



“Stinky Lunch Trauma” and the Bind of Diasporic Media Representation. POLIS: Journal of Society and Culture, Vol. 2, Issue 1, 2026. © Erin Lum.

“Stinky Lunch Trauma” and the Bind of Diasporic Media Representation

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Abstract

What does it mean to represent marginalized people and their experiences in media? What is its purpose, what does it accomplish, and who is it for? What is it meant to make us feel, not only as audience members, but as people meant to be represented by these portrayals? This paper critically analyzes emerging tropes found in film, television, and media that are meant to represent the Asian diaspora and the diasporic experience. Such tropes can be found in the Canadian independent film *Riceboy Sleeps* (2022), which paints an intimate portrait of a Korean immigrant family while also employing a common narrative known to some in the Asian diaspora as the “stinky lunch trauma” trope. Through analyzing Asian audiences’ responses to *Riceboy Sleeps*, I uncover the ongoing predicament of representing marginalized groups in media: how on-screen portrayals of racial experiences can simultaneously resonate with audiences yet also flatten real-life racial experiences into tropes.

Keywords: media representation, Asian identity, media tropes, diaspora politics, identity politics

“**A**s I try to move beyond the [racial] stereotypes to express my inner consciousness, it’s clear that *how* I am perceived inheres to *who* I am” (Hong, 2020, p. 64).

What does it mean to represent marginalized people and their experiences in media? What is the purpose of it, what does it accomplish, and who is it for? What does it make me feel, not only as an audience member, but as someone meant to be represented by these stories? I have long pondered these questions as a third-generation Chinese settler raised, educated, and socialized in Canada. As Stanley (2011) reminds us, the concept of “race” is socially constructed, historically produced, constituted by language, and relational. Race is not naturally or biologically occurring but is continually made through the process(es) of racialization. Media forges the racialized self and tells our stories back to us (Hall, 1996); we should understand media representations as a part of the process of constructing how race is perceived and embodied. Recent American blockbuster films such as *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), Marvel’s *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* (2021), and Best Picture-winning *Everything Everywhere All At Once* (2022) have been celebrated for their portrayals of the (East) Asian diaspora, as well as attaining widespread commercial success. These films meant a lot to me, and still do—they mark important moments of social progress. They also served as launching pads for intra-community discourse about mainstream media representations of the Asian diaspora, nuancing the discussion on the politics and limitations of representation as a whole. The Canadian independent film *Riceboy Sleeps* (2022) rests upon the backdrop of these films as an intimate portrait of a Korean single mother and son

that deeply resonated with some viewers, while also eliciting frustration with the film's use of clichés to depict the immigrant experience. Through analyzing Asian audiences' responses to *Riceboy Sleeps*, I uncover the ongoing predicament of representing marginalized groups in media: how on-screen portrayals of race and marginalization can simultaneously resonate with audiences yet also flatten real-life racial experiences into tropes such as "stinky lunch trauma." The wide range of opinions reveals how Asian artists and audiences grapple with postcolonial identity politics while being simultaneously constrained by the neoliberal marketplace of media production and consumption. I offer this analysis from a place of tension, my delicate disposition as an Asian artist and audience member, with the desire to untangle a topic that consumes me. This unraveling is an act of becoming, an attempt to reclaim the parameters of my Asian self-definition.

Riceboy Sleeps (2022)

Riceboy Sleeps (2022) is an independent drama directed by Vancouver-based filmmaker Anthony Shim. The film follows Korean single mother So-Young and her son Dong-Hyun from 1989 to 1999 as they immigrate to the suburbs of British Columbia. Bittersweet themes of internalized racism, motherhood, generational differences, and struggles with assimilation and cultural identity are traced through the mother and son's changing relationship as Dong-Hyun grows into teenagehood, culminating in the film's third act when the pair returns to South Korea. As both the writer and director of the film, *Riceboy Sleeps* loosely draws upon Shim's own life and relationship with his mother. It is a stunning film that left me hollow; I thought about it for days after watching it.

Riceboy Sleeps is intriguing in that it delivers nuanced storytelling of oppressive stereotypes of Asian characters in film, while also leaning into various tropes about the Asian immigrant experience that some interpret as shallow and overdone. In particular, the film shines in its subversion of the objectified, stagnant, and subservient stereotype of the East Asian woman. So-Young is a thoughtfully developed protagonist whose identity extends beyond her role as a mother; she demonstrates agency, is outspoken and rebellious, and directly challenges the racism that victimizes her. It is in this way that *Riceboy Sleeps* tactfully avoids the narrative of the East Asian model minority.

Dong-Hyun's characterization is a mirror for second-generation immigrants' struggles to assimilate and their propensity to internalize racism when growing up in a primarily white country. A kindergarten-aged Dong-Hyun is seen in the mirror trying to change his eye shape, using his hands to slant and widen his eyes in response to ridicule at school. In his teenage years, Dong-Hyun bleaches his hair blonde and wears blue eye contacts—a metaphor for his eroded self-worth and desire for whiteness that is nothing short of unsubtle. Perhaps the most distinctive trope appears in a scene where Dong-Hyun opens his lunch at elementary school and is bullied for the food being “stinky.” He returns home distraught and asks his mother to stop making Korean lunches for him in favour of “normal” Canadian food. This is an experience that many are familiar with, so much so that it has been coined within Asian communities and online circles as “stinky lunch trauma.”

“Stinky Lunch Trauma” and Tropes in Asian Diasporic Media Representations

I enjoyed *Riceboy Sleeps* for its tender, skillfully executed cinematic retelling of the immigrant experience. But the very moment that young Dong-Hyun pulled out his lunchbox at school, I knew

exactly what was about to unfold on screen. The origin of this now-tropified experience is very tangible; researchers such as Seko et al. (2023) have well documented that children from countries with non-dominant culinary backgrounds are often subjected to microaggressions or overt bullying, leading them to feel “stood out, ostracized, and embarrassed” (p. 383). Asian foods and cultural practices have “historically embodied a distinct Otherness in [the] White imaginary,” which lends itself to larger issues of food hierarchies and culinary racism (p. 384). Not only is “lunchbox shaming” a widely shared experience among the Asian diaspora but it is frequently depicted in Asian Canadian and American film and television, discussed in pop culture, and (over)relied on in personal essays and college applications that passionately recount how one overcame “the trauma of being the Asian kid with the stinky lunch” (Wong, 2024, para. 5). Wong (2024) finds that “if you’re part of the Asian American community and very online, you’re no doubt familiar” (para. 1) with this narrative—this has also been true to my experience. Eddie Huang’s acclaimed ABC television series *Fresh Off The Boat*—the first American sitcom to feature an Asian family as main characters in over 20 years—dedicates an entire episode to a similar plotline that Dong-Hyun experiences in *Riceboy Sleeps* (Khan, 2015). The Toronto Star also published an article in 2018 that interviewed Asian Canadians about their experiences with food-based discrimination at school (Kwong, 2018). The fact that the Asian diaspora has created a term to describe how food-based discrimination is represented in popular culture signifies that “stinky lunch trauma” has become distilled into a trope and therefore alienated from the lived experiences at its core.

Audience Responses to *Riceboy Sleeps* (2022)

In examining the hypersexual stereotypes of Vietnamese women in the renowned stage musical *Miss Saigon*, Shimizu (2007) emphasizes that audience engagement with and responses to media are vital to constructing its meaning. Shimizu notes how some Asian American spectators felt offended and alienated by *Miss Saigon*, while others felt seen—in varying degrees—by its depiction of cultural identity. A similar balance between criticism and appreciation can be found in audiences’ unfiltered reviews of *Riceboy Sleeps* on the movie review-based social media platform Letterboxd. The user @icebear expresses their frustrations with diasporic media representation:

I really don’t enjoy harping on Korean diaspora films, but when they regurgitate the same common representations of microaggressions seen throughout Asian American/Canadian films, *they lose all meaning they once had*. *Riceboy Sleeps* literally starts off with a lunchbox scene where David, our protagonist, gets bullied by the other kids for bringing gimbap. *I honestly don’t know what the purpose of these scenes are anymore other than to gain sympathy from well-meaning white liberals. [...] Representation is a trap*. Being part of a diaspora is a result of histories and political situations, but too often, we just get self-pitying depictions of Asian diasporic characters who are embarrassed to be Asian. (Icebear, 2023; emphasis added)

@icebear argues that tropes like “stinky lunch trauma” are overused in Asian diasporic media to the point where they are unsuccessful at contributing anything of nuance and value. It also appears that they are understandably conflicted by the effectiveness of media representation, questioning *who* these tropes are meant for and who they typically resonate with. By bluntly declaring that “representation is

a trap,” this viewer recognizes that the representation of the marginalized individual is too often conflated with that of the entire marginalized group, aligning with Roskam’s (2011) observations on trans media representation (p. 341). Dong-Hyun becomes an accidental ambassador for children of the Asian diaspora, and in employing excessively on-the-nose depictions of his racialized struggles, all of his complexities are effectively erased. Another user, @nimuy, shared similar qualms, finding that there are “more sophisticated and better-crafted ways of communicating this refusal to embrace your roots” than the literal act of Dong-Hyun transforming into blonde and blue-eyed (Nicole, 2022). *Riceboy Sleeps* tends to frame Dong-Hyun’s appearance change as merely teenage rebellion, and by doing so, it fails to highlight that the desire for European features stems from a history of colonial beauty standards that are continually and systemically reinforced. There was great potential for *Riceboy Sleeps* to underscore how internalized racism can be an unconsciously adopted strategy to survive and avoid discrimination. Instead, it relegates itself to what @nimuy dubs as a “ChatGPT result for a Korean diasporic tearjerker” (Nicole, 2022). Asian audiences are directly calling on Asian artists to move away from “the safety net of cliches that are constructed by Western frameworks” (Nicole, 2022). While these narratives may be valuable in building empathy and understanding within general (white) audiences, they risk reducing the diasporic experience to a personal story of exclusion, overlooking the broader complexities of systemic issues related to class, gender, and religion (Saxena, 2021). These two reviews underscore how Asian diasporic audiences might be feeling trapped by the “bind of representation,” a term Shimizu (2007) uses to describe how racialized people are confined to media

representations that they find limiting or even damaging. In the case of *Riceboy Sleeps* and adjacent Asian diaspora films, there are so few representations available in mainstream media that audiences have no choice but to interact with tropes and stereotypes. Perhaps these Asian viewers' dissatisfaction with "stinky lunch trauma" echoes how Black audience members like Brown (2016) are "so damn tired of movies about slavery."

These unfavourable responses to *Riceboy Sleeps* can be contextualized within the broader cultural landscape of liberal identity politics that marginalized folks have long been asked to navigate, having become heightened and increasingly polarized in the digital age (Wu et al., 2025). For those in the Asian diaspora, the personal is always and undoubtedly political, and audiences and artists will grapple with this reality in their own way. I interpret @icebear and @nimuy's responses to *Riceboy Sleeps* not only as a critique of the film's cinematic merit, but a clearly expressed desire to resist the categorization and expectation of relatability that they feel *Riceboy Sleeps* has placed onto them. What may lie beneath these reviews is a personal exhaustion with postcolonial Asian identity politics. This refusal to accept fixed representations of identity may be unique to younger generations, as scholar Earl Smith (2024) points out that Generation Z has "inherited a world deeply shaped by the legacies of identity politics" and has thus embraced a fluid and adaptable redefinition of identity.

However, there are a comparable number of positive reviews of *Riceboy Sleeps* on Letterboxd, signalling that a fair amount of Asian audience members resonated with the film's portrayal of the immigrant experience. The user @cccharlesl writes that "the beauty and delicacy [of] this movie made me feel like I truly was represented," citing the film's realistic hybrid of Korean-English dialogue and

mother-son relationship as healing to witness (Charles, 2022). Like others, @metafrick recognized the use of “stinky lunch trauma”; however, they find that *Riceboy Sleeps* “catapulted itself completely beyond” clichés and used them skillfully to recontextualize the Asian immigrant experience (Hannah, 2022). The myriad of audience responses to *Riceboy Sleeps* raises “thorny, problematic issues of accuracy and [...] authenticity,” resembling what Lau and Mendes (2011) describe as the “radical instability of representation” (p. 5). Our lived experiences shape our implicit understanding of racial identity, and by extension, our embodied and affective responses to stories told through film.

The Limits of Representation

Hall’s (1997) theory of representation tells us that “true” representation is impossible within a media text—there is never one true meaning because meaning can always be (re)constructed and disputed. Roskam (2011), a trans documentary filmmaker whose work engages with the community they belong to, contemplates that creating “the most politically progressive, egalitarian [...] a story about (fill in the blank)” is frankly unachievable (p. 337). One artist cannot represent the entire spectrum of identities and complexities of lived experiences; therefore, someone might always feel unseen or even “wronged by the insufficiency of that representation” (Roskam, 2011, p. 337). I have long pondered this dilemma in my own artistic practice: can I convey shared cultural experiences without inherently tropifying them? Is it possible to create art that is critical yet accessible, original yet relatable at the same time? What if someone thinks the way I have conveyed my lived experience is

cliché? Roskam's acceptance that "no matter how I make the film, and for whom I make it, I will always fail on some level" offers some consolation (p. 337).

Marginalized people need to move beyond the assumption that achieving positive media representation is the end-all be-all of our collective liberation. This is not to diminish the importance of diversity and equity in media representation. However, one should remember that mainstream films and television are bound to the market logics of neoliberal capitalism and therefore do not earnestly or entirely signify social progress. When the ultimate goal of film studios and production companies is profit maximization, it is difficult to reasonably expect that our lived experiences will *not* be commodified and tropified. It should be of no surprise that we see the same "(mis)representations time and time again," given that representation of marginalized groups must exist under the "confines of a [media] system that disallows for individual expression and a truly dissenting voice" (Roskam, 2011, p. 341).

This is further complicated by the reality that marginalized artists are constrained by the political-media industrial complex in which they work. To make their films, Asian artists must navigate media industries dominated by the (white) elite class and their tastes and values. At its most extreme, this is represented by the American Hollywood blockbuster model, but also applies to independent films, where films are commodities sold in the market. A feature-length film such as *Riceboy Sleeps*' very existence depends on receiving gate-kept support from private and public funders, production companies, broadcasters, and distributors. Receiving financing is contingent on many factors, such as artistic merit and belief in the director's capability, but ultimately depends on the story's potential to

appeal to mass audiences, which determines the film’s potential for “success” (i.e., visibility and profitability). Artists are tasked with balancing their creative vision with the sometimes incompatible demands of the industry. Korean-American writer Cathy Park Hong reflects on similar qualms when discussing the American literary industry’s long-overdue shift towards diversity in her memoir *Minor Feelings* (2020). While of course supportive of the initiative towards equitable representation, she notices that there has become a “template of ethnic fiction that supports the fantasy of Asian American immigrants” that the publishing industry favours and *expects of* marginalized authors—one that toes the line of cultural difference and racial trauma but does not challenge the white imagination (Hong, 2020, p. 48). Hong acknowledges that nonwhite artists are repeatedly asked to prove their humanity through retelling the oppression they’ve experienced; as a result, Asian artists may self-fashion themselves to maintain a career in their desired field. Hong observes that her work is “graded on a pain scale,” contemplating “if [my racial trauma] is [at] 10, maybe my book will be a bestseller” (2020, p. 49).

Perhaps this is how one should interpret writer-director Anthony Shim’s choice to engage with common racial tropes in *Riceboy Sleeps*. “Stinky lunch trauma” accomplishes the impossible: it satisfies the industry’s thirst for identity politics-laden, poignant yet palatable storytelling, while still invoking some measure of truthfulness to Shim’s lived experience of racism and assimilation. Engaging with tropes may be a “covert vantage point” for marginalized artists to negotiate power within the media industrial complex, similarly to Lau and Mendes’ (2011) observation that Asian artists’ self-Othering

practices may be a potential strategy to survive in the marketplace (p. 11). This may be true for Shim: *Riceboy Sleeps* is considered a victory for Canadian independent film. Its critical acclaim and successful film festival run have cemented Shim's status as a talented and capable director, which in turn gives him freedom for his future projects.

Moreover, media representations rarely address the systemic issues that underlie the individual lived experiences they aim to portray. I draw connections here to Mahtani's (2014) critique of critical mixed-race studies, where she argues that overindulged personal narratives around racial "impurity" and hybridity "in and of themselves are no guaranteed challenge to the racial orders" of white supremacy and systemic racism, which are the real issues at hand (p. 42). It should also not be assumed that diverse representation automatically results in positive material change for the groups represented. Celebrations of these representations as proof of liberation may even placate the pervasive inequities that continue to persist within and around the Asian diaspora, such as rampant income disparity and oppressive patriarchal norms.

It is also worth reflecting on positionality when assessing the validity and effectiveness of media representation. I am certainly influenced by my disposition to be hyper-conscious of these tropes, which is due to my generation, frequenting the internet, and the knowledge afforded to me through class privilege and higher education. Wong (2024) argues that there is still value in telling the "stinky lunch" story, "even if people on Twitter are sick [of it]," to which I agree (para. 31). Amidst these intra-community debates, it is important to keep in mind that others may not be as knowledgeable or attuned to the politics of media representation. We should avoid discussing this topic in an

unnecessarily academic tone or invalidating those who identify with what could be deemed as “tropified” to not come off as “inaccessible and condescending” (para. 32). I think of people like my grandmother, who recently asked me if people have ever commented on the appearance or smell of her home-style Cantonese cuisine when I bring it for lunch. For those in her generation, the “stinky lunch” trope is a genuine lived experience unattached to media representations, college essays, and internet jokes. For other folks in the Asian diaspora, tropes may just be the “place to start,” the necessary catalyst that begins the lifelong process of wrestling with one’s relationship to their race (para. 33). Media and art offer us these entryways to see and define ourselves. Indeed, being in community with others means that each individual should be allowed to explore and define their experiences on their own terms, in their own time.

Everyone in the Asian diaspora should have the agency to represent themselves as they please, just as they should have the agency to *feel* however they want about how they are represented. This is precisely the bind of representing marginalized groups in popular media—because there are still so few thoughtful, non-stereotypical portrayals available, the options are scarce and imperfect. The goal is that marginalized groups will one day be so vastly present as both subjects and creators that the unattainable ideal of media representation is no longer framed as a milestone yet to be achieved. Nuanced representations should simply exist so that there is something everyone can draw upon. Despite my and other audience members’ qualms with the use of Asian diasporic tropes in *Riceboy Sleeps*, if director Anthony Shim felt that the story told in the film was true to his lived experience, that

is reason enough to include a scene about “stinky lunch trauma.” South Asian author Soniah Kamal’s (2016) refusal to self-censor her storytelling “just because parts of the world have turned my reality into a cliché” is an affirming reminder worth taking away (para. 9). We can and should critically examine the potential limitations of a media representation *without* dismissing its cultural significance or personal resonance to audiences. Meaningfully discussing these contradictions will support the evolution of sincere and layered media representation. We can appreciate the work that exists and also want more from the stories that are supposed to be about us—this is the only way progress happens.

I am once again reminded of the remarkable complexities of the diasporic experience. No racialized person forges their identity in the same way, and so I find solace in knowing that I will never be able to predict how others interpret it. One story will never fully portray the “vastly different, extremely complex and beautiful variety of our lives” (Roskam, 2011, p. 342). My only wish for members of the Asian diaspora is that we stand valiantly in the truth of our lived realities—and “stop spelling ourselves out in the alphabet given to us” (Hong, 2020, pp. 47-48).

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