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## Book Review: *Discriminating Sex*

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Amy Sueyoshi. *Discriminating Sex: White Leisure and the Making of the American "Oriental"*. Urbana Il: University of Illinois Press, 228 pp.

In *Discriminating Sex*, Amy Sueyoshi plots how the stereotypes that make up the American "Oriental" began through the representations and constructions of Japanese and Chinese during the turn of the twentieth century in San Francisco. Focusing on the Japanese and Chinese communities in San Francisco during the turn of the twentieth century, she seeks to provide an alternative account to this "wide open" city that has been understood as a site of racial tolerance, and of gender and sexual liberation. While the idea that the production of cisgender heteropatriarchal ideologies of gender, sexuality, and sexual freedom is inherently tied to whiteness and the white body is not necessarily new, Sueyoshi puts forth that the boundaries of these categories reside on the racialized other, in this case Japanese and Chinese. As such, white gender norms and sexual freedom are negotiated through projecting on the Japanese and Chinese. Providing another alternative account, Sueyoshi argues that these negotiations (e.g., of womanhood, masculinity, femininity) are not fraught with anxieties but with confidence of their own supremacy. That is, it is the fundamental belief in white supremacy that allows for the negotiations to take place in public through popular leisure culture. Drawing on a wide range of print sources, case files, oral histories, and personal collections, Sueyoshi strings together a narrative that attempts to account for the various ways in which normative understandings of gender, sexuality, and sexual freedom were produced through the racialization of the Japanese and Chinese, tying personal discourses to the structures of power and privilege.

Sueyoshi begins this narrative with the ways in which Japanese and Chinese immigrants were received in San Francisco. Chapter 1 looks at the obsession of categorizing Asians and the fallacies of San Francisco as the "International City." Utilizing medical examiner autopsy reports to popular renditions in print media, she depicts the obsessive desires to project differences onto Japanese and Chinese as they are fitted into their racial and ethnic categories. Despite the title of "International City," white Americans feared the assimilation of these immigrants, alongside other people of color, who were seen as degenerate and of questionable moralities. In contrast, Italian immigrants were quickly accepted, despite a similar immigration period.

In the second chapter, Sueyoshi establishes the context that allows for San Francisco to be perceived as a sexually free and racially tolerant city. Arguing that it is the rigid hierarchy of white supremacy and heteropatriarchy that allow for white power to be

uncontested in various domains such as politics and culture, that permits miscegenation and same-sex love as these were consumed for the amusement of the middle-class white (male) audience. That is, they were permitted as they were seen as nonthreatening to the existing order that privileges the middle-class cisgender white heterosexual.

The construction of the modern white women in the third chapter brings into focus the negotiations surrounding white men's desires for the ideal women. The reduction of Japanese women into the geisha stereotype (docile, loyal, domestic) is used to simultaneously define (through negation) white modern womanhood (strong, independent, intelligent) and satisfy white men's desire and gaze. Sueyoshi demonstrates how the Japanese woman is used as a negotiating object between the new modern white women and the white heteropatriarchal expectations, and is thereby unsurprisingly riddled with contradictions (to be simultaneously innocent and also sexually experienced) as she takes on the multiple roles.

The next chapter deals with whites' construction of Chinese women as sex workers. Depicted as already sexually immoral, Chinese women served as a scapegoat for the negotiations of white moral anxieties, especially with the "shifting mores of white female sexuality" (74). Through this process of racialization, whites were able to attain sexual freedom as immoralities are scripted onto people of color, thereby restricting them. Sueyoshi cites census data as evidence that more white women were participating in sex work than Chinese women despite these projections. In addition, she also demonstrates the structural ways in which it is difficult for Chinese women to move out of prostitution as a form of income.

Chapter 5 shifts to the management of Japanese and Chinese men and their masculinities. Continuing the existing argumentative thread, Sueyoshi demonstrates how the stereotypical representations of Japanese and Chinese men depicted the appropriate range for acceptable middle-class white male civility. Beginning with the feminized Japanese men to the degenerate and beast-like Chinese men, she is able to articulate how these were projections of what white men perceived their best and worst masculinities to be. These arbitrary attributions were further affirmed to be projections when Sueyoshi cites the moment when these stereotypes flipped for both ethnicities as white America negotiates a different context (e.g., Japan's growing military might after the Russo-Japanese War shifts the perspective of Japanese male masculinity).

From the past chapters, Sueyoshi has established the ways in which appropriate white masculinity and femininity were explored through the depictions of Japanese and Chinese immigrants. Moving into Chapter 6, Sueyoshi shifts into how Japanese and Chinese immigrants managed their assimilation in the adoption (or not) of white American dressing. Beginning with the cross-dressing of whites, she moves into the ways Japanese immigrants adopted western dressing while Chinese immigrants incorporated only parts of it (even as they were depicted as completely disregarding western clothing). Tying both parts together with the example of whites' adoption of *kimonos* and aspects of Japanese culture (e.g., tea ceremony). In this chapter, the persisting hierarchy of white supremacy and heteropatriarchy drives how the racialized Japanese and Chinese immigrant can never

assimilate while their culture could be consumed to demonstrate whites' sense of worldliness.

The last chapter closes the narrative as Sueyoshi demonstrates how the distinctions established in the chapters before melded into the dreaded American "Oriental" stereotype. Differences, even as they were imagined, no longer mattered as whites in San Francisco shifted away from the negotiations and speculations of gender and sexuality. As the goal of white supremacy shifted to new imperial projects, constructing new racialized others, the movement from hypervisibility to relative quiet between the 1910s and 1920s allowed for the few-and-far-between stories to conflate Japanese and Chinese characteristics. Firmly tying the ways in which class, gender, sexuality, and race are understood and produced, Sueyoshi shows how the dwindling interest in gender and sexuality also corresponded to the decreased interest in race.

Closing the book with an epilogue chapter, Sueyoshi discusses briefly how the Orient came to be depicted alongside same-sex sexuality. The gay Oriental absorbs the attributions of the past Japanese and Chinese immigrants and is produced as middle-class whites stretched their gender and sexual norms. Ending with a tie-in to the twenty-first century, Sueyoshi hoped that the woven narrative in *Discriminating Sex* provided one point of origin for the depiction of American "Oriental," both in time and in geographical space, that haunts until today.

Throughout the book, Sueyoshi returns to how white pleasure and fulfilment comes at the expense of Japanese and Chinese experiences. Even as subthemes and in-depth examples were provided in each chapter, I feel that she never lost sight of this larger argument that she was making. Each chapter builds on top of the others, even if it is not always clear at the start. I appreciate the socio-political contexts she paints at the beginning of most chapters that help situate the examples as it relates to the Japanese and Chinese within the larger structures of white supremacy. I thought that the book did make whiteness visible in the construction of the Asian American subject and also convincingly tied the ways in which gender and sexuality are inherently racialized through the various examples that ultimately produced the American "Oriental." Given the subtitle of the book, I wished there was more of an orientation of what she thought the American "Oriental" to be. Outside of a short section (about half a page), the conceptualization of what is understood as American "Oriental" is left to the reader. Gesturing to Said's *Orientalism*, she defines the American "Oriental" to be similar in "form and function" (6) except for its centering of East Asians. Seeing as this forms an important part of her argument in the overall narrative of her book, I wished more elaboration was provided at the beginning. If a reader was unfamiliar with Said's work, how would they understand what she meant as form and function? How might this impact the overall understanding of the pervasive foundations of white supremacy in the construction of the Asian American subject and experience?

This book is an important addition to a number of different disciplines. As she has remarked, *Discriminating Sex* would provide an alternative account to the normative depiction of San Francisco as a free-wheeling, racially tolerant city. This also adds important histories and contexts to works on Asian American genders and sexualities,

even with its focus on the locality of San Francisco. Broadly, Sueyoshi's attempt at bringing in analysis of power and privilege links structure with personal stories that also makes a convincing case for how gender and sexual freedom for white middle class comes at the cost of people of color, therefore also making this useful for research in sexuality studies. Because of the ways in which white supremacy dictates representations, the book also points to how visibility projects and representational works may already fall prey to the limitations of the constructed frame. For example, projects reacting to the stereotype of the Asian "Oriental" may be working within the confines of the white imaginations that dictated attributions and cultural values that are "important."

*Discriminating Sex*, as it builds a cohesive narrative that ties in gender and sexuality to race and class, uncovers the invisible hand of whiteness in the production of an Asian American subjectivity. Tracing a point of origin for the American "Oriental," Sueyoshi's work demonstrates the ways in which Japanese and Chinese femininity and masculinity were manipulated for the exploration and consumption of middle-class whites. Attributing San Francisco as one of the geographical sites in which these stereotypes are disseminated across the nation, she also flips the script of the liberal city at the turn of the twentieth century. Merely offering alternative processes in the manifestation of racism, misogyny, and homophobia, the book is able to articulate how white supremacy and heteropatriarchy operate through the façade of gender and sexual liberty.

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