



PROJECT MUSE®

What Sticks

Summer Kim Lee

GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies, Volume 27, Number 1,
January 2021, pp. 157-161 (Review)

Published by Duke University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/777715>

Sinophone culture. Here, Chiang neatly locates these stories of corporeal variance within the convergence of culture and geopolitics in early Cold War Taiwan.

This book makes a rich and imaginative contribution to discussions about the psychobiological understandings of sex and sexuality that emerged in China in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. By showing the significance of those decades between empire and communism as an important interlude in China's modern history, Chiang's work challenges the view that only after the economic reforms in the 1970s did China open up to the global circulation of ideas regarding sex, sexuality, and the body. Drawing attention to sexual knowledge as a significant element in the formulation of Chinese modernity, his book also provides an engaging, innovative analysis of the gradual displacement of colonial modernity by Sinophone articulations from the middle of the twentieth century onward. *After Eunuchs* will be of great interest and importance to scholars working on the history of science and medicine, sex and sexuality, and Chinese modernity.

Séagh Kehoe is postdoctoral research and teaching fellow at the Contemporary China Centre, University of Westminster.

DOI 10.1215/10642684-8776960

WHAT STICKS

Summer Kim Lee

Sticky Rice: A Politics of Intraracial Desire

Cynthia Wu

Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2018. viii + 208 pp.

Sticky rice is a term for gay Asian American men who prefer sexual encounters with other gay Asian American men. In *Sticky Rice: A Politics of Intraracial Desire*, Cynthia Wu takes up the term to consider how intraracial same-sex desire between Asian-raced men in canonical Asian American literary texts become potential alternative sites for intraracial reconciliation, affiliation, and solidarity. Sticky rice

speaks to a sticky politics—sticky in that one prefers “sticking with one’s own” (23), but also sticky in that the intimacies with which Wu is preoccupied throughout the book are unwieldy and irreducible to modern gay male identity.

In each of the book’s five chapters, Wu identifies dyads of male characters, and while some engage in sexual acts with one another, for others, sex acts are coded through figurative language. Wu reads against the grain of these texts, tracing unremarkable, elusive expressions of queer desire that reside in metaphor and innuendo, in what goes beyond plot or prose. These sticky encounters between Asian-raced men offer another means of confronting the irresolvable heterogeneity of an intraracial Asian American coalitional politics shaped by ethnic and class differences.

For instance, in the third chapter, on Philip Kan Gotanda’s play *Yankee Dawg You Die* (1988), Wu addresses the friendship of its two main characters: Vincent Chang, an older, well-established closeted gay Chinese American actor, and Bradley Yamashita, a younger, emerging straight Japanese American actor. Each represents a different generation with clashing opinions on the political stakes of playing racist stereotypical roles. Meanwhile, the fourth chapter considers the relationships between working-class Chinese immigrant men in the bachelor societies of turn-of-the-century Chinatowns through H. T. Tsiang’s novel *And China Has Hands* (1937). The novel follows Wong Wan-Lee, a Chinese immigrant laundry owner in 1930s New York, whose passing encounters with men become sites of intraracial class solidarity. In her readings, Wu locates queer desire and intimacy as alternative political horizons over and against assimilation, inclusion, and competition.

The first chapter on John Okada’s novel *No-No Boy* (1957) considers the relationship of the protagonist Ichiro Yamada, released from prison for refusing WWII military service, and Kenji Kanno, a disabled veteran. Through Kenji and Ichiro, the tense relation between Japanese American draft resisters and veterans in the wake of Japanese American internment is given breathing room. Wu writes that these men’s homoerotic relation hinges upon an “unanswerable question” Ichiro poses to Kenji: “Would you trade places with me?” (33). As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990: 61) has pointed out, queer desire renders such a question unanswerable; an identification *as* and *with* someone is nondistinguishable from the desire *for* someone. One cannot be separate from the other, unless a woman gets involved, which is what happens in *No-No Boy* and throughout the pages of *Sticky Rice*.

When Kenji begins a relationship with a Nisei woman named Emi, he asks Ichiro to have sex with her on his behalf because of his disability. However, Ichiro

is not able to. Rather than interpret the stalled sex act as Ichiro's failure to align himself with heteromascularity, Wu writes, "Ichiro and Kenji exhibit an attraction for each other that not only makes women irrelevant but also regards their very presence as a barrier to the intimacy they forge" (37). Wu recognizes that there is no corresponding same-sex desire for women in the text. The radical potential of queer desires, queer intimacies, and non-normative, racialized masculinities are contingent upon the irrelevance of women, wherein women can exist only in a heterosexual relation to men. As a "barrier," women must be excluded, left behind, and condemned to bring the boys together in solidarity.

One is led to ask, then, whether the relations Wu moves through are pairings or in fact, as Sedgwick (1985) has written, the triangulations of male homosocial desire upon which heteropatriarchy is built. Wu states that given how Asian-raced men have historically been excluded from white heteronormative masculinities, the relation between Asian-raced men must be approached differently, and instead might gesture toward the radical potentiality of intraracial male same-sex desire. But Wu's textual analysis throughout the book remains ambivalent about the radicality of such male same-sex desires. This ambivalence is the most striking, prescient part of the book. In the second and fifth chapters, Wu homes in on the significance of men's homoerotic relations with one another at the same time that she works to complicate and loosen such homosocial bonds as the sole site of Asian Americans' internal conflicts and divisions, thereby lending these texts to a queer *and* feminist critique.

The second chapter takes up Monique Truong's novel *The Book of Salt* (2003), narrated by Binh, a Vietnamese cook working for Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas in Paris during the French Indochina regime. Unlike in *No-No Boy*, Binh acts on his intraracial desire with a mysterious man on a bridge, who is assumed to be a young Ho Chi Minh. Their desire is on the other side of "a chasm [that] divides Stein and Toklas's white, partnered, domestic, class-privileged lesbianism and Binh's economic and sexual transience" (54). Through a transhistorical understanding of the Vietnamese diaspora, Binh represents the South Vietnamese refugee displaced from his home while the man on the bridge represents the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. As such, their contact becomes a means of healing the split between the Vietnamese diaspora and the Vietnamese state.

The final, fifth chapter grapples with Lois-Ann Yamanaka's controversial novel *Blu's Hanging* (1997), which takes place in late-1960s and early 1970s Hawai'i and has been criticized for reinforcing Hawai'i's long-standing inequalities among East Asians, Filipinos, Native Hawaiians, and other Pacific Islanders. Unlike in other chapters, here Wu identifies the same-sex dyad as that of two East

Asian women, Big Sis and Sandi. Yet their relationship, coded as lesbian, valorizes East Asian middle-class domestic respectability over and against the irredeemable deviance of a working-class Filipino man named Paolo Reyes, whose portrayal as a rapist and child molester bars him from any sympathy or respectability.

What is interesting to note in this final chapter is Wu's observation that these two women's privileged "cozy domesticity" (145) mirrors that of Stein and Toklas in *The Book of Salt*. This brings up other questions. For why is it that lesbian desire is often conflated and therefore complicit with the comforts of middle-class respectability found in the home? Lesbianism gets confined to the gendered, classed, private realm of domesticity, becoming a place where scholars and writers base their critiques of middle-class respectability. In this context, what happens to the stickiness of lesbians' and, more broadly, queer women's desire?

Early in the book, Wu touches on queer and feminist Asian Americanist critiques of the heteropatriarchal forms of cultural nationalism in Asian American activism throughout the 1960s and '70s. She also cites art and scholarship on and by gay Asian men, whose pleasure decenters the desirability of gay white masculinity (Fung 1991; Nguyen 2014). But amid this crucial work remains an absence. As Gayatri Gopinath (2005) has written, the heteromasculinist, reproductive configurations of racial, ethnic, and national difference so often render the desire of the queer Asian diasporic woman an impossibility. Similarly, Vivian Huang (2018) has asked, "Whither Asian American lesbian feminism?"

Wu's attentive interventions within the canon of Asian American literature productively bring us to question the perceived political inefficacy and irrelevance of queer Asian American women and what passes between them. Throughout the book, queer Asian American women, their desires, and their shared social worlds hover, leading one to wonder what it is between men that sticks and what it is between women that does not.

Summer Kim Lee is assistant professor of English at University of California, Los Angeles.

References

- Fung, Richard. 1991. "Looking For My Penis: The Eroticized Asian in Gay Video Porn." In *How Do I Look? Queer Film and Video*, edited by Bad Object-Choices, 145–68. Seattle: Bay Press.
- Gopinath, Gayatri. 2005. *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

- Huang, Vivian L. 2018. "Whither Asian American Lesbian Feminism?" Presented at the National Women's Studies Association Annual Conference, Atlanta, GA, November 9.
- Nguyen, Tan Hoang. 2014. *View from the Bottom: Asian American Masculinity and Sexual Representation*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. 1985. *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. 1990. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

DOI 10.1215/10642684-8776974

SEXUAL INTIMACIES IN LITERATURES OF THE BLACK DIASPORA

Taiwo Adetunji Osinubi

Frottage: Frictions of Intimacy across the Black Diaspora

Keguro Macharia

New York: New York University Press, 2019. ix + 224 pp.

Keguro Macharia's book examines the centrality of sexuality to the elaborations of Black identities in the work of Frantz Fanon, Rene Maran, Jomo Kenyatta, and Claude McKay. Analyzing texts from the early to the mid-twentieth century, Macharia argues that these authors register, in their works, responses to colonial modernity's sexual antinomies in Africa and the Americas. Knitting together gender and sexuality studies, comparative literature, and postcolonial literary studies, he examines erotic constellations in contexts of slavery, ethnonationalism, colonialism, migration, and labor history. *Frottage* refers to both the method of artistic production and the sexual act; Macharia defines *frottage* as a "meeting place . . . between what Raymond Williams terms the residual and the emergent" (88). There is great potential in this definition: it captures the overlaps and productive interactions between historical and contemporary sexual practices and identities. Macharia's interpretations are imaginative, bold, and speculative. Frequently espousing a "yes, but . . ." position, he deploys contradictions productively.