Between Us

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Abstract

Between Us is a short film set in rural Japan about the strains and intimacies between a local transgender man and his queer Canadian partner in an unexpected encounter at the local hot springs. The story, while fictional, draws on my Master's thesis research and is inspired by the lived experiences of locals and immigrants in Japan with whom I have sustained close relationships for the past ten years. It was important to me that the film's production model also be rooted in creative international collaboration. From film professionals to office workers, students and seniors, to trans folks and allies, our cast and crew of 8 different nationalities came together to make this film possible.

We do not always have the vocabulary adequate to explore the spaces and experiences that exist between different cultures, genders or generations. *Between Us* invites audiences to engage with ways of being that cannot be placed on either side of a divide. The purpose of this support paper is to contextualize the film and to engage in a critical reflection on its content, form, and the creative process behind it.

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Introduction

What does it mean to belong? Does it mean being in the right place? Being with the right people? Being in the right body? My thesis film, *Between Us*, seeks to answer these questions, not through rhetoric but through an exploration of intimacy and the senses. The idea formed while I was living in Yamagata City in Northern rural Japan, where the film was shot. During the two years that I lived there (2011-2013), I went from feeling like a total outsider to feeling like an adopted family member, particularly among queer and trans friends who were forging their own path toward belonging. Having seen very few representations of Japanese family life that explored the intersection of LGBTQ+ and intercultural relationships, I felt compelled to make a film that would capture these complexities. Over the next several years, I collected footage and conducted interviews for a documentary, but ultimately the subjects asked to have their identities kept private. *Between Us* became a fictional film inspired by these experiences. It draws on research and collaboration with an expanded network of trans men from across the country. For the purposes of this paper, I am keeping these people's identities private.

The story centres on a local Japanese man, Kei, who longs for a "normal" life in rural Yamagata. For a transgender person who is jobless in his own hometown, finding normalcy is a steep climb, especially since Erin, his Canadian partner, longs to move to Tokyo, where they can live openly and freely as a queer couple. On his way to a job interview in the city, Kei meets an elderly stranger, Setsuko. He abandons the interview to help her and discovers she is the owner of the hot springs, a place he once loved, as a child. Kei's encounter with the healing waters is complicated by Erin's turning up as well. Finally, the couple—one on the men's side, the other, on the women's—must face the truth about their divergent wishes, identities, and murky notions of belonging.

Rather than placing them in conflict with society at large, the film focuses on Kei and Erin's relationship and the interiority of their world. Although the dialogue shows that they both feel uncomfortable about the way they are treated and perceived, the story is not about society's discrimination against them. Instead, the difficulty lies in the opposing nature of their hopes and desires. Kei wants to stay in the countryside and integrate without foregrounding his trans identity. He fears Erin cannot understand his wish. Erin wants to move to Tokyo, where they can both be out of the closet. She fears Kei will not accept her own struggles with gender, which have remained unspoken in their relationship. *Between Us* is a film about attentiveness and about learning to uncover new dimensions of people we love. It is about re-imagining our futures, so we allow each other room to grow without becoming fossilized.

Image 1: Poster for *Between Us* - Kei and Erin communicate across the divide at the bath

Research: Trans and Genderqueer Identities in Contemporary Japan

My impetus for making this film is highly personal, but I would first like to outline the legal and social frameworks that impact the lives of trans people in Japan. While living in Yamagata, I found very few queer-friendly spaces. The ones I did find were mostly gay bars that were not necessarily open to the spectrum of other LGBTQ+ patrons. Admission was by referral only. On one occasion, I was asked to explain my sexual orientation to the owner, after which I was asked to leave because I was "not exactly a lesbian." I wondered if my trans and genderqueer friends in Yamagata felt isolated, without a local community to turn to for support. It was hard to resist comparing their lifestyles to those of my friends in Toronto, who tended to be "out-and-proud activists." Why would someone prefer living in a small town, when they could live in Tokyo where, presumably, they could fit in? Why did I initially assume that Japanese friends who chose to keep their identity private, were living in fear, rather than with self-acceptance?

While living in Japan, I began to realize the extent to which trans experiences were absent from the dominant cultural narratives, particularly the stories of trans men. Through research I also learned how scarce the resources were for trans people who were navigating the complex legal and medical procedures necessary to have their gender formally recognized. Eventually I found pockets of trans activists in urban hubs like Tokyo and Osaka who were creating and sharing resources internally. Still, I wanted to gain a better understanding of trans experiences in rural areas. My background research for *Between Us* focused on the historical and social factors that might influence someone's desire to integrate rather than to be out as transgender.

Erasure of Trans Histories

Looking at the diverse gender representation in both historical and contemporary popular culture, it is tempting to conclude that Japan is a haven for gender nonconformity. From kabuki to anime, gender-bending characters have existed across many centuries and genres of entertainment, but these do not teach us much about the contemporary challenges faced by trans people. In fact, mounting human rights complaints from Amnesty International and the UN draw attention to punitive gender-change policies that require transitioning individuals to be diagnosed with a mental disorder, followed by surgeries that result in sterilization (International Commission of Jurists). In addition, right-wing political groups in Japan continue to fight feminism and LGBTQ+ rights in ways that suppress or erase the history and culture of trans people. In the words of one trans educational lecturer, "It's not that we do not exist...it's that we are not visible" (G-pit 2019).

I found few cohesive chronologies of Japanese trans history and fewer still in English. In *Queer Japan from the Pacific War to the Internet Age*, McLelland says he is "not aware of any English accounts of the historical development of diverse transgender practices in post-war Japan" (2003, 208). To conduct my thesis research, I had to rely almost exclusively on personal accounts and online resources that were easy to translate. In the absence of academic frameworks or support from public institutions, the websites I found were primarily produced by and for the trans community.

Many Japanese resources do not use the word "transgender" and instead use a wide range of other vocabulary, both formal and vernacular, to describe identities across the gender spectrum. Many trans men simply identify themselves as "FTM," short for female-to-male. Dale writes that "transgender as a term is hardly used in popular discourse" (2012, para. 5). This could

be because the English word “transgender,” which emerged from queer political activism, was only adopted in Japanese as a loan word in 1996.

The majority of scholarship focuses on gender fluidity and cross-dressing in the feudal period (1600-1867) and in early-modern Japan. While trans communities have existed throughout Japanese history, there is not a sustained record of their culture. During the post-World War II war era, magazines such as *Fūzoku kagaku* (Sex Customs Science; 1953-55) became a popular resource for trans communities, although images and discussions of trans practices were often depicted alongside other sexual “deviations” such as sadomasochism, as seen in *Ura mado* (Rear Window; 1957-65).

McLelland writes that these publications “offered a means for people to find each other and thereby imagine (and experience) community” by posting information about meetups and round table discussions in Tokyo (2004, 4). However, these magazines tended to focus on sexually explicit content featuring trans women, drag queens, and gay men in the entertainment industry. Rural inhabitants and individuals of lower socio-economic status may have had access to these magazines, but they could not provide the same kind of in-person access to social networks. McLelland says that in 1953 the editor of the magazine *Fūzoku Zōshi* (1953-54) received letters from rural inhabitants requesting support through an introduction and discussion service. It is unclear whether such a service was ever launched.

Despite the post-war increase in resources and media about trans identity, there was—and continues to be—very little content devoted to trans men. This is the case not only in Japan, but in North America and most areas of the world. This lack can in part be explained by the fact that they have traditionally been less involved than trans women in the entertainment industry. While neither group is widely represented in popular culture, a few Japanese trans women have gained

popularity on non-fiction TV programs and variety shows that feature fashion, dancing and modeling. Trans women are treated as a spectacle, whereas trans men are hardly visible.

I asked friends in the Japanese LGBTQ+ community why they thought this was the case. They said that perhaps it was due to the cultural hierarchy that placed men above women. They explained that on some level, it was understandable to the general public that a woman would want to "become a man" in order to climb the social ladder. Trans women were considered "funnier and more entertaining" to watch, because people were puzzled by the idea of men who would lower their status to "become women." It was also more shocking to see a man in women's clothing.

These observations illustrate the ways in which being trans has often been presented as a preference or a costume rather than being understood as a fundamental identity. In other words, the continued association of trans culture with entertainment has led to the misidentification and obscuring of culture that falls outside that sector.

What are the effects of this erasure? One parent I interviewed described thinking that her child was "the only [transgender] one in the world," because she had absolutely no exposure to trans life or culture as she lived in a rural area. She described being afraid of looking up any information about it online, because that would have "made it real." She talked about the way her son had suffered from depression as a teenager, but that they could not quite identify the issue. It was unrecognizable to them.

In *Between Us,* I wrote Kei's character with these kinds of personal stories in mind. We do not know many details about Kei's upbringing in the film, but we can infer from the dialogue and the setting that he and Erin do not know any other trans people in the region. To the extent

that he likely grew up with few examples with which to identify, we can begin to understand why Kei does not picture himself within the context of a greater trans community.

Legal and Medical Status

Between Us does not provide explicit details about Kei's transition process, nor do I think that background information is necessary to understand the story. However, my research into the legal and medical status of trans people played an important role in shaping my understanding of Kei's struggles. Early in the film he says he is "sick of his transition dictating everything." I wrote this to reflect the frustration that many friends have expressed about the exorbitant amounts of time, money, and energy that are expended in order to transition legally. People making the transition must meet many criteria, such as being over the age of 20, being unmarried, and having no minor children. In some cases, it can take several years to meet the list of requirements.

Among the most controversial laws for those seeking legal gender change is that they must undergo surgery that results in sterilization. From a Western human-rights perspective, the state's current approach is deeply problematic, as the procedures are expensive, invasive, exclusionary and stigmatizing (Amnesty International). Individuals pursuing legal gender change on their *koseki*, or family register, must also undergo psychiatric assessments to obtain two separate diagnoses of Gender Identity Disorder (GID) before proceeding with surgery (Knight 2017). Not surprisingly, there is much ongoing critique among Western scholars and medical practitioners regarding Japan's continued use of GID as a diagnostic tool, particularly since the American Psychiatric Association (2011) voted to remove the term from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders.

The issue, however, is not one-sided. A close examination of Japanese online resources suggests there is no clear consensus that the community wishes to eliminate GID diagnoses. Trans educator Junko Mitsuhashi explains that the diagnosis helps protect trans people by making "behavior acceptable that would be shameful if seen as a personal eccentricity" (Feder and Kininmonth 2016). Among the Japanese friends and individuals I interviewed, there were a few who said they actually no longer identified as trans now that the official transition process was behind them. They saw themselves as people who had "recovered from GID," and who were now living as "normal men." To me, this offered a new and interesting perspective on why Kei might prefer not to be "out," if being "out" is interpreted as a perpetual state of transition and mental instability. I do not want to suggest that this is the predominant perspective held by trans men in Japan, but it offers a counterpoint to North American narratives and I felt it was worthy of representation.

Social Expectations

Regardless of one's position on GID or the label "transgender," it is clearly not easy to "exist in the middle." Within queer communities, Japanese language has evolved to include a wide range of gender non-conforming identities, including *musei* (no gender), *chūsei* (middle gender) and *x-jendā* (x-gender), suggesting diversity in self-identification (Dale, para. 4). Yet the current structure of legal and medical procedures in Japan collapses the spectrum of gender diversity in ways that reinforce existing male-female binaries. In some cases, this has led to greater divisiveness within the trans community. In an interview, one friend described seeing online discrimination against so-called "untreated" trans people, who had not undergone surgery or had their gender legally changed. According to some, such people could not be considered "real" trans men. This example highlights the degree to which physical and social conformity are

still expected, even among genderqueer groups. Erin's fear of rejection has as much to do with Kei's reaction as it does with society's. Will he recognize and empathize with her gender struggles, even if she does not identify as trans? What steps would he expect of her? Will he still be attracted to her? She is unsure. Unlike Kei, Erin wants to be recognized as queer, and being non-Japanese complicates this matter.

To a Western audience, there are physical cues that could identify Erin as a queer person: dress, hairstyle, body language. However, these cues would not necessarily translate the same way in a Japanese context. Lesbian and genderqueer friends of mine said that, while living in Japan, people often commented on their cropped hair and androgynous style as something strange that "foreign women" did. The observers did not recognize these as cues of being LGBTQ+. Instead they thought these were indicators of a cultural difference. As one friend put it, "I could never identify a lesbian walking down the street in Japan." While Erin might understand the reason for this interpretation, this conflation of her queerness and foreignness would be a source of frustration, especially if she wants to be seen and accepted as queer. She does not know how to convey it in this cultural context.

Image 2: Still from *Between Us* - Erin's appearance may read as "queer" to a Western audience, but not necessarily to a Japanese one

As a man, Kei faces a different kind of pressure to conform to a long list of social expectations. He struggles, for instance, with unemployment, which tends to be a mark of failure in many cultures, especially in Japan. The trans men I interviewed for this film explained that it can be

hard to stay employed while taking the extended leaves of absence necessary for medical treatment and legal work. Some also choose to leave their workplaces while undergoing hormone therapy in order to keep their transition process private from co-workers. Job applications and returning to the workforce can produce significant anxiety, because of likely inquiries into the reason for gaps in employment. For individuals who have legally transitioned, the risk of being outed still remains when social networks and reputation informally influence hiring decisions. Finally, legal transition is costly and can leave individuals in debt for years.

With all of these factors in mind, we can begin to understand the weight and significance of Kei's decision to abandon the job interview in Tokyo. For him to risk continued unemployment and further stigmatization means that there are deep roots keeping him in Yamagata. Erin pushes for a move to the city in order to find community, however Kei's interaction with Setsuko reinforces his hope that locals will see and treat him as he wants to be perceived. Neither Kei nor the viewers can be sure whether Setsuko knows he is trans, but she has invited him to enter the bath regardless. With no other guests there to judge him, Kei has the power in that moment to claim belonging in a space from which he has long been rejected.

It is worth mentioning that Kei's decision to forego the job opportunity also plays against gender stereotypes. Among the reasons he does not want to move to Tokyo is that he does not aspire to the "salaryman" life. His desire to stay in the country to maintain local relationships and connections with nature, puts him at odds with the pressure to become the breadwinner. Not only in Japan, but in most cultures, earning power is so intertwined with male privilege and images of masculinity that it is difficult to escape that expectation.

Even among media produced for and by trans men in Japan, the scope of masculinity is narrow. In her analysis of *LAPH*, a trans men's lifestyle magazine, Yuen observes that the

publication's goal is not to "resist the norm" but rather to allow trans men to "place themselves within the realm of the 'normal'" (2018). Indeed, there is much continuity between the idealized portrayals of masculinity in LAPH and other magazines for and about cisgender men. The magazine's homepage states its mission:

> A lot of information can be found online these days, but what you don't often see is the reality of trans living. At LAPH, we use photography to focus on casual everyday life such as work, fashion, romance, cars, and rooms, rather than treatments or medical content.

Between Us attempts to depict everyday life in a way that raises questions and foregrounds interpersonal dilemmas. The goal is to allow space for the characters and the audience to imagine different ways of existing rather than to prescribe a singular, idealized one. Kei and Erin each face unique privileges and challenges. Neither the film nor this paper can illustrate the scope of complexity around these issues. Still, I hope they offer insight into a particular cross-section of trans and queer experiences that are often ignored.

My Relationship to Gender Nonconformity and Queer Experiences

I did not set out to make a "queer" film, and yet it would be hard to define my thesis film otherwise. What accounts for this? My relationship with queerness is complicated. I discovered and loved queer media and individuals long before I was taught to categorize them as such. The art, literature, graphic novels, films, zines, and fanfiction I consumed as a teenager were filled with gender-bending characters, whose relationships and identities blurred boundaries in ways that made sense to me. As a young person, it was not difficult or traumatic to accept my own inclinations toward fluid gender identity and sexuality. These aspects felt like an integrated part of me, but I did not consider them to be part of my identity.

At some point, I internalized the notion that trauma was the only true marker of whether I deserved to belong to "the queer club." Could I really claim membership if I had not suffered for it? According to some, I could not. I battled with many questions. Should I be "out?" Why? What would be the value? What would be the right term? Is there a single term for my identity? Eventually, I began describing myself as an "ally" interested in LGBTQ+ issues, because others told me I did not visibly fit into queer spaces. I wanted to be an ally, but not in a way that renounced my own relationship to queerness. Both in Canada and in Japan, I experienced rejection from queer spaces. I grew increasingly uncomfortable in them. All I wanted was to belong. "Belonging" is a simple idea, yet it is so complicated.

Story Origins and Inspiration Behind the Film

Finding "Family" in Yamagata

If I were an element, I would certainly be water. It is in my nature to be fluid. At my worst, I am indecisive and ever-changing. At my best, I work to bring sustenance and healing. I moved to Japan in 2011 on the heels of the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami. I was placed as an English teacher in a mountainous rural prefecture called Yamagata. Although I worked at a junior high school, I had loftier ideas about my purpose. I knew I was there to create breathtaking art and to find my place in the world. At 23, I thought I could achieve both. With few friends at first, I spent my days cycling through the rice paddies, luminous with shades of green I had never experienced. Often, I would stop at the local hot springs and strip away my clothes and anxieties, sinking into the cocoon of heat. It was like returning to the womb. My daily life was blissful, but most of the time I felt alone.

The role of foreigners in Japan is a complex topic. To understand the privileges and frustrations I experienced in Yamagata, it is important to consider the ways white foreigners are presented in the media and introduced to Japan through government programs. Since its defeat in WWII, the Japanese government has worked to repair its relationship with the United States by way of promoting and idolizing American culture in the media, and by encouraging English-speaking visitors from various countries to "fall in love" with Japan. The result has been an influx of cosmetic, imported diversity in regions like Yamagata over the past thirty years. The Japan Exchange and Teaching Program (JET), which I worked for as an English teacher, was created in 1987. JET was intended to foster economic growth and international interest in Japan by placing English teachers in rural areas where local people could teach them about the

traditional, beautiful side of the culture. Successful applicants were often recent university graduates not trained as teachers, so they had an ambiguous role in public school classrooms. In my experience, we were treated as visiting ambassadors whose relationships with locals were heavily curated.

As a JET teacher, I was told not to rock the boat: do not ask controversial questions and do not to impose my opinions. I was instructed to be a "model citizen" of my country, because I would be one of the only Canadians locals had ever met. I was also informally told not to let my "gender politics" get in the way of being respectful and doing cultural activities. As someone who loved Japanese culture and language, I tried hard to conform to these expectations, even when it meant hiding significant aspects of my personality. At work, I was often given nothing to do. I was asked to stand quietly at the front of the room smiling for an hour. My job was easy, but I had no autonomy. I was not trusted with important tasks, and I had very few responsibilities.

Before moving to Japan, I was extremely anxious about how to present myself. Women's business casual attire might as well have been drag. In Yamagata, I experimented with projecting femininity by wearing skirts and putting flowers in my hair. I had spent most of my life rejecting such things. They felt unnatural. Because I visually fit the mold of beauty standards in Japan—white and petite—people paid excessive attention to my looks. Although it initially felt like a privilege to be noticed and called cute, the recognition came with so many other assumptions about my identity and personality. It felt like a trap. I was constantly being documented without my permission. Fathers of students I taught would pull out their phones and film me, while asking whether I would rather marry them or one of their sons. Students would poke my breasts, asking about my cup size. With limited language skills at first, my daily interaction with people

was painfully shallow. I was “seen” everywhere. I had nowhere to hide, but my personality was invisible. As a guest in a country where I was also afforded many privileges and exempt from other cultural pressures like working overtime, I felt I also had no right to complain. I grew anxious, bored and lonely, longing for friends who would ask who I really was.

Nearly a decade later, I sit here, having made *Between Us*, a film which reflects on the phenomenal relationships I eventually developed. What changed? I can only describe it as having found “family” away from home. Whether on a train, at a coffee shop, or in a library, a series of fortuitous encounters led me to connect deeply with other people who were also outsiders in different ways. These were Yamagata locals who did not fit the mold: single mothers, people with bicultural backgrounds or who were different-abled, young folks who were queer and transgender. They were nothing like the conservative crowd whom you imagine living in the Japanese countryside. Even in urban areas, these marginalized groups faced stigmatization, and yet they chose to remain in Yamagata. In writing *Between Us*, I wanted to shed light on that hidden side of the local population and to subvert the usual narrative about rural backwardness and intolerance. I hoped that the film would help break the cycle of isolation for local LGBTQ+ communities, while opening up a broader conversation around tolerance and visibility in the general public.

These friendships changed me in profound ways, opening my eyes to the pockets of diversity that exist within other rural communities. Although the households were far from the norm, they became the lens through which I learned to understand Japanese family life. We cooked and shopped for daily necessities together. Friends invited me to stay at their homes. They introduced me to extended family members and invited me to visit their workplaces. They integrated with my circle of non-Japanese friends. We were each other’s moral support through

heartbreak, legal gender transition, and the illnesses of loved ones. I was humbled by their openness and generosity. These were friends with whom I could be authentic. Yet even among queer and trans friends, I felt obligated to perform, to live up to their expectations of "foreignness" and "femaleness." In truth, I longed to talk about gender nonconformity with my trans friends, because I thought they would understand my feelings.

As a young person in Canada I had put my body through a lot of pain trying to achieve an androgynous body, trying to erase my breasts. In Japan I felt alienated by the constant objectification. I wanted to have visceral, personal discussions, but I could not find a way to talk about bodies and feelings. I discovered that my trans friends did not want to talk about gender or their transition, and I wanted to respect that. I also saw the ways in which they struggled to pass as men and work within the ideals of masculinity, rather than to break away from them. I was not sure if they wanted to engage in discussions about gender non-conformity, and I did not want to force these discussions on them. I felt like an imposter by saying that I struggled with gender, when I looked like the kind of girl who would be plastered on the front of a Japanese women's magazine. I thought it would be selfish to talk about gender, when I was being treated like a celebrity and they were facing discrimination.

In retrospect, I wish I had tried to have these conversations, but I was terrified of losing friends who I could otherwise be so open with. I fell into the trap of playing into feminine gender roles because it was safe, and because it seemed to grant me greater access to intimate cultural practices.

Keeping in mind the way that my friends had been taught to interact with foreigners, I understood that they were being "good citizens" by including me in traditional women's activities like kimono-wearing and tea-serving. I could tell they were genuinely excited to share these aspects of their culture. I was not offended or pressured by these activities—they were beautiful. I was concerned that a lack of interest in women's activities might be insulting or even misogynistic on my part. Embodying and sharing in femininity was a way of connecting with women with whom I had few cultural touch points in common.

Image 3: Women friends invited me to take part in traditional tea ceremonies in Yamagata

One woman treated me much like a daughter. She took delight by engaging in "girly" activities together. We went shopping for frilly dresses. We got our nails done. To her these activities seemed like a natural extension of our relationship, after I had enjoyed activities like women's traditional craft-making. I did not have the heart to tell her I resented being dressed up like a doll.

Image 4: Friends in Yamagata dressed me up like a doll in traditional and Western clothes

On one special occasion, a friend took me on a weekend trip to a very famous hot spring up in the mountains, where she presented me with the gift of a beautiful traditional *yukata*, which she had worn as a young woman. After enjoying the bath together, she did my hair and dressed me up. Was it worth giving up these unique and beautiful experiences to reinforce my gender politics? Was I being inauthentic, living like a chameleon, identity ever-shifting? These types of questions were always on my mind.

I wondered whether some of my friends were also hiding parts of themselves. Were they afraid to show me these parts? In retrospect, I suspect they were performing "Japaneseness" for me too. It seemed natural to document our interactions through photos, videos, and audio recordings. I would often catch one friend recording videos of me on her phone even as I did mundane chores like dishwashing.

Another friend would make little semi-fictional video stories about my "discovery" of surprising parts of Japan, such as chatting up the ladies at a local hostess club. Why were we always observing each other so closely? What did we hope to learn from or about each other? By documenting each other, we were actually facilitating mutual acknowledgment of our culture and gender performances, without talking about it directly. Once the cameras began rolling both parties became aware of storytelling and of creating caricatures of ourselves.

The impulse to document was also integral to feeling accepted. I can look back on those photos and videos as evidence that it was possible to move to the other side of the world and find love among strangers. My friends can look at those records as evidence that they are also loved, and that different kinds of people, perspectives, and lifestyles exist elsewhere in the world. This knowledge offers profound hope at times when we feel trapped or misunderstood. I found myself dreaming about exploring these dynamics through a documentary, although I had no experience in filmmaking.

My Filmmaking Background

I came to filmmaking to understand personal struggles and relationships through a visual and tactile medium. In 2010, before leaving for Japan, I had made *Making It Up As We Go*, a video art piece about my fear that my dad would die while I was gone, before I had a chance to show him what I was truly capable of. In the process of co-creating with my dad, I made incredible discoveries that brought us closer together. I was amazed at what was possible when we both allowed ourselves to be seen through each other's eyes. I was also surprised when these films elicited deeply personal responses, even from viewers I barely knew. When I returned to Canada in 2013, I began working on my first film, *She Got Game*, an ambitious documentary

about women's empowerment through video games. The project took me from Toronto, to Montreal, to New York, and back to Japan. From that point onward, I became certain I wanted to become a director. My favourite genres have always been fantasy, magical realism, and surrealism, because they allow us to see imaginative things which do not tangibly exist, but I could not make these kinds of works on a small scale with no budget. My early work paid little attention to the formal aspects of film. I prioritized process over aesthetics. That was not so much a choice as a limitation in my technical capabilities.

I had two reason for returning to Yamagata to make a documentary. I wanted to go through this same transformative process with my closest friends there, and I was sure that the stories would be of interest to people outside the immediate community. I hoped that through the film, these friends would feel the depth of my appreciation for our relationship. Perhaps they would see some of their own beauty and complexity reflected back to them. While all were supportive and encouraging of my filmmaking, the friends I approached politely declined to be involved in a documentary, because they did not want their trans identities to be public. I understood, but I was also heartbroken.

Transitioning from Documentary to Fiction

When I applied to York's MFA program, I had spent about 18 months trying to dream up alternate ways of telling this story that would keep everyone's identities private. I considered a wide array of possibilities including animation, re-enactment, puppetry and even converting it to an audio piece. The story could have been told using any one of those techniques, but each one of them felt wrong for some reason. It took a great deal of reflection and connecting the dots before I could identify which elements of the story were most important to me and why. I

resisted techniques like voice disguises and pixilation (used to conceal subjects' identities), because fundamentally I wanted to make a film about people's desire to be seen by others as they see themselves. The individuals who inspired the film did not think of themselves as "hiding." It felt disingenuous to use a visual language that hid the subjects from view.

I was also opposed to finding strangers with similar stories and making a documentary about them instead. To me the subjects and my relationship with them were not interchangeable. I had no interest in trying to tell the story of a family I had just met in a region I was unfamiliar with. I wanted to shoot in Yamagata, because I wanted to re-engage with the community there, both within the setting of the story and by working together during production. I also felt certain that the emotional charge of my transformative experiences in Yamagata would carry me through the most challenging project I had undertaken. Although it would have made the film logistically easier, this story could not have been transported to a Canadian setting, given the completely different history, demographics, culture, and landscape, and the lack of social or geographical equivalents to the hot springs. After much thought, it occurred to me that a fictional approach might be the best way to preserve the characters, setting, and themes I was interested in. In my application to the MFA, I had not yet fully figured out how to make the transition from documentary to fiction, so I tried to bridge both:

> I propose a narrative short film presented through documentary-like footage. Aesthetically, I will work with natural lighting, minimal music, mostly hand-held camera, and liberal use of close-ups. The cameraperson is a character, so we hear her voice often. The onscreen characters have a close relationship with her. Actors actively break the 4th wall. Sometimes other characters hold the camera, affecting the visual style...I will reveal something about the filmmaking process to the viewers, directing their attention to the fictional undercurrents of documentary. I want them to think about the eyes through which they are seeing, and to trigger questions about privacy and personal boundaries.

The proposal's lean toward hybrid, hyper-reflexive methodologies grew out of internal turmoil rather than genuine interest in the genre. Did I have the capacity to write and direct fiction as a self-taught documentary filmmaker? Did I have the courage to live with the ethical consequences of telling a story which some might say was not mine to tell? With a documentary, I could think of several different ways to acknowledge or problematize my position within the film itself, but I was not sure how this could be done with fiction. Documentary felt like a safer medium to work in, because it aligned with my prior experience, and because it might give the subjects a greater chance to represent themselves. I hesitated to commit to fiction, worrying that all aspects of representation would be irrevocably distorted by my own lens as an "outsider" director.

I was initially waitlisted for the York program, so it took a while before I felt confident and ready to take on full responsibility for the ways my own perspective would shape the film. Once I was accepted, I enrolled in the fiction stream. I hoped that with strong mentoring I would find the right path. Unfortunately, a scheduling conflict prevented me from taking the screenwriting course, and I did not have a chance to workshop or develop my thesis in any other classes. With little formal guidance and no prior screenwriting experience, I began by writing passages of description and dialogue. I was clear on the setting and the characters, but I could not decide on a real-life event to portray. It was time to engage my imagination, rather than working from memory.

Politics of Representation and Ethical Considerations

In the summer of 2018, before starting the MFA, I decided to reach out to my trans and non-binary friends to talk about the idea for this film. Was it necessary? Was it appropriate for me to tell it? What kind of trans characters did they want to see on screen? Among the variety of

answers, there was one consistent theme: trans folks were tired of films about the pain of transition and the trauma of abuse. One friend suggested that if he were making this film, he would focus on a universal issue like the difficulty of relationships, in which the main character happened to be trans. Others, however, wondered how the film could be authentic if it did not address that which is uniquely hard about the trans experience.

When I first decided to make the film, I believed that it was acceptable to write about a trans protagonist, as long as I engaged in ethical consultation throughout the process. I maintained hope that the film would also foster greater empathy and understanding among viewers and collaborators alike. Still, I underestimated the challenge of legitimate collaboration, and my process sometimes fell short of my ideals. At times I became so overwhelmed by the practical challenges of producing the film, that I opted for compromises and solutions which were easier—and consequently less inclusive. This was the case with hiring my crew, which ended up including several white cisgender men, although I had been searching for a team that was Japanese, LGBTQ+ and/or female.

I found the process of consultation to be inherently messy. I would go into a conversation feeling that I should take feedback at all costs, because I wanted to be respectful of my trans collaborators' views. I did not want to homogenize their perspectives or listen selectively to the stories that suited my narrative. I did not want to put words in Kei's mouth as a trans person, although that is literally what you are doing when you write dialogue in a script. Avoiding stereotypes was particularly difficult when someone offered me suggestions containing tropes I wanted to avoid. At times, I wished I could simply follow someone else's ethical guidelines, although I knew a checklist approach would not lead to the best outcomes. At times, I failed to create a safe space for people, despite my best intentions.

I often engaged in obsessive research, feeling that no amount was adequate. Perhaps that is, and should be, the case when you are working from outside your experience. Much of my process relied on consultation with trans friends, who were kind enough to explain their own perspectives in relation to larger cultural discussions about representation. One friend expressed his excitement about the film, but told me that he "may not be the best representative" of the trans community; in the past, he had been criticized by other queer friends for not being political enough. He went on to explain that there is a great deal of conflict and fracturing between the various LGBTQ+ identities, particularly between trans and non-binary individuals. He agreed that some trans people would take the position that I should not tell this story as an outsider. "But if you need to tell the story, tell it," he said. "I think people who feel a strong desire to create art about gender nonconformity probably want to explore it within themselves." Having this discussion with him allowed me to open up about the ways in which that was true in my case. One by one, I consulted other trans and Japanese friends for feedback. Feeling that I had ground-level support from people within the communities I was representing, I decided to move forward with the project. It is impossible for a short film to sum up the magnitude and complexity of the challenges faced by trans people in Japan. Knowing that, I wanted to focus on a story about interpersonal struggles. My intention was not to "teach" viewers about "what trans life in Japan is like."

Despite my personal connection to the material, I am not transgender and cannot speak to that experience from the inside. Kei's character is written from my perspective as a non-Japanese, non-trans person, and it is valid to view that as problematic. These days, I wake up to mixed feelings about having framed the film from Kei's perspective. As I write this in the summer of 2020, it is impossible and irresponsible to ignore the call from BIPOC creators to

reserve their right to tell their own stories. The process of learning to be a true ally is a difficult and necessary one, and my understanding of it has changed considerably since I started this project.

If I were beginning this project today, I would almost certainly be writing the film from Erin's point of view, not to prioritize her narrative but to indicate my position and perspective as the filmmaker. I did my best to consult with friends, actors and research participants, but in the future, I would look more toward a writing-directing collaboration as a mode of ethical storytelling. Having completed this project, I am aware of how much more time- and energy-consuming collaboration can be regardless of the topic. Moving forward, I would not engage in such a project without a dedicated Japanese producer from within the trans community. Language barriers, tight deadlines, and exhaustion are not ultimately an excuse for taking short cuts when it comes to equitable hiring. I hope that by screening this film at queer spaces and festivals in Japan, I will meet local LGBTQ+ filmmakers whose projects I can support in practical ways such as volunteering my labour and equipment or leveraging my contacts and language skills to increase the visibility of their work.

Script Development and Writing Process

Conflict and Character Development

When I started writing the script, I decided not to watch trans-focused films as a mode of research, because I wanted to draw on my experiences and those of close friends. I did not want to write something derivative. Also, I was not interested in subversion for subversion's sake. If the film was going to push back against existing forms of representation, I wanted it to be grounded in relationships and details that felt tangible and meaningful. Having a great deal of research and personal experiences to draw on, the most difficult part of writing was narrowing the scope of what I wanted to say. Did I want to focus on cultural differences between the way trans people are treated and perceived? Did I want to forego political topics altogether and make a piece about familial love or loneliness? The only way to discover the answers was through an extensive process of rewrites and story changes.

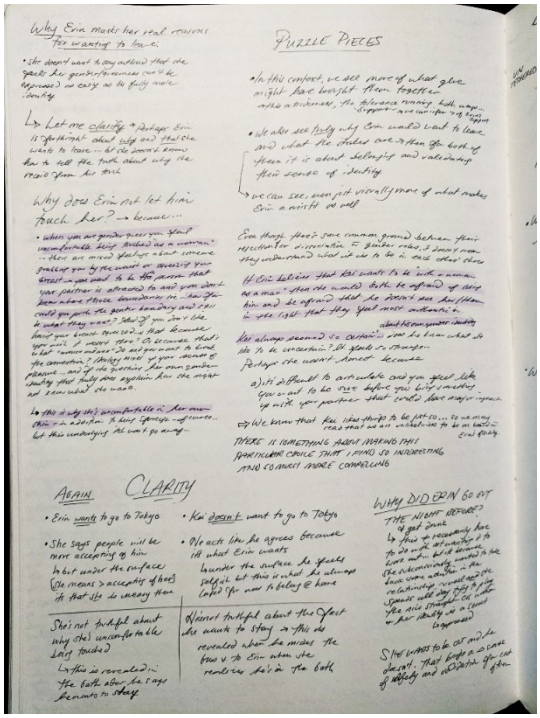


Image 5: Page from my production journal for the film

Through many drafts a few story elements remained constant. They were anchors through the stressful exercise of rewriting. I always wanted the key dynamic to be between a transgender Japanese man and a Canadian character who lived in Japan. In my experience, gender, culture and identity were intertwined in complex and compelling ways. Initially, I envisioned the characters as friends, but the stakes in a short film needed to be high, and there is not much time for backstory. It was easier to write tension into

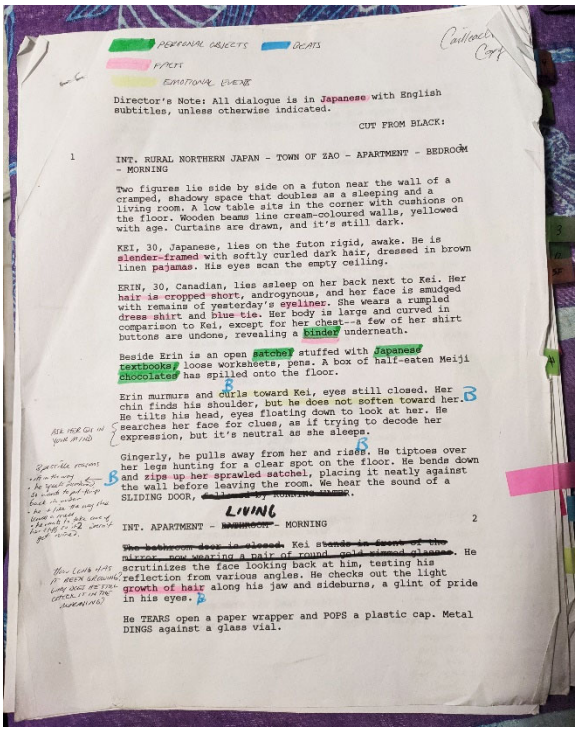
their dynamics as a couple, because there were significant decisions at stake. Early drafts also included Kei's mother, a character who provided a bridge to the rest of "normal" Japanese society. I struggled to write a short script that could do justice to all three characters. I lacked screenwriting experience, and perhaps I was too close to the subject. One character always became the third wheel, lacking purpose and depth. Eventually, following my first supervisor's advice, I dropped the mother from the story which allowed me to hone in on conflict in the central relationship.

The story no longer focused on alternative configurations of family in Japan, which was the topic that had initially interested me. When I say alternative, I mean not only blended families and those that include LGBTQ+ relationships, but also groups of people who identify as family, even though they are not relatives, for example, the ad hoc group that lives together in Hirokazu Koreeda's *Shoplifters* (2018).

In Yamagata, my relationships were not romantic. I was treated like a sibling, daughter, or granddaughter, while still remaining very close to my family in Canada. I thought it would be interesting to examine what circumstances would motivate people to grow that close to non-blood relations, when the dynamics are platonic.

While Koreeda's film depicts a family brought together by the practical circumstances of poverty, Miwa Nishikawa's film *The Long Excuse* (2016) explores this theme in the context of people compensating for a loss. The story follows two men whose wives are killed in an accident, so the men end up co-parenting one family's children. If I were to expand *Between Us* into a feature film, I would like to add to the discussion by looking at immigrants' integration into Japanese families outside the context of marriage.

Because I was not writing a feature film, it was a struggle to be concise and focus on a small set of issues. We are often advised to keep the ideal audience in mind while writing, but thinking that way frequently resulted in writer's block for me. The art of concealing and revealing information became an endless game of ping pong. I became so bogged down in details that the story could not move forward. Clarity was crucial, but I feared that too much exposition would result in a trite film. I wanted to screen the film in Japan, and I hoped to reach audiences beyond the LGBTQ+ niche, so those two factors became the primary compasses. Dialogue came easily at first, but once the story structure was in place, it was a challenge determining what should be said and what should become subtext.



Director's Note: All dialogue is in Japanese with English subtitles, unless otherwise indicated.

CUT FROM BLACK:

1 INT. RURAL NORTHERN JAPAN - TOWN OF ZAO - APARTMENT - BEDROOM - MORNING

Two figures lie side by side on a futon near the wall of a cramped, shadowy space that doubles as a sleeping and a living room. A low table sits in the corner with cushions on the floor. Wooden beams line cream-coloured walls, yellowed with age. Curtains are drawn, and it's still dark.

KEI, 30, Japanese, lies on the futon rigid, awake. He is slender-framed with softly curled dark hair, dressed in brown linen pajamas. His eyes scan the empty ceiling.

ERIN, 30, Canadian, lies asleep on her back next to Kei. Her hair is cropped short, androgynous, and her face is smudged with remains of yesterday's eyeliner. She wears a rumpled dress shirt and blue tie. Her body is large and curved in comparison to Kei, except for her chest--a few of her shirt buttons are undone, revealing a binder underneath.

Beside Erin is an open satchel stuffed with Japanese textbooks, loose worksheets, pens. A box of half-eaten Meiji chocolates has spilled onto the floor.

Erin murmurs and curls toward Kei, eyes still closed. Her chin finds his shoulder, but he does not soften toward her. He tilts his head, eyes floating down to look at her. He searches her face for clues, as if trying to decode her expression, but it's neutral as she sleeps.

Gingerly, he pulls away from her and rises. He tiptoes over her legs hunting for a clear spot on the floor. He bends down and zips up her sprawled satchel, placing it neatly against the wall before leaving the room. We hear the sound of a SLIDING DOOR, [redacted].

LIVING

2 INT. APARTMENT - [redacted] - MORNING

The bathroom door is closed. Kei stands in front of the mirror, now wearing a pair of round, gold rimmed glasses. He scrutinizes the face looking back at him, testing his reflection from various angles. He checks out the light growth of hair along his jaw and sideburns, a glint of pride in his eyes.

He TEARS open a paper wrapper and POPS a plastic cap. Metal DINGS against a glass vial.

Image 6: First page of the English production script I used when directing *Between Us*

I have never worked so hard to write 14-pages; there are 20 documents on my computer in a folder entitled "Thesis Film Ideas and Drafts." My writing explored such a huge range of issues that I could have written feature film script. No theme or idea was off limits: magical encounters, parental deaths, community rituals. The more versions I wrote, the more I knew I was writing fiction, and my fears began to dissolve. Based on feedback from readers, descriptions were the strongest elements of my script. I had a very grounded sense of space, atmosphere and other visual components, but the plot always seemed to come last. My characters inherited my own low tolerance for interpersonal conflict. I knew I had to make them say and do things that I disagreed with, because they were their own people. I

knew my writing was inhibited, but I did not know how to break free. In July of 2019, after several failed attempts at writing, I emailed my dad:

> On some level, I have always revered masculinity and prized it over and above femininity, and there is a darkness to that part of me. Part of it, I think, is perceiving that men have the permission to destroy...in order to access the pain and conflict that needs to emerge in my scenes. I am sitting at the table wearing the mask you gave me. It turns out masks are important—but it's not the characters who need them, it's me!

Image 7: I wore a mask as an exercise to liberate my scriptwriting

Most of us are used to putting on metaphorical masks in social settings as a form of protection. In this case, my intention was the opposite. I put on a physical mask, because I needed something tactile to help me dissociate from the material. The idea was inspired by *The Alter Ego Effect* by Todd Herman, which talked about a technique initially designed for athletes trying to break through performance barriers. The idea is that physical objects and clothing can be used to incarnate versions of ourselves capable of doing things that we normally cannot do. By wearing the mask, I felt safe to say things and to explore things I was normally afraid to.

I cannot remember whether this exercise led to any specific breakthroughs in the script, but it unearthed some important realizations about my own tendencies and motivations. Time and again, this film has taught me about the ways that I hold back, trying to keep myself safe and hidden. This project has been a lesson in peeling back the layers and allowing vulnerability to shine through. Ultimately, I was able to identify a central conflict in the story that felt profound,

but that was not until much later when Erin became a queer character thanks to the actor's input. In the film, we still do not see extreme conflict, because I did not feel that was the best way to communicate.

In an interview about her latest film *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, a lesbian love story set in 18th century France, Director Céline Sciamma says, "This big rule that telling about the obstacles between the characters' desire and its fulfillment would be more interesting and valuable than telling about the desire itself—is weird...lack of conflict doesn't mean lack of tension." Sciamma's approach completely resonated with me. Kei and Erin's very existence as a couple on screen—a trans Japanese man with a white queer woman—is unusual and worthy of representation. I have never seen another film that depicts that particular kind of relationship. Although the film does not explore their desire for each other, love and desire are implied by the fact that they feel strongly about not wanting to be torn apart. To the extent that I sympathize with both Erin and Kei, I did not want to make one or the other the clear hero or villain of the story.

Setting: Rural Yamagata and the Hot Springs

Throughout the scriptwriting process, setting was one of the few constants to which I could return to when I lost my footing. "Yamagata" means "mountain shape." The area is a nature-rich region, famous for its fresh produce, hot springs and dramatic scenery. The prefecture has a distinctly rural feel even within the capital city where I lived, with a population of 200,000. Having spent much of my free time exploring nature, my connection to the land felt visceral. My memories of having lived there were full of sensory details: the unique shades of green, the faint smell of sulphur from the springs, the mountain weather that shifted by the hour. I wanted to set

the film in this region, not only because it was familiar, but because it significantly shaped the story.

The landscape in *Between Us* will likely be recognizable to Japanese audiences, who have seen the Yamagata region in popular films such as in *Departures* (Yojiro Takita, 2008) and *Our Little Sister* (Hirokazu Koreeda, 2015). It is a location that is often chosen to represent the "quintessentially rural," a refuge where urbanites can escape from their stressful lives in Tokyo, as seen in Studio Ghibli's animated film *Only Yesterday* (Isao Takahata, 1991).

While such films tend to focus on traditional aspects of local culture, I wanted this film to be different. My social circles there were not conservative, and I wanted to bring their attitudes to light. The families I was close with included single parents and people of mixed backgrounds. They represented social groups outside the norm. I wanted these people to be seen. I tried to represent Yamagata as a place in which viewers could imagine a life that could be peaceful and communal but also isolating and constraining.

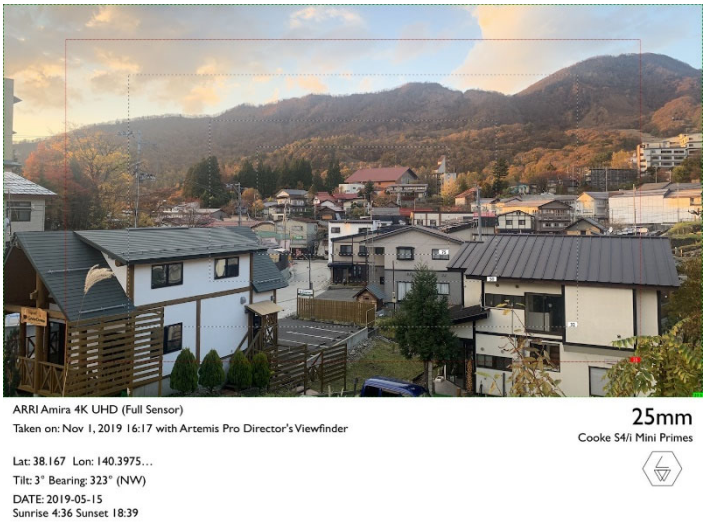


Image 8: Still from location scout - Zao Onsen

The mountain town of Zao Onsen struck the balance I was looking for. It is beautiful and charming, but it also feels like a ghost town during the skiing offseason, and many buildings are in disrepair.

We often talk about identity in ways that are divorced from a sense of place, as if identity is solely rooted in and contained by the body. I had queer friends in Yamagata who said their relationship with the landscape was

the primary reason for not moving to the big city. I found it remarkable that their sense of belonging could be so strongly tethered to the land that it outweighed the fear of being marginalized. I wrote Kei's character to reflect this experience. We are used to hearing stories of trans people who are outcasts in rural towns, but we do not often hear about what compels people to stay. Through Erin's character, I also wanted to explore the opposite feeling, in which pretty landscapes are not reason enough to stay and continue living in the margins.

The hot springs are a very special feature of the local geography and culture. I felt that they would be a compelling setting for a story about crossing divides. Hot springs do not have the same function as North American spas, which tend to be marketed as luxury spaces with high-end beauty treatments. In Japan the springs are historically significant spaces foundational to family and social life. Admission is usually the equivalent of just a few dollars. Some people I knew in Japan went every day. It is common for children to grow up visiting the hot springs with their parents and grandparents and for employees to go with their colleagues. They function as spaces for rest, relaxation and physical rejuvenation. Presumably, the baths are open to any member of the public, but they are also bound by strict rules of etiquette, both explicit and unspoken.

In a place where everyone is unclothed and gender-segregated, much attention is drawn to "non-standard" bodies, those that are overweight, underweight, tattooed, differently-abled, non-Japanese, or gender non-conforming. Over the years, I have been with many friends who either refused to go or who were denied entry for these reasons. Once, two young girls jumped out of the water when I stepped in, squealing that they did not want to be in the same bath as a foreigner.

Kei's decision to enter the men's bath in the film is not incidental. As a trans person who has not visited there since childhood, we know that he has missed out on years of social activity that most of his community has been allowed to enjoy. In a small town like Zao, the risk of being outed and stigmatized is high if other patrons find fault with, or are made uncomfortable by, his body.

In 2018, a popular Japanese variety show on the national broadcasting station NHK aired an episode that clearly illustrates common dilemmas faced by trans folks when visiting hot springs. The camera crew follows a group of willing LGBTQ+ subjects as they are "sorted into men and women" by the owner, according to appearance. Among those chosen for the men's side is a trans man who is excited about entering for the first time. However, the other men in the bath, who identify as gay, express so much discomfort about his "breasts" that he ends up switching back to the women's side. Usually, he explains, he has to alter his voice and demeanor to pass as a woman at the bath, because he has not undergone top surgery. In the end, the group on the women's side accepts him, however he is upset and feels he is in the wrong place. We can understand from this episode that the bath creates a microcosm of the everyday discrimination encountered by trans people who have to make painful concessions, even in the presence of other LGBTQ+ patrons.

In *Between Us* we see that Erin is actually uncomfortable, even if it is a space where she goes to find solace. While Kei cautiously settles into his place on the men's side, Erin is unsure about where she belongs. Internally she faces the turmoil of being uncertain about her gender in a space which so strongly and physically emphasizes the binary. She would also face amplified scrutiny as a big, tall, foreigner. In response to the film, one viewer wrote the following about her own experience:

> The visit to the onsen really triggered powerful memories. It was the time I felt most horribly uncomfortable and foreign in Japan...Every single woman in there, from young to old, staring at me...No possibility of hiding. I started showering before entering the baths but couldn't. I retreated. Put back on all my clothes and left. Humiliated and defeated...Clearly this stirred up so much for me.

The hot springs are an environment where it is almost impossible to hide literally. However, Erin also speaks of feeling like she is hiding metaphorically. By staying on the women's side, she is protecting the comfort of others and playing into their expectations at the expense of her own integrity. The wall between the baths is as much a symbolic as a literal divide. It underscores the interpersonal barriers between Erin and Kei, as well as the more universal fracturing that occurs between bodies, cultures, and identities.

Language and Translation

I have been studying Japanese on and off since 2009. Although I am far from being completely fluent, this film could not have been made without those language skills. Most of the local people involved in the production did not speak English, including the staff at the Yamagata Film Commission and the film department at the local university. As the director, it was my job to establish an environment that was safe for the cast and crew so they could take creative risks. I wanted to make it clear that communication did not have to be perfect. Our crew included French, Hungarian, Chinese, and Korean members for whom English and Japanese were already second or third languages, so it was essential to meet each other halfway. By speaking Japanese on set and allowing myself to be vulnerable, I was better able to lay the groundwork for trust. I was amazed by the effort the crew made to work across language barriers.

From the beginning, I knew the script had to be in Japanese for both practical and thematic reasons. As it turned out, neither of the actors who played Kei or Setsuko spoke English. Having it as a requirement would have limited the casting pool, one which was already quite small. I had rarely used English with my friends in Yamagata, so I wanted to have Erin speak Japanese. We do not know how long Erin has been in Japan, but we can infer by her language abilities that she is not there in passing—she has invested time and energy to become fluent. The translators initially asked if I wanted her speech to "sound foreign," but I was strongly against doing that. I gave the actors liberty to change their lines if anything seemed unnaturally difficult, but it was much easier for them to stick to the script verbatim. Despite Erin's fluency, Japanese test audiences have said they find her difficult to understand. This could be due to the fact that most Japanese are not used to hearing the language used by non-native speakers. For screenings in Japan, I will have to decide whether to subtitle Erin's lines in Japanese, which would be disappointing but perhaps necessary for clarity.

When it came to the script, I had some Japanese phrases in mind, but I wrote everything in English and then handed it over to two translators. It was fascinating and unsettling to know that the essential content would be the same, but that I would never truly know what nuances are communicated by the Japanese version from a native speaker's point of view.

My supervisor Ingrid and I spent a great deal of time thinking about the dialogue. What should be said directly and what should be left as subtext? In translation, much of this changed according to what sounded natural in Japanese. At times statements were converted to questions and vice versa. For example, in the English script, Kei says, "You wouldn't let me touch you when you came in." In Japanese, he says something more akin to, "When you came in, did you not want to be touched?" When presented as a question, Kei's line comes across as less

accusatory, and this alters the dynamics. A bilingual viewer listening to the Japanese and reading the English subtitles would notice that each language offers slightly different insights into the characters. This is particularly the case with Setsuko, who improvised a great deal using the local dialect. In the end, I rewrote some of the English subtitles to better reflect what was said in Japanese.

Expressions of Gender in English vs. Japanese

One of the interesting linguistic considerations was how to deal with gender. Erin uses the English loan word "queer" to describe herself in the film, but that term is not often used in Japan. The script translators and I debated whether to use another word to ensure that audiences would understand, but we could not come up with an alternative that had the same nuance. Ultimately, we decided that the most appropriate phrase for a character who is declaring her otherness, was "big, queer, foreigner."

The use of pronouns was also an interesting consideration while writing and translating the script, because Japanese uses them very differently from English. For one thing, pronouns are often omitted in Japanese when the subject of a sentence is clear, and it is common to repeat someone's name rather than replace it with pronouns. Pronouns were necessary in the descriptive passages of the script, which identifies Kei as "he" and Erin as "she." However, in the film, these indicators never actually appear in the dialogue. The only instance of "gendering" occurs when Setsuko calls out to Kei, referring to him as *seinen* which translates roughly to "young man."

There was no question about the fact that Kei would be written as male, but Erin's pronouns required a little more consideration, so that the actors could navigate the characters' struggles. The Japanese dialogue actually reveals more about how they each identify, both

through speech patterns and their different choice of pronouns for "I." Whereas in English we only have one word, Japanese has several, each of which carries different nuances, some of which are gendered. Erin uses *watashi*, which is the most standard and unisex version of "I." Kei uses *boku*, which is a masculine personal pronoun. We settled on female pronouns for Erin, because that is the identity her character begins to actively question at the end of the film. To write Erin as "they" from the start of the film would change the story dramatically, suggesting that she already identified as a non-binary person and that Kei acknowledged her as such.

"Yamagata-ben" and the Significance of Dialect

While the Tokyo dialect is taught in schools as the standard form of Japanese, numerous regional dialects are spoken in other parts of the country. "Yamagata-ben" is a particularly strong dialect. Locals always switched to Tokyo dialect when speaking with me, assuming they would otherwise be difficult to understand. Because of its association with older generations and a rural upbringing, I also had several friends who had adopted Tokyo accents, feeling that it was more refined and connected them more with the city. I thought it would be interesting to reflect some of these dynamics within the film.

Image 9: Still from *Between Us* - Setsuko asks whether Kei is really a local when he speaks Tokyo dialect

Although he is a local, Kei does not speak in the Yamagata dialect, a fact which causes Setsuko to question whether he is really a local. Kei is not motivated by the urge to reject his rural roots, which we understand from his decision to

stay in Yamagata. Rather, it is significant to him for two reasons, one practical and one thematic. For one thing, Erin would have learned "modern standard Japanese," so it makes sense for Kei to use Tokyo dialect with her, even if he had grown up speaking *Yamagata-ben*. In addition, by posing as an outsider, Kei guards himself against being outed by a local who might recognize him from before his transition. It is a way of signaling difference in relation to something other than his gender identity.

Setsuko speaks with a strong Yamagata accent, which viewers have said they can hear even though they do not understand Japanese. This is something that the performer, Ms. Kato, strongly requested. Through translation and improvisation, Ms. Kato transformed the original dialogue significantly to mirror not just the language but the communication style of local women her age. As a result, the character is much more talkative and upbeat than I had initially envisioned, but it creates a wonderful contrast with Kei who is more sparse with words.

Casting and its Influence on the Story

Casting Process

Even though I was still writing the script, I decided to cast the film during my initial research trip so I could meet the actors in person. I knew it would be difficult to find a transgender actor through traditional casting agencies in Japan, because they were unlikely to be represented and because they may not publicly identify as trans. I was not willing to compromise by hiring a cisgender actor. The handful of trans actors I did find through agencies were women. Likewise, my search garnered few results for women over the age of 50 who might be suitable for the role of Setsuko. Japanese-speaking Caucasian women were the easiest demographic to find, but most of them were models whose look and acting style were a far cry from how I wanted to portray Erin.

It was less important for me to locate professional actors than to find people who were excited about the story and who identified with the characters. Before asking for audition videos, I did in-depth interviews with everyone, because it was important to determine whether we were a good fit for each other. I wanted to make sure everyone was clear on what they would be signing up for. I also needed to see whether they were comfortable communicating and working with my level of Japanese. The cast members I ended up choosing were all first-time actors, so my process of working with each of them was different.

Finding Kei: Chihaya "Sho" Kadota

Kei is the anchor of the story, so I wanted to cast him first. To some extent, the mood of the whole film would be determined by his energy. In order to find trans folks who might be interested, I decided to go through networks of queer friends who could vouch for me. A half-

Japanese friend who had lived in Yamagata introduced me to the owner of Masaki Bar2's Cabin, a trans men's bar in Tokyo. Word spread quickly among the owner's friends and patrons. I was surprised by the high response to the casting call. I had left it open to anyone who identified as trans or genderqueer, which resulted in applicants across a wide identity spectrum. In the end I conducted interviews with 12 people for Kei's role.

The interview process for Kei's role was a fascinating one that informed my scriptwriting process. Most people said they were actively interested in bringing personal elements to the role and helping shape the story. The conversations mostly happened over Skype, in Japanese, and lasted about 30 minutes. A few people I clicked with ended up helping with the project in other ways, even though they were not cast. Satoshi Nachigami became our on-set photographer, and Akari Nagata became a research consultant and friend with whom I still keep in touch.

My first conversation with Sho Kadota stood out from the rest. He said he felt an affinity for the project because he had visited Toronto earlier that year, and had also done a cycling trip through Yamagata, biking all the way from Tokyo. He listened carefully and was very direct in communicating when he did not understand something I said. Our conversation lasted well over an hour, and we agreed to meet in person during my research trip that summer. We decided to meet at Bar 2's Cabin in Shinjuku Nichome, so I could also thank Masaki for introducing us. The night resulted in a funny misadventure in which we had to ride tandem on a bike and dash through the streets to catch the last train home. Within this short time, I could see that Sho was full of energy and a willingness to act quickly, to make things work. He seemed like a great fit, but I was unsure about casting him once I saw his audition, which was very quiet and subdued. I was torn between him and someone else who gave a much more upbeat performance. After

getting feedback from several people, I decided to proceed with Sho, but deep down I still felt uncertain. When I sent out the email offering the part, I actually cried.

Image 10: Still from *Between Us* – Kei, portrayed by Chihaya "Sho" Kadota

Looking back on the shoot and watching the film now, I am so glad I chose Sho. He was playful, relaxed, and affectionate with cast and crew. Once in character, he brought a subtlety, gentleness and intensity that really carries the film. Viewers have remarked that they also find it interesting seeing a trans actor who does not bear many visible signs of transition. At the hot spring, viewers noticed there was no scarring from top surgery, for example. He subverts our usual expectations about what trans characters can and should look like.

Sho expressed some anxiety about the role early on, because of how much his own personality and views differ from Kei's. After I sent him the script, I did not hear back from him for several days, and I suspected he might have some concerns. Two weeks before the shoot, we had a call, and I asked him to tell me honestly how he felt about the story and the character. "The story feels so...short. And I don't know what the ending means. It feels murky," he confided. "I don't know how Kei feels about being transgender. I don't know what kind of person Setsuko will be. Does she know he's trans?"

These questions and feelings were difficult to hear, but they were important. I tried to explain that his feelings of uncertainty and discomfort were actually what I hoped to evoke. I told him that my other trans friends were tired of seeing films that only depicted the trauma of

transition. I wanted to focus on other challenges. We talked about Kei's motivations and imagined why he felt connected to his hometown, but I did not want to dictate how he felt about being trans. As a non-trans person, that was not something I could know from the inside. Perhaps I was expecting too much of Sho as a non-actor, but I asked him to determine the answer on his own and to resist judging Kei. We talked about the fact that Kei is trans, but he is also Japanese, a Yamagata local, a boyfriend, an unemployed person—and that all of these factors should inform his needs and decisions.

Through our conversations, we developed much more trust, and it set a precedent for working through issues quickly. I am grateful Sho shared these reservations with me. The production would have suffered if he had let those sentiments go unspoken out of politeness.

Finding Erin: Mariella "Kai" Pacey

Although Erin is the character whose experiences and identity are closest to my own, she remained the weakest link through many drafts of the script. From the beginning, I had the urge to minimize her importance and make her a foil for Kei. When I tried to give her a more prominent role, she came across as selfish and antagonistic. At first Erin's behaviour lacked authenticity and motivation, because I was not clear on what deep personal discomforts I was willing to put on screen for everyone to see.

With the intention of returning to Yamagata to share the film, I knew that to some extent, it would be perceived as my commentary on having lived there. While I desperately wanted to make a story that focused on unexpected instances of love and integration, I also wanted to acknowledge the complications of my relationships there. How could I offer insight without simply centering or elevating my perspective as a white outsider, as so many have done before

me? As a non-trans, non-Japanese director, I was afraid to put Erin in conflict with Kei as a trans person and afraid to let her be critical of cultural norms, lest I be reinforcing problematic tropes of representation. How could Erin be a source of support or transformation for Kei, without falling into the "white saviour" narrative? I did not know how to answer these questions, so I wrote drafts in which Erin's character showed little depth.

Trying to play it safe, I initially cast a friend in the role without even holding an audition—a decision that was in sharp contrast to the exhaustive energy I had spent casting Kei. This friend was an American who had also lived in Yamagata, and I knew she would be easy to work with. By that point, I had established the story arc of the script, but the details of Erin's character remained enigmatic and fragile. Unfortunately, my friend had to withdraw for personal reasons a few months before the shoot, and suddenly I was left with a blank slate.

Among the people who auditioned, one person stood out from the rest. Kai Pacey was a non-binary Australian living in Tokyo. They dared to ask me one important question during our interview: What about Erin's own gender identity? The prompt rocked me to the core. It shook loose the realization that in telling this story, I was hoping to acknowledge or understand my own struggles with gender, although they were different from a trans person's experience. With no hesitation, I answered that I would love for the actor to bring that issue to the forefront of the relationship. There was something about Kai's mixture of strength and vulnerability that drew me in, and I felt that they had somehow brought me out of hiding. My imagination burst open with new found clarity. The script found its backbone as I allowed myself to sink into Erin's psyche with painful honesty, and to let her stand on her own two feet.

Image 11: Still from *Between Us* - Erin, portrayed by Mariella "Kai" Pacey

While Kai expressed excitement about Erin's role and the story's unconventional relationship dynamics, Sho was initially surprised about this development, which was such a departure from the audition material. He said he had expected Erin and Kei to be "further apart or more different." Perhaps he felt that by having Erin also struggle with gender, I was taking away from Kei's own experience? I tried to explain that by making both characters queer, I was able to explore more of the spectrum of attitudes, perspectives and identities that truly exist. I had also tried to write Erin in a way that more closely reflected Kai's own gender. In the end, I think both actors identified with and disagreed with some traits of both characters, which is exactly what I had hoped for. Each of them came to me questioning their characters' motivations, which in turn, helped them understand their partner's values in the story.

Kai Pacey and I corresponded extensively during pre-production to build Erin's backstory together. As a Tokyo resident and active member of the LGBTQ+ community there, they did not have trouble connecting with Erin's core desires and motivations. Kai is fluent in Japanese, so they were able to rehearse and work with Sho on character dynamics without needing my mediation. Kai usually works as a director of photography, so they were familiar with the on-set workflow. Like Sho, they were very clear about communicating their needs and boundaries.

Finding Setsuko: Kumiko Kato

My local ties in Yamagata proved to be invaluable when it came to casting Setsuko. Among the friends whom I visit when I return to Japan are Mr. and Mrs. Saito, a retired, vibrant English-speaking couple who have always celebrated and supported my filmmaking. During my research trip, I asked if they had any friends who might be interested in acting. Mr. Saito knew a couple of ladies in his local mandolin club who might suit the part. At the rehearsal, I met Ms. Kato, a wiry, energetic woman with a glowing smile. Though she did not speak much English, she was keen to interact with me, and I thought her feisty spirit would make a good match for the Setsuko character. Mr. Saito spent an hour on the phone arranging details with her the next day, so I did not feel right asking her to follow up with an audition. I had to trust my gut and hope for the best.

Kumiko Kato knew she would be playing the part of a hot spring owner, but she did not know many details about the rest of the story. At the time of the research trip, the script still was not finished. I was a little worried about how she would react to a story about a trans character, but I decided to send the script without any preamble or explanation. I wanted to give her and the Saitos the benefit of the doubt, so I treated it as a perfectly normal story. Mr. Saito was honest in his email reply. He said he and Ms. Kato were not sure what to think at first, but that he was certain it would be “a very novel and progressive film.” After the shoot, he said they came to understand the story over time, through multiple readings and with the help of his wife, who had formerly worked with trans youth. Mr. Saito worked on the role with Ms. Kato via weekly phone calls, and together they translated her lines into the local Yamagata dialect. By the end, they were proud to be a part of the story.

Initially, I imagined Setsuko to be a wise, otherworldly crone. Through Ms. Kato, Setsuko's character became more congenial and animated. Earlier drafts of the script described Setsuko almost as a magical character – a powerful threshold guardian who could somehow foresee what Kei and Erin needed by bringing them together at the hot springs. Ultimately, I dropped the wise crone from the script, because it seemed to overshadow the agency of the two central characters. I was also doubtful of having the time or skill to communicate complex ideas about ritual leadership in Japanese. Ms. Kato's version of Setsuko is utterly familiar, and I think this quality actually serves the story better. Kei is not trying to find acceptance among magical old wise women; he wants to belong among the locals.

Image 12: Setsuko, portrayed by Kumiko Kato

Image 13: Sho and Ms. Kato behind the scenes together

Sho and Ms. Kato took to each other right away and had a fantastic dynamic together on set. Despite the rain and hail during the stair scene, they kept each other's energy up. One of my favourite films is *Harold and Maude* (Hal Ashby, 1971), and in odd ways, I see echoes of it in this film. There is a parallel in the

unexpected friendship with an old woman that lets a young man reflect on the way he perceives his own life and opportunities. I was not striving to make *Between Us* humourous, but I found myself laughing out loud during the stair scene when I saw the rough cut, even though I had already seen the footage dozens of times. I got the same feedback from other test audience members, who said that it was a refreshing change of pace from what could have been a more serious and self-conscious drama. I am grateful to Ms. Kato who brought this radiant quality to the film.

Production: Lessons and Triumphs

One of the reasons I am drawn to filmmaking is that it helps release me from my need to control. Film making is an inherently collaborative artform. With documentary, I found it freeing and exhilarating to improvise and move with my subjects. I was used to discovering direction through shooting. Although there are certainly styles of fiction filmmaking that embrace these more fluid techniques and approaches, I decided to follow a much more traditional workflow to help mitigate the overwhelming number of risks I was already taking. With only three and a half days to shoot, I knew that my cast and crew in Japan would expect me to plan thoroughly and far in advance. Throughout pre-production, communication was significantly slowed by the time it took me to write in Japanese or to have materials translated. I also had to factor in extra time for my emails to pass through various levels of bureaucracy. Coordinating with individuals was one thing, but I was also working with institutions, such as the Tohoku University of Art and Design (TUAD), which supported this film through the loan of equipment and student volunteers from the film department.

To make a broad generalization, reputation and following protocol are very important in Japan. Personal introductions are taken very seriously, and if someone has vouched for you, it is expected that you will act in good faith by association. Having called in every favour and connection I could possibly think of, I felt a strong sense of responsibility toward the dozens of people and organizations who had gone out of their way to make this film possible. I wanted everyone involved to feel like they were investing their time and energy into something worthwhile. I knew the two main actors were taking time away from jobs that were already precarious. I did not want to break the trust I had spent years building by showing up unprepared, unprofessional, or disrespectful.

Image 14: My assistant director, Gina Haraszti (right), kept me sane on set

Film production is riddled with unpredictable factors and you will likely inconvenience people no matter how hard you work. One of the biggest challenges was constantly straddling the line between production manager, director, and people-pleaser. During production, I found myself torn between honouring prior agreements and doing what the crew agreed was best for the film. For example, I had spent a lot of time and energy interviewing and coordinating with the student volunteers, whom my crew had graciously agreed to mentor on set. However, time and space were limited. After the first shoot day everyone agreed that it would be easier without the volunteers. I felt bad about calling the students at 8 p.m. the night before and cancelling their participation entirely, but the needs of my crew were more important. In the end, I opted for a compromise that everyone was happy with, but these negotiations took time and energy away from directing.

The shoot went better than I could have hoped for. I quite enjoyed working with the actors, and I was amazed by what they were able to achieve given that they had no prior experience. In our discussions leading up to the shoot, I realized that they had not accounted for having to create their own character's backstories. Instead, they asked for everything to be explained in detail, and they expressed anxiety over whether or not they could "give me what I wanted." I did my best to guide them toward answering their own questions.

I had developed dozens of directing exercises to help facilitate trust, but there was no time for them or rehearsals or improvisations. Everyone had to work from their gut. Sho was very playful with the rest of the crew, pulling little pranks and telling everyone how much he loved them. If I had had more time or perhaps if my approach had been much more autoethnographic, I may have considered letting him change the direction of Kei's character. Again, there was simply no time. I could also tell from the first day of shooting that the other two actors were relying on him as an anchor. He was the most prepared. He memorized his lines and had a laser focus that allowed the other two to enter into his orbit of concentration.

In trying to be as trans and queer-inclusive as possible, I made one other decision during the shoot that in retrospect, I wish I had not. Before the shoot, a trans documentary student from Tokyo reached out and asked if he could shoot behind the scenes for his own undergrad film project. It turns out he had heard about my film through the same networks I had consulted for casting. Against the advice of other filmmakers who had had difficult experiences with documentary teams on set, I agreed. I was excited about the prospect of having a meta-narrative, told from the perspective of a trans person. It seemed like an opportunity for the project to come full circle.

The documentary student, however, was quite inexperienced and did not take time to gain the trust of the cast and crew, which led to their feeling invaded by his presence. Although not malicious, his naivete resulted in unethical behaviour, such as shooting when actors were getting dressed, or continuing to roll after I had asked him to stop. During production, I was unable to adequately address these issues, because I was so overwhelmed by the job of directing, producing, and translating. I had included him, because I did not want to be a gate-keeper. I felt that I was a guest in his social space, and that I should invite him as a guest into my space.

Unfortunately, the fact that this person was trans did not change the fact that trans and queer folks on set felt uncomfortable with his filming approach.

Image 15: Behind-the-scenes stills from the production of *Between Us*

This film is a story about learning to communicate and navigate boundaries. Through production, I also learned a great deal about these challenges. As directors, sometimes we need to push performers outside their comfort zones. At other times, we need to protect and respect people's limits. Sometimes it is not easy to know which approach is called for. I can honestly say

that I did my best. Kai, Sho and Ms. Kato told me the experience was like a dream, that they loved everyone, and that it was the most fun they had had in a long time.

One of the most meaningful outcomes of the shoot was the opportunity to connect locals with people from around the world, and to bring seniors and trans folks together—just like Setsuko and Kei. This was not a preconceived move to fabricate diversity, but rather a function of the people who wanted to be involved. Many of the cast and crew remarked on the unlikelihood of it all, and how connected they felt, even though they had been strangers. Individuals took it upon themselves to find ways of improving people's experience through small selfless gestures. The owner of the guest house where we stayed surprised us with free entry to the local hot springs so we could hang out and relax together after each shoot day. Mr. Saito showed up with gloves, heat packs and a giant poster he had printed to let locals know about our shoot. Our driver got up at the crack of dawn to prepare hot tea for the group before anyone else was even awake. My assistant director, cinematographer and interpreter worked overtime to solve logistical problems so I could concentrate on my own work. For all of this, I am beyond grateful.

Style

Influences

There is a disconnect between the kinds of films I prefer to watch and the films I end up making. In general, I am drawn to fantasy and magical realism, but these are genres that have been cost-prohibitive and inaccessible to me. Far from being a work of fantasy, *Between Us* is a slow-moving, meditative film lingering on the details of daily life. It does not fall into a style that I am predisposed to watch, so the question of influences is a tricky one to answer. I am affected by other films, but it is more by process of osmosis than it is one of consciously breaking down elements of other works and applying them to my own. In fact, once I start working on a film, I tend to avoid watching films that I think will be similar. Still, there are a few directors whose cinematic vision seems to align most closely with what I set out to achieve with this film.

My interest in Japanese culture stemmed from my "discovery" of Japanese film during my undergraduate degree at the University of Toronto. I took a course on Japanese Modern History as told and understood through the lens of cinema. For the first time in an educational setting, I felt that history was being communicated in a way that was visceral, memorable, and appropriately acknowledged for being constructed and subjective.

Hirokazu Koreeda is one of the first directors whose style compelled me to think about the director's relationship to the subjects of a story. His early documentary *Without Memory* (1996) follows a man who has amnesia due to an accident and who is incapable of forming new memories. The film itself becomes a document to which the protagonist can refer to understand the narrative of his own life.

Koreeda eventually transitioned to writing and directing fiction, but he maintained that eye for portraiture, family dynamics, people living on the fringes of society, such as the children in *Nobody Knows* (2004). There was something that fascinated me about a film that depicted the seemingly everyday life of people who were living a private truth that separated them from mainstream society. Without intentionally referencing Koreeda's films, *Between Us* carries a similar thematic through line.

Céline Sciamma's films have been particularly influential on my thinking about gender and sexuality. Her films are poetic narrative portraits of different ways of existing in the world. They are not didactic or plot-driven. *Tomboy* (2013) follows the story of a girl who lives as a boy for a summer, until she is caught by a girl she has come to like. Sciamma lets the character's gender struggles play out without letting the politics of it interrupt the storytelling. Rather than pandering to an audience's hunger for labels and conclusions, the film is woven together in an observational style whose inconclusive ending resonates with me.

Cinematography

A talented filmmaker can tell a brilliant story on an iPhone. Out of necessity much of queer cinema is rooted in DIY, low-budget filmmaking approaches. Being privileged in my position as a graduate student with scholarship funding, I had the option to produce something with a higher production value. Despite the increasing prevalence of LGBTQ+ cinema and the mainstream success of a few films with trans subjects, these stories are still considered niche, relegated to the interest of the community itself. Because the perception remains that queer stories and stories about women are assumed to be subjective, not universal, I wanted to shoot this film using a familiar, accessible visual language. It follows a fairly traditional narrative

format in the way that it is shot. I wanted to put queer and trans subjects at the centre of a polished film as a means of saying that this kind of cinema is also worthy of attention and respect. I strove to make a film that my cast and crew would be proud to share with the outside world and not only with our families and friends.

I give a huge amount of credit to my director of photography, Hans Bobanovits, for establishing the aesthetic of this film. Hans is based in Tokyo, and I met him through mutual film contacts in Montreal. I call him my DP, but truthfully his contribution to the film extended far beyond that, as someone who became a trusted friend and problem solver. I was touched by the extent to which he wanted to connect with the people and the spaces. A month before the shoot, Hans trekked up to Yamagata to do a location scout in Zao with Mr. Saito. Together, they wandered the local streets, mapping out the geography of the film.

I tend to shoot using a lot of closeups, in a style which borders on claustrophobic. That aesthetic did not feel appropriate for this film, and I knew we were short on time and would have limited coverage. Hans suggested that we stick to wider shots and use longer takes, because that would allow us to understand more of the characters' relationship to the places. He was right. The story centres on crossing thresholds; spatial boundaries can create both a sense of security and entrapment. We worked

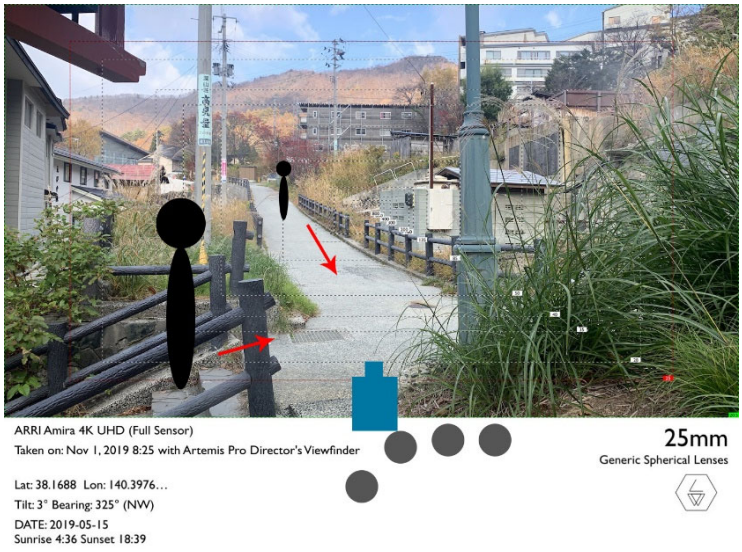


Image 16: Location scout photo and blocking diagram

with the surrounding architecture to explore this theme, finding frames-within-frames through doorways, walls, counters, gates, and the stairs.

From the beginning, I wanted to establish a sense of distance and discord between the couple, even in close proximity. For that reason, Kei and Erin rarely appear together in frame, and when they do, imbalance is created through differences in scale and focus. For example, the film opens with an intimate closeup. Erin comes into the foreground, but her face is obscured and blurry. Their opening dialogue in the kitchen is shot using singles, where the other person is almost always cut out of the frame. At the end, they are physically separated by the wall. I wanted viewers to recall the earlier scenes in which they were physically together, but emotionally apart. My intention was for the wall to create a symbolic parallel to the way they had already been approaching their relationship.

When one character is favoured in the frame, it is usually Kei; we often see Erin from the back, from behind a wall, from behind curtains. I used this technique to emphasize her feelings of isolation and her fear of not being seen. Kei is given more space, because this is a story about his move toward belonging and discovery. It was important to me that we understand his relationship to his surroundings, so I chose not to linger on too many closeups of him until the very end. In contrast to the scenes

Image 17: Still from *Between Us* - Kei remains in the foreground, while Erin remains out of focus

with Erin, Kei's scenes with Setsuko were meant to feel balanced. The two figures are shot side-by-side, with neither one dominating the frame.

Hans and I also agreed to approach many scenes from a low angle, which might seem at first like an odd choice. Traditionally, low angles are used to signal someone in a position of power or authority, but I saw it as a vantage point which opened up possibilities. You see more of your surroundings and more of the sky. There is something disarming about seeing people from below because it is slightly foreign to us, as if we are seeing from our childhood perspective. I thought this would give the characters breathing room to move and to grow upward and outward. Likewise, we made frequent use of the vertical axis through movement along the multiple staircases that characterize the mountain.

Colour was also an important consideration in the film, particularly in relation to the landscape. The staircase scene was shot through rain and hail, which could have created an unintentionally gloomy atmosphere. Conversely, the hot spring scene was shot on a bright, sunny day, even though it occurs on the same morning in the film. I wanted to preserve the natural beauty that Kei sees, while ensuring that it was not too saturated and romanticized. I did not want the audience to lose touch with Erin's ambivalence about living there. I opted for a soft look with low contrast, except for a few details. There are many shades of green, yellow, and blue that I associate with Japanese geography, and I wanted these to come alive. The distinctive, milky blue of the hot spring water needed to be just right. We shot at the end of fall, on the verge of winter when snow had already encrusted the tops of the mountains.

I had not given a great deal of thought to lighting prior to production, but I quickly gained an appreciation for our gaffer, "TK" Tsuguhira, who had a talent for simulating natural lighting and an eye for creating silhouettes, which are used throughout the film. These went a long way toward creating a sense of depth, while also counteracting the fast changes in weather.

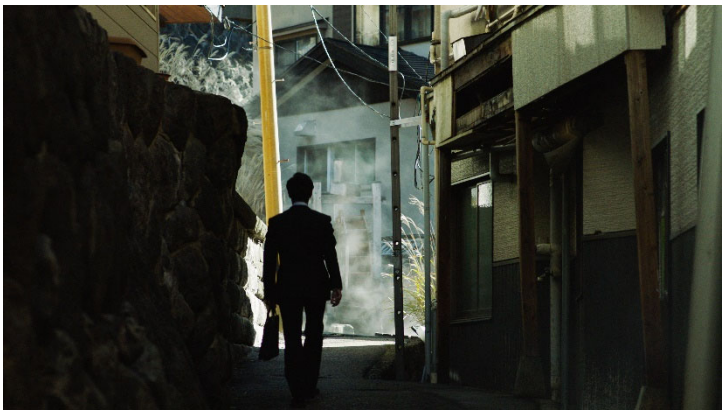


Image 18: Still from *Between Us* - example of silhouette lighting used throughout the film

Sound Design

My memories of Yamagata are firmly grounded in sensory detail, and that includes sound. Edan Mason was my ideal sound recordist. Often, he would leave lunch early, and I would find him sitting alone in the grass near a mountain pathway, quietly recording the trickle of a stream. Hot water actually flows through the streets of Zao Onsen, and the soundscape was built around this feature, as if it, too, were a character. Edan collected samples of wind, tall grasses, power generators, fall leaves, and running water of every variety. In the film, audiences should feel the significance of the environment if they are to care about the consequences of the couple staying or leaving. Through the power of these combined sound elements, the landscape is not just a passive story setting but rather a place with an almost tangible presence, with which Erin and Kei are necessarily in relationship.

I felt strongly about working with a queer sound designer, because that person would have a profound role in shaping the sensory experiences within the film. Dae Courtney is a sound artist who often creates installation soundscapes using environmental samples, so they were an ideal fit. I was not interested in traditional scoring, so much as enhancing the quiet details in the diegetic sound. I was excited, because sound gives you the ability to add a subjective layer to any given moment on screen. For example, it can denote a character's point of focus or a limitation on their perspective. In the bath, the use of only left or right channels increases the sense that Kei and Erin are on opposite sides of divide. In the interior scenes at the apartment, we increased small movements in the mix, like the rustling of Kei's pajamas, or the clink of his testosterone vial on the table, to draw attention to the actions of his everyday life. The ambient sound is otherwise so quiet at the apartment, that it equally suits Erin's experience of it being oppressive. Music is used sparingly, as a signal of decision or change, such as the moment when Kei abandons the interview to help Setsuko, or as he approaches the bath.

Image 19: Still from *Between Us* - Kei sits in the same hot spring that I visited during in order to write sensory details of the script

There are intricacies of human experience that are difficult to express in words. Film allows us to reach these liminal spaces and identities through the senses. While writing the script, I learned a lot by picturing myself in the shoes of the natural environment, honing in on each sense to make discoveries about the characters. My dad led me through a series of Gestalt exercises in which I became the water at a hot spring. In that context, I could sit and

imaginatively listen to the characters' bodies and movements without the interfering voices of the inner critic, society, or academia.

Between Us calls for close listening and attentive seeing, both literally and metaphorically. When Kei and Erin are separated by the barrier and cannot see each other, they are forced to engage their other senses in order to understand the other person. What can Erin learn from paying attention to Kei's breathing? What does the sound of swishing water tell Kei about the way Erin uses and treats her body in the hot springs? I wanted to direct the characters' and audience's attention to their senses to help them sink into the present moment, in which we can hear, taste, touch, smell, and see things that are simultaneous and contradictory. The film is a reminder that we can learn to hold space for discovery when we temporarily suspend thought, judgment, and analysis. That was my takeaway from being a regular at the hot springs.

Realism and Questions of Authenticity

The camerawork, dialogue and acting style of the film lean toward realism, and yet I will never objectively know how accurately the film portrays Japanese culture, Yamagata customs or trans experiences. The difficulty with aiming for authenticity is that it is impossible to represent the whole of any culture or identity. There is a constant tug between the need to get certain details "right" while also acknowledging the specificity of the characters' lives. I remember being distraught when I consulted a trans Japanese friend about the story, and he came back to me with a long list of questions and ideas for how to make it more believable: "Why would a foreigner be living in rural Japan? Would she really know what to do at the hot springs? If Kei is smart, why does he not have a job? Maybe there should be a shot of a Tokyo University diploma on the wall if you want the audience to think he's clever." It did not matter that my friend's own

lived experience defied these stereotypes; he still felt they were necessary to writing a believable story. I disagreed, feeling that they played into the conventional narratives I was hoping to avoid. This process of negotiation was very uncomfortable, but inevitable.

I relied heavily on Sho to depict accurate details about trans life and daily practices. We had established enough trust that I believed he would honestly tell me if there were red flags. One of the scenes which I was particularly concerned about was the testosterone injection. Trans friends with whom I had consulted described this process in many different ways; some used a gel, some went to the hospital, some asked their partner for assistance. I decided Kei should do whatever Sho normally does.

Sho agreed to take the lead in terms of the setup and supplies, so we shot the scene unrehearsed, unsure of exactly what to expect. I did not want it to be voyeuristic or invasive, and I remember being shocked when his pants came down, but he treated the scene in a very matter-of-fact manner. The issue was that we had nothing to inject, since we did not want to waste his supply. Sho jumped up and rummaged through the kitchen at the apartment where we were shooting. It turned out that *mirin*, a sweet Japanese cooking alcohol, had just the right colour and viscosity to be convincing.

Image 20: Kei covers his chest at the bath

One of the only moments that was questioned by Sho, as well as other men who have seen the film, is the way that Kei holds the towel to cover his chest as he approaches the bath. Sho explained that if Kei was worried about being outed, he would try hard to

blend in and would not do such a thing. In fact, many hot spring visitors in Japan do not conceal their bodies with the small, white towels. Although I agreed with Sho, I felt that it was important to signal Kei's discomfort to the audience and to reinforce the significance of entering the men's bath for the first time. "No man would ever do that," my dad observed, "but Kei's body language and self-presentation are otherwise so masculine, it helps remind us that he still struggles."

Erin also covers her chest at the bath, which is a choice Kai Pacey made based on their interpretation of the character. The actors may have been uncomfortable improvising lines, but they were quick to find solutions and to bring interesting, unpredictable details to their characters.

Image 21: Erin covers her chest at the bath

Mr. Saito spent a great deal of time drawing up suggestions regarding Setsuko's language, costume, and demeanor.

In the weeks leading up to production, Mr. Saito spent time reviewing the script with Ms. Kato in great detail. Whether it was due to the translation or the way I wrote the character, I am not sure, but Mr. Saito told me Ms. Kato had confessed that she did not fully understand Setsuko's role at first. After the shoot, she called Mr. Saito to say that she discovered her character's purpose through the performance, "Once I met Kei and Erin, I realized that my job was to care for them."

I feel that she is right, although I would not have described her that way when writing the script. It was unintentional, but Ms. Kato left out a few lines of dialogue, such as a comment

about Erin gaining weight, that might have changed the nature of that relationship. In this way, something authentic shines through in the way Setsuko is portrayed.

Setsuko's appearance at the staircase is serendipitous in a way that borders on magical realism. There is an uncanny quality about the empty streets with not a soul or a car in sight. Given that we were shooting in a tiny ski town during the off-season, the location was actually empty when we shot. Setsuko is the audience's only reference point for what the other locals are like, and she treats them with kindness and respect. The coincidence of Erin's arrival at the hot spring also has a dream-like quality, as does their conversation through the wall, since that style of bath is difficult to find. There was only one in the whole region, which is otherwise full of bath houses. Mr. Saito told me that such a conversation would never happen between a Japanese couple, because it would be socially taboo to yell across the divide. "But people here will find that part of the story interesting, because it takes a non-Japanese person to think of something like that. The story is fiction, after all." A Japanese audience may read the film as more imaginary—an interpretation rather than a realistic depiction. I hope the film will seem familiar but also a little out of the ordinary.

Editing and Experiments in Story Structure

After the shoot, I had to take some time away from the project. Perhaps I was trying to preserve the honeymoon period of celebrating the amazing experience we shared before moving on to the next phase of hard work. The part of my psyche that needed this project to be made had been satisfied by the shoot. I actually felt like I did not "need" to finish the film.

In January of 2020 I fell into a kind of postpartum depression of knowing I had to face all of the potential mistakes we had made during the shoot, while also missing the high of making

something risky happen. Once I finally found my editor, it turned out to be one of the least painful stages of the process.

Having submitted a rough cut which remained very faithful to the original script, my supervisor suggested the exercise of completely rearranging the edit. The film would open with the scene at the bath, followed by the morning of the interview and Kei's decision to help Setsuko. Only Kei ends up alone at the hot spring at the end. Ingrid suggested that in experimenting, I could bring an element of improvisation to my process, since it had not been possible during production. The reordering would also allow a rich subtext to emerge in the silences between Erin and Kei, and it would add weight to Kei's decision not to go to Tokyo. Although I was already satisfied with the direction of the edit, the painful script writing process was far enough behind me that I was open to trusting Ingrid's process. I had worked with an editor thus far, but this struck me as an exercise I should do on my own to help defamiliarize the material so I could see it in a new light.

I felt a twinge of excitement about the possibilities of re-arranging, as if somehow I would get to know the characters in another way, spending an extra day with these people I had come to love. In the so-called "radical re-edit," I found that some particular moments between them were imbued with a new power. When Kei tries to touch Erin in the bedroom scene, we already know he is afraid of losing her, and her recoil creates more tension. We also understand more clearly why she would be covering her chest. We see her wearing makeup, and it reads as an attempt to step back into a more feminine role, perhaps out of fear. Ultimately, the alternate storyline left the impression that the couple is drifting apart, because Kei chooses not to go to the interview, despite knowing how important it is to Erin. The last time we see her, she is washing her face in the apartment. Watching that cut, I realized how deeply I cared that Erin should not

be abandoned, even if the original ending still leaves the fate of their relationship open-ended. I myself had neglected Erin in so many drafts of the story. I could not stand to see her neglected in the final version.

The new structure was interesting, but it also created several major story issues and erased significant details. By starting with the conversation at the hot springs, we lost the tension generated by Kei's entry into the men's bath for the first time. Although I did not want to focus solely on Kei's trans identity, I thought it was important for us to see him take multiple small steps toward self-acceptance. Without these steps, it felt like a gimmicky plot twist to reveal that he was trans halfway through, after leading the audience toward Erin's gender struggles. In the end, I felt that the structure of the original script best reflected my goals. Even if this edit did not result in a stronger story, I can see how radical re-edits are an invaluable director's tool that I can apply to future projects. Perhaps I will despair less while script writing by understanding that a story remains malleable, even in editing.

Upon re-watching the film, I sometimes speculate about the couple's future at the end of the film. What opportunities and consequences are likely to arise if they stay in Yamagata? Despite his reservations, I imagine Kei will eventually find a job there, maybe even one outside of an office setting. It would allow him to grow into the kind of man he wants to be. Maybe he would end up working for Setsuko at the hot springs. I imagine that Erin could join them, somehow transforming the springs into a communal space for all kinds of people who normally feel excluded from that space. Ideally, this redefinition of a hot springs would draw out a local social circle of queer and differently-abled folks, immigrants, and other people who had remained in the margins. Kei would not necessarily have to come out, but he could feel safe living adjacently to people who understand the experience of not being the norm. As their daily

life became less insular and precarious, perhaps they would feel freer to show parts of themselves that they have kept hidden. The social barriers would still exist, but the one between them could be dissolved.

In a less optimistic scenario, Kei would remain jobless, which would place a heavy burden on Erin to support them, while putting strain on his self-esteem. Erin would remain trapped at a teaching job she does not like, where her potential goes underutilized, and she does not feel safe being out. Even if Kei accepted her gender queerness and continued to love her, it might not be enough to outweigh the loneliness of a life that is inauthentic and unfulfilling. Erin would likely leave Kei to go to Tokyo, where more jobs are available to immigrants. Kei would lose the one person who has been with him throughout his transition and who intimately knows that side of him. Although we do not know the outcome of their relationship, as a director, my message is that the future hinges on communication. Unless Kei and Erin continue to talk across the divide after the ending of the film, they will lose the opportunity for love and growth.

Conclusion

As filmmakers, we pray that our work matters and that we have not invested thousands of hours in vain. We want our work to be seen, the way our characters ask to be seen. Still, I cannot deny that I am afraid to release this film to the world—afraid of being pigeonholed or critiqued, particularly by LGBTQ+ communities. I see this film, not as a representation of queer life in Japan, but as a record of how an outsider is trying to comprehend and embody allyship.

The majority of viewers will see the film without knowing any context behind its making. Part of my job is to let go of the need to control how the film will be perceived. As filmmakers, we must recognize that our good intentions and backstories will not and should not protect us. *Between Us* will inherently invite debate and discussion, because of the way it explores opposing viewpoints, experiences, and desires. Aside from family and friends, I have shared the film with a small circle of people who knew nothing about the story. Their feedback assured me at least that the central themes are clear, and that they resonate on a personal level, even if the ending provokes more questions than answers. One viewer observed:

> Are they really a couple? Do they love each other? They seem so separate - so incongruent. Yet, aren't we all represented here - all of us coupled up or not - all struggling to belong to ourselves, to family, to someone, anyone...I may be projecting - since this is a major theme in my own life.

Another wrote:

> The bodies, revealed or concealed, the viewer never rests easy with male/female designation for either character...I was appropriately confused on the characters' behalf. I don't know what they need to do, either. But I think they will find a way. I want them to.

I have trouble answering these questions, because the characters themselves are unsure, entering into a new phase of mutual and self-discovery at the very end of the film. I, too, want Kei and Erin to find a way. I was unable to give up on this project, and I do not want them to give up on each other. To borrow a concept from Japanese filmmaker Nagisa Oshima, "The authentic subject can exist only in perpetual movement. Once it ceases to move and attaches itself to a fixed identity, it becomes part of the status quo, the social reality to be overcome." (Yoshimoto, 178).

My fears dissolve when I imagine sharing the film with everyone who was involved in its making. Whether or not they love the film, they can appreciate the odyssey it took to create it. I am holding off from sharing it with the cast and crew until I can be in Japan to hold a screening, because I want us all to witness that collective energy. I also look forward to sharing the film in Yamagata City, where films have been shot, screened and celebrated by an avid filmgoing community for the past 30 years.

I wonder what this film will mean to the various friends who inspired the project so many years ago. We did not end up making the film together, and indeed, the story is no longer about them. It took me a long time to realize that they never needed this film to be made—only I did. I am glad that the story became fictional, so that I could learn important lessons in taking responsibility for what I was creating.

My films often carry values that I still struggle to embody. I yearn to belong. I yearn for us all to find acceptance. And yet, like water, we are beings that do not stand still. We flow, we dry up, we boil over. We are vast. This film taught me that to commit to true collaboration is to willingly step into discomfort and conflicts that may not have resolutions. The same goes for a

commitment to love. With that in mind, this film is my invitation to you, to explore all of the beauty and complexity that lies between us.

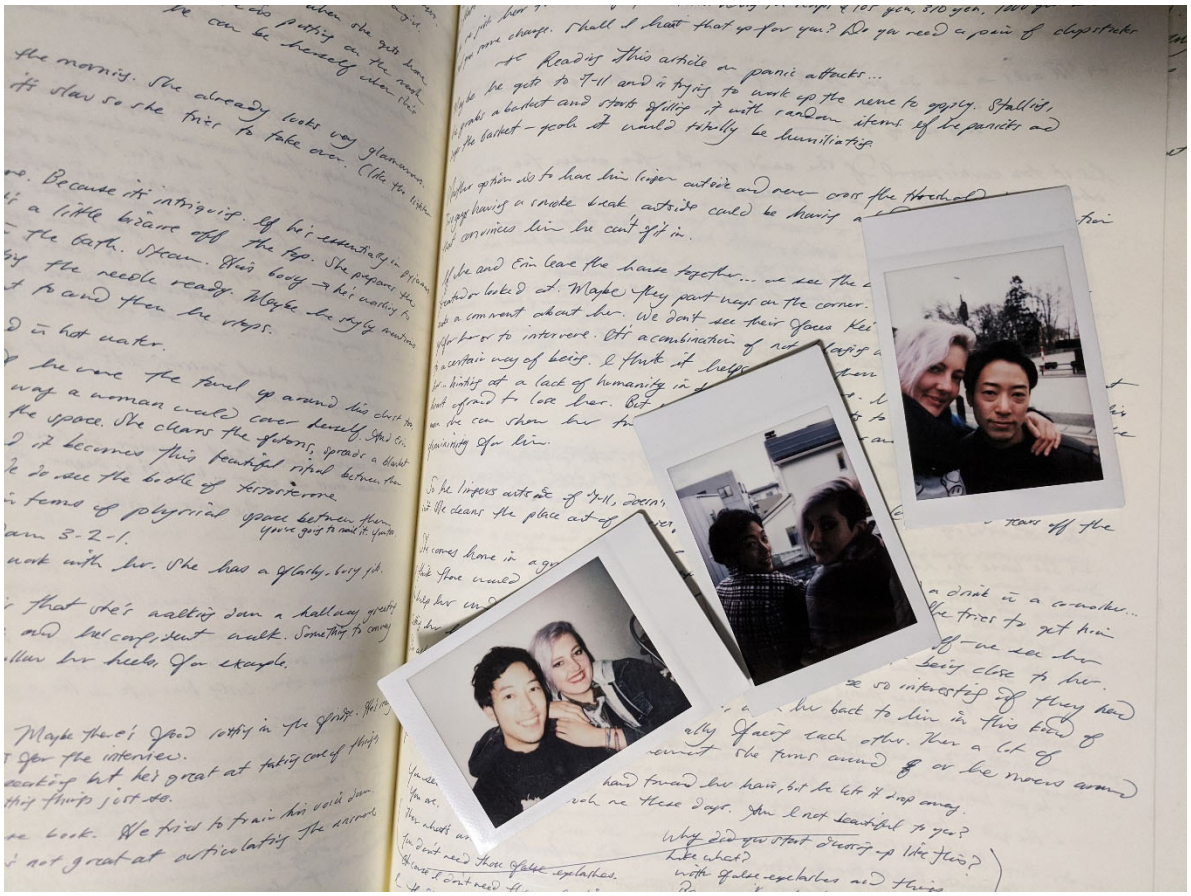


Image 22: Polaroid props used to portray moments from Kei and Erin's relationship
Background: My production journal for the film

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