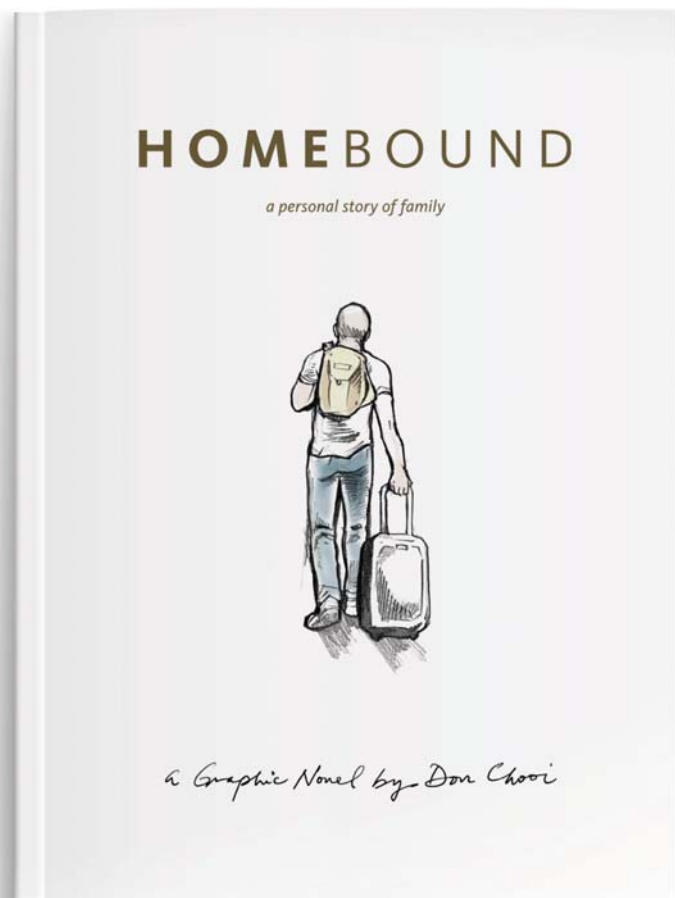


# HOMEBOUND

*The illustrated graphic novel as an autobiographic voice  
for an immigrant Asian gay male in New Zealand*



**BY DON CHOOI**

*Auckland University of Technology*

*December 7, 2016*



*'Homebound': The illustrated graphic novel as an autobiographic voice for an immigrant Asian gay male in New Zealand*

**Don Y. L. Chooi**

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***Don Y. L. Chooi***

Bachelor of Art and Design (Honours) (AUT University), 2015

Bachelor of Graphic Design (AUT University), 1996

National Certificate in Adult Education and Training (Level 5), 2014

Certificate in Open Flexible and Network Learning, 2014

December 7, 2016

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## *Abstract*

This practice-led artistic inquiry takes the form of an 80-page, scripted and illustrated graphic novel. Creatively, the work is concerned with the narratisation of a largely autobiographical voice through the juxtaposition of word, image, and decompression story telling. The narrative draws heavily upon certain experiences I had, growing up in Malaysia and moving to New Zealand. In this journey, I began to identify as an Asian gay man within the bear culture. Specifically, the novel and exegesis unpack the nature of belonging as both a concern of ethnicity and sexual orientation. In doing so, it draws upon recent discourse surrounding non-western considerations of gay masculinity, filial obligations and notions of the 'chosen family'.

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I would also like to acknowledge the Media Design School for their support, and the New Zealand bear community for being part of my family.

And above all, I would like to acknowledge my parents, whose encouragement, love and teachings remain the pillars of my being.



# Contents

SECTION	PAGE	SECTION	PAGE
Abstract .....	5	Chapter 4: Critical Commentary .....	43
Acknowledgements.....	5	Asian Gay Masculinity	
Table of Contents.....	7	The 'Chosen' Family	
Table of Images .....	8	Gay Bears	
Attestation of Authorship.....	11	The Autobiographical Graphic Novel	
Intellectual Property Declaration .....	11	Critical Commentary on Features of <i>Homebound</i>	
Ethical Approval and Consents.....	11	: <i>The illustrative sketch</i>	
Introduction and Overview.....	13	: <i>Watercolour painting and 'qi'</i>	
Chapter 1: Positioning the Researcher.....	17	: <i>Narrative juxtaposition</i>	
Beginnings		: <i>Panel design and speech bubbles</i>	
The Asian Gay Bear		: <i>Decompression story telling</i>	
The Illustrator and Designer		: <i>Colour</i>	
The Autobiographical Gay Male Researcher		Conclusion	
Chapter 2: Review of Contextual Knowledge.....	23	Chapter 5: Conclusion.....	57
Discourses Related to Gay Asian Male Identity		Summary of the Exegesis	
Filial Responsibility		Further Research	
The Gay Narrative and Cross-cultural Graphic Novels		Personal Conclusion	
Chapter 3: Research Design.....	29	References .....	61
Heuristics, Tacit Knowing and Sedimentation		Appendices .....	65
: <i>Immersive experience</i>		Appendix A: Historical Reflection .....	67
Research Methods		A.1: <i>In my own words</i>	
: <i>Telling, drawing and collecting</i>		Appendix B: Narration Of Experience.....	73
[ <i>the designer's journal</i> ]		B.1: <i>Background</i>	
: <i>Exploratory testing</i>		B.2: <i>Synopsis</i>	
: <i>Move testing experiments</i>		B.3: <i>Themes</i>	
: <i>Consultation</i>		B.4: <i>Main characters</i>	
: <i>Story design</i>		B.5: <i>The plot For 'Homebound'</i>	
: <i>Watercolour painting</i>		Appendix C: Progression Of Thinking.....	81
Conclusion		C.1: <i>Plot development</i>	
		C.2: <i>Exploratory illustration</i>	
		C.3: <i>Page design</i>	
		C.4: <i>Making</i>	
		C.5: <i>Auxiliary artwork</i>	
		Appendix D: Reflections on experience .....	93
		D.1: <i>Immersive experience</i>	



## Table of Images

ALL IMAGES ARE THE PROPERTY OF THE AUTHOR UNLESS OTHERWISE INDICATED.

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <p><i>Figure 1.</i> Photograph of me at 10 years at the Iskandar National Primary School, (1983).</p> <p><i>Figure 2.</i> Digital paintings in from my exhibition 'Lustrous', (2010).</p> <p><i>Figure 3.</i> Banner artwork for Bear New Zealand used in the Pride Parade, (2016).</p> <p><i>Figure 4.</i> Run-book cover artwork for International Bear Convergence (IBC), (2016).</p> <p><i>Figure 5.</i> Images of my studio, (2016).</p> <p><i>Figure 6.</i> An early iteration of a spread rendered in ink, (February 2016).</p> <p><i>Figure 7.</i> Pages from <i>Homebound</i> demonstrating contrasting modes of address, (August 2016).</p> <p><i>Figure 8.</i> Examples from designer's journal detailing exploratory experiments, (February – March 2016).</p> <p><i>Figure 9.</i> Examples of move testing experiments during the development of the narrative, (February – April 2016).</p> <p><i>Figure 10.</i> Examples of the novel's changing pagination plan, (March – May 2016).</p> <p><i>Figure 11.</i> Initial sketch studies, (February – March 2016).</p> <p><i>Figure 12.</i> Using sketching as a formal illustrative approach to the novel, (June – July 2016).</p> <p><i>Figure 13.</i> Examples of handwritten text, (April 2016).</p> | <p><i>Figure 14.</i> An example of progression of thinking to the historical section of the novel, (April – June 2016).</p> <p><i>Figure 15.</i> Page 21 from <i>Homebound</i> illustrating Tommy's sense of masculinity being challenged by his friend, Jean-Louie, (2016).</p> <p><i>Figure 16.</i> Pages 28, 54 and 55 from <i>Homebound</i> illustrating the erotic bear image, (2016).</p> <p><i>Figure 17.</i> Page 13 from <i>Homebound</i> illustrating Tommy's relationship to his chosen family, (2016).</p> <p><i>Figure 18.</i> A panel from page 42 from <i>Homebound</i>, (2016).</p> <p><i>Figure 19.</i> Pages 56 and 57 from <i>Homebound</i> shows an attempt to address the 'qi' of the artwork, (2016).</p> <p><i>Figure 20.</i> Pages 15 (left) and 70 (right) from <i>Homebound</i> exemplify contrasting compositional approaches using differing treatments of space, (2016).</p> <p><i>Figure 21.</i> Page 47 from <i>Homebound</i> illustrating Tommy's internal thinking, (2016).</p> <p><i>Figure 22.</i> Page 59 from <i>Homebound</i> showing Tommy unable to fulfil his filial duties, (2016).</p> <p><i>Figures 23. &amp; 24.</i> Alternative treatments of page 18 from <i>Homebound</i>, (2016).</p> |
|--|--|

## APPENDICES

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <p><i>Figure C.1.</i> Examples of concepts and ideation, (February 2016).</p> <p><i>Figure C.2.1.</i> Initial exploration with sketching, (February – March 2016).</p> <p><i>Figure C.2.2.</i> Examples of media used, (February – March 2016).</p> <p><i>Figure C.2.3.</i> Testing to obtain a sense of 'what worked' and 'what didn't', (March – June 2016).</p> <p><i>Figure C.3.1.</i> Examples of page design, (February – March 2016).</p> <p><i>Figure C.3.2.</i> Exploratory treatment of speech bubbles and fonts, (March 2016).</p> <p><i>Figure C.3.3.</i> Experiments in page design and layout, (March – April 2016).</p> | <p><i>Figure C.4.1.</i> Examples of typography exploration and prototyping of the novel, (February – May 2016).</p> <p><i>Figure C.4.2.</i> Example of design progress relating to page layout and illustration, (May – June 2016).</p> <p><i>Figure C.4.3.</i> Selection of watercolour pieces that were considered for the graphic novel, (May – July 2016).</p> <p><i>Figure C.4.4.</i> An example of the historical spread that combined watercolour artwork with text, (July 2016).</p> <p><i>Figure D.1.</i> Images of my studio during the development of the graphic novel, (February – October 2016).</p> |
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## *Attestation of Authorship*

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly indicated), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.



---

Yew Li Chooi (Don)

December 7, 2016

## *Intellectual Property Declaration*

I retain copyright of all images and artwork produced and presented as part of this thesis.



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Yew Li Chooi (Don)

December 7, 2016

## *Ethics Approval and Consents*

Because this is a fictional work that draws on the autobiographical it did not require University ethics approval.



## *Introduction and Overview*

- *The Graphic Novel*
- *The Exegesis*

# Introduction and Overview

*Homebound* is a semi-autobiographical illustrated graphic novel of which I am both the author and illustrator. Through the distillation of personal experiences, the narrative tells of a man's negotiation of his gay identity, cross-cultural anxieties and the historical events that shaped his life, leading to conflict between filial loyalty and loyalty to his gay partner and family.

## THE GRAPHIC NOVEL

As a media form, the novel has an extensive history. The word is a truncation of the Italian *novella* (from the plural of Latin *novellus*, meaning “new”). However, the concept of the ‘graphic novel’ is a comparatively recent iteration. The term’s genesis is normally attributed to the historian Richard Kyle, who, in his 1964 essay *The Future of Comics*, discussed a media form that presented a fictional story in comic-strip format but published as a book (Schelly, 2010). As a description of an illustrated form of storytelling, the term moved in to wider circulation after the publication of Eisner’s *A Contract with God* (1978) and Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1986).

In this thesis project I have explored the graphic novel as a narrative form because I am both an illustrator and (more recently) a writer. In gay literature the use of image-led storytelling can be traced back to the 1965 erotic *Kake* comics of Tom of Finland (Touko Laaksonen)<sup>1</sup> and Al Shapiro’s *Harry Chess: That Man from A.U.N.T.I.E.* (which was first published in *Drum* magazine of the same year).<sup>2</sup> However, there are arguably older precursors, including George Herriman’s ambiguously gendered *Krazy Kat* comic strip, that ran between 1916 and 1944, and the *Tijuana Bibles*, which were small comics featuring popular cartoon characters like Mickey Mouse and Archie in diverse sexual situations, including many that were explicitly homosexual.<sup>3</sup>

## THE EXEGESIS

The exegesis for this project inquires into the sexual and cultural identity of an immigrant Asian gay male, and is thematically concerned with notions of belonging and Asian gay masculinity. The word exegesis derives from the Greek *exegeisthai*, meaning to interpret, guide or lead. Originally it described a specific form of theological writing concerned with explanation and critical interpretation (Soanes & Stevenson, 2008, p. 498). In this thesis it is designed as an interplay between text, image and space, and as such it seeks a certain aesthetic alignment with the creative concerns of the graphic novel it serves to contextualise. This approach is deeply nuanced by my professional practice as a graphic designer. Working in tandem, the layout and typography of the exegesis offer a sense of harmony and openness, and thus, are able to weave the reader into the text.

This exegesis serves as documentation that in five chapters contextualises and explains the graphic novel's creative practice, methodology and context.

The first chapter positions me as the researcher and as a practitioner. As this project is largely autobiographical, the research draws from my lived experience. Therefore this chapter takes into consideration my personal worldview in narratising this project.

The second chapter provides a review of contextual knowledge. In this chapter, I bring to attention the theoretical texts that served to inform and orient the research. Situated within it are discussions related to gay Asian male identity, filial piety, and the cross-cultural gay narrative.

The exegesis' research design and methodological approaches are explained in the third chapter. Because this is a practice-led inquiry, the chapter considers heuristics, tacit knowledge and sedimentation as methodological constructs employed in realising the graphic novel. Under a discussion of methods, I consider reflective and reflexive practice, and the respective roles of immersion, exploratory testing and move testing.

The fourth and most significant chapter discusses the critical framework integral to the design process. It unpacks the thinking behind the novel's narratisation, design juxtaposition and visual treatment. The discussion also includes a non-western consideration of my practice in relation to certain Chinese aesthetic philosophies.

The fifth chapter offers a summary and conclusion for the exegesis, and considers its potentials for future research.

Given the nature and complexity of the research, appendices to the exegesis offer a personal reflection, a discussion of the novel's structure, characters and plot, and an account of the iterative experiments undertaken in constructing and refining the project.

<sup>1</sup> Laaksonen's homo-erotic drawings had appeared in physique magazines before this date, beginning with the cover of the 1957 Spring edition of *Physique Pictorial*.

<sup>2</sup> In the same year Joe Johnson's comic strips *Miss Thing* and *Big Dick* briefly ran in *The Advocate* magazine. For a more extensive overview of early gay comic book history see <http://gayleague.antonkawasaki.com/lgbt-comics-timeline/pre-stonewall/>

<sup>3</sup> These comics were illegally circulated between the 1930s and 1950s.





## ***Chapter 1***

# *Positioning the Researcher*

- *Beginnings*
- *The Asian Gay Bear*
- *The Illustrator and Designer*
- *The Autobiographical Gay Male Researcher*

This chapter outlines my position as a researcher by contextualising my relationship with the subject of the inquiry and discussing previous work that has prefigured the thesis.

## **BEGINNINGS**

I remember rain battering down with such ferocity that it threatened to drown anyone caught outside. The winds howled through the countryside and the skies turned coal black in the span of a breath. Everyone had stopped what they were doing and huddled, waiting for a respite. There was a hush inside the house. From my bedroom window I watched the lightning dancing across the heavens and I delighted in the following crack of thunder. The moment seemed magical. This was monsoon season in Kedah, a northern state in Malaysia.

In the house where I lived there were five people. My father worked as an agriculturist and my mother, in the tradition of most Malaysian-Chinese women, cared for my elder brother, my younger sister and me.

In truth, as a child I was a loner. I was not interested in the posturing and competitiveness of other boys my age. I would spend my time in the countryside under the light of watercolour skies, and dreamt of more than what was prescribed for my world. I tried hard at school (Figure 1), but I often fell foul of the nuns who terrorised my early education. This was difficult, because as a son in my family I was expected to work hard, to secure a good job, then to marry and care for my parents. That is what is required of good boys in Chinese societies.

But I went away.

## **THE ASIAN GAY BEAR**

I arrived in New Zealand in 1996 and settled in Auckland as a 23-year old international student. At this stage, I still considered my sexual identity to be very much in a liminal state, and subsequently I experienced a challenging socio-cultural transition. Not only had I come into a culture vastly different from my own, but also a community of contrasting opinions on sexuality and individuality. Since that time New Zealand has provided me the opportunity to come to terms with my sexual identity, and accept myself as a gay man.

Because I was raised in the provincial agricultural community of Kedah, I identify as Southeast Asian and of Chinese heritage. As a consequence, I am still compelled by traditional doctrines of a Malaysian-born Chinese. Malaysia regards homosexuality as taboo and it is deemed unlawful.<sup>4</sup> In Malaysian-Chinese society, homosexuality is generally seen as deviant behaviour and is considered dishonourable to the family name. These values remain a strong influence in my everyday decision-making. As such, in the course of pursuing a manageable identity, I continue to portray myself as heterosexual to my family, while negotiating my life in New Zealand as an 'out' gay man.

Within New Zealand gay society, I identify as a bear and I am comfortable with the ideologies relating to it, especially those centred around self-acceptance and inclusivity. However, within bear sub-culture there exist tensions around the performance of masculinity, and this highlights for me certain political issues related not only to Euro-centrism, but also to the hegemony of prescribed Western forms of masculinity.

While in New Zealand, I have encountered discrimination both as an immigrant and as a gay man.<sup>5</sup> Although these experiences have impacted on my self-worth in terms of confidence, I continue to advocate for a stronger affirmation of the Asian male in gay mainstream society.

## **THE ILLUSTRATOR AND DESIGNER**

I have always been able to draw. For me it is a form of thinking that operates beyond the limitations of words. I work professionally as both an illustrator and a graphic designer, and the ways that I engage with the world are heavily influenced by the communicative power of words and images on the page. Accordingly, both this exegesis and the graphic novel contextualise and explain, by employing the written word in sensitive relation to image, space, type and layout.

My engagement with the gay bear community includes my involvement with erotic art. I had my first gay bear art exhibition in 2010 on Karangahape Road, Auckland (Figure 2). Since then my art has featured in campaigns for *Bear New Zealand* (Figure 3), and it is used heavily to promote bear events and culture both in New Zealand and internationally (Figure 4).



*Figure 1.* Photograph of me at 10 years old at the Iskandar National Primary School, Kedah, Malaysia. (1983).



▲ Figure 1.

<sup>4</sup> Malaysia's laws on sodomy [Unnatural Offences, Section 377A] include both heterosexual and homosexual acts. Punishments include prison sentences of up to twenty years, corporal punishment and fines. A subsection of the criminal code [Section 377D. Outrages on Decency] also provides additional punishment for men convicted of "gross indecency with another male person."

<sup>5</sup> This discrimination is both racial and heteronormative. Distinct forms of discrimination also emanate from the gay world, especially with regards to how gay Asian men are perceived as meek and effeminate (and therefore considered as unattractive, or sexually undesirable) (Caluya, 2006).

## THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL GAY MALE RESEARCHER

*Homebound* is my first graphic novel and it is largely autobiographical. Autobiographical research can be deeply challenging, because in designing and writing a graphic novel that is so closely tied to one's identity and conflicting issues within it, one is rendered vulnerable. Although it has been argued that this vulnerability may give authority to autobiographic inquiries (Behar, 1997; Eriksson, 2010; Ryang, 2000) I am also reminded that, Clandinin and Connelly note, "The researcher [in such research] is always speaking partially naked" (1994, p. 423).

This research project has been undertaken for artistic, academic and personal reasons.<sup>6</sup> In creating *Homebound* I am endeavouring to give voice to a potentially useful identity story<sup>7</sup> that uses both what is written and what is communicated through the poetic and narrative potential of images. While the novel raises specific issues relating to the central protagonist, these are unpacked in this exegesis in a more analytical manner so the wider context of the work may be understood. By developing a practice-led, artistic thesis I am able to extend voices of marginalised experience within the academy (Engels-Schwarzpaul & Peters, 2013) in articulate ways that are concurrently accessible to both the university readership and the communities about which my research speaks (Ings, 2013). However, I am aware of the implications of positioning myself in this manner. Recent research continues to highlight the unsafe nature of higher learning institutions for self-declaring sexual minority individuals (Elia, 2005; Endo & Chamness Reece-Miller, 2010; Ewing, Stukas Jr., & Sheehan, 2003; Henrickson, 2013). Despite this, Ings (2014, p. 197) notes "a significant number of queer design candidates attempt to forge a connection between their research and a sense of personal 'wholeness'... [where, as] photographers, writers and artists, they seek culturally authentic ways of re-addressing dominant or flawed constructions of identity." Correlations between the researcher as authentic and the research as a manifestation of this authenticity have been alluded to in the writing of a number of sexual minority researchers (Davies, 1992; Endo & Chamness Reece-Miller, 2010; Gates, 2011; Morrow, 2006). In fact, Corey (1993, p. 125) argues, "to be out is really to be in - inside the realm of the visible, the speakable, the culturally intelligible." However, I am aware that for sexual minority individuals this can potentially lead to a marginalised and problematic position, identified by Burghardt (1982) as the Spokesperson/Invisible Man/Woman, where minority academics are called upon to speak for, or provide information about their own

groups, despite the fact that because of diversity within these groups, they cannot (Ings, 2013). By extension, LaSala, Jenkins, Wheeler, and Fredriksen-Goldsen (2008, pp. 259-260) warn that as a self-declared gay male academic I face the issue of being expected, perceived and encouraged, "to be exclusively interested in LGBT issues, [and my] professional development may be hindered and ... academic freedom compromised."

However, despite these issues, in pursuing this thesis I am reminded that under subsection 2, point 5 of the 1989 New Zealand Education Act, an academic in a New Zealand university is expected to "accept a role as critic and conscience of society." Accordingly, in this thesis I have positioned myself inside the inquiry as a subjective, reflective, self-declaring Asian gay man and bear artist. It is from this perspective that the concerns and discoveries in the thesis emanate.



▲ Figure 2.



▲ Figure 3.



▲ Figure 4.

Figure 2. Digital paintings in my exhibition 'Lustrous'. (2010).

Figure 3. Banner artwork for Bear New Zealand, used in the Pride Parade, Auckland, New Zealand. (2016).

Figure 4. Run-book cover artwork for International Bear Convergence (IBC), California, United States of America. (2016).

<sup>6</sup> I have not revealed my true sexual identity to my family, so the novel, beyond its artistic concerns, serves as a personal reconciliation, not just to my sexuality and masculinity, but also with family and cultural expectation. With this in mind, the story, while autobiographical, considers wider issues, including the pursuit of an authentic identity, belonging, loyalty, culturally shaped masculinity and sexuality.

<sup>7</sup> By 'useful' I refer to an experience-based novel that may provide personal resonance for gay men who navigate spaces of cultural conflict and identity.





## ***Chapter 2***

# *Review of Contextual Knowledge*

- *Discourses Related to Gay Asian Male Identity*
- *Filial Responsibility*
- *The Gay Narrative and Cross-cultural Graphic Novels*

This chapter offers a review of knowledge impacting on the graphic novel *Homebound*. I use the term 'a review of contextual knowledge' in preference to 'literature review', because in considering the context and resourcing of the creative inquiry, certain knowledge exists beyond what might formally be described as 'literature'.<sup>8</sup>

Accordingly the chapter is divided into three areas of consideration:

- Discourses related to Asian gay male identity
- Filial responsibility<sup>9</sup>
- Gay narrative and cross-cultural graphic novels

## **DISCOURSES RELATED TO GAY ASIAN MALE IDENTITY**

Although in the last decade there has been considerable consideration of gay men's identity<sup>10</sup> and the 'coming out' process (Altman, 2012; Guittar, 2013; Perrin-Wallqvist & Lindblom, 2015) the predominantly euro-centric nature of such writing has been expanded and challenged by contemporary discourse related to the gay Asian male.

Historically, these disruptions to Western gay discourses surfaced in two significant texts published in 1998 and 2008. Both Eng and Hom's (1998) *Q & A: Queer in Asian America* and Martin, Jackson, McLelland and Yue's (2008) *AsiaPacificQueer: Rethinking Genders and Sexualities* focus attention on variant cultural values impacting on contemporary gay Asian men's lives. In so doing the books promote the concept of Asian queer sexualities that interconnect with western cultures in mutually shaping and complicating ways.

Since the turn of the century there have been a number of other influential books that examine specifically Asian LGBT identity issues. Ho's (2010) *Gay and Lesbian Subculture in Urban China* considers urban Chinese same-sex identity and how it operates as a form of resistance, in the face of China's increasingly global power discourses. Then, in 2015, Engebretsen, Schroeder, and Bao's book of essays, *Queer/Tongzhi<sup>11</sup> China: New Perspectives on Research, Activism and Media Cultures* addresses sexual and gender diversity in China from both activist and academic perspectives. More importantly, building on Ho and Engebretsen et al.'s work, this book considers Chinese gay men's identity in relation to transnational contexts.<sup>12</sup>

In 2013, Ro, Ayala, Paul, and Choi (2013) released a study into the effect and impact of racism on gay men of colour.<sup>13</sup> Drawing on Han's

(2008) research, the authors argue that sexual rejection motivated by racism has a negative impact on self-esteem. Phua's (2007) study into issues related to contesting and maintaining hegemonic masculinities for Asian gay men drew a similar conclusion. Phua argues that for Asian men, masculine identity was largely assessed by western standards, or what Caluya (2006) describes as 'sexual racism'. Extending this debate, Daroya (2013) argues that because Asian gay men are often viewed (in western societies) as slender, submissive, and smooth, the masculinity paradigm conflict leads to them being conceived of as feminine. Han (2015) expands on this idea by suggesting that the ascribing of feminine attributes results in a form of 'racial invisibility', where gay men of colour are often sexually and communally excluded from the gay mainstream.

In addition to these literary works, a considerable body of contemporary discourse related to Asian gay men also functions online, and much of this has surfaced out of the US in the last decade. Significant to this project are three texts.

Luu's (2009) article, *When it's Stifling to be Out*, drew attention to the need for Asian gay men to manage a dual identity, so their sexuality does not bring 'shame' on their biological families. This concern is central to my novel, and it is unpacked in the anonymous article *8Asians* (2009). This work discusses the extent to which Asian gay men are often forced to placate cultural homogeneity by prioritising cultural over sexual identities. Ho (2013) discusses this idea in relation to approaches to the mediation of authentic identities, through the development of gay support networks or communities.<sup>14</sup> In *Homebound* we see this community (a close network of bear friends), supporting Tommy and Neil's relationship. However, the novel's tension is concerned with Tommy's entrapment in a pull between filial and community allegiances.

## FILIAL RESPONSIBILITY

A second issue that is integral to conceiving and contextualising *Homebound* is the concept of filial responsibility. In *Homebound* we encounter a man who is expected to perform conflicting family roles (in his biological family and his gay family). Kennedy and Dalla (2014) have examined identity consolidation processes among ethnic minority gay men and lesbians. In discussing the problematics of filial responsibility they observe,

“the intersection of their ethnic and sexual identities were most apparent within the family context – extending into their larger ethnic culture. Despite a strong identification with their family's ethnic heritage, participants were confronted with the convergence of these two identities as they gained an awareness of their same-sex attractions” (2014, p. 479).

In fear of being rejected, participants in their study expressed the need to conform and integrate their “ethnic and sexual identities” (2014, p. 480). They saw their true self at risk when placating normative gender roles and expectations placed on them by their families, religion and tradition. This issue is discussed by Hahm and Adkins (2009), whose research considers the tensions that Asian gay men experience within family-oriented environments. The issue is also discussed by Tan (2011) in relation to Singapore's gay culture, where Asian gay men often lead ‘separate’ lives from the role they play in their biological family. Tan argues that Asian attitudes towards remaining in the closet differ from Western concerns because they are influenced by Confucian concepts of the self. He notes that, in Asian families, homosexuality is not normally discussed, as it is considered a phase that a child will eventually grow out of before they resettle to a more hetero-normalised life. Laurent (2005) also discusses this issue in relation to Malaysian gay men, noting that they often manage a double life in order to preserve their personal cultural safety.

<sup>8</sup> These include blogs, websites, graphic novels and Facebook serials.

<sup>9</sup> In reference to my novel, Ho notes that Chinese filial piety places importance on “obedience, respect, ancestral worship, providing for one's aged parent, and ensuring the continuity of the family line” (1994, p. 353).

<sup>10</sup> I use the term ‘gay’ here to demarcate homosexual men from wider discourses related to other queer minority groups, including lesbians and transgendered people.

<sup>11</sup> Chou and Coleman (2013) translate the word ‘tongzhi’ as ‘same spirit’ or ‘comrade’. The term was used by Chinese revolutionaries, and subsequently appropriated into Chinese gay spectrum to sensitively address same sex cultural and sexual identities.

<sup>12</sup> The book presented a corpus of contemporary writing on queer China by an emerging generation of scholars, activists and artists.

<sup>13</sup> Although this study focussed on a specific region in the United States, it discusses racial bias experienced by ethnic minorities relevant to this research.

<sup>14</sup> The concept of identity management for Asian gay men is discussed as an act of reconceptualisation in Han, Proctor & Choi's (2007) conference paper *Margins Upon Margins: Managing the Stigma of Race and Sexuality among gay Asian men*.

## THE GAY NARRATIVE AND CROSS-CULTURAL GRAPHIC NOVELS

As a work of illustrated gay literature, *Homebound* may be situated with in a corpus of queer graphic novels. In contextualising the narrative themes of identity, culture and family in *Homebound*, six graphic novels<sup>15</sup> warrant consideration.

- Howard Cruise' (1995) *Stuck Rubber Baby*,
- Samuel Delany and Mia Wolff's (1999) *Bread & Wine: An Erotic Tale of New York*,
- Alison Bechdel's (2006) *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*,
- Amruta Patil's (2008) *Kari*,
- Beldan Sezen's (2015) *Snapshots of a Girl*, and
- Amir Soltani and Khalil Bendib's (2015) *Yousef and Farhad: Struggling for Family Acceptance in Iran: The Story of Two Gay Men*

*Stuck Rubber Baby* (Cruse, 1995) contains themes of homosexuality and racial tension. Contextualised within the American socio-cultural landscape of the 1960s, the narrative unfolds through the personal development of its protagonist. It tells of his struggles in addressing his gay identity and encounters with the black community as an outsider. The story is distinguished by its directness and contextualisation of a gay character within a specific historical context.

Delany and Wolff's *Bread & Wine* (1999) is a significant novel in contextualising this project, not only because of its autobiographical nature but also for its narrative approach and artistic treatment. In this work Delany recounts meeting Dennis, a homeless man, who later becomes his life partner. Wolff's art is almost sketch-like and exploratory, and this is used to reinforce the intimate nature of the narrative.

Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006) is also autobiographical. It tells the story of a lesbian character (the author) and her relationship with her closeted gay father. The narrative provides a complex analysis of a family's relationships, including approval-seeking behaviour and resolution. Narratively, Watson (2012) suggests that the novel functions as a literary device that "recirculates a modernist storehouse of images that document, critique and rework life narrative to new effect in twenty-first century stories" (2012, p. 304). In terms of *Homebound*, it is the novel's focus on inter-relationships between the characters, and the search for validation, that is of particular interest.

Amruta Patil's *Kari* (2008) considers gender, sexuality and relationships in urban India, as experienced by its gay protagonist, Kari. The novel is concerned with the pursuit of an authentic identity underpinned by loss and separation. The story provides an insight into a disenfranchised lesbian's experience of living in a cultural milieu that demands conformity and obedience.

*Snapshots of a Girl* (Sezen, 2015) is an autobiographical graphic novel that tells the story of the author's personal coming out journey. Significantly, the novel, like the others in this review, is distinguished by its emphasis on the protagonist having to negotiate certain cultural and familial challenges (in this instance, as an immigrant of Turkish descent).



*Yousef and Farhad* (Soltani & Bendib, 2015) was originally published as a serial on Facebook<sup>16</sup> by OutRight Action International. Subsequently, the serial was compiled into a 20 page graphic novel and made accessible freely on the internet.<sup>17</sup> The narrative describes the family conflict experienced by two gay men who are romantically involved in Iran. Although the central theme concerns family tension, it reflects the underlying challenges faced by homosexuals in a conservative and patriarchal culture. Mohamed (2016) claims that the narrative is considered accessible at a societal and cultural level in its visualised representation. As such, this graphic novel provides a medium for discourse in its ability to negotiate cultural differences, and to draw attention to familiar themes regarding homosexuality in a non-Western society.

Like *Homebound*, these autobiographical queer graphic novels draw upon the self-narratising author to examine a cultural milieu. They orchestrate image and text to draw attention not only to narrative, but also (arguably) to distinctive queer ways of understanding (largely non-Western) family relationships.

A review of contextual knowledge is always a difficult undertaking, because accounting for influences on a creative work can be a relatively nebulous endeavour. Beyond the explicit, one is also often influenced by nuances of knowledge. The texts considered in this chapter have been discussed because they were broadly influential in my thinking and positioning of *Homebound*. The application of these ideas will be unpacked in the critical commentary chapter of the exegesis. However, at this point it is useful to consider the research design employed in activating and developing the novel, its narrative structure and artistic treatment.

<sup>15</sup> These graphic novels portray the personal experiences of a gay or lesbian character who is the story's protagonist. Although I acknowledge an increasing body of recent graphic novels that contain gay characters, my concern in this review is only with those that are driven by a queer character.

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/yousef.farhad.story>

<sup>17</sup> The graphic novel can be accessed here: <https://www.outrightinternational.org/content/free-download-graphic-novel-yousef-and-farhad>



## ***Chapter 3***

# *Research Design*

- *Heuristics, Tacit Knowing and Sedimentation*
  - : *Immersive experience*
- *Research Methods*
  - : *Telling, drawing and collecting [the designer's journal]*
  - : *Exploratory testing*
  - : *Move testing experiments*
  - : *Consultation*
  - : *Story design*
  - : *Watercolour painting*
- *Conclusion*

In this chapter, I explain the methodological considerations that enabled the production of the graphic novel, *Homebound*.

Because this practice-led<sup>18</sup> project served the design and production of a largely autobiographical graphic novel, the research paradigm orienting the project may be described as post-positive. Dash (1993) describes a post-positivist paradigm as one that “emphasises that social reality is viewed and interpreted by knowledge that is personally experienced rather than acquired from or imposed from the outside” (1993, p. 1). Given this qualitative<sup>19</sup> orientation, it was necessary to engage a research methodology<sup>20</sup> that facilitated high chances of discovery and creative synthesis, when working in flexible ways with very ‘interiorised’ material. This is because, for a large part of this project, I drew on my personal experiences. To do this I needed to immerse myself within memory and the related anxieties that became narrative tensions within the novel. Such immersion as a methodological approach to research resides at the core of a heuristic inquiry.

## HEURISTICS, TACIT KNOWING AND SEDIMENTATION

Douglass and Moustakas (1985) describe heuristic inquiry as a “search for the discovery of meaning and essence in significant human experience” (1985, p. 40). I considered this methodology applicable for this project, because it positioned my lived experience as central to the work.<sup>21</sup> Heuristic inquiry deals not only with the autobiographical experience but also with its intuitive processing, synthesising and refinement. It centralises in an inquiry both tacit knowledge<sup>22</sup> and cognitive wisdom, such that the researcher’s “reflective search, awareness, and discovery constitutes the essential core of heuristic investigation” (1985, p. 42).

Polanyi considers tacit knowledge to be important to heuristic inquiry, because it “forms a pathway that [enables one] to discern and interpret and therefore act in a truly informed manner” (1983, p. 20). He suggests that tacit knowing enables us to problem solve and also “negotiate the matter in question utilising past experiences and gathering of information” (Polanyi, 1983, p. 20).

Sela-Smith (2002), Ings (2011) and Moustakas (1990) argue heuristic inquiry’s propensity to enable realisation through intuitive practices. Within this, one’s design process “is based on self-dialogue, intuition, reflection and insightful decision-making” (Ings, 2011, p. 228). However, heuristic inquiry also relies on accrued knowledge if its patterns of questioning and experimentation are to be effective

(Douglass & Moustakas, 1985; Ings, 2011; Kleining & Witt, 2001). In this regard, I have also drawn upon the concept of sedimentation – a term coined by the Chinese philosopher Li Zehou (李泽厚), who suggests that the action of ‘knowing how’ can only transpire through the wisdom and skill gathered through experience and practice (Wawrytko, 2013). Thus, my ability to intuitively sense my way forward in the project was constantly drawing upon my past experiences as a graphic designer, illustrator, storyteller and social being. The intuitive use of this accrued knowledge is what Kleining and Witt (2001) argue is central to a heuristic researcher’s ability to discern patterns and correlations in emerging data.

## Immersive Experience

At the centre of a heuristic inquiry is the idea of immersion (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985; Moustakas, 1990; Sela-Smith, 2002). Moustakas refers to this as living “the question in waking, sleeping, and even dream states. Everything in his or her life becomes crystallized around the question. The immersion process enables the researcher to come to be on intimate terms with the question – to live it and grow in knowledge and understanding of it” (Moustakas, 1990, pp. 28).<sup>23</sup>

In my research practice, immersion occurs primarily in the lived space of my studio (Figure 5). This is a private area in my home that enables me to fully concentrate on the making process and the life experiences that resource the work. This work space is embedded within the intimacy of my home life, my life with my partner and friends, and in a world where I am surrounded by objects that carry memories of my past. The walls of my studio are covered with images that serve as inspirations or reference tools. Surrounding me is the collateral of knowing and thinking, including books and tools, such as pens, paint, brushes and working sketches. In this space I am immersed in a non-verbal/aural dialogue with the work. Being private, I can freely operate with insight, frustration, angst and failure.<sup>24</sup>

Through immersion, I engaged with what Csikszentmihalyi refers to as ‘flow experience’. He describes flow experience as a state of creativity of an intrinsic and inspirational nature, a state of ‘being-in-the-moment’. He suggests that flow experience involves “concentration” or “intensely focused attention” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014, p. 7). When dealing with a novel led by both image and text, this flow is important, because it is within it that elements like story flow, graphic treatment, space, time and emphasis find their harmonious correlations.



Figure 5. Images of my studio where I worked on *Homebound*. (2016).

▲ Figure 5.

<sup>18</sup> This research leads primarily to a new understanding about practice, and therefore, it is a practice-led thesis. According to Candy (2006), "Practice-led research is research where some of the resulting knowledge is embodied in an artefact. Whilst the significance and context of that knowledge is described in words, a full understanding of it can only be obtained with reference to the artefact itself" (2006, p. 18).

<sup>19</sup> Qualitative research is concerned with the interpretation of the why and how human behaviour, and generally is associated with post positivism (McGregor & Murnane, 2010).

<sup>20</sup> The term 'methodology' refers to the overall approach a researcher takes to an inquiry. It is

a natural consequence of the paradigm that orients the study. Guba and Lincoln (1994) explain that methodology asks the question, "how can the inquirer go about finding out whatever they believe can be known?" (1994, p. 108).

<sup>21</sup> Barrett and Bolt (2014) describe 'lived experience' as the accumulation of knowledge from personal experiences and reactions, wherein the individual's "learning takes place through action and intentional, explicit reflection on that action" (2014, p. 5).

<sup>22</sup> According to Sela-Smith (2002), tacit knowledge is a "tacit dimension of personal knowledge ... that internal place where experience, feeling, and

meaning join together to form both a picture of the world and a way to navigate that world" (2002, p. 60).

<sup>23</sup> Conceptually, Tommy (the novel's protagonist) is a budding graphic novelist with only one novel to his name. He is working on his second book. As his story is my story, Tommy's identity and experiences are reflected within me, and I am in him. Tommy became my voice and therefore an extension of my being. In this regard, I became an active participant in the project, instead of an observer (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990); I lived inside the project and I was articulated through image, space and text.

<sup>24</sup> This is discussed in further detail in Appendix D.



Figure 6. An early iteration of a spread rendered in ink. (February 2016).

Figure 7. Pages from *Homebound* demonstrating contrasting modes of address. (August 2016).



▲ Figure 6.



▲ Figure 7.

## RESEARCH METHODS

If the research project employs a heuristic methodology, the methods used to apply and explicate this are concerned with reflection and reflexivity. *Homebound's* narrative emerged from reflections on my lived experience.<sup>25</sup> It began with my documenting formative moments in my personal history that might resource an overarching narrative that was concerned with identity and loyalty (see Appendix A). Within this, a sense of cultural voice was formed. By referring to truthful accounts of my historical experiences, the emerging story and its modes of address could be exercised as an embodiment of an authentic self.<sup>26</sup>

### *Telling, drawing and collecting [the designer's journal]*

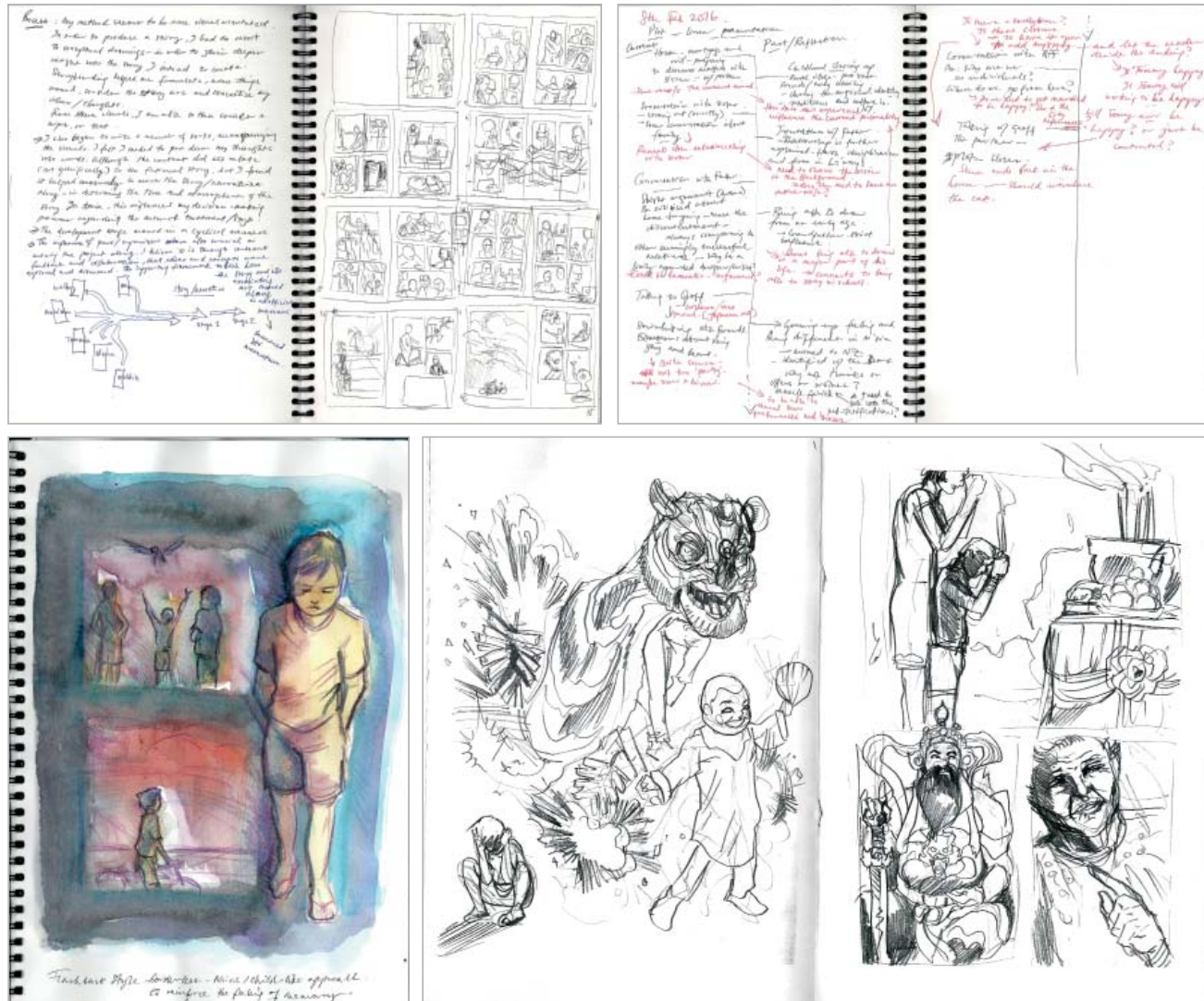
The methods I employed to do this were diverse. Initially I identified the main theme and purpose of the work (to tell an identity story on a Asian gay bear, and the conflicts of identity and loyalty that he encounters). To do this I did not actively seek out other graphic novels as touchstones. Instead, I began talking to trusted friends about my experiences. At the same time I began drawing some of these experiences and collecting ephemera related to them. As certain narratives began to reside more cohesively within the flow of the narrative and its intention, I afforded them greater clarity by scripting them as sketch illustrations. These illustrations provided the scaffolding for the written monologue. Only after the novel's arc and plot points became clearer were practical considerations given to typography, layout design and formatting (see Appendix C.3 and C.4).<sup>27</sup>

As part of this process I utilised a designer's journal (see Appendix C). In this document, conceptual and developmental thinking were generated and reflected upon, and from this surfaced emerging iterations of the project (Bilda, Gero, & Purcell, 2006). Van Manen (1997) has noted that, "Researchers have found that keeping a journal, diary or log can be very helpful for keeping a record of insights gained, for discerning patterns of the work in progress, for reflecting on previous reflections, for making the activities of research themselves topics for study, and so forth" (1997, p. 73). Inside this journal one can see evidence of two forms of experimentation. These are both discussed by Donald Schön (1984) in his observations on reflective practitioners. The approaches are exploratory testing and move testing.

<sup>25</sup> In this regard, Etherington (2004) describes lived experience as "personal stories, personal myths, and narratives [that] allow new knowledge to emerge," and to "enable us to create meaning out of experience" (2004, pp. 27-28).

<sup>26</sup> Van Manen (1997) said, "Objects of art are visual, tactile, auditory, kinetic texts – texts consisting of not a verbal language but a language nevertheless, and a language with its own grammar. Because artists are involved in giving shape to their lived experience, the products of art are, in a sense, lived experiences transformed into transcended configurations" (1997, p. 74).

<sup>27</sup> It was at this point, after I had found my voice and story, that I began to look at the work of other graphic novelists. This delay was a conscious choice because I wanted to preserve a certain authenticity of voice in the work.



▲ Figure 8.

Figure 8. Examples from designer's journal detailing exploratory experiments used in the development of Homebound. (February – March 2016).



## **Exploratory testing**

Schön (1984) insists that experimentation is crucial in determining the course of the practice and refers to it as “exploratory.” Schön defines exploratory experimentation as the “probing, playful activity by which we get a feeling for things. It succeeds when it leads to the discovery of something there” (1984, p. 145). Thus, such experiments operate as a search for potentials rather than the pursuit of refinement. For instance, in the original form of the novel the narrative was told entirely through one time frame and was related entirely through inked drawings (Figure 6). However, by experimenting with watercolour treatments I had learned as a child (and which arguably still carried something of the nuance of my formative Malaysian-Chinese aesthetics) I began to reformat the novel into a bifurcate approach that oscillated between two modes of address: the conventional comic book layout and the illustrated diary (Figure 7).

These explorations generally occurred in my journals, where written monologue, drawing, narrative sequencing and watercolour experiments co-existed in a discourse of thinking and questioning (Figure 8). Douglass and Moustakas view the trial and error nature of such process as an attempt to, “reach beyond the scope of usual perceptual abilities and discover knowledge and meaning unexpectedly and implicitly” (1985, p. 50). Thus, in exploratory experimentation practice was used in a probing manner to construct potential meaning and relationships.

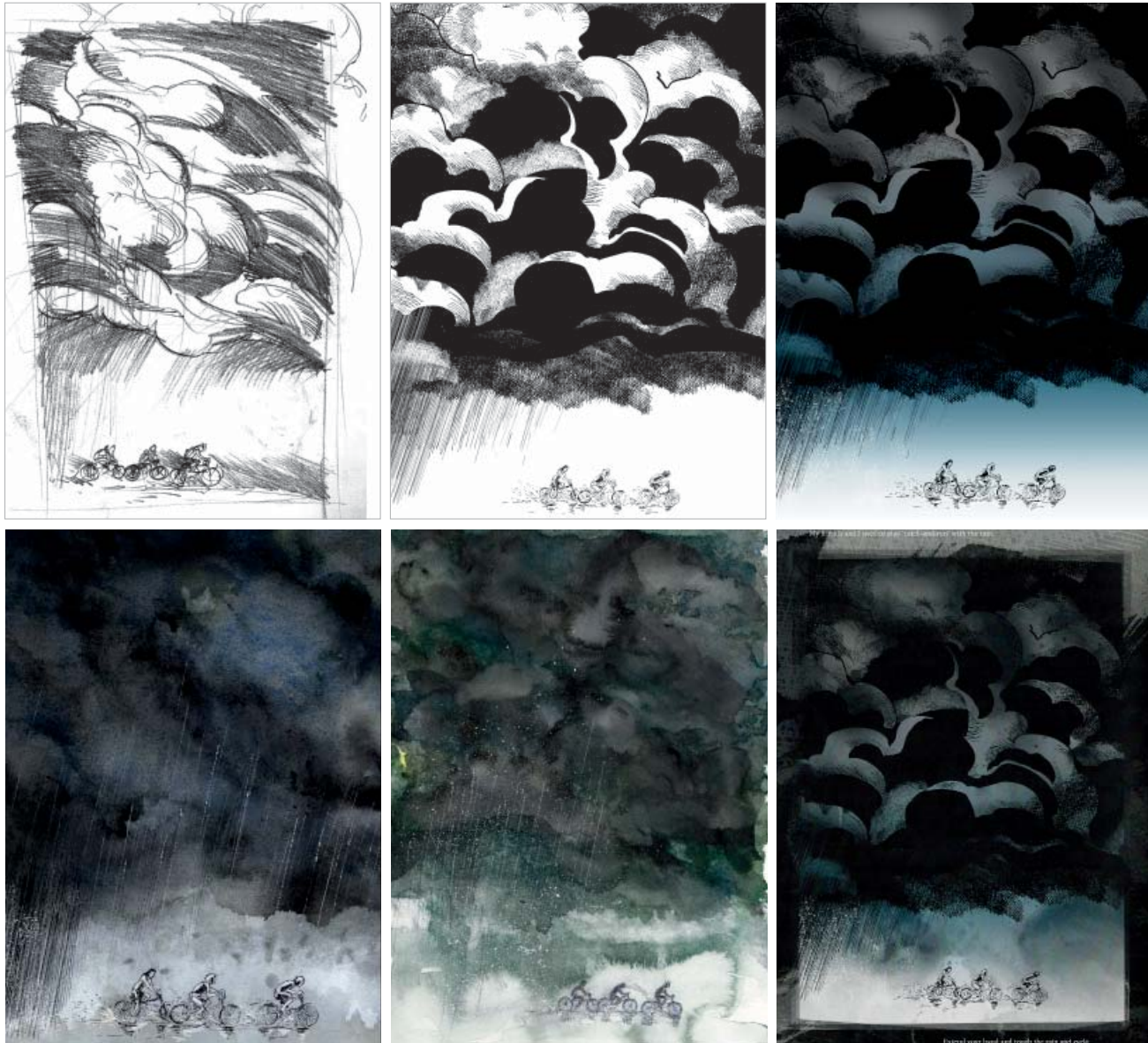
## **Move testing experiments**

Each development in the project’s exploratory process revealed different potentials and meanings, which were then considered and negotiated.<sup>28</sup> Schön defines this negotiation process as move-testing. The approach graduates beyond exploration to a form of experimentation where the practitioner performs a specific task in order to “see what happens” (1984, p. 146). One might also describe this as testing moves on an idea to refine its potential. In designing *Homebound* a great deal of time was spent fine tuning graphic treatments so I could bring diverse modes of telling into a sense of harmonious flow (Figure 9). Through move-testing, a sense of ‘what works’, and ‘what doesn’t’ was attained.

## **Consultation**

Although exploratory and move testing experiments were significant approaches to developing the novel, I also used consultation as a method of refining the work’s narrative and assessing its clarity. Although Douglass and Moustakas suggest that, in a heuristic inquiry, “through rigor and disciplined commitment, one follows the subjective past ordinary levels of awareness, living the question internally in sources of being and nonbeing, recording hunches, ideas, and essences as they emerge, and, ultimately, consulting with others regarding the phenomenon or experience” (1985, p. 40), by engaging other parties in a discursive, consultative process, I was able to gain outside perspectives on iterations of the novel.

<sup>28</sup> Also see Appendix C.



◀ Figure 9.



Figure 9. Examples of move testing experiments during the development of the narrative. (February – April 2016).





▲ Figure 10.

By consulting practitioners on effective story writing, the script (and dialogue) of the novel and its characters were incrementally refined (see Appendix B). Although the text is largely autobiographical, the story was adjusted to consider certain storytelling elements that might help to improve its narrative flow. These elements included tension, drama and resolution. In refining these elements I showed iterations of the work to five writers who also work with imagery as an integrated part of their storytelling.<sup>29</sup> The strategic employment of a reference group with specialist expertise meant that critique was generally highly informed and a wide field of reference data was able to be drawn upon, when raising issues within the work. This consultation process also broadened the contextual understandings of the novel, because I was introduced to less well-known work of other graphic novelists and theories of identity narrative.<sup>30</sup>

## Story design

Once satisfied with the narrative's trajectory and plot points, I began working illustratively with the story. In this process I developed a flexible pagination plan that altered as I balanced the pace of the novel (Figure 10). Iterations of the novel were sent out for feedback on pace and emphasis. However, any comments were drawn back into the self and the immersive state of the story.<sup>31</sup> Feedback was not treated as 'recommended edits' but as a form of questioning about clarity and emphasis. By adopting this approach I managed to ensure that the story and its telling were not unduly distorted.

During this time of negotiating pace and illustration, I also changed the mode of visual address from conventionally 'inked in' drawing techniques to a more sketched form that I realised was giving my initial drafts some of their dynamism (c.f. Figures 11 and 12). By exploring the potentials of the sketch, I pursued the idea graphically of a conflicted and unresolved identity, something that was taking form, and was emotionally resonant but simultaneously not absolute.

Throughout the process of story designing, I was constantly reflecting on relationships between image and text. Dialogue placement in relation to the illustrations became part of this process because I was seeking a means of depicting the dynamics of family pressure that

<sup>29</sup> The animator and story teller Dr. Miriam Harris, the graphic novelist Elena Paniata, the film writer and director Professor Welby Ings, the film and animation designer Tammie Li Chin Leong, and the art director and story teller Eddie Mun Ho Wong.

<sup>30</sup> As an extension of this I also presented iterations of my thinking at conferences, such as the Gender & Diversity Research Symposium (May 11th 2016, Auckland University of Technology). My paper was titled *Reframing gay Asian male masculinity through bear art*. This presentation discussed the Asian gay man's masculine identity and its cultural appearance in gay art. Thematically, the research underpinning the paper served to coalesce my thinking surrounding non-eurocentric considerations of sexual identity.

<sup>31</sup> In heuristic inquiry this is a contested process. Sela-Smith, in her 2002 critique of Moustakas' heuristic method, argues that such externalisation of thinking can be problematic because a "confusion of ... different perspectives and different meanings, can fully disorient the researcher doing self-inquiry" (2002, p. 71). Ings (2011) largely agrees with this, noting that when seeking external critique a heuristic inquirer has to be careful because, "the power of the subjective search can shift to an objective analysis of the created phenomena and this can result in a work in the final stages of its realisation, losing much of its integrity and idiosyncratic 'voice'" (2011, p. 231). This, he suggests, is because, "if one applies critique to the emerging artifact instead of the question, the outcome can become disconnected from the wealth of tacit knowing that brought it into being" (p. 231). However, he suggests that if "feedback is drawn back into the self, as opposed to simply being applied to the emerging design" then the designer/researcher can use comments and critique as a way of enriching the state of interior questioning (p. 231).



▲ Figure 11.



▲ Figure 12.

Figure 10. Examples of the novel's changing pagination plan. (March – May 2016).

Figure 11. These are examples showing initial sketch studies. By reflecting back on these works as the study progressed I came to appreciate them as a way of communicating the idea of irresolution and the artistic nature of the novel's protagonist (see Appendix C.2). (February – March 2016).

Figure 12. Using sketching as a formal illustrative approach to the novel. These draft pages developed in June and July 2016 show how line and space unencumbered by strong colour were used to emphasise a sense of dynamism and irresolution in the story. (June – July 2016).



equated with my lived experiences of conflicting obligations. Although I referred to a collection of illustration sources (ranging from independent and mainstream graphic novels) to help me with this process, in the end I returned to the rhythms of conflict and reflective pause that I experienced in such situations, and I designed an unique approach working from my lived experience.

As part of this process I also began testing fonts that might convey a sense of identity in the work. Although in the final novel I relied mostly on commercial fonts, I experimented with customised fonts and handwritten text (Figure 13).<sup>32</sup> Significantly, I spent some time examining the potential of the 'hand written'. In the final design this became the voice of the reflective storyteller, who unfolds a parallel (or explanatory) backstory in the novel. The use of handwriting made reference not only to diary entries but also to my childhood, where text was not generated from computers in school. These experiments led to the slightly idiosyncratic typeface in the novel that is designed to reference the personal and vulnerable voice of Tommy's childhood.

### **Watercolour painting**

In my experiments with story design I realised quite early that the novel might play out effectively as a bifurcate narrative. By this I mean it would contain both a current story and a series of reflections on childhood that could serve to explain Tommy's actions and reactions. Although initially I treated these historical recollections in a manner similar to the main story, I found that they lacked the essence of my Malaysian-Chinese upbringing. Accordingly, I began exploring watercolour rendering, which had been a significant part of my early art education (see Appendix C.2). Having learned watercolour throughout my schooling days, it is a medium I consider profoundly personal (Figure 14). By using this approach, I was able to suggest a fluid setting and this allowed for a less didactic interpretation of memory.

### **CONCLUSION**

Methodologically this project was developed through a heuristic inquiry that employed a high level of immersion in the self and memories of past experience. Elements of the recalled were physicalised as illustration and text. From its conceptual stages to the practical process of 'making' the novel, *Homebound* became a distillation of creative and reflexive practices that employed exploratory and move testing experiments, strategically resourced by a process of consultation. Numerous iterations of the novel were considered, discarded and re-integrated in a process indicative of heuristic inquiry, where the researcher moves forward by identifying cohesive patterns, representations and congruencies (Kleining & Witt 2000).

Having outlined the methodological approach to the novel it is useful now to consider critical ideas underpinning and driving the novel.

<sup>32</sup> See also Appendix C.4.







## **Chapter 4**

# *Critical Commentary*

- *Asian Gay Masculinity*
- *The 'Chosen' Family*
- *Gay Bears*
- *The Autobiographical Graphic Novel*
- *Critical Commentary on Features of 'Homebound'*
  - : *The illustrative sketch*
  - : *Watercolour painting and 'qi'*
  - : *Narrative juxtaposition*
  - : *Panel design and speech bubbles*
  - : *Decompression story telling*
  - : *Colour*
- *Conclusion*

This chapter discusses two arenas of critical discourse that were formative in the design of *Homebound*. These are:

- Asian gay masculinity and the 'Chosen' family
- The autobiographical graphic novel

It then offers a critical commentary on features of the work. These include:

- The illustrative sketch
- Watercolour painting and 'qi'
- Narrative juxtaposition
- Panel design and speech bubbles
- Decompression in storytelling
- Colour

## ASIAN GAY MASCUINITY

According to Levy (2009), 'coming out' as gay is regarded as a critical move towards accepting a genuine and authentic self identity. Thematically, the novel *Homebound* is concerned with issues of the immigrant Asian gay male's sexual and cultural identity. As an immigrant to New Zealand, when I came out and accepted my identity as a gay man,<sup>33</sup> I became immersed in the 'gayworld' (Altman, 2012) and eventually began to consider concepts of masculine representation and desirability (Duncan, 2010). To me, being positioned as masculine was an act of rebellion and rejection to hetero-normative expectations (Whitesel, 2010)<sup>34</sup> and I adjusted my worldview to fit into a western definition of gay masculinity.

Han, Proctor and Choi (2007) consider such an act as a 'reconceptualisation' or altering of one's self to "fit in" in order to change one's "status from a stigmatised one to a non-stigmatised one" (2007, p. 5). According to Han et al., stigma management strategies are often employed in order to facilitate the Asian gay man "passing as straight among other Asians or as non-Asian among other gay men" (2007, p. 6). I found myself adopting many stigma management strategies, and it was the conflict that such change raised that forms the substructure of the novel (Figure 15).

## THE 'CHOSEN' FAMILY

Weston (1991) notes that gay kinship is formed from mutual experiences and as a strategy to make sense of the dominant heteronormative worldview that gay men inhabit. He argues that 'gay families' form within a collective or community as surrogates. Blair and Pukall (2015) define the term 'chosen family': "[it] refers to non-blood related friends who come to fill the roles normally filled by family members" (2015, p. 259). Ings (2013) unpacks the linguistic and cultural origins<sup>35</sup> of the 'family' in gay society, and explains the phenomenon as a social response to the 'alienation' among sexual minority individuals who are ontologically different from their parents. The construct he notes has historically formed part of a navigation and mediation process, that since the 1700s has become a "significant social bonding agent" that gay men use to communicate with others who share common elements of identity and needs for social safety (2013, p. 135).

Although 'being' gay may be shaped by varying self-identifying categories,<sup>36</sup> these are generated to create an affirming sense of the self and exemplify an instinctual need to *belong*. Rowe (2014) suggests that the act of becoming (establishing and forming) an identity is to develop a need to belong "through engagement with collectivities." (2014, p. 434). Part of such "identification practice" is to tell life stories (2014, p. 435) and Rowe argues that gay men relate to interpersonal and intangible themes surrounding gay identity. *Homebound* is an exemplification of his observation. Although the novel is not a coming out story per se (because the protagonist is already an out gay man), we are led to consider why he chooses to return to a closeted role when he faces his biological family.<sup>37</sup> Surrounding this seeming paradox are the unfolding conflicts of filial loyalty in Tommy's Malaysian-Chinese family, and the loyalty to his partner and 'brothers' in his gay family.

## GAY BEARS

For this project, I drew insights from my chosen family, which is constituted by my partner, trusted friends and a social community who identify themselves as 'bears'. Embracing concepts of masculinity that celebrate a fuller, hirsute body (Dececco & Wright, 1997; Gough & Flanders, 2009; Hennen, 2008; Kampf, 2000; Moskowitz, Turrubiates, Lozano, & Hajek, 2013), bears constitute a community of gay men who perform a distinct form of gay masculinity. In general they do not conform, or subscribe, to the "prevailing gay aesthetic that valorises slender, smooth-bodied youths" (2010, p. 1). Hennen (2008) suggests

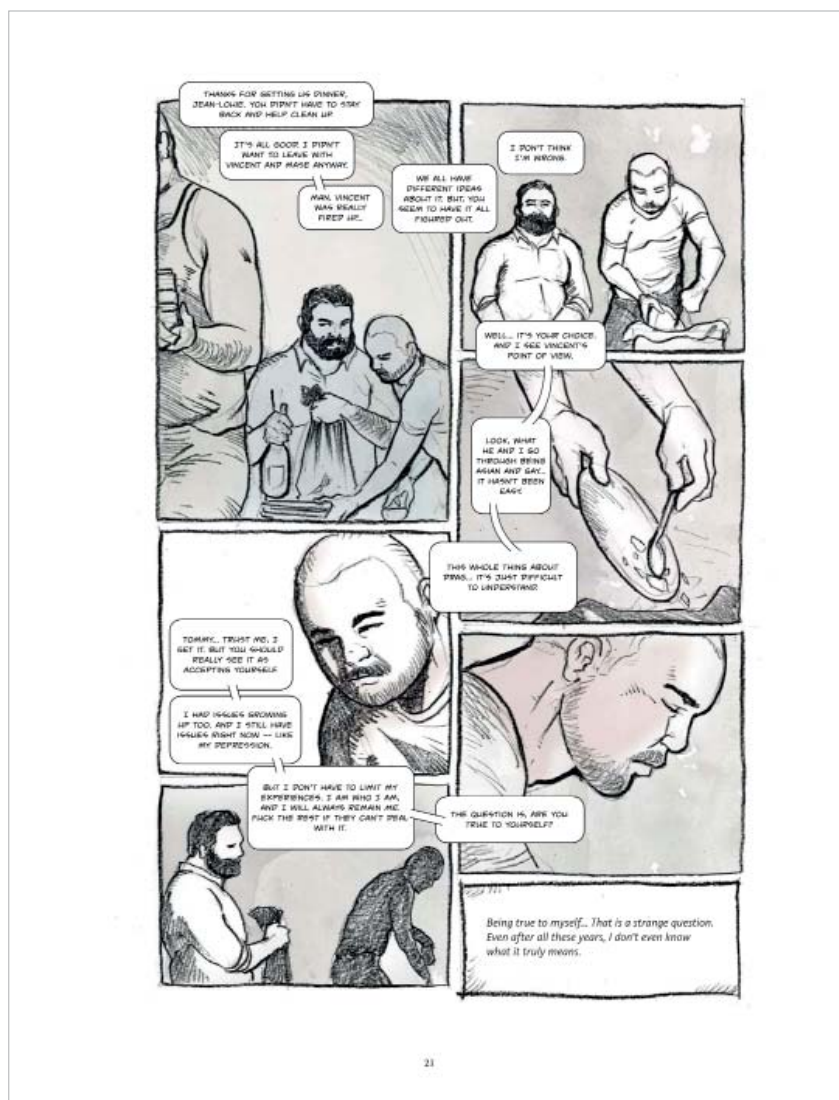


Figure 15. Page 21 from *Homebound* illustrating Tommy's sense of masculinity being challenged by his friend, Jean-Louie. (2016).

▲ Figure 15.

<sup>33</sup> My sexuality remains hidden from my biological family in Malaysia by choice.

<sup>34</sup> By this I mean to address heteronormative stereotypes of gay men. Whitesel claims that "heterosexism perpetuates the myth that gay men are effeminate and that effeminate men must be gay: simultaneously, it is erroneously assumed that same-sex relationships include a masculine role and feminine complement" (2010, p. 216).

<sup>35</sup> Up until the middle decades of last century, the word family was used by gay men and lesbian

women to describe one's homosexual community (Partridge, 2002, p. 377). Partridge suggests that the word dates from the 1700s where, in thieves' cant, 'family' men and women were individuals who belonged to discrete criminal communities (2002, p. 377). These chosen families often replaced biological families "that no longer functioned as support mechanisms (often because the person had been disowned or had left because life had become untenable" (Ings, 2015, p. 739). Chosen families had a distinct language (Baker, 2002; Ings, 2012), norms, and expectations (Livingston, 1991).

<sup>36</sup> Such descriptions are generally based on body types and behavior. For example, queens, radical faeries, bears, 'straight acting', twinks, Muscle Marys, chubs and daddies. Most of these are considered slang terms. The website, Scruff, offers a detailed lexicon of the most common of these terms: <http://www.scruff.com/slang/>

<sup>37</sup> Laurent (2005) notes that this is consistent with many Asian gay men, who often subscribe to a dual identity.

that “[...] the appeal of the bear image is based on its association with masculinity and strength while at the same time signalling a capacity for tenderness and conviviality” (2008, p. 115).

Among the various typologies of the bear subculture, masculinity is valorised as a sexual premium and contains eroticised connotations. Hennen (2008) suggests that when viewed as a masculinised creature, the bear “becomes a kind of homage to phallic power and masculinity” (2008, p. 119). In cultivating a community<sup>38</sup> that deals with anxieties of body image and social integration through intimacy and affection, bears are generally perceived as sexually open minded and accommodating (Hennen, 2008; Suresha, 2013). Consequently, they are often perceived as engaging in higher levels of social engagement and sexual activity within the community. These engagements occur through bear-related events, contests, erotic publications and in online spaces.<sup>39</sup> A number of these behaviours are reflected in *Homebound*, (e.g. the reference to Vincent’s predilection to a hook-up app, and Tommy’s vocation as an erotic bear artist) (Figure 16).

By appropriating certain tropes, Lin (2014) observes that Asian gay bears “learn behaviours through observing other Asian gay bears’ behaviour” (2014, p. 184). By doing this, they manage stigma through group formation (Han et al., 2007) and ‘collectivist’ attitudes (Rowe, 2014) (Figure 17).

## THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL GRAPHIC NOVEL

I began the novel with an ambiguous questioning that related to my personal and cultural position. Given the irresolution of my identity I knew that I faced a challenge to communicate the complexity of the unresolved within an accessible narrative. This is what Sela-Smith calls a sense of ‘un-ease’ (2002, p. 63). She says, “The personal question or problem connected to self-understanding is rooted in tacit knowledge and creates a sense of *un-ease* [emphasis from source] that the researcher seeks to resolve” (2002, p. 63). However, I was not attempting to ‘resolve’ my identity – rather, I was concerned with giving ‘voice’ to ambiguities that are often part of day to day life for Asian gay men. I wanted the story to feel unaffected because it was intimately resourced from my lived experiences and those of the men in my Chosen family.<sup>40</sup>

Peñalba García describes such self-permeating novels as ‘graphic life narratives’. In these autobiographical texts the author/illustrator/designer negotiates the interplay of words and (self) images in order to “articulate his or her own sense of identity” (Peñalba García, 2015, p. 156).

*Homebound* may be considered a largely autobiographical text, and as such I have experienced its development as a form of ‘empowerment’, (a term borrowed from Clandinin and Connelly’s (1990) writing on autobiography as research). The project’s empowerment lies in its making explicit my personal narrative, such that difficult aspects of my lived experiences operate as both a consideration and a kind of surrender.

<sup>38</sup> The bear subculture is defined by its own set of social etiquette, dress code and vocabulary, separate from the gay mainstream. The bear vernacular includes ‘Woof’ and ‘Grrr’ to denote sexual attraction or to show affection. Framed by the bear flag (in which the colours represent the fur colours and nationalities of the world [Kampf, 2000, p. 16]), bears organise annual community events, called ‘Bear Runs’. For example, the Lazy Bear Weekend (1995-) organised by the Bears of San Francisco (<http://www.lazybearweekend.com>), Southern Hibearnation (1998-) organised by VicBears in Melbourne (<http://southernhibearnation.com.au>), the Bear Festival (熊祭) in Taiwan (2009-), (<https://www.facebook.com/bearfestival>), and the Bear New Zealand Week (2009-) in Auckland (<http://bearnewzealand.co.nz>). Bear Runs are noted for their camaraderie but the events are also open for sexual encounters (Kampf, 2000, p. 100).

<sup>39</sup> Online spaces include dating websites and social apps such as Bearwww, Woofdate and Growlr, where bears are able to arrange dates or sexual encounters.

<sup>40</sup> Throughout the process, I was aware of what Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) refer to as the ‘confessional’ and ‘traditional research’ (2001, p. 15) and the risk of the project subsiding into narcissism and self-indulgence. In addressing this, I tried to stay close to actual lived experiences, and to imbue them with an artistic and sensitive rendering that spoke to my and other gay Asian men’s dual cultural positioning. The events that appear in the novel are arguably common. *Homebound* is not an exotic story of unlikely events, but the telling of a ‘common’ story with recognisable situations and behaviours. This said, I understand the implications of a project of this nature and its jeopardising impact on my cultural safety. This thesis serves as an effort to mediate my identity and personal belonging. By positioning *Homebound* as largely autobiographic, I am able to curate a reflective space and draw attention to often misunderstood aspects of Asian gay identity.



▲ Figure 16.



▲ Figure 17.

Figure 16. Pages 28, 54 and 55 from *Homebound* illustrating the erotic bear image. Explicit renderings of the body are seen as signifying both the sexual prowess and masculine virility that the bear considers attractive. Such explicit depictions of sex are arguably indicative of an 'open' attitude to sexuality and its expression. (2016).

Figure 17. Page 13 from *Homebound* illustrating Tommy's relationship to his chosen family. Sharing meals and social gay events are indicative of family rituals, also displayed through common interests in the arts, sports, physical and mental health, and professional undertakings. Underpinning these is a shared experience of a common sexuality. (2016).



## CRITICAL COMMENTARY ON FEATURES OF 'HOMEBOUND'

### The illustrative sketch

Visually *Homebound* is distinguished by its apparent <sup>41</sup> illustrative simplicity. Its drawings reference the sketched thinking of an artist but its narrative is composed in complex frames and relationships between written text and space. McCloud (2000) suggests that in comics and graphic novels, “the combination of simpler, more selective imagery and [...] frozen moments, lend a less fleeting, less transitory feeling to each moment, imbuing even incidental images with a potentially symbolic charge” (2000, p. 33). This use of selective, seemingly simple imagery is used in *Homebound* as a counterpoint for often complex compositional structures.

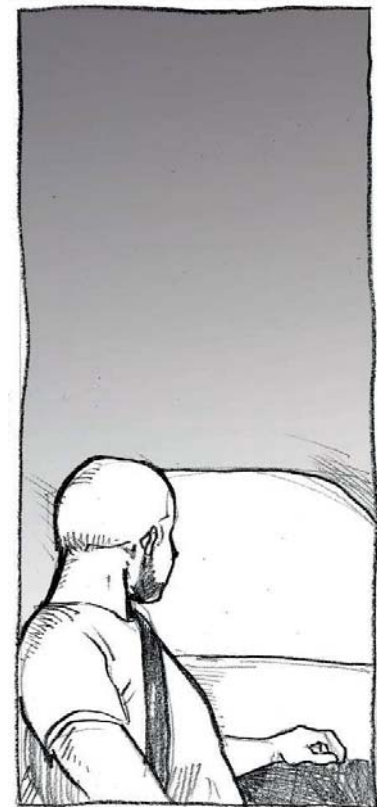
However, the distinctive use of line in my novel also draws on certain Chinese aesthetic principles. The Chinese painter Fang Xun (方薰, 1736 – 1799) said, “The line is defined by obverse and reverse, i.e. form and emptiness” (cited in Szmerdt, 2013, para. 12). In traditional Chinese painting the line should also represent the *yin xian* (隱現), i.e. “hidden, yet at the same time visible”. Although Szmerdt suggests that the term *yin xian* is mostly used in reference to landscape painting, (where the painter should not reveal everything in his painting), it can be arguably applied to approaches to drawing where one does not ‘over draw’ but allows the absence of line to create a dynamic within the work, such that the absence of detail becomes an expression of a greater whole (Figure 18).

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Figure 18. A panel from page 42 from *Homebound* shows the absence of detail in the illustration to suggest a sense of anxiety and alienation. (2016).

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Figure 19. Pages 56 and 57 from *Homebound* show an attempt to address the ‘qi’ of the artwork. Form and balance are suggested in a watercolour painting of boats moored in a harbour. Here emptiness and form co-exist within the same composition. (2016).



► Figure 18.



▲ Figure 19.

### Watercolour painting and 'qi'

The novel also uses a distinctive approach to watercolour painting that generally eschews detail so land is created as a remembered nuance. While the approach is apparently naïve (to reference the sense of childhood, watercolour painting activities are re-actioned through the mature talents of an adult graphic novelist), it also draws upon certain conventions of Chinese *shui-mo* (水墨, water and ink) painting. Fundamental to such painting is the concept of the *Spirit Resonance*.<sup>42</sup> This is the idea that a watercolour painting should retain the momentum and the spirit within the work, such that the painting will appear vivid and powerful.

In relation to this, Szmerdt discusses the idea of *qi* (氣) energy. In discussing traditional Chinese watercolours he suggests that if there is no 'qi'<sup>43</sup> present in a painting, it reveals the low skill of the artist. The artist, Szmerdt argues, "should be able to convey the spiritual and surreal features of the subject that he or she is painting, and go outside its realistic frame and solid form. This idea emphasises the nature of things, and not just things and their physical aspects" (2013, para. 4). In traditional Chinese painting, emptiness and form cannot exist without one another. Szmerdt notes, "The spirit (qi, emptiness) has no assigned form, and we can sense it

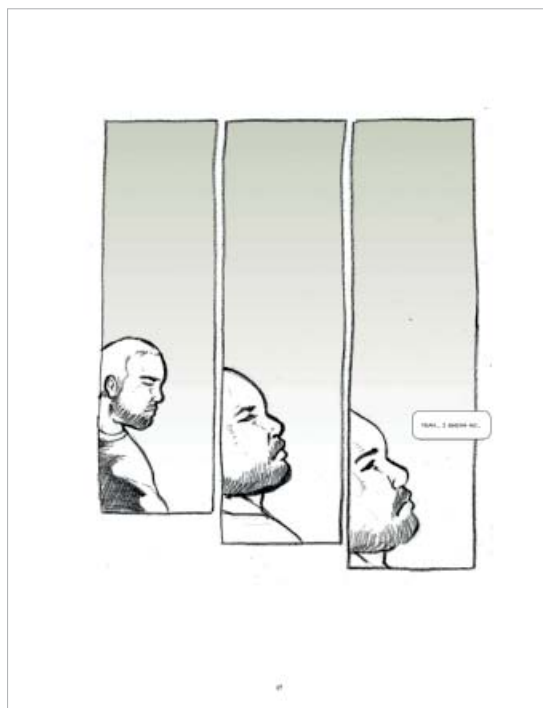
<sup>41</sup> I say 'apparent' because the use of space and non-resolution in the drawing style is actually highly considered. What is left out is as intricately designed as what is included.

<sup>42</sup> This idea was originally developed by Guo Ruoxu (郭若虛, 11th century) in his seminal text *Overview of Painting* (圖畫見聞志).

<sup>43</sup> In Chinese culture, 'qi' is closely related to breathing.



▲ Figure 20.



▲ Figure 21.

Figure 20. Pages 15 (left) and 70 (right) from *Homebound* exemplify contrasting compositional approaches using differing treatments of space to emphasise calm and tension, respectively. (2016).

Figure 21. Page 47 from *Homebound* illustrating Tommy's internal thinking. In the design he is isolated in space. All contextual detail is stripped away and we dwell with his internal self. The decompression emphasises a form of quiet introspection both in the character and in the manner that the reader is addressed. (2016).



only through its physical form. Thus, there is no form without emptiness, and vice versa" (2013, para. 4). Pohl (2009) explains that Chinese aesthetics refer to the notion of "suggestiveness" (2009, p. 89) and this is afforded a spiritual alignment with "naturalness and freedom" (2009, p. 90) because it promotes a balance between binary opposites (yin and yang) in a work of art (Figure 19).

## Narrative juxtaposition

The novel's title *Homebound* is a play on words. It talks about a journey to a physical place called home and also to a 'home' within the self. Concurrently the past tense of the verb 'bound' alludes to societal expectation and to a sense of being tied (bound) to convention. In the novel I have brought two worlds together and the protagonist is bound to both. The first is the bear family in which Tommy lives and the second is the world of his biological family. Beyond these worlds there is a third recollected world, comprising watercoloured diary entries that operate as renderings of childhood. Even Tommy's Chinese name, Yun Xíng Loh (運行), is a double entendre that refers to 'being in motion' or 'running'. This reflects Tommy's current position as the son who ran away from his filial responsibilities, and subsequently, his sense of Chinese cultural identity.

The conflicts of his contemporary world are contextualised by watercoloured, handwritten diary entries. These break into the flow of the novel at three points. By juxtaposing the contemporary narrative with recollections of childhood, I attempt to explain Tommy's present anxieties. With this approach, the reader is visually prompted to regard the text as a personal diary and to gain further insight into the protagonist's conflicted sense of belonging.

## Panel design and speech bubbles

The illustrated spreads of *Homebound* are alternately weighted. The contemporary narrative comprises subtly spot-coloured sketches that are light in their rendering. Eisner compares such approaches to comic design to the aesthetics of Chinese calligraphy, where meaning and intent are implicit within a brushstroke (1985, p. 14). He says, "In comic art [...] the subtle application of weight, emphasis and delineation combine to evoke beauty and message" (1985, p. 14). Thus, Tommy's world is rendered in a manner that evokes a personalised, 'sketched in beauty'. The characters are treated with restraint and the panels are constructed so they 'breathe' on the page. I have consciously avoided the heavy blackening of inks and the high contrast imagery they create, because I wanted to design a more nuanced, unresolved and personalised form of narration.<sup>44</sup>

Compositionally, McCloud claims that the space between the panels, or the 'gutter', is an important narrative agent. He says it "plays host to much of the magic and mystery that are the very heart of comics" (1994, p. 66). *Homebound's* page design uses the gutter in distinctive ways (Figure 20). The edges of the panels are drawn to create an arc that moves from a stable introduction to pages of narrative tension where panels are set very close together and words and images are juxtaposed to elicit a sense of building anxiety, claustrophobia and distress.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>44</sup> As an extension of this personalised form of narration, considerable time was spent designing the typographic voices for the work. Although early iterations were all hand rendered, eventually I employed 'UnmaskedBB' for Tommy's contemporary story, because it borders on the 'informal' and in this, suggests spoken dialogue. However, diary entries remained in a handwritten style that alluded to the personal and private. This said, considerable care was taken with what was written by hand, because I needed to ensure that the copy remained legible and easily accessible. Within these sections, the handwritten style is balanced with the use of 'KievitOT-Italic' for its larger body of text, for these same reasons.

<sup>45</sup> According to McCloud (1994) panel design is suggestive of the mood as it implies movement, space and time. It encourages pause, it can heighten or diminish pace, and evoke suspense (McCloud, 1994, p. 101).

The speech bubbles in *Homebound* are intentionally 'unassigned'. In designing this approach, I was seeking to encourage a deeper reading of the text through the use of "deductive reasoning" (McCloud, 1994, p. 71). Such reader involvement is noted by Kukkonen, who points out, "When speech bubbles work as textual clues, they elicit inference processes in readers" (Kukkonen, 2013, p. 21). Thus, I have designed dialogue in the novel so it is not directionally assigned. Bubbles do not point prescriptively to characters. Instead they float in and between the panels, so they reside in the context of the action. Refining this technique so it was not intrusive took some work, but the resulting reading experience is more nuanced and suggestive of voices one might hear in a room. This helps in a very subtle way to reinforce the sense of irresolution in the story, while ensuring that meaning is not lost.

### ***Decompression story telling***

There are parts of *Homebound* where dialogue is minimal or muted. This is done to indicate internalised reflection and deliberation, and the technique is regarded as 'decompression' story telling. The online blogger at Ogiue Maniax (2012) explains decompression as a story telling method that oscillates between action and reflection. Consequently, the text is afforded space to 'breathe' and pause. The reader is not thrown between action sequences, rather, one is invited to observe and participate in the mood of the story. Demarcating western and eastern philosophical considerations, McCloud (1994) observes that, "traditional western art and literature don't wander much. On the whole, [it is] a pretty goal-oriented culture" (1994, p. 81). By comparison we may consider Chinese literature as more contemplative.<sup>46</sup> By affording space for reflection and pause I have designed an approach to narratising Tommy's story that emphasises 'being there', rather than 'getting there' (1994, p. 81).

Thus, in the layout of *Homebound* characters are often paused in a state of contemplation. In a way this device operates as a form of passive punctuation. We encounter an extended pause or contemplative silence, wherein we are asked to pause in the rhythm of our reading to dwell with the feelings of the protagonist (Figure 21).

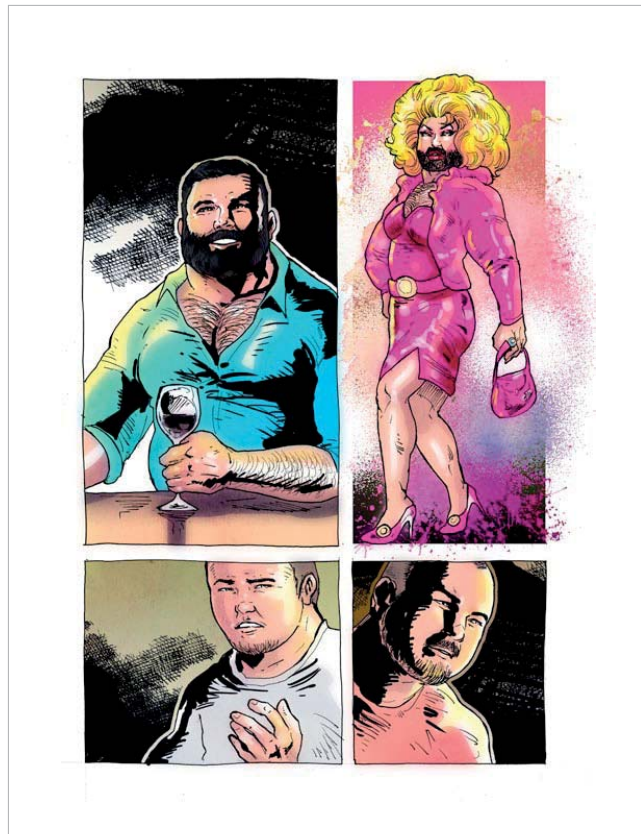
Expanding on this device, I also employed silence in the narrative. At certain times all text is removed from sequences so we 'watch' rather than 'read' what is happening. This again operates as a form of punctuation. Bell and Sinclair suggest that the device is capable of creating "more enigmatic" forms of narration (2005, p. 10). Such 'silence' can be used to reduce the didactic nature of story telling at certain points, so the reader is required to apply a higher level of interpretation to a situation. As a consequence they become arguably more complicit in "guiding the narrative" (2005, p. 10). I use the technique often to draw the reader in to the difficulty of a narrative episode, so they are suspended in a kind of empathetic awkwardness where irresolution exists because the protagonist cannot discuss the situation (Figure 22).

<sup>46</sup> A historical unpacking of this idea is undertaken in Daiyun Yue's (2016) *China and the West at the crossroads: Essays on comparative literature and culture*.



▲ Figure 22.

Figure 22. Page 59 from *Homebound*. In this episode we see Tommy unable to fulfil his filial duties but also unable to explain why. Being caught in an impossible bind he does not speak and we see him isolated both compositionally and by silence. (2016).



▲ Figure 23. Page 18 from *Homebound* in an earlier iteration. (April 2016).



▲ Figure 24. Page 18 from *Homebound* in its finalised format. (June 2016).

Figure 23 and 24. Alternative treatments of page 18 from *Homebound*. In Figure 23 we see the power of colour and its digital rendering referencing contemporary illustrative tropes like intensity, explicitness and dominance. Conversely Figure 24 removes the dominant colour treatments to create a graceful hierarchy and subtle dynamism (movement and stillness). In this example 'qi' is achieved through subtle washes and soft gradations of colour that do not detract from the illustration's line work or its powerful use of space. (2016).

## **Colour**

Originally, I had intended to apply a rich and detailed colouring treatment throughout the contemporary sections of the novel. This was to draw attention to the present day nature of the narrative (through its stylistic reference to modern comic art). However, the inked in and digitally brushed approach (Figure 23) tended to emotionally 'flatten out' the cultural voice I felt was integral to the work. It also rendered movement less dynamic and caused page spreads to become visually congested. This was because the intensity of the colour dominated space, detracted from nuances of deliberation and tension, and impeded the 'qi' energy in the work. By designing subtle colouring treatments in the novel (Figure 24), I was able to draw attention to anxieties in the story, in quiet ways that ensured closer attention would be paid to the characters and corresponding dialogue. Colour in Tommy's contemporary world is subtle and superficially, slightly unsure of itself. It suggests sensitivity and irresolution, but also paradoxically the control of a Chinese artist who has learned that one does not need to overstate to create power in an image.

## **CONCLUSION**

In this chapter I have considered Asian gay masculinity, the 'Chosen' family, and the autobiographical graphic novel. These discourses served as the critical substrate from which the writing and design of the novel drew its thinking.

These discussions were followed by a critical commentary on features of the work. These considered how restraint with space, speech, and illustrative modes were used to heighten a sense of irresolution and decompression in the narrative. In discussing these issues I drew upon both Chinese philosophical concepts as they apply to painting (yin xian (隱現), and qi' (氣)) and Western discourse concerned with comic and graphic novel design.

Of course much wider theoretical frameworks could be brought to bear on an analysis of *Homebound*, but I have chosen to be selective in highlighting what were the most influential discourses pertaining to the novel's design.





## ***Chapter 5***

# *Conclusion*

- *Summary of the Exegesis*
- *Further Research*
- *Personal Conclusion*



## SUMMARY OF THE EXEGESIS

This exegesis provides a critical contextualisation of a graphic novel, that is in turn a reflection on a personal journey towards reconciliation between sometimes opposing cultural values.

In Chapter 1, I introduced my cultural positioning as an Asian gay bear, illustrator, designer and researcher. My past and its circumstances were explained in relation to core narrative events and tensions in the novel. A review of contextual knowledge underpinning the novel's narratisation was outlined in Chapter 2. Here I discussed the phenomenon of Asian gay identity and its surrounding cultural discourses. I also considered a number of graphic novels that feature a gay and cross-cultural narrative. These served partly as contextualising practice for the inquiry. In Chapter 3, I unpacked the research methodology employed in the novel's design. Defined as a qualitative, practice-led inquiry, *Homebound* employed a heuristic framework to draw the self into a productive relationship with both the narrative and its stylistic treatments. Finally, in Chapter 4 I discussed critical thinking within the work. To do this I drew on both Chinese and Western concepts as a way of explaining not only the aesthetics and structure of the novel but also the principles that underpinned its design.

## FURTHER RESEARCH

In truth, a novel like *Homebound* is not written for a qualification. It has employed the rigour and opportunities of scholarly study to increase the depth of my thinking and to understand to a certain extent my motivations and creative processes. I will now seek publishers for the work,<sup>47</sup> because my intention has always been that such work only has life, when it touches the lives of others.

During the development of this thesis I have presented work in progress at a conference and at a number of lectures. These have been both queer-oriented and broader events dealing with issues of equity. With the novel complete I intend to use some of the contextualising material in this exegesis to resource thinking about cultural identity, as it impacts on Asian gay men. This is because current research suggests that while this population is growing, the unique issues many of us face are not widely understood.<sup>48</sup> Certainly current research on the sexual health of the Asian gay male community indicates a need for deeper, more informed targeting.<sup>49</sup> It is my intention, therefore, to publish articles about both the content and creative practice in the thesis, and to deliver at least one paper at a conference in 2017 where I can draw these elements into productive consideration.<sup>50</sup>

## PERSONAL CONCLUSION

This project has been challenging. The journey has compelled me to reflect on and question personal decisions I have made in my past. As a researcher, I have often had to adopt an objective position, especially when critiquing contexts and ideas impacting on my work. However, as a creator, self-narrator and practitioner, I have treated the emergent inquiry subjectively, and in this regard the novel's methodologies became mercurial. Creative processes were difficult to articulate, because most of the decisions and actions made relating to the novel were internalised. To keep track of my thinking, I found it useful to employ a designer's journal (see Chapter 3). In addition, consulting with other creators and narrators enabled me to refine the narrative clarity of my work and expand on ways I thought about the graphic novel as a potential blend of culturally resourced thinking.

On a personal level, the thesis has been difficult because I have, until now, chosen not to reveal my sexuality to my biological family. Although the project has enabled me to reflect upon certain anxieties surrounding my sense of identity and belonging, *Homebound* does not necessarily constitute a 'coming out' document. Careful thought will be given to how I prepare the work for publication. However, I am acutely aware that *Homebound*'s story is recognisable and relatable, and it emanates from a distinct, common, cultural milieu. When I converse with other Asian gay men, be they friends or acquaintances, we recognise the homogeneities that have shaped who we are. We share familiar stories of contesting insider/outsider status, both ethnically and as homosexuals. We operate between and within contrasting cultures.

*Homebound* is a graphic novel that was inspired by these kinds of stories. It is a narrative of my self and my journey to find the nature of loyalty and belonging. Although my cultural origin is Malaysian-Chinese, a large part of my cultural upbringing is Chinese. At heart, I remain a 'kampung' boy from Kedah, but, through *Homebound*, I have come to recognise that Asian gay men have lives that are woven with common threads of resilience, adaptability and steadfastness.

These are human qualities ... arguably, everybody shares them, and with this story I seek to draw such threads together so that we might come to appreciate and understand the meaning and challenges of culture.

... and perhaps in so doing, we might become better men.

<sup>47</sup> Graphic novels have now become more mainstream, but a work like *Homebound* will still have a niche market. In the first instance I will approach publishers such as Fantagraphics (<http://www.fantagraphics.com>), Genre Books (<http://www.genrebooks.co.nz>) and Penguin Random House (<http://www.penguinrandomhouse.co.nz>), because they have published gay themed graphic novels in the past.

<sup>48</sup> According to the New Zealand Gay men's Online Sex Survey (GOSS) 2002-2014, in 2002 Gay Asians consisted of 5.9% of the sample population and this increased to 14.3% in 2014. In 2006, the Gay Auckland Periodic Sex Survey (GAPSS) found that Asian gay male respondents comprised 2.9% of the sample and by 2014 this had increased to 8.9% (Saxton, Dickson, Hughes, & Ludlam, 2014). This increase is significant, but there has not been a corresponding increase in visibility of these men in gay men's art or media.

<sup>49</sup> Based on the New Zealand AIDS Foundation 2015 Annual Report, Asian gay and bisexual men diagnosed with HIV consisted of 24% in 2013 and 15% in 2014 (New Zealand AIDS Foundation, 2016). Although the quantitative sampling is low, the data suggest that the message for safer sexual engagement among Asian gay and bisexual men could be improved.

<sup>50</sup> Conferences currently under consideration are the 2017 Conference of the Image at Venice International University, in San Servolo, Italy (31 October–1 November 2017) - <http://ontheimage.com/2017-conference>, and the 2017 World LGBT Conference in Indianapolis (5–8 October, 2017) - <http://www.indypride.org/interpride2017>



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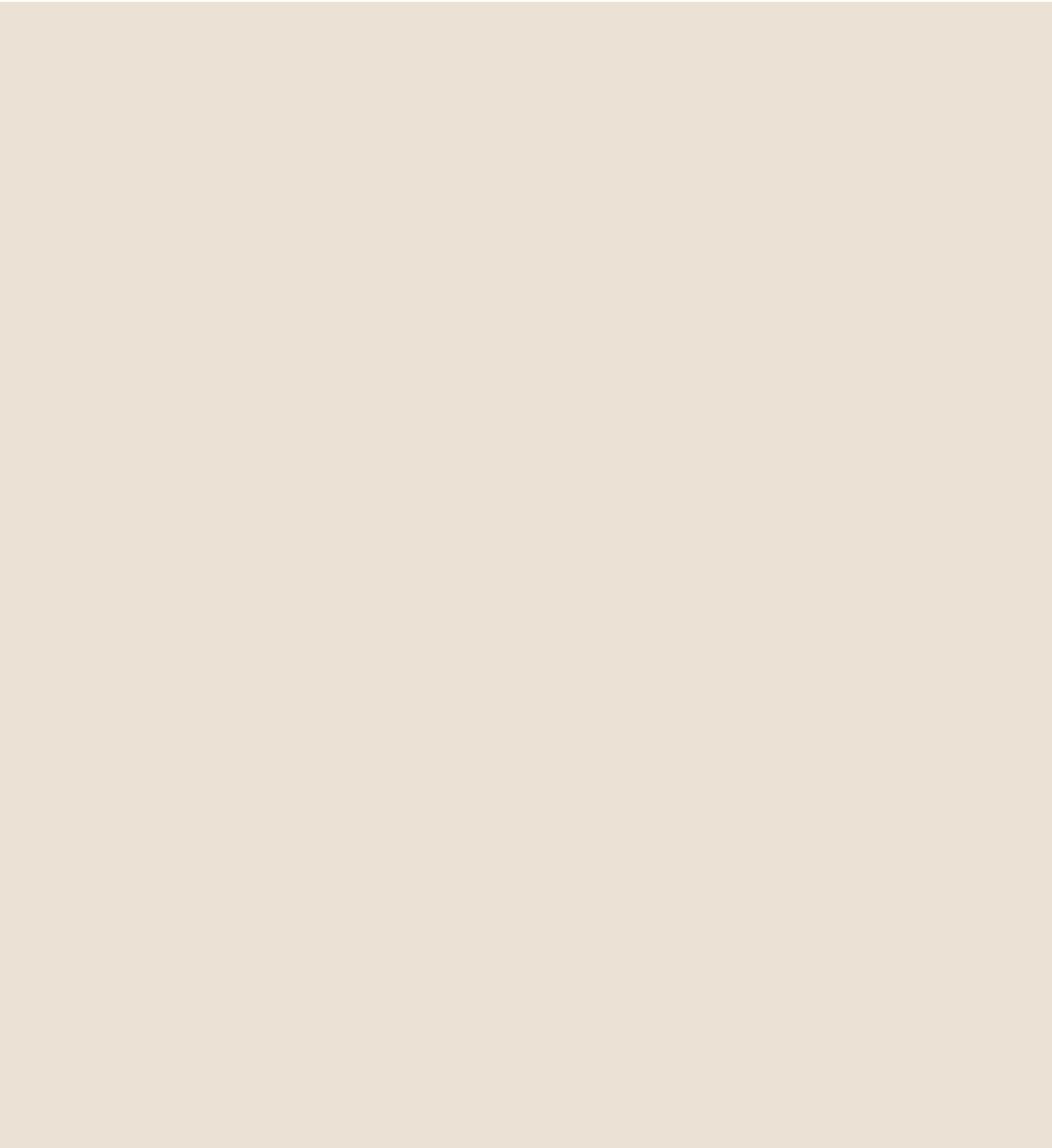






## Appendices

- *Appendix A: Historical Reflection*
  - : *A.1: In my own words*
- *Appendix B: Narration of Experience*
  - : *B.1: Background*
  - : *B.2: Synopsis*
  - : *B.3: Themes*
  - : *B.4: Main characters*
  - : *B.5: The plot for 'Homebound'*
- *Appendix C: Progression of Thinking*
  - : *C.1: Plot development*
  - : *C.2: Exploratory illustration*
  - : *C.3: Page design*
  - : *C.4: Making*
  - : *C.5: Auxiliary artwork*
- *Appendix D: Reflections on experience*
  - : *D.1: Immersive experience*



## Appendix A: Historical Reflection

At the beginning of the creative project, I wrote a script where I recalled my childhood and reflected on crucial formative events. Treated as an informal, first person memoir, this text served as contextual inspiration to *Homebound's* narrative. I spent most of the time writing in the middle of the night, as introspection and reflection were afforded greater clarity when I was undisturbed. In gathering insights, I reviewed personal items such as childhood photographs, my birth certificate and school records.

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### A.1: IN MY OWN WORDS

I guess my life can be summed up in one word – 'confused'. It's not because I have lived in a perpetual state of cluelessness. It's just a word I feel most aptly describes the stages in my life over these past 43 years. I don't believe I have led an extremely colourful life, nor a life terrorised and oppressed by heteronormative ideals. Although I must admit, as I can best recall, I felt different at times, and being different made me feel marginalised. I have lied, pretended, and hidden my true self from the most important people around me, just so I could pursue an emotionally and sexually authentic life. That may make me sound like a really bad guy, but in truth, I try to fit in. But what could be 'normal' for an individual who grew up realising he was gay (or at the very least, felt different from others) from the age of five, in a household and society that was firmly holding onto cultural traditions and customs while attempting to embrace a post World War II sensibility.

I grew up in the paddy fields in Kedah, a northern state in Malaysia. It was the 70's and we were still reeling from the effects of the Vietnam War. Being so close to the borders of Thailand, the possibility of the war bleeding into Malaysia was very real. My parents grew up in a highly suspicious society, an outcome from having to deal with the Japanese occupation and the leftover threat of communism. This impacted on the way the subsequent generation was raised. We lived very modestly. My parents were prudent with spending but they ensured necessary life principles were taught to us. Among these were honesty, integrity and to be as open-minded as possible. I grew up with support for my education, general well-being and, especially, I learnt to respect my elders.

Living within tight financial constraints meant that there were times when I felt I was missing out on certain things, like being able to buy toys or enjoy trips abroad. The stories told by my more affluent friends, who were charitable enough to share their toys, filled the

gaps in my lack-lustre upbringing and fuelled my imagination. I had hand-me-down clothes and wore old shoes that needed repatching. I could not understand why my friends had better things than I did and I questioned my parents' seeming withholding of such luxuries.

My father believed in corporal punishment and raised us under an umbrella of intimidation and discipline. My upbringing was strict and he placed a high premium on education. He wanted his children to academically surpass his own level of education and become better citizens. In his mind, he believed that, with better education, we would attain better working opportunities and live a life better than his. I shudder at memories of being lectured by him for hours on end about behaviour, time-keeping and bad habits. Even now that I am in my mid-forties, I am still subject to such lectures. From the outside, I was a compliant and studious son. But on the inside, I remained a rebel. At that age, this was not a surprise.

Even with the strictness in my upbringing, my childhood was filled with laughter and adventure. My father gave me a BMX bicycle for my birthday, and together with my friends, I was out cycling the paddy plains almost on a daily basis. The land was so flat that you could see the curtain of rain approaching and we would race against it. I raced pigeons, a hobby my parents abhorred and chastised me for continuously, because they believed it was a distraction to me lifting my academic performance. One of my friends kept an entire loft of pigeons and we'd spend time feeding, cleaning and letting them out to stretch their wings. We'd take them out onto a field and set them flying and mount onto our bikes to race them back to their roost. I would also spend time exploring and going on adventures in the jungle on the fringes of the rural 'kampung'. I played with tadpoles in pools of water that appeared after a heavy monsoon downpour, and searched for 'burung merbuk' (zebra dove) nests. These birds were prized for their melodic singing and were used for

singing competitions. Being in a rural environment, surrounded by jungles and paddy fields, snakes were in abundance. These ranged from pythons to cobras and vipers. They were everywhere – outdoors, sometimes even indoors. We had to be cautious where we stepped. Needless to say, I developed a healthy phobia of serpents that I carry to this day. There was one moment in my early childhood that I remember as a kind of dream, with the exact details somewhat blurred. I had to use the toilet. This was during the time when my family lived in a state house situated on the edge of a paddy field, and the toilet facilities were outside. There was still light, and, feeling the need, I ventured outside. As I prepared to aim at the bowl, a cobra that must have crawled in from the drain reared its head with its hood expanded. It stared me in the face, eye to eye. I was five at that time. Somehow I knew not to make any sudden movement, nor sound. So I stood still, afraid to even breathe. I don't know how long I must have waited, but I remember someone coming to look for me. My memory ends at that point. I don't recall the rescue or how the snake was chased away. But in that moment, as the cobra reared up, my fear of snakes was crystallised forever.

Upon reflection, I believe that even though my father raised me with a disciplined hand, I turned out to be a better man as a result of his teachings. I understood respect, obedience and piety. I learnt to distinguish good behaviour from bad.

While we prided ourselves as being liberal-minded, to the point of being agnostic, we also were taught how to 'pretend' to be Buddhists in public. This was to avoid being mistaken for communists and attracting the attention of the authorities. We all had identification cards, and mine (when coming of age) was labeled as 'Buddhist'. This was not to be questioned. The fear of being thrown into jail and persecuted was far too great. Upon reflection, this may be the first point at which I discovered that the act of lying could be acceptable, if used in a situation to protect oneself.

Aside from that, my family was proud to partake in cultural traditions, mainly to placate my grandparents. My father always said to us that we needed to know about our past and our roots. During Chinese New Year, we celebrated with firecrackers and dancing lions and dragons. The fireworks were loud and angry. The masked performers among the dancing troupe inflicted a fear so primal that I would run and hide from the main celebration. My parents would chide me for being foolish and acting like a coward, 'unmanly' even. I guess this became a millstone in my upbringing; that one has to hide

one's true feelings and emotions in order to be perceived as 'a man'. The New Year celebrations would culminate in a family trip to the local temple, to hold prayers, express our thanks to our ancestors, and to beg for continued good fortune. I remember looking up at the statues of the God of Fortune and Tin Qung (the Jade God) and feeling somewhat intimidated, but mostly it was an experience of awe. Their red-faced, heavily bearded, masculine statures formed a touchstone for what it was to appear manly.

I recall cultural traditions dictated by filial piety that were upheld with rigour. At the Chinese Lunar New Year, my grandmother would take us aside and stress the importance of upholding certain traditions and customs. I remember her advice regarding haircuts and sweeping the house: "Don't cut your hair, or sweep the house on the eve of the New Year, otherwise you will be sweeping all your luck and fortune away." She would also recommend the wearing of new clothes to mark the arrival of the New Year, otherwise you would be stuck with the misfortunes of the previous year. Advice would also be given relating to everyday procedures like laundry keeping and dining etiquette: "Don't put out the sheets at night as it will attract ghosts"; "Don't shake your leg or it will shake off all your fortune"; "Hold the rice bowl with your fingers and not with your palm; that is the difference between an educated individual and a beggar"; "Hold the chopsticks near the top and not the bottom, because it marks the level of education between a philosopher and a common labourer"; and, "Finish everything on your plate so that your face doesn't have pimples."

At dinnertime the family would eat together. There were no exceptions. My father, being an attentive disciplinarian, often said, "It is important to look ahead and plan accordingly, but you will never get anywhere if you ignore your past." My parents had expectations of me, and they made them abundantly clear: "Do your homework. If there is an A, you must achieve it. There is no reason why you cannot achieve the A. If you do not, it only means you're not working hard enough"; "Children are to remain quiet when adults are present. You are to be seen, not heard"; and my father's admonishment, "Do not mistake me for a friend. I am your father. You will do as you are told."

During this time, I learned a few life lessons:

1. Be responsible for your own actions.
2. Do your best at everything. Be your best to everyone.
3. Obedience and compliance are rewarded.

4. You are only truly and genuinely happy when others are happy.
5. Contentment and satisfaction come from wealth and prosperity.
6. Your self-worth is only valuable when you command respect and authority.
7. Your family comes first. Your work second. You are last.
8. Integrity and honour are everlasting and therefore cannot and must not, be compromised.
9. Remain humble at all times.

I discovered being 'different' when I started to pay more interest to boys than girls. I was sent to a Methodist preschool run by nuns when I turned six. If the truth be told, they scared the living daylights out of me. If I believed my father to be strict and harsh, these nuns gave him a run for his money. It was only a few days after being enrolled that they sat us all down and promptly told us to pick out an English name. From then on they would identify us by this anglicised name alone. I often wondered why my parents allowed them to do this. Was it an effort to erase or subvert our cultural identities? In any case, I felt pride when I thought of a name, raised my hand and called out my new identity, my new name: Donny (this could have been a subconscious recollection from watching 'The Donny and Marie Show' on television). I remember the head nun beamed down at me and nodded her head in approval. It soothed me to know that I had pleased her. I was proud to be accepted and known by this new name. It was at school that I realised there was a difference between the culture I was raised in, and the social identity that was imposed upon me.

The preschool was a same-sex institution; an all-boys school, as segregation between genders was still considered in-keeping with the local custom that the sexes should not intermingle. At this time, I didn't know how to identify sexual feelings, but I was generally drawn to boys, which was made much more evident in primary school, and through participating in physical education class. I would steal glances in the direction of my peers while in the changing room. Even at this age, I somehow knew it was wrong to let people know of such 'interest'. I kept my feelings hidden and never told anyone, even my parents, because I feared being punished. The nuns played a very effective role in teaching us about guilt and the consequences of our actions. I also became aware about how being 'different' in our society was treated; the effeminate, the outcasts, and the

underprivileged were subjected to prejudice and marginalisation. The terms 'Ah Qua' and 'pondan' (effeminate to the point of acting like a girl) were used in a derogatory manner and applied to anyone behaving in a non-conformist manner. It was at this time that I began practicing lying to escape scrutiny regarding my budding sexual awareness. In time, I became fluent in the craft of deceiving my parents, relatives and friends. I was embarrassed and ashamed about who I was, and in order to remain the 'good' child, I built a world where I performed the duties and mannerisms of a compliant and well-behaved son, grandchild, and student.

Sex became a fixation when I turned 10 years old, after I witnessed a friend masturbating in his bedroom. He was older than me by a few years and was part of my bicycle 'gang', as we called ourselves. Being a rural village, it was common for doors to be unlocked with no fear of being burgled, and we freely went into each other's homes. I had visited his house to see if he wanted to go riding. At first I thought no one was home but I heard a sound coming from his room. It sounded different from anything I had heard before. Out of curiosity, I crept up to the bedroom door (or more aptly, it was a doorway and only separated by a piece of muslin cloth), and quietly observed him. I didn't make my presence known as I knew it would be wrong, even damaging, to interrupt and intrude on him. I slipped out of the house and mimicked his actions with my own body. The joy I felt from the following orgasm was indescribable. From then on, I kept on the lookout for more occurrences concerning my friend, and attempted to catch him in the act again. It never happened. In time, my sexual awareness grew, and became physicalised in male-to-male encounters, all the time my discretion was accompanied by a 'knowing' that what I felt and expressed was forbidden. Was there confusion to my state of being then? I can't really say. The funny thing was that about this part of my life, there was a certainty – an epiphany of sorts. That this was who I was, and what I was doing, somehow defined me.

The effort of being a good student would eventually wear me out when I entered secondary education. I don't believe I was ever an intellectual. I performed dismally at school. I did attempt to pay attention to the teacher and to the subject being taught, but in examinations, I would break down and draw a blank. I struggled. Nothing I read before could be recalled. I tried cheating and attempted to convince my classmate to provide me with answers. And every time, I would get caught. It was obvious I wasn't even smart enough to cheat. The teacher who caught me would then



momentarily suspend the exams and humiliate me in front of my classmates, and I would be subsequently dragged off by the ear to the principal's office to be harshly reprimanded. This scene would repeat itself every examination season. Of course, in a time where corporal punishment was still encouraged, the cane and I became close acquaintances.

Somehow, no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't get the grades that my parents were hoping for. I was performing below my peers and it was evident that I was certainly not gifted in the sciences, let alone mathematics. However, I excelled in the arts. Especially in drawing. I started early in my life with drawing. I recall taking pencil to paper as soon I could hold the wood. It was such a fascination. Suddenly all my thoughts, my imagination, were made manifest. As I (my parents) couldn't afford to buy comics, I relied on my friends for access to these books. What I couldn't get my hands on, I created through my drawings. I drew up my own stories and made up my own adventures. One time, I was so engrossed with the art I didn't notice that my grandfather was in the room, watching what I was doing. All of a sudden, he started yelling and calling me 'deviant'. Startled, I began bawling. Did he know my secret? Of being and feeling different? Through the tears and wailing, I could only just make out why my own grandfather was so upset. It wasn't with what I drew, nor that I could draw at all... but it was that I used my left hand. He took a wooden ruler and slapped my hand and demanded that I start using my right hand. I tried, but failed. As soon as I began to draw, I switched back to the left. It just felt 'natural' to me. The corrective beatings went on for hours. I tried. I did my best to correct the perceived 'deviousness'. Needless to say I failed, and I was left with an extremely bruised hand. I never knew if my parents ever confronted my grandfather over the beating, because it was not discussed.. In retrospect, I view this as the precipitating incident that led to me feeling the need to hide my 'true' self. I felt that if I ever came out with the 'truth', whatever that may be, I would be punished.

I scraped by in the final secondary school exams, passing with mediocre grades. I could sense my father's disappointment in me. He wanted a son who could become an engineer, a nanotechnologist or a medical doctor. In his eyes, I was a failure. I couldn't play a musical instrument, nor converse or write in Chinese, even after extra tuition, and now, quite possibly, I was left without a prosperous future. It was only through some persuasion that I managed to convince him that I was capable of pursuing further education in art and design. He believed that art was a lowly career and he didn't want to see me

end up as a street artist painting portraits of passers-by. So I began studying graphic design at a local tertiary institution. I put my heart and soul into my studies and performed well. I could show my father that I wasn't a failure after all. My father continued to support my tuition and because we were not affluent, he worked three jobs to put me through my education. I felt obliged and bound by duty to not only make it through to graduation, but to excel and strive to achieve that elusive 100% grade. It was by a stroke of luck that I was offered a partial scholarship to further my studies in New Zealand. The trouble was, I couldn't tell if my father was proud of my achievements. If he was, he didn't show it and this confused me. I left, eager to experience a life outside of Malaysia, still hiding, still clutching to the belief that if I could find myself 'out there' if I was not held back by an outdated system.

When I moved to New Zealand, I struggled in adapting to the new culture. In Malaysia, students were discouraged from questioning the teacher, because it shows disrespect. You must comply and obey, whatever the instructions being given. Being in a New Zealand education environment, where the student must learn independent thinking, self-direction and is expected to engage with the tutor or lecturer in order to move one's thinking forward, I felt very alien. On top of that, the liberal thinking about sexuality also threw me. Here, no one seemed to care about being different. As a matter of fact, all of my classmates wanted to be regarded as different and therefore, an unique individual. I also discovered New Zealand's legalisation of homosexuality in its Homosexual Law Reform Act of 1986. My mind was blown. All the pent-up anxiety, all the stress; the revelation that being gay was all right proved to be as liberating as it was a relief.

Even then, I kept my sexuality hidden from my classmates and my Malaysian friends. I made friends with other gay students on the sly, and they introduced me to the night scene, especially on Karangahape Road. I visited bars and clubs. Some were of a sexual nature. In part because I was curious, and arguably as part as a rite of passage, I wanted to experience the world I only admired from afar, but now had the opportunity to truly live and be a part of. I happily discarded my old self and explored leather and BDSM for a time. This proved extreme but it was through 'wanting to be thrown into the deep end'. The experience opened my eyes to another level of identity where there were so many roles, behavioural types and sexual categories. Ranging from the dominant, the alpha, the master, to the submissive, the boy, the slave, the pup; the subtle nuances and overt display of sexualities proved intoxicating. There was so much

to see, to learn and to know about. But one thing that remained constant and overbearing, was the expectation regarding masculine behaviour. The male gender stereotype lived on.

After graduation, I worked as a graphic designer in a design firm in Auckland. I still kept my sexuality hidden because I believed that it didn't matter in a professional context. It was my private affair. However, my then partner introduced himself to my employer and workmates at one of the Christmas functions. I was mortified. I was outed. I feared for my job security and I anticipated the eventual loss of respect for me and the work I did. But no one batted an eyelid.. I was genuinely surprised. It was the first time in my life that revealing my sexuality had no impact, nor bearing on my social standing.

I eventually embraced being gay. No one that I knew actually 'cared' about my sexuality. That was when the realisation struck me that being gay in Auckland, and maybe, New Zealand, was acceptable. There were (and still are) people fighting and standing up for my rights, and for my existential being. At the time they were confronting the gay issue and they actively, unashamedly, fought the battle that I couldn't. I felt like such a coward, and guilty for my lack courage and determination. Eventually, I felt brave and comfortable enough to be who I am around people. There was no judgement, only support. It felt like the weight of the world had been lifted from my shoulders. I remember shedding a few tears in conversations about my acceptance of myself.

In time, I discovered the bear subculture. I was drawn to the camaraderie and friendliness of the group. The bears were open and accepting, and welcomed me with big hugs. I felt like I belonged and it felt good. I was not at all surprised to discover that this subculture also had its own set of rules and categories, much like the leather and BDSM scene. bear, cub, polar bear, black bear, panda, otter, wolf, these identities carried certain expectations in appearance, behaviour and performance. I relished the idea of a 'naturalised' masculine man. The idea of a man comfortable enough to be who he is, and the 'bear' look really appealed to me. In time, I made the bears the subject of my art, and became an erotic bear artist. I wanted to explore and capture the essence of the 'bear' – as eroticised and sexualised as it could be represented through illustration. I suppose this was a way to engage the bear subculture more intimately, and it gave me an opportunity to redefine myself, and position my self within the gay spectrum. Despite experiencing some sexual racism from the gay community, I made friends with people whom I now consider as my

'family'. Through the bear culture, I explored my own masculinity and it continues to define my identity. I believe this is an on-going process ... a continual journey. This is the life I have built living in New Zealand. My artwork has been published online as well as in print, although I regret sometimes not using a pen name to hide my identity. I lied to my parents about the inherent evil of the Internet, just so they wouldn't install a connection at home and be able to Google my name. In relation to my family, I am embarrassed and ashamed of what I've done. My parents can never know because it will break their hearts.

I bought a house recently with my partner. Putting my name on paper alongside his for the mortgage was a huge step for me. Not just because it meant that my relationship moved to the next level, but it was because I felt that I did not have to hold my life back. For once in my life, I felt brave to move into a territory where I was comfortable with my identity as a gay man, and not hide behind pretense. My partner and I have been together for 15 years. My relationship has lasted longer than my brother's marriage of nine years. But it's nothing that I can share with my family. When they visit, my partner is always the flatmate or roommate, and we have to move into separate bedrooms just to keep up appearances. We will hug and kiss out of sight. I can't share my heartbreaks, my joy, my good news or bad. It is like a scene out of Ang Lee's 'The Wedding Banquet'.

It was only recently that I came out to my sister. Even then, it was a necessary move, as the mortgage requirements demanded a next of kin in the personal will. Although it felt good to let someone in the family know, it felt really weird as it was such unfamiliar territory for me. I found myself still trying to behave as per 'normal' and still catching myself not acknowledging the relationship I have with my partner in conversations with her. I asked myself if I had lived a lie for so long that I now felt alienated? Did coming out to my sister affect my relationship with her? She advised me to never reveal my sexual orientation to my parents. We were both afraid that it could cause more damage than bridge the relationship I had with my family. I understood why this is, and I don't want to harm our family name.

I continue to field questions about marriage, finding the perfect lady, and planned children. I keep up my lie by either replying "not yet", or "I've just ended a relationship". I could have said anything to avoid providing 'evidence' of the non-existent relationships. I also kept a 'girlfriend' as backup, a friend who is complicit in my lie, and helps with scenarios that might require an occasional female companion.

I keep my social media network limited to a close range of friends and family, to avoid scrutiny, and my gay friends wonder why I don't accept their requests to be part of my Facebook network.

I find myself filtering the words I use and the images I share. I have to admit that since my sister is now part of my network, I have relaxed my guard slightly. But still, the fear of being found out, or having to confront this 'life' that I built in New Zealand with my family, is overbearing. Now that I am older, I begin to recognise the nuances of my lived experience in others. When asked by friends coming from a similar cultural background as mine, I give the same advice my sister had given me. Don't come out to your parents. Keep it to yourself. You'll hurt them so deeply that they will never forgive you. You have to be silent and play a part, so that you can protect them. This is very Chinese. It is the sacrifice that you have to make in order to live your life as a gay Asian man. It may not be the most sensible advice, but for now, I believe, it is all I have.

When my father was hospitalised and underwent major surgery, I was back home by my family's side as we feared he might die. While there, he and I had (what I would consider a heart-to-heart) conversation. It led to him asking about my wellbeing, and if I was happy with my work and life in New Zealand. It pained me. I felt conflicted about revealing the truth. Here was what could possibly be my father's last moments, and I continued to lie to him.

My partner's father suffered a stroke two years ago, and we moved him into our home to better care for him. He knew of our gay relationship and had welcomed me into the family, so there wasn't an issue about being able to care for him. When his situation worsened, he had to be hospitalised and he passed away a few days later. I was there in the room and I held his hand, reassuring him that his only son, my partner, would be taken care of. That moment gave me a respite and clarity of sorts about the direction that my life had taken. It made me question, where would I be when my own parents approached their final moment? Where would my partner be, to offer his love and support for me, and for my family?

I remain resolute in not coming out to my parents. My family must not know of the life I have led away from them. I have hidden everything I have become, all my achievements, all the things I have struggled with and overcome, and whatever sense of pride I have cultivated in myself. Instead, I have generated a lie so encompassing that I don't believe I can dispel it with the truth. And the worst thing

is, I have grown comfortable with the deception, this fictional reality that I have built. When confronted, the lies just spill out with little hesitation and they are said with conviction. The skill of concealing my identity, my self, has been honed to such a fine degree that it has become my 'other' identity. Two lives, but the same person. One life is fictional and external and the other is the 'real' me. In the former, I am a son in a family, and in the latter, I am the partner of a man and a friend to a close network of gay bears.

Do I want to tell my parents who I really am? Of course I do. Experiencing the love of my partner's family, witnessing the bond that only family can share, to be by my partner's side comforting his own father in his final hours, these are crucial life moments. I would like to be able to share these moments with my own family. I want a relationship with my family that is all-encompassing, and all-accepting. But I know that this is a dream confined to a Western concept of a redemption narrative. The question remains - what about my authentic self? Should I be true to my self? Who am I now and where will I go with this deception? Could this schism in my existence actually be the 'authentic' identity that I seek? The Asian migrant who must continue to lie about his sexuality in one world, while living a happier, more contented life in the other.

So I apprehensively live with this quote from Shakespeare's Hamlet: 'To thine own self be true'. Maybe it will work out someday; however at this stage, I continue living the lie and pray that my family will forgive me when the time comes when they find out.

At least for now - even though terrified - I remain happy and gay.

Pun intended.

*Don Yew Li Chooi*

25th February 2016

## *Appendix B: Narration of Experience*

### **B.1: BACKGROUND**

Although the graphic novel is a fictional story, it is based on true events about a gay man's life in his thirties. The narrative serves as a reflection on his personal growth and self-discovery, moving from a conservative, religious background in Malaysia, to a more liberal and secular New Zealand. In the novel, he examines his past and the impact it has had on his relationship with his family, especially his father, his friends and partner.

### **B.2: SYNOPSIS**

Tommy [Yun Xing Loh] is a gay man who has lived a life of deception in Auckland New Zealand, hiding his sexuality and the life he has made with his partner of 10 years from his family in Malaysia. He is confronted with his lies when his father falls ill, and, bound by an unshakeable sense of duty, he is required to return home to care for him. The journey tests relationships with his family as well as his partner, because he is torn between the filial pressure to conform to the construct of a 'good son', and his need to be true to himself. His sense of identity is challenged and he subsequently questions his responsibilities and obligations as a man, son and life partner. Behind this he wrestles with his sense of masculinity as a gay 'bear'.

### **B.3: THEMES**

Cultural and sexual identities, loyalty, belonging, queer masculinity, and the 'Chosen' family.

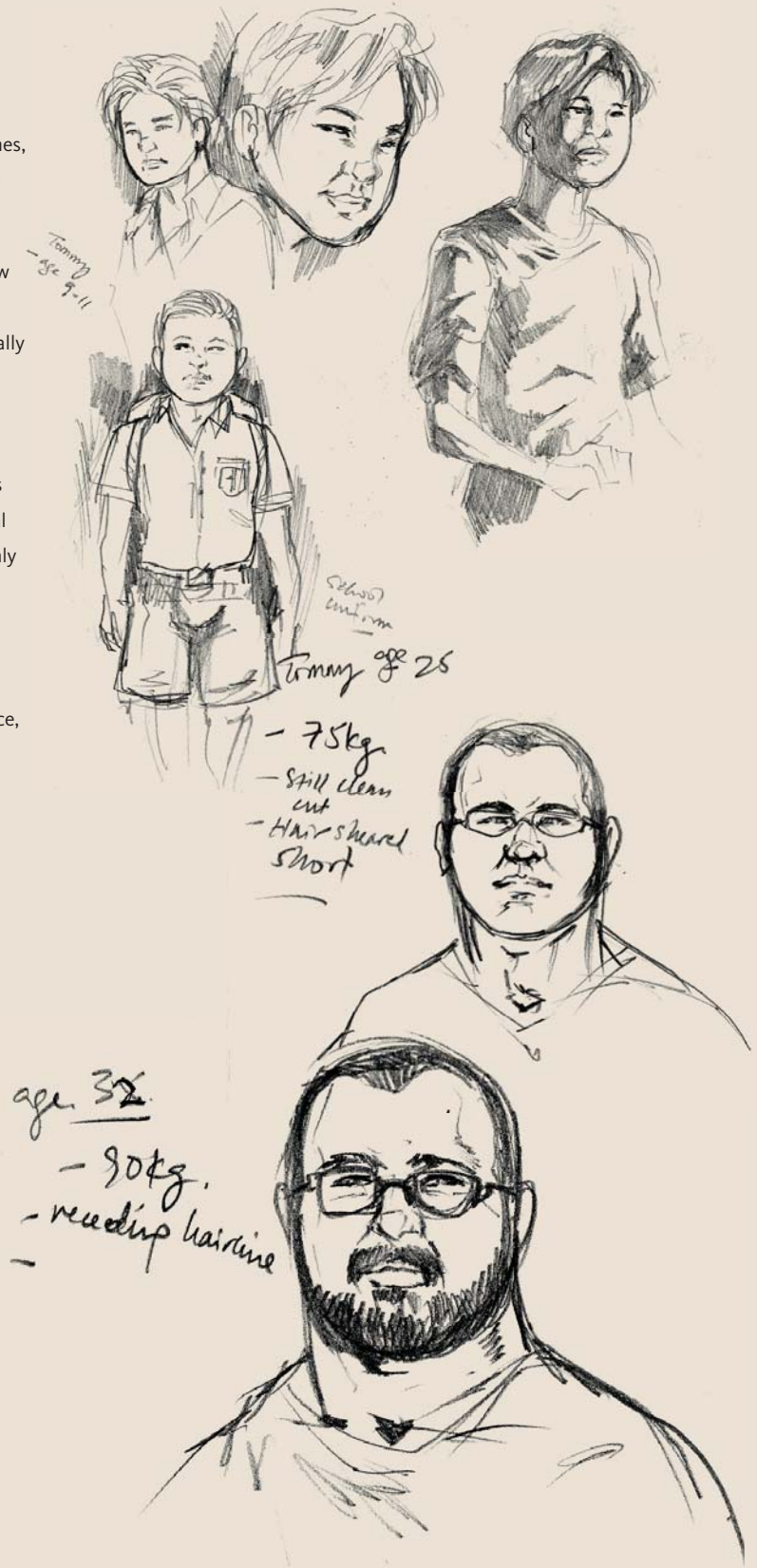
## B.4: MAIN CHARACTERS

**Tommy [Xing Loh Yun]** – the main protagonist. Tommy has two names, his Western moniker and his traditional Chinese name Yùn Xing Loh (運行; meaning to ‘be in motion’ or ‘running’).

Originally from Malaysia, Tommy is 36 years old and has lived in New Zealand for the past 15 years. He has recently purchased a home in Auckland together with his partner of 10 years. He is an internationally renowned gay illustrator and graphic novelist. His first novel was published three years ago to commercial and critical success, and he is now working on his second. Under pressure from his publisher to complete the novel, Tommy struggles with the decision to use his actual name in the work. Coming from a culture concerned with filial piety, ancestral traditions and theological dogmas, he is torn, not only by ethnic expectations but also by issues of sexuality.<sup>1</sup>

Tommy considers himself part of the New Zealand gay bear subculture, and is an active contributor to the community. He identifies as a bear because the subculture's tenets of self-acceptance, camaraderie and masculinity (manliness) are traits that he craves. His own perception of bear masculinity is challenged when the opportunity to perform in drag is presented by his friend.

Tommy is a considerate and sensitive individual, and he considers his close friends as his surrogate family. He is also a loyal friend and partner to Neil. While he lives a relatively contented life in New Zealand, he is afraid of revealing his sexuality to his own family in Malaysia.



<sup>1</sup> In post-World War II Malaysia, people were caught between establishing a national identity free from British colonial influence and consolidating multiple ethnic factions – predominantly the Malay, Chinese and Indian. Within this context, sexuality (especially homosexuality) were considered taboo and remain culturally sensitive.



**Neil – the partner**

Neil is a 35 year-old New Zealand gay man who works in the government sector. After losing his mother to cancer two years before the novel begins, he has formed a close relationship with his elderly father. His father has accepted Neil's sexuality and welcomed Tommy into the family. Neil fears for his father who lives on his own in Taumaranui. He believes he can offer space to his father to stay with them in the house that he bought with Tommy.

Although Neil fits the description of a bear, he does not like being labeled as such. He is comfortable in his own skin, and would rather spend a quiet evening in, rather than pursue a social event. He is very much a family man, and cares deeply for the people around him, in this case, his father and Tommy.

**Jean-Louie – Tommy's friend**

Jean-Louie is 42 years old and an immigrant to New Zealand from France. Although he was originally an artist, he has branched into IT and works for a highly successful company in Auckland. He still maintains his art as a hobby and shares a passion for gay bear art with Tommy. Jean-Louie is considerate, but often strong-minded. He is not afraid to speak his mind, and is single by choice.

**Mase – friend**

Mase is of Maori descent and is 30 years old. He is a proudly out gay man and has close ties to his family, who fully support him. Mase works at the NZ AIDS Foundation and considers the Pride Festival as important to his work in raising further HIV awareness within New Zealand's gay community. He is a reliable and mild-mannered individual. Considering the work he is involved in, he is socially active within the community. He is jovial and rational.



***Vincent – friend***

Vincent is a fellow Malaysian and is 20 years old. He has only been in New Zealand for two years and is still discovering the cultural differences that separate Malaysia and his new country of abode. He has only recently come to accept himself as a gay man, and considers himself as part of the bear community. (Tommy may have had some influence). He is sexually active and regards online dating apps as the only means of meeting people. Vincent is easily excitable but has a short temper and is prone to outbursts. He has yet to learn to finesse his social skills and he looks up to Tommy as a mentor.

***Xia Mei -Tommy's sister***

Xia Mei is 30 years old and married to a successful engineer. She prides herself on being the responsible sibling. She is considerate, thoughtful, persuasive and not afraid to assert her opinion. She is a stay-at-home mother for her 5 year-old son.

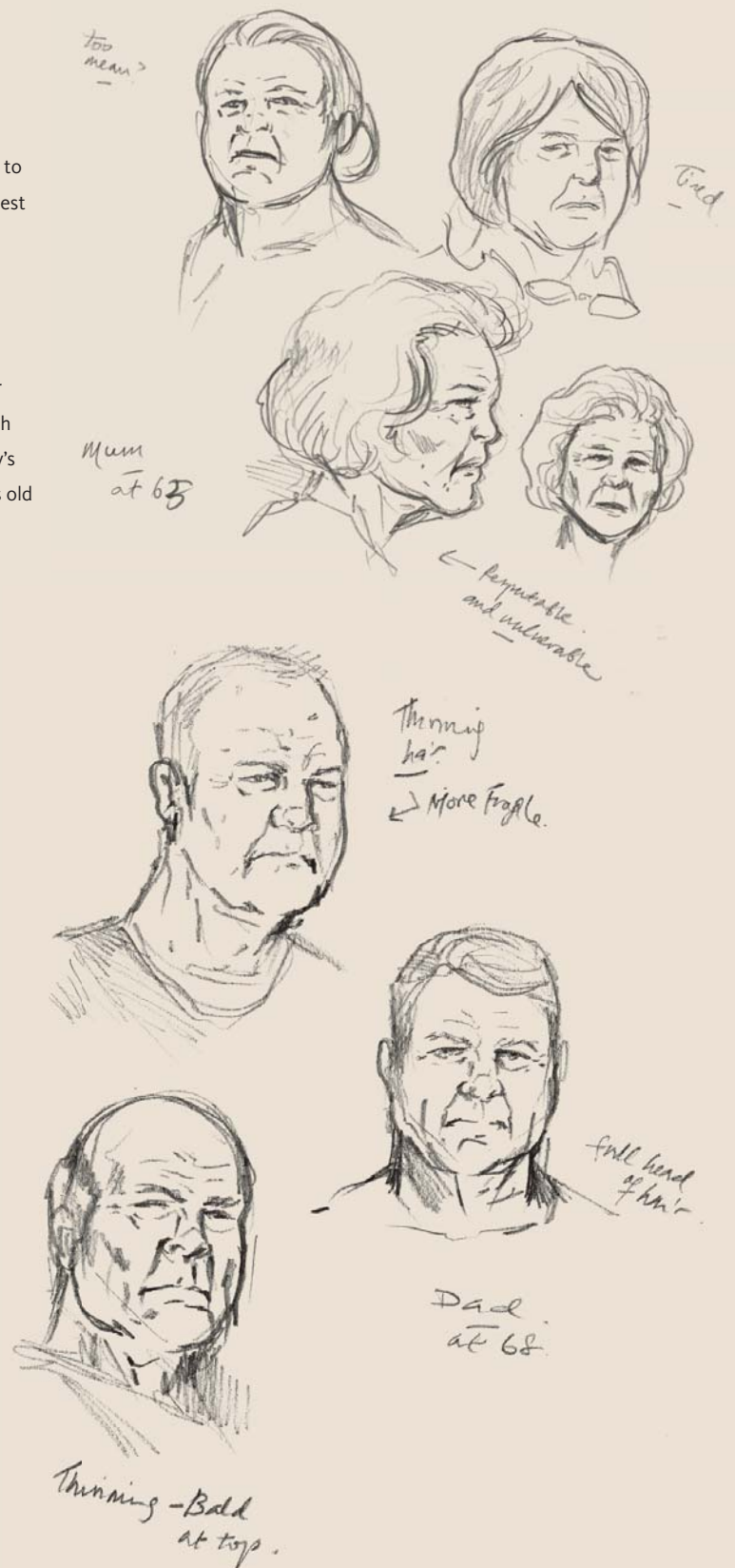


**Yun Chun Sing - Tommy's Mother**

Tommy's mother is a 66 year-old housewife who has been a strong presence in raising both Tommy and his sister. Although she defers to her husband in their disciplining, she shows compassion and is honest in her opinions. She continuously attempts to convince Tommy to move back to Malaysia.

**Yun Chung Han - Tommy's Father**

Tommy's father has always remained a firm and imposing character in his life. He is of a strong mind and believes in discipline. Although he seemed to prefer to distance himself emotionally during Tommy's childhood, he shows a different side to his grandson. He is 70 years old and a retired government employee.



### **B.5: THE PLOT FOR 'HOMEBOUND'**

Tommy and his partner, Neil, move into their new home with excitement. Neil brings up the subject of his father's health, and that now with the improved living conditions (a home with more space), he could have his father come and stay with them occasionally, so that they might get to spend more time with him.

They spend time unpacking, and checking to see if the move has damaged their prized crystal wine glasses (presented as a gift by Neil's father). They talk about Tommy's upcoming graphic novel. Tommy receives a call from his friends. Although Tommy explains to them that they are still unpacking and won't be able to receive visitors until they settle in, they invite themselves over with the promise of takeaways for dinner.

Their friends show up with food in abundance, which is promptly consumed. At the dinner table the conversation shifts to the upcoming Pride festival and their participation in it. They talk about their bear club and what they can do as representatives. Jean-Louie, Tommy's best friend, tells them that he intends to participate in drag. This shocks the group as Jean-Louie is considered a masculine bear, and the men fear for his image. The conversation then revolves around how bears are supposed to be perceived. Jean-Louie is not fazed and dismisses the debate by stressing that bears are meant to be 'fun', and not play to any masculine stereotype, and that he will proceed with the idea of being 'himself'. He then offers the challenge of 'manning up' and joining him in drag during Pride. The group of friends remain silent.

After their friends have gone, Jean-Louie stays behind to help with the dishes. Tommy and he have a talk about what happened that evening. The conversation touches upon self-acceptance and self-confidence, and it leads to their status as immigrants and their shared passion for gay bear art. Tommy reveals that he is scared of using his real name in his new graphic novel and it is revealed that he has not come out to his parents.

Tommy drifts into his memories about his childhood and the place where he grew up. He remembers the paddy fields in Kedah, his encounters with snakes, and the challenging education of a Methodist school.

A few days later, while Tommy is working in his studio space at home, he receives a call from his sister in Malaysia. She informs him that their father has been rushed into hospital and is going into emergency surgery. His sister tells him to come home immediately. Tommy is not in a position to argue and promptly agrees.

After frantically packing, Neil sees Tommy off at the airport. As the flight is 13 hours long, Tommy gets the time to ponder the deception he has fed his family through the years. He becomes apprehensive about being home, and being confronted with the lies he has told.

He recalls his upbringing in a strict household, and his relationship with his father. He also thinks back on his schooling days and how he incurred the wrath of his father with his bad behaviour.

Tommy arrives in Kuala Lumpur International Airport where he is greeted by his sister Xia Mei. She fills him in on how she is doing. Their mother is waiting at the hospital together with Xia Mei's husband and her 5 year-old son. She informs Tommy that their father has just gone into surgery. She then asks how Tommy is doing, and firmly suggests that he should return to help care for their parents in their old age. She reminds him of his obligations and compares her own life to his. She believes Tommy is avoiding the family and is living a hedonistic lifestyle.

Feeling trapped, Tommy argues that he cannot simply abandon his life in New Zealand. In response his sister accuses Tommy of being selfish and conceited. During the middle of the argument, feeling defeated, Tommy bursts out that he is gay. Surprised and shocked, Xia Mei quietly asks him to elaborate. Tommy fills her in on the past 15 years and tells her the reasons he left, about Neil, the house that they bought together, and his job. He debunks all of the lies he has told to his family.

After a moment of contemplation, his sister assures him that his secret is safe, but also suggests that he never reveal his sexuality to their parents. They could not handle the revelation, and she feels it will shame and embarrass them.

At the hospital Tommy is greeted by his mother, his brother-in-law and his nephew. His mother tells him how good it is that he is now

by her side. They anxiously wait in the room for the return of his father who is still in surgery.

During this time, Tommy reflects on his youth and on discovering that he was gay. He remembers having to live a life of secrecy and the feeling of liberation that came when he moved to New Zealand.

While Xia Mei is away, Tommy's father is wheeled back into the room. He is bandaged and has tubes coming in and out of him. The doctor takes Tommy and his mother aside to inform them of the success of the operation, and what to expect in the coming days with caring for their father. Tommy and his mother remain by his father's side to await his regaining of consciousness. The next day, Tommy's father awakens, to the joy of everyone around him. He slowly regains his strength, and Tommy assists in the feeding, changing and monitoring of his father.

When his father is well enough, he asks Tommy about his life in New Zealand. Tommy struggles with telling the truth, and in order to protect his father (and mother) from embarrassment, he concocts the story of a fictional life. Tommy feels conflicted and is torn between the two lives he has built around him.

A few days later, while he is at the hospital, Tommy receives a call from a distressed Neil. His partner tells him that his own father has just passed away from a fatal stroke. As he was on his own in Taumaranui, no one had realised his passing until the next door neighbour noticed his absence and went over to the house. Distraught over the circumstances surrounding his father's passing, Neil wants Tommy to come back to New Zealand, for the emotional support as well as to assist in planning for the funeral. With a heavy heart, Tommy tells Neil that he is unable to come home yet, as his own father has not fully recovered. They exchange heated words over the phone and Tommy cries.

Neil hangs up on Tommy. Tommy then decides to call Jean-Louie to talk things over, hopefully to gain some support and be consoled. Sensing something is wrong, Tommy asks Jean-Louie if he was alright. It turns out that Jean-Louie has been made redundant from his job, and he is suffering from depression, (and hints at being suicidal). He explains that he is unable to be of any help to Tommy. Tommy feels even more conflicted about staying in Malaysia and longs to return

to New Zealand to support his partner and best friend. He caves in to his feelings of inadequacy and helplessness, and cries quietly in the hospital hallway. He does not realise that his sister was just around the corner, and had listened in on his phone calls.

Tommy returns to the hospital room and discovers that the doctor is waiting with the rest of the family. The doctor informs him that his father, although recovering, requires close monitoring and care for the next few weeks, especially when he is sent home. Due to his age, Tommy's father may be prone to infection, or splitting his stitches. According to his mother, since his sister has her own family to care for, Tommy should move back to Malaysia and care for his father.

Tommy becomes agitated with the thought of his responsibilities to his family in Malaysia, as well as the others in New Zealand. His mother tries to ease the stress by comforting Tommy with words about how easy it will be for him to move back home. The more his mother believes she is relieving the tension in her son, the more Tommy is forced to lie to justify his need to remain in New Zealand. All this time, his sister stands quietly in the corner. Surrounded by escalating talk, Tommy contemplates just coming out with the truth. He can't just move back. He has a life in New Zealand. In guilt and anger, he decides to tell his parents the truth. That he is gay. That he has a life away from them. A happier, and satisfied life, with Neil. As Tommy is just about to come out ... his sister cuts him off.

Stunned, Tommy can only listen as Xia Mei informs their parents that it is not necessary for Tommy to move home yet because she believes that she and her mother can adequately care for her father. Tommy is working on an important project at the moment, one that he cannot simply abandon. He is a hard-working and committed individual, as their parents have taught them to be ... a man of integrity. She reassures them that Tommy will definitely come back to care for their parents, when the time is right, but this need not be right away. Xia Mei says she has discussed it with her husband, and they have agreed they are more than capable, and happy, to care for their father.

Relieved, Tommy tries to hide his tears and is filled with surprise and pride in his sister. At the same time, he feels ashamed that he has left Xia Mei with the responsibility. He pulls her into the hall and



thanks her. She reminds him that he is loved and to go sort out his affairs back 'home', in New Zealand.

A week passes, and Tommy is at the airport for his flight to New Zealand. Xia Mei is the only person there to see him off. She reassures him that all will be all right, and she asks him to maintain a closer, and a more honest, relationship with her. They are brother and sister after all, and they need to look out for one another. She comforts him by letting him know that it is only a plane's ride away between the two countries. She also tells him that she hopes that Tommy will introduce Neil to her one day. Her parting words are, "Be happy". Their bond is shown to be stronger, and Tommy feels relief and joy, as he heads for 'home'.

Tommy's plane soars into the sky while his sister watches from inside the terminal.

## Appendix C: Progression of Thinking

### C.1: PLOT DEVELOPMENT

The plot went through a number of developmental stages. These ideas were initially recorded in designer's journals that were then moved to the wall, in order to provide an overall view.

The plot was critical to the novel, as it was needed to define narrative parameters, structural arcs and set the appropriate tone of voice. In its progression the plot underwent alterations and amendments to consider the characters and their interaction to each other. As the plot unfolded, a dialogue began to form between myself and the other characters, and this allowed crucial insights to surface and enabled the novel to move forward.

▼ Figure C.1.

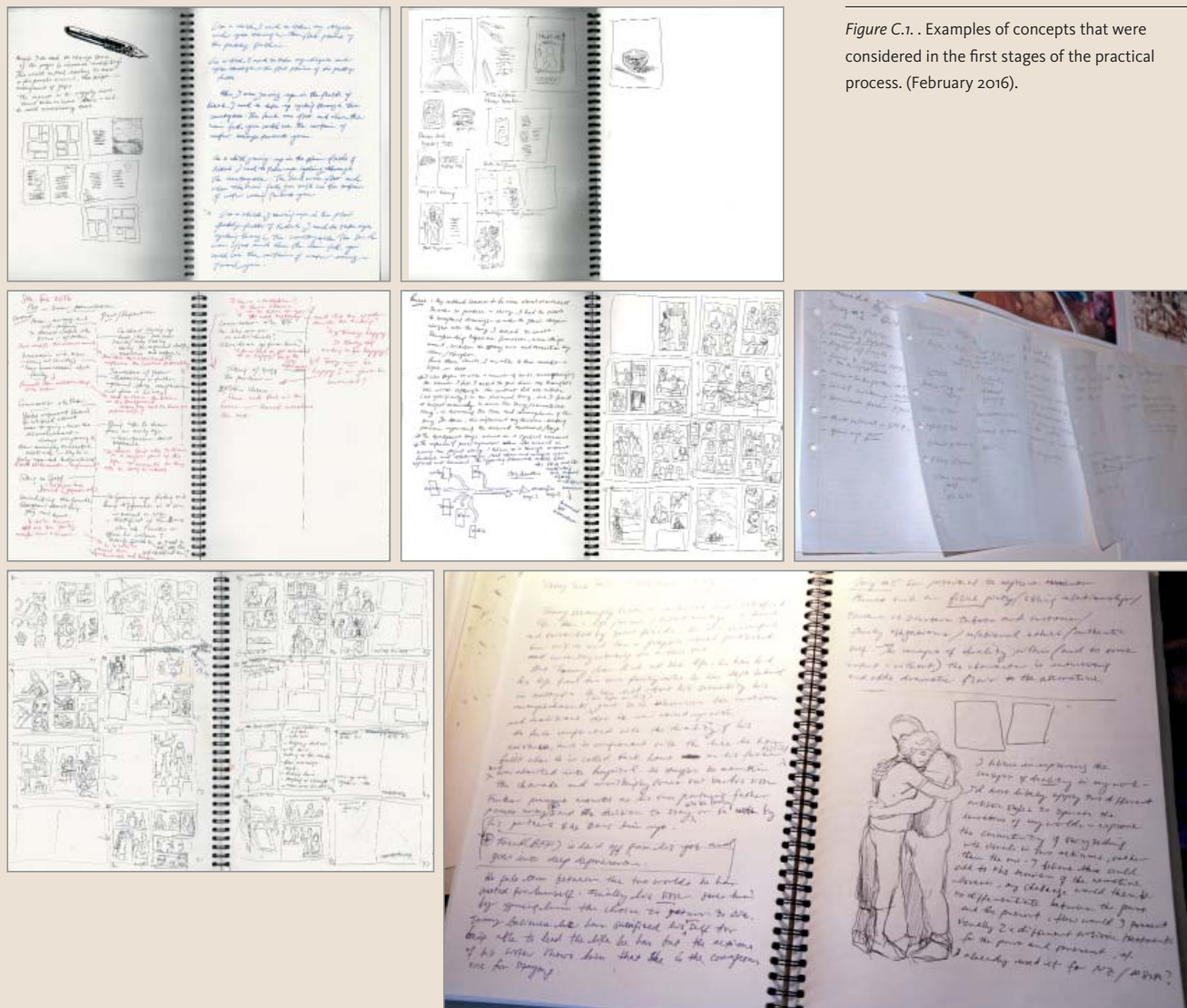
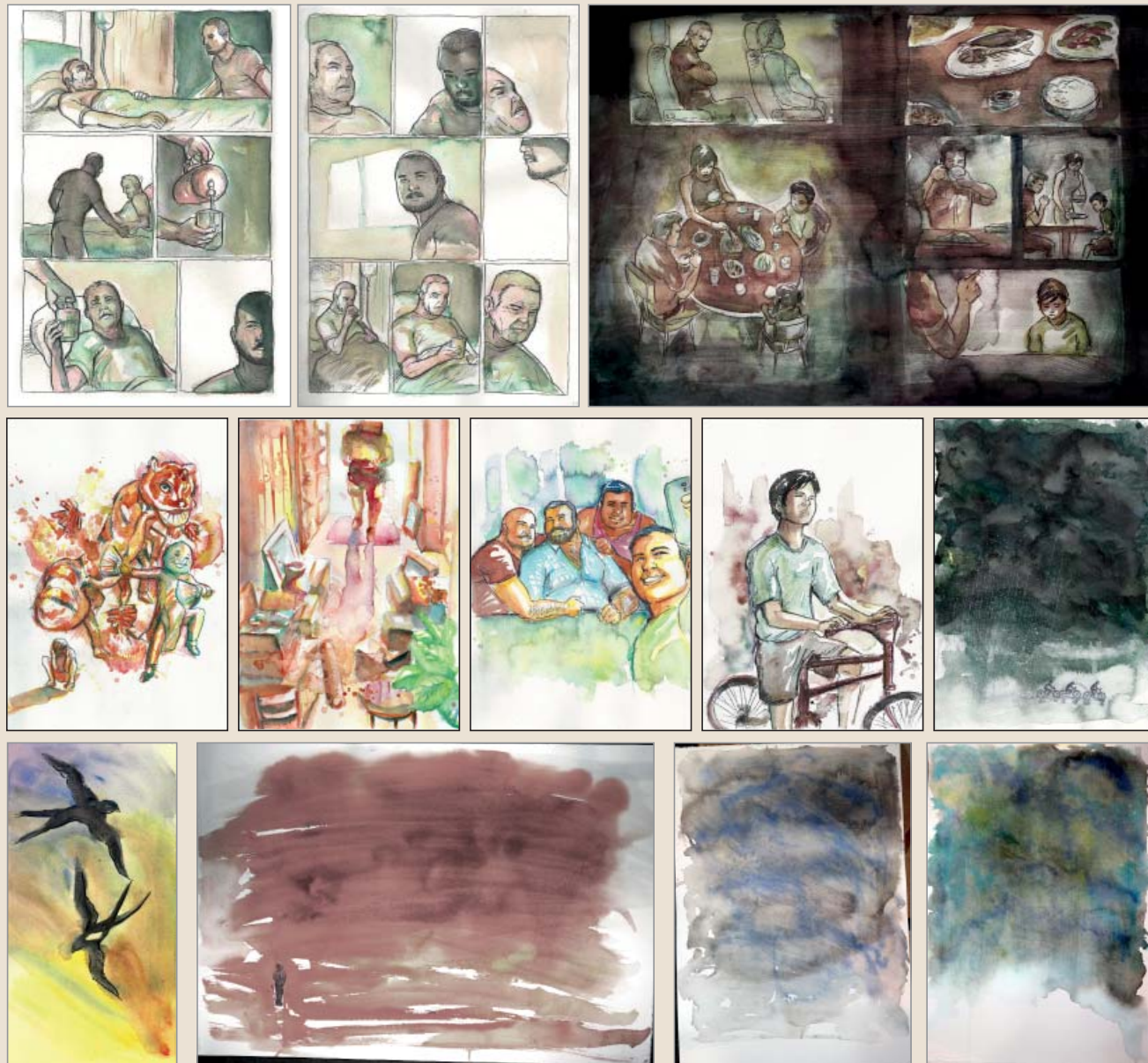


Figure C.1. Examples of concepts that were considered in the first stages of the practical process. (February 2016).









◀▶ Figure C.2.3.





Figure C.2.3. Numerous tests were made to obtain a sense of 'what worked' and 'what didn't'. These are a few examples of attempts to find the appropriate tone of voice to support the narrative of the graphic novel. (April – July 2016).

### C.3: PAGE DESIGN

Iterations of layout and paneling were tested because page design was regarded as integral to telling the narrative. Consideration was given in the design process to optimal understanding of the text and the potentials of pause and reflection. The arrangement of the panels was explored in order to effectively convey themes that are inherent to the narrative, such as tension and relief.

▼ Figure C.3.1.



Figure C.3.1. These are examples of the manner in which the page design was approached. Initial sketching provided an overview of the novel and highlighted the relationship and interdependence of the frames and panels in creating the flow of the story. (February – March 2016).



▼ Figure C.3.2.



Figure C.3.2. The illustrating process of the novel also considered the design and position of the speech bubbles that contained the dialogue. Fonts were explored and used to convey the tone of voice appropriate to the narrative. (March 2016).



▲ Figure C.3.3.

Figure C.3.3. Page designs were viewed 'flat' as well as in book form. By producing iterative bindings I was able to assess the flow and pacing of the narrative, both on page spreads and across the novel as a whole. (March – April 2016).

## C.4: MAKING

In the design much consideration was given to the text in terms of 'authenticity of voice'. This included investigations into commercial and custom-made fonts, and personal handwritten text. The making process progressed through constant reflection, with revisions made to support and reinforce the story. By developing the novel through iterations I was able to balance both overview and dramatic emphasis, so key events and flashbacks could be positioned to maximum effect. Iterative mockups were shared with a small group of critical friends who provided feedback on clarity, pace and illustrative approach.

▼ Figure C.4.1.

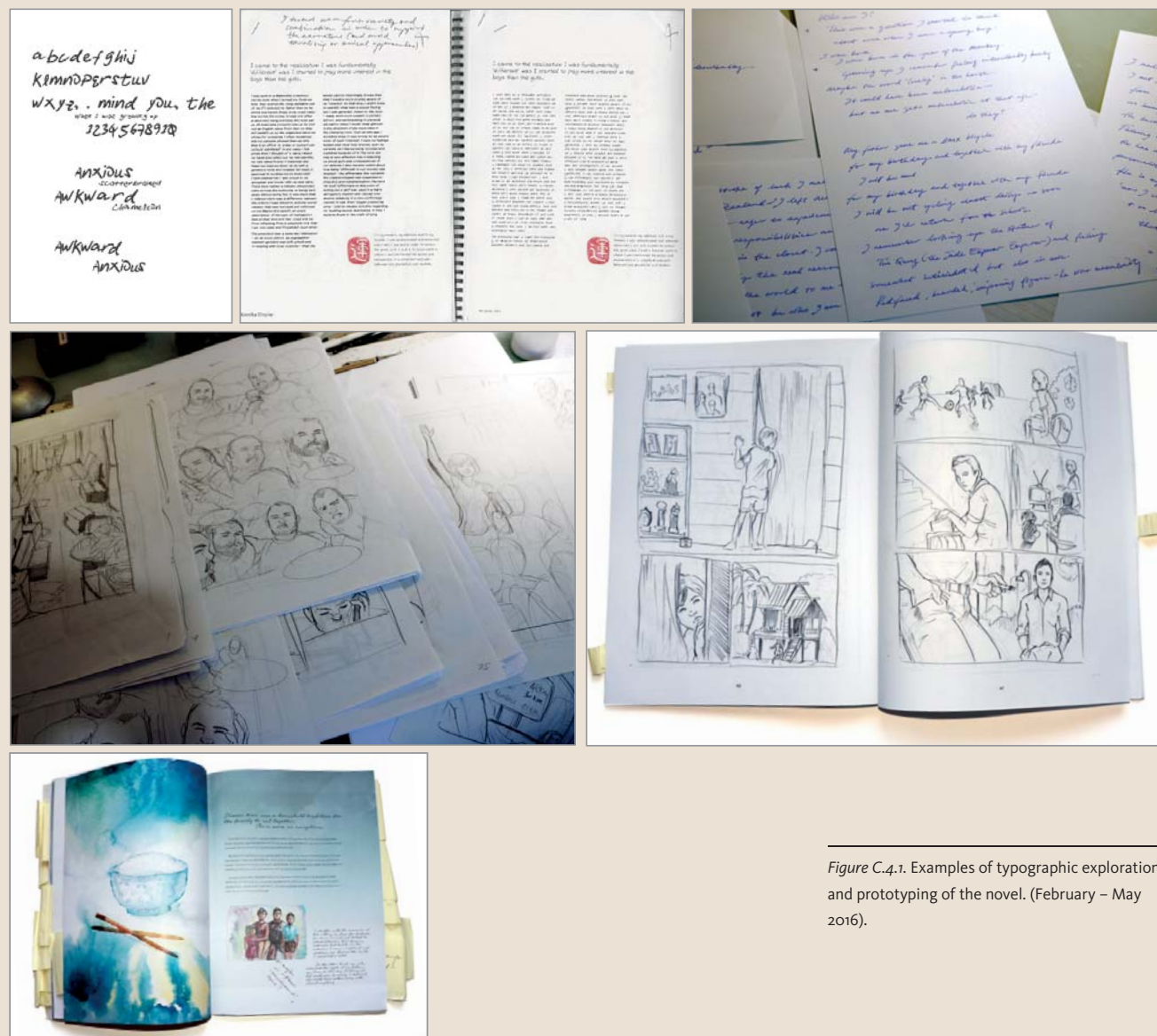


Figure C.4.1. Examples of typographic exploration and prototyping of the novel. (February – May 2016).

Figure C.4.2. These images show the design progress of the pages and illustrations. In order to improve the reading experience and maintain the narrative, the page design (and its illustration) was reflected upon and critiqued continuously. Adjustments were made accordingly to resolve the final outcome. (March – July 2016).

▼ Figure C.4.2.

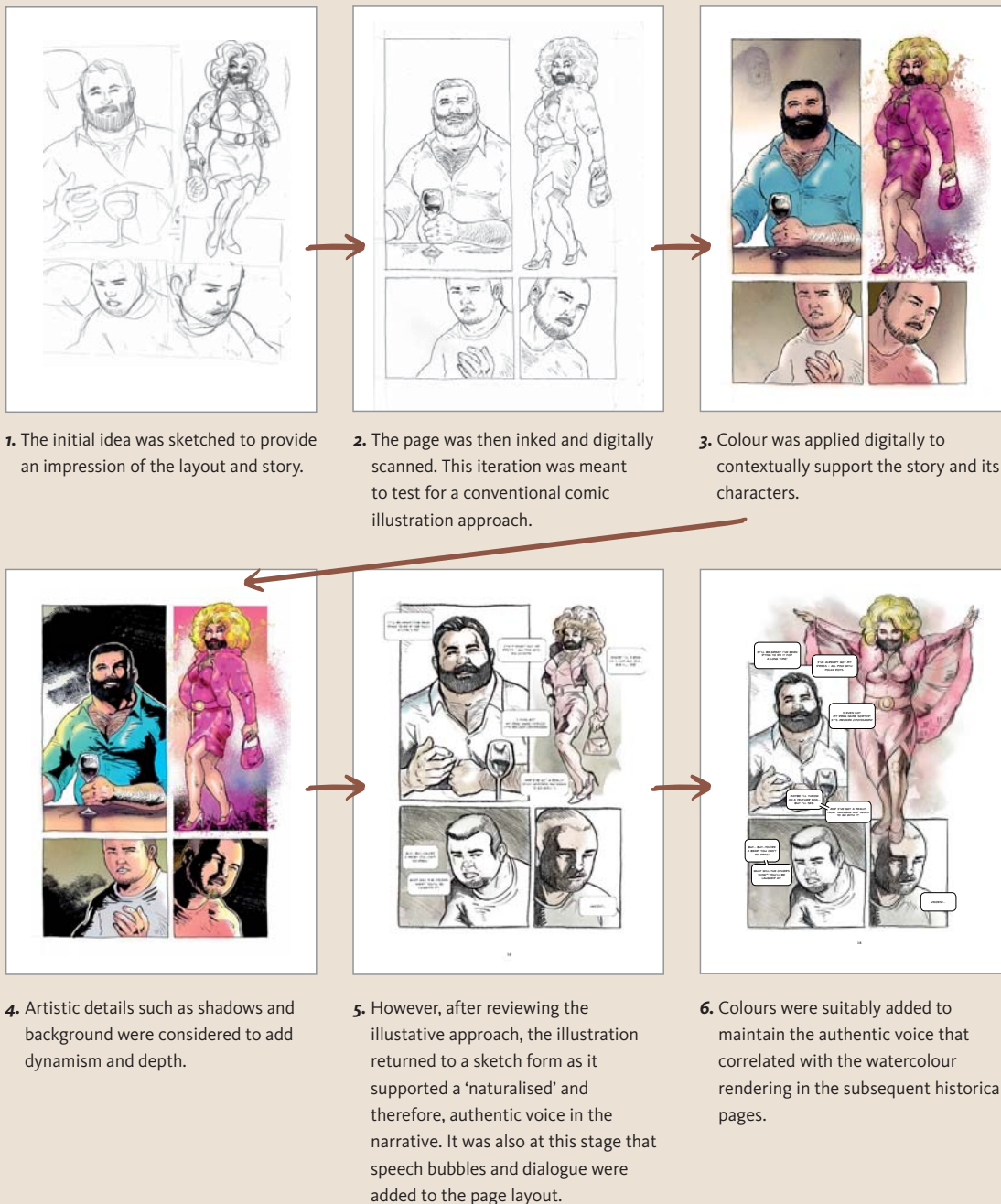
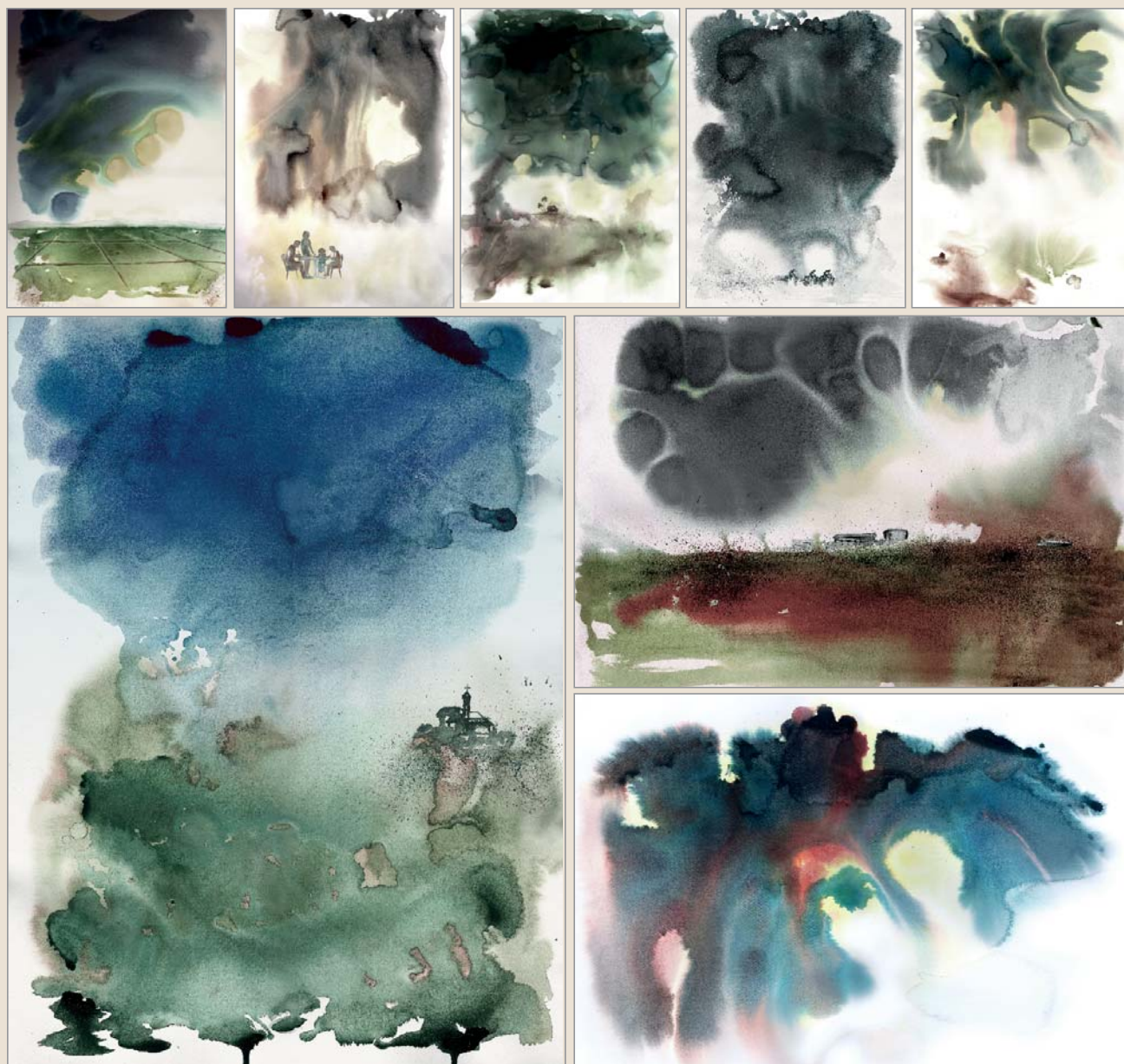




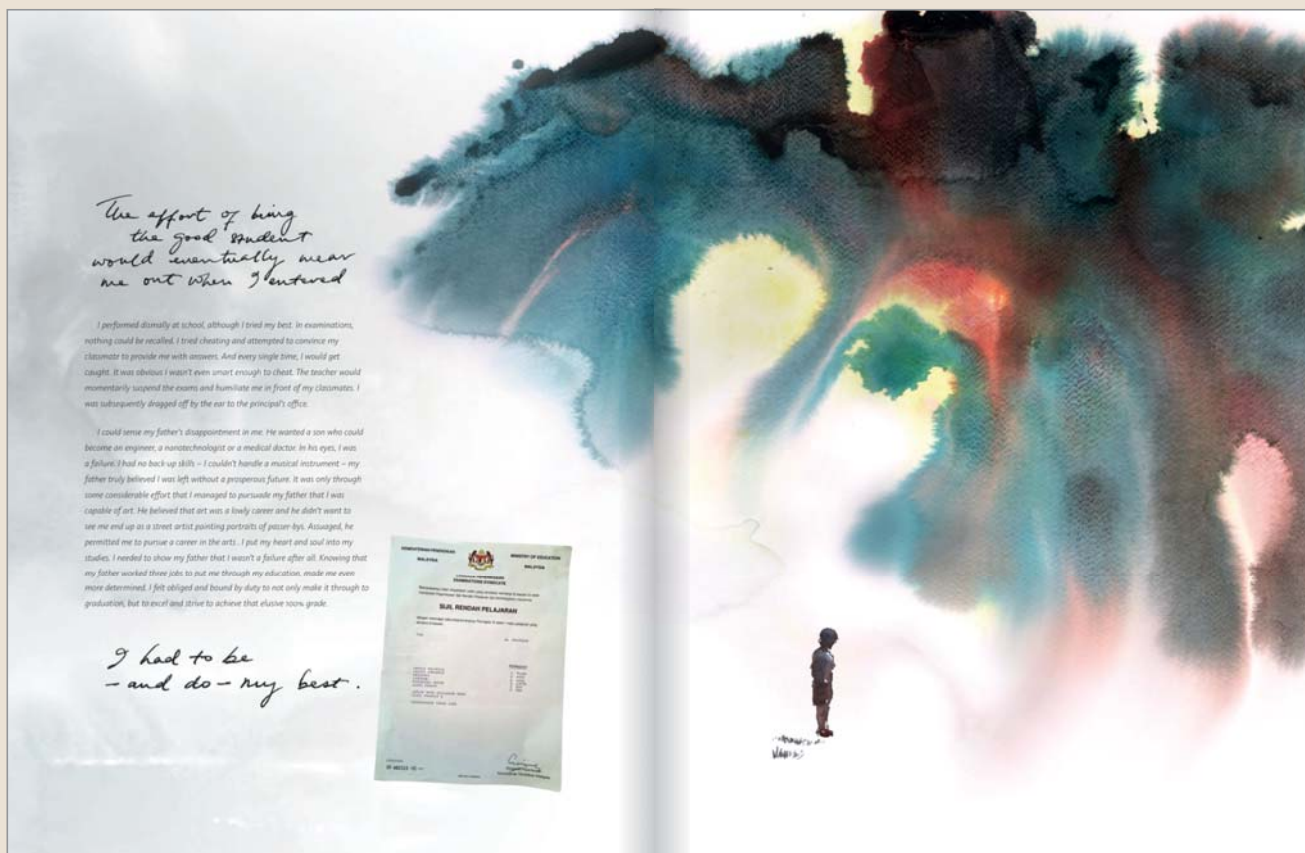
Figure C.4.3. A selection of watercolour pieces considered for the back stories in the graphic novel. (April – June 2016).



▲ Figure C.4.3.



Figure C.4.4. An example of a historical spread, combining watercolour artwork with the text. (July 2016).



▲ Figure C.4.4.

## C.5: AUXILIARY ARTWORK

These are the supporting artworks created to reinforce and contextualize the narrative.



### THE BIRTH CERTIFICATE

This is a typical Malaysian birth certificate of the '70s, when records were manually kept.



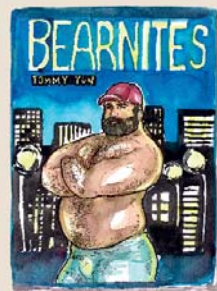
### THE JADE EMPEROR

The Jade Emperor, or 'Tin Qung', is a highly revered deity in Chinese culture. Considered the highest in the pantheon, he is regarded as the 'Heavenly Grandfather', a benevolent and wise figure.



### THE SECONDARY SCHOOL ACADEMIC TRANSCRIPT

This is an example of an academic transcript of the national standard examination.



### THE FIRST GRAPHIC NOVEL

'BearNites' is Tommy's first graphic novel that was published to a measure of commercial success. It features erotic stories of a gay bear's experiences when he moves from a rural town to a metropolitan city.



### THE IMMIGRATION STAMP

This is a recreation of the New Zealand immigration stamp used to date entries in foreign passports.



### THE BEAR FLAG

The bear flag is a symbol of the gay bear community. The flag represents inclusiveness and diversity. More information can be accessed at: <http://www.crwflags.com/fotw/flags/qq-ibbf.html>



### THE POSTAL STAMPS

These are postal stamps of Malaysia and New Zealand that were used in the '70s and 2001. These were added to the novel to indicate the State of Kedah (where Tommy grew up), and the year when he left Malaysia and entered New Zealand in 2001.



### THE FAMILY SEAL

This is an example of a Chinese seal that marks the family name in lieu of a signature. It is used for personal and official documents where authentication of authorship is required.

## Appendix D: Reflections on experience

### D.1: IMMERSIVE EXPERIENCE

The images on this page depict the studio where I worked on the graphic novel. This was where I was most creative, and many hours were spent experimenting, planning and creating the work. It was a space where I could dedicate attention to the illustrative nature of my project and be immersed in a 'flow'. It was also a space where I could freely acknowledge frustration and angst over failed attempts.

The experience of a project of this scope made me aware of the different layers of practice contained within the text. From writing to illustration, it required a level of concentration (and planning) that sometimes stretched my professional capabilities. Although I was familiar with illustrative practices, such as using different mediums for pencilling and watercolour, this project was my first attempt at rendering sequential art. I had to re-learn certain techniques, such as using watercolours. I was also mindful of composition and the dynamics of page design;

Figure D.1. These images show the immersive space of my studio where I engaged with the project. (February – July 2016).



▲ Figure D.1.

in this instance, angling the characters within the frame and how the placement of the speech bubbles can effect the composition of the page. The pages needed to work in harmony in order to maintain the narrative structure. Through a rigorous process of reflection and move-testing, amendments were made and reviewed.

Throughout the process of making, I experienced creative blocks that significantly affected my ability to focus and therefore interrupted my flow. There were periods when I could not face the project and I had to detach myself from the process. However, upon reflection, I consider the hiatus itself as being part of the creative process, instead of being an interruption. Having stepped away from the project for a few days, I would return with fresh eyes and this gave me the opportunity to reflect more objectively on the text.

I viewed this project in light of possible commercial publishing in the future. With this in mind, I worked with a pre-determined number of pages befitting publishing expectations. The graphic novel was initially planned as being 60 pages, so the writing and illustration were worked out accordingly. But after reviewing the narrative flow in the first prototype, it became evident that the page count had to be increased by 20 pages in order to fully realise the story. This impacted on the making process, as the script had to be refined and subsequent revisions made to the illustrations. The experience allowed me to regard prototyping as crucial to the design process, and that, as part of a more effectively managed practice, the script writing should be resolved in the earlier stages of the making process.









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