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Rice Sticking Together: Cultural Nationalist Logic and the Cinematic Representations of Gay Asian- Caucasian Relationships and Desire

Kenneth Chan

Interracial relationships often raise a complex set of cultural issues, and gay versions of these relationships are no exception. Any attempt to discuss the question of gay Asian-Caucasian interracial relationships, particularly within gay Asian and Asian diasporic communities, will produce a polarized debate framed by an us Asians-versus-them Caucasian rhetoric. It is this rhetoric that haunts my attempt to examine, in this essay, contemporary cinematic representations of gay Asian-Caucasian relationships and desire, what some would rather derogatorily call the “rice and potato” phenomenon. Here, I pay specific attention to gay diasporic Chinese films that carry this theme, many of which also happen to be English-language films.¹ This phenomenon also creates a sense of cultural anxiety that is urgent enough for many of these films to want to confront, assuage, or even consciously circumvent. To begin my analysis of the films, I find it necessary first to map out briefly the contours of this interracial dynamic in order to arrive at the narrative and representational motivations that underpin these works.

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The notion of “rice and potato” rests on the foundation of ethnic stereotypes, what Laurence Wai-Teng Leong identifies as instances “of specialist tastes among gay men seeking other gay men of a particular ethnic stock.”² The “potato queen” is an Asian gay man who dates white men exclusively, while the “rice queen” is his white counterpart who prefers only Asian men. The use of the food metaphors “rice” and “potato,” because they are clearly racialist in their connotation, runs the risk of being co-opted into various racist discourses. These terms also face the danger of eliding the heterogeneity and differences within the constitution of the ethnic categories “Asian” and “Caucasian.” Of course, this notion of ethnic/sexual labeling unveils only the tip of the “rice and potato” iceberg: the complicating intersections of racial and queer sexual discourses. In his sociological essay “Of Rice and Potatoes,” Leong analyzes some of the dimensions of this problematic, which I would like to briefly highlight here so as to create a theoretical grid to locate my analyses of the films.

The gay Asian-Caucasian interracial relationship is a relatively common occurrence, not only in cosmopolitan cities like San Francisco, New York, or London, but also in Asian locales such as Hong Kong, Tokyo, Singapore, Bali, and Bangkok. Although the specificities of cultural and political interaction vary from couple to couple, and from location to location, Leong suggests that they do share some commonalities, be they stereotypes or actualities. The “rice and potato” couple is haunted by Orientalist discourses of cultural domination and power, what one could call the “Madame Butterfly” syndrome. The stereotype features a mature Caucasian gay man who seeks out a young or young-looking, submissive Asian guy to be his sexual “boy toy.” Because the “rice queen” is generally “more financially secure than the younger Asian man in rice-potato dyads, it is argued that economic motives underscore such relationships.”³ The cultural and financial domination of the Asian man often translates into the sexual dynamics of the bedroom where the Caucasian is frequently the “top” (the “man” of the relationship) while the Asian the “bottom” (the “woman”). This fantasy stereotype of the sexual passivity of the Asian male is reaffirmed in white gay porn featuring Asian men, as Richard Fung has demonstrated in his essay “Looking for My Penis.”⁴ In addition, the forces of sexual “supply and demand” further influence the relational power dynamics in a “rice and potato” coupling: there is frequently a higher ratio of “potato queens” to “rice queens,” particularly in Asian communities outside the United States and Europe, hence creating not just vicious competition between Asians for Caucasians, but it also gives an unfair

numerical advantage to gay Caucasian men, which then translates into various forms of psychological and emotional leverage over their Asian partners.⁵

In light of these power imbalances, why do “potato queens” still desire and seek out Caucasian men? Leong posits a number of possible reasons. Firstly, the socio-economic disparities between the two create a situation where Asian men, be they struggling in post-colonial or developing countries, or finding their way as immigrants in Western countries, see in older white men a possible way out of their predicament. But more and more upwardly mobile Asian men, especially those living in developed countries both in the West and in Asia (such as Singapore and Japan, for instance) are now able to renegotiate relationships with their white partners by resituating themselves in a more economically and socially empowered position, thereby disrupting the colonialist and Orientalist stereotypes of the submissive Asian and the dominant white male.⁶ Secondly, the sexual imagery Asian men have access to tend to privilege white notions of sexual beauty and attractiveness, for instance the belief that Caucasian men have larger penises than Asian men, or that the Aryan blond hair and blue eye physiognomy is the one to be desired. This second point feeds conveniently into the third point of “the imperialism of Western popular culture.”⁷ Gina Marchetti’s *Romance and the “Yellow Peril”* is an excellent example of the critical work done on this racial dynamic in film studies that deliberates and questions the privileging of white power in the depiction of interracial heterosexual romances in classic Hollywood cinema. Her critique demonstrates how the notions of white cultural and sexual power have dominated public consciousness and imagination of what is considered to be sexually desirable.⁸ And finally, the most contentious argument Leong highlights is the idea that Asian men sleep with mature Caucasian men because the former sees in the latter a father-type figure to fulfill their need for paternal care and connection.⁹ A cinematic instance of this figuration is evident in Hong Kong director Simon Chung’s short film “First Love and Other Pains” (1999), which draws out this psychoanalytic framework to explain the relationship between an aging British literature professor and his Hong Kong university student. The student’s recurring nightmare of being abandoned during his father’s funeral procession marks the narrative’s attempt at rationalizing his desire for the older Caucasian man.¹⁰

These systems of domination and oppression in interracial gay relationships, as they are intertwined with Orientalist and imperialist discourses, cannot but generate not just a much

needed postcolonial critique, but also an often questionable form of culturalist identity politics. In extending the food metaphor, a cultural nationalist turn produces the notion of “sticky rice,” Asians who date only Asians. Leong observes that the term has only specific resonance within the “rice and potato” communities because “in Asian countries where Asians are the demographic majority, gay Asians may date other gay Asians in such a ‘natural’ (taken for granted) way that no label is needed to describe such relationships,”¹¹ just as one does not put a label on gay relationships between Caucasian men. Despite the possible derogatory connotations of the label “sticky rice,” gay Asians have started to reclaim the term. Many gay Asian men turn to their own, so to speak, because they are tired of the power imbalance and injustices within the “rice and potato” relationship, are becoming too old to compete with the younger Asian crowd, or are beginning to buy into the changing economic and class status of Asian men that has transformed the perception of Asian male desirability.¹² Whatever the reason or motivation, this turn is frequently framed along cultural nationalist lines: if we are treated as an inferior class by Caucasians, we should then learn to love ourselves. From a social and personal standpoint, I thoroughly appreciate and empathize, even if ambivalently, with this position. A Singapore friend of mine, for example, recently swore off dating white men because many of them belong to the transnationally mobile capitalist cadre, who frequently develop intimate relationships with the “locals” only to end them callously when it comes time to move on to their next career destination in another part of the world.

Yet, this form of identity politics makes me culturally anxious. While I identify with its impetus, being a Chinese Singaporean, and can see its political potential for what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak calls “strategic” essentialism,¹³ I am also deeply uneasy with its coercive tendencies and violating limitations. Living in a nation emerging out of a colonial past and remaking itself into an urban center for global capital, I realize that the deployment of a strategic essentialism can help in critiquing colonial nostalgia, neo-colonialism, and white cultural power as part of Singapore’s process of discursive decolonization. Chinese and Asian American communities, for example, also find strategic essentialism useful in reclaiming an Asian America, in resistance to white racism. Yet, the danger is when the “strategic” is soon jettisoned for an entrenched essentialism, creating strident and intransigent forms of cultural nationalism, a concern that Diana Fuss has effectively articulated in *Essentially Speaking*.

While I would agree with Spivak that a provisional return to essentialism can successfully operate, in particular contexts, as an interventionary strategy, I am also compelled to wonder at what point does this move cease to be provisional and become permanent? There is always a danger that the long-term effect of such a “temporary” intervention may, in fact, lead once again to a re-entrenchment of a more reactionary form of essentialism.¹⁴

I think the crux of this theoretical difficulty in “sticky rice” politics centers on the obscure object of desire and how one relates it to the question of cultural politics. If desire is constructed or at least informed by discursive systems of power (and in the case of the “rice and potato” by capitalist, colonialist, neo-imperialist, Eurocentric, Orientalist, patriarchal, and racist discourses), the Asian cultural nationalist reaction would be to promote the unlearning of these desires and to re-engineer them along cultural identity lines. While I understand, in a culturally intuitive fashion, this emotive logic and can see the interventional benefit of its challenging the hierarchies of power and domination, I am also wary of the danger that such logic can unwittingly replace one mode of domination with another, in this case an Asian form of essentialism or centrism.¹⁵

A productive way to conceptualize desire so that one could extend the effects of the dismantling of power structures is to borrow the theoretical tropes of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari—the desiring machine and the rhizome—to formulate a more fluid and liberating notion of desire, without blunting its politically critical edge. In *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari challenge the discursive hegemony of the psychoanalytic framework in their theory of the desiring machine:

There is always a flow-producing machine, and another machine connected to it that interrupts or draws off part of this flow . . . And because the first machine is in turn connected to another whose flow it interrupts or partially drains off, the binary series is linear in every direction. Desire constantly couples continuous flows and partial objects that are by nature fragmentary and fragmented. Desire causes the current to flow, itself flows in turn, and breaks the flows.¹⁶

This notion of desire is clearly rhizomatic in that “the rhizome is an antigenealogy,”¹⁷ challenging linear hierarchical causalities and power formations. Hence, as Deleuze and Guattari deploy these tropes to question the power of psychoanalysis in constituting our understanding of human sexuality, one can similarly use this conception of desire to splinter and undermine the power structures inherent in the “rice and potato” relational discourses, without sacrificing the fluid and liberating notion of desire in the first place.

In other words, desire need not lose its political edge and critical possibilities while *being* desire, in that we like who we like, even if who we like happens to be Caucasian. My point is that if desire “flows” and continually splinters, then one should be careful not to view the power dynamic and material configuration of gay Asian-Caucasian relationships in a homogenizing light. What I am advocating here is not the idea of a multiculturalist understanding of desire where one cannot politically question and critique instances or modes of desire; rather what I am suggesting is that in our critique we must also allow for a more expansive notion of desire as it flows, embracing possibilities that might contest our formulation of what constitutes that desire.

Ultimately, the tropes of the desiring machine and the rhizome also present liberating models to conceptualize the shifting notions of sexuality and desire in Chinese and Asian diasporas in general. The changing configurations of Chineseness and Chinese culture in a globalized world must account for the effect they have on sexual mores and practices, particularly in Chinese diasporic communities. Rhizomatic formulations of sexuality and desire may serve to rupture the hierarchical structures of Chinese patriarchy and cultural traditionalism. In a counter-intuitive move away from the usual postcolonial critique of the “rice and potato” phenomenon, I read in Chinese-Caucasian gay relationships the potential for a progressive politics of cultural crossings and border transgressions, in a similar way that a rhizomatic model of inter-Asian interracial relationships can question the ideological insistence of Chinese cultural purity.

In briefly addressing the theoretical tensions and critiques of the politics of desire in the “rice and potato” dynamic, I hope ultimately to highlight the cultural anxieties that confront the films discussed in this essay. In looking for contemporary English-language films that tackle the gay Asian-Caucasian relationship, my search has been limited by my own personal research agenda of looking at Chinese or Chinese diasporic texts; but many of them, particularly the Asian American ones, transcend Chineseness to embrace a larger conception of the ethnic category of “Asian.” With a range of cinematic works from Australia, Britain, the United States, and Hong Kong from which to work with, I am acutely conscious to register in my filmic analysis, as much as the limits of this essay will permit me, the specificities of place, culture, and nationality, and the way identity dimensions affect the cultural dynamics of and the responses to the question of gay interracial relationships. But in spite of these specificities and differences, these films do share common concerns. For instance, the ques-

tions of interracial cultural clashes, differing levels of familial attachments, and the resistance to outing oneself to family members—themes that appear in Ang Lee’s *The Wedding Banquet* (1993), for instance—find fresh formulations in many of the films I have looked at. Another major issue is, of course, the politicization of desire through an examination of the “rice and potato” relationship. In the four films discussed in this essay: Tony Ayres’s “China Dolls” (1997), Raymond Yeung’s “Yellow Fever” (1998), Todd Wilson and John Biasatti’s “Rice and Potatoes” (1998), and Wilson’s own feature-length *Under One Roof* (2002), this issue becomes the controlling ideological refrain that colors and informs the narrative structure of these texts. While Ayres’s short documentary and Yeung’s comedy rehearse the same theoretical reasoning I have briefly fleshed out earlier, both films suffer from the same cultural anxiety of needing to identify with a cultural nationalist rhetoric while, at the same time, embracing a multiculturalist notion of sexual desire. The narratives of both films arrive at this stance on desire only after treading through, like a rite of passage, a cultural nationalist path of awakening and identification. Wilson and Biasatti’s documentary, though working through some similar ground, resists plodding through the same narrative route, but adopts instead a more rhizomatic approach that effectively disperses the linear reasoning of the cultural nationalist logic, thereby challenging the stereotypes that support this logic. Wilson’s later work *Under One Roof* fictionalizes the utopian possibilities of his earlier documentary by telling an Asian-Caucasian love story that, despite its seamless idealism, accounts for desire in a more affirming and less restrictive fashion.

“Yellow Fever,” a short film by Raymond Yeung, is a hilarious fictional take on the “potato queen” and his discontents.¹⁸ Affecting an exaggerated British accent and pretentiously aristocratic manners, Monty (played by Singapore thespian Adrian Pang) is one such gay Asian male whose taste for “potatoes” happens to be specifically British. The film begins with Monty struggling with his non-existent love life on his thirtieth birthday. As his gay best friend Ernest (Ivan Heng), in assessment of Monty’s situation, so pithily observes, “the princess wants a white knight to make her a queen,” thereby commenting rather sardonically on Monty’s half-facetious statement of belief that Chinese men “have nothing down there.” Expectedly, Monty’s world of desire is turned upside down when he meets and falls for Jia Ming (Gerald Chew), his newly arrived neighbor from Taiwan. The rest of the narrative is then set expectedly into motion with Monty’s cultural identity crisis, accompanied by discussions of “rice and potato” desire with his

gays friends and “fag hags,” culminating in his sleeping with Jia Ming to see if “rice” is indeed to his taste. The film ends with Monty realizing that his being a “potato queen” is limiting the possibilities of his having a meaningful relationship, and decides to continue seeing Jia Ming.

What I find remarkable about Yeung’s film is the way desire is deployed as the authenticating and authorizing telos, the rhetorical goal toward which the rest of the film’s narrative logic and plot points are structured. Monty’s “sticky rice” desire is conferred a naturalized authority not on the basis of any kind of cultural nationalist reasoning, at least not at the beginning of the film: the *a priori* locating of Monty’s desire near the start of the narrative seems to suggest this. Instead, his desire for Jia Ming is allowed to *be* desire: the idea that we like who we like—Monty likes Jia Ming despite his being a “potato queen.” With this multiculturalist notion of desire set in its politically correct place, the film then grants itself the license to play out the cultural nationalist logic and critique as a *secondary* argument to support Monty’s new desire, to convince him (and the viewers) that he might as well give in to this desire because his “potato”-loving tendencies are not only getting him nowhere in his sex life, but it is also the culturally and politically sensible thing to do.

Upon discovering his “unnatural” desire for Jia Ming, Monty tries to suppress it and immediately seeks counsel from his gay friends. While working out with fellow “potato queen” Dex in the gym, Monty attempts to ascertain the reason for Dex’s success in dating Caucasian men:

Monty: Dex, do you find it easy to score in clubs?

Dex: It is easier now that I have a Jeff Stryker body . . . You know how the “scene queen” sees the Oriental. Now that I have a body to compensate.

Monty: What?! For the fact that you’re Chinese?!

Their conversation continues while it slips ironically into Cantonese (a Chinese dialect used mostly by Hong Kong immigrants) while they run on the treadmill:

Monty: Dex, have you ever thought about having sex with a Chinese guy?

Dex: Yuk! That would be like sleeping with your brother . . . or worse, your mother! . . .

It’s gross. Besides, I’m a potato queen! Why? Would you?

Monty: No, I don’t find Chinese attractive.

This gymnasium *mise-en-scène* is a significant step in the narration of Monty's identity development. It marks for him in a very physical sense the reality of white racist and prejudicial attitudes against Asians in the gay dating scene. What is fascinating here is not just that Dex sees the need to work out in order to compensate for his Chineseness (as if it were a character flaw), but that he also conceptualizes bodily beauty and desirability along racial lines: the body of white porn superstar Jeff Stryker. Of course, the scene ends with Dex raising the incest taboo to conceptualize "sticky rice" relations and desire, which effectively hinders Monty from pursuing the subject of conversation any further. This entire sequence is important in that it sets Monty thinking about the racial inequities of the way desire plays out in the "rice and potato" dating networks. The hard work he puts in at the gym in search for the perfect buff body also becomes a metaphor for the racially defined uphill climb in his search for the elusive "white knight."

The gymnasium scene functions as the preparatory narrative plot point that sets up Monty for a night out in the clubs in search for his ideal Caucasian guy. All freshly toned from his workout, and suitably dressed in trendy camouflage pants, Monty hits the town cruising gay bars and clubs. The pivotal moment is when, after suffering rejections, he sees a cute young white guy looking in his direction. He moves in for the kill but only to find that his advances are not just rebuffed by the young man, but an old, bespectacled, and balding "rice queen" quickly assumes the young man's position at the bar in the hopes of scoring with Monty. The rhetorical effect of this character substitution is substantial, as Monty is left wondering if the "potato queen" is indeed relegated to dating only mature white men, and to ask if all the effort spent in the gym is really worth it. The scene, hence, is a visual testament to the viewer to demonstrate how Monty has indeed attempted the Caucasian gay dating scene and has failed in the process, thereby providing a natural progression in the narrative for him to give in to his desire for Jia Ming, who is waiting in the wings. This cultural logic frames in an absolute sense the "potato queen's" desire for Caucasian men as one of impossibility, hence, by default, redefining "sticky rice" desire as the culturally and politically logical next step.

As one desperate last ditch attempt, Monty turns to Andrew, his Caucasian friend, for advice:

Monty: Why do you find Oriental men attractive?

Andrew: Well I don't know. Why do you find Caucasian guys attractive?

Monty: Because they are more sophisticated.

[*Shot of a soccer-crazed, jersey-wearing, beer-guzzling young bloke. Andrew laughs.*]

Andrew: Dear oh dear . . . You're suffering from the typical colonial mentality, aren't you? You've been brought up to look up to anything western. Vivian Westwood, Charlie's Angels, Brotherhood of Men.

[*Shot of older working class women in the bar.*]

Monty: Ok now, thank you Miss Freud. Can you now answer the bloody question?!

Andrew: Well, my first boyfriend was from Hong Kong. We met in college. Maybe that's got something to do with it. I don't know. No, no, hang on, before that I was already interested in Eastern culture. I guess being English these days you don't really got much of an identity. I mean what is English? The Queen? The pub? Football? Rugby? Roast beef? Mad cow disease? That's English.

Monty: Andrew, get to the point!

Andrew: OK, if you have to get down to basics, I guess I like their smooth skin, black hair, youthful appearance. [Sighs] Those eyes. God, those eyes.

Monty: Oh I don't believe this. You are such a typical rice queen. These are just stereotypes!

Andrew: But I'm sorry. Physical attraction is stereotypes. Why do people like the French? Because of their sexy accent. Why do people like the Italians? Because they're supposedly passionate and kind of hairy. And why do people like the English? Yeah, why *do* people like the English?

Monty: Surely there's more to it than this?

Andrew: But of course there is. If you're talking about a relationship, then the vital thing is the personality and not the nationality. Look, if you have met an Oriental guy, why don't you just sleep with him and find out. I mean grow up Monty! Stop behaving like a bloody school girl!

This conversation between Monty and Andrew unsettles Monty's notion of desire for the British male by unmasking the stereotypes that constitute its foundation. Learning this lesson helps Monty make up his mind about Jia Ming. But what I find more intriguing is in the messenger and not simply the message. Yeung's choice of having Andrew, a white gay male, deliver the lesson is strategic. Of course, one could read this moment as a reinforcement of white paternalism (that it takes a Caucasian to bring

home the message because of his cultural authority); but I would prefer also to read it as the film's way of deflecting any possible accusation of an Asian identity politics, which the dynamics of his discourse will radically shift into if Andrew were Chinese. My point ultimately is that the film anxiously works through the cultural nationalist argument to explain the sensibility of Monty's desire for Jia Ming, while at the same time embracing what would be a liberating notion of desire. This notion of desire works to cover over and protect the cultural nationalist identity politics by imbuing it with a secondary rhetorical status, but a status nonetheless.

The cultural anxiety of needing to struggle with the politicization of desire, as one sees in "Yellow Fever," takes on a slightly different mantle in the Australian short documentary "China Dolls" directed by Tony Ayres.¹⁹ While the film similarly succumbs to the imperative to adopt the cultural nationalist position as the pathway towards the multiculturalist conception of desire, it employs the conventions of documentary filmmaking to convey its message. "China Dolls" opens with Ayres as the master-narrator telling his life story, which frames the entire film, while bringing together the different personal stories that Ayres obtains from the gay Asian men he interviews. Clearly, the function of the various interviews is to imbue the film with a veneer of documentary objectivity (through the authority of a collective voice) and to simultaneously displace the taint of subjectivity in Ayres's sole autobiographical account. The use of the multiple interviewees lends credence to Ayres's understanding of his own experiences, in that these experiences are not isolated exceptions, but are shared by many who occupy his cultural and identity positions. I do not take issue with these strategies, though I am uneasy with the way the various interviews are weaved around the central core of his understanding of the "rice and potato" issue as a means of articulating a singular vision, vis-à-vis a Bakhtinian dialogism of multiple voices.²⁰ In other words, the various interviewee accounts work to substantiate a master narrative that is Ayres's, a formula that may contradict a more fluid and rhizomatic notion of desire.

The film begins like the average immigrant story: "In 1964, my mother, my sister, and I migrated from Hong Kong to Australia." Ayres describes how his mother, in feeding him multivitamins, has helped turned his pee yellow, leading to the white Australian boys in school calling it "Chinese pee." This moment of racialization through familial intervention establishes the cultural coordinates of the documentary: Ayres thinks of himself as "a banana, yellow on the outside, white on the inside," a form of racial self-hatred the film must now interrogate and unravel.

In setting up the question of the Asian immigrant's struggle with racial identity in a white racist Australia, Ayres complicates this further with his gay sexuality. The various interviewees tell the same story of sexual discovery and Asian sexual repression: interviewee Chi-Kan Woo says, "You go through this really oppressive childhood and then suddenly you come out and there is this amazing subculture where you can express your sexuality." But with this discovery of a gay subculture and community also comes a realization of racial marginality and alienation. As Ayres puts it, "In this exciting new world, I had to come face to face with the reality: no matter how white I was on the inside, my skin was still yellow." Beng Eu (interviewee) notices that "there was a lot of sexual tension in the whole bar. Everyone was cruising. You sort of notice that people look through you. For some reason, you're not part of the game." Inserted in the midst these touching testimonies of rejection and alienation is an image of Ayres covering his face with white chalk to depict his desire to be white. This is followed by a simulated phone call between Ayres and a white gay male talking for the first time and checking each other out. The Caucasian male rudely cuts short the conversation upon discovering Ayres' ethnicity. Ayres arrives at the conclusion that "when most Caucasian men in the gay scene look at Asian men, they don't see a tall or short man, an attractive or unattractive man, they don't see a Chinese, a Filipino, a Cambodian; they see nothing: the Asian." But this homogenizing stereotype does have something of a discourse: an Orientalizing one. As Anthony Wong (interviewee) observes, gay Asian men are perceived to be "the perfect boyfriend[s] because I don't [sic] answer back. They cook for you wonderful fragrant Chinese meals. They do shiatsu on you and they'll do anything you want." His statement is followed by an image of the China doll, a woman who looks like Suzie Wong in a cheongsam (the traditional Chinese dress for women).

The film's expert arrangement of testimonies, images, and performances produces an emotional impact that is undoubtedly stunning. One cannot but feel indignant at the injustices experienced by these men because they articulate an experiential truth of racism that, on a personal level, I cannot deny. Ayres uses this momentum in the narrative to segue into a discussion of the "rice and potato" relationship, into "a world where being Asian is highly prized." But there is a catch, as Anthony Wong comes to realize: "My first couple of lovers were older men. And I started to get the thing in my head like, O my God, am I going to be relegated to a life of older white men? Not that there is anything wrong with older white men, but I just thought that it accorded with that

stereotype that Asian men are only attractive to the so-called ‘rice queen.’” On the flip side, attraction to gay Caucasian men also induces a sense of cultural guilt and betrayal. “For a long time I think I felt really guilty about it. It is kind of like you’re betraying yourself,” reflects Chi-Kan Woo. Beng Eu echoes a similar sentiment: “You would use certain criteria to exclude Asian men. You use size and height, and all these things which you can use and justify to yourself that it’s all ok . . . but it is all an excuse sometimes.”

The emotional struggles built around a racialized sexual identity depicted in the film up to this point cannot but logically point to a cultural nationalist definition of “sticky rice” desire. The initial series of semi-erotic images of gay white men which Ayres uses to depict the world that these Asian men were shut out of is now supplanted by another series of similar images featuring Asian men instead, followed by articulations of liberation and self-affirmation on the part of the interviewees. Ayres offers an extended story of his own sexual experience with a Chinese man:

In 1995, I went to China for the first time to work in a television project. *I was looking for my roots, a sense of my Chineseness.* Unfortunately though, most people on the Mainland mistook me for a Japanese tourist. But one significant thing happened. I met a man called Robert and we spent the night together. I have never slept with a Chinese man before, but it was as familiar as touching myself. Chinese skin, hard and smooth and polished. Perhaps for the first time, I felt desire that had nothing to do with race. He did not want me because I was Chinese; I did not want him because he was Chinese. We were simply attracted to each other. It was the most liberating experience of my life.²¹

Ayres’s highly moving account of his political and cultural identity transformation is significant precisely because he uses the cultural nationalist identity position as a conduit to arrive at a multiculturalist notion of desire. I sense that there is a strategic erasure of politics in the reading of his attraction to the Chinese man. Though I cannot dispute his argument that his attraction “had nothing to do with race,” his analysis of it clearly does. In the first place, he began his trip with the idea of “looking for . . . [his] roots.” The physicality of his experience is defined in terms of “Chinese skin, hard and smooth.” Besides, how can this be “the most liberating experience” unless it is liberating him from something else?

In the final segment entitled “Fruit Salad,” the film mobilizes a utopian vision of desire where race no longer matters. Ayres explains:

In the past few years, I noticed a change in the gay scene. The rigid boundaries of the sexual hierarchy are blurring. Desire isn’t polarized into the rice queen and the potato queen anymore. There is a new gen-

eration of young men out there, confident and defiantly visible. When I see these guys dancing, and laughing and fitting in, I feel a pang of jealousy. I wonder, is it as easy for them as it looks? . . . [The club scene features some of the interviewees in the film dancing with one another and with Caucasian men.]

. . . We came to this country to be part of a dream, not realizing the dream only knew itself by excluding us. In recent years, things have changed for me as well. [Ayres is shown removing his white chalk make-up.] I don't dream about being blond haired and blue eyed anymore. In the end, it doesn't really matter if one person wants you and another person doesn't. It's taken me half a lifetime to realize that.

The process of reaching the idealist goal of the "fruit salad" (or the preferred metaphor in U.S. multiculturalism being the "bouillabaisse," a French fish stew) is based here on a form of strategic essentialism, where a temporary turn to a racial identity politics will eventually lead one to an idealized sexual utopia where race and culture are no longer definitional factors for attraction and relationships. This is where Diana Fuss's carefully calibrated critique of strategic essentialism becomes useful again in forewarning the dangers of the cultural violence that can result from extending this form of essentialism. Ayres's own ambivalence is revealing in that it undermines the premature celebration of this utopia, particularly when he himself "wonder[s], is it as easy for them as it looks?" Does this ambivalence forebode the extension of the cultural nationalism of "sticky rice" in a limiting way that Fuss has warned us of? On the other hand, one should credit both Ayres's and Yeung's aspirations to approximate cinematically and discursively this utopia where race truly does not matter and that one can love and desire whoever one wishes.

I would like to conclude my analysis with a brief joint reading of two films from the United States: John Biasatti and the late Todd Wilson's documentary "Rice and Potatoes" (1998) and Wilson's full-length feature comedy *Under One Roof* (2002).²² My choice to close the essay with a "positive" reading of these films' attempt at engaging the issue does not reflect a North American bias on my part. There are after all other Asian American cinematic works that delve into the cultural nationalist argument, such as Quentin Lee's short film "Fall 1990" (1999),²³ for instance. These two films by Biasatti and Wilson, and Wilson himself, happen to offer filmic strategies that engage the cultural anxieties over the politics of "rice and potato" desires without falling into the same cultural nationalist pitfalls of the earlier two films I have looked at so far. (Of course, one should speculate on how the ethnic make-up of Biasatti and Wilson might have made it easier—and much too easily perhaps—for the films to circumvent the identity politics temp-

tation; though to move this observation any further might lead one into even more troubling essentialist ground.)

Biasatti and Wilson's "Rice and Potatoes" falls into the same category as "China Dolls," not only in terms of its genre but also in the subject matter. But one of the main critical differences between the films is that "Rice and Potatoes" does not have an overriding autobiographical master narrative as a controlling core structure. With the absence of this device, the film feels purposefully random in its approach to the material. It features a series of interviews, which are presented in parts within separately labeled segments, again not unlike "China Dolls." The key differences are that "Rice and Potatoes" features both Asian and Caucasian interviewees (which is a very important element in that it gives the so-called "rice queens" a voice to challenge stereotypes), and that there is a less distinct rhetorical progression in the arrangement of the film's segments, with "China Dolls" following a more rigidly cultural nationalist argument, and "Rice and Potatoes" less so with a more random structure: the segments are labeled in the following order—"First Attraction," "Turn Ons," "Hair," "Sticky Rice," "Rice Queen," "Food Metaphor," "Attitude," "Stereotypes," "Age," "Sex," "Family," "Out," and "Communication."

In each of the segments, the comments offered by each interviewee do not follow any unifying framework, creating a splintering feel that prevents the solidification of a distinct central argument. Contradictions and conflicts of opinion reside within the same segment, which enables a productive form of "dialogism." Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the term has been defined as "the characteristic epistemological mode of a world dominated by heteroglossia. Everything means, is understood, as a part of a greater whole—there is a constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others."²⁴ One opinion comments on another, while another offers contrary responses. This dialogism creates a dialectical as well as a critical de-coagulating effect, allowing for new ideas to be generated and for theoretical models to maintain a state of fluidity. For example, when the topic of the "rice queen" was raised, both Asian and Caucasian interviewees feel that it is a "disturbing term," that "it's limiting" and "debilitating," or that it conveys a "predatory feel" which is not always reflective of the "rice and potato" relationship. John Donnelly (Caucasian interviewee) questions the racism against Asians implied in the term: "When I get called a 'rice queen,' to me I think it is motivated by racism, because if I had dated someone who was white, nobody would put a label on it or make any comment." On the question of age difference between the Asian and the Cau-

casian, Brian Lye (Asian interviewee) observes that he has “never seen a relationship or known of a relationship between an older Asian man and a [younger] white man.” He thinks “the reason . . . is that there is an unstated power dynamic between white men and Asian men that relates to a kind of larger racial dynamic in American society.” Lye’s comment rather interestingly comes after Henry Segalove’s (Caucasian interviewee) point that he will “always love to date people . . . [his] own age. It is tough enough when you are dating someone else from another culture to have the commonality to work with” and he does not wish to have to deal with a generation gap at the same time. Though Segalove’s point may not debunk Lye’s analysis, it does suggest that not all Asian-Caucasian relationships abide by the same power dynamic. And on the notion that Asian men are almost always bottoms while Caucasians are always tops, one Caucasian interviewee even argues that he knows of white men who are looking for Asian men to “fuck them silly.” This heteroglossia of conflicting voices affirms precisely Deleuze and Guattari’s theoretical model of desire and its liberating yet critical possibilities.

While “Rice and Potatoes” does not visually articulate the utopian vision that “China Dolls” does, its concluding ethos, as encapsulated in the final statement of one of the interviewees, “You like what you like. You are attracted to what you are attracted to,” offers the same utopian hope of desire, where race no longer matters. I want to argue that Wilson’s follow-up feature film *Under One Roof* fictionally presents this hope. My very brief reading of this film works on an aesthetic of absence: the painful politics of “rice and potato” is not so much deleted as is made inconsequential. It is still important but it has transcended its moment. Its “absence” signifies for the film a form of progression beyond identity politics.

The film tells the story of Daniel, a gay Chinese accountant who lives with his mother and grandmother in San Francisco. The family takes in Robert, a young gay Caucasian tenant, whom Daniel falls for. The film ends with Daniel coming out to his mother, and his mother coming to terms with not only his sexuality but also the idea that having “a second son” isn’t such a terrible thing after all. In using the same matchmaking skills that she deploys to try to snag Daniel a good Asian girl, his mother finally brings Daniel and Robert together, a refreshing and affirming conclusion, though a little too Hollywood in its all-too-easy happy ending. The utopian ending is problematic on the basis that such social possibilities are contingent on one living in queer ghettoized spaces in San Francisco and in New York City. But when read together with “Rice and Potatoes,” the film succeeds in depicting interracial relationships

and connections in a way that allows for such desires to be articulated as a part of the kaleidoscopic conception of desire: Daniel is shown to have ex-boyfriends who are Caucasian and Asian, without the film actually making a political fuss about it. Hence, while Biasatti and Wilson's "Rice and Potatoes" directly engages the politics of Asian-Caucasian relationships, Wilson's *Under One Roof* takes this engagement to its logical end by visualizing the ideals without taking the path of cultural essentialism and identity politics to achieve this.

Under One Roof and "Rice and Potatoes" are potential though flawed instances of a new generation of gay films that begin to deal with the issues of race and interracial sexuality in a fashion that sufficiently politicizes and yet does not stifle and politically coerce. Quentin Lee's *Drift* (2000) is another such cinematic work.²⁵ How much the presence of these films is a result of the climate of multiculturalist politics in the United States is debatable. A more intriguing question is whether this filmic trend marks too quick a turn to muting discussions of racism and cultural imperialism in exchange for a color-blind utopia. I seem to have unfortunately come full circle to the cultural anxieties that I began with in this essay. But, on the other hand, a consciousness of these anxieties may be the means to negotiate the critical balances located in the conception of desire that Deleuze and Guattari envision, balances that are becoming increasingly necessary as one intervenes and enmeshes culturally in a globalized world. What is ultimately praiseworthy about *all* the films this essay discusses is their willingness to grapple with these anxieties, hence helping lay the cinematic ground for future gay Chinese and Asian diasporic filmic works to tread.

Notes

¹ My decision to focus on diasporic Chinese cinema in order to conceptualize the Asian-Caucasian gay relationship emerges out of my own research work on Chinese and diasporic Chinese cinema in general. I am attuned to the fact that any generalizing theory on the label "Asian" is bound to rely on selective attention on ethnic, national, and cultural specificities, defined by personal inclinations, investments, and interests. For instance, I am aware that films like *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) and *Touch of Pink* (2004) feature gay Pakistani-Caucasian relationships that register a very culture-specific nuance that differs from my own choice of films for this essay; the same kind of cultural inflection is also articulated in Sandip Roy's delightfully incisive critique of the "curry queen," an Indian variation of the "rice queen" phenomenon. Sandip Roy, "Curry Queens and Other Spices," in *Q & A: Queer in Asian America*, eds. David L. Eng and Alice Y. Hom (Philadelphia: Temple

University Press, 1998), 256-61. Hence, my intention is not to negate these specificities in my thinking about the "rice and potato" issue through these diasporic Chinese films. In fact, many of these films, particularly the Asian American and British Asian ones, feature not just a Chinese presence but also various different Asian voices, and these voices establish a resonating connection in their similarity of experiences. I am, therefore, appropriating these connections in my use of "Asian" as a larger ethnic and political category of intervention.

² Laurence Wai-Teng Leong, "Of Rice and Potatoes: The Dynamics of Interracial Gay Relationships," in *People like Us: Sexual Minorities in Singapore*, eds. Joseph Lo and Huang Guoqin (Singapore: Select Publishing, 2003), 112. While Leong's piece addresses the Singapore context in particular, the theoretical scope and significance of his study have a much broader reach.

³ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁴ Richard Fung, "Looking for My Penis: The Eroticized Asian in Gay Video Porn," in *Asian American Sexualities: Dimensions of the Gay and Lesbian Experience*, ed. Russell Leong (New York: Routledge, 1996), 181-98.

⁵ Leong, "Of Rice and Potatoes," 117-18.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 115. This shifting economic class structure that global capitalism has created for Asian elites is also now enabling an emerging gay inter-Asian Orientalism between Asian men of different racial and/or national origins. A gay Singaporean colleague recently pointed out to me his sexual fascination with the cultural "exoticism" of Thai men, which he himself has self-reflectively and candidly described as a form of Asian-on-Asian Orientalism. Many Singaporean gay men, empowered by the Singapore dollar, travel to Bangkok frequently to indulge in the Thai gay sex trade; some even developing relationships with Thai men.

⁷ Leong, "Of Rice and Potatoes," 114.

⁸ Gina Marchetti, *Romance and the "Yellow Peril": Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

⁹ Leong, "Of Rice and Potatoes," 114-15.

¹⁰ "First Love and Other Pains," dir. Simon Chung, 50 min., 1999. It is available as part of a two-film DVD compilation: *First Love and Other Pains & One of Them*, dir. Simon Chung & Stewart Main, 50 min. & 47 min., First Run Features, 2001.

¹¹ Leong, "Of Rice and Potatoes," 118.

¹² *Ibid.*, 119-21.

¹³ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Methuen, 1987), 205.

¹⁴ Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature & Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 32.

¹⁵ I presented a version of this essay at a recent conference on Asian queer sexualities and was chastised by a number of people from the audience for not being sufficiently anti-colonial, despite my anxious reiteration that I vigorously and unequivocally support the postcolonial critique of the stereotypical "rice queen" mentality. In trying to work through and avoid the dangers presented by extreme positions on this issue, my paper is consequently deemed politically untenable when assessed on the basis of a militant form of postcolonial intervention. This conference experience invokes precisely the kind of cultural anxiety I see circulating as

a discursive undercurrent in the films my essay analyzes.

¹⁶ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 5.

¹⁷ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 21.

¹⁸ "Yellow Fever," dir. Raymond Yeung, 26 min., 1998. This film was released on VCD as part of a collection of shorts by different directors: *Banana Queers*, 107 min., Ying E Chi, 2002, VCD. Yeung has recently released his full-length feature *Cut Sleeve Boys* (2006), which I unfortunately am unable to view in time for the purposes of this essay.

¹⁹ "China Dolls," dir. Tony Ayres, 30 min., 1997. This short film is also available in the collection *Banana Queers*. Apart from short documentaries, Ayres has also directed, to date, two feature films: *Walking on Water* (2002) and *The Home Song Stories* (2007), a movie featuring Chinese characters in Australia, starring Joan Chen.

²⁰ M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).

²¹ Emphasis mine.

²² "Rice and Potatoes: A Documentary on Gay Asian-Caucasian Relationships," dir. John Biasatti and Todd Wilson, 58 min., Fags Make Films, 1998, videocassette. *Under One Roof*, dir. Todd Wilson, 74 min., TLA Releasing, 2002, DVD.

²³ "Fall 1990," dir. Quentin Lee, 35 min., Margin Films, 1999. This film also finds its way into *Banana Queers*, consolidating the collection's key theme.

²⁴ Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 426. This definition is taken from the volume's glossary, produced by translators Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist.

²⁵ *Drift*, dir. Quentin Lee, 86 min., Fox Lorber, 2002, DVD.