

Convocation of Dean Celine Parreñas Shimizu

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Convocation of Dean Celine Parreñas Shimizu

Viet Thanh Nguyen

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize

University Professor, the Aerol Arnold Chair of English, and a Professor of English, American Studies and Ethnicity, and Comparative Literature at the University of Southern California

It was really a thrill for me to learn from a news report that my old friend, Celine Parreñas Shimizu, had been named Dean of the School of Theater, Film and Television at UCLA, the—let me check my notes— “best public university in the country” quote unquote. My pleasure at this news was only lessened a bit because I am a stickler for the facts, and there was a major error in the news report because obviously, the best public university in the country is UC Berkeley.

I think Dean Shimizu, being an alumni of UC Berkeley, would agree with me, but of course she’s also an alumni of UCLA and probably much more diplomatic than I am, which is one reason why she is your Dean. She was also my classmate at UC Berkeley, where, it is safe to say, she was one the most memorable undergraduates there, which, if you know anything about UC Berkeley, is saying

a lot. Berkeley was full of distinctive personalities with cogent visions of themselves, and even among them, Dean Shimizu stood out for her charisma, her leadership, her intelligence, and, of course, her sartorial style.

She came to my attention through her role as one of the leading figures in the world of undergraduate artists. She looked like an artist, dressed mostly in black, in my memory. She acted like a bohemian, and she lived that role, being part of a collective of women of color artists who produced a magazine featuring the art and writing of women of color called—smell this. The title was unforgettable, as she herself was. She was already a provocateur and a feminist, and we ended up in the same women's studies class taught by the theorist and filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha, where we learned to question assumptions about gender, power, and representation in politics, theory, and art. Even at that young age, we were learning that we both wanted to be artists and scholars at the same time.

One other thing I remember from those college days that we shared is that we were also both Ethnic Studies majors. Being an Ethnic Studies major had some element of defiance to it. The major was a legacy of the Third World Liberation Front strike that shut down Berkeley in 1969. I was radicalized by my time at Berkeley and by the memories of the late 1960s, but I was also a bit

embarrassed, because the Sixties activists were protesting against war, racism, imperialism, capitalism, and conformity, and the activists of the 1980s were protesting against apartheid, while those of us who were student activists in 1990 were calling for greater diversity—in our curriculum and our faculty. That call for diversity didn't seem quite as urgent and world-defining to me as the protests against the Vietnam War and South African apartheid.

But, fast forward to today, and diversity has become a central site of conflict and demonization in academia and the rest of American society, as you know very well here. We university students, like Dean Shimizu and myself, were right after all in investing so much of our energies in this apparently provocative and now subversive idea that academia and the arts would be better places if they were more inclusive of different peoples and different stories.

Dean Shimizu's own life story is moving and inspiring. Her parents were political refugees and she herself was born in the Philippines and came with her parents to the United States, where she confronted patriarchy within her family and racism and sexism outside of it as an immigrant, a Filipina, and a woman of color. Her life experiences and her sense of history as someone who is part of a Filipina feminist genealogy inform her many films, from *Mahal Means Love and Expensive* in 1993 to *The Celine Archive*

in 2020. She has also written a trilogy of scholarly works that I have read closely: *The Hypersexuality of Race: Performing Asian/American Women on Screen and Scene*; *Straitjacket Sexualities: Unbinding Asian American Manhoods in the Movies*; and *The Proximity of Other Skins: Ethical Intimacy in Global Cinemas*. These books are an intense examination of how race, sex, and gender intersect in the making and reception of cinematic and theatrical works, and how they compel an ethical response from spectators and creators.

Dean Shimizu has devoted her impressive body of artistic and scholarly work to a principle of greater inclusion and diversity. But, more than that, her work demonstrates that she understands how art and power and politics cannot be separated from each other, which is what makes filmmaking and storytelling not just modes of entertainment and art but also of provocation and social change. American cinema is both an art form and also a form of soft power for the United States. As a refugee from the American war in Viet Nam, I have seen what American soft power can do in terms of erasing, silencing, and distorting Vietnamese and Southeast Asian stories, not to mention Vietnamese and Southeast Asian people themselves. Dean Shimizu has talked about what it means to be Filipina and to be subjected to American soft power, which comes in to re-narrate the impact and

consequences of American hard power on places like the Philippines and Viet Nam.

The result for Filipinos, Vietnamese, and other Asian immigrants and refugees to the United States, and many other so-called minorities, is that we were acclimated to living in narrative scarcity. Narrative scarcity is when almost none of the stories are about you. So, when a story about you comes along, you freak out. Oh my God! At last—a story about us! The tendency is to place an unfair burden of representation and expectation on a single story, novel, movie, writer, director, actor, and so on. Narrative plenitude is when almost all of the stories are about you. So when a story about you comes along and you don't like it, you can dismiss it as "just a story" because there are literally a thousand other stories about you. If you have ever said a story is "just a story," it means you are a part of a majority of some kind and you have unexamined privilege.

Those of us who are so-called minorities do not have the luxury of saying that stories are just stories. Stories are literally a matter of life and death, because we know that our erasure, our silencing, our distortion in stories is often a sequel to and a prelude to killing us or damaging us or deporting us in real life. So, for Dean Shimizu to become the Dean of one of the most important schools of film, television and theater in the country is enormously

significant, because narrative plenitude is not simply a matter of having more writers and artists and directors and actors and creative workers who are diverse in many ways. Narrative plenitude can only be achieved if there is also greater representation behind the scenes, within institutions, among the investors, producers, brokers, gatekeepers, administrators and leaders.

UCLA is lucky to have Dean Shimizu, because I think she is very aware of the challenges facing artists and scholars, teachers and students, as they face an environment that can be and often is hostile to the arts, to diversity, to ideas, and certainly to narrative plenitude. In a country and a time when so much emphasis and storytelling is placed on individual achievement and glory, she has said, “You don’t do film and theater alone. You empower others to join in to do amazing things together, whether on set or on stage, behind the scenes and in front of the camera and the audience.” Now, I am a writer and I do write alone, and I like it that way, because I don’t like people. In the world of film and theater, you don’t have that possibility of working only in solitude. You have to work with others and, just as importantly, as Dean Shimizu makes clear, you should work for others as well.

Dean Shimizu has worked with others and worked for others the entire time I’ve known her these past thirty-five years. I expect her to do great things here at UCLA as

your Dean of the School of Theater, Film and Television at one of the best public universities in the country, and I expect that her story here will provide ample evidence for a very controversial opinion in some parts of this country, which is that refugees and immigrants like Dean Shimizu make America great.

Rhacel Salazar Parreñas

**Doris Stevens Professor of Women's Studies and
Sociology, Princeton University**

It's really my deepest pleasure to be here speaking not as an academic, but as the sister of your wonderful dean, Celine Shimizu. So, Professor Nguyen gave a more formal introduction of my sister, Dean Celine. He talked about her accomplishments as a scholar and filmmaker. So I'm going to give a little bit more of a personal account of Celine.

Celine, as Viet mentioned, and I can call him Viet, because we actually grew up together because we went to that wonderful school up north, the other public school. We were all there together as undergrads. But Celine and I, as Viet mentioned, we came here as refugees, in the eighties and we actually ended up in Cambridge, Massachusetts, which is like a very odd place for a Filipino family to end up in.

Because like most, I sound like a sociologist here, because most migrated to Southern California. But Celine and I, we lived in, with our family, in a two-bedroom apartment in the housing projects. If you're from

Cambridge, you will know this place, it's called Ridge Towers. Otherwise known as Murder Mansion.

And it was really an impoverished place. So, we grew up pretty impoverished, and so we lived in a two-bedroom flat. And there were two households there, and at some point, there were 20 people living in this two-bedroom flat. So, I can say that I know my sister really well because the whole time we lived in that flat, she and I actually shared a single twin-sized bed.

And so, we went through school. I mean, I don't even know how we survived living in such a tight space. And we didn't really master sleeping in this kind of bed because then in my field work, I've spent a lot of time with low wage migrant domestic workers in the Middle East and a lot of them also share a twin size bed. But then when I met them, I was also shocked that they actually kind of had the art of it. Like one one slept with their heads not together. So I was like, yeah, why didn't we do that? But we didn't know how to sleep together.

And so, my sister and I were very close and we also worked at Dunkin Donuts. I would say legally I was 13, she was 14. And then I was so jealous of her because we started out as counter help, but then she was better at the job than I was and she got promoted to be the jelly filler. I was making \$3.35 cents an hour, and then she got a 10-

cent raise so \$3.45 cents an hour and I was so jealous that I wasn't good enough to fill those donuts.

But anyway, so then she went to Berkeley. And as a little sister, I followed her. I was like, I have to go to Berkeley too. I don't know how we ended up in Berkeley from Massachusetts but we did. This is our commitment to public school education, but you know, Celine always had this deep commitment to the arts.

She like utilized the arts. Like she knew the power of like creativity, the power of fiction, the power of just like artistic expression and you know, and while she knows the power of it, her utilization of it, she takes people along with her. Like, she doesn't just produce some artistic work, but she creates a community of people to create this artistic work.

And she did it with very little resources as an undergrad at Berkeley. She was the person who created this collective of women of color writers. And that they named themselves, Smell This. She started this woman of color film festival that featured works by undergraduates of UC Berkeley, which didn't have film school.

And so she was just this amazing person just carrying people with her and I'm positive she's going to do this as well here. And so, this last story that I just have to share that really illustrates her use of the arts and her commitment to the arts and her embodiment of the power of the arts.

So, when we were undergrads, we took a class together. I was such a sociological nerd, you know, I had to have my empirical data, I had to have my literature that I engaged in. I worked on my papers eight weeks before they were due. I was such a nerd. And so, we were in this class together and I was working on my paper eight weeks ahead of time, so we were all working on our paper.

So the night before it was due, she wrote this poem and she submitted the poem as her final paper. So fast forward, she got an A plus. I didn't. But I think that the perfect illustration of her: she doesn't conform to rules that constrain your ability to express yourself. And that's what she did with college.

I'm going to tell everyone here, do that. All the undergrads here do that too, and you should be rewarded if you do it well. But I'm really excited for my sister to be here. She's a perfect person to be a dean. Because she is not a selfish leader, but she's one that will carry a community with her to unparalleled success.

So please join me in welcoming my sister Celine Shimizu.

Dean Celine Parreñas Shimizu - UCLA TFT

We need all the stories we can get in all the voices we can muster.

Convocation – September 25, 2025

As your new dean, I lead with the joy of an alumna and the responsibility of a steward. I know what can happen here—for individuals, families, industries, independent creators, and the scholarship that shapes our world. I return 30 years later with a clear vision: to ensure UCLA TFT continues to transform lives and set the standard for how universities lead the arts, scholarship, and innovation.

One thing you must know: I am a grieving mom. My son Lakas died almost 12 years ago at age 8. He would be 20 now, a sophomore at UCLA if he had lived. I know this because his three best friends with whom I have mourned are here. Vosse is a frosh; Noah a sophomore, Parker a transfer student. Lakas would be your classmate, your student. He liked solos and would be in Musical Theater.

As a grieving mom, I've learned the urgency of confronting suffering rather than letting it persist. That urgency shapes how I lead—by strengthening institutions so they never stand still, growing stronger through compassion, accountability, and relentless pursuit of excellence. Leaders who tolerate unaddressed suffering risk institutional stagnation. We must develop strategies that fortify our institutions.

When I was a student here in the early 1990s, our community looked very different. Today, TFT reflects a transformation both remarkable and hard-won. Despite

limitations imposed by Proposition 209 in 1996, we proved diversity is not a compromise of excellence—it is excellence. This growth mirrors California's changing demographics and shows how UCLA leads cultural and academic progress.

This is an extraordinary time to lead because we can generate meaningful change every day—whether advancing a field, investing in stories that deserve backing, or elevating new voices to center stage. I am proud to champion inclusive excellence.

My leadership philosophy centers on several core principles—what my staff calls "Dean Celine-isms." Listen to lead. Information equals orientation, which equals empowerment, which equals engagement. Respectful speaking and respectful listening. These are more than personal values—they are becoming the cultural DNA of TFT. They guide how we empower our staff, how we cultivate faculty excellence, and how we prepare students for impactful futures.

In practice, this means respecting our staff's expertise, learning from our faculty's wisdom, helping our students by removing obstacles that impede progress, and enabling our donors to do good with their resources. I strive to teach our community to care for themselves and others, practice radical kindness, and inspire responsive action when needs arise. Above all, I lead with our values as the foundation for every decision.

My singular mission as your dean is simple: to unify our community so we can achieve great things together. And what better way than to bring everyone together today to hear the vision of our new anthem: Your Voice, Our Story.

You see this outfit? This walking cupcake dress, this Hershey's kiss hat? This is my declaration: I'm gonna be me so you can be you. In a world trying to silence voices like mine—brown, woman, feminist, immigrant, free—and therefore yours too, I choose visibility that asserts critique and a better world we could make happen. In my films and scholarship, I choose unforgettable stories about denigrated people you can no longer unsee, whose stories you no longer unfeel. I choose audacity to expand the acceptable. Because when I take up space fearlessly, my goal is to make room for you.

This is what UCLA TFT stands for: Your Voice, Our Story.

Here's what awaits you at TFT: You will become scholars and makers living a heightened life where your senses are entirely awake. Your seeing will sharpen because you're always composing a scene or a stage. You'll see light differently figuring out if a soft wash Fresnel is required or a beaming focused spotlight instead; you'll hear dialogue with new ears, repeating what people say so you can savor the subtext in their words, you will understand exquisite numinosity—the meaning of objects and the potency of movement. You'll learn that film and theater people are the ultimate purveyors of emotion—crafting

jump scares, swoons, catharsis, uncontrolled laughter. As scholars, you will read and write so much, you will become so powerful! Indeed, we have that much force that we can explode deeply seated narratives that persistently limit our imaginations and curb our relations. We explode deep narrative in zero-sum logics. We achieve connectedness, emphatic empathy. We reshape entrenched belief.

At TFT, we believe representations build better realities. Your stories—spoken from your singular perspective—foster understanding, love, legibility and recognition. When Francis Ford Coppola, Julie Dash, Gina Prince-Bythewood, Steven Canals, Grace Lee, Carol Burnett, Mariska Hargitay, Tim Robbins, Bob Nakamura, Teshome Gabriel, Marina Goldovskaya, Vivian Sobchack walked these halls, they learned what you're about to discover: that your individual voices compose our collective story and this includes scholarship and representation both.

Today, this evolution happens within a context. We live in a world of deepening inequality, where universities are under attack, where hatred is amplified online and lies proliferate. Your response cannot be silence but the infinity of our stories in all the voices we can muster. Storytelling matters more than ever now, to protect democracy, bridge polarization, prevent the denial of suffering to access dignity equally. We make people feel for others who are different from themselves.

This is why I may be the perfect person to lead TFT: I

LOVE CINEMA AND NEED THEATER so deeply that I will dedicate all my force in this one life to protecting and defending them, ensuring they thrive and endure forever so everyone can experience the profound joy, pleasure, happiness and care they offer.

Here now is my Concrete Vision to make sure future generations experience theater and film lasting forever and that you, our students, faculty and staff thrive with the help of our board, donors, friends and family and the university's center- Let me share how we'll champion your voices with my decanal initiatives:

For our students:

Picture Start – Annual intensive partnering students with nonprofits to create disability verticals, consciousness commercials, Olympic trailers, and language preservation training videos. Build your reel while serving community. This year: Melnitz and MacGowan soap opera microdrama series. Graduate with a portfolio of socially impactful work and a reputation as makers who merge artistry with service.

Technology Innovation – Strategic partnership with AMD provides advanced technology and graduate funding, positioning UCLA TFT to lead industries that don't yet exist. Like our groundbreaking 1969 Ethnocommunications Program, we equip students with contemporary tools for timeless stories.

Career Readiness as Wellness – Your mental health is your career foundation. Yoga, community gatherings, mentorship, and professionalization support are structural investments, not add-ons. Funding from Chance to Excel and Clinch Fuentes ensures wellness strengthens career outcomes and sustains long-term excellence.

Next Generation Speaker Series & LA Rebellion Legacy Alumni Screenings – Previous cohorts share wisdom, connecting Bruins across eras. Our archives hold the roadmap for impactful film and theater. Turn legacy into living practice, inheriting tools to craft films of equal aesthetic achievement and social impact.

Crew Call – Student ambassadors learn to build new structures and establish programs, preparing to run studios and institutions. Partnership with Documentary Legal Clinic explores storytelling in the age of T. Connect with industry broadly defined—Hollywood, nonprofits, community media. Design new economic models. Enter as institution builders and system architects, not just employees. Celebrate with TFT Crew t-shirts designed by alumna Cauleen Smith.

Renovation² – Executive board dues fund space renovations signaling that UCLA TFT values student work, comfort, and creativity at the highest level. Starting with our Experimental Design Room—where engagement with different viewing experiences happens.

For our Faculty & Staff

TFTEE – Engagement and empowerment through town halls, monthly meetings discussing Michel Foucault on authority and agency, and Josslyn Lockett's LA Rebellion book.

Cross-Rank Mentorship – Support systems for everyone.

Grant-Writing Culture – Expert-led sessions to maximize funding opportunities.

Take, Focus and Thrive – Development Day for mutual care.

TFT Studio – Celebrating better collaborative practices.

Crew Call Faculty/Staff – Unit meetings discussing shared readings: Michel Foucault's "Two Lectures" and Josslyn Lockett's "Towards A More Perfect Rebellion."

The Stakes? Every time we speak, we may not be heard. We may be harmed when we make art, when we critique. But "see me, hear me, feel me" that my leadership embodies is not just a wish—it's a diving into the strength of cinema and theater.

Equal access to the force of story means equal access to dignity in a world where we have unequal access to it. This is why I risk standing up, speaking out, and taking space. Because I believe in making work for the benefit of those who come after us. Let film and theater last, develop, change, thrive.

The Call You are here to find what bell hooks calls "homeplace"—where you have equal access to dignity. One day you'll say: "This is where I found my people, where I learned from those who came before, where I became me." And perhaps you will give back to those who follow you.

Independence in voice. Innovation in form. Impact in society. That is TFT.

Our talents and our approach in TFT demand resources and deserve investment. This summer, we raised one million dollars—but that is only the beginning. The scale of our vision matches the scale of our responsibility: to preserve the influence of theater and film for future generations and ensure UCLA TFT remains a cultural engine for democracy, empathy, and human dignity. Join us. Give. Invest in courageous dreams that will shape not only our students but the world they go on to reshape.

Closing While the algorithms may prefer lies and hatred may be empowered, we hold the enduring strength of stories. The force of each singular voice builds our collective voice. And as a community, this is what we will nurture, care for, and protect—not only for ourselves, but for the university, for society, and for those who follow.

Today marks the beginning of our students' evolution from beginners to those who possess command of their abilities as authors of their own stories. Let's get to work.

Your Voice, Our Story. Your Voice, Our Story. Your Voice,
Our Story.