SEXUALITIES

Abstract Do videotaped scenes of Southeast Asian prostitutes intimately engaging western sex tourists provide evidence of victimization by sex trafficking? Scenes presented in popular 'gonzo' or professional–amateur pornography of Southeast Asian sex tourism tell a more complex story that requires a critical visual reading practice not only of prostitution but of pornography and slavery. Looking at the particular case of the sexual imaging of Asian women, I show how we need to develop ways of critical reading that do not simply diagnose pornography as racism, prostitution as victimization, or sex as slavery, but as complex scenes of power, agency, and difference. I illustrate the historical use of Asian women's images to establish how sexuality is tied to racial sexual difference and interrogate scenes of gonzo porn in which the prostitutes engage the camera. I argue that by employing 'intimate literacy', we can attend to what the prostitute might be saying through pornography.

Keywords Asian/American women, gonzo pornography, representation, sex trafficking, Southeast Asian sex tourism

Celine Parreñas Shimizu
University of California at Santa Barbara, USA

Screening Sexual Slavery? Southeast Asian Gonzo Porn and US Anti-Trafficking Law

In Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), the Vietnamese prostitute famously utters 'Me so horny! Me love you long time!' as she attempts to sexually entice the young American soldier, while her baby wails in the crib beside them. Visual images of Asian women represent a popular fantasy of hypersexuality, what I define as the attribution of a proclivity towards excessive sexual practice as natural to a particular racial and gender ontology. The fantasy is not a pretty picture, but an emblem of moral panic. In regards to Asian women, social fantasy links the externality of skin to the internality of a bizarre sexuality with an erotic basis in poverty, desperation,

underdevelopment, war, and in the scene just described, even bad mother-hood. More recently, Lifetime Television for Women presented *Human Trafficking* (Duguay, 2005), its most popular mini series that year. The film features 'horrific' stories of sexual slavery from all over the world and broadcasts a call to action for what it deems the most troubling issue of our time. In the film, the abducted child represents Asian victims of human trafficking. Asia is also a site of perverse pleasures where a white child is abducted in the crowded and congested street markets. A dark and dank night club serves as a front for sex-tourist pleasure domes catering to prohibited desires: a blue pool populated with young children swimming with much older adult sex tourists. Today's popular moving images on film, television, and new media feature traffic in sex. But, are all the subjects victims?

When pornography, one of the most lucrative of moving image industries, emerges from the Southeast Asian sex tourist scene, the traffic in images links directly with human trafficking discourse in ways we should carefully and critically address. Since the late 1980s, the popular series *101 Asian Debutantes* by Jean Marc Roc has eroticized inequality between rich, first-world, western male sex tourists and poor, third-world, South-east Asian colored females by explicitly showing their sexual acts and practices onscreen. The style of the filmmaking is known as 'gonzo' for its use of a reality-based documentary style of pornography where the filmmaker is also the john who participates in the sexual acts on screen. *101 Asian Debutantes* combines prostitution, pornography, and sex tourism – three central sites that are greatly debated among feminists today.[1] Gonzo porn featuring Southeast Asian prostitutes relates to current feminist discussions of trafficking, which focus on issues of prostitution – specifically, on the politics of the prostitute's consent and whether racial prostitution is a form of modern slavery.

In popular film such as *Full Metal Jacket*, widely watched television like *Human Trafficking* and in gonzo porn as *101 Asian Debutantes*, too often the visual moving image provides seemingly unquestionable evidence of the horrible bind of the trafficked life: the forced consent, the humiliation, the frightening perpetrators. These images can easily support a moral panic about the situation of human trafficking. But what also come to our attention are the roles of the 'victims', who upon closer reading, emerge as ambiguous subjects whose consent and desire are questionable. My previous work targets the unexpected findings mined when using methods of moving image intimate literacy, such as the close reading of the structure and grammar of visual and performance representations, in the scenes and screens of sexual representations of race.[2] The use of moving images to provide unquestioned evidence for assessing victimization needs to be interrogated. That is, when people talk about trafficking, they talk about

real people stuck in situations vividly illustrated in images like those of the prostitute in Vietnam, Thailand, and the Philippines, or of the sexually enslaved child, as if the representation simply and directly represents reality. So while film, television, and the media in general have a powerful role in discourses of trafficking, critical and analytic studies of them as works of representation are marginalized. Moving images are central to supporting the urgent need to address human trafficking, but moving image intimate literacy is not central to the discussion. Yet, it is important because of the powerful ease with which moving images provide visible evidence not just of sexual slavery, but of sexual panics. Therefore, we need to read these representations more closely and carefully.

Many people talk about trafficking, including those without access to trafficked persons. In this respect, we do lack empirical information on this important issue. Visual studies make an important contribution because they present opportunities to study encounters of sex trafficking as representations and not just realities. The scenes in films like *Full Metal Jacket* or *101 Asian Debutantes* do not simply present images of victims as they are, but they capture perspectives on the subject by 'traffickers' themselves and reveal the possibility that their 'victims' might actually have the opportunity to express resistance within the constraints of their situations. Most specifically, if the women featured in the gonzo porn are trafficked, what can visual studies contribute to the discourses of trafficking?

Gonzo Pornography as Sex Trafficking?

In gonzo porn such as *101 Asian Debutantes*, a western john wanders the streets of Southeast Asia and in the voiceover, audibly identifies the women as those who supposedly enjoy sex. He then shoots their intimate relations. Transnational viewers witness scenes like the customer's discovery of the women in the bars and streets of Bangkok and Manila, and we listen to their conversations before they engage in sexual intercourse. If we were to read these images in the most established way of looking at images of sexuality, especially in racial discourses of representation, we would conclude that the women who appear in these commercial sex tapes embody the victimized subjects identified in US anti-trafficking law. Two specific approaches particularly dominate this assumption: that the enslaved subject is powerless in the face of her victimization, and that this visual account provides evidence that the sexualized subject is being victimized.

The perception that the non-consenting victim of prostitution is the ultimate emblem of sex trafficking recycles the classification of pornography from the anti-pornography versus anti-censorship debates

of the 1970s and 1980s. In *Sex Wars*, Lisa Duggan and Nan Hunter address the 'porn wars', in which certain feminists supported the 'state suppression of alternative lifestyles and . . . the political activist communities – of sex workers, of butch-fem dykes, [and] of lesbian sado-masochists' (1995: 5). Duggan and Hunter describe how the anti-pornography campaigns that moralized against sexual identities and practices that deviated from the norm continue to inform feminist politics today. Scholars like Laura Agustin (2007), Denise Brennan (2004), and Rhacel Parreñas (2008) also address how conservative campaigns co-opt these earlier feminist arguments in order to suppress the new movement of women who are looking for alternative gender roles or class mobility in sex and other work across borders.

In terms of the uses of the visual, moral panic logics persist. In the 1980s, the Meese Commission investigated pornography as an industry that propagates violence against women. The congressional sessions featured the screening of a compilation of pornography clips taken out of context. Such a method, which follows moral panic logics, does not account for the working of sexual fantasy (that women may even desire sex) or critical viewing practices (that the 'truth' of images can be resisted). Similarly, only showing the most egregious form of trafficking (the child victim) prevents fuller discussions of the wider range of trafficking involving subjects that span different and complex forms of human labor, sexual or otherwise. That is, to base our understanding of trafficking in terms of the child, or the most clear-cut form of slavery in the sense of total and absolute domination and powerlessness, does not account for the complex situations of women for whom consent and choice are not straightforward.

To use the moving image as proof, through the power of visuality, of the truth of identity and event deceives and seduces us to see slavery in the racial sex act. Against such a direction, this essay asserts that the scenes presented in gonzo pornography of Southeast Asian sex tourism tell a more complex story that requires a critical reading practice not only of prostitution but of pornography and slavery. Looking at the particular case of the sexual imaging of Asian women, I show how we need to develop ways of reading that do not simply diagnose pornography as racism, prostitution as victimization, or sex as slavery, but as complex scenes of power, agency, and difference. I illustrate the historical use of Asian women's images to establish how sexuality is tied to racial sexual difference. I interrogate scenes of gonzo porn in which the prostitutes engage the camera. I argue that by employing this form of moving image intimate literacy, we can attend to what the prostitute might be saying through pornography.

Historicizing Approaches to Screening Sex as Racial Slavery

The conjugal engagement of white men and women of color is a colonial entanglement, a particular bondage impossible to flee in the history of Asian/American women. Race and sexuality were used to inscribe an aberrant identity on the earliest Asian women migrants to the USA. Their identification as prostitutes shows how the interpretation of their sexuality produced racial subjects out of Chinese women, whose immigrant acts became sexual acts.[3] Their race, gender, legal status, and popular image also shaped their working conditions as prostitutes.[4] Eithne Luibheid discusses how sexuality-based immigration law enacted a sexual monitoring of immigrants in an era where national fears of interracial encounters dominated the public imagination, such as in the movements of Eugenics, Race Suicide, and the Yellow Peril (2002, 31). The emphasis on race and sexuality in the production of an aberrant identity for Asian women manifested in a variety of ways: how immigration officers interrogated women's sexual practices in entry interviews; the attribution of a proclivity for lying as specific to race/ethnicity; the establishment of a good-versus-bad distinction based on sexuality; and most of all, in the requirement to submit passport images so immigration officials could use exterior appearances to make interior character judgments (Luibheid, 2002: 43, 44, 38). The Chinese female's racial and gender identity was tied to her visibility as a racial, sexual, and gender deviant – a prostitute who threatened the white nation and family (Lee, 1999).

In the late 20th century, filmmakers have used the medium to show the sexual slavery of women of color in its complexities. The aboriginal filmmaker Tracey Moffatt's classic film short *Nice Colored Girls* (1987) dramatizes and visualizes the particularly vexing legacy of sexual relations between white men and women of color. When three aboriginal women attempt to con a drunken white male 'captain' on the dance floor of a night club, they do so out of a lack of choices and resources. While the man is ridiculed, he remains powerful in his ability to withhold the funds and resources the women seek. Small acts of power through the women's wielding of laughter and sex illuminate the complexities of both power and history within their sexual relations. The cinematography expresses the imprinting of racial bodies onto each other at the moment of the sex act, when a shadow of darkness lingers like a coat of spray paint on a white body and vice versa. A male hand withholds a bag of coins from a woman who desperately attempts to grab possession. As such, the sex acts are sites that shape identities and mark colonial inequalities. In the case of gonzo porn, where the western, male filmmaker is the author, how do the women-of-color prostitutes fare? Do they author and voice their experiences?

Speaking for Themselves?

In her essay 'Soft Glove, Punishing Fist', Wendy Chapkis asserts that the victims of human trafficking can speak for themselves when provided with the opportunity. She explains:

> However, their accounts do not always reduce to simple morality tales featuring evil sex traffickers, naïve victims, and protective border guards. Instead, their stories are ones of enormous complexity that challenge easy distinctions between innocent and knowing, between mere exploitation and severe abuse. (Chapkis, 2005: 65)

The ability of the subaltern to speak is questioned by Gayatri Spivak (1998), who argues that even if the space is given, will they be heard? What words will the radically unrepresentable or subaltern speak so that she is understood? For scholars with access to English and other ways of making ourselves understood, even working with American media requires training. What of a prostitute speaking into a microphone for a documentary? How do the filmmakers edit what she will say and manipulate how she comes across?

While *101 Asian Debutantes* announces that all the participants are over 18 years old and presents these women as willing participants in the narration, the series not only provides a diverse picture of the women involved but also shows the drama of power, pain, and pleasure in the Southeast Asian sex tourist industry. Characteristically, gonzo porn utilizes a *cinéma vérité* technique. In *101 Asian Debutantes*, the method captures the Southeast Asian women in long scenes of sexual engagement from the moment of the filmmaker's procurement (from a madam), discovery (in a bar), or first encounter (in the motel room), to the women's preparations for the camera in the grooming process (powdering the body), costuming (adjusting clothing for a sexier self-presentation), and self-introductions (where the prostitute speaks directly to the viewer). One woman introduces herself as looking for a husband or boyfriend, as if she were making a video for a dating service; another masturbates with a variety of dildos in a focused manner. One woman directs the filmmaker/john to move his body in a particular way, presumably to facilitate her physical pleasure, while yet another measures her appearance and shifts accordingly by looking into the monitor or directly into the camera. Two women demonstrate a 10-year familiarity with the filmmaker, or so he says. Still other scenes show the man refusing a condom, a woman appearing afraid, and another woman less-than-enthusiastically participating in and then altogether abandoning a *ménage-à-trois*, to the filmmaker's frustration. These are all key events that show how awareness of the camera, the nature of the genre, and the particular consumer are targeted.

As we watch these scenes, what if we assume that sex or particular sexual acts are not always already immoral, or that visual representation is not necessarily a form of violence thrust upon women? Then the wide-ranging diversity of Southeast Asian women utilizing sex and technology establishes a new presence on screen. That is, we can see new shapes and forms of representation for Asian women that go beyond the classifications of negative sex and negative representations within the racial context. By looking at such images with an awareness of how representation shapes our interpretations, we may even develop new understandings of Asian women or new ideas about race and sexuality that go beyond binaries of powerless and powerful or forced and free.

The gonzo scenes from *101 Asian Debutantes* do not present a simple story of victimization or of slaves in sexual labor, but of women negotiating their situation and attempting to voice something across the male- or western-controlled apparatus representing them. These scenes also show us the unreliability of what we see: what is the rest of the world missing in those small moments? What is apparent is that the women's engagements with the camera tell a very different story from the coerced and victimized subject outlined in the anti-trafficking law. It is an atypical story of subalternity, for these are not straightforwardly victimized subjects, but women who struggle with the limits of their choices of work and access to self-expression. These women live in poverty and situations of radical inequality in ways exoticized in the film, which exploits the powerful visual elements of their condition. The women's poverty and lack of choices enter the pornographic scene as sexual objects themselves (Truong, 1990).

While I may not be the typical or intended audience for the popular gonzo pornography circulating transnationally today, as a film scholar and filmmaker utilizing feminist and postcolonial approaches, I advocate a reading of it that does not assume that visual media representations can be used simply and automatically to confirm slavery or inequality. Then we can begin to answer the more provocative questions that arise: How can visual moving image technology and the commercial industry of pornography capture the excesses of reality, the shifting of power, and the loss of control in relations of race and sexuality? What is our role as viewers in speaking with the subjects on screen? Are we unwilling to allow for film and video to shift our preconceived constructions of the victims of trafficking? Are we able to deprivilege the trope of victimization to interrogate what actually transpires on screen? How can we escape our attachment to moral panic in the framing of women, in both reality and representation? What are these women actually doing, and can we make space for how they are speaking within the limited means of someone else's film or in ways that exceed our expectations?

In the context of the anti-trafficking law that makes moral judgments about bad women who choose prostitution and good women who are forced into it, a screening method that releases us from the bondage of this dichotomy may allow us to see a fuller picture of what transpires in scenes of inequality. By derailing our assumptions when entering the realm of pornography, prostitution, and sex tourism we open up the possibilities for us to analyze Southeast Asian women's participation in terms that go beyond victimization or agency. I argue for the possibility that the prostitutes are utilizing the camera to assert the recognition of both their victimization and their resistance, to be seen and possibly heard as existing somewhere in between the social forces that lead to their situation of limited choices. From this space, Southeast Asian prostitutes attempt to resist their bondage, both on screen and in their everyday lives.

Notes

1. See the *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism* Special Issue 'Sex For Sale', which features essays from opposing perspectives on pornography and prostitution (*Yale Journal*, 2005).
2. See my book *The Hypersexuality of Race: Performing Asian/American Women on Screen and Scene* (Shimizu, 2007).
3. The Page Law of 1875, the earliest anti-trafficking law in the USA, specifically targeted Chinese women migrants. According to Lucie Cheng Hirata (1979) racism against Chinese prostitutes found form in how 'racial superiority at first led whites to condone Chinese female slavery', while the simultaneous exploitation of Chinese prostitutes benefited white society and also patriarchy. For example, Hirata shows how the selling of girl children in the face of disaster indicated the lesser value of girls in the family (1979: 4). She also argues that mining conditions and frontier politics were conducive to prostitution rising as a lucrative business that benefited men across race (1979: 5). See also Laura Kang's analysis of the film *Thousand Pieces of Gold* in *Compositional Subjects* (Hyun Yi Kang, 2002).
4. Sexual relations across race also produced a racial hierarchy in sexual partners. Hirata describes how whites forced certain aberrant acts upon the women as racialized sexual partners (1979: 13). In this way, the sex worker's race, gender, and legal status shaped her working conditions. However, a contradictory cultural context framed these women differently in Chinese culture. Unlike white projections of fallen women, they were good daughters caught in labor and family demands (1979: 27). Also, in *Dollar A Day, Ten Cents A Dance* (1984), we can see how the worker's body in stoop labor relates to the worker's loosened body in leisure. See the racial politics of social life in the taxi dance hall discussed by Rhacel Parreñas (1998) in 'White Trash Meets the Little Brown Monkeys'.

References

Agustin, Laura (2007) *Sex at the Margins: Migration, Labour Markets and the Rescue Industry.* London: ZED Books.

Brennan, Denise (2004) *What's Love Got to Do With It?: Transnational Desires and Sex Tourism in the Dominican Republic.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Chapkis, Wendy (2005) 'Soft Glove, Punishing Fist: The Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000', in Elizabeth Bernstein and Laurie Schaffner (eds) *Regulating Sex*, pp. 51–67. New York: Routledge.

Duggan, Lisa and Hunter, Nan D. (1995) *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture.* New York: Routledge.

Duguay, Christian (dir.) (2005) *Human Trafficking*, film. Lifetime Entertainment Services.

Hirata, Lucie Cheng (1979) 'Free, Indentured, Enslaved: Chinese Prostitutes in Nineteenth-Century America', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 5(1): 3–29.

Hyun Yi Kang, Laura (2004) *Compositional Subjects.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Kubrick, Stanley (dir.) (1987) *Full Metal Jacket* (VHS). Los Angeles: Warner Bros. Pictures.

Lee, Robert (1999) 'Third Sex', in Robert Lee *Orientals: Asian Americans in Popular Culture*, pp. 83–106. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

Luibhéid, Eithne (2002) *Entry Denied: Controlling Sexuality at the Border.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Moffatt, Tracey (dir.) (1987) *Nice Colored Girls* (DVD). New York: Women Make Movies.

Parreñas, Rhacel Salazar, (1998), 'White Trash and Little Brown Monkeys', *Amerasia* 24(2): 115–34.

Parreñas, Rhacel Salazar (2008) *The Force of Domesticity: Filipina Migrants and Globalization.* New York: New York University Press.

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

Spivak, Gayatri (1998) 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in Cary Nelson and Larry Grossberg (eds) *Marxism and the interpretation of Culture*, pp. 271–313. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Truong, Thanh-Dam (1990) *Sex, Money and Morality: Prostitution and Tourism in Southeast Asia.* London: Zed Books.

Yale Journal (2005) Special Issue 'Sex For Sale' *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism* 18.

Biographical Note

Celine Parreñas Shimizu works as a filmmaker and film scholar in Asian American, Film and Media, and Feminist Studies at UCSB. Her areas of expertise are in Film and Performance Theory and Production, Social Theories of Power and Inequality, Race and Sexuality Studies, Transnational Feminisms

and Asian American Cultural Studies. Her first book *The Hypersexuality of Race* won the Cultural Studies Book Award from the Association for Asian American Studies in 2009. In it, she analyzes hypersexual representations of Asian-American women in various media including industry and independent film, pornography and feminist video. Her film *The Fact of Asian Women* (2002) won four national and international festival awards. She completed her latest film, *Birthright*, her fifth experimental ethnographic film, about mothering across difference, which won the 2009 Best Feature Documentary at the Big Mini DV Festival in New York. Her next book project, *Straitjacket Sex Scenes: Mapping Asian-American Men in the Movies*, is forthcoming from Stanford University Press. *Address:* Department of Asian American Studies, Humanities and Social Sciences Building, University of California, Santa Barbara, CA 93106–4090. [email: shimizu@asamst.ucsb.edu]