
Asian American Media Studies

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One way of orienting a genealogy of Asian American feminist media studies is through the dialectic of pain and pleasure that has come to dominate the way we understand images of Asian American sexuality. We can begin with Renee Tajima's 1989 article "Lotus Blossoms Don't Bleed: Images of Asian Women," in which she describes how the mainstream media has caused Asian American women pain through its consistent portrayals of hypersexualized stereotypes, including lotus blossom babies, geishas, prostitutes, picture brides, mama-sans, concubines, China dolls, and dragon ladies.¹ These simplistic figures are reduced to the availability of their sexual bodies and often serve as expendable mates for white male leads. Gina Marchetti notes that such representations have allowed white audiences to flirt with the titillating taboo of interracial sexual mixing without actually disrupting Western dominance.² These various injustices are of course matched only by the general dearth of Asian women in film and television, and the pain of symbolic annihilation.

While the preponderance of these representational harms within the mediated sphere has been one site of historical pain for Asian American women, another persistent site of exclusion and misunderstanding has been within the feminist movement itself. During its rise in the 1960s, many politicized and radicalized Asian American women started to come together within their own ethnic communities to fight racism and classism. Early immigration laws in the United States had specifically targeted and forbidden the immigration of Asian women, which led to sexual exploitation and economic inequities. Asian immigrants were also racially segregated into ethnic ghettos that suffered from poverty, limited health care and social services, underemployment, and a host of other issues that Asian Americans were just beginning to address through pan-ethnic political activism in the 1970s and 1980s. It was difficult for Asian American women to

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participate in white feminist movements that did not recognize or understand these broader racial struggles and cultural differences, and mainstream feminist activism struggled to address the overlapping oppressions wrought by both race and gender.³

As Asian American women started to develop their own specific forms of feminist theory and practice, they started to question and criticize the assumption that hypersexualization and the representation of Asian American female sexuality could only lead to pain and needed to be unilaterally condemned. Asian American feminist scholar Celine Parreñas Shimizu argues that we need to consider pleasure alongside pain, allowing for the reality that Asian American women possess their own complex sexual desires and might respond in multiple or contradictory ways to such images. She asks, what about Asian American women who were shamelessly turned on by “the whorish, the bad, and the dangerous”? Was it possible that such a “productive perversity” or desire for “bad images” could lead to empowerment?⁴ In her 2007 book *The Hypersexuality of Race: Performing Asian/American Women on Screen and Scene*, Shimizu challenges media studies scholars to reconsider the efficacy of stereotype analysis and the ways in which its insistence upon moralizing and critique fails to sufficiently address the realities of sexual fantasy and the pleasures of engaging with sexual imagery.

Beyond reconsidering narratives of sexuality in mainstream representations, Shimizu also addresses the more challenging problem of Asian women in hard-core pornography and other sexually explicit materials. Indeed, if Asian American women are underrepresented in feature films and television programs, they are greatly overrepresented and highly valued within the world of pornography. Debates about the politics of pornography have proliferated within feminist culture wars for decades, with theorists like Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon arguing, starting in the 1980s, that pornography led to women’s subordination and normalized violence against them.⁵ Pro-sex feminists like Drucilla Cornell, Candida Royalle, and Linda Williams, among many others, countered these censorious moves with the argument that pornography is also importantly a site for fantasy and female pleasure.⁶ They particularly pointed to the active and agentive role that women have played in producing sexually explicit imagery. Shimizu’s construction of a race-positive sexuality clearly builds from these debates by addressing the hypersexuality ascribed to Asian American women, and how their unique socio-cultural histories can allow for an engagement with sexual imagery that is “pleasurable, powerful, and painful simultaneously.”⁷

This centering of Asian American women's sexualities and the productive possibilities engendered within their relationship to mediated imagery have been particularly important as counterpoints to dominant discourses about Asian American male sexuality. There have been many efforts put forward by Asian American men to recognize and call attention to the pain inflicted by images of their sexuality—namely, that they are commonly represented as effeminate and/or asexual. A documentary by Jeff Adachi called *The Slanted Screen* (2006) focuses on Asian American men and their feelings of disempowerment due to the repetition of stereotypical and weak representations. Complaints about these issues have also been put forward by grassroots media activist organizations such as the Media Action Network for Asian Americans, whose members regularly celebrate when they are able to find portrayals of Asian American men as virile and heterosexual, as well as violent.⁸ These perspectives are taken to an extreme in Darrell Hamamoto's infamous essay "The Joy Fuck Club: Prolegomenon to an Asian American Porno Practice" (2000), where he argues that Asian American men have been rendered desexualized and homosexualized eunuchs who embody an alienated sexuality because they are excluded from straight pornography in the United States.⁹ He then proposes that Asian American men can recuperate their sexuality by participating in pornography with Asian American women—a project that he actually initiated by producing an Asian American porno called *Skin on Skin* (2004). The making of this explicit video is captured in a documentary called *Masters of the Pillow* (2003), which stars Hamamoto as the porn director.

While Shimizu's first book argues for the political possibility of Asian American women taking control over their sexually explicit representations (among other possibilities), her second book, *Straitjacket Sexualities: Unbinding Asian American Manhoods in the Movies* (2012), helps to explain why Hamamoto is misguided in his solution for Asian American men. In exploring a range of Asian American masculinities, she argues that representations such as those in *Skin on Skin* seek to empower men by reinscribing their sexual dominance over Asian women and affirming gendered relations through phallic power.¹⁰ She calls this the "straitjacketing of Asian American masculinity," where it seems like the only way to counter male inadequacy and lack is through heterosexual machismo and violence. But the reality is that alternative masculinities exist, and that Asian American men could instead strive for ethical manhoods that embrace caring, vulnerability, and queer subjectivities.

This perspective is productively taken up by Tan Hoang Nguyen in *A View from the Bottom: Asian American Masculinity and Sexual Representation* (2014).¹¹

In his exploration of queer Asian moving image archives, Nguyen argues that “bottomhood” can be a position of power through its ability to undermine normative ideas of gender, sexuality, and Asian racialization. Like Shimizu, Nguyen challenges the assumption that a feminized position must be denigrated in order for empowerment to take place—although he also does not require resistance or subversion in order to justify the pleasures of bottomhood.

Together, these arguments have helped scholars of Asian American feminist media studies develop more sophisticated analyses of the complex relationship between pain and pleasure. On one hand, we cannot automatically assume that pain is politically harmful and must be avoided at all costs; on the other, we must more carefully interrogate sites of pleasure in order to understand how they intersect with cultural histories of race, gender, and sexual power dynamics. The specific dimensions of Asian American racialization and the different ways in which Asian American gender relations have developed provide a productive lens through which we can now more carefully interpret the meaning of images of Asian American sexuality and sexually explicit materials. ■

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NOTES

1. Renee E. Tajima, “Lotus Blossoms Don’t Bleed: Images of Asian Women,” in *Making Waves: An Anthology of Writing by and about Asian American Women*, ed. Asian Women United (Boston: Beacon, 1989), 308–17.

2. Gina Marchetti, *Romance and the “Yellow Peril”: Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

3. Esther Ngan-Ling Chow, “The Development of Feminist Consciousness among Asian American Women,” *Gender and Society* 1, no. 3 (1987): 284–99.

4. Celine Parreñas Shimizu, *The Hypersexuality of Race: Performing Asian/American Women on Screen and Scene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 2.

5. Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon, *In Harm’s Way: The Pornography Civil Rights Hearings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

6. Drucilla Cornell, *The Imaginary Domain: Abortion, Pornography and Sexual Harassment* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Candida Royalle, “Porn in the USA,” *Social Text*, no. 37 (1993): 23–32; Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the “Frenzy of the Visible”* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

7. Shimizu, *The Hypersexuality of Race*, 145.

8. Lori Kido Lopez, *Asian American Media Activism: Fighting for Cultural Citizenship* (New York: New York University Press, 2016).
9. Darrell Hamamoto, "The Joy Fuck Club: Prolegomenon to an Asian American Porno Practice," in *Countervisions: Asian American Film Criticism*, ed. Darrell Hamamoto and Sandra Liu (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), 59–89.
10. Celine Parreñas Shimizu, *Straitjacket Sexualities: Unbinding Asian American Manhoods in the Movies* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012).
11. Tan Hoang Nguyen, *A View from the Bottom: Asian American Masculinity and Sexual Representation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).