

THE (GAY) SCENE OF RACISM: FACE, SHAME AND GAY ASIAN MALES

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Abstract

As adept as we have become in tracing the discursive and institutional contours of contemporary Australian racism, such a focus sometimes shifts attention away from the 'lived experience' of racism, in Fanon's sense. What does it mean to face racism? What does it mean for gay Asian men to face racism on the gay scene? How is it possible to face racism? Indeed, do we face racism or does racism 'face' us? Drawing on autoethnographic research, this essay focuses on the lived experience of anti-Asian racism on the gay scene. It analyses cultural examples of racial wounding on the gay scene to tease out the constitutive role of shame for gay Asian men's racial-sexual subjectivities.

The (Gay) Scene of Racism

I'm in a gay club leaning against the bar waiting for my drink to arrive. My head is bouncing back to the beat of a Madonna remix, 'What it feels like for a girl'. Looking across the dance floor, I see an ocean of heads bobbing to the beat. Pumped-up male bodies bound about wildly, seemingly unaware of the irony.

A head pops into view. He leans forward to order a drink and then turns my way. In reaction I smile. His left eyebrow rises, his eyes look me up and down, he scrunches his nose and with curled back lips he says, "I don't do Asians". He raises his hand to block the sight of me. He palms me off, so to speak, and suddenly I feel ashamed. I'm ashamed to be the object of his disgust, ashamed of my

skin, my face, to be in the last moment one of them ... one of those 'Asians'.

My face flushes with shame, its warmth sinking into me and reforming itself into anger: the heated anger of masculine pride. I want to lean over and explain, 'the smile was polite, sweetie. I wouldn't fuck you with a dildo!' But all this is just ego politics, which is part of the problem. Anger flows too easily from wounded pride in the push and pull of the maintenance of face. What I'm facing here is the politics of the face: saving face in the face of racial interpellation. My anger steps in to protect my wounded pride, my self-esteem: in short, anger saves face. But I'm also attempting to save my face from the ugly clutches of this 'Asianness', which he finds so unattractive. In turn I'm faced by the inconsequentiality of a strategy that throws back his racial recognition with a sexual misrecognition. Instead I falter and decide to leave it alone.

Increasingly lesbian and gay Asian-Americans and Asian-Australians have begun to critique the complex relationships of race and (homo)sexuality in relation to questions of power (see Leong, 1996; Eng & Hom, 1998; Jackson & Sullivan, 1999). Ridge, Hee and Minichiello's (1999) research into gay Asian men's experiences in Australian gay culture suggests that the experience narrated above is not an uncommon event. Drawing on in-depth interviews with gay men from Southeast Asian backgrounds they show that Asian men in the gay scene not only face overt racial discrimination, but also more covert forms of racism, such as being

ignored by bar staff or catching disapproving glances from Anglo patrons. Ridge et. al. situate these exclusionary practices on the gay scene within larger racist practices in Australian society in general.

Despite the similarities in racially exclusionary practices across social fields, my contention is that there is a specificity to anti-Asian racism in western gay culture, namely, what is referred to as, 'sexual racism'. In April, 2003 the *Sydney Star Observer*, an Australian gay newspaper, reported on a campaign called 'Sexual Racism Sux', which tackles the prevalence of 'No GAMS' (i.e. Gay Asian Males) used in gay online dating services (Mills, 2003). What's interesting about the opening scene narrated above is the conflation between racial and sexual registers. 'I don't do Asians' is simultaneously a racial interpellation and a sexual categorisation. Asian becomes something that one does or does not do. In other words, 'I don't do Asians' calls me into being as an Asian and simultaneously marks me outside of his sexual preference.

While Asians remain unattractive to the bulk of gay white men in Australia, there are other gay white men who have developed a particular 'taste' for Asians, pejoratively referred to as 'rice queens.' Often other gay white men will use the existence of 'rice queens' as proof that the gay scene isn't racist since, as one man put it, "everyone can 'get some' on the scene". Yet, as Tony Ayres argues, this is the flip side of overt racism. "It is an attraction to me because of my Asianness, my otherness" (1999: 89). This desire can be read within the ambivalence that Ien Ang has identified at the heart of multiculturalism: "racially and ethnically marked people are no longer othered today through simple mechanisms of rejection and exclusion,

but through an ambivalent and apparently contradictory process of *inclusion by virtue of othering*" (2001: 139). Thus, rice queen desires can be viewed as a sexual inclusion by virtue of racial othering, relying on a sexual fetish of the same racial stereotypes of Asians as those employed by non-Asian gay men who refuse to sleep with Asians.

This essay explores the specificity of gay Asian male experiences of racism on the gay scene in Australia and how those experiences simultaneously constitute our racial and sexual subjectivity. I follow Wendy Brown in considering minority identities as "wounded attachments," in which subjection and subjugation commingle in the logic of pain (1995). In this essay I extend Brown's argument by focusing specifically on the painful subject formation of gay Asian males in the gay scene. The essay takes cultural moments like the scene narrated above as instances of racial-sexual 'wounding'. As an exploration into the psychic wounding of the Asian subject it is aligned with theories of racial melancholia (see Bell, 1999). For Anne Anlin Cheng, the racial other "suffers from racial melancholia whereby his or her racial identity is imaginatively reinforced through the introjection of a lost, never-possible perfection, an inarticulate loss that comes to inform that individual's sense of his or her own subjectivity" (2000: xi).

While I do not doubt the prevalence of racial melancholia, from my perspective it is an over-coded affective complex. As the opening scene reveals, the shame involved in facing racism doesn't always involve a 'never-possible perfection'. It can simply point to a failed social interaction. Instead, I follow Elspeth Probyn in considering shame in terms of its positivity for the self (2005, see also Biddle, 1997; Sedgwick & Frank, 1995). Her use of the term 'positivity'

should not be understood in normative terms. Positivity is meant in its Foucauldian sense, by which she means to consider the productive dimensions of shame. What does shame do or what does it produce? In my essay I ask how shame is involved in the production of the Asian subject on the gay scene and what is specific about this moment of shame.

To be sure it is not my intention to 'recuperate' shame, just as it is not my intention to suggest that liberation is achieved when we no longer feel shame. Nor am I suggesting that shame is the only affect involved in racism. On the one hand, facing racism can often lead to despair, sadness and melancholia, as many of my informants narrated to me during my research. On the other hand, if one recognises that s/he is the subject of racism this can often lead to anger and, over time, sometimes hatred. My contention however is that focusing on the moment of shame in facing racism on the gay scene will shed some light on gay Asian male sexual subjectivities and their imbrication with larger discursive structures of race in the politics of gay desire. Such moments are often not found in more overt racial discrimination but in those moments that Tony Ayres writes, involve "a wearing, subtle, almost imperceptible feeling of exclusion" (1999: 89).

In order to get at this specificity, I draw on ethnographic research I conducted in 2003 in Sydney's gay scene (mainly bars, clubs and dance parties), which involved multiple informal interviews with gay Asian men. Methodologically I take what I call a critical autoethnographic approach to this research. As the term 'autoethnography' suggests, it is a mode of researching the self-social nexus (Reed-Danahay, 1997). This means on the one hand, being attentive to the

self in ethnographic research, and on the other hand, drawing on an autobiographical mode of writing that still does justice to the lived social experience of the researched. By 'critical' I mean to signify attentiveness to the relations of power within the social field being researched and described. In part this methodology is inspired by Probyn's refiguring of the written self in her *Sexing the Self* (1993). Her book provides a theoretical model for using the self differently by disrupting the experiential and the epistemological levels of the self. For Probyn, writing the self is more a mode of doing theory than confessing the truth (of the self). My hope is that sharing these anecdotes will resonate with other Asian men's experiences on the gay scene.

The (In)Visibility of the Gay Asian Male

In 2000 I had the privilege of meeting William Yang (renowned gay Chinese-Australian artist), at a SilkRoad meeting where I had taken two Asian members of Queer Boys. Yang delivered a brief but informative history of the gay Asian male presence in Sydney, discussing some of the tensions and the concerns that informed gay Asian community formations. His talk opened a window into an otherwise ignored history within white gay narratives of the past. He also noted in his talk the feelings surrounding the Asian migrant's irrecoverable past: the realisation that one can never be 'authentic'. I felt my experiences echoed in his; I felt a connection.

After the talk I asked him what he thought was important for gay Asian men to do in the present. His reply was to become "more visible", to go out there and make our presence known. Fair enough. It intuitively made sense, considering the history of silence surrounding gay Asian men, of being

invisible and ignored on the gay scene. As a political strategy to 'become visible' suggests a mode of making one's presence known, one's voice heard and, in effect, to provoke a recognition of oneself in one's other.

I forgot about this meeting until a recent event triggered its memory. In October 2002 the first Mr. Gay Asian Male beauty contest was held in Sydney. I discovered that an acquaintance of mine was competing. I had mixed feelings of pride and defeat. On the one hand, I recognised that the contest was meant as an affirmation. It was intended to challenge the invariably white representation of beauty within Australian gay culture. Tony Ayres points out that gay magazines, pornography, community services and programs targeting gay men often fail to represent Asian men in their advertising. "Each of these sins of omission contributes to the invisibility of the Asian men's body on the scene" (1999: 91; see also Fung, 1996: 183; Ridge, Hee & Minichello, 1999: 51; Chuang, 1999: 31). The beauty contest implicitly claimed 'we are beautiful too!' On the other hand, I felt that the event was too easily complicit with an assumption that Asian men be judged as a separate form of beauty. In other words, the event *presumed* racial difference. Why can't, for example, an Asian male win a Mr Gay Australia beauty contest?

This event concretises my ambivalence toward the emergence of gay Asian male communities in Australia. In the last decade, gay Asian men have become more 'visible', more 'out there', particularly in Melbourne and Sydney. For example, the Asian Marching Boys have won awards for best float in the Sydney Gay & Lesbian Mardi Gras Parade within that time. There are now several gay Asian-specific social groups (Long Yang Club, SilkRoad), dance

parties (Chinese New Year Party, Gaysha) and Asian produced films are screened at QueerScreen, Sydney Gay & Lesbian Mardi Gras's Film Festival. Yet amidst the polyphony of these emerging voices and the montage of increased visibility, I still wonder what exactly does it mean for gay Asian men to be visible?

In part gay Asian networks have risen in response to the lack of Asian representation in the gay scene and culture. Without deriding the enormous benefit that gay Asian males, including myself, have gained from this politics of visibility, I believe that such strategies can often miss their mark. To take an example, in January 1992 a letter was printed in *Campaign* (a Sydney gay magazine) in response to the use - the first in Australian gay publishing history - of an Asian cover model. I quote the letter in full at large to reveal the extent of his affective reaction:

I have to compliment you on the beautiful guy on the November cover, Linden Davidson. But when I looked inside I was disappointed to see that Asian queen Chee Kun Woo. He would probably look good in the *Hong Kong Weekly*. How come there are thousands of gay men coming out from Asian countries? [...]

It is okay to go to bed (for one night) with a coloured person but to have an everlasting love affair is out of the question. So you are kidding yourself when you featured an Asian on the front cover and try to be multicultural. It is only the stupid Australian (gay poofers) who want the so-called "multicultural" pot. We hate each other. There are only a few white men interested in the small Asian dick. You can show me a small dick and show me a big black one and it is more important to go off with the big black one than the small Asian one.

So whatever you do there is never going to be harmony between the colours and the whites and others. We just laugh at

you and other journalists who are in a dream world (Phillips, 1992).

Both the letter and the publication were attacked and *Campaign Australia* was forced to print an explanation of the editorial decision as well as reserving the next two editions' letters pages to responses. While it's possible to pull apart the flimsy argument of this disjointed letter, it's more interesting to consider the sheer complexity of the concerns conflated in the letter; concerns about Asian immigration implied by 'thousands of gay men coming out from Asian countries'; concerns about masculinity working around the 'importance of the big (black) dick'; and finally concerns (or rather a conviction on his part) of the failure of multiculturalism's promise of racial harmony. Clearly an amazing conflation of anxieties crystallised around one Asian body in a gay rag!

The letter also illustrates the continuing affective reaction to, and rejection of, the sight of the gay Asian male. The 'disappointment' that begins the letter soon changes to 'hate'. Instead of the gay Asian male being *invisible*, it is rather the very racial visibility of his 'Asianness' that renders him an object of, in turns, disgust, disappointment, anger and hate. In other words, Asian men's 'invisibility' in gay culture is premised precisely on the visibility of their corporeal racial markers. As Takagi has argued, being 'gay' is not like being 'Asian' because the former is relatively invisible (1996: 25-6). Whereas lesbian and gay people need to 'come out' in order to be seen, we don't need to 'come out' as Asians, insofar as it is (presumably) already visible on our bodies.

This absurdity of coming out as Asian can be usefully inflected by queer theory critiques of 'coming out' as a liberatory strategy in queer politics. As Diana Fuss notes:

To be out, in common gay parlance, is precisely to be no longer out; to be out is to be finally outside of exteriority and all the exclusions and deprivations such outsiderhood imposes. Or, put another way, to be out is really to be in – inside the realm of the visible, the speakable, the culturally intelligible (1991:4).

If the Asian can be considered to always already be 'out', that is to say 'inside the realm of the visible,' it follows that employing strategies to make ourselves 'visible' may be a lost cause. It's my contention that we need to critique the terms of visibility itself, to question what precisely is made visible in what way and to whom. Attempting to counter racism with visibility fails to recognise that racial visibility is a precondition of racism in the first place. To put it bluntly, even if there is increased representation of Asian men in gay spaces, media and organisations, this will not in itself change our predicament so long as gay men for the most part remain disgusted at the very sight of Asians. In the next section, I look more closely at the discursive and visual regimes governing representations of Asians in gay culture.

'As Undesirable as a Woman': Slippages in the Masculinity Politics of Gay Desire

A number of gay Asian men have recently critiqued the ways in which Asian males are represented within gay culture. Richard Fung's ground-breaking essay, 'Looking for My Penis' (1996) was one of the first works to articulate the mechanisms through which racialised power relations are reproduced in western gay erotica. In this essay, Fung argued that the Asian male in Western gay pornography is invariably represented as submissive, passive and undersexed in relation to white men. Similarly, Tony Ayres (1999) locates this power relation in representations of

Asian men in gay magazines. He argues that in representations of Asians the focus is on the curves of the body, which is a photographic convention typically used for the portrayal of women.

In order to critique the construction of these racialised desires Fung mobilises a reversal of Fanon's claim that the Negro is a penis. 'So whereas, as Fanon tells us, "the Negro is eclipsed. He is turned into a penis. He is a penis," the Asian man is defined by a striking absence down there. And if Asian men have no sexuality, how can we have homosexuality?' (1996: 183). This 'striking absence', referring to the stereotype that Asian men have small penises, becomes the fundamental anxiety that structures much gay Asian male writing. Indeed the title of Fung's essay betrays this structuring impetus, which he describes as "my lifelong vocation of looking for my penis, trying to fill in the visual void" (184). What Fung, and others, are trying to get at is that even when Asian men are represented in gay culture the penis is usually cut off, so to speak, from the reader's or viewer's perspective. There is a certain symbolic castration at play, which seems to be central to the workings of this articulation of racialised desires. In short, sexual racism in gay culture works through gendered discourses.

This leads to a rather interesting introjection, on the part of gay Asian men. Kent Chuang in his article 'Using Chopsticks to Eat Steak' comments, "So what do you get when we put a small Asian dick onto a slim Asian frame? A woman, of course, implying that we like to take it up the bum. Absolutely passive." (1999: 47). In another example, Tony Ayres, commenting on another's disgust at the sight of his Asian face says, "It is the demoralising feeling that I am, in the eyes of the majority of the gay male population, as undesirable as a

woman." (1999: 88). As these examples show if gay Asian men have been represented as undesirable by our conflation with femininity then gay Asian men have responded with the re-phallicisation of our bodies in the attempts to mediate this horror. During my research a number of gay Asian men expressed going to the gym in the hopes of becoming more masculine and hence to mitigate the racism they felt on the scene.

However, there are a number of slippages in these passages that I want to tease out because they reveal something about the inter-relation of gender, race and sexuality in the politics of gay desire. Richard Fung's beginning assertion that Asian men are marked by a 'striking absence down there' somehow leads to the claim that 'Asian men have no sexuality', which begs the question of women's sexuality. The slippage from 'not having a penis' to 'not having sexuality' logically presupposes the phallogocentric logic of desire that is not only the traditional grounds of women's exclusion from sexuality, but the very basis of Asian men's exclusion in the first place. In Chuang's quote he slips between having a small dick and being a woman, which he suggests means 'taking it up the bum', the thought of which would make some women squirm. What these slippages reveal is a set of gendered and sexual stereotypes that are the hallmark of phallogocentric (gay) desires and which, in the case of Asians, are inflected through race. What's interesting here is that phallogocentrism is not only the basis for excluding gay Asian males (because we're presumed to have small dicks or because we're passive or 'bottoms'), but that gay Asian males are responding within the same gendered terms.

If the gay Asian male is caught within gendered representations, then Fung's assertion appears paradoxical when he argues, "Asian gay men are men. We can therefore physically experience the pleasures depicted on the screen, since we too have erections and ejaculations and can experience anal penetration." (1996: 187). It seems that Fung is so cornered that his reply takes the form of a tautology: men are men. If, on the whole, gay Asian male writing has revealed how the Asian body is positioned *differently* in the discursive domains of masculinity, then such a positioning severely impedes any appeal to a corporeal commonality on the basis of (natural) male bodies. What occurs in gay Asian men's writings is a reflection of male phallogocentric anxieties in general. The politics surrounding the disavowal of the penis ('the striking absence'), the recovery of the penis ('looking for my penis') or appeals to the penis as a site of securing commonality with the brotherhood ('we too have erections and ejaculations') strikes me as a rather limited enterprise, if not anti-feminist. Gay Asian men's writings for the most part have framed the reader as sympathetic to the horror of castration.

Such responses work within the logic of what Eng calls 'racial castration', which he wittily explores in his book of the same name. Whereas in classic fetishism, defined by Freud, the male fetishist refuses to acknowledge the female's lack of a penis by imputing on the female body a penis that is not there to see, racial castration involves a strange reversal of this logic. Through Eng's reading of *M. Butterfly* he argues that Gallimard, the white male character, blatantly refuses "to see on the body of an Asian male the penis that is clearly there for him to see" (2001: 150). Desire for or against Asians on the gay scene often work through this logic of racial castration, insofar as the reasons given

for excluding or fetishising Asians often rely on discourses of masculinity. Consequently, some gay Asian males respond to such emasculation through a re-masculinization process, such as going to the gym to get a muscular body (see Ayres, 1997). However, here I must diverge and instead follow Eng's warning against "the rehabilitation of Asian American [and Asian Australian] masculinity" (2001: 21). While I recognise that gay Asian men's writings above are responding to a form of sexualised racism, to my mind the response nevertheless accedes to the gendered terms of the debate. I suggest it is because they analyse the cultural representations of Asians in gay culture that are, as they deftly show, reliant on gendered and sexual discursive and visual regimes, that such responses become trapped in a cultural politics of subversion. However, subversion ultimately cannot dismantle those regimes of representation.

In the next section I want to approach this from another angle. Rather than focus on a subversive cultural politics of masculine pride, I want to return to the shameful moment of facing racism on the gay scene with which I began this essay. We have done much to denaturalise racial, gendered and sexual categories – that is, to reveal their fundamentally constructed character – but we have done very little to conceive how we might be, to borrow Levinas' phrase, otherwise than white or otherwise than Asian. I believe this is a consequence of poststructuralism's anti-essentialist stance, which forces us to continuously circle around the repetitive claim that such categories are discursively, socially and culturally constructed. If race, gender and sexuality are constructed, what is prior to such categories, what is effected by such constructions and how are they effected? Drawing on Probyn's (2000)

critique of the politics of pride, in the next section I dwell on the play of disgust and shame in that moment in order to figure the mechanisms involved in losing (one's) face in the face of racism.

Facing Racism or Race-ing Face? Between Shame and Disgust

While the example of Asian men's attempts to get a gym-toned body lie in the hopes of reasserting masculinity, it can also be read in terms of a politics of pride. The shame of being emasculated in gay culture is recovered through the gym that sublimates it into self-esteem. This is echoed in the formation of a group called 'Asian Pride', itself a reflection of the politics of pride in gay liberationist struggles. However, Probyn warns that pride erases the pain of shame and bypasses any individual recognition of disgust. In exploring "disgust and shame as the hidden face of body pride" she outlines a new affective politics grounded in the power of bodies to react (2000: 128).

Recalling that moment when the man at the bar 'palms me off' with which I began this essay, it's clear from his facial expression that he is expressing his disgust at the sight of me. For Probyn, "when we designate something or someone as disgusting [...] we want to distance ourselves from this uncomfortable proximity" (2000: 131). In doing so, he attempts to reassert his distance from the object of his disgust – the Asian. This is more evident in the letter sent to *Campaign Australia*. The very sight of an Asian cover model (when at the time there were literally no representations of Asians in Australian gay media) compels him to publicly state his disgust. It is the consciousness of proximity, of being "within the realm of uneasy categories" (132), that necessitates the theatricality involved in dispelling the uncomfortable situation.

The point I'm trying to make here is that the drama of racial wounding has an affective inter-subjective dimension.

Another moment: I am dancing on the third level of Home nightclubⁱⁱ. It's *Queer Nation*. Third floor plays funky house. Feet tapping, butt wiggling, head bouncing, I feel the groove sending waves down my body. I catch someone smiling at my butt. I'm still dancing. He's smiling. I swivel around, turning my body to face him still tapping, still wiggling, and still bouncing. He's smiling as he traces the lines up my button-fly and up my chest. I'm smiling, waiting for him to see me. He's still smiling until he catches sight of my face and suddenly he frowns and quickly diverts his glance away. I know what it means. Nothing more need be said.

Tony Ayres echoes a similar moment when he writes, "I am at a beat and someone is coming towards me because they are attracted to my shape or size, but turn away as soon as they see my face" (1999: 89-90). To be sure, I am not suggesting that the man who smiled at me necessarily smiled with sexual intent. He may have smiled out of sheer enjoyment in watching me dance or perhaps just sharing in the joy of dancing to good music. Whatever the case, the smile indicates some level of interest or enjoyment and gestures towards the possibility of an interaction, a social dialogue. But when he sees my face, what is it about this face that no longer holds out such possibilities? What is it about this face, or rather how does the abstract machine of faciality function, such that the Asian face no longer needs to be responded to?

In order to understand this we need to grasp what is prior to the Asian face and here I turn to phenomenology. For Alphonso Lingis, in facing another addresses me and in doing so stands

over and before me. "In the interval extended when the other takes a stand apart from me, and through the discourse that moves across that distance, reality is given" (1996: 67). This distance, across which the face of the other appeals, is both the occasion of discourse and the condition for responsibility. "The relationship with alterity is responsibility before the other and for the other." (67).

Seemingly, the Asian face is different. Insofar as Lingis is influenced by Levinas, what he outlines is the face in its ethical relation or the face as an encounter with the Other. However, as Levinas argues "The best way to encounter the Other is not even to notice the color of his eyes!" (1985: 86) for as soon as one recognises blue eyes, for example, one no longer grasps the face in its ethical relation. I want to make a distinction here between what I call 'the social face' and 'the ethical face'. Whereas the ethical face, as Levinas and Lingis conceive it, is what one encounters in their relation with an Other, the social face, as I conceive it, is a socially created image. The social face is framed by the historico-culturally specific discursive and visual regimes of representation that writers such as Fung, Chuang and Ayres have analysed as outlined above, not to mention a myriad of cultural critics, critical race theorists and critical whiteness scholars. Elsewhere I've shown how the Asian face relies on, and is produced through, the legacy of western physiognomy that naturalises the Asian face as a racial category (Caluya, 2005). But here I want to focus on what happens to the ethical face in its relation to the social face.

Roland Barthes in analysing a Frenchman coming face-to-face with a Japanese person writes that the encounter dwells in the "nothingness or excess of the exotic code" (1982: 96).

While the context of France and that of Australia is certainly different socio-historically speaking the point that 'Asians' fall under an 'exotic code', that is, made culturally intelligible through social regimes of racial representation, holds in most Western nations. It is precisely the paradoxical quality of recognising the Asian face that becomes the grounds for – and here I appropriate Povinelli's phrase (2002) – 'the cunning of recognition', since in the moment that one is recognised as Asian one is also *not* recognised as one's self.

What I'm drawing attention to here is the Asianisation of my face as a process of defacement. To be given an Asian face ultimately desecrates my alterity, that is my ability to be truly Other to the one that recognises me as Asian. Do my eyes look like every other pair of 'Asian' eyes? Do my lips look like every other pair of 'Asian' lips? Does my tongue taste the same as every other 'Asian' tongue? Does my kiss have the same touch, the same caress or the same rhythm? As I'm given an Asian face I am cornered into a specific form of otherness, for it is not an alterity that is strange but all too familiar. As some people put it, 'Asians all look the same'.

It is this that constitutes the paradox of nothingness and excess. From the perspective of the 'I' of alterity,, the sign 'Asian' captures nothing about me, nothing about my individuality. Yet it is precisely because of the social regimes of representation that I can be interpreted, read and visualised under the sign of 'Asian'. The sign 'Asian' is always excessive; it always exceeds the inter-personal encounter by drawing on social representations. From this perspective, the ability to recognise that someone is Asian is always already a recognising of the Asian face. Consequently, in the moment of recognition, as *my* face assumes the Asian

face, it loses its ethical imperative and I am no longer recognised. My face no longer requires or commands responsibility from the other. In short, the social face interrupts the ethical face. This is why, in a different context, Fanon argues that the black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man (1967).

Yet, this interpretation of facing racism requires me to acknowledge that racial constitution occurs in and through racial wounding. This focus on racial constitution compels me to move away from thinking of racism as an exclusionary practice. More precisely, as Deleuze and Guattari argue, from the viewpoint of racism, "there is no exterior, there are no people on the outside. There are only people who should be like us and whose crime it is not to be." (1987: 178). This is because:

Racism operates by the determination of degrees of deviance in relation to the White-Man face, which endeavours to integrate nonconforming traits into increasingly eccentric and backward waves, sometimes tolerating them at given places under given conditions, in a given ghetto, sometimes erasing them from the wall, which never abides alterity. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 178).

In other words, racism doesn't work through exclusion but through codifying faces into specific categories. That is, racism works via filtering a variety of faces through regimes of discursive and visual representation that categorises them into set groups via race, gender and sexuality. From this perspective the Asian does not exist prior to the experience of racism. As Scott argues, "It is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience" (1991: 780). By extrapolation, the Asian does not experience racism; rather (anti-Asian) racism is the experience that

constitutes the Asian. To replay this in my terms and this is my main point, *the Asian does not face racism on the gay scene; it is the scene of racism that faces the Asian.*

But what does this mean specifically for the Asian man on the gay scene? As Ridge et. al. argue, social relations on the gay scene are also sexual relations, and here is where the racial and the sexual begin to commingle, for not only are we "labelled as 'Asians' and then socially devalued on the scene, [we] are also sexually devalued and excluded" (1999: 56). As I have argued, however, such experiences of racism should be read not in terms of exclusion but in terms of what they do, what they produce or constitute. As I enter the gay scene with my friends 'I' am no longer 'I', but made culturally intelligible through the sign 'Asian'. I encounter so many instances of sexual exclusion to the extent that I no longer begin with asking 'does he like me?' but with 'does he like Asians?' Even my friends, when trying to set me up with someone, also need to inquire about the person's racial preferences in bed.

On the other hand, there are also other moments that aren't sexually exclusionary but nevertheless lock me into a racialised grid of intelligibility. For example, rice queens often use 'where are you from?' as a pick-up line, which combines the curiosity of racial origins with their sexual interest. Another rice queen once told me that he liked me because 'Asians look like boys'. Such moments reflect a continuing imbrication of racial stereotypes with sexuality on the gay scene. For the Asian man on the gay scene, such moments impinge on their sexual sensibilities and on their sexual expressiveness. When I'm dancing sexily with my gay white friends and I see another white guy checking them out, I move away, dancing by

myself, to make sure he doesn't think that my friend is a rice queen. My point is that the sexual subjectivity of those interpellated as 'Asian' on the gay scene is partially formed in reference to the racial category of 'Asian' because it pervades social interactions on the gay scene. In effect, 'Asianness' filters the social relations and thus sexual relations others have with me and I with them.

But phenomenology opens another path even here. One can simply look away from the Asian face, to deny its proximity or even to deny its existence. Hence the examples given above: a hand shoved in my face, a head turning away. However, Lingis argues that this is only possible if in the first instance that face had the capacity to initiate a response. "I can't be sure, by doing nothing, by refusing to budge from my silence, refuse to recognize the other, deny his right to question me... But these responses are possible only because alterity already faces, and speaks imperatively." (1996: 71). Here is the rub, for even in the act of denying the Other, even in that moment of recognising the Asian face, one nevertheless must have a prior recognition of the encounter with the Other. In other words, even though the man's disgust may be aimed at shaming me, even though he may have done so cruelly, he nevertheless has recognised me as an Other, since he directs his words at me, since he holds his hand out to block my face.

Here I want to rework Lingis' argument in terms of the affective dimensions of the face in order to figure the role of affect in racial wounding. Specifically, I return to the moment of shame in facing racism in order to figure the affective dimensions of the facial encounter. If shame is the interruption of interest and disgust the movement of pulling away (see Sedgwick & Frank, 1995: 134-135), then I can re-read the shameful

moments of racism as an inter-subjective encounter. It has been widely argued (from Darwin on) that the physiological affects of shame and disgust are registered in terms of the face. Shame reduces facial communication:

By dropping his eyes, his eyelids, his head, and sometimes the whole upper part of his body, the individual calls a halt to looking at another person, *particularly the other person's face*, and to the other person's looking at him, *particularly at his face*. [my emphasis] (Sedgwick & Frank: 134).

In disgust the response "intends to maximize the distance between *the face* and the object which disgusts the self" [my emphasis] (Sedgwick & Frank: 135). Shame and disgust both move across the face, they play on the face and, importantly, between faces. In regards to the Asian face as the object of sexual rejection, whether it is shame or disgust the effect is to interrupt face-to-face contact. In doing so, such affects effectively curb the possibility of connecting.

However, Probyn highlights the social relations between shame and disgust when she argues:

disgust forces upon us a tangible sense of the closeness of others: we feel the proximities of objects and people that we fear will invade our bodies ... And if, as a general rule, disgust reveals the object in all of its repellent detail, it causes us to step back, and, in that very action, we are also brought within the range of shame. Recalling that shame arises out of an intense subjective awareness of trespassing proximity, we are then caught between the pull of two forces. Disgust pushes us one way; shame pulls us another (2000: 139).

Thus, disgust and shame can often, though importantly not always, work together in an encounter between two. In the opening anecdote, the disgust

the man expresses causes me to feel shame, which can be read as a form of racial exclusion, but on another level reveals an affective interaction and self-formation.

In that moment of being ashamed in racism, when I find myself the object of another man's disgust, I am forced to flee into the Asian face. This is a double articulation around the Asian sign for as another re-cognises my Asian face, I must simultaneously assume the Asian face. I must assume the Asian face since – to the extent that I am now responsible for answering 'as an Asian' – I am forced to take the Asian face on. "Where are you from?", "What's your 'Asian' name?" and "I know another Asian like you" are all typical examples of this racial homogenisation. If I want to answer back I cannot do so from the 'I' of alterity, the face of alterity, but only through the Asian face.

This is why I argue we cannot confront racism face-to-face, at least not within a framework of visibility. As soon as we fight back 'as Asians' we concede to the terms of 'Asianness' that are pre-given by western regimes of racial representation. The fact that 'Asian' signifies different things if you're in Australia, the USA or the UK (not to mention its different meanings within Asian nations themselves) shows the fundamentally historico-cultural nature of this sign, and in effect, reveals the limitations of any international coalition of 'Asians'. From this perspective inquiring into Asianness or Asian gayness is a moot point, and so too for that matter is inquiring into 'whiteness', because it will always lead us back to social regimes of representation that exceed the self and the encounter with an Other.

It should be clear from what I've argued that I'm in no way trying to recuperate

shame. As Jennifer Biddle (1997: 231) warns, we must be cautious of any uncritical celebration of shame's productivity. Nevertheless I believe it is still possible to analyse the "identity making aspect of shame" (230) in moments of racism. In the painful moments that I've explored in this essay, it should be clear that shame can lead to some quite awful experiences. My point, however, is that shame in moments of facing racism corporealises the racial category even, and this is important, if we disagree with those categories. You might say that shame is the affective dimension to what psychoanalysts of culture have referred to as psychic introjection. However, psychic introjection suggests that one identifies with the category introjected, whereas in my model, regardless of whether one identifies as Asian one nevertheless realises that the sign Asian is used to refer to oneself in such moments.

Specifically for gay Asian men in Australia, this racialisation of the face also connects with the circulation of desire. Painful experiences of racism on the gay scene are formative moments not only for racial identity, but also the sexual subjectivities of those racially wounded. The gay Asian male on the gay scene comes to know himself sexually, to interpret his desirability, through multiple sites of racialised rejections, fetishisations and social interactions. The choices offered to Asians on the scene are to be rejected sexually on the grounds of being Asian or to be fetishised as an Asian. In short, we're stuck between a rock and a hard place. In this way for the Asian male on the gay scene racial intelligibility is inextricably linked with sexual desirability. If we accept this model of racial wounding then addressing anti-Asian racism on the gay scene doesn't necessitate re-investing ourselves in the politics of masculinity or fighting back as

Asians, but in trying to rethink how we might come to be recognised outside of the sign Asian. In other words, I think we should begin to think through how we might be otherwise than Asian and thus how we might connect (sexually or otherwise) with others outside of the sign Asian.

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Notes

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- ⁱ While some of the venues and events I attended during my ethnographic research are places I usually go to I'd argue that the ethnographer occupies a very different posture during fieldwork. For starters, I was sober throughout the ethnographies, something that is difficult in a dance party, and I had to take field notes in the toilets. I also purposefully sought out conversations and introduced myself to different groups, which I otherwise find extremely intimidating. Simultaneously, the research wasn't covert, which meant that people treated me differently sometimes even confrontationally.
- ⁱⁱ Home is a nightclub in Sydney, Australia that mainly caters to a straight crowd, but has recently become the venue for a dance party called 'Queer Nation'.