

A man lives not only his personal life, as an individual, but also,
consciously or unconsciously, the life of his epoch and his contemporaries.

– Thomas Mann

Truthful contact between nations and lovers can only be the result of
heroic effort. Those who prefer to bypass the work involved will remain
in a world of surfaces, misperceptions running rampant.

– David Henry Hwang

Preface

ONE NIGHT IN SAIGON DURING THE SPRING OF 2000, I was browsing through a silk boutique near the Rex Hotel when I spotted the perfect kimono: one of those shiny, reversible gowns with the Chinese-style embroidery and fancy dragon design on the back. I thought it was charmingly flamboyant – the kind you’d wear lounging about in the study with a gin martini – so I bought it. Back home in the West, my fellow Caucasians offered a more sobering assessment of that gown. “It’s a smoking jacket,” smiled a friend, “like the one that dreadful Rice Queen wore in *The Year of Living Dangerously*.”

Later, when I happened to be watching a rented video of the 1982 film, it struck me that Wally O’Sullivan – the character my friend was referring to, a middle-aged correspondent for the *Sydney Herald* – never *once* appears in a kimono. Had my friend confused him with a similar character from another film? Perhaps. But it’s more likely that two fleeting hints of Wally’s sexuality – his tender caress of a young Indonesian waiter serving him a late-night drink, and a scene in which he’s accused by the film’s protagonist/narrator of “using boys for pleasure” – had provided enough stereotypical coding to peg him as a “dreadful Rice Queen.” A kimono would have completed the caricature.



The term “Rice Queen” is a product of contemporary western gay vernacular. It refers to a man, usually Caucasian, who is sexually attracted to men of Far East – including Southeast – Asian origins. Like his heterosexual equivalent, the Rice Queen is drawn to youthful, androgynous features typical of the “Oriental” look: smooth brown skin, black hair, and broad faces with high cheekbones, elongated (“slanted”) eyes, and porcelain-perfect lips. Along with the physical attraction is an obsession with all things Asian: from cuisine and home decor to history, culture, religion, and spirituality. Many Rice Queens, after travelling to the Far East, return with planeloads of Asian knick-knacks.

Where does this attraction come from? How is it that sexual preference

can be limited to – or, at least, dominated by – a certain racial (stereo)type? For some white men, the appeal is transgressive: Asian guys are a turn-on because their boyish looks, regardless of their actual age, allow for paedophilic fantasies that can be acted upon with exhilarating results – but without breaking the law. For others, the appeal is rooted in culturally determined, essentialist notions of Asian passivity or femininity. Asian guys are seen as more “gentle” or agreeable than white guys, so an interracial match is seen as complimentary. (Again, in either case the same can be said of “Rice Kings” – straight white men attracted to Asian women.)

Not surprisingly, “Rice Queen” is heavily burdened with political baggage. It’s most often a pejorative label that denotes ethnic fetishism and a preference for relationships based on inequality. Those saddled with the label are often charged with neo-colonial racism. The stereotypical Rice Queen is middle-aged or older, wealthy, and overweight; his Asian lover is young, sleek, feminine, servile, and passive in bed. What makes the Rice Queen more notorious than other cultural fetishists named after food groups – “Curry Queens” for lovers of South Asians, “Salsa Queens” (Latin Americans), “Chocolate Queens” (Africans), “Potato Queens” (Europeans) – is the dubious legacy of “Yellow Fever” in the Orient. In no other hemisphere, it seems, does imperial dominance-as-sexual-metaphor carry such heavy symbolic weight: Imaginary Occidental power in the Far East is typically embraced through the fetishization of smaller bodies and the essentialist notion of the inscrutable Asian whore.



In 1978, Edward Said’s *Orientalism*¹ prompted fierce academic and literary debates about racism, cultural Darwinism, and western imperialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Said argued that the West, in the course of establishing its dominion over the non-Caucasian, non-Christian East, invented the idea of “The Orient” and an entire corporate and institutional mindset for “making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it.” Said’s “Orient” was confined geographically to the Middle East of Palestine, Egypt, Syria, and Arabia – the “near Orient,” in relation to western Europe. But for North

1. New York: Random House, 1978.

American readers, who tend to equate “the Orient” with the Far East, the western triumphalism Said was describing could also be seen in the Pacific Rim. Orientalism was alive and well in the development of modern China during the opium wars; the colonial history of Burma, Indochina, and the Philippines; the post-World War II administration of Japan; the Cold War politics of Korea; and the tourist economy of Thailand, to name a few.

Nowhere is the mentality of essentialist Orientalism more evident than in the treatment of Far East Asians as sex objects. Western literary references to Oriental or Far East Asian beauty typically focus on the “beguiling,” the “sensual,” and the “mysterious.” Such attractiveness is often depicted as a powerful, even dangerous erotic force the white western male is incapable of resisting. Consider the following passage by W.P. Kinsella, from a short story many readers have interpreted as a thinly veiled ode to the author’s erstwhile girlfriend, the former teen prostitute-turned-novelist/poet Evelyn Lau:

He stared at her beautiful peach-colored skin, her small,
delicate Asian eyes, and was overwhelmed with love....
Lloyd leaned over and kissed her right earlobe. It was as
soft as a peach.²

If it were possible to compile an image bank of my own sexual history, the volume of couplings with East Asians would far outnumber those featuring any other ethnic group – my own included. Over the decade and a half that encapsulates the following narrative, I fell under the spell of countless “Orientals” with dark eyes, lean brown bodies, smooth skin, and “inscrutable” charm. But unlike the stereotype, I was not – at least, by most Rice Queen standards – considered a “ufo”: ugly, fat, and old. I was attracted to men of all races and was *not* an obsessive collector of all things Far East Asian, an expert in Far East Asian languages, or an adherent of Far East Asian religion. So, what kind of Rice Queen would *that* make me?

Whatever the case, it wasn’t long into my erotic life before I felt the glare of disapproval from a critique that saw “Yellow Fever” desire as politically suspect. Radical feminists like bell hooks accused white men attracted to non-whites of “commodifying Otherness.” Eric C. Wat argued that not

2. W.P. Kinsella, “Lonesome Polecat.” *Canadian Author*, Winter 1998.

enough Rice Queens were aware “that their desire, when based on fantasies and stereotypes, shares the same source of [sic] a bigot’s hatred.”³ And Song Cho lamented Rice Queens’ reduction of gay Asians to “boy toys” for their “predatory consumption,” even describing one Toronto bar as a “hunting ground” where Rice Queens “cruised looking for their prey.”⁴

I didn’t see myself as a “predator” or my attraction to Far East Asian men as anything to be ashamed about. Human reality is too complicated to be reduced to competing stereotypes or social orthodoxies, and people develop sexual tastes, preferences, and habits for reasons that defy prejudice. On the other hand, the fact that a Rice Queen discourse existed – and that anecdotal evidence raised questions of motivation I found disturbingly familiar – was a compelling enough argument to put my own history of desire under the microscope. But how to share the results of such a probe?

It wouldn’t be easy. Since the early 1980s, the discourse that began with Edward Said has set the standard by which all writing about race, sex, and culture is to be taken seriously as post-colonial thinking. At the same time, the increasing number of Far East Asian cultural critics obtaining tenure in the western academe has ensured that sins of literary racism – facile stereotyping, appropriation of voice – get pounced upon immediately, the offenders exposed as “reactionary.” One unfortunate consequence of all the vigilance has been a literary chilling effect: depictions of interracial desire that are not simply narratives of objectification (see the Kinsella passage quoted earlier) often adhere to a “multicult” school of writing whose expression is so cautious and freighted with euphemism that it seems almost crafted by committee.

Anti-Orientalism doesn’t go far enough to account for layers of complexity in human relationships that obscure what might on the surface seem concrete political “truths” about interracial contact. Even video artist Richard Fung, a respected critic of Orientalism, conceded as much in his groundbreaking (and unforgettably titled) 1991 essay, “Looking for My Penis: The Eroticized Asian in Gay Video Porn.”⁵ Fung argued that several

3. “Preserving the Paradox: Stories from a Gay-Loh.” *Asian-American Sexualities: Dimensions of the Gay and Lesbian Experience*, edited by Russell Leong (New York: Routledge, 1996).

4. Introduction. *Rice: Explorations into Gay Asian Culture & Politics* (Toronto: Queer Press, 1998).

5. First published in *How Do I Look?: Queer Film and Video*, edited by Bad Object-Choices (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991).

questions of sex and ethnicity could not be confined to the usual discourses of power. Chiefly:

How and to what extent is desire articulated in terms of race as opposed to body type or other attributes? To what extent is sexual attraction exclusive and/or changeable, and can it be consciously programmed? These questions are all politically loaded, as they parallel and impact the debates between essentialists and social constructionists on the nature of homosexuality itself. They are also emotionally charged, in that sexual choice involving race has been a basis for moral judgement.

Fung was asking some of the same questions about sex and race that I'd been pondering as a white male. However, the negative stigma of the RQ label had cowed me into silence. (As Fung's partner, Tim McCaskell, once said: "Smart rice queens learn to keep their mouths shut.") In the end, the only way to break through that silence was to adopt the Rice Queen label, temporarily, as a kind of experiment: to embark on a physical, emotional, and intellectual journey of Rice Queendom that would deconstruct and, hopefully, demystify the label. To do so, I would have to begin by reaching back to my earliest perceptions of race and culture, recall the growing sense of awareness of all things erotic (and how they often intersect with the exotic), and then – accounting for my adult experiences – navigate the heady politics of ethnic fetishism and cross-cultural confusion as I stumbled my way through a succession of Asian partners.

There is no way of doing this without describing at least *some* sex. As with most literary depictions of lovemaking, the physical details are often less relevant than the lessons learned. In the story that follows, the lessons become more significant once the Narrator crosses the Pacific Ocean. In recounting the exotic East, many western correspondents downplay their own amorous adventures – and whatever challenges to their assumptions may result – in the guise of maintaining some heroic omniscience or objectivity. This book is an attempt to offer a more nuanced, human dimension to the discourse.