

## WHAT A DRAG! FILIPINA/WHITE AUSTRALIAN RELATIONS IN THE ADVENTURES OF PRISCILLA QUEEN OF THE DESERT<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This paper tracks the ways in which the deployment of Orientalist logic (in)forms the Australian film *The Adventures of Priscilla Queen of the Desert* (1994) and responses to the film. I argue that Orientalism within *Priscilla* privileges a white hegemony that denies the potentialities of queer as destabilising normative coherence. I focus on the white protagonists' relationship with Cynthia, the Filipina character, in order to interrogate how whiteness and Orientalism (in)forms their contact with one another, and I process queer (to a heterosexist social order) characters as normative protagonists because of their whiteness. Here, I insinuate my own readings of the film to show that while Orientalist whiteness shapes the film, it also produces and is produced by perceptual practices that deploy investments in and/or resignify the scope of white Orientalism. I track this simultaneous affirmation and reconceptualisation of normative structures through the characters' use of drag. Such impermanence maintains whiteness as the speaking/subject position. Consequently, queer potentialities for extending the scope of white Orientalism cannot eventuate. This paper pushes towards recognising whiteness and Orientalism as integral facets of queerness within *Priscilla* and through responses to the film. With this, the multiple ways in which queer identities are experienced can be addressed.

### Introduction

Many responses to the film *The Adventures of Priscilla Queen of the Desert* posit it as concerned with the queering of (Australian) masculinities. Yet, in most of these discussions, the racialised nuances of queerness within the film are elided. Examples of this elision can be found in fan reviews, such as:

Two drag-queens (Anthony/Mitzi and Adam/Felicia) and a transsexual (Ralph/Bernadette) contract to perform a drag show at a resort in Alice Springs... They head west from Sydney aboard their lavender bus, Priscilla. En route, it is discovered that the woman they've contracted with is Anthony's wife. Their bus breaks down, and is repaired by Bob, who travels on with them (Goldberg 1994).

Here, Anthony/Mitzi, Adam/Felicia and Ralph/Bernadette are positioned as the lead characters, thus narrating the film as 'seen' through them. Other characters, such as Bob and Anthony's wife are included as secondary roles, but prominent enough to be included in the review. Although the wife is not named, her position is cemented as enabling the main characters to journey across the Outback. Importantly, these characters are all identifiable within the film as white. Conversely, 'non-white' characters are written out of the review. For instance Cynthia, the Filipina character in *Priscilla*, is not included despite her pivotal role in leaving Bob, which provides the impetus for Bob and Ralph/Bernadette to become

romantically involved with one another. Moreover, the Indigenous sovereignty that the white protagonists engage with through their travels and by their contact with Aboriginal people is not explored. The lead characters' sexualities remain the focus, but their racial status as white individuals is not specified. These omissions speak of the white race privilege which naturalises whiteness as the dominant norm that is often not critiqued. Consequently, white hegemony foregrounds *Priscilla* and discussions of identity in the film. It may be argued that the scope of short reviews cannot explore these complexities yet, at the same time, white hegemony is worthy of being noted as this typifies many approaches to *Priscilla*.

Whiteness as the normalised speaking/subject position is reiterated in scholarly approaches. I use Australian responses, such as those from Rose Lucas (1998) and Kelly Farrell (1999). Both show how discourses of male hetero/homosexuality (in)form the film, yet do not substantially mark how race is significant to any discussion of the film. I acknowledge that their critiques cannot exhaustively examine beyond their specified focus because of constrictions that determine publication. Yet it is an oversight to exclude how male sexualities are racialised. Lucas' paper does signal towards "ethnicity and difference" (1998: 138), but this does not develop beyond one paragraph and does not take into account how whiteness could be an ethnic category. Farrell's analysis does not gesture towards an identity politics that extends beyond gender and sexuality.

Even in analyses that make racialising practices apparent in *Priscilla*, the focus remains on white protagonists to foreground discussions of 'Australianness'. An essay by Allan James Thomas (1996), entitled 'Camping Outback: Landscape, Masculinity and Performance in *The Adventures of*

*Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*', maps the complexity of constituting 'Australianness': "...the Bush Tucker Man is no more representatively Australian than a Vietnamese immigrant, an Australian subsidiary of a foreign multinational, or indeed a drag queen" (107). However, the remainder of his paper only uses the white drag-queens' experiences (in the context of *Priscilla*) to provoke a discussion on 'Australianness'. This postulates that a 'different' (to the heterosexual white) type of Australian constitutes 'Australianness', but this 'difference' is marked out in terms of the white drag-queens' self-actualisation.

White self-actualisation is depicted as unable to "mark its cultural meanings onto the landscape, to make it 'ours' as it were" (Thomas 1996: 99). Here, white Australia is projected as being helpless within the Australian landscape without taking into account how whiteness legislatively determines relations to land. In terms of Indigenous relations to land, Aileen Moreton-Robinson uses the descriptor of 'post-colonizing' to "signify the active, the current and the continuing nature of the colonizing relationship that positions [Indigenous people] as belonging but not belonging" (2003: 38). Although this post-colonising relationship implicates *all* Australians, white European colonisation is the point of reference that foregrounds Australia's post-colonising society and culture.<sup>2</sup>

The aforementioned responses are not an exhaustive sample. There are Australian responses to the film that critique *Priscilla*'s racialising practices. To name a few, Nicki Saroca (1997) contextualises an examination of *Priscilla* by arguing that the film deploys Orientalist notions of Filipino women. Damien W. Riggs (2006) uses the film as a trope through which to examine the racialisation of white queers in Australia, where he engages in a self-reflexive critique of his own whiteness, gender

and sexuality to interrogate how these facets of identity construct certain hegemonic ideologies and representations in *Priscilla*.

Taking the lead of these academics, I interrogate the racialising practices within *Priscilla*. With this, I focus on Filipina-Anglo Australian relations as shown through the film's white protagonists: Bob (Bill Hunter), Anthony/Mitzi (Hugo Weaving), Adam/Felicia (Guy Pearce), Ralph/Bernadette (Terrence Stamp) and Bob's wife, Cynthia, the Filipina character (Julia Cortez). I am compelled to focus on representations of the Australia-Philippine nexus as I am a Filipina migrant living in Australia. Therefore, I am invested in representations of the subject positions that my subjectivity/identity straddles. Further, it is rare to see Filipinos portrayed in mainstream Australian films. I thus focus on Cynthia's character to examine what occurs when a Filipina is represented. Here, I implicate whiteness as a racialising strategy that endorses Orientalist perceptions of Cynthia. In implicating whiteness as a structural force within the film, I draw on Suvendrini Perera's (2005: 30) conceptualisation of whiteness as a:

[P]alpable, material, and eminently quantifiable category against which those to be excluded were measured... The state and the bodies of its citizens were explicitly constructed in and through their relation to whiteness, establishing a hierarchy of belonging and entitlement.

Perera's statement refers to the constitution of a racially exclusionary 'White Australia'. I argue that *Priscilla* invests in a 'White Australia' that normalises whiteness as the natural yardstick against which a range of categories of difference are defined (Perera 2005: 31).<sup>3</sup> I argue that whiteness packages Anthony/Mitzi, Adam/Felicia,

Ralph/Bernadette and Bob as natural protagonists, despite their visible queer subjectivities that package them as Other within heteronormative social structures.

The politics of Australian national identity have always engaged with Orientalist whiteness (D'Cruz & Steele 2003; Wong 2003). Therefore, it is necessary to mark how Orientalism and whiteness package an Australian film such as *Priscilla*. By this, I do not intend to typify white people as Orientalists (and vice versa), but in regards to *Priscilla*, the white protagonists may be seen to invest in Orientalist practices that work to maintain authority over the Orient/Oriental (Said 1995: 3).

With Orientalism, whiteness is processed as a geo-political strategy that specifies what locations and people comprise 'west' and 'east', and constitutes these categories as different from one another. Those considered as 'Oriental' are fixed as the 'strange', 'different', 'sensual', 'exotic' Other to a normative Occidental social order (Said 1995: 72). Through this fixing, a framework of development processes 'Orient'/'Orientals' as Third-World underdeveloped children who need to catch up to First-World, adult, western nations. A chief point of difference used to mark people/nations as Oriental or Occidental is through equating whiteness with being western and 'non-whiteness' with being Oriental (Said 1995: 252). Orientalism is thus the mode of production that produces racial/geo-political knowledges about people, spaces and their negotiation with one another and themselves through the rubric of whiteness.

In this paper, I first map out the ways in which the film deploys Orientalist practices that privilege white hegemony in order to show the dominant cultural discourses presented by *Priscilla*. This provides a framework within which I

locate my own experiences of these cultural discourses to ensure that I question the assumptions made, and the ones I make about identity within and around the discourses I, and others, critique. By this, I do not intend to specify that all viewers are influenced/influence in the same ways that I am/do. Instead I point towards the importance of self-reflexive critique to interrogate the ways in which cultural discourses intersect, form and are formed by individual analysis.

White dominance problematises the 'originality' of the film, a characteristic touted as the essence of *Priscilla*. According to Al Clark, the producer of the film, *Priscilla* is original (1994). The film does open up spaces for queer destabilisations that make it an innovative project that differs to many in the Australian film industry. However, it is not original in that it centres on whiteness as the narrative driving force. Originality in representing queerness is curbed by fixing queerness mainly through the bodies of white men, thus discouraging many possibilities of queerness in the film.

In discussing queerness, I draw again upon Damien W. Riggs' (2005) work to talk about queer embodiment. He suggests, following Spurlin (2005), that Princess Diana may be understood as a queer icon, as "the term 'queer' may have little to do with sexuality or sexual object preference, and more to do with the disjunctures or paradoxes that certain modes of being may engender" (2005: 1. See also McCormack, this issue, for more on the use of the term 'queer' in this style). "In this sense", he suggests, "to 'queer' is to destabilise, to challenge, or to present a critique of established norms" (Riggs 2005: 1), or as Case (1991: 11) suggests, "to shift the ground of being itself". This 'ground of being' is a complex matrix of socio-cultural factors and therefore is prone to constant change. In this context,

queering does not invest in totalising positions. As Eve K. Sedgwick specifies: "Queer is a continuing moment, movement, motive-recurrent, eddying, *troublant*" (1993: xii).

Taking this particular understanding of queer, I argue that *Priscilla* reaffirms essentialist racialising practices that deny the activist possibilities of queering. While *Priscilla* does destabilise the normative assumptions of 'Australianness' through "the apparent incongruity of offering two drag queens and a transsexual as representative of the essence of 'Australianness'" (Thomas 1996: 97), the film does so in ways that foreground 'Australianness' as white and western.

### **White Orientalist Subject Positions**

Whiteness thus packages the events, characters and settings of *Priscilla*. This can be evidenced through Bob's flashback, which is borne out of a story he tells the white protagonists in order to sate their curiosity as to why he married Cynthia. Here, Bob calls the Orient into being, and with it, creates Cynthia as an Oriental who is defined by the white individual. Although Bob refers to a Filipina and a Philippine geographical space, he does not name these specificities. Bob's flashback provides an ambiguous space that gestures to 'Oriental' bodies (both female and place), thus subsuming the Philippines and Filipinas under a broad category of Oriental Otherness.

The scene begins with Bob waking and realising he is in pain, as evidenced by his groan and facial wince. These expressions of pain allude to his hangover. He is lying on a bed in what appears to be a motel room. Although the location of this room is not blatantly specified in the film, the 'Oriental' music, along with Bob's sense of dislocation in this setting, intimates that the room is not

in Australia. A film transcript says as much by describing the room as situated in 'manilla' [sic].<sup>4</sup> Further, what Bob sees cements this place as 'Oriental'. For instance, he glances to his side and notices an 'Oriental' woman smoking a cigarette and (presumably) drinking alcohol. Their dialogue transpires:

BOB: Hello.  
 CYNTHIA: (*smiling seductively*) Hello.  
 BOB: Who are you?  
 CYNTHIA: (*exaggerated sweetness*) I your wife.  
 BOB: Guess I'll be going home then. (*pushes himself off the bed*)  
 CYNTHIA: (*shouting angrily*) No, you no going! I coming too! I your wife! (*shoves a marriage certificate in Bob's face*) See, I your wife!

This scene relies on Orientalist stereotypes to capture the essence of an Oriental space, woman and situation. These stereotypes provide a template of essentialised characteristics used to define the limits of the Orient/Oriental's subjectivity, which include positing the Orient as non-white. The differences in Bob and Cynthia's skin colour visibly distinguish Bob from Cynthia, and it is what this skin colour connotes that compels the scope of interracial relations. Skin colour is offered as the locus of a person's subjectivity, racial identity and geo-political status. Cynthia's brown skin posits her as naturally Oriental. She continues to inhabit a non-western, Third World space even when she is seen within the Australian nation. Her visibility (e.g. brown skin colour) and audibility (e.g. her stunted English and accented voice) speaks of her geo-political status despite her location in a space that is not normatively linked with her outward appearance and voice. Conversely, Bob's 'white' skin secures him as western. Here, I do not indicate that 'white' coloured skin secures the subject's position as white. But, in *Priscilla*, visibly apparent white skin

signifies a separation from non-whiteness.

Another Orientalist mode of subject formation is deployed through 'Oriental sounding' music which aurally constructs the space as Oriental. 'Oriental' sound that can be heard in Chinese Kung-Fu films is played whenever Cynthia appears (except when she performs her strip-tease). In some scenes, this music is played faintly, acting as a subliminal message to reiterate Cynthia's status as Oriental. In other scenes, such as the one previously discussed, this music is loud and DVD subtitles specify that 'Oriental Music' is being played.

The use of non-diegetic sound from Chinese contexts to frame Cynthia's actions conflates Cynthia with a host of other Asians in film. Non-diegetic sound is also known as 'commentary sound', and in this context the comment that is made gestures to the perception that 'all Asians look alike', and in respect to sound, one Asian sound can speak for every Asian. The evocation of 'Chineseness' indicates Anglo-Australian negotiations with Chinese identity. As Chinese people are one of Australia's most recognisable Oriental Others, the use of Chinese Kung-Fu music conflates the Filipina Cynthia with perceptions about Chinese identity. These could include racist assumptions about China, Chinese migrants and Chinese-Australians, which have been continually processed from the inception of the Australian nation via the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901. Kung-Fu music evokes such racist histories, but does so within the framework of popular culture. The complex matrixes of Asian identities are reduced to comedy which allows viewers to feel comfortable with what they are watching.

Comedy attempts to absolve racially reductive representations from being recognised as callous as the comedic genre allows for laughter to flourish in

situations that would not be funny in another situation (Littlewood & Pickering 1998: 293). But does this excuse the film from the repercussions it has? Member of the Centre for Philippine Concerns Australia, Emere Distor, states that *Priscilla* endorses violence against Filipinas by allowing 'malicious' stereotypes to form perceptions about Filipinos (1996). Violent representations of Filipinas become normalised through repetitive inclusion into the imaginary of (inter)national viewing audiences. Distor specifies:

There are many stereotyped images of Filipino women in Australia. The Filipina mail-order-bride is one of those stereotypes. There is also the stereotype of Filipinas being domesticated, submissive and faithful... To the extreme of the stereotyping is the image of Filipino women as manipulative. The media have for quite a while been insensitive about the issues of Filipinas in Australia...there was a book published... telling men that the cost of getting the [Filipino] women is the same 'as a lousy second hand car'.

*Priscilla* adds to these stereotypes by declaring that the Filipina is manipulative and inherently inferior. Yet, according to Jane Littlewood and Michael Pickering, comedy is supposed to play "disrespectfully on our sense of what is socially respectable or ethically correct" (1998: 292). In this context, do responses such as the ones given by Distor become invalid or over-serious in the face of comedy? The politics of inclusion and exclusion is at stake in this question and in the following: In whose interest are the jokes being made? Who is displaced from feeling 'at home' with *Priscilla*'s comedy?

It is this feeling of being 'at home' or 'not at home' that constitutes how laughter implements Orientalist distinctions. These distinctions work on the basis of laughing with and laughing at, wherein Cynthia becomes attached to an antagonistic

laughing *at*, while viewers are invited to laugh *with* the white characters. According to Stephan Elliot, director of *Priscilla*: 'I chose to write a film where in the first half you laugh at the [white drag-queens] characters, and in the second half you are laughing with them' (1994a). This develops a sense of feeling 'at home' with the white characters through a laughing *with* that encourages a communal bonding.

To track the separation that comedy deploys, I discuss two scenes. The first starts with Adam/Felicia dressing in full drag and then going out in Coober Pedy. He meets several men, and one (Frank) starts to flirt with him. However, upon discovering that Adam/Felicia is a man, Frank and his friends threaten to bash Adam/Felicia, who flees them. The men run after Adam/Felicia and pin him into a corner where more violence seems inevitable. In the nick of time, Ralph/Bernadette and Bob appear on the scene:

RALPH/BERNADETTE (to Frank): Stop flexing your muscles, you big pile of budgie turd. I'm sure your mates will be much more impressed if you just go back to the pub and fuck a couple of pigs on the bar.

BOB: Bernadette, please.

FRANK: Bernadette? Well I'll be darned. The whole circus is in town. Well I suppose you wanna fuck too do you? Come on Bernadette, come and fuck me. That's it. Come on. Come and fuck me. Come on.

[Ralph/Bernadette knees Frank in the groin]

RALPH/ BERNADETTE: There, now you're fucked.

Ralph/Bernadette's line: 'There, now you're fucked' invites audiences to laugh with him/her and his/her friends *at* Frank. Consequently, they invite empathy and respect and can belong in spaces of the dominant norm.

Humour is not mobilised in the same way for Cynthia. For example, when Bob

hauls Cynthia off the stage during her striptease, the joke becomes Cynthia's ridiculous figure. Humour, in this context, reinforces Cynthia as someone to be laughed at. Cynthia as the site of ridicule positions Bob as a hero because he 'helps' Cynthia despite the danger he puts himself in through his association with her. Here, *Priscilla's* comedic genre aligns viewer empathy with the white western protagonists. Western whiteness becomes the 'at home' space that allows viewers to feel comfortable with the film's contents.

This sense of comfort is reiterated through Cynthia's voice, which shifts from high pitched wheedling to angry alto yells. Her voice helps to package the Orient/Oriental as irritating the comfort zones of a normative social order. Filipina-Australian journalist, Pura Santillan-Castrence states that the Philippines' relationships with western nations occur through a 'whine', wherein the Philippines 'whines' for western attention (2004: 19). The verbal assaults of the whine and Cynthia's 'annoying' voice signify a threat to the bodily/aural integrity of a cohesive white order (sound). 'Sounds' of the Orient thus constitute social subjects. Their bodies are codified with aural signs that declare their racial identity wherein irritating sounds package the Orient/Oriental as burdensome.

The burdensome status of the Oriental body is reiterated when Anthony/Mitzi asks Bob: 'Why in God's name did you bring her [Cynthia] home?' Bob replies: 'She was me wife'. Here, Bob 'speaks' himself as taking up a white man's burden through his conspicuous benevolence towards Cynthia. Yet, a marriage ceremony between Bob and Cynthia is not shown. This elision intimates that Cynthia may have forged the marriage certificate, and in doing so, coerced Bob into caring for her under fraudulent terms. Cynthia thus becomes criminalised as a conniving

woman who dupes Bob for her self-serving needs. Because of this, Bob's complicity in Cynthia's unhappiness, or in their marriage being a dysfunctional one, is invisibilised. Instead, Bob is presented as a victim of the self-centred machinations of the criminal Oriental woman.

The non-white Other becomes the site of culpability, while white western attention is presented as the 'cure' for being non-western. A paternalistic relationship thus posits the Orient as the needy child to the adult-parent Occident. Santillan-Castrence reiterates that the Philippines is a "very little girl" (2004: 19). Being (be)littled, in this context, implies that the Philippines is subordinate to (and subordinated by) white/western nations. This is redeployed within *Priscilla* through the subordination of Cynthia's social standing in relation to the white protagonists. Further, being feminised, in this circumstance, invokes conventional gender ideologies that subordinate women to patriarchal power. Here, the Orient is visibilised as the feminine Other to a masculine Occident.<sup>5</sup>

The perception of the Orient as the feminine Other is reiterated in same-sex relationships (see also Han this issue). For gay men, Kent Chuang intimates that to be a strong 'Aussie', it is necessary to be white and male/masculine:

So what do we get when we put a small Asian dick onto a slim Asian frame? A woman, of course, implying that we like to take it up the bum...[This] does not fit in with the popular Aussie he-man image' (1999: 37).

In *Priscilla*, the Orient/Oriental is embodied by the female character of Cynthia. Here, the Philippines and Filipinas are personified as a female/feminine body that is open for masculine white Australian conquest. The fact that Bob's flashback intimates that he and Cynthia had sex reiterates

this male-female copulation. This assumption is tacitly gestured through specific codes: the motel room, Cynthia's clothing, Bob's hangover and the 'Oriental' setting. These signs signify the pattern of 'east-west' interaction that is made apparent by Orientalist systems. Although these interactions may not involve the bartering of sex, the relationship between Australia/Australians and the Philippines/Filipinas figuratively proceeds through a sexualised schema. For instance, conflating the Philippines as a space that can be plundered positions Filipinas as sites of penetration by white Australians.

Within such a framework, Bob's disciplinary actions towards Cynthia are legitimised. He becomes the speaker who is believed as presenting the truth of the Orient/Oriental. The other white protagonists are also authoritative spectators to Bob's declarations, as it is to them that the truth of the Orient/Oriental is revealed. It is their curiosity that fuels the Orient/Oriental to come into being and answer for its presence.

White characters are thus the 'meeting point' in which 'non-white' characters enter the narrative. It is through the white protagonists that Aboriginalities and Asian identities are presented and it is predominantly with the white protagonists that Aboriginal and Asian characters make contact. While the focus of this paper is to critique the relationships between the white protagonists and Cynthia, I cannot discuss these relationships without including how indigeneity is represented. Because of the parameters of this paper, I cannot provide an exhaustive interrogation of these interracial negotiations. But, I show that an Aboriginal/white/non-white migrant dichotomy is underrepresented in *Priscilla*.

Non-white migrant and Australian-Aboriginal contact is shown through Cynthia's striptease. She dances for her male audience, which includes some Aboriginal men. This is the extent of such contact, and it is one that holds whiteness as the fundamental mediator of identity. Most of Cynthia's audience are white and it is Bob who attempts to govern her actions by managing how long she can dance for.

The white protagonists make contact with Indigenous people when their bus breaks down in the Outback. During this time, an Indigenous man (Alan Dargin) invites Anthony/Mitzi, Adam/Felicia and Ralph/Bernadette to his campsite. Here, the white characters perform a drag-show wherein they include Dargin's character in their act. This section appears like a fantasy of the Australian nation wherein white-black reconciliation is achieved through positivistic song and dance. While the white protagonists are enabled to make ties with Aboriginal Australians (and vice versa), this connection is not afforded to any non-white character in the film. Divisions between Aboriginal and migrant/diasporic discourses are evident within broader Australia. For instance, debates on reconciliation and Native Title centre on a dialogue between 'black' and 'white' Australians, without assessing how other Australians contribute to these issues (Stephenson 2003). Whiteness, in this context, becomes the site for interbodily/interracial/intercultural contact.

White protagonists occupy Orientalist subject positions by speaking for non-white subjects. Their Orientalist actions are displayed as benevolence as they bring Aboriginalities and Asia/ns into the consciousness of the film text. Yet this 'inclusion' is posited through distinction/separation. For instance, the aforementioned short scene (four minutes and three seconds) relegates

Aboriginals to the peripheries of the film text. Aboriginals come into 'extended' focus when they are seen in the Outback, thus placing Aboriginality in a time/space outside the urban reality of the white protagonists. Aboriginals are positioned within a fetishised Outback belonging, thus reducing the multiplicity of Aboriginal existence to a single position/being. Moreover, Cynthia is labelled as a mail-order bride<sup>6</sup> within the film and film reviews, and therefore categorised as Other.

However, Bob's flashback reveals that Cynthia is not a mail-order bride. Yet, when Ralph/Bernadette refers to Cynthia, she names her as mail-order bride. To Anthony/Mitzi, she asks: 'Did you catch that mail-order bride?' 'Catch' deploys the imperialistic intention to capture and ensure that the Other can be defined. Ralph/Bernadette's naming thus grasps the truth of Cynthia's discursive positionality. Such 'truth' constitutes a hegemonic means of experiencing Asians and their relationships with white western people. Even some writers who critique Cynthia's character reiterate Cynthia as a mail-order bride. Saroca for instance, states that *Priscilla* "articulates the dominant discourse of the mail-order bride in Australia" without stating that Cynthia is *not* a mail-order bride (1997: 90).

Mail-order bride typecasting can be further evidenced through the naming of older white men and their younger Asian male partners. A popularised nickname for the white man in this relationship is 'rice queen', reiterating the sense of consumption that the white partner does. While 'rice queen' does not necessarily indicate a white man who has met his partner by mail-order basis, the term denotes connotations of pariah partnerships associated with mail-order bride industries and their participants (Chuang 1999: 39).

By juxtaposing mail-order brides with rice queens, I am not trying to state that those who identify as gay mimic heterosexual norms. Rather, I intend to show that prejudices intersect. In this case, homosexuality does not break crippling dogmas that totalise identity. Nor does it mean that gay people are queer in that they destabilise dominant norms. Homosexuality may signify a queering of dominant norms within a heterosexist social structure, but being homosexual does not mean that one *naturally* resignifies normative demands for coherence. In this context, being gay does not necessarily disavow Orientalist whiteness, but Orientalist whiteness remains a pervasive racial performative that constitutes racial beings through perpetually 'grasping' the Other. Therefore, one's occupation of a racial/geo-political subject position is not an expression of what one is, but "something that one does" (Lloyd 1999: 196).

### **Orientalist Pregazing**

The production of specific subject positions through what 'one does' can be evidenced in my transcription of the dialogue between Cynthia and Bob in Bob's flashback. I make visible Cynthia's emotions through describing how she speaks. Here, I offer an essentialised unity that is evoked through presenting the tonality and volume of Cynthia's voice and through revealing what is not visible: the emotional workings of Cynthia's mind. Through this, Cynthia becomes the lascivious, lusty Oriental woman ('smiling seductively'), the sly Oriental who embodies an 'over the top' ethnic excess ('exaggerated sweetness'), the dangerous non-white Other ('shouting angrily'). Yet, I could have described Cynthia as smiling sweetly instead of as smiling seductively. However, I wrote my descriptions without thinking how Orientalism calls my own perceptions into being. It was only after I

re-read what I wrote that I realised the implications of my Orientalist 'pregazing'.

According to Rey Chow, 'pregazing' refers to the historical understanding brought to a film (1990: 19). Pregazing is therefore a scopic regime that is configured by interrelated socio-cultural and geo-political factors. In this instance, Orientalist pregazing cultivates the Orient as an idea that has a history of thought, imagery and vocabulary that gives it presence in and for the west (Said 1995: 9). In regards to Orientalist pregazing, Orientalism colonises the visual field, shaping it to conform to an Occidental imperialism which promotes a white western perspective as authoritative. Here, various ways of reading the film are implicated as performative practices that reiterate specific norms in order to assume a given sociality. Orientalism, in this respect, is deployed by the 'inner' workings of subjectivity, a latent Orientalism that separates white from non-white.

Queering normative means of knowledge production are disabled through a pregazing that refers to a re-presentation of whiteness and Orientalist canonical material (Said 1995: 177).<sup>7</sup> In my case, pregazing prompted a reiteration of Orientalism, thus inducing (and induced by) me to 'speak' for the Orient. Here, I performatively pass myself as a scholar who can accurately describe 'Orientals'. My descriptions declare myself as situated within a western nation and therefore as embodying a normative 'white' position. This is because the scope of Orientalism traditionally places the white western individual as the 'speaking' subject, while casting non-white, non-western individuals as 'spoken for' (Said 1995: 6). In this context, racial performativity does not simply indicate race, but also gestures to one's geo-political status and access to a 'speaking' position.

Performing an imperialistic white western subject position is reiterated through the methods of representing an Asian space. For instance, 'manilla' is not cited as a specific place within the film. *Priscilla's* Oriental space is a haze of ambiguity, a disruption to normative comfort zones. Bob's hangover emphasises this 'out of body/space' feeling that is made synonymous with the 'Orient'. When this space is named, ambiguity is reiterated through misspelling Manila as 'manilla', thus ensuring that Asian cities become subsumed under the category of 'Orient'. Referring to a Philippine space and female body thus belongs to a pregazing which deploys recognisable conventions. Manila does not need to be named as a specific place or spelled correctly. It is enough to intimate that Manila is the Orient for it to be recognised as non-white, non-western and Third-World.

### **Racialised Dragging**

Impermanence is played out through the characters' taking up of drag to present themselves as specific social subjects or to subvert normative designations for their being. Thomas states that *Priscilla's* drag queens offer a model for this 'impure' identity which "articulates itself through that which is not *self*, that is through *performance*" (1996: 105). Thomas further specifies: "Traditionally... drag has offered the spectacle of gay men and/or transsexuals playing out an exaggerated version of a culturally coded version of femininity..." (105). This interpretation of drag declares that specific people can be named as performing drag. These people are 'gay men and/or transsexuals', and the gender to be performed is a 'version of femininity'. This does not accurately describe drag, which involves a crossing of male and female genders. Limitations are thus present when attempting to define drag

and it is this sense of 'limitation' that I examine in this section. I argue that one such limitation exists in what and who can name or be named as drag/performing drag.<sup>8</sup>

I discuss three examples of drag: Bob's location in 'manilla', Anthony/Mitzi, Adam/Felicia and Ralph/Bernadette's drag-queen performance in an Outback pub, and Cynthia's striptease at this pub. The racial and geo-political positions that Bob embodies enable him to 'cross' into an Oriental space. His presence in the Orient (through his bodily presence in an Oriental space, or through his statements about the Orient/Oriental) drags normative assumptions about his gender, sexuality and racial position. For instance, the Orientalist patriarchal norm of the dominant white male is subverted through Bob's concession (supposedly against his will) to accept Cynthia as his wife. Bob plays the submissive role normatively consigned to the Oriental. This repositioning of dominance/submission is deployed through the resignification of the Asian-white sexual relationship. According to Richard Fung, these relations 'privilege the [white] penis while always assigning the Asian the role of bottom: Asian and anus are conflated' (cited in Paul B. Franklin 1991: 153). In the flashback however, it is Bob's bottom that is exposed. He lies on his stomach, ensuring that his penis is covered and his anus is made vulnerable for penetration. In this context, Bob becomes the penetrated while Cynthia takes on the role of penetrator. Cynthia does not lie passively on the bed. She 'penetrates' Bob's space by berating him to accommodate her in his life.

For this examination of the inversion of penetration/penetrator, I draw on the Ilocano (Filipino dialect) words: *buto* and *ubut* to emphasise the 'crossing' of these roles. *Buto* translates to penis, and *ubut* translates to the bottom. These

words use the same letters but use them in a different order to rearticulate their meanings. In this context, the penis takes on the role of bottom and vice versa. This intimates that *buto* is always-already in *ubut* and *ubut* is inherent in *buto* (i.e. the letters are there and are tacitly gestured). Bob portrays this inversion through his position on the bed, thus making it possible for the penis to be conflated to the bottom. In this case, the patriarchal scope of Orientalism is resignified through inverting the role of the penis and the phallus. The phallus is refigured as Oriental (and thus not a phallus) through Bob's assumption of stereotypical Oriental characteristics.

Yet, Bob's drag actions are not named as drag in many film reviews or in the film. Drag thus becomes a descriptor that is exclusive to certain people for specific times. This can be evidenced in the opening night of Anthony/Mitzi, Adam/Felicia and Ralph/Bernadette's performance in Bob's home-town, wherein two performances are shown: Cynthia's striptease and Anthony/Mitzi, Adam/Felicia and Ralph/Bernadette's dance. Only the latter is routinely named as drag. However, some acquiesce that Cynthia performs drag. Karen Brooks states that Cynthia's striptease constitutes drag because of Adam/Felicia's response to her performance: "Felicia [acknowledges] in Cynthia and her performance a parody of hyper-femininity and a consummate drag act" (1999: 87). This acknowledgment is determined by the white character's assessment of Cynthia's act. Cynthia cannot produce drag in and for herself, but her performance has to be put in relation with the white drag-queens' expectations of drag.

I argue that Cynthia's striptease posits a drag-performance because her actions reconceptualise gendered geo-political boundaries, not because the white characters assume she is performing drag. Before I can discuss this, it is

necessary to describe the scene in which the white protagonists' act intersects with Cynthia's dance. In this scene, Anthony/Mitzi, Adam/Felicia and Ralph/Bernadette's performance is interrupted by Cynthia's arrival. She wears a zebra pattern body-suit that has a zipper on the crotch area. The white characters move offstage as Cynthia walks towards them. On stage, Cynthia unzips the crotch area of her body-suit and inserts a white ping-pong ball into her vagina. Ralph/Bernadette and Anthony/Mitzi greet this with shocked horror, while Adam/Felicia laughs raucously and exclaims: 'You can't do that with a ping-pong ball!' Cynthia then bends over and – whoosh – balls fly through the air and hit members of the audience. Bob, in distress, carries Cynthia away while Cynthia screams for help.

Before Cynthia arrived, Anthony/Mitzi, Adam/Felicia and Ralph/Bernadette were performing the 'real' drag show, in that they dressed in cabaret outfits normatively designed for women.<sup>9</sup> As their performance is considered as drag within the film, their performance is the self-conscious representation of an identity that is 'Other' to them.

To extend this discussion of drag, I use Yasumasa Morimura's photograph, *Daughter of Art History, Princess B* to outline an aesthetic of drag in order to argue drag as a racial/geo-political/gender performative practice that constitutes the discursive possibilities of/for *Priscilla*. Morimura's photograph references Diego Velasquez's portraits of the Infanta Margarita of Spain (1653–1659). Through his allusions to Velasquez's works, Morimura drags his racial/sexual/gender position by occupying roles that are not normatively consigned to his male Japanese body/geo-political position. He dresses as a Castilian Spanish female, thus positioning himself as a feminised European subject. Further, he insinuates

himself into western modes of image production through his appropriation of Velasquez's work. Drawing on drag, he attempts to occupy roles that are Other to his self. Yet, Morimura's face denotes his Japanese ancestry. Further, Morimura's hands appear out of proportion to the rest of the body, thus revealing that it is not a biological girl nor is it racially a white person in the photograph.

Props used in Morimura's photograph further signify the slippages that occur through drag. Inclusion of kitschy toys in the background creates a whimsical tone, which resignifies the seriousness of Velasquez's originals. This posits drag as infused with an ironic wit that inflects performance. These toys also posit drag as play-acting, which indicates that slippages in drag are consciously performed. In this respect, drag is founded on a mimicry that transcends mere imitation to challenge socio-cultural norms.

Like Morimura, *Priscilla*'s white drag queens embody roles that cannot be fully embodied. Their overt 'masculine' bodies and voices show that despite dressing as women and acting in a 'feminine' manner, their bodies cannot be contained within their performances. It is this slippage within the performance that constitutes their actions as drag. Yet, to drag needs a corpus of references which can be appropriated. Drag thus utilises a self-reflexive, intellectual engagement with one's performance. Attributing 'drag' to Anthony/Mitzi, Adam/Felicia and Ralph/Bernadette affirms that they can self-reflexively assess their positions. Here, white characters are capable of self-reflexive, critical thought. To be acknowledged as performing drag thus gestures to one's access to (intellectual) power. In Bob's case, although he is positioned as a white character, his actions are not named as drag. This presents the normative assumption that

drag solely concentrates on 'playing' with gender roles. The notion of gender as isolated from a broad matrix of other factors that constitute identity is thus deployed.

With *Daughter of Art History, Princess B*, Morimura references the high-art status of Velasquez's work to signal the socio-cultural debates circulating the 'divide' between high-art and popular culture. Morimura's use of photography and computer graphic design to 'paint' his artwork rearticulates the role of art, thus positing the questions: What can be named as art (and therefore, a superior aesthetic production/product)? Who can be called an artist? This debate is played out through the white drag queens' proximity to Cynthia. Though the tensions that occur from this do not pertain to 'art', issues of superiority/inferiority are played out on/through *Priscilla's* characters. For instance, Cynthia is not commonly recognised as presenting drag. Estella Tincknell specifies:

Cynthia [is]...sadly lacking in ironic self-reflexivity... If the drag queens are parodies of female grotesques, Cynthia is offered as a 'real' grotesque, a monstrous woman... (2002).

Cynthia is presented as inferior to the white drag queens and therefore as incapable of performing drag. I argue that Cynthia drags by 'crossing' into a gender that is not her own. For instance, Cynthia's ingestion of the white ping-pong balls literally and figuratively signals that she 'has balls'. This expression is normatively used to denote intrepid individuals who activate processes of self-agency. In this context, Cynthia's ingestion of white balls visibly reconceptualises the position of white men in the film. Cynthia has 'balls' and is able to use them, specifically to ejaculate (by the balls hitting members of the pub crowd) onto the white men. Here, she takes on the role of the white

men in the film by 'taking up' the marks of masculinity.

Further, I argue that Cynthia drags by using a costume that problematises her position as an Oriental Other and Bob's status as the benevolent man. I argue that this constitutes a drag-performance as Cynthia's actions 'play' with gendered geo-political roles. Cynthia takes up the marks of her Orientalist positioning by wearing a zebra patterned body suit. Her dressing in the 'skin' of an animal presents her as the uncivilised Other to a (usually) civilised white social order. These white individuals may act in favour of bestial lasciviousness (e.g. the pub crowd's approval for Cynthia's performance). However, these white men can revert to their 'good' natures (e.g. these men allow Bob to remove Cynthia from their presence). Cynthia's zebra print costume signifies the primal characteristics foisted solely onto the non-white Other. This, in turn, signals to the exotic sexualization of non-whites, most notably the fetishisation of Sara Baartman.<sup>10</sup>

Cynthia's costume, coupled with her sexual dancing, shows that she is unashamedly behaving in a way that is not condoned by Bob. She has no desire to be 'saved' by her white 'saviour' (i.e. Bob), and thus reconfigures the Orientalist notion of continual 'non-white' lusting for white assistance. In fact, Bob's effort to save Cynthia (by hauling her off the stage) is met with Cynthia's cries for help. Bob's 'salvation' is an intrusive action that hurts, rather than saves. Here, Cynthia is aware of the ways in which she will be seen, and what she needs to do to be seen. She uses herself as a spectacle and manipulates the scopic field to acknowledge her existence.

Spectacularisation is reiterated through the means in which Filipina mail-order brides are depicted. Mail-order bride

catalogues offer pictures of Filipinas which men can peruse. Here, the non-white body is made to be sexually visible for the white man's pleasure. In *Daughter of Art History, Princess B*, Morimura brings this to light by transposing his male Asian body into the framework of the royal marriage market that the Infanta belonged to. Velasquez painted four portraits of the Infanta, which were sent to her betrothed, the future Emperor Leopold I. These portraits were a means for the future Emperor and his family to keep tabs on the Infanta's (sexual) development, acting as evidence of her reproductive suitability in continuing the royal line. Morimura drags himself as the young girl who is offered to a man. He signals the mail-order bride and sex trade businesses wherein young (Asian) women and men are offered to (white) men for their (sexual) pleasure. The context in which the Infanta's portraits were produced conforms to the definition of a mail-order bride as previously outlined. The Infanta marries a man who she has had little or no contact with. Her portrait constitutes her as a body made visible for 'buyers' (i.e. the royal family).

Although these portraits were part of the economy of (sexualised) flesh, they are now normatively consigned as objects to be viewed, discounting the corporeal complicities that inflect these images. Visible corporeal inconsistencies within *Daughter of Art History, Princess B* destabilise the dismembered neutrality of Velasquez's portraits. Through Morimura's body touching the Infanta's 'flesh' and the 'flesh' of the canvas on which the Infanta is painted on, Morimura shows that economies of flesh are present in Velasquez's works and in the mail-order bride catalogues that he gestures towards.

Investments in being touched, not being touched and of not touching can be evidenced through Cynthia's striptease.

The fact that the white ping-pong balls hit the predominantly white crowd reconceptualise divisions between white and non-white. Cynthia hits her predominantly white audience, touching the spaces and people she is forbidden to touch. She infiltrates the spaces consigned to white individuals, appropriates them for herself and accrues power that is normatively consigned to the white characters.

Drag, in this circumstance, reveals the materiality of flesh: social interaction is worked on and through bodies. Thus, while drag may deploy normative roles, these norms cannot contain subjects within unified categories. Drag thus signals to an interrogative queer/ing that problematises dominant means of producing knowledge.

### **Queer (Re)conceptualisations**

*Priscilla* thus opens up the possibility to critique normalising ways of knowing and being. The presence of 'non-whiteness' within *Priscilla* and responses to the film enables resignification. For instance, although I used an Orientalist discourse to transcribe Bob's flashback, I am not chromatically 'white'. Also, although I currently live in Sydney, Australia, I was born in Manila, Philippines, and lived there for seven years. Therefore, my racial and geo-political positions are not 'white' or 'western'. In this context, my opinions are exposed as drag in that I take up a position normatively construed as Other to my own, but declare this as failing to fully embody a specific subject position. Traces of the undefinable are thus always present in subject constitution. The deployment of Orientalist logic through the rubric of whiteness is disrupted by the 'unfixity' of bodies and the racial/geo-political positions they reframe.

For example, the resignification of power that occurs through Cynthia's ejaculation of the white balls does not occur by transplanting the position of white power onto the non-white individual. Cynthia and the white characters simultaneously embody positions of empowerment and disempowerment. Cynthia's predominantly white audience were enthralled by her dance, succumbing to Cynthia's desire to be acknowledged by an audience. Yet, these white men used Cynthia to fortify their status as white western men who watch, rather than be watched. The emotions/feelings that bind their relationships fail to produce a seamless trajectory of power/emotion. Because sensation is transitory, processes of touching and feeling are fractured by multiple points of discontinuity. The fault-lines of subject constitution are exposed. It is through the bodies of *Priscilla's* characters and the interstitial spaces they create that leave traces which resist normative coherence (Pugliese 2003).

Simultaneously, *Priscilla* does not 'shift the ground of being' but reaffirms it. As can be evidenced in the film, whiteness equates to being legitimate. The ways in which Ralph/Bernadette's character is juxtaposed to Cynthia is indicative of this. Ralph/Bernadette's articulate British accent and coiffed physical appearance mark his/her performative enactments of femininity as a styled femininity – that of the white lady (Ticknell 2004). Conversely, Cynthia's 'Oriental' accent and language are rendered as inarticulate noise. Moreover, her clothing ranges from formless outfits that present her as an unkempt child, to her 'stripper' outfits which position her as a cheap harlot. These visible codes signify her low-class status. Cynthia thus becomes the vulgar, unclean, primitive Other to Ralph/Bernadette's model of civilised restraint and modesty. Consequently, although Ralph/Bernadette does not fit

the normative model of the white woman, his/her performance of femininity is closer to an idealised version in which the feminine/feminised body is made safe through its whiteness.

However, since Ralph/Bernadette is not biologically a woman her role as female is presented as a deviation from, as well as an attempted imitation of, a proper model of white femininity. The figure of the male haunts Ralph/Bernadette's identity. His/her biologically male physique and deep male voice ensure that this 'figure of the male' is always-already present in his/her expressions of femininity. Maleness as the locus of the film's narrative is reiterated through the film's focus on the (biological) male characters.

Despite the presence of a lesbian character in the film, lesbian homosexuality is not explored. Anthony's wife, for example, is 'outed' by her son when he tells Adam/Felicia that she had a girlfriend. Female-female sexual relations are included as a tangential point that forwards the 'main' story of male homosexuality. Queerness, in this case, becomes gender specific: it concentrates solely on gay male experiences of queerness.

However, this focus is an imagined projection of gay queerness. The actors who play the white gay protagonists are not gay (or have not declared themselves as gay). *Priscilla* is a fictional narrative of queer identities co-opted by openly heterosexual actors and presented as valid performances of queer subjectivities. *Priscilla*, and many responses to it, refers to the language of the dominant, by its male, white, Anglo-centric English language, thus disabling modes of becoming that are not indebted to dominant norms.

What is thus promoted as a queer movie is not queer in terms of its activist potentialities. The bounds of racialised

and queer whiteness remain unnamed, yet it pulses in every scene. Whiteness is the film's heartbeat that is heard, but rarely questioned. By naming whiteness and Orientalism as integral facets of queerness within *Priscilla* and through responses to the film, the multiple ways in which queer identities are experienced can be addressed. In this, unnamed racialising practices can be named. They can be recognised and made to answer for their bodily (re)positions within dominant Australian culture and the ways in which we experience it.

### Author Note

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Thank you to Goldie Osuri and to my two anonymous reviewers. I sincerely appreciate and value your feedback.

<sup>2</sup> Synonymity of 'Australianness' with white characters is reiterated in many responses to *Priscilla*. For example, McKenzie Wark's chapter, 'Screening Suburbia' (1999), focuses on the politics of Australian spatial positionalities. In regards to *Priscilla*, the "confrontation of the urbane with the bush without too much suburbia in between" (Wark 1999) is analysed in relation to *Priscilla*'s

use of the white ocker. Again, in Karl Quinn's, 'Drag, Dags and the Suburban Surreal' (Summer 1994/1995), questions about Australian identity are asked by focusing on the white protagonists, thus positioning whiteness as the authoritative determinant of national identities/subjectivities.

<sup>3</sup> By this, I am not trying to state that whites are a monolithic group devoid of ethnic configurations. Further, issues such as socio-economic background, (dis)ability, gender, age, and sexuality inflect how white subjects negotiate their identities.

<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.awesomefilm.com/script/priscilla.txt> (viewed 29 May 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Even when Asian male characters are used in film, the identic site of 'Asian' remains as a feminine Other to a masculine Occident. *Japanese Story*, for example, features Sandy (Toni Collette), a white Australian woman, and Hiro (Gotaro Tsunashima), a Japanese man in the Australian Outback. The first sex scene in this film shows Hiro lying (presumably) naked under the bed sheets, while Sandy puts on his pants and climbs on top of him. Here, Sandy takes on the role of a dominant white 'masculine' western role by symbolically castrating the Japanese man's masculinity by taking of his pants and wearing them. She literally embodies the (hetero)normative male role of 'wearing the pants' in the relationship. Further, Sandy covers Hiro's body with her own body, thus hiding any blatant visible signs of his manliness with the expanse of her own flesh. Here, her body works to dominate Hiro and the scopic field.

<sup>6</sup> By the term mail-order bride, I refer to a woman whose personal details and a photograph are advertised through a catalogue and whose decision to enter into marriage is made with little or no personal introduction (Cahill 1990: 133).

<sup>7</sup> Such an Orientalist pregazing is also deployed in the film reviews that name Cynthia as a mail-order bride despite the film showing that she is not one.

<sup>8</sup> See Judith Butler's *Bodies that Matter* (1993) for a more detailed account of drag and its performative possibilities.

<sup>9</sup> Here, I am working with a broad, general understanding of drag.

<sup>10</sup> For a detailed discussion of the sexualised exhibition of Baartman's body see Gilman (1986).