

Sexual Identity and Cultural Identity: A Crash Course

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When I was fourteen, I used to go to John's Adult Book Exchange. I was tall for a Chinese, and the craggy Slavic man behind the counter — presumably 'John' — never questioned me about my age. My magazine of choice was *Australian Gay*, a hard-core, cheaply reproduced stick mag. Occasionally, to fill space, they'd print social pages of men in bars with mythical names like 'Signal' and 'the Barracks'. In the privacy of my bedroom, I'd sate my lust over blurred, succulent close ups of the male anatomy, then afterwards study the social topography of this exciting new world: handsome, shirtless men, arm in arm, shoulder on shoulder. I'd stare at the faces, willing them into recognition. These were gay men. Men like me. Unconsciously, I understood that soon, in a couple of years at most, I would be there as well.

At seventeen, I left Perth to study at the Australian National University. My first experience in a gay bar was in Canberra, the Ainslie Pub, which I had read about it in the student newspaper. I cycled there one balmy night in late autumn, wearing army disposal pants, involuntarily perspiring. As I pushed open the door, I already had an erection.

It wasn't what I expected. It was, after all, a gay bar in Canberra. I sat by myself, too shy to talk to anyone, until a group of drag queens talked to me. They were very scary, and I don't think I understood a word they said. I spent about an hour summoning up the courage to speak to a guy probably in his early twenties, one of the few guys who were around my age at the bar. He was sitting by himself as well, as nervous as I was. So finally, after my third beer, I thought, what the hell, I'm going to fall over soon anyway, so I went up to him and said ... didn't even get a first sentence out. All he said to me was, 'Sorry, I'm not into Asians'. And that was it. End of conversation. That was the first, although not the last time I heard that expression. Being 'Asian', being Chinese, put me in a different category from the other men in the bar.

In the male gay world, a world where sexuality draws everyone together, the rules of attraction which govern sexuality, are also the governing social rules. So, people are accorded power and status according to their powers of sexual attractiveness. As in all other sections of our society, this means that physically attractive people have a social advantage over people who are considered 'unattractive'. So if you're young and good-looking, you're at the top of the social hierarchy. You're fascinating and charming by default, even before you open your mouth (especially if you *don't* open your mouth). But anyone who is older, shorter, fatter, taller, disabled, or otherwise out of the dominant paradigm of what is considered attractive, struggles to be visible.

What I didn't realise was that, according to the predominant rules of Caucasian Western sexual attraction, being Chinese was actually a distinctive sexual category in a racial hierarchy. Asians were behind Black and Latino men in the scale of things. Of course, white men were on top.

In the heterosexual world, Asian women are coveted and fetishised. From Suzie Wong to the Singapore Girl to Gong Li, the Asian woman has traversed the distance into Western consciousness, embodying a sexy blend of enigma, suffering and compliance. She is the epitome of femininity. Because the majority of gay Asian men in Australia are slimmer and smaller than their Caucasian counterparts, they are also stereotyped as feminine or 'boyish'. However, in a culture where Tom of Finland is the pinnacle of what is considered desirable, being feminine is neither respected nor valued. The same racial stereotype that makes Asian women desirable makes Asian men marginal.

I've often been told that I'm tall 'for an Asian'. On more than one occasion that I'm masculine 'for an Asian'. It doesn't matter if we're from the north of China or the south of Vietnam, irrespective of body type, size, age or weight, Caucasians have a preconception of what an 'Asian' looks like. It's this preconception which puts us near the bottom of their sexual hierarchy.

When I was coming out in the mid-eighties, the men who tended to be attracted to me were a category of their own: 'Rice queens'. These are Caucasian men who primarily desire Asian men. Frankly, I wouldn't have had a problem with this except that most of the 'rice queens' I met were also somewhere near the bottom of the sexual hierarchy. They were always older men, sometimes twenty years older. So whilst I found it flattering to be desired, these men rarely triggered my own desire in return.

I found myself trapped between a rock and a hard place. I wasn't comfortable with the 'rice queen' world, but every time I tried to find a place for myself in the mainstream gay scene, I ran into a different kind of barrier. It wasn't that people were rude or belligerent. Overt racism, on the rare occasions I've faced it, is easy to handle. It is, after all, someone else's problem. What is much more difficult to deal with is the subtle, almost imperceptible sense of exclusion.

Was I being paranoid? Did that really happen? Did I imagine it? Is it because I'm not attractive as a person, or is it because I'm Asian? Am I expecting them to reject me, and therefore acting as if they already have? Or am I being subjected to racial discrimination?

For most of my adult life, I've wrestled with these questions in silence. It's not something that I've felt comfortable acknowledging. Racism is about Pauline Hanson and Mabo and Wik. Or Cambodian refugees and Vietnamese street gangs. It's not about the fact that most of my Caucasian friends have never had a sexual experience with an Asian person. It's not about the psychic energy you have to expend to maintain the charade of equality. Besides which, you don't want to put the spotlight on your own inadequacies or sound like you're whingeing. Everyone has to deal with rejection, what makes mine worse than anyone else's?

I think I only really started realising that what I felt did have a political implication when I started befriending other gay Asian men. In 1996, I started research on a documentary called *China Dolls*, based around my experience of growing up gay and Chinese in Australia. As part of the project, I talked to other gay Asian men. What immediately struck me was the rapport we shared.

Meeting other gay Asian men in the making of *China Dolls* was an empowering experience. What I had always considered private anxieties suddenly became common points of sympathy, neither unique nor imaginary. Here were other men, men who I considered to be attractive and intelligent, who had the same doubts and questions that I did. I wasn't alone.

More importantly, it became abundantly clear that to trivialise inequalities based upon race is as oppressive as denying inequalities in class or gender, or denying that the earth moves around the sun. Everyone has to deal with the possibility of rejection, but not everyone is immediately prejudged by their skin colour.

At dinner one night a Chinese friend, Adrian, said to me, 'You know what the worst thing about this stuff? Every time I look at a man I'm interested in, I have to think first, "Does he like Asians?" not, "Does he like me?"'

As part of my research, I conducted a 'test' on the internet. In a gay personals bulletin board, I ran this ad: 'Guy, 36 years old, black hair, brown eyes, 5' 11", 71 kg, lean gym-fit body, looking for hot sexual encounters'. I got 22 replies. A week later, I ran the identical ad, this time including the word 'Asian' at the front. I got 3 replies. This hardly ranks as scientific method, but what it confirmed was the negating power of that simple word: 'Asian'.

When you think about it, the question isn't so much 'Why aren't Caucasian men interested in Asian men?' but, rather, 'why would they be?' Sexual preferences tend to be shaped by two global factors. First, there are the idiosyncrasies of our personal histories — the first boy or girl we fiddled with in the back shed, the gym teacher with the tight shorts, our first high-school crush. Then there are the social signifiers of the 'desirable body' — movie stars, supermodels, Calvin Klein ads, porn movies, etc. In both cases, Asian men lose out.

Most gay Caucasian men in Australia have their earliest experiences with other Caucasians. This is the template by which desire is, initially at least, stamped. When desire is further shaped by public representations of what is considered 'desirable', there's a marked absence of Asian men both within the gay and mainstream media.

In spite of historical reality, post-settlement Australia has invented itself as an Anglo-Saxon outpost at the other end of the civilised world. Consequently Asia, which represents 'not White', is an essential part of defining 'Whiteness' just as negative space defines positive space. For instance, the ANZAC has always been one of the cornerstones of Australian national identity. The heroic male, defending his country against foreign invasion. But who were they defending themselves against? Johnny Turk. The cunning Jap. The Yellow Peril. The Viet Cong. The Asian.

An unconscious fear of Asia is embedded within the Australian national identity, and expresses itself not only in the obvious flinch response of Pauline Hanson and her supporters, but in automatic, preconditioned responses such as sexual desire.

It would be very neat and convenient if this were the whole argument but desire is the complicating factor. Our own desire. Being brought up in an Anglo-centric culture, I've internalised Anglo-centric notions of what is considered desirable and undesirable. For instance, I am not attracted to other Asian men. If I'm out cruising, I'll avoid making eye contact with other Asian men, and they avoid making eye contact with me. It's an unspoken rule. We're not chasing each other, we're competing for the interest of the limited number of Caucasians who desire us.

Until recently, my desire has always been exclusively for whiteness. The handsome white men at the top of the sexual pecking order. The men in the porno movies and the ads for resort weekends in Palm Springs. Those ubiquitous shirtless men in the social pages. I've empowered these men with the tyranny of my longing just as they have disempowered me with their disinterest — perhaps this can be traced to the teenager poring over the social pages of *Australian Gay*. Or that first crush I

had on the basketball star at high-school. Or maybe it was inherited from my mother who brought us to this country with the hope of becoming a part of the White Australian Dream, not realising that this dream only knew itself by excluding us.

In recent years there's been a noticeable change in the gay scene. The influx of Asian migration through the mid to late 1980s has led to an increased presence of gay Asian men in the late nineties. A new generation of young men are going to the gym, bulking up, doing drugs and dance parties, finding a place for themselves.

It's not that the dominant paradigm of the desirable body has expanded, but there are now Asians who fit into this paradigm. This is still buying into the cult of youth and beauty which dominates the gay scene, but it does suggest that race is no longer a total prohibition. This is a small step in the right direction.