

Scratching the Lotus Blossom Itch

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Dans cet article, SanSan Kwan jette un regard critique sur les formes qu'a prises le corps des femmes asiatiques rendu exotique. Kwan met en question son propre malaise envers le soi-disant attrait sexuel des femmes asiatiques. En analysant une parodie de diverses représentations, elle observe la sexualité comme un échange plutôt qu'un simple instrument, mettant en scène la femme asiatique comme objet de désir, à l'intérieur de cette structure d'échange.

In March of 1997, the *New York Press* published a highly controversial cover piece entitled, "Gook Fetish." Written by columnist Melissa de la Cruz, the article concerns itself with the phenomenon of certain white men who lust after Asian women. De la Cruz lashes out at these white guys with fetishes for Asian women while, in the same breath, she celebrates with unswerving conviction and pride the desirability of the Asian female body. As is her style, de la Cruz sardonically mocks people on all sides of the issue: white guys with Asian fetishes, the Asian women who date them, the Asian women who won't, the Asian guys who get left in the lurch. By the end of the article de la Cruz has parodied everybody so biting that I am left confused as to where she stands or what her point is. Should Asian women flaunt their desirability or be offended by its implications? De la Cruz's ambivalence makes me recognize my own uneasiness in the face of these questions. As an Asian woman, I, too, feel conflicted about the whole Asian fetish issue.

At the same time that the "Gook Fetish" article came out I was performing in a dance-theater piece called *Lotus Blossom Itch*. Through the piece we (a troupe of Asian American, mixed race, and Caucasian men and women) explored similar issues of exoticism and eroticism, as well as questions around transaction and sexual exchange. Like "Gook Fetish," the performance reveals an equally uncomfortable position towards the sexual desirability of Asian women. How does our fetishization by others influence the way we see ourselves as sexual beings? To what extent are we implicated in our own eroticization? How do we, can we, respond to it? Should we downplay our desirability? Relish in it? Most importantly, how can we maintain our sense of ourselves as sexual beings without succumbing to fetishization?

The notion of the fetish historically carries with it a number of different connotations ranging from the sexual to the racial to the economic. "Gook fetish," a popular culture term referring to white men's desires for Oriental lovelies, encompasses all of these understandings at once. The fetishized Asian woman, as a raced and gendered body, is endowed with both erotic charge and racial

mystique. As a material body, she also takes on symbolic commodity value in the marketplace of desire.

Lotus Blossom Itch makes explicit each of these forms of fetishization. By “explicit,” I refer to a term introduced by Rebecca Schneider in her book on feminist performance art: “the explicit body in representation is foremost a site of social markings, physical parts and gestural signatures of gender, race, class, age, sexuality – all of which bear ghosts of historical meaning, markings delineating social hierarchies of privilege and disprivilege” (2). In explicating some of the historical markings of Orientalism on the Asian female body, I wonder whether *Lotus Blossom Itch* effectively resists them? Schneider would argue that the very literality of the explicit body works to explode the fantasy – which fetishism relies upon – of bodies as symbols and signs of other delights. *Lotus Blossom Itch* begins as a parody. As a form which necessarily names that which it subverts, parody makes explicit the issues around Asian fetishism. Towards the end, however, the piece progresses from parody to more literal critique. By first blatantly displaying Asian women as they are fetishized (the parodic section) and then revealing the distance between those women and the exotic associations they bear – that is to say, exposing the body explicitly rather than implicitly – the piece exemplifies Schneider’s notion of the explicit body as a site of subversion.

I want to examine the possibilities for Asian women to represent not just desirable fetish objects, but also desiring subjects. Sexuality, like performance, involves not only objectification, but also exchange. As a parody, *Lotus Blossom Itch* manages to transform a traditionally fetishistic, and therefore one-sided, relationship into a transaction in which the Asian woman acknowledges the system she lives under. But does the performance do more than that? Sex is an exchange in the social dimension, but it also often involves a material exchange. By addressing larger questions concerning the relationship between the social and the material, I want to investigate whether that economy of exchange is an equal one.

Lotus Blossom Itch presents a series of thematic dance “numbers” framed as a tourist revue of the delights of the Orient. Three Asian tour guides in Aloha shirts lead the audience/tourists on a voyeuristic armchair journey through several imagined locales: Polynesia, China, Japan, Southeast Asia, the Middle East and finally Times Square, New York City. At each stop a different dancer performs the exotic dances of her “native land.”

As performers, we reproduce our exoticism with tongue lodged firmly in cheek. Our excessive mugging and smiling – practically smirking – is intended to reveal the masks that we wear in performing these stock roles. Through exaggeration we emphasize our self-consciousness, and the fact that we knowingly mock what we present. In her essay on the documentary *Paris is Burning*, Judith Butler discusses hyperbole as important to parody:

Where the uniformity of the subject is expected, where the behavioral conformity of the subject is commanded, there might be produced the refusal of the law in the form of the parodic inhabiting of conformity that subtly calls into question the legitimacy of the command, a repetition of the law into hyperbole, a rearticulation of the law against the authority of the one who delivers it. (*Bodies That Matter* 122)

Butler's use of the term "law" here refers to the system of utterance by which a subject becomes socially constituted. That subject can refuse the law which names her through hyperbolic mimicry. By over-aping law, performing it perhaps too well, she reveals its constructedness and thereby resignifies its power over her. The overstatedness in *Lotus Blossom Itch* is apparent in everything from our false eyelashes and our cheesy Oriental lounge music, to the continual replaying of *Blue Hawaii* and the tour guides' on-going list of delights:

We've got spears, we've got fans,
We've got pearls, we've got girls,
And, at the end, we've got a raffle!
We've got luaus, we've got Buddhist bells,
We've got rituals of the torch lighting up cute China dolls.
Forbidden islands where native children play,
glistening brown skin,
And free papaya!
And, of course, pineapple ham.
We've even got spam!

The tour guides recite similar lists throughout the performance. By conflating numerous forms of exotic culture into one comprehensive fantasy, they emphasize the constructedness, the arbitrariness, of exoticism. The parodic excess reveals the construct of the seductive Oriental as only ever imaginary, mythic, beyond possibility: thus the desires projected onto her are always unattainable.

Nevertheless, in parodying the exotic Asian body in its many incarnations the performance risks perpetuating debasing stereotypes even as it means to critique them. In identifying and mimicking its opposition, parody unavoidably validates the very force it wishes to disrupt. The images of the coquettish China doll or the sultry dance of the seven veils, even as parodies, do not completely overcome their histories and associations. As Butler notes in another essay, the kind of criticism that parody achieves is always somewhat suspect. Parody requires a troubling "intimacy with the position it appropriates" and raises questions of "whether you can rehearse that position without falling prey to it in the midst of performance" ("*Merely Cultural*" 3). Parody necessarily implicates the performer in the very practice that she opposes. As we

mimic hula princesses and jungle kitties, the smiles on our faces represent both signs of sarcastic derision but also true pleasure. As de la Cruz confesses in her *New York Press* article, “as far as I know, I was having just as much fun in the bedroom as the person who got off on the fact that I had almond eyes and dark hair.”

As Asian American performing bodies our relationship to our sexuality is inherently conflicted. How can we categorically deny that we are sexual beings – especially when our profession necessitates the exhibition of our bodies on stage? On the other hand, how can we justify displaying our bodies in the very ways that serve to fetishize us? Unfortunately, these kinds of questions neglect the messiness of sexuality. They forget that sexuality involves practices of sexual exchange – and that desire works both ways. We cannot avoid engaging with objectifying desire when we interrogate our own sexuality because the history of fetishization and Orientalism has already been written on our bodies. Disavowal is not the answer.

And so parody. As a form that simultaneously subverts and reinscribes the thing it subverts, parody allows space for ambivalence. Because of its capacity to accommodate contradiction, however uneasy, parody allows us to both relent and resist, desire and be desired. *Lotus Blossom Itch* claims the Asian woman’s subjectivity back from fetishization by displaying her sexuality as part of a perspectival negotiation. At numerous moments during the piece the performers direct glances out at the audience. Before the China doll is about to be “penetrated” by her Samurai lover she looks to the audience with a bored sigh and a wave of her fan. “Miss Hawaii” constantly shifts from gleaming at her audience to glaring at her misbehaving Polynesian studs. At moments such as these our masks come down and we reveal an awareness of what we give. That knowledge makes the performance bilateral. We return the gaze of the gazer and thereby shatter the one-way mirror protecting this voyeuristic world. Parody works as resistance because there is a knowingness under the performance, and through that cognizance we can try to stem objectification.

“Salome” poses self-consciously stage left. Wearing sequins and glitter make-up, a gold bikini, and a multi-colored fringe of gauzy scarves around her waist, she focuses on the white man across the stage, dancing with another Asian woman. She gestures to him with a come hither finger. He looks to the audience as if to question, “What to do?” and then continues to attend to the other woman. So Salome approaches center stage, glances knowingly at the audience (“Watch this!”), and dramatically drops her skirt. Revealing a tiny gold thong she looks sidelong at the man to gauge his reaction. He abandons the other woman and shifts his attention to Salome.

The cartoon-like plot of this scenario and the exaggerated gestures of the characters let the audience off the hook through humor, allowing them to believe

that we are having fun with our own exoticization. At this point in the piece, after several sections that trot out various Asian stereotypes, *Lotus Blossom Itch* risks playing into the very system it means to oppose. In order to rescue itself from total co-optation, the piece has to abandon parody at points. Simply cataloguing the numerous guises that fetishism takes and making fun of them is not always enough to condemn them. So as Salome begins her sultry dance the parody drops away and the tour hostess recites:

She walked 5 miles and 40 days
through midnight corridors in Bangkok hotels
she swam oceans and back just to earn a buck
just to hear you call her name . . .
You wanted fantasy, she gave it
You wished for love, she made it.

Here, Salome is a willing participant in her own objectification. But her performance is no longer tongue-in-cheek. The text suggests not her easy and unfettered desire to be desired, but the man's command over that desire and her desirability. The hostess continues:

. . . She threw herself into song into cheap video and blue light hotel
Sang Miss Saigon and Siam Suzy
answered to, "Hey, kitty, kitty, kitty!
Hey, China, kitty, kitty, kitty!"
She was the call girl of your dreams
the Asian pussy with the sideways slit
the last whore before she bore your children
She searched for the vein of your soul like a needle in her arm
Conjured up promises in a currency only you could pay
in the bedroom
in the boardroom
for your Joy Luck Club audiences
She donned gossamer wing
Sang Butterfly's song
cause it was the only thing she knew to play
it was the only role you'd give her

You wanted fantasy, she gave it
You wanted love, she paid for it.

Accompanying the text, Salome scrapes and slithers at the feet of her lover. Her performance mimics the role of the submissive Oriental, but now without the humor. The stage lights are dimmed, the music turns from boppy to sultry,

the smiles disappear. Rebecca Schneider has commented on such serious moments invoked in the middle of raucous parody: "As interruptions, such moments of serious invocation present a challenge to the audience. These 'sacred' moments interrupt the profanity of parody as if to cast cracks into the criticism (or weave errors into the fabric) through which another vision, another experience might breathe" (173). This moment in *Lotus Blossom Itch* questions its own light-hearted dismissal of fetishization. Rather than utilizing humor to return the fetishistic gaze, this moment is more directly accusatory. It does not allow the audience to have its fun, but instead explicitly implicates it in the colonization of the Asian female body.

The Salome section represents one of the most sexually explicit moments in the piece. The text is no longer coy ("feel the tongue of the ocean hit the shaft of your . . . thighs"), but is more crude in its representations ("the Asian pussy with the sideways slit"). The dance is rougher, too. Salome's skin makes a squealing noise as she is dragged along the floor clad in a scanty thong. While humor and parody work through inferred criticism, the explicit nature of this section means to bluntly discomfort.

This moment is the first of an increasing number of interruptions. From the Salome section on, *Lotus Blossom Itch* turns darker and the viewer becomes ever more insinuated in an uneasy relationship with the performers. S/he is no longer a tourist on a ride through fantasy land, but a participating agent in a sexual exchange. That exchange now extends beyond a mere trading of gazes to an actual material transaction: the performers here play exotic dancers at a night club, soliciting dollar bills from the audience/bargoers. It is not enough to merely acknowledge oppression: you watch me and I know it. The performers now seek some agency through a more active exchange between bodies and money: you want something from me and I want something from you. The hope is that through an equal exchange of sex for cash we can bypass fetishization. We hope to sell ourselves as merely physical objects and thereby get something tangible for what we give. Of course, this is based on the false assumption that commodities are "merely physical" and carry no psychic or metaphysical weight.

Sexuality translates easily from the realm of the cultural to the realm of the material because sex is not just about social behavior, it also entails production and commerce. Marx's traditionally economic conception of the mode of production can be extended to include kinship production, in other words, the (re)production of human bodies. The social relationship that allows procreation, termed by Marx a "mode of co-operation," is itself a "productive force" (157). Just as reproduction requires a sexual division of labor, material needs influence the regulation of socio-sexual modes of cooperation. The cultural and the economic, the sexual and the material, are tightly imbricated within one another.

Desire is an element of commerce, bought “just as any tangible object is bought” (Schneider 5). Because the female body represents this product she becomes a symbol of something that exceeds her. She has meaning not for what she is, but for what she comes to represent in the exchange: a social relationship. What she produces is not simply her material self, but others’ desires for her. Since she is both exchanger and exchanged, labor and product of labor, her sale as a product can never be complete. Commodity fetishism refers to this irresolvable crisis between use value and exchange value. As a commodity fetish, the woman refers to the crisis between herself and the desire for her that she engenders in others.

Lotus Blossom Itch lays bare the secret of insatiable desire as a constructed commodity, as human nature “designed, packaged and sold – marketed, out-fitted and set upon a runway of dreams” (Schneider 5). The tour guides continuously intermingle enticing invitations to exotic locales with unabashed solicitations for money. Tourism is, after all, about selling culture: “We’ll take you by the hand./ We’ll take you to enchanting far off lands./ We’ll take you to a jungle fantasy./ Lush worlds of palm fronds and seashells, too./ We’ll take you through hula skirts and thatched huts./ We’ll take your fifteen bucks./ Yes, we are your tour sluts.”

The slut metaphor becomes literal when the performance/tour reaches Times Square. We dance in skimpy black vinyl with garters full of cash on our legs. One of the dancers approaches audience members and motions for them to slip her some bills. Our bodies become material products exchanged for money. By depicting sex as a monetary transaction *Lotus Blossom Itch* attempts to counter the fantasy of fetishization and “make apparent the fetishistic prerogatives of the symbol by which a thing . . . stands by convention for something else” (Schneider 6-7). The fetishized body always embodies more than itself: desire, the exotic other, etc. The commodity itself can even vanish in the shadow of the desires and social relations it has come to represent. By depicting the sex industry as a literal exchange of money for bodies, *Lotus Blossom Itch* wants to remove the symbolic associations that fetishize, and thereby erase, the body.

As a way out of objectification, *Lotus Blossom Itch* wants to believe that “exotic dancers” do have some agency, that through the open and willing exchange of gaze for gaze, sex for money, we can resist fetishization and retain power over our sexuality. Through the portrayal of explicit sexual transaction, the Times Square section means to remove the excess of insatiable desire from an equation between sex and money which might otherwise balance, or even tip in the stripper’s direction. The idea behind the striptease is that the customer never gets all that he lusts after while the stripper, who never fully gives herself over, walks away with cold cash. And yet at the end of the piece this idea falters. We flail about trying to tear the money out of our garters because, ultimately, commodity fetishism overcomes us. We can never conduct a straight-

forward trade of cash for bodies, use value for use value, because cash just doesn't make up for bodies. If the stripper never fully delivers, the cash she receives never fully pays either. Bodies and cash are always overwhelmed by the exchange value of desire. After we finally rip off our garters in frustration, though, the angry music fades and we reassemble our smiles as the lights dim. Desire is never satiated.

This is not the end of the piece. The lights dim, the house comes up and we re-enter the stage in our street clothes, bitching and moaning at each other. The fourth wall has come up and we don't reveal any awareness of the audience. Our fetishistic overvaluation as exotic fantasies dissolves. Instead, we whine about day to day concerns. We peel off our false eyelashes, complain about our costumes, argue over who stole whose spotlight. Here is where the Asian female body is made most explicit. The bare realization of us as performers performing exotic roles reveals the distance between ourselves and our fetishized value. This epilogue destroys our symbolic associations with the Orientalist fantasy and unveils us as material beings.

And yet, like our stage counterparts, we are also concerned about getting paid. As one of the dancers bluntly puts it, "That's it. I'm not playing no fucking lotus blossom pussy again until I get paid!" Beyond the idea that the Geisha girl is involved in an exchange of desires with the British admiral, or that the Times Square stripper is dancing for money, is the idea that the performer performing the Geisha girl or the stripper is doing it for the money, too. Our reality as performers performing for a paying audience closes the piece with some ambivalence. The insatiability of desire is still at work here. Commodity fetishism still resists equal distribution. We do not make enough money for the critical interrogation of fetishization that we produce. Perhaps the explicit disclosure of the piece as a constructed performance takes back any ownership the audience might have felt in its viewing. The lingering notion, however, that the performer never redeems the full value of her performance leaves me where I began. How can Asian women escape fetishization without giving up sexuality? I find, sadly, that I have no easy answer.

Works Cited

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