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Difficult belongings

Abstract:

The emergence of queer theory and politics in the 1990s was widely touted as heralding a new era of sexual inclusivity. However, this has not proved to be the case for everyone. This fictocritical essay features three vignettes of gay male Asian migrants living in Australia. We suggest that the sense of belonging these men develop is complex and difficult. All three subjects find themselves straddling two artificially polarised worlds: the white and modern world of 'gay Australia' and the racialised and striated 'migrant' world. This work explores some intersections of sexuality, belonging, race and migration in contemporary Australia through alternating acts of scholarly and creative writing.

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Keywords:

Creative Writing – Queer writing – Gay Asian migrants – belonging – fictocriticism – Australian culture

The emergence of queer theory and politics in the 1990s was widely touted as heralding a new era of sexual inclusivity. The traditional categories of 'homosexual' and 'heterosexual' were superseded by an all-encompassing celebration of sexual diversity. Or so it seemed. For some groups, the utopian promise of queer has fallen short. Despite the many gains that queers have made, neither 'queer', 'ethnic' nor 'mainstream' communities have been easy places for those who do not identify as 'white' and 'heterosexual'.

Building on that, this article will interrogate some examples of how sexuality, race, migration, belonging and writing intersect in contemporary Australia. The importance of writing is foregrounded firstly in our choice of genre. This essay belongs within the broad-ranging genre known as fictocriticism. According to anthropologist Mick Taussig, 'fictocriticism is humorous and playful and suspicious of authority and therefore in its own way political, nowhere more so than its cockeyed wink at the necessary fiction of the fiction/non-fiction divide' (cited in Muecke 2010: 180). Literary scholar Anne Brewster remarks: 'Fictocriticism is one practice which enables the interrogation and the shifting of the boundaries of the essay (or any other genre)' (1996: 90). Developing on Taussig and Brewster's observations, we hope to demonstrate how fictocriticism can help comment on and think through certain aspects of 'reality' in a way that might not be achievable in more traditional 'fiction' or 'non-fiction'. We combine fictional vignettes with analyses of the issues that are raised in these vignettes.

Secondly, we acknowledge that 'belonging' has been a popular theme in Australian writing since at least the 1980s. This period has seen a proliferation of writing (particularly life writing) by members of groups whose belonging within Australian society had been – a albeit in different ways, and to different degrees—contested throughout history. These groups have included migrant authors, Indigenous authors, queer authors, and women authors (Gelder and Salzman 2009). Said authors have articulated their experiences of belonging – or trying to belong, or not-quite-belonging, or belonging to two (or more) cultures – in Australia. They have done this via a range of textual forms, including fictocriticism, as well as fiction, poetry, autobiography and journalism. Our article forms a kind of dialogue with the work of these authors.

So, what is 'belonging' in this context? Political scientist Montserat Guibernaut goes some way towards answering this question when she writes: 'Belonging fosters an emotional attachment; it prompts the expansion of the individual's personality to embrace the attributes of the group' (2013: 28). Cultural theorist Elspeth Probyn has written about 'the desire that individuals have to belong', which she describes as

> a tenacious and fragile desire that is ... increasingly performed in the knowledge of the impossibility of ever really and truly belonging, along with the fear that the stability of belonging and the sanctity of belonging are forever past. (1996: 8)

Thus, 'belonging' is personally and politically significant. 'Belonging' is what so many of us aspire to. Belonging is what is meant to make us feel grounded, indeed, make us feel real ('long' to 'be').

Also, and this is suggested in Probyn's passage above, belonging is inherently *difficult*. Belonging can be particularly difficult for those who do not identify as 'white' and who live in Australia, where (as elsewhere) whiteness has been a marker of social power.[1] Belonging can still – in an era marked by a supposed 'tolerance' (a famously fraught concept) towards sexual diversity – be difficult for those who do not identify as heterosexual.[2]

The term 'difficult belongings', thus, is useful because it encapsulates the tenuous nature of the sexuality/migration/race/belonging nexus. On the one hand, the sense of belonging that comes from immersion in a specifically queer identity or community is juxtaposed, uncomfortably, with the alienation (or perhaps dissonance) that accompanies migration. On the other hand, the assumption of 'belonging' to a culture or community that is defined in ethnic terms, through primordial links, is problematised by sexuality and the invariably contentious space occupied by 'divergent' or 'queer' sexualities within discrete and autonomous migrant cultures.

In contemporary academic discourse, the term 'queer' encompasses gender and sexual practices that fall outside the strict traditional definition of heterosexuality, or are non-heteronormative, but cannot be neatly categorised as 'gay' or 'lesbian' behaviours or practices. Accordingly, in this essay, where the lived experiences of the three gay male characters described in the vignettes are characterised by a complex interaction between sexuality and race, the term is used, firstly, as a signification of disruption within hetero-patriarchal socio-cultural paradigms, if not specifically a disruption of 'gay' identity. In this sense, we acknowledge varying inflections on the term 'queer' in non-western and non-white contexts, where the term readily accommodates 'everyday practices that resist both hegemonic norms as well as attempts to translate them into self-conscious counter-hegemonic movements' (Menon 2007: 18, see also Menon 2005). Secondly, 'queer' suggests a utopic space in which sexual diversity is embraced, and hierarchies and discrimination are disrupted. This utopic space was hinted at in this essay's opening paragraph, and has been envisioned by activists going back to at least the gay liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s. As the late Jose Esteban Munoz famously put it, this queer utopia 'is not yet here ... We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that is distilled from the past and used to imagine a future' (2009: 1).

All three characters featured in this essay are queer men[3] of Asian descent who are living in contemporary Australia. This is not insignificant given the large number of migrants from Asian countries that have settled in Australia in recent decades (Bowen 2012). As Eithne Luibheid points out, gay Asian men 'make up the largest regional group of entrants under Australia's provisions for same-sex couples' migrating to this country (2008: 177). We specifically focus on three significant features of the migrant – and, specifically, the queer migrant – experience, and how they inform the queer migrant's sense of belonging. These features are family and faith; self-regard and concepts of community; and interracial desire and ageing. The three queer migrant narratives unfold in Australia, though they might well echo the experiences of queer migrants living in a range of Western countries (see Chan 1995, Eng and Hom 1998, Gopinath 2005, Ratti, 1993).

We envision this article as a contribution to ongoing queer work on the issue of migration. We have mentioned the important proliferation of writings by migrant authors in Australia since the 1980s. According to Luibheid, 'international migration and related transnationalizing processes have transformed every facet of our social, cultural, economic, and political lives in recent decades' (2008: 169). Migration has occasionally been framed in heteronormative terms:

> migrants are sometimes described as the upholders of family values that promise to remoralize a citizenry that has lost its virtue. Or, within national heterosexual romance narratives, they are painted as passionately desiring the nation, as shown by their migration; thus citizens depend on migrants to show that the nation remains lovable (Luibheid 2008: 169-70).

Alternately, but equally problematically, migrants – and especially non-white migrants – have elsewhere been stereotyped as 'the bearers of aberrant sexual practices, questionable sexual morals, and sexually transmitted diseases, including AIDS, that threaten to "contaminate" the citizenry' (Luibheid 2008: 170). Here, migrants pose a sexual and physical danger to the (white) Australian nation-state. Conversely, as Luibheid demonstrates, queer migration scholarship has sought to move beyond stereotypes and explore the diverse lived experiences of queer migrants. Questions that have energised this research field include, what challenges have queer migrants faced as they have moved between countries and cultures? To which country/culture do they feel a sense of belonging? How are whiteness, location and sexuality intertwined in their everyday lives?

Jon

At 30, Jon was caught between a desire to be honest and forthright with this mother, and a need for stability and quietude in his relationship with her. He had long waited for the right time to come out; to let his parents know that he wasn't dating girls and that he liked men and hoped to meet a guy with whom he could envisage a future. That right time had never materialised. He had decided early on that he would only come out if he was in a stable relationship. He had long anticipated his mother's fears and prejudices – her fear that he would always stay single; her conception of a 'lifestyle' that was inherently hostile to the idea of companionship; her fears about the social opprobrium attached to coming out as gay and the implications it would have in his professional life; her fears about disease – and knew that she would voice her apprehensions equivocally, not as outright disapproval but as concern for his wellbeing. He needed a stable partner to support him through the process as well as to assuage his mother's fears.

Jon and his mother had arrived in Australia from the Philippines when Jon was five years old. They had been brought over to Perth by her second husband, an Australian aid worker then based in Manila. Jon's stepfather was a practicing Catholic and Jon's upbringing and education were closely intertwined with the church. His mother, although nominally religious when they lived in the Philippines, now followed her husband's lead in faith and family matters assiduously. After his stepfather's death, his mother maintained her involvement in the church and its affiliated charities.

In his senior year, Jon was granted considerable autonomy. When Jon informed his mother of his decision to go to university in Melbourne, she was anything but discouraging. She was happy that he was going to what she hoped were greener pastures and promised to support him financially.

When he arrived in Melbourne, it was as if the firm yet intangible lines that had circumscribed his life in Perth suddenly vanished, receding further into the background with every new encounter in this city. At 30, he still had the discretion and quiet circumspection of his youth but he was now much more intrepid, more outgoing and more willing to take a chance. Now, he felt an undeniable need to bring greater clarity to his life, and reconcile those difficult and convoluted bits that defied easy reconciliation. He admitted to himself that he wasn't likely to be in a steady partnership anytime soon but nevertheless resolved to come out to his mother when he met her next.

The influence of family and religion on an individual's sense of belonging and/as a queer subject cannot be overestimated. Both can provide a sense of emotional support and stability, just as both can be oppressive. And just as an individual is born into a particular family, so too are they born into that family's religious beliefs – regardless of whether or not the individual chooses to embrace or reject these beliefs. Migration cannot necessarily sever an individual's ties with family or religion, and at any rate, severing these ties may not necessarily be an individual's aim or desire (Gorman and Nash 2014, Howe 2007).

Jon's story bears out the above points. Jon never did make the choice between his parents (and, by extension, their chosen faith, Catholicism) and his sexuality. This is sexuality which he has slowly embraced in his adopted city of Melbourne. Migration – there are two migrations in this narrative – have enabled Jon to develop relationships with his faith and his sexual identity. As a young child, he migrated to Perth, and religion became an important aspect of his life via his stepfather. It was in 'migrating' to another Australian city (Melbourne) that Jon developed a sense of belonging as a queer subject. This migration itself belongs to a history of men and women relocating to urban centres and, in doing so, embracing non-heterosexual identities (Weston 1995).

In Jon's narrative, faith is contextualised by migration. Jon's adoption of a faith-based worldview, or at least its appurtenances, is intertwined with his adoption of a new homeland. In literary and ethnographic writing, migration has been posited as a complex and contested experience, characterised by the dialectal processes of acculturation and resistance to acculturation (Luibheid 2008, Weston 1995). Here, sexuality plays a critical role by augmenting Jon's incipient resistance; it is a crucial marker of his still inchoate sense of self and an element of the inevitable differentiation between self and family he must enact and re-enact, ultimately by undertaking migratory journeys of his own.

The supplanting of an old/new home ties into the development of a specifically queer identity in a new locale. This process signifies, at the time of migration, autonomy and freedom, though it is quite a different kind of 'autonomy and freedom' to that which

Jon was granted by his mother during his final year of high school. At the same time, Jon's need for reconciling the disparate elements of his life, and forging a more honest relationship with his mother by coming out to and sharing his life more openly with her, speaks to a deeply felt desire to redemptively return to one's origins. Jon's desire to disclose his sexuality to his mother suggests that he wants to move beyond the anxiety caused by her (supposed) disapproval of homosexuality.

Siddhartha

Siddhartha moved to Australia from the United States 22 years ago. After a degree from Wharton, he had worked in the US in the telecommunications sector for a couple of years before relocating to Melbourne for a new job. His American partner, David, who was a lecturer in economics, moved with him when he was offered a position at a university in 1992.

Siddhartha was born and raised in India. He was educated at an elite boarding school ensconced in the foothills of the Himalayas (founded by the British and modelled on the likes of Eton and Harrow), and subsequently attended the best liberal arts college in the country where he pursued a degree in economics. His family epitomised the small but conspicuous westernised urban elite of the era. His father was a prominent banker and his mother a journalist with a leading English-language daily. He had grown up steeped in a culture in which taste and class were defined by a familiarity with and predilection for British, American and European art, literature, cinema and music. John Steinbeck, Evelyn Waugh, Aldous Huxley and Pink Floyd were the staples of his youth. This was not necessarily a culture that defined itself in opposition to 'mainstream' Indian culture, but existed rather as a completely separate and impermeable entity.

Siddhartha and David have built a solid community of friends and acquaintances in Melbourne. They describe themselves as being socially active in the 'scene' and as being in an open relationship. On being asked about the Melbourne scene, Siddhartha offers a pithy observation on how the 'gay demographic' has changed considerably over the past decade. Against a background of increasing immigration from India, Siddhartha says he has unwittingly grown more uncomfortable over the years with what he perceives as the 'provincial' and tawdry makeup of the 'new migrants'. Although he had earlier established cordial connections with the older stock of migrants of Indian origin, he says social contact with the 'new migrants', whom he encounters often enough at work and in the telecommunications sector in general, is difficult for him.

Siddhartha has consequently also grown more uncomfortable about his provenance and background. His is a ressentiment that is undergirded by anxieties born of class, culture and sexuality. He is reminded of his distaste for what he has long since rejected. He is reminded of cultural codes, perceptions, rituals and value systems he believed he had left behind on moving to the US. On Twitter and Facebook, he abhors the occasional reminders of the old world that somehow still filter through despite his best efforts to forget. He abhors the ritualised affordances of a rigid Indian society where only such events as weddings and 'alliances', underpinned by

wealth, are seen as social 'accomplishments' and markers of status; everything that falls outside the hetero-patriarchal mould is seen as 'failure'. His sexuality and his lifestyle are so incompatible with the social and cultural frameworks of that world, he deems it unnecessary to maintain ties with anyone outside his family; and although these 'regressive' frameworks in no measure or manner even remotely affect his life here, he sees the new migrants as their representatives. He identifies as 'Australian', yes, but the social backdrop has changed. Now as a middle-aged man active in the gay scene, Siddhartha thinks with amusement of the contrast, and proximity, between himself and the new migrants.

The issue of racism in Australian queer communities has been the subject of considerable and necessary commentary (see, for example, Caluya 2006, Daroya 2013, Rajkhowa 2014). Much of this commentary has focused on racism directed by white queers against non-white queers, including those of a migrant background, though even those who are not white can help enforce racial hierarchies; their own prejudices can be white-supremacist. In an article about sexual racism, Arjun Rajkhowa (2014) argues: 'Narratives of the "self" often reveal the intricacies of the unconscious processes that determine our choices and perceptions of others. They also reveal the ways in which we are implicated in the same mechanisms of exclusion that we criticise as the handiwork of others.'

In his article, Rajkhowa provides the example of several non-white migrants (male and female) who are living in Melbourne. These migrants almost exclusively desire white subjects, and view men and women of colour with varying degrees of disdain. Siddhartha finds a sense of belonging (self-determined and natal; unproblematic and fraught) in two polarised worlds. These are the 'gay world' – a world that is implicitly white – and the world of Indian 'new migrants', which is non-white and heterosexual in its makeup. Siddhartha feels a greater sense of belonging in the 'gay world'. This world exemplifies a desired and desirable Western modernity, and produces the dominant dispositions of his habitus (see Bourdieu 1990:66-67). Siddhartha's (fraught) sense of belonging in the Indian 'migrant' community comes via his family, with whom he has not (yet) severed ties. Even then, continually changing demographic trends within this 'community' remind him of a 'repressive', backward and homophobic – in other words, pre-modern – culture. The irruption of this culture into his reconstituted lifeworld has thus become a locus of anxiety for Siddhartha.

Charlie

Charlie is a 33-year-old man of Malaysian-Chinese origin living in Melbourne. He came to Australia at the age of 18. Growing up in Penang, Charlie had always felt that moving abroad would finally allow him to fully come into himself; that he needed to be somewhere else to experience life; that, under the unremitting glare of his loving but overprotective family in Penang, he would always feel restrained, unable to try new things and explore new horizons. Coming to Australia at 18 changed all that.

But it hasn't quite been what he expected. Reflecting on his life today, Charlie appears conflicted. He has done well for himself professionally in Melbourne, and on the personal front, he has transformed into an outgoing and adventurous guy. The changes in his life, he says, have been tremendous.

Yet despite this contentment, for over fifteen years, Charlie has experienced the lows as well as the highs of the gay dating scene in Melbourne. The dominant theme of his ruminations on dating is what he describes as his failure to sustain a long-term commitment. Through his twenties, he revelled in the freedom afforded by youth, a new life in a Western society and the prospect of boundless possibilities, but at 33 he feels rudderless. Over the past five years, he has primarily dated white Australian men who have been forty-five years of age and older. While he was always conscious of the stereotypes associated with this -'rice' and 'potato' queens come to mind – he is now indifferent towards them. Nevertheless, Charlie hasn't been able to establish a lasting relationship.

Admittedly, Charlie is anxious about the constantly shifting terrain of what he deems his 'precarious' dating life. His anxieties stem from what he experiences as a disconnect between perception and reality. While most men he meets claim to want casual lovers and to avoid substantive commitments, the reality, he feels, is that they crave commitment and the stability of a long-term partnership. His emotions are often strained by the seeming contradiction between the demand for casualness running through his chats and conversations and the palpable inner desire for commitment he detects in the men he encounters. Do these men want consistent companionship in their 40s, or do they prefer casual partners and occasional flings? How do they negotiate the terms of their relationships and how do they conceive of their relationships with younger men? In spite of all the experience he's accrued over fifteen years, he still feels overwhelmed by the imponderables of dating life. The ceaseless process of engaging with new faces and personalities has tended to confound, rather than enhance, his appreciation of other men's wants and desires.

Charlie believes that his background continues to shape his expectations. He comes from a culture that valorises family, and regardless of his having sidestepped conventions by overcoming pressure from his family to get married, his expectations remain entwined with those same values. In a culture that has, to his mind, comprehensively deconstructed and transcended those values, his dilemmas take on the aspect of an anachronistic struggle, one that is, apparently, of little consequence to those around him.

Moreover, Charlie has had ample reason to ponder the inescapable role of race in gay dating. While in recent years he has come across a spate of trenchant online discussions about racism in gay dating (particularly in online spaces) and noticed a general upsurge in counter-cultural discourses, he finds that entrenched views and habits in the real world, including his own, have persisted in unreconstructed form, largely or wholly unaltered by the critique. The rhetoric of these discursive efforts has tended to emphasise overcoming the deleterious impact of perceptions of racial undesirability, and extricating self-worth from online spaces, but the reality of dating (and the ineffable alchemy of desire undergirding it), even in his case, remains much

the same. The emancipatory language of these laudable efforts notwithstanding, most Asian guys he comes across, like himself, continue to overwhelmingly, or even exclusively, desire and pursue Caucasian men on dating apps, in the scene and in their minds. He finds this issue difficult to unpack. Mostly, he is reluctant to even try.

Charlie's story illuminates the roles that ideals play in the queer non-white migrant's sense of belonging. He actively questions his attitudes and approaches to dating, and is familiar with debates about sexual racism. Yet despite this, Charlie continues to 'exclusively desire and pursue Caucasian men.' Interracial desire is not *in itself* racist, nor is it necessarily incongruous with eliminating 'perceptions of racial undesirability'. Nevertheless, Charlie's specific desires are very evidently constructed by racial ideals. Emerich Daroya (2013) points out:

> Representations and idealisations of Asianness are internalised by gay Asian men in their erotic habitus, actively brought into consciousness in personal ads. Gay Asian men self-Orientalise to attract their objects of desire (who are usually white men) (9).

Once again, the worlds of 'gay (white) Australia and 'non-white migrant in Australia' are polarised. The 'gay (white) Australian' world becomes the more desirable world, the world in which Charlie arguably feels a stronger sense of belonging as a queer subject. Charlie's interactions with other Asian-Australian gay men reveal the same attachments and (dis)identifications. In spite of existing critiques of the impact of racialised desire on self-worth, desire for whiteness remains firmly embedded within the social and psychic space occupied by gay Asian men (see Fung 2004).

On another level, Charlie's story says much about the way in which age and ageing help shape notions of desire and belonging. Important work has been conducted on the impact of aging on queer men and queer male communities (Leonard et al. 2013, Lo 2006). In this work, the valorisation of youth and the hegemonic dominance of 'youth culture' in the gay community are juxtaposed against and queried through the inevitable psychological and emotional changes that are brought on by and associated with aging. The onset of these emotional changes in Charlie's case is intertwined with his continuing negotiation with culture (insofar as culture is implicated in the perceived absence of, and yearning for, 'family values' in his dating life) and race.

Critics have sought to interrogate overt racism in gay interactive spaces, for instance, and to question, more fundamentally, the existence of racialised desire or even the racialisation of desire (see Caluya 2006, Chang 2001, Helligar 2014, Huang 2013, Rajkhowa 2014). In Charlie's case, this kind of questioning leads to an emotional and intellectual cul-de-sac; he is willing to engage with broader debates about sexual racism and to scrutinise the role of race in his own dating life but perhaps unwilling, or even unprepared, to attach any significance to it. He is also primarily apprehensive about his age and his attempts to reconcile his expectations regarding love and relationships with the verities of dating within what might be referred to as the 'hookup culture' (Clark-Flory 2013) that sustains it.

Charlie asks whether gay men 'want companionship at 40, or did they want casual partners and occasional flings?' Charlie is really asking how he can belong as a gay

man, and date older gay men in a culture where the idealised gay man is not only 'white' but also aged under thirty. The answer to these rhetorical questions remain elusive to Charlie, and understandably so. In a study of ageing gay Australian men, sociologist Charles Lo asks rhetorically: 'How often do we see, for example, a picture of an older gay man on a front cover of a gay paper or magazine?' (2006: 94). This overlooking of older gay men persists in academic research: Lo notes that Australia has not had the 'long tradition of research ... on GLBT gerontology' that the US and UK have had (2006: 94).

Though, of course, older gay men have not been absent from popular culture. According to Dustin Bradley Goltz: 'Derived from negative mythologies assigned to the gay male body, popular representations repeatedly cast the older gay male as doomed to a future of sadness, misery, isolation and perpetual loss' (2010: 3). This gloomy older gay man does not have the family or the loving, long-term relationship that so many of his heterosexual counterparts presumably have. The years following one's mid-thirties are marked as difficult years for the queer man to belong within. How must this sense of difficult belonging be amplified for the non-white queer migrant? How and where does the older queer male migrant belong?

Whether we're living in queer times or whether queer has not yet arrived, it remains the case that the utopian ideal of a world in which people from all sexual stripes can develop an unproblematic sense of belonging remains just that – utopian. In Australia, developing a sense of belonging can be a particularly difficult project for non-white queer migrants. Trying to establish this sense of belonging entails struggle and dispute, it implies contradiction. Indeed, as the above vignettes suggest, non-white queer migrants can find themselves 'belonging' in two different, artificially polarised worlds: the white and modern world of 'gay Australia' and the racialised (that is, non-white, heterosexual and pre-modern) 'migrant' world. Put simply, non-white queer migrant belonging in contemporary Australia can indeed be difficult. But then, as Elspeth Probyn (1996) reminds us, 'belonging' is by definition difficult. Our fictocritical writing and analysis has aimed to highlight some intersections between sexuality, race, migration, belonging and writing in this queer/not-yet-queer nation.

Endnotes

1. The historical dispossession of Aboriginal land, and the ongoing inequalities faced by Indigenous Australians, further demonstrate the social power of whiteness (see Moreton-Robinson, 2009).
2. Two recent examples will suffice: in March 2015, the conservative Australian Marriage Forum released a television advertisement condemning same-sex marriage; and that same month, beyondblue (a national organisation oriented towards mental health) released a study which revealed the homophobia expressed by Australian males aged between 14 and 17 years (Davey 2015).
3. The decision to focus on male characters is due to various factors, including constraints of space. There will doubtless be similarities (and differences) between the experiences of these three characters and the experiences of non-white migrant queer women, as well as those who identify as 'trans' or 'gender variant'. Furthermore, while these narratives may well echo the experiences of many gay male Asian readers, they are neither intended as fully representative of some monolithic 'gay Asian experience' nor posited as somehow disentangled from class,

linguistic, ethnic and other considerations. These are fictional vignettes based on observation, personal reflections of contacts within the community and the lived experience of the writers, and as such speak to specific circumstances and realities.

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