LEVELLING UP ASIAN-AUSTRALIAN ROMANCE: INTERSECTIONAL REPRESENTATION IN LEANNE YONG'S *TWO CAN PLAY THAT GAME**

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Abstract

This article examines Leanne Yong's young adult debut *Two Can Play That Game* as one of the few Australian romance novels to foreground an Asian-Australian character. The narrative unfolds through the popular enemies-to-lovers trope, following Malaysian-Australian aspiring-game-developer Sam Khoo's coming-of-age journey. Through close reading and analysis of reader reviews on the Goodreads and Storygraph platforms, I explore how the novel negotiates cultural specificities, gender, and sexuality within the framework of romance and its promise of a Happily-Ever-After. I argue that Yong expands the genre's inclusivity by centring a demisexual protagonist whose narrative challenges normative assumptions about intimacy and success. While the text reproduces certain binaries between "Asian" and "Australian" identities, it simultaneously interrogates stereotypes such as the "model minority" and the "fake gamer girl". Reviews highlight the representational significance of this approach, reflecting both the appetite for Asian-Australian protagonists and the genre's shift toward diversity.

Keywords: Asian-Australian Literature, Young-Adult Romance, Ace-spectrum Romance, Intersectionality, Demisexuality, Cultural Identity, Gaming Culture.

POTENCIAR LA FICCIÓN ROMÁNTICA ASIÁTICO-AUSTRALIANA: REPRESENTACIÓN INTERSECCIONAL EN *TWO CAN PLAY THAT GAME* DE LEANNE YONG

Resumen

Este artículo examina la novela juvenil *Two Can Play That Game* de Leanne Yong como una de las primeras obras del género romántico australiano que sitúa en el centro de la narración a un personaje asiático-australiano. La narrativa sigue el proceso de maduración de Sam Khoo, una joven malasio-australiana aspirante a desarrolladora de videojuegos. Mediante una lectura atenta del texto y de reseñas en Goodreads y Storygraph, exploro cómo la novela negocia especificidades culturales, género y sexualidad dentro del marco de la narrativa romántica. Sostengo que Yong amplía la inclusividad del género al centrarse en una protagonista demisexual cuya historia cuestiona supuestos normativos sobre la intimidad y el éxito. Si bien el texto reproduce ciertas dicotomías entre las identidades "asiática" y "australiana", también interroga estereotipos como la "minoría modelo" y la "falsa gamer". Las reseñas destacan la relevancia representacional de este enfoque, reflejando tanto el interés por protagonistas asiático-australianos como el giro del género hacia una mayor diversidad.

Palabras clave: Literatura asiático-australiana, narrativa romántica juvenil, narrativa romántica en el espectro asexual, interseccionalidad, demisexualidad, identidad cultural, cultura *gamer*.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Reader responses to Leanne Yong's young-adult romance *Two Can Play That Game* (2023; henceforth *TCPTG*) show enthusiasm for the portrayal of Asian-Australian characters as well as for its female protagonist on the asexual spectrum. "I love how Leanne Yong represented an ethnic Australian family" (GR 40 2023),[1] reads one online review. These readers' reactions reflect two concurrent realities: the demand for Asian-Australian protagonists in romance, and the romance genre's ongoing shift toward greater diversity (O'Mahony 2021, 87). As Kamblé, Selinger, and Teo (2021) argue, contemporary romance provides a space for diverse authors to explore intersectional identities and offer a "utopian hope that a happily ever after ending is possible for everyone" (1). In this paper, I contend that Leanne Yong has written such an intersectional exploration of identity within the hopeful framework of romance, thus expanding Asian-Australian representation.

Historically, Asian-Australian authors have faced constraints tied to their labelling as minority writers, often expected to produce migrant or ethnic narratives (Graham 2013, 70), as well as having to contend with the burden of representation when writing about cultural markers that risk reinforcing stereotypes (Schwegler-Castañer 2025, 63). These pressures, compounded by industry discrimination and gatekeeping, have contributed to their underrepresentation in popular genres such as romance (Ali 2021, 325, 329; Teo qtd García Fernández & Fresno-Calleja 2020, 266). However, the diversification of the romance genre noted by Kamblé, Selinger and Teo (2021) is also apparent in the Australian literary landscape. The mainstream success in the United States of romance centred on East Asian protagonists –with works such as the film *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) and Helen Hoang's romance novel *The Kiss Quotient* (2018)– has helped create space within the English-language publishing industry for such narratives by demonstrating their commercial viability, despite their continued relative scarcity (Teo 2020, 2-3).[2] Romance by Asian-Australian authors appears to emerge in the 2020s in the wake of this development. In 2020, Birdie Song published *The Guy from the Flower Shop*, the first novella of her Somerville Stories, a series of contemporary romances set in Perth and featuring Asian-Australian characters. Then, in 2023, three novels marketed as romance by Asian-Australian authors were released, including the object of this study: Leanne

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[1] In line with ethical considerations, reviewers have been anonymized and given an identifier based on their platform of publication and a number: GR for reviews on Goodreads, SR for reviews on Storygraph, and G&SR for identical reviews published on both platforms. Publication years were included whenever available.

[2] While not a romance novel, Gabrielle Zevin's bestselling *Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow* (2022) –which features a Korean-American male protagonist and explores themes of gaming and prejudice akin to those in *TCPTG*– might also have contributed to carving out space for *TCPTG*. Leanne Yong has expressed appreciation for the novel and its central idea that "a collaborative working relationship can be just as valuable as a romantic relationship" (qtd Lawn 2023).

Yong's *Two Can Play That Game* (2023), Saman Shad's *The Matchmaker* (2023), which centers on characters from the Pakistani diaspora in Sydney, and Ann Liang's young-adult (YA) romance *This Time It's Real* (2023), featuring Chinese characters in an international school in Beijing, followed a year later by *I Hope This Doesn't Find You* (2024), featuring Chinese-Australian characters. Also notable is the five-part YouTube series *No Ordinary Love* (Screen Australia 2022), which portrays the romantic reconnection between a Korean-Australian man and a Zambian-Australian woman. The web drama presents itself as a "love letter to K-Dramas," thus reflecting the global popularity of South Korean media and its contribution to the visibilization of Asian-centred romance (see Oh 2025).

This recent surge of Asian-Australian romance fiction is significant not only for the increased representation it entails, but also because the genre itself provides space for negotiating questions of identity. Romance narratives, with their focus on personal transformation and relational dynamics, have historically engaged with issues of gender and societal belonging. In the Australian context, as Lauren O'Mahony observes, romance novels have explored "the 'place' of women within the nation and its culture ... in a range of settings from colonial settlements of Australia to the cities, suburbs, farms, and outback of modern Australia" (2021, 90). This is especially the case for the YA subgenre of romance. YA novels are often characterized by a search for selfhood intersecting with questions of gender, class, culture and, for racialized characters, race/ethnicity (Ramdarshan Bold 2019, 22). Lana Zannettino's (2007) study of Australian young-adult novels featuring second-generation migrant minorities argues that these narratives interweave gender and class with the protagonists' efforts "to negotiate racialised and ethnic identities" across distinct cultural contexts (48-50). In such texts, coming-of-age is inseparable from this negotiation, which is resolved through the dynamic portrayal of identity as protagonists are ultimately "able to embrace their cultural heritage in a flexible third space" (54). Alice Pung's *Laurinda* (2014), for example, draws on her own adolescent experiences to critically depict the challenges of growing up in a multicultural Australian city in the 1990s, highlighting tensions between race, gender, class and family idiosyncrasies (see Schwegler-Castañer 2025).

YA fiction often incorporates autobiographical elements, functioning as a "highly symbolic device" through which both authors and readers negotiate cultural circumstances and personal agency, thereby "underscoring the diversity of childhood and contradicting any tendency to essentialize the 'ethnic' or 'Asian' subject" (Davis 2006, qtd Dong 2018, 149). Leanne Yong is no exception. She explains that the source of inspiration for her debut novel is two-fold: it is driven by her desire to see her own experience depicted in popular literature, and to question stereotypes in relation to her cultural and idiosyncratic specificities. She writes:

> As the daughter of Malaysian immigrants, I wanted to see my experiences reflected in a YA novel. But on top of that I also wanted to challenge the common narrative of the tiger parents who pressure their children to become high-achieving professionals. Growing up, my parents were always supportive. ... That said, I also wanted to

> explore the different kind of pressure that intersection of supportive parents and traditional Asian values brings. (n.d.)

Indeed, this interest in representation is also reflected in her biographical note, where she defines herself as "an Asian-Australian author of Singaporean and Malaysian heritage who loves writing the diaspora experience into contemporary and fantasy fiction" (2023, 375). While *TCPTG* is not fantasy but a YA romance, it does focus on the diasporic experience in a contemporary, post-2020 Brisbane setting. Albeit marketed primarily as romance, the narrative is akin to the coming-of-age narratives analysed by Zannettino since it is "analogous to entries in a personal diary" by dealing with "hopes, dreams, fears and desires [...] as well as the more typical adolescent concerns about 'fitting in' with peers, schoolwork, and relationships with friends and family" (2007, 48).

Written in first-person, *TCPTG* follows the story of Samantha Khoo (Sam), whose sexuality falls on the asexual spectrum. She is a second-generation Malaysian-Australian, like her love interest: Jaysen Chua (Jay). Their love story develops following the trope of the enemy-to-lover: Sam wants to become an indie video-game developer instead of going to university. To prove to her parents that she has a future in game development, she plans to attend a game design workshop. However, she loses that opportunity when Jay unfairly snatches the last ticket from her hands. When she threatens to reveal what he did to their "Asian Gossip Network," that is, their Singaporean and Malaysian communities, they decide to compete for the ticket in a one-on-one competition of classic video games. This competition is layered with Sam's struggle to reconcile her dream job with the internalized expectations she has about what "success" is, framed by her identity as an eldest daughter within her diasporic community.

Through a close reading of the text alongside reader reviews from the online platforms Goodreads and Storygraph, this paper examines how *TCPTG* engages with themes of sexuality, gender, ethnicity and cultural identity. The novel's intersectional approach emerges through Sam's negotiation of her identity as the eldest daughter of Malaysian immigrants in postcolonial Australia, her struggle with the pressures of success in a capitalist society, the challenges of being a woman in the male-dominated video game industry, and her experience of romance on the asexual spectrum in a hetero- and amato-normative[3] world (Vares 2021). By critically writing dominant tropes –such as the "model minority" and the "fake gamer girl"– in conjunction with non-normative traits, the narrative stretches conventional romance structures to make space for more inclusive representations. These intersecting dimensions illustrate the difficulties of living fully within normative frameworks, prompting

[3] Amatonormativity refers to the societal assumptions that prioritize long-term intimate relationships over other forms of connection. These intimate relationships are typically understood as "sexual, amorous and partnered" (Vares 2021, 10). The concept is closely linked to allosexuality, which is addressed later in this discussion.

critical reflection on norms such as national identity and the sexual components of romantic relationships.

The article is organised into two sections. I begin by examining Sam's sexuality which, although the most implicit aspect of the text, is key to understanding the novel as ace-spectrum romance fiction (ARF; Carter 2020). I then turn to Sam's experience as an Asian-Australian teenager navigating Australia's white, neoliberal, and patriarchal structures as part of her struggle for self-definition within the heroine's journey, which is at the core of romance fiction (Kamblé 2023, 13) and of Australian romance's historical engagement with women's identity and their place in the nation (O'Mahony 2021, 90). At the same time, this paper critically considers the novel's limitations, particularly its binary articulation of Asian and Australian identities, which reflects the persistence of a white, Anglo-Celtic Australia beneath Australia's official multicultural discourse. Despite this tension, several online reviews suggest that readers find affirmation in Sam's story from diverse perspectives. As of December 4, 2025, *TCPTG* has accumulated 124 reviews across online platforms, namely 84 reviews on Goodreads, 19 on Storygraph, and 21 appearing on both.

2. "BUT THERE WAS NO KISS": REIMAGINING HEA AND INTIMACY IN ACE-SPECTRUM ROMANCE

Sexuality has traditionally been central to the romance genre. As Hannah McCann and Catherine Roach note, "[w]hether represented explicitly, metaphorically, or through mere discreet allusion, sex is an integral feature of the romance genre" because sexual satisfaction underlies the story's gratifying resolution in its "Happily Ever After" (HEA) (2021, 411). This means that romance narratives position sexual desire as fundamental to intimacy and romantic relationships,[4] reflecting broader societal views (Selinger 2022, 376). Recent scholarship, however, highlights emerging narratives that challenge this framing. Ellen Carter's "Asexual Romance in an Allosexual World" identifies a growing number of contemporary romance novels featuring protagonists on the ace-spectrum, that is, on the asexual spectrum. While these characters experience little or no sexual attraction, they "still yearn for romantic and emotional connection and their happily ever after" (2020, 1), desires with which they are forced to contend from an outsider position in "an allosexual (non-asexual) world" that treats sexual desire as normative and pathologizes asexuality (2020, 1). Carter notes that a large portion of ace-spectrum romance fiction (ARF) belongs to the YA and New-Adult (NA) subgenres, not accidentally, as these genres more readily accommodate a focus on the protagonist's discovery of their sexual orientation (2020, 7).

[4] See, for example, Jodi McAlister's analysis of the conversation as having "a deeply eroticised edge in heterosexual romance novels, [functioning] to build the intimacy between the characters" (2022, 125).

In *TCPTG*, Sam's story diverges from the pattern identified by Carter, in which sexuality is a central component of the ARF storyline. Sam's sexuality on the ace-spectrum is suggested, never explicitly labelled. Confirmation of her asexuality comes only through the author's annotation of the first three chapters, which she made available through her newsletter and where she acknowledges Sam's "ace-ness" and credits editorial encouragement for prompting her to explore it further (27). This approach contrasts with Carter's findings, where most novels (47 novels; 72%) make ace-spectrum orientations visible in the text, and only a minority (seven; 11%) reveal them through author commentary, mostly on social media (2020, 7). Most significantly, Sam's asexuality is never presented as a source of conflict between characters, not even as her relationship with Jay develops. Instead, it operates as a subtle marker of difference that reinforces her sense of being an outsider. This emerges in her inner narration. For instance, Sam reflects that she is unable to understand attraction based on physical appearance, not grasping how others can classify strangers as "'hot' or 'not hot'" (Yong 2023, 27). She is also indifferent toward casual sex. She narrates:

> I've never understood how people can want to have sex with someone based on their looks alone, despite ... attempts to explain it to me in the past. I've never had that fluttery feeling because someone's got a great face or body ... and I'm happy to remain blissfully ignorant. (171)

This feeling of exclusion becomes particularly visible in scenes with her Bengal-Australian best friend, Aneeshka, who easily navigates social dynamics that hinge on shared norms of attraction. At one point, when a group conversation turns to "hot gamers," Sam disengages, observing that Aneeshka "belongs here" while she cannot relate since she does not "understand how abs or legs or butts or boobs or faces can stir feelings in anyone" (317). The juxtaposition between Aneeshka's seemingly effortless belonging and Sam's quiet detachment illustrates how non-normative sexuality shapes Sam's experience through moments of social disconnection.

The non-centrality of Sam's ace-ness also shapes the romance arc: the relationship develops slowly, marked by minimal physical intimacy. Physical attraction appears rather late in the narrative –on page 219 of 365 and again on page 361– after both Sam and Jay have shared vulnerabilities and built mutual understanding. Sam describes the attraction as a "natural extension after seeing parts of who he is that he chose to reveal to [her]," feeling for the first time, when he touches her hand, "the butterflies, shortness of breath and strange physical reactions that Aneeshka claims to get when looking at 'hot' boys" (219). This progression suggests that Sam is demisexual, a term which denotes an orientation "halfway between sexual and asexual" where sexual attraction arises only after forming an emotional bond (McAlister 2014, 300; Vares 2021, 2). This may partially explain why her ace-ness is not central to the plot; her sexual orientation is not in conflict with the promise of a happy ending since attraction eventually does materialize, albeit as a consequence of intimacy rather than as the driving force of the relationship. As Carter notes, "[c]rafting a credible path to HEA is less challenging for authors writing demisexual or gray-

asexual characters since these orientations experience sexual attraction under certain circumstances" (2020, 9). Moreover, Sam's sexual-attraction arch is in consonance with what McAlister calls the romance genre's "governing paradigm" of "compulsory demisexuality," that is, the expectation that the female protagonist will experience "true sexual pleasure" with only one person, their one true love (2014, 300; see also Selinger 2022, 378).

However, the expectation of sexual satisfaction, which McCann and Roach describe as "inherent to the appeal of the genre" (2021, 411), does not necessarily hold true for *TCPTG*. In the novel, intimacy unfolds through a slow build-up culminating in minimal physical contact –limited to gestures such as hand-holding (219, 264-66; 350) and Jay's stroking Sam's back (354)– with only a vague suggestion of future physical intimacy, namely a kiss that might occur on a possible subsequent date as Jay makes her feel like she "could kiss him" (266). Notably, several readers expressed disappointment at the absence of such a kiss: "BUT THERE WAS NO KISS!! I just wanted one" (GR-14 2023; capital letters in original), "personally I could have done with a kiss at the end" (GR-38 2023), and "I do have one complaint though / All those pages and not one kiss?!" (GR-82 2025). These reactions illustrate the significance of romantic kissing, which is usually considered "the first sexual behavior that an individual engages in" (Thompson, Hill & Record 2023, 02), as an important element to achieve readers' satisfaction. It is the first kiss between the main couple, in particular, which often appears in mainstream media as an idealized, metonymic symbol that signals the HEA (10).

This absence of conventional romantic expressions through physical intimacy is spotted by one reviewer who remarks that, "[w]hile there aren't any obvious acts of romance between the two characters, the chemistry there is undeniable" (GR-21 2023), significantly conflating romance with sexual gestures by obviating non-physical acts of romance. Most remarkably, a reviewer fails to register Sam and Jay's relationship as romantic –interpreting it only as a future possibility, expressing that "[i]t was refreshing that relationships were kept out of the storyline" (GR-64 2024). This deviation from convention leads some readers to question whether the novel qualifies as romance. One reviewer argues it is "undeserving of the genre: romance in general" due to "only minimal tension and minimal romance to the plot" (GR-69 2024), while another offers a harsher critique, claiming it is "NOT a young adult romance like we are led to believe, more about Sam who did nothing but complain, about her situation, about her parents, about her game, about winning a scholarship, about her life... you get the picture!" (GR-58 2024; capital letters in original).

Yet, the lack of overt sexual satisfaction is also framed positively by other readers. For instance, one praises that the story "doesn't have over the top romance as you'd see in some YA novels" (G&SR-19 2025). Only one reviewer explicitly brings to light the link between romance and sexuality, highlighting it as unusual in a positive way, noting that "while [they tend] to like romances with a fair bit of steaminess, the slow clashing of personalities-turned-meeting of hearts, driven by ambition and playfulness rather than lust, was refreshing and so very enjoyable!" (GR-20 2023). In addition, some readers interpret Sam to be on the ace-spectrum

through the lack of physical intimacy, identifying her as demisexual before the author confirmed it, and appreciate this representation:

> Also, can we take a moment to appreciate Sam as a demi character? The way Sam explains her confusion over romantic attraction, but also how her romantic attraction unfolds is so well done. Because demiromantic/sexual is not well understood (or as discussed as other identities), we really need more demi characters in books and TCPTG is a great example of why that representation matters and how to do it well. (SR-15 n.d.)

That said, the implicitness of Sam's sexuality is regretted by some readers, as shown in the following review: "I would have love [sic] it more if the word demisexual was actually in the book" (GR-33 2023). Others, however, defend the choice, arguing that "Sam doesn't have to label or categorize that aspect of herself to make herself relatable" (GR-78 2025). This tension mirrors broader debates in ace representation. As Carter (2020) notes, authors often struggle with whether to explicitly name ace identities, fearing didacticism; a concern voiced by Vanessa North, a romance author who tweeted about regretting not labelling a demisexual character in her own work: "I knew, and wrote him that way, but didn't know how to address it without going didactic" (2016, qtd Carter 2020, 8).

By decentering sexuality as neither a source of conflict nor a core part of the HEA, the novel can be read as normalizing non-normative sexualities within broader narratives of belonging, challenging "the central love/sex nexus and its core value of sexual pleasure" (McCann & Roach 2021, 413). In this sense, the novel participates in what Carter identifies as a shift from a discourse of romance –centered on passion and the pursuit of the perfect partner– toward an intimacy discourse based on communication, friendship, and shared vulnerability (2020, 12). It has to be noted, however, that some readers interpret the absence of sexual depiction through the lens of purity culture, as reflected in reviews describing the story as "pure and wholesome" and labeling it as "clean," a term often associated with religiously-inflected purity norms (Adair 2020, 243). At the same time, the term "clean" also evokes "puriteen" discourses, a trend in which young people employ progressive rhetoric "to criticize pop-cultural texts (and their audience) that do not meet their personal 'moral' standards" (Kobus 2025, 230), in particular content they perceive as overly sexualized, and which thus does not necessarily encourage inclusivity.[5] Notwithstanding these readings, the depiction of Sam's sexual orientation has the potential to expand the genre's inclusivity and invites readers to question "patterns of intimate life within our predominately sexual society" (Carrigan 2012, qtd Carter 2020, 13), particularly when characters voice their non-normative views towards sex.

[5] See also Pande 2024 on intersection between purity discourse and race/ism in online spaces.

3. "SOOO RELATABLE!": WRITING RECOGNITION ACROSS IDENTITY AXES IN ENEMIES-TO-LOVERS

From as early as page 4, the novel weaves in details of Sam's second-generation Malaysian-Australian background. These cultural elements often appear subtly – similarly to the treatment of Sam's sexuality– as evidenced in the author's annotations on the first three chapters. One annotation, for instance, draws attention to the detail of Sam's and Jay's fathers playing badminton together as specifically "an Asian uncle thing" (annotated ver., 4), a nuance likely recognized as culturally-specific only by readers familiar with it. There are, however, many more instances when cultural specificities are made explicit, conceivably for the benefit of an anglophone readership presumed unfamiliar with Malaysian traditions. Another annotation identifies as autobiographical the passage describing a recipe invented by Sam's father "as a poor Malaysian student" (19). In the narration of this passage, Sam offers a linguistic explanation for calling her parents "Mummy" and "Daddy" as a young adult –"it makes much more sense in Canto" due to its inflection– while noting that it "becomes a bit weird around Westerners, who seem creeped out about it" (19). The explanation contrasts with recent trends toward leaving cultural specificities unmediated, as seen in Vivian Pham's first novel *The Coconut Children* (2020), a coming-of-age novel set in 1980s Cabramatta, which incorporates dialogue in Vietnamese without glossing. That said, the relative opacity or accessibility of such cultural references may owe less to deliberate authorial choice than to genre conventions in the case of *TCPTG*. Finally, Sam's self-conscious explanation for calling her parents "Mummy" and "Daddy" can also be read as gesturing toward the broader tensions at the heart of the story.

In contrast to Sam's demisexuality, the depiction of Asian-Australian identity is explicitly tied to the novel's central conflict, which is about Sam's grappling with societal expectations as a second-generation Malaysian Australian. Despite the book's cover, title and summary all highlighting the romantic aspect of the novel, the text focuses on Sam's dilemma regarding her future: Should she give up a scholarship to attend Queensland University of Technology in order to pursue her dream of becoming a video-game developer, risking failure and her parents' disappointment? Sam repeatedly articulates that her decision is shaped by her second-generation status. She feels that she cannot easily pursue a "risky" or unconventional career path in the same way as "*gwei lo*" (referring to white Anglo-Celtic Australians, often perceived as non-hyphenated Australians) who, she thinks,

> don't have parents who've migrated entire continents and struggled with a different lifestyle and culture, hoping to provide a life with more opportunities for their kids. They don't have an entire community looking to them as an example of what can be achieved with hard work. In order to break the mould, I have to be even more successful than all the gwei lo. (182)

This conundrum crystallizes the tension between cultural expectations and individual desire, situated within the specific contexts of diasporic identity and

Australia's video-game industry. It intertwines intergenerational pressures, the "model minority myth" (Walton & Truong 2023, 396), and prevailing notions of success, while also engaging with gendered dynamics in a creative, male-dominated field, further complicated by the video-game industry's relative lack of prestige.

As the eldest daughter, Sam has internalized the notion of *gwai* –a term connoting obedience and propriety, appearing 19 times throughout the novel (from chapter 2, page 13, to the penultimate chapter 29, page 352)– as in "gwai lui" ("good girl"; 164) or "gwai zai" ("good boy"; 13). This concept shapes her sense of responsibility toward her family and community. Although her parents do not impose rigid academic expectations, having never "been the type to expect straight A's" (37) and thus defying common expectations of Malaysian-Australian parental behaviour (see Voon & Pearson 2011; about Asian-Australian students in general, see Vialle 2013), Sam perceives achievement as a source of communal pride. She wonders whether maintaining an ethic of hard work allows her to claim a Malaysian identity despite her cultural distance from her parents' Malaysianness:

> Did it mean that even though I wasn't Malaysian in the same way my parents were, as long as I kept that spirit and worked hard and achieved all the things my parents (the "true" Malaysians) expected, I would also be Malaysian in my own way? I could still be the "good Malaysian kid", the pride of the community. (201–2)

These ideals echo the model minority stereotype of the deserving, hardworking Asian migrant discussed by Asian-Australian writers like Alice Pung (2009), Hsu-Ming Teo (2020), and Malaysian-Australian poet Omar Musa, who observes that, as Asian Australian, he is "positioned as a model minority ..., mythologized as 'working hard'" (qtd Vickery 2021, 222). This resonance between *gwai* and the minority model is made explicit when Sam reflects on her identitary attachment to the minority model. Sam asks herself: "I was always the model Asian kid. What am I, if not that?" (182). Leanne Yong's engagement with such a trope is similar to that of Chinese-Australian author Benjamin Law (2009), who outlines three possible strategies for handling stereotypes: introducing unfamiliar characters, creating characters that directly invert the stereotype, or deliberately representing the stereotype to expose the "surface values" (260) it conveys. Like Law, Yong adopts the third approach, contextualising the model minority stereotypes within the Malaysian-Australian community and its *gwai* ideal, as a mainly culturally shaped –not inherent– trait, and interrogating it from this insider's perspective.

Because Sam applies the ethic of hard work to creative labour, she has a difficult time reconciling ideals of *gwai* and model minority with an industry in which meritocracy falters; in which, as Sam ponders, "[w]orking hard does not always equate to success" (65). This tension forces Sam to negotiate competing priorities, pursuing a career aligned with her passions while ensuring her employability to avoid disappointing and burdening her family. Her internal struggle surfaces repeatedly, such as during a conversation with her parents after they learn that she is considering rejecting her scholarship. Sam contrasts "the part of [herself] who is Australian, who has grown up with gwei lo values all around [her]" and who is unwilling to settle

for a secure but passion-less job (245), with the pressure to be "employable," a value she associates with filial duty since "what Asian family wants a kid that leeches off them?," a belief that brings her shame and "poisons every thought, seeps into [her] determination" (246). The dialogue with her parents, together with her internal struggle, articulates the conflicting intersection of pluricultural values and personal desire.

Yet the perceived incompatibility between creative ambition and normative success proves largely internal. While the notion of "model minority" is used, the novel resists framing Sam's behaviour as the product of "tiger parenting" –her parents are supportive of her choices– ascribing it instead to a sense of duty towards her community and her parents' migrant experience. In that same conversation with her parents, they reassure Sam that they would never see her as "a disappointment" (248) regardless of her choices, revealing that her anxiety stems from her own sense of identity rather than external pressure. This is illustrated by her discomfort at the possibility of being perceived as "gwei lo" (247), an identitary categorization she associates with the privileging of individual happiness over parental one. Sam's central identity struggle is repeatedly cast in contrast to her little sister Eva –just as her sexuality is juxtaposed with Aneeshka's –who prioritizes her free time, hobbies and having fun with friends. Eva herself feels like she is "just like a gwei lo," a "fake-Asian with white friends" (106), for prioritizing her social life instead of achieving academic success, while Sam considers herself to be "[m]ore properly Asian instead of Australian," which makes her "feel good about [her]self" (248).

This is perhaps where the novel arguably lacks nuance by taking a dichotomic approach in its binary articulation of Asian and Australian identities, presenting them as opposing poles. Sam is torn by two impulses, each defined in contrast to the other: one marked as "Asian" and the other as "Australian," the latter understood as an Anglo, white, middle-class norm and often used synonymously with "Western." In addition to the fragments quoted above, in which diligence and filiality are coded as inherently "Asian" while freedom and individualism are associated with "Australianness," there are several other passages that illustrate this dichotomic articulation. One of the most telling examples occurs in chapter 14 when Sam listens to her sister express frustration about not feeling "Asian enough" and calling herself the "Australian sheep of the family" (181) because she wishes to engage in activities with her white Anglo-Celtic friends, activities her parents disapprove of. The term "Australian" is used to refer solely to Eva's white friends and excludes hyphenated identities such as Sam's Bengal-Australian friend Aneeshka and Sam's entire family. Sam reinforces this dichotomy when she describes her household as "a normal Asian family" in contrast to a "normal Australian family" (181). While aiming to express the challenges faced by minority groups, this passage inadvertently reaffirms the notion of a white, Anglo-Celtic Australia where other ethnicities remain outsiders (Ang 2001; Hage 1998; Mishra 2005; Wang 2000). Or, perhaps, put differently, the novel exposes the endurance of a white, Anglo-Celtic Australia in spite of its multicultural discourse (see Schwegler-Castañer 2025).

Indeed, at the same time, as previously noted, the novel critically reveals the affective labour required of diasporic subjects to reconcile communal duty with

individual aspiration. This tension is captured in the closing metaphor of chapter 14, where Sam and Eva hug each other, "one foot in each culture, both ... trying hopelessly to bridge what seems like an impossible gap between worlds" (183). This image gains further significance when read alongside the novel's ending. The challenge of balancing responsibilities with aspirations does not conclude with the outright fulfilment of Sam's dream, but with a compromise: Sam enrols in university without the scholarship –opting to study game design instead of programming– and takes a job at an escape-room venue, describing these choices as "a compromise [she] can live with" (364). Such a resolution emphasises the novel's thematic concern of negotiation rather than triumph, a theme with which many reviewers reported identifying and that Kamblé describes as central to the romance heroine's journey and to the genre's enduring popularity (2023, 16). Romance heroines, she argues, "enact a dialectic in which they accept some aspects of external definitions of their identity and contest others" in a way that speaks to readers since the continually reconfigured dialectic "represents the dichotomies women continue to face in the twenty-first century under late capitalism: native versus outsider, ... and so forth" (2023, 16).

Illustrating this dialectal appeal, online reviews suggest that Sam's negotiation of Asianness within a predominantly western context deeply resonates:

> As an Asian girl who was born and raised out of Asia, I felt seen and understood. (G&SR-5 2023)

> The culturally accurate references to Asian heritage and what it means to be Asian in a prominently white community: BRAVO! (GR-48 2023; capital letters in original)

> As a Malaysian-Australian myself, there were many things in the novel that felt like I could resonate with. ... I love the way this author combined Malaysian and Australian cultures together as well as weaving the Malaysian viewpoints which made this novel SOOO RELATABLE! (G&SR-19 2025; capital letters in original)

> [T]his book made me feel seen as a Malaysian-Australian buried under the mounting Asian pressures to perform. ... I felt seen in a way I don't even know if other non-Malaysian Asians would feel, and the only other time I ever felt seen this way was with Crazy Rich Asians, which was still highly unrelatable. (GR-24 2023)

One reader even reflects on how the novel prompted them to consider the scarcity of stories that mirror their own coming-of-age experience: "This just reminds me of how many non-Australian high school/uni stories I've read, truly so heartwarming to read something that reflects what I've grown up in!!" (GR-9 2023). This appreciation towards minority representation is expressed even by some reviewers who are less enthusiastic about the novel:

> Asian-Australian representation AND women in gaming?? It should've been a hit with me, but I just couldn't get past the writing. (GR-26 2023; capital letters in original)

> Normally I would rate this storyline as a 3 star but the representation of the pressure on the eldest child, and young Asian Australians brings so much dimension to the story and makes it a 4. (GR-41 2023)

Moreover, despite the text's dichotomic articulation of Asian/Malaysian and Western/Australian identities, some readers interpret its cultural references otherwise. One reviewer expresses that it was entertaining to read "the references to australian [sic] culture and lifestyles as someone who lives here. that was cool considering [they] haven't read a book written about australian [sic] characters!" (GR-13 2023), thereby identifying the Asian-Australian characters as Australians. Similarly, other reviewers identified the novel as Australian, without the hyphenated Asian or Malaysian, through tags such as "aussie" (GR-17 2023), "australia" (GR-8 and GR-35 2023; G&S Reviewers 1 2023 and 15 2024), "aust-lit" (GR-6 2023), "loveozya" (GR-29 and GR-34 2023), "aussie-authors" (GR-53 2024) and "aus-authors" (GR-71 2024), as well as through descriptions in their reviews themselves: "[t]his was a really fun Australian young adult novel" (GR-8 2023) and "[t]his incredible Australian debut is a hilarious, heartwarming story of family" (G&SR-2 2023)

This reception aligns with Law's strategy –which, as aforementioned, Yong adopts– of not avoiding stereotypes and preconceptions with certain characters, but instead centring "them as protagonists" as a way to invite "audiences not to see the Asian characters as outsiders, but as people who would personally resonate" with them (Law 2009, 260). Indeed, some of the non-Asian reviewers express that they could relate to Sam's conflict and pressures: "A very relatable story about older sibling expectations, the balance of persuing [sic] passion over financial stability, and working so hard to only have everything crumble" (GR-55 2024). As Hsu-Ming Teo argues, "the problems of filiality" that affect Asian characters are also problems that more generally "characterize and enrich modern lives in a cut-throat neoliberal society marked by the striving for material success and the privatization of social problems" (2020, 24). In this context, the tension between employability and passion –and its management as a matter of individual responsibility– becomes a universally relatable dilemma within a neoliberal structure.

This leads to the final dimension of this analysis: how gender intensifies these tensions and how the romance subplot offers a counterpoint of hope. Sam explicitly expresses how video games are dismissed as silly, as merely a hobby (54), and how being a woman makes it even more difficult to be taken seriously: "So many stories of women being harassed and discriminated against" (26). Her worries are grounded in real-world misogyny within gaming culture, referencing GamerGate, a harassment campaign in 2014-2015 that targeted women in the industry, including feminist media critic Anita Sarkeesian and video-game developers Zoë Quinn and Brianna Wu. The novel further illustrates the prejudice of the industry through moments of casual misogyny, such as an episode where a patronizing compliment escalates into hostility after being rejected: a male developer at the Future Devs Showcase –which both Sam and Aneeshka attend to present their respective video games– reduces Sam and Aneeshka to "cute little faces" that he will remember (289). Aneeshka dismisses him, "[w]e've met too many mediocre white men in the industry and the faces all

start to blur together, you know?" (289), which sparks laughter in Sam, and together they are able to emotionally manage his parting insult and threat, when he calls them "lesbian bitches" who will "never work in this industry again" (289).

By invoking GamerGate and illustrating moments of misogyny, the novel situates Sam's personal anxieties within a broader systemic context, where such misogyny heightens the cultural and familial pressures she already faces. This intersection adds a political dimension to her pursuit of a creative career; her ambition is articulated as a form of resistance, explicitly positioning her success as both individual and collective. This is evident in her toast at the Future Devs Showcase, in which she describes her highest ambition, that of going

> from dodgy apartment bootstrapping to becoming a leading Australian studio that'll grow the industry and make it viable to have a rewarding career as a game dev in Australia. I spin the story one last time, both for them and for myself, weaving in everything I ever wanted for us. For other girls who love games, who are fighting to be seen as a legitimate part of the industry without having to beat the boys first, who just want to do their own thing and still live up to their family and their community's expectations. (316)

Yet this toast is given at a point when she grows discouraged and is on the verge of giving up after her game fails to attract the same attention as Aneeshka's. Despite being described as "well-crafted" (305), one scout deems it insufficiently "unique" (306) to stand out in a competitive market. This disappointment makes her eventual decision to abandon her dream of becoming a video-game developer slightly jarring, although the text hints at the possibility of revisiting this ambition in the future (356); nevertheless, this ending is arguably more realistic and more consistent with the novel's thematic concern with negotiation.

Against this backdrop, and in light of the resolution of Sam's dream, the romantic subplot acquires significance; it is through her relationship with Jay that Sam gains a sense of equilibrium and belonging, leading to a hopeful ending. Initially, Sam perceives Jay as part of the same male gatekeeping culture when they fight over the last ticket for the video-game workshop: "having to prove myself again is just too much even though I've been doing it my whole life. 'Oh, so now I have to prove I'm a 'real' fan because I'm a woman and women can't possibly be gamers, huh?'" (14). However, her attraction to Jay develops because he understands her in an "intersectional way": not only does he understand her struggles as a Malaysian-Australian –being himself the oldest brother– but he also takes her seriously as a video-game fan from very early on in the narrative. This positions him as a counterpoint to the industry's toxic masculinity, an image further reinforced by the fact that Jay makes "adorable" (17) crocheted phone charms (218).

Where Sam expects dismissal after losing to him in a video game, recalling the times she has heard that "*girls [can't] play real games*" (136; italics in original), Jay instead acknowledges the difficulty of the game and treats her as a worthy opponent. Their shared cultural knowledge deepens this connection. When Sam arrives at Jay's home with ingredients for *kat chai suen mui* (calamansi sour plum juice), he and his

younger brother immediately recognize what she intends to make. For Sam, this moment –"to find two people who know exactly what I have in mind" (198)– feels like belonging. She reflects on her dynamic of recognition with Jay as particularly pleasant:

> The fact that we can relate over these foods that most other people would have no clue about? Also delicious, in that comforting homemade food way. Because whether it's food or gaming, I don't need to code-switch the way I do to make my Malaysian-ness more palatable to others at school – or, more importantly, to make gaming more palatable to my parents. (113).

When a threshold is reached in which Sam confides in Jay about her struggle to reconcile passion and expectations, his response of sharing his own experience as the eldest son expected to "set the example" (264) reframes their struggles as shared rather than isolating. This moment deepens when Jay expresses admiration for her dedication to game development in a way that positions her as a role model, challenging the gendered hierarchy that often defines gaming spaces.

Crucially, Jay does not offer to fix Sam's problems, but to stand beside her: "If you encounter a boss fight in life that keeps beating you down, I don't want to defeat it for you. I just want to hand you a mana potion so you can get back into the fight" (351). The potion metaphor reframes support as empowerment rather than dependency, allowing Sam to reconcile intimacy with her resistance to patriarchal norms, and her struggle against the competitive individualism of capitalist success. In this sense, the romantic arc is an extension of the novel's central themes of negotiation. What begins as a competitive rivalry –Sam asserting that "two can play that game" (7) when they fight over the workshop ticket– evolves into a cooperative partnership that redefines the meaning of the novel's title: life as a game is "so much better when played by two" (356). With Jay, food and gaming become spaces where she can simply be herself: "Sam, foodie and gamer and overall nerd" (113), rather than exist as a cultural representative or a dutiful eldest daughter. This shift transforms the enemies-to-lovers trope into a commentary on recognition and respect across multiple axes of identity, while also challenging the norms of competition and isolation that regulate both gaming culture and neoliberal life.

4. CONCLUSION

In this article I have argued that Yong's YA romance *Two Can Play That Game* reconfigures Australian YA romance by negotiating intersectional identities –ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. In doing so, the novel represents a noteworthy shift in Australian romance through its centring of an Asian-Australian protagonist and its incorporation of non-normative sexualities into a genre historically defined by heteronormative and Anglo-centric ideals. Its articulation of national identity is perhaps limited as, unlike YA novels like Alice Pung's *Laurinda*, which interrogates the racial core of Australianness, Yong's text reproduces the Asian/Australian divide,

positioning Asian identity as oppositional to an imagined white mainstream, mirroring broader cultural understandings of Australianness that remain entrenched in binary ideologies. Nevertheless, the narrative's engagement with diasporic pressures, gendered dynamics in gaming culture, and ace-spectrum representation broadens the possibilities of Australian romance and the genre in general, thus participating in the continual "recalibration" of the genre as it responds to contemporary readers' evolving "ideas of romance and the erotic" (Kamblé 2023, 17). In so doing, *TCPTG* fulfils Amanda Allen's hopes that "the way in which gender will be explored in YA romance will continue to expand, as will intersectional focuses on 'race/ethnicity, class, sexuality, and age'" (2020, 185).

This reading aligns with reader reviews, which highlight that the novel's focus on an Asian-Australian demisexual protagonist meaningfully contributes to diversifying the romance genre, responding to a need for more inclusive representation. *TCPTG* expands the horizons of YA romance by shifting the focus away from sexual desire and privileging recognition across diverse dimensions of lived experience. Ultimately, Yong's work exemplifies how contemporary romance can function as a space for negotiating intersectional identities, and imagining that a happily-ever-after is possible beyond traditional scripts of intimacy and success, even if such negotiations remain imperfect, constrained by their reliance on individual solutions to structural inequalities.

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