

[Review] C. Winter Han (2015) Geisha of a different kind: race and sexuality in gaysian America

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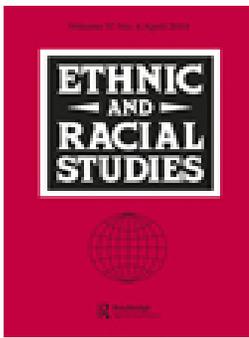
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Geisha of a different kind: race and sexuality in gaysian America

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BOOK REVIEW

Geisha of a different kind: race and sexuality in gaysian America, by C. Winter Han, New York and London, New York University Press, 2015, vii + 237 pp., £16.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-1479855209

Who are we referring to when we talk about the “gay community?” Especially over the last decade, queer scholars have started interrogating the implicit racialization of the category “gay” and shown how the whiteness of gay spaces is maintained through exclusionary practices. Not many studies, however, provide such a thick description and analysis like C. Winter Han’s *Geisha of a Different Kind*. Focusing on gay (East and Southeast) Asian (or “gaysian”) American men, Han’s ethnographic study does not only vividly illustrate how “race” and sexuality intersect in the lives of these men, but it also rigorously explores how gender impacts on these intersections. Or, in other words, Han’s study is unique in the ways that it explores how sexuality is gendered and racialized; how gender is racialized and sexualized; and how “race” is gendered and sexualized. In order to gain some understanding of how these categories operate in contemporary life in the ++U.S., Han takes us on a, sometimes rather uncomfortable, journey.

The five chapters of the book bring together historical constructions and media representations of “race” with lived experience and identity development to show

how the various ways that Asian men have been constructed in the western mind have affected the way they come to see themselves, other gay Asian men, and what it means to be both gay and Asian within the western context. (4)

By looking at representations of (gay) Asian men in Western mainstream and gay media, the first two chapters provide some insights into the social context that gay Asian American men find themselves in. Han argues that

Asian men, both gay and straight, have historically been feminized as a result of western domination and control and continue to be feminized today through subtle means, which helps to maintain masculine domination of white men over Asian men. (17)

These colonialist gender constructions of European men as masculine and superior and “oriental” men as feminine and inferior to white men are still present in mainstream media (he looks at TV, film, porn, magazines and comic books). Han discusses various popular television shows and movies where characters of Asian men are feminized, de-sexualized and represented as sexually undesirable and as failing to achieve the masculine norm. Gay media outlets contribute to these representations rather than challenge them. Looking more closely at two popular Western gay magazines, Han points out different ways through which white gay masculinity is established as the norm of desire and beauty and gay Asian men, if represented at all, figure only as the feminine “other”. Han argues

that the hegemony of masculinity within the gay community needs to be challenged and replaced by a more ambiguous model of masculinity.

Chapters 3–5 then challenge some of the stereotypes that are deployed in gay media such as the construction of Asian communities as homophobic and backward, whilst ignoring the effects of racism in the gay community. Here, then, he focuses on his fieldwork conducted in Seattle, U.S., a city which he describes as having a history of progressive sexual and racial politics and interracial and interethnic cooperation, and where Asian Americans are the largest ethnic minority group. Given this portrayal of Seattle as a diverse and cosmopolitan city, one might expect very different findings. However, these chapters, which explore how gay Asian American men negotiate their sexual and racial identities within the different social settings of both the gay and the Asian American++ “community”, paint a rather bleak picture.

His respondents’ accounts illustrate how racism can operate in many subtle ways, such as being ignored/“not seen” or treated in a stereotypical way. Han argues that a “highly racialized hierarchy of desire” underlies the racisms gay Asian American men experience (18). Whilst white gay men explain their non-desire for Asian men as “preference”, many personal ads on dating sites have indeed very racist undertones such as “no fats, no femmes, or Asians need respond” (93), “If you are Asian, I won’t reply, you Ching Chong” (94). Being constructed as “undesirable”, feminine and submissive (and sexual “bottom”) impacts on gay Asian American’s self-esteem, and how they see themselves and each other. However, Han describes how his respondents use subtle ways to actively challenge these racist stereotypes and reconceptualize what it means to be gay and Asian (for instance, through building connections and creating their own spaces).

In *Chapter 4* Han further explores strategies used by his participants to combat stigma of “race” and sexuality. Whilst his respondents negotiate stigma attached to their sexuality within Asian communities fairly easily, often through “passing” as straight or ignoring their sexual identity, stigma attached to their “race” in the gay community seems far more difficult to negotiate. His respondents’ accounts challenge stereotypes of Asian communities as homophobic, and demonstrate that racism in the gay community is much harder to tackle. Rather than taking on hyper-masculine performances to challenge the stigma of being feminine and undesirable, drag performances that highlight these gendered attributes can counteract the stigma attached to them. Already being perceived as more feminine in the white imagination, gay Asian drag queens use this advantage to win drag titles, and gain a public platform to challenge racism and homophobia and raise visibility of gay Asian men in both the gay and Asian American communities. In addition, as Han argues, their performance challenge constructions of beauty, the desirability of whiteness and shows that racialized desire is in fact socially constructed.

The final chapter is perhaps the most interesting one theoretically. Han’s account of identity formation is truly intersectional and challenges Western constructions of sexuality that are inherently racialized (namely white). He presents a complex model of sexuality that is not based on the common “coming out”

narratives but constructed through social interaction. Han follows a queer theoretical understanding of sexual identity that defines it as fluid and performatively produced; however, his research shows that this performativity is also gendered and racialized. The formation and negotiation of gay Asian American male identity is a “messy process where race intersects with sexuality, gender intersects with race, sexuality intersects with gender, etc. and all exert pressures on each other” (186). Han highlights that it is the situational context, the felt gendered, racialized and sexualized difference and the experiences of oppression that provide the groundwork for gay Asian American identity, not some “inherent” sexual and racial identity.

Han presents us with a very rich ethnography of a community that he is part of. He could perhaps have said more about his research design, how many interviews he conducted and provide more background of his participants (age, class, etc.), as well as include some of the images that he analysed. Whilst the number of categories arguably has to be limited to do justice to intersectional research, the omission of class nevertheless is surprising. This could be a project for further research, as well as the exploration of the experiences and gendered constructions of bisexual, lesbian and transgender Asian Americans.

Geisha of a Different Kind is a “must read” for anybody who tries to understand gender, sexuality and “race” as not only intersectional but in fact mutually constitutive categories. The book is interdisciplinary in nature and therefore makes important contributions to different fields such as queer studies, geographies of sexualities, media and critical “race” studies. Challenging sexual and racial stereotypes and misconceptions, it is a fascinating, illuminating and lively study (Han used to be a journalist) that should not only be an interesting and enjoyable read for students and scholars but also for the general public.

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