The hypersexuality of race: performing Asian/American women on screen and scene

Celine Parreñas Shimizu, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2007, 340p, ISBN 978-0-8223-4012-6 (cloth : alk. paper), \$84.95; ISBN 978-0-8223-4033-1 (pbk : alk. paper), \$23.95

In *The Hypersexuality of Race*, Celine Parreñas Shimizu interrogates Western culture's fascination with the hypersexuality of Asian and Asian/American women with sensitivity and tenacity. Her main argument is that Asian/American women are hypersexualized in their framings and representations at the 'sites of production, consumption, and criticism' (p. 24). Therefore, she insists, it is through sex that Asian/American women can resist and subvert these representational tropes in order to form a race-positive sexuality. Her argument stresses 'that pleasure and fantasy from the sexualization of race must be part of race politics' (p. 6).

Parreñas Shimizu proves her argument through a close reading of several types of texts featuring sexualized Asian/American women. She investigates the performance of hypersexualization, including *Miss Saigon's* singing Vietnamese prostitutes and the Asian/American *femmes fatales* of mainstream Hollywood. She also considers at length the performance of sex acts onscreen, including white women in yellowface in early stag films, Asian/American stars of mainstream pornography and the Asian prostitutes who appear in gonzo sex tourism videos. Lastly, she considers the works of Asian/American feminist filmmakers, such as herself. The commonality in these different representations is, of course, the hypersexuality of Asian/American women, and also their significant relationships with Western white men and (often) implicit comparisons with the figure of the virtuous white woman.

Parreñas Shimizu is very frank about her exhaustive archival consideration of historical, amateur and mainstream pornography. She explains,

Rather than subscribe to the typical stance of knowing what porn is without seeing it, or arguing against porn without evidence, I see the project of looking at porn closely and historically as a way to evaluate sex and its contributions to fantasies, ideologies, and knowledge about race. (p. 105)

Thus, *The Hypersexuality of Race* considers many pornographic representations that have not been given much scholarly attention, such as the privately screened stag films and amateur sex-tourism films.

The Hypersexuality of Race marks a valuable contribution to feminist scholarship considering pornography. It encourages feminist spectators, and Asian/American feminist women in particular, to consider the pleasures, as well as the perils of viewing pornography and sex on stage and screen. In her investigation of both

pleasure and danger in the representations of Asian/American sexuality, Parreñas Shimizu uses the term 'bondage' to describe 'the experience of viewing, performing, and criticizing hypersexuality as both punitive and pleasurable, as well as political, for Asian/American women' (p. 16). She argues that the perverse pleasures for Asian/American female spectators in seeing the mechanisms of their own hypersexualization functions as a 'queering of heterosexual frameworks of race' (p. 13).

The Hypersexuality of Race is part of a larger movement in feminist scholarship that re-considers concepts of materiality within postmodern media culture. From Judith Butler's influential 1993 *Bodies That Matter* to Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman's recent edited collection, *Material Feminisms*, questions about the specificity of the female material body have become of paramount interest and the subject of heated debate. Parreñas Shimizu uses an approach informed by phenomenological and performance theories to consider the ways in which the raced female body is produced in and through hypersexuality yet whose material reality renders that body 'unknowable' in many of its power relationships.

These power relations are part of wider postfeminist media culture in which hypersexualization is enmeshed with hyper-commodification and a fetishization of the concept of women's choice. The incorporation of many tropes from pornography into the mainstream (from the Playboy brand to pole-dancing aerobics) is a valuable site for applying Parreñas Shimizu's method of investigation to the hypersexualized female consumer. In a postfeminist media culture that insists on framing sexuality as a consumer product and an act of diligent self-policing, is Parreñas Shimizu's goal of race-positive sexuality possible? And in what form? Postfeminist sexuality depends upon a white heterosexual norm against which all other sexualities are measured. Parreñas Shimizu's goal of queering heterosexual conceptions of race would de-centre this postfeminist framing not only at the site of sexuality, but also within consumer culture.

In *The Hypersexuality of Race*, Celine Parreñas Shimizu handles a great number of texts, genres and historical contexts with dexterity. Her consideration of the intersection of race and sexuality at the site of the performed sex act is a unique and valuable contribution to feminist scholarship and pornography studies. *The Hypersexuality of Race* leaves many questions open-ended, and arguing for the subversive and feminist potential of pornography is certainly contentious. Even though some may disagree with Parreñas Shimizu's conclusions regarding sexuality, she asks important and necessary questions.

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