

INTRODUCTION

“Sticky rice,” a term affectionately embraced by gay Asian American men who prefer emotional and sexual relationships with other Asian-raced men, refers to the varieties of rice whose grains stick together when cooked. The rice that accompanies many Asian cuisines has a texture different from the rice to which most North American palates are attuned. It has a glutinous consistency meant to be lifted with chopsticks to the mouth in bite-size morsels. It can also be pressed or rolled into forms that hold their shape in sushi, kimbap, musubi, and similar food items. Conversely, most commercially available rice in North America is favored for its very inability to clump. Those who eat it prefer the separation among grains. According to the logic of the metaphor, Asian American men who engage in intraracial sexual socialities, who stick to themselves rather than pursue white men, reverse the terms on which North American tastes stand. “Sticky rice” implies that the sexual practices of gay Asian American men who bond with their own initiate a world making that contests the primacy of whiteness and the valences of power coalescing around it.

In *Sticky Rice: A Politics of Intraracial Desire*, I mobilize a term from gay Asian American cultures to analyze intraracial intimacies in Asian American literature. I argue that the trope of male same-sex desire accompanies a range of literary polemics that grapple with how Asian America’s internal divides can be resolved to facilitate coalition building. The embrace of “sticky” politics suggests that forming connectivities within one’s racial group intervenes in assimilationist tendencies. It conveys a rejection of entrenched standards of

value, desirability, and legitimacy. A common thread passing through many intraracial conflicts in Asian America is the friction between the ascription to Anglo-American ideals and the motivation to challenge them. The disparities between those who capitulate to the former versus those who pursue the latter deepen fractures within Asian America. The literary texts I examine attempt to resolve such conflicts by invoking queer desire between men. These narratives matchmake dyads of characters, each half representing a contingent at odds with the other, in a plea for resolving disputes that stand in the way of coalitional action in Asian America. The characters come into social, erotic, and sexual intimacy with each other as an injunction to vanquish desires for whiteness that prevent intraracial peace. Taken collectively, the chapters that follow show that the configuration of two Asian-raced men paired together is pliable and suits multiple contexts and agendas. At the same time, not all of them are liberating or even innocuous.

Intraracial conflict in Asian America needs to be understood in the context of relational formations *across* racial categories. In other words, it cannot be disarticulated from the conflicts that U.S. capitalism engenders *among* racial groups. These *interracial* dynamics have a history as old as North American expansion itself. The pitting of Asian immigrant laborers against African Americans (as well as against working-class whites) in the nineteenth century sowed the seeds for twentieth-century and present-day conditions of inequality. When aggrieved populations occupy differential positions in their relationships to the state and their places in the economy, resentment follows. This resentment discourages collective revolts against the exploitative conditions that subjugate all. The myth of the model minority, which emerged most saliently in the 1960s (even if its primordial traces appeared much earlier), upholds the perceived industriousness and docility of Asian Americans to demonize African Americans and Latinxs for falling short. It champions a facile multiculturalism without attention to structural inequity. The cultural and economic leverage that Asian Americans glean from the model minority myth remains measured, but it is not easily declined. The policing that Asian America faces from within stems largely from fears that its unruly subjects will jeopardize the limited benefits that accrue from this place of slight advantage. Living up to the myth's demands is desirable for many, tenable for some, but oppressive for all. The uneven ways Asian Americans are situated in proximity to or distance from the model minority myth's ideals unevenly incentivize its defense or dismantling. Herein lie the grounds for intraracial discord.

The model minority myth's rise in the 1960s is often explained by indexing the attainment of middle-class status among many Asian Americans in the generation following World War II. This phenomenon owes itself to the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943; the Immigration and Nationality

Act of 1952, which allowed people of Asian descent to apply for naturalized citizenship; and the Hart-Celler Act of 1965, which abolished national quotas for immigration. Meanwhile, the mainstream media's coverage of rebellions headed largely by African Americans, Latinxs, and Native Americans to redress race-based and settler colonial abuses stoked the fears of many white Americans. Asian Americans, in fact, were involved in these movements but have received less visibility for their participation.¹ The ways Asian Americans versus other people of color were regarded at this moment exacerbated historical fissures between them. What often goes unaddressed in the above changes enabling Asian American upward mobility is U.S. militarism. By "militarism," I do not mean an entity pertaining to only the armed forces. Rather, the term signals a broader economy, culture, means of state governance, and worldview that supports, infuses, and naturalizes military influence in all aspects of quotidian life. As with other racial groups, the GI Bill benefits for veterans returning from war allowed Asian Americans to gain a foothold in middle-class life.

In addition, given that twentieth-century U.S. wars with Asia have spurred influxes of Asian arrivants, we cannot discount the influence that militarism has held over Asian American immigration. The question of who can be trusted as an ally versus who falls under suspicion as a terrorist adds another dimension to the model minority myth that draws distinctions within racial groups. The wars with Asia have prompted the U.S. collective imagination to dichotomize Asians into friendly and enemy forces. However, even when "good Asians" come to and settle in the United States as a result of empire and multinational conflict, there always lingers the taint of their racialized contiguity to the bad. They may compensatorily perform in response to suspicions of imperfect assimilation, or they may refuse to engage with an impossible situation. And they can choose alliances among themselves—which are sometimes surprisingly queer—to redress the capitalist and imperialist underpinnings of the United States.

Sticky Rice unravels the contrarian pleasures of the desire it names in the face of whiteness, upward economic mobility, heteronormativity, and collusion with empire. The field of Asian American studies presumes that Asian American activism emerged from racial liberationist movements upholding heteropatriarchy that were only later challenged by feminism and queer thought. I argue instead that Asian American men were never uncritical, yet failed, aspirants to normative masculinity. Rather, they have always been strategically queer. They express same-sex desire within racial lines to encourage reconciliation among Asian America's internal factions. In this book, I provide a sustained analysis of the "sticky dyad" in some of the most widely read Asian American literary texts: John Okada's *No-No Boy*, Mo-

nique Truong's *The Book of Salt*, Philip Kan Gotanda's *Yankee Dawg You Die*, H. T. Tsiang's *And China Has Hands*, and Lois-Ann Yamanaka's *Blu's Hanging*. Most of these narratives would not be considered queer by any stretch. Some may convey staunchly heterosexist—or even homophobic—ideas. Yet we see in them calls for coalitional urgency through Asian American men who love, long for, and have sex with other Asian American men. At the same time, I do not want to relegate sticky pairings to that of rhetorical device only. These literary iterations of desire occur alongside contemporaneous discourses of sexual deviance, gender non-normativity, gay activism, and homonormativity that have real-world consequences for actual LGBT people. For these reasons, it bears historicizing the above texts in this way and heeding the distinctions between homosociality and queer acts and identities, even as they blur.

THE SEXY LURE OF RACE AND RICE

The video artist Nguyen Tan Hoang's *7 Steps to Sticky Heaven* (1995) is a twenty-four-minute video that is part ethnography and part homage, showcasing the voices, culinary strategies, and kinetic sex of gay Asian American men who prefer intraracial intimacies. The artist interviews his informants about why they are “sticky,” desirous of other Asian-raced men. Responses range from the serious to the lighthearted. Several suggest that being sticky can overcome internalized racism. Another subject mentions that he simply finds sex with Asian men more meaningful. One humorously extols the benefits of not having to interrupt sexual activity to pick body hair out of his mouth, as he presumably would with white men. Yet another, after a thoughtful pause, calls out the aspirations to normativity behind the question itself: “What made me turn sticky? That’s like asking me what made me turn gay.”²² His racial preference is not an aberration begging an etiology. Throughout the interview sequences, Nguyen’s voice from behind the camera probes with follow-up questions. He flirts with his informants.

The locations where Nguyen conducts the interviews are informal. They include the seating areas of bars, cafés, and restaurants and the interior of homes. Some of the ambient sounds—such as voices at nearby tables, the clink of silverware on plates, street noise, and background music—can make it difficult to hear the dialogue at times. The movement of Nguyen’s handheld camera is subtle but noticeable as he inserts himself as an active participant in the interchanges. These elements, which place the process of creating *7 Steps to Sticky Heaven* outside the more formal realm of studio film, complement the unscripted, sometimes halting dialogue and spontaneous shows of affect. Together, they lend an endearing candidness to the testimonies.

The interviews are interspersed with recurring scenes of the video artist eating rice. These interludes have no audio, and their silence provides a jarring contrast to the low to moderate din in most of the interviews. Nguyen begins by neatly cradling a ceramic bowl in his left hand in accordance with Asian table etiquette while his right hand works a pair of chopsticks. As the narrative progresses, he scoops the rice into his mouth with increasing urgency and speed. At the halfway point, he abandons the chopsticks to push the rice overflowing from his lips back with his hands. By the video's end, the partially masticated mouthfuls of rice have become impossible to contain, and they spill onto his bare chest in this frenzied meal. The artist ecstatically rubs the rice into his skin and writhes on a bed. The scenes where Nguyen begins to eat more quickly are uncomfortable for the viewer as his mouth fills with rice at a rate faster than that at which he can swallow. As he endures what looks like a self-administered force-feeding, our uneasiness increases. What seems like compelled behavior then erupts into a rapturously orgasmic finale.

The scenes of Asian-white or Asian-Asian sex portrayed in the video exist beyond a hierarchy of acceptability. The tangle of bodies and dim lighting flatten phenotypic and other distinctions. Voiceovers where the interview subjects confess inclinations shaped by socialization into white gay cultures accompany a scene featuring Nguyen and a white lover identified as “X-boy-friend.” As Nguyen’s partner playfully slaps and tops him, an informant can be heard relaying these words amid the slaps and moans:

I think, I think you go through a period where, you’ve been foisted with all these images of . . . the gay community where you see mostly white, queer men, the white-dominated community. . . . I think everyone falls for that, that whole desirability process where, you know, these images of white men with tight bodies, six packs, and bulging biceps. And, you know, I fell for that. . . . You know, the whole dominant trip.

Another voice joins in, reporting, “I mostly like rough sex with Caucasian men, but with Asians I tend to get more [*pause*], um [*pause*], pretend there’s meaning to it.” Despite these strategically placed interview segments, the reciprocal joy conveyed by both men in the scene quells any tendency to pathologize the sexual pairing of white top-Asian bottom as simply evidence of the Asian American man’s internalized racism. Nguyen, the auteur, holds the camera in some of the shots, including those in which he is on his back while being penetrated. The viewer is positioned accordingly, with his point of view in a way that, Glen Mimura claims, undermines the “stereotypical coding of Asian men in mainstream, commercial gay porn,” because Nguyen retains

control of the representation.³ In subsequent scenes that feature Asian-Asian pairings, Nguyen portrays himself in scenarios that imply more sexual versatility. His partner is behind the camera in some shots, suggesting a co-authorship between him and the other man. No voiceovers from the interview material exist in aural counterpoint as before. However, rather than regard these instances of intraracial sex as egalitarian correctives for the former, the expressions of pleasure among all lovingly reveal a mutual give-and-take. We are left to understand that separating acts and partners into neat categories of “good” or “bad” is simplistic.

A bridge between the sex scenes and one depicting the eating of rice occurs when a shot of Nguyen fellating his partner cuts to one similar in composition. Head bowed over a bowl and with chopsticks in hand, Nguyen insists on shoveling the rice into his mouth, despite his inability to ingest it as quickly as he feeds himself. The pleasures of rice are ambivalent. There may be expectations within collectives of politicized gay Asian American men to congress within one’s race that are restraining. (The 1990s-era term “politically correct” comes up twice during the interviews.) These imperatives can reprise doctrinaire forms of social justice from the past that relied on essentialist notions of race. Yet that pressure—the buildup and explosion of rice in its overabundance—can also produce states of unanticipated possibility and bliss, as the climax of *7 Steps to Sticky Heaven* suggests. In the end, the video leaves us with the tender kissing and embracing of two Asian-raced men who are slightly conscious of performing for the camera even while they show genuine affection for each other.

Nguyen’s video covertly references a slightly earlier film, Marlon Riggs’s *Tongues Untied* (1989), which makes a similar proclamation about intraracial love. The film, which originally aired on PBS, blends elements of documentary, performance, and found-object pastiche. It ends with the declaration, “Black men loving Black men is *the* revolutionary act,” each word in white lettering flashing in sequence silently on a black screen.⁴ Riggs asks us to think about what can be accomplished by something as ordinary as love when it flourishes among African American men. “What is it that we see in each other that makes us avert our eyes so quickly?” a voiceover asks when recounting a story about crossing paths with another African American man in the Castro District of San Francisco. “Do we turn away from each other not to see our collective anger and sadness?” This refusal to recognize gay black bodies and subjectivities stems from both internalized racism and respectability politics. The film’s concluding polemic makes a case for a radical intraracial erotics that intervenes on both counts.

A shot in *Tongues Untied* of an illustrated, heavily muscled black male figure with an oversize penis conveys African American men’s alienation

when encountering products meant for white consumption. The recurring image of the impossibly endowed black body persists in the Western imagination because of historically sedimented discourses that cast blackness as corporeal excess. This excess is commonly focalized at the site of the genitals. Under chattel slavery, black men were emasculated because of their inability to conform to European-descended standards of normative masculinity. They remained powerless to protect black women from the sexual violence perpetrated by white slaveholders. Upon emancipation, the archetype of black hypermasculine pathology emerged to justify the subjugation of black men through lynching and castration. An oft-cited claim from Frantz Fanon declares, “The Negro is eclipsed. He is turned into a penis. He *is* a penis.”⁵ Black men are reduced to their genitals. Correspondingly, the elevation of whiteness within a Cartesian modernity privileges the mind’s purported capacity to restrain the body’s beastly urges. Although present-day African American men can harness some clout within U.S. white gay cultures because of the valorization of masculinity therein, these partially enabling avenues to sexual access are troubling. They can turn into jarring reminders of the racial hierarchies that marginalize black participants.⁶ Riggs urges his brethren to avoid these unpleasanties by prioritizing the loving of other black men.

A counterpoint to Riggs’s polemic might be Samuel R. Delany’s novel *The Mad Man*. Published in 1994, it similarly immerses itself in the milieu of the pre-1996 antiretroviral therapy era. Instead of the highly aestheticized optics that *Tongues Untied* presents, *The Mad Man* confronts its reader with a dogged anti-aesthetic, refusing to serve a portrayal of intimacy that appeals to the PBS-loving crowd. This does not invalidate Riggs’s vision of revolution. There are multiple voices that speak to the viability of intraracial desire. The African American protagonist of *The Mad Man*, John Marr, seeks erotic and sexual connection mostly with white homeless men. Repeated utterances of anti-black slurs pepper their role-playing, and Marr’s indulgences include the consumption of piss, shit, and snot. According to Darieck Scott, these acts incite their sexual charge precisely because they embroil themselves in a history of unequal power relations between black and white men. The domination Marr craves, when granted, “gives him pleasure . . . that opens the way to his most powerful ecstatic experiences.”⁷ As a point of contrast, Marr takes offense at being called “boy” by his professor, Irving Mossman, a straight white man for whom he feels no sexual inclination.⁸ Riggs may upend the respectability politics of heterosexual African American cultures, but Delany turns even Riggs’s oppositional consciousness on its head.

The relations Marr maintains with white men allow him to explore an identification with an Asian American one. Marr, a graduate student in phi-

losophy, pursues research on Timothy Hasler, a fictional Korean American philosopher whose brilliant career was cut short by murder outside a gay bar in New York. As Marr and his adviser, who conducts overlapping research, learn more about the reclusive philosopher's life, Marr's interest piques while Mossman expresses alarm. Marr signs a lease in the same apartment building where Hasler lived and tries to retrace his steps in every way, including through sex with some of his former lovers. Meanwhile, Mossman abandons his project not because of the subject's sexual identity but because of "the *kind* of gay man he was. . . . He was an obnoxious little chink with an unbelievably nasty sex life."⁹ The professor's inability to reconcile his admiration for the late philosopher's work with his disgust for the newly unearthed information about his personal life turns the intellectual of color revered for his success in a field dominated by white men into a "chink." Marr's inquiry into his subject, conversely, opens the door to joyously hedonistic erotic experiences. The intimacy Marr craves with Hasler is not sexual in our traditional understanding of the concept. He does not appear to long for a tryst with the dead philosopher. Rather, his desire mediates itself through their mutual ties with the economically transient world outside academia's exclusivity, throwing all pretense of respectability to the wind. Delany speculates that if the model minority Asian American, who earned recognition on white America's terms, found pleasure turning away from it, his African American doppelgänger might, too. Ultimately, the cathartic effects of Marr's transgressions go beyond racial identity in partner choices. Simply rejecting whiteness appears tame in light of the boundaries Delany encourages us to push.

THE EXPERIENCE OF QUEERNESS FOR MEN OF ASIAN DESCENT

Despite the differences among Nguyen, Riggs, and Delany on the question of intraracial love for men of color, we need to keep in mind that whiteness often remains an irresistible lure, according with North America's normative logic. Nguyen's playful celebration of Asian and Asian American men who stick with one another does not exclude other pairings. Rather, it reveals that they can be sexy in the face of white economies of desire. The white men in Riggs's film are domineering, unsympathetic figures, suggesting that more equitable connections can take place only among African American men. Delany complicates whiteness as the definitive source of power when he creates white homeless characters who contrast sharply with his middle-class African American protagonist. The differing perspectives among these authors attests not to a ranking of radicalness but to a constantly shifting set

of hopes and dreams about what consorting among one's own can or should accomplish.

This multiplicity of types and degrees of enthusiasm for intraracial bonding informs my treatment of the literary texts in this book: John Okada's *No-No Boy*, Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt*, Philip Kan Gotanda's *Yankee Dawg You Die*, H. T. Tsiang's *And China Has Hands*, and Lois-Ann Yamanaka's *Blu's Hanging*. Whereas Nguyen qualifies his enthusiasm for the value of Asian American men loving one another with his wish to prevent these sexual choices from being reductive, my measured endorsement of such intimacies stems more from a skepticism about the utopian fantasies they generate. I have selected the above texts because of their foregrounding of the often difficult and sometimes treacherous waters of intraracial discord. When these narratives introduce a queer dyad to air and reconcile differences, the gesture may be compelling, but it does not always hit the mark. Some examples may inadvertently solidify entrenched inequalities. Others may overlook the gender specificity of this male-centered model. Latent or overt homophobia issuing from the narrative voice, the characters themselves, or the reader might thwart their efficacy. In instances where the sexual activity is coded through figurative language, the effect can reproduce silence about same-sex desire. Rather than jettison this pairing because it is imperfect, I probe at what makes it useful, even transformative, in the midst of forces that relegate Asian Americans to states of internal division.

The trope of intraracial reconciliation through queer male desire unfolds in the context of Asian-raced men's gendering in the United States. Because of colonialism, slavery, labor exploitation, and other inequities, nonwhite men inhabit a space outside sanctioned ideals typified by Anglo-American heterosexuality. This fact remains apart from how they may identify sexually on an individual level. White, middle-class models of kinship, domesticity, and sexual comportment valued in the United States historically have remained off-limits to people of color. Conditions that have divested them of the requirements—such as self-determination, property ownership, recognition of full human status, citizenship, and other factors—for achieving those mandates ensure it. Despite the collective positioning of men of color across racial categories outside the charmed circle of Anglo-American heterosexuality, there are variations in how Anglo-America perceives them.

Riggs's unpacking of the gendering of black men calls attention to the distortions they face because of post-emancipation fears of black sexual excess. In contrast, Asian American men are gendered differently because of the historical circumstances of migration from Asia to North America. The immigrant population, especially from countries such as China, the Philippines, and India, was largely male. Ethnic enclaves were thought of as "bach-

elor societies,” even though many men who lived in them were married to women who remained in Asia. The residential arrangements of Asian immigrant men existed outside the domain of Anglo-American propriety. Even before the Page Act of 1875, which barred entry into the United States of women from China, the gender ratios in Chinatowns along the West Coast were skewed such that women constituted only 7.2 percent of the population. That figure had dropped to 3.6 percent by 1890.¹⁰ The labor into which Asian men were tracked after the railroad and mining industries declined was associated with women: laundry, food service, and domestic work. The connection between Asian male bodies and femininity comes from this past. Present-day gay Asian American men participating in sexual cultures that celebrate traditional norms of masculinity cope with the disadvantages of this association. Instead of excess, they are marked by lack. The filmmaker and cultural critic Richard Fung observes that gay pornography “privilege[s] the penis while always assigning Asians the role of the bottom.” Thus, he argues, “Asian and anus are conflated.”¹¹ If Asian-raced men are consigned to phallic/penile absence within a racialized optics that centers the (white) masculine top, it is not difficult to imagine why broaching the topic of Asian American male-desiring men loving one another is subversive.

Because of the gendered immigration and labor histories that have rendered Asian masculinity non-normative in the United States, Asian immigrant men were perceived as deviant, often violently so. Unbalanced ratios between men and women in early ethnic enclaves created contradictory anxieties in the U.S. popular imagination about Asian men’s potential to disrupt public safety. As Victor Jew, Mary Ting Yi Lui, and Nayah Shah have shown, Asian-raced men throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were demonized because of their imagined propensity for sexually assaulting white women and men. A judicial system increasingly preoccupied with Asian defilement of white bodies responded to and fed into these fears.¹² On the other side of this contradiction, Jennifer Ting claims that early Chinatowns were considered “non-reproductive and non-conjugal,” which cast Chinese men as hyposexual and, therefore, safe for employment in white households where women and children lived.¹³ These early Asian migrants existed at a remove, albeit in different ways from that of the figure of the sexual predator, from respectable kinship, domestic, and intimate formations. For this reason, David L. Eng proposes that Asian Americans’ “historically disavowed status as . . . U.S. citizen-subject[s] under punitive immigration and exclusion laws” scripts them as “queer” apart from the specificities of sexual identity or practice.¹⁴

It may be useful to parse the vexed and very imperfect overlap between the deviant and the queer in portrayals of Asian-raced masculinity. Whereas

the U.S. cultural imagination and penal system joined in the vilification and criminalization of Asian male immigrants at the turn of the twentieth century, these men—as I discuss in detail in Chapter 4—invented intimacies outside conventions of Anglo-American middle-class life. Certainly, Eng’s attempt to recuperate notions of Asian sexual deviance by invoking queerness presents us with a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it permits the imagination of different modes of affiliation that go beyond what white America can perceive or accept. These alternate relationalities can be sites of resistance and transformation. As Judy Tzu-Chun Wu argues, we should not fall prey to a reproduction of heteronormative assumptions when we challenge racist immigration laws.¹⁵ On the other hand, Jinqi Ling warns that, in our care not to replicate patriarchal values when critiquing the subjugation of Asians, we should not “risk . . . decontextualizing Asian American men’s deeply felt historical injustices toward them.”¹⁶ These discriminatory practices, Ling reminds us, had real-world consequences, such as the passing of antimiscegenation laws and the instigation of physical attacks by private citizens. The dislocation between the deviant and the queer lies in the degrees and types of agency men had in structuring their lives in the midst of conditions not of their own making.

Most contemporary scholars respond to the familial, erotic, and sexual entanglements of historical Asian lived experience by proposing more capacious racialized masculinities. They view the temptation to reassert heteropatriarchy as a replication of gender and sexual hierarchies that weaken, not bolster, claims to racial liberation. Jachinson Chan avers that we not disavow Asian effeminacy but, instead, recognize a multiplicity of legitimate gender compartments for men.¹⁷ Celine Parreñas Shimizu prescribes an alternative order of values that challenges parameters of masculine viability. She argues that multidimensional Asian American men assert “the presence of both vulnerability and strength [and] . . . forge manhoods that care for others.” Also, they “invest in the most rewarding of relations beyond propping up the self.”¹⁸ This interdependence, which cuts against Enlightenment notions of agency, appears in Nguyen Tan Hoang’s scholarship, which complements his video art. Returning to Richard Fung’s observation about the link between “Asian” and “anus,” Nguyen does not renounce this association. He calls for a commitment to “bottomhood,” defined not narrowly as anal receptivity alone but as a worldview that disperses the abjection attending femininity and queerness.¹⁹

Proponents of sticky politics rescript the historical sexualization of Asian men under the white male gaze. White desires for Asian bodies, when occurring among men, operate in much the same way as they do in iterations of normative heteromasculinities vis-à-vis Asian and Asian American

women. This dynamic presumes the former's agency in the face of the latter's docility. According to Eng-Beng Lim, colonial-era narratives about the "white male artist-tourist on the casual prowl for inspiration and sex" in Asia invoke "the native boy . . . [as] a sign of conquest, the trope of an Asian male or nation infantilized as a boy, a savage domesticated as a child, and a racially alienating body in need of tutelage and discipline."²⁰ Joseph Allen Boone shows the extent to which this object of desire persists in the erotic longings of European men traveling to North Africa.²¹ These asymmetrical white-Asian pairings from the past shape present-day sexual relationships between Asian American and white men. In his ethnographic work, C. Winter Han reports on micro-aggressions issuing from gay white men, known as "rice queens," who actively pursue Asian Americans because they understand their sexual power over them in a context in which whiteness is prized.²² Given the predominant whiteness of mainstream gay economies of desire, Asian American men have many incentives to align themselves with whites rather than with one another, whom they often view as competitors instead of potential partners.²³

Together, the imperatives of sticky politics and erotics comprise three intertwined goals. The first revises North American standards of physical attractiveness; the second contests Asian American men's relegation to subordinate roles that buttress white paternalism; and, finally, the third dispels entrenched patterns of Asian American intraracial rivalry. The structures and thinking that result from colonialism and racism form the backdrop against which Asian American men proclaim desire for one another. Because these inequities persist in making whiteness appealing, intraracial pairings can be, in many cases, transgressive.

STICKY'S LONG FETCH IN COALITION BUILDING

My reading of *7 Steps to Sticky Heaven* frames my treatments of intraracial queer desire in Asian American literature from the 1930s onward. The distinctiveness of Nguyen's film lies in its refusal to aspire to a transhistorical universalism. The self-consciously casual recording of the footage exposes the seams of the video's production, revealing its status as a crafted object situated in time and space. However, I argue that in the context of Asian American literature's political project, men have long been bonded erotically to one another. The extensive fetch of this trope attests to its persistence, malleability, and flexibility and its relevance to a multitude of structural conditions. In effect, desire among Asian American men has been par for the

social justice course for a long time. *Sticky* is part and parcel of the language of revolution, and those articulations of social change take myriad forms.

This book does not merely replicate Nguyen's implied claim in *7 Steps to Sticky Heaven*; nor does it contradict it. To be sure, I find Nguyen's proposition for intraracial love compelling in that it urges its viewer to see what makes it enjoyably validating. However, what interests me most about the idea of two Asian American men entwined in a loving embrace is not so much the rejection of whiteness therein, although that remains a part of it. Instead, the crux of *Sticky Rice* lies in uncovering the significance of this intraracial dyad for a population that historically has struggled with coalition building. In these texts, the mere existence of Asian American men loving one another is often presented as unremarkable. These moments do not always hide under an oppressive heterosexuality. They tend to exist in tandem with it. What *is* unspeakable, however, are the political stances these moments extol, because they unsettle notions of acceptability within populations marked by race and ethnicity. Keeping this in mind, I claim that male same-sex intimacy emerges as the vehicle through which potentially divisive ideas can be aired and debated in the service of intraracial cooperation.

The bonds between men in *Sticky Rice* blur the boundaries among the homosocial, the homoerotic, and the homosexual in ways that lie beyond our concepts of modern gay identity. In fact, none of the instances of same-sex contact in the literature I read—with the probable exception of one—would be considered gay in the familiar sense of the word. My intention, however, is not to transcend a presumably limiting focus on gay specificity. It is to show how the thought and action founded by real-life intraracially desiring Asian-raced men can inform how we read the refusal of multiple normativities in Asian Americanist discourse. In her pioneering work *Between Men*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick wrote about the “radically discontinuous relation of male homosocial and homosexual bonds” in middle-class Anglo-European cultures.²⁴ This stands in contrast to, following Adrienne Rich and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, a continuum of intimacies among women. The differences between male and female same-sex closeness lie in the divergent levels of access to power that men and women possess and the investment the former has in mobilizing bonds among themselves to maintain their position over the latter. Sedgwick's schema changes, however, when we consider social locations that are informed by racial and class oppression. I do not claim that Asian American cultures remain free of the motivation to protect heteropatriarchy. Rather, I argue that the homosocial, homoerotic, and homosexual connections among men in Asian America look very different from the types that Sedgwick covers in Renaissance and Victorian literature. Asian

American men's access to the gendered and classed power presumed in *Between Men* historically has been limited.

A productive friction between acts and identities emerges as a persistent, if not always primary, undercurrent throughout *Sticky Rice*. Some of the queerest agents in this intraracial same-sex configuration are heterosexual. These very characters can also be the perpetrators of active homophobia. In one of the texts I examine, *Yankee Dawg You Die*, the most conservative, if not reactionary, of the characters is a self-identified gay man. The most legibly gay of sexual encounters in *The Book of Salt* exists in imperfect relationship, because of colonial subject status, with the timeline of gay history recognized as the master narrative. A contextualization of these texts accordingly with that history reveals the extent to which they, too, embed themselves in events that produce uneven conditions for populations defined by sexual difference. This is an analytical maneuver that begs more exploration in Asian American studies. Can we locate *No-No Boy* in an era of McCarthyist panic about the connection between homosexuality and threats to national security? Can we regard *Yankee Dawg You Die* as a cultural product of the HIV/AIDS crisis of the 1980s? Does *And China Has Hands* urge us to rethink the storied narratives about gay life in New York City in the early twentieth century? My answer to these questions is a resounding “yes,” even if the sexual identity of the characters sometimes makes it counterintuitive to think this way.

This thorniness around questions of identity in general lies at the heart of Asian American activism. Asian America, as a panethnic project, consolidated in opposition to the identitarian tendencies that previously stood in the way of a sustained and collective effort of social critique and redress. Organizing across categories of ethnicity, gender, class, and other valences of difference can be difficult, even though Asian American people inhabit a shared social location as nonwhite subjects in a country where whiteness has defined one's standing with the state. Whether it is in the context of immigration, citizenship, property rights, or other *de jure* factors, Asian Americans occupy a position in relation to whiteness that marks them as other. Although collective action may seem easy to espouse, coalition building remains an uncomfortable and often counterintuitive endeavor. Bernice Johnson Reagon has famously declared that one should not expect to feel safe, nurtured, or at home while doing it.²⁵ Instead of providing a space that validates sameness and unity, a coalition forces its participants to confront their differences. The process of pursuing shared interests, in fact, defines those interests. A coalition is always an entity in progress—never a *fait accompli*.

Barriers exist that threaten intraracial cooperation. Because of colonial and other types of international conflict within Asia, Asian immigrants

may be suspicious of others whose regions of origin are or have been in opposition with their own. The United States' selective militaristic interests have long instigated or exacerbated clashes among nations in Asia, an effect that then reverberates in Asian diasporic populations. For instance, K. Scott Wong sheds light on the nonchalance with which the United States addressed Chinese Americans' concerns about imperial Japan's encroachment on China in the 1930s, an inaction that alienated Chinese Americans and increased resentment between them and Japanese Americans.²⁶ Lack of interest by the United States dissolved, of course, as soon as Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. Josephine Nock-Hee Park further expands on the role of U.S. militarism in stoking intraracial conflict. The dealings with the Soviet Union that led to the Korean and Vietnam wars and the division of Korea and Vietnam into two states—a communist north and a democratic south—fell in line with a mode of conceptualizing Asians as either friendly or dangerous. Yet Park shows that the transformation of Asians into U.S. allies and, later, immigrants is always incomplete, for the “mere fact of their American existence recalled often calamitous U.S.-Asian relations, which confounded the liberal trajectory from outsider to citizen.”²⁷ Wong's and Park's work addresses the relevance of nation-state origin in intraracial interactions. Yet even among people who share a regional or nation-state identification, dissimilarities in socioeconomic class, generation, immigration history, English language proficiency, citizenship status, and political affiliation can present difficulty. As with all race-based social justice movements, hierarchies defined by gender, sexuality, and ability status create further unevenness. Women of color feminists have long observed that raising issues germane to these vectors of difference tends to elicit charges of detracting from racial liberation.

Sticky Rice immerses itself in the terrain of Asian American coalitional politics described in Lisa Lowe's well-known article “Heterogeneity, Hybridity, and Multiplicity.” According to Lowe, social justice initiatives must recognize variations among people of Asian descent, avoid dictating an imaginary cultural purity, and acknowledge disparities that result from unequal social locations within Asian America. One can gloss over difference to foster solidarity, but doing so can “short-circuit potential alliances against the dominant structures of power in the name of subordinating ‘divisive’ issues.”²⁸ Insisting on sameness in the name of political organizing also unwittingly replicates hegemonic misconceptions of Asians as an undifferentiated mass. By recognizing these heterogeneities within Asian America and, more important, understanding that multiplicities have real-world consequences, activists can avoid replicating inequality in their efforts to redress racism. Lowe's cultural theory exists alongside Yen Le Espiritu's ethnography, which

argues that organizing across ethnic categories remains absolutely essential and that it benefits all Asian Americans. However, even though panethnic movements are powerful in theory, the interests of dominant subgroups often prevail in practice. Activists who occupy disadvantaged positions often wind up working, with increasing frustration, for interests that benefit those who already have greater leverage. The “needs of subgroups have often been subordinated to the interests of the larger entity, resulting in a loss of autonomy for these communities and declining power for their leaders. . . . [T]he gradual consolidation of group boundaries is often met by a counter-tendency toward intergroup divisions.”²⁹

Published in 1991 and 1992, respectively, Lowe’s and Espiritu’s texts arrive after two decades of heated exchange between male writers in the cultural nationalist tradition and their feminist peers. (Lowe cites this debate directly. Espiritu references it obliquely.) The two most prominent players in the debate, Frank Chin and Maxine Hong Kingston, typify the intraracial, intergender conflicts in Asian American coalitional politics. The extensive literary-critical work on the Chin-Kingston debates has more than adequately shown how a narrowly defined commitment to racial liberation has overlooked gender disparities within Asian America.³⁰ Asian American sexism arose in part from a compensatory reaction by Asian American men to U.S. immigration policies that blocked their access to heteronormative family structures. Because feminist writers such as Kingston challenged this misguided misogyny, thus exposing cracks in what cultural nationalists wanted to project as a unified front, they were denounced by Chin and his colleagues for working at cross-purposes with antiracism.

What if we decenter the conversation on Asian American coalitional politics from the familiar schema of cultural nationalism versus feminism and turn our attention to other instances that beg intraracial resolution? Some of the conflicts examined in this book are not obscure or unexpected. The debates between Japanese American men who volunteered for military service and those who resisted the draft during World War II, which informs the plot of *No-No Boy*, is a well-known and well-researched phenomenon in Asian American studies. The same is true of the material disparities between East Asians and Filipinos in Hawai‘i that plantation capital instilled, conditions that give the controversy behind *Blu’s Hanging* its weight. The intergenerational tensions between old and young Asian American actors, as *Yankee Dawg You Die* explores, has not received as much attention as the other two examples. Neither has the faction between pro-labor and pro-capitalist Chinese immigrants in the early twentieth century, the setting for *And China Has Hands*. The recent burgeoning of work in Vietnamese American studies has fostered a lively debate about reestablishing ties with the homeland,

which tends to divide refugees who believe in it from those who do not. *The Book of Salt* comes out of this state of affairs. These instances of intraracial partition have in common the presence of a male-male dyad in the fictional texts most closely aligned with their representation.

TACTICS FOR READING

My methodology reflects the primordial commitments of Asian American literary studies. Practitioners in the field have discussed at length the misguided tendency, especially on the part of white readers, to approach literature by Asian American authors as ethnography. By consuming these texts, one presumes to gain epistemological ownership to a racial minority group and come away with a culturalist knowledge of it.³¹ This reading practice overlooks the creative capacity of Asian American authors in crafting fiction. It also divests them of their agency as intellectuals who mobilize literature to intervene in the world. As it is assumed, Asian Americans cannot imagine, critique, shape, or strategize. They can only be. One formative piece of Asian American literary scholarship presents a solution to this problem. Donald C. Goellnicht—writing in 1997, during deconstruction’s wane in North American English departments—argues that a liberatory reading practice must regard the imaginative literature of Asian Americans and other people of color as intellectual production. We need “to read Asian American texts as theoretically informed and informing rather than as transparently referential human documents over which we place a grid of Euro-American theory in order to extract meaning.”³² Goellnicht’s lens, which regards literature as theory, dismantles artificial generic barriers and shows how they are racially inflected. Texts by Europeans and white Americans fall into the realm of philosophical tract, while the same by Asian Americans and other people of color are mere ethnographic artifact.³³

The intervention Goellnicht made in 1997 remains relevant long after its appearance. A more recent generation of Asian Americanist scholarship expands on the theorizing potential of literature and calls attention to creative writers’ mitigation of their misreadings in a racialized literary marketplace. Stephen Hong Sohn speculates that the present-day proliferation of Asian American literature featuring protagonists who do not align with the ethnoracial identity of their authors discourages autobiographically or autoethnographically informed interpretations. Moreover, in refusing a one-to-one ethnoracial correlation between protagonist and author, these texts prompt readers “to consider both the relational and the asymmetric nature of social difference and associated inequalities.”³⁴ The fictional worlds these authors craft position Asian Americans as only one part in a multifaceted

system in which racism, capitalism, and settler colonialism converge. Min Hyoung Song challenges us to rethink literature as that which is merely derivative. Literature is not just a transparent document of its times; its role in theorizing lies in its ability to imagine a different order of things. It “has the capacity to make worlds that might seem otherwise not to be possible, and in showing in concrete detail what such a world looks and feels like, literature can point to ways of being and becoming that we haven’t yet considered.”³⁵ The theorist and fiction writer Viet Thanh Nguyen’s declaration about wanting to “write fiction like criticism and criticism like fiction” shows that even if we still choose to maintain a boundary between one and the other, we can allow the characteristics that define each to permeate the barrier in generative ways.³⁶

I write from the vantage point of someone who has held positions in two English departments, and I have witnessed that creative writers are institutionally marginalized in ways similar to those of us who specialize in critical race and ethnic studies. (Some practitioners straddle the two categories, so these groups are not mutually exclusive.) Our fields are presumed to be less rigorous and less serious than those in areas that enjoy a greater amount of cultural capital. We expend more energy justifying the validity of our work in everyday conversation and in official communication related to renewal, merit raises, tenure, and promotion. Although the line between creative writers and critics in the discipline of literature in English was very porous during the early part of the twentieth century, the boundaries between one and the other began to solidify after the mid-century and have only grown thereafter. My interpretation of the literary texts in *Sticky Rice* aligns with the reading practices elucidated above that regard them as theory. Insofar as theorists challenge sedimented patterns of thinking or make transparent the workings of power hidden in plain sight, creative writers do the same. Literary texts often contain an argument, even if it is implied and not offered bluntly in the form of a thesis statement. Their claims, like those advanced by cultural and literary theory, are nuanced. They support themselves with evidence, rhetoric, persuasion, and narrative progression—the same components in scholarship, even if our respective articulations take dissimilar forms.

I will add that when we categorize, and thus read, literature as theory, we need also to remember that theory is not rarefied gospel. It is polemic we approach critically. Its ideas open themselves to agreement, validation, amendment, problematization, debate, dispute, indifference, or collaboration. Its claims may be useful, or they may not. It can call much needed attention to what has been neglected, but it can also fall short or unwittingly replicate hegemonic assumptions. We should acknowledge our intellectual debts to

creative writers when appropriate, bringing them into our citational communities when warranted. Correspondingly, we should be diplomatically honest about the oversights of their work. Ultimately, the range of responses to creative writing should run the gamut of those we bring to scholarship.

By examining representations of same-sex desire in some of the most widely read pieces of Asian American literature, *Sticky Rice* is not a recovery project that attempts to “diversify” a body of work. It does not add heretofore unknown or underappreciated texts that disrupt a supposed majority. Rather, it shows how a slice of the existing canon has always been queer.³⁷ My analyses are indebted to Daniel Y. Kim, who demonstrates that even within the narrow gender and sexual compartments that Asian American literary cultural nationalists espouse, we can look for moments of nonconformity. Kim identifies a sexually inflected homosociality “so extravagantly on display” when masculinist agency appears to be most salient.³⁸ These moments of male same-sex desire express a wish for penetrative intimacy with the trappings of white masculinity. In a reading of a nonfictional essay by Chin about working on a railroad, Kim interprets the depiction of Chin’s body merging with the train as coded sexual desire for his white male colleagues. According to Kim, Chin “prise[s] open a boundary . . . between the homoerotic and the homosexual . . . that resembles and is yet somehow different from the more literal coming together of male bodies that occurs in gay sex.”³⁹ Chin’s infamous championing of an Asian American manhood that accords with North American standards inadvertently destabilizes it.⁴⁰

In the midst of these discourses about Asian masculinity, I take up the contradictions that Kim identifies in historical strains of racial liberatory thought and revise them in two ways. First, rather than assume that slips in heteropatriarchy betray evidence of the impossibility of gender and sexual normativity, especially for men of color, I read these breaches of sanctioned models of masculinity in multifaceted ways. Kim catches users of homophobic language with their drawers down, so to speak. I, instead, regard them as agential envoys of queer thinking whose challenges to traditional masculinity may also be connected to their seeming advocacy of it. I do not cast an overly optimistic light about this paradox, however. Some invocations of queerness seem deliberate, purposeful, and maybe even playful. Others are accompanied by a panic that reveals the phobic underpinnings of their consequent disavowals. Still others may be emotionally and affectively neutral about their nestling within the realm of sexual non-normativity. Second, whereas Kim points to Asian American men’s inclination for white men or masculinities in his creation of a queer counternarrative, I direct attention to the transhistorical centrality of *intraracial* desire in these and other instances of self-actualization and coalition building.

At the same time, however, I stake a bridled claim about the efficacy of proposing intimacy between men in Asian America. A glorified vision of intraracial love may inadvertently stifle tough questions about internal power differentials. Some of the Asian-Asian pairings in this study initiate restorative justice. Others replicate the elisions that weaken coalitions. All of them could be problematized in some way. Ignoring internal conflicts for fear that their notice will be divisive inadvertently deepens the fissures their sweep under the rug was meant to curtail. For this reason, I organize the chapters in this book not according to chronology but in a sequence that reflects the trajectory of my argument. *Sticky Rice* first excavates the presence of sticky principles most optimistically before it complicates their pleasures. Chapters 1 to 4 lay out examples of reconciliation through male same-sex social/erotic/sexual bonding. They achieve their goal in varying ways and to varying extents. Chapter 5 warns against monolithic veneration of intraracial connections by examining their failures or missed opportunities. In addition, the arrangement of the chapters, which renders temporality non-linear and privileges argument over chronology, lays bare what recent queer theory asserts about the relationship between time and sexuality. (I address this body of work in depth at the end of Chapter 4, which imagines a temporally flexible origin narrative for Asian America.) In this way, *Sticky Rice* is performative, queer in its structure, insofar as its form conveys its content.