

# prism

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## Screening Anti-Asian Racism Gendered and Racialized Discourses in Film and Television

**ABSTRACT** The global pandemic of COVID-19 has exacerbated anti-Asian racism—the demonization of the Asian American and Pacific Islander communities as viral origins—in the United States. Offering strategies for inclusion and for identifying tacit forms of misogynistic racism, this article analyzes the manifestation of the ideas of yellow peril and yellow fever in recent films and television series. The spectatorial aspect of racism has both fetishized Asian bodies and erased Asianness from content creators' visual landscapes. These case studies reveal that racialized thinking is institutionalized as power relations in the cultural and political life, take the form of political marginalization of minority groups, and cause emotional distress and physical harm within and beyond the fictional universe.

**KEYWORDS** anti-Asian racism, misogyny, tropes of illness, colorblind gaze, techno-Orientalism

In an attempt to curb the outbreak of the disease now known as COVID-19, the Chinese government ordered a lockdown of Wuhan on January 23, 2020, two days before the Chinese New Year, and the World Health Organization declared the outbreak a pandemic in March 2020. The putative Asian origins of the global pandemic have exacerbated anti-Asian racism in the United States that was already brewing in previous years, fueled by the Trump administration's racist and incendiary language about minorities. The stay-at-home orders may have slowed down the spread of virus but they also accelerated anonymous hate speech online.

The cultures and practices associated with China—including people of East Asian descent—have been vilified, which has led to collateral damage in the form of hate crimes against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI). Due to stay-at-home orders, more people found time to tune into social media to connect with like-minded individuals for venting and socialization, both demonstrating Sinophobic behaviors, on Reddit, Twitter, and 4chan.<sup>1</sup> The lockdown has thus not only distended time but also turned back the clock on human rights by inadvertently curtailing the rights of minority groups.

The shelter-in-place orders also led to increased engagement with video content repackaged for at-home consumption, making racism go viral. Examining

an archive of films and television series, this essay identifies pejorative constructions of Asianness. Drawing on Belinda Kong's pre-COVID essay, "Pandemic as Method," which treats the phenomenon of the pandemic as "a set of discursive relations" that is "a product of layered histories of power,"<sup>2</sup> and on Carlos Rojas's methodology of conceptual extrapolation, I examine key scenes in these works to delineate the intersections of anti-Asian racism and misogyny, and to show how these two forms of oppression share a similar vocabulary. Below, I use a series of snapshots of films and television series coupled with analyses of attendant cultural contexts to reveal the "networks within which those works are positioned" during the pandemic.<sup>3</sup>

Films have often projected both negative and superficially positive stereotypes of racial minorities and their claims to personal truths, which give fodder to racial hate. A prominent example of cinema's status as a barometer of imaginative prototyping is D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), which revived the then-declining white-supremacist terror group the Ku Klux Klan. In fact, it was only after the film was released that the KKK adopted the practices of wearing white hoods and burning crosses, and during the film's five-year tour across the United States, lynchings rose fivefold wherever the film was screened.<sup>4</sup>

### Visibly Invisible Asianness

One film stands out during the Covid pandemic: Steven Soderbergh's *Contagion* (2011), which was inspired by the SARS outbreak of 2002–3, skyrocketed to the top of Warner Bros.' charts in 2020. For context, the film ranked 270th in popularity in December 2019.<sup>5</sup> In the film, Beth Emhoff (Gwyneth Paltrow) contracts an unknown disease in a Macau casino, after which she returns home to Minneapolis. The opening sequence comprises a series of scenes in the daily life of Tokyo, Hong Kong, and other East Asian cities, with title cards showing population numbers. East Asian characters, who have no lines in those scenes, appear sick on buses and sidewalks, some dropping dead in public. As the camera follows an unnamed, ill Chinese man through an open-air poultry market in Hong Kong, the shot is trained on vendors hawking their goods over live chickens in rusty cages. Though no voice-over narration is included, these scenes tacitly link Asianness with disease, animality, and inscrutable food culture. The film's final scene, meanwhile, consists of a flashback that takes audiences to a forest in southern China that is being bulldozed. As local bats are disturbed, they flee to human habitats, and one drops an infected banana in a pig farm. The pig that consumes the banana is then slaughtered and cooked by a Macau chef who, without washing his hands, shakes hands with an unsuspecting Emhoff, thereby unleashing a global pandemic—a binary clarity not found in our world ravaged by COVID-19. Like *The Birth of a Nation*, *Contagion* uses these cognitive shortcuts to frame an entire group of people and their cultural practices as the perceived source of illness.

Films provide a linear narrative and sense of closure that may seem comforting, and *Contagion* puts human faces—Chinese faces to be exact—on an invisible, viral threat. Mixing fictional narratives about characters struggling to survive with visualization of the spread of contagion, the film offers global roundups on alarmist maps showing projected numbers of deaths. However, only the death of white characters is given cultural significance, while others remain faceless casualties. Despite its topic of a *global* pandemic, the film focuses on the tribulations and eventual triumph of its white protagonists.

The film's insinuation that Asian cuisine may give rise to diseases echoes similar scenes in other works. For example, in the ABC series *Fresh Off the Boat*—which chronicles a Taiwanese American family's relocation from Washington, DC, to Orlando, Florida—a schoolboy is bullied over “eating worms” (noodles) at lunch, and begs his mother for “white people lunch.” Food-related insults such as “rice eater” are also hurled at the mixed-race character Alina Starkov (played by Chinese-British actress Jessie Mei Li) in *Shadow and Bone*, Eric Heisserer's fantasy streaming series on Netflix (2021). In these examples, Asian characters as three-dimensional humans recede into the background while the shock factor of Asian food takes center stage. “Ethnic” food is presented as unhygienic and a source of shame.

Food also emerges as a flash point in Lee Isaac Chung's *Minari* (2020), a film that tells the story of a Korean American family's relocation from California to rural Arkansas. Brought to the United States by the grandmother, Soon-ja, to plant by a creek, the titular *minari*, a Korean water celery, becomes a symbol of resilience that sustains the family physically and emotionally. The final scene, following a conflagration that destroys the produce on the family's farm, shows new life and hope in the form of the prospering *minari*. The vegetable turns a patch of land by the creek into Korean-inclusive, sustaining soil. Desperate to fit into mainstream American culture at home and in school, the young David quizzes his grandmother on whether she bakes cookies like a “real [American] grandma.” Disappointed, David nags Soon-ja about her behaviors that defy stereotypes about grandmothers, such as chugging Mountain Dew. Apparently, and fortunately, one is not always what one eats.

With regard to *Contagion*, and despite the pandemic-induced rise of anti-Asian racism in 2020, most recent mainstream English-language news stories about the film have not paid attention to its problematic portrayal of East Asia. Instead, most of the discussion, in venues such as the *Guardian* and the *New York Times*, has focused on how realistic and prophetic the ten-year-old film's portrayal of a pandemic is. This indifference to anti-Asian attitudes is astonishing when one considers the prominence of East Asia in the film's plot, and it demonstrates the political and cultural invisibility of Asians in the West.

The operating definition and institutional understanding of “diversity” in the United States rarely includes people of Asian descent because of unfounded

claims of their overrepresentation as well as emotional, if inaccurate, assertions that the “model minority” is wealthy, autonomous, and exempted from discrimination. In fact, Asian Americans have the largest income disparity and the highest poverty rate of any racial group.<sup>6</sup> For instance, Asian Americans were left out of the #OscarsSoWhite, a campaign to diversify the voting membership of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Their political invisibility also results from other factors relating to the multiple and contradictory meanings of race in contemporary American culture. The intense focus on Blackness and white supremacy may also obscure other groups, such as Hispanics, Chicanos, and Native Americans. Further, compared to other minorities such as Latinx, meanwhile, Asian Americans are more reluctant to report crimes, and are therefore less visible in public records.<sup>7</sup>

### The Colorblind Gaze

The cinematic screen is a discursively formed liminal space between fictional universes and film audiences’ lived realities. When actors embody the characters, they draw attention to their accents, mannerisms, and (un)intentionally highlighted or concealed traces of racialized inscriptions in their lives. Yet audiences of *Contagion* seem to have looked through—rather than at—the Asian characters, many of whom are unnamed. Laura Mulvey has theorized that Hollywood films tend to operate under the determining, tripartite male gaze of the characters, filmmakers, and audiences, which projects masculinist fantasies onto the narrative.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, audiences of the dominant racial group often approach films through a colorblind gaze, one that erases the presence of Asianness that is seen but not *truly* acknowledged.

There is a well-recognized tradition of using Asianness for ornamental value, particularly in dystopian sci-fi films that draw on Asian cityscapes and food to express exoticism. For instance, Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner* (1982) is set in a futuristic, Japanesque Los Angeles where Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford) eats ramen between missions. Junks, the iconic Hong Kong ships with fully battened sails, adorn the skyline of future New York in Luc Besson’s *The Fifth Element* (1997), as figure 1 shows. Chinese neon signs and lanterns pepper the street scenes of Bay City in the Netflix series *Altered Carbon* (2018–20). In San Fransokyo, the fictional city and backdrop of *Big Hero 6* (2014), the Kabuki-za, the principal theater in Tokyo for the classical form of dance-drama, sits comfortably among American high-rises, merging the two coasts of the Pacific in the sunny future. James Mangold’s *The Wolverine* (2013) engages in habitual deployment of Japanese architecture, such as a *shiro* (castle) and Tokyo’s Zōjō-ji Temple, and warrior outfits (Ichirō’s electromechanical suit, named the Silver Samurai) to signal evil within.

These films also feature a great deal of Asian script, amplifying the myth that Asian writing is inscrutable. There is no culturally meaningful engagement with the Asian settings in these films. The characters may live in a futuristic Asian uni-





FIGURE 1. A flying Hong Kong Junk selling Thai food in New York in Luc Besson's *The Fifth Element* (1997).

verse, but they move through the social and architectural space without giving meaning to the presence of Asian writing, food, and modes of transportation. Asian cities and people, therefore, become disembodied, exotic “aliens.” The geographical distance enforces the temporal distance as contemporary Asian urban scenes are reframed as futuristic cinematic space.

There is an important distinction between color-conscious and colorblind casting, in that the former involves choices made to counteract the erasure of minorities, bringing actors' identities into intentioned, meaningful interactions with plot elements, whereas the latter perpetuates racism by equating social justice with the absence of stereotyping in selection processes.<sup>9</sup> Some actors, such as John Cho, take on non-racially coded roles without being typecast. William Yu initiated #StarringJohnCho, a project calling for diversity in casting the Korean American actor in Hollywood's traditional leading roles. A series of film posters were modified to feature Cho, such as *The Martian*, *Spectre*, *Me Before You*, and *Avengers: Age of Ultron*.<sup>10</sup> These posters invite viewers to imagine otherwise, a world that is both color-conscious and colorblind.

In particular, a putatively colorblind gaze has led to a twofold problem of Asian invisibility in screen culture. Films and television programming either lack Asian representation—a phenomenon exacerbated by the practice of “whitewashing” (in which white actors are cast in Asian roles)—or they focus only on negative portrayals of Asian characters, such as Gong Li's performance of Isabella, lover of and financial adviser to a drug dealer in Michael Mann's film *Miami Vice* (2006). Edward Zwick's *The Last Samurai* (2003) features a large East Asian cast supporting a white male lead (Tom Cruise). There are a few Western-produced films that feature predominantly East Asian casts, such as Yuen Woo-ping's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon: Sword of Destiny* (2016), Rob Marshall's *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005), and Wayne Wang's *The Joy Luck Club* (1993), together with films that star Indian actors, such as *Life of Pi* (2012) and *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008). However, these films often encourage a colorblind gaze that ultimately subsumes Asian-

ness under more putatively universal themes that appeal to white audiences, such as familial bonds (*Joy Luck Club*), and Hollywood pop feminism, individualism, wealth porn, and romance (*Crazy Rich Asians*, 2018).

While *Crazy Rich Asians* made history for Asian American representation in mainstream US cinema, for instance, it failed to humanize the Asian American communities. The film maps East Asian faces onto Hollywood's comforting conventions of a romantic comedy between Rachel Chu (Constance Wu) and her boyfriend Nick Young (Henry Golding), heir apparent of the Young family business empire. The conflict between Rachel and Nick's mother, Eleanor (Michelle Yeoh), casts the tensions between diasporic Asians and those who reside within Asia in simplified, binary terms. Old Asia, represented by Eleanor, is described as feudal and patriarchal, while "New" Asia embodies a hopeful future of neoliberal capitalism and individualism. The film glosses over the diverse communities within Singapore by casting non-Chinese actors in ethnically Chinese roles, thereby contributing to the myth that Asian faces are interchangeable and indistinguishable from one another.

Even the film's intertextual engagement with other films remains patently white. For instance, as Nick, his best friend Colin, and other guests approach the bachelor party on a container-ship-turned-party-boat from the air, the helicopters in formation against the soundtrack of the *Walkürenritt* ("Ride of the Valkyries") invoke key elements of the iconic scene in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979), including the ocean and the setting sun. Similarly, the way the characters look out in awe through a helicopter's windows echoes the parallel scene in Steven Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* (1993) in which the tycoon John Hammond's guests approach Isla Nublar in a helicopter. In addition, the bloody fish in Rachel's vandalized hotel room pays tribute to the severed horse head as intimidation tactic in Coppola's *The Godfather* (1972).

By translating what may not hold mainstream interest (uniquely Asian struggles) into American pop feminism that is more palatable for mass audiences, *Crazy Rich Asians* renders its Asian context transparent and irrelevant. Asian locations, actors, and characters are seen without truly being understood, which is why Brian Hu and Vincent N. Pham have called on filmmakers and cinema studies to "center Asian America beyond the customary turn taking" of such occasions as the AAPI heritage month.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, the film's success at the US box office in the United States speaks volumes for Asian American communities' tolerance of its flaws for the sake of enhanced visibility. As Sara Ahmed writes, minorities are often forced to celebrate the few works that represent them, no matter how biased, because, as novelist Vin Packer put it, "more important was the fact there was a new book about us."<sup>12</sup> Fortunately, *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* (directed by the Hawaii-born Destin Daniel Cretton, 2021), a superhero film consisting almost entirely of Asian actors, and other forthcoming films are changing the landscape of filmmaking.



FIGURE 2. Chen Zhen (Bruce Lee) getting hold of the insulting “Sick Men of Asia” banner in *Fist of Fury* 精武門.

### Yellow Peril

At work in *Contagion* and other films is the racist notion of “yellow peril,” the idea that East Asian people are less civilized in their cultural practices and therefore sources of diseases and social ills. Racists have always associated racialized differences with a language of illness and inferiority, though that language has been used within China to counter oppressions as well. As Carlos Rojas shows, “discussions of disease have been used to reassess notion . . . of national identity.”<sup>13</sup> The idea of yellow peril has been used in the Chinese colonial history as a symbol of Western bullying. In Wei Lo’s *Fist of Fury* (1972), Bruce Lee’s character, Chen Zhen, tears apart a banner that says “Sick Men of Asia” (figure 2). The Hong Kong film, set in what is known as a “century of humiliation” (1839–1949), is one of the most prominent references to the that phrase in the twentieth century.

Historically there were many incidents linking the perception of people of East Asian descent to diseases, an association that *Contagion* propagates and *Fresh Off the Boat* depicts. Nineteenth-century Chinese railroad workers were accused of eating vermin and were associated with disease and unhygienic practices. In the spring of 2020, however, Asian Americans were often vilified when they wore face masks to help prevent the spread of the coronavirus, even though this hygienic practice was later widely adopted within society as a whole.<sup>14</sup>

The notion of yellow peril also manifests itself in the misconception that Asian accents are interchangeable. *Crazy Rich Asians* conflates and flattens different Asian accents while privileging British and American ones. Singaporean identities are erased when actors do not speak Singlish. Two other examples of linguistically driven imaginations of racialized otherness are Joel Schumacher’s *Falling Down* (1993) and Mina Shum’s *Double Happiness* (1994). In the former film, the unemployed William “D-Fens” Foster lashes out when he is caught trying to shortchange a Korean shopkeeper:



SHOPKEEPER: No way!

D-FENS: Yes, way! You give me seventy “fie” cents back for the phone. What is a fie? There is a “V” in the word. Fie-vuh. Don’t they have “v”s in China?

SHOPKEEPER: Not Chinese. I am Korean.

D-FENS: Whatever. What difference does that make? You come over here and take my money and you don’t even have the grace to learn to speak my language.

Racist attitudes often cast the body as a microcosm for political community. D-Fens sees himself as the embodiment of an entire nation-state and a language, pitting South Korea against the United States. Further, D-Fens’s American pop-cultural vernacular (“yes, way”) sounds like “Yes, Wei!” as if he is calling the shopkeeper a random Asian-sounding last name, collapsing different Asian identities. He also parodies pidgin grammar.

Accents are aligned with racial identities in the latter film, *Double Happiness*, a story of an aspiring Chinese-Canadian actress. When Jade Li (Sandra Oh) is asked to deliver her lines with an accent in an audition scene, she answers in a playfully Parisian accent before being forced to revert to “a ‘very good’ Chinese accent” to please the white judges. Scholars have interpreted the scene alternately as victimizing and empowering, noting the tension between her “assimilated voice” and her “racially marked body,” and the performative nature of Jade’s accent, which deconstructs racialized and gendered stereotypes.<sup>15</sup>

Later, Jade is able to partially disrupt racialized limitations on how she should carry herself as an Asian woman. She gets to play a waitress in a TV soap opera without a Chinese accent. However, the performance has a catch: she only has a disembodied presence because she is offscreen in that moment, which hinders her career development but makes her audiences comfortable.

### **Yellow Fever**

The notion of yellow peril also intersects with the colonial legacy known as yellow fever. Racialized difference is imagined as an inversion of what are perceived to be gender norms. In contemporary American media and popular discourse on dating, the term is used to identify and sometimes to critique the social phenomenon of white men exclusively preferring East Asian women, who are seen “as passive as ‘lotus flowers.’” The fetish was amplified by the US military presence in Asia in the twentieth-century.<sup>16</sup> The combination of yellow peril and yellow fever fantasy appeared onscreen as early as 1916 as it “found its way into the American silent cinema.”<sup>17</sup>

The racialized myth about Asian women provides a partial explanation of the baffling phenomenon of white supremacists in the United States exclusively dat-

ing Asian women. The alt-right, with their a set of far-right, white ethnonationalist ideologies, imagines Asian women as subservient and hypersexual individuals who are “naturally inclined to serve men sexually.”<sup>18</sup> While yellow fever is not a fetish exclusively among white men, it is a fact that “white men more often intermarry with Asian women” than they do with Black women.<sup>19</sup> Kellie Xiong, the ex-wife of former police officer Derek Chauvin, convicted of the murder of George Floyd in 2021, is a Hmong woman who was born in Laos.<sup>20</sup> Studies have shown that heterosexual Internet daters are driven by “gendered conceptions of race” and that Asian women are often depicted as “submissive, and more feminine” while Asian men perceived as less masculine.<sup>21</sup>

While the uninitiated may have assumed positive outcomes from being desirable on the dating market, the lived realities of Asian women—objectified and seen as expendable—are far from rosy. The fetish dehumanizes and depersonalizes Asian women. If they are not identifiably individuated, they are subject to perceptions of “fungibility,” as Martha Nussbaum calls this consequence of objectification.<sup>22</sup> That is, the object can be replaced by another identical, mutually interchangeable object. Furthermore, while women in general are subject to sexual objectification, Asian women have to contend with an additional layer of oppression in the form of racial depersonalization, which causes racialized discomfort. The fetish of yellow fever “threatens Asian/American women with doubts as to whether they are or can be loved as individuals rather than as objects in a category.”<sup>23</sup>

The 2021 tragedy in Atlanta was a turning point when anti-Asian racism emerged into the public discourse. On March 16, 2021, a white man killed six women of Korean and other East Asian descent, among other victims, in three massage parlors in Atlanta, Georgia. He cited his “sexual addiction” as the justification for the shooting spree, to rid him of his “temptation.”<sup>24</sup> The shootings stood out due to the magnitude of the incident and the nature of the crime, targeting specifically Asian American women at an Asian spa, a site that embodies racialized sexual fantasies. This incident shows that the discourse of Asian Americans as a model or desirable minority only goes so far; they disproportionately bear the brunt of racism in times of national crisis.

Yellow fever has also led to the bifurcated imaginations of Asian women as either virgins or femme fatales. David Cronenberg’s 1993 film adaptation of David Henry Hwang’s play *M. Butterfly* (1988) combines the tropes of China dolls—stereotypically submissive young women who need to be rescued—and cunning “foxes” out to deceive men. French diplomat René Gallimard (Jeremy Irons) falls in love with Song Liling (John Lone), a trans woman who turns out to be a spy for the Chinese Communist Party. In one scene, Gallimard shares his appreciation of Giacomo Puccini’s *Madame Butterfly* with a sense of pride, imagining Song in place of Cio-Cio-San and himself as Lieutenant Pinkerton: “You made me see the

beauty of the story, of her death. It's, it's pure sacrifice. He's not worthy of it, but what can she do? She loves him so much." Song points out his hypocrisy while breaking the fourth wall: "It's one of your favorite fantasies, isn't it? The submissive Oriental woman and the cruel white man." The *M. Butterfly* complex captures the duality of the yellow fever.

Some scholars argue, however, that there is space for women of color to lay claim to their own sexuality through performative "productive perversity."<sup>25</sup> As performers and spectators at once, some actors and characters counter the idea that sexualization, as a form of self-performance, is demeaning. This theory holds true for meta-cinematic and meta-theatrical works such as *M. Butterfly* and *Double Happiness*.

Contributing to the patterns that dehumanize Asian women are multiple sci-fi films that feature cyborgs and androids in Asian female bodies. In Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* (2015), the white genius inventor Nathan (Oscar Isaac) creates a series of female androids with artificial intelligence and human emotions, several of whom are Asian and tucked away in his closet. Ava (Alicia Vikander) is one of the most intelligent, but the mute Kyoko (played by Japanese-British actress Sonoya Mizuno) is placed in a subservient role and not given a language function. She cooks, cleans the house, and serves meals to Nathan and his guest, Caleb. The dishes she prepares align with her given racial identity: Japanese cuisine with an emphasis on sashimi and sushi rolls. Further, Nathan explicitly states that the female androids can be penetrated and can sense pleasure, telling Caleb that "you bet she can fuck" and hinting at sexual assault. The camera does linger on Kyoko's face from time to time, suggesting that she may have consciousness but is unable to speak. Two other scenes stand out in their portrayal of Kyoko. One morning, Nathan sends Kyoko to wake Caleb up by delivering breakfast to his room. Nathan boasts to Caleb, with sexual innuendo: "She's some alarm clock, huh? Gets you right up in the morning." In a later scene, sensing Caleb's presence, Kyoko proceeds to undress herself in front of him, as she is designed to be a house maid and serve as a sex doll.

Other screen works also amplify the instrumentality of female Asian figures. A sentient Asian female android is the lead in both Channel 4's series *Humans* (2015) and its source, the Swedish series *Real Humans* (2012). Bought at a shopping mall by Joe Hawkins, an overworked, white father, Mia (played by Chinese-British Gemma Chan; her Swedish counterpart is played by Korean-Swedish Lisette Pagler) is tasked with helping with household chores including cooking, babysitting, cleaning, and grocery shopping. Solidifying the stereotype against Asian women is the scene in which Joe purchases Mia. His young daughter, in anxious excitement, asks: "What if she's not pretty? Can we return her if she is not pretty?" The premeditated action of returning Mia like a piece of merchandise ("it") contradicts the choice of pronoun, *she*, that indicates Mia's status as a

human. The family does not treat her with courtesy (such as saying “Thank you”), either, since they see Mia as a machine and not human. Tensions arise later in the series between Mia and Joe’s wife. Laura feels outshone by Mia’s cooking and organizational skills, and suspects that Mia may even become Joe’s surrogate wife, rendering Laura irrelevant in the house. Indeed, one day Joe activates Mia’s “adult mode” and has intercourse with the android.

Some East Asian films critique this pattern of representation. Nozomi, an inflatable, life-sized Japanese sex doll in Hirokazu Kore-eda’s allegorical *Air Doll* (2009), played by South Korean actress Bae Doona, becomes sentient and finds the box in which she arrived as merchandise. She ditches her maid’s outfit, and begins exploring Tokyo and pursuing an independent life. Her “owner,” on discovering this, asks her to return to the status of a lifeless doll, “the normal, plain old doll,” because it’s “easier” for him emotionally. Film audiences are as shocked as Nozomi in the scene where she meets her maker in the doll factory: Nozomi is fungible and replaceable by other dolls. Similar to *Ex Machina* and *Humans*, this film depicts racialized and gendered prejudices against Asian women.

The Asian female androids and the doll in these works have fleshlike skin and nuanced facial expressions. As such, their presence onscreen feeds into the fetish of yellow fever and the notion of yellow peril. Unlike the female-voiced, incorporeal AI in Spike Jonze’s *Her* (2013), or the AI robots in films such as Alex Proyas’s *I, Robot* (2004), who do not have fully human forms, the Asian female androids in *Ex Machina* and *Humans* conflate Asian women with fungible objects that one can abuse, subjugate, and sexually exploit without moral burden. A by-product of Asia’s new position in the global economy since the 1980s,<sup>26</sup> these figures also conflate automated productivity with Asian culture due to “the jettisoning of the Asian/Asian American other as robotic . . . and not quite human, as not quite lived.”<sup>27</sup>

## Conclusion

These misogynist and racist tendencies can be explained by the theory of techno-Orientalism that aligns technological and racial imaginations of otherness. As the flow of capital between Asia and the West increases “in the wake of neoliberal trade policies,” so does “techno-Orientalist speculations of an Asianized future.”<sup>28</sup>

The anxieties of yellow fever and yellow peril are evolving, in the twenty-first century, into new forms of techno-Orientalism as Asian nations become more significant economic and military competitors with the United States. As a result, Asian women are presented as a threatening alien even in films that seem to grant their Asian female leads more agency. Alex Munday (Lucy Liu) in McG’s *Charlie’s Angels* films (2000 and 2003) and O-Ren Ishii (also Lucy Liu) in Quentin Tarantino’s *Kill Bill: Volume 1* (2003), for example, are framed as “attractive” threats.

Race, like many identity markers, is a shorthand for articulating differences, and thinking through gender and race estranges what is taken for granted and reveals what is hiding in plain sight.

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### Notes

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- 3 Rojas, "Introduction," 1.
- 4 Ang, "Birth of a Nation."
- 5 Guerrasio, "Everyone Is Watching *Contagion* Right Now."
- 6 Eng and Han, *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation*, 2.
- 7 Borja, *Virulent Hate*.
- 8 Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema."
- 9 Mazzocco, *Psychology of Racial Colorblindness*, 4.
- 10 Rogers, "John Cho, Starring in Every Movie Ever Made?"
- 11 Hu and Pham, "IN FOCUS," 116.
- 12 Ahmed, *Promise of Happiness*, 109.
- 13 Rojas, *Homesickness*, x.
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- 15 Marchetti, *Chinese Diaspora on American Screens*, 163; O'Neill, "Asian American Filmmakers," 57.
- 16 Curington, Lundquist, and Lin, *Dating Divide*, 147.
- 17 Marchetti, *Romance and the "Yellow Peril"*, 3.
- 18 See Lim, "Alt-Right's Asian Fetish," and interviews with white nationalists in Harkinson, "Meet the White Nationalist."
- 19 Lin and Lundquist, "Mate Selection in Cyberspace," 185.
- 20 Wright, *Plague Year*, 169.
- 21 Lin and Lundquist, "Mate Selection in Cyberspace," 208, 185, 191.
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- 23 Zheng, "Why Yellow Fever Isn't Flattering," 407, 410.
- 24 Fausset, Bogel-Burroughs, and Fazio, "Suspect in the Spa Attacks."
- 25 Shimizu, *Hypersexuality of Race*, 1–29.



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 27 Chun, "Race and/as Technology," 51.  
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