

**The double invisibility of queer Asian Canadians:
Reproduction of racism in LGBTQIA2S+ spaces and sexism in Asian homes**

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INTRODUCTION

The lived experiences of queer people of colour in Canada are shaped by the intersection of structural prejudices against race, gender, and sexuality (Fuks et al., 2018; Logie & Rwigema, 2014; Munro et al., 2013). With (at least) a double minority status of being queer and Asian, queer Asian Canadians face oppression from both the majority and single minority groups, such that intra-minority conflicts manifest in racism in White-dominated LGBTQIA2S+ spaces and sexism in cis-heteronormative Asian households (Hart et al., 2021).

Within the White-centric LGBTQIA2S+ community, the construction of queerness as an essentialist sexual identity feeds into White privilege, thereby positioning Whiteness as the face of queerness (Giwa & Greensmith, 2012; Logie & Rwigema, 2014; Patel, 2019). The erasure of racial discourse in the queer scene prompts racism, including queerphobic racism (e.g., not being desirable) and sexualized racism (e.g., being feminized) experienced by queer Asian Canadians (Fung, 1996; Gopinath, 2005; Patel, 2019). As follows, queer people of colour are burdened by a lack of belonging and social support in the LGBTQIA2S+ community, the denial of queer and Asian identities, and internalized oppression (Giwa & Greensmith, 2012; Logie & Rwigema, 2014). At home where parents perpetuate the fabric of cis-heteronormativity in Asia, the Western rhetoric of coming out dishonours the family name in a collectivist climate (Fuks et al., 2018; Gopinath, 2005). Given that sexism denies their queerness, queer Asian Canadians anticipate rejection, ostracization, and stigmatization from family (Hart et al., 2021; Ocampo & Soodjinda, 2016). In protecting not only family reputation and harmony but also family support that buffers racism, queer people of colour ultimately resort to the stressful concealment of their queer identity as a coping mechanism (Greene, 2000; Ocampo & Soodjinda, 2016).

This paper explores how racism and sexism are (re)produced in two spaces of oppression

— LBGTQIA2S+ (White) spaces and Asian (cis-heteronormative) homes — and restrict performances of intersectionality for first-generation queer Asian Canadians. I will also offer insights into how queer Asian Canadians mitigate the incompatibility between their queer and Asian identities to become more secure in their intersectionality and find self-acceptance.

METHODS & LIMITATIONS

This paper shares socially constructed meanings from the intersectional experiences of three first-generation queer Asian Canadians at The University of British Columbia (Vancouver Campus) (Table 1). The inclusion criteria selected for participants who identify as Asian, a first-generation immigrant to Canada, and gender and sexual minorities. Using a phenomenological approach, I obtained the participants' informed consent, recorded our semi-structured conversations on identity and belonging, and analyzed their accounts for themes.

Table 1. *The demographics of first-generation queer Asian Canadian participants (n = 3).*

Pseudonym	Gender identity	Sexual identity	Ethnoracial & cultural identities	Immigrated from
SG (she/her)	Woman	Bisexual	Asian; [undisclosed]	[undisclosed]
LG (she/her)	Woman	Sexual minority	East Asian; Chinese Canadian	China
PT (they/them)	Non-binary	Sexual minority	East Asian; Filipinx-born Chinese Canadian	The Philippines

A limitation of the study is its small sample size ($n = 3$) which inadequately captures the diversity of queer and Asian identities and experiences. Participation bias is another limitation; because I sampled through my social network, my frequent contact and exchange of ideas with the participants as friends may somewhat homogenize the queer Asian Canadian attitudes reported in this paper. Indeed, there is an inherent bias in my interpretation of the data, mostly pertaining to my own understanding of intersectionality as a queer Asian Canadian.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Racism in White-centric LBGTQIA2S+ spaces

A theme of rejection emerged from the entitlement of White privilege, resulting in the participants' poor integration into the mainstream LGBTQIA2S+ community despite efforts to do so. SG was called out in a queer and White friend circle after sharing the fraternal birth order effect on homosexuality in men (Blanchard & Bogaert, 1996): "Maybe we shouldn't talk about the biological component of being queer." SG's friend felt comfortable, and that they had a right, to dismiss SG's recent learning on a facet of queer identity development because their Whiteness validates their understanding of queerness, thereby ethnocentrically positioning their Western perspective as superior to a racialized perspective. By instilling the notion of a "correct" queer value system, they not only reproduce binary thinking in this LGBTQIA2S+ (White) space but also urge SG to assimilate into Western discourses of queerness. The pain of in-group exclusion silences racialized voices from the LGBTQIA2S+ community because such attributed "wrongness" compels people of colour to accommodate White standards to be accepted as queer (Fung, 1986). Western queerness, in turn, mobilizes support for Whiteness as its norm.

Similarly, LG and PT were repeatedly denied seats at semi-empty tables by White attendees at a drag show in East Vancouver. LG said, "I don't know how many [people] we asked, maybe three or four, but at that point it was too many for me." As they tried to make their way to stand at the back instead, PT recounted, "[LG] was just trying to pass and [a famous White YouTuber] was just like, 'This seat is also taken.'" Quite literally, the racial power dynamic is depicted through White folks' entitlement to comfortably take up space (read: to sit in the front) that displaces Asians (read: to stand at the back). LG and PT did not explicitly mention that the majority race present was White until I asked two clarifying questions. The censoring of race as a critical detail in their encounters may (i) be a form of denial that racism exists in the LGBTQIA2S+ community — a community they see as inclusive and a source of

support (Munro et al., 2013) and/or (ii) play into the narrative that Canadians are too polite to talk about race and subsequently rid racial discourse altogether (Williams, 2017). Both derivations of their framing sustain the continued domination of Whiteness in the LGBTQIA2S+ community which enables White folks to reject queer people of colour.

The participants' Asian identity is simultaneously the source of discrimination and erasure in the LGBTQIA2S+ community (Giwa & Greensmith, 2012; Patel, 2019). For as long as queer White folks exercise their White privilege by rejecting queer Asian Canadians — that is, placing (physical) distance between their proximity to colour, different perspectives, and intersectionality — racism will continue to hinder racialized minorities' full participation in the queer scene and cater the celebration of queerness to the White sociopolitical agenda.

Sexism (anti-queer prejudice) in cis-heteronormative first-generation Asian homes

At home, a prominent theme among the participants is the concealment of queer identity as a consequence of cissexism and heterosexism. There appear to be two roots to concealment: the anticipation of parental rejection and stigma from extended family. Queer Asian Canadians then reach an unfair compromise that places Asianness before queerness, rendering their intersectionality invisible. In response to sexism expressed by her father, SG recalled, “I couldn't say anything or else [he'd] be like, ‘Oh why are you defending [the queer community] so much? Are you also queer?’ I said as much as I felt would be safe to say.” Having to hold back her support for the LGBTQIA2S+ community restricts her honest performance and self-acceptance of queerness, but SG made a compromise to upkeep apparent family harmony rather than risk rejection. LG and PT have been subject to more explicit anti-queer prejudice from their parents, with warnings like “don't be queer yourself” to LG and “you're not my son if you're gay” to PT's brother. Comparable to Fuks et al.'s (2018) findings, LG and PT struggle to come out given

the anticipation of disappointment and abandonment from crossing their parents' defined cis-heteronormative boundaries. As a non-binary individual, PT is frustrated by the constant reinforcement of womanly expectations placed on them but feels the cultural pressure to conform: "If you ever see photos of me being feminine, that's just because I felt like I had to." This compromise to better fit into the gender binary leads to internalized cissexism: "I think I misgender myself. *Laughs* When I'm talking about myself I use— I sometimes use— I often use she/her pronouns." The internalized denial of their non-binary identity at home, compounded by recurrent anti-queer prejudice from their parents, may be detrimental to PT's self-esteem and connection with their heritage. Thus, performances of intersectionality are absent at home not only because of parental rejection of queerness but also heritage rejection upon the assumption of a Western orientation that morally positions Asia as traditional and less progressive than the West (Fuks et al., 2018; Leung, 2017).

All participants spoke about the responsibility that their parents have over their (hetero)sexuality, such that raising a queer child would reflect badly on the parents' reputation within the extended family. SG explained, "[Being queer] means that your parents failed you. If you aren't a cis hetero person the blame goes to your ... parents." As per the model minority myth, the pressure to preserve an unproblematic, "successful" image involves the consideration of both collectivism and conformity to the heteronormative Asian culture (Chastain, 2021). By making the compromise to hide their queer identity and transferring the so-called responsibility to their own hands, participants could protect their parents from saving face and experiencing stigma as model minorities: "I don't wanna make [my parents] feel ashamed of me ... [Coming out] would bring them a lot of turmoil in terms of ... how they're going to have to dodge [my family's] questions about me ... and I don't really want that for them" (LG). Queer immigrants

of colour share this guilt for (potentially) bringing shame to the family name by coming out (Fuks et al., 2018; Gopinath, 2005). Accordingly, queer Asian Canadians stay closeted as an act of collectivism because, unlike individualistic Western culture, they must consider how their queer identity will be received by and impact their parents and extended family, oftentimes above themselves. Cissexism and heterosexism stress the concealment of queerness for queer Asian Canadians because conformity to cultural norms at home, at the sacrifice of intersectionality, dissipates the two-fold familial rejection from their parents and extended family.

Buffering oppression through a multicultural value system and social networks

Queer Asian Canadians' double invisibility in LGBTQIA2S+ (White) spaces and Asian (cis-heteronormative) homes as a result of racism and sexism, respectively, is a stressor in developing secure intersectional identities. SG's reflection that "I would always be Asian or a woman before I'm queer" beautifully encapsulates the marginalization of queerness within said spaces of oppression. Participants buffer the complex and overlapping oppression they experience by building a multicultural value system and seeking support from a partner and queer Asian social networks. For the former strategy, SG described, "The parts of my identity that I think of as [Asian], I pick and choose." Specifically, she keeps attitudes like "respect for elders" and opts out of anti-queer ideologies or traditional gender roles from her culture. SG balances contradictory queer and Asian values by curating a value system that simultaneously honours her heritage roots yet precludes the sexist aspects of it. Likewise, LG shared that her Chinese grandparents' gendered division of labour is "not a model for any way of how I'm gonna live." As a corollary of acculturation to Western society, she deviates from the traditional Asian (and possibly model minority) mold, and the integration of Chinese and Canadian cultures encourages well-being and security in her queer and Asian identities (Berry & Hou, 2016). The

participants' line of thinking is not a complete detachment from Asian culture per se; finding acceptance and validation for their queerness in Western culture allows queer Asian Canadians to (re)integrate constructive Asian values into their lives (Fuks et al., 2018).

The constancy of support from partnered relationships and friendships constructs an intimate pocket of safety that buffers against (internalized) racism and sexism. For LG, knowing that her current “relationship is the best relationship for me ... I’ve found my person and ... being queer allows me to [be with them],” she has the motivation to protect her relationship through combating sexism from family and tolerating being closeted for now. At public LGBTQIA2S+ events, the presence of other queer Asian Canadian friends brings comfort in familiarity and ensures a safety net to fall back on when faced with racism. Participation and social support in distinct queer Asian spaces are crucial to developing security in intersectionality (Fung, 1986). By knowing that Waacking emerged from LGBTQIA2S+ clubs in the ’70s and taking Waacking classes with a predominately Asian demographic, SG is “expressing a certain part of queerness.” Under an empowering atmosphere where the emphasis is on feeling good in a queer body rather than legitimizing queerness, SG is able to find belonging in this LGBTQIA2S+ subculture and wrestle with her intersectional identities without judgment.

CONCLUSION

Being queer and Asian is “a very powerful identity” (LG). The rejection from racist LGBTQIA2S+ spaces and concealment of queer identity in sexist Asian homes push first-generation queer Asian Canadians to develop a multicultural value system that enables performances of intersectionality. Sharing space with queer Asians allows the participants to have mutual support and acceptance for intersectionality, thereby discouraging the assimilatory play into the hegemonic, reductionist narratives of queerness and Asianness in Western society.

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