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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
RIVERSIDE

Extending Belonging:  
Martin Wong's Sociality in Practice

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Art History

by

Beck Luo

September 2023

Thesis Committee:

Dr. Jason Weems, Chairperson

Dr. Susan Laxton

Dr. Fatima Quraishi



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2023

The Thesis of Beck Luo is approved:

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Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

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Live like others deserve to live.

## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Extending Belonging:  
Martin Wong's Sociality in Practice

by

Beck Luo

Master of Arts, Graduate Program in Art History  
University of California, Riverside, September 2023  
Dr. Jason Weems, Chairperson

The scholarship on Martin Wong is marked by ideals of belonging and community, with his mother and friends being the major proponents in the posthumous dissemination of his art. The literature splinters the artist into distinct periods: 70s counterculture, 80s New York, 90s Chinatowns, etc. Yet, Wong's identity and practice evade these neat and tidy classifications, often marked by ambiguity and a self-fashioning to navigate a conditional inclusion into communities. Visible tensions between the self and community within the artist's artworks—a secret Chinatown painting and a lack of depicted eroticism after a diagnosis with AIDS—reveal that the artist's practice extended his social belonging. By reconciling the scholarship with the discursivity of images, I understand the contradictory and paradoxical nature of Wong's images as negotiating identities to navigate communities: immediate family, neighbors, friends, and the art market. This navigation illuminates how this insistence on belonging as a process of working-towards can perpetuate communion amidst hostile sociohistorical contexts.

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## Introduction

Born on July 11, 1946, in Portland, Martin Victor Wong grew up in San Francisco's Chinatown. Wong's father, Anthony Victor Wong, passed away in 1950 when Wong was still a young child.<sup>1</sup> Having turned into a single mother, Florence Wong-Fie placed Wong in foster care for three to four years to find work.<sup>2</sup> Wong-Fie married Benjamin Wong-Fie a few years later, who became "Pop" to a nine-year-old Wong and maintained a close relationship with his son until his death in 1999.<sup>3</sup>

Wong's mother encouraged him to delve into his interests in art in his childhood. Having taken classes in a youth art program at the M. H. de Young Memorial Museum, the then-forming artist drew a series of self-portraits.<sup>4</sup> This attention to his likeness would manifest again throughout his career as a foundation for understanding his practice and himself. As a teenager, Wong took drawing classes from Dorr Bothwell, a Bay Area Surrealist artist, at Mendocino Art Center.<sup>5</sup> Having learned the Kimon Nicolaïdes' contour drawing method from Bothwell's courses formed the stylistic gestural lines seen throughout his later works.<sup>6</sup> The young artist would go on to graduate high school, entering Humboldt State University and majoring in fine arts with a concentration on ceramics and printmaking.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Dean Johnson, "Narrative Chronology," Martin Wong Catalogue Raisonné, July 21, 2022, <https://exhibits.stanford.edu/martin-wong/about/narrative-chronology-mark-dean-johnson>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> See Margo Machida, "Martin Wong: Interview with Margo Machida," Martin Wong Catalogue Raisonné , July 18, 2022, <https://exhibits.stanford.edu/martin-wong/about/1989-martin-wong-interview-with-margo-machida>.

<sup>6</sup> The blind contour method consists of rendering the contours of an object without looking at the sketch. For more information on the contour drawing method, please refer to Kimon Nicolaïdes' *The Natural Way to Draw; A Working Plan for Art Study*.

In contrast to his childhood years, this pursuit of the arts in higher education caused tensions between the artist and his parents, who wanted Wong to pursue architecture instead to provide economic stability while allowing the artist to continue drawing.<sup>7</sup> He eventually relented, transferring to the University of California, Berkeley in 1966 for architecture; despite the attempt to follow his family's wishes, Wong dropped out after two years. After a couple of years of producing art and experiencing San Francisco's counterculture, Wong returned to Humboldt State for his bachelor's degree and graduated in 1970.<sup>8</sup> He began a graduate program at Mills College in Oakland; these abstract sculptures would form his first solo exhibition in Nova 1 Gallery, leading to his inclusion into the Association of San Francisco Potters exhibition.

In 1971, Wong traveled to Afghanistan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Turkey; his interest in and learning about tiled mosques and mosaics would lead to the artist's incorporation of glitter into a ceramic work. The Association of San Francisco Potters rejected the work due to its mixed-media nature, causing the artist to leave his graduate studies and turn towards painting over the restriction of sculpture.<sup>9</sup> Despite never fully finishing his graduate work in Mills, his education formed the basis for his future practice; these varied interests in drawing, painting, sculpture, architecture, art history, and culture contributed to the artist's conceptual frameworks in his later years, where these subjects resurfaced onto the canvas.

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<sup>7</sup> Kwon, "Gary Ware: Interview with Marci Kwon, Pt. 2."

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. During the years that Wong dropped out, he was arrested during San Francisco's 1967 Summer of Love. Wong's mother had seen the artist in the newspapers at work; as a result, she gathered as much of the *Chronicle* as she could at Bechtel so that no one would know her son was arrested.

<sup>9</sup> Johnson, "Narrative Chronology."

In the next few years, he started his own practice painting his neighborhood in Eureka, California, participating in the Angels of Light Free Theater group, and starting his portrait business.<sup>10</sup> The artist traveled to New York in 1978, first staying at Meyer’s Hotel and then working as the night watchman for the house for three years. Wong stayed in the hotel until 1982 when he moved into the Lower East Side, or *Loisaida* in Spanish. A year later, he met Nuyorican poet, Miguel Piñero, who would introduce the neighborhood to Wong.<sup>11</sup> This period marks his acclimation to New York and remains one of the most written-about stages of his art production. Rendering the urban landscape and the people within it, community permeates both the art of this period and the scholarship written about it. The cohabitation with Piñero also led to “collaborations”<sup>12</sup>, paintings which incorporate Piñero’s poetry into Wong’s paintings.<sup>13</sup> Widely exhibited during the time, the *Loisaida* paintings were placed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, the Museo Rufino Tamayo, and the Newport Harbor Art Museum. More importantly, the artist had multiple solo exhibitions at Semaphore Gallery; as part of the gallery’s “family”<sup>14</sup>, notions of community also pervade the artist’s social life in New York.

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<sup>10</sup> Multiple sources mention that while the artist participated in the theater group, he always maintained a distance away from them and maintained his independence. This will be further explored in Chapter 2.

<sup>11</sup> See Yazmin Ramirez, “Chino-Latino: The Loisaida Interview,” in *Martin Wong: Human Instamatic* (London, UK: Black Dog Publishing, 2015), pp. 109-121, 111.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 113. These claims of collaboration shared authorship with Piñero, but the author did not write specifically for Wong and rarely initiated projects with the artist. Wong took phrases and poetry from Piñero and simply lettered them onto his paintings.

<sup>13</sup> Machida, “Martin Wong: Interview with Margo Machida.” Throughout the scholarship on Wong, his relationship to Piñero was often cited as lovers. However, Wong has never explicitly stated that, preferring to call the poet his roommate and friend. The closest is in the Machida interview, where he admits that he was in love with one of the Puerto Ricans, which is why he painted them.

<sup>14</sup> This is specifically in regard to his statement to Semaphore’s gallery owner, Barry Blinderman, which would be explored further in Chapter 1.

Wong belonged to multiple communities: family, *Loisaida*, San Francisco, Chinatowns, and the art world. Taking the form of exhibition catalogs, much of the scholarship emphasizes the formative and productive aspects of the artist's interpersonal relationships in the two decades he lived in New York. This is largely due to how Wong's mother and his friends continued his legacy through exhibits and scholarship, including deeply personal accounts of the artist in the literature. Their sentimental memories, recurring references to each other, and emotions capture the intimacy, both with the artist and each other. In other words, the scholarship on the artist simultaneously evokes their closeness with Wong while fostering a community between the figures in his life.

Yet, like the tensions over his choice of a college major with his family, Wong's inclusion within these groups was conditional. Like the relationship between two people, belonging is a mutable state, contingent on the interactions between the individual, the overarching group, and its constituents. Fluid and shifting, belonging can be solidified and dissolved but never cemented nor constant. Tensions in Wong's kinships hint at an awareness of this fluctuating nature in the artist's rendering of his navigation of communities. However, the insistence on community in his works, practice, and legacy obscure these brief mentions to reaffirm its centrality. The rhetoric of community becomes a self-perpetuating apparatus. That is not to say a social collective cannot offer genuine connections, security, and protection. Wong's belief in being a part of social groups is visually evident; depictions of other people characterize his oeuvre. As this thesis will explore, the artist certainly prioritized his belonging, working towards its promises. However, as Wong furthered his belonging, his paintings and words often

interrogate the homogenizing effects of community identification. His critical awareness of the systems and rhetoric surrounding the ethos of community visually manifests throughout his practice, where his art simultaneously resists and extends his inclusion to community.

Since the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the concept of community has become a device for a utopian notion of unequivocal goodness. The moral connotations of the term exploit the human desire for acknowledgment from others, mutual understanding, and safety provided by social infrastructures that are given upon inclusion into a community. Especially with the rise of the COVID-19 pandemic and the increasing awareness of a lack of state support for different racial groups, very recent evocations of community are also attached to the uniqueness of humanity and what distinguishes *homo sapiens* from other species: love, freedom, agency, consciousness, language, civilization, and progress. This rhetoric of community hinges across different disciplines and cultures, where discourse is dominated by a need to prioritize community to form the basis for ethical relations between people. In these usages, belonging is positioned as something everyone aspires to, because it is the universal epitome of what it means to be a social human.

Various scholars have attempted to theorize what exactly constitutes community and how it is perpetuated. For a social group to form, a single or selected few identifications ground the entire structure, in which inclusion means the individual has to accept and follow these identifications. Philosopher John Dewey's 1916 book, *Democracy and Education*, suggests that a democratic society perpetuates itself through education. Introducing the concept of cultural pluralism, Dewey proposed that sustaining

democracy entails educational reform, in order to institutionally homogenize the different social groups within a nation through its youngest members.<sup>15</sup> By assimilating these groups into an environment to be guided in common interests through interactions, these “...points of contact... secure a liberation of powers which remain suppressed as long as the incitations to action are partial, as they [individuals] must be in a group which in its exclusiveness shuts out many interests.”<sup>16</sup> In this stance, Dewey hinted at the limiting boundaries of a community; to be a member is to maintain the same interests as the group while othering those without the same interests. Dewey further expands on this process of homogenizing the individual, theorizing that a democratic education utilizes the individual’s strengths and interests towards a common interest. He reasserted the importance of abiding by the society, wherein “Each... [does]... his own part, and never transgressing, the order and unity of the whole would be maintained.”<sup>17</sup> A democratic community is marred with threats of exclusion. This relationship between the individual and community is crucial to analyzing Wong’s awareness of and entry into the different social groups he extended his belonging in.

Towards the end of the century, the discourse on community became more intensely focused on the oppressive structures of state identity. Instead of theorizing community as an ultimate end to a means, the witnessing of global communist movements and their failure to establish an utopian communism led scholars to question how nationalism operates. Political scientist and historian Benedict Anderson’s book, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, analyzes

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<sup>15</sup> John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (General Books LLC, 2009), 26.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

how Marxist movements in the 20<sup>th</sup> century evolved into nationalisms. In these installations of socialism, the nation is conceived as a productive process, in which national identity, sovereignty, and communion are imagined upon conjuring the nation. In this becoming, “The nation... has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations. No nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind... regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep horizontal comradeship... it is this fraternity that makes it possible... for so many millions of people... [to] willingly die for such limited imaginings.”<sup>18</sup> The reconception of the nation as a community reveals how the structure of nationalism operates; it idealizes the camaraderie between people within a geographical boundary in order to maintain itself by simultaneously distinguishing itself from another. Material objects reflect this nationalism; the printing press, the dissemination of knowledge, and the increase in literacy gave rise to national consciousness through language and religion.<sup>19</sup> In the becoming of nationalism, time and people become homogenized to assert a new genealogy based on nationalism.<sup>20</sup>

Gender and sexuality studies scholar Miranda Joseph’s *Against the Romance of Community* surveys rhetorical usages of community discourse as a critique of community. Joseph understands the invocation of community under capitalism as replicating social hierarchies. This manifests through the boundaries around which community is defined by and the power structures employed to realize that community. By reconciling with

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<sup>18</sup> Benedict R Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 7.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 41.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 195.



community as tied to capitalism, Joseph understands that the rhetoric of social groupings is utilized in capitalist production to continue exploitation of the individual. She states, “The indeterminateness of capital, its openness to determination by use value, is an opening to ‘community,’ to determination by social relations and ‘values’ in exchange, production, and consumption.”<sup>21</sup> Because use value can be applied to anything, the interpersonal bonds and links between people can be commodified, in which community becomes subsumed into the “machinery that turns the raw material of community into subjects of the nation-state and capital.”<sup>22</sup> Alienation no longer restricts the relations between the individual from each other and their labor; the promise of a union disavows community and further alienates people as a homogenized group.

As the previous scholars critique the mechanisms of community and how it operates, philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy’s *The Inoperative Community* reveals how community negates itself. The word, “community,” is a promise made upon an idealization of love between its members. However, the *clinamen*, or the inclination that enables deflection against or connection towards others, is never cemented in practice. Because there is no connecting force, community becomes inoperative; the promise of a community undoes the possibility of communion or communication by placing it before connection. Communist movements have not effectively employed Marx’s theories in praxis because the rhetoric of community secures its impossibility and the death of the individual.<sup>23</sup> Although differing from Anderson in their understanding of what

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<sup>21</sup> Miranda Joseph, *Against the Romance of Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 14.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 23.

<sup>23</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy and Peter Connor, *The Inoperative Community* (Oxford: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 12.

community constitutes, Luc Nancy states, “A community is the presentation to its members of their mortal truth.”<sup>24</sup> Death is the evidence and result of the promises of community. Like Luc Nancy, philosopher Giorgio Agamben’s *The Coming Community* emphasizes the impossibility of cementing community. He writes, “Being-called—the property that establishes all possible belongings (being-called-Italian, -dog, -Communist)—is also what can bring them all back radically into question.”<sup>25</sup> Because identification closes down the boundaries of community, collectivity cannot exist; cementing the conditions of belonging negates community. Thus, community is unrepresentable by any identity, belonging, or concept. For a community to exist, it must open up and remain a singularity, undefinable, untied, and incommunicable.

The aforementioned readings arrive at the possibility of community differently. In Anderson’s analysis of nation-making as community formation, he suggests that the memory of another’s death as a personal death prevents historical and social amnesia.<sup>26</sup> Joseph’s book ends with a reflection on her own queer activism, in which “None of these efforts is pure or perfectly oppositional to capital flow and none involve a complete abandonment of identity or community.”<sup>27</sup> Resistance manifests from a simple awareness of and the insistence on the self to constitute communion. In this case, the individual does not have to be sacrificed for communion and belonging, processes that can replace the destination of community.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>25</sup> Agamben, 17.

<sup>26</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 206.

<sup>27</sup> Joseph, *Against the Romance of Community*, 174.

Luc Nancy's book collected different papers that the author has written; "The Inoperative Community" is only one of five chapters. The fourth chapter, "Shattered Love," emphasizes the importance of the kiss as the *clinamen*, or connecting force, that binds lovers together. It is through this analogy that Nancy reaches the solution for community:

"There is community, there is sharing... Community does not lie beyond the lovers, it does not form a larger circle within which they are contained: it traverses them, in a tremor of 'writing' wherein the literary work mingles with the most simple public exchange of speech. Without such a trait traversing the kiss, sharing it, the kiss is itself as despairing as community is abolished."<sup>28</sup>

Only the prioritization of materializing personal communions can create community. Instead of invoking community to create interpersonal relationships, a community can only be realized through communication. In this case, the tangible links between people operate community while dismantling its promise altogether.

Likewise, Agamben's book suggests the embracing of a community that effaces identity enables an interruption within the State's attempts to create community:

"...humans could... be only the thus, their singular exteriority and their face, then they would for the first time enter into a community without presuppositions and without subjects, into a communication without the incommunicable."<sup>29</sup>

Without the structures that define and close down on community, the opening up of community is possible. The process of being and of working-towards without a goal of community is central to both Luc Nancy's and Agamben's constitutions. It is this working-towards, or the notion of extending one's own belonging, that this thesis seeks to understand as capable of perpetuating the possibility of community.

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<sup>28</sup> Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 40.

<sup>29</sup> Agamben, 72.

After Miguel Piñero's death in 1989, Wong entered a period of mourning. The painted surface comes to be informed by a sense of loss, mourning, and emptiness. In 1994, Wong was hospitalized and received a seropositive diagnosis. Moving back to his childhood home in San Francisco the same year, his paintings turn away from the sexual, urban, and linguistic focuses that characterize his New York period. The turn towards cacti and succulents as subject matter reveals that Wong was aware of his conditional belonging to family and extended it by changing the pictorial plane. Yet, his parents took care of him despite these tenuous relationships, and Florence Wong-Fie continued to tirelessly perpetuate the artist's works. Luc Nancy's and Agamben's emphasis on language and writing becomes even more pertinent; the recent increase of literature on Wong shows that many feel a deep personal connection despite death. Writing allows belonging to extend beyond death, where the writer and reader can encounter the artist as a person. In this moment of witnessing, no matter how mediated, the self can inform the other self. The individual's memory, love, and communion perpetually reinforce each other.

Theorist bell hooks' book, *Belonging: A Culture of Place*, explores belonging as a cyclical process. The final chapter traces her parents' commitment to each other, to her, and to community. She states:

“Before her memory loss, Mama was always on her feet working, cooking, cleaning, meeting someone else's needs... Now she needs us to serve her, to dedicate ourselves to her comfort and care. This service is the enactment of a ritual of regard. The devotion she arouses in her loved ones is a natural outcome of the care and commitment she has extended to all of us.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> bell hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 229.

hooks' exploration realizes the potentiality of community as a personal process. In failing to remember, her mother's unbelonging leads her to feel that it is better to die.<sup>31</sup>

Belonging and unbelonging are deeply personal and individual processes; one can navigate through, assert, and resist belonging. Based on the premise that community is the process of negotiating belonging, the inability to be in a state of working-towards is indicative of a social death. Navigating community is a means of offering a chance of reciprocity; the incapacity to do so closes down on the opportunity. As a result, community cannot be realized because communication and communion is impossible. Any incitations of community are false; communion can only occur if others enable one's belonging. hooks' mother found her community only when others entered a state of working-towards—out of responsibility, reciprocity, love, and memory. This process of belonging can be gleaned from Wong's practice and the scholarship on him. By extending his belonging through his artworks, he offered the possibility of reciprocating—to belong to him.

Reconciling the artist's awareness and conceptual thinking with historical analyses of an incredibly oppressive era for intersectional peoples in America, Wong's practice often served as a site for him to explore, undermine, and extend his belonging into communities. In that way, understanding belonging as a mutable state reasserts the individual's choice to be in a continual process of working-towards. Inclusion and exclusion are not opposing states but a sociality that the artist occupies. His art operates to manipulate this sociality to extend his inclusion while resisting the homogenizing

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 225.

effects of community. Simultaneous reciprocity and isolation emerge, wherein the dynamic processes and complex state of belonging manifest into visually and materially tangible objects through the artist's practice. In this praxis, the possibility for community emerges.

## Chapter 1: Social Lives

Images of people and architecture proliferate Martin Wong's paintings from his time in New York's Lower East Side, or *Loisaida*. Most of the literature written on Wong and his artworks understand these figural depictions as markers of community, revealing a simultaneous belonging and isolation. Yet, a discrepancy exists between the imagery of urban community, the scarcity of self-representations, and the highly personal nature of the Martin Wong Papers at New York University's Fales Library; the individual cannot occupy both inclusion and exclusion if they are binary states of belonging or not. This precarious simultaneousness suggests that belonging is a fluid and mutable process, in which the individual can navigate through. By analyzing Wong's works in relation to each other, complex dialogues about the self and the other emerge from the visual and conceptual connections.

Multiple processes emerge: identification in relation to the other, mistranslations in appropriation to destabilize the boundaries of social formations, and the usage of the art object to extend belonging to communities. The first section analyzes Wong's twin imagery under the framework of mirror reflections. By understanding his self-portrait in *Stanton Near Forsyth Street* as a dual image of the other, the repeated contemplation on the simultaneous difference and similarity between twins suggests that the artist thought deeply about how identification affects relationships. As the self identifies with the other and vice versa, it highlights racial, gender, and societal recognition as fluid processes. By the rendering of a simultaneous union and separation of identities, Wong's works reveal that the identity of the self negotiates with identification with the other. Within the

process of articulating the self, identity oscillates between dis/similarities. The second section analyzes how these dis/similarities are also present within his translation of mediums. The artist's practice of appropriating mass cultural forms suggests that Wong employed dis/similarities to distance from and to draw nearer to different social spheres. In these mistranslations of medium, the artist interrogated the structures that determine the boundaries and homogenization of identity for community. The final section analyzes how, under these awarenesses of the homogenizing nature of community, the artist utilized the dis/similar art object to navigate these social spheres. By understanding the artist's relationship with the art market and the creation of a public persona, Wong's artworks reveal a fluidity in identification. The artist employed art objects to extend belonging within both social and economic communities, which are not mutually exclusive.

Ultimately, Wong's practice is deeply imbued with sociality, both conceptually and physically. By viewing identity as a process based on articulations of dis/similarities, the boundaries of community can be deconstructed to allow a belonging as a fluid state of working-towards. In this instance, the individual navigates social bonds, accounting for discrepancies in kinships that often contradict romantic understandings of community.

### ***Dis/Similar Identifications***

Wong's 1983 painting, *Stanton Near Forsyth Street* (Figure 1.1), renders a complex microcosm of the self, others, and the environment. A false, painted frame encompasses the entire canvas: "MORNING AT THE EDGE of TIME IT NEVER



REALLY MATTERED” is written on the top, while “STANTON NEAR FORSYTH STREET” is lettered at the bottom with the artist’s name and the year. In the background, superimposed brick buildings coalesce into a homogenized urban landscape, despite the different colors and textures. These structures recede into the black night sky as the composition opens up to the celestial: constellations and sign language occupy the upper register. On the far right, a translation sits on top of a building: “REINALDO HABÍA LLEGADO AL DEPARTAMENTO DONDE VIVÍA ESTEBAN QUE AGOBIADO ABRIÓ LA PUERTA”. In the foreground, a single apartment on the right features a significantly darker tone than the buildings behind it. Burgundy bricks converge with smoky gray stairwells, contributing to an overall darker tone. Rubble lays on the ground, flanking both sides of the building. Two figures in black stand on opposite sides of the canvas; one faces the viewer on the left, while the other looks at him from across the frame.

American curator, Dan Cameron, has identified these parallel figures as Wong (left) and Miguel Piñero (right).<sup>32</sup> The self-representation is especially distinctive, given that Wong rarely painted himself within the set of paintings in New York. Chronologically, the closest known self-portraits were *Untitled (Self-portrait)* (Figure 1.2) from 1974-1975 and *Self-Portrait* (Figure 1.3) from 1993. The former precedes his move to New York, exhibiting a figure on a light green background, placed within a hand-painted frame. Fluid brushstrokes fill the canvas as the facial features emerge out of voluptuous curves. Brown tones dominate the self-portrait. On the contrary, the 1993

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<sup>32</sup> See Marcia Tucker, Barry Blinderman, and Dan Cameron, “Brick by Brick: New York According to Martin Wong,” in *Sweet Oblivion: The Urban Landscape of Martin Wong* (New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1998), pp. 1-13, 1.

*Self-Portrait* precedes his move back to San Francisco. Whereas the face is similarly composed of curvilinearity, the chiaroscuro is flattened to lines amongst fields of color. Black tones dominate appearance; thick gold lines juxtapose and emphasize the stark black of the hair and jacket. The figure wears a hat, replete with an image of Christ and a belt below it. A conglomerate of blue faces forms the background, their eyes gazing upon each other, the figure, and us. Reminiscent of Buddhist depictions of wrathful deities, these visages reveal what art historian Marci Kwon calls a “self-orientalist” style.<sup>33</sup> In his Chinatown paintings, the incorporation of Oriental iconographies enabled the artist to reveal how its residents incorporate landmarks, paraphernalia, and subject matters into their identities to retain historical consciousness, such as the prominence of laundromats as a continued form of capital and space for community.<sup>34</sup> Within *Self-Portrait*, Wong ties these marginalized histories to his own image.

In addition, the juxtaposition of these azure faces and that of Christ points to the convergence of Eastern and Western iconographies. While there is no known syncretic stylization of Christ,<sup>35</sup> this depiction diverges from European standards. The sallow skin of the crucified Christ in pain is composed of a smoky gray, darkening the complexion along with the hair. Like the 1974-75 portrait, Christ is placed on a light green background, further adding to the relationality between the two portraits. Despite the

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<sup>33</sup> Robert Slifkin, Anthony E. Grudin, and Marci Kwon, “A Secret History of Martin Wong,” in *The Present Prospects of Social Art History* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Publishing Inc, 2021), pp. 113-130, 115.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 118-119.

<sup>35</sup> See Patricia Harrington, “Mother of Death, Mother of Rebirth: The Mexican Virgin of Guadalupe.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 56, no. 1 (1988): 25–50. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1464830>. Mexican syncretism of Catholicism has been explored by scholars of various fields; for example, Harrington explores how the Virgin Mary has been adopted as the Lady of Guadalupe and the changes in representation.

racial ambiguity of the artist's face, the presence of both Buddhist and Catholic expressions point to Wong's identification as "Chino-Latino". Yasmin Ramirez, a long-time friend of the artist and curator, gave the artist the moniker of Chino-Latino in 1984; this was strictly in regard to how Wong's residence in *Loisaida* and his friendships in the predominantly Puerto Rican neighborhood manifests a bridge between Asian and Puerto Rican communities.<sup>36</sup> To Ramirez's surprise, the artist revealed in a later 1996 interview that his father was half-Mexican:

“YR [Yazmin Ramirez]: How about the whole idea that you once wrote you were like a Chino-Latino?

MW [Martin Wong]: Well, that's the way it is, my father's half Mexican.

YR: He is?

MW: Yeah, you've seen him.<sup>37</sup>

In this instance, Ramirez realized the term's gravity in identification a blurred self and perceived other. This is something that Wong purposely uses, especially because his father is actually his stepfather; the artist does not inherit any Mexican heritage by blood. The 1984 moniker transforms the internal self into a public identity, drawing links between Chinese and Mexican, the public and private, and the self and the other. The 1974-1975 *Untitled (Self-portrait)* did not exhibit the symbols that can be neatly typified as either Chino or Latino. Centrally placed in a striped frame, the figure meets the viewer's gaze, the warmth of brown skin juxtaposing the pastel green background. Fluid modeling and curvilinear brushstrokes compose the flesh in the face, focusing on artistic style and representation. By 1993, *Self-Portrait* depicted and emphasized the syncretism

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<sup>36</sup> See Antonio Sergio Bessa and Yazmin Ramirez, "Chino-Latino: The Loisaida Interview," in *Martin Wong: Human Instamatic* (London, UK: Black Dog Publishing, 2015), pp. 109-121, 109.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 114-115. It should be emphasized that his "father" is actually his stepfather, Benjamin Wong-Fie. This will be explored later on in the text, especially in how playing with identification extends belonging by challenging the structure of community.

of Asian and Latin American physiognomy. Appearances of multiple faces—Christ on the figure’s hat and dragons on his jacket, and deities in the background—ground the portrait in cultural identifications. Even if partially, another scholar’s perception of Wong mutually informed the altered likeness and its visualization of racial and artistic persona.

What do the self-representations make of *Stanton on Forsyth Street*? Suppose one understands the 1974-75 and 1993 portraits as reflections of the artist’s mutable identity. In that case, *Stanton on Forsyth Street* similarly represents the network of dialogues between people that affect public identification. Identification is a dual process, hinging on the negotiations between the private self and others. Standing on opposite sides of the frame, the figures embody the relationship between the self and the other, the same but different. The Wong and Piñero of *Stanton on Forsyth Street* reflect each other; two individuals form a mirror image across the canvas.

Mirror images permeate Wong’s oeuvre. The concept of twins recurs often throughout his notebooks as sketches or poems. In a sketchbook, Wong writes about the relationality between two individuals:

“HOW VERY MUCH ALIKE THEY 20  
WERE TWINS IN EVERY WAY 19  
AND YET LIKE MIRROR IMAGES 22  
HOW COMPLETELY OPPOSITE 21”<sup>38</sup>

The paradoxical similarity and difference reveal how social relationships between separate entities often balance identification with the other person while retaining one’s

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<sup>38</sup> See “Scene with Brick Wall”, MSS.102, Box 31, Folder 31.3, Martin Wong Papers, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University. While it is unknown what the numbers next to the line stand for, they most likely would have listed the chronological order. Wong often edited his poems, resulting in multiple reiterations of rearranged lines. Another possibility is that he lifted these verses out of another literary source, with the numbers representing the original order or page.

sense of self. Whether in platonic, romantic, or familial bonds, kinships between two people often hinge on this navigation of dependence and independence. The Self is fragmented and composite in nature; identities are constructed socially, in which the self constantly negotiates itself in relation to others.

Psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's 1949 lecture, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function" provides a methodological framework for further discourse on how Wong understands the self as informed by others. Expanding upon Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory, Lacan establishes a developmental stage of self-identification upon seeing one's reflection. The mirror reflection is the first moment a baby sees their whole and unfragmented body. The child internalizes this unfractured conception of the body as an Ideal-*I*, upon which the ego develops. Yet, Lacan argued that a schism exists between this idealization and the self, resulting in a split subject. A mirror representation cannot substitute the body nor the ego; an index might embody or retain an imprint of the self, but it's not the person. This ideal, unfractured self is unattainable.

Based on this false, idealized image of a whole self, the ego cannot let go of this unattainable image because it cannot accept being fragmented. Once matured, this ego is how the individual differentiates themselves from others, wherein the "specular *I* [deflects] into the social *I*".<sup>39</sup> The mirror stage ends when that ego ("*I*") is used and applied socially. Lacan states,

"It is this moment that decisively tips the whole of human knowledge into mediatization through the desire of the other, constitutes its objects in an abstract equivalence by the co-operation of others, and turns the *I* into that apparatus for which

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<sup>39</sup> See Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function," in *Jacques Lacan: Ecrits*, ed. Bruce Fink (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), pp. 93-100, 98.

every instinctual thrust constitutes a danger, even though it should correspond to a natural maturation. The very normalization of this maturation being henceforth dependent, in man, on a cultural intervention...<sup>40</sup>

The viewer begins to define their sense of self in relation to others but are also rivals with them. In this sense, others create the ego as much as they try to usurp it. In Wong's imagery of twins, the self is simultaneously the other. The boundaries blur between the two entities; yet, this blurring constitutes their differentiation and individualization. The dynamic of the social self constantly negotiates between sameness and difference with the other.

Wong continuously reiterated an articulation of self in kinships through the concept of twins. In 1989, a *People Are Talking* episode centered on Senator Jesse Helms' questioning of The National Endowment for the Arts funding after Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ* was exhibited on an NEA grant. Wong attended as part of a group of artists who brought their work to be debated by other guest speakers and the audience. His 1986 painting, *Big Heat* (Figure 1.4), was revealed to the public. When the host of the show, Richard Sher, asked Wong about the meaning behind the kissing firemen, he replied, "I don't know why everyone assumes they're kissing. This is an affirmative action poster. They're identical twins, they just happen to be Siamese twins joined at the mouth."<sup>41</sup> The playful humor in his words prompted chuckles amidst the volatile atmosphere among the audience and the speakers. When asked to expand further, he continued,

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> See "'People Are Talking': Topic: NEA Funding (WOR TV, Ch. 9)", MSS.102, Box 45, Case: 102.0003, Martin Wong Papers, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University.

“But this is a real story. In Boston... There were these two Irish identical twin firemen and they just got fired this year because they weren’t black. And what I’m saying is there’s fewer identical twins in the United States than black people. And they wrote down on the form that they were black when they took the test because they flunked it twice. But the thing is why doesn’t anybody ever speak up for twins?”<sup>42</sup>

When Sera tried to tie *Big Heat* to Robert Maplethorpe, artist Leon Golub replied with a critique of Helms and his friendship with Roberto d’Aubuisson, citing the 1980 order of assassination on Archbishop Óscar Romero as more corrupt than the NEA funding. Wong’s comments were forgotten when the debate became emotionally charged again, with little to no subsequent mention of his painting; this is also in part due to his seating amongst the audience instead of amongst the panel of guest speakers. He was not prompted to speak again.

Yet, multiple layers of identification occurred through this seemingly tongue-in-cheek comment. For one, Wong touched on racial identification by bringing up the Philip and Paul Malone case; the twins stated that they were Black on their job application for the Boston Fire Department, who fired the pair after ten years of service for the misuse of affirmative action plans.<sup>43</sup> In addition, a note on a sketchpad expands upon the concept of twins in *Big Heat*: “BIG HEAT IS AN ALLEGORY OF THE AGE OF AIDS. REPRESENTS HYPNOS AND THANATOS. SLEEP AND DEATH—IDENTICAL TWINS[—]YET LIKE IDENTICAL TWINS, COMPLETE

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Susan Diesenhouse, “Boston Case Raises Questions on Misuse of Affirmative Action,” *The New York Times*, October 9, 1988, <https://www.nytimes.com/1988/10/09/us/boston-case-raises-questions-on-misuse-of-affirmative-action.html>

OPPOSITES.”<sup>44</sup> With this comment, identification extends to sociocultural contexts. The “twins” in *Big Heat* represent more than homosexuality; it reflects the beginning of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, situating identification with a time and place. Sleep and Death renders a simultaneous difference and similarity of being “at rest”; in the unconscious, one experiences a collapse of time and a lack of individual agency and bodily autonomy. However, Sleep sustains life as Death is the complete end; the former generates infinite psychic possibilities, while the latter ends a finite life. The comparison of AIDS to Hypnos and Thanatos likely points to the in-between state of “living death”<sup>45</sup>, in which the body experiences a social, political, and physical death. The self reflects more than another individual but constitutes a mirror image of and negotiation with society. This articulation of identity diverges from Lacan’s theories, in which the Self is subject to structures because they are unaware of it. As the creator of this mirror image, the artist is politically and historically aware of the relationality between the self and society. Art historian Margo Machida interprets this reverse mirroring as a search for identification of a heterogeneous identity, stating, “In this reverse mirroring, they make alternative and often oppositional art forms to aggressively engage both Western and Asian audiences.”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> See “Before: Mikey reads a poem”, MSS.102, Box 4, Folder 4.85, Martin Wong Papers, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University.

<sup>45</sup> See Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” in *Necropolitics*, trans. Steve Corcoran (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), pp. 66-92. While there is a history of people diagnosed with HIV/AIDS being generally referred to as the living dead, I am strictly using Mbembe’s conception of necropolitics, in which the state imposes the inability to retain bodily sovereignty. This subjugation results in the body occupying a liminal space, living a social and political death. Such is especially pertinent in the discussion of social identity; the development of the social self also implies a life and subsequent death.

<sup>46</sup> Margo Machida, “Seeing ‘Yellow’: Asians and the American Mirror,” essay, in *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s* (New York, NY: Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, 1990), 109–27, 113.



Wong further explored Hypnos and Thanatos visually. These names identify a sketch of two figures facing each other (Figure 1.5). Labeled at the top and bottom of the composition as Hypnos and Thanatos, the embracing twin brothers form a mirror reflection of each other. Exaggerated features verge on figural caricature; yet, each figure's identity is asserted only through their relation with each other, instead of stylistic emphasis.<sup>47</sup> A visual difference occupies the center of the composition: Hypnos' hand is positioned underneath Thanatos', who drops an object into the former's hand. The arms in the middle create a focal point, a singular difference to contrast the doubling of form. The figures are complementary and symmetrical but not an exact reflection of each other. This relationship between two parts of a whole enables the viewer to distinguish between them, simultaneously providing identification with and against each other.

The composition takes its final form in the 1992 painting, *Co-dependant No More* (Figure 1.6). The painting's former identity as the gods of Sleep and Death can be inferred through the collapsing of time; despite the clocks occupying the upper corners of the painting, Wong omitted the handles to prevent the viewers' ability to tell time. The two figures stare at one another, their faces pressed against each other. Both wear black waistcoats, trousers, and ties, culminating in burgundy oxfords. The sleeves of the figures lead the eye to the same central focal point; however, the figure on the right holds an eight ball as its twin on the left holds a gesture over it. Reminiscent of Buddha *mudras*, the self-orientalist stylization appropriates Buddhist iconographies from paraphernalia;

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<sup>47</sup> Caricatures have been used, within prints, mass media, and other cultural forms, to stereotype and essentialize different races. The figures in Wong's work do not draw on these visual stereotypes to identify the figures; rather, it is their difference from each other that gives the viewer any kind of identification to ground meaning upon. Emphasizing the relationality of the figures through dis/similarities takes away the mechanisms of caricature's ability to stereotype.

there are no *mudras* that position the little and ring finger with the thumb. Likewise, an eye unites the two figures' foreheads; the third eye is also a Buddhist symbol for enlightened perception. It gazes down at itself, looking of the interplay of similarities and dissimilarities. In addition, the painting's title, *Co-dependant No More*, again points to the self's relationality. Alcoholics Anonymous initially coined codependency to describe how the relationship between the alcoholic and another individual hinges on a mutual dependence on each other.<sup>48</sup> While the term is not a recognized diagnosis in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, the trait is increasingly accepted as a condition caused by "a lost Self".<sup>49</sup> The title's renunciation of this disorder implies a promise made to the self, to form and preserve it against the threat of collapse with the other. These twins render a simultaneous union and separation of identities.

Dis/similarities with another forms a composite self. Wong's twins reveal an awareness of how he negotiates with dis/similarities from and with others; he concluded his 1990 artist statement with, "Twinology as a field of study touches on many related issues such as those of telepathy and the nature of consciousness itself and hold much fascination for those of us secretly two people from the waist up."<sup>50</sup> Not only do the dis/similarities form the self, but in the process of articulating identity, the self oscillates between paradoxes. The composite nature of identification constantly fluctuates; Wong's practice reveals an acute awareness of this mediation between doubles. Through the

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<sup>48</sup> See Lennard J. Davis, *Obsession: A History* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 178.

<sup>49</sup> See Darlene Lancer, *Codependency for Dummies* (S.I.: John Wiley & Sons, 2022), 31. Lancer is a licensed marriage and family therapist, and has been practicing for 30 years.

<sup>50</sup> For an artist resume with a selected biography and artist statement, see "Wong, Martin - Selected Document," artsiamerica, accessed May 22, 2023, <http://artsiamerica.org/documents/8766>.

mirror image, conscious identification articulates a negotiation: between the self and the other, similarities and differences, and closeness and distance.

### ***Destabilizing Mistranslations***

Dis/similarities are also present within the materiality of Wong's artworks. Like his identifications, Wong's appropriation of literary, artistic, and cultural traditions generates composite forms: lines with double meanings, canvases with two faces, and paintings appropriated from other surfaces. Dis/similarities in identification manifest materially, revealing a causal relationship between identity and art. The incorporation of the mirror into the art object becomes a device where the persona is knowingly enacted. In this visual encounter, Wong's practice acts as a site to negotiate identities and come into being within different social spheres. By manipulating representations, the artist constructs and engages in discourse about the process of identification, especially how the individual identity is maintained through closeness with and distance from others. This awareness and subsequent ability to control representation, repurpose materials, and fashion one's identity plays with the Lacanian mirror and its mechanism. By implementing these dis/similarities to understand relations, Wong reframed the mirror image into a locus to contemplate a fluctuating identification with and against others: within relationships, societies, and communities.

Under this understanding, it is pertinent to note the constructed-ness of *Co-dependant No More's* simultaneous dis/similarities. Every messy sketch, every scrawled note, and every allusion imparts the intentionality of the final surface, rendering

visible its deliberate constructions and engagement with others. Wong also replicated the intentional closeness and distance in the Wong and Piñero of *Stanton Near Forsyth Street*; just like twins, the reflecting image is similar but different. The Spanish text in the painting translates to, “Reinaldo had arrived at the apartment where Esteban lived who, breathless [overwhelmed], opened the door.” Wong did not speak Spanish fluently; most notably, his exposure to the language hinged on his closeness to Piñero and his writings.<sup>51</sup> While he did not depend on only Piñero’s writing, he relied on those around him to fully understand the language. Wong spoke about the phrase in a 1991 lecture at the San Francisco Art Institute entitled, “It’s Easier to Paint a Store If It’s Closed”:

“It’s in sign language for the deaf, but in Spanish. I think it said that Renaldo went to Alfredo’s house and the door was locked and nobody was home. Because I live in a Hispanic neighborhood, I wanted to fake it when I [painted] the neighborhood, so I would put Spanish writing in it. I would copy random phrases from a love comic and then later somebody told me what it all meant...”<sup>52</sup>

In this case, the contexts and his own interpretation of the painting relied on another person’s translation. Wong lifted the phrase out of a 1977 *fotonovela*, *El Sonambulo: Un Ejemplo de Amor de La Vida Real*. The *fotonovela* featured Esteban, who sleep-walked into his neighbor's house in the middle of the night; in the morning, his neighbor comes back to find Esteban lying with his wife, to both of their surprise. The artist appropriated the narration in the exposition in which a friend, Renaldo, visited Esteban to converse about his parasomnia, or sleepwalking, foreshadowing the subsequent climax of the *fotonovela*. As much as his understanding of the phrase

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<sup>51</sup> Ramirez, “Chino-Latino: The Loisaida Interview,” 115.

<sup>52</sup> See Caitlin Burkhart and Julian Myers-Szupinska, *My Trip to America by Martin Wong* (San Francisco, CA: California College of the Arts, 2015), 91.

depended on another, the process of painting and the final rendering also depended on a significant mass cultural product of a heritage that the artist identified with.

By superimposing Renaldo and Esteban's encounter onto the two figures in *Stanton Near Forsyth Street*, Wong simultaneously distances from the original narrative to render queerness while drawing closer to identification with Latin America. Writer Roy Pérez understands this purposeful appropriation of Latin American cultural signifiers as a visual lingering that marks Wong's visual proximity to *latinidad*. Wong's use of Latin American visual forms enables cross-cultural proximity with Nuyorico, allowing for a "...closeness without becoming and nearness without arriving..."<sup>53</sup> The misspellings of "Rienaldo" and "departemento" betray slippages in the approximations to *latinidad*.<sup>54</sup> These mistakes reveal the simultaneous distance and proximity to *latinidad* that underlies Wong's deliberate identification with others—an identification of close enough. Charlie Ahearn's documentary, *Clones of Bruce Lee: The Art of Martin Wong*, records Sharp, or Aaron Goodstone, dedicating a song to Wong, calling him a "Chino Malo" during a heartfelt farewell.<sup>55</sup> Unlike Ramirez's moniker of "Chino-Latino", *lo malo* indicates that the artist has committed *una maldad*. The mistakes in appropriating *El Sonambulo* signal a wrongness in Chinese and Latino crosscultural references. In this process, Wong's proximity isn't necessarily being Latino but "a way for him to extend the poetic reach from his position at the frame of a cultural archive of which he is a constitutive part in a

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<sup>53</sup> See Roy Pérez, "The Glory That Was Wrong: El 'Chino Malo' Approximates Nuyorico," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 25.3 (2015): 281.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, 295.

<sup>55</sup> See *Clones of Bruce Lee: The Art of Martin*, *Vimeo*, 2023, <https://vimeo.com/152493246>.

material way.”<sup>56</sup> These instances extend his close-enoughness to *latinidad* as much as mistakes distinguish him from it.

Yet, Pérez’s use of the *maldad* to describe the simultaneous dis/similarity to and from *latinidad* to explore Wong’s visual approximations disregards the artist’s intentionality. Wong’s own words about the phrase reveal a nonchalance; these misspellings are not pre-planned but always voluntary. Cultural authenticity is never at the foreground of these appropriations; if it were, Wong would not have mistakenly called Esteban “Alfredo” in the 1991 lecture. This is an especially important distinction to make: his practice was deliberate in its thinking about relationality instead of cultural authenticity. As Wong translated from one medium to another, these accidental “mistakes” come to undermine the power of the original medium and the homogenizing identifications of culture that it perpetuates.

As a popular form of entertainment, the Latin American *fotonovela* reflected the capitalist ethos of passivity.<sup>57</sup> While its purpose changed and artists have appropriated its form over time to generate *latinidad*, the romance plots of *fotonovelas* from the 1970s and 1980s that Wong worked from emphasized the feminine relinquishing of agency to give oneself to love. Within love, two heterosexual individuals renounce their individuality, in which “...the state of loving, not necessarily a specific action... takes control of the situation and brings about the solution to the problem.”<sup>58</sup> The homogenization of people into a larger truth reflects the assimilation of the individual

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<sup>56</sup> Pérez, “The Glory That Was Wrong: El ‘Chino Malo’ Approximates Nuyorico,” 295.

<sup>57</sup> See Cornelia Butler Flora and Jan L. Flora, “The Fotonovela As a Tool for Class and Cultural Domination.” *Latin American Perspectives* 5, no. 1 (1978): 134–50. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2633343>.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, 140.

into capitalism, and the embracing of both types of false consciousness is “...an acceptance of change—a change over which one has no control.”<sup>59</sup> *El Sonambulo*’s predicament also embodies this lack of agency and the resulting interpersonal conflicts; succumbing to parasomnia disrupts personal bonds, and the conflict is then fixed by succumbing to love. Yet, Wong chose the homosocial bonding in the exposition of the *fotonovela* to ground the meaning of *Stanton Near Forsyth Street*, an encounter in which both characters willingly and consciously meet. By misplacing the description of the scene and translating it into a painting, Wong subverted the medium’s control and flips the homogenization of heteronormative love into a mutual homosexual meeting. The characters are not subjected to love but willingly choose it. The mistranslations in both meaning and spelling rely on their dis/similarities with the original. Visual context and the artist’s inability to read in Spanish shift the relationality between the two characters, reconstructing their relationship to a possible mutually romantic one.

By understanding Wong as a *malvado*, Pérez highlighted a purposeful destabilization within these mistranslations. These seemingly incidental slippages reveal the simultaneous distance and closeness to the cultures that Wong has continually created a visual identification with. While Pérez’s article focused on the artist’s proximity to *latinidad*, mistranslation also constitutes the self-orientalism in *Co-dependant No More*’s *mudras* and his Chinatown paintings. Slight mistranslations appear in the artist’s Chinese lettering in *Sanja Cake* (Figure 1.7) from 1991. Featuring the familiar pair of kissing firemen from *Big Heat* against a brick heart, Wong drew the composition from the food

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

wrapper of hawflake candy (Figure 1.8). Hawflakes are made of compressed Chinese hawthorn and sugar, dried into flat discs, and packaged in stacks. Like how *fotonovelas* bear a cultural nostalgia, these sweet and tart candies hold a significant role in Chinese and Chinese American foodways, which are eaten after drinking bitter herbal medicine, used as an ingredient, or simply eaten as a snack.<sup>60</sup> Wong's rendering of 餅, the character for cake or cookie, misses the last stroke in the 饣 radical on the left.<sup>61</sup> Likewise, the far left stroke in the 女 of 安 is extended; the artist wrote the radical in four strokes instead of three, revealing that he derived his written 安 from the font of the packaging. These minute details betray the artist's unfamiliarity with written Chinese; these mistakes create a distance that undercuts both the artist's assumed cultural identification to Chineseness and the standardization of a written language.

In addition, the paper wrapper's depiction of a man and woman kissing in a red heart reveals how the mass production of food enforces biopolitical power. Encasing the commodified food object with heterosexual ideals of love visually links sustenance to sexual reproduction. Mass production conspicuously utilizes romantic love to relegate the

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<sup>60</sup> While there isn't a lot of literature written on hawflakes to quantify its significance in cultural foodways, its incorporation into Western literature is often about the nostalgia it provided for those that are of Chinese heritage. See Jiayin Gao, "English/Mandarin Code-Switching in the United States: A Case Study of a Northern California Chinese Language School" (thesis, 2012).

<sup>61</sup> While Chinese characters are used throughout China, Japan (*kanji*), and Korea (*hanja*), these characters often slightly differ from each other. Because these logograms don't have a set phonetic pronunciation, the same characters can change in meaning and visually over time and usage. These differences are most apparent in traditional and simplified Chinese; the latter was adopted and implemented by the People's Republic of China after the Chinese Revolution to increase public literacy. Thus, regional differences are rendered apparent even if it is the same word or symbol. This is especially important in our discussion of Wong's lettering, because the 餅 character I used to translate it into a typed document does not correspond to the character on the hawflake packaging; the 丷 on top of the 并 should be a 人 to correspond to the wrapper. Yet, digitized Chinese characters do not have such a character, nor the ability to combine that character digitally. This is all to say that various linguistic contexts exist even in the original packaging in addition to Wong's mistranslations, wherein these differences resist the standardization of language itself. Likewise, my points of comparison in Wong's mistranslations are only in relation to the hawflake wrapper at the Fales archive, and not any other form of the characters.



body as the site of reproduction through depictions. In writer Michel Foucault's 1976 lecture, "Society Must Be Defended", a bourgeois state regulates sexuality through power mechanisms to maximize reproduction, such that "sexual apprenticeship, sexual training, sexual precocity...the goal is to use sexuality to reproduce a labor force, and it is well known that, at least in the early nineteenth century, it was believed that the optimal labor force was an infinite labor force: the greater the labor force, the greater the capitalist system of production's ability to function fully and efficiently."<sup>62</sup> Regulation of sexuality to ensure the perpetual reproduction of a labor force manifests materially in the hawflake wrapper; to eat the mass-produced candy is to also visually consume the apparatus that manufactures heterosexual reproduction.

Political scientist Jemima Repo further elaborated on this regulation of sexuality in her essay, "The Life Function: The Biopolitics of Sexuality and Race Revisited". She examined how the death function of race and the life function of sex interchange and intersect in biopolitical power, stating,

"Whereas race becomes reterritorialized by the death function as a means of establishing the parameters of the species, of those who should be allowed to live and encouraged to reproduce, and who should not, the death function reterritorializes sexuality when a perceived sexual misbehavior becomes intolerable or threatening, and those practicing it must be left to die or be killed in order to protect the propagation and wellbeing of the species."<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> See Michel Foucault, "*Society Must Be Defended*": *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*, ed. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 31.

<sup>63</sup> See Jemima Repo, "The Life Function: The Biopolitics of Sexuality and Race Revisited." *Theory & Event* 16, no. 3 (2013): 15.  
<https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/life-function-biopolitics-sexuality-race/docview/1441289695/se-2>.

In this case, sexuality is mechanized to perpetuate death and life, wherein enforcing heterosexuality ensures the continuation of the labor force and death for sexualities that threaten mass reproduction.

The implementation of heterosexuality to control bodies within populations is especially pertinent in *Sanja Cake* and Wong's replacement of the kissing couple with the same pair of firemen from *Big Heat*: "BIG HEAT IS AN ALLEGORY OF THE AGE OF AIDS. REPRESENTS HYPNOS AND THANATOS. SLEEP AND DEATH—IDENTICAL TWINS[—]YET LIKE IDENTICAL TWINS, COMPLETE OPPOSITES."<sup>64</sup> The twin reflections enable sociohistorical consciousness and an awareness of the imposed structures that led to a lack of institutional support for the AIDS crisis. Susan Sontag's book, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors*, explores how the biopolitical mechanism operated through public denial of the epidemic, in which "...raising the disease's [AIDS's] metaphorical stature... does not diminish its status as, mainly, a consequence of illicit acts (or of economic and cultural backwardness). That it is a punishment for deviant behavior and that it threatens the innocent—these two notions about AIDS are hardly in contradiction."<sup>65</sup> By appropriating the heteronormative packaging of the hawflakes, Wong undermined the institutional implementation of heterosexual reproduction by superimposing brown men kissing. The relationality between the self and the other explored through the twin imagery is also an awareness of the individual as a constituent of society. The distance created through these pictorial dis/similarities—a missing stroke, a wrong radical, darkening of the skin, and

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<sup>64</sup> See "Before: Mikey reads a poem", MSS.102, Box 4, Folder 4.85, Martin Wong Papers, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University.

<sup>65</sup> Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors* (New York: Picador, 2006), 161.

queering of a kiss within the same composition—are deliberate misrepresentations maintained in his practice. Whether intentional or not, every mistranslation is an act of undermining the “correctness” imposed upon language, sexuality, race, their identifications, and how it affects the manner in which the individual relates to other people.

While semantic mistranslations reveal a simultaneous distance and closeness to social groups that Wong referenced, mistakes also illuminate an awareness of how to navigate these cultural identifications that are fraught with contradictions about who can belong. The artist created these visual distances; he rendered these dis/similarities for the viewers to witness. His distance away from these contexts asks the viewer to investigate the structures within the communities that he seemingly belongs to by reappropriating ephemeral material—many of which are cultural signifiers of *latinidad* and Chineseness. The visual manifestations of the precarious relationships between the signifier and the signified, the self and the other, the individual and the society, and the negotiation between agency and dependency interrogate the limits of community and belonging, resisting the homogenization of community. Slippage is resistance; it does not only occur when incorrect rendering of language inserts heterogeneity into a homogenized and standardized culture but also when the imprecision of his practice interrogates the process of identification with a social group altogether. In his questioning, artworks loosen the boundaries of community to allow him the possibility of cultural belonging.

Wong’s practice of appropriating language and signs forms an intricate network of social commentary about identification and the process of homogenization. His

deconstruction repurposes material, allowing the artwork to oscillate between concealing and revealing the double contexts of both the original form and the appropriation. In just *Stanton Near Forsyth Street*, the artist layered Spanish and sign language alongside visual motifs to create a piece that can only be dissected carefully through physiognomic likeness, archival research, and language familiarity. Curator Julie Ault highlights this simultaneous concealing and revealing in another painting, *Attorney Street*: “The painting asks what the distinctions are between various codes, what particular codes embody and engender, and how language defines, bonds, and bounds a community.”<sup>66</sup> By utilizing language’s role in *Attorney Street* to understand Wong’s later 1998 painting, *FDNY*, as an oscillation between a simultaneous disclosing and disguising of the artist’s sexual desires and its representation in his prison paintings, practice and painting becomes its own language.<sup>67</sup> The relationship between the individual and the social group reflects language, wherein boundaries and parameters for who belongs within these spheres are just as mutable as the relationship between the signifier and the signified. Wong’s practice destabilizes the rigidity of identification’s role in entering a community; by rendering a heterogeneous identification, the homogenizing and limiting community opens up. Acceptance into and belonging to social spheres becomes a fluid process of simultaneous navigation and resistance that is dependent on the interplay of public signs and private signifieds.

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<sup>66</sup> Antonio Sergio Bessa and Julie Ault, “Martin Wong Was Here,” essay, in *Martin Wong: Human Instamatic* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2015), 83–101.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

### *Social Devices*

While practice provided a conceptual site for the artist to deconstruct identifications and community, the resulting art objects became social devices. The process of selling or sharing with the public imbues the pieces with a social function. These objects negotiate sociality, wherein the artist initiates interaction and reciprocation through the material with its viewers. In engaging with both the art world and his interpersonal relationships, the artist's translations blur the boundary between the personal and the social. The signs the artists chose to be public and or to remain private are especially pertinent to distinguishing between recreation and rewriting of meaning; appropriation depends on the preservation of the original material. Complete obliteration of the former medium obfuscates the power structures that manifest the material. The preservation of phrases, composition, and magazines allows the viewer to see the original material's significance; the artist retained the validity of these products and their role in reasserting power to destabilize it. By working with the original material and maintaining its visibility in the final composition, Wong challenged the structure behind social identifications; in a community's homogenization of the individual, other identifications are relegated and even completely erased. This is seen in the scholarship of Miguel Piñero; in the upholding of his role as a Nuyorican poet, his homosexuality is relegated to the margins, often only in his relationship with and to Wong.<sup>68</sup> Wong's open play with signs publicly defies these conditions of assimilation and straightening, yet still reaffirms his interactions within these social spheres.

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<sup>68</sup> Pérez, "The Glory That Was Wrong: El 'Chino Malo' Approximates Nuyorico," 278-280.

Under this framework of the art object imbued with a social function, Wong's 1986 painting, *Iglesia Pentecostal* (Figure 1.9), utilizes proximity to Nuyorico to dissociate the artist's identification as Chinese. The painting depicts the padlocked entrance of a Pentecostal Church. The folding gate closes off the storefront with interlocking diamonds, oscillating between beige and black. Visible brush marks form a gritty texture throughout the surface. However, the back of the painting reveals a hidden underpainting of a Cantonese opera actor, obscured by the stretchers of the canvas.

Initially exhibited in the "Last Picture Show" in 1986 at Semaphore Gallery, the 107 by 83-inch painting stood on the floors alongside eight other storefronts. While the facade presents a life-sized facade to the viewer, the surface denies the viewer entry, pointing to the effects of gentrification on the urban spaces. In an October 1986 issue of *Arts Magazine*, editor Richard Martin connected these paintings to gentrification in his article, "What is Absent in Objects: The New Paintings of Martin Wong". He stated that the painting is "also a narrative by implication, as Wong points out that the church was kicked out of the building described and continued to have services in an old school bus across the street."<sup>69</sup> According to Martin, figural absence points to a layered surface that documents multitudes of contexts and memories of past figures to conjure up nostalgia against urban change. This context of gentrification in connection to the lack of figural depiction marks a turning point in the Semaphore Gallery itself; "Last Picture Show"

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<sup>69</sup> Richard Martin, "What Is Absent in Objects: The New Paintings of Martin Wong," *Arts Magazine*, October 1986. A copy created by Florence Wong-Fie was accessed in the Martin Wong Papers (Box 46) at Fales Library.

commemorated the gallery's closing in the same year as its owner, Barry Blinderman, accepted a position as Director of University Galleries at Illinois State University.<sup>70</sup>

Blinderman's decision to close Semaphore East was a contested one. The gallery opened its doors in 1984 due to the encouragement from the artists who were showing in Semaphore Gallery in SoHo, including Wong. Because the gallery was understood to foster a space for younger artists and establish an art movement for them, closing off that space became a disputed move. Artist Mike Cockrill was particularly outspoken about the decision, codifying the choice as a betrayal in his 1986 'zine, *Semaphore Walkout* (Figure 1.10). Moral implications aside, the closing of Semaphore East reveals that its opening was based on the intrinsic relationship between the art object and the market. In a *New York Magazine* article on the closing of Semaphore East gallery, Blinderman states, "We were just about breaking even in the East Village, but the incentive to stay has disappeared. Two years ago, it was important to have a profile in the neighborhood because the East Village art scene was shaping its own aesthetic. Now it's not shaping anything. There are 100 galleries there now showing everything from conceptual to kitsch. Having an East Village gallery now has become an empty gesture."<sup>71</sup> To its artists, Semaphore East might have been initialized as providing cultural space within East Village.

Yet, the moral reasoning behind closing Semaphore East ultimately doesn't matter, because its opening in 1984 built upon a process that had already begun. More accurately, the initial inception of Semaphore East depended on the emptying of space

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<sup>70</sup> Miss Rosen, Barry Blinderman: The Downtown Art Scene, interview, June 11, 2019, <https://www.missrosen.com/barry-blinderman-the-downtown-art-scene/>.

<sup>71</sup> "Gallery Gives Up on East Village Scene," *New York Magazine*, August 11, 1986.

that historian Rebecca Amato theorizes as being a fundamental process in urban gentrification. Amato states, “A declaration of ‘vacancy’ is also a powerful way to produce empty space in a jam-packed, growth-minded city.”<sup>72</sup> By understanding a space or field as untapped capital, hence “empty”, move into that space, and the resulting dispossession it causes becomes justified. In this case, the community of Semaphore East intersects with spatial commodification, in which establishing an art movement initiates capitalism. In a 2019 conversation with Marc H. Miller, Blinderman expanded on how the attempt to carve an art movement centered on location was intrinsically tied to the art market, in which “It [East Village style] was an arbitrary designation that had a lot to do with money, either a profusion of money or a lack of it on the artists’ part.”<sup>73</sup> Only once time had passed did this gentrification become apparent through the homogenization of space, increasing competition, and the commodification of the art object.

If the figural absence of *Iglesia Pentecostal* documents gentrification and its perpetuation through community, the back of the painting reveals the artist’s participation in the galleries and art market. While the human is alienated on the recto, the underpainting of a Chinese opera actor on the verso demonstrates Wong’s engagement with and extensions of belonging to these systems. The premise of negotiating the self toward belonging in various communities elucidates how Wong navigated into

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<sup>72</sup> Rebecca Amato, "12. On Empty Spaces, Silence, and the Pause" In *Aesthetics of Gentrification: Seductive Spaces and Exclusive Communities in the Neoliberal City* edited by Christoph Lindner and Gerard Sandoval, 247-268. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021. 255.  
<https://doi.org/10.1515/9789048551170-013>

<sup>73</sup> Miss Rossen, The explosive rise—and inevitable downfall—of the East Village art scene, interview, Document, September 25, 2019.  
<https://www.documentjournal.com/2019/09/the-explosive-rise-and-inevitable-downfall-of-the-east-village-art-scene/>



Blinderman's social sphere by asking for entrance. The curator's article, "Martin Wong's Chains of Desire", details this instance:

"In the fall of 1983, Martin accompanied Mark Kostabi to Semaphore... That winter, I ran into him at Danceteria... Since we lived a few blocks from each other, we shared a cab back to the Lower East Side, and along the way, he asked impishly if he could join my 'family' as a Semaphore artist. I was elated and offered him a one-person exhibition on the spot for the following September."<sup>74</sup>

The use of "family" to designate the relationship between the Blinderman and his artists indicates that Wong understood how the social was tied to the economy; navigating through one is a means to navigate through the other. The artist interrogated the boundaries of belonging within his practice; this awareness of the underlying social structures that limit inclusion extended his belonging and navigation through it, in which profit was contingent on identification with community.

As Wong's artworks and their subject matter contain an open play with signs that open up community, he also used the art object to build new modes of relationships and affirm his inclusion into these spheres. The artist often traded his works with graffiti artists whose work he sought to collect. Artist Chris "Daze" Ellis recalled when Wong proposed to exchange paintings instead of buying his works.<sup>75</sup> Trading enabled the artist to begin his graffiti collection without having to invest a large amount of funds, while also establishing physical reciprocity in the interpersonal bonds between the self and the other. There are also instances when Wong gave away his paintings. Before his first exhibition at Semaphore Gallery in 1984, the artist gave his paintings away to passersby

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<sup>74</sup> Barry Blinderman, "Martin Wong's Chains of Desire," *Evergreen Review*, accessed May 22, 2023, <https://evergreenreview.com/read/martin-wongs-chains-of-desire/>.

<sup>75</sup> Sean Corcoran and Carlo McCormick, *City as Canvas: New York City Graffiti from the Martin Wong Collection* (New York, NY: Skira Rizzoli, 2013), 231.

on the street. Blinderman recalls, “Martin had been unable to sleep for two days after taking the LSD. In this jagged state, he came convinced that he needed to give away all the paintings in his studio. Dragging over a dozen canvases large and small down six flights of stairs onto Ridge Street, he exclaimed the proverbial New York retailer’s slogan ‘Everything Must Go’ as he handed them over to startled passersby.”<sup>76</sup> Gifting as a process cements the social function of his works, wherein the spontaneous generosity was founded on the “thought [that] my paintings could brighten up some of my neighbors’ lives.”<sup>77</sup> Psychologist Barry Schwartz analyzed the initiating of sociality perpetuated through gift-giving, in which, “The gift imposes an identity upon the giver as well as the receiver. On the one hand, gifts... are frequently given which are consonant with the character of the recipient; yet, such gifts reveal an important secret: the idea which the recipient evokes in the imagination of the giver... The identity he [the giver] thereby generates for himself is perhaps the most important of a long career of identity pronouncements, for it is his last and is unalterable.”<sup>78</sup> The exchanging of materials cements identifications between the giver and the receiver, while the resulting reciprocity or lack of defines the members of an intragroup from an extragroup. Thus, Wong’s gift-giving initiated an invitation of mutuality, imprinting on the receiver upon which further bonds and kinships can be built. The artworks that he used become social devices, in which the depictions interrogating the boundaries of community further help to facilitate the artist’s movement through these socialities.

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<sup>76</sup> Doryun Chong and Cosmin Costinaş, *Taiping Tianguo: A History of Possible Encounters: Ai Weiwei, Frog King Kwok, Tehching Hsieh, and Martin Wong in New York* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015), 111.

<sup>77</sup> “‘Priceless’ Art Irks Dealer.” *New York Magazine*, October 15, 1984.

<sup>78</sup> Barry Schwartz, “The Social Psychology of the Gift.” *American Journal of Sociology* 73, no. 1 (1967): 1–11. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2776124>.

The underpainting of *Iglesia Pentecostal* operates in a similar manner; its obscuration reveals the artist's entrance and navigation of the gallery system and art market by negotiating the self. A photograph of the underpainting (Figure 1.11) in his archives renders the figure visible. Hung on the wall and lit up by lamps flanking its side, the original display of the underpainting in the artist's personal space suggests that Wong painted the figure before *Iglesia Pentecostal*. Temporally, *Iglesia Pentecostal* is on the back of this underpainting. The composition also resonates with the temporal relationship between the two subjects; whereas the *Loisaida* paintings mark his time in 1980s New York, the imagery of Chinatowns resonates with the numerous photo collages of Chinatown the artist created throughout the mid to late 70s (Figure 1.12). Yet, these Chinatown paintings were not finished nor displayed until the 90s. In a 1989 interview with Margo Machida, Wong told the scholar that he "...has a whole body of Chinatown paintings that nobody knows about, I just haven't shown them yet. I still work on them too."<sup>79</sup> After the Chinatown series was exhibited, the artist announced in a 1991 lecture at the San Francisco Art Institute, "Everyone thinks all I paint are Puerto Ricans, but secretly I paint Chinatown. For about the last ten years I've been accumulating a secret stash."<sup>80</sup> In the Chino-Latino interview with Ramirez, Wong told the curator, "The Chinatown series is something I've always wanted to do when I first came to New York, but I didn't have the technical facility yet, so after I did the Lower East Side paintings, that's when I did the Chinatown paintings, like I have wanted to do them for about 20 years and then suddenly I just did them."<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Machida, "Martin Wong: Interview with Margo Machida."

<sup>80</sup> Burkhart and Myers-Szupinska, *My Trip to America by Martin Wong*, 97.

<sup>81</sup> Ramirez, "Chino-Latino: The Loisaida Interview," 119.

The underpainting would manifest into *Chinese New Year's Parade* (Figure 1.13), which utilized the same materials as his Lower East Side paintings. The “technical facility” that the artist emphasized was in regard to how he needed the overall composition highlights the materiality of the paint, allowing the viewer to see the paint as minerals just as Buddhist paintings did.<sup>82</sup> Yet, the artist often oscillated between acrylic and oil paint, so there is little to no change in the medium and cost of materials that Wong worked in to warrant large-scale experimentation for the series. If Wong had been working on Chinatowns for decades, the appearance of other subject matters within this time frame suggests that the lack of “technical facility” also encompasses a social aspect. Just as the opening of Semaphore East was contingent on the art market’s commodification of space, the decision to delay the Chinatown series was in part due to a need to adhere to the demands of the gallery and the larger market. Because most of Wong’s works were shown in gallery exhibitions to generate profit, the gallery acts as an intermediary, forming and facilitating networks between artists and buyers. The gallery space was a manifestation of a larger amorphous market, each mutually informing the practices of each other.

The art market in 80s New York was largely informed by Ronald Reagan’s trickle-down economics. In 1981 and 1986, Tax Acts were passed to lower taxes under the assumption that reducing government spending and taxes would stimulate economic growth. The *People are Talking* episode that Wong participated in discussed this conservatism in government funding; in 1989, Jesse Helms had called for a cut in NEA

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<sup>82</sup> Machida, “Martin Wong: Interview with Margo Machida.”

funding as a part of the economic ethos, citing the controversies of Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano's artworks as reasons to limit grants. By 1991, Helms wanted the states to be in control of the funds instead of Washington, which would cut New York's \$26 million in the 1990 fiscal year to \$7 million.<sup>83</sup> As artists' funding was being threatened, the art market was flooded with capital and the increased affluence of the wealthy classes; Reaganomics led to a "once-secure American middle class... [getting]... shredded, while the richest got the gated precincts of a new Gilded Age. The last time that happened, late in the 19th century, extravagant displays of New World wealth included amassing great collections of Old World art and artifacts. Now, with most of that art long-since spoken for (and transferred into museums), the super-rich angle for what's left: Modern and, since those gems are mostly gone, contemporary art."<sup>84</sup> Contemporary art had found its place with buyers who held both political and financial power, those who were just as concerned about the art object as the artist.

Investment in the artist and their morality, ethics, and personal lives was the driving force behind Helms' call for action. Historian and curator Paul Ardenne explains this fundamental influence of the market on the artist in his chapter for *A History of the Western Art Market*. He writes, "A work of art is a complex equation that does not suffer anonymity well. What it produces of aesthetic feeling, historic information, convention, or subversion demands, for the sake of credibility and value, to be attached to a body. The market therefore, needs the artist as much as the work does; it knows how to outdo itself

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<sup>83</sup> Gwen Ifill, "Senate Votes to Limit Arts Grants," *The New York Times*, September 20, 1991, <https://www.nytimes.com/1991/09/20/arts/senate-votes-to-limit-arts-grants.html>.

<sup>84</sup> Christopher Knight, "L.A.'s Growing Pains, Status," *Los Angeles Times*, December 20, 2009, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-ca-knightessay20-2009dec20-story.html>.

in exploiting the process of identification with the artist, or devotion to his production, a process always active in the act of acquisition of a work of art.”<sup>85</sup> Identity and the meaning of the artwork are directly tied to the profitability of one’s artwork; persona and artifice determine the value of the art.<sup>86</sup> A framework of artifice bridges the contradictions in Wong’s artworks, private life, and public behavior; because the artist didn’t directly comment on Helms’ economic policies, the subject matter of twins relegated the artist’s and *Big Heat*’s appearance on the show. The artist’s awareness of how to navigate the relationship between the private self and the public other effectively hid the anti-capitalist, historical, and social commentary that constitutes his twin reflections.

Like his other articulations of the self as a composite, Wong’s acknowledgment of an artist-subject’s negotiation between private desire and market desire is affirmed by his comments on twinology, wherein the field “hold[s] much fascination for those of us secretly two people from the waist up.”<sup>87</sup> Likewise, it also accounts for Wong’s abrupt interjection in his 1991 lecture in the middle of a discussion about his invitations to the Gay Police Officers Action Committee’s Christmas parties, asking the audience, “Do you ever have the feeling in the morning sometimes when you look in the mirror and see double?”<sup>88</sup> Because the artist-subject is a composite, art objects such as *Iglesia*

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<sup>85</sup> Paul Ardenne, "The Art Market in the 1980s" In *A History of the Western Art Market: A Sourcebook of Writings on Artists, Dealers, and Markets* edited by Titia Hulst, 353-357, 356. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520340770-107>

<sup>86</sup> Gianni Jetzer, Robert Nickas, and Leah Pires, *Brand New: Art & Commodity in the 1980s* (New York, NY: Rizzoli Electa, 2018).

<sup>87</sup> Artasiameica, “Wong, Martin - Selected Document,” <http://artasiameica.org/documents/8766>.

<sup>88</sup> Burkhart and Myers-Szupinska, *My Trip to America by Martin Wong*, 97.

*Pentecostal* retains the fragmentation between desires: private obsession, public belonging, and the market's demands for a singular identification.

Wong's works always left traces of the former material or reference, allowing the viewer to see the power structures and identifications that he critiques.<sup>89</sup> *Iglesia Pentecostal* operates in a contrasting manner; the underpainting on the back retains his private desires to paint a Chinatown series. Wong's preservation of the underpainting suggests a reluctance to efface the subject matter completely, allowing for the possibility of revisiting the reference. The photograph also hints at this motivation; the artist prolifically collected references due to his practice of appropriating mass cultural forms to generate social critique. The codification of the series as a secret accumulation provides the reasoning behind this delay in the project. To present the work publicly, especially in an exhibition format that Semaphore East can provide, the work had to be a part of a series. Displaying a cohesive body of work unified by a singular theme, Chinatown cements a coherent identity for the viewer and buyer. Ardenne further expands on this concept of the self in the art market, in which "Selling work is tantamount to selling an image of the artist as well, a portion of the fate accruing to its uniqueness... By the time an artist put in his appearance on the art scene, he was effectively already formed. No sooner was the figure unveiled than his biography was written, and the critique of his work and the catalogue raisonné were in press."<sup>90</sup> Like gift-giving, identity becomes a persona once perceived by the other. As soon as

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<sup>89</sup> Burkhart and Myers-Szupinska, *My Trip to America by Martin Wong*, 95. Wong had regularly covered his paintings, even painting over the surface of an original Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot. Only retaining the frame, the back of *Cupcake and Paco*, Corot only shows traces of its former representation.

<sup>90</sup> Ardenne, "The Art Market in the 1980s", 357.

perception is built, the art objects contribute to an artist's inclusion and exclusion into social and economic groups.

### ***Conclusions***

The figure in the underpainting behind *Iglesia Pentecostal* took its final form in the *Chinese New Year's Parade*, displayed to the public in *Chinatown USA*. The exhibition opened in January 1993, nearly a decade and a half after the artist had been preparing for it. Charges of Orientalism rushed in, with the extravagant surfaces of Wong's Chinatowns deemed as stereotyping Chineseness.<sup>91</sup> In various interviews, the artist stated that he was not afraid of such criticism, despite his family's worry about the market stereotyping his style.<sup>92</sup> He also acknowledged that his paintings render a "...view of Chinatown is more like an outsider's view."<sup>93</sup> This is in stark contrast to his words, "I refuse to not be Oriental."<sup>94</sup> These seemingly contradictory statements reveal how identity can still exist within the nonchalant play with identifications, which serves to deconstruct the boundaries of community to extend belonging as a process.

Wong's awareness of identifications, outsiders, personas, and reception corresponds to how his Chineseness marked his distance from the Puerto Ricans in the Lower East Side, despite their acceptance and kinships with the artist. Throughout the 1996 interview with Ramirez, Wong insisted on his identification as Chinese and the unbelonging that came with the identification:

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<sup>91</sup> Yee, "Martin Wong's Picture-Perfect Chinatown," 55.

<sup>92</sup> Machida, "Martin Wong: Interview with Margo Machida."

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Yee, "The Secret World of Martin Wong," *Tai ping Tianguo*.



“YR [Yazmin Ramirez]: Did you feel like an outsider a little bit?

MW [Martin Wong]: Yeah like a tourist.

...

YR: Did you ever feel that you were part of the Latino community though?

MW: No!”<sup>95</sup>

Wong was aware of the limits of a community and how identification closes down his belonging. Yet, the artist also extended a closeness through identification with *latinidad*, as opposed to an identification as Latinx. Resulting in a blurred distinction between the Chinese self and the Latino other, the artist’s resistance to singular identification generates a purposeful ambiguity that allows movement through various social groups. Wong would use his stepfather’s half-Mexican ancestry to bring into question how ethnic identification limits inclusion into communities such as the museum and gallery spaces. In the same interview, Ramirez stated that if she had known that the artist had a direct connection to Mexican ancestry, she could have used that identification to give Wong an exhibition at the El Museo del Barrio:

“YR [Yazmin Ramirez]: Well, the hell did I know? Now I’m really mad at you because if I had said that at the Museo de Barrio they might have let me do the show I wanted to do with you.

MW [Martin Wong]: (laughs)

YR: You jerk.

MW: (Laughing) I thought you knew.

YR: How would I know that your father’s half Mexican?

MW: Well you said I was Chino-Latino, so I thought...”<sup>96</sup>

The perception of Wong as Chinese homogenized him into a singular identification, barring him from access to both social and economic inclusion into the Museo del Barrio. Yet, a single identification also immediately secured his belonging. In

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<sup>95</sup> Ramirez, “Chino-Latino: The Loisaida Interview,” 114.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 114-115.

this instance, the decade-long period between the conception of Chinatown's subject matter and its completion enables the artist to culminate his artworks into a singular identification; Wong negotiated his identity to maintain the serial aspect expected by the art market. From bricks, to twins, to *Latinidad*, and then to Chinatown, Wong organized the self and its multitudes of interests and identifications into a single public persona. The materials created out of this compartmentalization highlight the fluidity in identification; the artist utilized art objects to assist with extending belonging within the art market and maintaining inclusion in the social communities.

On a copy of the exhibition's guest book, painter Charley Brown wrote, "Bravo Martin! Finally Chinatown after all those snapshot walks!" (Figure 1.14).<sup>97</sup> A sense of familiarity can be gleaned through the warm felicitation, suggesting that the veil of secrecy has been lifted once another has reciprocated. Artifice and persona can result in a false closeness, as seen in Wong's espousing of Mexican ancestry to Ramirez. However, the artist's ambiguous identity offers the possibility for kinships to form, often leading to real closeness. Reciprocations become evidence of Wong's practice of extending his belonging, simply because another has affirmed this belonging by sharing affection and care. Ramirez's concern for Wong's inclusion into El Museo del Barrio and Brown's memory of a shared experience reveals that he has succeeded in extending his belonging. In this state of working-towards, the awareness of, resistance against, and usage of homogenous identifications allows Wong to further his communion with others.

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<sup>97</sup> Johnson, "Narrative Chronology." Charley Brown was also a member of Wong's cohort at Humboldt State.

## Figures



(Figure 1.1) Martin Wong, *Stanton near Forsyth Street*, 1983. Acrylic on canvas. 48 × 64 in.



(Figure 1.2) Martin Wong, *Untitled (Self-portrait)*, c. 1974–75. Acrylic on canvas with hand-painted frame. 14 15/16 × 17 5/16 in.





(Figure 1.3) Martin Wong, *Self-Portrait*, 1993. Acrylic on canvas. 40 in. diameter.



(Figure 1.4) Martin Wong, *Big Heat*, 1986. Acrylic on linen. 60 1/8 × 48 1/8in.





(Figure 1.5) Martin Wong, *Hypnos and Thanatos*, date unknown. Pencil on paper. Scanned from the Martin Wong Papers at Fales Library & Special Collections.



(Figure 1.6) Martin Wong, *Co-dependant No More*, 1992. 46 × 30 in.



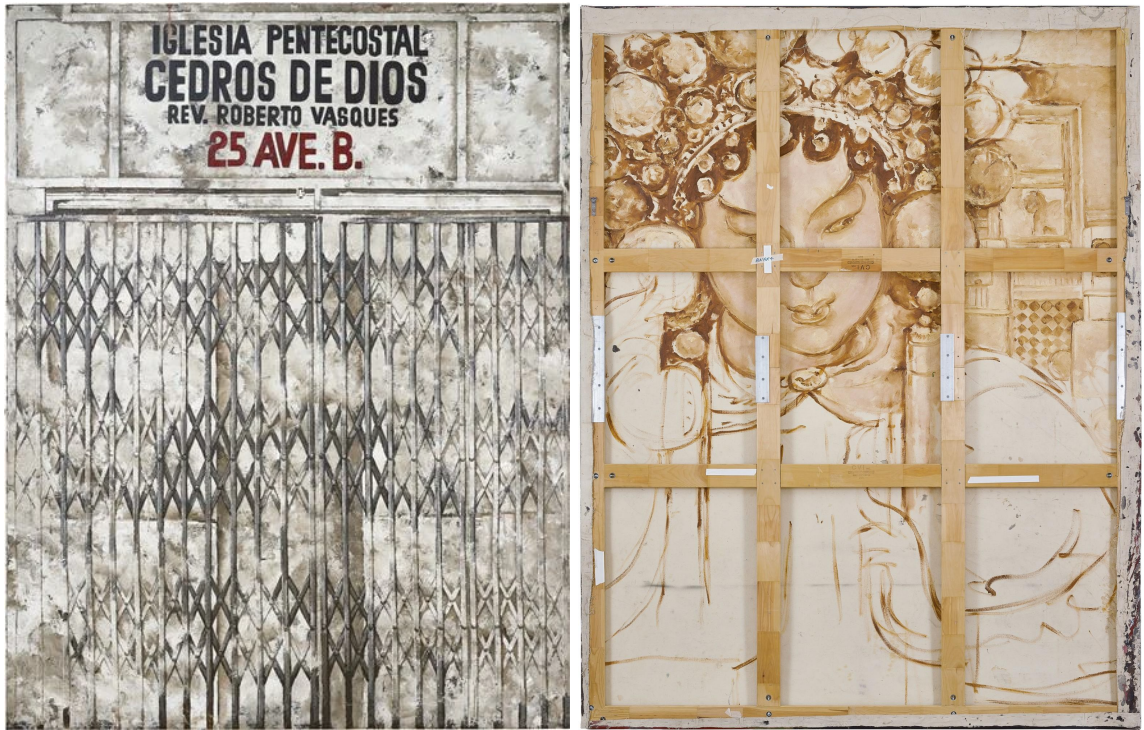


(Figure 1.7) Martin Wong, *Sanja Cake*, 1992. Acrylic on canvas. 32 × 30 1/8in.

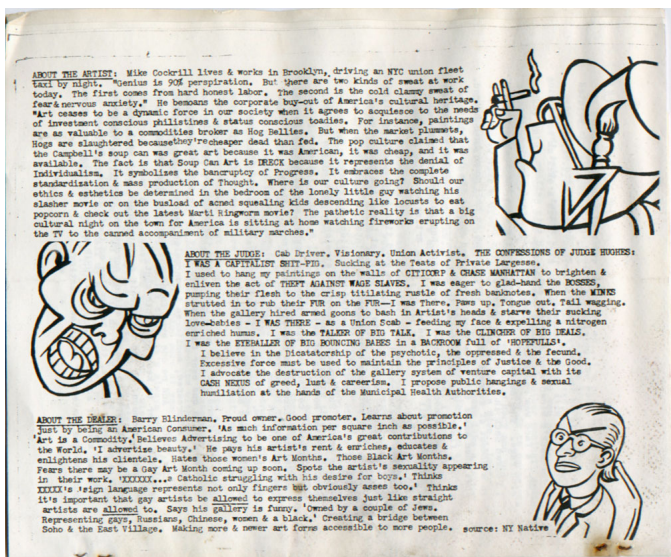
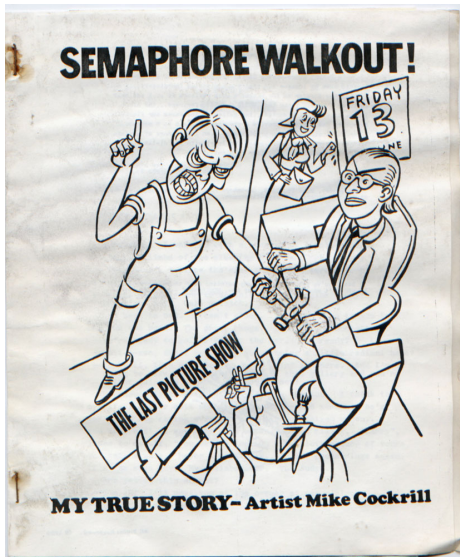


(Figure 1.8) Food label (scanned from the Martin Wong Papers at Fales Library & Special Collections), c. 1982-1999.





(Figure 1.9) Martin Wong, *Iglesia Pentecostal* (front and back), 1986. Acrylic on canvas.  
107½ × 83¼ in.



(Figure 1.10) Mike Cockrill, "Semaphore Walkout!" front and back cover, with biographies of artists Cockrill and Hughes and antagonist Barry "Larry the Dealer" Blinderman, 1986.





(Figure 1.11) Photograph (scanned from the Martin Wong Papers at Fales Library & Special Collections), c. 1982-1999.



(Figure 1.12) Photocollage (scanned from the Martin Wong Papers at Fales Library & Special Collections), 1977.





(Figure 1.13) Martin Wong, *Chinese New Year's Parade*, 1992-1994. Oil on linen. 84 × 120 1/2 in.

Bravo Martin!  
finally Chinatown after all  
those snapshot walks.  
Charley Brown

(Figure 1.14) Copy of guest book (scanned from the Martin Wong Papers at Fales Library & Special Collections), c. 1993.



## Chapter 2: Afterlives

In 1994, Wong was diagnosed with AIDS. This discovery upheaved the artist's life in the Lower East Side, forcing him to move back in with his parents. As previously discussed, Wong was not by any means apolitical towards the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Many he knew contracted the illness and died of HIV-caused complications, including Miguel Piñero. While Wong opted for nonchalant humor to avoid political overtones in the discussion of his artworks, the artist participated in multiple shows that suggested the presence of a neutral persona that masked a private political self. Since the 1980s, his participation in Exit Art, Asian American Arts Center, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Community Center, the Decade Show, and various other exhibitions and organizations reveal overt political undertones within his work and practice. This is evidenced by the iconographies in his works, where pictorial depictions of the HIV/AIDS epidemic became a personal reality for the self. After the 1996 interview, Ramirez published an article titled, "*La Vida: The Life and Writings of Miguel Piñero in the Art of Martin Wong.*" She noted the prominence of twin imagery in the three depictions of Piñero throughout *La Vida* and the mourning that motivated the community portrait. With a seropositive diagnosis, the artist's contemplations became personal consequences.<sup>98</sup>

By the 1990s, the HIV/AIDS crisis had ravaged individuals and many social groups, predominantly affecting gay men. New York and San Francisco became the two most affected metropolitan areas, both with large populations of gay men. Because the cities had different populations, the conversation in New York centered on San

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<sup>98</sup> See Yazmin Ramirez, Marcia Tucker, Barry Blinderman, and Dan Cameron, "*La Vida: The Life and Writings of Miguel Piñero in the Art of Martin Wong.*" in *Sweet Oblivion: The Urban Landscape of Martin Wong* (New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1998), pp. 33-52, 33.

Francisco's education programs and providing resources to those with a positive diagnosis.<sup>99</sup> This was likely due to population demographics; white gay men encompassed most of the seropositive diagnoses in San Francisco while many in New York were people of color, with the infection transferred via needles.<sup>100</sup> In 1983, the University of California, San Francisco and San Francisco General Hospital were the first to develop an outpatient AIDS clinic and the San Francisco Model of Care, which emphasized treating patients with respect and compassion. In all likelihood, Wong moved back to San Francisco to be under his family's care and the city's health system.<sup>101</sup>

As he moved back home, the artist declared his retirement.<sup>102</sup> While he marked an end to his career and art production in New York, he continued to paint. The first section of the following chapter explores how the artist continually engaged with queering under the watchful gazes of his family. His cacti and succulent series evoke the body, wherein plants take on the qualities of the flesh. These visual explorations enable the artist to continue queering his body while shielding it, simultaneously asserting bodily autonomy while navigating his belonging to family. This resistant process of working-towards belonging resists the oppressive narratives surrounding queer bodies and desire. The second section focuses on the lives of those who knew and loved Wong and how they extended his belonging posthumously. Wong's artistic practices were persistent assertions of his social navigation; the continued preservation of his works ensures a legacy to perpetuate this belonging. By participating in and reciprocating the process of

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<sup>99</sup> *The New York State Department of Health Aids Institute, July 30, 1983 - July 30, 2008: 25 Years of Leadership, Service and Compassion* (Albany, NY: AIDS Institute, New York State Dept. of Health, 2010).

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Ault, "Martin Wong Was Here," 95.

<sup>102</sup> Ramirez, "Chino-Latino: The Loisaída Interview," 119-121.

working-towards, those who loved Wong formed their personhood and subjectivity by mourning the artist's death. Thus, recent literature can be read as asking the reader to bear witness and perpetuate the steps to community, even despite never knowing the artist personally.

Ultimately, this chapter attempts to understand how Wong continued this active working-towards after a life and career in New York. The precarious and unstable nature of belonging threatens the ill and dead of being forgotten, even if a community had extended inclusion for them. Once a person dies, the imprints of them fade. Yet, the artist's social navigations and negotiations of identity extend past his retirement, illness, and death, pointing to the impact of his awareness of the fluid nature of belonging. As his works are increasingly exhibited, his legacy and place within the canon are cemented. In this afterlife, the artist's works and feelings within them are perpetuated through multiple loved ones. His activity after a life remains in them, and through him, they can assert their subjectivity by reciprocating the process of working-towards belonging to others. While the first chapter emphasized how Wong navigates community, this chapter analyzes how his undeniable belonging transforms into a perpetual process. He comes to be accepted and reciprocated even after life; this process of belonging allows the people who loved him to in turn extend both his and their belonging to scholars who have never met him. In this way, the possibility for community, communion, and communication arises within perpetuation of the self.

## ***Bodily Ecologies***

With the artist's parents living in San Francisco and the city's infrastructure adapting to treating those with the illness, Wong moved back to his childhood hometown within the same year as his diagnosis. The artist's mother and stepfather have always provided support, whether financially or physically. Marci Kwon's 2021 interview with Wong's long-time friend, Gary Ware, reveals the intimate details of the family dynamics. Ware states, "Everybody loved him and wanted to help him... Of course, over the years, his mother and stepfather were helping support him... Mom and Pop were always there to back him up. And they helped him financially."<sup>103</sup> Especially during the HIV/AIDS epidemic, many had to default on familial support as friends were also being diagnosed with the illness or could not provide constant care as a biological family is expected to. That is to say, even though the relationships that Wong built in New York were real, tangible, and felt, the epidemic had prevented any large-scale support from forming, forcing patients to rely on their families.<sup>104</sup> The artist's Chinese ancestry has some part to play in this shift in social spheres, in which family relationships constitute the social lives of patients.<sup>105</sup> Namely, family provides care as much as preventing social death.<sup>106</sup>

In 1996, the artist declared his retirement to Ramirez:

“YR [Yazmin Ramirez]: So what are you painting now?

MW [Martin Wong]: Nothing. I'm retired.

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<sup>103</sup> Kwon, "Gary Ware: Interview with Marci Kwon, Pt. 2."

<sup>104</sup> *The New York State Department of Health Aids Institute, July 30, 1983 - July 30, 2008: 25 Years of Leadership, Service and Compassion.*

<sup>105</sup> Shan Qiao, "The role of social relationship in HIV healing and its implications in HIV cure in China." *Health psychology and behavioral medicine* vol. 3,1 (2015): 115-127.  
doi:10.1080/21642850.2015.1040405

<sup>106</sup> See Lisa Cacho's *Social Death: Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected* to further think through the implications of confinement's effect on personhood, especially when identity is contingent on capitalist and heteropatriarchal measures of worth.

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YR: Are you satisfied with what you've done?

MW: Yeah, that's basically why I stopped painting... I knew I couldn't equal what I've done, you know... When I was younger, I was always paranoid that I would die before I could finish my paintings."<sup>107</sup>

The first few years of the artist's move back to San Francisco were largely occupied by his health complications. After staying at Roosevelt Hospital<sup>108</sup> in New York, Florence Wong-Fie, Benjamin Wong-Fie, and Gary Ware traveled to Manhattan to aid in the artist's recovery. His mother would stay behind in order to escort the artist back.<sup>109</sup> Both parents and Ware provided medical care, assistance, and a support system for Wong, in a time when, "...he simply lay in bed for almost a year without much of anything, he was so down and out. He was depressed, of course, because he was so laid up."<sup>110</sup> The proclaimed lack of artistic production was in part due to his declining health but was also due to social isolation from those he also considered "family".<sup>111</sup> This is further complicated by the artist's physical confinement to his childhood home and limited contact with anyone outside of his mother, stepfather, and Ware.

Despite a close relationship with his parents, family was a community that held complicated dynamics. Throughout a 1989 interview with Margo Machida, the artist briefly spoke on what his parents thought of his choice in career:

"MM [Margo Machida]: So when you became an artist, was that a big blow to them?

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<sup>107</sup> Ramirez, "Chino-Latino: The Loisaida Interview," 119-121.

<sup>108</sup> Roosevelt Hospital has since merged with Mount Sinai Health System and was renamed to Mount Sinai West in 2013.

<sup>109</sup> Marci Kwon, "Gary Ware: Interview with Marci Kwon, Pt. 6," Martin Wong Catalogue Raisonné, August 2, 2022, <https://exhibits.stanford.edu/martin-wong/about/2021-gary-ware-interview-with-marci-kwon-pt-6>.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Blinderman, "Martin Wong's Chains of Desire."

MW [Martin Wong]: Not really. I mean they kind of wanted me to work for Bechtel but when I decided to become an artist my mom's attitude was, you're lucky you became an artist... Because after I decided to become an artist there was a big oil crunch and they laid off a lot of people from a lot of those places."<sup>112</sup>

At this moment, the artist coated his parent's sentiments with an air of nonchalance.

However, those who are close to him, especially in Wong's younger years, often expressed how much his mother and stepfather's expectations weighed on him. Having attended Humboldt State University with Wong, Ware states, "Art wasn't supposed to be his degree when he was there. His parents didn't want him to major in art. They kept telling him that art is a hobby. You, you need to have a real job... he did not want to become a landscape architect, which his parents thought would be a more lucrative thing to do."<sup>113</sup> While Wong enjoyed a close relationship with his parents, these tensions of parental expectations inevitably influenced the artist's practice, especially in relation to the art market.

Thus, the artist's practice not only reflected isolation away from the communities he engaged with but also the navigation through familial dynamics. In this way, the absence of artistic production and a definitive proclamation of retirement likely pointed to a loss of social and artistic freedom under the gaze of his parents. Such is gleaned through the change in subject matter when the artist started painting again, inspired by his returns to New York and its social sphere.<sup>114</sup> Paintings of graffiti artists Sharp and Angel

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<sup>112</sup> Machida, "Martin Wong: Interview with Margo Machida."

<sup>113</sup> Marci Kwon, "Gary Ware: Interview with Marci Kwon," Martin Wong Catalogue Raisonné, July 18, 2022, <https://exhibits.stanford.edu/martin-wong/about/2021-gary-ware-interview-with-marci-kwon>.

<sup>114</sup> Kwon, "Gary Ware: Interview with Marci Kwon, Pt. 6." Ware stated that Wong put all his energy to meet with people instead of painting during these New York trips, in which he would later return to "painting again. So [Florence and Ben] cleared out the basement for him and made a little studio for him downstairs [in San Francisco]. That's when he painted those pictures of Sharp."

Ortiz, a Puerto Rican Parade, and architecture echo his social realist stylization previous to the move back to San Francisco. His return to New York from 1996 to 1998 culminated pictorially in these paintings, which project nostalgia for that social reality. However, visual evidence of the artist's navigation of family manifests through the cacti and succulent paintings produced throughout his final years. Whereas the New York-inspired paintings are completely flat and devoid of the sexuality that characterized his New York years, these cacti paintings embody and explore a bodily sensuality that the artist was not able to openly do while at home in San Francisco.

*Echinocereus Tulensis* (Figure 2.1), depicts a monochrome, curvilinear form amidst a black field. The background gradually lightens towards the bottom; the gray brush marks transition from dark to light to create an atmospheric effect. In a similar interplay between light and dark, the chiaroscuro forms mounds that point to the cardinal directions. Gray midtones blend into black shadows to create an illusion of mass and plumpness in the central form. White outlines highlight the contours, further distinguishing the form from the background. Spherical areoles sit on the top and side portions; yellow spines, grouped in three, surround these white orbs. Through the illumination of a central light source, the four mounds cause the viewer's gaze to flit between each constituent in a deltoid, or kite, pattern. At the center of this cluster, two smaller nubs emerge. These are likewise treated with the same gestural brushwork to create an illusion of volume and light. While the paint is blended, the brushstrokes are still visible to the eye. The chiaroscuro, curvilinearity, and subtly uneven texture coalesce into an organic and voluptuous mass. The title, *Echinocereus Tulensis*, directs the

identification of the portrayal as a succulent. The focus on botanical study points to a desexualization of the artist's practice. This is also seen in the figural paintings of the same period; skin was shown but never in a sexual manner. Devoid of embellishments, *the surface* echoes a desexualized quietude and stillness within the attention to formalist qualities.

Like the figural absence in his storefront and architectural paintings, *Echinocereus Tulensis* recalls the contexts and people missing. In a 1989 interview with Margo Machida, Wong elucidated how his paintings derive from people. He stated, "To me that's how you get worked up about the painting, if you can get worked up about the person then you're more likely to get worked up about the painting."<sup>115</sup> The succulent paintings compositionally disassociate from people. Yet, impressions of skin, flesh, and cellulite pervade the canvas. The semblance to human breasts renders anthropomorphic qualities within the abstracted succulent. This visual reference to the body is furthered by the painting's structural properties; Wong painted *Echinocereus Tulensis* on a 20 by 30-inch rectangular canvas, rendering the likeness to breasts life-sized. The emphasis on the chiaroscuro and fluidity of lines depart from the artist's formerly ornamented style; the cacti is isolated from the deconstructionist play between subject matters of twins, sexuality, and identifications evident in his earlier state of working-towards community.

However, the discursivity of the surface in the former works remains. That is to say, these paintings are not devoid of play between the signs. Philosopher Jacques Derrida's 1966 lecture, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human

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<sup>115</sup> Machida, "Martin Wong: Interview with Margo Machida."



Sciences,” describes discursivity as the free play of concepts. By examining the structurality of structure, Derrida understands Western thought as ordered around a conceptualized center, which solidifies thinking through binaries and limits the possibility for free play. Throughout history, these centers are substituted and manifested into different understandings of presence: existence, consciousness, God, man, etc. Such a multiplicity points to the desire for a constant and stable center, negating the existence of a center altogether. The awareness of an absence of a locus, or the rupture that decenters a single source, allows the signs to freely interplay; the signifier and signified can maintain fluid association that enables meaning to be disassembled and reconstructed. Derrida states, “Freeplay is the disruption of presence... Freeplay is always an interplay of absence and presence.”<sup>116</sup> This simultaneous presence and absence of the body in Wong’s *Echinocereus Tulensis* point to the mechanisms from which it was created, much like his earlier works that render a play between public identifications and the private self. The blurring of boundaries between the human and plant likewise points to a visual discourse that enables resistance against identifications to further social inclusion.

The succulent series reveals the artist’s complex navigation through family. Although sparse, various people in Wong’s life and afterlife have mentioned his parent’s tensions with his homosexuality. In particular, his homosexuality was shrouded in silence and absence. In performance theorist Joshua Chambers-Letson’s book, *After the Party: A Manifesto for Queer of Color Life*, his conversation with artist Dahn Vō revealed that “...in spite of the obviously close relationship between Martin and Florence, Martin’s

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<sup>116</sup> Jacques Derrida and Alan Bass, *Writing and Difference* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 369.

sexuality lived behind a veil of prohibitive silence.”<sup>117</sup> Wong’s involvement with The Angels of Light added to this tension. Having split from an avant-garde theater group, The Cockettes, the Angels of Light manifested the hippie psychedelic counterculture of the 70s. Living a communal lifestyle and renouncing individual authorship, the group disallowed its members to hold jobs outside of the group. Despite the artist’s involvement in creating stage sets and masks for the group’s performances, he had maintained independence from them. Former member Beaver Bauer explains that Florence Wong-Fie disapproved of his involvement, desiring for the artist to maintain an income: “...When you were working with us, you weren’t supposed to be doing paid gigs. And his mother wanted him to make money with his art.”<sup>118</sup>

According to those who knew the artist, the theatre group was a venue for the artist to explore his sexuality and come out, which his mother disapproved of. Another former member, Tahara commented, “...He felt being gay with his family background was causing problems...”<sup>119</sup> Ware reaffirmed the role the group had in Martin’s sexual identity and Florence Wong-Fie’s disapproval of them:

“I think even though she knew Martin was gay—he kept trying to say that to her, but she didn’t really want to address the issue—the idea of men running around dressing up as a woman did not appeal to her very much. The other thing was that she felt that they were promiscuous. Expression of sex did not appeal to Aunt Florence very much. And I think she was afraid for Martin’s safety.”<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Joshua Takano Chambers-Letson, *After the Party: A Manifesto for Queer of Color Life* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2018), 122.

<sup>118</sup> Burkhart and Myers-Szupinska, *My Trip to America by Martin Wong*, 120.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Marci Kwon, “Gary Ware: Interview with Marci Kwon, Pt. 3,” Martin Wong Catalogue Raisonné, August 2, 2022, <https://exhibits.stanford.edu/martin-wong/about/2021-gary-ware-interview-with-marci-kwon-pt-3>.

His parent's silence, and even disapproval, is reflected in Wong's works, both figurally and botanically. As flesh was desexualized, plants provided a subject matter that was socially acceptable. Especially with his health complications, illness often leads to a social denial of sexual desire and autonomy. Because the body is othered as abnormal, even perverse, ill bodies are either desexualized or hypersexualized; one denies sexual desire to prevent reproduction, and the other is a manifestation of the anxieties of perverse reproduction.<sup>121</sup> Both of these ethos stem from essentialist ideas that a healthy normative sexuality is only capable by those with a whole and unfragmented body and mind. This is especially explored in disability studies; upon visual recognition of a disability, the viewer undermines the person's autonomy, in which the "...opportunities for sexual agency, self-determination and autonomy... [become]... marred by essentialist and essentializing discourses that equate disabled sexualities as Other to, and of, the 'normal' heterosexual able-body."<sup>122</sup>

These ideologies are further complicated by a diagnosis of HIV/AIDS, which has been characterized by the conservative right as a metaphor for punishment for sexual perversity; identification of illness in this case signals a judgment on moral character.<sup>123</sup> Thus, sex is stigmatized in relation to the flesh because the body is not considered to be human and incapable of distinguishing between moral and immoral. Since HIV/AIDS was understood as a "gay disease" in the 1970s and 1980s, identification with the illness is tied to homosexuality, and the fear of an infectious eradication of the self and bodily

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<sup>121</sup> Cassandra Loeser, Barbara Pini, and Vicki Crowley, "Disability and Sexuality: Desires and Pleasures," *Sexualities* 21, no. 3 (2017): 255–70, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460716688682>.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>123</sup> Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors*, 53.

agency is conflated with the homophobia of the other. A positive diagnosis had to be kept a secret because it inserted the self into a “...community of pariahs.”<sup>124</sup>

While Wong’s family constituted the support system for the artist, it was also a community that he had to navigate in order to make the social relations less tenuous. Interpersonal relationships, community, and family can replicate othering in an attempt to define themselves through dis/similarities. Chambers-Letson gleaned this, writing, “This silence must have been painful for him to endure, as it often is for many queers and trans people who accept some form of prohibition in order to sustain relationships with biological families that sustain us in other vital ways.”<sup>125</sup> Under these contexts, the succulent paintings provide a social function. The painted succulents are based on what the artist found during his visits to Ware’s cacti and succulent shows at the Hall of Flowers in Golden Gate Park. He recalls the family’s involvement with these activities, stating:

“So Martin and Ben and Aunt Florence, and sometimes our friend Virginia, would come to the Hall of Flowers to see those shows and see the plants. So Martin was always interested because they’re very interesting-looking plants. They’re sculptural, and they’re odd-looking things... So Martin started buying plants. And I gave dozens of plants to Aunt Florence to put in her backyard because I had all these extras. Pretty soon, she had a whole backyard full of them. And they had an atrium in the house, and she filled that up full of plants as well.”<sup>126</sup>

These cacti and succulents were social; they were acquired through gifting, imbuing them into socialities and the economy. The artist took multiple photographs that document these cacti not just as studies, but as a fundamental part of his parent’s home and Ware (Figure 2.2). The blurred image of succulents is rendered visible in the outskirts. Art

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid, 131.

<sup>125</sup> Chambers-Letson, *After the Party: A Manifesto for Queer of Color Life*, 122.

<sup>126</sup> Kwon, “Gary Ware: Interview with Marci Kwon, Pt. 6.”

historian Giovanni Aloï speaks of the blurring as a device to carry out a transgression, wherein, “Blurred photographs broke the straightforward linguistic connection between form and content—they inserted hesitation where once was affirmation. They shattered the sensuality of surfaces to focus on a broader overview of connectedness.”<sup>127</sup> The paintings of these succulents reassert this connectedness between the artist and his family in San Francisco, with Wong using the othering of plants to navigate community and extend his belonging.

Yet, a transgression has occurred within the blurring of boundaries between body and plants. Despite the allusion to the feminine body, these images are not yonic; *Echinocereus Tulensis* only reference the breast. Throughout Renaissance iconography, the breast has signified female provision of nourishment.<sup>128</sup> Likewise, female nudity either signaled the depiction of feminine ideals, which include beauty, or the ethos of women’s inherent closeness with the natural world, which intersected race and colonialism with gendered sexuality.<sup>129</sup> Wong’s female nudes contain “...undertones of eroticism that come out.”<sup>130</sup> Various sketches depict the *Venus pudica*, or the classical pose wherein the hands are placed over the breasts and genitalia. These sketches reveal that the artist engaged with the Western canon through female nudity and eroticism. In addition, the artist has painted the *Winged Victory of Samothrace* and the *Venus de Milo*

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<sup>127</sup> Giovanni Aloï, *Why Look at Plants?: The Botanical Emergence in Contemporary Art* (Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2019), 30.

<sup>128</sup> Megan Holmes, “Disrobing the Virgin: The Madonna Lactans in Fifteenth Century Florentine Art,” in *Picturing Women in Renaissance and Baroque Italy*, eds. S. Matthews Grieco and G. Johnson (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 167-195.

<sup>129</sup> Paul Gauguin and Diego Rivera’s depictions of women often fetishized indigeneity as pure and free from corruption.

<sup>130</sup> Rebecca Dimling Cochran, “April 21–August 6, 1995,” *Art at the Edge: Social Turf*, 1995.

(Figure 2.3).<sup>131</sup> Likewise, his 1982 triptych, *Tai Ping Tien Kuo* (Figure 2.4), renders the artist's parents nude. Recalling a similar composition to William-Adolphe Bouguereau's *The Abduction of Psyche*, the reworking of the European iconography references the Taiping Rebellion in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which contributed to the immigration that gave rise to Chinatowns.<sup>132</sup> His 1992 painting, *Saturday Night* (Figure 2.5), features two women in a bathtub, as one cups the breast of the other. Building upon his arrangement of a bathtub in between a toilet and a sink in his 1984 mixed-media work, *White Slavery*, the composition engages in the visual play with the mass cultural forms to enable the artist to explore his own Orientalism, gender, and eroticization.<sup>133</sup> <sup>134</sup> Throughout Wong's portrayal of the female nude, the artist engages with classical European traditions, reworking the figure to understand his own existence.

Wong's cacti and succulent paintings are not overtly sexual. However, these abstractions contain and preserve the resonances of the feminine body and its erotic undertones. Serving the same purpose of understanding his own experience through the nude, the artist rendered this iconography differently. While not all of the cacti series exhibited such references to the female body, most retain this bodily quality. Paintings such as *Double Lithops*, *Gymnocalycium saglione*, *Mammillaria wildii crest* (Figure 2.6), and *Mammillaria* do not visually reference the female body but still employ an organic

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<sup>131</sup> Only a photograph of the painting exists in the Martin Wong Papers; painted around the early 1980s, the painting is depicted in his style of emphasizing musculature in a similar manner as the 1974 self portrait.

<sup>132</sup> Margo Machida, "Family as a Conduit to Things Chinese," Martin Wong Catalogue Raisonné, July 11, 2022, <https://exhibits.stanford.edu/martin-wong/feature/family-as-a-conduit-to-things-chinese>.

<sup>133</sup> See Lydia Yee's chapter, "Martin Wong's Picture-Perfect Chinatown," in *Sweet Oblivion: The Urban Landscape of Martin Wong*, 53-63.

<sup>134</sup> Machida, Yee, and Kwon all have scholarship on Wong that speaks to the artist's Orientalization and how sexuality and gender factors into it.

quality reminiscent of the body. This quality is abstracted, creating an otherworldly and exoticized body. This departure towards abstracted plants is how Wong engaged with bodily queerness under conditions where sexual queerness would alienate him. The cacti were not objects of queer desire but operated to hide the continual and resistant process of eroticism, both in existence and in contemplation.

Animal studies have explored how objectification occurs in both animals and plants. Anthropocentric standards of being—sentience, awareness, consciousness, communication, etc.—are used to affirm humanity’s power over flora and fauna. While plants are othered, nature is often conflated with reproduction; many would cite this link to espouse homophobia, in which “...ideas, spaces, and practices designated as ‘nature’ are often so vigorously defended against queers in a society in which that very nature is increasingly degraded and exploited...”<sup>135</sup> In his book, *Why Look at Plants?*, Aloï expands on how “...acknowledging plants’ agency or alternative modes of sentience entails risking the human once again...”<sup>136</sup> Western botanical illustrations replicate this othering; scientific study is enacted to dissect, name, and understand plants as other, removing the social entanglements and relations between humans and plants.<sup>137</sup> In this way, humans simultaneously assert power over flora and fauna while projecting their understanding of humanity onto these bodies.

By retaining their scientific names as titles and abstracting representation, Wong exoticized these bodies, simultaneously distancing himself from taboos to further the

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<sup>135</sup> Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson, *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), 5.

<sup>136</sup> Aloï, *Why Look at Plants?: The Botanical Emergence in Contemporary Art*, 9.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

closeness between himself and his family. Yet, the projected anthropomorphism onto these bodies reveals that Wong engaged in bodily explorations, ones that are inherently queer because they transgress the boundaries between humans and flora.<sup>138</sup> These transgressions subvert the rhetoric about nature that has been utilized to alienate gayness, allowing the artist to explore the body in a sociopolitical context where the gay body is seen as foreign, infectious, and perverse. In this sense, the artist's queerness remains at the center, not his sexuality and/or attraction to another. Through the interplay of the body and plants in representations, Wong maintained both his bodily autonomy and a method of identification that subverts community. The continual queering resisted heteronormative assumptions about the body, exploring bodily queerness while desexualizing it. Especially with a seropositive diagnosis, this desexualization simultaneously distanced and brought him closer to multiple identifications to further his belonging. By using plants to further himself from the persecution of an identification, which would have led to exclusion from communities, this choice in subject matter allowed him to further his working-towards belonging while maintaining his sense of self.

Ultimately, these depictions would influence the body itself. Wong's 1999 painting *Black Venus* (Figure 2.7) alienates the female nude through the same monochromatic abstraction that stylized the succulent series. Although the lines are fluid, the musculature is formed through dramatic highlights, with little blending between the black and white; the muscles are isolated to create a clumpy texture. Emerging out of a

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid, 35. Aloï likens plants to the human body rhetorically, stating "Bodies that partake into complex, reflexive, and intra-active relationships of coevolution and becoming." In this way, the author also queers the body and further transgresses these boundaries in writing.



Chinese porcelain cup or vase, the *contrapposto* in the hips leads the eye to the neck and shoulders, to the points of figural fragmentation. Defaced, the figure's identity can only be ascertained through the script on the left and the torso.<sup>139</sup> In this headless, abstracted, fragmented, and nude figure, the body still retains their identity.<sup>140</sup>

### ***Mourning Subjectivity***

As established in the explorations of Wong's works, the artist knew the conditionalities of belonging intimately. The artist always understood his diagnosis constituted a social death; in addition to physical deterioration, these conditions synthesized him into a single identification of AIDS victim, despite his resistances against a singular identification. Wong rarely referred to AIDS directly but had always talked about death often.<sup>141</sup> Kwon's interview with Ware revealed the artist's thinking about death became more somber during his illness. The artist often talked about death when they were younger; once Wong received a positive diagnosis and was bedridden, these conversations came to be about grappling with death, one that the artist knew was inevitable. Ware vividly recalled the details of these instances, saying,

“...he'd sometimes just off the cuff turn around and look at me, and he'd say, 'You're going to die.' ...And then months or weeks later, he would say it to me again. 'You're going to die.' So when he came home during his illness, when he started telling me whenever we'd go out, 'Gary, I'm dying,' I wasn't surprised to

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<sup>139</sup> On the right of the painting, 維納斯的藝術 (The Art of Venus) is inscribed. Not only is Wong's inability to write Chinese rendered legible but the use of Traditional Chinese likely points to the figure being based on a statue or ephemeral objects the artist collected.

<sup>140</sup> For statues from antiquity and even the Renaissance period, the heads and arms are the first and most likely to break off. A female nude with just a torso is a known iconography by the time Wong was born, but there is no certainty whether it was a personal choice to omit the head, especially because the artist painted the *Venus de Milo*, which still has a head.

<sup>141</sup> Louise Siddons, “Exploring Gender/Experiencing AIDS,” Martin Wong Catalogue Raisonné, July 16, 2022, <https://exhibits.stanford.edu/martin-wong/feature/exploring-gender-experiencing-aids>.

hear him say that... he would bring it up repeatedly... I think it was his way of coming to terms with it.”<sup>142</sup>

These conversations allowed Wong to understand this mode of living that is dictated by the immanence of death, in which the self is constantly threatened to be subject to other’s perception. The artist’s belonging did not only constitute survival but to remain in the memories of those that he loved in a manner that he wanted to be remembered. Ware recalls an exchange between the two:

“In a way, he was so anxious not to be forgotten. He literally said... ‘Don’t forget me. You won’t forget me, will you?’ ‘No, I won’t forget you. How could I forget you? You’re too much. I can’t forget you.’”<sup>143</sup>

In this instance, the artist forewent his nonchalance and humor, which had always been a method to cope and to understand his personhood. Instead, sincerity permeates these interactions and conversations about death, especially with a person who identified with the artist.<sup>144</sup>

From just this interaction, it is clear Wong’s biological and found families cared for and loved him back. His parents knew of his sexuality and illness; despite any disapproval, they carefully organized dosages of his medicine and assisted in administering them.<sup>145</sup> They nursed the artist back to relative health, giving him time to travel, make art, and re-enabling his social life. Ware stated, “We were so lucky. In a sense, we were able to make the very best of a bad situation. We got in all kinds of adventures. We got in all kinds of art. And we got trips to New York. We got to go to the

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<sup>142</sup> Kwon, “Gary Ware: Interview with Marci Kwon, Pt. 6.”

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Ware is likely queer; in the first part of the interview with Kwon, he recounts how the two of them were nervous to go to gay bars in San Francisco during college.

<sup>145</sup> Kwon, “Gary Ware: Interview with Marci Kwon, Pt. 6.”

zoo. And there was painting done and stuff... With his folks... They stepped right up and did it. So lots of points, many points they get for that.”<sup>146</sup> The artist’s love was returned, and he was taken care of, supported, and mourned. This belonging was in part due to the effort of the artist, whose willingness to work-towards community extended an invitation for reciprocity.

The artist had yearned for community and family; his notes and thinking revealed that he understood and navigated the conditionalities of belonging. In return, he was accepted. He participated in domestic and international exhibitions, and others had expressed wanting to do a show with him.<sup>147</sup> His artworks were bought, with a painting shown at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. His parents and Ware traveled to New York to visit him, proudly standing at the Met.<sup>148</sup> Others drew him, and they gave him the portrait almost as evidence of their acceptance and love.<sup>149</sup> He formed the Museum of American Graffiti with friend and artist Peter Broda in 1989; after his diagnosis and move back to San Francisco in 1994, he donated the collection to the Museum of the City of New York, which accepted the collection and since created a traveling exhibition commenced in 2014. After his death in August of 1999, he continued to be loved. His mother maintains his room in their San Francisco house while maintaining the sales of his works. Broda

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Ramirez, “Chino-Latino: The Loisaida Interview,” 114-115.

<sup>148</sup> Marci Kwon, “Gary Ware: Interview with Marci Kwon, Pt. 5,” Martin Wong Catalogue Raisonné, August 2, 2022, <https://exhibits.stanford.edu/martin-wong/about/2021-gary-ware-interview-with-marci-kwon-pt-5>.

Ware recalls how when Wong’s painting was placed in the Met, he, Florence, and Ben Wong-Fie went to see it. The artist’s mother was so proud of this accomplishment that she approached visitors, telling them about the painting. She would end the tour with, “Oh, you know that this is my son’s picture.”

<sup>149</sup> Throughout the Mart Wong Papers, one of the least unexpected things was how many portraits of Wong there were hidden in the boxes. These instances of confronting the artist, depicted in another’s style, revealed how imbued with sociality he was, even in his collecting practices.

cleaned everything from Wong's apartment to form his estate.<sup>150</sup> Broda took his art to PPOW Gallery and brought his papers to New York University Libraries to form an archive.<sup>151</sup> Since then, various exhibitions have been held both domestically and abroad; as a result, exhibition catalogs form the basis of much of the literature on the artist. These essays focus on a single aspect of a series, largely defined temporally. This fragmentation of the artist through the literature reflects and perpetuates the artist's practice; series were used to navigate the market, satisfy Wong's fascination with a single subject, and evade the taboos of his other works. If the artist's practice is imbued with this deliberate process of working-towards community, then the actions of those who work to perpetuate the artist's legacy also constitute a reciprocation—of working-towards Wong.

The formation of an artist's archive, especially those with a seropositive diagnosis, depended on fragments collected by their biological and found families. Robb Hernandez's book, *Archiving an Epidemic: Art, AIDS, and the Queer Chicana Avant-Garde*, analyzes how the archive can be imbued with tensions caused by a community's claim over an artist's personal effects. This requires an approach and analysis that depends on articulating an archival body/space; the destruction of materials reflected how the HIV/AIDS epidemic devastated queers of color's lives and the communities they belonged to. Family members would intervene with an oeuvre, erasing the connections between artists and traces of an artist's sexuality. Hernandez writes, "Biological families oftentimes dissolved, trashed, or looted the deceased's private

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<sup>150</sup> Amy Zion and Peter Broda, "Martin Wong's Jackets: Estate as Process." *Art Journal* 76, no. 1 (2017): 75–80, 75. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45142446>.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*

collections.”<sup>152</sup> This imposition of silence requires a methodology that articulates the role of the bits and pieces of materials that have been relegated. Archivist and historian Harrison Apple’s article, “I Can’t Wait for You to Die: A Community Archives Critique,” further polemicizes the ethics of an archive. They recall how Robert “Lucky” Johns’ destruction of his own materials of the Travelers Social Club. Raided by the police and then losing the federal court case in 1988, Johns’ materials signaled the hostility towards homosexuality and the destruction the epidemic wrecked upon its members. With membership being obscured from the public as a way to shield it from identifications and their consequences, materials stopped circulating. Johns’ multiple attempts at destruction were caused by his mourning of the club’s members, in which “...the actual processes of arrangement, description, and endless repetition were not empowering for Lucky [Johns].”<sup>153</sup> Archiving and digitizing a collection meant pulling up memories that were painful for its owner. In this instance, Apple’s custodianship of the collection led to a refusal to publicly archive Johns’s materials, informed by his own intervention of the material and what it might mean to those who are still living.

Hernandez’s book and Apple’s article seem to contradict each other, with the former arguing for the re-creation of the archival body and the latter arguing to shield it for those still mourning. However, at the center of both authors’ arguments is the ethics of archival processes and historicization, by extension. Both sought to understand and define the other’s role in an archive. For Hernandez, this is about what scholars can do to

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<sup>152</sup> Robb Hernandez, *Archiving an Epidemic: Art, AIDS, and the Queer Chicana Avant-Garde* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2019), 8.

<sup>153</sup> Harrison Apple, "I Can't Wait for You to Die": A Community Archives Critique." *Archivaria* 92 (2021): 110-137, 118. [muse.jhu.edu/article/840122](https://muse.jhu.edu/article/840122).

reconstruct using ephemeral materials for the preservation of the artist. He states, “An emphasis on containers’ interiority demands a rethinking of the neutral grounds of storage, especially in lieu of a custodian’s care, object safeguards, and staged encounters with different light sources to embellish or shield.”<sup>154</sup> Whether materials are protected and stored by someone or by no one, these contexts affect the visibility of, access to, and the materials themselves. For Apple, this is turned inwards towards the self. They state, “What was left of physical evidence resembled an opaque and reflective surface. I was tempted to see my own reflection in this as evidence of a queer history to call my own.”<sup>155</sup> The other defines the archive. The archive itself “infinitely rehearses their last words.”<sup>156</sup> These accumulations of materials recreate the deceased; it is the living who create and continue to live on through these afterlives.

In many ways, the perpetuation of Wong’s work and memory parallels these narratives set forth by Hernandez and Apple. After Wong died in 1999, those who knew him worked tirelessly to continue his memory through his art. His stepfather, Benjamin Wong-Fie, died a year later in October 2000.<sup>157</sup> As a result, Florence Wong-Fie became the primary proprietor of Wong’s works. His mother continued the sales of his paintings, expressing that she needed to place his paintings in museums. Ware recalls his conversation with her:

“She’s told me, ‘He wants his stuff to go into museums. It’s nice to have it purchased. It’s nice to be in somebody’s house. But the important thing is to get it into museums so that it’s exposed to as many people as possible, and that it be

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<sup>154</sup> Hernandez, *Archiving an Epidemic: Art, AIDS, and the Queer Chicana Avant-Garde*, 27.

<sup>155</sup> Apple, "I Can't Wait for You to Die": A Community Archives Critique," 117.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>157</sup> Jim Herron Zamora, “Benjamin Wong Fie, Engineer and Football Star,” SFGATE, February 5, 2012, <https://www.sfgate.com/bayarea/article/Benjamin-Wong-Fie-engineer-and-football-star-3051240.php>.

taken care of and it's safe.' So that became her program, not only in purchases, but also in donations to museums. She arranged and approved many donations to different museums and stuff."<sup>158</sup>

The artist's mother established the Martin Wong Foundation in 2001, providing funding to art education programs and scholarships for emerging artists.<sup>159</sup> On Florence Wong-Fie's expressed trust and request, Broda cleaned out Wong's apartment in New York. PPOW Gallery took in his artworks; New York University culled through materials, taking in sketches, writing, and records and leaving behind personal effects to form the artist's archive.<sup>160</sup> Broda saved whatever was left from NYU's process: painted jackets, jeans, and a refrigerator (Figure 2.8).<sup>161</sup> In an interview with Amy Zion, Broda repeatedly wondered why he kept onto the artist's belongings, stating, "I should have just let it go to become scrap or whatever but there's something about it - that it's important somewhere, I don't know where yet, but until it happens, until someone figures out it's important, I'll keep it. Hopefully someone will remember that I have it!..."<sup>162</sup> Despite her initial distaste for Wong's choice of career when he was younger, Florence Wong-Fie ensured its continuation after his death, even extending out to his collaborators and friends in New York. Contrary to Hernandez's and Apple's analyses, this change in heart was due to Wong's success as an artist or this allowed her to mourn, wherein assertions of working-towards were an effect of witnessing the artist's extensions towards her love.

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<sup>158</sup> Kwon, "Gary Ware: Interview with Marci Kwon, Pt. 5."

<sup>159</sup> "About the Scholarship," The Martin Wong Foundation, accessed May 22, 2023, <https://www.martinwong.org/apply>.

<sup>160</sup> Zion and Broda, "Martin Wong's Jackets: Estate as Process," 75.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

Florence Wong-Fie's mourning of her son and her reaching out to those he knew to help perpetuate his works ultimately formed a community of its own, although unnamed in the scholarship. A constellation emerged between Wong's family, friends, and the scholars who write about the artist, resulting in posthumous kinships. This working-towards a post-death community, based on a response-ability to the artist and those that knew him, enables an assertion of one's own self and its perpetuation in others. Philosopher Kelly Oliver's book, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*, polemicizes Hegelian understandings of the Self and the Other as fundamentally antagonistic, one based on the differences between the subject and the object. Oppression results from objectification, a process of seeing another person as an object. Oliver understands witnessing suffering and oppression as an inherent act of subjectivity, wherein the person can take up agency through recognition and response. She wrote of a social and affective energy that is exchanged between individuals, which establishes a response-ability; subjectivity is furthered through the responsibility to respond.<sup>163</sup> Thus, this connection to and the responsibility that arises towards another subject is to love them, wherein "Love is the ethical agency that motivates a move toward others, across differences."<sup>164</sup> By basing seeing on agency, love, and critical reinterpretations of identity, witnessing enables the subject to work through their agency and historical amnesia. This assertion of identity "...constantly renegotiated through interpretation and elaboration of the performative aspect of signification will yield new forms of relationships, both with one's self and with

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<sup>163</sup> Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (Minneapolis, MN: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2001), 14.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid*, 218.



others.”<sup>165</sup> Witnessing is formative, for the self, its relation to others, and its transgression of differences.

In Wong’s navigation of communities, part of the motivation for his negotiations of belonging was because he loved someone in that community. Ware recalled, “Well, I think everyone knows he was an extremely romantic person... He’d make fun of himself... Because one of the ways that Martin dealt with himself was self-deprecation. He would make fun of himself to keep it from hurting too badly. He’s the only man I’ve ever known who made a practice of sending out valentines to his various crushes.”<sup>166</sup> Likewise, recall Wong’s statement: “To me that’s how you get worked up about the painting, if you can get worked up about the person then you’re more likely to get worked up about the painting.”<sup>167</sup> This proclamation of working-towards another person he loved manifested in the artist’s 1973 painting (Figure 2.9). Two identical skeletons caress each other while gazing at each other, hands raised and touching each other’s hearts. Preceding both *Big Heat* and *Co-dependant No More*, the untitled painting renders one of the earliest of Wong’s twin images. This painting’s composition would be replicated multiple times in 1978, with slight changes and titled with the name of *I.M.U U.R.2*. Phonetically, the title reads, “I am you, you are two/too/to.” The artist’s awareness and articulation of a blurring of boundaries between the self and the other reveals that these romantic depictions embody the artist’s working-towards; its name further emphasizes the relationality of self through the “I” and the other through the “U”. The subject matter unveils the individual’s subjectivity in a state of working-towards.

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid, 219.

<sup>166</sup> Kwon, “Gary Ware: Interview with Marci Kwon, Pt. 3.”

<sup>167</sup> Machida, “Martin Wong: Interview with Margo Machida.”

Wong would continually use the phrase, “IMU UR2”, throughout his practice. In 1986, the Public Art Fund commissioned the artist to create an animation for Times Square.<sup>168</sup> He named it *IMU, UR2* (Figure 2.10). In the blurring of fine and commercial art, we find that the artist navigated the art market and community again, this time intersecting it with the subject matter of love.<sup>169</sup> By the 2010s, Florence Wong-Fie’s promotion of her son’s art had paid off. His works were sold, multiple exhibitions were being held, and there was a lasting interest in the artist; these were all direct results of his mother ensuring his memory, asserting her own subjectivity through mourning. Amongst scholars and artists interested was the artist Danh Vo, who won the Guggenheim’s Hugo Boss Prize in 2012. Using the money to buy the objects that Wong and Florence Wong-Fie had collected together, Vo exhibited *IMU UR 2* in 2013 (Figure 2.11). Vo and Wong-Fie collaborated for the exhibition, forming a kinship between the two that also meditated on the relationship between a mother and her dead son.<sup>170</sup> Chambers-Letson writes, “...by keeping Martin’s work alive after his death, Florence couldn’t help but sustain the force and vision of queer brown desire that animates so much of his work.”<sup>171</sup> Not only was Wong’s subjectivity perpetuated but also Wong-Fie’s as she witnessed and spoke of the artist’s works. The subject matter of love was returned.

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<sup>168</sup> Johnson, “Narrative Chronology.”

<sup>169</sup> “Martin Wong: Messages to the Public: IMU, UR2,” Public Art Fund, accessed May 22, 2023, <https://www.publicartfund.org/exhibitions/view/messages-to-the-public-wong/>. As there is no digital access to the video online, Public Art Fund’s website is the only source with photos and information about the exhibition. On the pages, the project director of the Public Art Fund states, “We’re trying to do art that’s timely, has a message, is visually potent and is trying to deal with the fine line dividing fine art and commercial art.” In this instance, Wong’s navigation through capitalism and community is rendered even more legible in this project than his paintings.

<sup>170</sup> Chambers-Letson, *After the Party: A Manifesto for Queer of Color Life*, 114.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid*, 122.

Vo's Guggenheim funds supported Wong-Fie's medical expenses.<sup>172</sup> The mother had originally wanted to hold a garage sale for the artist's collection.<sup>173</sup> Broda visited Wong-Fie annually "...to help her purge these more quotidian, 'valueless,' personal effects."<sup>174</sup> Many objects were saved, and many were already sold. Yet, by buying these objects and exhibiting them, Vo forms a relationship with the mother of a deceased artist and those who knew him. In curator Doryun Chong's essay, "A Personal Reflection," this relationship between himself, Vo, Wong-Fie, and Wong blurs. He wrote, "Perhaps it was just my imagination, but I felt that Florence seemed to treat us, two Asian guys, not only as professionals in the same field as her son, but also like grandnephews who wanted to learn about an uncle they never got to meet."<sup>175</sup> As these familial relationships form, witnessing itself is perpetuated, enabling mourning and nostalgia for an artist whom Vo and Chong had never met: "Treading cleaner and safer streets of New York more than a decade after Martin had departed, both Danh and I perhaps felt that we got there too late."<sup>176</sup> In this instance, Vo and Chong formed their own subjectivity by working-towards mourning with Wong-Fie.

The 2013 exhibit itself formed these networks of relationships and perpetuated witnessing. Broda stated, "Danh Vo and Julie Ault came out to Pennsylvania, where I live now, and he asked if I knew what happened to the painted jackets. And I said, well,

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<sup>172</sup> Johnson, "Narrative Chronology."

<sup>173</sup> Henri Neuendorf, "Destined For a Garage Sale, Martin Wong's Collection Is Saved by Danh Võ and the Walker Art Center," *Artnet News*, February 11, 2015, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/destined-for-a-garage-sale-martin-wongs-collection-is-saved-by-danh-vo-and-the-walker-art-center-249721>.

<sup>174</sup> Zion and Broda, "Martin Wong's Jackets: Estate as Process," 78.

<sup>175</sup> Doryun Chong, "Afterword: A Personal Reflection," *Martin Wong Catalogue Raisonné*, July 19, 2022, <https://exhibits.stanford.edu/martin-wong/feature/afterword-a-personal-reflection-doryun-chong>.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*

funnily enough, they're in a box over there. So I dug them out.”<sup>177</sup> In the search for Wong’s materials, Vo and Ault formed a kinship, just as Ault had done with Wong. Likewise, Broda connected with Sharp, who “found out when we connected at the Guggenheim exhibition *IMUUR 2* (2013) that I had them [Wong’s jeans], and he was like, ‘Oh! Can I have a pair?’ So I brought the box and he picked a pair. So it’s not like I’m keeping the best ones for me. I’m keeping them until someone else wants them. And I’m not judging: ‘Oh you deserve them,’ or ‘You don’t deserve them.’ If someone wants them they can have them. I just want someone to want them.”<sup>178</sup> Wong’s subjectivity in his working-towards belonging is perpetuated by those who loved him; in witnessing and mourning the artist, one is capable of working-towards kinships—even a community. This process of reaching out to grasp others, as Wong did, allows those mourning to continue living.

### ***Conclusions***

Florence Wong-Fie passed away in 2017. The Martin Wong Foundation is currently headed by many familiar names in this text: Peter Broda, Doryun Chong, Marci Kwon, and Gary Ware. The foundation continually provides scholarships and funding to emerging artists. *IMUUR 2* culminated in Stanford University’s symposium in October 2022. Titled *IMUUR2: Art, Aesthetics, and Asian America*, the conference inaugurates the Martin Wong Catalogue Raisonné. The catalogue raisonné provides the most comprehensive overview of Wong’s works, digitizing notes, sketches, and artworks that

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<sup>177</sup> Zion and Broda, “Martin Wong’s Jackets: Estate as Process,” 78.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid*, 80.

were otherwise not publicly accessible. New essays were published, adding to the ever-growing literature on Wong's art and life.<sup>179</sup> Interviews with the artist and Gary Ware were included, affording more scholars access to primary sources. These essays and interviews are replete with personal photographs: of the artist, his family, those who knew and loved him, and those he had never met.

If Wong's practice is a process of working-towards community, this catalogue raisonné maintains his work to return the love, extending, inclusion, and perpetuation of life. The title of the symposium, *IMU UR2*, reveals an offer. If IMU signals that the self identifies with the other, then UR2 offers the possibility of reciprocation. The ability to work-towards community is offered to viewers and readers, allowing for Wong's play, belonging, and life to be perpetuated through you too.<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> From April 29 to June 4, 2022, Galerie Buchholz held an exhibition on Wong's early works, titled, "In Dream Fungus: Early Works 1967-1978". These early sculptures have rarely been written on in literature and are evidence of the increased interest of the art world into Wong.

<sup>180</sup> This concept that empathy and love could be perpetuated through scholarship has been largely informed by Marci Kwon's interviews with Gary Ware. While they were immensely helpful in supporting a lot of the ideas in this thesis, it was the mourning that could be felt that propelled the idea of witnessing further.

## Figures



(Figure 2.1) Martin Wong, *Echinocereus Tulensis*, 1997-8. Acrylic on canvas. 20 × 30 in.



(Figure 2.2) Martin Wong, Untitled photograph (scanned from the Martin Wong Papers at Fales Library & Special Collections), c. 1994-1999.





(Figure 2.3) Martin Wong, Photograph of unidentified painting (scanned from the Martin Wong Papers at Fales Library & Special Collections).





(Figure 2.4) Martin Wong, *Tai Ping Tien Kuo (Tai Ping Kuo)*, 1982. 92 × 144 in.



(Figure 2.5) Martin Wong, *Saturday Night*, 1992. Acrylic on linen. 30 × 45 1/2 in.



(Figure 2.6) Martin Wong, *Mammillaria wildii crest*, 1997 - 1998. 20 × 30 in.



(Figure 2.7) Martin Wong, *Black Venus*, 1999. 48 × 30 in.





(Figure 2.8) Refrigerator from Martin Wong's apartment, with tags by graffiti artists, c. 1980s.



(Figure 2.9) Martin Wong, Untitled, January 16, 1973.





(Figure 2.10) Martin Wong, *IMU, UR2*, 1986. Animation commissioned by the Public Art Fund.



(Figure 2.11) Danh Vo, *IMUUR 2*, 2013. Installation.



### **Conclusions: Articulating a Life**

Relationality, distance, desire, morality, exteriority, and obligation. While most of these concepts never materialized into the main text, these words—with fluid and unstable meanings—directed its trajectory.

The process of writing the thesis was marred by uncertainty from the beginning. In my race to find a thesis topic, I encountered Martin Wong's *La Vida* while reading Joseph's *Against the Romance of Community*. Martin Wong soon became a possibility. As the academic process dictates, he eventually became an application for a departmental travel grant. I told myself, "If I get this, then he'll be my thesis topic. If not, I get to switch!" Then, Martin Wong became the thesis topic. Doubts immediately formed: about my role in the scholarship, how I was using his life to graduate (reductive phrasing but true), and how to see him as a person—alive but dead, here but not, close but distant, present but absent.

My initial research process were attempts to truly know him, which resulting in an unsettling closeness. My occupation with Martin Wong as a thesis induced a stress dream, where he asked me, "Is this what you wanted?" The vivid barren concrete walls that caged us certainly made for a theatrical and melodramatic scene. So many art historians come to know their artists with a level of ease, confidence, and certainty. Instead, I stared at my ceiling thinking about the version of Martin Wong my (stupid) brain concocted, asking an ambiguous and existential question. This discomfort drove me away from attempting familiarity anymore. I began to increasingly question, hesitate, and waver. I can tell this sometimes frustrated peers, who can write, investigate, and present research

with steadfast conviction. Instead, it felt right to keep a deliberate distance away from Martin Wong.

Because how can we really know a person? One can know things *about* others, which becomes the familiarity that forges a connection, bond, and relationship. The Latin *familiaris* denotes “an intimate, a familiar resident or visitor in the household, a member of the familia, that wider family which embraces servants, confidants, and close associates.”<sup>181</sup> At least in Western thought, this familiarity can encapsulate a variety of social relationships as long as we consider it a close one. This familiarity stems from whether we think what we know about the other person is enough to consider the relationship close, without needing to take into account our biases and the power we have over them. Because we can unknowingly ignore things about the other person in favor of creating the ideal Other, we can deny them their personhood, their ability to simply be, and their right to exist without our perception. We are entitled in closeness. For example, how do we know someone is lying? When we accuse another person of lying, we are claiming to know the truth as well as their identity. We assert ourselves over them under a pretense of falsehood, when multiple modes of being can occur outside of us. We can even lie to ourselves. To purport that we know who someone is to hold claim over a person, to subject them, and to speak for them with certainty. To be close is to close an identity down to an identification: someone we know.

This is why relationships are so precarious. When confronted with an existence outside of us, we feel as if we know nothing about them. People’s words, actions, and

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<sup>181</sup> Wilfred Lewis Warren, *Henry II* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2000), 305.

beliefs can also be fleeting. We constantly surprise each other with new thoughts, behavioral changes, and even things that simply never come up in conversation. Closeness shatters when the distance becomes visible. Constructing a false closeness can devastate our relationships, people, and their lived truths. Especially when identities can evade identifications, which are unstable, paradoxical, and mutable, how can I write as if I know Martin Wong, when knowing is a fraught endeavor? How can we really know someone, when there are multiple truths and modes of existence exterior to us? Martin Wong's words, art, and thoughts are things I can know about, but they are intermediaries between different temporalities, desires, and modes of being. How can I engage with someone in death, if they cannot resist? How can I articulate the life of a person—a life lived as real as mine but an existence I may never come to know.

Following the premise that both the act and claim of knowing someone is about the self, what does that make of knowledge and the other person? Here is one possibility: to know is to attempt to hold onto a piece of someone. Knowing fragments the known into a singular, tangible object, which constitutes one's power over it. Think of the way learning is approached. When confronted with an unknown, we seek to define it: whether it be a problem, a phenomenon, or a person. We try to make sense of it and reach a point of being able to provide our own answers about it—in other words, familiarization. We learn of an unknown by internally defining it, and we reduce it to something to tell other people about it. In this way, good memory is often associated with the knowledgeable; recalling a definition is the simplest way to show others that one contains knowledge. You contain the explanation to a problem, the complexities of whatever and whichever

phenomenon, and a fragment of a person. Perhaps knowing is motivated by the desire to grasp—to hold onto another person through a single sliver. For many, the opportunity for closeness is worth knowing and being known.

This sense of knowing and closeness pervades materials; it is at the heart of the process of historicization. Within the archive, time and space are compressed and objects are reorganized into boxes. Artist and curator Julie Ault's concept of actionability in the archive entails being aware of the misrepresentations caused by institutional protection. She stated, "...documents and artifacts...are not intrinsically truth-telling; they are fragmentary and often disconnected from context. Archives can mislead through omission."<sup>182</sup> Because Martin Wong's personal effects were left out of the archives, solely relying on the institution runs the risk of building a knowing based on a falsity. Aiming to know negates the purpose of archival research altogether. Archives can construct a false sense of knowing because we desire to hold onto materials, memories, and thoughts of the people we write about. How can I articulate anything—much less a life—when all I know is ultimately mediated by the archive, the literature, and even the artist himself?

Yet, the pressure of having to know Martin Wong was still there. At some point in the middle of writing, I was put in a position to answer questions about him. People asked me whether I knew if his *Loisaida* works were instances of inserting himself into Latinx spaces he didn't belong to or whether his works referencing the Classical nude utilized and continued misogynistic ideals of the female body. It was clear that they knew my research methodology as one of a working-against the artist and the scholarship.

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<sup>182</sup> Julie Ault, "Active Recollection: Marvin J. Taylor in Conversation with Julie Ault," 24.

Hesitation, indifference, and not knowing became an charge, even if implied. In these instances, the distinctions between the artist and I began to blur. Some began to know me as willingly holding a blindness to the injustices caused by the artist's actions. Others came to know me as lacking confidence because I did not overhaul the established scholarship.

Yet, accepting distance led to deliberate attempts at working-towards instead of working-against closeness. What I can speak to is that the communities he depicted embraced the person and his works; Martin Wong was felt—rather than known. However, this evidence was not a sufficient enough answer to the aforementioned askings and knowings. If we consider the scholarship to be biased in their love for and knowing of Martin Wong, then these questions and comments can only be answered on the basis of ethics—in other words, a universal sense of morality and distinction between good or bad that everyone has access to and should abide by.

Unfortunately, one's morality is deeply personal and can remain unknown. One can know another for years and never be able to talk about what constitutes someone's responsibility and obligation to the world. Ideals also differ because people exist at different levels of stratification, oppression, and survival. To claim to know an intersectional person's ideals and assume we have the same morals is to hold people under a homogenized system of being. I have three questions in response to the knowings. Can alternate attempts to survive be discouraged in its perceived wrongness?

Are queers of color obligated to create utopia?<sup>183</sup> Must we perpetuate an oedipal

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<sup>183</sup> For more information, I implore readers to research for themselves the anti-relational turn in queer studies. Most notably, two works (amongst many) investigate how queers understand and operate in life: Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* and José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia*.

scholarship, constantly desiring to supplant in the inevitability of being usurped? A critic becomes uncritical when we don't interrogate what knowing is, why we want to know, and how we know. These instances of knowing are about the knower than the known.

What I have presented is a binary and a paradox. On one hand, should a person know another or not—to limit and subject a person to hold them or to let them remain free from our grasp and face the loneliness of that absence? On the other hand, if I had chosen to not assume I know Martin Wong, I am only capable of writing about something that I can make sense of. I am close in my distance and distant in my closeness. These are the main concerns in this text. How can one write in an ambiguous, unknowing state? Can a writer articulate a life that emerges from art, words, and thoughts through only what they can perceive?

I can never come to know Martin Wong. Much of the scholarship calls him Martin because they are written by people who knew and loved him. I can only know the artist as a thesis topic; this text can never form a relationship with him nor forge any kind of familiarity. Despite my similar identifications with Martin Wong, I experience community and belonging differently. In this way, I will never know him.

Acknowledging that he could just be Martin Wong enabled a reconciliation with an

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I have not decided to include this into the text, because I understand these opposing arguments to be indicative of how the queer experience can vary but be equally valid in existence. I also encourage readers to use this anti-relation turn to think about your own relationship to community. Do you believe in community and work towards inclusion into its boundaries, or do you eschew it to risk a freeing suspension? While I believe in a life of the latter, I've concluded Martin Wong often chose the former. Both these existences are equally valid methods of survival, as well as any other engagements with community I didn't mention. In addition, for those that are interested in latter, please read Xine Yao's *Disaffected: The Cultural Politics of Unfeeling in Nineteenth-Century America*.

existence external to me, a life that I may never come to know. There can be simultaneous truths, paths, and existences in the same space.

Yet, I've come to understand his art as capable of pointing to a truth I hold: some people have to work-towards belonging in a community—to extend when others don't have to and to even sacrifice parts of themselves to do so. We may never know another person due to the multiplicity in existence. However, what we confront in the infinite externality of others is a possible point of near convergence.

The contemporary definition of “understand” is similar to the Old English *understandan*: to interpret or view. However, in a literal sense, to under-stand is to stand in the midst of—to occupy a space amongst something and to be close to it. In a temporal and spatial sense, understanding offers a fleeting point of near convergence between two existences, under the distance of time, space, and death. To interpret is to isolate this point where and when people are simply close *enough*. This is how a person can write about another without knowing or having to know them, rendering only a part of a whole communicable. This possibility to remain unknowing abandons the desperate desire to close that distance and hold a piece of the other person. Only in distance can we approximate closeness through “the forces that gather atoms into trees just as they do into human bodies”<sup>184</sup> that occupy the spaces in between. The entirety of a life, its full trajectory, length, and details, are only rendered visible in the relativity of distant closeness.

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<sup>184</sup> Laura Bieger, Joshua Shannon, and Jason Weems, “Introduction: Toward a History (and Future) of the Human Being in American Art,” In *Humans* (Terra Foundation for American Art, 2021).

The obligation in articulating a life is to sustain an understanding of it as internal as mine as it is external to me. That is to say, to work-towards understanding without having to know.



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