

# “The More Labels We Give to Ourselves”: Breaking Down Binaries with the Work of Andy Quan

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## Introduction: Beyond Analogy

**T**HE DEFAULT APPROACH TO MINORITY IDENTITY in Canadian literary studies has been to regard any category of identity as decisive; generally, writers have been filed, within the broad corpus of Canadian literature, under their ethnicity or sexual orientation, for instance, and are considered principally and usually sympathetically through that lens. One danger in centring such classifications is the creation of ghettos and subghettos, all defined by deviation from a tyrannical norm — the sole category that does not need to explain or define itself. Of course, this approach has a progressive — even a defiant — origin. Even today, what is usually entailed in this classification is the assumption that equality and justice within a nation — across gender, class, race, and so on — are the broad goals of both the writing itself and critical attention to it. This approach has produced, to a substantial degree, the fields of Asian Canadian and queer studies, with all their achievements and contradictions, as well as their various struggles to assert independence from, or commonality with, their counterparts in the behemoth below the border.

As society evolves and the literary field shifts, however, it becomes clear that the response to Asian Canadian literature has yielded so far only what Christopher Lee and Christine Kim have called “partial solutions that respond to racism while leaving structural exclusions intact” (6). Ultimately, such an approach does not relieve “the dissatisfaction that many writers and critics have felt with respect to promises of multiculturalism” (6), even as it has challenged and successfully undermined any complacent or monochromatic vision of Canadian lives and literatures. Today it is clear that the approach of dealing with minority writings as variations on a demand for inclusion is increasingly unsatisfactory, and new alternatives must be sought.<sup>1</sup>

Such alternatives are hard to develop because the state is one privileged order of analysis and ethnicity is another; one's place in this warren of slots and cubbyholes is among the first things that strangers reveal (or try to divine) about one another, and few social situations allow such information to become secondary, let alone irrelevant. We can continue to recognize and honour the validity of identities based upon race and sexual orientation, but the question is how to work them free from the national framework and mobilize them while avoiding numerous possible pitfalls: essentialism and hard borders, the stimulation of new dogmas or stereotypes, or the absorption of all varieties of experience into triumphalist cosmopolitanism or undifferentiated accusation. As Lee and Kim continue, "Asian Canadian studies has largely unfolded within nation-based (and often nationalist) frameworks even though it has sought to critically expose the racist foundations of the Canadian nation-state" (7). This essay seeks to make a contribution to questioning or destabilizing the centrality of national narratives in the analysis of minority subject writing by putting queer and Asian perspectives simultaneously to work. The medium for this modest project of subversion is the work of Andy Quan, a poet and fiction writer active since the late 1990s.

Born in Vancouver, Quan spent much of his early adulthood traveling and working in Europe and the Americas before settling in Sydney in 1999; even before he left Canada, however, his work challenged the framework established by the categories of national writing. In the 1999 introduction to the anthology of Chinese Canadian poetry that he co-edited, Quan addressed a Canadian "polysyllabic policy of multiculturalism" (7) and the place of minority expression in it. As one reviewer of *Slant*, Quan's first book of poetry, noted, the author "is Vancouver born of Chinese descent, but explores gay sexuality" (Boyd), a phrasing that, with its telling (and faintly exotic) "but," typifies how for many the overlapping of these categories has always been the defining feature of his work. Membership in two minority categories — Asian Canadian and queer — has put Quan in a particular position vis-à-vis both, a kind of minority to the second degree, sensitive to the blind spots of either identity.

Critical reception of his work has been limited and focused on this duality. This approach has its usefulness. In any of the relevant categories — queer, Asian, Chinese — Quan's work reveals, in the first instance, how liberating projects contain concealed hegemonies: the power of white bodies in gay and queer movements and communities,

for instance, or the privilege of heteronormativity in Asian diasporic communities. His own pronouncements on the subject also show that, far from disclaiming or underplaying minority identities, Quan has consistently acknowledged several minority identities as seminal to his motivation; at the same time, his writing always engages in a project of undermining the hard borders of identity or the received roles of sub-groups within them. For instance, in a 2008 interview with *Ricepaper*, he remarked that

My journey as a writer has been: how do I write as a gay writer, an Asian writer, a gay Asian writer? How do I deal with those issues in a way where I can use those to an advantage to break stereotypes but not become a stereotype and not be seen as using these categories to get attention, which overshadows my writing? The more labels we give to ourselves, the easier it is to break down those labels.

In one text, the story “Immigration,” from Quan’s first collection, *Calendar Boy*, the parallel between the two minority identities is immediate: the narrative is split into two voices: one in italics, about immigration in 1905 from Canton province (presumably to Canada), the other in ordinary font about coming out as a young gay man (presumably in Canada). Coming out, like migration, involves a loss of language, of familiarity, and of belonging. The two experiences are presented in constant proximity, appearing as variations of one another, a structure that generates an almost polemical effect. Also included is the sense that “it was planted in my genes . . . that I would be a traveller, that I would leave my home” (172). Put into the mouth of the young gay Chinese Canadian, the analogy is manifest: coming out is also moving away, an uncertain search for home, a quest for community always less welcoming than it appears at first. Little wonder that many of the other stories have poetic narrators who are footloose wanderers, Asian Canadians, gay, and often all three.

“Carry On,” a poem in *Slant*, shows Quan working in a similar mode of direct juxtaposition. The poetic iteration incorporates more nuance, and chronologically speaking the terms of the analogy differ from “Immigration”: as indicated by the title, the poem is not about the symmetry between the single events that initiate the new identity — migrating and coming out — but about the two simultaneous and contemporary conditions of being Chinese Canadian and gay.

The starting point for this poem is the importance of documentation for Chinese immigrants, particularly “paper sons,” whose fictive claims of kinship allowed them to enter Canada during the period of racist exclusion of Chinese from immigration. The necessary obsession with paper (“old information — /details, ticket stubs and news clippings”) is transformed into a traumatic historical memory of “bureaucrats demanding full account” and, in a caustic joke, “sudden scavenger hunts.” The immigrant’s fear of persecution, rather than evaporating over generations, fuels the self-identification of the speaker as a “place needing to be archived.” The paperwork of a racist past keeps “people talking / long after they should,” with legitimacy perpetually conditional, even as the paraphernalia of nineteenth-century maritime migration ceded to the twentieth-century traveller (with carry-on baggage). For “a modern homosexual” like the speaker, the Chinese stigma surrounding a lack of offspring joins bureaucratic anxiety to create a monstrous paper son imbued with “gestures and facial tics” to “carry on my family name.” And is the paper son, “gathering legacies to one day / be charged up like Frankenstein,” also the poet’s work, waiting for the reader?

Having identified a few of the many ways in which this oeuvre allows Canadian, queer, and Asian identities to illuminate pervasive hierarchies within each other, I propose two different avenues for reading Quan’s work that can advance thinking about Asian Canadian literature in anti-binary and non-national directions. First, Quan’s writing, particularly the erotica in *Six Positions*, is used to confront the heritage of imperialism as expressed in the global stereotyping of Asian bodies. Second, the displacement of Quan’s protagonists and speakers, from Canada to Europe, South America, and ultimately to Australia, is read as the diffusion of both the racial and the national signifiers.

This not only diffuses the nation but also destabilizes the queer claim to egalitarianism. The final step — rather than simply attempting to cast Canada as a place of origin for mobile Asian bodies or the queer as a refuge from the failures of Canadian multiculturalism — is to seek to neutralize both simultaneously. An insistence on specificity confutes any narrow construction of nation, culture, or ethnicity, valorizing negotiable and complex personal identities in place of easy labels: it is possible to avoid taking refuge in “hybridity” or “diaspora” — both of which carry the shadow of incompleteness, imperfection, and inauthenticity — and to insist instead on the illegitimacy of the

nation-state to provide any primary identity. Part of that weight can be borne by another primary, queer, identity — yet one whose own tendency toward totalization, and even ethnicization, disqualifies it as a fully load-bearing alternative. The weight of an individual subject must thus be borne not by any single identity, or by multiple identities each demanding entire (and therefore uncritical) subscription, but by the freedom permitted by multiple identities, deployed with a consciously attenuated, perpetually skeptical, attitude: the tools by which to defend the complicated, contradictory self.

### The “Bottom Rungs”? Racial Stereotyping in Global Gay Communities

One of the persistent paradoxes of queer emancipation has been its tendency to develop — as if to fill some sinister vacuum — new forms of restriction, categorization, and stereotyping to replace those being attacked and (one continues to hope) dismantled. The stereotypes imposed from *within* the gay population on gay male Asians — emasculate, subservient, effete — in Euro-American societies as well as in international spaces have been noted in both the social sciences and the arts. Among the best-known critiques of this phenomenon is that of Toronto videographer and critic Richard Fung, who observes that “the narratives privilege the penis while always assigning the Asian the role of bottom; Asian and anus are conflated” (343). Fung’s immediate object of scrutiny might be gay male pornography, but such a phenomenon is the surface of a deep structure that produces stereotypes understandable as the products of a “system of ideas and reciprocal practices that originated in Europe simultaneously with (some argue as a conscious justification for) colonial expansion and slavery” (339).

It can escape no one familiar with gay male interaction in multiracial societies that the Asian bottom stereotype is still broadly operational, everywhere imposed, perpetuated, resisted. Stereotyping and pressure are relational and expressions of abusive power dynamics — the establishment of a kind of “sexual totem pole” (Quan, Letter to the author) — rather freely acknowledged within spheres of queer interaction, and more generally kept silent about in the more prudish larger society (which still has limited tolerance for the open discussion of sexual roles among gay males), even as the more general issue of sexual racism has

become mainstream. This intimate oppression has seldom been legible in Canadian literature, not least because gay Asian voices remain both few and courteous. Not so Quan, especially in *Six Positions*, a work that has been entirely denied critical attention, likely because of its self-labelling as “sex writing” and its explicit, though never gratuitous, content.<sup>2</sup> *Six Positions* lays bare the subtext — in terms of desires, stereotypes, and sexual practices — of much of what is troubling and unequal about racial dynamics, with consequences that reach far beyond the subcommunities of homosexual men.

For instance, in the unrelentingly provocative *Six Positions* text “Why I’m,” the unnamed gay Asian male narrator explains that he is a top (i.e., the insertive partner in homosexual intercourse) since “I’ve never managed to enjoy being a bottom,” and he reports being repeatedly pressed by other tops to revise his “position.” Although considering that it “*might* be because I’m a smaller man” or that the historical moment for fixed sexual roles is over, he nonetheless determines “But I’m pretty sure it’s because I’m Asian” (156). Similarly, an acerbic though mischievous double entendre is perceptible when the Chinese Canadian protagonist of “Something about Muscle” remarks that “Those of us on the bottom rungs of the ladder know who is on top while those higher up are probably just staring at the view” (105).

Another related and widespread stereotype is perhaps best introduced by the same text. At the beginning of a sexual encounter between the Chinese Canadian protagonist and a white man in Sydney, “I threw off my shirt, hurriedly, awkwardly: / ‘You’re bigger than I thought you were,’ he commented. / *Wait until you see my cock*, I thought but furrowed my brow” (107). Here a stereotypical assumption is anticipated and angrily (but silently) contradicted. When the reveal does occur, and is duly commented on (“You’re big. I haven’t seen an Asian with a cock like this” [108]), the narrator again suppresses his feeling of righteous offence: it would spoil the mood. Instead, he exorcises the stereotype through egotistical, instrumental sex (“That was quick.” “Sorry. Uh, do you want to come?” [111]). During the postcoital awkwardness, it transpires — upon examination of photographs — that the white Australian’s steady boyfriend is “a young, slight, passive Asian boy who lives with his parents” (111). The repeated comment “This is different” (107, 108) that the white man makes earlier in response to the narrator’s assertive sexual behaviour, muscular physique, “endowment,” and

adoption of the role of top during sex now comes sharply into focus. The white man has been comparing the protagonist's behaviour with his expectations of Asians in general, as represented by the absent (and sexually betrayed) boyfriend. The encounter is framed as an exotic variation on a familiar script — a temporary reversal of the expected roles — and the act of assertive (and insertive) sex with a white man is shadowed by the more familiar stereotype, present, almost surveilling, even in the room in which intercourse takes place. Betrayal of the submissive Asian boyfriend results in temporary rejection of socially fixed ethnosexual roles, expressed in the transgressive act.

Entered into by the white man as an exceptional adventure, it seems to prove the rule: the subversive state is not allowed to persist, and despite the ardent desire of the protagonist, the act cannot be renewed. The white man returns to his relationship with his Asian boyfriend (who has found out about the infidelity), and “proper” sexual roles are re-established. The narrating Asian top is left frustrated, trying “to hang on to this physical memory for as long as I can because I know it's the last I'll ever feel of it” (114). The story inserts and controverts several related stereotypes (Asian passivity, feeble physique, lesser endowment, etc.), combining them into a comprehensive expression as the assumption (or internalization) of a sexual role. The story — of subterfuge, frustration, and transgression — is also remarkable in its mirroring of how any homosexual encounter might have been written a generation earlier: the disturbance caused by the failure to observe the approved allotment of sexual roles by race is an echo of the intense sense of transgression once incurred by male homosexuality per se. This resentment of the place of Asians in the racial-sexual dynamic of a predominantly white society recurs throughout Quan's work, albeit usually in less explicit form.

One example is the story “Rufo,” also in *Six Positions*. In that story, the narrator feels, under the scrutiny of an Italian man with a preference for Asians, as though he is “being pinned like a butterfly into a collection, [his] wings studied carefully” (62), an image that combines the voyeurism of exoticism, the avarice of acquisition, and the captivity of an unequal relationship. Moreover, the simile evokes the Italian/Asian *Madama Butterfly* love story, with all of its irritating capacity to fix racial roles — and David Henry Hwang's adaptation thereof, in which the Butterfly figure has become a cross-dressing Chinese man.

But the alternative to objectification might be invisibility: the narrator of “Rufo” observes that, if his Asianness draws special attention from Rufo, a large number of men ignore him for the same reason: “Where would you ever see the statement ‘No Asians’ except in gay personal ads?” (61). The question of sexual racism demands uncomfortable consideration of the degree to which supposedly non-moral and “natural” impulses such as sexual attraction might be determined by internalized racism. It is this gap that the stories of *Six Positions* courageously and transgressively explore through their unwillingness to halt the discussion of social stereotyping at the bedroom door; in other words, it is a project to make explicit (in both senses) how underlying stereotypes operate, up to and including the homosexual act itself.

While some of the narrators foil, expose, or disturb stereotypes, some of the more self-reflective protagonists are troubled by the way their desire may be perpetuating these roles. Are the narrators’ tastes results of internalizations of racial-sexual stereotypes? Are the narrators by that rationale complicit? Generally, the objects of the (usually Asian and usually Canadian) narrator’s desire are characterized as white, built, and fair-haired. As one of them puts it, “I fall stupid at the sight of a pretty muscle boy. Actually, they don’t even have to be that pretty” (*Six Positions* 157). But this desire is sometimes accompanied by a feeling of inferiority vis-à-vis the object of desire. “Did you absorb stereotypes? Do you consider yourself less handsome for the shade of your skin?” asks the unnamed narrator of “Getting It if You’re Asian,” a non-narrative *Six Positions* inquiry first published in the Asian Canadian magazine *Ricepaper*. For a gay man, according to that speaker, sex is accessible but tainted by a constant experience of injustice: “It’s an odd trade-off between the pleasure of the senses and social equality, but sometimes you take what you can get” (119).

As Fung and others have shown, these desires, preferences, and stereotypes must be seen in the context of a history of perceptions of Asian emasculation in the wake of Euro-American imperialism. That heritage is still a part of sexual power dynamics, with sociologists consistently finding that a “stereotypical image of the feminized queer Asian American man” (Kumashiro 503) is imposed on Asians in multi-racial societies. Moreover, the tension of “coming to terms not only with their sexuality but also with racism” shows no signs of abating, with the “perceived inadequacies of the Asian male body compared to the white



male body” continuing to undermine the freedom and ability to negotiate sexual roles for ethnic Asians in multi-ethnic societies (Han 64).

That racism is more acceptable when expressed in terms of attraction to “types,” and that typology (often in racially marked forms) has been exacerbated by the conveniences and push-button desires of the Internet era, mean that twenty-first-century gay dating or sexual encounter is one of the places where these stereotypes are most baldly expressed. Quan, by acknowledging the stereotypes and writing against as well as about them, while also recognizing the possibility of complicity with a system of values built upon physical appearance, addresses a taboo that underlies racial dynamics in literature and offers a glimpse into the spaces where politically correct taboos do not apply and racialized power relations are given free rein. A Quan narrator is usually incensed that the gay Asian is beheld as imperfect, receptive, slight, and granted desirability only via the attentions of a white man. If this condition is what the embrace of a queer identity leads to for an Asian Canadian, then what has become of that identity’s promise of equality, to say nothing of liberation?

### “Leaving All that I’ve Made”: Sojourner, Traveller, Emigrant

If Quan’s writing inserts instability into the self-righteous claims of gay movements and identities, then it also undermines Chinese or Asian Canadian as a category of national minority. From the perspective of the (overly) neat categories of minority writing, Quan’s work is complicated by his unwillingness to stay put either physically or narratively. Fellow (gay, Vancouver, Cantonese) writer Wayson Choy’s back-cover blurb for *Slant* places Quan within the tradition of the itinerant poet: “Andy Quan belongs to that species of poet who remembers home and family but travels everywhere to make discoveries that deepen his insights into himself”; indeed, parts of Quan’s work share affinities with queer Canadian poets such as Edward A. Lacey or Blaine Marchand. But where they have found an articulation of identity through the distances of travel and life abroad, Quan traces a border-crossing history, both personal and familial, without permitting resolution under a single banner.

Quan is now an Australian citizen, and his twenty-first-century work has been featured in Australian forums such as *Meanjin’s* 2004 *Asian Issue* and the Australian queer poetry anthology *Out of the Box*. He is thus occasionally positioned within Asian Australian, Australian queer,

and/or Australian immigrant writing. However, an ongoing engagement with the images and experiences of childhood and adolescence — the Cantonese family, the Asian queer adolescent body — means that his literary connection to Vancouver recurs, and his aesthetic is formed and informed more by Canadian than by Australian colleagues. The 2014 selection in *CV2* contained “Australian Poem,” which Quan claims in the introduction is an effort to “match his Canadian voice to [his] own new surroundings and homeland” (35). The introduction to the selection ends with Quan proclaiming himself “Still an outsider after all these years” (35). In his writing, the outsider status itself is a constant, while the terms of that status alter over time and in context.

Taking Quan’s oeuvre as a whole, outsider status is relevant not only from the familiar Chinese Canadian and queer minority categories but also from the perspective of the young backpacker, the international health worker (particularly in the Thailand- and Indonesia-set poems of *Bowling Pin Fire*), and the immigrant *within* the Western anglophone First World. As with other mobile Asian Canadian writers such as Madeleine Thien or Ying Chen, the complex peregrinations of the authors, and the shifting of locales in their writings, supersede any simple minority or immigrant biography or identity.

For instance, the first poem in *Slant*, “En Route,” identifies mobility itself as the family heritage. Rather than reducing arrival to a single event, the poem is a reminder that most immigration is the result of recurring itineraries, over various generations, in various branches of a family; arrival is necessarily incomplete, just as origin is myth, and the human condition is one of being perpetually “en route.” In four stanzas switching among “Mother’s great grandparents,” “Father’s grandparents,” “Father’s sister,” and “Mother,” four separate movements are invoked, followed after a break by three stanzas that identify not a homeland but the condition of movement as the narrator’s inheritance:

So it should not surprise me,  
 this blind following  
 of a destination

Written deeply under folds  
 of skin, blood and tissue  
 though my false heart  
 above the clouds says

This cannot be me again  
 leaving all that I have made. (13)

Travelling, emigration, and sojourn are inscribed on the speaker, inherited once again almost genetically, expressed here in a mode of melancholy, fatalism, and perpetual transience. This emphasis on movement, on liminality, and on strangerhood defies strictly ethnic or national readings of his texts. As Quan notes, “In terms of both of the drivers of writing, sexuality and race, it’s not been particularly useful to think in terms of national borders, but to look for connections and resonance with others across, or in spite of, borders” (Letter to the author).

Quan’s protagonists and speakers are caught in various moments of complex itineraries. In the poem “Condensation,” for instance, the reader finds strangers in a bathhouse in an anonymous Western city coming together while the protagonist’s lover is in Shanghai and the interlocutor’s “lover [has] returned to Hong Kong after five years for work and family and sometimes it is nice to hold someone and be held and why do we need reasons” (*Slant* 79). Quan’s work is often an attempt to derive meaning from international encounter and anecdote, blending malaise or even grief with cosmopolitan *joie de vivre* or hedonism.

But minority bodies are still marked, no matter how unexpected the venue. “Passport Problems,” another poem in *Slant*, illustrates how this embodied experience operates in Quan’s oeuvre. The poem opens with “Certain Scandinavians bow and speak Japanese to me although I am not Japanese” (94). During the Christmas holidays, “they stop me at the border to examine my passport with ultraviolet rays.” Physical appearance pre-empts the possibility of anything other than an Asian nationality or identity; the ultraviolet rays, beyond the visible spectrum, are an echo of how the majority culture expects ethnic Asian citizens to be “really” from somewhere else — perhaps a stronger technology will reveal a deeper truth. The speaker’s challenge in “Passport Problems” is to try to have his non-European ethnicity fully acknowledged as legitimately Canadian by persons outside the country.

The second stanza complicates the relationship between traveller and local in an unusual way. “My last travels in Europe, if treated as a foreigner, I simply / switched countries” (94). This line already situates the speaker as being a foreigner since the reader knows that his usual place of residence is elsewhere. However, the fact that the speaker regards being “treated as a foreigner” offensive is interesting; any North

American travelling in Europe would expect to be treated as a foreigner. The usual sense of the word *foreigner* has been subverted: treating the Asian Canadian speaker as a foreigner suggests that, in contrast, white Canadians are not treated entirely as foreigners in Europe. The speaker implies that the European (possibly even the white) mind dissolves distinctions among European nations of the same race as essentially internecine when confronted with an Asian body. Frustrated by this unwillingness, or inability, to recognize his citizenship, the speaker “crave[s] their pigments to darken, for a sudden blooming of Asian eyes,” insisting, through the exercise of this fantasy, on understanding the experience of discrimination, or the commonalities of human experience, or the arbitrariness of race.

Challenged on the validity of his passport, the speaker does not respond by defending his citizenship or by challenging the guard’s assumption that Canada, by definition, is a white nation. Instead, he answers, “There are Asians living in Canada,” thus implicitly though sarcastically bowing to the supposition that an Asian body with a Canadian passport is an aberration requiring an explanation. Moreover, the tense suggests a temporary condition — residence, not nationality — and the speaker does not try to explain things in terms of identity, since that battle has been lost earlier in the poem. His manner of salvaging matters, or making do, consists not of explaining who he *is* but of accounting for his passport status despite whom the passport controller sees him to be.

The last stanza digests the defeat: as long as the speaker is on European territory, his status will be subject to European impressions of his race. He is particularly offended that this should be true even though European borders themselves are “imaginary.” Ironically, in his view, Schengen Europe eliminates internal national barriers while erecting racial barriers between Europeans and outsiders. The phrase “On this continent, he knows my destiny better than I” deepens the dilemma: on the one hand, it suggests the fact that his legitimacy as a Canadian has not been acknowledged; on the other, it ominously hints that the border guard might know something of which the speaker is unaware — that he might not be considered a full-fledged compatriot by other Canadians. The last sentence reaffirms the message of the poem, that in the eyes of many, race can and does trump national identity, “my black hair and slant eyes shouting at them brighter than any flag they have ever seen” (94).

In other works, Quan's protagonists or speakers are North American outsiders, "this Canadian stranger who bears / gifts, speaks twisted Spanish / and walks in such short, rushed steps" ("Shaving," *Slant* 15); middle-class Canadian students abroad who might or might not be Asian ("The Polish Titanic" and "Travel" in *Calendar Boy*); or privileged international work travellers in Asia (e.g., the *Bowling Pin Fire* poems "Lonely Planet," "Dismayed," and "Sukhimvit Soi 5"). Protagonists and poetic speakers spend periods living in Brussels, London, Ecuador, and Sydney and travelling in Austria, Poland, Vietnam, Germany, Thailand, and Scandinavia. Quan's oeuvre can be envisaged as a system of instances and anecdotes strung in nodes across the globe, with different aspects of identity shifting in and out of focus.

Quan's footloose oeuvre offers the opportunity to use these complex itineraries to challenge thinking on diaspora in the wider social sciences. As migration sociologist Yasemin Nuhoğlu Soysal has written, the usual treatment of diaspora "suspends immigrant experience between host and home countries, native and foreign lands, homebound desires and losses — thus obscuring the new topography and practices of citizenship, which are multi-connected, multi-referential and postnational" (13).

In literary studies, the idea that Chinese Canadian exists between two geographic places ought to be equally antiquated. For a writer such as Quan, from multigenerational Canadian (and Hawaiian) Cantonese heritage, living in Australia and writing about travels, the North American Pacific and his family there feature as the points of departure and remembrance, not of arrival. In both prose and poetry, the outsider identity is imbued with a Canadian voice and an attitude toward race in particular, marked by growing up a minority in the mandated Canadian multicultural state. As Quan wrote a decade ago for an Asian Australian journal, identities shift and are relationally defined depending on the context: "In Canada, I'm Chinese-Canadian; in Europe and to Asian-born Asians, I'm more often North American or Canadian; in other situations I'm Asian, East Asian, Person of Colour (reluctantly), a member of a visible or ethnic minority (a fact), and Oriental (but no thank you)" ("Found in Translation" 172).

In the work of writers like Quan and others who were formed in Canada but travel between societies and/or settle abroad, it is Canada that creates the cultural and social substrate from which their works emerge in dialogue with societies elsewhere (including Asian ones). Even

as a Canadian identity is retained, it is mitigated, jostled, questioned, and complicated by the other elements of self — and leaves no residue of gratitude or entreaty on behalf of multiculturalism. Why should it? It is the basic responsibility of the state to ensure equality of its citizens, and its willingness and ability to do so are always questionable, in Canada as elsewhere. Meanwhile, we also have other people to be.

## Conclusion

Quan's 1999 introduction to *Swallowing Clouds: An Anthology of Chinese-Canadian Poetry*, coedited with Jim Wong-Chu, asserts that the outsider perspective is one of the primary contributions of such a body of work: "Some of what empowers the work in this anthology is the alien glance: someone from the outside looking in and seeing something that hasn't been noticed before. We're not just looking in, though: we're tapping on the glass. We're walking through the door and bringing in the outcast, taking the outsider inside" (8). Quan, then thirty years old and at the beginning of his writing career, in this text views his project as the integration of Chinese communities into the Canadian literary narrative through the classic minority/national framework. His introduction goes on to highlight how other factors — queerness or even the marginality of poetry in Canada — contribute to a sense of the Chinese Canadian author as an outcast.

A decade and a half later Quan wrote about his writing career with the awareness that he was then inscribing himself as much in queer writing as in Asian Canadian work. Citing mentors and models in American and British gay writing and among Canadian poets who wrote in autobiographical modes, Quan remarked that

It was natural for me to follow in these footsteps. I also thought there was something particularly honest about putting myself on the page, and asserting an identity, both gay and Asian-Canadian, that hadn't been published before. It's interesting to look back and reflect on that stance, and see it as formed by history and culture. . . . LGBT literature has splintered into a hundred voices, including many that are not particularly confessional or autobiographical. (Letter to the author)

Asian Canadian voices, too, have splintered. This is a good thing, both in that they are less bound to ethnic categories and in that thematic

variety is an indication that a larger scope of individual truths is finding expression. Taken as a whole, this diversity of voices within queer or Asian Canadian writing mounts a salutary challenge to a single narrative or identity, in the same way that either one, in its day, denied the assumed monolithic truth of straight white men.

In literary studies, as in other fields and in daily life, excessive power is given to the nation-state to shape canons, identities, and categories. Land and people are cordoned off by imaginary colours, and departments like the one that I work in and publications like the one that you are now reading are set up along hard lines drawn over fuzzy transitional spaces. Meanwhile, non-white, non-Aboriginal populations in settler states are established as “visible minorities” (that uniquely Canadian and unpalatable term), as though visibility is a freak occurrence occasionally befalling the otherwise unseeable (and can there be any doubt to which race the implied beholder, in that term, belongs?).

As Quan writes about his childhood,

“Where are you from?” never meant Canada, my birthplace, nor Vancouver, my home town. But China wasn’t the right answer either. “I’m Chinese,” I learned to say, “Chinese-Canadian” at a later age. “My father’s parents came from China to Canada,” was a longer version, “and my mother’s great-grandparents came from China to Hawaii.” This was the most accurate account, but wordy. Still, they asked and asked. I would barely get to ask them about their mongrel-European backgrounds. I was always in the spotlight. (“Found in Translation” 172)

This is a familiar irritant for ethnic Asians in Western settler societies, but behind it stand more fundamental questions. Why is this the first line of inquiry? Why is notional ancestral origin uncontested and ethnicity allowed to acquire absurdly absolute (though feebly understood) geographies? Why is nationality, ethnicity, or citizenship a primary order of identity? Rejecting it, what can replace it? There are only a few identities more primary: gender is one, and sexual minority is another (since, as with whiteness, the majority identity, straightness, is activated, often defensively, only when a minority identity is present, invoked, or applied). To be a minority is to perceive oneself always as an intrusion, a deviation from the norm.

However, Euro-American societies continue to presume that their newfound embrace of homosexuality provides “the model of eman-

icipation to which migrants and minorities from less enlightened background[s] necessarily aspire” (El-Tayeb 89), a complacent attitude that also imposes assumptions and inequities on non-white queers across their possible identities. As a result, queer people of colour often experience the climate within queer spaces as neither progressive nor accepting. The rationale of self-interest, expressed perhaps in its purest form in casual sexual encounters, shows a society deeply invested in sexual-racial stereotypes. Their careful examination is still largely silenced by prudery and the complacency — especially among white male queers — that the process of achieving formal equality and toleration is sufficient to ensure equal lives.

This phenomenon, a failing both of equality (between queers of different races) and of solidarity (between minorities) exposes the conditional “citizenship” made available to queer Asians in the subculture. By calling out the queer community on its racial inequity, Quan pairs the demand for inclusion with the indication that identity, while adopted, will be modified by its coexistence with other identities, with a superabundance of identities. If one cannot acquire full acknowledgement as queer, or as Canadian, then one must acquire these and other identities in varying degrees, no identity meriting full loyalty or identification, but each identity providing an assurance against the dangerous, the dictatorial, tendencies of the others — with the self, the individual, to be found, or at least pursued, in the interstices.

Returning to the image proposed by Quan: the more labels are adopted, the more unstable the entire system of labelling, of identification, of judgment becomes and the more illegitimate the tyranny of categorical identities appears. Even as his narrators and speakers pick apart the constructs of state and race, they reject neither and at times profit from both. His writing not only disrupts labels by acquiring too many of them but also constantly undermines — lyrically, graphically, narratively, polemically — the binary terms by which labels can be affixed.

As an author, Quan is too critical and unsentimental to write in liberationist or utopian veins, but his works reveal the compromising nature of any and all of the central identities (queer, Canadian, Chinese, Asian) likely to be affixed to him. This salutary doubt regarding the promises of nation and ethnicity can be extended to any and all who similarly have been handed parentheses and hyphens in their assigned identities, in the modes and manners that worth and belonging are



made available to them. Full subscription to any identity emerges as a method of becoming absorbed, adjusted, and silenced; instead, it is one's own possible and competing subjectivities that one must seek constantly to play off one another, never allowing any single aspect to stand in for, or demand fealty of, the complex self.

### AUTHOR'S NOTE

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The most substantial critical examination of Quan's writing to date, Taiwanese literary scholar Bennett Yu-Hsiang Fu's book chapter "Omnivorous Globetrotter: Ethno-Sexual Subjectivities in Andy Quan's *Calendar Boy*," takes this approach, suggesting that Quan's stories "construct a space where the Asian queer individuals display the complexities of subjectivity related to ethnicity, gender, home and the body" (180).

<sup>2</sup> It also appears in fewer library collections than Quan's other work, presumably because of its subtitle, *Sex Writing*. Although Quan is Vancouver born and raised, *Six Positions* was, at the time of writing, not in the collections of the University of British Columbia, Simon Fraser University, or the Vancouver Public Library.

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