as parasitic on a social level [by] monopolizing healthcare resources" (Wykes 2014, 2). Fatness came to be seen as a moral failing signifying fat individuals' inability, or refusal, to properly manage their bodies by losing weight, thus deeming them both socially and physically unfit (ibid). Because being fat is seen as self-incurred and attributed to a person's lack of willpower and self-control, social ostracism and discrimination of fat people is often seen as deserved. Such discourses legitimized the notion that policing, regulating, and marginalizing fat bodies is not only acceptable but imperative (see Lupton 2013).

Because fat is obtrusive and cannot be hidden, it is impossible for my interlocutors to employ strategies that would allow them to pass as thin in order to avoid rejection and social injuries by those around them (see Goffman 1963). All of them shared numerous stories detailing the regularity with which they are subject to pejorative comments, prejudice, and harassment by friends and strangers alike. Many of them had internalized the dominant view that fatness is negative and had come to expect treatment from others that reminds them that their bodies are 'wrong', take up too much space, and are undesirable. This led my interlocutors to develop what Elspeth Probyn called everyday shame, "the body's feeling of being out-of-place in the everyday [which] is a shame born of the body's desire to fit in, just as it knows that it cannot" (2004, 328).

While my focus in this chapter is on Bears, it is important to note that Chasers are also subjected to ridicule. Although they do not inhabit fat, hairy bodies—within the community, fatness and hairiness would mark them as Bears and not Chasers—they are stigmatized because of their attraction to large bodies. In expressing their wish to be with fat men, they are defying

societal expectations and are subverting normative understandings of desirable bodies. Hence, they are also ostracized by gaystream and mainstream cultures (see Pyle & Loewy 2009). The Bear community provides both Bears and Chasers with an environment where their sense of everyday shame gets to be suspended, and where they get to renegotiate their identity as fat, gay men, or as admirers of fat, gay men. This is because they enter a social context that provides them with alternative ways of looking at themselves.

To appreciate how participating in the Bear community shapes men's self-understanding, it is helpful to envision Bears as a community of practice. Within communities of practice, the idea of identity is continuously negotiated and legitimized through individuals' engagement in actions and interactions. Learning as participation is understood as "the vehicle for the evolution of practices and the inclusion of newcomers while also (and through the same process) the vehicle for the development and transformation of identities" (Wenger 1998, 13). In other words, identity is built individually and collectively when a person participates in a community of practice. Fat, gay men become Bears by learning from, creating bonds with, and becoming invested in, the Bear community. They develop a sense of belonging to this community that is strengthened through their ongoing participation in community events. As such, the identification with a specific community—and in this instance, a man's self-understanding as being a Bear—"is not merely a subjective experience; it is socially organized … [and] a dynamic, generative process" (Wenger 1998, 192).

Much of Bear culture revolves around men's participation in Bear-themed parties and social events that allow Bears and Chasers to connect with others who accept them as they are and, thus, foster a sense of comfort and normalcy. Borneobear, an event well known to Bears and Chasers throughout Asia, was one such occasion that brought men together and positively

affected the lives of many of my interlocutors and helped them reframe their self-understanding. Borneobear was a beauty pageant for Bears that took place over the course of three days each November between 2011 and 2016. Every year during my time in Malaysia, I flew to Kota Kinabalu, a coastal city in the Northern part of the island of Borneo, to volunteer at the event. It was run by Thomas, a Kadazandusun[3] man in his early forties and one of my oldest friends in Malaysia, who had asked me to assist him at the pageant when we first met in 2012. Borneobear was well known in the region, and through my involvement in the event, I met Bears and Chasers from many Southeast Asian and East Asian countries. Each of these countries has its own Bear community with many of its members living in big cities. Regardless of whether they stay in urban or rural areas, most of the participants frequently travel to get-togethers in one of these cities thus participating in the larger Bear community within their country. Additionally, Bears and Chasers from different countries regularly attend prominent events abroad, which creates and extensive, yet close-knit, transnational Bear network in the region. At Borneobear, we welcomed contestants and visitors from many countries, including Indonesia, Brunei, Thailand, Taiwan, Japan, the Philippines, and Myanmar. They usually found out about the event by word of mouth or via a private Facebook group that grew to have more than 2600 members, because queer events had to be advertised discreetly to avoid catching the attention of Malaysian authorities.

While the pageant itself was always held on a Saturday night, Thomas and his team organized a variety of events on the remaining days. Trips to small islands, daytime stays at one

[3] Kadazandusun is the generic ethnic label applied to about 40 ethnic and speech communities indigenous to Sabah. These groups are considered non-Malay *bumiputera* because they do not traditionally practice Islam—a religion that is not indigenous to Malaysia, yet often falsely assumed to be practiced by all *bumiputera*. Together with *Orang Asli* and Malays, *bumiputera* are regarded as original inhabitants of the land as opposed to Chinese Malaysians and Indian Malaysians.

of the many resorts in the region, dinner parties, drag shows, and karaoke sessions were all part of Borneobear. They allowed visitors and contestants to socialize and make the most of a long weekend among Bears and Chasers. Such extended community gatherings are common among Bear communities in different parts of the world. Barrett (2017) referred to them as "bear runs" and stated that they can last for up to a week and are held on a regular basis in places like the U.S., Canada, Europe, Australia, and Mexico. A prominent one that partially inspired Borneobear was the San Francisco based International Bear Rendezvous, which took place between 1995 and 2011. It hosted the annual International Mr. Bear contest in which Bears competed for the title of International Mr. Bear as well as other titles, including International Grizzly Bear for larger men, International Daddy Bear for those who are older, and International Mr. Bear Cub for younger ones.

In the Malaysian pageant, ten men competed for the Mr. Borneobear title over the course of three rounds. The first round was called Bear Run and required contestants to walk down the catwalk channeling their Bear self. During the second round, Bear Talent, the men were expected to showcase a special talent of theirs, and I have seen Bears sing, dance, strip, recite poetry, and pole dance. The last round asked them to create and wear an outfit that manifests the pageant's theme which changed every year—among them were Fetish, Cirque de Borneo, and Playbear. For each of the rounds, a jury of three men awarded the contestants points that were combined with scores given by the audience and determined the winner of the competition. Because Thomas and his team were able to secure local, queer-friendly businesses to sponsor the event, the winner as well as the first and second runner-up received an award and prize money.

At Borneobear, it was my role to take care of the contestants: to make sure that they knew what to expect during the competition, and to make them feel comfortable with one another, so

they could enjoy their stay. Every year, there were men who got nervous when they saw the stage that they would have to walk onto[4]. In 2012, Somchai, a Thai man in his early thirties, told me he had signed up on a whim, because he saw the contest as an opportunity to get to know other Bears. Like many of my interlocutors who identified as Bears, he had a network of gay friends in his home city, Bangkok, but felt that he lacked the opportunity to meet men who were sexually or romantically attracted to him. Somchai was generally a shy and quiet man, but figured that competing in Borneobear would be a good way to put himself out there and gain confidence. However, upon seeing the three judges having drinks and jokingly jostling their friends in the audience, he got cold feet and asked me how he could withdraw from the competition. He was concerned about how people would react to him, worried about being "too fat, maybe," and having "no true talent like the others, definitely."

After a long conversation in which we discussed the variety of body types that Bears can inhabit and agreed that a speech about precisely that issue qualifies as a talent, Somchai decided to stay and compete. With an erotic striptease that included a set of pliers and a torch, he won the fetish themed costume round of the competition. The judges also loved his Bear Run and, ultimately, Somchai managed to accumulate enough points to come in third overall. While he remained nervous about the pageant itself, Somchai became more comfortable with the men around him during other events. He felt most at ease when we spent a lazy afternoon at the beach on one of the tiny islands off the coast of Kota Kinabalu. Between eating grilled seafood, snorkeling, and wrestling each other in shallow water, men were sitting in small groups in the

[4] The pageant was usually held in a nightclub in Kota Kinabalu that profiled itself as straight-friendly gay and had been running for 15 years before it closed down in 2019. Each year, between 60 and 100 men attended Borneobear at least half of which flew in from Peninsular Malaysia or other countries in Asia.

shade of luscious trees quietly talking and nursing their hangover from last night's drinking with fresh coconut water.

Somchai shook his head at one of the other contestants who gestured for him to join them in the water. I poked him in the arm encouraging him to go. "Not, I'm not ready yet," he told me and blushed slightly. During the night of the pageant, he had received many compliments from men in the audience about his appearance and how he carried himself. He was excited that several of them were attracted to his soft and round body but confessed that he was unused to that much positive attention, especially the flirtatious words and glances. Although he had hoped that people would respond positively to his participation in Borneobear, experiencing his body as an object of desire was overwhelming because it contrasted with how it was usually perceived by others. "I'm still shy. More than they think. But they are nice," Somchai stated as he looked over at a couple of men lightheartedly shoving each other into the water. Eventually, he plucked up the courage to get up and join them.

Fig 1.2: Somchai and the winner as well as runner up of Borneobear 2012 presenting their awards, surrounded by fellow contestants and audience members. Source: Author.

Somchai carried these sentiments back to Bangkok with him, and his experience at Borneobear helped him become more self-assured and gave him the courage to try new things. Rather than staying in to avoid "bad looks and so many bad comments," he started to organize Bear events in Bangkok that allowed him to keep mingling with other Bears and Chasers. These events grew in size and now attract an international crowd that is often larger than Borneobear's ever was. Eventually, he was able to turn his skills into a profession and began operating a travel and event business with his boyfriend, whom he met soon after his visit to Malaysia. While the overwhelmingly positive personal changes and professional success that followed Somchai's

decision to compete in Borneobear were unique to him, my Bear-identified interlocutors tended to agree that being part of the Bear community changed their lives for the better. I argue that Somchai's experience illustrates this positive shift that is common to all Bears and occurs in three interrelated areas: with regards to their understanding of themselves, their friendships with other men, and their sexual and romantic relationships.

First, men like Somchai often internalize the everyday shame they experience within gaystream and mainstream culture which treat their bodies as abnormal. My interlocutors' body insecurity and self-loathing surfaced in both self-directed comments and behaviors, particularly in situations that made them feel vulnerable. During the pageant, for instance, Somchai worried that his body was too big even for a Bear, and at the beach, he kept himself wrapped in a towel careful to hide his naked stomach from view. Similarly, Han Ying, a Chinese Malaysian friend of mine, confessed his desire to hide his body whenever he is about to become intimate with another man: "I don't want to be seen. I don't enjoy people touching my body … it makes me feel naked, ugly." These men anticipated hurtful treatment from others and interiorized negative views. For them, being part of the Bear community was able to provide relief from such feelings of shame and self-contempt.

Bear events provided these men with a safe space where they could spend time with people who were either like them, or who supported and admired them. Rather than viewing them as less than, these people reconfigure Bear bodies as objects of desire. In doing so, they normalize fatness and imbue large, aging bodies with value (see Hennen 2008; Whitesel 2014). Frequently spending time with Bears and Chasers allowed my interlocutors to learn and reframe how to think about themselves and their bodies (see Lave & Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998), often helping them to become more comfortable with how they look. It is important to note that any

event that aims to promote body self-acceptance for larger or older men is able to accomplish that. For instance, communities such as the Chub for Chub group that Ihsan used to be part of, or the Girth and Mirth movement in the U.S., afford similar opportunities for fat gay men to develop a more positive understanding of their bodies. They do so by creating what Whitesel (2014) described as a physical and psychological sanctuary for them. Somchai experienced this when he participated in Borneobear and during subsequent Bear events in Thailand. By regularly engaging with fat-positive men, he became more accepting of his body and more confident about himself. When we sat together on a beach in Borneo the year after we first me, he no longer held on to his towel and did not hesitate to join our friends playing in the water.

Fig. 1.3: Somchai carrying a Bear flag and his boyfriend carrying a Pride flag at a beach during Borneobear 2014. Source: Author.

In addition to this shift in self-understanding, Somchai's growing involvement in the Bear community enabled him to widen his social circle and build new friendships. He and other

interlocutors of mine expressed that they had missed having an active social live, prior to learning about Bears. They often struggled—and many continued to struggle—with everyday activities and mainstream as well as gaystream events, because of the frequent incivilities they encountered. Even well-meaning comments about their weight that they received under the guise of care chipped away at the men's self-esteem and caused some of them to self-isolate. As Raahim, a Malay Bear, put it: "My sister, my friends, [they are] just like everybody. They give me advice, but it's tiring. It's not kind. Sometimes, I don't want to hear it." Bear events provide a space in which men can socialize and grow friendships without fear of being disrespected or discriminated against. Such events allowed my interlocutors to forge close bonds and nurture a sense of belonging to a community of what anthropologists refer to as fictive, chosen, or voluntary kin—people with whom they created family-like relationships through trust and affection rather than through blood, marriage, or adoption (Nelson 2013). For Somchai, participating in Borneobear set this process in motion because it connected him with Bears and Chasers from different parts of Asia. They were among the first to support him in his efforts to organize Bear events in Bangkok and, over time, became his closest friends.

Importantly, the Bear community is as much about friendship as it is about sexual and romantic relationships. Gay communities are ostensibly sexual communities, but because being fat is regarded as sexually undesirable, large men have low erotic capital and tend to be desexualized with the gaystream (Edmonds & Zieff 2015; Pyle & Klein 2011). Many of my interlocutors stated that men frequently reject them citing their body size as the issue. Matthew, an Indian Malaysian man in his early forties, bemoaned the narrow beauty ideal that dictates erotic value in the Malaysian gaystream: "There is so much discrimination right now. Nobody wants to go on a date, let alone fuck. They will say, no fat people, no stocky people, no hairy

people. Online and at parties, it's the same." Within the Bear community, however, fat bodies are constructed as objects of desire. As such, participating in Bear events allows men to "disrupt the categories of status and privilege based on body shape and size … [and] redefine themselves as sex objects: sexual beings who are motivated by the desire of other men" (Whitesel 2014, 59-60). During his first trip to Borneobear, Somchai felt flattered, yet overwhelmed, by the positive attention he received. As he began to organize and attend get-togethers for Bears in Bangkok, he became more comfortable with the thought that he was indeed physically attractive to some men. Just a few months after the pageant, he met his boyfriend and the two of them have been in a what he calls a "committed and very sexy" relationship for close to ten years now. In those years, I have never seen them travel anywhere without the set of teddy bears they got to playfully commemorate their love for one another and their belonging to the Bear community that brought them together.

Fig. 1.4: The teddy bears Somchai and his boyfriend take along on their travels—here, on a snorkeling trip in the Maldives. Source: Somchai.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I analyzed how Bear identity is understood, cultivated, and enacted by gay men in Malaysia. By framing the Bear community as a community of practice, I have shown that Bear identity is socially produced through a man's participation in the subculture. Communities of practice come together around a shared interest or objective. In the pursuit of that objective, communities of practice foster a connection between the individual and the group, thus playing an important role in shaping their members' self-understanding in relation to the world and their orientation towards it.

Through their continuous participation in the Malaysian Bear community—through activities they partake in, the beliefs and values they promote, the language they use, their physical appearance, and the friends and sexual or romantic partners they choose—my interlocutors interacted with others in ways that allowed them to position themselves as Bears or Chasers. They learned to contest dominant ideas within mainstream gay culture that presume that only young, hairless, thin, and muscular bodies are desirable, and that sexual attraction must conform to this narrowly constructed beauty ideal. I demonstrated that their engagement with other members of the Bear community enabled my interlocutors to reframe this perception and, thus, shift their sense of self. Over time, they began to identify with the community and presented themselves to others as either Bears or Chasers. I argued that, as such, Bear identity is relational in that it is produced and reaffirmed in men's interactions with others.

For my interlocutors, Bearness evoked images of a natural, or common, masculinity that is seen as innate to the person. I have illustrated, however, that Bear masculinity—as an integral part of Bear identity—was produced and negotiated through their participation in the Malaysian Bear community. Bear masculinity comprises of a variety of attitudes, behaviors, and aesthetic

markers, one of which are facial and body hair. I focused on my interlocutors' practices of growing and grooming facial hair to show that the men employed different strategies to construct and bring out the kind of masculinity they considered paradigmatic of Bear identity. Acts like getting a beard transplant, for instance, allowed the men to grow facial hair, which they saw as emblematic of Bear identity. Their ability to, then, groom different beard styles was important to my interlocutors, because it enabled them to visualize Bear masculinity. In other words, wearing a beard helped the men externalize their Bear selves and denote their belonging to the Bear community. This is yet another indicator of the fact that Bear identity is a social process, as Bear masculinity is formed, enacted, and reasserted in relationships.

Ultimately, what I hope to have shown is that the Malaysian Bear community provided a safe space where my interlocutors were able to find emotional support and friendship. By engaging in community events, they became part of a brotherhood of men who show love, care, and respect for one another. Along with fostering friendships with other Bears and Chasers, the community has also enabled my interlocutors to meet sexual partners and create romantic relationships. Prior to joining the Bear community, many of the men struggled to connect sexually or romantically with others and often felt ridiculed or dismissed. Being among a group of like-minded people, however, gave them more opportunities to find sex and love. To that effect, the Bear community provided my interlocutors with a social foundation upon which they were able to build a web of relations that extends beyond the collective itself.

I cannot overstate how important participating in the Malaysian Bear community has been for the men I worked with. Most of them asserted that their social lives blossomed since joining the community, and that many of the enduring relationships they built—both platonic and romantic—were only possible because they were initiated within a space of shared understanding

and mutual respect. This, in turn, allowed the men to change and grow. Their continued and positive engagement with others encouraged them to work towards becoming the men they want to be. In other words, actions and practices that both foster and signal the love existing between them shaped my interlocutors' subjectivities and enabled them to mature into their queer, fat, loving Bear selves. In the next chapter, I shift my focus from my interlocutors' engagement with the Malaysian Bear community to their romantic relationships. I examine what romantic love means to them, how it is practiced, and what forms resulting relationships take.

CHAPTER 2

Making Love: Intimacy, Passion, and the Decision to Commit

Introduction

Yazri, a Malay man in his early thirties, had never been in a committed romantic relationship. He told me that, throughout his twenties, he had dated a large number of men and slept with even more, but he never felt compelled to commit to one of them. He preferred casual sexual encounters over ongoing relationships but was adamant that this was only temporary and that, in the future, he was going to look for a life partner: "I do hope that I will find somebody whom I can live my life with together and share things, travel around, eat good food, run our own business—a little cottage or hotel, a bed and breakfast kind of place—and then just live life to the fullest until we die."

Yazri believed that everybody wants to share their life with someone: "I think that's why Allah has created us, to find this partner[5] … I feel that every one of us will, at some point, launch to have this sort of relationship, this sort of bond." He asserted that the role this life partner fulfills can differ from one person to the next, "it could be a soulmate, it could be a sex mate, it could be a travel mate, I don't know. It could be all of the above. What I do know is that we were not meant to live alone." Having made that statement, Yazri shrugged and sighed. In response to the questioning look I gave him, he explained that he did not know what such a relationship would look like for him. While he had well-formed expectations regarding sexual chemistry and

[5] I will use the terms 'partner' and 'boyfriend' interchangeably when referring to the persons my interlocutors are in a committed romantic relationship with, because these are the terms the men themselves use most often. As I will show later in this chapter, some of them also refer to their partners as 'husband' or '*husbear*', but they tend to employ these terms only on occasion.

performance when meeting an attractive man, he was unable to imagine what form he would want “an actual loving relationship, and not just a casual affair” to take.

My conversation with Yazri highlights two of my general observations regarding my interlocutors: one, they stated that the desire to experience romantic love and romantic relationships is universal; and two, they often had divergent ideas about the forms these relationships might take. Scholars of love across various disciplines would agree with the men that the capacity for and experience of love in general is a common feature of human existence (Fisher 2004; Dion & Dion 1996; Hatfield, Mo, & Rapson 2015; Jankowiak & Fischer 1992; Karandashev 2017; Singer 1994). They would point out, however, that not all kinds of love are considered ubiquitous, and that the occurrence of love as a universal emotion does not lead to a shared understanding of that emotion. Accordingly, romantic love exists throughout the world, but its interpretation and significance vary notably across cultures and times, and they change depending on the sociopolitical context people live in. Moreover, the unique ways in which romantic love is conceptualized and expressed differs from one person to the next, meaning that the forms romantic relationships can take are also incredibly diverse.

Comparing queer and straight relationships in various Western countries during the 80s and 90s, Weeks, Heaphy, and Donovan (2001) argued that there is more complexity and a stronger sense of fluidity in queer relationships. They attributed this to “the lack of a sanctioned institutional framework for intimate relationships in the non-heterosexual world” and viewed it “as an opportunity for creativity and choice that is still largely denied to the heterosexual world” (2001, 107). In addition to the restrictions legal structures place on LGBTQ individuals by, for instance, disallowing same-sex marriage and not providing protections from widespread discrimination in social and professional setting, there is also a lack of role models that help

define what a normative queer relationship should look like. This has forced queer couples to be more creative in their endeavors to build meaningful relationships than their heterosexual counterparts (see also Giddens 1992; Halperin 2019). For gay men in Malaysia, it is both the absence of role models and legal oppression contributing to negative societal attitudes towards LGBTQ communities that influences what forms romantic relationships between men can take. Queer individuals, including gay men, are seen by many as deviants, and non-normative expressions of gender and sexuality are deemed immoral and illegal, and are punishable by law (Singaravelu & Cheah 2020). This compelled my interlocutors to build relationships that could adjust to, and subsist within, the restrictions placed on queer communities in Malaysia.

In this chapter, I investigate how my interlocutors navigate the interplay of individual desires and societal expectations in their approach to romantic love. Importantly, whereas I honed in on experiences and understandings that are connected to my interlocutors' self-identification as Bears and Chasers in the previous chapter, here, I zoom out and look at the creation and practice of loving relationships in their capacity as gay men more generally. I argue that romantic relationships are constituted through ongoing negotiations between partners that both produce and disregard heteronormative understandings of love in Malaysia. As such, their experiences illustrate a variety of ways in which gay relationships are constructed in Malaysia, which shows that romantic love can take many different forms. Because their love is seen as morally wrong by Malaysian society and is, thus, always already outside the Malaysian norm, their romantic experiences provide a first glimpse at the many possibilities that arise when people's sexual and emotional desires are not confined by normative expectations. Having said that, it is important to note that my exploration of the diverse forms romantic love take among my interlocutors is not intended to showcase how *exceptional* people experience love but, rather,

how *people* who are forced to content with exceptional circumstances due to their position in society find ways to love.

In order to understand how my interlocutors think about, manifest, and practice romantic love, I utilize Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love (1986) as a theoretical framework. As a psychologist, Sternberg intended for his theory to capture a variety of emotional experiences that make up the spectrum of love within a small set of key constructs. His theory was not meant to understand the psychological components of only one type of love—romantic love—but to comprehend love more generally and its various kinds. Sternberg posited that love consists of three components: intimacy, passion, and decision/commitment. He defined intimacy as "feelings of closeness, connectedness, and bondedness in loving relationships" (1986, 119), which was maintained by both partners continuously engaging with and learning about each other. Sternberg characterized passion as "the drives that lead to romance, physical attraction, sexual consummation, and related phenomena in loving relationships" (ibid) and includes the motivational sources for the experience of passion between two people. Finally, he stated that decision/commitment "refers to, in the short term, the decision that one loves someone else, and in the long term, the commitment to maintain that love" (ibid).

For Sternberg, these three components can exist separately but interact with one another to determine the form of a loving relationship. Depending on the type of relationship people have (e.g., parent and child, siblings, lovers, close friends), all three of these components, a combination of any two of them, or just one might be present. For example, passion tends to be very high in the early stages of a romantic relationship but is less common in the relationship between friends. It is important to note that the significance of each component can differ from one relationship to the next and even between two partners. It is rare that both members of a

couple emphasize the same combination of components to the same degree. Additionally, the importance of each component tends to shift over time within a specific relationship. For instance, while passion is often present at the beginning of a romantic relationship and declines as time passes, intimacy and commitment tend to grow gradually and become more prominent as the relationship progresses.

Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love has been helpful in showing how love is both understood and practiced by people across different cultures (see Sorokowski et al. 2021). Likewise, I am utilizing his theory as a lens for detailing and interpreting the various forms romantic relationships between my interlocutors take. Sternberg's conceptualization of love seems particularly relevant, as the language used by the gay men in Malaysia to describe important aspects of their relationships echoes the terms used by him. However, when my interlocutors spoke of intimacy, passion, or commitment, they did not always ascribe the same meaning to each term. Importantly, I am not only applying the Triangular Theory of Love as a framework to show how love is understood within a queer, Malaysian context, but to make this ambiguous, and sometimes hard to grasp, concept more accessible by breaking it down into discrete components. This also helps me to concretize love as a relational practice between people. In this chapter, I hone in on each component of love and identify how it shows up in everyday actions as a couple, and how it affects the shape of their romantic relationships. In my analysis, I pay particular attention to temporal dynamics that determine the development and duration of a relationship.

In the first section of this chapter, I focus on intimacy and the factors influencing how it is understood and lived by my interlocutors. I show that heteronormative ideas about emotions being gendered determine what behaviors and actions are seen to foster a sense of intimacy

among couples. These can differ from one man to the next, and I illustrate that their divergent approaches to intimacy allow for diverse relationship formats. In their actions, many of the couples I worked with simultaneously diverge from and reinforce heterosexual norms about romantic relationships. I argue that in doing so, these couples complicate and challenge supposedly naturalized forms of gender and sexual practice.

In the second section, I explore what role passion plays in my interlocutors' romantic relationships. I attend to the importance of sexual passion for men's long-term satisfaction with their partners, and show that, for many of them, satisfying their sexual desires is closely linked to experiencing high degrees of intimacy. Furthermore, I demonstrate how different understandings of passion and incompatible sexual needs can prompt a couple to redefine the form of their relationship by, for example, opening it up to introduce other sexual partners. Such decisions raise questions about what commitment means to my interlocutors, which I examine in the third section of this chapter. Here, I discuss why most of the men prefer long-term, committed relationships to short-term ones, and discuss why notions of commitment and monogamy are not mutually exclusive. I analyze what same-sex marriage means to my interlocutors and show that many of them reject the notion of marriage as a symbol of intimacy and commitment. Finally, I illustrate that the existence of different relationship formats does not imply varying levels of commitment but is simply a reflection of couple's attempts to meet individual needs over time.

The primary aim of this chapter is to outline how my interlocutors both understand as well as practice love and build and maintain romantic relationships within a cultural context that places immense sociolegal restrictions on queer communities. Still, the men I worked with experienced a set of privileges that distinguishes them from other gay men and queer people, which I explore in the last section of this chapter. Most of my interlocutors were well educated,

professionally established, and financially well off. I argue that this allowed them to make choices about their romantic lives that gay men who are less advantaged do not have such as being able to live independently and share a home with their partners.

Creating Intimacy across Space and Time

Sternberg (1986) viewed intimacy as a component that is common to a variety of loving relationships, including romantic ones. He defined intimacy as "feelings in a relationship that promote closeness, bondedness, and connectedness," (1986, 120) and include a person's desire to ensure the wellbeing of their loved one, to mutually share thoughts, experiences, feelings, and possessions, to provide and receive support, and to intimately communicate with their partner. In other words, intimacy refers to the feelings of warmth that develop as two people get to know and invest in each other and, thus, stimulate and grow their relationship. Intimacy is a multidimensional concept (Hook et al. 2003) in that the specific behaviors and actions that are perceived to foster a sense of intimacy are varied and often differ from one person to the next. Hence, how my interlocutors expressed love for one another through intimate gestures greatly determined the form of, and dynamics within, the romantic relationship they were building.

One important factor influencing a person's understanding of intimacy is their gender. In heterosexual romantic relationships in Malaysia, women and men are generally expected to assume heteronormative gender roles that are seen as complementary. Women are supposed to be adaptable, forgiving, nurturing, and responsible for ensuring that the relationship progresses well (Ismail 2014). They are doing the bulk of the emotional labor within their relationships and actively forge intimate ties with their partners. Men, in contrast, ought to be independent,

assertive, in control of their emotions, and able to provide support and care for their partner (Ismail 2014; Liow et al. 2017). They tend to rely on women to perform intimate gestures that strengthen the bond between two partners. Having grown up in a system that perpetuates heteronormative ideas about romantic relationships, my interlocutors did not receive the same cultural socialization in the emotional labors of love as women do. Because women are not the object of their desire and affection, gay men cannot depend on them to do the work and must find their own ways to create intimacy and maintain the romantic bonds women usually sustain.

Of course, gendered differences in the understanding and practice of intimacy are not innate, but the result of cultural ideas about women and men that shape behavioral norms in Malaysia. Accordingly, while these ideas were reflected in my interlocutors' experiences of intimacy in their romantic relationships, the men were not bound to act upon them. At times, they drew on the familiar and reinforced certain aspects of intimacy that are associated with masculinity such as the desire to maintain a high level of independence by establishing strong boundaries with their partner. Other times, they diverged from heteronormative patterns of intimacy and configured their romantic relationships in alternative ways that were often influenced by ideals common withing the Malaysian Bear community many of them were part of. It is important to emphasize that neither familiar nor alternative forms of intimacy forged by my gay interlocutors are entirely absent from heterosexual relationships. Nevertheless, looking at intimacy within a queer context allows me to examine how gender and sexual identity affect romantic desires and people's ability to build romantic relationships with others more generally.

Benny was a Chinese Malaysian man in his late forties who lived in Ipoh, a small city about two hours north of Kuala Lumpur. He grew up in a town a short drive from Ipoh and spent several nights a week at his mother's house supporting her financially and assisting with

everyday tasks. In addition to his condominium in Ipoh, he owned one in Kuala Lumpur that he usually rented out, but which he said he would move into "eventually, once I retire and don't have to be in Ipoh anymore." In 2008, Benny met Jason on Fridae.com, a site that provides news and entertainment content for LGBTQ communities throughout Asia and allows users to link up and interact. They connected over their shared interest in travel and hiking, which continued to be an important aspect of their relationship. Jason was also a Chinese Malaysian man in his late forties. Unlike Benny though, he did not live in Peninsular Malaysia, but in the city of Kota Kinabalu (KK) on the island of Borneo where he shared his childhood home with his mother and a younger, unmarried sister.

After talking online and on the phone for a couple of months, Jason and Benny met up and spent a weekend together in Kuala Lumpur. They thoroughly enjoyed each other's company, so, despite living three flight hours apart, they decided to be in what Benny called a "committed and exclusive" relationship. When I asked him whether they discussed what this relationship would look like in detail, Benny shook his head: "Not really. We talked about some things in the beginning, but mostly we talked about stuff at different points. Whenever things came up, you know." The main topics the two of them discussed during their first weekend together were sexual exclusivity in a relationship, and how they would handle the distance. Benny asserted that they chose to be in a closed relationship even though they had no intention to move in together: "In general, we always understood it as a long-distance relationship. It was never something where we thought we will end up living together and we're okay with it, I think." This was an unusual stance, because in Malaysia, both heterosexual and queer couples in committed, long-term relationships tend to aspire to share a home and associate a shared domestic lifestyle with

increased intimacy. Yet, for Benny, this was not needed in order to feel connected with his boyfriend.

A separate conversation with Jason revealed that he had not been quite as relaxed about living apart as Benny. He stated that he, initially, wanted to move in with Benny, "because when things start, you tend to be in a honeymoon stage, where you want to be with your partner, like, 24/7." It was only after the first couple of years, once they were out of the honeymoon period, that he "had naturally gotten past that need" and realized "that you need your own space" and that this need "doesn't make the relationship any worse." While it is common for relationship needs to evolve over time, I do not believe that Jason's change of heart was an entirely organic development. Rather, I argue that the couple's personal circumstances forced them to accept that they would not be able to share a home and would have to progress their relationship in alternative ways. I am basing this on the fact that the couple once tried to move in together. Six years into their relationship, and well after the honeymoon period had ended, Jason moved to Kuala Lumpur, staying in the condominium Benny owned there. He told me that the plan had been for Benny to join him once he was able to transfer his business to a new location. That, however, never happened because Benny felt uncomfortable leaving his mother behind. Moving her in with them was not an option as his mother did not know about the nature of his relationship with Jason.

The same is true for nearly all my interlocutors. With only four exceptions, none of them had disclosed their sexual orientation to their parents, though many of them came out to select family members, who tended to be younger such as siblings, nephews, or nieces. Some of the men stated that their sexuality was an "open secret"; they were certain their parents suspected that they are gay. Yet, neither party forced the issue, thus keeping an uncomfortable balance that

protected everyone from the potentially painful consequences of revealing that aspect of the men's identity (see Singaravelu & Cheah 2020). As Jason put it: "My mom stopped asking about girls long ago. She is Catholic and conservative. [Her and my older brother] don't ask. If they ask, I will tell them. If they don't ask, I won't. That's my policy." He introduced boyfriends as close friends, and his family always accepted them as such. My other interlocutors have done the same. Those living together referred to their romantic partners as flatmates when in the company of their parents, who did not ask questions, even though two financially independent, middle-aged men living together is uncommon in Malaysia. Importantly, not all couples living together told their families that they share a home. Because most of my interlocutors are financially well off, many of them own several properties. This makes it easy for one partner to temporarily move out in case the other's parents come to visit and stay for a few days, enabling the couple to keep the fact that they are romantically involved and live together hidden from their families.

Most of my interlocutors cited religion as the main reason why they could not disclose their sexual orientation. It did not matter if their families identified as Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, or Christian, the men stated that their parents' religious beliefs would prevent them from accepting a queer son. Secular concerns such as the criminalization of homosexual acts in Malaysia were rarely mentioned and generally understood as the government attempts to reinforce an already exiting moral code that is anchored in religion. Fami, a Malay man in his early forties, was among the small number of men who had come out to his family. At the time, he was in his mid-twenties and had just returned to Malaysia after spending several years studying and working in the United States. As he had been able to create a fulfilling life for himself "as a brown, little queen, in Alabama of all places," he had wanted to continue "just being myself in KL, like I was [in the U.S.]." However, Fami regretted sharing this aspect of

himself with his mother, whose religious beliefs made it difficult for her to handle the news: "She was devastated and scared, because she knew that Allah would not allow me to join her in heaven. After so many years, she still cries because she thinks we cannot meet once we are both dead. I feel horrible about it all." Such experiences were not uncommon among queer persons in Malaysia, and knowing about them discouraged men like Benny and Jason from coming out to their parents.

Jason spent close to two years working for an accounting firm in Kuala Lumpur before the death of his father caused him to return to Borneo and move back in with his mother. He told me he did not fault Benny for choosing to stay in Ipoh; neither did he regret going back to his hometown. Both men felt that their obligations towards their mothers were more important than their desire to live together. This is not an uncommon choice among the couples I worked with. In Malaysia, it is customary for people from all ethnoreligious backgrounds to rely on family for care and support, and adult children often take in their parents and care for them as they age (DaVanzo & Chan 1994; Ibrahim et al. 2018). Chinese Malaysians in particular place great importance on the notion of filial piety—for them, the concept is rooted in Confucian teachings—which is understood as respect and care shown by children to their parents and the elderly (Tan, Noew, & Sarvarubini 2020). Accordingly, most of my interlocutors financially supported their families, and several of them lived with their parents to assist with everyday needs. Only those with siblings taking on the responsibility of being the primary caretaker chose to live with their boyfriends.

I argue that the sense of filial obligation instilled in Jason and Benny caused them to readily accept the responsibilities they have towards their mothers. As they could not tell their parents that they were a couple, Benny and Jason let go of their wish to share a home and,

instead, moved in with their aging mothers. They also adjusted expectations within their romantic relationship accordingly. Benny, who was never as committed to the idea in the first place, redefined what living together would mean for them, and asserted that the geographical distance between Jason and him was, in fact, advantageous:

> [Jason] loves activities that do not coincide with mine. So, if we ended up doing completely separate things all of the time, even though we're living together, it might actually be worse for the relationship. At the very least, with the way things are now, I can enjoy the fact that he's so far away … We give each other space and time to do stuff … So, the long-distance relationship works for us because of the way we are as individuals.

His words show that, for Benny, living in different states does not detract from the relationship. Rather, it strengthens the bond between Jason and him because it allows them to follow individual interests that they do not enjoy sharing. He stated that this, in turn, gives them the chance to "focus on what we share" and connect through interests that truly bring them together.

To make up for the distance, the couple found other ways to join their lives and create intimacy. Jason told me that he was often asked by friends how they were able to make their long-distance relationship work for more than a decade: "I will tell them that communication is number one on the list. After that is trust and love." He added that key to feeling close is their joint effort to "be honest, and just talk about things that trouble you. Work things out together. I think that will make any relationship work." Benny concurred and stated that consistent communication is what makes them feel intimately connected: "We keep in contact daily, we talk about things that happen or things that matter to us." He emphasized that short weekend getaways every couple of months and longer trips once a year were crucial to maintaining the physical bond that is also important to them. However, for him, the conversations, jokes, and

debates they share “after [Jason] wakes up, during his lunch break, and before I go to bed” denote true intimacy to him.

Although both men view communication, honesty, and trust as fundamental to their relationship, they bore more weight for Jason than for Benny. Jason semi-jokingly said of himself that he tended to take on the role of the “wife” in his romantic relationships as he pushed for vulnerability in conversations: “Sometimes, I feel like his wife because I want to talk a lot. I want to know how he feels and ask about stuff that troubles him.” Benny also believed that open communication was important, but he was less invested in the notion that romantic partners ought to share all of their problems and feelings: “I don’t need to talk about everything … Jason does. I just want my space sometimes. I don’t need to process everything with him.” He stated that he tried to accommodate Jason and voices most of his thoughts and feelings in their daily calls. While there are moments when he feels tempted to withdraw from his boyfriend, Benny recognized that their communication style helps them to stay connected and maintain the intimate bond they have formed over the distance.

The couple’s communicational dynamic recreated a pattern that is common in many heterosexual relationships. Jason’s drive to be emotionally vulnerable and express feelings openly is associated with femininity, whereas Benny’s tendency to withdraw and focus on resolving any issues by himself before consulting with his boyfriend is in line with stereotypically masculine behavior (see Vogel et al. 2003). I attribute the ease with which Jason incorporated traditionally feminine ways of engagement into his relationship with Benny to his long-standing participation in the Malaysian Bear community. As noted in Chapter 1, Bears form a queer subculture that encourages expressions of both heteronormative masculinity and femininity. While Bears emphasize a traditionally masculine appearance by valorizing larger,

hirsute bodies, they also value traditionally feminine expressions of intimacy, affection, and nurturance (see Barrett 2017; Wright 2013). During what my interlocutors referred to as *hompas*, or house parties, men always sat in groups and were not shy to cuddle and platonically caress each other as they chatted and laughed. Similarly, dinner parties were marked by intimate conversations over a home-cooked meal, which were generally followed with our small group curling up on the sofa sipping tea and the men giving each other the occasional backrub.

Fig 2.1: Two of my Malaysian interlocutors sharing an affectionate hug, as they walk back to their respective cars after a lunch meetup in the city of Petaling Jaya. Source: Author.

Irfan, a Malay Bear in his early fifties, attributed the men's comfort with such gestures of closeness, which are often perceived as feminine, to Bear ideology: "We're like the Dunlopillo

pillow for the gay community, you know. We tend to be warm, friendly, and we're not scared to care about each other." While there are men belonging to the gaystream and other queer subcultures who tend to display hypermasculine aesthetics and behaviors, Bears generally embrace sensitivity and warmth as part of their identity. Therefore, men participating in the Malaysian Bear community are socialized to show affection both physically and verbally, and they carry over these values and behaviors into their romantic relationships. Jason, who has been part of the community for about fifteen years, implemented practices of open communication in his relationship with Benny and was encouraging his boyfriend to do the same. Due to them attending events together, Benny has also had exposure to the Bear community, but as he neither identifies as a Bear nor a Chaser, he has been less invested in taking up some of its values. He asserted, however, that he appreciates Jason's efforts of maintaining a close relationship even if "I don't have that same need to connect all the time as [Jason]. But it's actually good for us."

Overall, the couple's practices of intimacy contributed to them forming a relationship that diverged from the heterosexual norm but, at the same time, echoed some heteronormative patterns. On the one hand, Benny and Jason chose not to follow the prevailing relationship trajectory of moving in together and creating a home as a couple. Instead, they decided to live in separate parts of the country to support their mothers. During a follow-up Zoom call in the summer of 2021, Jason told me that he and Benny planned on staying in their respective hometowns even after the passing of their mothers. He said that there is "no need" to change things: "It works well, you know. I think we wouldn't *feel* closer if we lived closer. And I like KK. [Benny] likes KL and Ipoh better." His words show that the unconventional form their relationship takes benefits them. While long-distance couples generally aim to close the distance

and move in together, the two men aspire to live apart long-term. They believe that doing so will help them sustain the intimate bond they share.

On the other hand, Jason and Benny recreated an emotional gender pattern that was reminiscent of that of conventional heteronormative couples—a man and a woman occupying traditional gender roles within their relationship. Jason's commitment to an ongoing, open dialogue that required both partners to be vulnerable and reflective was typically seen as a feminine quality. While Benny appreciated his boyfriend's efforts to connect in this way, he tended to respond in a conventionally masculine manner, by withdrawing emotionally when he was preoccupied with something happening in his life. The couple's occasional struggle to bridge that "gendered" gap between them mirrored a stereotypical pitfall of heterosexual relationships.

It is important to note that, by both diverging from and reinforcing heterosexual norms, the couple complicate and challenge supposedly naturalized forms of gender and sexual practice. Jason and Benny are two men in love experiencing issues similar to those a man and a woman in love might encounter. Also, just like many heterosexual couples, two men in love have to find ways to create and maintain a loving relationship in the face of obstacles that can stem from the relationship dynamic itself, but also from societal norms that the couple is at odds with. This illustrates that practices of intimacy are cultivated both within society at large and within a person's immediate peer group meaning that the forms intimacy takes reflect dominant scripts in that person's life. As a gay couple, Benny and Jason oriented themselves towards Malaysian norms and echoed gendered practices of intimacy that are typical for conventional heterosexual couples. At the same time, they had been socialized within the queer communities they are part of and incorporated acquired values into their relationships. Ultimately, both gender and sexual

orientation greatly influence a person's approach to intimacy, but they do so in a much more nuanced manner than heteronormative conventions might suggest (see Stacey 2005; Worth, Reid, & McMillan 2002).

Fighting for Passion in Long-Term Relationships

The second component that Sternberg (1986) considered a fundamental aspect of loving relationships is passion. While intimacy is essential to a variety of loving relationships, including those towards a parent or a close friend, passion tends to be restricted primarily to romantic and sexual relationships. According to Sternberg, passion refers to the motivations and "drives that lead to romance, physical attraction, sexual consummation, and related phenomena in loving relationships" (1986, 119), and it includes "what Hatfield and Walster refer to as 'a state of intense longing *for union* with the other'" (1986, 122). People tend to experience passion as feelings of physical arousal and an overall positive sensation in their bodies that occurs when they are around the person they love. In romantic relationships, passion is primarily understood and expressed through a sexual desire for one another, but other needs, such as those for self-actualization or belonging, can also add to the experience of passion.

Sternberg noted that many romantic encounters are initially sparked by passion and that, at the beginning, sexual needs often predominate over feelings of being intimately connected. Over time, however, passion and intimacy become increasingly interactive and can evolve a relationship into something close and long-term. This was the case for Nicholas, a Chinese-Malaysian man in his early fifties, and Azmi, his Malay boyfriend who was just four years younger than him. Theirs was a whirlwind affair that quickly turned into a committed,

monogamous relationship. When they first met in 2007, Nicholas was in a relationship with a man whom he had been living with for three years. Just three weeks after meeting Azmi and becoming immediately enamored with him, he decided to break up with his boyfriend and asked him to move out of the condominium he owned in the center of Kuala Lumpur: "The relationship with [my ex-boyfriend] was not good anymore. It needed to end, and when I started to spend time with Azmi, it was a reminder [of that], you know." It only took a few days for Azmi to move in with him and they have been living together ever since.

When I asked Azmi what motivated him to move in with Nicholas within three weeks of knowing him, he laughed: "Hormones?—I'm serious, *lah*. We always had great sex. I'm a sexual person and [Nicholas] is too. Whatever I think of, he'll try. Leather harness? He likes it. A new toy? Yes. Ropes? Also, yes. It was exciting." He acknowledged that lust and the sexual chemistry between them had outweighed any concerns about not knowing Nicholas all that well yet. They gave him an, admittedly illusory, sense of connection that eventually grew into real closeness. Nicholas agreed that being able to openly explore kinks and fetishes with Azmi had been appealing and had made him feel that he could also trust his new partner in other areas of life, "because we were already so intimate". Nicholas stated that he believed in their relationship from the start, because sex with Azmi had felt special and more meaningful than other sexual encounters he has had: "I can have sex with strangers, and it means nothing, it's just sex. It's just physical pleasure. It's always physical pleasure to begin with, but when you meet someone [whom] you really like, who is really hot, and then you have *that* kind of sex. It changes things. It tells you things, and that's what happened with him."

For Azmi and Nicholas, the intense passion they initially felt for each other was instrumental in the development of their relationship and contributed to them forming a lasting

connection. Yet, it was only a first step. Sternberg noted that "the passion component is what may draw the individual to the relationship in the first place, but the intimacy component helps sustain closeness in the relationship" (1986, 122). Having known Nicholas and Azmi as a couple for ten years, I was always struck by their visibly close bond that they maintained through a variety of intimate practices. Outside work, they spent most of their time together sharing many of the everyday activities that other couples were happy to do separately. For instance, Nicholas and Azmi coordinated their schedules so they could train at the gym together; after work, they met at the market to get groceries; at home, they prepared their meals together and spent many of their evenings in each other's company chatting, or with Nicholas reading a book and Azmi playing a game on his mobile phone. When either of them was away on a business trip, the partner staying back in Kuala Lumpur clearly missed the other. Once, whilst Nicholas had traveled to Bangkok for a meeting, Azmi and I spent an afternoon watching a movie. Clearly distracted, Azmi kept checking his phone. Eventually, I nudged him gently and asked what was on his mind, and he looked up and sighed: "I know it's only two nights, but the condo is so empty when he isn't sleeping there."

While the high degree of closeness in their relationship became primarily based on companionship and mutual emotional support, sex continued to be of great importance for the couple. Nicholas described sex as a barometer that tells him whether his relationship is healthy and able to last: "Sex is very important for a relationship. Sex is the intimacy, it's the closeness to that person, and it's the connection. It tells me that we're okay. And even after a long time, I need to know that I'm still sexy for you and you still want me. That's quite important to me." Nicholas' words indicate that he views sex as an expression of both intimacy and passion. For him, their sex life enabled him to gauge how connected he was to boyfriend. Knowing that he is

"still sexy" for Azmi showed him that he could still arouse passion in his partner. This, in turn, reaffirmed the romantic bond between the two as it made Nicholas feel close to Azmi. According to Sternberg (1986), Nicholas' sentiment was not unusual, because passion and intimacy are often linked, and it helps many couples to feel intimately connected when both partners' needs for passion are regularly met within the relationship. By satisfying each other's desire for both physical and emotional intimacy, these couples are often able to cultivate long-term, monogamous relationships, if they choose to do so.

Importantly, Sternberg pointed out that, unlike the intimacy component which "seem[s] to be relatively stable in close relationships, … the passion component tends to be relatively unstable and to come and go on a somewhat unpredictable basis" (1986, 120). He believed that the intimacy component tends to be more stable than the passion component because it is easier for a person to deliberately create feelings of intimacy. Indeed, as I have shown previously, couples are able to generate sensations of warmth and closeness by putting conscious effort into sharing experiences and having conversations that reinforce those emotions for them. Passion, on the other hand, is difficult to consciously control as it is a motivation that derives from undeliberate need. As a result, it often wanes over time and can leave a couple feeling like their relationship is becoming stagnant or that, alongside passion, love is fading. To maintain passion within a relationship, both partners have to stay mindful of their needs and create habits that help to fulfill them together. While some couples like Nicholas and Azmi were able to sustain passion for one another primarily through the sexual relationship they shared, other interlocutors of mine struggled with this aspect of their relationship. In fact, the majority of the men I worked with have experienced strain in their relationships because of diminishing passion. Often, this is due to a mismatch of needs and expectations among two partners.

Wei Wei and Han Ying were two Chinese Malaysian men in their late forties. They met in 2014 at a mutual friend's *Hari Raya* open house—a celebration indicating the end of the Islamic holy month of Ramadan—and were in a committed relationship throughout my fieldwork[6]. Both described the first two years of their relationship as happy and gratifying. By the time I returned to Malaysia though, they were sometimes struggling to maintain a close bond. Wei Wei primarily attributed this to what he called a "lack of passion" on Han Ying's end, by which he was referring to his boyfriend's indifference towards sex. Han Ying admitted that he, indeed, lacked a desire for sex, but emphasized that this has always been the case for him and was not particular to his relationship with Wei Wei. Over the course of several one-on-one conversations with both men, I began to realize that the couple's difficulty to maintain passion in their relationship is not only the result of them having mismatched sex drives but is also due to them evaluating passion itself differently.

Wei Wei equated passion with physical arousal and sexual fulfillment. Accordingly, he saw the expression of passion through sex as an indicator of his attraction to his partner: "Sex is such a powerful emotion. It gives you such strong emotions and makes you feel excited about the other person. The sparks, they feel good, and they fill something in you, you know?" Additionally, he believed that passion and intimacy are correlated meaning that sexual desire and emotional bonding perpetuate one another. Therefore, he perceived the lack of sexual intimacy in his relationship with Han Ying as a loss of emotional intimacy: "I want to connect on a physical

[6] *Hari Raya* is how my Malaysian interlocutors refer to *Hari Raya Puasa* or *Hari Raya Aidilfitri* or *Eid al-Fitr*. It is a day of celebration that marks the end of the Islamic holy month of Ramadan during which people fast between dawn and sunset, and it is the time of forgiveness. My Muslim interlocutors generally spend the holiday with their families to offer apologies for any wrongdoings committed over the past year. They also tend to host late-night open houses for their Muslim as well as non-Muslim friends in the weeks leading up to *Hari Raya* to break the fast with them and enjoy seasonal foods and each other's company.

and mental level. One without the other feels empty … [Han Ying] doesn't want [sex] and it's hard not feel like we are apart, you know? I mean, I miss having sex with him. It's like there is a wall when we can't have that."

For Han Ying, on the other hand, sexual passion and intimacy existed independently, and he felt romantic love for his boyfriend without sexual desire. He did not view sex as an important aspect of his romantic relationships and was adamant that passion for a romantic partner could be shown in various, non-sexual ways. He believed that creating positive memories was going to nurture a relationship over the years: "Spending happy times together is more important [than sex], good memories are more important … I prefer having dinner, going on a trip together, [or] shopping together." While shared, everyday activities made Han Ying feel intimately connected to his boyfriend, sex did not. He admitted that sex was difficult for him because it neither gave him pleasure nor made him feel more attracted to Wei Wei. For the benefit of their relationship, Han Ying had been trying to change his attitude towards sex, "but I just don't know how to approach it, how to make it feel right … [Wei Wei] has a high sex drive, and I don't. When he approaches me, I know what he wants, but I shut it down most of the time." As Han Ying was unable to become more comfortable and excited about sex, "for the past two to three years, we have had no sex at all."

I wondered how the couple was dealing with their different needs for sexual passion. Knowing that the two of them had chosen to be monogamous when they began their relationship, I asked Wei Wei how he managed the lack of sex. He stated that he had been focusing on other aspects of the relationship that he considers equally, if not more, important: "I'm very sexual, but I learned a long time ago that only pursuing that kind of physical attention is valueless … If a person inspires me, and I don't mean in a big way, if I feel that there's something that he does, or

he makes me smile, or he reminds me that he is a guy of substance, then I know he's a keeper. Regardless of sex, you know?" He considered Han Ying "a keeper" because he consistently showed love and care for Wei Wei, with gestures such as preparing lunch for him to take to work or cuddling and massaging his shoulders after an exhausting day at the office. Wei Wei admitted that none of this could entirely replace the pleasure of sex for him, and that, at times, his frustrations about this boiled over into an argument with Han Ying. Yet, because he prioritized emotional intimacy and care over sexual passion, Wei Wei asserted that he was happy to stay in the relationship and willing to live without sex.

Nonetheless, a conversation with Han Ying revealed that Wei Wei had not been handling the absence of sex quite as smoothly as he suggested. As the two of us were sitting in the couple's living room sharing a dessert he had prepared earlier that day, Han Ying looked at me pensively: "He sometimes meets up with other men; he has sex with them. He thinks I don't know, but of course I know." I was stunned by his words and the matter-of-fact tone in which he proceeded to detail how he came to know about his boyfriend seeking sex outside the relationship. My surprise was rooted in the fact that while Wei Wei had disclosed being unfaithful in previous relationships, he had insisted that he had never, nor would ever, stray from Han Ying. Eventually, I learned that Han Ying's assertion was correct, when another interlocutor of mine told me about a small number of sex dates he had had with Wei Wei in the years prior to our conversation. Moreover, I was surprised that Han Ying seemed to be at peace with the situation and was able to discuss it in pragmatic terms, whereas Wei Wei was unable to admit to any sexual indiscretions in their relationship.

The men's responses to my questions further illustrate that they interpreted their incompatible erotic desires differently. I believe that Wei Wei was not able to tell me about

having sex outside the relationship for a variety of reasons, including him likely feeling uncomfortable openly discussing such a vulnerable, private matter, or him worrying that I might judge his actions or share information with his boyfriend. Nonetheless, I contend that, first and foremost, he kept silent about the issue because he felt guilty about his behavior. In the context of a romantic relationship, he viewed sex not only as a physical act, but also as an expression of emotional connectedness with his partner. When engaging in sex with other men, Wei Wei was sharing a kind of intimacy with them that, in his view, should be reserved for his boyfriend. Han Ying, on the other hand, was able to tolerate Wei Wei's sexual indiscretions, because he separated sexual passion from emotional intimacy. Sex was not important to him, and he fulfilled his desire for closeness solely by participating in non-sexual activities with his partner. At the same time, he recognized that Wei Wei has sexual needs he was unable to meet and, therefore, understood his boyfriend's drive to seek sex outside the relationship. Indeed, Han Ying admitted that he feels "not as bad about saying no [to Wei Wei's requests for sex], when I know he has met with someone else." This indicates that Wei Wei's actions provided a sense of relief for Han Ying because they allowed him to decline his partner's sexual advances while simultaneously helping Wei Wei's to satisfy his erotic desires.

I must emphasize that accepting Wei Wei's infidelity was not easy for Han Ying. In particular, he had been struggling with the fact that Wei Wei had been having sexual relations with other men behind his back. For Han Ying, his boyfriend's silence on the matter felt dishonest, which he considered a greater threat to their relationship and the intimate bond they have formed than Wei Wei's desire to sleep with other people. This is not surprising; even for those of my interlocutors who were in a consensual open relationship, honest, continuous communication was paramount to maintain a healthy relationship. Coelho (2011) showed that

opening a relationship sexually can be fulfilling for many couples but requires both partners to negotiate the terms of such an arrangement and to always be transparent and candid according to the guidelines that have been set. Not doing so poses a risk and can lead to the demise of the primary relationship.

In response to me asking why he would not take the first step and talk to his boyfriend about having sex with other men, Han Ying stated that he did not want to initiate an argument about something he was essentially in favor of: "I don't like the secrecy but what [Wei Wei] does, it's working, you know. Maybe he will tell me later." Two years after our initial conversation about this, we talked via Zoom, and Han Ying told me that Wei Wei is still keeping his sexual endeavors hidden from him, and that he himself continues to accept his boyfriend's actions because, ultimately, "we are happy together." The reluctant acceptance of an open relationship occurs frequently in Malaysia. In their study of intimate relationships of gay men in Malaysia, Liow et al. (2017) worked with several men who engaged in sexually open relationships. Some of them would have preferred a monogamous relationship but, like Han Ying, "they are willing to enter an open relationship in order to be connected to another person" and because it allows them "to sustain a homosexual relationship" (2017, 1150).

Despite them experiencing passion differently, the two couples I have discussed in this section were able to have fulfilling relationships. Nicholas and Azmi had a shared understanding of what passion in a relationship should look like. For them, passion was about showing their sexual desire for the other and about demonstrating a longing to connect. They viewed the fulfillment of one another's erotic needs as an expression of love and intimacy. Additionally, their sex drives were well matched, which contributed to Azmi and Nicholas being highly compatible romantic partners who were able to maintain an overall happy, monogamous

relationship for almost fifteen years. Wei Wei and Han Ying, in contrast, have what LaSala (2004) described as "monogamy of the heart"—they are intimately committed to one another, but sex is not part of their romantic relationship. They had conflicting views of what passion meant, and the form their relationship took reflects this. Han Ying has no sex drive and did not see sex as intertwined with intimacy, whereas Wei Wei believed that sex is important and can foster closeness between two partners. Wei Wei chose to get his sexual needs satisfied by men other than his boyfriend, which allowed him to stay in his primary relationship. Han Ying has was able to tolerate his partner's choices but found it difficult to accept that Wei Wei never disclosed his desire to open the relationship to him. Han Ying would have felt more content about being in a non-monogamous relationship if decisions regarding it would have been made together.

"Emotionally Exclusive but Sexually Open" – Making Decisions about Commitment

The previous two sections of this chapter have already hinted at the third component of love, which Sternberg identified as decision/commitment. This component has a short-term and a long-term aspect. The short-term one is "the decision that one loves someone else," and the long-term one refers to "the commitment to maintain that love" (Sternberg 1986, 119). The decision/commitment component completes the triangle of love and is as important to the success of a relationship as are intimacy and passion. In fact, Sternberg argued that during trying times, which are inevitable in long-term relationships, the decision to love and the commitment to be with one's partner are essential to maintaining the relationship and getting through rough periods. The relationship between Wei Wei and Han Ying exemplifies this. For several years

prior to my fieldwork, the lack of sexual passion on Han Ying's part had been causing a large amount of strife between them. Nevertheless, the two of them were committed to one another, which motivated them to keep working on their relationship and find ways to overcome the issues that threatened their bond. Because they had been choosing each other continuously and consciously, they were able to actively sustain the intimate connection they shared.

Sternberg (1986) emphasized that the decision to love does not necessarily go hand in hand with a commitment to sustain that love over time; one can exist without the other and result in a meaningful connection. Most of my interlocutors fall in love with another man before they decide whether they want to pursue a long-term relationship with that person or not. Yet, some of the men commit to the love of another person and, thus, a relationship with them, prior to being aware of their love for that person. Most of the time, however, the decision to love precedes the commitment to stay together in the long run. Accordingly, the decision/commitment component determines whether a romantic relationship is intended to last for a long period of time. As all three components of love—intimacy, passion, and decision/commitment—show up and interact differently from person to person and couple to couple, a relationship between two people can take various forms.

Liow et al. (2017) suggested that, typically, the dating culture among gay men in Malaysia is fast paced in that men tend to commit to relationships quickly, but that many of these relationships dissolve within a year or two. This is not the case among my interlocutors, however, most of whom have been in long-term, committed relationships, some of which are monogamous and some of which include additional sexual or romantic partners. I speculate that the difference in findings primarily stems from the fact that the communities of men studied in

these projects are of different ages[7]. Liow at al. worked with men who were between 21 and 35 years old, whereas most of my interlocutors were in their forties and fifties. They were in entirely different stages of their lives, and what they are looking for when connecting with another man has often changed as they have gotten older.

Although little is known about how aging influences the ways in which people set and prioritize different relationship goals (Menkin et al. 2015), research has shown that with age comes maturity and increased experience with romantic relationships overall, which affects how romantic relationships are viewed (Hatfield at al. 2008; Lantagne & Furman 2017). Those of my interlocutors who had been in a relationship for close to a decade or more enjoyed telling me about their romantic adventures in their younger years and made it apparent that their priorities and expectations had shifted as they got older. As Matthew, an India Malaysian man in his late forties, put it: "Of course, when you're 21, you're trying to explore. Back then, I liked to play around and meet different men and see what it's like … Today, I want my relationship. I believe in long-term relationships … I don't need the change anymore and just want to have my boyfriend by my side."

[7] Although Liow et al. (2017) provided no information on this in their work, it is likely that their interlocutors came from different class backgrounds than my interlocutors, which would also affect the form romantic relationships can take. I discuss the importance of class in relation to romantic love later in this chapter.

Fig 2.2: Matthew, an Indian Malaysian man, and his partner of nine years during a day trip to Port Dixon, a town on Peninsular Malaysia's west coast. The couple travels together several times a year to, as Matthew put it, "remind us how good it is to be together." Source: Author.

As I have indicated above, most of my interlocutors wanted what Matthew had—he and his partner had been in a committed relationship for nine years at the time of my fieldwork, and intended to stay together for life. It is important to note, however, that a small number of them only chose to commit to short-term relationships. Yi Xuan, the Chinese Malaysian aesthetic doctor I introduced in Chapter 1, was among them. In his twenties, he was in a monogamous relationship with a man for almost nine years, which, he said, lasted that long only because "where I lived back then, it was hard to meet people, and I was not as confident as now." Once he moved to Kuala Lumpur, he took advantage of the larger number of men he was able to meet and had a string of relationships, none of which lasted more than three years. When I conducted fieldwork, he was in his early forties and considered himself a self-assured and attractive man: "There is an 80 percent chance that I can get anyone I want at once. So, why wouldn't I?"

Yi Xuan was not invested in long-term relationships for two reasons. For one, he stated: "I'm a greedy bitch. I want everything … One person cannot satisfy my needs, the need for quality time and adventure, so there will be other men. I will go from one relationship to another, eventually." For Yi Xuan, romantic relationships were about shared joy and pleasure, and he prioritized the intense sense of passion that marked the early stages of a relationship over the calmer feelings of intimacy which take time to grow. Hence, he chose to be in non-monogamous, short-term relationships. While he liked to live with his primary partner for the duration of their relationship, he also had ongoing emotional and sexual relations with multiple other men. Yi Xuan's second reason for not investing in anything long-term was that there "is no need to prolong relationships unnecessarily when you don't have kids. My sister has kids and it's different. Her marriage is about more than just them." Other interlocutors of mine also believed that many couples stay in long-term relationships because of shared commitments such as parenting responsibilities or the maintenance of shared properties. Like Yi Xuan, they asserted that primary motivations for staying with one's partner should include affection, passion, and desire for them, rather than a sense of obligation, and they practice their relationships accordingly.

Among my interlocutors, there are a few who choose to be in short-term, non-monogamous relationships like Yi Xi, and some who decide to maintain long-term, monogamous relationships like Matthew. Yet, the majority of the men I worked with desired the closeness that comes with a committed relationship but, sometimes individually and sometimes as a couple, choose not to be sexually exclusive. Imran, a Malay man in his early fifties, and Choon Ming, a Chinese Malaysian man in his mid-forties, were among the couples who described their relationship as "emotionally exclusive but sexually open". The two of them met in 2009 at the

gym where they both trained. Imran was upfront with Choon Ming, telling him that he was not looking for a relationship but "just a bit of a fling." At that time, he had been happily single for close to six years: "I'm not a relationship kind of person, to be honest. I never have been … I'm not selfish. I do anything for people that I love but, emotionally, I'm a very strong individual. I do not need anybody else for my emotional wellbeing and if you're in a relationship, a lot of people cannot handle that. They want to be needed."

Sternberg's (1986) terminology suggests that falling in love is a decision people make. Imran would disagree with that because, for him, "loving Choon Ming just happened and was easy." He believed, however, that maintaining that love was a choice that required some conscious deliberation, a choice it took him close to a year to make. Imran asserted that his hesitancy was never about the feelings themselves; he was aware of they felt about each other several months after meeting: "I remember exactly when he said, I love you. I had organized a surprise birthday party for him. And, you know, we were about to sleep after that. He was hugging me, and I could feel the tension. I knew he was going to say something. And, finally, he said, 'I love you'. And I said, 'I know. I love you too. Now go to sleep'." He chuckled after recounting that memory.

Imran, then, told me in a more serious tone that their decision to become a couple took longer as he wanted to know that these feelings were not fleeting. He needed to be sure that "there's nobody else I want to be with," and that meant exploring his feelings for a few more months. For him, committing to a relationship is a choice that should not be taken lightly because it indicates that "I will live the rest of my life with this person … Everything I do, whatever my plan is, this all includes him. Not because I need him, but because I want him." For Imran, choosing to be in a committed relationship meant putting in an ongoing effort to maintain the

bond with one's partner. He compared their relationship to a marriage stating that "like my parents, we are each other's family. Sometimes, we fight and annoy each other but, at the end of the day, we support each other and are always there."

Like Imran, many of my interlocutors alluded to marriage when talking about their romantic relationships. While same-sex marriage and same-sex partnership arrangements are not recognized under Malaysian law and are rejected as potentially harmful to those involved and society at large by broad segments of the population (see Manalastas et al. 2017; Muhamad 2010), the men often compared their relationships to those of married couples or described them using language associated with marriage. For instance, some of them refer to their boyfriends as 'husband' or *husbear*[8]. I argue that my interlocutors use such language as a shorthand that allows them to make the nature of their romantic relationships legible to others.

As a socially and legally sanctioned union between a woman and a man, marriage is one of the hallmarks of heteronormative relationships. Marriage exists universally in some form (Hatfield, Mo, & Rapson 2015, Jankowiak 2008) and fulfills different societal and personal functions across countries and communities. In most cases, marriage provides a structure within which a person's need for affection, sexual gratification, status, economic safety, and companionship can be regulated and satisfied. Marriage also tends to provide a framework for the organization of childrearing and inheritance within a society. In Malaysia, marriage is generally considered "sacred" and "for life" (Azmawati, Hashim, & Endut 2015), and by comparing their romantic relationships to a marriage, my interlocutors want to show that their

[8]*Husbear* is an affectionate Bear language term that is commonly used by men in English speaking Bear communities to refer to partners identifying as Bears. I have spoken about Bear language in Chapter 1.

bond is as valued and valuable as that between heterosexual couples. It indicates that they view their boyfriends as indispensable companions and partners for life.

I want to point out that the men's concept of marriage is rather narrow and echoes the dominant understanding of it in Malaysian mainstream cultures. When they define the term *marriage*, they tend to describe it as a monogamous, committed relationship that is based in romantic love. While this view on marriage is prevalent in contemporary Malaysia, it does not recognize other forms of marriage that do not take romance into account, such as arranged marriages in which either the parents or a professional matchmaker find a suitable spouse for their child—a practice that is still common among some social groups in the country (see Jones, Hull, & Mohamad 2015). In fact, the idea that marriage must be based in love and choice is relatively new in and beyond Malaysia and, like all other forms, culturally specific (Levine et al. 1995; Singer 1987). Having such a specific understanding of marriage likely affects the men's attitude towards it.

With that in mind, it is important to note that most of my interlocutors stated that they are ambivalent about same-sex marriage and would not be inclined to pursue it, if it was an option. There are, of course, exceptions to this. A small number of the men I worked with stated that they would love to have the option of getting married to their boyfriends, often pointing to the symbolic value attached to love marriages in the country. For instance, Farid, a Malay man in his early forties, stated that "I would marry [my boyfriend] today. He is that special and, like, *the one*. I want him to always remember that and as his husband I could show him that." For Farid, marriage was a symbol of love, and an affirmation of the unique status a person's spouse holds in their life. He would have wanted to have the opportunity to be married to his partner to be able to express his love and commitment. Furthermore, Farid wondered if the legalization of same-sex

marriage would help change society's perception of LGBTQ persons. He speculated that "maybe we wouldn't have to hide then. If marriage between two queens is accepted, maybe they'd accept queens in general." In other words, Farid recognized that heterosexual marriage is a normative institution in Malaysia—and many other countries—and noted that extending the privilege of a legal union to LGBTQ individuals might normalize them and accept them into mainstream society. Scholars have been debating this question for decades (see Bernstein & Burke 2013; Boellstorff 2007; Clarke 2003; Warner 1999) disagreeing on whether advocating for same-sex marriage has normalizing effects. Many of them do believe though that, at the very least, marriage-equality movements in different countries are able to foster critical discourse about larger issues faced by queer communities.

Having said that, the majority of my Malaysian interlocutors had no interest in getting married to their romantic partners. Rather, what they are looking for is a long-term committed relationship with their partner. Wei Wei's words capture the essence of what many of them have told me when I asked them how they feel about gay marriage:

> I'm neutral to it. I don't really feel that getting married truly defines who I am as a gay man. This is not one of the things that are important to me … To me, [what is important] is having a committed relationship. Like, if I know that the person I love is by my side, by my deathbed, then I'm okay with that. If, one day, gay marriage is legal and it's mainstream, then would I pursue it? I don't know. At this point, I don't really see the need to because [Han Ying and I] are living the life of a married couple. We just don't have a paper. If we think about it in terms of legal rights and, you know, it's a thing of protecting him—I don't know, I might change my tune in the next five years. But it's never been a priority for me.

For Wei Wei, marriage was not a necessity because there is little that distinguishes the lives and concerns of married couples from those of unmarried couples in a committed relationship. Like most of my interlocutors, he felt that a marriage certificate would not strengthen the commitment

or emotional attachment between him and his boyfriend. Its main advantage would be several legal benefits and protections that are exclusive to those who are married.

I want to emphasize that my interlocutors' attitudes towards same-sex marriage were likely not simply the result of conscious reflections on their part but also influenced by fears and desires that they were either unaware of or unwilling to share with me. For instance, some of my interlocutors might have rejected the idea of marriage to their partners because they did not want to entertain a life goal that would be impossible for them to reach in Malaysia—yearning for something unattainable would only cause them unnecessary distress. Furthermore, it is likely that some of them internalized negative societal attitudes towards homosexuality and same-sex marriage. Research has shown that "gay men with a high level of [internalized sexual stigma] would be less likely to desire to marry and to recognize the positive effects of the legal recognition of the same-sex family" (Baiocco, Argalia, & Laghi 2014, 193, see also Mohr & Daly 2008). It is possible some of my interlocutors were similarly affected by the emotional struggles that accompany being gay in Malaysia.

Having acknowledged this caveat, it is clear that Wei Wei was ambivalent about marrying Han Ying because he believed that doing so would not enrich their relationship. Wei Wei stated that, overall, the life he shares with Han Ying already resembled that of a married couple. I asked him to explain that further, but he just laughed at me saying: "You're with us all the time. You know what we do. We take care of each other." Importantly, for Wei Wei and most of my other interlocutors, taking care of each other not only entailed being emotionally supportive but included different kinds of practical assistance. For example, many couples started joint businesses and acquired assets together in the form of shared properties to provide financial security for themselves, now and in the future.

Like Wei Wei, Imran asserted that showing care and providing support for one another are fundamental aspects of his relationship with Choon Ming. For him, they were also core elements of a successful marriage, which is why he was comfortable equating the bond with his boyfriend to the ties of a married couple. Halfway through a sentence about the importance of shared values in a relationship, Imran suddenly paused and grinned at me: "Apart from sex. Monogamy is such a straight marriage thing." He was half-joking, of course. Yet, some scholars have found that gay couples are more likely to be in non-monogamous relationships than lesbian or heterosexual couples (Bonello & Cross 2009; LaSala 2004). They largely attributed this to the dominance of hegemonic heteronormative processes that determine the construction of monogamy as the only appropriate relationship template that couples, especially those who are married, can draw upon (Scoats 2019).

Indeed, the overwhelming majority of my interlocutors were in non-monogamous relationships, some of which had been agreed upon by both partners. In other cases, one or both partners were not disclosing that they are having sex outside the relationship. Those who told me about it stated that they were reluctant to bring up their preference for a non-monogamous relationship with their boyfriends because they feared conflict, a loss of trust within the relationship, or that they would lose their partner altogether. Unlike them, Imran and Choon Ming had been open about their sexual values with one another. They had had several conversations about sexual exclusivity when they first started dating and decided to maintain an open relationship. One evening, as the three of us were preparing dinner together, Imran said: "We do not believe in sexual monogamy." Choon Ming nodded in agreement: "Imran and I, mentally and emotionally, we have a really, really strong connection. Fooling around doesn't mean that you will fall in love with somebody else." He emphasized that, even when both

partners share the same sexual beliefs, "it's better to talk and have a mutual understanding first, before you do anything with others" to protect the primary relationship. Therefore, the two of them established a set of rules to guide them in their sexual encounters with other men. Choon Ming asserted that "we don't have many rules. The main rules are protection, protection, and protection." "Yes," Imran jumped in to add, "and we don't talk about specifics. I don't want to know who the men are. It could be awkward. Just be safe and have fun, and for cuddling, come home to me."

The Privilege to Choose

It should be clear that, based on individual preferences and desires, romantic relationships among my interlocutors took a variety of forms. Many of the choices the men make were shaped by the restrictions that Malaysian sociolegal norms place on queer communities. At the same time, the men I worked with could make certain decisions based on the privileges they have that other gay or queer people in the country do not share. Based on their gender alone, they have been able to do and pursue things that are not as easily accessible to women in Malaysia. For instance, while most of my interlocutors and their brothers have studied abroad at universities in Australia, the UK, the US, and Japan, their sisters were generally expected to stay home and attend a local college or university. This, of course, shapes the professional and socio-economic trajectory of each person. Today, the majority of my interlocutors are well educated, work in respected professions (among them are medical doctors, business consultants, architects, composers, CEOs, accountants, and engineers), and are financially well off[9]. Not all of them

[9] I must emphasize that this is not the norm. There are many gay men in Malaysia who are less affluent than my interlocutors, or who experience economic hardships. Often, these men cannot financially afford to

came from privileged backgrounds, but as they were middle aged or older, they have had several decades to work towards the professional and financial position they were in at the time of my fieldwork. The money they made provided them with a large amount of freedom in terms of where and how they could live their lives.

As I have mentioned previously, it was common for adult children to offer financial and physical support to their parents through co-residing with them (see DaVanzo & Chan 1994). Although a small number of my interlocutors lived with their parents, most of them had been able to buy one or more properties to stay in, while still supporting their families. Living alone, they had a private space in which they could safely spend time and foster relationships with queer friends and lovers. They could also choose to live with their boyfriends and create a home together, which shaped the dynamics of the romantic relationship and allowed for different forms of attachment to be created. As Wei Wei put it: "Because we were living together, we bonded more. We have a home and share everything. It's different, closer. And we can just do anything we want, anytime, you know?"

Their financial independence also enables them to be mobile and to travel. For some of my interlocutors that means that they can maintain long-distance relationships as they are able to visit each other or go on trips together. Benny and Jason, who at the time of my fieldwork had been a couple since 2008 despite living 1000 miles apart, stated that regular weekend getaways and longer shared vacations were fundamental to keeping the relationship going. Benny talked

participate as freely in Malaysian queer subculture as my interlocutors who regularly travel to other parts of the country and abroad to attend queer events. Less wealthy men are forced to make different life choices that affect what kind of queer friendships and romantic attachments they can make. Because of this, they have fewer opportunities to build relationships with the men I worked with meaning that they rarely become regular members of the friend group. Any new friends joining my group of interlocutors tend to be in the same, financially privileged position as them, as they can join in whenever it suits them.

about how hiking trips that have taken them to various places in Southeast Asia strengthened their emotional bond: “Mostly it’s just the two of us on these trips … when you’re in the mountains together and everything around us is so beautiful. It’s good to share that. There is always something to see and we can talk about it … We get to do everything together. He can be annoying, but he’s so much fun, Sandy. I always remember that when I come back. I always miss him when I’m back.” His words show that spending time together physically was important for long-distance couples as it allowed them to share experiences that everyday phone calls cannot replace, and it revives and reinforces their connection. Having the financial means to travel and regularly see one’s partner is a privilege that enables men to choose romantic relationship formats that are less feasible for others who do not have the same resources.

Moreover, being financially able to afford travel also means that my interlocutors can, and do, attend queer events in Malaysia and abroad. When travelling with their boyfriends, they can often share experiences as a couple that are impossible to have in Malaysia. Several of my interlocutors mentioned that they did not have to be as vigilant about hiding their relationship in public when they visited countries where homosexuality is not criminalized, or that are generally more queer-friendly than Malaysia. They felt especially comfortable in Australian and Western European cities, where they did not mind displaying their affection for one another publicly and often introduced themselves as romantic partners when meeting people and making new, local friends.

My interlocutors also had the privilege of declining marriage to a woman. While getting legally married to their boyfriends was impossible and, for the most part, undesirable for them, they had to deal with the pressure to get married from family, friends, and acquaintances especially when they were younger. As is common across Southeast Asia, adults in Malaysia are

expected to enter a heterosexual marriage and have children. Like in neighboring Indonesia, marriage and notions of the nuclear family are highly politicized and Malaysian nationalist discourses frame them as integral parts of the state's modernization project (Razif 2017; Stivens 2013, 2020). Boellstorff (2005) has shown that, within an Indonesian context, such discourses result in a nationalist logic that makes it common for gay men and lesbian women to pursue a heterosexual marriage alongside same-sex relationships. In Malaysia, scholars have also noted that some gay men choose to get married to women to fulfill family expectations and societal obligations (Baba 2001), and several of the men I worked with told me about discrete sexual encounters they occasionally have with married men in male saunas or at one of the few gay clubs and pubs in the Kuala Lumpur[10].

Among my interlocutors, however, everyone seemed comfortable defying the duty to get married. I argue that this is due to a combination of factors: first, by virtue of being men, they were given slightly more leeway and time to find a marriage partner than most women (see Peng 2007), which afforded them more time to build stable relationships with other men; second, my interlocutors were middle-aged or older and their families had often come to tolerate their 'single' status over the years; third, most of them were not only financially independent, but also supported their parents and often even extended family, which might have made them less comfortable to confront my interlocutors as they were depending on their help and goodwill; and fourth, their professional position and wealth provided them with a large amount of social capital and respect among their broader social circle and, thus, they faced fewer antagonistic questions

[10] During my years in Malaysia, I have only personally met one self-identified gay, Malay man who, after a string of relationships with men, returned to his *kampung* (village) and got married to a woman. He had been working different jobs in the hospitality industry in Kuala Lumpur and had struggled to make ends meet. At the time, he cited this as his main reason to go back and live with his family—he was hoping for more stability and was looking forward to the support a heteronormative family structure can provide.

than people of a lower social status might. These factors set my interlocutors apart from gay men living in less privileged circumstances, and enable them to choose long-term, romantic relationships with men over heterosexual marriage without strong pushback from their immediate social circle.

A privilege my interlocutors shared with other members of Malaysian LGBTQ communities is the ability to enter interethnic relationships. Despite great ethnic diversity in Malaysia, interethnic marriage does not occur at a large scale. While scholars believe that the number of interethnic couples is on the rise, in the year 2000, only 4.6% of marriages involved partners with different ethnic backgrounds (Pue & Sulaiman 2013). This is largely due to the negative perception of intermarriage in Malaysian society. Because of stereotyping and ethnic categorization that occurs alongside legislative and bureaucratic obstacles, interethnic couples are seen as incompatible, and their relationships are portrayed as problematic and short-lived (ibid). These perceptions trickle down so that interethnic couples often face objections from family members especially when marriage involves religious conversion[11] (ibid).

Queer populations are always already forced to practice their romantic lives largely outside the watchful eyes of family, mainstream society, and state-level actors. Consequently, they can disregard some of the societal restrictions that govern the conduct of heterosexual couples and choose a partner without considering their ethnoreligious background. While the fact that queer couples must love in secret brings its own set of serious challenges, these couples have the privilege of creating romantic relationships that can adapt to the differences their personal

[11] Malaysian law does not recognize interfaith marriage between Muslims and non-Muslims. Non-Muslims are required to convert to Islam if they want their marriage to a Muslim to be legally recognized (Samuri & Khan 2020). This can lead to tension in couples' families, especially those of converts as they struggle to accept the abandonment of the family's birth faith and accompanying rituals and customs.

backgrounds bring with them. Indeed, at the time of my fieldwork, all my interlocutors were, or had previously been, in interethnic relationships, and generally did not perceive them as more challenging than relationships with men sharing the same ethnoreligious background. As Jia Hui, a Buddhist Chinese Malaysian man who had been with his Muslim Malay partner for seven years, stated: “We share love for each other, and religion is not an issue. We don’t limit each other from what we want to do. He says his prayers when we go to bed every day. I don’t understand it; I hear it, but it doesn’t concern met. The same with food. I can eat pork anywhere; I don’t need it at home. It’s not complicated.”

This is not an exhaustive list of the privileges the men I worked with enjoyed. Nevertheless, I intend for this selection to show that romantic decisions my interlocutors were able to make, and the forms their relationships coulc take, were not only based on their understandings of intimacy, passion, and commitment, but also informed by individual life circumstances. Furthermore, it is crucial to bear in mind that these privileges neither negate nor protect my interlocutors from the dangers inherent in being queer in Malaysia. They must continue to conceal their romantic lives and relationships for fear of persecution and enjoy none of the societal acceptance and legal protections that cis-heterosexual individuals and couples have. In other words, my interlocutors could make use of any privileges only within the narrow set of limitations the Malaysian state and society place on LGBTQ communities.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined how my interlocutors understand and practice love as they build romantic relationships. By drawing on Sternberg’s Triangular Theory of Love, I access the

concept of love as a composite that is made up of three different, interconnected components: intimacy, passion, and decision/commitment. While each component plays an important role in the men's approach to their relationships, there is little consensus on their precise meaning and on how exactly they are supposed to manifest in men's everyday practices. For example, I have shown that some of the men associate intimacy with physical closeness, care, and physical affection. For others, however, intimacy means connecting emotionally and intellectually through conversation, and by openly sharing thoughts and feelings. In that sense, romantic relationships are the result of ongoing negotiations of different wants, needs, and understandings between partners, all of which can shift over time.

For my interlocutors, this situation was further complicated by the fact that non-normative expressions of sexuality and gender are taboo in Malaysia. In their efforts to create and maintain romantic relationships, the men must grapple with sociolegal restrictions that limit what they can do, and how they can act, in different social spaces. This, of course, impacts how my interlocutors understood and approached love. I illustrated that ideas of—and practices around—intimacy, passion, and decision/commitment were cultivated through my interlocutors' engagement with different social groups. They learned one set of romantic norms and expectations from their families, another one from their queer peers, and yet another one from the Bear subculture, to mention just a few. I have shown that romantic norms intersect with—and are, in fact, often rooted in—normative beliefs about gender, sexuality, the body, religion, and family. Because social groups do not always have a shared understanding of any of these norms, my interlocutors were exposed to a variety of normative ideas, many of which contradicted each other.

Building on these insights, I argued that gay couples in Malaysia practice love in ways that reproduce both dominant and subversive understandings of romantic love. Because they draw on values and scripts from all the communities they are engaging with, and not just the one group they feel closest to, their approaches to love reflect multiple perspectives. Consequently, the forms their relationships take are varied and neither entirely contradict nor reinforce hegemonic ideas about love and loving practices in Malaysian society. Instead, they complicate and challenge prevailing ideas that presume that manifestations of romantic love are fixed and natural. For instance, I demonstrated that sexual passion is interpreted, valued, and practiced differently by different couples and between romantic partners at different stages in their relationship.

One of my aims in this chapter was to show that my interlocutors were able to build long-lasting, satisfying romantic relationships, despite the tremendous amount of socioreligious and legal pressure they face as gay men in Malaysia. At the same time, I recognized that the specific community of men I worked with enjoyed a number of privileges that other queer individuals do not share. Because my interlocutors are well educated, professionally successful, and financially well off, they can practice romantic relationships in ways that are not open to less privileged queer people. For one, many of them can choose to move in and share a home with their partners, because they have the financial means to live independently. Having a variety of options neither protects them legally nor negates marginalizing experiences all of them have had. It does, however, give the men a certain amount of freedom and autonomy when it comes to negotiating the form of their romantic relationships with their boyfriends.

CHAPTER 3

Nourishing Queer Relationships: Food and Commensality among Gay Men in Malaysia

Introduction

Having examined how my Malaysian interlocutors thought about and manifested romantic love in the last chapter, I now want to hone in on one of the specific practices they employed to build and maintain romantic relationships—commensality, the act of eating together. In this chapter, I investigate the ways in which food and commensality facilitated the creation and continuation of relationships for the men. Because the process of sharing a meal with others fosters a variety of social connections, I consider the role it played in their friendships as well as their romantic relationships. I am particularly interested in exploring how my interlocutors' food-sharing habits intersected with their self-understanding as gay men and romantic partners. I contend that eating together helps to reinforce their sense of self as gay Bears and allowed them to feel connected to the Malaysian Bear community. Moreover, I argue that eating out—that is, eating together in a restaurant or public space—assists the development of their romantic relationships, because it is one of very few romantic practices gay couples can embrace in public without fear of being "outed".

Fig 3.1: A small alleyway in the center of Kuala Lumpur. To the left and right there are eateries and a tiny market that also serves food to locals and others passing through. These places are open all day and late into the night—many Malaysians enjoy "supper," a late-night snack with friends, and places like the mamak *on the left accommodate them. Source: Author.*

My interest in my interlocutors' food-sharing habits is not random but stems from my observation that food and commensality were important to the men—they enjoyed talking about food, loved to prepare it for each other, and regularly went out to eat together as couples or with friends. I had the pleasure of being included in many of these activities. Most Sunday mornings, Ryan and Kevin, a Chinese Malaysian couple, invited me to come along and share dim sum, *char kuey teow,* or other Chinese breakfast delicacies at one of the hawker centers[12] speckled

[12] Hawker centers are open-air food markets that house different stalls selling a wide variety of affordably priced food. In Malaysia, hawker centers can be found everywhere—in cities, towns, and villages—usually close to residential areas.

throughout the cities of Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya. Having ordered a variety of dishes from different stalls, we would be perched on plastic stools to share our food and discuss what coffee shop we would want to go to after breakfast. Late at night, I often met Matthew, an Indian Malaysian friend of mine, for a chat at his local *mamak*, an open-air food stall that serves a typical variety of Muslim-Tamil or Malay dishes. No matter the hour, we would always make sure to have *roti susu*, a flaky, hot bread soaked in sweetened condensed milk, with our milk tea, which I would enjoy while semi-seriously reprimanding Matthew for smoking when food was on the table. He would grin at me, apologize, and, inevitably, pull another cigarette out of his pack. Even day trips and weekend getaways were largely organized around the sampling of local specialties. For instance, every time I visited Thomas, a Dusun man from the state of Sabah in Northern Borneo, he delighted in taking me to places that served smoked wild boar, sauteed python, or fresh seafood that had been caught off the Kota Kinabalu's coast earlier that day. Indeed, food had such a strong presence during my fieldwork that activities and conversations I recall tended to be intertwined with memories of the flavors and textures of accompanying food and drink.

Fig 3.2: A hawker center in Malaysia selling a large variety of cuisines (Malay, Chinese, Nyonya). Each food stall tends to serve a very small number of dishes—usually, variations of the same dish. Source: Author.

The attention my interlocutors gave to food is not particular to them but something I encountered in Malaysia at large—I have never met a person who was not enthusiastic about exploring the different kinds of cuisine the country has to offer. It helps that food is readily available everywhere at any time of the day, and it is often cheap. This makes it possible for almost anyone to eat out and enjoy the wide array of localized cuisines. What is more, Malaysians take pride in the diverse culinary traditions that reflect the multi-ethnic and transcultural structure of the country. Malay, Chinese, and Indian cuisines dominate the culinary landscape of Malaysia. Yet other cultural groups who live, or lived, in the country, including Kadazan, Perenekan, Portuguese, and Indonesian communities, have added their own dishes and flavors. Over time, these different ethnic groups settling in Malaysia have indigenized their

traditional cuisines by adopting local ingredients. They also shared recipes and preparation techniques with one another leading to the creation of hybridized dishes that are distinctly Malaysian. Consequently, the culinary landscape of Malaysia features a significant range of foods that represent both the culinary heritage of multiple ethnic groups as well as the gastronomic results of their intermingling.

Fig 3.3: Places like this can be found all over the city of Kuala Lumpur (and throughout the country), in residential areas and close to office buildings. They serve a variety of—usually halal—dishes. Many of my interlocutors regularly have lunch at either a hawker center or at self-service eateries like this one. Source: Author.

Since I first met them in 2012, my interlocutors have taken great pleasure in introducing me to traditional dishes and foods they had grown up with. Their primary excitement was not about sustenance and nutrition, but rather about food's other, more implicit qualities. In addition to praising the flavors of specific foods, the men often remembered childhood events certain dishes evoked and taught me some of their favorite recipes. They shared their food with me both literally and figuratively, which indicates that food and food behavior hold various kinds of

meaning. Indeed, scholars have long argued that in addition to nourishing the body, food is a system of communication, both a symbol and a sign, encoding cultural messages that speak to our identities, communities, and the relationships we build—in short, food has functions for the social order (Barthes 2013; Dalessio 2012; Douglas 1972; Gunkel 2016; Lévi-Strauss 1969, 1978).

For one, how people prepare and consume food establishes and expresses class, ethnic, and religious differences (see Bromberger 1994; Goody 1982; Sjögren-de Beauchain 1988). Food and practices around it are also used to distinguish femininity from masculinity, and to draw lines between women and men (Counihan & Kaplan 2003; Jansen 1997). Furthermore, food plays an important role in people's self-understanding, identity politics, and practices of distinction (Bourdieu 2019; Lupton 1996). For me, the ability of food to reveal many of the individual, social, and historical particularities of people and places is one of its most intriguing qualities. Thus, I was only too happy to join my interlocutors in their food adventures and explore Malaysia's culinary landscape with them. Over the years, we bonded over our mutual interest in food and food culture, and I was able to learn about how different foods are tied to both individual life stories and broader historical developments in the country.

When I returned to Kuala Lumpur to conduct fieldwork in 2018, the men welcomed me back by treating me to all the local foods they were certain I had missed during my time in the United States. Eating together and tasting various dishes brought back memories and reminded me of what I knew about Malaysia, which quickly made me feel at home again. For one, it enabled me to reconnect with my interlocutors and revitalize our friendships. It also made me aware of things that had changed in the country in the three years I had been abroad. For instance, we always had to be thoughtful in choosing a restaurant when going out with a bigger

group of people to ensure that the food served would not breach any ethnic or religious food taboos. Yet, during the time that I was gone, the discomfort of entering places serving non-*halal*[1] (permissible, lawful) food seemed to have grown for some of my Muslim friends. In the past, many of them had not minded going to non-*halal* eateries as long as there were plenty of food options that did not include pork. That was no longer the case, however, due to a growing fear of being spotted and potentially detained by the state-led *Unit Pencegah Maksiat* (Vice Prevention Unit), colloquially referred to as the Morality Police (MP), whose role it is to enforce virtuous Islamic practices among Muslims in Malaysia. Considering the state's increasing Islamization measures and its strengthening of *syariah* (Islamic) laws (Osman 2017), the men's altered behavior was not surprising.

My Muslim friends' changing eating habits signaled that religiopolitical shift in the country to me. Their reluctance to visit restaurants they had previously been happy to eat at emphasized the impact religiopolitical dynamics have on their everyday lives. It reminded me that Malaysia is a divided country, and that food choices and consumption habits manifest that demarcation. It also highlighted the importance of commensality for creating and maintaining interpersonal relationships—limiting the number of eateries we could go to as a multiethnic group affected how we were able to engage with one another.

[1] *Halal* is an Arabic term that can be translated as permissable or lawful in Islam. The opposite of *halal* is *haram*, which means forbidden or unlawful. Both terms are commonly used in relation to food, drink, and other physically consumable products such as cosmetics. With regards to food, *halal* describes the dietary standard as prescribed in the Qur'an. *Halal* foods and drinks are those that are "free from any component that Muslims are prohibited from consuming according to Islamic law" and "processed, made, produced, manufactured and/or stored using utensils, equipment and/or machinery that have been cleansed according to Islamic law" (Islamic Council of Victoria 2020). It is important to note that while *halal* is a universal principle, how it is understood and practiced is affected by cultural and political norms that differ from one society to the next.

In this chapter, I investigate the role of food and commensality in the men's relationships, both romantic and platonic, and explore how gay couples express their love for one another by sharing food. While various religious food taboos in Malaysia make it difficult for people belonging to different ethnoreligious communities to eat together, I show that some of my interlocutors breached the resulting divide in ways that did not compromise their faith. Doing so enables them to connect and form relationships with others. By reflecting on one of many dinner parties some of the men and I regularly held, I illustrate that commensality is both a communicative and an interactional act and thus builds friendships and assert their sense of belonging to the Bear community. This is because every food event adds to the rich web of personal and social meaning that individuals weave as they come together and share different dishes as well as the stories attached to them.

Furthermore, I argue that within many romantic relationships eating together is an important routine that helps two partners maintain their romantic connection. By regularly eating out in the same restaurant, many of the Malaysian couples I worked with get to invoke memories of their shared lives and reinforce the sense of intimacy that continuously grows through such joint activities. Moreover, I contend that gay men in Malaysia highly value dinner dates in public venues because romantic connotations inherent in the act are not easily legible to people around them. Hence, it is a safe way for gay men to partake in a heteronormative dating activity and signal romantic love to each other without fear of being discovered.

Food Divides and Conquers

Chan Yong, a Chinese Malaysian friend of mine, and I were seated at a small table near the glass door of our favorite seafood restaurant sipping hot chrysanthemum tea and scanning the plastic pages of the extensive menu, when Haziq arrived. Haziq frowned and motioned for us to get up: "Why are you sitting here? Everyone can see us. Let's find another table in the back, where we always sit." Clearly frustrated, he walked further into the restaurant, greeted the elderly Chinese Malaysian guy manning the till, and plopped down at one of the tables in the corner. Chan Yong and I picked up the tea pot and our cups and followed Haziq. Feeling bad about our thoughtlessness, I apologized to Haziq before handing him the menu and offering him a cup of tea. I knew that Haziq enjoyed the food in this place. I also knew that he was often a little uneasy about joining us in the restaurant, because it served pork and alcohol—as a Malay Muslim man, Haziq was not allowed to have either. While he never touched any of the dishes containing pork, being there with us, eating various foods, and using plates and utensils that, at some point, had certainly come in contact with *haram* (forbidden, unlawful) items was a risk. On previous visits, we had talked about Haziq's worry that the Morality Police (MP) might spot him and ask to see his MyKad (identity card), which prominently displays his faith. None of us wanted to experience the consequences of this, so we usually made sure to sit in the back of the restaurant where we were less visible to curious passersby.

Religious dietary restrictions are common throughout the world and shape the way people are able to live and eat together. They are particularly visible in Malaysia reflecting the country's ethnic and religious composition and how they intertwine. The major religions in the country are Islam (66%), Buddhism (15.7%), Christianity (9.4%), and Hinduism (5.8%) (Pew Research Center's Religion and Public Life Project 2020), all of which have their own dietary restrictions.

Muslims in Malaysia are only permitted to consume *halal* food, although some of my Muslim interlocutors did not strictly follow this rule and would eat in places that did not prepare dishes according to Islamic law or, occasionally, drink alcohol. All of them, however, avoided the consumption of products made from pork. Some of my Christian and Hindu friends also avoided pork and said that their decision was based on their faith. The majority of Hindus I know did not consume beef either, and a small number of them followed a strict vegetarian diet. Similarly, some of my Buddhist friends also adhered to a vegetarian diet.

My description of some of the dietary restrictions common throughout Malaysia is cursory and only meant to illustrate how diverse and, at times, incompatible different food preferences are when people from different religious groups come together. Restaurants and other food outlets tend to cater to those with specific dietary requirements, which means that many places are only able to welcome certain sections of the population. What stands out is that patrons of a particular eatery often belong to the same ethnic group. This is because, in Malaysia, most religions are closely correlated with specific ethnic identities. For instance, all Malays are Muslims, three quarters of Chinese Malaysians practice Buddhism, and more than eighty percent of Indian Malaysians follow Hinduism (Rahman, Sulong & Hussain 2019). This means that food taboos based on religious beliefs largely fall along ethnic lines. The demographic characteristics and menus of Malaysian restaurants reflect the entanglement of ethnicity and religion because what they serve determines who is able to eat there. Only if they make adjustments to their menu, such as ensuring that all their dishes are *halal*, are they able to expand the circle of those who can eat there without worry. This shows that food outlets have the capacity to reinforce the already existing ethnoreligious divide in Malaysia.

The most rigid, and easily observable, division exists between Muslims and non-Muslims, because Muslims belong to the only religious community in Malaysia that criminalizes the transgression of food taboos. Whereas food restrictions among other religious communities are considered a personal matter to be dealt with in private, Islamic food taboos have been escalated into the public sphere and become a target of state intervention. *Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia* (the Department of Islamic Development of Malaysia, or JAKIM) is a centralized division of the federal government that oversees all Islamic affairs in the country. One of its duties is to ensure that the ingredients contained in food products available in restaurants or supermarkets are not contaminated by alcohol or other non-*halal* substances. In line with the standards set by JAKIM, the MP regularly screens Muslim patrons in non-*halal* restaurants and have the authority to detain them for the consumption of alcohol and *haram* foods. Lee and Tan (2017) noted that policing the consumption of *halal* food products has become a priority for Malaysia's Islamic bureaucracy, because *syariah* legal practitioners think that transgressions have the potential to destabilize the social order as these actions paint Islam in a bad light. They also asserted that Islamic authorities fear that "those who consume alcohol may become intoxicated and 'cause havoc', and commit other crimes, including at worst, murder" (2017, 108). Islamic authorities apply the same logic to other *haram* issues such as public eating or drinking during Ramadan, *zina* (adultery), or prostitution, which they believe endanger not only an individual's state of spirituality but also the wellbeing of those around them.

Because the Muslim taboo of consuming *haram* food products is reinforced by Malaysian law, it is difficult for Muslims and non-Muslims to share food in non-*halal* eateries. It is important to note that this stark division between Muslim and non-Muslim eating spaces is the result of increasing state-led Islamization in Malaysia. While Muslim dietary restrictions existed

long before the 1970s, today, the taboo is reinforced by "a sense of a Malay panopticon of laws and restrictions that did not register so strongly in the past" (Duruz & Khoo 2014, 9). As I have outlined in the Introduction to this dissertation, at Independence in 1957, the British left behind an ethnically divided society. To this day, the political parties in Malaysia are defined by, and cater to, the different ethnic groups and their corresponding religions (see Hoffstaedter 2011; Shamsul 1996).

The United Malays National Organization (UMNO) had been the leading Malay party since the first general elections in 1959. It was surprisingly defeated in the 2018 general election, but returned to government in March 2020, and is currently the leading party with UMNO Vice-President, Ismail Sabri bin Yaakob, serving as the Prime Minister of Malaysia. Once its biggest rival, but now an ally, has been *Parti Islam SeMalaysia* (Islamic Party of Malaysia, PAS), a conservative Islamist party that is popular with many Muslim Malays. In order to bolster its own Islamic image, UMNO introduced legal and bureaucratic changes that have centralized Islam in the political realm, especially during the first administration of former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohmad (1981-2003, 2018-2020). Today, Islamic thought is integrated into the governmental and legal infrastructure of Malaysia and imposes a particular standard of moral conduct on Muslims (Lee & Tan 2017). One instance of this is the strict separation between *halal* and non-*halal* eating spaces, which makes commensality illegal for Muslims who want to join their friends in a non-*halal* restaurant.

Not surprisingly, most of my Muslim interlocutors would only eat out with their non-Muslim friends at *halal* restaurants. There were, however, a few Muslim men who regularly came along to have food in eateries that serve pork and alcohol. Their decision to join their non-Muslim friends, however, should not be seen as disregard for their faith. While some of them did

not actively practice Islam, most of them saw their behavior as taking a more liberal, and entirely justified, approach to their religion. As Hakim, a Malay man in his late thirties, stated: "It's not wrong to go out with my friends. As long as I don't eat anything with pork, I am not doing anything bad." Like Haziq, he was careful when going to a non-*halal* restaurant, and generally chose to sit inside and towards the back. Both men knew that this would not protect them during a raid but felt like it helped prevent them from being spotted by *Mat Skodeng* (snoop squads, or "Peeping Tom" squads). These squads are comprised of volunteers who have been enlisted by religious enforcement units in some Malaysian states, and who are "encouraged to report Muslims committing 'immoral' acts" (Lee & Tan 2017, 104). Hakim and Haziq believed that eating pork would be a religious transgression. Yet, they argued that merely spending time with other in a non-*halal* place and not consuming any *haram* items is simply a way to build and maintain relationships. They considered their behavior responsible and morally justified, because they never ate any dishes that contain pork.

At the communal level, there are many situations, in which dietary preferences and religious restrictions in Malaysia make it difficult for people belonging to different ethnoreligious communities to eat together. What is permissible for one group might be inedible for the next allowing only people within one community to share specific foods. This shows that food and food practices can highlight and redefine boundaries between communities. Importantly, in the Malaysian context, maintaining a *halal* diet and eating environment is especially important because the notion of *halal* is not only applicable to individual religious matters, but has become a priority for state institutions that regulate halal practices for economic, religious, and social purposes (see Khalek, Mokhtar, & Yao 2019). This further exacerbates already existing differences between ethnogeligious groups in the country. Hence, while

commensality means bringing people together, which leads to the tightening of social bonds, dietary restrictions tend to limit this effect to those already belonging to the same ethnoreligious community keeping others separate (see also Duruz & Knoo 2014; Grignon 2001; Nasir, Pereira & Turner 2010).

At the personal level, however, there are many Malaysians who choose to negotiate these differences and find ways to eat with others without transgressing their own dietary preferences—this was true for my interlocutors and remains to be true for most other queer or straight persons living in Malaysia who want to enjoy food in public spaces. Sometimes, they might act like Haziq and Hakim, and limit themselves to specific dishes that they consider safe. Other times, they might choose to go to a *halal* restaurant that offers a variety of vegetarian options and is, thus, able to accommodate a wide range of patrons. Another common way in which many of my interlocutors brought friends and acquaintances from different ethnic backgrounds together was by inviting them into their homes, where they were able to cook and eat foods that could be enjoyed by everyone. This shows that the consequences of dietary limitations, which tend to fall along, and reinforce, ethnoreligious boundaries in Malaysia are not insurmountable. Indeed, as I demonstrate in the next section of this chapter, when commensality is made possible, food connects people and enables them to build relationships that often transcend ethnic and religious distinctions.

We only Cook for those we Love

"I only cook for the people I love," said Hayyan in an earnest tone as he leaned back in his chair and folded his hands across his stomach. I looked up from my plate of Syrian *maqluba,*

rice with stewed chicken, aubergine, and cashews, at the content faces of the men sitting beside me. There were six of us gathering at the condominium owned by Xin Yi, a Chinese Malaysian man, and his Malay boyfriend, Haissam. We were sitting around a large wooden table that was heavy with bowls containing several hot dishes and plates filled with bread, hummus, and fresh vegetables. Haissam had made sure to match our water glasses with the colorful set of pottery the couple had picked up on a recent trip to Morocco. I was not surprised to notice a small fresh flower arrangement in similar colors, which they had placed on the sideboard close to us. It was usually the two of them, or Ryan and Kevin, the Chinese Malaysian couple sitting beside me at the table, who hosted these regular dinner parties. Sometimes, we invited others to join but, more often than not, it was just the six of us who got together for dinner, cocktails or tea, and the occasional game of cards afterward. We would all take turns preparing food—though all of us usually chipped in and helped with small tasks—and during this particular week, Hayyan had insisted on cooking several dishes from his home country for us. Not quite thirty years old, he was the youngest among us, but his tall frame, light beard, and serious eyes made him appear several years older. He grew up in a city in the South of Syria close to the Jordanian border. To avoid being drafted by the military, which would have forced him to fight in the ongoing war, his family had urged him to leave the country. With their financial support, he had enrolled in an MBA program in Malaysia, and lived there from 2015 to 2020.

"*I only cook for the people I love.*" Hayyan's words seemed to touch all of us. With a big smile on his face, Xin Yi leaned over to him and squeezed his shoulder in response, Kevin mumbled a shy "thank you", and Haissam and I beamed and praised the flavors of the food to show our appreciation. Ryan nodded in agreement as he reflected on how much he was able to relate to the words. The next morning, he posted a picture of our dinner on one of his social

media accounts, noting that Hayyan's statement "really struck a chord. I've known most of these guys for a long time. We've been through thick and thin together and here we are today, still celebrating our love and friendship over home-cooked food. *When you invite friends in your home and cook for them, you're really inviting them into your life and offering a piece of you to them*." Hayyan did just that. The dishes he had prepared were among his childhood favorites, and he served them alongside snippets of information about his Syrian home—about leisurely breakfast chats on the terrace with his mother, and her never waning concern that he was not eating well living on his own. By sharing his food with us, Hayyan shared a part of himself, too, as telling us about the dishes' significance for him entailed him opening up about other aspects of his life.

Both Hayyan and Ryan spoke of cooking for others as an act denoting love and intimacy. Their words indicate that the practice of offering food shows affection and allows for people to engage, provide care, and forge close social bonds. This suggests that sharing food is both a communicative and an interactional act. It is communicative because, at its most basic level, giving food to a person signals care for that person's bodily wellbeing, while receiving food means to accept and acknowledge the care being shown. Food offerings are also able to convey gratitude, provide comfort, or act as a reward. Furthermore, specific foods hold different kinds of meaning, and by sharing these foods, people have the ability to relay the ideas attached to them; through these foods, they can convey their own religious beliefs and signal political, social, or ecological ideologies—in short, they can express facets of their identity to others. As such, the importance of food and the act of sharing it goes beyond its capacity to provide sustenance, as it also communicates emotions, intentions, and beliefs (Atkins & Bowler 2001; Barthes 2013; Stajcic 2013).

Fig 3.4: Setting the table for one of our regular dinners at my interlocutor's condominium. He and his boyfriend pay even more attention to the quality of the food they are preparing for their friends. Source: Author.

Moreover, eating together is an interactional practice in that it opens up a space for people to engage with one another. Coming together to eat means to share an experience, which allows people to establish and deepen their relationships. Whether a meal is eaten with strangers, relatives, friends, or a romantic partner, research has shown that people perceive food-sharing as an important indicator of building intimacy, friendship, and love (Erwin, Burke & Purves 2002; Hamburg, Finkenauer & Schuengel 2014; Miller, Rozin & Fiske 1998). Commensality strengthens the social bond between people because it allows them to share aspects of their identity with one another. The food itself, the manner in which it is prepared and eaten, and

conversations happening at the table—on the floor, the couch, or as people walk down the street while eating—all enable people to get to know each other, which creates a sense of intimacy between the parties involved. This illustrates that sharing and eating food with others is an interactional act that brings people closer.

The dinner with Hayyan accomplished much of the above. He had spent hours sourcing the right ingredients from different places in the city and carefully preparing several dishes. He also voiced concerns that there might not be enough food, or that we would not enjoy what he offered. Him wanting us to be satiated and happy with the food as well as his efforts indicated that he cared for us, thus, reaffirming the emotional bonds that already existed between us. Offering us a selection of Syrian dishes signaled his pride in, and affection for, his heritage. The six of us tasting the dishes together gave him an opportunity to talk about this background and heritage, and to share memories about his life in Syria. By preparing foods for us that carried a lot meaning for him, Hayyan revealed parts of his identity we would not easily have been privy to otherwise, living together in Malaysia and not Syria. The dinner allowed us to get to know him better, and, combined with our responses, questions, and insights, it helped create a greater sense of intimacy between us. This further emphasizes the ability of commensality to help strengthen relationships.

Nourishing Bear Identity and Communal Belonging

In addition to enabling a person to communicate aspects of their identity to others, food and commensality can also reaffirm that person's own sense of self and their sense of collective belonging. Whereas, in the first section of this chapter, I emphasized how sharing food can bring

out dissimilarities between different groups, here, I want to highlight the ways in which it can also—often at the same time—reassert an individual's identification with the different communities they are part of. In fact, Fischler (1988; see also Calvo 1982) asserted that food is so central to people's sense of identity and collective belonging that, in situations where individuals or groups migrated to a different cultural context, food and eating habits were often retained even when other features of a culture, such as language, had been forgotten. He attributed this to the fact that "the absorption of a food incorporates the eater into a culinary system and therefore into the group which practices it, unless it irremediably excludes him" (1988, 281). In other words, for people who are part of a cultural community, the ingestion of dishes that are common to that community reinforces their identification with, and sense of belonging to, that specific community. It also helps members of that group to demarcate themselves from others.

For Hayyan, preparing several Syrian dishes to share with his friends was not only an invitation for us to get to know him and his cultural background better. It also reminded him of his roots and reaffirmed his self-identity as a Syrian, as is evidenced by the memories and stories the dinner elicited. Hayyan spent large parts of the evening reminiscing about his life in Syria, which made his affinity for, and connection to, his home country apparent. While eating his food and listening to his stories contributed to an increased sense of comfort and intimacy among us, these feelings of closeness and communal belonging we experienced did not derive from the kind of cuisine we shared; after all, Hayyan was the only Syrian at the table. Rather than the food itself, it was the set of activities surrounding it—the act of cooking, setting the table, and eating together—that reinforced a sense of community among us. The specific community it made us feel close to was the one that had facilitated our friendships: the Malaysian Bear community.

Although this chapter aims to bring out the significance of food and commensality to people in Malaysia in general and to my gay interlocutors in particular, I want to emphasize that food practices are especially important for the men because of their relevance to Bear culture. Most of my interlocutors loved food and, for them, sharing it with others was a crucial way to live out and reassert their identity as Bears. The notion that Bears care about and identify themselves through food is not only a Malaysian phenomenon but has been noted in literature on Bears in the United States and Brazil (Barrett 2017; Unsain et al. 2020, 2021; Wright 2013, 2014). For instance, in an autobiographical essay that details his process of becoming a Bear, Hill noted that "[t]he one statement I can make that isn't a generalization is that we love to sit down to a really good meal. Step back, Julia Child, the Bears are in the kitchen. Invariably, fifteen minutes into every meal involving Bears, the trading of recipes began" (Wright 2013, 76). Bears' appreciation of food and cooking is further illustrated by the fact that there are two cookbooks by and for Bears. According to their authors, the cookbooks were written because they "recognized the correlation between most Bears and comfort food" and "agreed on one simple truth: food is love" and should, thus, be shared with the community (Gray & Hunter 2012, 1, see also Gray 2005).

Some scholars (Barrett 2017; Unsain et al. 2020) argued that Bears' food choices and eating habits contain a variety of signs that indicate Bear masculinity. For example, in their research on Bears in Brazil, Unsain et al. (2020) showed that respondent distinguished between feminine and masculine ways of eating. These men considered barbequed meats and beer "macho food" and labelled fruits and vegetables "feminine food". When coming together as a group, they would consume an abundance of the former while they would avoid eating any of the latter. In doing so, they were also able to maintain and show off their fat appearance and

construct themselves as non-feminine—combined, these traits denote Bear masculinity in a broad sense. According to Unsain et al., this shows that their food choices and eating habits helped these men to signal and assert their membership in, and identification with, the Brazilian Bear community. I suggest that its capacity to reinforce a man's self-understanding as a Bear is one of the reasons why commensality is an important social practice within Bear communities in Brazil and elsewhere.

While my Malaysian interlocutors did not share this concept of macho food, they also took pride in indulging in a large variety of rich foods at get-togethers with other Bears and Chasers, which helped them to affirm their Bear masculinity. As fat men, they tended to be shamed for their appreciation of and indulgence in food by family, friends, and strangers. Several of them stated that being regularly subjected to fat-shaming caused them to avoid eating in public or sharing meals with others. Within the Bear community, however, they felt comfortable to enjoy food without fear of reproach. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the community provided them with a safe space in which they could express characteristics, values, and interests that are important to them and integral to Bear identity but might be seen as transgressive by many people within mainstream and gaystream cultures. Unabashedly sharing their love of food with others while being fat was considered one such transgression. It was, however, welcomed within the Bear community, and being able to share this joy with likeminded people muted the shame they tended to feel around food and fat in other settings.[13] As Ihsan, a Malay man in his late thirties, put it: "With the [Bears], I don't worry so much about things. I'm a Bear so I'm allowed

[13] See Whitsel (2014) for similar observations among Girth and Mirthers in the United States. He noted that for fat men "making the effort to go out to eat together as a group is a remarkably courageous act" and normalizes behavior—eating in public as a fat person—that is considered deviant by society at large (2014, 15-16).

to be me. I love food, and I love to cook. That's it. That's just me, right? When we get together, I can eat, I can cook, sometimes I bake, and the boys actually like it, you know … we all like food and so we like to eat together."

Ihsan's word indicate that, in addition to reasserting his self-identity as a Bear, sharing food with others participating in the Bear community also served to bolster his sense of belonging to said community. He and his friends frequently got together as a group and bonded over their shared interest in food and eating. Knowing that many people outside the Bear community judged the ways in which they indulged in food only increased that sense of unity. Commensality is thus a social marker that unifies the Bear community and sets it apart from other social groups. As mentioned previously, the dinner parties my interlocutors and I regularly organized achieved a similar thing for us. Whether Hayyan prepared Syrian *maqluba*, Ryan cooked one of his signature pasta dishes we all loved, or Xin Yi whipped up a batch of scones with clotted cream and jam from scratch, eating together served as an affirmation of intimacy and friendship among us. It also united us as members of the Malaysian Bear community. Of course, I identify as neither Bear nor Chaser, but that did not prevent my interlocutors from making me feel welcome and integrating me into their group. By encouraging me to participate in Bear events—most of which entailed sharing food with one another—they made me feel part of the community and strengthened our bond as friends.

The Loving Boredom of Eating Together

Of course, food and commensality are just as important when it comes to establishing and maintaining other types of relationships, including romantic relationships. Sharing food is an

essential aspect of courtship as well as life as a couple for people across different cultures, and the men I worked with in Malaysia were no exception to that. Yi Wei and Irfan have been in a relationship for twelve years and food has been a part of that relationship since the very beginning. Irfan, a Malay man in his early fifties, told me that, initially, they "had a bit of a fling [and], on and off, were sort of dating for about a year." Most of their dates involved going out to eat and trying different kinds of cuisine together. Yi Wei, a Chinese Malaysian man in his mid-forties, described himself as a quiet man and stated that sitting down and sharing food made it easier to get to know Irfan because, if nothing else, they were able to talk about the food and learn about each other's tastes. Their relationship developed slowly but steadily, and dinner dates have become an integral part of Irfan and Yi Wei's routine as a couple. The two of them chose not to live together full-time because they liked being able to return to their own space after a long day at work. Nevertheless, they spent each weekend together at Irfan's house and went out for dinner every Saturday as well as a couple of times during the week.

Fig 3.5: One of the couples I worked with invited me along on one of their weekly dinner dates. They have been coming to this particular Chinese restaurant for years—they have celebrated several of their anniversaries there. Source: Author.

On a sweltering August evening, Irfan and I were having a drink outside a Starbucks in the city of Petaling Jaya. The patio was empty as most people seemed to prefer the relief provided by the air conditioning inside the shop. We, however, enjoyed the privacy our table offered us and shared a slice of cake while chatting and waiting for Yi Wei to finish work and meet us for dinner. The two men wanted to introduce me to a Japanese restaurant that had opened recently and become a fast favorite for them. Taking a sip from my iced tea, I asked Irfan what attracted him to Yi Wei. Without hesitation, Irfan told me that what he loves about him is his heart. Then, a grin appeared on his bearded face. "I can get bored of [Yi Wei] sometimes, because he wants the same fucking food every time. I know exactly what he's going to order tonight. I know, trust me. Salmon skin salad, the *tamago* (egg) thing—the big one—the pasta that you like, Sandy, and most probably the salmon *teriyaki*. Mark my words." I looked at Irfan

as he continued talking: “He hates the fact that I call him predictable. Every time we want to go eat, I say, ‘let’s try something different’. And he says, ‘okay, let’s go for Perenakan [food]’. And I say, ‘sweetheart, that is exactly where we go when you want an alternative’.” After a short pause and a swig from his cup of coffee, he smiled again concluding: “You know, Yi Wei is a good man, and a good man is so rare. He has a good heart.”

Irfan and Yi Wei rarely seemed to eat anything other than Japanese food when going out, which had caused me to tease Irfan when he first told me about their plans for the evening. With few exceptions, the two of them had been going to the same restaurant every Saturday night for several years. On occasion, they had invited me along, and I had noticed their familiarity with the place, the menu, and the staff. They did, indeed, order the same food whenever we went there and offered each other bits to try even though they knew each dish by heart. While frequenting the same place on a weekly basis over to course of many years might appear somewhat extreme, many of the couples I worked with had a dinner date routine that brought them back to a particular restaurant ordering the same dishes regularly. The quality and taste of the food certainly mattered to these couples. Nonetheless, I argue that their shared fondness of a specific restaurant has less to do with the food itself and more with what the event of visiting the place and eating the same dishes *represent* to the couple. Within the context of each relationship, every part of such a restaurant visit carries meaning that is tied to how that relationship is viewed and maintained by both partners. Even though my focus in this section is on romantic relationships, it is important to note that this is also true for other kinds of relation such a family relationships or friendships, many of which entail similar routines.

My conversation with Irfan illustrates the close link between food and romantic love. When asked about what attracted him to Yi Wei, Irfan talked extensively about his boyfriend’s

food preferences and eating habits. At first, his response confused me because it did not seem relevant to the question at hand. While reflecting on Yi Wei's eating behavior allowed Irfan to contemplate key parts of his partner's personality such a steadiness and reliability, he did not appear to admire these traits associating them with moments of boredom. In fact, it seemed as though he had gone off on a tangent detailing Yi Wei's less-desirable characteristics rather than focusing on what he loves about him. I realized, however, that this tangent was important to his thought process because it reassured him that his understanding of the relationship was anchored in knowledge about his boyfriend, a high degree of intimacy, and love. By emphasizing Yi Wei's predictability when it comes to going out for dinner together, Irfan signaled to both of us that he knows his partner very well—he knows which dishes Yi Wei will want to eat, he knows what kind of restaurant he would suggest as an alternative, he even knows that Yi Wei would respond with annoyance if he heard us talking, because the two have had similar conversations before. Sharing such detailed knowledge about his boyfriend's food preferences allowed Irfan to do two things. First, it reassured him that he does, indeed, have a good understanding of who Yi Wei is, which allows him to speak confidently of traits that he loves, such as his boyfriend's good heart. Second, it enabled him to show me that their relationship is characterized by a high degree of intimacy and attention towards the partner. This closeness is an indicator for the love the two men share and emphasizes their strong romantic bond.

Precise knowledge of each other's eating habits is the result of frequenting the same restaurant over a long period of time. This highlights once again that the act of eating it together plays an important role in romantic relationships. Repeatedly sharing food allowed Irfan and Yi Wei to learn about each other's likes and dislikes, and aided them in creating intimacy in their relationship. Developing a routine around their commensality practices, then, enabled the couple

to maintain their romantic connection, because the continued return to the same restaurant reminds them of what they already know and reinforces their feeling of closeness. The routine created a sense of familiarity for Irfan and Yi Wei, because they got to reexperience the shared joy of going out to eat together, and reaffirmed their bond with one another. This is what allowed Irfan to predict Yi Wei's choices, actions, and reactions. As I have mentioned previously, it is this predictability that reassures a person that they can trust themselves in knowing their romantic partner's personality, preferences, and attitudes, and, thus, their relationship. This suggests that routinely sharing into an activity such as visiting the same restaurant signals consistency, stability, and togetherness to the couple, which, in turn, helps to maintain the romantic connection between both partners. Commensality is a universally common social practice that most people choose to partake in. Because it is generally an accepted way of bringing people together, it lends itself to being a meaningful action for couples to grow and continue romantic relationships. It is important to note, however, that commensality does not only bring bout positive changes in a relationship. Food and eating habits were often contested and created moments of tension and insecurity among my Malaysian interlocutors. Chapter 4 explores the divisive potential of food sharing practices in romantic relationships of the men in greater detail.

Love Under Cover of Eating Out

What stood out to me during the years I spent in Malaysia was that going to restaurants on a regular basis was important to all my interlocutors. Whether it was a first date, a sixth anniversary, or a low-key date night on a Thursday after work, the men's preferred way to spend time together was by eating out. I have shown that the act of *eating* together was vital as it

helped foster relationships between men. *Eating out* together was meaningful for the men for yet another reason—it allowed gay couples in Malaysia to participate in a heteronormative romantic activity in public without fear of being found out. When Yi Wei and Irfan had dinner in their favorite Japanese restaurant, they would often share a few dishes and take bites from each other's plates as they chatted and laughed. For them, this was time they spent as a coupe taking care of their relationship, and they were able to recognize romantic love for one another in each other's gestures. To an outside observer, however, their behavior was not automatically read as romantic or sexual. While sharing food and eating from the same plate denote a high degree of intimacy, these actions were not restricted to couples. They were also common among members of the same family, close friends, and even colleagues who would regularly eat out together in Malaysia. In short, because commensality plays an important role within a variety of relationships, its more intimate aspects do not only denote romantic intentions but can signal friendship or familial relationships. It all depended on the specific script people were following when they got together to eat.

Fig 3.6: A couple sharing breakfast at a Chinese hawker stall. One of my interlocutors is preparing and seasoning an egg dish for his boyfriend, knowing how he likes it. A loving gesture that is not legible as strictly romantic. Source: Author.

Scripts are a form of schema that we use to make sense of our experiences and organize the world around us. They are sets of stereotypical actions that enable us to predict the conduct of those we engage with and inform our own decisions on how to behave in different situations (Laner & Ventrone 2000; Wierzbicka 1994). All scripts are inherently embedded in a cultural context, which means that they are informed by values and norms characteristic of that culture (Klinkenberg & Rose 1994). As we enact the cultural scripts that guide our behavior, we incorporate personal knowledge and preferences into our actions, thus creating interpersonal scripts that are more subjective and detailed than cultural ones (Simon & Gagnon 1984). Here, I am focusing on scripts that determine dating attitudes and behaviors and direct how food can be used to help establish romantic relationships. For example, the vast majority of my Malaysian interlocutors expected their first date with a man to include dinner and drinks as these denoted

romantic intentions for them. These dinner dates followed a dating script that dictates the standard and desirable sequence of events, including the setting for the date, what is being eaten, how much food is being consumed, and who is paying the bill. Differences between the script that guides a dinner date and scripts that direct other types of food outing are often subtle and not always obvious to onlookers. Nevertheless, every aspect of the date communicates specific intentions to the two people involved and allows them to know where they stand in relation to one another.

It is important to note that the notion of expressing romantic love through food is generally anchored in ideas about heterosexual family and love relations. This means that commensality practices denoting romantic love are often based on scripts that rely on traditional gender roles. For example, among heterosexual couples, the man is expected to be proactive, organize the date, and pay the bills, while the woman ought to be receptive and responsive, take care of her appearance, and eat lightly (Amiraian & Sobal 2009). Within established romantic relationships, scripts also follow heteronormative ideas when it comes to the shared consumption of food. In her analysis of relationship dynamics in American food commercials, Bordo showed that women speak "the language of love and care through the offering of food [to men, and] receive their gratification through nourishing others" (1993, 123). She asserted that these commercials illustrate the belief that, in American culture, providing food corresponds to wifely love while appreciating the food offered signals husbandly love. In my experience, heterosexual couples in Malaysia followed similar gender-based scripts during the different stages of their romantic relationships. In the early days, men took the initiative and arranged dinner dates outside the house. Once the relationship was more established, women became more proactive, but men were often still expected to assert themselves by ordering for the table and paying the

bill. When food was shared at home, women tended to be the ones preparing meals for their partners and the family.

Homosexual couples in Malaysia heavily draw on these heterosexual dating and relationship scripts, though their own interpersonal scripts do not fully encompass the gendered dynamics that are at the core of heterosexual scripts. Because society does not expect them to assume traditional complementary gendered roles, gay men tend to have more flexibility to reject aspects of these roles that do not fit their personal needs and desires (Klinkenberg & Rose 1994).[14] While my interlocutors did not fully adopt the gendered dynamics that define many heterosexual dating scripts, they accepted most other parts of these scripts, because their meanings did not change based on the men's sexual orientations. After all, these men grew up in the same cultural context as their heterosexual peers and were taught the same ideas about courtship.

Kevin and Ryan, for instance, always enjoyed eating together and believed that dinner dates are a traditionally significant practice during courtship. They first met at the birthday party of a mutual friend more in 2013. After spending several hours talking only to each other, they exchanged numbers and Ryan asked Kevin out for dinner. This was the first of many dates they spent either eating out at a restaurant or preparing meals for one another in the home they now share. Just like Irfan and Yi Wei, they considered commensality an important part of their relationship, because it had been fundamental to building a romantic connection and allowed them to continually show love and care. From the beginning, Kevin and Ryan developed their

[14] According to Klinkenberg and Rose (1994), the same is true for lesbian women. In their study of gay and lesbian first date scripts, they stated that "within a date pair, lesbians and gay men did not adopt specific gender-typed roles, as has been found for heterosexuals" (1994, 33). Instead, both people take on most tasks jointly.

own, less gender normative dynamic around their dinner dates. They were equally proactive when it came to organizing dates; they were not overly concerned about who pays the bill; and, when at home, they made sure to take turns preparing food for each other. Apart from these differences, Ryan and Kevin's dinner dates followed the same script as heterosexual couples in Malaysia. Despite the fact that there was very little setting their behavior apart from that of a man and woman on a date, the couple had always been comfortable sharing food in a public setting without fear that the nature of their relationship would be discovered.

I suggest that other patrons of the restaurant did not view the getting together of a gay couple like Kevin and Ryan as a dinner date because they did *not expect* them to be romantically involved. People came together to share food for a variety of reasons such as two friends catching up over lunch, a son taking out his mother on her birthday, two coworkers meeting for dinner to discuss a project, or a man treating his girlfriend to breakfast. These outings were guided by different cultural scripts that determine which actions were deemed appropriate in each situation. Because they were aware of what the scripts demand, cultural insiders often presumed to know what kind of relationship two people have when they observed them sharing dinner in a restaurant. However, their guesses were based on stereotypical expectations contained in food outing scripts that limited the scope of possible relationships to a narrowed range of normative options. Hence, intimate gestures such as eating food off each other's plate tended to be read in standardized ways. For instance, when Ryan and I shared food in this manner, our close friendship was regularly mistaken for a romantic relationship, because both types of relationship were appropriate and made sense. Yet, whenever Ryan offered Kevin a bite of his food, they were thought to be either good friends or brothers—they were never considered

romantic partners as queer relationships are non-normative in Malaysia and a dinner date script for gay couples does not exist.

An additional factor that makes it easy to assume that two men sharing dinner at a restaurant are most likely friends or relatives is that romantic dinner dates in Malaysia do not involve any overtly sexual gestures. Public displays of affection such as holding hands or kissing are prohibited for Muslim couples and avoided by most non-Muslims (Lee & Tan 2017). Accordingly, heterosexual couples dining in a restaurant will not signal romantic love through such unambiguous physical gestures, but rather communicate through overt actions that obscure their intentions to those around them. This allowed my interlocutors to participate in a heteronormative dating activity without having to worry that they will be outed. During a dinner date, the men did not have to modify their behavior to hide their sexual orientation, because the standard set by the Malaysian script ensured that their romantic objective was signaled with subtlety.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined commensality as a practice of queer love. I illustrated that the act of eating together is important for my gay interlocutors, because it allows them to build and maintain relationships with others. I focused on two kinds of relationships, both of which are important to the men's self-understanding as gay men: one, I looked at how sharing food helps them to bond with friends and to promote a sense of belonging with the Malaysian Bear community; two, I analyzed the role of commensality as a romantic practice that contributes to the creation and continuation of their romantic relationships. In both instances, I showed that the

practice of sharing meals is in itself an intimate act, because offering food to someone means to open oneself up to that person. Simultaneously, it is an invitation for the other person to engage, and it, thus, fosters a sense of closeness between those participating in the meal. Importantly, my interlocutors often take risks when they choose to eat together in public. I contend that these risks are worthwhile, because the reward for sharing food include more intimate relationships with their friends and romantic partners.

I started this chapter with illustrating that commensality helps to transcend ethnoreligious boundaries between people. In Malaysia, ethnic identity is "just as much a question of 'who you are not' as 'who you are'" (Nagata 1975, 3), and there is generally a strict division between ethnic communities. The diverse culinary landscape of Malaysia reflects the country's multiethnic makeup, and faith-based dietary restrictions that are inherent in different culinary traditions add an additional barrier for people. They make it harder for individuals from diverse ethnoreligious backgrounds to eat together, which solidifies the division between different groups. Nevertheless, I have demonstrated that my interlocutors found ways to share meals with others without transgressing their own dietary restrictions. By respecting each other's food restrictions and finding places that accommodate individual preferences, they were able to spend time and eat together. In doing so, they created relationships that were not confined by ethnoreligious demands.

I have shown that commensality is not only a social practice that brings people from different ethnic groups together. It also fortifies the sense of cohesion within social communities that were formed around shared interests, not common ethnoreligious roots. Moreover, it reaffirms an individual's sense of belonging to said community. I argued that for those of my interlocutors who identified as Bears, sharing meals with each other provided a platform through

which they could live out their identities. Their love of food was something they had in common, and the Bear community provided one of the very few spaces where the men did not dread eating communally, because they did not fear being judged by those around them. I illustrated that this made them feel accepted as members of the community and strengthened the friendship between the men. It also reinforced the overall feeling of connectedness within the community. This is because fat men enjoying food is considered a transgressive act in mainstream society, which demands that fat individuals maintain a strict diet and do not indulge.

In addition to demonstrating that commensality played an important role in the development of my interlocutors' friendships—especially those that were forged through a joint engagement in the Malaysian Bear community—I also showed that sharing food is essential in the continuation of their romantic relationships. The routine of eating together provided couples with a sense of stability and consistency regarding their relationship. Furthermore, frequent dinner dates allowed them to reconnect as romantic partners and could intensify feelings of intimacy for both partners. For example, I illustrated that habitually going to the same restaurant brought up memories and could remind couples of the things they know and love about each other. This helped my interlocutors to maintain their romantic relationships, as it consistently nourished the bond between partners.

In the last section of this chapter, I examined what eating out means to the men. Here, I argued that going to restaurants or eating in other public venues was important to my interlocutors, because it allowed them to participate in a heteronormative dating practice without fear of discovery. As gay men, it was difficult for them to publicly show affection towards their partners. Because expressions of queer love are illegal in Malaysia, they had to be careful when they flirted or courted one another in the presence of strangers. They could, however, go on

dinner dates because the romantic intention behind such an outing was invisible to others. Rather than presuming them to be a couple, people in Malaysia were much more likely to view two men sharing food as siblings, friends, or colleagues. Because intimate acts, such as tasting each other's food, indicate a high level of closeness more generally—and do not denote romantic love in particular—eating out is a safe way for gay men to practice love in public.

In this chapter, I outlined the ways in which eating together can be seen as a practice of queer love that helped facilitate and sustain romantic relationships among my gay interlocutors. Yet, it is important to note that food and eating practices can also be a source of conflict in the men's romantic relationships. In the next chapter, I explore how specific food choices and eating habits were often contested among romantic partners, because they were implicated in conversations about health and the body. I investigate how my interlocutors dealt with tensions and insecurities that arose in moments when eating practices—alongside exercise routines—became the subject of disciplining efforts in their relationships.

CHAPTER 4

Challenging Love: Disciplining Body Practices in Gay Romantic Relationships

Introduction

Lee is a handsome man. I looked over at him lounging on the couch in the condo one of my friends had rented for me in the Eastern part of Kuala Lumpur. I was preparing two cups of the tea the two of us had picked up on a recent trip to the Cameron Highlands, a mountain range in the center of Peninsular Malaysia. Lee was, as he liked to remind me, "tall for a Chinese man," of large build with a softly bulging belly. He had short, graying hair, was hiding two dimples behind a meticulously maintained beard, and usually wore a pair of dark rimmed glasses that made him look more serious than he was. He smiled at me as I handed him one of the cups and scootched over to make space for me on the couch. After taking a careful sip of hot tea, he sighed: "I don't know what to do. We've been together for [eleven] years, but I don't feel safe to open myself, right. To be naked and ugly and completely open. And he cannot accept that."

At the time of my fieldwork, Lee and his boyfriend, Edward, had been living together for ten of the eleven years of their relationship in a condominium in Bangsar, an affluent district Southwest of Kuala Lumpur's center and one of the city's most sought-after residential areas that was also known for its drinking and dining scene. Edward, a Chinese Malaysian man in his early fifties, was a successful business consultant and had bought the condominium several years before meeting Lee. Lee still owned a little terrace house outside the city that he had been renting out since moving in with his boyfriend. He stated that keeping the house is less about the small

amount of money it brought him and more about knowing that he wiould always have a place to go “just in case. You never know.”

Overall, their relationship worked well and brought them happiness. Both men were working full-time and shared responsibilities for household chores. While they often went out to eat in one of the many restaurants or at one of their favorite hawker stalls in the neighborhood, they also took turns cooking dinner for each other when they were home. Because he was an early riser, Lee often prepared breakfast for Edwards before heading to the office. In turn, Edward cooked Lee’s favorite herbal soup for him whenever he felt tired or down. Several times a year, they went on vacation together—sometimes as a couple and sometimes in a small group with friends. They also spent weekends with each other’s families. Lee’s mother knew Edward as his closest friend and treated him like another son, regularly calling him to make sure that he still had “enough of my garden herbs in the freezer. If not, I can drop off more”. Edward’s parents were more reserved but made sure to include their son’s ‘best friend’ in family gatherings and special events.

Nevertheless, Lee told me that they had been struggling with their relationship and that moments of tension had become more frequent and were harder to dispel than they used to be. These tensions contributed to a growing emotional distance that had been causing Lee to feel guarded and made it difficult for him to openly share his thoughts and feelings with Edward. While there were multiple reasons for this development, I noticed that one of the things frequently producing friction between the two men were conversations and comments about appearance related concerns. For instance, when we went out to eat together, Edward often

remarked on his boyfriend's food choices reprimanding him for "always eat[ing] one *kueh*[15] too many," or insisted that they share one portion of rice because more than half a portion each is unnecessary and might make Lee gain more weight.

Markey et al. (2017) referred to communication about topics such as weight, body size, muscularity, or hair as "body talk." They have shown that body talk among romantic partners has a strong impact on the way an individual feels about their body (see also Daniels 2021; Markey & Markey 2014). Because couples generally share a deep emotional bond and high levels of physical intimacy, romantic partners act as reference points for each other regarding their understanding of their physical selves. When a person expresses positive feelings about their romantic partner's body, the latter tends to feel more satisfied with, and confident about, their body (ibid). In instances where a person perceives their romantic partner's comments as negative, however, they often experience feelings of shame, self-doubt, and bodily dissatisfaction (Goldsmith & Byers 2016). Research carried out in the United States has shown that body size is a particularly important concern in the romantic relationships of gay men, which is exemplified by the fact that gay men are more likely to regulate their romantic partner's eating behavior than lesbian women or straight people (Foster-Gimbel & Engeln 2016). My observations demonstrate that the same is true for gay men in Malaysia. Among my Malaysian interlocutors, most couples engaged in both positive and negative body talk, and the regulation of eating practices and other bodily habits were common.

According to Lee, body talk between Edward and him had become increasingly negative by the time I returned to Malaysia. He stated that, in the early years of their relationship, his

[15] *Kueh* (also spelled *kue* or *kuih*) is the term used for bite-sized sweet or savory dessert foods that are commonly found in Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and Brunei.

boyfriend had regularly complimented his body and his physical appearance: “I’m a Bear and [Edward] was always obviously into that. He told me that, and not just when he wanted to fuck.” Lee had felt secure in the knowledge that his partner had valued and appreciated his body not only for its erotic capacities. Over time, however, the tone had shifted and many of the conversations they had no longer celebrated Lee’s appearance. Rather, they focused on Edward’s concerns about “all the things I’m doing wrong, like, not eating healthy food, not working out with him enough, [and] that my tummy is [getting] fatter.” He asserted that Edward had been trying to assure him of his attractiveness, but Lee admitted that these assurances often felt hollow. They were unable to counterbalance feelings of discomfort and shame he experienced every time his partner attempted to intervene in his bodily routines and self-care practices.

Edward’s behavior had been eating away at Lee’s self-esteem and brought up body image concerns, which he has been wrestling with on and off, especially in his younger years. To protect himself and to avoid conflict with his partner, Lee began to emotionally withdraw from the relationship. This, in turn, caused Edward to feel rejected by his partner. Edward stated that Lee’s disregard of his efforts to take care of his physical wellbeing, which he perceived as acts of love, had been painful and, at times, had made him doubt his boyfriend’s commitment to their relationship. Observing the back and forth between the two men, it was apparent that they had created a dynamic that was increasingly challenging their romantic bond and, thus, put their relationship at risk.

All relationships—romantic or otherwise—are created through an iterative process that involves the ongoing negotiation and renegotiation of values, needs, and desires of the two people involved. As romantic couples work on maintaining feelings of intimacy and passion in their relationships, they regularly face challenges that can shift these feelings and make them

question whether they should remain committed to each other. In this chapter, I examine one of the main issues causing a negative dynamic in my interlocutors' romantic relationships. I focus on one of my interlocutors, Lee, to analyze how the disciplining of body practices in couples affected the nature of their relationships. There is a long tradition in anthropology to ethnographically foreground a particular individual to show what forms sociocultural life can take (see Biehl 2005; Crapanzano 1980; Shostak 1981). Rapport (2020) stated that detailed studies of an individual are not just about the life in question but are able to reveal larger issues in the current cultural situation. He argued that the individual should be at the center of ethnography, because "while forms of sociocultural life often precede and outlive individual users, they possess no life or agency on their own, no logic, consequence or impact beyond their implementation by particular individuals in particular situations and outside these individual usages and interpretations" (Rapport 2020, 11). I contend that Lee's experiences can shed light on how most of my interlocutors—and arguably people in romantic relationships in general—grapple with social rules and norms as they pursue emotionally and physically fulfilling relationships. Specifically, his story illustrates how the couples I worked with were continuously trying to mediate the harrowing effects of societally induced body insecurity within their relationships.

In the first section, I trace moments in Lee's life that shaped him both physically and emotionally and, in many ways, made him who he was at the time of my fieldwork. I examine the difficulties of inhabiting a culturally stigmatized fat, gay, HIV-positive body that have forced Lee to contend with feelings of bodily insecurity. I follow his process of trying to overcome emotional wounds that were tied to his body image and, thus, work towards lasting acceptance of his body. In doing so, I maintain that ours are "knowing bodies" (Santoro 2009) that hold and

reflect our individual, lived experiences and, at the same time, signify broader cultural discourses that we learn from, conform to, but also push against in our engagement with others.

In the second section of this chapter, I look at the underlying causes of the dynamic that was challenging Lee's romantic relationship. I argue that both Edward's motive for monitoring Lee's bodily habits and Lee's response to his boyfriend's actions were informed by competing discourses around fatness. In this section, I focus on Edward's attempt to regulate Lee's exercising habits, which was motivated by his desire to ensure that his boyfriend was healthy and strong. I maintain that his rationale drew on hegemonic discourses on fatness that conflate body size, health, and fitness. By examining Lee's response to Edward's attempted intervention in his workout routines, I show that the emotional pain triggered by his boyfriend's actions stemmed from Lee's own contentious engagement with the same dominant discourses.

In the last section, I consider the impact of such body disciplining practices on Lee and Edward's relationship. I assert that, ultimately, Edward's well-intended, but misguided and unwanted, attempts to regulate how Lee takes care of his body led to the creation of a dynamic that diminished the love the men felt for one another. Here, I illustrate how the dynamic was manifested in the couple's lives. I look at Edward's efforts to change his boyfriend's food and eating practices and detail the main strategies employed in his attempts to cope with Edward's behavior. I show how these strategies contributed to a growing lack of intimacy and passion in their relationship that became increasingly difficult to bear for both men and prompted them to question their commitment to one another.

Lee Growing into Himself

People make sense of their world and their position in it through their bodies. A person's identity script is writing itself as their bodies grow and change, and they can do little more than take on and play the part sociocultural conventions have drafted for the category of person they represent. This is not to say that there is no room for flexibility. Yet, it is difficult to act outside the cultural logics determining who we are as embodied beings (see Bordo 1993; Bourdieu 1977). For instance, fat, hairy, gay men cannot avoid the societal stigma attached to fatness and homosexuality that exists across cultures. Nevertheless, as I have shown in Chapter 1, some of them choose to embrace these characteristics by participating in a subculture that refuses to accept hetero- and homonormative categories that fat, gay men are placed in. The Bear community is one of several queer subcultures that valorizes and eroticizes a variety of aesthetic qualities, like hirsuteness and fatness, and helps gay men to positively reframe their self-understanding as acceptable and desirable (see Hennen 2008; Wright 2013). In Malaysia, this does not protect men from rejection and social injuries within mainstream and gaystream culture. Nevertheless, the Malaysian Bear community provides them with a network of support and care and offers them a space in which they can find friendship, love, and sex.

In his autoethnographic writings, Santoro (2009, 2012) examined his process of becoming a Bear and showed that the journey is complex and often painful. He reflected on his early efforts to dismiss the Bear community, because being surrounded by men who looked like him made it difficult to ignore his body and what it represented to the world. He wondered whether Bears' endeavor to refuse being pigeonholed by wider society was even possible:

> How can one, especially the hypermasculine (and hence, hypersexual) gay bear body and/or persona, truly abandon categorization without escaping corporeality? Within the body's materiality, sexual codes communicate sexual desires. The body, therefore, is

> always already grounded in a sexual politic existing in a state of co-optation, selling itself in a currency of conscious and unconscious desires. In these formative moments, our bodies become in/validated—met with sexual attraction (possibility) or sexual aversion (impossibility)—and, consequently, defined. (2009, 56-57)

Santoro's attempts to escape the reality of his body was futile. It took him years to understand that he would only find the sense of freedom he was looking for if he learned to accept his body. Rather than trying to run away from it, he eventually leaned into the idea that his body could be attractive and opened himself up to "finding the desirability of my undesirable body" (2009, 57).

Many of my interlocutors can relate to Santoro's struggles, but not all of them can overcome the shame that comes with fat embodiment. Even those who have been able to redefine their self-image by participating in the Bear community, experience moments of insecurity, anxiety, or self-loathing. For Lee, these moments became more frequent in the years before my fieldwork and often occurred as part of interactions with his boyfriend, Edward. He stated that he was always more aware of his body when spending time with Edward, both in positive and negative ways, sometimes simultaneously. Physical intimacy, for example, felt pleasurable and wonderful, as it let him know that his body was desired, but every caress was also an unwanted reminder of his excess belly fat, his slightly enlarged chest, or the asymmetrical growth of hair trailing down his pelvis. The host of contradictory emotions Lee experienced in these moments often gave way to feelings of shame about his body and brought up bad memories and emotional wounds he had tried to put behind him. By its very appearance, his body had been provoking commentary from people around him for decades, which continued to shape his self-understanding.

For as long as he could remember, Lee had been wrestling with body image concerns. He was a slender, effeminate child who grew into a young man whose hefty body and facial hair

signaled the kind of normative masculinity he had been yearning for in his early teens, when schoolmates teased him about his slight build. At age nineteen, he moved to England to earn his bachelor's degree in Business Studies and spent four years living and studying in London. It was there that he also had the freedom to explore his homosexuality. He frequented gay bars and nightclubs and spent many weekends in the seaside city of Brighton enjoying himself among queer friends and lovers. Just a few months before Lee was about to graduate, his life came to a sudden halt:

> It was good. I had one subject left but knew it shouldn't be a problem. I had already passed the interview and had a job in England for afterwards. But one day, when I was playing video games, I felt a body rash coming on everywhere. So, I went to see a doctor and he told me that it was maybe some kind of infection. He said he needed to do the tests twice. So, he did another kind of blood test. That was in 1996. And then, okay, I was [HIV-1] positive.

The diagnosis felt devastating to Lee and changed the trajectory of his life. Because he flunked his last class, the job offer he had received was rescinded. He decided to spend one more semester in London to retake that class, but only "because there was nothing else to do; it didn't matter anymore."

Although the development of combination antiretroviral therapy in the 1990s made it possible to combat HIV-1 infections (Laskey & Siliciano 2014), Lee saw his diagnosis as a death sentence. He was just as scared of developing AIDS and dying as he was of the stigma attached to the virus should anyone find out. Other interlocutors of mine who contracted the virus in the 1990s or early 2000s expressed similar fears. Even two men who were diagnosed after 2010 were initially petrified, despite knowing that they had access to medical care that meant the virus would have little impact on their health-related quality of life and they could expect a near-normal life span. My interlocutors' panic was justified. Research has shown that, to this day,

across the world, people living with HIV or AIDS continue to experience discrimination, violence, loss of employment, and restrictions regarding their ability to travel (Piot et al. 2009; Tran et al. 2019). Additionally, my interlocutors worried that knowing about their HIV status would enable people to figure out their sexual orientation, and they feared the effects of the double stigma attached to being both gay and HIV positive[16]. In Malaysia, HIV and AIDS continue to be associated with homosexuality (Wong & Syuhada 2011) and internalized as well as externalized stigma is significantly greater for people living with HIV or AIDS who are part of the LGBTQ community than for other populations (Ahmad et al. 2021; Lowther et al. 2014).

In the months following his diagnosis, Lee felt isolated, because "I didn't know who I could speak to about this. I was alone." He believed that his future in England had evaporated, but the thought of returning to Malaysia filled him with immense dread. Lee felt paralyzed:

> I was already gay. Now I knew I'm [HIV] positive and that I wouldn't live long. I didn't go out [to meet friends]. I stayed at home and only saw the doctor who tried to figure out specific pills to help. But there was no point. I tried to hang myself, but I was afraid of the pain, afraid that the lamp will drop. And I tried to use a knife, but that was also painful, so the best thing was to collect a lot of sleeping pills. I took them all at once and thought I would sleep and die like that. But I only slept for two days. I basically just slept.

Lee fell silent staring into space getting lost in the memories surrounding those days. I removed the teacup from his grasp and placed it on my couch table before turning back to him. Then, I took his hands and my touch seemed to bring him back to the present. "I didn't know that about you," I said slowly. Lee nodded and stated: "Nobody knows. Apart from my mother and brother. [My mother] found me the second time I tried, when I was back in Kuala Lumpur. I don't talk

[16] In fact, some of these men must contend with three kinds of stigma as they are gay, fat, and living with HIV, every single one of which has had a profound impact on their lives.

about it to others." I paused before responding: "Not even with Edward?" Lee smiled: "No, not with anyone. This here is the first time I ever mentioned [the attempted suicide]." He gently squeezed my hands.

Lee was the first of my interlocutors who talked to me about having tried to end his life. Throughout my fieldwork year, there was a steady increase in the number of men who admitted that they have experienced suicidal ideation, attempted suicide in the past, or inflicted deliberate self-harm. This took me by surprise because despite having known most of my interlocutors for years and counting some of them among my closest friends, I had not known about the amount of anguish many of them had felt, especially when they were younger and struggling to come to terms with their sexuality. Similar to Lee, they felt isolated with their fears because they had nobody to turn to and ask for advice as they navigated this new aspect of their identity. Bisaam, a Malay man in his late thirties, remembered feeling "kind of lost and depressed. My friends kept talking about women and I said nothing … I was alone and scared and didn't want to live like that." Like Lee, he survived an attempt to end his life. Others could not pinpoint a singular cause for their desire to hurt themselves. Rather, they were overwhelmed by a variety of things happening in their lives. Our conversations revealed that their struggles to adjust to living a life at the intersection of multiple, spoiled identities (Goffman 1963)—for instance, gay and fat—prompted them to resort to such extreme coping strategies. Generally, my interlocutors asserted that it has been several years since they have felt the need to harm themselves.

Research has shown that LGBTQ populations are at an elevated risk of mental disorder, suicidal behavior, and deliberate self-harm (Haas et al. 2010; King et al. 2008). Because they are marginalized by society and subject to prejudice, social and familial exclusion, and homophobic violence, queer people tend to internalize feelings of shame about their sexual or gender identity.

As I have demonstrated in previous chapters, my interlocutors identifying as Bears also feel excluded from the Malaysian gaystream and other queer subcultures because their bodies fail to meet the desired norms. Negative feelings about their physical appearance are common among them, and often add another layer of anxiety to the emotional struggles that exist for most gay men. For Lee, his HIV status further complicated and amplified these feelings. Despite his failed suicide attempt, he believed that the virus would soon cost him his life, and thus began to neglect himself. To distract himself, he started spending his nights dancing in clubs and numbed his fears by getting drunk and trying different kinds of drugs. He no longer paid attention to his diet and stopped playing badminton with his friends from university, which had been a favorite hobby of his. Nevertheless, he managed to finish his last class and graduated in Spring of 1997. Soon after, he returned to Malaysia.

By the time he got back, his body started to show signs of the stress and neglect he put it through. He had lost weight and his skin looked dry and pallid: “I wasn’t careful, but I also had bad side effects from the second set of [medication] they gave me. My liver was painful, and I lost weight until I was only 45 [kg]. My bum, my whole body, had not more meat at all.” After spending several months slowly collecting an even larger amount of sleeping pills than he had had in England, Lee tried to end his life once more. He would have succeeded if not for his mother, who paid him a surprise visit and got him admitted to a hospital. Faced with her shock and grief, he reassessed his life and began to gradually invest in a future for himself. He stopped most of his self-destructive behaviors, started getting regular medical checks, found a way to afford medication to help keep the virus in check, and began working at the company he is with to this day. Lee stated that he now felt good about himself and his life.

However, he continued to struggle with his body image. HIV and the effects of its medical treatment had not only shaped Lee's physical appearance but also his relationship to it: "I was so skinny, and one medication made my breast tissue grow bigger. It's like a woman's breast. I looked kind of strange and ugly … Now, I try not to lose weight because I've been there. People kept asking if I was sick and there were lots of rumors. So, I eat a lot because I'd rather look fat." Lee preferred his body bulky because he associated the skinny version of himself with the virus and did not want to be reminded of that. He also did not want others probing him about potentially being HIV positive though he has been open about his status with close friends and sexual partners. Lee's concerns were connected to an assumption that used to be common in gay culture: during a period starting with the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, weight loss and a thin appearance signified a possible infection with HIV among gay men (Fox 2007, Gough & Flanders 2009). Linking the two is no longer as prevalent as it was in the '80s and '90s, but it was still a concern I occasionally came across among my interlocutors. Over time, Lee managed to gain enough weight for his body to become "round and flabby, and it's good. Nobody thinks I'm sick anymore. At least not in *that* way." He carried his fat like a safety blanket, feeling relieved when others no longer worried about him being ill.

However, having a large body came with its own form of social backlash that tapped into a different kind of health discourse. As I have detailed in Chapter 1, fatness is stigmatized in both mainstream and gaystream cultures and has been constructed as a health crisis and social problem. Such discourses have contributed to the development of hierarchies in gay communities that are based on sexual desire and idealize slim and muscular bodies (Davies 2021; Moskovitz et al. 2013). Men like Lee who fail to meet those expectations were considered sexually undesirable and are, thus, marginalized within gaystream culture. In their everyday lives, men

who were both fat and gay were subject to such negative messaging about their bodies, which reminded them that they are unwanted, are making "bad choices" (Saguy 2013), and are, therefore, deserving of the stigma they receive.

As is the case with most of my Bear interlocutors, Lee dealt with his "spoiled identity" (Goffman 1963) by internalizing the negative feedback to which he had been exposed to over his life. He admitted to experiencing conflicting emotions regarding his body: "My chubby belly looks better with my breasts. Bigger breasts are more normal on fat men … I look normal for a fat guy but that's not normal for anyone else. It's still abnormal and I don't like it. Some days, I don't feel confident in my body. I don't enjoy people seeing me or people touching me." Lee's words suggest that although his increased body size provided him with a sense of comfort and relief from some of the turmoil accompanying his HIV diagnosis, it did not stop him from feeling deviant and unattractive. The shame he used to feel when people looked at his scrawny body with suspicion and concern was replaced by feelings of inadequacy and guilt as he began to face derogatory commentary about being too large and, thus, fundamentally unhealthy and undesirable.

In the early 2000s, Lee discovered the Malaysian Bear community, where he was able to build a network of friends and lovers who appreciated his body type. As it did for other interlocutors of mine who identify as Bears, the community provided him with a safe space in which a range of aesthetic markers like hairiness and fatness were celebrated and eroticized. By spending time with his newfound brotherhood of Bears and Chasers, Lee learned to become more accepting of, and comfortable in, his body. He began to identify as a Bear and put a lot of effort into cultivating an appearance that allowed others to recognize his Bearness. While participating in the Malaysian Bear community enabled him to become more confident in, and

content with, himself, it did not protect him from marginalizing experiences in his everyday life. Like Santoro (2009), who understood that "[his] desire to [have] one of *those* bodies was never going to happen" (121, emphasis in original) even after transforming it and becoming a slimmed-down Bear, Lee realized that his body too would never fit the norm. He recognized that his was "a knowing body continually made aware of its participation in [his] culture's drive toward mythic body image and of the necessity of unending reflexivity required to attain or resist such form" (Santoro 2009, 120-21). Lee chose to work towards a lasting acceptance of his body, and was usually content: "For myself, I'm comfortable with my body. Just sometimes, it's hard."

How Conflicting Discourses Inform the Monitoring of Body Practices

Lee got up from the couch to fix us both another cup of tea. While he waited for the water to boil, he opened my fridge looking for the little bags of cut fruit he had picked up on his way to my condo from one of the roadside stalls close to his home in Bangsar. He handed me a large slice of papaya, which he knew I liked, and chose several chunks of *ciku* for himself. Once the tea was ready, he plopped back down next to me and looked at me expectantly, happy to continue our conversation. "You said you're usually happy with your body, but when are you not? What happens in those moments when it's difficult?," I asked him. Lee nodded and paused for a moment before responding: "Sometimes, people say something when I go out, but I'm used to it, you know. But it's difficult with Edward. Yeah, he's pushy sometimes, and that's hard."

As Lee talked about various interactions with his boyfriend that made him feel self-conscious about his appearance, two main areas of conflict emerged: Lee's eating habits and his exercise routine. Since the beginning of their relationship, sharing meals and going to the gym

together were important joint activities for the couple. Initially, Lee took great pleasure in both and considered them an excellent way to bond with Edward: “While we were dating, it was actually fun. Going to the gym was one of the best ways to spend time together, just like dining together. We can talk and be silly and have fun. Yeah, dining and the gym were such good ways to share our time.” Yet, the lightheartedness characterizing these activities in the early days of their relationship gradually gave way to a tense earnestness. This change marked a shift in their meaning for the two men—while working out and eating together used to be about spending quality time, for Edward, food and exercise became more and more about maintaining a health-conscious lifestyle as a couple.

Accordingly, Edward had been paying close attention to their eating habits and exercise routines, urging Lee to adopt practices he saw as essential in the pursuit of a healthy, balanced life. For Lee, however, the attention Edward paid to his body and behaviors could feel oppressive and bring up feelings of bodily insecurity that were tied to his fat and HIV positive subjectivity. Lee had been dealing with such feelings for decades and, combined with well-intended pressures that Edward put on his boyfriend, they contributed towards a dynamic that negatively impacts their relationship. I argue that both Edwards attempts to regulate his boyfriend’s eating practices and workout habits and Lee’s emotional response to Edward’s actions are informed by larger discourses around fat embodiment and health.

Prior to meeting Edward, Lee had never had a long-term relationship. He had spent several years “dating and hooking up with guys but it didn’t go anywhere.” In the fall of 2011, he met Edward on GROWLr, a networking and dating app for Bears, and the two of them had an instant connection and quickly grew a romantic bond. Lee remembered feeling flattered by the attention Edward paid to him—Edward who, according to Lee, was “tall, hot, fit, you know. The

kind of man almost anyone would do." With regards to his appearance, he especially liked Edward's broad shoulders and sinewy arms that were strong enough to hold up Lee's body and had the ability to make him feel light, almost delicate. Edward, in turn, stated that he was physically attracted to Lee's "tall and soft body. He is masculine, like, confident in that he's not afraid to show his emotions. He owns his feelings if you know what I mean." He asserted that Lee's hugs never failed to bring him comfort and make him feel safe to relax and "be [him]self." In many ways, the men complemented each other and were able to soothe one another's insecurities, which helped them to develop a lasting relationship.

When they met, Edward's daily routine included going to the gym before heading to the office, and Lee was happy to join him because "it was one more hour we got to spend together, and it was fun." He himself had been working out for several years, but mainly as a pastime "to get out of the house and look at other people and to talk to other people." Unlike Edward, he had never been committed to training hard and building up stamina and muscle mass. He had always been more invested in the social aspects of going to the gym such as making friends and participating in a community. With Edward, however, working out turned into a physical challenge that Lee became less enthusiastic about as the months passed.

Once he had moved into his boyfriend's condominium, Lee decided to stop going along with Edward: "I became lazy, and he pushed me too hard sometimes … [He would say] that I was wasting my time. All the sports that I had done the previous years were a waste of time because I wasn't pushing hard … If I followed his rules, then it was called cardio. Otherwise, it was just play play." In other words, in their joint gym sessions, Edward asserted his understanding of what an effective daily workout was and rejected any suggestions to alter the routine to incorporate Lee's preferences. Although Lee admitted that "I need somebody to push

me sometimes," he felt that Edward's behavior towards him was uncompromising and dismissive. To avoid feeling this way, Lee stopped regularly going to the gym with his partner and only joined him, as he said, "once in a blue moon." I asked if he ever returned to his old routine that combined exercising and socializing with acquaintances at the gym. "Rarely," Lee explained. "I want to see Edward after work and it's weird to go there but not together."

Edward had been unhappy with Lee's refusal to work out with him. Towards the end of my fieldwork, he told me that he felt that his boyfriend's actions were "kind of selfish because it's not just about him but about both of us." He stated that his insistence to exercise together was not about Lee "suddenly becoming slim. Yeah, he can gain more muscles, but he also looks great when he is a little chubby. You know that I find him hot, right?" Rather, it was about cultivating habits that allowed them both to stay healthy. In our chat, he also brought up Lee's HIV-positive status. Edward, who is HIV-negative, believed that Lee's condition made it even more important to "take care of his body and watch his weight a little so that he's strong and doesn't get sick or anything." Ultimately, for Edward, his insistence to train his boyfriend was about the two of them being able to create a long-lasting, healthy, and happy future together.

Lee was aware of Edward's thoughts on the matter. Back in my living room, and just as he was about to finish a second portion of *ciku,* Lee summarized a conversation Edward and he had had several times over the years: "I know what he thinks. For [Edward, going to the gym] is a way to keep our relationship together, because he's looking at it as a long-term thing. It means we can spend more time together and live longer, so we must keep in good health. So, he was saying that, okay, we must work out together, do some sports, eat healthy, improve our bodies, so we can stay together longer." He paused for a moment before wondering aloud if his HIV status increased Edward's concerns about his physical wellbeing. After another thoughtful pause

he sighed: “It’s because he loves me, you know but he shouldn’t do *that*”—*that* referring to the ways in which Edward had been trying to discipline some of Lee’s bodily practices. Lee’s words indicate that, rationally, he could appreciate that Edward asking to train together and urging him to push himself during their sessions are forms of care. Nevertheless, Lee admitted that he had been unable to let go of the emotional discomfort he feels every time Edward presses him to come along to the gym.

I argue that both Edward’s motivations and Lee’s response are informed by dominant as well as subversive discourses around fatness. Lee was feeling dismissed and disparaged by Edward’s behavior towards him, because calling the exercise routine he had followed for years “a waste of time” suggested that Edward believed Lee was unable to properly take care of his own body. This caused Lee to feel ashamed and inferior—two emotions he was familiar with because of how the world around him tended to respond to his large body. As I have shown previously, social discourses frame fatness as personal failing and a consequence of moral weakness and bodily neglect (see Lupton 2014; Monaghan 2007). They portray fat persons as inactive, defiant, and unable to properly manage their bodies. Because of such discourses, fat people are commonly subjected to humiliation, shaming practices, and uninvited paternalistic interventions that are meant to persuade them to take responsibility for their bodies and change their habits in the interest of losing weight (ibid).

Lee had spent years working to create a safe social network for himself—for example, by joining the Malaysian Bear community and fostering relationships with body-positive people—that gave him a break from the negative attention his appearance often attracted. People in these spaces subverted dominant constructions of fatness by reframing fat bodies as valuable, capable, and aesthetically as well as erotically pleasing. By engaging with these people, Lee learned to

accept his body, and for the most part, he became a body-confident and happy person. However, as was the case with most of my fat interlocutors, body size remained a site of anxiety for Lee even if his self-understanding was no longer dominated by a sense of bodily inadequacy. Edward participated in the same social circles as Lee and generally showed him that he loved, respected, and was physically attracted to him. However, Edward's repeated criticism of his exercise practices undermined this message and put into question whether he truly accepted and desired his boyfriend's body. They reminded Lee of his perceived physical failings and triggered feelings of shame and worthlessness in him that he usually only experienced within mainstream and gaystream cultures.

Edward insisted that his attempts to reform Lee's workout habits to better his body and physical wellbeing were demonstrations of love and concern for his boyfriend's wellbeing. All my fat interlocutors had people around them use the same sentiment to justify their interference in their everyday lives. This sentiment is also rooted in hegemonic social discourses that pathologize fat bodies. In addition to constructing fatness as a "moral burden" (Jutel 2005), medically ratified views have contributed to the creation of an aesthetic of health that relies on body weight and size as indicators of health (ibid). This weight-centered health paradigm, which is prevalent in Malaysia and throughout the world, perpetuates the idea that fatness equals poor health, and that losing weight improves a person's physical health consistently (Hunger, Smith, & Tomiyama 2020). Despite evidence to the contrary, the general belief is that dietary improvements and regular exercise allow people to achieve the idealized, thin body, thus conflating fitness and health with thinness (see Harris et al. 2018; Powell & Fitzpatrick 2015; Ward, Beausoleil, & Heath 2017).

Because fatness is linked with poor health—which is seen as objectively dangerous and undesirable—and believed to be under the voluntary control of the individual, the governing and shaming of fat people is regarded as necessary and socially acceptable (Eaton 2016; Greenhalgh 2015). At every level from the individual to the state, interventions that are intended to manage and remake fat people into slim, fit, and healthy persons are encouraged. They are framed as acts of care because highlighting an individual's body size is seen as way to help them realize that their fatness is dangerous for them and regulating a person's bodily habits means making up for that person's inability to properly do so themselves. Thus, rather than being recognized as oppressive acts, unsolicited commentary and the regulation of fat bodies are objectively understood as acts of kindness and medical necessities[17]. Edward's words and actions seem to be motivated by precisely that logic. He claimed that his behavior was driven by his love for Lee and that he was looking out for his boyfriend's wellbeing whenever he remarked on Lee's exercising habits. He asserted that he feared for Lee's health and saw his attempts to manage his boyfriend's bodily practices as a loving investment into the long-term future of their relationship.

I suggest that Lee's HIV-positive status strengthened Edward's conviction that helping his boyfriend improve his health is the right thing to do. By carrying the virus, Lee's health was

[17] While I am not able to explore this in detail within the frame of this dissertation and am merely hinting at it in this chapter, I want to highlight that there are important parallels between the construction of fatness and disability. Several scholars have noted that both fat people and disabled people are stigmatized, discriminated against, tend to be simultaneously invisible and hyper visible, and are considered in need of medical intervention and other normalizing procedures (Cooper 1997, Garland-Thomson 2005, Herndon 2002). Although there are important differences between fat and disabled groups, scholars of fat studies have argued that an intellectual—and in some cases even practical—alliance with disabilities studies and disabilities justice allows for the target of scholarly investigations " to shift away from a seeking of inclusion or accommodation, to a dismantling of the social, cultural, and political-economic conditions and structures that create inequality and oppression in the first place" (Meleo-Erwin 2014, 109). Doing so emphasizes that concepts such as health, illness, fat, slim, normal, and abnormal are socially constructed and ideological in nature, and helps to destabilize the notion of a single biomedical truth.

factually compromised, and from a medical perspective, he was expected to pursue a health-conscious lifestyle to keep the virus at bay. In addition to antiretroviral treatment, dietary therapy and physical activity are seen as paramount in the treatment of HIV/AIDS because exercising regularly and maintaining optimal nutrition have been shown to improve an individual's immune function (Somarriba et al. 2010; World Health Organization 2016). Knowing that a balanced diet and daily physical activity were recommended as part of the medical management of the virus, Edward felt further justified in his efforts to regulate Lee's habits. For him, the combined health risks associated with inhabiting a fat body and being HIV positive legitimized his interventions as acts of concern and care.

For Lee, however, it was difficult to reconcile Edward's rationale for his actions with the feelings these actions prompted in him. While he recognized that Edward believed that he was approaching him from a place of love, his boyfriend's focus on his physical wellbeing and bodily appearance were hard to bear. On the one hand, being part of the Bear community taught Lee that his fat body is not fundamentally flawed but strong and desirable—Edward's continually shown attraction to him validated those beliefs. On the other hand, his boyfriend's regular attempts to change Lee's workout routine made him doubt Edward's acceptance of his physical appearance. Edward's actions fit with the overall fatphobic societal approach to large bodies, implying that Lee cannot take care his own body and might be exacerbating already-existing health issues or causing new ones. Although Lee felt that he had been managing his HIV related health well and generally led a balanced life, Edward's repeated comments chipped away at his confidence. By tapping into the stigma attached to both fatness and living with HIV, Edward's commentary induced feelings of guilt and shame about what Lee's body denotes. Such

disheartening connotations made it difficult for Lee to perceive Edward's behavior as acts of love.

Having said that, I want to provide a caveat regarding Lee's feelings about his HIV status. It is important to note that Lee's discomfort was likely not entirely prompted by Edward's actions but might partially derive from his own fears of passing the virus to his partner. Lee occasionally voiced concerns about putting his boyfriend in danger, especially in the years before pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP)—a medicine that drastically reduces the risk of getting HIV during sex—became available to Edward. The couple told me that they had always taken precautions when having sex but there was, of course, always a small amount of risk left. It is possible that the knowledge that there was always a chance of him exposing his partner to a potentially lethal disease heightened Lee's feelings of remorse whenever Edward reminded him of his already damaged health. In other words, Lee's own fears likely fed into his perception of, and emotional response to, his boyfriend's comments.

I want to emphasize that the contradictory emotions regarding fat, or otherwise compromised, bodies that Lee and Edward were dealing with were neither unique to their relationship nor were they mutually exclusive. I observed similar dynamics among many of the couples I worked with. Nearly all my interlocutors participated in the Malaysian Bear community because they wanted to be surrounded by men who shared their values and normalized and eroticized large bodies. They embraced subversive discourses around fatness that validate fat subjectivities as desirable. Yet, regardless of whether they identified as Bears or Chasers, they had also internalized dominant understandings of fatness that permeate Malaysian mainstream culture and inform how they relate to fat embodiment. In other words, Bears like Lee and Chasers like Edward were not pitted against each other as opposing parties representing

subversive and hegemonic discourses respectively. Rather, their realities were fragmented, and they all drew on both types of discourses as they engaged with fatness in their everyday lives.

Accordingly, my interlocutors moved back and forth between contradictory thoughts such as "fatness is sexy because large, soft bodies are arousing," "fatness is difficult to handle because the world around us finds fat bodies disgusting," "fatness worries me because it puts fat persons at risk of different health concerns," and "fatness feels safe because it means this person is eating well and is nurturing their HIV positive body." Therefore, Edward could be attracted to Lee's fat body and, simultaneously, wonder about him not living a health-conscious lifestyle. Similarly, Lee could prefer inhabiting a large body because it made him feel confident and safe, while also worrying about other's ostracizing or disparaging him. Importantly, as they grappled with competing ideas about fat bodies, my interlocutors drew on different discourses at different points, which meant that their approaches to fat embodiment did not always align. Because this continued to be a sensitive and contentious issue for many of them, this could lead to conflict in their romantic relationships.

The Disciplining of Body Practices and its Impact on Romantic Relationships

For Edward and Lee, their exercise routines were one major point of contention. Another were their differing eating habits. In public health discourses, nutrition and physical activities go hand in hand when it comes to living a healthy life, so not surprisingly, Edward had been trying to transform Lee's diet alongside his workout routine. According to Lee, "Edward uses my love for food against me. He says, okay, if you come to the gym, you can eat whatever you want because you're burning body fat. If I don't go … he will say, oh, you're getting fat and it's so

unhealthy, [so that] I won't eat how I want." This shows that Edward's efforts to, as he said, "improve what [Lee] eats … so he's going to be healthy" were guided by the same weight-centered logic he was applying to justify his endeavor to better his boyfriend's workout habits. He saw body size, health, and fitness as linked, and believed that a combination of the right diet and an appropriate exercise routine would directly lead to a healthy body and fit appearance.

For Lee, "the food stuff is more difficult [to deal with] than the gym stuff." I contend that this is because giving up on sharing meals as a couple to avoid Edward's criticism was harder to do and had more far-reaching consequences for the relationship than not working out at the gym together. As I have shown in Chapter 3, food and commensality played a central role in the romantic lives of my interlocutors. Beyond meeting their basic need for nutrition, sharing food fostered relationships and helped to grow and maintain the romantic bond between partners. Like the other couples I worked with in Malaysia, Lee and Edward prepared many of their meals together and regularly went out to grab breakfast or dinner at one of the hawker stalls or restaurants in the city. Edward described their habit of sharing meals as a way to spend "quality time. Especially when we go to the wet market and then cook together. [18] Then we just eat, chat, relax. Yeah, I love it."

Nonetheless, Edward's unwelcome efforts to regulate Lee's food and eating practices created conflict between the two and undermined the benefits of commensality for the couple. In addition to causing feelings of frustration, sadness, and self-doubt in both men, Edward's actions

[18] Wet markets are large collections of open-air stalls that typical
ly sell perishable items such a fish, meat, and produce. Some of them offer live animals and fish that tend to be slaughtered on-site. Many of the bigger wet markets in Kuala Lumpur and the state of Selangor also sell non-perishable goods such as rice or household products that are typically found at dry markets. It is also not uncommon to find food vendors sprinkled into the mix and many shoppers will pick up pastries, snacks, or entire meals there.

affected their perception of the men's love for one another and their commitment to the relationship. Their discord over Edward's attempts to discipline Lee's body practices led to the creation of a destructive dynamic that affected their everyday lives as romantic partners. I want to emphasize that while many of the couples I worked with developed corrosive relationship patterns around this issue, these patterns did not always manifest in the same way. Yet for all of them, the dynamic impacted couples' abilitt to stay intimately connected.

As the afternoon slowly turned into evening, Lee and I took a break from our conversation. We were on our third cup of tea and had finished five portions of fruit between the two of us. When I asked him if he needed anything else, Lee shook his head. He took off his glasses, sat them on the table, and with a satisfied sigh, lay down on the couch and put his head in my lap. For a long moment, we stayed like this, with Lee snuggled into the sofa glancing out the large glass doors leading onto a balcony, and me sitting there and slowly running my fingers through his hair. Eventually, his gaze shifted to me as he was ready to pick up the thread of our discussion: "Remember our trip to Penang a couple of months ago? The night we went to the *pasar malam* (night market)?" "Yeah," I responded.

The trip Lee was referring to took place in late September, just after my return to Malaysia. Lee, Edward, and I drove up to the island of Penang to meet with two friends of ours—Jia Hui, a Chinese Malaysian man, and his Malay partner, Raahim—who have been living together in Penang's capital city, George Town, since 2014. Despite knowing that all of us had been to the island before, Jia Hui and Raahim were excited to act as our tour guides by showing us around the city and introducing us to their favorite foods. Penang is famous throughout Malaysia for its street food, and we spent several days trying everything from *char kuey teow*, a noodle dish with prawns, cockles, and Chinese sausage, to *assam laksa*, a pungent, sweet and

sour fish noodle soup, to *cendol*, a dessert made of shaved ice, coconut cream, red beans, and jelly noodles. The five of us would usually get a selection of dishes from different food stalls and share them ensuring that all of us were able to taste everything. On our last evening, before heading back to the hotel, we stopped at a night market in the center of George Town for a late-night supper. Afterwards, we said our goodbyes to Raahim and Jia Hui as we planned on leaving early the next morning and went to our respective rooms.

Fig. 4.1: One of the many food carts on the island of Penang from which my interlocutors and I loved to pick up items to share. Many of the vendors would only set out to sell food at night catering to the large number of locals and tourists who craved a late-night supper. Source: Author.

Lee recounted those last hours of our trip, while I continued playing with his hair: "When we were alone in our hotel room, [Edward] tried not to make lots of comments about the food, but then he said, I told you not to eat so many things, but you just grab everything you want to eat, and then you wonder why you gain weight or feel sick." He looked up at me. "But I don't agree with that, it wasn't too much."

I nodded: “It’s not true. We shared all the food, and you didn’t even touch the *laksa* and the *mee rebus*. I think you ate less than all of us. I noticed that you didn’t even touch some of the other food.”

Lee shrugged: “I know … Because I knew he was going to say something. So, I just stopped [eating].”

Lee emphasized that he and Edward had similar exchanges on a regular basis. On several occasions, I had witnessed Edward giving Lee pointed looks or whispering intently into his ear when we shared a meal among friends. Edward’s tone combined with his gestures indicated that he was commenting on Lee’s food intake. Sometimes, Lee would simply ignore his boyfriend, and other times, he would quietly respond and put down his utensils to signal that he was done eating. I observed such behavior among other interlocutors as well. Many of them were less subtle than Edward and openly chastised their boyfriends for eating “too much” or choosing the “wrong food.” Importantly, while these interventions were almost always aimed at men who were fat, the partner leveling the criticism was not necessarily slim himself. This conforms with research showing that it is common for fat individuals—especially fat men—to internalize fatphobic concerns not only by developing insecurities about their bodies but also by projecting these worries onto others (see Aruguete, Yates, & Edman 2006; Fahs 2018). Consequently, many fat persons are just as likely to express their dislike for fat bodies and propose ways to either stop being, or avoid becoming, fat as their slim counterparts.

I looked at Lee’s face and asked: “What is that like for you? I mean, [Edward] is kind of policing how you eat, when you eat, what you eat. How do you feel about that?”

For a moment, Lee frowned: “I’m not really happy with that … I understand that eating too much is not so good. I try not to eat too much, especially in front of him … In front of him, I try to control it because I know that he doesn’t like it. I just don’t want to argue about this again and again … Like, when he keeps mumbling, you shouldn’t eat this, you shouldn’t eat that—the feeling is not good, so I rather stop myself from eating in front of him.”

As he continued talking, a twinkle entered Lee’s eyes: “On my own time, if I want to eat, I’ll eat … When [I’m] with him, I just eat dinner like he wants. You want veggies? You want salad? Okay, I can eat that, it’s fine. Then, tomorrow, I’ll go out on my own and eat what I like. So, that’s how I deal with him. What he can’t see, he doesn’t know, and then it’s fine.” Lee started laughing as he detailed several instances in which Edward almost caught him “breaking the rules,” and I could not help but laugh along with him.

Despite the levity in his tone, Lee’s discomfort with his boyfriend’s behavior was apparent in his words. Edward’s constant attempts to regulate his eating habits made it difficult for Lee to enjoy shared meals with him. To avoid quarrels with his partner, he had been trying to adjust his diet to meet Edward’s expectations when the two of them eat together. However, to satisfy his hunger and cravings, Lee began eating in secret, meaning at times, in locations, and in ways where he could not be seen by his boyfriend. For example, he started to plan more one-on-one lunches or dinners with friends. Many times, only the two of us went out for a meal, and when we were done, Lee would always remind me to “not tell [Edward]. There’s no need.” He also told me that he was hiding “those snacks Edward doesn’t approve of” in their condo, so he would have something to munch on when he was home alone.

Secrecy commonly leads to personal distress and creates discord in relationships (Bedrov & Leary 2021; Uysal et al. 2012; Wismeijer 2011), and Lee’s secretive behavior was no

different. It contributed to the creation of a destructive dynamic between him and Edward that had been causing both of them pain and negatively impacted the romantic bond they share. In Chapter 2, I have shown that love consists of three interrelated components: intimacy, passion, and decision/commitment. All of them are essential in the creation and continuation of long-term romantic relationships, and at least one partner tends to feel unhappy and disconnected, if any of the components are weakened or missing (see Sternberg 1986). The recurring conflict between Lee and Edward changed how they experienced intimacy and passion in their relationship, which, at times, made them question whether a continued commitment to each other made sense.

For one, their dynamic created emotional distance between the two. Although Lee's strategy to eat in secret brought him culinary pleasure and helped him avoid conflict with Edward, he admitted that doing so also made him feel ashamed. He felt guilty because he deliberately excluded his boyfriend from certain outings because he wanted to be free to eat whatever he craved: "I feel bad that I plan [food outings] without him because I like spending time with him. It's bad because it's on purpose." Additionally, Lee confessed to feeling self-conscious about his body, because at times, he wondered if Edward was right when he suggested that some of his eating habits were unhealthy: "When I go out with you, I like to try different [foods] and I eat a lot. Sometimes, I think it's disgusting how much I can eat … I know I shouldn't be[come] fatter than now."

Lee asserted that these thoughts did deter him from eating in secret, but that feelings of shame and guilt that accompanied these actions strengthened his determination to keep this behavior hidden from Edward. Not being able to share any of this with his boyfriend caused Lee to emotionally retreat from the relationship. He explained that he had been increasingly unwilling to discuss food choices and body image insecurities with Edward because he feared

that his partner would use any sign of bodily dissatisfaction as justification for his endeavor to change Lee's eating habits and workout routines. He worried that this, in turn, would further heighten already existing tensions between them. I suggest that, for Lee, keeping secrets from his partner and emotionally withdrawing from the relationship had thus been useful strategies to protect his heart and to prevent additional discord in their relationship.

Furthermore, both Edward's efforts to discipline his boyfriend's body practices and Lee's own secret eating habits caused some of Lee's long-held body insecurities to rise to the surface, making his sex drive wane. He worried that Edward was encouraging him to lose weight because he no longer found him attractive. He also knew that his "sometimes excessive" food outings potentially added extra fat to his body. These thoughts made Lee feel guilty and ashamed, and fed into his anxieties about being unattractive and inadequate. Slowly, this made him withdraw from sex:

> Because I care about what [Edward] thinks, I can't even take off my shirt sometimes when I've eaten lots of food. I'm afraid that he will look at me and think badly [about me]. Or I will think badly when I see him look. I like touching him or giving him a blowjob, but sometimes I don't feel confident about my body, so I don't enjoy him touching me. I just stop. I should let it go, but I worry too much … To be naked and ugly in front of him is hard, I can't get the fear out of my brain.

Lee was concerned that exposing his fat, naked body would elicit disgust in his boyfriend and prompt Edward to reject him and, eventually, make him want to end their relationship. To avoid this, he gradually stopped sleeping with his partner. Although Lee knew that this increased the emotional disconnect between him and Edward, he could not overcome the thought that Edward truly seeing him would be a greater danger to their relationship.

Over the years, Edward and I had several conversations in which he showed an awareness of the growing distance between him and his boyfriend. Although he could not

pinpoint the precise reason for Lee's emotional reservedness, he had been able to sense that his partner was not always forthcoming about his thoughts and feelings. In part, Edward attributed this to Lee's personality: "He is not very expressive when it comes to his emotions, you know. In many ways, it's who he is." Yet primarily, Edward believed that his boyfriend tended to withdraw from him whenever he was dealing with his own anxieties: "[Lee] is insecure and has his issues and all that. I think he's still at the beginning of a tunnel and he needs to get through that. Then he will be less reserved, less guarded. It's difficult, I know, because I've been through that tunnel." Here, Edward was referring to the years it took him to come to terms with his sexuality and overcome some of his own body image concerns[19]. Based on his own experiences, he was convinced that by working through his issues, Lee would automatically become more open and outgoing.

Edward rightly assumed that many of Lee's insecurities were tied to his body image. However, he was unable to recognize the role he played in reinforcing these insecurities. He believed himself to be a supportive and encouraging partner whenever he pushed Lee to "eat better and work out properly, [so] he'll feel better about himself." He did not see that his attempts to regulate Lee's bodily habits merely served to amplify his boyfriend's negative self-image. For him, his actions were motivated by his desire to help Lee and he was thus frustrated and disappointed when his efforts were met with reluctance or outright refusal. Edward did not

[19] Edward spent much of his youth and early twenties denying his sexuality primarily because he was unable to reconcile it with his Christian faith. It was only after spending several years working in Australia and joining a liberal, pro-LGBTQ church that he learned to accept himself as being gay. During this time, Edward was a slender man who struggled to bulk up and gain muscle mass. He believed that he would appear more masculine and thus more attractive to other men if he put on weight in the form of muscle. He began to work out daily and slowly built up his body. This, and the male attention he started to receive when he finally began experimenting romantically and sexually, helped him to overcome many of the insecurities that he harbored when he was younger. Now that he is in his early fifties, Edward is a self-assured man—the fact that his appearance meets both hetero- and homonormative hegemonic aesthetic ideals certainly helps as it means that he gets compliments and approving glances from people around him.

realize that Lee's emotional withdrawal grew out of that dynamic. Instead, he saw it as an expression of Lee's internal struggles that were unrelated to their relationship. Nevertheless, he felt its impact on the romantic bond between him and Lee: "Yeah, communication is important. I express my needs and feelings and [Lee] has to do that too. Otherwise, we're not really bonding, you know. It doesn't bring us closer together, and what's the point of being together then?" Edward's words show that, for him, Lee's secretive behavior and reluctance to emotionally open up translate into a profound lack of intimacy which puts the relationship at risk.

Lee's waning sex drive amplified this feeling of disconnectedness for Edward. Like many of my interlocutors, he believed that sex is about more than physical pleasure. Rather, it is instrumental in creating and maintaining a romantic relationship: "I love to have sex with the person I love … I need to spend time with him, I need to talk to him, and I need to have sex with him. All of it tells me who he is, how he thinks, and how we are doing as a couple." Because for Edward sex was a way to emotionally bond with his partner, the lack of passion in their relationship affected him strongly. He stated that, in the early years of their relationship when Lee first started to become distant, he pursued him and initiated sexual contact in an effort to maintain a sense of connection with him. Due to his boyfriend's increasing reluctance, however, Edward's desire to sleep with him began to diminish as he started to associate sex with him with feelings of sadness and detachment. He admitted that, unbeknownst to Lee, he has had sexual encounters with different men outside their relationship, "but only for pleasure, not because I want to be with them." I suggest that doing so did not make up for the loss of passion and connection in the couple's relationship. Yet, like it did for other interlocutors of mine, getting his sexual needs met in this way enabled Edward to stay with Lee because it reduced some of the tension that had built up in that area of their relationship.

The disciplining of body practices is pervasive within the community of men I worked with. I want to emphasize that my interlocutors employed a range of different strategies to cope with instances of it in their relationships. The secret eating behavior Lee resorted to is something I have only noticed some of the men do. Avoidance of sex and physical closeness, on the other hand, was common among my interlocutors because physical intimacy requires a high level of bodily comfort and makes the men question how attractive and desirable they are to their partner. It is important to note that the disciplining of bodily habits never directly led to the breakup of a relationship among the couples I worked with. In fact, there tended to be multiple factors that caused my interlocutors to end a relationship. However, the dynamic that ensued when one of them attempted to regulate his partner's body practices heavily impacted the romantic connection between the two. By challenging the couple's romantic bond and causing them to lose feelings of closeness and desire, it contributed to the dissolution of a relationship. While most of my interlocutors had been trying to work through these issues and chose to stay together, a few of them eventually decided to break up with their partners. They stated that they were unable to overcome feelings of desolation and loneliness that had gradually replaced their love for each other.

More than three years had passed since Lee and I shared tea, fruit, and secrets in my Malaysian living room. In January 2022, we were on a video call talking about the impending holiday. Lee and Edward were planning to celebrate Chinese New Year with Lee's mother and they were both looking forward to a cozy dinner at home. The two of them were still together although they had talked about ending the relationship about two years prior to our call, when the emotional distance between them felt too difficult to handle. I asked Lee what made them decide to continue their relationship. He took off his glasses and smiled at me, which made his dimples

peek out from his graying beard: “Love is bittersweet. It grabs your heart, and it’s so painful. But it will bring you all the joy, at the same time … We know it in our guts, you know. Our love evolves. We still had that strong feeling, and we wanted it to stay. We knew that it depends on how we’d handle the relationship.” Lee explained that they had been making a conscious effort to talk more and spend quality time together. In other words, they were actively practicing love. This helped them to revive their bond and was enabling them to continue their relationship. Lee admitted that this did not mean that they have resolved all their problems. They often fell back into old dynamics which caused new tensions to emerge. However, their efforts to be more transparent about their thoughts and feelings helped them to get a better sense of what works and what does not work for them. “So, I suppose,” Lee concluded, “you just have to keep doing what you think is right for both of you, and not think too much about it. Well, you should think about how to [keep our love going], but not too much. That doesn’t help. [It’s about] balance, right?”

Conclusion

Whereas previous chapters in this dissertation focused on the ways in which my Malaysian interlocutors developed and maintained fulfilling romantic relationships, this chapter attended to some of the difficulties that arose for couples and challenged the romantic bond between partners. Romantic relationships come to be through people’s ongoing engagement with each other. Their development is not linear or sequential but experienced as a series of negotiated exchanges between partners, some of which increase feelings of closeness and some of which do the opposite. In this chapter, I examined how the disciplining of body practices among couples caused tensions and created negative dynamics between partners that made them question their love for one another and, thus, weakened their attachment. At the center of this chapter was the

relationship between Lee and Edward, two Chinese Malaysian men who had been struggling with this issue for several years. I focused on how Lee had been experiencing his boyfriend's attempts to monitor his eating and exercising habits, to explore how couples try to mediate the painful consequences of socially induced body insecurity within their relationships. I argued that neither Lee nor Edward—nor any of my other interlocutors—could work outside the logics of competing social discourses that inform how romantic love ought to be practiced and dictate what kind of person should be considered a desirable, responsible, and responsive partner.

By tracing important events in Lee's life that affected how he viewed himself and his body, I demonstrated that he had been dealing with body image concerns for most of his life. It took him many years to come to terms with the fact that he was inhabiting a socially stigmatized fat, gay, HIV-positive body. As was the case with most of my interlocutors, his participation in the Malaysian Bear community was vital in that process. It allowed him to build a network of friends and lovers, whose love, respect, and encouragement enabled him to reframe his self-understanding. He began to identify as a Bear, and practicing this identity helped him to gain confidence and to recognize that he did not need to confine himself to normative ideas about gay, male beauty and desirability that are not absolute. In his relationship with his boyfriend, Edward, he generally felt validated because Edward regularly assured Lee that he was a valued and attractive partner.

Nevertheless, Lee's appearance was also at the heart of a recurring conflict between the men. In this chapter, I have shown that Edward was concerned about his boyfriend's health and had been voicing this concern by encouraging Lee to change his eating habits and adjust his exercising routine. In his commentary, Edward often focused on Lee's body, warning him that any increase in size could have negative consequences for his wellbeing. He claimed that his

actions were a sign of his love for Lee and an effort to secure a healthy long-term future for them. I illustrated that Lee was having a strong emotional response to Edward's interference. He felt that Edward did not believe that he could take care of his own body and worried that his boyfriend no longer found him physically attractive. I argued that Edward's motive for, and manner of, disciplining his boyfriend's bodily habits and Lee's response to Edward's behavior were informed by competing discourses around fatness. I showed that despite their participation in the Malaysian Bear community, which had taught them to reframe their approach to fatness, neither of them had unlearned, or were able to entirely remove themselves from the emotional impact of, hegemonic ideas about the body.

Social and public health discourses conflate body size, health, fitness, and nutrition. They link fatness with poor health—which is seen as both dangerous and undesirable—and portray it as something that is under the control of the individual. Because of that, fatness is framed as a moral weakness, a personal failing, and an indicator of an individual's inability to properly manage their body. From this perspective, actions like those by Edward are not only socially acceptable but viewed as necessary because efforts to intervene in a fat person's body practices are portrayed as caring practices that help that person to take responsibility for their body and health. Edward claimed that his actions were not meant to be a commentary on Lee's body and should, thus, not be taken as a dismissal of his boyfriend's desirability or worth. Yet, I demonstrated that his efforts could not escape the slippage that happens when someone's physical health is being questioned—body size and health are conflated because body weight and shape are always made part of that conversation.

I have shown that Lee could not escape that slippage either. He was also unable to separate Edward's criticism of his eating practices and workout habits from critiques about his

physical appearance. Accordingly, his boyfriend's behavior triggered emotional pain in Lee and brought up old, familiar feelings of self-doubt and shame—precisely the kinds of feelings these dominant discourses are supposed to prompt in people who fail to meet their expectations. In the last section of this chapter, I analyzed how these feelings impacted Lee's behavior and contributed to a negative dynamic in their relationship. I illustrated that his coping strategies included emotionally and physically retreating and keeping secrets from Edward to avoid further conflict and feelings of distress. This, in turn, caused Edward to feel rejected, and the emotional distance both men experienced often lingered long after the moment of conflict had passed. I asserted that such a dynamic was common among the group of men I worked with and has had adverse effects on their romantic relationships. It produced a lack of passion and intimacy between romantic partners and contributed to the deterioration of their relationships.

CONCLUSION

I want to conclude this dissertation by returning to its beginning; that is, to the words Ming Hee shared with me at Irfan's *buka puasa* open house. Telling me about his long-distance relationship with his boyfriend who was living in the U.S., Ming Hee asserted that "love makes you do lots of things just to make it work." Having spent several years observing and analyzing how my Malaysian interlocutors made their romantic relationships work, I could see the validity in Ming Hee's words—most of my interlocutors put a lot of effort into maintaining romantic bonds with their partners; sometimes, they were so intent on making it work that they chose to do things, and agreed to compromises, that caused them pain.

However, in my conceptualization of queer love, I have gone a step further than Ming Hee, whose words suggest that he viewed love as an emotional force that causes people to act in specific ways. In this dissertation, I have not envisioned love as a feeling that simply is, but as a practice that triggers and, thus, encompasses a range of emotions, which are elicited through a person's deliberate, ongoing engagement with another person. In other words, rather than looking at queer love solely as a *form of being*, I conceptualized it as a *form of doing*.

By envisioning queer love as a practice, I have been able to focus on the ways in which love is manifested through actions that are part of the negotiations between romantic partners that constitute their relationships. In this respect, queer love was both felt and actualized when, every morning without fail, Benny took a cup of coffee into the small garden behind his mother's house and called his boyfriend, Jason, to wish him a good day. Another instance of queer love was when whenever Irfan braved Kuala Lumpur's rush hour to pick up his partner, Yi Wei, after an exhausting day at work, and took him out for dinner to one of their favorite restaurants in Yi

Wei's neighborhood. The moments when Edward pulled his boyfriend, Lee, in for a hug and nuzzled his nose into his beard, knowing that this would make Lee smile, were also demonstrations of queer loving. All of these actions are practices of queer love in that they allow both partners to connect and foster feelings of intimacy and passion with one another; they are the gestures that influence a person's decision to stay committed to their relationship.

Queer love can be made and unmade anywhere, though the context within which it comes to exist has an impact on what forms it can take. Malaysia is a multiethnic, multicultural, and multireligious country, where the state maintains an uneasy balance between the privileged Muslim Malay population and other ethnic and religious minorities. Malaysia is also a deeply conservative place with regards to sexuality, meaning that sexual minorities are severely disenfranchised by state apparatuses, homosexual acts are criminalized, and same-sex marriages are not legal. In this dissertation, I have shown that queer loving comes to mean different things to different people, as they try to build relationships within the reality of Malaysia. What they are looking for in a relationship, and how they want—and can—live that relationship is shaped by intersectional factors such as an individual's socioeconomic background, ethnic roots, religious beliefs, family ties, and educational and professional opportunities. For instance, some of my interlocutors prioritized emotional intimacy as the foundation for romantic love, whereas others believed that physical intimacy is more important when it comes to strengthening the bond with their partners. Furthermore, for some of the men, it was important to live with their boyfriend and create a home together, while others preferred staying in separate homes or with their respective parents. I want to emphasize that such variety in terms of relationship styles and love practices does not only exist among queer community but also among heterosexual couples in

Malaysia. Although the latter have the option—and expectation—to get married, there are straight men and women who pursue relationship forms that fall outside this norm.

While the homonegative environment of Malaysia limits how gay couples can safely express queer love in the public sphere, it does not prevent queer relationships from existing, and even flourishing, in private spheres and the queer spaces the men create for themselves. Through their ability to forge and maintain fulfilling long-term relationships, my interlocutors demonstrated that queer love is not subordinate to social norms and institutions. Rather, it is produced alongside, and through its interplay with, other social constructs—ethnicity, religion, class—that constituted the lifeworlds of the men I worked with. Accordingly, although gay relationships are not sanctioned by the Malaysian state—and gay couples have none of the legal protections that heterosexual, married couples have—they exist, and my interlocutors found ways to ensure that that their partners were financially, emotionally, and socially secure. For example, some gay couples started a business together to be able to share assets and ensure each other's financial futures.

The specific practices that constitute queer loving are informed by different ideas of romantic love that suffuse my interlocutors' lives and guide their emotional experiences, values, and behaviors. Both ideas and practices of love are socially constructed and must, therefore, be learned by people. As I have shown in this dissertation, my interlocutors continued to learn about love through their participation in different social spheres, such as their families, queer communities they were part of, religious and educational institutions, and mass media. These spheres often advance different sets of norms and discourses that determine how love ought to be understood, practiced, negotiated, or restricted. Because gay men's approach to love is shaped by

multiple discourses, practices of queer love are varied, shift over time, and simultaneously reproduce, subvert, and disregard different kinds of social norms.

Queer love does not only have the capacity to reproduce and subvert dominant romantic norms and, thus, affects how individuals engage with social institutions. It is also essential for the development of the queer self. By learning about love, and through practicing it in their relationships with other men, my interlocutors came to be as gay lovers and queer romantic partners. As two people give and receive love through conversations, activities, and intimate gestures, they are reaffirmed in their sense of self. For instance, when they experienced love from their boyfriends, my interlocutors identifying as Bears tended to be reassured of their desirability and worth as romantic partners and Bears. Similarly, moments of conflict that make a man feel dismissed or devalued by their partner, can cause him to doubt the accuracy of his self-understanding as an attractive, gay man. In that sense romantic relationships are important reference points for a person's self-understanding, and queer love is the practice through with which both relationships and self-identities come to exist and get to evolve.

The capacity of queer romantic practices to both reaffirm and destabilize hegemonic conceptions of love and understandings of the self is what makes queer love queer. It illustrates that queer love is neither entirely inside nor outside the social canon of romantic conduct. Indeed, the variety and fluidity of romantic relationship styles and practices of queer love that existed among my interlocutors demonstrates that the conventional construction of love as a social institution that promotes only customary forms of private life is limited and incomplete. In saying this, I come to a similar conclusion as Halperin did—whom I quoted in the Introduction of this dissertation—when he argued that queer love "is not insurgent but simply inapposite: what's queer about love is its social inaptitude, its sheer irrelevance to social forms" (2019, 419).

Like him, I think that recognizing the queerness of love makes it possible to acknowledge and foreground forms and features of love—and, I would add, of the person—that cannot be standardized or institutionalized. What is more, I believe that emphasizing queer love as a relational practice allows us to see how the production of affective relations is fundamental to creation of a person's lifeworld and, thus, the self. This foregrounds queer *loving* as a process that is always situational and never finished even if it feels complete.

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