

Questions for Seminar Readings and Images

Leslie Bow
Mark and Elisabeth Eccles Professor
University of Wisconsin, Madison

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Cute Imperialism?

Throughout the late 19th and 20th-centuries, demeaning racial imagery contributed to anti-immigrant policies and U.S. imperialist endeavors in Asia and the Pacific. In the contemporary moment, psychologist Derald Wing Sue has suggested that stereotyping represents a form of racial microaggression that negatively impacts Asian American mental health and well being. The belief that reductive racial imagery constitutes a form of injury or harm is foundational to Asian American Studies and other disciplines of Ethnic American Studies. This seminar hopes to complicate that association by exploring the relationship between commodity aesthetics and racial representation across national boundaries.

What constitutes visual imperialism? In the post-Civil Rights era U.S., racial caricature has become taboo—whether or not this prohibition extends to portrayals of American Indians or Asian Americans is an open question. Moreover, contemporary artists attempting to satirize American racial stereotypes have been subject to the criticism that they recirculate pleasurable fantasies of race for largely white audiences. How do global commodities interact with this still-debated legacy?

As a group, we'll explore the split affects produced by iconographic representations of Asians that might be said to be at once racist . . . and adorable. How do context (Asia/U.S) and spectatorship (white/nonwhite) influence the interpretation of visual rhetorics surrounding race? Do kawaii (“cute”) commodities function as racist caricature by reinforcing scripts of biological difference? We will explore the ways in which “cute” may signify differently within the contexts of theory, the American history of collectibles, mascots, and *chinoiserie*, post-imperial Japan, or Kawaii International. If the image is implicated in maintaining racial hierarchy, how do we understand the pleasure it likewise elicits?

Image File: “Cute Imperialism”

*Please note that this file contains images that some may find offensive.

Reading:

Sue, Derald Wing, Jennifer Bucceri, et. al. “Racial Microaggressions and the Asian American Experience.” *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* 13.1 (2007): 72-81.

Harris, Michael D. Excerpt from *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003. 190-210.

Harris, David. "Cuteness." Excerpt from *Cute, Quaint, Hungry and Romantic*. New York: Basic Books, 2000. 1-21.

Kinsella, Sharon. "Cuties in Japan." In *Women, Media, and Consumption in Japan*. Lise Skov and Brian Moeran, ed. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1995. 220-254.