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Racial Asymmetries

Asian American Fictional Worlds

STEPHEN HONG SOHN



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always looking to complete the next big business deal. Katherine's father thus becomes the metonym for American global capitalist desire and its hunger to dominate populations for labor power in the service of profit. When Katherine as an individual character seeks out new flesh-eating opportunities in Canada, we wonder if she is really the so-called cannibal we should be worried about. *A Carnivore's Inquiry* leaves us in an ominous place, suggesting that the new global economy must have its appetite sated through the labor of racial Others.

Art and Crypto-Colonial Appropriation in *Forgery*

Forgery, Murray's fourth fictional publication, also involves the wide arc of imperial projects, revealing how colonialism can surface in insidious ways. Greece, although not typically associated with American ethnic studies, is the fertile ground of *Forgery*, spotlighting how the acquisition of classical art becomes a damaging form of transnational appropriation. This process is likened to a more subtle form of colonialism, detailed through the adventures of an antiques dealer traveling to Greece in pursuit of more goods. The year is 1963. Rupert Brigg, the protagonist and narrator in *Forgery*, is a thirty-year-old American man who is not racially marked. At the novel's outset, Rupert travels to Greece for both business and pleasure. Dispatched there by his father, known as Uncle William, Rupert aims to find precious classical Greek artifacts, such as ceramic jars and fragments of statues. Rupert has also been encouraged to journey abroad in the wake of a tragic drowning accident that killed his son. The strain following the child's death led to the dissolution of his marriage, and he hopes that some sightseeing in Greece will take his mind off his troubles. Upon arriving, Rupert meets an old friend of Uncle William's, a Greek man by the name of Kostas Nikolaides, who is accompanied by his son, Nikos. After settling in at an Athens hotel, Nikos and Rupert embark on various adventures, which include romancing European tourists. Rupert also manages to make another acquaintance, Steve Kelly, a journalist staying in the same hotel. Once Rupert locates a couple of leads for his artifacts search, the novel shifts to a fictional Greek island called Aspros. The plot thickens as Rupert travels with Nikos, and they stay with Nikos's cousin, Neftali, who lives near properties and areas that might yield more classical artifacts and other treasures. At that time, Neftali happens to be entertaining a motley crew of guests, including Jack Weldon, a famous American sculptor, and his wife, Amanda; Nathan, a rich American publisher, and his boyfriend,

Clive; and Nathan's dear friend Olivia, who is dying of cancer. The latter half of the novel also includes a murder plot in which Amanda ends up killing her husband, in part to retain the material wealth that Jack begins to lose as he becomes more politically involved and uses his artistic talents to aid others rather than to make a profit.

Like Murray's other novels, *Forgery*'s plot seems to have very little to do with Asian American characters or contexts. Indeed, no major or even minor characters are marked as Asian or Asian American, nor do any of the major plot elements situate Asia and the United States in some sort of dialogic relationship. Even in passages that take place in the United States, little suggests that the United States is beginning to be embroiled in a war in Vietnam. However, Asian American literature must be read through its racial asymmetries, as the storytellers directing Murray's fictional worlds encourage critical reading practices in which colonial contexts can be read comparatively. *Forgery* presents yet another case of a narrator unusually concerned with history. As opposed to Katherine's tendency to question, Rupert is much more inclined to embrace a reductive view of the past in which culture can be accessed through artifacts rather than the living people who might be able to better understand a location's peculiarities and its riches. The novel questions how individuals categorize and determine the value of objects in relation to their passage through time. Though actual man eating does not take place in *Forgery*, the novel gestures to the metaphorical ways in which one nation consumes another through the purchase and the pillaging of its cultural productions. This mode of ingestion operates selectively by promoting only goods and objects, often at the expense of that nation's inhabitants. As Rupert begins to understand his participation in this process as an antiques dealer, he begins to reconsider his relationship to art and to profit.

While Murray's earlier fictions take place in countries where colonial influence has been well documented, modern Greece is an interesting case because it was never directly colonized, although at points it was occupied by foreign powers. The anthropologist Michael Herzfeld considers Greece to be exemplary of what he has called "crypto-colonialism," defined as "the curious alchemy whereby certain countries, buffer zones between the colonized lands and those as yet untamed, were compelled to acquire their political independence at the expense of massive economic dependence, this relationship being articulated in the iconic guise of aggressively national culture fashioned to suit foreign models" ("Absence Presence" 900–01). Herzfeld's larger aim is to consider "the

relationship between Greece and social-cultural anthropology: that both were products of the colonialist venture, being respectively a physical location and a discourse through which the moral segregation of the West from the rest of the world was effected" (902). Herzfeld explains how the Enlightenment project sought to identify one European origin point and targeted Greece as one possible marker for this hallowed past. According to Effie-Fotini Athanassopoulos, "Up to the eighteenth century Europeans regarded their heritage as Roman and Christian in origin. The great shift from Rome to Greece, the rise of Hellenism, began in the mid-eighteenth century. An idealized Greece was now defined as the starting point of European identity" (279).[26] In some ways, to imagine Greece is to imagine an ancient and unchanging civilization, one that could firmly root a Europe seeking a distinguished past. In a study of the ambivalence of modern Greek poets in relation to the past, Gregory Jusdanis foregrounds the historical underpinnings of artistic values: "This strong interest in Greek art established a relationship to antiquity that was unique, for it posited classical Greece as a utopia worthy of emulation. Travelers went to Italy and then to Greece with the aim of observing, recording, and removing its masterpieces" (46).[27] As ancient Greece attained this signification, archaeological excavation became commonplace.[28] The esteem placed on Greece based on its classical history was no less important for the United States, which sought to integrate classical arts and disciplines into its founding cultures, as has been documented by a variety of historians and cultural studies scholars.[29]

At the same time, Greece's relationship to the United States must be considered in relation to the novel's temporal specificity. Because the novel is set in the post–World War II era, Cold War politics offer much to ground *Forgery*'s narrative. Greece's difficult and chaotic economic recovery required significant financial support from the United States. Further, intelligence data marked Greece as a geographical nexus point; the country could function as a strong buffer between the communist East and the capitalist West.[30] In this regard, many historians argue that Greece was pivotal in the development of Cold War policies, especially in relation to the creation and deployment of the Truman Doctrine. Judith S. Jeffery clarifies the goals of the Truman Doctrine and the subsequent deviations from that initial model.[31] Moreover, Jeffery explains that though the Truman Doctrine is strongly associated with military intervention and war, "the speech on which the Doctrine was based made absolutely clear the administration's commitment to its preferred method of containment, which was through rehabilitation and

reconstruction. This was the core of the Truman Doctrine, including its application in Greece" (2).[32] In addition, Howard Jones and Evanthis Hatzivassiliou both show that Greece's northern territorial integrity was consistently in question due to the possibility of an independent Macedonia as well as invasions by Bulgaria.[33] The border alongside Albania and Yugoslavia, too, became a potential haven for Greek communists engaging in subversive activities.[34] Such findings explain the militaristic nature of the Truman Doctrine, in which violence and conflict were perceived as necessary given the specter of communism. When the Greek civil war began in 1946, the United States financially and militarily supported the more right-wing government in power, to the detriment of the communist-oriented opposition, which was ultimately handed a bitter political defeat in 1949.[35]

Strengthening Greece's military clearly occurred at the expense of the social welfare programs that could have cultivated a more stable political and economic atmosphere in the postwar period. Consequently, America's hold on Greece became paramount, as the country depended on the United States to continue its economic recovery. Jon V. Kofas sums up a commonly held view that Greece was compelled to "maintain high defense expenditures, to pursue a right-wing ideological and political orientation, and to follow free trade and orthodox monetary policies. In the three decades after the Truman Doctrine, Greece struggled to forge representative institutions, to modernize its economy, to advance education and health care, and above all to improve living standards" (4).[36] Herzfeld's notion of crypto-colonialism appears most salient here, as the Greek government faced mounting expectations to remain centrist and to dilute and expel any radical leftist presence to remain in America's good graces. Complicating matters during the period directly after the end of the civil war was the territorial dispute over Cyprus that loomed between Turkey and Greece, making the postwar national environment one of ongoing uncertainty.[37]

That the novel begins in 1963 is significant, especially since Greece was then at a turning point. The right-leaning government that had been in power since the conclusion of the Greek civil war had lost recent elections to the more centrist party headed by George Papandreou. In addition, new elections gave the United Democratic Left a majority in the new parliament, a situation that alarmed many observers in Greece and in the United States due to the party's communist leanings. As Herzfeld notes, "Papandreou was no leftist—he had been the British authorities' choice for prime minister in exile during the earlier phases of the war and

had refused to form a coalition with the procommunist United Democratic Left after his initial victory in 1963" (*Portrait* 186). But other sites of power, such as the palace and the military, became alarmed. Criticism of Papandreou stemmed from the perception that the country would be "under threat from communist menace within and without" (Clogg 157). Whether or not the United Democratic Left symbolized a dangerous return to the more militant tactics of the Communist Party of Greece (KKE), the implication—according to Western military intelligence—at the time was that a communist threat still existed and could overtake the country. This possibility further explains why the United States backed a Greek military-led coup in 1967, hoping to push the country firmly back toward the right. Adding to the general political turmoil during the 1960s, anti-American sentiment was high in Greece, as a result of US intervention in Vietnam and its entrenchment in the territorial disputes between Turkey and Greece over Cyprus.

Against this backdrop that merges the former brilliance exuded by Greece's classical antiquity with its postwar politics, *Forgery* treads unstable international topographies. My reading of this novel takes a cue from Constantine A. Pagedas, who states that "the study of US-Greek relations between 1952 and 1963, . . . following Greece's recovery from the devastation wrought by the German occupation and the Greek civil war, is a period often neglected by historians and has not received the attention it deserves" (91). *Forgery* enables an exploration of crypto-colonialism at work during this neglected period, in which cultural appropriation occurs in the context of economic interdependence. Rupert Brigg can be read as a narrator-character who must negotiate his own complicity in a transnationally exploitative business venture, as he seeks to find rare classical artifacts that can then be sold in the United States. We should therefore expand the conception of crypto-colonialism by considering the very word nestled in the term: "crypt," where the dead are buried. Brigg's archaeological excavations require him to literally uproot an artifact and bring it metaphorically back to life. Of course, the artifact that Brigg revives is ultimately connected to global capitalism, as art circulates in a market economy in which classical antiquities fetch exorbitant prices. This process involves Brigg's frequent interactions with Greek locals, many of whom seem unaware that Brigg has come to plunder classical artifacts, sculptures, ceramics, and pottery. Though his business operation appears harmless to the locals, Brigg clearly values inanimate objects more than he does the laborers and contemporary artists he encounters. This novel thus exposes the more inconspicuous

forms of consumption that unfold alongside crypto-colonial undertakings, in which people living in the present are rendered obsolete.

Forgery also exposes other issues related to Rupert's artistic leanings, which surface based on his personal experiences of loss. At the novel's inception, Murray introduces a discussion of aesthetics as conveyed through Rupert in a monologue, which suggests that art's status might have the ability to grant humanity access to the divine: "The need to approach the inanimate bulk of solid marble and find himself within it: idealized, beautiful, immortal. Without art, we have no hope of discovering our divinity, our oneness with God" (1–2). But Rupert also reveals an ambivalent relationship to art. While he acknowledges that art can be "beautiful," he believes that it can be also "useless" (1). In the context of his son's death, Rupert finds the creation of art completely superfluous but still finds himself looking for some sort of existential fulfillment, needing to "believe in something. Maybe in science, a sort of art, and transference of energy" (2). Rupert's crisis of faith animates the novel and is resolved only amid Greece's crypto-colonial landscape, where his halfhearted journey helps him rediscover how he might put art to a range of meaningful uses.

Rupert travels to Greece, in some sense, with a skeptical gaze. As an antiques dealer, he has an attachment to the beauty of classical forms, yet he is wary of the idea that art can bring one closer to divinity. The country might contain beautiful antiquities, but this prospect still leaves him without much hope for personal healing. When Rupert arrives, he reveals this particular conception of the landscape and its people: "It was 1963, and although they'd managed to weather the last two thousand years, they had the bad form to let it show. Something in my Western education had encouraged me to view Greece as a beloved anachronism, a culture that, thus preserved, entered the modern age in England, and the space age in America, as the great baton of civilization got shuttled around" (5). Rupert conspicuously discloses his desire to traffic in the stereotype of Greece as a static landscape, akin to, we might say, orientalist depictions of the Middle East. Rather than aging, Greece should be ageless, perfectly "preserved," while other countries assume a progressive trajectory. Thus, Rupert expresses his disdain for what he sees as a flaw in the way that the country appears: "Greece should have been something I could go back and visit—Ancient Civilization Land—as if it were a pavilion at the World's Fair. But the architecture was all recent postwar-boom concrete and the music was the belch of misfiring engines and pragmatism. The people had been through a lot,

and it showed in their shabby clothes" (5). These two passages establish the multiple ways in which Greece remains a landscape of oppositional conceptions. On the one hand, Greece is the "beloved anachronism," a site in which an unchanging past can be found. This perspective helps explain why Greece might be viewed as "Ancient Civilization Land" and "a pavilion at the World's Fair." The evocation of the "World's Fair" is further appropriate given the fair's historic connection to the development of anthropology as a discipline and the growing desire to classify and study what was considered foreign, primordial, or primitive. On the other hand, Rupert also realizes that Greece is not simply a location of classical ruins and artifacts, noting the "postwar-boom concrete" and other such developments. That Rupert places Greece in relation to England and America is significant because Greece, by that time, had received major financial and military support from both countries. As such, the postwar era becomes an immediately vital element to the plot, contrasting effectively with the anthropological and archaeological elements that characterize Rupert's search for classical goods and commodities. The clash between the ancient past and the contemporary moment underscores the contradictory ways that Rupert first observes Greece. Yet Rupert's critique of the Greeks' struggle to modernize—they "had the bad form to let it show"—exposes a rather dismissive attitude, especially given the nation's thorny sociohistorical trajectory.

As an antiques dealer, Rupert resituates Greece as a nation with potentially inexhaustible resources. In this quest to find precious ancient items, Rupert must authenticate such objects through two different and important characteristics tied to geography and temporality: "I had to determine the provenance and the provenience, two seemingly similar words but so much more than that to the dealer in antiques. Provenience spoke to origin; provenance to history" (41). Since Rupert can easily prove that the items he finds are from Greece, the more difficult element becomes the way he can "provide a past" for an object or artifact. The ability to categorically pinpoint an object's connection to a historical event raises that object's value. Rupert provides one example in the context of Abraham Lincoln and the pencil he may have used to compose the Gettysburg Address. On the one hand, a pencil existing at the time that Lincoln wrote the address might be considered "just a pencil from Illinois, approximately a hundred years old. Not that remarkable." But, on the other hand, "if that same pencil had been used to draft the Gettysburg Address, it would of course be priceless. The pencil would no longer be a pencil, because who would write with it? But it was something you could hold in

your hand, a concrete reminder of the significant, historical, and dead" (41). Rupert explains that provenance possesses the power to transform the object, which then takes on another functional capacity. The pencil no longer would be used to write but instead accrues value in its positioning within the historical past. This shift from the pencil as a functional tool to the pencil as a priceless artifact establishes how an object's movement through time alters its signification. The reference to the Gettysburg Address further reminds readers of the tumultuous period of American history that saw the country embroiled in a bloody civil war. The historical context for the Gettysburg Address obliquely calls attention to the very moment that Rupert travels to Greece, where the tensions of that country's civil war can still be felt in the political arena.

As Rupert continues to seek out classical antiquities, he begins to understand that art's value is ultimately subjective and constructed. For instance, he realizes that his family friend Kostas can capitalize on the wish to own something related to the ancestral past: "The value of an object is whatever it can fetch at auction. . . . I could see how someone like Kostas, with his gift for palaver, had been able to make himself quite an empire, because provenience requires only some knowledge of regional industry, and provenance a good imagination and a willing customer" (41–42). If "provenance" can be falsified, then art assumes an unstable and arbitrary value. The word "empire" is one to pause on, as it clearly links Kostas to the economy of art production. Kostas can act as a go-between for Westerners such as Rupert who seek a piece of Greek history and the locals who might have the appropriate items that can be linked to the desired provenance. An artifactual "empire" forms through this process; Greek culture, even as it is manufactured in some cases, is appropriated, something that can be claimed from afar. Rupert will later attempt to hide the fact that a Greek sculpture he acquires is actually one of a large group of forgeries. As Rupert rationalizes it, "I knew the head was inauthentic but was not prepared to sacrifice it as such. I thought of all its sisters resting beneath the waves in Faros. If I could just get rid of them, my head would stand alone, an important find. Disputing the authenticity of a single head would be much more difficult than relating it to a known group of forgeries" (195). Rupert's quest affirms a kind of empire building that fails to account for provenience in relation to contemporary geographies. He does not fully acknowledge the bodies that work to help excavate or create these forgeries and why these forgeries would have been created in the first place; nor does he consider his privilege as a transnational elite.

19. See Turner, Turner, and Green for a study in which cannibalism is disputed rather than corroborated.

20. See Turner, Turner, and Green 107–08.

21. Building on the "social pathology" thesis, Billman, Lambert, and Leonard contend, "we propose that, faced with severe environmental stress, food scarcity, and sociopolitical upheaval in the mid-AD 1100s, certain groups in the Mesa Verde region used violence to terrorize or even eliminate neighboring villages, and that cannibalism was part of this pattern of violence" (146). By offering up the pressures of environmental stress as a motivating factor for cannibalism, Billman, Lambert, and Leonard provide a vital context to theorize why indigenous populations might have resorted to anthropophagy. For another useful study contending Anasazi cannibalism, see Flinn, Turner, and Brew. The anthropologist Brian Fagan also argues that the Anasazi engaged in "eating human flesh" (126).

22. In a series of articles, including "A Reappraisal of Anasazi Cannibalism" and "A Return to the Question of Cannibalism," anthropologist Peter Y. Bullock has been particularly vocal about his opposition to the possibility that the Anasazi practiced cannibalism. His work is clearly positioned, in part, against the work of the Turners in *Man Corn*. According to John Kantner, there are "no foolproof ways of demonstrating that human flesh was actually eaten" (78).

23. Dongoske, Martin, and Ferguson specifically dispute the human-fecal-matter hypothesis (offered by Billman et al. and others) contending that "without reporting the laboratory techniques and scientific methods used in the study, it is not known whether the analysis was microscope, biochemical, or molecular-genetic, and the validity of the scientific results cannot be evaluated with respects to the known limitations of blood residue analysis" (184). Lambert et al. do offer their rebuttal to Dongoske, Martin, and Ferguson in a published response appearing in 2000.

24. For instance, studies of Anasazi cannibalism directly affect Hopi Pueblo native groups seeking advocacy and legal aid. Larry J. Zimmerman explains that Hopi tribesmen face much difficulty in building coalitions in the political arena due to perceptions that they are part of a culture promoting human-flesh eating; he thus has cautioned scholars and academics to think more deeply about the ramifications of their research (306). Further still, the Native American Graves Protect and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA; 1990) was passed in order to allow indigenous communities the possibility of claiming artifacts and important objects related to ancestral land claims. For more on NAGPRA, see Pensley; Dumont; and Fish.

25. With respect to the work conducted by Christy Turner and a documentary based on Anasazi cannibalism, Jeff Berglund contends that such work ultimately reinforces damaging stereotypes rather than complicating them or placing them in wider context (6).

26. Athanassopoulos adds that "the work of anthropologists and other scholars has made it clear that Greece is viewed somewhere between the familiar and the exotic, the European and the Oriental. The modern Greek state emerged as a cultural construct before its political formation" (280).

27. Along these lines, see Loukaki 29; and Morris 31. For more on the "treasure hunting" aspect of Greece and its classical antiquities from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, see J. Scott.

28. According to Jusdanis, "archaeologists in the nineteenth century were the ones responsible for discovering, interpreting, and popularizing Greek art, the one realm in which the ancients held superiority over the moderns" (47). Yannis Hamilakis makes clear that Western and colonial archaeological practices must be seen in tandem with the ways in which nationalist projects redefined and rearticulated the notion of Greek identity (16–21). For further studies on the importance of classical artifacts and ruins in the imagination of Greece, see Shanks; and Peckham.

29. See Gummere; Richard, *Golden Age of the Classics* and *Greeks and Romans Bearing Gifts*; Kassel; Roessel; Winterer; and Shalev.

30. These intelligence reports were ultimately wrong or at least overemphasized the geographical importance of Greece to the advancement of communist ideologies (Panourgiá 117).

31. Numerous useful studies of Greece in the postwar period exist; also see Couloumbis; Roubatis; Frazier; and Close.

32. Whether or not American intelligence was correct in the matter of Soviet involvement in Greece, Howard Jones explains, "policymakers believed that the Soviets hoped to strip Greece of its northern territory by encouraging the establishment of an independent Macedonia, which might become part of the Yugoslav Federation, and by facilitating Bulgaria's acquisition of Thrace" (13). See also Frazier 167.

33. See H. Jones 13; and Hatzivassiliou, *Greece and the Cold War* 7–13.

34. See Gantzel and Schwinghammer 221–22; and Clogg 19.

35. For some useful sources on the Greek civil war, see Vlavianos; Sfikas; Close; and Iatrides.

36. This position has been challenged by the historian James Edward Miller, who places some emphasis on the failure of Greek policy administrators (x).

37. For considerations of the tensions between Greece and Turkey, also see Kalaitzaki 106; Moustakis and Sheehan; and Hatzivassiliou.

38. In fact, Amanda gives Tomas the forgery to shift attention to the excavation site's project and away from her whereabouts, as she is later found to be the murderer of her husband, who is killed on the local island of Hydra.

39. Katherine is more a figurative embodiment and reproduction of America's continuing legacy of violence. Her motive, never fully revealed over the course of the narrative, is not as important as the fact that her father is a business magnate and that his single-minded interest in pursuing profits is, however tangentially, connected to his neglected daughter, who seeks to consume the very bodies of the young men who might one day become the foot soldiers of America's new economic empire.

5 / Impossible Narration

1. Though I primarily employ Chu's theory of science fiction, a number of scholars have offered their own approaches to the field; see, e.g., C. Freedman.

2. I employ the literary term "analogy" in contrast to other comparative rubrics such as the allegory precisely because the analogy allows one to explore various juxtapositions. The allegory is understood in its most traditional sense to be a kind of masked narrative functioning in a metaphorical way. That is, the allegory functions with one primary comparison point, but the narratives analyzed in this chapter can be compared in multiple ways against and alongside external referents.