



THE RICE QUEEN
DIARIES

a memoir

Daniel Gawthrop

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ARSENAL PULP PRESS
VANCOUVER

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for
Saw Along Horse Nymph Jay

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

- Thomas Mann

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

- David Henry Hwang

Preface

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

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



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

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

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

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



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

1 New York: Random House, 1978

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

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

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

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

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

2. W. P. Kinsella, “Lorraine Hanser,” *Quattro Asien*, Winter 1988.

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

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

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

Anti-Orientalism doesn’t go far enough to account for layers of complexity in human relationships that obscure what might on the surface seem concrete political “truths” about interracial contact. Even video artist Richard Fung, a respected critic of Orientalism, conceded as much in his groundbreaking (and unforgettably titled) 1991 essay, “Looking for My Penis: The Eroticized Asian in Gay Video Porn.”⁴ Fung argued that several

3. “Pursuing the Predator: Sinners from a Cap-Led,” *Asian-American Studies: Dimensions of the City and Lesbian Experience*, edited by Russell Liming (New York: Routledge, 1995).

4. Introduction, *Explorations in Gay Asian Culture & Politics* (Toronto: Queen Press, 1990).

5. First published in *Asian (re) Visions: Queer Subjects*, edited by David Gauntlett (Seattle: Bay Press, 1993).

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

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

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

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

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Imprinting

Sex comes to us in different ways; it alters us; and I suppose in the end we carry the nature of our experiences on our faces.

– V.S. Naipaul, *Half a Life*

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I
Skeletons



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DEEP IN THE FRASER CANYON, nestled in a mountain range about ninety minutes east of Vancouver on the Trans-Canada highway, is a riverside logging town called Hope. To outsiders, it was once best known as an ideal shooting location for low-budget Hollywood fare. Hope was where Sylvester Stallone began his *Rambo* franchise with the filming of *First Blood*. A few years later, it still had a few things in common with the fictional, Anytown U.S.A. it portrayed in that film. Hope in the late 1980s was the kind of place where only drifters took solitary walks along the highway and loners were regarded with suspicion; where everyone was on a first name basis with the mayor and the local sheriff; and where no one seemed offended by the sight of a teenaged boy walking around wearing a baseball cap that read: "ams- Kills Fags Dead." During the first few months of 1989, this was the place I called home.

At twenty-five, I was beginning my writing career as the reporter/photographer for Hope's weekly community newspaper. One day, I was assigned to cover a performance by a visiting dance troupe from Vancouver. Kokoro Dance, appearing at the local high school as part of a provincial tour, had caused quite a stir with its new production, "Rage," a symbolic re-enactment of Japanese internment during World War II, had special resonance in this part of British Columbia: a few weeks after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, some 26,000 Japanese-Canadian residents of Vancouver Island and the Lower Mainland had been stripped of their homes and possessions and sent to internment camps from the Fraser Valley to the Kootenays. One of those camps was located on a former cattle farm just outside Hope. So it wasn't hard to build tension for this show.

As the lights went down in the school gymnasium, a brief silence was followed by the pounding of taiko drums. The presence of the drummers – each wearing a bandana and a loose-fitting pair of fisherman's trousers – was gradually revealed by a fade-in follow spot. After entering the gym, they began circling the centre of the basketball court. Then they retreated, and a lone figure appeared in their midst. Slowly the crouching body unfolded until the audience could see that this muscular, bald-headed man – covered

in talcum powder and wearing nothing but a loin cloth – was bound to the floor by a web of ropes.

Not long before the performance, the federal government officially apologized to all Japanese Canadians for the miscarriage of justice that had led to internment forty seven years earlier. It also reached a redress settlement of \$12 million, or \$21,000 for each internment camp survivor, plus community legacy funding. "Rage" was asking its young audience members – most of them white and all of them born more than a generation after the war – to come to grips with a dark chapter in the nation's history, part of which had occurred a few kilometres down the road. The message? We were all implicated – if not in the event itself, then by our collective responsibility never to allow such things to happen again.

For me, "Rage" was a sobering reminder of something I too had learned about in high school. *Yellow Peril. The Enemy Within. Japs Out!* Stories of deprivation, pain, and ostracism that had left their imprint on tens of thousands of people who had built their lives on North American soil and played a part in building our still young country – only to be banished for the colour of their skin. Stories revealed in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* and Ken Adachi's *The Enemy That Never Was*. In university, I had denounced the injustice and held strong opinions about the "racists" who carried it out. It didn't matter that times had been different, or that the "racists" represented a large proportion of the Canadian public. I just knew, with the smug self-righteousness of youth, that I wouldn't have condoned such a policy.



Three years after seeing "Rage," I was handed a scrapbook that had once belonged to my uncle. After his death, it was passed on to my father, his only brother. But Dad had never discussed its contents in detail, and the first time I'd flipped through it I hadn't bothered to read the faded news clippings inside. The rest of the contents – an assortment of photographs, telegrams and greeting cards – seemed mostly concerned with long-lost relatives I'd never met. But now, turning the pages until I found my grandfather's obituary from the *Victoria Times*, I decided to read every word.

More than twelve column inches in length, the obit was accompanied by a large portrait photograph and a subhead describing Granddad as a "widely known" civil servant for the provincial government. It said that Granddad

was once the regional director of development for the old Trade and Industry ministry, an expert on unemployment and rehabilitation who had held important posts in the relief government during the Depression. It went on to say he had worked on flood rehabilitation in the Fraser Valley and with the Dutchboers after the loss of their mortgaged communal lands. And then it said this: "During [the] Second World War, he was loaned to the federal government to organise reception centres for 26,000 Japanese ordered to quit his coastlands..."

So, there it was: my grandfather, an English immigrant whose claim to Canadian citizenship was more recent than that of many Japanese immigrants, had been one of the "racists" I had condemned in my student days. Was it possible to feel betrayal from new information about an old event? Guilt by association for something that happened in my family long before my birth? I felt both. Why hadn't I been told? My father said I had – but that I must have been too young for the information to register. Now here it was, five decades after Pearl Harbor – and I was only *just* learning of my blood connection to Yellow Peril.

Flipping through the rest of the scrapbook, I gazed deeply into each photo of Granddad – reading his face, looking for clues, trying to find answers in between the wrinkles. The most striking image was an official government portrait taken not long before Granddad's death. In it, my father's father is dressed in a black wool jacket and a fedora, its brim resting high on his brow. A Commonwealth pin is attached to his lapel, and his tie is loosely fastened to his white shirt. He sits casually for the session – his left hand in his pocket, his right hand dangling a cigarette. Knowing roughly when the photo was taken, I found it hard not to see his face as a mask of the burdens he had carried until that moment.

Like Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida* gazing at the photo of a condemned would-be assassin just before his execution, I saw catastrophe in this portrait. Granddad may have been nothing more than a cog in the wheel of Japanese internment – a low-level bureaucrat "just following orders." But at the moment this photo was taken, World War II had come and gone. How did he feel about the camps? Did he ever think about internment? Or was it merely an unpleasant consequence of *mal politik*, a bad dream to be stored away in the subconscious? How often did Japanese Canadians pass him on the street? How would he have felt when they did? I would never know.

While pondering these questions, I was struck by an unsettling irony: two generations after J.T. Gawthrop had helped round up a group of East Asians to "quit se's coastlands," I, his grandson, had begun targeting East Asians for special welcome to those very same coastlands. Since moving to Vancouver shortly after seeing "Rage," I'd found that an increasing number of notices on my bedpost had been delivered by handsome young pan-Asian men – not infrequently Japanese. Why, just the other night after visiting the Club baths, I had brought home Yukio – a tall, slender androgyne in his early twenties who had feathery long hair and a twenty-six-inch waist.

We had passed each other twice in the Club's shadowy labyrinth, both times turning around for another look. In the second instance Yukio stroked my palm with his fingers as he passed by. White guys never did that. Then he followed me into a telephone booth-sized cubicle where our towels fell to the floor and our naked bodies met. As I watched his tongue run a trail down my abdomen, a white bandana with red-and-black calligraphy suddenly appeared around his forehead. Visions of a samurai warrior began dancing in my brain.

Later we felt our way to the back of a dark room where other strangers were having sex. I sat down on a bench against the back wall. Yukio, facing me, stepped onto the bench, planted his feet around my hips, and stood up straight, his loiner quivering a few inches above my face. Then, leaning against the wall by his forearms as he bowed his head, his long sweaty hair matting his brow and covering his eyes, he began to lower himself. His body folded into a crouch as he wrapped an arm around my neck, and I grabbed his waist with both hands to help him down. As the crack of his ass reached the tip of my erection, it occurred to me that Yukio might want to "bareback" – a cause for some concern, since my better judgement was disappearing by the second. But then he produced a condom, seemingly from nowhere, rolling it onto me just fast enough to maintain some illusion of spontaneity.

Having signaled his desire to be penetrated, Yukio had shattered the samurai warrior fantasy and replaced it with visions of a fully clothed Tokyo urbanite in a starched white shirt and black tie. Ah yes, Yukio: faithful torchbearer of a workaholic culture. Yukio, getting his thick black hair all

messy while rushing to meet deadlines for his bottom line-chasing capitalist slavemasters. Yukio, bowing to company guests before getting drunk and inappropriate over sake. Yukio, eyeing the vice-president in the men's room and then going down on him in a cubicle. Yukio, right here with me now, lurching on my lap in a western sauna....

Who or what was he thinking about?

When I invited him to my apartment, he accepted. We had sex once more on the couch before going to bed, and again in the morning a few moments after waking up. I didn't know it yet, but Yukio would return to Vancouver only a month later, at Christmas, and again the following Christmas. He would call on the phone each time to invite himself over, then spend the night with his legs wrapped around my neck before disappearing for another year. With each passing Christmas I would begin to associate the festive season at least partly with the memory of his perfect lovemaking.

And yet, I knew next to nothing about him. I knew he was born and raised in Tokyo and now lived in Brussels. I knew he worked as an accountant while collecting the final credits for a Master's in business administration. And I knew he had a western boyfriend, who he'd leave back at the hotel while he came over to my place to get fucked. But other than these few facts, Yukio was a complete mystery. Not, for that matter, did I know much more about the other young Asian men I'd had sex with than my grandfather must have known about the anonymous Asian faces he'd sent packing to the internment camps.

Why was I so attracted to Far East Asians, rather than repelled by them, as Granddad's generation had been? In making these young men a part of my universe, I had altered the family narrative from a politics of Yellow Peril to one of Yellow Fever; from Asian Invasion to Asian Persuasion, in two generations. How had this happened? Closing the scrapbook, I went to the bathroom and looked in the mirror. There was no denying the power of genetics. The traces of Granddad could be found in the eyes, the mouth, the jawline, and the puffy cheeks. With the exception of a few trendy Asian habits (shirts made in Hong Kong, a preference for stir-fries), everything about me screamed Rule Britannia.

The old man may have died a decade before I was born, but we were connected. Could I have made the same choices, had I been in Granddad's position? Instead of cruising young Japanese guys like Yukio and licking

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