

## 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

their performance of hypersexual Asian women in a creative collaboration and conflict with predominantly Western white male filmmakers who produce, direct, and write these roles. We must go beyond understanding Asian women who work in popular culture as simply complicit with the white male authors of popular culture. By engaging with popular culture, Asian American women actors—and their spectators—help to author themselves, bringing their own versions and interpretations of experience in collision with the white male versions of their lives. As such, I characterize popular culture as an encounter with and of power. My idea of metaprocess thus not only dramatizes spectatorship as an encounter with director, actors, and culture but also dramatizes authorship itself as always contested.

The formulation of sexuality is a significant part of my understanding of cinematic relations. It is formative in the sense of understanding our phenomenological relation to cinema as described by Vivian Sobchack in *The Address of the Eye* (1991). Directors and actors shape each other, as do the text and the spectator, in an intersubjective relationship. Thus the question about whether our work reinforces popular myths about Asian women's sexuality can only be answered if we take into account our social location and the relations that occur at both the moment of authorship and spectatorship.

As Asian American feminist filmmakers, we are not completely dominated by Hollywood versions of Asian women. Rather, we are caught in the traffic of power; industry images repress our experience but also compel our film practice and our speech. As such, the representations of explicit sex acts in my films can be understood as feminist practices. My obsession in making sexual images is compelled by fantastic representations that I find infuriating and of utmost concern. At the same time, the enterprise of making films that prioritize Asian female subjectivity is affirming. My films are about immersing myself and my Asian female characters in the messy morass of power that is sexuality and film.

*HL:* Asian and Asian American women are often depicted in various modes of servitude, including sexual servitude. The stereotypes of passive servant or aggressive dragon lady are both very charged, hypersexualized images—they imply that we have secrets or skills that aren't available to other women. Although I am critical of these stereotypes, at the same time I want to present strong Asian female characters whose sexuality isn't completely uninflected by these matters, whose sexuality acknowledges the popular lineage of the lotus blossom/dragon lady stereotypes without buying into them. One of the challenges is how to refigure the sexualized image of Asian women, how to make them whole and human and emo-

tionally complex, and also how to signal that their sexuality is also somehow specific to them, to their background. I want to do this in ways that don't smack of didacticism or give us another tiresome rehearsal of race. For some reason people always end up in bed in my films. But it's not like the films are headed there, that the narratives are telescoping to a culminating sex act. Perhaps it's because sex, for me, always stands for something, like a turning point or expression of the moment.

In my films, sexual expression or a sexual act often acts as a pivot—in story or character or thematic terms. It's an assertion of the body, the racialized and gendered figure who may be socially subjugated in my films. Against this subjugation, the private, sacral moments between lovers that I represent can't be "judged." I generally try to avoid the sexual victimization of the lead character, even when the sex doesn't have a good end. Such victimization is too easy. Sex can surely complicate matters, but it can also clarify—it's after sex that, in *My Niagara* (1992), Julie realizes the limits of her commonality with Tetsuro, and that the nameless main character in *Subrosa* (2000) realizes that her longing and need for connection cannot be satisfied through a casual sexual liaison with the Korean bar owner. In *Sally's Beauty Spot* (1990), the sexual thematics of the piece are treated lightly, allusively, and symbolically, with various almost-kisses that lead up to the final one with the black lover that finally breaks Sally's illusions. In *Prey* (1995), the scene in bed with Il Bae and Noel acts as a kind of bridge for the characters to enable them to get to another stage with each other, intimacy created via the tongue and through kissing as well as through language. Sex is never the culmination or endpoint.

For me the most powerful moments in cinema are wordless—I remember images and emotions, never dialogue. This is because of film language itself, its meanings conveyed by the style, tone, and rhythms of the filmmaking. It's exactly in the ineffability of certain situations, the fact that speech cannot possibly render these moments, that the beauty and expressive capacity of cinema are best demonstrated. The sex act as represented on screen rarely feels intimate in itself (usually it works as a signifier for intimacy—okay, they got there, we got that), and it's more the stuff around it, getting there, that creates both the feeling of intimacy for us and what is meaningful for the characters. Granted, sometimes talky sex can work, especially for comedy, but then the pure viscerality of the body becomes diminished. For those moments that in one way or another should be moments of transcendence, speech can be intrusive. In any case, representationally speaking, it's not how explicit or "sexy" a scene is, it's how that kiss or exchange is shot—in a surprising or innovative or unexpected manner—that makes it satisfying.

In *Sally's Beauty Spot*, Sally comes to realize the process of her objectification; in *My Niagara*, Julie remains stifled by daughterly devotion and haunted by the maternal specter of her mother's death by drowning; in *Prey*, Il Bae disregards sexual and social taboos by pursuing her desires and bedding a guy who shoplifts at her father's store; the character in *Subrosa* unwittingly mirrors the fate of her prostitute mother. All of these characters, their problems, their affective lives, and their issues have a sexual dimension that has an inexorable quality, propelled as it is by social circumstance or driven by personal pursuits. As a filmmaker, I try to bring a more subversive or playful quality to the sexual scenes so as to keep things ambiguous and alive. At the same time, throughout, sexual identity is always inextricably tied to racial, social dimensions of the self.

Race is always loaded on the screen—it's there, it's visible, there's a lot of baggage attached to what all the spectators bring to their particular reading of the image; it's more than any one filmmaker can calculate. I like to bring together characters of markedly different racial backgrounds in my films. In *Prey*, a cross-cultural comedy set in a Korean convenience store, Il Bae becomes even more powerfully attracted to Noel, a Native drifter with a gun in his pocket and charm to spare, after catching him shoplifting. *The Art of Woo* (2001) is a romantic comedy about a young woman who poses as an Asian heiress to find her man of means but unwittingly finds herself falling in love with her next-door neighbor, a poor but talented Native painter. Fast friends and then enemies, Alessa Woo and Ben Crowchild quit their endless sparring with a surprisingly gentle, largely mute encounter beneath translucent sheets. Though they share and genuinely connect, some secrets—like their true identities—remain secret. Alternately, I bring together Asian men who differ from the Asian Americanness of the protagonists in *Subrosa* or *My Niagara*. *Subrosa* describes the melancholic return of the prodigal daughter, a Korean adoptee looking for home. The unnamed heroine's fruitless search for her birth mother culminates in a sudden, furiously unemotional, somewhat sordid act of sexual intercourse in a seedy motel room with a Korean bar owner in Seoul. The light is red, the moment painful. Her purpose: self-obliteration. In *My Niagara*, a minimalist drama set in a water filtration plant by the lakeshore, emotional disenchantment and suburban ennui find odd—and literal—bedfellows in Julie Kumagai and Tetsuro, a stranger from Japan whose seeming familiarity has its limits when Julie discovers the foreigner within. Their bodies explore and commune in a mutual wish for transcendence, but their cultural differences divide, especially as their own private wounds remain unhealed. In both these films, I set up a collision that happens in a social and emotional sphere that's

open to numerous interpretations, whoever you are. Indeed, the one thing that leads me as a filmmaker is what makes sense emotionally given who my characters are.

The social engineering of these dynamics can be a trap, but at the same time I try to use what we've come to expect typically from these characters and to try something else as well. I want to focus on what is most contemporary, what's most indicative of our times, and yet remain personal and grounded and specific. The moment that a character, or a spectator, is caught off guard can generate a frisson in cinema, that perfect collusion of action, framing, music, gesture, pauses, dialogue (usually very little), blocking, and the cut. It's all about the materiality of that moment, of embodying it with things that both encompass race/sexuality/gender—the heady issue stuff—and the inchoate and ineffable. It's like that moment of recognition you talk about when you see someone on screen, somebody who speaks to you through some kind of complicated image/identity system, and you in turn feel recognized, understood. That moment for me as a child was when I saw Nancy Kwan in *The World of Suzie Wong* on my television set in suburban Toronto. So much is wrapped up in that moment of recognition, in what we have invested in it, and the stakes are not small—image, self-esteem, representation, power, projection. And you try to figure that out as a filmmaker, why it got you in the gut in the first place.

*CPS:* The production of sexually explicit images of and by women of color can generate race panic, in the sense of the sex panics of the 1980s when anticensorship and antiporn platforms collided and challenged feminist community and discourse. That is, within a racial critique, sexual representations of racial subjects supposedly dangerously reify fantasies of Asian women as always sexually available. Thus, within this framework, Asian American feminist filmmakers representing sex as both painful and pleasurable can be seen as self-indulgent, as engaging in a form of self-exoticization. And for pro-sex feminists, the discussion of racial subjugation in sex can be seen as regressive and part of a problematic moralistic, puritan crusade. In this framework, it's interesting that the sex acts that would visibly confirm Asian female hypersexuality in classical and contemporary cinema and theater, such as *Madama Butterfly* (Puccini [1904] 1995), *Miss Saigon* (Schönberg, Maltby, and Boubilil 1989), and the films featuring Anna May Wong, Nancy Kwan, and Lucy Liu, never overtly depict sexual interplay between racialized actors. These sex scenes are implied and unimportant in and of themselves. They are significant in the sense of what they produce in the film narratives—for example, biracial babies. What I aim to accomplish by focusing on overt dramatic sexual

interaction between racialized actors is to show racial sex acts as a lived process of identity formation and thereby to challenge a visual regime in which bodies of color seem to naturally and biologically exude a particular racialized sexuality. As filmmakers, we can portray the sex act with an awareness of the ways people of color are fetishized as innately sexual. In my work, I investigate the sex act as a site where we can see how racial identities form and transform rather than simply showcase supposedly innate traits.

In the very incarnation of the racial-sexual subject in my work, the fetishistic cinematic legacy of *Slaying the Dragon* (1989) and *Picturing Oriental Girls* (1992) is never far away. From screenwriting through the work of designers, camera, and lighting crew, and in the directing/acting collaboration and the postproduction process, my filmmaking represents what can actually happen between people who are insistently projected and projected upon as sexually perverse because of their race. I recast private moments that supposedly create public identities for Asian women. I speak in explicit sex acts in order to articulate sex as a site for seeing how race and relationships can be reimagined as not just about oppression and domination but as about redemption or, perhaps, even about life-affirming, everyday pleasure practices.

I do this by taking seriously Trinh T. Minh-ha's idea of "speaking nearby" (Trinh and Chen 1994). I formulate a method of interview after I draft the scripts for my films. For my first film, *Mahal Means Love and Expensive* (1993), I observed and interviewed young college-age and mostly Filipina American women of various classes and immigrant/citizen backgrounds about the politics of sleeping around. I then crafted an aesthetic inspired by these interviews. For example, I incorporated Roman Catholic sensibilities with a set design that features altars and icons. Philippine natural disasters such as volcanic rupture informed the lighting and the color timing of the film. Unnatural disasters in colonial politics helped to shape the poetic dialogue and voice-over. Based on my interactive conversations with the interviewees, I focused on their active self-erotization that made use of their various histories of colonialism, Catholicism, and diaspora that they brought into moments of intimacy. Like you, Helen, the results I find are transformative for the characters.

While the political goals are quite clear in my project, I find unexpected pleasure in directing sex scenes where power and subjectivity are explored. In *Super Flip* (1997), I directed Desi del Valle, who was also in your *My Niagara* (1992) and is currently a well-known actress in independent gay and lesbian film. *Super Flip* interweaves religion and sexuality, two themes that are closely associated in Latino and Filipino cultural formation. A



hyperhetero/Latino/Filipino sex scene eroticizes Catholic religious iconography and the shared colonial legacies of the two lovers. I recast these caricatures as characters by scripting a narrative about their sameness and difference in the context of the richness of their cultures. Again, shooting was also a process of discovery with the actors. While the scene is written in English, we decided to shoot in Tagalog and Spanish. The actors didn't understand each other, but it made sense in the film to use language in this way to set up the tensions of sameness/difference in their intercourse. It doesn't matter that these two do not understand each other's languages; the more important point is their coming together not just as representations of two specific cultures but as bodies crossing with their individually powerful sexual signification, revealing them to be projections they live within this moment of intimacy.

HL: All my films prior to and including *The Art of Woo* (2001) feature Asian female protagonists caught up in some cross-cultural encounter. That's the most basic generalization I can make about my work. When someone asks, "What are your films about?" it's sometimes difficult to answer because they are about the gaps and fissures, the preconceptions and misconceptions, the absences and longings, and always, somehow, about forms of racial melancholia that are like seepages in the more obvious dramatic or comedic content of the films. The plot is one thing, and the other aims of what we do—the social issues we try to engage, though not in obviously didactic ways—are I feel our *raison d'être*, why we're in this game after all.

I'm constantly pulled by different forces in my filmmaking (I sometimes fantasize about making genre-based action movies like Kathryn Bigelow; I used to worship Jane Campion, and I think Claire Denis is one of the most exciting filmmakers working today), but always there's the question of audiences, which in feature filmmaking is not unrelated to marketing. *The Art of Woo* is an extremely low-budget film but was completely financed in an industry-oriented setting and produced through the Canadian Film Centre (CFC)'s Feature Film Project. (The CFC was founded in 1989 by Norman Jewison and is modeled on the American Film Institute in terms of its mandate to train film professionals for the industry.) *The Art of Woo* is somewhat anomalous in my work, I think, but also part of a continuum. It has obvious commercial intent, and the dramatic/comedic situation is completely exteriorized, but it still has themes and characters true to my previous work. The film has a romantic comedy setting and features nonwhite lead characters. The point was to engage with a familiar and beloved genre and to put a different spin on it, to activate these characters and let them loose in a terrain that we associate

with Audrey Hepburn or Julia Roberts, and to bring our own things into the mix. The character of Alessa Woo is both the stereotypical Asian princess and something grittier and real; Ben Crowchild is a struggling Native painter but also a child of privilege. But none of this is presented as de facto truth; these identities are always at play and rubbing against each other throughout the film. Both characters are very aware of how they “signify” and are both resistant to and fall into preconceptions of how they are perceived as outsiders to the mainstream. Identity is at the core of the film, but it is not the issue. For some viewers it may have been an uncomfortable fit—hey, these characters are Asian but they’re not acting that way (whatever that means), or the movie doesn’t have obvious ethnic content that is easily consumable in the *The Joy Luck Club* (1993) way.

I’m always concerned about inside and outside, about the politics of margin and center. In Canada, as a person who goes through life ethnically inscribed but living in a place like downtown Toronto, which is probably one of the most multicultural, multiracial environments in the world, I am constantly questioning or being made aware of that ongoing flux of inside/outside. During the last five years, Korea has also been a big part of my life, and that too—looking Korean in Seoul but not speaking the language very well—has a whole different set of complications and conundrums: the transnational perspective, the whole idea of return and repatriation, immigration in reverse. I find all this incredibly stimulating as a filmmaker. I am constantly being challenged and live in a very conscious state of who, why, where I am. And because these issues were always at work in my films anyway—issues of belonging, identity, desire—it makes for a really invigorating time for me. I feel we live in an extremely interesting period of social experiment. For example, that collision of Ben, the Native character, with Halmoni, the Korean grandmother, in *Prey* (1995): now when else in history would two people like that meet? It’s an unpredictable moment.

*CPS:* The social experiments you undertake in your filmmaking practice, such as placing seemingly incongruous characters together or racializing the subjects of romantic comedy, seem to derive from your own dilemma. Your work as a director and screenwriter illustrates how you are caught within the larger world of cinema history, on the one hand, and your own life as an immigrant, as a racialized, gendered, and sexual subject stitching those worlds together, on the other. My own film language is informed by my situation within the academy. Like Trinh T. Minh-ha, who made it possible for me to imagine life as a maker-theorist, I also work as a professor-filmmaker. The academy is conducive to reading/writing and

making, one life half lived without the other. *The Fact of Asian Women* ([2002] 2004) was informed by the classroom itself, for I shot the studio and the city sets as sites where actors as students experiment in order to gain knowledge. Teaching is very much a part of my film agenda, which involves media literacy, access to technology, the business of building an audience, and establishing venues such as feminist- and ethnic studies-based distribution and production organizations that enable our work.

HL: Trinh Minh-ha was at one point my ultimate role model, almost perilously so, because I read the whole world through her *Woman, Native, Other* (1989) paradigm, and that can be stifling because, of course, there is always more than one model. But she remains incomparable, especially for combining academia and filmmaking. Despite her own critique of “influence,” Trinh’s eloquence as a writer and speaker and the interrogative character of her films became, like it or not, a standard-bearer for feminist postcolonial studies. But then my focus changed, and although I think my filmmaking is still idea based, making intellectually driven work and speaking to an elite (and small) audience became less satisfying. My first film, *Sally’s Beauty Spot* (1990), emerged specifically from a desire to share theories I found personally exciting with more people, to push style and content outside the classroom. I thought it was only possible to pursue filmmaking and remain in the academy if my films were avant-garde or at least reflexive and critical in nature—in other words, expository. That mode wasn’t, and still isn’t, compatible with dramatic filmmaking, with the way that industry is structured, or with the timelines and kind of commitment that’s necessary to succeed in dramatic filmmaking.

In terms of how one aligns oneself, I always felt closer to the feminist film context, at the same time that I was comfortable in an Asian American one—those are my roots. And I’m thankful for getting a speedy education in development issues (my first training was at DEC Films, a development education center in Toronto that had a film distribution arm specializing in social and political documentaries about the third world). My concerns were distinctly political, and I entered filmmaking in order to visualize these political issues, to animate them in a cinematic framework, to make them more accessible and possibly entertaining. Richard Fung was one of my first mentors (we worked together at DEC); when I moved to New York, Rea Tajiri, Shu Lea Cheang, Christine Chang, Yunah Hong, and Kimsu Theiler were all very important to me, as was the fact that we were this community of Asian women filmmakers. The connection and grounding were powerful—we understood each other’s work but came from very different spaces and viewpoints, so there was both specificity and commonality there. At the time I was employed at Women Make Movies as

the promotions coordinator, and working with their films on a daily basis. It was an incredibly vital time for me, for all of us. The desire to innovate and be radical in what we were trying to say, that was our common ground—we were all filmmakers, feminists, Asian women. Just to be with each other and see each other's work was very empowering. While working at DEC Films in the late eighties, I attended the (now-defunct) Montreal Women's Film Festival and met the executive director of Women Make Movies, Debbie Zimmerman, and my predecessor, Patricia White (who now teaches at Swarthmore College). Women Make Movies is now the world's largest distributor of feminist film and video, and I first visited their office in New York City when I started attending NYU in 1989. There, I watched Pam Tom's *Two Lies* (1989). The film, a half-hour black-and-white thesis film made at UCLA, left me thunderstruck; that someone could deal with issues personal to me—she was speaking to me—in cinematically interesting terms was a revelation. A perfect combination of style and content, *Two Lies* is about two squabbling sisters and their anxiety about their mother's eyelid surgery/sexuality, indelibly inscribed throughout with Pam's signature as a filmmaker. I respected her craft enormously. The mood and atmosphere and texture of life she was able to create in a short drama stunned me, inspired me. After that, I thought, I'd like to do this! Now, more than a dozen years on, working as a filmmaker remains interesting and completely absorbing.

The past couple of years have been varied and challenging in different ways—shooting *Subrosa* (2000) in Korea, making *The Art of Woo* (2001) in Canada, and embarking on new projects, including a video installation called *Cleaving* (2002), which was mounted at Werkleitz Biennale in Germany, and a short called *Star* (2001), which was a commissioned piece for the twentieth anniversary of LIFT (Liaison of Independent Filmmakers of Toronto). The range and variety of these projects is what has been so stimulating, as well as finding different form and expression to give to different ideas. It would be impossible for me to focus only on feature filmmaking: I'd be making only one film every five years! And, in truth, it's not as if they're rolling out the red carpet for Asian female directors in feature film land (even the success of Gurinder Chadha's *Bend It Like Beckham* [2002] won't likely change that). I think the dividing line for opportunity here is not race but gender. The situation is extremely different for men—it's still a boy's game, especially the feature film industry. But I have no envy or bitterness or any really negative thoughts about it, because I'm grateful for who I am—if I was a white young male, who knows what I'd be making films about? Would I have anything to say?

CPS: Our films engage both feminist and Asian Americanist concerns

and practices: the lives of women at home and in diaspora as well as the context of filmmaking as a global and persistently male industry. Though my own identification is continuously in flux, I do situate myself as a feminist filmmaker of Asian American cinema. I also feel strongly enabled by the antitraditional experimental films made by women of color such as Julie Dash, Lourdes Portillo, Pratibha Parmar, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Dawn Suggs, Cauleen Smith, and Camille Billops. There is a particular political project in their films that they accomplish in different ways. However political, their work is never didactic but expressive of the forms engaged. The scene, for example, in Trinh's *Shoot for the Contents* (1991), in which the light is not on the two people in conversation but on the translator, literally illuminates the limits of translation and its mediation of meaning. I teach Cauleen Smith's short *The Message* (1990) alongside Laura Mulvey's essay on "Visual Pleasure" (1975), for it engages the concept of the male gaze through a self-reflexive black female objectification of the black male body. In *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), Julie Dash puts the subjectivity of black women in the center and demands spectators occupy the position of the margins, requiring them to decenter themselves. Many of these women filmmakers also work as activists, critics, curators, and theorists. As a feminist filmmaker, I identify strongly with films made by women of color. Through my work, I incorporate the multiplicities of race, class, sex, and gender differences with experimental, documentary, and narrative film language in order to make new unbounded forms that address social problems. I try to engage the unspoken in Asian American life to prioritize feminist concerns especially around sexuality. For example, I love Jennifer Pheng's *Love Limited* (1999), in which the son and daughter both come out as gay and lesbian at the dinner table, enabling the queer in the rest of the family to emerge as well.

How does all this fit in the larger body of work we know as Asian American cinema? In the practice and teaching of this cinema, I avoid the pitfall of offering a false narrative of progress from early Hollywood films such as *The Cheat* ([1915] 1997) and *Toll of the Sea* (1922) to contemporary engagements such as Justin Lin's *Better Luck Tomorrow* (2002). Eve Oishi has accurately critiqued the myth of forward movement "from the minor to major leagues" for Asian Americans working in film. A closer look reveals that early stars such as Anna May Wong and Sessue Hayakawa were actually able to make pronounced differences in Hollywood. They were more able than actors today to protest the limits of categorization and ghettoization placed upon them. The contemporary actress Lucy Liu seems more constrained in her engagements with fan culture, very guarded in terms of her racial, gender, and sexual critique. If you look at her

interviews in fan magazines, she flippantly raises issues about exotification and the problems Asian men encounter in popular representation. While she engages these issues, she does so in a limited manner. Anna May Wong, on the other hand, raised hell and came to be known for her scathing critiques and fury regarding her roles. Where is the progress? It seems to me that we are caught within our historical context. What seems certain is that we must continually engage cultural production as a site for social struggle.

What I find so interesting, Helen, about your making *The Art of Woo* in the context of the history of both Asian American cinema and feminist cinematic progress is its challenge to the contemporary conception that “women make experimental or documentary films and men make feature narratives.” Renee Tajima makes this observation in “Moving the Image: Asian American Independent Filmmaking, 1970–1990” (1991). It’s almost like women perform service work documenting the community while men are able to make myths and be creative in articulating the community. As women, racialized women, it’s already challenging to make the short films that we do make. From start to distribution, my budgets are about \$1,000 per minute, so that the ten-minute *Mahal Means Love and Expensive* cost \$10,000 and *Super Flip* cost \$30,000. Some features get made for that much money. Why not go all the way, then? Where do women filmmakers get stalled? It’s not for lack of gall or courage. My point is that more of us should be making narrative features as well as shorts and documentaries.

*HL:* Personally I’m scared as hell to make documentaries—real people, not actors, dealing with real life issues—that takes courage. It’s no wonder that documentary, especially experimental autobiographical documentary, has become a realm for women filmmakers of color. It takes guts. At the same time, documentary can be a generic ghetto for filmmakers of color. If it isn’t social issue-based, people aren’t going to give you a chance. When someone asks me why my films are always about Asian women and will that always be my topic, they act as if it’s some kind of handicap or self-marginalizing gesture. The truth is, I don’t feel constrained or limited to it in any way; it’s just my area of concentration, my choice of focus in a real, centered, nonsimplistic, and provocative way. Of the half-dozen stories I have circulating in my head at the moment, only one portrays a white male protagonist, and that script is being written by another screenwriter. I am constantly trying to figure out, however, how to make stories interesting and relevant to a larger population. Otherwise you’re just preaching to the converted. And also how to innovate, how to both push the issue and the form. That’s the trick.

I want to return to Anna May Wong. Wouldn't we all love to make a film about her life? She's incredibly fascinating and has taken on mythical proportions. And you're right that there's no progress. The lineage from Anna May Wong to Nancy Kwan to Lucy Liu—it seems like it's only in thirty-year intervals that the American public can accept a breakout Asian American movie star. I met Lucy Liu last year on the set of Vincenzo Natali's film, *Cypher* (2002), and she was surprisingly forthright and friendly. She took the initiative to greet me and my friend, the only other Asian women on the movie set, and stated her desire for material that spoke to her as a Chinese American—but not in that typical immigrant narrative mode or as the oppressed ethnic minority, obviously not! That girl is mainstream all the way, that's where her power and stardom are generated. I personally love to see her kick ass on screen. Seduction with a punch. Earlier this spring, I also met Nancy Kwan (it was a banner year) at a commemorative screening of *Flower Drum Song* ([1961] 1991) at the San Francisco Asian American Film Festival. What a touchstone she's been for me, both in terms of *Sally's Beauty Spot* (1990), which had excerpts from *The World of Suzie Wong* (1960), and the video installation, *Cleaving* (2002), which quotes the "I Enjoy Being a Girl" number in *Flower Drum Song*. We should treasure what these women (and others, such as the fabulous Margaret Cho) have given us, instead of endlessly making tiresome dragon lady critiques. That's too easy. The pleasures and conflicts are much more complicated than such a critique allows.

*CPS*: I love the legacy you encourage us to celebrate—to understand Anna May Wong, Nancy Kwan, and Lucy Liu as living, fighting actors caught within history and institutions. There is so much strength in the choices these actors made and also in their ghostly presences on celluloid. As an Asian woman interpellated by their images, I can't just accept them as puppets in roles whose parameters are set by others; I see the struggles they faced and continue to face as women and actors in embodying limited characters. It's amazing and powerful to watch this kind of ghostly overlapping of woman, actor, and character on screen—the fantasy and the fact of Asian women in an encounter for us to see and wrestle with as audiences. The gender continuum in history is also represented in the migration of Asian women into the West: as prostitutes, picture brides, war brides, and pen pal brides. It makes sense for us to be so obsessed with them; it is our history. In my work, I hope to represent Asian women in terms that capture both how they are imagined and imaged—and also in terms of how real women off-screen confront and live their lives in the face of the powerful fantasies established about them. In light of this, when you discuss documentary and narrative, features and shorts, and

small or large audiences—I think you are capturing an important aspect of the challenges, priorities, and problems you and I face in terms of an Asian American feminist film practice.

The way we deal with these challenges is dynamic. This is evident in terms of our most recent works, in your recasting the feature via race/sex in *The Art of Woo* (2001), or my experimental documentary, *The Fact of Asian Women* ([2002] 2004). What I know is that the spaces we occupy—me in the smaller and you in the larger arenas of the film industry—converse with each other in our culture. Together, in our different battles as Asian American women filmmakers working in different modes, we both help to build audiences concerned with the subject of Asian women not only as viable subjects on screen but also in the streets and scenes of everyday life.

I truly look forward to what the future of films by Asian American women will look like. The movement from Loni Ding, Freida Lee Mock, and Trinh T. Minh-ha to the many young women now working is something to be excited about: Grace Lee of *Barrier Device* (2002), my producer Yun Jong Suh of *We Too Sing America* (2001).

As you move further into narrative feature filmmaking, Helen, I am thankful that we can occupy these different fronts so that we can redefine the form and also shape politics from different places. I can't wait to see what you will do next and how your sensibilities will change cinematic form and how you will be changed by it. I plan to keep making experimental narrative shorts and documentaries—as well as one day, a feature—all the while teaching, reading, and writing.

HL: Celine, you must add to the teaching, reading, and writing also rearing your newborn child! I'm not sure what the future agenda of an Asian American feminist film practice is, except that we must raise the bar cinematically and in terms of content. Even just to keep going is an achievement, it's a struggle. How many women have viable careers as filmmakers—and a body of work? While a great deal has already been done, it's up to us all to always keep things moving, to keep the debates fired up and sophisticated and challenging. Maintaining the status quo is death. And the regeneration you speak about, the emerging filmmakers out there who are producing exciting new work, I can't even envision the kind of work that will be made; I'm sure it will blow our minds.

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