

WHERE IS THE ASIAN BODY?
THE PROBLEM OF ERASURE IN WESTERN VISUAL CULTURE

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Abstract

Asians have suffered from erasure and poor representation in western media, which at its core is a visual problem as well as a sociopolitical one. Since humans are inherently visual creatures and receive a lot of information from the media and entertainment they consume, the lack of visibility and humanization given to Asians on-screen very well affect how people perceive Asians off-screen. This poor representation is not a new phenomenon; racist portrayals of Asians and the use of Asian clothing and objects for clout is in fact a continuation of deeply ingrained traditions in the West. My paper reveals the different issues of Asian stereotypes and erasure and the history that allows these incidents to keep happening. Though the term "Asian" includes many ethnicities, this paper will mainly focus on East Asian appropriation and representation in Western media.

INTRODUCTION

On the 16th of March this year, a white man drove from Woodstock to Atlanta in Georgia, and took a gun to three different day spas, killing six Asian women. After the act, he admitted to the police that he was a sex addict and wanted to “eliminate the temptation.” He denied that this shooting was racially motivated, even though he specifically targeted Asian day spas. This event comes following a rise in violence towards Asians in the West, especially after it was announced that the epicenter of the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic was Wuhan, China. To any person of color in the West, this event was tragic, but unsurprising.

The West, and particularly the United States of America, has had a long tradition of racially motivated violence. Attacks against Asian-Americans have largely been buried and forgotten, but since the Atlanta shooting, events like the Chinese Massacre of 1871, the Bellingham riots of 1907, and the murder of Vincent Chin in 1982 have again begun circulating in the media. Many claim that they do not know how this could have happened, or how they never saw this coming, but the truth is, many of the Asians in America were waiting for an event like this to unfold since the first time former President Donald Trump uttered “Chinese virus”¹ and “kung flu.”² Attacks like this one are a strong indication of the failed assimilation of Asians and other non-European minorities in the West. To be clear, this is not the fault of the minorities.

Despite claims of being a “melting pot” of cultures, the history of colonization perpetrated by Western Europe, and later the United States, signal that western societies purposely create this racial divide to maintain imperialistic Eurocentric power. This message is

¹ Trump, Donald (@realDonaldTrump): “The United States will be powerfully supporting those industries, like Airlines and others, that are particularly affected by the Chinese Virus. We will be stronger than ever before!”

² Steakin and Pereira: “Trump brought up the virus's origins in China, much to the amusement of the crowd. ‘COVID-19. That name gets further and further away from China as opposed to calling it the Chinese virus,’ he said to a loud applause. He also later referred to it as the ‘kung flu.’”

then supplemented repeatedly by the structures of these societies, and by the media culture they embrace, and circulate. This paper aims to exam the different frames of anti-Asian media in the West, including the deliberate placement *and* erasure of Asian bodies, and how this media then reflects and reinforces the social climate in Western reality.

I. RACIAL INEQUALITY AND THE UNCANNY VALLEY IN THE WEST

Despite claims of racial equality, to this day, Western societies clearly favors those racialized as “white.” Historically, they have been the majority and traditionally played the role of imperialistic power. A representation of this power in the United States is citizenship, which was only freely given to white people until the ratification of the 14th Amendment in 1868, which allowed African Americans citizenship as well. In 1906, Congress revised the Naturalization Act of 1870 to add an English fluency clause as an additional requirement for U.S. citizenship, meaning that “free white persons” and “persons of African nativity or persons of African descent” who could speak English could gain citizenship.³ Takao Ozawa, of Japanese descent, and Bhagat Singh Thind, of Indian descent, both filed for citizenship under this act, arguing that they constitute as “free white persons.” Ozawa had resided in the United States for 20 years and Thind had served in the U.S. military during World War I. However, in both cases, the Supreme Court of the United States ruled that neither East Asians nor South Asians could identify as “white” and therefore could not become citizens of the United States.⁴ In Ozawa’s case, it was determined that there was too much difference between Asians and whites in terms of racial origin, while in Thind’s case, the courts expanded the definition of “white” to include linguistic

³ Takao Ozawa v. United States, 260 U.S. 178 (1922), United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind, 261 U.S. 204 (1923)

⁴ Takao Ozawa v. United States, 260 U.S. 178 (1922), United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind, 261 U.S. 204 (1923)

and cultural differences.⁵ The 1922 and 1923 verdicts categorically refused whiteness nor assimilation to those deemed “Asian,” regardless of which part of Asia they hailed. Despite subsequent laws that eventually allowed US-born Asians and immigrants citizenship, this precedent created a sense of hostility towards Asians in Western societies. Despite “Asians [having] resided in America throughout three-fourths of the nation’s history, many fourth-generation or fifth-generation Asian-Americans still feel like foreigners in this country.”⁶ The social structure and racial hierarchy of the West not only reinforces this idea but encourages it.

In 1970, Japanese scientist Masahiro Mori published an article on what he coined the “uncanny valley,” or his theory of human reactions to objects that are humanistic. On the graph, the y-axis represents human affinity while the x-axis represents the degree of realistic portrayal. Mori explains that as things go further along the x-axis, people start feeling a negative affinity to those objects. For example, a toy robot will vaguely represent a human, but is not frightening because they are not made to look realistic. The toy robot retains features that make it undeniably inhuman. However, something like a prosthetic hand or a corpse may bring about a feeling of unease to a healthy human being, since they resemble something human but are not, or no longer, human. This reaction is represented by the deep plunge at the bottom of the graph, where the curve goes south in measurements of human affinity.⁷ Mori’s uncanny valley is often used in android design in an autonomous future to describe the unease that occurs when looking at objects that mimic humanity. The response is perhaps even instinctual as androids are a clear example of what could replace humans altogether. It is only natural for people to ostracize that which can destroy them; therefore, the crux of the uncanny valley lies in the innate fear of human

⁵ Takao Ozawa v. United States, 260 U.S. 178 (1922), United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind, 261 U.S. 204 (1923)

⁶ Tung, 90.

⁷ Mori, 98-100.

mortality.⁸ In this vein of thought, the uncanny valley can also be applied through a racial context in Western societies, especially in Europe and the United States. Revealed on a microscopic level, “research on immigrant students of color reveals that students undergo a process of racialization as they are incorporated into the existing racial hierarchy of the United States—one that places White people at the top and defines them as the only true Americans.”⁹ Furthermore, “participants in both of our studies internalized these notions of Americanness, evidenced strongly in their reserving the term ‘American’ to refer to White people, while using ethnically or racially specific language to identify themselves or other people of color.”¹⁰ When enlarged to a national scale and enforced by systematic ostracization, compared to the white majority or “true Americans,” the racial Other seems to invade the United States or exists in it unnaturally in the eyes of both parties. Since these “Others” do not resemble the white majority, their existence becomes a parody of white livelihood and their humanity comes into question.

This racial division in the U.S. is further perpetrated by the stereotypes and biases the white majority forces on these Others. By creating these exaggerations, the white majority can control how the racial Other is portrayed. These caricatures are the start of the systematic dehumanization, with different archetypes assigned to different racial group. With East Asians, alienation peaked with the spread of the Yellow Peril ideology. Throughout the late 19th and the early 20th century, mass immigration brought an increase of Asian population in the United States as a direct result of Western military and imperialistic influences on Asia. However, this influx brought fear that these so-called “foreigners” would disrupt or potentially overtake the white majority. As a response, British author Sax Rohmer created Fu Manchu, a crafty Chinese

⁸ Mori, 98-100.

⁹ Lee and Vaught, 457.

¹⁰ Lee and Vaught, 464.

mastermind plotting to overthrow the white, Eurocentric world, at the height of the Yellow Peril. While Fu Manchu himself represented the white man's fear of the Chinese invasion, his army of minions that carried out his orders had traits that paralleled with what people believed of the Chinese laborers at that time. They were seen as "'instruments'—that is, as 'exploitable, containable, and inhuman,' and as 'the perfect 'laboring machine[s]—a swarm of mindless coolies who could be easily 'programmed.'"¹¹ The Chinese were seen as unintelligent and robotic; they were "beings that appear human and behave in human-like ways, but that are really subhuman on the 'inside.'"¹² Yet the white man still feels anxiety in regards to the Chinese because they are a "contradiction between [the] thing's appearance and the essence that one has attributed to it."¹³ To the white man, the Chinaman is "felt to be both human and subhuman—and therefore as an uncanny entity"¹⁴ because he is simultaneously both Fu Manchu and his faceless, mechanical minions.

Needless to say, Fu Manchu did not only represent the Chinese, but the looming threat of the East and Asian bodies to white society. Unsurprisingly, the character of Fu Manchu has

¹¹ De Kosnik, 92: "One reason that Hollywood's techno- Orientalist tradition begins with *The Mask of Fu Manchu* may be the fact that machine metaphors were often employed in public references to Chinese immigration at that time. David Palumbo-Liu cites a number of fiction and nonfiction works published between 1894 and 1929 that refer to Chinese people's 'absence of nerves,' 'special race vitality,' and 'immun[ity] to stimulants' and their ability to 'stand all day in one place without seeming in the least distressed.' Betsy Huang quotes California Senator John Miller stating in 1881 that the Chinese were 'inhabitants of another planet' and 'machine- like,' unable to feel heat or cold. These late nineteenth-and early twentieth- century discourses characterizing Chinese people as 'instruments'— that is, as 'exploitable, containable, and inhuman,' and as 'the perfect 'laboring machine[s]— were transcoded into *The Mask of Fu Manchu* as a swarm of mindless coolies who could be easily 'programmed.'"

¹² Smith, 420: "When we dehumanize others, we assign them a peculiar status. We typically think of them as beings that appear human and behave in human-like ways, but that are really subhuman on the 'inside.' Conceiving of others in this way is only possible with the support of a network of interlocking folk-metaphysical assumptions. Teasing out these assumptions and showing how they cohere with one another is the first step toward unpacking the moral psychology of dehumanization."

¹³ Smith, 420.

¹⁴ Smith, 434: "But in cases of dehumanization, the uncanny effect produced is a contradiction between a thing's appearance and the essence that one has attributed to it. Typically it is the dehumanized person's appearance that leads one to classify her as a human being, and it is the non-perceptual belief that she is a subhuman creature— normally acquired by political propaganda or entrenched ideological biases—that draws one's mind in the opposite direction. The dehumanized person is consequently felt to be both human and subhuman—and therefore as an uncanny entity."

always been represented onscreen by a white man in costume; even his description in Rhomer's books contained Anglo-Saxon features such as "[a] brow like Shakespeare" and "shimmering green irises."¹⁵ As the embodiment of the Yellow Peril, Rhomer created the Chinese mastermind with intelligence and agency; to the white majority, these traits cannot be separated from whiteness as evident in the appearance of Fu Manchu as they are understood as human traits. Therefore, by imposing Asian features on a white man while trying to maintain that the danger he embodies in fact resides in the East, Rhomer created a truly uncanny and inhuman monster as it forces his audience to think about racial implications.¹⁶ If Fu Manchu is an intelligent mastermind, then he must be white. But his role of representing the Yellow Peril categorizes him as a racial Other. The racial contradiction of Fu Manchu reflects the unease of white audience as they are confronted with the possibility of humanity residing in the racial Other. One of the solutions to ameliorate this anxiety is not only by marking the Asian body as uncanny but destroying the Asian body altogether.

II. A HISTORY OF YELLOWFACE AND APPROPRIATION

The tradition of yellowface has presided in Western societies as far back at the 18th century. In 1759, *The Orphan of China* opened in London starring two white actors in oriental costumes as Confucian nationalist Zamti and his wife Mandane. While the title seems to indicate that the story is about a Chinese orphan, the play opens with criticism of Chinese patriotism and ends with rejection of Chinese traditions in favor of European ones.¹⁷ The true message of the

¹⁵ Chu, 82.

¹⁶ Chu, 82-83: "Rohmer's creation is a humanoid patchwork whose unsettlingly miscellaneous parts vividly evoke a web of seams and stitches. As a humanoid artifact that is always already noticeably damaged, Fu Manchu bears a meaningful resemblance to Frankenstein's uncanny monster."

¹⁷ Ou, 395

play is the reassurance of European superiority while simultaneously providing exotic and “imported” goods in terms of costuming for white consumption. More than a century later, in 1885 *The Mikado* opened in London, also starring white actors in Japanese costumes. This opera was about British politics and institution set in a fictional Japan for satire and gained so much popularity that a production opened in New York just five months later and was accompanied by collectibles such as actor trading cards.¹⁸ Advertising companies quickly took advantage of this momentum, especially after the release of a character called Yum-Yum, portrayed by Geraldine Ulmar wearing a kimono and holding a paper fan. Soon enough, it became fashionable for the everyday white woman to wear kimono-resembling garments and accessories, to a point where owning Japanese objects became a symbol of status, liberty, and enlightenment.¹⁹ In contrast, the same kind of aesthetic on Asian women at the time inspired a much more negative reaction.

Ironically enough, the reason why the kimono was so popular among white audiences in the 19th century was that it also symbolizes the stereotype of the submissive Asian wife. Edith Eaton, a biracial Chinese woman with the penname Sui Sin Far, revealed in her autobiography that in the 1890s, her white fiancé asked her to pass as a Japanese woman by wearing kimonos because it would help his status since the Chinese ethnicity sparked anxieties. Edith’s younger sister, Winnifred Eaton, was also an avid writer, but wrote under a Japanese sounding pseudonym, Onoto Watanna. Winnifred embraced the *Mikado* sensation, publishing photographs of herself in kimonos and writing romantic fantasies set in Japan, but the reaction to her appropriation was less than enthusiastic. Though her stories were popular, the Asian body of Winnifred Eaton in *Mikado* fashion met with repulsion and criticism. Though the *Mikado* was

¹⁸ Matsukawa, 586.

¹⁹ Matsukawa, 592-593.

popular in the 19th century, the appropriation of Asian clothing has continued well into the present day, as well as the lack of attempt to alter white faces to complete any transformation.

A surge of performances by white singers in the past decade or so have appropriated Asian fashion and aesthetics while dismissing or even ornamentalizing Asian bodies. Many of these women include but are not limited to Madonna, Gwen Stefani, Angelina Jolie, Katy Perry, Avril Lavigne, and Lady Gaga. In 2004, Stefani hired four Japanese women to promote her new album “Love, Angel, Music, Baby,” whom she renamed after the words in the title. Dressed in harajuku style, which was a Japanese street fashion popular at the time, the job of these women was to be Stefani’s exotic backdrop. Sources report that they were contractually obligated to only speak Japanese, or not at all, transforming them into living foreign ornaments whom Stefani pretended “were not materially present” and “had dreamt...into being.”²⁰ Stefani still is profiting off a clothing line based of the imagery of these women. In a similar vein of appropriation, Katy Perry took the stage at the 2013 American Music Awards dressed in what she imaged as a Geisha costume, though her kimono had obviously been modified to include revealing silts up her thighs and a collar reminiscent of the Chinese cheongsam.²¹ In addition to conflating cultures and perpetuating the Western idea of an Eastern monolith, the very arrangement of this performance is reminiscent of *The Orphan of China* and *The Mikado*, as it starts with an Asian woman in a Japanese kimono with an Asian man playing a traditional shamisen, but then these figures disappear to reveal Perry clothed in a highly sexualized reimagining of Japanese female

²⁰ Oh, 369: “For Gwen Stefani, her appropriation of Japaneseness was highly visible during the promotion of her *Love.Angel.Music.Baby* (2004) album in which she objectified, in spectacular fashion, four Japanese American backup dancers, contractually forbidding them from speaking in public except under her direction and only in Japanese when permitted. Stefani pretended in interviews that she had dreamt the dancers into being and that they were not materially present; she even feigned fake surprise when interviewers referenced the dancers. Her transformation of real women into fashionable accessories was to make her Whiteness more interesting, and her enactment of power over racialized ethnic others was claimed as appreciation for Japan. The point is that the appropriation of exotic Japanese femininity is a way of gaining agency at the expense of exoticized others.”

²¹ Oh, 368-372.

clothing. Perry also specifically chose her garment with the song she was performing in mind, a song about unconditional love that harkens directly to the Lotus Blossom stereotype.²² The preference of whiteness and Western societies is clearly being transmitted in these examples as is the suggestion that the Asian body is not a requirement to fulfill the fantasy assigned to Asian clothing; even more so, as exemplified by the response to Winnifred Eaton, the Asian body is actively being rejected, erased, and replaced.

In 2015, while showcasing art from the Impressionist period, particularly *La Japonaise* by Claude Monet, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston drew critique after offering the related events titled “Kimono Wednesdays” and highlighted discussion “Flirting with the Exotic.” During this period, the exhibit encouraged patrons to try on a replica of the kimono Camille Monet wore in the painting. These events attracted protests *and* counterprotests, with some Asians arguing that the museum was encouraging alienation and appropriation while other Asians argued that sharing culture was not offensive. However, it seemed that the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston had missed Monet’s intentions with his painting in the first place. While the museum may have displayed *La Japonaise* as celebration and commemoration of Impressionism and Japanese culture, Monet very much did not paint it for that reason. In fact, *La Japonaise* was Monet’s criticism of *Mikado* fashion and the rising obsession with foreign Japanese objects.²³

²² Oh, 365-366: “Prior to stepping onto the stage of the 2013 American Musical Awards (AMA), Samsung Mobile and the AMAs uploaded a backstage photo of Katy Perry in a “geisha-inspired” kimono with the hand-scrawled message: “I think I’m turning AMA” (Yang, 2013, November 25). The Twitter photo, a reference to The Vapors’ 1980 smash hit, “Turning Japanese,” was a prelude to her performance of “Unconditionally,” which borrowed Orientalist Japanese imagery to visualize submissive love. The Vapors reference fits given the song’s legacy of promoting Orientalist sonic culture and images. However, their hit, as lead singer David Fenton claims, is not about Japan at all but about “going crazy” after a break-up (Kim, 2012); turning Japanese, then, is a metaphor for becoming unrecognizable to one’s self—to become exotic and different. In both cases, Orientalist imagery is employed as a metaphor for Western artists and is excused for that reason. By using signifiers of exotic Japanese difference, the artists extend claims to creative empowerment while advancing Orientalism, a performative appropriation of Japaneseness that has occurred since the stage productions of *Madame Butterfly*.”

²³ Matsukawa, 584.

In Anne Anlin Cheng's theory of Ornamentalism, she proposes the idea that what people perceive as "Asianness" resides within exotic clothing and ornaments from Asia rather than the Asian body and is related to the Western desire of erasing the Asian female body in favor of creating an incorporeal fantasy.²⁴ In fact, other Asian scholars have noted that "yellowface [is] a kind of transparent disguise in which racial impersonation is performed simply by picking up the right objects."²⁵ *La Japonaise* is a perfect example of Ornamentalism, as Monet titles it "the Japanese female" but uses the face and body of his white wife in the painting. Hence, it can be interpreted that what Monet is referring to as "the Japanese women" is not Camille but just his representation of a woman's kimono. Reinforcing this idea is Camille holding a fan with the French flag on it close to her face, reminding everyone of her whiteness. The kimono also places the juxtaposition of a dehumanized depiction of an Asian man drawing a sword and almost violently escaping the cloth in which he is contained; Monet's reminder of the Yellow Peril is not lost in his critique of Western society embracing Asian dress and products. In order for Asianness to be to be given any sense of humanity, past or present, the host on which the "Asianness" exists must be white and any Asian traits must only be for display or entertainment. Even then, the danger of the East might be too great, and the West must be reminded to be ever vigilant.

III. WHITE MAN/ASIAN FEMALE: HOW IT RELATES TO ORIENTALISM

In 1978, Edward Said published a book titled *Orientalism*, describing how Western perception of what they call the Orient (which include countries in parts of Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa) is influenced by their imperialistic desire, and therefore continuing the

²⁴ Cheng, 415-446.

²⁵ Matsukawa, 591.

Western construct of the Orient benefits Western societies in terms of global power. While Said focused his analysis on Western perception of the Middle East, it can also be applied to the entire Orient, as the theory literally sets the East and the West as mutually exclusive opposites. This framing purposely allows a “binary logic [that] does not set the East and the West on equal footing, but instead pits the two against one another in order to highlight the colonial (and, therefore, cultural) superiority of the Occident over the Orient,”²⁶ and is often used as Western justification for their political and military involvement in Eastern societies in the real world.

Orientalism also allows the West to craft a narrative of the East that Occident could “study in the academy...display in the museum...reconstruction in the colonial office, for theoretical illustration in anthropological, biological, linguistic, racial, and historical theses about mankind and the universe, for instances of economic and sociological theories of development, revolution, cultural personality, national or religious character”²⁷ to prove the inferiority of the East with “scientific” evidence. Essentially, because what the West understood of the “Orient” is not and never was a reality, they have effectively created a scapegoat that allows them to impose whatever version of the East they need, be it threat or fantasy, so the West can always demonstrate their supremacy and dominance. Even the term “Orient” did not exist until Western scholars started referring to the East as such, and thus, bringing the term and their fantasy into canon.²⁸ Hence, an explanation can be proposed on why even though the East is portrayed as a monolith, Asian people and Asian characters in Western media are assigned so many conflicting tropes and stereotypes that somehow all exist simultaneously.

²⁶ Rosenblatt, 52.

²⁷ Said, 7-8

²⁸ Burney, 31-32.

Though seemingly unrelated and progressive, one of the most timeless Asian tropes is the constant romanticization of Asian female and white male relationships; the reason for its popularity is directly related to Orientalism. The imperialistic desire for the East by the West can be sublimated into this trope, as the Western concept of an Asian female is unusually hypersexual, but at the same time, contradictorily subservient and infantile, “presented as the perfect complement to the exaggerated masculinity of the White Man.”²⁹ White masculinity and white femininity are arguably both equal when representing Western society, as both are symbols of freedom and enlightenment, whereas the East is deliberately portrayed as primitive and feminine in terms of offering itself up in terms of exotic goods for exterior consumption. This explains why white men are so sexually fixated on Asian woman; Asian women are simultaneously perceived as an exotic “good” offered by the East, a manifestation of the white man’s Oriental fantasy, and proof of the Western superiority by conquest of the Asian woman. Whether idealized as the subservient fantasy (Lotus Blossom) or villainized as the female corollary to the Yellow Peril (Dragon Lady), “Asian women are seen, for the most part, as being ‘tamed’ by White masculinity.”³⁰

The taming of Asian women by the white man is then the ultimate metaphor for colonialism, as the subjugation of the Asian woman is analogically seen as conquering the East. Coincidentally, this effectively makes the white woman the ultimate treasure and reward to the

²⁹ Woan, 79: “The Asian woman of White male sexual fantasies toddles into view—‘small, weak, submissive and erotically alluring,’ her ‘eyes almond-shaped for mystery, black for suffering, wide-spaced for innocence, high cheekbones swelling like bruises, cherry lips.’ She not only exemplifies hyper-sexuality, but hyper-heterosexuality, male-centered and male-dominated. She is presented as the perfect complement to the exaggerated masculinity of the White Man, existing solely to serve men and be sexually consumed by them.”

³⁰ Balaji and Worawongs, 226: “Mainstream media outlets in the United States generally employ two contrasting images to fulfill the males’ desires—the Lotus Blossom or the Dragon Lady. Grounded in the concept of sexuality and ones’ relation with the (White) male character, Asian women are subjected to being portrayed in the media as docile or diabolical. Despite the dichotomies, Asian women are seen, for the most part, as being “‘tamed’” by White masculinity.”

white man because she “actively resist[s] subjugation” and is perceived as an equal representation of the superior West.³¹ Since Asian women were not considered as pure or equal as white women, the consumption of Asian women was thought of to be acceptable; in fact, due to the sociopolitical boundaries of the time, sublimating the sexual desires of white men to Asian women was seen as preserving the purity of white women.³² At the same time, white women could fulfill their own sexual fantasies through the depiction of Oriental women without appearing amoral.³³

Though the pairing of white men with Asian women is not always bad, it does call to question why there seems to be an innate desire in Western entertainment to replace Asian romantic leads with white ones. Source authors Jenny Wan of *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* (2018)³⁴ and Kevin Kwan of *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018)³⁵ have both admitted to being asked to whitewash their characters when they were given film adaptation offers to their stories. When the first reaction to genuine love stories featuring Asian women who are not stereotyped, especially when they are paired with white men, is to erase the Asian women, then the implications of the role of Asian women in Western entertainment cannot be differentiated from their role in the larger Oriental fantasy.

³¹ Woan, 294: “Guided by sexual stereotypes of Asian women as subservient, these men saw Asian mail-order brides as the much-welcomed antithesis to the White American woman. Where the White feminist woman actively resisted subjugation, the Asian woman was portrayed as enjoying it. While these perceptions of Asian women originated from the colonial era, they have endured through the decades, haunting the experiences of Asian women even today.”

³² Lalvani, 265-268.

³³ Lalvani, 280.

³⁴ Han: “TV: That’s definitely something I was curious about with this film; on the *Crazy Rich Asians* press tour, author Kevin Kwan was talking about how a producer suggested that he change the lead to a white woman. Did that ever come up in the casting for this?”

JH: Yes. Not with the people I ended up working with, but early on, the same thing happened. To me, the more alarming part of it was that people didn’t understand why that was an issue.”

³⁵ Li: “During this early meeting, Kwan says, the producer asked him to reimagine his protagonist, Rachel (played by Constance Wu in the film), as Caucasian. ‘That was their strategy,’ he remembers. ‘They wanted to change the heroine into a white girl.’”

Similarly, Orientalism also explains why Asian men are continually emasculated and desexualized by the West, and compared to its mirror, there is a distinct lack of Asian males paired with white females. The Orientalist framework rebels against the idea of a dominant East, and the rape of white women by Asian men has always been included in the perceived threat of the Yellow Peril. Despite being the first ever romantic comedy in the United States to feature an Asian male lead, *Selfie*, starring John Cho and Karen Gillan, was cancelled after one season due to low ratings.³⁶ A modern reinterpretation of the 1964 American classic, *My Fair Lady*, the show was guaranteed to eventually explore a romantic relationship between Cho and Gillan's characters. Poor response to concept of an Asian man romantically involved with a willing white woman in *Selfie* demonstrates how the West has not yet given up their Orientalist fantasy of white supremacy.

IV. INSIDIOUS WHITEWASHING AND THE USE OF THE MODEL MINORITY MYTH

Recently, there seems to be a more insidious type of Orientalism being portrayed in Western entertainment which scholars have dubbed "Techno-Orientalism," as this form of Orientalism often involves technology and the science fiction genre. Within Techno-Orientalism, the surviving society is often framed as an amalgamation of the East and the West, in which many Asian signifiers are used to indicate a futuristic and technologically advanced era. One of the most repeated themes is signs and posters in written Asian languages (usually Japanese or Chinese) littering the backdrop of scenes. Others include foreign imported goods such as futuristic vehicles and weapons and the acquisition and fluency of Asian languages by the West.

³⁶ Ng: "ABC has had enough of *Selfie*. The network is not ordering additional episodes of the rookie social media-centered half-hour comedy beyond its initial 13-episode order... *Selfie* had a tall mountain to climb from the outset. Expected to open Tuesdays for ABC this fall, the comedy failed to make waves in the ratings, debuting to a mediocre 5.3 million viewers and a 1.6 rating among adults 18-to-49."

On the occasions that Asian bodies do appear, they are often ornamental, only there for scenery and to further the story of the white lead.³⁷ Techno-Orientalism seems to be the natural conclusion of the Orientalist fantasy as the West is finally able to consume the East but frame it in a progressive narrative of necessity for collective survival. In truth, Techno-Orientalism only benefits the West; the perceived amalgamation is not that but more imperial in aspect, as though Asian signifiers are present and Asian commodities are lauded, the lack of Asian bodies shown with agency in these futuristic imagining is glaring.

One example of Techno-Orientalism is portrayed by the 2002 American science fiction series, *Firefly*. Harboring elements of a space opera and western drama, *Firefly* stars nine characters in a universe where China and the United States are the two dominant superpowers from the result of a massive war. The “Alliance” controls most of the wealth and political power in this universe, but outer colonies and miscellaneous survivors who are not affiliated with the Alliance also exist. In this series, Chinese signifiers are prominent, as all the characters are fluent in Mandarin and “Chinese” can be seen on several screens and signs throughout the narrative. The characters also frequently encounter exotic “Chinese” objects and sometimes are even clothed in “Chinese” garb.³⁸ At a quick glance, the combination of China and the United States seem passable, especially to a white audience used to Orientalist rhetoric.

In reality, the incorporation of China as an equal global power in the *Firefly* universe is almost satirical. For one, despite being half of the population, Asian bodies are scarcely seen in the show. Out of the nine main characters, not one of them is Chinese or of Asian descent. Chinese is not well integrated, as characters have to constantly be reminded that they are fluent

³⁷ Wong, 3.

³⁸ Ishii, 184

in the language.³⁹ It also seems odd that while different versions and accents of English exists in the universe, everyone seems to speak Mandarin despite the fact that modern-day Chinese can be separated into seven major regional groups, and then further distinguished into over 200 different dialects. Written Chinese in the series for some reason contain Japanese katakana; though Japanese kanji comes from Chinese hanzi, Japanese katakana is a discrete Japanese writing system.⁴⁰ When asked about the lack of Chinese characters and the poor integration of Chinese culture in a universe where they share half the global power, show creator Joss Whedon answered that “it was a mission statement of the show to say that cultures inevitably blend, even if it happens through conquest and violence.”⁴¹ Whedon’s statement, along with the overtones of *Firefly* itself, echoes the warnings of the Yellow Peril while simultaneously revealing the Orientalist framing of the entire show. With the Alliance conveyed as an unsympathetic coalition, the uncanny representation of the Chinese half seems almost deliberate. *Firefly* presents itself as a version of the Techno-Oriental utopia, free of Asian bodies through the Western “conquest” of its Chinese half, which allows them the spoils of Chinese goods and culture for white consumption. At the same time, *Firefly* presents a Yellow Peril dystopia, where Chinese culture and language seem unnaturally forced upon its Western half, made even more eerie by the lack of Chinese bodies. Regardless, in both frameworks, the Western aspect is portrayed as more sympathetic and actively benefits from the degradation of the East.

Another example of Techno-Orientalism is the constant disregard for Asian bodies in Western science fiction, exemplified by the constant and deliberate replacement of Asian bodies

³⁹ Inshii, 191: “INARA: I didn’t mean petty.
MAL: What did you mean?
INARA: Suoxi?
MAL: That’s Chinese for petty.”

⁴⁰ Inshii, 184.

⁴¹ Inshii, 181.

with white ones. In 2016, *Doctor Strange* came under fire for erasing and replacing an Asian character with Tilda Swinton, a white woman. Marvel Studios claimed it was an attempt at defusing harmful stereotypes, but somehow could not see that the entire story of *Doctor Strange* was Orientalist. It is interesting to see Western entertainment so quickly disregard Asian bodies in the name of enlightenment, but rarely consider the opposite, or reinterpreting a white character as Asian. One screenwriter even admitted that due to the political climate at the time, Marvel Studios did not want to lose the international Chinese audience by having a Tibetan character.⁴² Additionally, “more disturbing still is the persistent and pernicious linking of whitewashing to stories of racial progress so that imagining a nonracist future means imagining a white future,”⁴³ as white bodies in Asian costumes carries the racist history of yellowface and Orientalism.

In 2017, *Ghost in the Shell* was criticized for casting Scarlett Johansson as the lead actress, though the true atrocity of the film is how the plot of the movie tries to solve the whitewashing controversy surrounding it.⁴⁴ One solution was to recreate Johansson’s character altogether so that she did not blatantly have a Japanese name. As a result, Mira Killian was introduced in the film as the main character. She is the only survivor of a cyberterrorist attack and given a cyborg “shell” to save her life since her human body was dying. However, these memories were revealed to be false and implanted in Killian by Hanka Robotics. The truth is that Motoko Kusanagi, as a teenager, was an anti-augmentation rebel who was eventually kidnapped by Hanka Robotics to serve as a test subject. At the climax of the movie, Johansson’s is revealed to be Motoko Kusanagi after all, despite all the external controversy and being referred to as

⁴² Nishime, 30: “C. Robert Cargil, one of the screenwriters, also cited political reasons for the change, arguing that the original setting of Tibet would offend Chinese viewers and might result in a ban on the film and a loss of the lucrative Chinese market.”

⁴³ Nishime, 30.

⁴⁴ Nishime, 29.

Mira Killian for most of the film. Not only was a white body forced on an unwilling Asian woman, Hanka Robotics, run by a white man, portrayed it as a benevolent, life-saving act. In addition, the fact that Hanka Robotics are crafting the image of the “perfect” human bodies in their cyborg prosthetics hones in on the racial message of the film when the West decides to impose the body of a white woman on an Asian youth.⁴⁵

Consequently, there is also an interesting correlation between the attainment of agency for the white woman at the expense of Asians in Techno-Orientalism. Within Orientalism, the conquest of Asians by the white man is overt and unapologetic, but in the case of Techno-Orientalism, subjugation of Asians in favor to the white woman is celebrated as radical and progressive. In the 2017 *Ghost in the Shell*, the protagonist as a white woman is shown to be a capable and intelligent counterterrorism officer. However, not only is this character infantilized as an Asian, but she is also portrayed as a helpless victim to a white man. At the same time, the film still carries traces of Yellow Peril, as some antagonistic and weaponized cyborgs in the film are portrayed as geisha. Originally a tradition of Japanese entertainment, the geisha has been desecrated to become a symbol of Asian female sexuality in the West and utilized in many Techno-Orientalist films.⁴⁶ These Asian cyborgs are, of course, revealed to be inhuman and destroyed by Johansson’s character as a necessary step in gaining her real memories. The humanization and liberation of white women through the sacrifice of Asian bodies is troubling since it directly relates to the idea of white supremacy, yet this trope appears quite frequently in Western science fiction containing Asian characters.

A demonstration of this is the 2014 film *Ex Machina*, where Ava, a white android, gains her freedom through the sacrifice of Asian androids, one of whom is named Kyoko. Though

⁴⁵ Wong, 15.

⁴⁶ Wong, 4.

Ava's body is shown as mechanical at the start of the film, her white face stays intact and human-like through its duration. As Ava gains more agency, she begins to look more human as well, with more "skin" to cover her android body. In contrast, Kyoko starts out with a human-like body, but is shown abused and violated throughout the film. Eventually, her Asian face is torn to reveal her "true" robotic structure underneath, highlighting her inhumanity.⁴⁷ At the conclusion of *Ex Machina*, Kyoko dies in an attempt to help Ava kill their creator, but Ava is able to escape, donning the skin of another Asian robot to mask her identity.⁴⁸ The layers of anti-Asian racism in this film is astounding, but all of it can be seen from the wider framework of Western society. Firstly, the blatant use of the submissive Asian female trope, where for some inexplicable reason, Kyoko does not have the ability to speak and is subservient to her creator. Second, Kyoko becomes the uncanny Asian robot, juxtaposed to Ava and her whiteness. Third, the inhumanity and incorporeality of Asians is reinforced when Ava is allowed to appropriate Asian skin from a closet full of deactivate Asian robots, literally picking and choosing with which Asian skin she wants to decorate herself. Most notable of all is the undercurrent of Fu Manchu in *Ex Machina*, as this racially ambiguous and murderous android, Ava, uses Asian bodies to achieve freedom, but throughout the movie, we are constantly reminded that her agency comes from her being white originally.

The common vein of erasure and whitewashing in Techno-Orientalist stories is instilled in the newer framing of Asians in western societies as the model minority, with Yellow Peril as a subtle undertone rather than an overt message. Though many consider *Blade Runner* (1982) the first example of Techno-Orientalism being demonstrated, it can be argued that the first signs were exhibited in *Star Wars IV: A New Hope* (1977). Film creator George Lucas had admitted

⁴⁷ Nishime, 42-43.

⁴⁸ Nishime, 35.

that his franchise was inspired by the 1958 Japanese film *The Hidden Fortress*. Concepts such as “the force” and “the Jedi” are also thinly veiled, whitewashed interpretations of Chinese Daoism, and Japanese Bushido.⁴⁹ Just a decade before the *Star Wars* film was released, William Petersen published an article in the *New York Times* titled “Success Story: Japanese American Style” which praised the socioeconomic achievements of Japanese Americans.⁵⁰

Since then, Asian Americans have been praised as a racial group that has successfully been integrated into the United States. This framework allows white westerners to criticize other non-Asian racial groups while simultaneously defend their so-called progressiveness by making those from the East a scapegoat. This deliberate divide between Asians and other people of color has historically been practiced before by white people against other minorities to ameliorate the fears of racial coalesce and uprising, and of course, to maintain white socioeconomic, political, and imperial power.⁵¹ In reality, the model minority framework reinforces the social uncanny valley, except while with the Yellow Peril, the unease existed between white people and the racial Other; the model minority makes Asians uncanny to both white people *and* non-Asian racial Others. Asians exist in a limbo where they are perceived as white in the eyes of other racial minorities, but categorically unequal in the eyes of the white majority, which allows the erasure and appropriation of Asian experiences in the West. The model minority is in fact just a reinterpretation of Orientalism, but with the advantage of a liberal façade.

The additional struggle then lies with the use of Techno-Orientalism to perpetuate other forms of racism, such as antiblackness, in Western media. In Techno-Orientalism, the submissive and technologically advanced Asian model minority is often juxtaposed to a violent and

⁴⁹ De Kosnik, 97-100.

⁵⁰ Xu and Lee, 1367.

⁵¹ Xu and Lee, 1364-1365

primitive portrayal of Black people, or characters with Black signifiers.⁵² It is this animosity towards Black people that allows white people to tolerate Asians as the model minority and even condone white/Asian race-mixing, especially if this pairing comprises of a white man with an Asian woman.⁵³ A white surrogate in a study revealed that she “could carry a Japanese baby or a Chinese baby because they are white to me...but a Black child is more difficult.”⁵⁴ The 2004 series *Battlestar Galactica* demonstrates this desired future, as the show portrays itself as a history for modern humanity. A blend of space opera and military drama, the show is set during a war between humans of the Twelve Colonies and their self-inflicted creations known as Cylons. *Battlestar Galactica* has also drawn criticism for its antiblackness, as all the Black characters meet gruesome deaths and none of the white/Black couples survive or reproduce.⁵⁵ In contrast, one of the most prominent relationships in the show is between the Asian Cylon Athena (Grace Park) and white human Helo (Tahmoh Penikett). Though Athena is originally introduced as an incarnation of the Yellow Peril, her Asianness is “tamed” by Helo’s white masculinity, and she is accepted by other characters though her status as a wife and mother.⁵⁶ Their biracial child Hera is an indication of future humanity as she is later revealed to be the in-universe common

⁵² Ishii, 180-192.

⁵³ Huh, 103: “*BSG* reveals that although historical racial contaminations, particularly the ‘taint’ of blackness, still resonate today, Asian-white mixings are not only acceptable but highly desirable. But this desire comes with a caveat: the pairing is desirable only when the Asian partner is female and ultimately conforms to the submissive Asian woman stereotype.”

⁵⁴ Huh, 105.

⁵⁵ Huh, 107: “In *BSG*’s genealogical analysis, however, blackness is erased out of our evolutionary history. This is unsurprising since all the black characters tend to either die or disappear upon arrival onto the New Earth; indeed, much has already been written (both critically and informally) about *BSG*’s problematic representation of blackness. In terms of the human characters, one has only to look at Dee, Bulldog, Phelan, Elosha, and Sue-Shaun to witness the disappearance of black characters into the inevitable ‘black hole.’ Dee commits suicide, Bulldog is literally abandoned to the Cylons by Adama only to return to be abandoned again, Phelan is a criminal (aka ‘felon’) who is killed off by Apollo for being the immoral leader of, yes, the Black Market, the priest Elosha dies after triggering a Cylon landmine on Kobol, and Sue-Shaun begs Starbuck for death while hooked up to the Cylon fertility machine. An online commenter notes, ‘Every single black character was killed, murdered and mutilated in the *BSG* Universe. Adolf Hitler could not have dreamed up a more inspirational script.’”

⁵⁶ Huh, 109-110.

ancestor of humanity after the war is resolved. The first introduction of Hera in the show is racially symbolic, as she is revealed by “exemplars of the white, heteronormative couple” Baltar and Number Six who “simultaneously welcomes and concedes the future to an Asian-white mixed raced baby.”⁵⁷ Interesting enough, Hera was almost forcefully aborted by in-universe, cancer-ridden, white president Laura Roslin (Mary McDonnell) for being too heretical of a creature, before Roslin discovered that Hera’s blood could cure her illness. Permission for Hera’s existence is in her benefit to white society, and she is expected to reject her Cylon (and therefore, Asian) inheritance as she champions humanity.⁵⁸ The Techno-Oriental model minority framing in *Battlestar Galactica* allows white society to believe they have finally succeeded in conquering the Orient. In this context, what was once perceive as a racial abomination now becomes the solution to Yellow Peril through biological whitewashing and furthermore, this race-mixing aligns with the white desire of Black eradication for a truly “white” utopia.

V. A CASE-STUDY ON DAENERYS TARGARYEN AND GAME OF THRONES

Game of Thrones, an HBO television series based on the *A Song of Ice and Fire* books by George R. R. Martin, unapologetically presents itself as an Orientalist fantasy through the lens of one protagonist, Daenerys Targaryen. The series utilizes multiple narrations from the perspective

⁵⁷ Huh, 109: “When Messenger Six reveals the baby to Baltar, strongly implied to be Athena and Helo’s yet unborn daughter, Hera, she declares that the baby is ‘the guardian and protector of the new generation of God’s children. The first member of our family will be with us soon, Gaius...Come...see the face of the shape of things to come.’ The ‘face’ and ‘shape’ is mixed-raced on multiple levels: Asian-white, Cylon-human, alien-earthling. Of Greek mythological fame, Hera was the goddess of marriage, emphasizing *BSG*’s acceptable delineation of racial mixings and couplings. The racialization of this scene is significant because it outlines Baltar and Six as exemplars of the white, heteronormative couple who simultaneously welcomes and concedes the future to an Asian-white mixed raced baby.”

⁵⁸ Huh, 110: “One of the dilemmas running throughout the show is President Roslin’s unpublicized cancer; in an episode titled ‘Epiphanies,’ Roslin’s cancer returns and threatens her life and, subsequently, the survival of the fleet. Parallel to Roslin’s cancer story line is the dilemma of Athena’s pregnancy. Early on in the episode, Roslin orders the destruction of the human-Cylon hybrid, the unborn Hera, arguing that ‘[a]llowing this thing to be born can have frightening consequences’ (‘Epiphanies’). But, when Hera’s fetal blood is discovered to be a cure for cancer and injected into an ailing Roslin, Roslin declares a ban on all abortions.”

of different characters to present an overarching story of tumult and treachery in this medieval fantasy. One main storyline present by the HBO show is protecting Westeros from a mysterious threat present beyond a giant, icy wall in the northern territory, thematically corresponding with the “winter is coming” sentiment reoccurring throughout the series. Concurrent storylines revolve around the Iron Throne of the Seven Kingdoms, a symbol of centralized monarchical power under which the different feudal systems operate. Most of the narrating cast reside within Westeros; however, Daenerys Targaryen in Essos represents the overseas threat. To start, Game of Thrones has already set up a racist and Orientalist framework with the continents of Westeros and Essos set as binary opposites, their naming making the clear the real-world influences that Martin has drawn on to create his fictional universe.⁵⁹ Westeros is analogous with medieval Europe infused with colonial North America, populated almost entirely with racially white people except for the unknown northern region beyond the wall and a southern region known as Dorne. Essos is a larger continent than its counterpart and clearly an adaptation of the exotic Orient. Two other continents also exist within this world, Sothoryos and Ulthos; not much are known about these lands, with the caveat that the primitivity of Sothoryos seems to correspond with the historically racist view that the West has of Africa, as Sothoryos is described to be inhabited by dark-skinned creatures who are brutally strong, but stupid, which makes them good as slaves but undesirable as mates.⁶⁰ Though Essos is a conflation of many Eastern countries and cultures, it is interest to see where the bodies of color are placed, and where they are deliberately erased.

⁵⁹ Hardy, “Godless Savages and Lockstep Legions,” 194: “The division of the continents (and story arcs) into the Anglo-European Westeros and the Middle Eastern/Asian Essos follows quite conventional fantasy genre tropes. In line with Hall’s notion of the West and the Rest, viewers are encouraged to view Westeros as Western and Essos as Eastern. The screenplay and casting reinforce this, with Essos encompassing peoples of color ranging from the Pacific Islands, South Asia, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean, while Westerosi characters are predominately white and European (with the exception of the Moorish/Iberian culture of Dorne).”

⁶⁰ Martin, “Beyond the Free Cities: Sothoryos” in *The World of Ice and Fire*.

According to the mythos of *Game of Thrones*, the current population are descendants of five major racial groups, Andals, Rhoynars, First Men, old Ghis and Valyrians. Westeros is mostly influenced by the Andals and the First Men, while the Rhoynar people, originally from Essos, had settled in Dorne, which explains the Oriental (especially that of the Middle East) influences in what seems to be Latin America.⁶¹ Essos is organized more haphazardly than its counterpart, with no centralized power since the Old Empire of the Ghis and the Valyrian Freehold. Instead, multiple ethnic groups inhabit the land in different sovereignties and city-states, with a majority of the populations described as descents of slaves and racialized as nonwhite. For instance, the horse-riding nomadic barbarians known as the Dothraki are clearly a prominent colored race in this region, brown-skinned with Asian features such as almond-shaped eyes; Martin admits that the inspiration for the group comes from the Mongol Empire and indigenous North American tribes.⁶² The population of Slaver's Bay near Sothoryos also boast a majority of Ghiscari people, who are the descendants of the Ghis, or Egyptians as suggested by the pyramids present in this region. To the far East in Essos are people of the Golden Empire of Yi Ti and the island of Leng, which seem to emulate China and Japan, but they are never seen onscreen except from afar. In theory, Asians of every origin seem to be the key population of Essos, except for those of Valyrian descent, meaning Asians and other people of color should be among the ruling class of Essos, as well as the general population.⁶³

In practice, the most prominent characters of Essos in *Game of Thrones* are racialized as white, with bodies of color serving as little more than scenic decorations to mark a foreign land

⁶¹ Hardy, "Game of Tropes," 414: "The location and depiction of Dorne...is a classic Orientalist trope, which Martin describes as having been influenced by Moorish Spain and Palestine. It's inhabitants are generally darker of skin than the other Westerosi...garbed in all the Orientalist clichés of Moorish costume."

⁶² Hardy, "Godless Savages and Lockstep Legions," 196: "The Dothraki were actually fashioned as an amalgam of a number of steppe and plains cultures...Mongols and Huns, certainly, but also Alans, Sioux, Cheyenne, and various other Amerindian tribes...seasoned with a dash of pure fantasy."

⁶³ Martin, "Beyond the Sunset Kingdoms" in *The World of Ice and Fire*.

or demonstrations of disposable military power. A look at the Good Masters of Astapor, the Wise Masters of Yunkai, and the Great Masters of Meereen demonstrates this clearly; omitting the casting of a token Black person, all these ruling class people are portrayed by white actors, despite these cities being located in Slaver's Bay. In contrast, the Unsullied, a slave army trained in Astapor and later acquired by Daenerys, are understood to be populated with bodies of color, with their leader Grey Worm portrayed as a black man.⁶⁴ Modeled after Asia, neither East, South, nor West Asians are given priority or even visibility in Essos, with Khal Drogo and the Dothraki occupying a grey area since their visibility is directly related to Daenerys' influence. Despite being a larger continent than Westeros, hers is the only point of view from which Essos is experienced, in contrast to the several narrative characters dispersed among the many feudal territories in Westeros. The fact that this singular perspective is provided by a white woman shown to be derisive of Essos customs suggest that this Orientalist view is deliberate, which is later supported by Daenerys' colonization of Eastern cities.⁶⁵ Though there are many more examples within *Game of Thrones*, these incidents of geography and population reveal how unconscious bias can manifest even in completely fantastical settings, and then be reinforced by the spread of this "fictional" media, as this reoccurring correlation between whiteness, power, and enlightenment is imposed even in spaces designated nonwhite.

Within the universe of *Game of Thrones*, the whiteness of Daenerys Targaryen plays a significant role in her character and development, one which cannot be ignored when looking at the greater Orientalist framework. Firstly, Daenerys' whiteness is used to differentiate her

⁶⁴ Hardy, "Godless Savages and lockstep Legions," 200-202.

⁶⁵ Mesbah: "As a liberator Daenerys turns from a queen to a colonizer for her rightful golden crown. Her colonization of Essos under the pretense of spreading freedom represents the high morals of Westeros and depicts the inferiority of Essos, as a continent where slavery is legal. Having lived in Essos for a long period of time should be enough to shape her beliefs; yet, she chooses to act as a Westerner rather than an Easterner, as an appropriate method of gaining power and feeling superior enough to play the role of the western white savior."

racially from the Dothraki people.⁶⁶ This whiteness makes Daenerys desirable to Khal Drogo, as she symbolizes Western royalty and power, even though she effectively has none when they first meet. Secondly, white womanhood in the West in opposition with womanhood of color becomes a sign of purity that needs to be cherished and protected. This idea is reinforced when Daenerys is shown molested and raped by the Dothraki chief and later expanded upon when Daenerys eventually uses her whiteness to “tame” Khal Drogo and win his heart.⁶⁷ Daenerys is shown to humanize (or westernize) Khal Drogo. A significant moment in Daenerys’ story is when she teaches Khal Drogo how to look in her eyes during sex for emotional connection, suggesting that the Dothraki leader (and by extension, the Dothraki people) only knew sex as a violent and physical act before bedding her.⁶⁸ Thirdly, Daenerys’ whiteness in contrast to the racialization of the rest of Essos is used as a sign of liberty and progressivism, corresponding to the white man’s burden trope as well as the white savior trope.⁶⁹

Daenerys seems to view her possession of dragons as a divine sign of her right to reform Eastern governments when they do not conform to her Western standards. When she does grant people freedom, her whiteness is deliberately highlighted, firmly framing those of color as submissive and grateful to her white intervention. A scene from the episode “Mhysa” paints this clearly when the brown slaves of Meereen encircle Daenerys’ white figure and call her “mother” after she murders the previous Meereenese leaders for their unjust rule, thus “freeing” these

⁶⁶ Mesbah, 701.

⁶⁷ Hardy, “The East Is the Least,” 33-34.

⁶⁸ Mesbah, 702: “Furthermore, her ideas contradict with those of the Dothraki; yet, she inserts herself into their culture, which she perceives as an ideology, specifically when she thinks that rape is inherent in Dothraki society, but is considered vicious in Westeros.”

⁶⁹ Hardy, “The East Is the Least,” 35: “From that point, Daenerys stamps her more liberal—Western—values across the continent, even though things do not always go as she desires. Her liberation of the slave cities provokes resistance to change, rebellion, and then inexorable regression into barbarism, sectarianism, and squalor when she departs. The idea that Eastern peoples are unable to govern themselves without a stern white parent taking the heavy and thankless task of overseeing them was a standard Western belief of imperial times.”

people.⁷⁰ All signs point to a messianic interpretation when the brown masses are shown lifting her up in celebration, including the backdrop of fantastical Egypt which is conveniently populated with bodies of color when a show of deference is needed. This is reminiscent of Western occupation in the East, especially with the current Middle East tension, and reveals what the West thinks of themselves when they utilize imperial power.⁷¹ Allowing a woman to represent these tropes is not a sign of enlightenment when her whiteness is used to express superiority of the people she is “saving.” Daenerys as a symbol of Western and white power is also intriguing considering the fact that the Targaryens originated in Essos and were once an Eastern empire before their conquest of Westeros. There is little reason to racialize the Targaryens as white unless this whiteness carries the message of differentiation and superiority that sets the Targaryens apart from the rest of nonwhite Essos.

Though racially presented as white, the Targaryens contradictorily carry many Asian signifiers including their land of origin, and the trajectory of Daenerys’ story follows that of common Asian tropes. The conceptualization of Daenerys also borrows heavily from different Asian mythologies. Key to Daenerys’ character is her possession of dragons, which earns her the moniker “Mother of Dragons.” The relationship between Daenerys and her dragons seem to mirror a figure from Chinese stories, Longmu; in fact, the dragon eggs were gifted to her in Essos, suggesting Asian heritage. Today, Longmu is honored as a patron of parental love and her dragons of filial devotion. Much like with House Targaryen, dragons also symbolized royalty in imperial China. When compared with Daenerys, the parallels are too noticeable to be dismissed;

⁷⁰ Game of Thrones, season 3, episode 10, “Mhysa,” written by David Benioff and D. B. Weiss, aired June 9, 2013 on HBO Entertainment.

⁷¹ Hardy, “Godless Savages and Lockstep Legions,” 207-208.

it is her dragons that allow her military conquest in Essos and she is hailed as a maternal figure to those she liberates.⁷²

Similarly, aspects of Daenerys' journey come from other Asian lore. The Targaryen house motto is "fire cannot kill a dragon;" a significant moment for Daenerys occurs when she emerges, unburnt, from her husband's funeral pyre.⁷³ This ordeal by fire seems to be lifted from Hinduism. In South Asia, this trial was known as Agni Pariksha; Agni, the Fire God, would be invoked while the accused would be asked to sit on a burning pyre. According to Hindu scriptures, Agni would save those innocent but let those who were guilty be burnt to ashes. In *Game of Thrones*, the traitor Mirri Maz Duur, who ironically is portrayed by a South Asian actress, perishes in the same flames that leave Daenerys unscathed. A third incident of Asian influences is shown when Viserys, Daenerys' brother, is killed by having liquid gold poured on his head. Molten metal was historically used as a test of innocence in several Middle Eastern countries; those who survived were deemed innocent while those who died were judged guilty.⁷⁴

As separate occurrences, the relation to Asian cultures might seem coincidental; however, together suggest that whiteness was used deliberately to disguise the theft of Asian cultures. More insidiously, elements from Asian cultures were used to emphasize Daenerys' purity as a white woman so that juxtaposed to the all the negative Oriental stereotypes assigned to the rest of Essos, Daenerys becomes a contrasting factor within the East itself as well as across the sea. While it is condescending that the franchise seems to believe that Asians cannot recognize signs of their own cultures being whitewashed and appropriated, within the context of *Game of*

⁷² Game of Thrones, season 3, episode 10, "Mhysa," written by David Benioff and D. B. Weiss, aired June 9, 2013 on HBO Entertainment.

⁷³ Game of Thrones, season 1, episode 10, "Fire and Blood," written by David Benioff and D. B. Weiss, aired June 19, 2011 on HBO Entertainment.

⁷⁴ Hardy, "The East Is the Least," 36-37.

Thrones, it is impossible for Daenerys to be allowed to be visibly Asian. Daenerys is the only contender for the Iron Throne who originates in Essos; portraying Daenerys as Asian would mean legitimizing Essos and nonwhite races, which would unravel the world of *Game of Thrones* as it so heavily relies on Orientalism and white superiority.

If Daenerys were portrayed as Asian, then her transition from hero to villain becomes almost predictable, as her story is characterized by her transformation from Lotus Blossom to (literally) Dragon Lady. Through this framing, even Daenerys' death by Jon Snow can be foreseen, as he becomes the model minority foil to her Yellow Peril. Though a native of Westeros, Jon Snow has always been portrayed as an outlier of the Stark family because of his status as a child outside of wedlock. Due to his parentage, he visually appears different from the other Stark children. Jon Snow is shown to be a submissive character, allowing negligence from his adoptive mother and even banishment to the Night's Watch to thwart his political advancement in deference to his adoptive siblings.⁷⁵ Even when his true heritage is revealed, Jon Snow only uses his status as a Targaryen to help defeat the otherworldly threat beyond the northern wall, after which he immediately assassinates the only other known Targaryen, hence ending the Eastern threat to Westeros.

Jon serves as a perfect model minority metaphor where his Otherness is used only to benefit white society. When Jon is no longer necessary, he is denied legitimacy and entry to Western society, and instead exiled again to appease those wary of his political potential.⁷⁶ Jon's deference mirrors what the West truly desires from ostracized people, and because of his compliancy, he is allowed to survive. In contrast, Daenerys' desire for power is seen as insane

⁷⁵ *Game of Thrones*, season 1, episode 1, "Winter Is Coming," written by David Benioff and D. B. Weiss, aired April 17, 2011 on HBO Entertainment.

⁷⁶ *Game of Thrones*, season 8, episode 6, "The Iron Throne," written by David Benioff and D. B. Weiss, aired May 19, 2019 on HBO Entertainment.

and unnatural, for which she is ultimately killed. In the East, Daenerys' whiteness is revered as a symbol of freedom. However, as an Eastern power in the West, Daenerys suddenly becomes too ambitious and too foreign to be allowed to rule Westeros; her act of freeing slaves in the Essos is even framed as something negative because of the fear of those Oriental bodies invading Westeros.⁷⁷ The rise and downfall of Daenerys Targaryen can best be understood through a blend of Orientalism and the uncanny Asian because whether consciously or not, *Game of Thrones* reincarnates Fu Manchu, complete with her own army of faceless foreign soldiers. This contextualization also explains the popularity of *Game of Thrones* throughout the last decade: in an age of visible minority population growth and dissent, a revival of the oriental fantasy assuages the ever-present fear of white mortality because after all the conflict and commotion about change in *Game of Thrones*, the story ends the same as it begins, with a white man on the Iron Throne and the characters of color dead or out of sight.

VI. THE EFFECTS OF ERASURE AND MISREPRESENTATION

One of the most powerful tools in society is visual media as humans are inherently ocular creatures and are so easily exposed to different optic-based entertainment. Propagandist aspects do not even have to be explicit because constant reinforcement will contribute to unconscious bias until the audience becomes desensitized to Othering and start internalizing these stereotypes. While scholars may take certain media and critically analyze them, the masses generally are not thinking about how the Western entertainment industry complex benefits when they are consuming what are supposed to be sources of amusement and relaxation. This is what makes visual media so impressive; messages through "neutral" media such as the news that seemingly

⁷⁷ *Game of Thrones*, season 8, episode 6, "The Iron Throne," written by David Benioff and D. B. Weiss, aired May 19, 2019 on HBO Entertainment.

have no malicious agenda often gets reflected in entertainment, creating a cycle that builds bias in a “passive and easily manipulated audience.”⁷⁸

However, nothing in media is neutral; the easy acceptance of racist archetypes in the West partly relies on the pre-existing knowledge that the audience already possesses through history and previously established media. When the audience sees characters of color, they already have expectations on what roles these characters serve, often for the benefit of the white leads. Thus, these stereotypes keep compounding until they become impossible to retire because that would require the white majority to accept that their worldview is flawed. In Hollywood, almost 90% of all content creators are white men; hence, most media productions are framed from the perspective of white men and used to garner sympathy for them.⁷⁹ This correlation between the elite of the racial hierarchy and that of the entertainment industry is not coincidental and directly contributes to the continuation of white supremacy and the justification of white violence.⁸⁰ The recent controversy surrounding the new Star Wars films demonstrates this; despite showing promise in the initial revival film, *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (2015), by the end of the trilogy, all the leading characters of color were relegated to background caricatures in favor of the white villain who was introduced as a neo-Nazi analogy.

When racial minorities are misrepresented or erased, both audiences of color and white audiences are affected. Studies suggest that “heavy exposure to media, television in particular, shaped how viewers [see] the real world,”⁸¹ especially when the exposure happens at a young age. The constant exposure to white characters in a multitude of different positions allow the audience to experience the extent of possibilities for white people while in comparison,

⁷⁸ Fürsich, 114.

⁷⁹ Hunt and Ramón, 16-23.

⁸⁰ Fürsich, 119.

⁸¹ Monk-Turner et al., 103.

minorities are frequently cast in negative roles to highlight the heroics of white characters. One analysis revealed that media engaged children are 71% more likely to imagine white people in positions of power and 59% more like to assume criminality in Black people.⁸² Repeated consumption of the same stereotypes and tropes develop preconceived notions that are often not acknowledged in Western societies. Adverse effects on self-esteem occurs when these assumptions influence how white people interact with people of color. At the same time, self-worth among minorities can be impacted because they are often not judged individually, but by the virtue of their entire racial group.⁸³ Lastly, racial archetypes also affect how different racial groups understand and interact with each other. For example, the model minority myth was purposely disseminated for the benefit of white people. Portraying Asians as the model minority helps incite rivalry and distrust among people of color.⁸⁴ When minorities are manipulated to not interact with other minorities, the exposure to different racial groups gets severely limited to media. This “divide and conquer” method results both in the dominance of white people in media as well as in the continuation of white supremacy in society.

Studies have been conducted over the past few years to prove that minorities are severely underrepresented in Western films and TV but ironically overrepresented in the audience. According to the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), minorities are represented in less than 30% of films and television shows despite the fact that they are twice as likely to consume these media.⁸⁵ The same study reported that Asians have less than 5% of leading roles in films and less than 2% in television shows. Another study conducted in 2017 reported that in the 2015-2016 broadcasting season, 64% of all the series aired did not contain any Asian cast

⁸² Chong, 51.

⁸³ Mastro, 411.

⁸⁴ Kim and Taylor, 8-10.

⁸⁵ Hunt and Ramón, 7.

members. The television shows that do contain Asian roles only have these characters appear onscreen for a third of the time compared to their White peers, and 68% of these characters are the only Asian character present in the series.⁸⁶ Unfortunately, even when Asian characters are present, they are often stereotyped, tokenized, and isolated. One 2018 analysis of primetime television revealed that 97% of interpersonal interactions included a white character, and 65% of the time, it was with another white character.⁸⁷ Rarely are there two characters of the same race on a TV show, and even more uncommon is the sight of two minorities interacting with each other without a white presence. The lack of leading nonwhite characters is exacerbated when live-action adaptations unapologetically whitewash source material.

The 2010 film *The Last Airbender*, inspired from the 2005 cartoon *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, “specifically requested ‘Caucasians or any other ethnicity’”⁸⁸ in its casting call, even though the cartoon clearly depicted fantasy Asia with a cast of Asian and indigenous characters. Unsurprisingly, the antagonist of *The Last Airbender* (2010) remained Asian. U.S. media often refer to the racial hierarchy when trying to defend whitewashing, citing “the...need [for] an American hero”⁸⁹ while unironically rejecting nonwhite American actors. Similarly, roles with unspecified race requirements are understood to be white, as one producer reveals that “[if] you want a person of color, then you must specify it in writing; if you want a White person, then you do not specify a race.”⁹⁰ When the lack of racial indication is understood to be white, then the roles for minority groups become further stereotyped and pigeonholed. Therefore, the entire

⁸⁶ Chin et al., 8.

⁸⁷ Riles et al., 310.

⁸⁸ Chong, 45-46.

⁸⁹ Chong, 36.

⁹⁰ Chong, 44: “Approximately 54.8% of the casting calls did not specify a race. However, nine out of ten times, if the race is unspecified, the role goes to a White person because casting directors eliminate people of color by default. Rene Balcer, the White executive producer of *Law & Order* says if you want a person of color, then you must specify it in writing; if you want a White person, then you do not specify a race. Thus, the number of White casting calls in Robinson’s study is actually 77.3% (22.5% plus 54.8%).”

purpose for systematic racialization, in both media and reality, is dehumanization of those deemed not white.

CONCLUSION

Anti-Asian racism in the West is still thriving, encouraged not only by the sociopolitical climate but also the media and entertainment. The legacy of the West perceiving Asians as unequal and uncanny can be witnessed throughout the entire event of the COVID-19 pandemic. Even after the tragic shooting on March 16th, 2021, people questioned the legitimacy of the Asian day spas that were attacked, suggesting instead that they were brothels in an attempt to underplay the violence against Asian women.⁹¹ Though racial issues largely go unaddressed, they are inherently tied to the history of the West. The refusal to discuss these issues do not make them disappear, and in fact just passes on the tradition of silence and ignorance. There is no answer to whether the Atlanta shooting could have been avoided, but the response to the shooting was easily enough predicted, just as the response to the pandemic that pushed violence against Asians to the forefront. The expectation for compassion was already anticipated when the shooter was revealed to be a white man, because Western media has always framed the plight of the white man as sympathetic just as it continues to frame Asian women as submissive sexual objects. So many anti-Asian problems arise because the West is still clinging onto the Oriental fantasy, which is blatantly being reimaged in modern day entertainment through facets of ornamentalism, cultural appropriation, and whitewashing. Until we acknowledge that the problem of racism and Othering is systematic and influences nearly every aspect of society, we

⁹¹ Sherman: "It's a savior narrative, advocates say, that just doesn't work. It ignores the nuances of massage workers' lives in favor of sexist, racist stereotypes that portray Asian-owned massage businesses as lairs of sex trafficking. And beyond spreading the inaccurate idea that 'happy endings' are bought and sold at all these spas, these stereotypes conflate sex trafficking and sex work, which are not the same."

will continue to make the same mistakes of forgetting that people of color are human too, and not just cultural fodder for white consumption.

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