

Unbelonging: Anti-Asian racism in Australia's gay community

Edition 16, 2023

Dr Gilbert Caluya

DOI: 10.37839/MAR2652-550X16.11

Belonging, at its root, is a fantasy of a socio-cultural space where differences do not impede on feeling connected with others. Some link belonging to our innate human desire for emotional comfort grounded in feelings of recognition, connectedness and/or acceptance. It is often a social emotion: the feeling of affinity with a group, of being part of something larger than ourselves and being welcomed by others. Many of us first experience this feeling in the family home and seek to recreate it in ever widening circles from school to workplaces to neighbourhoods and communities.

If you are lucky, you mostly move through life feeling like you belong. While we all, at some points in time, feel like a 'fish out of water', especially in novel cultural spaces, this experience of benign non-belonging is a temporary feeling and generally exceptional in one's everyday life.

By contrast, if you are unlucky, other people accidentally or purposefully, sometimes even maliciously, ensure you do not feel 'at home'. From overtly violent and bullying behaviour to more subtle workplace discrimination, ill-treatment in everyday life, and social exclusion, homophobia, transphobia, racism, classism, and ableism can make some of us feel we don't belong. This discrimination could manifest as a lack of affinity or feelings of discomfort to being actively demonised and even threatened with violence. Unlike the benign, fleeting non-belonging that sometimes occurs, this unbelonging results from systematic behaviour that blocks or erodes a particular group from belonging. I think of the 'un' in 'unbelonging' as highlighting the active undoing of someone's belonging, unravelling their sense of social connection and

sometimes safety.

For minority groups that experience unbelonging, identity politics creates a refuge. It replaces that unbelonging from family, the neighbourhood, or the nation with the notion of a 'community' through shared experiences around subjugated identities. This is why I believed as a teenager that when I finally became part of the gay community, I would feel whole. Facing homophobia in the home, in the Filipino community, in the Catholic Church, and at school, I genuinely believed that once I became part of the gay community I would finally belong somewhere.

However, as I have written previously of my experiences of the gay scene in the late 1990s and early 2000s, I was in for a rude awakening. The racism I experienced on the Australian gay scene was so explicit, so vitriolic, so visceral, and so pervasive, I was ill-prepared for the shock. At that time, gay Asian men experienced being excluded from entering gay venues, refused service at the bar, and blocked from parts of the dancefloor. On some occasions I was spat on, sworn at, tripped or pushed down staircases, and sexually humiliated. Physically, socially, emotionally, gay Asian men were made to feel that we did not belong in the Australian gay community.

The persistence of sexual racism

Thankfully, many of those more overt practices of social and physical exclusion have receded from Australian gay culture today. While they have not entirely disappeared, they are rare and no longer go unchallenged. It indicates some norms are shifting. But one persistent practice that continues today is sexual racism: the practice of excluding men from, or including men in, dating and sexual life on the basis of racial stereotypes and characteristics. Online dating and dating apps made sexual exclusion more explicit on people's dating profiles and introduced the ability to filter potential dates by race and ethnicity. While some gay dating apps have attempted to remove racial filtering and banned racial abuse, such as Grindr, this has not stopped

the pervasiveness of sexual racism.

Often these practices are defended as benign sexual preferences. One oft-cited study addresses this defence by demonstrating that gay white men who have racialised sexual preferences (specifically anti-Asian) were more likely to hold other generic racist views. This has been held up as proof that racial sexual preferences are indeed racist. But this is a guilt-by-association argument. If at some point in time, racialised sexual preferences are no longer strongly correlated with wider racist views, as a later US study found, is it still racist?

As many gay Asian men, including myself, have argued, sexual racism is problematic in and of itself. Sexual racism occurs when a racial preference is grounded in histories of racist stereotyping and violence, which reinforces racial hierarchies of inequality and violence through their dating, sexual and relationship practices. From this perspective, it does not matter whether they *also* hold *other* racist views because the racism is in the sexual and/or romantic practice itself.

Sexual racism as a cultural pattern establishes a racial hierarchy of desirability in the community that devalues gay Asian men in Australian gay culture. Being subjected to sexual racism tends to lead to lower self-esteem and lower life satisfaction. Body-shaming of Asian men is rife and often intertwines misogyny, racism and transphobia. For example, the 'small Asian dick' stereotype combined with the 'lack of hair' stereotype are often attributed to Asian men being 'boyish' or feminine. In such cases, white cultural expectations of beauty, ageing and gender, combine to portray Asian men as lacking masculinity. This can be undesirable to some gay men who dismiss Asian men as mere 'boys'. But this same stereotype can be fetishised by other gay white men, who use the perceived boyishness and/or effeminacy of Asian men to justify hierarchical relationship practices that they impose on their sexual or romantic Asian partners. This is often imposed as assumed gendered roles of the Asian boyfriend who may be treated as the woman or wife of the relationship not only by the white boyfriend but their family and social network, which brings sexist stereotypes and practices into play. For example, the Asian

partner may be expected to take on more domestic duties, particularly cooking, and submit to their partner's sexual needs. In major life decisions about future careers, place of residence, etc. the Asian 'boy' may be expected to defer to their white partner's career.

Marriage equality

In recent years, Australia has moved into a period of what some refer to as 'homonormativity', where gay couples are seen to mimic heterosexual ideals of the married, nuclear family from which they have been historically excluded. The legal recognition of same-sex de facto couples, the legalisation of same-sex unions and marriages, the right to access to reproductive technologies and the right to adoption have increasingly made this possible. Yet as gay rights and relationships are increasingly normalised in Australian society, this interacts in unusual ways with continuing racism in the gay community.

Take, for instance, the marriage equality vote in Australia. The pro-marriage equality campaign aimed to make same-sex marriage legal in Australia. During the public debates across media, supporters of marriage equality often pointed to the similarities with the decriminalisation of interracial marriages, under the rallying motto: 'love is love'. This was borrowed directly from the US marriage equality campaign, which often cited the *Loving vs Virginia (1967)* case, which ended anti-miscegenation laws, as a precedent for expanding marriage equality. Another slogan was 'love doesn't discriminate'.

However, while pro-marriage equality campaigners pointed to the legalisation of interracial marriage as a precedent to support same-sex marriage, simultaneously gay white men in Australia actively practiced sexual racism as detailed above. In other words, many gay white men pointed to a law that opposed anti-miscegenation, that challenged the disgust at interracial sexual mixing, as a precedent for their own right to marry, even while simultaneously practicing sexual racism, which socially

enforces the racial exclusion of Asians from gay romantic and sexual life. Thus, attempting to highlight the connection between legalising interracial heterosexual marriages and same-sex marriages, actually served to highlight the continuation of racially-exclusionary sexual practices from anti-miscegenation to sexual racism.

Another example from the marriage equality plebiscite was a meme that circulated among marriage equality supporters asking the viewer to consider who Australia would be associated with on this issue. On one side, under the 'Yes' column, they listed countries that had legalised marriage equality, the vast majority of which (except Brazil and Argentina) were Western countries. On the other side, under 'No', were countries that did not support marriage equality. Here, they listed Australia among countries from the Asian and African continents, including many Muslim-majority countries. At the bottom of the meme it reads: 'This is the company you keep'. There is no substantive argument to support marriage equality in the meme, merely the fear and shame of being associated with such 'backward' countries. This draws on longer colonial histories that posited a hierarchy of civilizations. The meme mobilises the reactionary, racist disgust that white Australians have of Asian and African countries, peoples and cultures, and particularly against Muslim-majority countries in the context of the War on Terror, to persuade the public to vote Yes.

Finally, when the Yes campaign won the plebiscite, ABC election analyst Antony Green, claimed that the high 'No' vote in Western Sydney was because the state, New South Wales, 'has, by far, the highest proportion of people born in non-English-speaking countries'. On the very eve of our win, one of Australia's most publicly trusted analysts, blamed the No vote on migrants from 'non-English speaking backgrounds'. Instead of celebrating, some queers of colour spent our time fielding accusations. Public commentators churned out explanations of the ostensible migrant No vote (backward cultures, migrants as naturally conservative, the village mentality) which set the terms of the debate, even when activists and progressive academics attempted to defend migrants.

While one study of the marriage equality vote suggested that electorates with larger

proportions of ‘immigrants’ or ‘multicultural electorates’ had higher opposition to same-sex marriage, ‘immigrants’ was narrowly defined as foreign-born, non-Christian religious, recently-arrived immigrants from non-English speaking backgrounds. This problematically conflates non-Christian religion, foreignness, non-Anglophonic background, migration status and multiculturalism. Another analysis that disaggregates the variables demonstrated that the more salient correlation was not a link between being born overseas and the No vote, but between being religious (including Christian) and voting No. Further calculations using other survey data not only corroborate that religiosity is strongly correlated with opposition to gay rights but also that religiosity suppressed the liberalising effects of education, parental education and city residence.

Thus, at the very moment gay Asian Australians were supposed to be celebrating our historic win with our gay community, instead we were unceremoniously ejected from the celebrations as political enemies simply because we came from ‘non-English speaking backgrounds’. We were forced to defend ourselves and our communities and expected to bear the brunt of guilt for the No vote. The fact that, in some queer spaces, straight white allies were more welcomed into the celebrations, while queer Asian Australians, among other queer of colour communities, were treated with suspicion and even hatred, demonstrates how much whiteness shaped the marriage equality debate in Australia. Overall, the marriage equality plebiscite in Australia underscored how much gay Asian ‘inclusion’ in the (white) gay community is often tenuous.

Queer families

The second key foundation of homonormative times is the normalisation of gay families that mimic white, heterosexual, middle-class nuclear families. Historically, gay communities cultivated more radical ‘families of choice’ that sought to fill in for the loss of family many gay people experienced after coming out, such as being disowned and kicked out of their parent’s home. As a result, early lesbian and gay

liberationists were highly critical of the nuclear family, often arguing that it was central to their oppression. Gay people were forced to create alternative kinships and networks of care because the state had legally blocked their ability to replicate the kinds of security available to straight relationships. Even after homosexual relationships were decriminalised their relationship status was not legally recognised and were often banned from adopting or using in vitro fertilisation services.

As lesbian and gay rights were won in the latter half of the twentieth century, the opportunity for white, middle-class gay couples to mimic white, heterosexual, middle-class nuclear families led to a period of normalising this ideal particularly in US gay mainstream media and entertainment. The growth of same-sex de facto and married couples has created a more secure base for a growing interest in having children, including through surrogacy. Since Australia legally bans commercial surrogacy, gay couples wanting to have children through surrogacy need to seek an altruistic surrogate in Australia or turn to commercial surrogacy outside Australia. Some Australian white gay couples have turned to Asia, such as India, Cambodia and Thailand, to find surrogates through commercial means.

However, inter-country, interracial surrogacy for gay white couples raises new problems. In most instances, the gay white male couple uses gestational surrogacy, which means the baby is not biologically related to the surrogate mother. This allows gay white male couples to ensure their baby is white while also including the fathers as donors. Such arrangements, no matter how well intentioned, nevertheless exploit the power imbalance between the rich gay white men in an overdeveloped nation hiring surrogates and the poor Asian women renting their bodies to produce white children. The inter-country commercial surrogacy is a commercial industry based on the commodification of Asian women's wombs to produce white babies that ensure the reproduction of white gay families in the Global North, including Australia. The labour of carrying a baby to term and giving birth, the physical toll it takes, and the risks it carries for the surrogate's body, is outsourced to people who are less privileged in relation to gender, race, and class.

This is difficult to disentangle from longer histories of the sexual commodification of Asian women by Western men particularly in conjunction with military campaigns in Asia and the Pacific. While gay white men are not commodifying Asian women for sex per se, they are commodifying them for the sexual reproduction of their white families. Using a wider angle, gay white men outsourcing reproductive labour to Asian women is steeped in the colonial histories of using Asians for cheap labour, aka 'coolie labour', which are replicated in contemporary global economies that treat Asian bodies (and even body parts) as tradeable commodities: from sex tourism to medical tourism and now surrogacy tourism. It is notable that the commodification of Asian wombs for rent that guarantee white families while outsourcing reproductive labour, emerges precisely in the global context of racist demographic anxieties about 'Asian overpopulation', which feature heavily in white nationalist fears about high Asian birth rates in the West.

I know some gay Asian men who do not care about the issues mentioned here. Many even actively participate in these practices themselves, such as sexual racism against other Asians and using Asian commercial surrogacy services. But these practices sit uneasily with me at an ethical and political level. Personally, it is quite difficult to navigate these issues. I am genuinely happy that some of my gay community are finally able to have children and that we have more expansive reproductive rights. But the ease with which many gay white men exploited systems of inequality for their families, and the anger they have shown when I have raised these issues, remind me that I'm expected to turn my critical gaze away. In other words, my belonging to the Australian gay community requires me to let go of my solidarity to a broader Asian community.

Gay Asian men's belonging in the Australian gay community is tenuous, fragile and perpetually contingent on our perceived usefulness and 'good behaviour'. Sometimes our inclusion is interrogated as we saw after the marriage equality plebiscite. Sometimes we are wheeled out to demonstrate inclusiveness in organisations, even while racially exclusionary practices are openly supported in Australian gay dating life. We are tokenised to diversify gay advertising and LGBTIQ+ organisation board

rooms, but, similar to white nationalism, we are treated as permanent guests who out of politeness are expected to not raise thorny questions about colonialism and racism. Although I've found a way to live with it (I've been at this a long time) I struggle to call this predicament 'belonging'.

Image credit: Aiden Craver/Unsplash. (This image has been cropped)