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UCSB Professor Studies Depictions of Asian American Women in Film and Theater

While the sexualized representations of Asian American women in Western cinema and theater tend to be denounced as necessarily demeaning or negative, it may actually be the case that the images represent women taking charge of their own sexuality -- including desires and subjugation -- as actors, producers, critics, and viewers.

In her new book "The Hypersexuality of Race: Performing Asian American Women on Screen and Scene" (Duke University Press, 2007), Celine Shimizu, an associate professor of film and video in the Department of Asian American Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, suggests a more nuanced approach to the mysterious mix of pleasure, pain, and power in performances of sexuality in film and theater. The representations of Asian American women as excessively sexual or hypersexual beings serves as the foundation for her examination of race and sexuality. She advances a theory she refers to as "productive perversity," using the term to define a broadening perception of what is and is not considered normal behavior.

"It's important to humanize these women actors, producers, and critics and acknowledge them as active participants in creating their own roles and to acknowledge their agendas of offering representations that express both their

subjugations and their visions that come from that experience," Shimizu said. "They contribute to the authorship of these images. It's also important not to dismiss the creative process when we're analyzing these representations and the powers they have to restructure existing definitions and realities."

The book includes a theoretical and textual analysis that calls into question the accepted beliefs regarding controversial portrayals of Asian female sexuality in film and theater, such as that in the popular Broadway musical "Miss Saigon." Drawing on ethnographic research and interviews with some of the actresses who have performed in the musical, Shimizu discusses how viewers--including Asian American women--can take pleasure in images that seem negative.

"In paying attention to the desire for identities that centrally pivot on sexuality, I aim to show how hypersexuality, performed and consumed pleasurably as well as painfully, expresses yearnings for better representations and realities for those marginalized by race and gender," Shimizu writes in her book. "Instances of hypersexuality alert us to limited definitions of sexuality, race, and representation, and are crucibles for the creative formations of subjectivity. Thus, representations of racialized sexuality offer a tremendously political critique in rewriting the utility of 'moving image' cultures to race and sex politics."

In addition to looking at how three Asian American femme fatales--Anna May Wong, Nancy Kwan, and Lucy Liu--negotiate representations of their sexuality, Shimizu analyzes stag films of the 1920s and 30s in which European American women perform as sexualized Asian characters. Further, she considers the performances of Asian American women in films ranging from the stag pornography of the 1940s to the Internet and video pornography of the 1990s. She also reflects on two documentaries that depict Southeast Asian prostitutes and sex tourism: "The Good Woman of Bangkok," and "101 Asian Debutantes."

In her study of films and videos produced by Asian American women such as Annabel Chong and Asia Carrera, Shimizu describes how female characters in those works reject normative definitions of race, gender, and sexuality while expanding the definition of racialized sexualities in representation. Chong appeared in more than 50 adult films and Carrera in more than 300. Shimizu argues for a comprehensive analysis of the combined pain and pleasure reflected in these representations, and of the women's participation in creating them.

"With this book I look at the most popular articulations of Asian American women as hypersexual beings and consider what can be productive about examining these images closely rather than fleeing from them because they may produce pain as well as pleasure," Shimizu said. "When an encounter with these images leads to thoughtful engagement beyond the moral condemnation that often surrounds sexuality and visuality, it can become a transformative learning experience."

Shimizu will read from "The Hypersexuality of Race: Performing Asian American Women on Screen and Scene" on Thursday, Oct. 18, at 6:30 p.m. at the Stanford University bookstore, 519 Lasuen Mall. Another reading sponsored by UCSB's MultiCultural Center will take place on Tuesday, Nov. 6, at 5 p.m. in the MultiCultural Center Lounge.

About UC Santa Barbara

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