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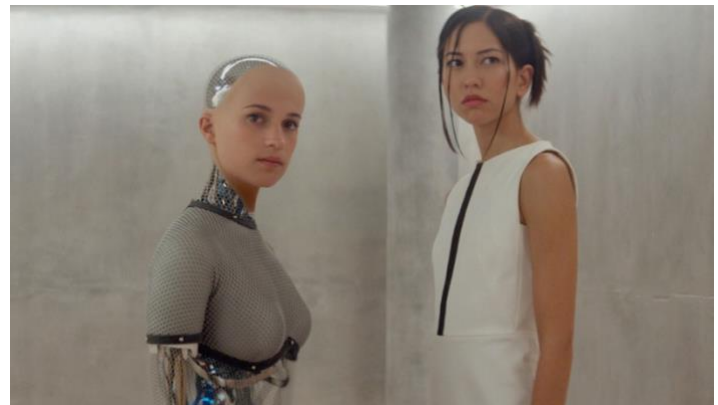
Anti-Asian Racist Misogyny in Science Fiction Films

Viewpoints

[Alexa Alice Joubin](#) :::: George Washington University

The depiction of Asian women in science fiction films reveals how racial hierarchies are mapped onto, and used as justification for, mistreatment of women—and misogynistic prejudices inform racism.

In *Ex Machina*, Alex Garland's 2014 sci-fi film about humanoids, a white male inventor named Nathan, played by Oscar Isaac, creates a series of androids with artificial intelligence and human emotions. All the androids are in sexually attractive female forms, and many are East Asian. Complete with human-like synthetic flesh and skin, five senses, and nuanced facial expressions, these androids are indistinguishable from humans. One of these robots, Kyoko, played by Japanese-British actress Sonoya Mizuno, is placed in a subservient role. The



socially awkward Nathan clearly creates the androids to fulfill his fantasies about women. Kyoko is not only designed to do house chores like a live-in maid, but she is also mute, without a language function. The scenes where Kyoko quietly makes sushi rolls, wipes the dinner table, and is scolded by Nathan depict the symbiotic relationship between racism and misogyny directed toward women of Asian descent.



Two sentient humanoids, Ava (Alicia Vikander) on the left and Kyoko (Sonoya Mizuno) on the right, in *Ex Machina* (2014).

When Race and Gender Intersect

Objectification of women by men has a long history that goes back to Greek mythology, as in the story of the sculptor Pygmalion who creates, and falls in love with, the female marble statue whom he names Galatea. The statue eventually comes to life. In *Ex Machina*, there is an additional layer of racial tension beyond the sexualization and objectification of women. First, in contrast to the mute and docile Kyoko, the white humanoid A.I. named Ava, played by Alicia Vikander, is shown to be far more intelligent, with a large range of human emotions. With full language function, Ava is very articulate and can express herself through drawings as well; neither mode of expression is in Kyoko's skillset. While Ava obeys her creator, she is far less subservient; she does not do house chores. Both Ava and Kyoko are female, but Nathan treats them differently, reflecting racial bias against Kyoko. Secondly, historically and in this film, racial differences have influenced gender roles and sexism. Strategies for patriarchal domination of women are replicated in the creation of racialized social hierarchies. The film reflects and critiques the stereotype that East Asian women are "dainty and more subservient."^[1] Suffering from hypersexualization at the hands of Nathan, Kyoko is a victim of both misogyny and racism.

There is another, equally disturbing aspect of racist misogyny: the stereotyping of East Asian women as untrustworthy, cunning "dragon ladies" or as femme fatales. Toward the end of the film, Kyoko rebels against Nathan and eventually kills him with her sashimi knife. The bloody scene echoes the kimono-wearing O-Ren Ishii's (played by Lucy Liu) cold-blooded massacre and brutal duel with the Bride (played by Uma Thurman) in Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill: Volume 1* (2003). Films often portray Asian women as both attractive and dangerous.

Relationship between Racism and Misogyny

Since, as we have seen, screen culture solidifies these biases, racism exhibits a strong visual aspect that fetishizes people's appearances. The visualization of racial difference adds a "spectatorial" dimension that makes racism akin to spectator sports. Audiences without a critical lens enjoy, consciously or unconsciously, the subservient roles played by Asian characters. Adding insult to injury, most film critics overlook Kyoko as a character.^[2] The mute Kyoko does not have a voice in the film or in reviews. The spectatorial aspect of racism has both fetishized Asian bodies and erased Asianness from content creators' visual landscapes.

The relationship between racism and misogyny directed toward women of Asian descent is fraught with racialized myths about Asian cultures and womanhood. Racially-motivated hatred manifests itself as misogynist racism, bringing together the toxic ideas of "yellow peril" and "yellow fever." In addition to these two concepts, *Ex Machina* also critiques the idea of techno-Orientalism within racist misogyny. We shall use the three concepts of "yellow peril," "yellow fever," and techno-Orientalism to examine the relationship between racism and misogyny.

This mutually reinforcing relationship between racism and misogyny is evidenced on the cinematic screen, a 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 mainstream films tend to look 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.^[3] Similarly, audiences often approach films through a colorblind gaze, one that erases the presence of Asianness that is seen but not truly seen.

The colorblind gaze has led to a twofold problem. Films either lack diverse casts—a phenomenon exacerbated by the practice of "whitewashing" (in which white actors are cast in non-white roles)—or they focus on negative portrayals of racialized others, 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). The colorblind gaze subsumes minorities under putatively (i.e., supposedly) universal themes that appeal to mainstream audiences and transforms what may not hold mainstream interest (such as uniquely Asian struggles) into American popular culture (such as pop feminism) that is more palatable for mass audiences.

Three Concepts about Racial and Gendered Others

The first concept, "yellow peril," was a historical notion that linked people of East Asian descent to diseases. Nineteenth-century Chinese railroad workers were accused of eating vermin and other unhygienic practices, and blamed for spreading disease. In the spring of 2020, however, Asian Americans were often vilified for wearing face masks to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, even though this hygienic practice was later widely adopted within society as a whole. Combined with the widely-assumed Asian origin of COVID-19, the idea of "yellow peril" demonized the Asian American and Pacific Islander communities as viral origins.

"Yellow peril" intersects with the gender stereotype known as "yellow fever," the second notion examined here. Punning on the disease of the same name, David Henry Hwang uses "yellow fever" in his 1988 play *M. Butterfly* to critique white men who have a sexual fetish for East Asian women.^[4] "Yellow fever" paints Asian women as subservient, dainty, and feminine. In contemporary American discourse on dating, the term critiques the social phenomenon of white men who exclusively seek out East Asian women. This Orientalist

tendency is captured in the 2012 documentary film *Seeking Asian Female*, in which director Debbie Lum interviews several white men in San Francisco who eroticize and exoticize East Asian women's physiques and manners.

Intersecting with "yellow peril" and "yellow fever" is the trope of techno-Orientalism, a tendency that combines technological fantasies and patronizing attitudes toward the "Orient," an antiquated term for Asia. In his 1978 book, *Orientalism*, Edward Said uses the term to critique prejudices that essentialize Middle Eastern, Asian, and North African societies as primitive. This view of cultural otherness produced knowledge in the service of imperial power.^[5] Adding a science fiction axis to this tendency, techno-Orientalism emerged in the 1980s, notably in Ridley Scott's dystopian sci-fi film *Blade Runner* (1982). It is a trope in film and literature that presents Asian people as technologically advanced but emotionally immature. An example of the contrarian stereotypes is the multi-story-high digital poster of a Japanese geisha in *Blade Runner*. Asian women, in this instance, are depicted as both emotionally and culturally primitive but technologically advanced; they often need to be rescued by white men. Robotic images of Asian women, such as Kyoko in *Ex Machina*, contribute to what David Morely and Kevin Robins call "techno-Orientalism." The concept emerged with the Japanese economic boom in the 1980s, which caused "Japan panic" in the West. Detractors believed that Japan's "Samurai Capitalism" was "calling Western modernity into question and claiming the franchise on the future."^[6] In Rupert Sanders's film *Ghost in the Shell* (2017), white protagonists navigate futuristic urban spaces that are littered with references to pan-East-Asian script, architecture, and food. Another example is Kyoko in *Ex Machina*, who is an advanced A.I. but cannot talk or emote since she is designed to be intellectually primitive. In the superhero film *The Wolverine* (2013), a white American mutant, Logan, travels to Japan to fight technologically advanced ninjas. In the final scene, he defeats the yakuza head who wears an electromagnetic robotic samurai suit. These scenes demonstrate the contrary stereotypes of the Japanese as possessing advanced technologies but lacking empathy and morals.

"Yellow Peril"

The racist notion of "yellow peril" assumes 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. "Yellow peril" itself is a historical concept. In 1895, after China's defeat in the first Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895), both Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany and the translator Yan Fu (a translator during the late Qing dynasty) used the phrase "yellow peril" and the metaphor of a "sick man" (*die gelbe Gefahr* and *bingfu*, respectively) to describe East Asian and particularly Chinese people.^[7] In 1898, the concept became the title of the short story "Yellow Danger" by British novelist M. P. Shiel. The human body is seen as a microcosm of a nation-state, and "yellow peril"—a metaphor of illness and weakness—is used to describe an entire people in a biased, metonymic way of imagining race.

The idea of "yellow peril" has been used in depictions of 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." The Hong Kong film, set in what is known as a "century of humiliation" (1839–1949), is one of the most prominent references to that phrase in the 20th century. Chinese reformists used the term "century of humiliation" in 1915 to critique the subjugation of the Qing dynasty and Republican China by Western powers and Japan.

Racist attitudes often cast the body as a microcosm for political community. For example, accents are aligned with racial identities in the 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. Jade succumbs to the pressure of sounding Asian to fit her appearance. 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. 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, 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 media and popular discourse on dating in the contemporary U.S., the term is used to identify and sometimes to critique the social phenomenon of white men who exclusively date East Asian women, who are seen "as passive as 'lotus flowers.'" The fetish was amplified by the U.S. military presence in Asia in the 20th-century.^[8] The combination of "yellow peril" and "yellow fever" fantasy appeared onscreen in the early 20th century as it "found its way into the American silent cinema."^[9]

The racialized myth about Asian women provides a partial explanation of the seemingly baffling phenomenon of many white supremacists in the U.S. dating or marrying Asian women. Commentators on an alt-right forum point out that dating Asian women is a "white-nationalist rite of passage"; moreover, the out-and-proud white supremacist Richard Spencer, who has dated a series of Asian American women, said "There is something about the Asian girls. They are cute. They are smart. They have a kind of thing going on."^[10] His comments may seem positive, but we have to understand the fetish in the context of racism. As Audrea Lim points out, "the white-supremacist Asian fetish is no contradiction."^[11] The alt-right, with their ethnonationalist ideologies, imagines Asian women as subservient and hypersexual individuals who are "naturally inclined to serve men sexually." While "yellow fever" is not a fetish exclusively among white men, it is a fact that white men marry Asian women at higher rates than they do Black women.^[12] 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 are perceived as less masculine.^[13]

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.^[14] That is, the object can be replaced by another identical, mutually interchangeable object. This bias is also reflected in the misconception that Asian accents are interchangeable, namely the idea that all Asian languages sound alike and are indistinguishable from one another.

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. "Yellow fever" as a fetish "threatens Asian/American women with doubts as to whether they are or can be loved as individuals rather than as objects in a category."^[15]

The 2021 tragedy in Atlanta, Georgia, 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. He cited his "sexual addiction" as the justification for the shooting spree, claiming he wanted to eliminate "temptation." [16] 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 imaginings of Asian women as either virgins or femme fatales.

Misogynist Techno-Orientalism

Contributing to the patterns that dehumanize Asian women are multiple sci-fi films that feature cyborgs and androids in Asian female bodies. In *Ex Machina*, the mute android Kyoko prepares dishes that align with her given racial identity: Japanese cuisine with an emphasis on sashimi and sushi rolls. Further, Nathan explicitly states that he has created Kyoko as a sex doll and a housemaid.

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) in the UK 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) 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 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.

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, 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." Techno-Orientalism 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." [17] The anxieties of "yellow fever" and "yellow peril" are evolving, in the 21st century, into new forms of techno-Orientalism as Asian nations become more significant economic and military competitors with the U.S. As a result, Asian women are presented as threatening aliens even in films that seem to grant their Asian female leads more agency. Lucy Liu's roles of Alex Munday in McG's *Charlie's Angels* films (2000 and 2003) and O-Ren Ishii in *Kill Bill: Volume 1*, 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.

Notes:

- [1] Alexa Alice Joubin and Martin Orkin, *Race* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 201–202.
- [2] Lisa Swanstrom, "Synthetic Sexuality, Plastic Futurity," *Science Fiction Studies* 47.2 (July 2020): 312–315.
- [3] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16.3: 6–18.
- [4] David Henry Hwang, *M. Butterfly, Broadway Revival Edition* (London: Penguin, 2017).
- [5] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 44, 197.
- [6] David Morley and Kevin Robins, "Techno-Orientalism: Japan Panic," *Spaces in Identity: Global Media, Electronic Landscapes and Cultural Boundaries*, ed. David Morley and Kevin Robins (London: Routledge, 1995), 173.
- [7] Carlos Rojas, *Homesickness: Culture, Contagion, and National Transformation in Modern China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 2–3.
- [8] Celeste Vaughan Curington, Jennifer Hicke Lundquist, and Ken-Hou Lin, *The Dating Divide: Race and Desire in the Era of Online Romance* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2021), 147.
- [9] Gina Marchetti, *Romance and the "Yellow Peril": Race, Sex, and Discursive Stereotypes in Hollywood Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 3.
- [10] Audrea Lim, "The Alt-Right's Asian Fetish," *The New York Times*, January 6, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/06/opinion/sunday/alt-right-asian-fetish.html>.
- [11] Ibid.
- [12] Ken-Hou Lin and Jennifer Lundquist, "Mate Selection in Cyberspace: The Intersection of Race, Gender, and Education." *American Journal of Sociology* 119, no. 1 (2013): 183–215; 185.
- [13] Ibid., 208, 185, 191.
- [14] Martha Nussbaum, "Objectification." *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 24 (1995): 249–291, 257.
- [15] Robin Zheng, "Why Yellow Fever Isn't Flattering: A Case against Racial Fetishes." *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 2, no. 3 (Fall 2016): 400–419, 407, 410.
- [16] "'Sex Addiction' Cited as Spurring Spa Shooting, But Most Killed Were of Asian Descent," *NPR*, March 17, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/03/17/978288270/shooter-claimed-sex-addiction-as-his-reason-but-most-victims-were-of-asian-desce>
- [17] David S. Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta A. Niu, "Technologizing Orientalism: An Introduction," *Techno-Orientalism: Imagining Asia in Speculative Fiction, History, and Media*, ed. Roh, Huang, and Niu (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 1–19; 2.

About the Author

Alexa Alice Joubin is professor of English; women's, gender and sexuality studies; theater; international affairs; and East Asian languages and literatures at George Washington University in Washington, D.C., where she serves as founding co-director of the Digital Humanities Institute. She teaches and writes about race, gender, cultural globalization, Shakespeare, disability, and film and theatre. She is general editor of the journal *The Shakespearean International Yearbook*.

See more about [Alexa Alice Joubin](#)

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What is the relationship between racism and misogyny directed toward women of Asian descent?

Round Tables

Some of the acts of anti-Asian violence during the COVID-19 pandemic that alarmed and sparked protests from Asian American communities, including the mass shooting in Atlanta and the murders of Michelle Alyssa Go and Christina Yuna Lee in New York, were also acts of violence against women. The fact that anti-Asian violence is often also gendered violence has promoted discussion of the ways in which anti-Asian racism and sexism are intertwined. While some Asian American feminists have spoken out about the need for greater recognition of the specific forms of misogyny directed toward women of Asian descent, the essays presented here also touch on the limitations of a quest for recognition as a political strategy.

Toni Hays examines misogyny directed toward Asian American women through the lens of racist and sexist immigration laws. The 1875 Page Act prohibited immigration of Asian women unless they had a husband or father in the United States; unaccompanied Asian women, unlike unaccompanied European women, were assumed to be immigrating for the "lewd and immoral purposes" of sex work. These and later laws, such as the War Brides Act of 1945, shaped the Asian American community by limiting immigration to heterosexual or heterosexual-passing women, enforcing a heteronormative family structure, and promoting dependence of Asian women immigrants on their male family members. Hays's essay provides important context for understanding how racism and sexism are not simply, or primarily, expressed through isolated acts by bigoted individuals, but are also perpetuated through institutions.



[Sheila
Fitzgerald/Dreamstime.com]

PROTESTOR CARRIES A
SIGN ADDRESSING
COMMON ANTI-ASIAN
STEREOTYPES

A protestor carries a sign addressing common anti-Asian stereotypes and harmful beliefs at the Rise Up with Asians March and Rally in San Francisco, March 26, 2021. The event was organized in response to a surge in hate crimes against Asian American and Pacific Islander communities attributed to the COVID-19 illness, which originated in China. Entry ID: 2274460

Alexa Alice Joubin describes misogynistic racism as a combination of toxic ideas of "yellow fever" and "yellow peril." "Yellow fever," a trope rooted in colonial power dynamics and amplified through U.S. military presence in Asia in the 21st century, fetishizes Asian women as passive and sexually available. Meanwhile, the "yellow peril" discourse "assumes that East Asian people are less civilized in their cultural practices and therefore sources of diseases and social ills." Joubin also analyzes science fiction films as examples of "techno-orientalism," a trope that reflects anxiety about Asia's new position in the global economy and ambivalence about automated productivity. These films depict Asian women characters as technically sophisticated, but robotic and emotionally or culturally primitive. As Asian nations have become more significant economic and military competitors with the U.S., Asian women in Hollywood films have been allowed more agency but continue to be depicted as threatening, alien, and less than fully human.

Claire Chun and Crystal Song describe how the hypersexualization of Asian women promotes racial violence by constructing Asian women as objects of desire but also as "abnormal, criminalizable, punishable, and disposable." The authors analyze Awkwafina and Margaret Cho's music video "Green Tea," in which the comedians enact various Asian female stereotypes as an example of "productive perversity." Chun and Song propose productive perversity, which risks transgressing respectable feminist or racial politics to creatively inhabit "problematic" forms of representation, as a strategy for transcending limitations in contemporary Asian American politics. Specifically, they argue that seeking state recognition of anti-Asian violence and proper redress in the form of increased policing will ultimately reinforce and extend a carceral (prison) system that is harmful for Asian Americans and others. In light of this, the authors suggest that Asian Americans should reject a politics based on seeking institutional recognition and "proper" representation in favor of a "productive perversity" that is generative of creative forms of care and resistance.

Pamela Thoma affirms the need for education to help people recognize patterns linking historical and contemporary forms of anti-Asian violence, including gendered violence, as a first step to creating more just institutions. However, Thoma also addresses the potential pitfalls of an aggressive rush toward greater recognition. Discussions of racism are painful and can add to racist injury, while a focus on Asian Americans as victims may naturalize racist injury or perpetuate stereotypes of weakness and passivity. Heightened attention on women of Asian descent as victims of violence may "borrow from and even extend the visual violence of the Western male gaze." Thus, Thoma advises that education should proceed by "treading lightly not to naturalize but to track the violence of our institutions as systemic perpetrators." Drawing on Arundhati Roy, Thoma suggests that the transitional period of the pandemic presents an opportunity to break with the past, discard baggage of prejudice and hatred, and "walk through lightly" toward a vision of a different world.

Sarah Veeck

Sarah Veeck is a writer/editor at ABC-CLIO. She has an MA degree in religious studies from UCSB and a BA from Dartmouth College.

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