

Book Review

Sugino, C. M. (2025). *Making the Human: Race, Allegory, and Asian Americans*

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Corinne Mitsuye Sugino's book, *Making the Human: Race, Allegory, and Asian Americans*, breathes new life into older conversations around Asian American representation and, in the process, brings scholarship in the area into dialogue with compelling new theoretical currents, specifically recent humanities scholarship concerning what it means to be "human."

Making the Human offers a theoretically sophisticated and intellectually ambitious intervention into contemporary Asian American studies, rhetorical studies, cultural studies, and critical race scholarship. The book's central thesis is that "Asian American" racialization functions allegorically within U.S. public culture to help stabilize what Sugino (drawing heavily from Sylvia Wynter, Denise Ferreira da Silva, Zakiyyah Jackson, and others) calls "Western Man." As they write, "Ultimately, *Making the Human* wrestles with questions of Asian/American legibility, categorization, and comparative racialization in the contemporary era, thinking through anti-Asian racism as a constitutive strategy for maintaining and rearticulating Western Man" (p. 19).

Focusing on what it means to be Asian American is a particularly good way to understand what it means to be human. At least since the time of Genghis Khan, Asians and Asian Americans have been characterized as animalistic, primitive, bestial, and barbaric. In other words, there has long been a preternatural questioning of the very humanness of Asians. Along with this larger history, littered throughout the doctrinal history of U.S. law, up to and including the early 20th century, are cases of Asian Americans not having the rights of citizenship, education, business practice, health, and human rights. Thus, in law, Asian Americans have been treated differently than other *humans*. So, what does it mean to be human? And, how and why have Asians and Asian Americans not been understood and treated as such throughout history? This is the

fundamental question of the book, including the book's coda, where it becomes apparent that our very being, our humanity, is very much prescribed by what people have told us we are.

In turn, Sugino suggests the very idea of Asian American is narratively produced through overlapping and sometimes contradictory stories that anchor our figural meaning. She further avers that anti-Asian racism cannot be understood in isolation but must instead be theorized as necessarily cathected and entangled with equally complex notions of cultural and political anti-Blackness, colonialism, capitalism, gendered violence, and carcerality.

The book consists of an introduction, five substantive chapters, and a coda. Throughout, Sugino moves fluidly across rhetorical criticism, critical race theory, Asian American studies, Black studies, media studies, affect theory, feminist theory, and critical cultural studies. Indeed, one of the book's greatest strengths is its refusal of disciplinary provincialism. It is deeply interdisciplinary. It is never superficial or additive. Rather, Sugino synthesizes scholarly traditions into a theoretical architecture organized around the concept of "racial allegory," which she defines as the process by which "public, social, institutional, political, and/or cultural discourses utilize narrative to make racial difference legible and shore up Western Man" (p. 9).

One might use a book's introduction not only as a synopsis of the book, but also as a hint of the book's theoretical import. This introduction does not disappoint. There, Sugino situates the project amidst several overlapping public controversies and crises, including anti-Asian violence during COVID-19, the Atlanta spa shootings, Black Lives Matter protests, and Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard. Importantly, they refuse the familiar liberal tendency to treat anti-Asian racism as either newly emergent or politically separable from social structure which includes anti-Blackness. Instead, she argues that Asian Americans have become key "narrative figures" in contemporary

struggles over justice, meritocracy, nationalism, policing, public health, and multiculturalism but ultimately that narrativization fundamentally supports the unspoken, but ever-present, figure of Western Man.

What distinguishes the introduction from many recent books on Asian American racialization is its sustained engagement with the category of "the human." Sugino argues that Asian American racialization operates through unstable distinctions between human/nonhuman, animate/inanimate, and citizen/alien. Particularly compelling is her contention that racial allegory is not merely representational but also materially constitutive. Anti-Asian racism, they write, "acts as a narrative resource that relies on and helps to congeal the boundaries of Western Man" (p. 10).

Chapter 1 examines "Asian fetish" through race-specific dating websites and Debbie Lum's documentary *Seeking Asian Female*. Sugino demonstrates how "Asian fetish repackages racial and gendered violence in the benign language of interracial love, desire, and multicultural plurality" (p. 16). This chapter is especially nuanced in its treatment of intimacy, animacy, and commodification. Sugino compellingly argues that Asian American women are simultaneously rendered hyperanimated, by which they mean sexually desirable and animalistic, as objects of emotional and sexual fulfillment while also depersonalized and made into interchangeable fetish objects, which supports her twin arguments about Asian Americans represented as both pre-modern and techno-Oriental simultaneously.

Chapter 2 turns to *Crazy Rich Asians* and what Sugino calls a "multicultural redemption narrative." Reading the film within the historical context of the Moynihan Report and Cold War racial liberalism, they argue that the film's celebration of East Asian American success functions as a racial allegory stabilizing the white heterosexual nuclear family. The chapter is particularly effective in showing how celebrating multicultural visibility can operate as a mechanism

for reinscribing colonialism, anti-Blackness, and capitalist hierarchy. Sugino's analysis of gendered respectability politics is especially sharp here, particularly her discussion of how Asian American femininity becomes legible through opposition to pathologized constructions of Black motherhood and Black family life.

Chapter 3 analyzes *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard* and is perhaps the book's most explicitly rhetorical chapter. Sugino argues that affirmative action opponents appropriated the language of anti-racism by narrating Asian Americans as victims of racial discrimination. Importantly, they show how the case simultaneously mobilizes and disavows racial categories. As they explain, SFFA "relies on segregation and Black civil rights struggle as governing metaphor for making Asian/American victimhood legible" (p. 18). The chapter's analysis of affect and rationality is particularly insightful, especially Sugino's argument that Black applicants are framed as overly emotional and embodied, whereas Asian Americans are figured as cognitive, machine-like, and hyper-rational.

Chapter 4 examines anti-Asian discourse during COVID-19. Here Sugino is at her most theoretically daring. Rather than merely cataloguing racist rhetoric, they interrogate the entanglement of anti-Asian racism with discourses of animacy, contagion, zoonosis, and public health. The chapter's analysis of terms such as "asymptomatic carriers" and "zoonotic reservoirs" is especially compelling, because it reveals how scientific discourse and racial discourse can become mutually imbricated in political rhetoric. Sugino demonstrates how Asian Americans become racialized through proximity to animality, disease, and technological modernity simultaneously.

The final substantive chapter, Chapter 5, explores carcerality, which is aptly the chapter's title. Sugino examines the COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act, Tou Thao in relation to the murder of George Floyd, and the aftermath of Trump's

Muslim Ban. Sugino questions the degree to which narratives of racial victimage can play a decisive role in subtly recentering and bolstering carceral power that ultimately harms racialized communities, in the plural. Sugino insists on a more complicated framework that accounts for the "web of carceral power" (p. 126), emphasizes interconnection without reductiveness, and attends to uneven power relations among those fighting against anti-Asian racism, anti-Blackness, police violence, deportation, and structural incarceration.

Many interdisciplinary monographs suffer from a kind of conceptual drift in which individual case studies overwhelm the book's larger argument. Sugino avoids this problem. The concept of racial allegory is analytically meaningful throughout the book, allowing her to connect seemingly disparate case studies focusing on dating websites, Supreme Court cases, pandemic discourse, and Hollywood film into a sustained and coherent theoretical question of what it means to be human.

The book also makes an important intervention into rhetorical studies specifically. Although rhetoric scholars have increasingly turned toward affect theory, critical race theory, and Black studies in the relatively recent past, scholarship on Asian American rhetoric remains comparatively underdeveloped. Sugino helps remedy this insufficiency by demonstrating how Asian American racialization is fundamentally rhetorical, not simply sociological or representational. Indeed, the book repeatedly shows how racial categories emerge through communicative processes of narration, allegory, circulation, and affect.

At the same time, the book contributes substantially to media studies. Sugino refuses simplistic representational politics. Indeed, she recurrently notes that the book is not interested in telling a "positive" story about Asian Americans. Instead, her complex account of mediation in popular culture and public discourse does not ask whether representations are "positive" or

“negative” so much as how they create gravity for particular formations of racial capitalism, gender, and nationhood. In this regard, the book productively extends traditions of critical cultural studies scholarship associated with such figures as Stuart Hall, Herman Gray, Lisa Lowe, and David Eng.

The book will be valuable to Asian American studies scholars, as well. Sugino carefully avoids collapsing “Asian American” into a stable or coherent identity category. Instead, she foregrounds the instability, contradiction, and unevenness of Asian American racialization itself. Particularly refreshing is her refusal to position Asian Americans as either innocent victims or honorary whites. Instead, they insist upon the contradictory ways Asian Americans are differentially incorporated into structures of anti-Blackness and empire.

Ultimately, *Making the Human* is a major contribution to rhetorical studies, media studies, Asian American studies, and critical race scholarship more broadly. Sugino has written a theoretically sophisticated, politically urgent, and intellectually generative book that significantly advances conversations about racialization, narration, animacy, and the human. The book’s central contribution is in demonstrating that anti-Asian racism, and protests of it, are not merely about exclusion from and inclusion into the category of the human, but rather are constitutive of how “the human” itself is narratively and materially organized under racial capitalism and Western modernity into a continual reproduction and stabilization of the particular figure of Western Man.