My proposal for the International travel grant was to make an experimental short film shot in Japan’s love hotel, at approximately 20 minutes in length. The project took place in Kyoto and Osaka over 5 weeks. I took an anthropological approach to document the sensorial setting of love hotels, a space that provides a private place for experiencing eroticism, intimacy and freedom of expression. The first half of the trip was dedicated to researching, locating love hotels, and speaking to locals whenever possible on the subject matter. Over the second half of the trip I filmed in 14 love hotel rooms between Osaka and Kyoto. The themes of the rooms include S&M, Barbie, subway train, school gym, Disneyland, luxurious European escape; in addition, I also filmed in average looking rooms in older love hotels. (fig.1 – fig.3)

The destinations of Kyoto and Osaka offer the highest concentration of themed Love hotels in Japan. Love hotels originated in Japan and it is a type of business unique to Asia. These hotels allow for a wide variety of fantasy “sets” for sexual intimacy in very crowded cities. Even during economic hard times, love hotels are recession proof business. The NY Daily News estimates, as of 2014, up to 30,000 hotels, an industry worth 40 billion dollars is thriving in Japan. The popularity of love hotels can be attributed to the lack of privacy and busy schedules of working adults, coupled with the high prices of real estate, with more people living with their parents or roommates. Although a recent law has been passed to prohibit any new building of love hotels, recent love hotels are bypassing what qualifies as a “love hotel” by claiming to be luxury hotels that provides love hotel like amenities.

1. Inside Q&P love hotel, Osaka, Japan.
2. Inside Brio hotel, Kyoto, Japan.

3. Inside Jiso area love hotel, Osaka, Japan.
Filming at these locations permitted me to fully explore both the realm of fantasy and sexuality in the publically constructed private spaces that allows people to freely express themselves in a culture that demands selfless conformity. I am fascinated with the compartmentalized roles people play in Asia, such as in the Japanese society and the extreme subversive counter culture that results. Love hotels in Japan can be traced back to Edo period, where discreet entrance in the guise of inns or teahouses were first recorded. Love hotels proliferated after World War II and saw an increase in business after 1958 when prostitution became illegal. During the 70s and 80s, themed hotels became popular, catering to every imaginable desire, fantasy and escape; ranging from S&M, haunted dungeons, subway cars, to hello kittens and Christmas wonderland. Most are equipped with luxurious amenities for a fraction of the cost of four stars hotels – hot tubs, flat screen TVs, lounge area, and even karaoke machines. Discretion is guaranteed with minimal interaction with staff, sometimes none at all with the convenience of choosing your room through a vending machine. (fig 4 & fig 5) There are usually several entrances to prevent being seen together, and plenty of placards are also provided to cover up license plates. It is a perfect place for people having an afternoon affair, couples who want to spice up their love life, individuals who needs time alone, drunk club goers who missed the last train, and even the budget traveler looking for a place to crash.

2. Typical front desk of older establishments.
3. Rooms available are lit up, you can press the bottom upon choosing.

4. Placards are available to hide license plates.
During my research, I was able to see some of the effects that took place with the obscenity laws, most fantasy themed love hotels in the inner city has been asked to either tone down the decorations or renovations. The only thing left is the extravagant exterior shell of love hotels, with the inside completely gutted, they are replaced with average hotel rooms that are indistinguishable from a normal hotel. (see fig.5) While I was there, there were already hotels that just finished renovations, or are in the process of renovations. There were also specific regulations that are being enforced, such as no wall to wall mirrors, rotating beds, and inappropriate erotic decorations. What’s interesting is that the fantasy themed loved hotels still exists, they are just repackaged as luxurious getaway hotels with the options of renting by the hours in order to work around the grey area of a love hotel as a sex establishment and a regular hotel. Location wise, they are often pushed out of the view in busy city centers, adding to the getaway appeal despite being in a working class area near freeway exits.

5. Mickey Cookies and Chapel Christmas love hotel in Osaka, Japan.

I found out that love hotels acts as more than just a place for hook-up, it offers a romantic escape for busy couples who can’t afford a vacation, or a spa retreat with your female friends. These romantic and relaxing themed hotels are typical of the newer establishments, and they are often found on the outskirts of the city. The main attractions are strikingly different from the ones found in the entertainment district of the inner city, with focuses on luxurious amenities to attack female customers, offers like brand name bath products, facial masks, gourmet food, all access movie channels, and even the pornography offered is more female friendly. They also encourage membership cards or VIP cards with discounts rates and free food, one love hotel even has a promotional offers of “Stay in all of our rooms and earn a flight to California!”
Besides the pressure of conforming to regulation of obscenity laws, love hotels are motivated to change its image for two reasons: one, women are less inclined to go to love hotels since they have been depicted in TV shows, mangas, and literature as a place of crime scene and nefarious activities; two, woman, not the man of the relationship are increasingly the ones deciding the love hotel they want to go to.

One thing I did not expect was that solo females are often not accepted in older love hotels near areas of vibrant nightlife. I was rejected numerous times in Osaka, only to later find out that it’s due to incidents of suicides. For an establishment that relies on protection of privacy, I was surprised by the amount of surveillance with in the establishments, it seems as though there were security cameras everywhere except inside hotel rooms. Apparently the staff watches movement of their clients very closely to catch suspicious activities, on the other hand, the staff also use them to make a decision on who is allowed to rent a room. Another feature that was borderline creepy was that most hotels do not have in-and-out privileges, meaning, once you are in your hotel room, you cannot leave until you pay. To pay, there is a machine that prompts you to insert cash or credit card, and only when the transaction is completed is the door unlocked. (see fig.6)
What exciting I came to realize is that love hotel serves as a metaphor of a body, particularly the female’s body. Concurrent to recent rise of women entering the workforce, choosing careers over the traditional homemaker role of marriage, women are more than ever exploring their sexuality and identity. Just as women are demanding to choose the love hotels to have sex with their consideration in mind, they are proclaiming ownership of their bodies, demanding fulfillment of their desires and pleasure, rejecting the prosaic attitudes of women bodies are presented as something owned and serve. I went to document settings of love hotels but I ended up founding so much more. I’d like to thank the generous donors of the International travel grant who funded this profound trip, and the faculty at University of Michigan who supported my research project.