

## Personal Voices

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### Dragon Ladies, Snow Queens, and Asian-American Dykes: Reflections on Race and Sexuality

Sharon Lim-Hing

I'd like to approach the subject of race and sexuality two ways: first, how my race has influenced my understanding of my sexuality, and second, how my sexuality has influenced my understanding of my race. . . .

I'm Chinese. I was born in Kingston, Jamaica. My parents moved to Miami when I was eleven, and I grew up in Florida. I came to Boston about six years ago for graduate school.

#### Racial Understanding Informing Sexual Understanding

One day when I was about five years old, I was masturbating in the front yard. My mother came out, saw me, and quite sternly told me not to do that. Instead of explaining to me not to play with myself in public places, she simply told me to desist — for the rest of my life, presumably.

That was the extent of the sexual education I received from both my parents until the advent of my first period. I had been kept so ignorant that I thought I was sick, or that I had internal injuries from racing on my ten-speed bike. My mom then squeamishly completed my education by telling me the function of menstruation, and how to prevent blood from getting all over my clothes.

I've talked to other Asians, and I don't think the extreme prudishness of my childhood is characteristically Asian. However, health professionals who work with Boston Chinatown residents describe Chinese attitudes toward sex as "puritanical," citing patients' avoiding the discussion of sexual matters unless they relate directly to some malady. This cultural penchant, the silencing of sex and often of subjective, private feelings, was compounded in my parents' case by the Roman Catholic Church.

If run-of-the-mill sexuality is taboo for conversations in such a family, how would other forms of sexuality be treated? Well, quite simply, it wasn't treated at all. My family looked the other way; one of my sisters knew I was a lesbian and she was very supportive. There was some tacit acceptance of my proclivities. I remember giggling and holding

my first lover's hand in the back seat of the family car while my mother was driving. She was dropping us off at a theater, because we were too young to drive. My mother never so much as glanced in the rearview mirror, although she took an undue dislike to Karen. Whenever stray, unidentified panties showed up in the family wash, presumably discarded by a guest who found the raiment too encumbering, the cleaned object would mysteriously appear on my dresser, as if I knew who left them. To this day I still wonder which one of my siblings knew the owner of those small, black lace panties.

The implicit message my family gave me was not so much a condemnation as an embarrassed tolerance inextricably tied to a plea for secrecy. I complied with this request, waiting until I had moved fifteen-hundred miles away from the family homestead to begin coming out. When I did come out to my mother, she was staying with me and my lover, and could easily see only one bedroom with a single large futon.

"Mom," I said hesitantly, "you know I'm gay, don't you?" I couldn't say the word "lesbian" to my mother. She began with a remark on how as a child I didn't play with dolls—which is untrue. I had a couple of favorite G.I. Joes, but I didn't argue the point.

"I never talk about things you children don't talk about first," she then said, letting me know that she already knew. Then she said that she would always love me, and that if I was happy it was alright with her. I don't know if she told my father. Like my mother, he seems to have been able to figure things out on his own. In any case, I've never felt the need to do an official coming out with him. During a recent visit home, I sensed my father fidgeting uneasily as the news broadcast a story about "outing" closeted figures. At the end of my stay, he asked me if "they" would pick me up at Logan airport, although he knows Jacquelyn's name. My father's inability to accept my being a lesbian is related to his more traditional values: family first; make money and buy land; don't stand out.

Now that I'm more or less out to my immediate family and to some of my relatives, they've all stopped sending me invitations to weddings, on the presumption that I wouldn't want to get all dressed up—in a dress—to celebrate some heterosexual union. Of course they're right, but by not inviting me, they are trying to keep me a skeleton in their closet, in keeping with the same plea made years ago: don't tell anyone we know ("we" would include the loose network of Jamaican-Chinese spread over the Americas). This tolerance, curiously ambivalent, tells me that I'm still part of the family, but that being gay or having a gay person in the family is shameful.

What about the Asian pressure to procreate? Some Asians feel as if their parents push them to get married, so they can have lots of kids—at least one male child—to feed lots of white rice to, so they in turn can grow up to get married and have lots of kids. I never felt this pressure, but maybe that's because I'm the youngest of four children, and by the time my true tendencies had fully unfurled, my siblings were well on the way to marriage (with the appropriate sex) and procreation.

Up until the exodus of many Jamaican-Chinese in the 1970s (due to fear of the island becoming communist), there was a sizable Chinese community. If we had not left Jamaica, I would have been expected to find a husband from among the Chinese men there. Throughout my childhood I remember hearing the racist Chinese term for Black people, *black ghost*. It was sometimes preceded by *damn*, which used to convey much more venom than it does today. Much later I was surprised to find that an equivalent term exists for those of a paler shade (*white ghost*, strangely enough), though it was hardly ever used. When my mother explained this term, she said that Chinese people are arrogant, believing they are superior to others. Even though my siblings have married white individuals my parents seem quite happy—though I remember the time I came home with a black male friend, my father threw a fit.

### Sexual Understanding Informing Racial Understanding

How has my sexuality affected my race? Here I feel comfortable using the amorphous term *race* because non-Asian people perceive me as belonging to this huge varied group, "Asian." In fact, the first thing many of you would think if you walked into a room and saw me is "Asian woman." Not young, old, badly or well-dressed, intellectual, punk, jock, diesel dyke, girlie girl—just "Asian." Whites get to play all the roles, while Asians are invisible or are stuck in a few stereotypes. So pervasive is the mindset that holds white as the norm that when describing a white individual to a third party, we usually don't state that person's race, but if the person being described is not white, we do specify the race. Female Asian characters make rare appearances throughout Hollywood film history as the personable Suzy Wong prostitute, the throwaway Vietnam War prostitute, the Dragon Lady, and the Submissive Lotus Flower; male Asian characters are portrayed as asexual, arch-villains, or aberrant detectives, all fantastically inhuman.

Luckily, in real life we have more choices; we have the "model minority" stereotype. This covers those typical Asian characteristics—such as introverted, dorky, hardworking, smart like computers, especially good at math and sciences, passive, and apolitical.

About two years ago I became involved with a group called the Alliance for Massachusetts Asian Lesbians and Gay Men (AMALGM), a loosely organized group with social and political aims. We have different events, some open to everyone, some for Asians only; we publish a newsletter. Through experiences and talks with AMALGM members, I've become more aware of not only racism in the gay community but also tokenism and the lack of sufficient dialogue about race. At AMALGM we talk about Asian invisibility in what is called the "gay community."

As Asians, we go into bars, and we fell less attractive or simply undesirable. This is because we have been inculcated to appreciate and emulate white standards and types of beauty, like anyone who has ever seen a billboard, TV, magazine, or film. And how well trained we are; we even have slang to describe gay Asians who lust chiefly after white people: *snow queen* or *potato queen*. One corollary of the supremacy of white beauty is the ugliness of all those who are not white.

I'd like to underscore the paradox of Asian Americans. Not all Asians were born in Asia. Some like myself don't speak any Asian language and haven't been closer to the Pacific Rim than San Francisco. We grow up in a white culture—a culture that believes it is, and prides itself on being, primarily white. Some of us grow up thinking we are white: we believe we can get a job, make good, buy a home, and somehow avoid the war raging silently in this country. Some of us know better. Then we enter a subculture of the gay community—a community of "pariahs" and "radicals." Even there we discover that we are perceived as alien entities.

Last summer I was in a Boston gay bar. I was ordering drinks. I heard a voice behind me say, "Go back to your oriental country." I turned around and I saw two white men.

"You talkin' to me?" I asked, quickly pulling myself up to my full five feet, four inches.

"No, I'm just talking to my friend here," one man replied.

I should have said, "Oh, I thought you just made a racist, asshole comment. But what I thought I heard was so ludicrously ignorant that no one would dare say such a stupid thing. Don't you agree?" Of course, I thought of that later. At the time, all I said was, "Oh."

I was stunned. It was easier for me to think I was having a hallucination than to recognize that a gay man was making a blatantly racist remark to me in a gay bar. Only later did I realize that I was operating on the assumption that a member of an oppressed group will try to understand your oppression rather than try to oppress you.

During a recent conversation on race, a white woman who is aware of many types of

oppression said to me, "I would never think of having a relationship with an Asian, but I don't think I'm racist." She reminded me of the old liberal cliché, "Some of my best friends are . . ." a strange bundle of guilt and self-deception. I wasn't mad at her because at least she had the guts to say that. Many people go around thinking unconsciously, yet not saying, "I would never have a romantic or erotic relationship with an Asian, or with a Black person, or with a Latino/a person, but I don't think I'm racist." These people might wish to reflect on their personal definition of racism.

The private realm of desire is where the little racist in each one of us will make its last stand. I am not suggesting the policing of desire, but I bring up this aspect of racism because it is this very intangible—sexual orientation—that has driven bisexuals, lesbians, and gay men to question most givens of the dominant culture. Why not put the *sex* back into *homosexuality*?

I have no solutions to the racism we carry in our hearts, except the slow process of self-questioning and self-education.

An analogy is frequently made between racism and homophobia. Well, there is at least one fundamental difference. Most of us (not all) if we really had to could pass as straight. Yet, to walk through the Somerville, Massachusetts hinterland, I can't change my clothes, my buttons, the way I walk, to avoid being thought of or harassed as a "Chink."

I'm not saying that racism is somehow worse than homophobia. In some ways, the fact that gayness has not yet been linked to biologically determined factors makes choosing our own sexuality harder to justify to our foes, who would like us to just change our behavior and conform to their standards.

Racism and homophobia are two different forms of oppression that have similar and different sources, that function differently, and that have different effects. They need to be discussed in more than a superficial way. What makes it hard to discuss is the fact that if we are gay, lesbian, or bisexual, we are supposed to be "politically correct," making it harder to admit having racist thoughts. In spite of this, I hope we will all continue to talk about the convergence of race and sexuality, and that members of the gay community will look more closely at their own racism.

## Memoirs of a Gay Fraternity Brother

Joshua Clark Meiner

It is 7:30 in the morning on a Friday. I don't want to get up, but if I want to have hot water, I must get up early. Not many brothers living in Sigma Phi Epsilon ever get up this early. Drake University offers early morning classes, but I seem to be the only one who takes them. I get out of bed, get my shower stuff, and shuffle into the hall to the bathroom. The air is still a little thick with cigarette smoke from last night's second-semester senior drinkfest. Once in the bathroom, I quickly check the mirror to see if "FAG" has