

Sex Acts: Two Meditations on Race and Sexuality

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Helen Lee (HL) and *Celine Parreñas Shimizu (CPS)*: As Asian American feminist filmmakers, the explicit representation of the erotic in our works has a distinct relation to the hypersexual representation of Asian and Asian American women in industry cinema. Thus, we will be talking about why sex is so central in our films, and we would like our conversation here to highlight the challenge our work brings to issues in contemporary Asian American film feminisms.

CPS: I came to filmmaking informed and fueled by the need to counter the power of existing images of Asian women. While to some degree reactive, my creation of such images makes sense to me in light of how I experience as guilty pleasure the hypersexual fantasies about Asian women circulating in American cinema and public life. The triangulation of popular images, the pleasure of consuming problematic images, and the formation of the "self" compel me. Mine is a professional focus but also a very personal one: a pivotal moment of sexual awareness happened on a bus when I was a Berkeley undergrad in my first year away from home. An old veteran asked me if he had met me in Vietnam and seen

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me doing acrobatic sexual tricks in the bars. This is an extreme example, but the connection between the sex work attributed to Asian women, images on screen depicting them, and my own new sexual formations collided in ways that inform the language of my filmmaking. In fact, both of us make explicit sexual representations of Asian women in our movies.

When I say *Asian women* here, I am referring to a particular construction in the cinema. Asian women appear on screen as dragon ladies and prostitutes with hearts of gold, and they perform a particular sexual role as fantastic figures in American cinema. The Asian American feminist documentaries by Asian Women United, such as Deborah Gee's *Slaying the Dragon* (1989) and Valerie Soe's *Picturing Oriental Girls* (1992), identify this social problem well. *Picturing Oriental Girls* effectively shows the persistence of Asian women as sexual caricatures in Hollywood movies, especially as these corroborate other media such as men's magazines and mail-order bride catalogs. Selecting small moments in popular cinema that feature sexualized Asian women, Soe convincingly shows these repetitive caricatures to be a perverse undercurrent in Western popular culture. In *Slaying the Dragon*, Gee presents the limited evolution of Asian women on screen as they affect and delimit perceptions of Asian American women in contemporary society. In an oft-cited article, "Lotus Blossoms Don't Bleed" (1989), Renee Tajima assesses the problem as a no-win situation for Asian women spectators who learn about themselves as distorted representations of "lotus blossoms" or "dragon ladies." Indeed, the legacy of Asian female hypersexuality in the popular imagination cannot be overestimated, as it shapes how Asian women see themselves and are seen by others. However, Gee's and Soe's important critical film texts depend upon a certain kind of unidirectional understanding of representation: that Hollywood images demonize, injure, and oppress Asian American women. It is as if spectators simply learn and accept these images rather than converse with and challenge them in a dialectical process.

My own work aims to capture that dialectical process, to recognize not only the pain but also the pleasure provoked by these images. I understand cinema as a set of productive relations among socially and historically situated makers, spectators, and the text/image itself, operating within culture as something alive and contentious. As Jessica Hagedorn describes in her essay, "Asian Women in Film: No Joy, No Luck" (1994), pleasure may be available for viewers even in the most unexpected representations. In Michael Cimino's *Year of the Dragon* (1985), for example, Hagedorn identifies the Jade Cobra gang girl as affirmative and enjoyable, particularly for an Asian American female spectator who participates in a kind of "take what I want, leave what I want" viewing practice. Peter Feng (2000)

describes Nancy Kwan's authorship in *The World of Suzie Wong* (1960) similarly. He characterizes consuming *Suzie Wong* as a double-edged experience, both painful and pleasurable, and he emphasizes the constraints upon actors who can find work only in the portrayal of stereotypical characters. Both of these writers touch upon the ambivalent experience of spectators of color, who must either take in their own annihilation (the Jade Cobra gang girl gets hit by a car) or partake in the white male fantasy of sexy Asian female subservience in *Suzie Wong*.

As a filmmaker, I try to turn these caricatures around by imbuing the sexually available Asian female with emotion and situating her in a historical context marked by colonialism, racism, and sexism. In *Mahal Means Love and Expensive* (1993), the Asian female is a desiring subject who offers herself to an unworthy lover as if she were dessert. My direction underscores her highly contradictory subject position by highlighting her complex and ambivalent participation in sexual activity. I link immigration and colonial definitions of womanhood to her emotional experience of sex. Thus, in a moment of raw vulnerability, she objectifies herself to her lover. Her behavior, though not admirable, cannot simply be understood as positive or negative. Rather, we have a more complicated picture of Asian women's sexuality than that available in popular representation. Because Asian female sexuality on screen typically signifies a particular racial perversity, to bring emotions such as pain and discomfort to bear on representations of intimacy renders their sexuality in a very different way. It makes Asian women more human in their relationship to sex.

Beyond this critique of film content, I also offer a cinematic language reflective of my multiple concerns about race, class, sex, and gender power dynamics. In my last film, *The Fact of Asian Women* ([2002] 2004), three contemporary Asian American actors re-enact the most emblematic Asian women on screen from the 1920s to the present in order to assess their power. These larger-than-life sexual figures are the dragon lady, the prostitute with a heart of gold, and the dominatrix—all re-presented so that their production is revealed in a kind of metaprocess. By *metaprocess*, I mean the explicit revelation of the cinema as a set of mutually constitutive relations among director, actors, and spectators within the context of popular culture. In this regard, I approach the directing relationship as a classroom where actors learn for themselves and discover their own power within the creative process. Through my actors' mimicry of Anna May Wong, Nancy Kwan, and Lucy Liu's performances in popular films and the subsequent rearticulation of the scenes with different emotion and direction, I show how Asian female actors help to author themselves as sexual beings. By showing that the actors are creative authors, I place

