

Ethics and Responsibility

The Sexual Problems of Asian American Men in the Movies

The April 2004 edition of *Details*, the popular U.S. men's life and style magazine, features a photo of an everyday Asian American man-on-the-street, albeit one with a "man-purse." The caption professes to convey a light-hearted ribbing that ultimately conflates and makes mutually exclusive the differences and similarities between Asian American and gay men: "One cruises for chicken; the other takes it General Tso-style. Whether you're into shrimp balls or shaved balls, entering the dragon requires imperial tastes."¹ Asian Americans protested the image on a national scale with a massive internet campaign that included tens of thousands of signatures demanding an apology from *Details*.² In the *Harvard Crimson*, Jacquelyn Chou '07, a student involved in the protests quickly organized outside the magazine's offices in New York City, critiques the image as one that "stereotyped Asian men, stereotyped gay men, and it also stereotyped our concepts of masculinity. . . . In a nation where we are composed of so many different types of people, we should work on being inclusive rather than exclusive."³ Chou identifies how Asianness, gayness, and manhood are all denigrated in this stereotype—what Homi Bhabha defines as "arrested representations."⁴ Indeed, the *Details* image ridicules not only the looks but attributes, behaviors, acts, and practices of gays and Asians and reduces them to uniform and static identities. In evaluating this image, however, Chou recognizes differences within gay and Asian America and refuses to fear the queer or keep racial identity

straitjacketed. In this we can see how the *Details* spread presents an opportunity for scholars, critics, and activists to re-image Asian American manhood as not simply counter to feminism or complicit in homophobia.

When we acknowledge that the *Details* image also fits into a longer tradition in Hollywood movies of iconic portrayals of Asian American men, we identify a persistent problem: the rapacious and brutal (Sessue Hayakawa in *The Cheat*, 1915), pedophilic (Richard Barthelmess in yellowface in *Broken Blossoms*, 1922), masochistic (again Barthelmess, in *Son of the Gods*, 1932), criminal (the Fu Manchu series), treacherous and also romantic (Philip Ahn in *They Met in Bombay*, 1941, *Daughter of Shanghai*, 1937, and *King of Chinatown*, 1939), and quaint (Charlie Chan and Mr. Moto). Sexuality and gender act as forces in the racialization of Asian American men in these early representations. A crisis of masculinity forms when Asian American men fall short, i.e., they are problematically represented in movies as veering away from the norm. But this crisis must not lead to solutions that actually deepen and reemphasize Asian American masculinity as lacking, such that the presumed and unstated racial problem is really the queer and the feminine. We need to beware that the representation and criticism of Asian American men in the movies can also be straitjacketed into a narrowly circumscribed vision of masculinity, informed by a reactionary claim to male power and privilege. The solution to the problematic representation of Asian American men in the movies is not to add the phallus, which ultimately reproduces sexual heteronormativity and gender hierarchy, but to identify new criteria that dodge the crosshairs of victimization with an accounting of male power and privilege.

Hypersexual Asian American Women and Asexual/Effeminate/Queer Asian American Men

Touring my first book, *The Hypersexuality of Race: Performing Asian/American Women On Screen and Scene* (2007) for two years, I described how Asian American women use their ascription as pathologically hypersexual on screen and scene to articulate as political their own desires and sexualities. I identified hypersexuality—or the excessive proclivity for sex deemed as natural to Asian American women—as a disciplining and productive force. A persistent question popped up coast to coast: If Asian American women are hypersex-

ual, what do you have to say about Asian American men as asexual, effeminate, and gay? There is a lot of pain surrounding this perception of Asian American male emasculation on screen, but in answering it, we must be careful not to inflict harm. Too often, the perception of asexuality, effeminacy, and queerness as racial emasculation is met with a demonization of difference and the valorization of severely constrained genders and sexualities. The understanding of Asian American female hypersexuality as companion to Asian American male hyposexuality would describe the female as the one in an empowered position over the disadvantaged Asian American male. This logic holds up only if we subscribe to a normative sexuality that uses criteria that both Asian American women and men ultimately fail to fulfill—for racial reasons. My response, then, is to look at historic and contemporary engagements of Asian American masculinity in U.S. industry movies in order to dispel the easy and inaccurate assessment of asexuality, effeminacy, and homosexuality as emasculation—what I call straitjacket sexuality—scribed to them in U.S. popular culture.

Rather than present a sequel that pits Asian American female excess against Asian American male lack, I emphasize the differing situations of power that inform male and female representations. Asian American men need to account for the opportunity of power they face. Mark Anthony Neal critiques the concept of the “‘Strong Black Man’ which can be faulted for championing a stunted, conservative, one-dimensional, and stridently heterosexual vision of black masculinity that has little to do with the vibrant, virile and visceral masculinities that are lived in the real world.”⁵ Where’s the flexibility versus the rigidity of black manhood? he asks.⁶ While African and Asian American masculinities differ in their contexts, they share some concerns in the assignation of hypersexuality to black men and hyposexuality to Asian American men in popular culture. Both deviate from the norm—into what I see as places of possibility rather than closure or fixity.

The crux of my argument is to recommend an acknowledgment of the special position Asian American men occupy as an ethical event, what Richard A. Cohen calls “the event of ethics— . . . the absolute alterity of the other person encountered in the immediacy of the face-to-face.”⁷ In paying attention to how films use the power of facial expression and bodily gestures, acts and movements to express what the self desires—especially in relation to another—I consider the cinematic space between people rich with the desire for connection and ripe for instantiating new relations. Encounters in repre-

sentations—between filmmakers and spectators or within their diegesis—act as discrete sites for the forging of ethical relations because they are where and when we see subjects articulate their desires, hopes, and wants. And in exposing themselves, subjects come to recognize their own limits and possibilities in seeing how they may affect the other as the other affects them. The direction this recognition goes from here can entrench relations of inequality or break them open. This for me is the power of cinema—its ability to introduce new ways of relating and offering solutions to problems of unequal relations.

In a kernel, I am interested in cinematic representations as an accounting of power. In exploring film, I ask whether its contribution to the discourse of Asian American manhood accounts for male abilities to oppress and be oppressed—as part of my goal of understanding film relations as comprising ethical acts. Here I present ethics as an important structure for viewing Asian American masculinity especially when the normalizing maneuver in response to sexual problems in representation is especially pressing in the case of men. That is, alternatives for Asian American masculinity in representation risk the unethical because of their structural location in wielding power and receiving discipline. Indeed, contemporary Asian American male filmmakers and actors see the Asian American male body as a site of racial wounding, gender grief, and sexual problems in ways haunted by the framework of falling short of the norm—where the identification of castration becomes a rally cry for changing and protesting hurtful images that lead to, when unwatched, seduction by patriarchy and heteronormativity. Rather than hurt others, unfasten the straps of Asian American manhood to expose the boundless dramas and pleasures of how Asian American men live at the crossroads of power. Asserting the presence of both vulnerability and strength, they forge manhoods that care for others. They invest in the most rewarding of relations beyond propping up the self.

Responsibility, then, is consciousness of how one takes and gives lashes as a man, within a society that hierarchizes and privileges by race, gender, and sexuality. As Michel Foucault contends, we cannot argue for freedom of sexual expression for we need to be aware of the importance of choice in sexual relations.⁸ I extend this argument to the accounting of gender power for Asian American men in the context of the romanticization of male victimization by race and sexuality and the vilification of queerness as a further constraining of sexuality. Thus the problem particular to Asian American men that I address in this book is the expression of freedom that can curtail others’.

The expression of Asian American masculine sexuality in representation, unlike that of Asian American women in possessing gender power over others, instantiates an ethical struggle worth pursuing. In *The Hypersexuality of Race*, for example, I commend experimental filmmaker Machiko Saito's *Pre-menstrual Spotting* (1999) for exposing the ramifications of incest on Asian American female subjectivity. The critique of her artistic irresponsibility regarding the airing of dirty laundry requires the silencing of her female subjection by sexuality. When I talk about ethics and responsibility, thus, I am talking about how one's self-expression should not curtail those of others.

A focus on gender liberation in terms of sexual power—wherein the appearance of a man must mean the arrival of power in the sense of domination—gets us in trouble; it's a discourse that fetishizes inadequacy against the norm. Whether in assessing the absence of representation or measuring masculine success in terms of what R. W. Connell calls "hegemonic" manhood—or the traditional scripts of masculinity that require a gender hierarchy of men over women and the binary logic of straight versus gay—we remain trapped in a framework that hierarchizes race and defines sexuality and gender within a kind of fixity.⁹

How a man experiences gender need not be measured by whether he beats up other men or conquers women to lick his wounds but whether his experiences make others feel as well. To engage images of Asian American men in the movies may actually mean that we need to explore new and better terms for organizing our definitions of manhood—especially when we see Asian American men in the movies risk themselves for the sake of others.

Rather than vilify asexuality, effeminacy, and homosexuality, my book focuses on the ethical manhoods Asian American men carve through gender and sexuality in the movies. Using the conceptualization of ethical relations by Emmanuel Levinas, I show the exposure of both strength and vulnerability by men in intimate relations with others as a crucial expression of responsibility—in acknowledging one's ability to oppress and at the same time experience subjugation, as well as generate pleasure and good feeling. By recognizing the importance of caring for the well-being of others beyond bolstering the self, I highlight a sensibility of empathizing with others who occupy structural locations different from one's own. What we can ultimately learn from moments of tenderness and force—so often intertwined—by Asian American men on screen is not only the wider range of male experience but how the idea of the penis and the phallus likely in-

forms our understanding of masculinity. That is, the phallus represents male power as exemplified in conquest and the submission of others to brutality and the naturalized propensity for violence and physical power. The problem, too often, is the conflation of the literal male penis with the symbolic power of the phallus. Instead of understanding the penis as representing male phallic power absolutely, let us consider how the penis hardens temporarily. In always threatening to soften, its vulnerability to castration becomes even more prominent. Thus, to make a distinction between the penis and the phallus then allows for us to identify what is undesirable in aspiring to dominate others. Doing so reveals the crucial role of vulnerability in envisioning manhood, especially for those who attempt to lay a claim to power where little is usually accorded.

In claiming power responsibly, we must find a place in ourselves for the simultaneity of powerlessness. According to Leo Bersani, *jouissance* risks the shattering of the self and identifies the phenomenon of powerlessness in sex.¹⁰ That is, orgasm shows surrender in overwhelming the body. Vulnerability to the other in the exposure of the self critiques our most accepted structures of relationality across race, gender, and sexuality, such as the nature of viable masculinity for men who fall outside normative sexual relations. Because of the effectiveness of cinema in presenting dramas of power, we see how Asian American men present masculinities that embrace asexuality, effeminacy, queerness, and multitudinous other sexual formations—in short, plural masculinities. As such, *Straitjacket Sexualities* identifies a number of ethical moments in the movies wherein masculinity is figured anew and in unexpected ways that challenge and exceed straitjacket assessments.

Straitjacket Sexualities shows the many manhoods represented in Hollywood and Asian American cinema in the post–Civil Rights era. I begin with the premiere documentary *The Slanted Screen* (2006) and the problematic identification of racial emasculation on the screen. What happens when we diagnose the representation of emasculated men as a misrepresentation of an entire community? I then engage how two experimental films draw two very different relations to cinema in forging their recommendations of manhood for Asian American men. From here, in Chapter One I rewind to 1966–1972 when Asian American manhood burst into the national and international scene with the on- and off-screen sexuality of martial arts action hero Bruce Lee, who epitomized gender power as an antidote to those suffering with the pathology of male lack. I then move in

Chapters Two and Three to the 1980s/1990s and Hollywood figures such as Long Duk Dong to the range of manhoods found in independent films today such as the model minorities gone awry in *Better Luck Tomorrow* (2003) as well as anxiety-ridden men in *Charlotte Sometimes* (2002). Chapter Four studies recent pornography that has drawn national attention to the sexual problems of Asian American men in sexual representation. By looking at various representations of explicit sex that range from political pornography to experimental film, I illustrate the problem of celebrating heterosexual male privilege that does not account for its injury to others. Then, in Chapter Five, I call back from the archives of cinematic history the work of James Shigeta and Jason Scott Lee so as to correct the amnesia regarding the absence of Asian American male romantic leads in U.S. industry cinemas and to highlight the manhoods they present in history. The Epilogue reflects on *Gran Torino* (2008), where a young Hmong American man claims the power of lack in ways that teach an old white man to become more ethical, in caring for others beyond the self.

Straitjacket Sexualities examines the powerful ways both heteronormative sexuality and gender hierarchy organize the perceptions, projections, and imaginings of Asian American manhoods in Hollywood movies and their interlocutors in Asian American independent film practices. I direct my critique to both sites of movie production and draw my counter-critique from both sites as well. Rather than lack, I evaluate what is presented in films by and about Asian American men and analyze those images that upend the meaning of access to normative gender and sexual power. The stories told about Asian American men in Hollywood movies and independent Asian American film can and do go beyond the assessment of asexuality/effeminacy/queerness to deeper questions about how to establish oneself as a man within sexual, gendered, and racial orders. By attending to the sexuality and gender of race within these screen worlds, I examine the creative ways Asian American male filmmakers and actors attempt to formulate their masculinities in, through, and beyond straitjacket sexualities.

A History of Sexuality for Asian American Men

I am specifically concerned about representations of Asian American men engaging desire, love, romance, and sex in composing their manhoods. For

Asian American communities, erotic relations are historically intertwined with the politics of reproduction as part of national belonging. Asian American men have been racially targeted through sexual exclusions that created bachelor societies and prevented them from participating in heterosexual institutions and practices such as marriage and sex.¹¹ We can see in the selection of my films that the sexual implications of the historical exclusions inform and exceed the content of the films available about Asian American men. Compounding this problem of male sexual victimization is the perception that Asian American women benefit from their sexualization by popular culture in a way that contributes to the asexuality/effeminacy/queerness ascribed to Asian American men. This negative rendering of different sexualities and genders for men organizes racial critiques of representation as well as the priorities of Asian American cultural production. Racial critique too often comes from a male understanding of gender and sexuality; or, racial lenses take priority in a way that leaves different experiences of sexuality and gender inaccurately and inadequately addressed. Manhood, race, sexuality, and representation need particular analysis of how privilege and power tensely intersect with subjugation and pain.

Straightjacket Sexualities is the first full-length study of sexuality and gender as they define the racialization of Asian American men in Hollywood films in the years 1959–2009. It argues that the attribution of asexual, effeminate, and queer as lacking that characterizes discourses of Asian American masculinity inadequately captures how Asian American men wield power as well as experience its disciplining force. Oft-repeated, the assessment of lack secures gayness, asexuality, or feminine masculinity as wrong and undesirable—as if these identities are themselves not wonderful, rewarding, and viable. Forsaken by the diagnosis of lack are the rich and revealing processes of coming to manhood by Asian American men as part of a more expansive repertoire of voices and visions that make racial masculinities on screen and in history fascinating. Relevant to American culture—past, present, and future—Asian American intimacies on screen, especially those that engage these marginalized qualities, capture the dramas and processes of becoming a man within unjust and unequal social terms and conditions. In this process, Asian American men formulate an ethic that captures the dilemmas of power over others, by others, and of the self through their performances in film.