Tina Takemoto’s Looking for Jiro is a research project and experimental performance video inspired by Jiro Onuma, a gay Issei (Japanese-born immigrant) that explores the hidden dimensions of queer sexuality for Japanese Americans incarcerated during World War II. At age 38, Jiro Onuma was imprisoned at Topaz concentration camp in Central Utah. The absence of queer historical accounts of Japanese American incarceration camps is partially related to the atypical structure of the prison camps. Unlike most prison facilities in which individuals are gender segregated, the Japanese American concentration camps organized inmates by family units. Some historians also suggest that the hidden history of Japanese American queer sexuality relates to internal pressures within Japanese American communities to assimilate into American culture by conforming to heterosexual norms.

Jiro Onuma worked in the prison mess hall and liked muscular men. He was also an avid fan of homoerotic male physique magazines. How did this dandy gay Issei bachelor from San Francisco survive the isolation, humiliation, and homophobia of imprisonment? In Takemoto’s imagining, Looking for Jiro, a queer musical mash-up video, it features drag king performance, U.S. propaganda footage, muscle building, and homoerotic bread making. I was fortunate to continue my conversation with Takemoto via email.

LJR: Can you talk a little about where you grew up and what is was like?

TT: I grew up “east of the East Bay” in a predominantly white conservative suburb about an hour east of San Francisco. There were only a few Asian American families in town, so I had very little access to Asian American or queer communities. In high school, I felt so isolated and different that I was convinced I didn’t “fit in” and probably wouldn’t live to be 21. At the time, I couldn’t connect this feeling to being Asian or queer, but I just couldn’t imagine ever feeling comfortable with myself in the world. I figured I didn’t belong in the world. It turns out that I just didn’t belong in my hometown.

LJR: How did you decide to become an artist and scholar? What put you on that track?

TT: I went to UC Berkeley to study science. It didn’t even occur to me that I could study something else until I took my first art and art history courses. When I enthusiastically announced that I wanted to become an art major, it didn’t go over so well with my parents. Eventually, I switched my major to architecture, which seemed more acceptable to my folks, but I kept gravitating towards the visual arts. With the help of some great faculty advisors, I completed an individualized major degree in visual studies, which combined architecture, art, and art history. This experience put me on the path to the arts.

LJR: Your video Looking for Jiro opened MIX 24: New York’s Queer Experimental Film Festival. For me and others, it was a real highlight of the program. Before you made the video the work about Onuma that you produced included material objects and performance. Can you talk a little bit about the project, how it began, and your process, and how it ended up as a video?

TT: In 2009, I was invited by E.G. Crichton to respond to a personal collection in the Gay Lesbian Bisexual Transgender Historical Society archive. I was “matched” with Jiro Onuma, a gay immigrant who moved to the U.S. from Japan in 1923 at age 19. Onuma’s collection is rather modest. It consists of a few photo albums, some personal papers, and a small collection of homoerotic male physique magazines. It also contains a few photographs of Onuma taken when he was imprisoned at Topaz concentration camp in Central Utah during World War II. These are the only known photographs of an adult gay Japanese American in the U.S. incarceration camps.
As a queer Japanese American, I was shocked and deeply moved by these images. Like so many Yonsei (fourth-generation) Japanese Americans, I grew up hearing family stories about the American concentration camps, but no one ever mentioned the queer experience of imprisonment. These images prompted me to wonder what life must have been like for Jiro Onuma and other adult LGBT Japanese Americans in camp.

For Gentleman’s Gaman: A Gay Bachelor’s Survival Kit, I started making objects and accessories for Onuma based on craft practices developed in the prison camps known as the “art of gaman.” This series includes a tarpaper wallet and cigarette holder, carved wooden bird cuff links and tie clips, and a muscle man card set based on a popular Japanese card game. Looking for Jiro began as a drag king performance in which I try to imagine how Jiro Onuma survived the isolation, boredom and heteronormativity of the camps as a dandy gay bachelor who is forced to work in the prison mess hall while dreaming of muscular men from his male physique magazines.

LJR: There were several things that really struck me about the video when I saw it. One was the concept of it being a mash-up; it was spliced with historical footage of Japanese Incarceration Camps, a music video of the song Hung Up by Madonna, and you performing in drag as Onuma. Why did you choose the format of the mash-up for your video?

TT: I was attracted to the mash-up format for a variety of reasons. I knew that I wanted to combine drag king performance with historical film footage and a popular song about waiting and desire. When I remembered that Madonna’s Hung Up features a sample of ABBA’s Gimme Gimme Gimme (A Man After Midnight), I decided to recombine the Madonna/ABBA tracks and slow down the music to lower the vocals in order to accentuate how “time goes by so slowly” when you are waiting for a lover who will never arrive, especially in prison. This queer mash-up also includes images of prison guards, hot mess hall workers, and young 442nd military men from U.S. war propaganda films; early Edison footage of the “Great Sandow” flexing his muscles; and scenes of Asian American restaurant workers dancing in Madonna’s music video. The third element of this experimental musical mash-up is the drag performance of homoerotic bread making and muscle building.

LJR: You reached out to the Japanese American community to try and find other queer survivors of the incarceration camps. Have people come forward with additional narratives of other LGBTQ people that were imprisoned during that time?

TT: In a commentary piece for the Nichi Bei Weekly, I made a general plea to the Japanese American community for information that could help broaden LGBTQ perspectives on the American concentration camps. While I received many messages of support from readers of my generation, I was also sent this response from a clearly offended reader:

This message from “Straight Shooter” was sent to my personal email address from an untraceable email account. The reader angrily proclaims that life in the concentration camps was too difficult “to put up with such nonsense” and that Issei [first generation immigrants] would have had no tolerance for such “abnormal” and deviant behavior. Straight Shooter rejects the very idea of that there could have been LGBT people in the concentration camps by claiming that homosexuality would have been eradicated from within the Japanese American community.

Clearly, my inquiry struck a nerve for this reader. The vehemence of Straight Shooter’s response took me by surprise and forced me to reconsider the stakes involved in this research. Beyond the blatant homophobia and contempt for “my kind,” the respondent’s outrage seems to arise from the reader’s desire to preserve a certain version of historical memory that would maintain the gravity of incarceration as well as the normalcy and morality of innocent Japanese Americans who were unjustly imprisoned. Our stakes are similar to the extent that we are both deeply and personally invested in Japanese American history.

The question that Straight Shooter finds unspeakable (“Gays in Topaz?--Are you serious?”) is one that would have been doubly treacherous for LGBT individuals in prison especially given the intolerance of the Issei, the assimilationist pressure of the second-generation Nisei, and the policing of all non-normative sexual behavior by security guards within a prison where inmates were organized by family unit. What Straight Shooter sees as “nonsense” and frivolity, I see as modes of resistance and survival.

LJR: One of the things that struck me about watching the video at MIX was how you performed identities of queer masculinity. I’m wondering if you can speak about your thoughts about embodied effeminate and macho masculinity as it relates to incarceration, race, gender, drag performance and sexuality?

TT: Looking for Jiro is an homage to the gay Asian immigrant and a performance of Asian genderqueer masculinity. In the context of incarceration camps, the pressure to conform dominant codes of heterosexuality was heightened especially among Nisei (second generation) men, who sought to prove their masculinity and American citizenship by policing sexual behavior, disavowing homosexuality, and enlisting in the U.S. military. In contrast, Jiro Onuma spent most of his life working in domestic and “feminized” professions as a laundry presser and housekeeper.
In my performance as Jiro Onuma, I tried to imagine how this dandy gay bachelor from San Francisco survived the isolation, humiliation, and heteronormativity of incarceration. I knew that Onuma was obsessed with Earle Liederman, a popular muscle man who ran a mail-order school that promised to make you “a giant among men” for seven dollars a week. Each week Liederman would send personally typed letters containing exercise assignments and images of Liederman posing with his signature exercise device. Onuma kept these photographs of Liederman as well as the medal of achievement that Onuma received after completing the 12-week course. Whether Onuma actually did the exercises is another question entirely. For the performance, I set up a fantastical scenario in which Jiro Onuma’s homoerotic desire is expressed by being and becoming muscular through the kneading and fisting of bread dough.

LJR: Where do you locate yourself in historical and contemporary frameworks of film, dance, and performance? Who has influenced you most?

TT: My video was initially inspired by Isaac Julien’s film *Looking for Langston*, which offers a queer meditation on Langston Hughes and the Harlem Renaissance using archival materials, contemporary art, and popular music. Julien’s film, along with John Greyson’s *Zero Patience*, helped me imagine an alternative approach to Japanese American history that could include queer speculation and camp aesthetics. In terms of contemporary performance, I am really inspired by the work of Nao Bustamante, Dynasty Handbag, and Kalup Linzy who engage in the aspirations and disappointments of queer worldmaking with emotion and humor. Although I am great admirer of dance, I’m actually a terrible dancer. So my attempt to follow Madonna’s dance moves is really an exercise in hope and failure.

LJR: I recently read a really brilliant article by the scholar Tirza Latimer about the concept of the radical or renegade archive on the SFMOMA blog that was about the archive project that you participated in at the San Francisco GLBT Historical Archives. Lately the topic of the archive in relation to queer history and contemporary cultural production has been a hot topic. Why do you think in this contemporary moment the archive has surfaced as such a crucial site for making new work?

TT: Queer archives offer amazing resources for artists engaged with queer history and queer speculation. I am most interested in work that conveys the desire to be connected to queer histories as well as the longing and grief associated with the impossibility of fully recovering these histories and the circumstances that have contributed to their erasure. For example, I cannot forget the first time I encountered the photographs of Jiro Onuma in Topaz prison. I have always considered Japanese American history and queer American history as the two social and political legacies that most significantly influenced my own identity formation. Yet the struggles against the racial injustice of wartime incarceration always seemed quite separate in my mind from the challenges facing LGBT Americans during the pre-Stonewall era of the 1940s and 1950s.