REVIEW


Cynthia Wu
University at Buffalo, State University of New York
cw229@buffalo.edu

How might an analytic that foregrounds race inform prevailing concepts of the biological? This is the question that undergirds Rachel C. Lee’s ambitious and playful recent book. Lee convincingly shows that an Asian Americanist critique in science and technology studies (STS) and an analytic that takes seriously the biological in critical race and ethnic studies is not far-fetched. The mutual constitution of these strains of thought is absolutely necessary in order to understand the present’s ongoing structural disparities. The antiracist critiques that have issued from both in and outside of the academy in the past few generations have rightfully undermined biological explanations for racial difference that were birthed by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scientific racism. Indeed, the weight of our contemporary understandings about US structural inequalities rests on a tacit separation between the biological and the racial; the state and its collusion with capital, not genetic differences, are what create inequality. These interventions of the past were, and continue to be, productive, to be sure, which is why Lee’s book, which proposes to

http://www.catalystjournal.org | ISSN: 2380-3312
© Cynthia Wu, 2016 I Licensed to the Catalyst Project under a Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial No Derivatives license
Lee demonstrates how modernity’s exercise of power is both biopolitical and necropolitical and that the specificities of its deployment are defined by a history of colonialism and racial classification. Modern states are, by and large, produced and motivated as well by the selective generation of death, however much we might want to distinguish them thusly from older forms of governance. This parceling of life into bios—that is, life that entails protection or recognition, and zoe, or bare life not thusly protected and recognized—is at the heart of broader concepts of what it means to be human. This distinction is defined along racial lines as well as in ways specific to gender, sexuality, colonial subject status, and ability status. Although it may be understandable to assert a reactionary claim to human-ness (and a corresponding disavowal of the nonhuman) for those who do not currently possess it, Lee insists that a more enabling goal “intervenes into zoe-communication by adopting a hospitable regard toward the intertwinement of nonhuman and human populations” (p. 48). The hallmark of the regulation of life in contemporary times might be readily understood as that which subtly but coercively “makes live.” However, a corresponding dynamic occurs, too, where the denial of life is not merely relegated to an unintentional side effect of the state’s (selectively directed) life-giving actions. Lee argues that, in order to redress disparities between rights-bearing and non-rights-bearing life forms, we must dismantle the conceptual barriers that have historically distinguished them from each other. In short, we must put an end to the separation between the human and the nonhuman.

Lee’s book thus presents deftly argued and almost kinesthetically-imposing close readings of contemporary cultural productions that launch an Asian Americanist critique of transnational capital, distribution of resources, and regulatory mechanisms informing gender, sexual, and ability comportment. From the fragmented bodies in the poetry of Lois-Ann Yamanaka, the dance of Cheng-Chieh Yu, the fiction of Kazuo Ishiguro, the comedy of Margaret Cho, or the performance art of Denise
Uyehara, the privileging of the part over Enlightenment-descended concepts of the whole prevails. The cross-species intimacies suggested by Ruth Ozeki, Amitav Ghosh, and others implore us to recognize that much of the havoc wrought by colonialist, neo-colonialist, and/or neoliberal forces can be explained and undone by a critical framework that de-centers the human. Throughout these examples, Lee puts the disparate sources of her archive into coherent, complementary (but also productively frictive) conversation about the creation of interfaces among differing categories of biological life produced by modernity.

For instance, Lee effectively shows that narratives about disjointed or denigrated corporealities—even when they are not explicitly about race, as in the example of Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*—carry with them the racial registers with which we are familiar. Presumably racially neutral figures are the providers of somatic, life-sustaining parts without being able to occupy the uncomplicated position of their recipients. When they do enter that charmed circle, Asian-raced subjects can mitigate the surveillance that coerces sanctioned models of health. Moreover, they can call out the very biopolitical project itself on an aggregate scale. These interventions take the form of unsettlingly queer, feminist, and crip articulations, such as in Yu’s *My Father’s Teeth in My Mother’s Mouth* or Uyehara’s *Big Head*.

Lee’s book also makes an indirect, yet provocative, statement about form. The exquisite corpse signaled in her book’s title—based on the form originally called *cadavre exquis* by writers like Andre Breton in the early twentieth century—is a jointly-composed poem created among multiple authors, each composing one line after the previous contributor has laid and hidden theirs. The final product bears the characteristics of its idiosyncratic fusion. Similarly, in Lee’s book each chapter attaches itself to the next not in terms of chronology or other transparent ordering logic but through thematic resonance. Rather than place an acknowledgements section preceding the narrative proper, Lee appends to the conclusion what she entitles a “Tail Piece” that performs that and other functions, asking “Can an epilogue mark a becoming rather than an ending?” (p.
In these ways, the book is performative. It does what it says as it embraces nonlinearity and fragmentation in its composition.

The one question with which I am left after reading The Exquisite Corpse of Asian America is not specific to the book itself. It is one I pose to the recent and not-so-recent trends alike in the fields of STS, critical race and ethnic studies, queer theory, and gender studies that propose a politics of non-hierarchy between the human and the nonhuman. In a different context, I had asked it of Mel Chen’s (2012) Animacies, and we can ask it, too, of older texts in this tradition, such as Donna Haraway’s (1991) iconic Simians, Cyborgs, and Women. In calls to cast away the stifling separations between the human and the nonhuman, are we overlooking how this imperative might be politically enabling to differential extents for those who do and do not already have full human status? Who can and cannot afford to make these boundaries permeable?

To be sure, Lee is careful to acknowledge that her proposition to embrace cross-species relationships is not the exclusive provenance of the elite, academic Asian Americanist left. Her stance is not purportedly “more ‘advanced’... in comparison to articulations that prioritize social justice on behalf of those human-animals” (p. 50) subjugated by the forces of racism and colonialism. As she recognizes, some populations, such as people with disabilities and indigenous people, have always respected the porosity between the human and the nonhuman. Still, I wonder if the social location of the speaker, specific to time and place, matters in these appeals for a non-hierarchy among species. Whose words carry more weight when making these claims? Is the posthuman turn ultimately most efficacious for those whose human-ness has already been recognized? Is the renunciation of a charmed status associated with the human more earth shattering—or, at the very least, practical or affordable—for some than for others at the present time?

Lee asks us to consider the myriad ways in which “Asian Americans ruminate over their bodies and body parts as sites of governmentality and norming” and provide “living testaments to the organism’s resilience and unpredictability in expressing biopolitical agency” (p. 101). My hope is that
the book will inspire further experiments with form as well as further experiments in cross-fertilization between STS and Asian American studies.

References


Bio

**Cynthia Wu** is an associate professor of American studies in the Department of Transnational Studies at the University at Buffalo (SUNY). She is the author of *Chang and Eng Reconnected: The Original Siamese Twins in American Culture* (Temple, 2012).