

Pranks and Fake Porn: Doing Feminism My Way

Welcome to the Home of the Big Bad Chinese Mama. THE #1 MOCK-MAIL-ORDER BRIDE/ASIAN PORN SPORF SITE IN THE WORLD! Inside are contained the "demure lo-tus blossoms," the "geishas," the "oriental slits"—whatever you had imagined in your patriarchal, colonialist longings. These women will take you by storm (and will kick your ass). Yeah, you've seen mail-order bride sites before, you may have even surfed over to an Asian porn site, but never in your wildest, culturally commodifying, sick sexual desires, have you been schooled by women (womyn) like this! . . .

—<http://www.bigbadchinesemama.com> (May 2000)

— In May 2000, I created the site www.bigbadchinesemama.com both as a public art piece and as an Asian American anthology of voices and personal satire. The site was my senior project as an undergrad at UCLA. It was a daring project for me because I was taking a mix of scholarly ideas and annoying frustrations and sharing them on the Web with strangers in the crude and seemingly amateurish medium of a mock mail-order bride/fake porn site. The site's content hints that it is intended to question the mail-order bride industry and to attack all white males as bigots, but these were only my secondary and least important objectives. As a woman artist who also happens to be Asian American, I continue to feel pressure from the Asian American and feminist movements to be "representative" of their political goals—goals I do not always understand or agree with. The process of developing the site helped me test and renegotiate what I loathed about "feminist" notions and activist politics. This site helped me change what I thought about feminism and activism by redefining those ideas for myself and other people.

Why was I afraid of the word "feminism"? I had spent four years at

college avoiding using the word to identify my leftist politics. At UCLA, using the word "feminist" is like declaring yourself a political leader. The way I saw it, you couldn't just casually call yourself a feminist and go about your college life drinking at parties and flirting with guys. If you were a self-identified feminist, it was as if you had declared a religious vow that came with responsibilities. A feminist was someone who lacked humor. If I wanted to be what I thought a feminist was, I'd have had to make lifestyle and attitude adjustments according to the Commandments of Political Correctness. In other words, as a self-proclaimed feminist, I would have to develop a supersensitivity to anything that might be somewhat offensive, policing society for every ounce of injustice. "Feminism" was a word that was repellent to me, even as an educated college student.

Until recently, I feared the word. I refrained from declaring myself a feminist when I offered guest lectures about the skewed representations of Asian women on Asian sex sites and about my efforts to subvert these images through www.bigbadchinesemama.com. On one occasion, a student put me on the spot and asked me if I thought of myself as a feminist. I explained, "I don't consider myself so much a feminist as I do an artist who believes that there is political power in the personal voice." The San Francisco State University professor who was hosting me in her classroom corrected me in front of the class. She explained that that was what feminism is about. Third wave feminism is about embracing individual experience and making personal stories political. First and second wave feminisms sought to empower women as a united front. Although they offered a political voice for women as a whole, they didn't acknowledge the varying agendas and experiences of individual women. Third wave feminism was a response by women of color and others who felt homogenized by a movement defined by the goals of middle-class, white women.

This definition of third wave feminism astonished me. Who knew that, according to some odd academic definition previously unavailable to me, I was a feminist? I had two degrees from UCLA and still didn't know that feminism wasn't about man-hating women holding picket signs. Too bad the rest of the world couldn't understand the kind of feminism I was embracing without taking a women's studies class. Was it also possible that the only people who know about this so-

called third wave of feminism are the "learned" feminists who have already struggled with the definition in classes and discussion groups? What about John Doe, a fifty-four-year-old accountant who couldn't care less what "feminism" means, just as long as he's out the door by five o'clock? How about Jane Doe, a new immigrant in America who would much rather make ends meet and learn English than know that "feminism" is not a scary word?

Maybe a national billboard campaign needs to be launched. We need giant signs above every campus and freeway that read: "Hey, America! Don't be afraid of the word 'feminist'! It doesn't mean man-hating or being humorless! There is a new thing called 'third wave' feminism that will open the door so you can embrace politics by being who you are!"

The concept of feminism has become so academic that only a select few understand its new meaning. In spite of this, feminist politics can be shared with the world if it is carefully disguised in the mass media. Pop culture provides an effective vehicle to carry the self-celebrating concepts of third wave feminism. The unfortunate downside is that we end up with inane catchphrases such as "Girls Rule, Boys Drool" and "Girl Power." These sound bites are paradoxical in their attempt to inspire women. For example, the gorgeously thin and shapely women of Destiny's Child singing about being independent certainly have no problem maintaining their self-esteem. Feminist catchphrases in pop culture use the term "girl" but rarely, if ever, use the word "woman." It suddenly becomes too serious to say "Woman Power!" instead of "Girl Power!" I wanted to bridge the gap between serious feminism and pop feminism in order to make the idea of feminism less scary. As it turns out, www.bigbadchinesemama.com was the bridge.

Let me set the backdrop for the creation of my Web site by describing my history.

During my freshman year at UCLA, I was vulnerable to the indoctrination of ethnic studies and women's studies courses. I grew up as a third and fourth generation Chinese American in San Francisco and saw the advantages of being "Americanized." I witnessed the subtle effects of liberal white racism in the disguise of "multiculturalism," and I grew up an awkward teenager because I always felt torn between my individual identity as a woman and pop culture's constructions of fem-

inity. I resisted when approached by student groups formed on the basis of ethnic background. I felt such groups were "clannish" because they did not embrace other ethnic groups. Soon, however, I found myself drawn to them as a way to bring me closer to "the motherland." My first women's studies class was like a therapy session, with the help of theory and academic analysis. I was able to examine my experiences. I finally had a place where I could see my own experiences in context and analyze every awkward and uncomfortable moment from my childhood. The women's studies classroom gave me a place where I could redirect my anger and self-hatred—at government, at my culture or lack thereof, at the mass media, and especially at white men and their big oppressive penises.

These were amazing revelations, but instead of feeling empowered, I felt completely helpless. Women's studies almost ruined me. I spent my first summer after college toxically angry back home in San Francisco, unable to reconcile my "new identity" with my day-to-day living. I shaved my head because I didn't want to be the object of the popular gaze. I roamed the streets in search of ex-boyfriends, believing that they somehow owed me an apology for every inequity in our past relationships that might have been rooted in their assumptions about my race and gender. I was unable to watch television or movies, because the overwhelming presence of white actors on screen reminded me that my life was a product of "colonization."

The power that I thought I had been given by my new-found knowledge completely paralyzed me. At the end of that summer, an ulcer ripped through my stomach, and I had a semi-nervous breakdown. I realized that my anger was only hurting me and was doing nothing to change the world around me. From that point on, I acknowledged that I gave racism and sexism too much credit for causing my woes. Though my gender and ethnicity framed my experiences, I was still an active agent in my life. The only thing that was really victimizing me was my own self-pity; the inherent factors of race and gender only posed a challenge. Of course, this is a melodramatic example of what happens in a "self-awakening." During my second year of college, I was able to calm my aggression; I began to make amends with my feelings of cultural displacement through art and performance.

After this point, I felt pressure to make all of the artwork I created

"representative" of Asian people. The mass-media stereotypes of Asians I had become acutely aware of were the images of Asian women as exotic and sexual creatures, or conversely, as sexually inert and nerdy. Through my classes, I became overly sensitive to elements in my artwork that were stereotypical and began to censor those elements so that my work would be "empowering." However, I discovered that the more unsterotypical I made my art, the less human and more uninteresting it became. In my attempts at complete political correctness, I wrote about characters who were unreal. It was very difficult to create characters or address themes in my work that were honest. I began to feel resentful of my activism, as it seemed to suffocate my artistic voice instead of allowing me to explore it.

Soon it seemed more appropriate to write a history book than to create art, because the obligation to "represent" everyone's politics accurately was so overwhelming. Why was the act of achieving personal freedom through art so oppressive? Why had the process of making art as an Asian American woman become so drenched in unanticipated responsibilities? Could it be possible that the act of living and creating art freely was protest in itself, and that it was more subversive and more challenging than an overt act of protest? Is it possible that by not caring about the constraints put on me because of my race and gender and by just living my life, I had actually been able to achieve goals similar to those that major political movements would seek to meet? In my case, those goals meant living as if my race or gender was not a constraint.

I knew that politics was indeed constraining the messages of art—and not just my own work—when I attended a poetry reading at UCLA for Asian Pacific Heritage Month. Poet after poet seemed to drone on forever about "identity politics." The poets' works cast away stereotype after stereotype, but rarely revealed who the poets were. A Vietnamese American woman approached the mike. Before reading, she apologized for not having work that was "important and political." It was disappointing that she felt that her work was neither important nor political just because she didn't talk about white oppression or feeling silenced by institutionalized racism. Her poem was about her struggle with weight loss. This was an issue that was very personal to her and very

relevant to many people in the room because it confronted issues of body image.

In a way, I connected with this poet because I wanted to create an art piece that appealed to audiences without being too pedantic or too politically correct; I also did not want my art to have its message negated—that is, the way pop culture did—by refusing to get too serious about feminism. I wanted to create an anthology that would be public and that could be understood both by people who were knowledgeable about academic rhetoric and by those who were not. I was wary of reducing my arguments to academic theories that I didn't understand and that I knew were inaccessible to the mainstream. I wanted to express what I thought feminism should be by creating an unpretentious and simple work that didn't bog audiences down with theory but used theory in an accessible way. I didn't want to negate the idea of strong women by carrying my message through bikini-clad women. Nor did I want to "de-program" the female image by making my participants asexual.

Art has the potential to be more broadly accessible than other forms of communication, but the problem with most anthologies, art events, and chapbooks made for Asian American women is that audience potential is limited to how many seats are available or how many copies can be produced and sold. While live performance and literature can play a role in a cultural critique, the demographics of their audiences limit their potential. When people participate in an Asian American-themed event or purchase a literary work by an Asian American, they generally are already interested in Asian American issues. I wanted to reach people who had neither an existing interest in nor a concern for Asian American women and their politics.

The solution to this dilemma came to me through my work with Mimi Nguyen, a Ph.D. candidate in gender studies at UC Berkeley who showed me how to make academia relevant in day-to-day events. After a draining quarter in her Asian American Women's Literature class, with endless readings that seemed to take the same point from a different angle, her Web site (<http://www.worsthanqueer.com> [March 10, 2000]) was offered as the last assignment of the term. Mimi's site is self-declared "critical theory for handy everyday use." Mimi is a queer Viet-

nameless refugee and a participant in punk rock culture. Her writing demolished my stereotype of academics as dry, intimidating readers of ancient books. Her site is an archive of journal reflections on daily events, magazine articles, and drawings, all of which reflect her studies in postcolonial and poststructural theories. With her sassy writing style, Nguyen was able to awaken my interest in academia. What I found very interesting was one entry in which she stated that people had found her site by doing a search for Asian porn.

It dawned on me that locating "safe spaces" for Asian women to meet and converse on the Internet was virtually impossible because doing a search for "Asian women" almost always yielded mail-order bride and pornographic sites. In addition, I was tired of "safe spaces"—I had spent four years in classes, at art events, and at poetry readings that were so safe I felt insulated—and I began to feel awkward because I wasn't as upset as the people around me. I yearned for reality; I was tired of feeling like I was preaching to the choir.

I decided to build a Web site, not as a discussion space for Asian American women, but as a space that would examine my conflicting politics. I also decided not to take on the burden of trying to please or represent an entire population. I wanted to reach people who were knowledgeable about Asian American politics and those who weren't. I thought that intercepting traffic would be the best way to reach those who most needed to see my message. I quickly realized that this tactic would target the gross guys who accost me at places like the 99-cents store and ask me if I speak English; the people who ask me why it is that Asians are so docile; the men who come up to me at clubs and tell me it is their "fantasy to be with an Oriental woman." Through a highly arbitrary and unscientific survey of this sample, I deduced that this group is probably part of the same population that visits Asian porn sites or mail-order bride sites.

And thus my format for www.bigpaddhinesemama.com was born!

I chose my domain name before I knew the site would be a mock porn site, because I wanted to subvert the *Joy Luck Club*-esque notion of a Chinese Mother as a weak, pained, and silenced woman who was set against the backdrop of mythology and ghosts. Instead, I wanted to move toward what I saw as the future of the Chinese Mother—a more

aggressive, down-home "mama" similar to black mothers or mothers from the Deep South. "Big," "bad," and "mama" are also words used to describe women in black porn sites. Asian porn sites emphasize the smallness, shyness, and coyness of women; by using dramatically different adjectives, I intended to subvert a dominant trend. Just try typing the stereotypical adjectives used to describe Asian women—words such as "exotic," "petite," and "demure"—into a search engine, and typically you'll get Web sites on Asian porn or Asian themes. The pictures of the women on Asian porn sites emphasize shyness, and many women pose in a "naughty but nice" way. Type words that stereotypically describe black women—words such as "big booty"—into a search engine and you'll get black porn sites. In those sites, the fonts are inflated and gaudy, with the photography emphasizing the overt sexuality of black women; sometimes there are jungle prints in the background. Type in "Latina," and you will find naked Latin ladies and potential brides.

Before I built the site, I spent many late nights in college doing unofficial research. As I surfed the Web, I discovered that the general format for Asian sex sites was begging to be mocked. These sites made me laugh more than get upset because the emphasis on "orientalness" was so extreme that it was ridiculous. The exoticness of Asian culture was emphasized ad nauseam. The Web designers overused things such as decorative oriental fans, chopstick fonts, lanterns, and clickable gongs. In the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) section on almost every mail-order bride site, I found pertinent questions for potential "buyers," such as "Will my bride speak English?" and "Why will an Asian bride be a better wife than a Western bride?" and "What will a visa cost to bring her over?" Both the questions and the answers emphasized the apparently inherent subservience of Asian women and spoke of women as commodities instead of as humans. Although we would like to think that stereotypes of Asian women as "dragon ladies" and subservient "lotus blossoms" are long since passé, sites like these not only keep those images alive but also profit from customers who believe the stereotypes to be true.

In trying to encourage women who weren't hard-core activists to participate in this project, I assembled a harem of mail-order brides

from my UCLA friends and classmates; these women, I thought, would represent a broad spectrum of empowered women who enact their politics at different levels. Some are political organizers; some participate in Asian American community events; others are considered "sellouts" or "apathetic." I had each woman create a mail-order bride bio to parody the bios on real mail-order bride sites. I wanted the bios to respond to what these individuals had experienced as women—and not just to their lives as Asian Americans. I had the women pose for pictures that responded to the images of Asian women in sex sites. In these pictures, some make funny faces, while others cover their faces; one chose not to be pictured at all. All of these images were subversive responses to the commodifying gaze placed on most Asian women on the Web.

I tried to get a large spectrum of experiences and demographics in the pool of "brides" for the site without attempting to make the diverse participants reflect the population at large. The participants come from different ethnic backgrounds; some are mixed race, some are queer, and all come from different economic backgrounds. I acknowledge that to represent every experience and demographic would be impossible, and I am not responsible for representing everyone. I hope to encourage visitors from all walks of life to explore bolder forms of expression by seeing the broad range of women who participate in my site. I have since received new bride submissions from visitors to my site. I have three brides who are Asian men; in their bios and photos, they poke fun at issues such as Asian male emasculation and being a gay Asian man constantly picked up by "rice queens" (slang for old white men who prey on gay Asians).

For my Web site, I parodied the FAQ section on other sites by creating a "F.U.Q." ("Frequently Un-asked Questions") section. I took questions from the mail-order bride sites and answered them on my own terms—slamming the answers found in traditional mail-order bride sites with my own Riot Grrrl sensibilities. My answer to whether the brides on my site speak English is an adamant "Of course we do. Why the fuck wouldn't we?" The pictures framing the sides of this section are of the "brides" beating and hurting white men. I intentionally made these pictures over the top, both to spoof the idea of "the angry Asian American feminist" and to show how rallying cries like "Bring down the White Man!" can be translated into ridiculous images. It was

my personal response to the occasional fanatical antagonism in revolutionary movements.

I also included prank calls made to massage parlors and porn studios to set an example of what I see as "armchair activism." In one call to a massage parlor, Randy, our caller, pretends to be an eighty-five-year-old white man who would like to be massaged by "an Oriental." In the call, he asks such ridiculous questions as "Is there a senior discount?" and "Can my twenty-five-year-old wife watch?" The woman on the other line takes every laughable concern very seriously, as if she is used to getting weird calls like this all the time. In this parody, she also explains that "it's all the same" when he asks if he can have a Chinese instead of a Korean masseuse. Although she first answers the phone in a sexy voice, the woman becomes increasingly suspicious of Randy's motives during the call; by the end, her real voice is blaring through the receiver as she questions his age. I have received responses from visitors who feel that the prank calls are juvenile and do nothing to change the current state of politics. This is true: prank calls are juvenile and do not do what petitions and rallies do. However, posting these calls publicly gives visitors a glimpse of the sex industry as well as the male, eurocentric values it caters to and works under. It also gives an example of subversive action that even the laziest of activist types can take. I also want to show that it's okay to laugh at certain injustices instead of feeling constantly offended and disempowered by them.

One link on bigbadchinesemama.com is called "Memoirs of an Anti-Geisha"—a deliberate play on the title of Arthur Golden's best-selling novel, *Memoirs of a Geisha*. For the months that this novel about the geisha with the silver eyes (ahem) was all the rage, I put up with people (always white) trying to talk to me about this book. They acted as if they were so much more familiar with me and "my people" after reading the novel. (Never mind the fact that China and Japan are different countries or the fact that I live in America.) Golden's book was released in 1997, when Asian trends were all the rage in fashion, food, and beyond. Barnes and Noble packaged the book with tins of green tea to provide readers with an "authentic" cultural experience. And Madonna morphed into a geisha after reading the book. In my spoof of *Memoirs*, I celebrate the facets of my life that are ugly because they make me who I am, not because they are exotic or trendy. I describe

crude habits such as nose picking and booger flicking that all humans secretly participate in. The section entitled "Big Feet, Loud Mouths" responds to subtly oppressive beauty standards for Chinese American women, using my big feet as a metaphor. My big feet were regarded as ugly when I was growing up; I was told that men prefer women with small feet. I grew up feeling uncomfortable about the size of my feet, always wishing that I could have feet that were more petite and less stinky. In my critique, I point out that I should have been proud of my big, stinky feet because they symbolize the freedom that my ancestors never had during the subjugating era of foot binding. The point of my critique is not to throw out Golden's book as inaccurate or poorly written but to embrace a less fanciful representation of Asian American women that pop culture tends to overlook.

I sought traffic in unorthodox ways because I wanted to get hits from people who were not familiar with Asian American women's issues. I cut and pasted a meta-tag from a porn site into my site so that when people searched words for porn, they would be led to my site. I placed ads for the site in the back of the *New Times LA* where the ads for escorts are, advertising my site as a porn site to see Asian women. I would also go into chat rooms and spam my Web address. Occasionally, people would try to kick me out of their chat rooms, though most times I would get curious visitors to bite the bait. I found clubs at different Web sites dedicated to fans of Asian women (ironically, many of these sites were housed at Click2Asia.com, a site intended for an Asian American audience). Most of these clubs were visited by men looking for a quick lay; the clubs were essentially porn-swapping clubs. I linked my site to these clubs, promising people who clicked on the link a gorgeous Asian woman. I used suspiciously alluring copy: "Wanna see hot and naked Asian women holding eggplant for free? Click here!" The descriptions I used were intended to entice men who were used to seeing Asian women as commodities. I tried to make the descriptions sound slightly subversive so that perceptive women might catch on that something wasn't quite right.

I also found much support by linking my site in nonsubversive ways to other sites on the Web. I found fan bases in sites for Asian and Asian American women. I was linked to academic sites, Asian American women's sites, feminist sites, and personal sites. I also received press

from publications such as the *Village Voice*, the *LA Weekly*, and the Asian Pacific American magazine *Pacific Times*.

I was nervous when I first launched the site. I felt vulnerable because visitors could access and interpret my thoughts and images whenever they wanted. However, it was liberating to have this presence on the Web because all the work is accessible twenty-four hours a day, and this approach is not as exhausting as day-to-day activism. It was exciting to know that my words and ideas could be found even when I was sleeping. This was a change from what I was used to thinking of as activism: a demanding effort that required participation by my "live" self.

I monitor the progress of the site and reactions to it across the Web through my guestbook. This is how I learn about people's reactions to the site. Many sites will censor and delete entries that condemn the Web site in order to protect their image to their loyal visitors, but for me, it is very important that the guestbook remain unaltered, because I want people to see that racism and sexism are alive and well. I was especially concerned about the reaction from other Asian Americans who might see my representation of Asian American women as crude. Soon after the launch of the site, I had obsessive visitors who would sign and start conversations in my guestbook daily, if not hourly. This was interesting to me because I immediately noticed how defensive my opposition was. They tried to take control of my Web site through my guestbook. They questioned every image and idea that was presented and then retuned anyone who signed with a note of appreciation. Some looked right past the obvious and accused me of not properly "representing" their image of an Asian woman.

Almost two years after I launched the Web site, I am extremely jaded. My guestbook entries are e-mailed to me daily, and I have slowly numbed my social conscience under the onslaught. Can you imagine what it is like to receive and file away daily e-mails that proclaim "Fuck niggers!" hundreds of times, that inform me that I am a "dick-sucking cumbag," or even tell me that I should die? These guestbook entries, the public reactions to the site, prove that my site has reached its intended audience; my tactics have attracted both those interested in Asian American politics and those who are "oppressors." Because their positive and negative responses all appear within my site, they can be read only within the context of my site. There are those who live under

the illusion that the world is much more progressive. The negative reactions that I leave posted on the board reveal the extent of real ignorance that still exists.

Reactions from Asian Americans are usually empowered. Occasionally, I get letters saying that my site offered both a new way to think about challenging oppression and the confidence to try activism in different ways. Other Asian American visitors criticize my site as not a "good representative" of Asian Americans and complain that I am making "us" look bad (as if "we" were a baseball team).

Unfortunately, these viewers fail to see that I wanted to challenge the idea that any public Asian American figure is obligated to stand in for the entire Asian American community. It's virtually impossible for one person to represent all political concerns, since the Asian American population is so huge and varied. Because the issue has been broached publicly, other visitors respond and get the chance to generate a public dialogue on the subject. Some visitors tell me that they cannot understand that my site passed as an "academic" project because the bright colors and images seem so juvenile. My response to them is that my site is more catchy and accessible than pie charts and long, convoluted thesis projects. I want to challenge traditional modes of academia and to explore how dialogue generated in a classroom can be transported into the rest of the world.

Through a special hits counter, I discovered that some unorthodox traffic finds me in ways that I did not anticipate. I have been linked to some sites that cater to men with foot fetishes because of the pictures of my feet in the "Memoirs of an Anti-Geisha" link. I get at least two e-mails a month from men who want me to rub my feet on their faces so they can worship them. Yes, this is disturbing, but it comes with the territory. These are the visitors who, despite my blatant attempts to show that my site is a farce, still believe that my intention is to provide myself and the harem of mail-order brides as a commodity. It's quite shocking that some visitors fail to see through the heavy-handed satire I have created. This public display of ignorance is important because it wakes up visitors who respond to my site by saying, "So what? People aren't this dumb. Your message is old hat." Sometimes I respond to visitors who seem unconvinced that my site is serving any purpose, but the task can be overwhelming, as I receive so many negative responses

a month. My goal is not to convert anyone to my way of thinking but just to share my ideas with them.

The site has served its purpose. It took me out of anger, now I am working on new art that my anger and frustration were hiding. I don't feel so reluctant when I take on new performance projects because I have already been to such an extreme with www.bigbadchinesemama.com that I know how to handle good and bad feedback. It is easier to do new projects that explore facets of identity. The project finally gave me a chance to use knowledge that I thought would forever be confined to a college classroom and would have no outside applications.

Recently, I have been much more comfortable calling myself a feminist when people ask me to describe the work that I do. Feminism has become something to which I have given my own interpretation, and I have taken the responsibility of not letting the word feminism "name me." Instead, I believe that I can take the reins and redefine the word for myself. This is the attitude that I would like to pass on to others; I hope that they, too, will change their attitude toward the word. Feminism is a proactive, creative act that you can do in your backyard. It is anything that will change the state of women for the better or open new dialogue on the state of women. Through my Web site, I tackled many of my fears about the inaccessible and impersonal nature of feminism. What I didn't realize until later was that, in challenging what I thought was wrong with feminism, I was actually doing feminism.