The Abject of Asian American Studies

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OPENING: The Question of Pleasure and Subjugation

How do we understand deriving pleasure, even orgasm, from rehearsing one's own subjugation?

In 2007, I toured my book *The Hypersexuality of Race* for two years across universities, city libraries, community organizations, and film festivals. A young woman at a small liberal arts college told me she enacted fantasies of being a Southeast Asian prostitute in wartime with her soccer star boyfriend and published a story about it in the school paper—for which 100 women of color across various student organizations demanded her public apology to each and every one of them for endangering their own intimate lives. An older Black woman confessed her BDSM pleasures to me after my large auditorium presentation. In a seminar, a young man loudly thanked me for enabling him to buy a dildo for himself. While I don't know what specific pages led to their whispered or proudly declared practices, they did affirm to me the infinities of desires as well as attachments to sexual narrations by others as part of one's intimate self.

A central argument from my work is how hypersexualization forms the very ground upon which we craft our identities–as resistant, as self-sovereign, as autonomous in the widest, expansive and inclusive ways–towards self-acceptance and freedom in this world where we live immersed in our subjugation. In *The Hypersexuality of Race*, I developed a theory of "productive perversity"—arguing that sexualization, rather than being only demeaning or debasing which

they can be, are also constitutive of the very basis of resistance. Thus, the pleasure and fantasy that compose the sexualization of race shows how desire does not occur in a vacuum. When wrestling with narratives that must be exploded by taking them in, destroying them and transforming them to something else for oneself, lust can be just in the sense of justice as the right to one's fierce desires as a righteous act. By claiming one's sexual particularity as one's own, within structures and histories that Asian/American women—and by extension other women of color—resist and subvert, representational tropes can form what I called a "race-positive sexuality" which moves us away from cultures of dissemblance and disavowal that denies the fact of jouissance from sexual practice and fantasy in the Lacanian sense of paradoxical joy. In other words, we practice cathartic agency in the face of intimate power.

The collision of pleasure and subjugation, of intimacy and inequality—is where my work on representations begins, where film and ethnic studies intertwine in my search for self-centrality in a world designed around women of color's self-sabotaging servitude and subordination.

PART I: Occupying the Abjected Position / What is the Abject?

This talk is entitled "The Abject of Asian American Studies." The abject is the dehumanized relegation into "trash" within social hierarchies. It's what society positions as "worse off"—and this hierarchical positioning sustains entire knowledge systems in terms of who speaks and who is heard..

In the *Powers of Horror* (1982), Julia Kristeva taught us that the abject is what we expel to define ourselves as subjects. For women of color, there is something to be acknowledged and even owned in the experience of abjection as shaping not only experience but perspectives that

are necessary to help understand the world we live in together. I know this as a leader. As one who has lived in the crosshairs of structural power where institutions whether the church or school or family relegates women like me to secondary and derivative status, I use my power to uplift, to remove obstacles and refuse suffering in silence. My leadership is shaped precisely by experiencing the persistency of abjection.

The Abjected as Knowledge Producers

In 2012, I wrote about what I called the "fashionable discounting of Asian American narration" in historical knowledge and the "frequent bashing of the academy in popular culture." I was responding to anxieties about whether Asian American Studies was getting left behind in a place of irrelevance as discourse seemed to move elsewhere. This is the moment when Linsanity and Tiger Motherhood showed up in popular culture and scholars debated their relevance.

What I couldn't fully see then was how this discounting would intensify to where we are now in the criminalization of addressing persistent inequity through prohibited words and even identities formerly protected from discrimination. A calculated assault occurs on the very idea that knowledge emerges from margins.

Let me be concrete. When I studied representations of intimacy at sites of inequality—examining both self-representation and fantasy-representations constructed by others—I asked about how hypersexualized representations of Asian/American women exceeded "positive" or "negative" frames. It was about understanding what it means when Anna May Wong, Nancy Kwan, Lucy Liu negotiate their sexualities on screen. When *Miss Saigon* actresses deploy sexuality as what they called "a technology of personal strength and self-authority." When performers in

pornography claim their own desires even when marked as perverse, they were expanding not only what was normal but exploding why we mark certain sexualities as perverse even.

This is uncomfortable. It's supposed to be as we dislodge deeply embedded narratives. My new film *So to Speak* explores a young woman of color coming of age within the university setting—the commingling of ethnicity, gender and sexuality, the struggle to claim one's voice through the classroom assignment, and the importance of sisterhood as lifelong strength and support. As a filmmaker and scholar of race, sexuality and representations, I amplify subjugated perspectives and create new narratives.

Because the abject of Asian American Studies lies not in marginalized subjects themselves, but in knowledge produced from positions of abjection—knowledge from those society deems ineligible can be of service to learning and to leading both.

PART II: How Ethnic Studies Shapes Entertainment

The Force of Story in Shaping Reality

In my work, stories aren't luxuries. Representations make better realities. They're assertions for access to dignity and creativity. For those of us deemed abject, our erasure in stories precedes and follows our erasure in real life. Deportation, detention, dismissal—these material violences have narrative precursors. Who speaks? Who gets heard? Who is rendered invisible? For whom do we feel? If we don’t speak, injustice continues and institutions worsen. This is why cinema and theater matter as sites of power.

Concrete Example: How Ethnic Studies Transformed Film & Television

When I was a student at UCLA TFT in the early 1990s, our community looked very different. Today, despite Proposition 209's limitations, we proved diversity is not a compromise of excellence—it IS excellence. I am so honored to lead UCLA TFT because of its ethnic studies-based institutional leadership in diversifying Hollywood. This is a story I unbury.

The LA Rebellion — Our 1969 Ethnocommunications Program didn't just train Black filmmakers. It created a multiracial model of collaboration: that those deemed abject could author their own stories, and help each other tell theirs, with equal aesthetic achievement and social impact. I call their names: Julie Dash, Charles Burnett, Haile Gerima, Irene Zeinabu Davis, Sylvia Morales, Montecuma Esparza, Duane Kubo and Robert Nakamura emerged from recognizing that the unrecognizable could fulfill the power of cinema to help us feel for others. And this models my own plans for the school as its Dean.

My Vision at UCLA TFT:

- Picture Start: Students partner with nonprofits creating disability verticals, consciousness commercials, Olympic trailers, training videos for dying languages, and music and dance videos to cultivate manifold speech—all for students to build reels while serving community
- Industry partnership: Advanced technology for arts industries that don't yet exist
- Next Generation Speaker Series connecting alumni across eras to capture ripples of the LA Rebellion
- Crew Call: Training students as institution builders and system architects in new models of production, new economies of distribution and dissemination

This is how ethnic studies shapes entertainment: not by merely adding diverse voices to existing structures, but by transforming authorship. Innovation happens centrally within education as sites of play and experimentation unbound to profit.

PART III: The Stakes Right Now

So what does it mean for the university then to be under attack (and underfunded)? Hannah Arendt warned us about this. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, she showed how domination begins with making certain people unrecognizable as fully human, as knowledge producers, as subjects of their own stories. Totalitarianism doesn't just attack people—it attacks the very capacity to think independently, to imagine alternatives, to see each other as equals.

We're at the crosshairs right now. Federal punishment exceeds institutional funding. Hatred amplified online, lies proliferate. Universities under attack as “independent centers of thought.” The enterprise of the university misrepresented as indoctrination rather than discovery. ICE raids in Los Angeles and beyond causing fear and anxiety in students. Queer and trans students targeted. Diversity and inclusion become "dirty words."

Arendt understood that when you destroy the ability to think critically about power, when you eliminate the spaces where people can understand their own lives and their collective capacity for action, you damage democracy itself.

What We Must Protect

To me, there is no greater place on Earth than the classroom. It is where we create powerfully critical and analytic citizenry, where our students find their voice and their vision, and learn that they are not alone in the human enterprise of asking questions and forging answers.

The classroom is a space I celebrate, protect, and defend. I am in complete awe and reverence because students come out of those classrooms confident and powerful—you see it in their postures, faces and voices—how ready they are to contribute to the world.

Arendt also taught us about "the right to have rights"—that before any specific rights, there must be recognition of your eligibility to be a rights-bearing subject at all. This is what's at stake when we talk about the abject and the role of education in empowering multiple perspectives.

We cannot lose “independent centers of thought” capable of scrutinizing power, the capacity to see those deemed "lesser" as fully human, tools to understand how domination works through representation, the discovery that happens when everyone is present, when more diverse voices are represented, the better the solutions are, the greater the art is. Not just in terms of box office profit but resonance and reach! When I look at Sterlin Harjo’s *Reservation Dogs* and Donald Glover’s *Atlanta* on television, produced from positions society tries to erase, it is elating and mind-opening. This weekend, I got to experience Ashley Zarah’s *Class Has Begun (Freedom is Coming)* which featured Iranian women rapping and dancing where they are otherwise prohibited with life or death consequences. You can't help but feel the power of the work beyond people needing to express themselves or they will literally explode. Last week, UCLA TFT showed Justin Lin’s new indie film *Last Days* about an Asian American missionary trying to colonize an untouched civilization in India to catch his own demise, and Lav Diaz’s *Magellan,* a three-hour film from a filmmaker whose average length is 8 hours in the genre he founded, “slow cinema.” These works reveal a vast span of experience beyond typical Hollywood movies.

PART IV: What Kinds of Stories Do We Need?

Art that teaches people to understand their power is more than a merely pleasurable and addictive enterprise. We cannot lose the larger goal of understanding ourselves and the world better. This is what peace looks like—not confusing, not confounding, not painfully alienating.

I am making a film right now to get out of the oblique. I grew up in the Philippines during the Marcos dictatorship. I saw the power of cinema and theater to teach people how to understand their lives, and more importantly, to understand their power. Forty-two years after my family fled, we face a reckoning with our father's legacy—the contrast between public narratives and private truths comprises this film about me and my sisters called *Talk to Me About Dad Only When He is Dead*. Making this movie enables me to examine events, from the rooms and words that transpire to tell the truth about the impact of psychic and physical violence for girls who grow to become powerful women. This film is for myself and for generations of women after.

CLOSING: Defiant Optimism

I should say that what comes out most singularly for my work and my life is I am a grieving mom—my son Lakas died almost 12 years ago at age 8—I've learned the urgency of confronting suffering rather than letting it persist. Leaders who tolerate unaddressed suffering risk institutional stagnation and this is where perhaps my defiant optimism comes from.

The abject of Asian American Studies isn't about marginalized subjects—it's about recognizing the everpresence of the unrecognizable as knowledge producers. This serves higher education's true mission.

The writer Viet Thanh Nguyen said at my convocation to inaugurate my deanship that refugees and immigrants like me in charge of one of the most important cultural production institutions in the world is what makes America great.

And to this I add: the creativity of the abjected makes democracy possible. Because we know what it costs when dominant epistemologies exclude what they cannot afford to acknowledge. We know what Arendt knew: that thinking itself is a form of resistance to domination. And that's what films and theater do: thinking leads to action that creates vocabularies to bind us together towards new and needed relations.

Films and theater gather people together to make work, to risk standing up, speaking out, taking space in creating records of our stories, standing among ancestors and homeplaces.

Let film and theater last, develop, change, thrive. Let ethnic studies continue to insist that all people have the capacity to create knowledge from their own positions within the historical context of inaccess and inequality.

Let the classroom remain the place where the work of power can be made legible and where the abjected claim analytic power towards representation as democratic practice. That's the work. Let's get to it coast to coast from LA to Providence.

In the face of coordinated attacks on the university and specifically ethnic studies that produced me, we cannot disappear, we cannot walk into our funerals, we cannot get down on our knees after all the work that results in standing tall in stylish big hats buoyed by substantial books and movies. We have to support each other, lean into our strength, to always build and create, not just defend our students and our own ever evolving selves. Like our blossoming students, I believe

my best work is still ahead. I stand up so the abjected can keep going, with no guarantees I will last, for the future of our freedom is worth the fight.

Thank you.