

## 'Autonomy and the Other Woman: Queer Active Agency and Postcolonial Expectations'

Jenny Barrett and Rosa Fong

*Deconstructing Zoe* is a British documentary film about transgender actor Zoe / Chowee Leow (2016), directed by Chinese British filmmaker, Rosa Fong. Together with British film scholar Jenny Barrett the following chapter is presented as a self-conscious reflection upon the practices of documentary filmmaking and the critical analysis of the film's subject from our different perspectives. It draws attention to a particular dilemma that arises in the enabling of a 'voice' to Zoe, a form of ethnographic statement in which she declares her transgender status and her racialised performance, and in the mediation of both the documentary format and the academic essay. The chapter is divided into two sections which indicate the author and help to create a negotiation of reflective practice and criticism. In the process, taking the lead from scholars Mohan J. Dutta and Ambar Basu in their autoethnographic study of subalternity and neoliberalism (2018), we explore and interrogate our own positions of privilege and autonomy in a neoliberal environment.

From a theoretical approach, Rosa seeks to articulate Zoe's 'unfixing' of her identity, creating what Homi Bhabha refers to as a 'double consciousness' of the colonized mind, not simply in Zoe's identity as a woman, but in her performed identity as a Chinese woman, the 'Other' woman, in her stage performances, in the documentary and in everyday life. Firstly, by observing Dorinne K. Kondo's 1990 analysis of David Henry Hwang's play, *M. Butterfly* (1988), we can recognise Zoe's dissolving of the boundaries of both gender and race in an elected identity that can be understood as self-authored.

Then, by comparison with the Chilean artist, Pedro Lemebel, Jenny presents Zoe as the author of a marginalised identity that, in this case, evokes a pro-colonial discourse and yet is unmistakably subversive. The documentary allows Zoe's 'voice', as subaltern, to be heard, within which she theorizes her own identity, and in this we hear the voice of both Self and Other, an endeavour that a postcolonial worldview would have good cause to celebrate. However, whilst Zoe's Orientalist performance destabilizes Eurocentric authority and essentialism, and is thus a postcolonial activity, her racialized identity is procolonial, and so resists a postcolonial worldview. Ironically, if Zoe is understood as subaltern, postcolonial thought would celebrate her autonomy and self-authorship, and so would defend her right to author her own ethnography. Zoe's deviation from the 'norm' of postcolonial thought, then, itself a dominant ideology in the neoliberal environments of British independent filmmaking and of Western-based academia, can be seen as a creative practice that resists hegemony.

### Rosa

In 'Deconstructing Zoe: Performing Race' (2018), I explore the means and implications of embodying a gendered and racialized identity in my documentary, *Deconstructing Zoe*. I argue that Zoe's self-aware performance as a Malaysian Chinese trans woman in Britain is evidence of a queer active agency. The documentary presents interviews and performances by Zoe in which her racialized, feminized identity is expressed, both to articulate her own selfhood and, she makes clear, to express her sexual identity. I have considered, then, how Zoe, whilst playing to an Orientalist stereotype that she calls 'the Orchid,' is able to create agency and ownership of her identity. She is able to do this because she understands that the Western Orientalist tropes assigned to East Asian women are somehow considered

innate, saying 'The Orchid represents my gender, my race and how I'm seen in the West as this delicate little flower' (*Deconstructing Zoe*, 2016). Yet when it comes to her own identity Zoe embraces the notion that it is not fixed, but is forever shifting and cannot be shackled by convention. This understanding of her own identity draws to mind Edward Said's seminal work, *Orientalism* (1978), which offers insights into the binary opposition of the central Self and decentralized Other. But Zoe resolutely refuses to be one or the other; she is knowingly both, simultaneously. A deconstructionist postcolonial approach, offering a more nuanced perspective, acknowledges a 'double consciousness' (Bhabha, 1994:256) whereby the colonizer and the colonized cannot be clearly identified in a binary opposition. This is because there are multiple perspectives available to the subaltern subject creating manifold identities of contestation. I have said elsewhere (2020) that Zoe grew up in the former British colony of Malaysia and has experience first-hand of the colonial rhetoric, potentially furnishing her with this 'double consciousness' of the colonised mind in the process of colonial mimicry. Bhabha utilizes a Lacanian notion of mimicry as camouflage, which produces ambivalence or hybridity. Indeed, Zoe demonstrates how she plays with this ambivalence when she says, 'I think the Orchid is a metaphor for a race or culture which is foreign to someone and I feel as Zoe there is this exotification of myself.' Zoe uses this knowledge to play 'the submissive butterfly' but sees this act of submission as a 'powerful tool' (*Deconstructing Zoe*, 2016). In her analysis of the Tony Award-winning theatre production *M. Butterfly*, a rendering of the early twentieth century Giacomo Puccini opera, *Madama Butterfly*, Dorinne K. Kondo explains how the act of submission, which Zoe also utilizes, can result in power. The play adapts the opera's tragic love story by changing the American male from naval officer to French civil servant ('Pinkerton' becomes 'Gallimard') and his Chinese partner from a woman to a male performer whose on-stage role is female

(‘Butterfly’ becomes ‘Song Liling’), although Gallimard does not realise that Song is physically male. Kondo describes how Gallimard demands to see Song naked, which would expose Song as a man. Kondo explains how Song, ‘in a brilliant stroke realizes that Gallimard simply desires her to submit’ (1990:18). Song kowtows to Gallimard and he yields, ultimately making Song the victor in a contest for power. Kondo asserts, ‘Indeed, it is at the moment of his greatest submission / humiliation as a woman that Song consolidates his power as a man.’ (1990:18)

Zoe’s own gendered and sexual politics use a similar ambivalence to great effect, declaring that,

When I’m Zoe I sometimes project the idea of a delicate Oriental butterfly. Because that, in itself, is quite a powerful tool. I think it’s only powerful because I’m playing it from an Asian male’s perspective. Because an Asian male is seen as something lesser, I guess. (*Deconstructing Zoe*, 2016)

Zoe’s understanding of postcolonial power relations enables her to negotiate the hegemonic structures of power and meaning. In particular, there is a recognition of her gendered identity in the geographical locus of power in the West, specifically Britain where she lives. Asian men are seen as less desirable, or in Zoe’s words, ‘lesser’ in the West: Zoe’s ‘submission’ to the procolonial trope of an Orientalized woman, gives her power as an East Asian man.

Kondo uses her analysis of *M. Butterfly* to articulate how ‘in anthropological theories of the self or the person [...] gender and race are mutually implicated in the construction of identity and the pervasive insidiousness of gender and racial stereotypes.’ (1990:6). Her analysis evokes Gramsci’s theory of hegemony, whereby power is re-established by coercion and consent rather than force. Here, this is through the iteration of stereotypes. Kondo’s

approach lends itself to a deeper understanding of the tactics employed by Zoe to author her own selfhood. She outlines the different frameworks of self from anthropology and philosophy, which define persons, selves and selfhood and are reliant on characterizations of 'the concept of self' (1990:14), which reify an abstract notion of an essential selfhood. She proposes that in *Madama Butterfly*, the opera, identity is fixed and essentialized. However, in *M. Butterfly*, 'selves in the plural are constructed variously in various situations' (ibid). These 'selves' are multiple and ambiguous, and they both shape and are shaped by 'relations of power' (ibid). Zoe, similarly, constructs a self that is multiple, performing both gendered and racialized stereotypes as a means of claiming power.

Kondo also draws our attention to how gender power relations are mapped onto geography in the binary of West/ East and male/ female, again found and explored in *M. Butterfly*. That the East submits to the West is one of the enduring narrative conventions of Orientalism. Indeed, Said (1978) illustrated how the gendering of the East as 'female' operates via Western imperial hegemony. Alessia Belli and Anna Lorentori explain that this demonstrates that 'the East is not only a cultural construct but also a sexual one' (2017:485). This is an important distinction that allows us to unpick the interconnected power relationship between geography, race and gender, which Kondo asserts is explored in *M. Butterfly* (1990:7). Zoe's complex renegotiation of her identity which allows her to create agency is perhaps illustrated by Kondo's analysis of the scene in *M. Butterfly* where Song is almost unmasked as a man but submits by kneeling to Gallimard, as discussed earlier.

Similarly, Zoe's apparent submission to Western essentialist notions of the Oriental 'Other woman' allows her to 'dissolve the boundaries' of gender and race, history, culture and

narrative conventions (1990:15) to create agency. What is important to establish, is that Zoe chooses to both perform and identify as, and so is, this Oriental Other woman. Belli and Lorentoni explain that 'in modernity, the configuration of identity should have an elective character,' that is, a recognition of our ability to be the authors of our own identity (2017:483). A similar approach could be employed to create a critical framework to help unpick Zoe's performative strategies. Belli and Lorentoni cite the work of Judith Butler who theorises identity 'as an affect that is produced or generated' (2017: 494). Understanding identity in this way allows a person 'greater access to agency' (ibid). Using these conceptions of active agency in the authoring of identity, we can argue that Zoe creates agency whilst / despite using Western essentialist stereotypes. The authors also highlight the limits of 'liberal patriarchy' (2017: 484), which often disavows the heterogeneous nature of minority cultures. They point towards the 'ethnically charged paternalism towards other cultures, judged to be incapable of internal dynamism' (ibid). To demonstrate the vibrant nature that minority cultures often employ in self-representation, Belli and Lorentoni utilize the concept of 'fluid identity' (2017: 493) to describe the shifting nodes of identity formation. Indeed Zoe actively makes use of such an approach to her own identity as she describes how gender is a spectrum and her gender identity fluctuates within that continuum depending on how she feels on any given day (*Deconstructing Zoe*, 2016). Zoe's proactive use of fluid identity formation allows her to create self-authorship in order to surmount procolonial inscriptions of race and gender.

In making *Deconstructing Zoe* (2016) I have taken a subjective approach to the film making process, which brings a personal dimension to my research. My methodology utilizes personal experience as a tool to understand cultural experiences and is known as

autoethnography (Ellis et al 2011). An important tenet of autoethnography is the recognition that personal experience influences the research process and that the selection of research literature to analyse experience is also subjective. My own research analysis draws on postcolonial debates and notions of hybridity and queer politics. These theoretical precepts have enabled me to articulate my experience as an East Asian woman living in Britain. When talking to Zoe about how people respond to her as a woman, I started to recall the original impetus for my research. Seeing Zoe in the early years of her 'coming out' and making the transition from a stage persona to a lived identity as a transgender woman, I was often struck by the attention she would get from men. In those early years, Zoe's performance as a Chinese woman seemed larger than life and hyper-orientalised. Zoe's version of a Chinese woman seemed to play up to the stereotype of oriental exoticness. It was at odds with how I wanted to be perceived as an East Asian woman. Experience had taught me that when men say that they wished I was 'more Chinese', I knew this was another way of saying that they wished I was more like the submissive fantasy some Western men have of East Asian women. When reflecting on this it became apparent that the attraction for these men was not gender per se, but an imagined geography of race (Fong, 2020). These reflective musings were the starting point for my research question, which was to explore how race can be performative. I have described elsewhere (Fong, 2017) how I drew on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity (1999) and Katrin Seig's study of ethnic drag (2009) to analyse racial performativity. I discuss the filmic strategies I used to draw out the nuances in Zoe's racial and gender performance and I described how I captured and responded to the performative act in front of the camera and in the editing process (ibid). This approach to my creative practice opens up the possibility of developing a dynamic response to knowledge formation, through the interplay between critical

research and the process of filmmaking. With this in mind I'm reminded of Nicola Mai's discussion on the limitations of academic writing, whereby he felt he was not able to 'convey the embodied, sensuous, affective, performative and intersubjective dimensions of knowledge production' through writing alone (Mai, 2016: 9). Mai turned to a form of filmmaking called ethno-fictions, which he says 'tries to represent the way knowledge happens during ethnography and qualitative interviewing' (Mai 2016: 10). Much in the same way, as a visual thinker the medium of film / video allows me to reflect and respond to the subject in front of the camera in a way that writing does not. In addition to that, the sensorial nature of film creates an embodied representation creating an emotional and intellectual moment of understanding for the viewer. For instance, in my documentary we are able to witness Zoe's performative strategy when using the idea of the East as a bankable commodity - that is the intellectual proposition of orientalism as a commodification of a race. As we watch her performance both on and off stage this creates an insight in to how this racialised gendered performance operates.

Ellis et al describe how writers of autoethnography use the storytelling characteristics of autobiography and scientific approach of the ethnographic study of people and cultures (2011). Autoethnographic filmmaking embraces the characteristics of both and it creates an embodied as well as a cognitive moment of knowledge formation. In my article "Deconstructing Zoe: Performing Race" (2017), I describe that I took an autoethnographic approach to the research of the documentary. I outline the very personal, subjective stance I took in making the film and how the creative process is underpinned with theoretical analysis. What makes autoethnographic filmmaking valid as research is that it interrogates



experience analytically (Mitch Allen quoted in Ellis et al 2011). Autoethnographic filmmaking can also be transformative and perhaps allows 'rhetorical agency', which is a person's ability to act on evaluations of the self and to be the author of their own narrative. In a recent discussion with Zoe about her experience making *Deconstructing Zoe*, she described how it helped change her outlook. She said the process of making the film helped her 'distil' her identity. It made her more conscious of who she was and how she presented herself to the world. She questioned, how do people perceive me? She considered how she might 'create' the person she'd like to present to the world. Zoe now does not make the distinction between her female and male persona. She now uses her birth name Chowee, whether she dresses as female or male. The binary distinction no-longer exists as she embraces her gender fluidity. When reflecting on Chowee's epiphany from the process of making the film, I am reminded of the closing statement in my previous article, '*Deconstructing Zoe* [thus] reveals racial and gender discourse, and by revealing, empowers.' (Fong, 2018)

### Jenny

Watching *Deconstructing Zoe* for the first time, I was faced with a problem. Whilst I was able to acknowledge the significance of Zoe's opportunity to present herself as her chosen identity, I was also struck by the particular characteristics of her performance. As a scholar and lecturer, the expectations of postcolonial theory are indelibly fixed in my mind from my own scholarship and numerous lectures on ethnicity and representation, providing a 'lens' if you will through which I automatically assess (judge) moving image texts. My automatic response on regarding a racialized performance such as Zoe's is to recoil, to resist its apparent embracing of a colonial discourse, to reject it as valid in the twenty-first century.

However, through several months of conversation with Rosa about her film, my perspective has taken a new shape. This is not, I would claim, a softening of my attitude towards colonial discourses, nor a consequence of getting to know the filmmaker herself and so adopting a positive attitude to her creative output. Instead, through a reconsideration of Zoe's racialized performance as a form of self-aware resistance, I am able to see it as a form of empowerment made possible through the film's mediation of her voice. Our participation in the dissemination and analysis of that voice, however, presents an additional problem in terms of Zoe's commodification, which I will explore below.

Above I referred to regarding Zoe through the lens of postcolonial theory. In fact, as we meet her in the documentary, she can be regarded through a range of lenses, one of which is recognising her as author of her own performed and lived identity, albeit one that is controversial. She is not alone in this; there are many artists whose public, performed persona, gender expression or sexuality has created controversy. Alejandro Urrutia's perspective on the 'credible authorship' of the Chilean *crónica* writer, novelist and performer, Pedro Lemebel, is helpful in this respect, particularly because of Lemebel's reputation as a gay creative artist whose practice and public appearances were often as shocking as they were political. Urrutia explores ways of regarding Lemebel as an author through an analysis of the writer's published works and recorded performances, most of which are still untranslated from their original Spanish. Lemebel (1952-2014) wrote and performed his 'chronicles' as a means to challenge both the right-wing, military dictatorship of Pinochet's Chile and homophobic left-wing political groups with which he at times associated himself. His identity as an author and artist is typically referred to by commentators and scholars as 'he,' whereas his identity in his tales and memoirs as 'la

Loca,' a 'Queen' persona often characterised as a feminine gay male, is often referred to as 'she.' In fact, Melissa M. González uses both pronouns in her article on Lemebel and subversion in the neo-liberal marketplace (2018). Thus, Lemebel had (and has) an ambiguous, flexible, gendered identity that was designed to disrupt fixed social categories not only on his own behalf, but also as a means of speaking the 'voices' of the marginalised in his country. Like Zoe, Lemebel features as a character in his own art, meaning that he 'interferes' with a reading of that creative work (Urritia, 2017, p.139). Lemebel's one published novel, *Tengo miedo torero* (*My Tender Matador*, 2001), for example, features his persona as the 'Queen' as an intervention within the *guerrilla* genre, wherein the protagonist is typically an 'ideologically conscious and consistent militant in a Marxist organization and preferably male and heterosexual' (p.144). The story tells a fictionalised account of an assassination attempt on Pinochet and displays similarities with what Urritia calls a 'Lemebelian discourse': 'challenging class, sexual normativity, and social injustice, and advocating the struggle for social rights and the positing of alternative identities' (p.144). Lemebel can be clearly identified as a character in his own novel (as the 'Queen'), and his politics also feature prominently, both in terms of gendered and sexual politics and the nation's political heritage.

Zoe also, in Rosa's film, features as a character in her own artwork (the performance as the 'Orchid') and the interviews create a space for her to more fully describe her politics which advocate the right to identify as a Chinese woman challenging not only sexual or gendered normativity, but also ethnic boundaries. Both Lemebel's Queen and Zoe's Orchid personas are situated in quasi-fictional spaces where a conventionally marginalised identity can be authored / spoken. In both cases, the author has a presence both inside and outside of the

fiction through, in Lemebel's case, written fiction, recordings, public appearances and interviews, and, in Zoe's case, in the interview and performative sequences of *Deconstructing Zoe*. This helps to further establish the performer / writer as 'author.'

Although Lemebel has typically been explored within the discipline of Latin American studies, his work and life are also interpreted and discussed within queer studies and subaltern studies frameworks, which are equally appropriate for the analysis of Zoe as author and performer. Certainly, Lemebel's political and cultural context is vastly different from Zoe's, practising in a country and time of overt state suppression of specific practices, lifestyles and politics. His practice, however, gives us a means to regard Zoe's self-authored identity and performance (on and off-stage, on and off-camera) as both non-conformist *and* conformist in the alleged 'freedom' of the neoliberal environment. Melissa M. González (2018) works from each of the disciplines mentioned, along with a recognition of the neoliberal context, to expose the irony of Lemebel's creative practice and public recognition: that he was fully aware of 'the delicate dance between subversion and co-optation that she performs in the context of neoliberal capitalism' (2018, p.138, *change of pronoun deliberate*). This 'dance between subversion and co-optation' refers to a status where marginalised voices gain value through cultural or academic acceptance, and consequently the marketplace vigorously assimilates then promotes their message (or the speakers of the message) for profit. Whilst Lemebel remained steadfast in his exposure of social inequalities, he knowingly accepted the benefits of his public success, retaining his subversiveness and yet conforming to the rubric of neoliberalism whereby his own exoticized difference was used as capital. Gonzalez argues that he 'is fully aware of the exoticism that inspires at least one segment of her audience to consume her cultural

production, and that she is unapologetic about the financial exchange involved' (2018, p.145). Lemebel was equally unapologetic about the offense he caused when invited to television interviews and university events, including antisocial behaviour when invited to speak at Harvard University in 2004:

Throughout the talk, Lemebel consumed copious amounts of whiskey, spoke through the time reserved for audience questions, joked that fellow Chileans assumed she was going to Harvard just to do the academics' hair, and famously stated that she never had to come out of the closet because poor people have wardrobes, not closets. (pp.140-1)

Lemebel is both knowing and unapologetic, and these traits, whilst found in a different cultural context, can be found in Zoe's work and everyday performance. As the quotation from the documentary reveals, cited earlier, the Orchid persona represents not only her gender, but her chosen race also (Chinese, not Malaysian). She demonstrates the same knowingness as Lemebel in her performance of Otherness, with the distinction that she is fully aware of the colonialist discourse with which she exoticizes herself, one that exaggerates an identity as 'subaltern.' However, as indicated above in relation to Lemebel, academia places a value upon the marginalised voice, assimilating it into a scholarly 'marketplace' which profits the scholar.

Postcolonial communication scholars Mohan J. Dutta and Ambar Basu present an interruption in the conventional academic discourse on subalternity and postcolonialism in their autoethnographic article of 2018, 'Subalternity, Neoliberal Seductions and Freedom: Decolonizing the Global Market of Social Change.' They discuss their own complicity, as part of a self-confessed educated elite of South Asian origin, in a political and academic reinforcement of Indian communities as subaltern in a neoliberal age (p.84). Guilty of commodifying 'exhibits' within the academy, along with other scholars, specialists and

members of NGOs, they expose a neo-colonial practice, whereby their work serves a postcolonial worldview, yet excludes the voices and opinions of the very communities they work in / for. They refer to this as a form of 'erasure' or a recognition of their efforts as the establishment of 'colonial sites', making them complicit, as they put it, in 'reproducing the margins' (p.84). Dutta and Basu have provided us, then, with a means of both exploring Zoe's autonomy and our own participation in the telling of / interrogation of her story. By situating Zoe's life and practice in a neoliberal environment, her 'freedom' to identify racially as Chinese and female in terms of gender can be acknowledged, her authorship of herself can be witnessed. However, this same neoliberal environment presents Rosa and I with a situation whereby this academic output commodifies her for our benefit as scholars. Given this tension, we need to consider Zoe's own role in self-authorship and commodification, as well as our role in mediation and interrogation.

Dutta and Basu, amongst other things, draw attention to the potential given by neoliberalism for neocolonialisms to emerge, whereby the voice of the subaltern remains unheard. In their summary of 'neoliberalism' they describe it as: 'a political, economic and cultural logic that is based on the idea that the market brings about solutions to problems of access, citizenship, and development' (p.92). Whilst this predominantly concerns late capitalist enterprise, western health models and more, it also includes academic discourses, particularly postcolonialist scholarship written from a place of privilege, which concentrates, for example, on the former British colonies of India and Singapore. They argue:

Postcolonial work as high theory rewrites and reworks the colonial enterprise, reiterating the tools of the colonial master in its celebrations of theory as removed from the everyday struggles of/in subaltern communities and detached from the messiness of everyday life. (p.89)

They conclude that the way forward is to move away from 'theorizing on' these communities and towards 'theorizing with' them (p.89), thus defending their particular scholarly approach which involves gathering and mediating stories from and with the communities themselves.

Duff and Basu's confrontation with their own identities forces us to do the same: I am a British white scholar who explores racialized identities in popular culture; Rosa is both a scholar and a practitioner, and is a British Chinese woman. Through her mediation of Zoe's story in the documentary, and through our participation in this chapter we are, one could argue, both providing Zoe with a space to have her voice heard *and* presenting Zoe as a 'specimen', something that Duff and Basu might regard as the scholarship of 'exotica.' Rosa's own ethnic identity suggests that she employed the documentary form in order to 'theorize with' Zoe as an active subject, whilst this chapter considers Zoe's racialised performance, and is therefore a means to 'theorize on' her as a passive object. All over again, Zoe becomes both Self and Other simultaneously. This presents a problem which is exacerbated by a conventional postcolonial response to Zoe's particular racialized performance.

As we have established, if we were to regard the representation of the Chinese woman as Other, 'butterfly' or 'Orchid,' the submissive, exotic female stereotype established through centuries of institutional and cultural racism, as part of a colonial discourse, then Zoe's racialized performance is procolonial. Her racialized identity, as claimed and performed, perpetuates a sign of colonial privilege, particularly as her interviews make it clear that this is part of her sexual independence. It goes beyond the mimicry that Rosa indicates, from

Bhabha, in her discussion of the double consciousness of the colonized mind. Surely, then, Zoe's autonomy becomes an instrument of erasure, a means of silencing postcolonial resistance to conceptions of the 'Orient'. Does she not subjugate herself to a colonial discourse? Has she re-colonized herself? The answer, given Dutta and Basu's call to 'theorize with' instead of 'theorize on', is 'yes' and 'no'. As a person from an immigrant background, someone who might be labelled 'subaltern,' the typical postcolonial approach would be to argue for her voice to be heard, for her to author her own identity. This is certainly the impulse behind Rosa's film. But when we look at the choices that Zoe makes, the postcolonial mindset is confused. The relative freedoms both of British filmmaking and academia mean that Zoe's voice can be heard, despite it presenting a controversial message. The documentary is her ethnographic statement as much as it is her expression of herself as a woman. Through it she theorizes herself. The uncomfortable irony is that the apparent freedoms of the two outputs (the film and this chapter being produced and available in a public forum) mean that Zoe's voice is both heard *and* commodified.

What is important to highlight, however, is Zoe's deviation from the norm. The postcolonial expectation is that the Orchid persona is unacceptable, it belongs to and should remain in another time. Socio-political, cultural and academic activities work to exclude such stereotyping and prejudice from our world with very good reason. However, creative and cultural expression, often known for its non-conformity, may be found to play with dominant expectations of identity and behaviour and thus draw attention to their hegemonic nature, as we have seen in the case of Pedro Lemebel. Lemebel's knowingness of his own participation in a neoliberal world as an artistic commodity sat alongside his controversial creativity. Zoe, similarly, knowingly expresses her right to non-conformity not



only as a trans-woman, as a performer and in the everyday, but also as a colonial type. Zoe's racialized identity, following a pattern rejected by postcolonialism, is thus a controversial act of resistance which forces us to acknowledge that a racialized performance may be as valid as any other aspect of our identity. Specifically, Zoe's agency can be said to have a deconstructing function towards essentialist, postcolonial expectations of Chinese Malay identity in Britain.

### Rosa and Jenny

In 2010 the UK government made the decision that undergraduate degrees in the arts, humanities and social sciences would not be funded by public money as they are not considered to be priority areas for public investment. It was a decision described by journalist Andy Worthington as the 'disturbing sub-text' to the Browne Report (Worthington, 2010). This is especially unsettling at this time, when the neoliberal phase of political economics leaves little to no room for art which is deemed to have no commercial value, as is often the case with works that deal with minority cultures and topics. Furthermore, a critical art practice which uses a personal experience in order to question cultural experience might be seen to have no immediate intrinsic value. It is only after a period of gestation that the impact of that research might be felt. This all entrenches a perception that higher education is a commodity to be bought and which first and foremost prepares undergraduates for work. It implies that the value of a critical education in the arts and humanities is only for the preserve of an elite (McGuigan 2016:109) or, even worse, is not necessary at all.

What this draws attention to is the vital role that research through critical arts practice in the academy has in creating knowledge formation, not to provide answers but to raise questions. Curricula are increasingly designed with employment as the priority, above the consideration and study of issues in our world that have no clear 'black and white' explanation. The desire to have the answers, to provide incontestable solutions to ethical questions in our research, practice and writing, needs to be met in some cases with resistance. It is, instead, the processes of thinking and debating matters that must be kept at the heart of the humanities. Henry A. Giroux's perspective on the contemporary US academy sees scholars subject to 'new regimes of neoliberal governance' which focus more on grants, budgets and career progression than on meaningful enquiry. (Giroux, 2014: 17). He writes, 'many academics have disappeared into a disciplinary apparatus that views the university not as a place to think but as a place to prepare students to be competitive in the global marketplace.' (ibid) He cites the novelist Toni Morrison from her own scholarship who emphasises the vital role of universities which is, in part, 'as interrogator of more and more complex ethical problems.' (2014:19) The dilemma that Zoe presents to us, in the authoring of a flexible identity that challenges our perceived 'correct' worldviews, could be understood as such a complex ethical problem. She refuses to fit and this forces us to think. Equally, our role as academics and filmmakers in a privileged part of the world, working on attempting to understand Zoe's identity whilst giving her the platform to voice it, draws attention to Zoe as object case study. The dilemma thus extends to our motivation in this written reflection: do we present and theorise Zoe's lived identity as a means of 'chasing theory for its own sake' as Giroux puts it? (2014: 17) Can we argue that our intention is to raise issues that have no definitive resolution? Whether or not we can answer these

questions is not the point. What matters is the mandate of critical arts practice to raise those complex ethical questions in the first place.

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#### Filmography

*Deconstructing Zoe* [film], 2016. Rosa Fong dir. UK.