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Just a Preference

Disclaimer: This essay contains sexually explicit content. My hope is that you will embrace the explicit, the profane, the sacrilegious in this essay, and my purposeful and queer defiance of societal norms in choosing these specific topics, as part of my unique queer voice as a gay Asian man studying electrical engineering at UT Austin and as part of the vast richness and diversity of experiences that people bring to this beautiful campus. Welcome to my world, and Namaste.

“Fair skinned guys are my type. I’ve been attacked expressing this bc [sic] it’s attributed to being obsessed with white people, but that’s just my preference.... Idk, [sic] it’s just like how I’m gay, I can’t change that about myself” (Personal communication, May 20, 2019).

As much as I love and support my friends in their ever-more-exciting sexual endeavors, my friends and I often disagree about whether sexual attraction is “just a preference.” Inherent in this claim is the premise that sexual attraction is essential and unmalleable – that we were born with our preferences and we can’t change them once we’re born. For me, the argument that my love

is lazy, for it eschews the dynamic interactions between media and sociocultural forces that fundamentally make up my perspective and lived experiences. As I have become more comfortable in my gay identity, I have turned a critical body politics lens to the media sources of my sexual attractions,

beginning to unpack the ways in which my search for queer representation in YouTube and porn have subtly, and substantially, whitewashed my erotic desires.

Body politics is a new field in which scholars seek to understand how bodies and culture are deeply intertwined. Stemming from queer and cultural studies, body politics explores the ways in which social scripts² seek to regulate the human body, determining which parts of the body are taboo and/or sexualized and which are not. Body politics encompasses more than just bodies, however, as the complex social scripts surrounding bodies often incorporate issues like race, gender, and sexuality. Kobena Mercer and Richard Fung, writing commentaries analyzing race dynamics in the portrayal of bodies through photography (Mercer, 1992) and gay video pornography (Fung, 1991), exemplify some of the foundational texts first synthesizing these fields. In his article on Roger Mapplethorpe's *Black Book*³, Mercer notes that Mapplethorpe's homoerotic photography is not just an objectification of black male bodies as many others have claimed; it also resists black male sexual scripts by "confront[ing] whiteness with the otherness that enables it to be constituted as an identity" (1992, p. 12). Here, Mercer unpacks how the black male body becomes a vehicle to challenge dominant white narratives through artistic and discursive practices, exemplifying one body politics approach to analyzing media.

Similar in approach to Mercer, Richard Fung analyzes the roles of Asian pornstars in gay porn in "Looking for my Penis" (1991), finding that Asians simply disappear into the completely white landscape. He states:

"The gay Asian viewer is not constructed as sexual subject in any of this work—not on the screen, not as a viewer.... I may lust after Eric Stryker [white pornstar] and imagine myself as the Asian who is having sex with him, but the role the Asian plays in the scene with him is demeaning." (Fung, 1991).

Fung's analysis is particularly poignant, as it describes how porn reflects the positioning of Asians (both in porn and broader society) as powerless and subservient to white hegemony, an analysis that, from my experience, largely still rings true today. Mercer and Fung's analyses of cultural media in their own personal contexts highlight the clear intersections of race and body and lend to my own racialized and sexualized experiences consuming gay short films and porn.

Growing up as a child, I was always a few years behind on the latest trends in pop culture and media. I never really watched television or movies because they simply could not capture my interest. The only shows that I watched with any sort of attachment were *Phineas and Ferb* and *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, two kids' shows with stellar intellectual comedy and nuanced social commentary that still remains poignant today. And, to be honest, I couldn't have cared less about what else was on the screen. We had a local Blockbuster, and I can count the number of times I went there as a child – once, to rent *The Lion King*, because my parents had the cultural awareness to attempt to give me a normal childhood. I fell asleep halfway through; in my defense, it was past my bedtime. I also never really sought out music outside what was on the radio in my mom's car on my way to school: Joel Osteen and family-friendly 80s rock. Many would say that I lived a deprived life as a child, but thus was the life of a bookworm: while the plebs of the public (a.k.a. other children) were reveling in Disney Renaissance reruns and superhero films, I read the *Hunger Games* and *Maze Runner* series before it was cool.

It was not until I got my first iPad as a freshman in high school that things began to change. My new iPad unlocked a whole new world of online video, and all of a sudden, I was inundated by the millions of videos that YouTube had to offer, from cats to BuzzFeed to SourceFed, all at my fingertips. The sheer possibilities and options of media content that I could access and consume freely on YouTube at the literal touch of a button on my iPad blew my

mind. I spent days curled up in my La-Z-Boy rocking chair just watching and clicking on videos in my “Recommended” section, falling down deep holes and vicious cycles of content that were somehow completely banal but left me completely enraptured.

Not soon after, around my junior year of high school, I began to question my sexuality. Most of my friends had come out already, and I wondered whether I was one of them too – but I was too masculine, certainly not the stereotypical white high school twink that talked in a high-pitched voice and sashayed his hips while he walked⁴. I was absolutely NOT gay...or was I...? Turning to YouTube for answers or solace or something other than the dark depths of my dirty imagination, I stumbled across a gold mine: a vast new source of YouTube videos classified as “gay short films.” Enamored by the stories they told and the reflections they offered on the gay milieu, I began to seriously contemplate my sexuality in new ways – in relation to my identity, my life story, and my life goals. In particular, “The Language of Love” (TheVoicesProject, 2013) and “A Song For Your Mixtape” (Zuck, 2017) resonated with me because I saw in the protagonists a piece of myself: I wanted the pure, serene, peaceful, almost childlike form of gay love Charlie describes when talking about Sam, but I, like the narrator of “A Song For Your Mixtape,” rejected the monolith of partying, drinking, and constant activism that so many of the LGBTQ+ community subscribed to.

What was peculiar about watching gay short films, and what was most captivating about watching gay short films, however, was not how much I engrossed myself in the protagonists’ storylines or how much I identified with the characters; it was how mind-numbingly HOT everyone was. The sexual energy that would build up in me as I watched gay short films, especially the ones with carefully cropped sex scenes was palpable: it came to the point where if I wanted to masturbate, I could select specific films to sufficiently arouse me before I needed

something stronger to finish. Thus was my entrance into the sweat-drenching, cum-splattering, butt-clenching, deeply pleasurable world of porn. Unlike the world of gay short films, where everything still had to be tasteful and conform to YouTube community guidelines, porn was where all my sexual fantasies and desires could play out in spectacular fashion. The sheer male beauty and pure fucking that happened in porn allowed me to indulge in my sexuality alone behind closed doors, without needing to come out. At least for satisfying my sexual desires, I didn't need the teasing and occasional slip of the dick that gay short films had to abide by as videos on YouTube: I could see it all on PornHubGay or XVideos or HelixStudios or SeanCody. The next four years of my life were filled with sopping wet tissues and blissful ignorance.

I didn't begin questioning the porn I watched until sophomore year of college. By then, I was pretty sure of my gayness and had come out to myself, but I wasn't ready to tell the world yet. Instead of committing to coming out, I decided to take WGS 303: Intro to LGBTQ+ Studies to learn more about the LGBTQ+ community and culture. In the course, I read Chong-suk Han's piece titled "No Fats, Femmes, or Asians" (2008), which discussed how Asians by and large only found white people attractive, eschewing their own race. This idea was shocking to me, as I had never thought about the kinds of people I was sexually attracted to – I liked what I liked, those were my preferences, and that was just how my brain was wired. But Han spoke truth: all the porn I watched was performed by all-white casts. If I was on PornHubGay, I only clicked on videos with white actors in it, not because I did intentionally, but somehow in my watching of porn I always simply skipped over all the non-white porn. I began to question myself: "why am I not looking at gay porn with Asians? Are they not attractive?" And the simple answer was no, they were not attractive in my eyes. They were too slim, too weak, too effeminate, too pale, too subservient to compare to the young, fit, able-bodied, cisgender, heterosexual/straight-

presenting, sensual white male hunks and twinkles that painted the internet porn scene. Just as Fung described in his 1991 article, it was as if the white pornstars cast shadows over the Asian pornstars, masking their eroticism and potential for pleasure. While there were Asians masturbating or having sex in the porn I watched, they were never enjoying themselves or each other, and if they were, they were always accompanied by white men. The Asian pornstar simply blended in as yet another tool for the pleasure of the white pornstar, almost like a “Where’s Waldo?” puzzle.

Yet pegging (pun intended) the prolific white porn industry as the root cause of my clicking habits was too easy – instead, I returned to the source of my porn desires: gay short films. Every single one of the gay short films I had saved on YouTube featured a young, all-white twink/hunk cast, with the notable exception of Charlie in “The Language of Love.” As I watched more films and used them more to motivate my sexual desires, I had begun to subconsciously avoid films with bodies I deemed unattractive, and as a result, my attractions had become attuned to whom I saw most prevalent in the films I watched: the college-age white muscle twink. The dominant narrative of the muscular, fit, white male body as the ideal male body propagated through the medium of gay short film, if not directly through the casting itself, then through the objects of desire. After all, everyone and their daddies and their lovers were white. Even Charlie, a Korean twink, sought his object of desire in Sam, a white twink. Since there were so few Asian-related short films to begin with, I was never introduced to the romantic or erotic capacities of the Asian body or even its ability to be the object of desire, let alone that of other bodies of different shapes and sizes. As such, Asian bodies fell by the wayside in my erotic desires, becoming second-class to the white muscle twink body. Fung’s analysis still rang true, almost thirty years after it was published, and so did Han’s: I was conditioned to only like

the white body and the white penis associated with it as a result of the media I consumed, on both porn sites and YouTube. In Fung's words, I had found my penis among the undesirables of gay porn, and as a gay man who loves penises, I didn't like it.

Disturbed by my findings, I decided to step outside the dark mode of PornHubGay, SeanCody, HelixStudios, and the sites I frequented and start looking for gay Asian porn elsewhere on the internet, in the hopes of deconstructing my whitewashed eroticized ideals. There were barely four when I first started searching and none of the porn was produced in nearly as high quality as all the "typical" white-centered porn sites. However, my gaysian resilience held strong, and in time, I found the two sites I now frequent regularly: PeterFever and Himeros.tv. PeterFever is a gay Asian professional porn site that features Asian muscle hunks fucking and getting fucked in as good as, if not better quality than, most professional sites. Himeros.tv is a gay porn site started by gay YouTuber Davey Wavey and strives to showcase all forms of diversity in bodies interacting with each other, including old, disabled, feminine, crossdressing, different races, and many differently masculine bodies. Through these high-quality sites and careful monitoring of what I watch on PornHubGay, I have begun to re-eroticize myself to my own race and, more broadly, embrace the diversity of bodies that the non-white gay muscle twink worlds have to offer.

I laid spread-eagle, face down on my bed, staring at my phone. My hands and mouth still reeked, even though I had washed them after a long session on the gay side of PornHub. Ray Dexter's hard cock stood paused on my screen, ready to cum for the third time into Jessie Lee's muscular ass⁴. A text popped up on my phone – from my gay Filipino friend. "I wouldn't date an Asian guy unless he was really hot. It's just a preference, I can't change what [*sic*] I'm attracted to," it read. *But was it really?*, I wondered. Was sexual attraction really just a preference, or was

it a product of a conditioned brain, whitewashed by the forces of Western cultural scripts surrounding race, bodies, and power? Or, as Fung argued, was body politics at play: the trope of the desexualized, invisible, erased Asian in mainstream sexuality discourse seeping insidiously into my gay friend's mind, reinforcing the message of the Asian as a step below others on the attractiveness ladder? Reflecting on my own experiences navigating similar questions, I found my answer in the latter, having to critically deconstruct the ways I eroticized and viewed porn and acknowledge that my media practices before porn, gay short films, had primed me to idealize the young, white, toned male body. In seeking new, more diverse forms of pornography, I have begun to unlearn my whitewashed ways and find sexual enlightenment in the beauty and totality in which bodies and performances can be enacted – outside the dominant cultural script.

Notes

¹For the uninitiated, these are different body types that are often seen as physically desirable in the gay community. A twink is a man who generally looks young, fit/skinny, and has relatively little body hair. A hunk is a man who is generally physically fit, muscular, and has a large build (think football players). A twunk is a twink who has a toned body, not pencil-thin like a twink but not quite built as a hunk. A bubble butt is a butt that is larger than average, firm and round, but can also refer to people who have bubble butts.

²The term “social scripts” is used in a wide variety of fields, including gender and sexuality research. Social scripts, and its related term, cultural scripts, have different meanings based on the particular context and field, but most definitions usually refer to the unwritten patterns of human behavior and ways of acting that occur in a given space or context (Goffman, 1959). For this essay, I define social scripts (or cultural scripts; the terms are relatively interchangeable) as the set of cultural norms, values, and practices that produce meaning, frame behavior, and

structure interactions at an individual level within a confined or situational space or context. An example of a social script, related to body politics, is the cultural understanding (at least in America) that it is taboo to talk about sexual or bodily functions in public social contexts. Of course, this taboo has led to the marginalization of queer people in society, as their sexualities are seen as abject and disgusting and their struggles are seen as illegitimate and/or private. A fair amount of queer activism has challenged social scripts as a resistance mechanism, bringing discussions about sex and therefore sexuality into the political limelight and giving rise to body politics.

³Roger Mapplethorpe was a white male American photographer who was extremely controversial in the 1970s and 1980s for his photography of nude bodies. His work *The Black Book* featured gay black men and various segments of their nude bodies in black and white photography. He was widely criticized by the general public and scholars alike for objectifying the black men that were his subjects, initially including Kobena Mercer, a white British art historian and critic, in 1986. However, Mercer penned a new article in 1992 in which he returned to his first article and revised some of his arguments to discuss the resistance and power that is exhibited alongside the objectification of gay black male sexuality in the original book.

⁴Obviously, this caricature of gay men as effeminate is a gross overgeneralization that plays into heteronormative stereotypes. I only include them here as a depiction of my thought process at that point in my life.

⁵Ray Dexter and Jessie Lee are gay Asian pornstars who work for PeterFever.

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