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RECKONING WITH APPETITE

Sticky Rice: A Politics of Intra-racial Desire

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Sticky Rice: A Politics of Intra-racial Desire

Aaron K.H. Ho

***Sticky Rice: A Politics of Intra-racial Desire.* Wu, Cynthia. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2018. 194 pp. \$29.95 Paperback. Ebook available.**

Cynthia Wu's ambitious book draws its title from the gay slang, "sticky rice," a nomenclature designated for male Asian homosexuals who are attracted to, and exclusively date, other Asian men in North America. Derived from the staple Asians consume, such a term—not unlike "potato queen" (Asian men who like white men) and "rice queen" (white men who woo Asian men)—is slightly derogatory, but Wu seeks to recuperate the negative connotations behind the desire between Asian men by revisiting several notable and popular Asian American literary texts (some of which are canonical), such as John Okada's *No-No Boy* (1957), Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt* (2003), Philip Kan Gotanda's *Yankee Dawg You Die* (1988), H. T. Tsiang's *And China Has Hands* (1937), and Lois-Ann Yamanaja's *Blu's Hanging* (1997). Readers familiar with Asian American literature will be quick to note that only Truong's novel depicts gay Asian men explicitly, whereas others are heterosexist or even homophobic. However, part of Wu's project is to reclaim from heteropatriarchy the queerness that has always existed in the heart of Asian American literature, which may explain the breadth of her book: from the 1920s to 2000s, from East Asian Americans to Southeast Asian Americans, from queer to postcolonial theories, from the Great Depression to

9/11. In her study, Wu posits that the same-sex male desire within Asian communities are acts of resistance and subversion, displacing the desire for whiteness, which is generally seen as the ultimate goal of assimilation in the United States.

According to Wu, the desire for whiteness is to conform to the standards of heteronormativity, economic ambitions, and other factors of the American culture. She is careful to note that the rejection of this conformity through nonhierarchical Asian same-sex

desire is not more significant than heterosexual ones, nor does the sameness have the same meaning across the board for Asian Americans of different backgrounds and origins. However, she claims boldly that Asian Americans, sharing the same yoke of racial and class oppression, become “queer agents who challenged capitalism and heteronormativity” (141). This claim collapses once the definition of “agency” is examined. To possess agency requires choice and a purpose to the action. The two protagonists in *No-No Boy* suffer because they do not have choices: the draft resister loses his standing among the Japanese American community while the veteran dies from a leg wound from the war. They do have two choices between the devil and the deep blue sea, but both choices render their lives meaningless. Furthermore, impoverished Asian Americans in the early twentieth century (whom Wu discusses) worried about their next meal, not about resisting heteronormativity. From a privileged and distant point, Wu’s claim that Asian Americans have agency against the American culture requires further examination.

Also bearing further exploration is the Asian queer culture depicted by Wu. In the introduction, she cautions that the bonds between Asian American men differ from the homosocial, homoerotic, and homosexual connections in the modern gay culture. But she constantly employs Western critical queer theory to examine these literary texts she, and as a result, some instances of over-reading the texts occur. For instance, in a sock-washing episode in *And China Has Hands*, she reads the quietness between the two male workers as cruising, the stench of socks as rectum, and washing them as fisting. Although there are no overt physical displays of affections in Asian cultures (like hugging and pecking on cheeks as salutations), close same-sex bodily contact exists as a kind of cultural understanding. In some Asian cultures, men can hold each other’s hands in public, as women often do. When Japanese salarymen drink, they can be touchy with each other. These forms of intimacy are accepted culturally and cannot be reduced to a Western definition of homoeroticism. In the epilogue of Wu’s book, she openly admits that her cultural blindspot has led her to overlook the obvious romantic relationship between two Asian American male students in her class, and this same oversight is apparent in her book.

Wu’s negligence of the “Asian” part of Asian American literature is symptomatic throughout the book as she focuses on the “American” constituent, but this focus has

allowed her to transpose a shorthand onto her argument; in some cases, Wu borrows arguments from other American cultures and claims that the Asian American culture works in a similar fashion. For instance, she quotes Tim Dean's work on the attraction for the disabled and contends that the same attraction works between the disabled veteran and draft resister in *No-No Boy*. Is American gay culture the same as Asian American culture? The resister's anal fantasies "echo Kathryn Bond Stockton's argument... in a reading of Toni Morrison's *Sula*" (36). Is African American culture the same as Asian American culture? While similarities between cultures prove a point that Asian American culture is very much integrated into the American fabric even as Wu argues that same-sex desires resist assimilation into American policies, the similarities demand clearer and better explanation.

Besides the insufficiency in cultural readings, chronology appears to be problematic in Wu's analysis. Although she carefully provides extensive historical background on the texts, she treats them equally in her overarching argument that desire between Asian men serves to heal intraracial conflicts and to resist American cultural hegemony. However, is a text written by Tsiang, a Chinese immigrant during the Great Depression, similar to a text by Gotanda, a baby boomer born in California, or a text by Truong, a Vietnamese refugee? The span of Wu's analysis, from 1920 to early the 2000s, is too wide, and if her thesis is to stand, it would mean that the culture of same-sex desire between Asian men has been unchanging for eighty years.

A second chronological issue is located in her analysis: she treats her texts dichronologically and sometimes trichronologically. Usually in literary analysis, we read the text as a cultural and ideological artefact of its times (Victorian literature, for example) or we read the text to illustrate what the creator means to say about a particular subject or a historical event. But Wu does not make a distinction between the two scholarly methods. She reads *No-No Boy* as a critique of how America mishandled the Japanese Americans during World War II and as an artefact of the Cold War. Given the proximity of the World War II and the Cold War, perhaps the analysis is acceptable, but when it comes to *The Book of Salt*, the analysis becomes muddled. Wu associates the text, which is set in 1920s France, to the Vietnam War in the sixties and post 9/11 in the 2000s America. The overdetermined reading of placing one text in three locales and three time periods confuses the reader and makes the analysis imprecise.

Another problem with the analysis is the pop psychology applied to real human beings. It is one thing to use psychoanalytic literary theories on fictional characters, but I am uncomfortable when the same technique is employed on human beings, some of whom are still alive. Firstly, Wu suggests the triangulation of the same-sex desire between Frank Chin and Lawson Fusao Inada—who are considered the pioneers or "fathers" of Asian American literature—and Okada's widow mirrors a similar situation in *No-No Boy*. Clearly, Wu means to prove her thesis and destroy the

heteropatriarchy that Chin and Inada have created by injecting a little queerness into their relationship. However, the theorizing of real people seems disrespectful to them. In another chapter, Wu discusses sociologist Paul Siu's documentation of Chinese laundrymen. When Siu and a worker shared a pipe, Wu reads the pipe as "an analogue for phallic power, a leisure commodity, and an instrument of homoerotic bonding" (130). If this scene were to occur in a fictional work where writers imbue their worlds with significance, then perhaps Wu's reading may be appropriate, but in real life, it is common for men, especially blue-collared workers, to share cigarettes or pipes as a sign of camaraderie and not be labelled as homoerotic. Sometimes a pipe is just a pipe. This pop psychology applied to real humanbeings not only shows a disrespect for their lives but also runs the risk of over-reading what is not there in real life.

What Wu does best in her book is her bricolage ability to adopt and incorporate vast and interdisciplinary elements and apply them to Asian American literature; she employs queer theories from Sara Ahmed, Eve Sedgwick, and John D'Emilio and postcolonial theories from Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, and Frantz Fanon. She enhances our understanding of the texts by providing them with historical context and concrete information, even managing to uncover real-life counterparts of the fictional characters in the literary texts. Her close-readings of the literary texts are mostly concise, insightful, and sharp. She links her interpretations to contemporary, real-world situations such as the whitewashing in recent Hollywood films, specifically *Doctor Strange* and *Ghost in the Shell*; #OscarsSoWhite; and the 2013 viral post on Craigslist where a gay Asian man devised a point system to seek a potential mate. That is to say, her study has important real-life repercussions and contributions.

Works Cited

Wu, Cynthia. *Sticky Rice: A Politics of Intra-racial Desire*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2018.