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Joseph Black

Abstract

This essay explores the subtle, affectively charged dialogues that shape the lives of queer Chinese international students in Sydney. Moving away from dominant frameworks of visibility and identity politics, it focuses on the quieter, often ambiguous moments through which queerness is expressed, negotiated, and felt—what might be termed "quiet worldmaking." Drawing on memory-based vignettes from the author's own interactions with queer Chinese friends and acquaintances, the essay examines how fleeting utterances, silences, jokes, and gestures become meaningful sites of affective labor. These remembered conversations illuminate the complex negotiations of intimacy, belonging, and self-presentation within diasporic life, foregrounding the emotional textures of queerness that unfold in everyday settings. Situated at the intersection of queer diaspora studies and affect theory, this work argues that the half-said and the quietly endured offer crucial insights into how queer subjectivities are lived under conditions of transnational mobility, racialization, and cultural constraint. In attending to these small but powerful moments, the essay offers a method for thinking with, rather than about, diasporic queer lives—one that values emotional nuance, relational ethics, and the transformative potential of shared feeling.

Keywords

Queer Chinese diaspora, affect theory, memory, everyday life, quiet worldmaking, racialized desire

Introduction

In the vibrant and multicultural city of Sydney, queer Chinese international students inhabit a space marked by possibility, contradiction, and negotiation. Their diasporic lives unfold across multiple registers—linguistic, cultural, emotional—within a society often ambivalent toward both queerness and foreignness. These students, far from home and embedded in shifting landscapes of friendship, study, and self-fashioning, frequently encounter moments where identity is not declared but delicately alluded to; where belonging is not claimed but cautiously explored. While queer life is often studied through the lens of visibility, resistance, or activism, this essay is interested in quieter, more ambiguous registers of experience: the half-said, the joked-about, the awkwardly laughed off. It turns to small, remembered conversations—fragments of speech, passing disclosures, and affectively charged silences—as rich sites for understanding how queer Chinese students navigate their diasporic realities.

The affective dimensions of these everyday encounters—feelings of shame, uncertainty, joy, and desire—are not merely background noise to identity formation but are themselves central to how subjectivities are lived and understood.[1] A casual confession during Lunar New Year, a cutting comment from a parent back home, the deletion of a dating app: each of these seemingly mundane moments opens a window into how queer diasporic life is felt and negotiated. These moments, I argue, are not incidental; they are foundational. They reveal the subtle strategies by which queer Chinese students navigate cultural expectations, racialized norms, and queer aesthetics in a transnational frame.

This essay asks: How do remembered conversations between queer Chinese students and their peers reveal strategies of navigation, concealment, and quiet worldmaking within diasporic life? I approach this question through a method that combines queer ethnography and affect theory. Drawing on memory-based vignettes from my own life in Sydney—reconstructed dialogues, moments of hesitation, glances and laughter shared among friends—I explore the affective labor of queerness as it unfolds in intimate,

[1] Generally see: Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), p. 6, 69.

everyday interactions. These are stories drawn with, not about, queer Chinese friends and acquaintances: they reflect a shared space of friendship, misrecognition, and connection. As a queer white American international student, my relationships with Chinese peers were shaped by both intimacy and difference—offering a partial but deeply felt vantage point into their experiences.

Theoretically, this work builds on queer diaspora studies (e.g., Eng 2010; Gopinath 2005; Kong 2011), which foreground the entanglement of queerness with histories of migration, kinship, and belonging. It also draws on affect theory (e.g., Ahmed 2004; Stewart 2007), particularly the ways affect circulates quietly, structuring life beneath the surface of words. Finally, it aligns with scholars of everyday queer life (e.g., Manalansan 2003; Kong 2011), who emphasize the subtle, improvised, and often ambivalent ways queerness is lived in ordinary contexts. In what follows, I read remembered conversations as affectively rich archives that disclose a quiet politics of queer worldmaking—a politics enacted not in declarations, but in pauses, hesitations, and laughter that trails off.

Method & Positionality

This essay emerges from a position that is both intimate and partial. As a white queer American international student who has lived in the UK, Canada, France, the US, and Germany before arriving in Australia, I brought with me a history of mobility, difference, and outsider-ness. Although English is my native language and I benefited from racial and linguistic privilege in Australia, I often felt peripheral to mainstream Australian social life—its codes of familiarity, its norms of inclusion. This sense of being slightly out of place led me to form close bonds with other international students, particularly those from China, who were navigating similar tensions of belonging, difference, and self-presentation. Among these friendships, several were with queer or gender non-conforming students, including a 'T' friend from Hunan whose social circle became part of my own. Our interactions unfolded in apartments, at shared meals, and during spontaneous conversations—occasions where identity was neither fixed nor explained, but felt, hinted at, and lived in fragments.

Methodologically, this essay draws on a set of remembered and reconstructed vignettes based on those everyday social interactions. The dialogues recounted here are not formal interviews but moments that stuck—lines of speech, gestures, or silences that carried emotional weight and lingered in memory. These are "stories with," not "stories about"—narratives that reflect a shared social space rather than an ethnographic gaze from outside. Pseudonyms are used, and while the dialogues are re-constructed, they remain faithful to the tone, structure, and affective atmosphere of the original encounters. I approach these memories with an ethic of care, attuned to the trust embedded in these moments and mindful of how much was left unsaid.

This approach allows for attention to what might otherwise be dismissed as trivial: moments of laughter, glances, awkward pauses, confessions delivered in half-jest. Affect theory helps frame these as "quiet affects"—feelings such as shame, joy, confusion, and longing that do not announce themselves loudly but nonetheless shape diasporic queer life in powerful ways. By treating these everyday moments as meaningful sites of affective negotiation, this method foregrounds the subtle, emotionally textured work that goes into queer worldmaking within diasporic contexts.

3. Three Core Vignettes with Analysis

The following three vignettes offer glimpses into the everyday experiences of queer Chinese international students negotiating identity, intimacy, and belonging in Sydney. Rather than seeking dramatic turning points or definitive truths, these scenes are selected for their affective texture—their hesitations, tensions, and fleeting moments of connection. Inspired by ethnographic approaches and queer phenomenology, I use these vignettes not merely as illustrations but as sites of analysis, attending to how queerness is felt, expressed, and negotiated in minor, often ambiguous ways.

Vignette 1: "I Like Both, Is That Bad?"

It was Lunar New Year, and we had gathered in a small apartment kitchen in Kingsford, passing around beers and coca colas. The conversation drifted from group gossip to

relationships. That's when Y, a transmasculine student from Hubei, leaned against the countertop and said, offhandedly, "I like both… Is that bad?" There was a pause and then a chorus of giggles, someone teasing, "So greedy!" Y smiled and shrugged, as if to say, *just kidding, maybe not*.

This vignette may seem slight, even forgettable. But it offers a poignant example of what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick called the "epistemology of the closet"—the constant calibration between disclosure and ambiguity.[2] Y's statement is simultaneously a question, a performance, and a soft test of the room's safety. Bisexual desire, often erased or misunderstood, emerges here not as a proud declaration but as a tentative offering. The humor—"So greedy!"—deflects vulnerability, allowing intimacy to surface without direct confrontation.

From an affective lens, Sara Ahmed's conception of shame is instructive. Shame, Ahmed argues, does not always silence; it can also gesture toward connection.[3] Y's casual tone, framed as a joke, hints at potential shame or uncertainty but also invites recognition. In this moment, shame and desire are entangled—not opposites, but co-constitutive forces that shape how queerness is felt and navigated.

This brief exchange also reflects how queer diasporic subjects manage visibility. Bisexuality here is not foregrounded in identity-political terms but emerges within the folds of everyday conversation. This resonates with Martin Manalansan's call to decenter coming out narratives and instead attend to the ambient, improvised ways queer people negotiate space, intimacy, and belonging.[4] Y's "I like both" doesn't resolve into a fixed label—it remains open, flickering between assertion and withdrawal.

This is a moment of quiet worldmaking. The question "Is that bad?" is not seeking a definitive answer but signaling the presence of queerness, of complexity, and perhaps a desire for shared recognition. In laughing, in not answering directly, we all participated in

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[2] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 8, 67-78.
[3] Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 10.
[4] Martin F. Manalansan, *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 19, 123.

sustaining the ambiguity—a refusal of fixed boundaries that was, paradoxically, deeply affirming.

Vignette 2: "My Mother Said I Look Like a Monster"

We were scrolling through each other's photos one evening in the common room. T, another Chinese international student and close friend of Y's, stopped on a picture of themselves taken when they were in high school just outside of Changsha. Their hair was cut close, styled deliberately boyish, their posture confident, eyes steady. They looked like themselves. But with a quiet laugh, T said, "My mother saw this and said I look like a monster."

The statement hung in the air. No one knew quite what to say. T didn't seem angry, just resigned. "She cried when I got this haircut," they added. "Said I look like a criminal. Like I'm going to rob someone."

This vignette lays bare the tension between queer self-fashioning and filial expectation. Judith Butler's work on gender performativity is helpful here: gender intelligibility is not merely about self-expression, but about being recognized within a cultural field of norms.[5] T's haircut marks a refusal—or perhaps a negotiation—of femininity, a visual cue that disrupts their mother's expectations. In doing so, it renders T's body less "intelligible" as a daughter, more legible perhaps as a threat, a stranger, a "monster."

But the language of monstrosity is deeply affective. As Ahmed reminds us, affect "sticks"—words like "monster" don't merely describe but wound, imprinting a sense of deviation from familial and national norms.[6] At the same time, T's matter-of-fact recounting also signals resilience. There is no attempt to reconcile or justify the choice. The haircut stands, despite its cost.

This moment also illuminates a diasporic double bind. Living in Sydney, T has the freedom to experiment with gender aesthetics that may be difficult to maintain at home.

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[5] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
[6] Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 10.

Yet home remains psychically close. The mother's reaction, mediated by a digital photograph, echoes across distance. What is visible online becomes another site of surveillance, misrecognition, and vulnerability.

T's story is not one of rupture but of dissonance. The "monster" is not rejected, only named. And in naming it aloud—in a shared space of quiet understanding—T reclaims some of the affective ground. As with Y's vignette, the tension is not resolved but held. And in that holding, a kind of queer kinship is formed—not necessarily with family of origin, but with chosen others who witness, nod, and continue the conversation.

Vignette 3: "I Deleted It Because It's Too Racist"

Late one night, while we were talking about dating, Z—a law student from Hubei—mentioned that he had deleted Blued, the Chinese gay dating app. "It's too racist," he said bluntly. "I don't want to see those comments anymore." When pressed, he explained: "It's weird. Everyone says they only want Chinese or maybe Asian. No black. No brown. No white. Sometimes I just feel like deleting everything."

This vignette draws our attention to digital intimacy and the ambivalent terrain of online queer life. Blued, once hailed as a groundbreaking platform for queer Chinese users, becomes here a site of exhaustion. The app's algorithmic environment amplifies racial preferences, fetishizations, and exclusions. As Z generally put it, "Even if you're Chinese, you feel like a product. Everyone's selling something."

Z's decision to delete the app is not framed as political, but affective. Fatigue, frustration, and ambivalence drive the act. Yet this very deletion can be read as what Kara Keeling might call a "queer temporality"—a refusal to participate in normative circuits of desire and visibility.[7] This is not a coming out or a confrontation. It is an opting out, a quiet act of disengagement that speaks volumes.

Here, a theory of queer sinophone digital culture could be instructive. Platforms like Blued reflect both possibilities and limits of queer worldmaking under Chinese

[7] Kara Keeling, *The Queer Times, Black Futures* (New York: NYU Press, 2019), 39.

techno-capitalism. While offering visibility, they also discipline users through interface, market logic, and unspoken hierarchies of desirability. The result is a digital landscape marked by inclusion and erasure, intimacy and alienation.

Z's experience also speaks to the complex position of queer Asian men in transnational circuits of desirability. As discussed in literature, queer of color digital users are often rendered hypervisible and hypervulnerable, subject to both racial fetishism and exclusion.[8] Z's casual but definitive "I deleted it" signals not just a critique of others, but a self-protective gesture—one shaped by weariness rather than ideology.

As in the earlier vignettes, this moment does not culminate in activism or catharsis. But it registers something powerful: a refusal of the terms on offer. Deletion, here, becomes a minor politics, a way of withdrawing from systems that promise intimacy but reproduce harm. In sharing this with me—not dramatically, but wearily—Z invites recognition of a shared exhaustion, a tacit understanding that sometimes, the best way to care for oneself is to quietly log off.

4. Conclusion

This short ethnographic reflection has centered on small, remembered moments—half-jokes at New Year's, offhand comments about an app, or a photo shared in passing. Yet these "small" exchanges offer a rich archive of diasporic queer life, full of affective depth. In each vignette, we see how queer students navigate identity, belonging, and recognition not through grand declarations but through everyday talk, glances, gestures, and silences. These are not minor moments because they are insignificant, but because they often pass beneath the radar of conventional analytic frames. And yet they carry profound insights into how queerness is felt, negotiated, and sustained across borders, languages, and cultural norms.

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[8] André Carrington, *Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016); Shaka McGlotten, *Virtual Intimacies: Media, Affect, and Queer Sociality* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2013).

A focus on such minoritized moments challenges us to rethink what counts as queer theory, as data, or even as knowledge. The speech acts in these stories—"Is that bad?", "She said I look like a monster," "I deleted it"—are not mere reflections of identity but practices of worldmaking. They stake claims to a certain kind of visibility or refusal, vulnerability or humor, affirmation or critique. Equally, silences and deletions are not empty spaces but charged ones. They are affective responses to constraint and confusion, shame and desire, hope and fatigue. To delete an app, to withhold a label, to let a comment trail off without closure—these are gestures that tell us something about the textured, often ambivalent realities of queer life in diaspora.

Indeed, what these vignettes reveal is that diasporic queer experience is not always articulated in the language of pride, resistance, or linear progression. It often unfolds in contradiction, in hesitation, in trying things out and pulling back again. As researchers, and as people in relationship with those we learn from, we are called to attune ourselves to the affective force of these quiet forms. These remembered conversations are not trivial; they are affectively rich archives of how people make sense of themselves and one another amid the push and pull of migration, family, platform, language, and desire.

To take such utterances seriously is to move beyond extractive or identity-based methods toward a queer ethics of listening. It means acknowledging that "data" can come not only from formal interviews but from kitchens and couches, from passing comments and shared laughter. It also means accepting that not everything will resolve into a clear narrative. Some things remain unclear—deliberately so.

Perhaps the gentle provocation of this work is this: What happens when we listen closely, not just to what is said, but to what is barely said? What new forms of knowledge emerge when we take ambiguity, hesitation, and deletion as serious sites of queer theorizing? These stories suggest that in the quiet, affectively charged spaces of everyday life, new worlds are already being made.

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