

‘That’s What Rice Queens Study!’ White Gay Desire and Representing Asian Homosexualities

Peter A Jackson

I confess reluctance about contributing this essay to a collection on theatre, film, art and literature by Asian Australians. In part, I am concerned that the issue of how White gay cultures receive representations of Asian men may not interest a general audience. However, all Australian artists, writers, and academics engaged in presenting images and analyses of Asian homosexual men are viscerally affected by the contradictory ways in which their work is received by White gay audiences, and I suspect that those with little direct knowledge of this country’s gay cultures do not appreciate the intense power of the stereotyping that affects all gay researchers and artists working on gay Asia and/or gay Asians within their own communities. For this reason it is important that a wider audience should appreciate the fractured and fractious context within which such intellectual and creative activity is carried out.

I am also concerned that I am only offering a White perspective on this issue, examining, in particular, how the racialisation of White homosexual desire impacts on the reception of my writing on homosexuality in Thailand and how I have attempted to negotiate this. Most previous writing on the racialisation of male homosexual desiring has emphasised the marginal position of Asian subjects in Western societies, and indeed much has been produced by gay men and lesbians from Asian backgrounds.¹ However, the minoritisation of Asian men within White-dominated homosexual cultures emerges from a power relation in which Caucasian subjects are both implicated and intimately affected.² A White voice speaking on this topic is entering a fraught domain. Nevertheless, I believe that White refusal to engage with these issues — whether out of fear of saying something untoward or becoming enveloped in debates about the politics of voice — is a dereliction of intellectual responsibility. In the matters of race, desire and the production of knowledge, silence is not an option. While to speak is to immediately insert oneself into a contradictory position, to remain silent is to renounce agency and become complicit with the racist status quo. It is only by taking the risk of speaking that any negotiation of the contradictions of race and sexuality is possible.

My interest in exposing the relations between cross-cultural homoerotic desire and Western knowledges of gay Asia/gay Asians has to some extent been spurred by the fact that in researching Thai gender/sex history³ I have chosen to study that Asian country which is arguably the most subject to Western ‘sexoticising’ representations. As Rosalind Morris observes, ‘Few nations have been so thoroughly subject to Orientalist fantasies as has Thailand. Famed for ... the pleasures of commodified flesh, the Thailand of tourist propaganda and travelogues is a veritable bordello of the Western erotic imaginary’.⁴ Any study of eroticism in Thailand, hetero or homo, is automatically located in the context of this ‘veritable bordello’ of Western imaginings, forcing researchers to reflect on their own placement in this

powerful circuit of discourses and images.⁵ Research on Thai eroticisms is easily appropriated within exoticising discourses, as I discovered when my publications on male homosexuality in Thailand appeared on the recommended pre-travel reading lists of Western gay tourist publications. This appropriation may, of course, have ambiguous results. I like to think that my studies of Thai homoeroticisms contribute to more informed cross-cultural interactions. However, the suspicion remains that in exposing the workings of another erotic culture I may only be producing guide books on how to perpetuate Western sexual hegemony in more refined forms. At the end of this essay I describe how I have attempted to subvert the appropriation of my research within Orientalist imaginings.

Anecdote 1

I'm in Vauxhall, South London, trying to get into a late night gay club called The Hoist, which has a strict dress code: leather or army fatigues are essential. My black Levi jacket and jeans aren't butch enough to get me in, but the doorman has taken pity on this naive Australian and let me borrow his own leather vest provided I leave my 'poofy jacket' at the coat-check. Inside, I get a drink and install myself up on the platform with a decorative block and tackle that give the bar its name. From here I can survey the hundred or more men below me in the pit of the bar.

A twenty-something man beside me wearing only leather chaps opens conversation: 'Good crowd 'ere tonight then?' More used to the disdainful superciliousness of Sydney gay bars, I find the young man's chatty intimacy immediately relaxing. Half-a-dozen sentences later I remark how White the crowd is. We're in a part of London with large Black and Asian populations but there isn't a single Black man in the club and only one East Asian-looking man. The young man shrugs and waves his exposed backside at a shirtless, shaven-headed man in army pants who has just squeezed past. It seems he has taken my remark as meaning I'm not interested in White men, and he quickly reassesses his options for a pick up.

'Oh', he says, directing his words at me but looking at the shirtless man's crutch, 'If you're interested in Orientals you should go to 'Heaven on Sunday' nights. They've got some Bangkok DJ disco. The Asians 'ave got their once-a-monther too, Kali Queen, I think in Islington. Black guys hang out further south in Brixton. Substation South is a good bet ...'. His words trail as he sets off in the direction of the shirtless man who is pretending not to be looking at the young man's exposed rump.

Commentary

In gay cultures across the Western world race and desire intersect to produce entire argots, specialised commercial venues, and social networks with tightly monitored boundaries of inclusion and exclusion based entirely on the ethnic background of the men one is presumed to find erotically interesting. Food and colour metaphors abound in the popular discourses of the ethnically fractured gay cultures of Sydney, London, New York, San Francisco and elsewhere. White men who prefer East and Southeast Asian men are 'rice queens'. Asian men who prefer White men are 'potato queens'. In London, White men interested in South Asian men are 'curry queens', while in the United States White men who restrict their sexual and romantic contacts to African-American men are labelled 'dinge queens'. These labels for

racialised homoerotic desire define entire social worlds within which large numbers of gay men restrict both their lives and their loves. By definition, a real rice queen never sleeps with another White man, and a real potato queen is believed to be incapable of having sex with another Asian man. In these subsections of the West's gay worlds, men of one's own ethnic background are sometimes called 'sisters' and are de-eroticised by a gay incest taboo. The thought of sex with the ethnic-same can arouse disgust or repulsion. It is the racial other who incites desire.

Anecdote 2

I am having coffee in Sydney's Oxford St with a gay Caucasian academic who is researching gay politics in Asia. We talk about my research on homosexuality and trans-genderism in Thailand, compare the legal and cultural situations between Asian countries and exchange addresses of gay academics and activists who we each know around the region. After the waiter has condescended to take our orders for a second round of cafe lattés, my colleague leans across the table. He glances left and right to check that no-one is within ear-shot, and after an attention-focussing pause, he whispers, 'But of course, you know I'm not a rice queen'. We're in the heart of queer Sydney surrounded by people using diverse codes of hairstyle, fashion, attitude and tone of voice to proclaim rebellious pride in the label of sexual pervert. However, amidst this colourful affirmation of erotic experimentation and ritualised transgression, my colleague apparently considers his words so dangerous that they can only be whispered in strictest confidence.

Commentary

The racialisation of homosexual desire is not a democratic form of cultural diversity or an expression of equivalent modalities of erotic taste. In all Anglophone countries it is a tightly structured hierarchy in which White men are indisputably at the top of the sexual desirability stakes and Asian men are somewhere far beneath them. Dominant discourses within White gay cultures stereotype Caucasian-Asian homoerotic relations in terms of two opposed models: firstly, the exclusion of Asian men as erotically attractive and, secondly, the fetishisation of Asian men as the only possible objects of erotic interest. These two models are established by an interlinking set of race-based exclusions that transect discourse, desire and social interaction within Australian and other Western gay communities.

A dominant narrative in Australian gay cultures is the cry, 'I don't find Asian men sexually attractive', a proclamation that legitimate desire is for the race-same. The dominant de-eroticisation of Asian men within White gay cultures occurs by an effeminisation of Asian men's bodies and the privileging of a model of masculinity based on the idealised attributes of a Caucasian male. The effeminisation of Asian males has a long history in Western imperialist imaginings of the Orient and its role in nineteenth and twentieth-century justifications of the colonialist project has been traced in several studies.⁶

The narrative of the rice queen, the Caucasian gay man whose desire is based on a fetishisation of Asian men and a denial of the attractiveness of other Caucasian men, is subordinate within White gay cultures. The rice queen occupies a stigmatised and marginal position, being stereotyped as a sexually unattractive man who is unable

to find a Caucasian partner. The rice queen is mocked as a man whom 'only Asians find attractive'. In his confessional whisper across the table my colleague has not evinced anxiety that someone might find out he is gay. He is out at work and he speaks publicly on gay and lesbian issues. He does not care what the straight world thinks of him. He lowers his voice and leans forward to bring me into his confidence because he is anxious about what the other gay men around us might hear and think of him. I interpret his body language as reflecting an anxiety that I should not mistake his professional interest in gay Asia for a personal interest in Asian men. Perhaps, most importantly, he is anxious that I do not affect his reputation by gossiping amongst what he presumes to be my social milieu of rice queens and potato queens that he is 'into rice', that is, prefers Asian men.

Foucault was right when he said that sexuality and eroticised identity are now regarded as telling us the 'truth about ourselves'.⁷ One could add that within gay cultures sexuality has also become the measure of human value. In these cultures founded upon desire-based identity, sexual desirability often becomes a key measure of personal worth. The gay cult of hypermasculinity and the prevalence of testosterone-inflated 'muscle Marys' in the bars of Oxford St, West Hollywood, the Castro, and elsewhere are testimony to the power of this sexual ideology. Negotiating this minefield of laboriously constructed and meticulously preened images of masculinity, in which the goal is to become the object of another man's lustful gaze, preoccupies vast numbers of gay-identified men. The issue is not simply to get sex. In a postmodern marketised variation of the Hegelian master-slave dialectic, the goal of the fashion victims of this ideology is to be recognised as sexually attractive by men who seem to have mastered the techniques and technologies of making manhood.

This dominant sexual ideology becomes even more distressing when one adds the dimension of race. When desirability is linked with race, and when certain races are ascribed a greater erotic interest than others, then to be a member of an 'unsexy' ethnic group is to be equated with an inferior form of existence. Within the dominant Caucasian-focussed gay sexual ideology, Asian homosexual men are simply 'not worth a fuck'. Gay academics, artists and authors who are concerned about how their work on gay Asia is received within their own communities must also confront the pressures of this dominant ideology.

Gay Asian men in Australia are not passive in the face of this racist sexual ideology. Social groups and entertainment venues organised by and for gay Asian men are found in both Sydney and Melbourne, and, in the 1990s, AIDS Councils in different states often attached anti-racist messages to their safe sex campaigns and engaged Asian men in professional and community outreach positions. Gay Asian men also deploy the weapon of language to denote ethnic solidarity and to provide a dismissive label for the narcissistic racism of the dominant anti-Asian gay desire. Following the tradition of using food metaphors to describe racialised desire, Asian men sexually involved with other Asian men are called 'sticky rice', while Caucasian men who seek out only White partners are called 'mashed potato'. Despite the success of these forms of popular and institutional resistance in raising the issue of anti-Asian gay racism, race-based exclusions nevertheless remain prevalent throughout Australia's gay cultures.

Anecdote 3

I have just finished an advisory meeting with a gay student. We are both out to each other and he has told me that his Asian partner is applying to migrate to Australia under the gay immigration or interdependency regulations. We talk about his boyfriend's application and he asks me about my visit to London. I reply that I found parts of the London gay scene to be just as racially divided as in Sydney, but that Englishmen are more chatty and not quite as obsessed with the cult of body building. He is surprised that I found the almost all-White bar, The Hoist, just as interesting as Bangkok Night at the cavernous West End gay disco, Heaven. 'I thought you were a rice queen', he announces, and then asks in a somewhat concerned tone of voice, 'But if you find English guys spunky does that mean you won't be doing any more research on gay men in Thailand?'

Commentary

The racialisation of desire infects not only social relations and sexual and romantic relationships within gay cultures. It is also widely presumed to underpin the production of academic knowledge about non-Caucasian homosexual men. The gay student presumes that my academic interest in Thai homoeroticisms emerges from a desire for Asian men. He also presumes that what he perceives to be a change in the focus of my erotic interest may lead to a redirection of my academic attention away from Asia. I interpret the concerned tone of his voice following the revelation that I might find Caucasian men's bodies interesting as reflecting the fact that he sees me as having transgressed the boundaries that mark off the world of the rice queen from that of the dominant White gay culture. Contemporary gay cultures repeatedly celebrate the ritualised transgression of heterosexual norms. However, these putatively transgressive cultures are themselves disturbed and destabilised when members flaunt the boundaries that have been installed in order for new sexuality-based social forms to be constituted. Not respecting the racial boundaries that define the tribalisation of gay desire can elicit confused and even antagonistic responses that operate to make the recalcitrant gay man conform to group norms. Within the defensive culture of marginalised White rice queens and their Asian potato queen partners, a Caucasian man who shows interest in other White men is suspect. He may be viewed like a traitor who has gone over to the enemy — that is, the dominant White-centred gay culture.

'That's What Rice Queens Study'

The racialisation of gay desiring goes much further than excluding Asian men and marginalising Caucasian men who prefer Asian partners. It impacts on the reception of all cultural forms and academic knowledges about gay Asia and gay Asians, drawing academics, artists and writers, of whatever ethnic background, within its web. Much more than theoretical concerns are at issue here. Apart from Indigenous Australians, men from Asian backgrounds make up the largest non-Caucasian section of the gay cultures in this country's major cities. Since the mid-1980s growing numbers of gay and lesbian Australians have been engaged in government and privately funded projects in Asia on a range of HIV/AIDS and homosexual rights

issues. The gay cultures of Asian cities like Bangkok are major holiday destinations for Australian gay men, just as Australian gay scenes are popular among Asian gay tourists. Understanding Asian gender/sex cultures is arguably more important for Australian gay researchers and activists than for our North American and European colleagues. However, a crucial question for White gay Australians is how to imagine cross-cultural contacts and collaborations in ways that recognise cultural diversity within this country and promote homosexual autonomy and dignity in Asian societies.

The intersection of competing racialised and fetishising discourses leads both to an undervaluation and an overvaluation of writing on gay Asia and gay Asians. Desirability and intellectual interest are conflated, with racialised forms of sexual attractiveness having epistemological consequences. Studies of gay Asia have at times been marginalised within 'mainstream', that is, Eurocentric, gay-queer research. The dominant stereotyping of Asian men as sexually unattractive has contributed to the minoritising of studies of Asian homosexualities as intellectually uninteresting. In contrast, amongst Caucasian men who identify as rice queens, academic research on gay Asia has a heightened value and level of interest.

The presumed desire of an academic also impacts on the reception of his work. Within Western gay cultures the desire of an academic who researches Asian homoeroticisms is often presumed to be fixated upon Asian male bodies. Knowledge of Asian homoeroticisms produced by Caucasian researchers is widely regarded to flow from this presumed erotic fetishisation of Asian men. This means that amongst Caucasian men who prefer White partners an author's presumed interest in Asian men can render his work suspect and potentially tainted. His work may be reductively dismissed as 'what rice queens study'. The minoritised status of an author labelled as a rice queen, and his association with an 'inferior' form of racialised desire, can lead to his intellectual products also being tainted with a minoritised status. That is, the presumed erotic subjectivity and the discursive products of the Caucasian academic who writes on Asian homoeroticisms are both enveloped within the racialisation of desire that fractures Western gay cultures.

It is exceedingly difficult to escape from the net of these ideas because a successful critique cannot be a simplistic negation of racism. The rejection of Asian men as sexually interesting and its binary opposite, the fetishisation of Asian men, both involve the privileging of certain racialised bodies as erotically more desirable and hence intellectually more interesting than others. The fetishistic projection of Orientalist fantasies upon Asian men, on the one hand, and racist dismissals of Asian bodies as 'unsexy', on the other hand, are opposite sides of the same dialectic, mirror images which merely invert race-based exclusions. The desire of the rice queen inverts the dominant anti-Asian regime of White gay desire, reformulating but not abolishing its race-based exclusions. Within the fetishising desire of the Caucasian rice queen, and also the Asian potato queen, race remains a category of exclusion, only in these cases it is one's own race that is expelled from the domain of erotic interest.

The minoritisation of studies of gay Asia within the Western academy cannot be countered merely by an inversion that produces yet another set of racialised exclusions in a fetishised form. In order to write without privileging one particular position of knowing, whether Western or Asian, it is necessary to destabilise the race-based exclusions that underpin both the fetishistic will-to-know and the racist will-to-ignore gay Asians. It is necessary to subvert the fetishisation/exclusion binary

in order to be able to imagine racial difference in ways that do not privilege one racial group over another.

Beyond Racism and Fetishisation

I reflected on White gay men's desire to know gay Thailand in my novel *The Intrinsic Quality of Skin*.⁸ La Trobe University academic Chris Berry has also felt the need to explore the issues of race and homoerotic desire in a non-academic genre because, as he states:

maintaining the distance of traditional academic rhetoric runs the risk of reproducing the very distance ... that I am criticising. ... If I am suggesting that allowing this effect [of ending the distance between the knowing Caucasian author and Asian subjects of knowledge] can be a positive thing, then I have to stop writing in this mode and move into another.⁹

In order to impact on the competing racist/fetishising discourses that dissect knowledge of gay Asia/gay Asians, we must move out of academic discourse and engage in a form of cultural activity that intersects directly with the cultures that are the sites for the production of racialised homosexual desiring. The reception of academic writing on gay Asians is determined by cultural forces outside of the academy and one must enter the domain of popular culture in order to influence the modalities of desiring which in turn influence gay academic knowledge. Literature, film, music, and other forms of cultural production are central to the enterprise of de-racialising homosexual desire and, hence, to developing knowledges of gay Asia that are free of either racialised or fetishised imaginings.

I do not claim great skill in creative writing. However, I do see my novel as central to the academic enterprise of reporting and analysing Asian homoeroticisms. Until now I have avoided commenting publicly on this text, in the perhaps misguided belief that once in the public domain creative products should speak for themselves. It is perhaps a measure of the failure of *The Intrinsic Quality of Skin* to achieve its intended objectives that some critics have interpreted it as a naive fetishisation of Asian men rather than an attempt to destabilise both racist and fetishistic Orientalist imaginings. Writing in *Social Text*, Rosalind Morris has described *The Intrinsic Quality of Skin* as 'sex-travelogue attired in the form of ethnography with romantic gestures towards self-discovery'.¹⁰ My attempt at subversive literature may have failed, but perhaps the intention behind that work can be partly salvaged if I summarise the theory that preceded the novel and informed its writing.

In *The Intrinsic Quality of Skin* my intention was to unsettle both the dominant racist and subordinate fetishising discourses of gay Asians by writing across these counterposed narratives. The challenge facing White gay authors in their erotically-charged epistemological relations with Asian homosexual cultures is to imagine the men who live in those cultures as attractive/interesting (counter-racism) but not to privilege that attractiveness (counter-fetishisation). It is necessary to acknowledge the desirability of the other in ways that do not deny the desirability of the same. In fighting racism we must avoid setting up a fetishising counter-racist discourse.

In moving towards an account of non-racialised/non-fetishised cross-cultural homoerotic desire, I decided to begin by resisting the dominant racist exclusions and

to open the text with imaginings of the desirability of Asian men. The novel's protagonist is initially represented in terms that can perhaps be read as approximating the stereotype of the Caucasian rice queen. It was a calculated decision to start the narrative with a positive, albeit imperfect image of cross-ethnic desire rather than a negative, exclusionary image of anti-Asian gay racism. In retrospect, the book may have received a wider audience and its intention may have been less open to misinterpretation if the opening images had been of White gay racism. I am aware that some readers have not read past the first two or three chapters because they assumed the opening images of a rice queen represented the totality of the text. As the narrative moves past the opening scenes, it proceeds to destabilise the protagonist's initial fetishisation of Asian men by progressively inscribing him within the discourses of the Asian other who so attracts him. My aim was to experiment with a form of discourse that reconstructs desire/knowledge from an initial model of fetishistic projection to one framed more in terms of identification. The text concludes ambiguously with the protagonist situated across both Western and Asian discourses of homoeroticism imagining possible future relationships with both Caucasian and Asian partners.

Berry has also considered the White Australian desire to know Thai eroticisms in his analysis of the diverse responses to film-maker Dennis O'Rourke's 1991 'documentary fiction' film, *The Good Woman of Bangkok*.¹¹ This film purports to trace O'Rourke's relationship with a Bangkok female sex worker, Aoi. Berry reads the film as being concerned with the question of how the White male subject is to avoid both racism and fetishisation of Asian subjects, and detects in it an attempt by the filmmaker to 'exorcise the white patriarchal myth that inhabits him'.¹² He sees O'Rourke as trying to 'move through his "original sin"' of being a White male and 'get in [to the issue] in a manner that depends less on the metaphor of penetration and more on that of identification and empathy'.¹³ Berry argues that there is no simple reading of O'Rourke's film, and locates the competing racist *and* fetishist moments of Caucasian male desire for Asian bodies as emerging from a modernist incapacity to deal with incoherence and ambivalence.

I agree with Berry that in writing and living across the binaries that dissect desire, subjectivity and knowledge in cross-cultural imaginings one must learn to negotiate ambiguity and tolerate contradiction. Berry maintains that for Caucasian academics writing on Asia this learning process needs to begin from an acknowledgment of 'original sin', by which he means an authorial admission that in choosing to write within Western discourses one must recognise the 'original sin' of racist exclusion 'already committed by the textual practice ... taken up'.¹⁴ From this starting point it may be possible for gay Caucasian writers, artists and academics to move towards the production of images and discursive representations of Asian homosexual men that are based more on identification than either the overvaluation of fetishistic projection or the undervaluation of racist negation.

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- 1 See, for example, Russell Leong (ed.), *Asian American Sexualities: Dimensions of the Gay and Lesbian Experience*, Routledge, New York and London, 1996; also contributions by Kent Chuang, Damien Ridge, Amos Hee, Victor Minichiello, Tony Ayres, Long-Yen Chua and Audrey Yue, in Peter A Jackson and Gerard Sullivan (eds), *Multicultural Queer: Australian Narratives*, Haworth, New York, 1999.
- 2 I reflect here only on the minoritisation of Asian men in Australian gay cultures, although as Audrey Yue indicates Asian women face similar issues within lesbian cultures. See Yue, '<interface: reflections of an ethnic toygirl>', in Jackson and Sullivan, op. cit., pp 113-34.
- 3 See Peter A Jackson, *Dear Uncle Go: Male Homosexuality in Thailand*, Bua Luang Books, San Francisco, 1995; also Peter A Jackson and Gerard Sullivan (eds), *Lady Boys, Tom Boys, Rent Boys: Male and Female Homosexualities in Contemporary Thailand*, Haworth, New York, 1999.
- 4 Rosalind C Morris, 'Three sexes and four sexualities: redressing the discourses on gender and sexuality in contemporary Thailand', *Positions*, vol 2, no 1, 1994, p 15.
- 5 I have elsewhere analysed Western gay fantasies of Thai homosexualities. See Peter A Jackson, 'Tolerant but unaccepting: the myth of a Thai gay paradise', in Peter A Jackson and Nerida Cook (eds), *Genders and Sexualities in Modern Thailand*, Silkworm Books, Chiang Mai, 2000, pp 226-42.
- 6 See Christopher Lane, *The Ruling Passion: British Colonial Allegory and the Paradox of Homosexual Desire*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 1995; and Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The 'Manly Englishman' and the 'Effeminate Bengali' in the Late Nineteenth Century*, Manchester University Press, Manchester and New York, 1995.
- 7 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1*, (trans. Robert Hurley), Vintage Books, New York, 1978, p 69.
- 8 Peter A Jackson, *The Intrinsic Quality of Skin*, Floating Lotus Books, Bangkok, 1994.
- 9 Chris Berry, *A Bit on the Side: East-West Topographies of Desire*, EmPress, Sydney, 1994.
- 10 Rosalind Morris, 'Educating desire: Thailand, transnationalism, and transgression', *Social Text*, vol 15, nos 3-4, 1997, p 67.
- 11 See Chris Berry, 'A bit on the side: thoughts after seeing Dennis O'Rourke's "documentary fiction"', *The Good Woman of Bangkok*, in Berry, *A Bit on the Side*, pp 59-67; and Chris Berry, Annette Hamilton and Laleen Jayamanne (eds), *The Filmmaker and the Prostitute: Dennis O'Rourke's 'The Good Woman of Bangkok'*, Power Publications, Sydney, 1997.
- 12 Berry, *A Bit on the Side*, p 51.
- 13 *ibid.*, p 52.
- 14 *ibid.*, p 56.