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SCRIPTING RACED AND GENDERED MYTHS OF (UN)BELONGING

RACHEL KUO*

Oppression shows up in 'ambiguous and nebulous' forms that are more difficult to pinpoint and acknowledge.¹ Derald Wing Sue defines racial microaggressions as 'brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioural, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group'.² These interactions take shape in everyday interactions concealed by benevolent intentions. Often also called "everyday racism" and "everyday sexism", the prevalence of microaggressions extend and maintain ongoing social injustices as they are tied to larger systemic disparities and violations of human rights. In the United States, despite multicultural metaphors of melting pots and salad bowls, the culture of middle class whiteness still dominates what is perceived as "normal". Such normalisation is quietly sustained through banal instantiations that police the boundaries of whiteness. These daily exclusions are part of our cultural narratives of gender and race. Below, I reflect on two commonly heard phrases from my own life, 'Where are you really from?' and 'You're so exotic', and how they reinforce racial, gender, and cultural assumptions that are also linked to history and policy.

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¹ Derald Wing Sue et al, 'Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Implications for Clinical Practice' (2007) 62(4) *American Psychologist* 271, 273.

² Ibid.

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I INTRODUCTION

Oh, but where are you really from?

Glen Mills.

No, you must be mistaken. I mean originally.³

My identity, as tied to Asian and American, is often questioned. I do a lot of work negotiating between the two. As an Asian American,⁴ ‘Where are you really from?’ is a question that comes up often. The other question I’m often asked is ‘What are you?’ or more specifically, ‘What kind of Asian are you?’ Sometimes, people try to guess where I am from. ‘Are you from China? Let me guess. You’re Korean? Japanese?’ Usually when people ask these questions, what they really want to know is that my parents immigrated to the United States from Taiwan. They need to know my ethnicity and my immigration history, thus isolating what is different about me, in order to begin interacting with me. As an Asian American woman, I experience specific forms of racialised sexism, where my experiences of racism are

³ Jennifer Sa-Rlang Kim, ‘Where Are You From?’ in Vickie Nam (ed), *Yell-Oh Girls! Emerging Voices Explore Culture, Identity, and Growing Up Asian American* (Harper Collins Press, 2001) 13.

⁴ In this article, I am focusing primarily on my own experiences as an East Asian American women. However, it is important to note the unfortunate ways Asian women become homogenised by others as East Asian. There is an overlap here with experiences of South Asian, Southeast Asian, Middle Eastern, and Muslim women, but these communities have unique experiences which may go beyond the scope of this piece.

simultaneously tied to my experiences of gender and sexuality.⁵ For example, disguised as a compliment, I am also often told, ‘You look exotic’.

On the surface, these questions and so-called compliments don’t seem particularly harmful. Rather, they seem more like innocuous expressions of someone’s well-intentioned curiosities. Yet, oppression shows up in ‘ambiguous and nebulous’ forms that are more difficult to pinpoint and acknowledge.⁶ Racial microaggressions are ‘brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioural, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group’.⁷

These interactions take shape in everyday interactions concealed by benevolent intentions. They insidiously make white supremacy a part of “everyday common sense” — a type of “folk theory” for people to interpret the world.⁸ Microaggressions circulate within the routinised discourse of banal racism,⁹ an inconspicuous kind of racism that reproduces and reifies racial difference.¹⁰ Often also referred to as “everyday racism” and “everyday sexism”, microaggressions extend and maintain ongoing social injustices as they are tied to larger systemic disparities.

In the United States of America (‘US’), despite multicultural metaphors of melting pots and salad bowls, the culture of middle class whiteness still dominates what is perceived as “normal”. Such normalisation is quietly sustained through commonplace instantiations that police the boundaries of whiteness.¹¹ These daily exclusions are part of our cultural narratives of gender and race. Below, I briefly summarise how two commonly heard phrases from my own life, ‘Where are you really from?’ and ‘You’re so exotic’, link to historical and

⁵ Sexualised racism is another common term used in US law review literature to refer to this phenomenon.

⁶ Derald Wing Sue et al, ‘Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Implications for Clinical Practice’ (2007) 62(4) *American Psychologist* 271, 273.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Jane H Hill, *The Everyday Language of White Racism* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2008).

⁹ Ibid; Hill examines discourse as the material presence of language-in-use through talk and text where ideas and knowledge circulate.

¹⁰ Zhu Hua and Li Wei, “‘Where are you really from?’: Nationality and Ethnicity Talk (NET) in Everyday Interactions’ (2016) 7(4) *Applied Linguistics Review* 449, 450.

¹¹ See Nancy Leong, ‘Racial Capitalism’ (2013) 126 *Harvard Law Review* 2152.

legal frameworks around race and gender that continue to uphold the norm of whiteness and white supremacy.

II SCRIPTING MYTHS

Mythic tropes like the perpetual foreigner, the model minority,¹² and the submissive “China Doll” and “Lotus Blossom” function via types of speech. As Roland Barthes writes:

It is the language which myth gets hold of in order to build its own system ... Myth is a pure ideographic system, where the forms are still motivated by the concept which they represent while not yet, by a long way, covering the sum of its possibilities for representation.¹³

Repetitive scripts index the process of racialisation and also function as glossing to explain the formation of racial metalanguages that conceptualise representations of “Asian-ness” in the US. Glossing, or speech events that define language or make one stretch of language equivalent to another, is a referential speech event that takes language as the referent or object of description.¹⁴ For example, many Asian Americans, in their lived experiences of being racialised as perpetual foreigners, learn a particular script to defend their claims of “belonging” to the US and asserting their “American-ness”. The script is something similar to this:

‘Where are you from?’

‘Chicago.’

‘Where are you really from?’

‘Chicago?’

‘I mean, where are your parents from?’

¹² See Ellen Wu, *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority* (Princeton University Press, 2015).

¹³ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Annette Lavers trans, The Noonday Press, 1972) 114, 126 [trans of: *Mythologies* (first published in 1957)].

¹⁴ Michael Silverstein, ‘Shifters, Linguistic Categories, and Cultural Description’ in Henry Selby and Keith Basso (eds), *Meaning in Anthropology* (University of New Mexico Press, 1976) 11–55.

This familiar script functions as a way to describe and reinforce the alienation of Asians in America as well as *feelings* of alienation.¹⁵ Each time I enter this script, I understand precisely what the other person desires — as a prerequisite for interaction, they must place my ethnicity and my immigration history. As if knowing that particular detail about me satisfies their need to reconcile the very fact that my body is in a place that they don't expect it to be.

The demand that Asians must justify their belonging to one particular place affirms the alienation of Asians in the US and demonstrates the inability for someone to comprehend the presence of an Asian body in the US. Despite varying degrees of connection someone might feel towards so-called places of national origin, Asians are perceived to be 'bounded and bonded to a specific geographic location or particular context'.¹⁶ There is a construction that Asian identities are tied to distant, faraway places. Given the pervasiveness of this script as a common shared experience among Asian Americans,¹⁷ the "perpetual foreigner" trope is not only glossed but also indexed by generating individual feelings of alienation while also normalising xenophobic racism as acceptable. These scripts rely on indexical order to create micro and macro social frames.¹⁸

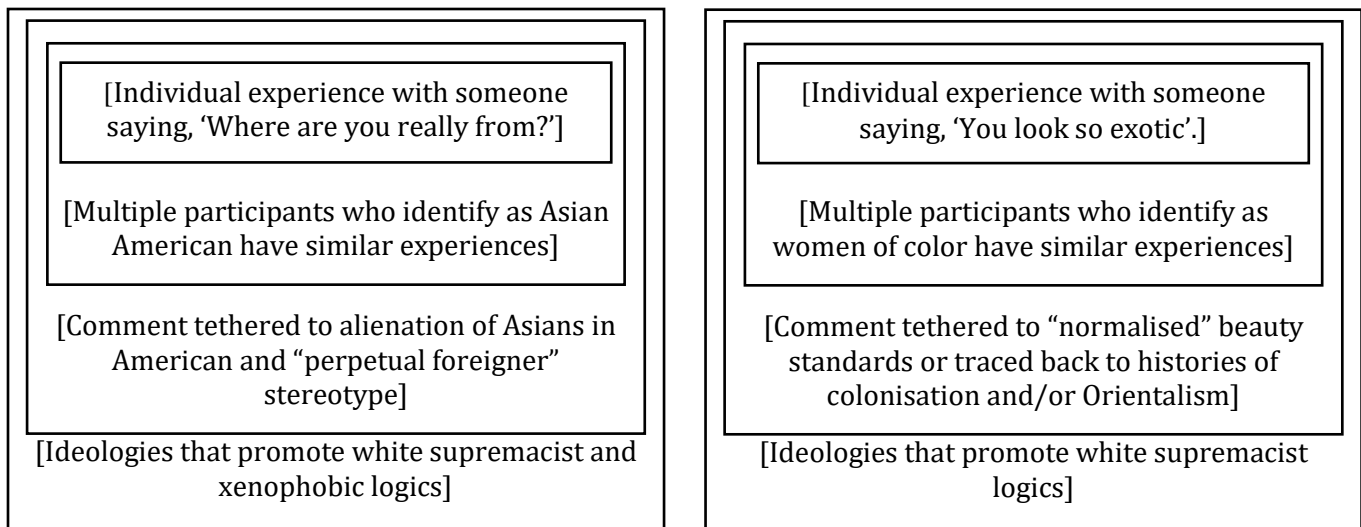
¹⁵ See Kesaya E Noda, 'Growing Up Asian in America' in Asian Women United of California (ed) *Making Waves: An Anthology of Writings By and About Asian American Women* (Beacon Press, 1989) 24–251.

¹⁶ Jennifer Ann Ho, *Racial Ambiguity in Asian American Culture* (Rutgers University Press, 2015) 1–21.

¹⁷ Ibid; Ho describes an opening scene from Ruth Ozeki's 1998 novel, *My Year of Meats*, to demonstrate the 'spaced, placed, and raced' construction of Asian-ness in the US cultural imagination. The protagonist Jane Takagi-Little encounters an unnamed white character where he asks her a series of questions including, 'Where are you from anyway?'; 'No, I mean where were you *born*?'; and 'No, no, *what* are you?'

¹⁸ Michael Silverstein, 'Indexical Order and the Dialectics of Sociolinguistic Life' (2003) 23(3) *Language & Communication* 193.

Through chains of analogies, individual experiences are connected to institutional and ideological frameworks. For example:



Figures 1 and 2: Indexical orders of micro to macro social frame for ‘Where are you really from?’ and ‘You look so exotic’.

In addition to invalidating the everyday lived experiences of Asian Americans unrepresented by mainstream culture while also failing to represent the many different histories that make up Asian American identity, the question ‘Where are you really from?’ and the comment ‘You look so exotic’ conceal and reinforce historical legacies of xenophobic racism and sexual imperialism. Despite the Americas being a geographically and nationally diverse region, being “American” has become code for being white and being a US citizen. Due to my appearance as “non-white” — rather “definitely” Asian — I must always qualify my “American” identity as Asian American. My ethnicity is imposed upon me. These questions are reminders that my identities and my experiences are mismatched with what is expected and “normal”.

III ‘WHERE ARE YOU REALLY FROM?’: ON YELLOW PERIL AND XENOPHOBIC RACISM

So our food seems smelly and weird, we are rumoured to eat dogs, we all look “the same”, our names are too hard to pronounce, and/or we are here to steal jobs. These tropes seem silly until we remember Vincent Chin, beaten to death with a baseball bat in 1982 by two

white men;¹⁹ Japanese international student Yoshihiro Hattori, shot to death in 1993 for going to the wrong house on his way to a party;²⁰ Kuanchung Kao, shot to death in 1997 because a police officer was scared of his ‘martial arts moves’;²¹ and Cau Bich Tran, who suffered from mental illness and was shot by police while he was holding a vegetable peeler in 2003.²²

Xenophobia, or fear of perceived foreigners, specifically tied to anti-Asian sentiments, is not a new phenomenon. The persistence of the question ‘Where are you really from?’ shows the perpetuity of how “Asian-ness” indexes “foreign-ness”.²³ For many Asians in the US, their lived experiences of being racialised as perpetual foreigners are affected by similar questions that reinforce the idea, ‘You don’t look like you’re from around here’. More extremely, Asians may be told to ‘go home’. There are many stereotypes, generalisations, and suspicions about Asian Americans that paint Asians as forever “alien”, which is also the US government’s official term within immigration policy for non-citizens in the United States. As our bodies are linked with geographic and spatial distance, racial interpellations of Asian American identity are often temporally tied to US investments in international relations and foreign policies. These frame us as simultaneously excluded yet in need of “containment”. Ideologies about the “right” kind of citizen become marked legally, economically, and also morally.²⁴

¹⁹ See *United States v Ebens*, 800 F 2d 1422 (6th Cir, 1985); in this often-cited case, Chin was a Chinese American murdered by Ronald Ebens and Michael Nitz. Both Ebens and Nitz worked in the auto industry and were recently laid off. The Detroit auto industry had steadily been losing market shares to the Japanese auto industry. Chin neither worked in the auto industry, nor was he Japanese.

²⁰ ‘Defense Depicts Japanese Boy as Scary’, *New York Times* (online), 21 May 1993 <<http://www.nytimes.com/1993/05/21/us/defense-depicts-japanese-boy-as-scary.html>>.

²¹ Scott Winokur, ‘Kuanchung Kao’s Political Legacy’, *San Francisco Gate*, 9 September 1997 <<http://www.sfgate.com/news/article/Kuanchung-Kao-s-political-legacy-3101781.php>>.

²² See Andrea Ritchie, ‘Law Enforcement Violence against Women of Color’ in Incite! (ed) *Color of Violence: The Incite! Anthology* (South End Press, 2006) 138–156.

²³ See, eg, E San Juan, Jr, ‘The Predicament of Filipinos in the United States: ‘Where are You From? When are You Going Back?’ in Karin Aguilar-San Juan (ed) *The State of Asian America: Activism and Resistance in the 1990s* (South End Press, 1994) 205–219; see also Frank Wu, ‘Where are You Really From? Asian Americans and the Perpetual Foreigner Syndrome’ (2002) *Civil Rights Journal* 16, 16–22; see also Mai Anh Huynh, ‘Double-A’ in Han Arar and Hsu John (eds) *Asian American X: An Intersection of Twenty-First Century Asian American Voices* (University of Michigan Press, 2004) 70–75.

²⁴ See Paula Chakravartty and Denise Ferreira de Silva, ‘Accumulation, Dispossession, and Debt: The Racial Logic of Global Capitalism — An Introduction’ (2012) 64(3) *American Quarterly* 361, 361–385: ‘Raciality and historicity attribute to persons and places to determine their legitimacy as juridical, economic, and ethical entities — both natural history and science of life take geographic and bodily traits as signifiers or mental (moral and intellectual) characteristics’.

For Asian Americans, moral dichotomies of good versus bad — good/bad immigrant, model minority/perpetual foreigner — can be mapped along our particular usefulness to the federal administration at a given historical moment. The dual racialisation of some Asians as exceptional “model minorities” and as backwards “perpetual foreigners” historically complements one another and provides the basis for Asian exclusion or assimilation in the United States.²⁵

Here, I focus primarily on a short history of Yellow Peril to offer one context around racialisation, morality, and citizenship in order to unpack the question, ‘Where are you really from?’²⁶ Yellow Peril specifically generated terror and fear towards East Asians as economically predatory and also created the threatening perception of Asians as sexually immoral and devious, leading to policies like the *Page Act of 1875* and *Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882* that specifically aimed to keep Chinese immigrants out of the US.²⁷

During the 1800s, most Chinese people in the US were immigrant men working as low-cost labourers. Brought to the Americas to supplement and replace slave labour, the contract worker occupied an ambiguous, intermediary position that obscured the labour performed by enslaved people while also being distinguished from enslavement.²⁸ In a liberal narrative of overcoming slavery through freedom and emancipation, the contract worker, or “coolie”, functioned as a tool — his material labour made the possibility of liberty attainable.

In examining the role of Chinese women, historically their presence as imports could establish the capacity for Chinese workers to create a reproductive family community. In this way, Chinese people could become useful and valuable as a ‘middle’ class through women

²⁵ See Colleen Lye, *America's Asia: Racial Form and American Literature, 1893-1945* (Princeton University Press, 2004); Iyko Day, *Alien Capital: Asian Racialization and the Logic of Settler Colonial Capitalism* (Duke University Press, 2016).

²⁶ Arguably, histories of Yellow Peril have been excessively narrated, especially as compared to discussions of how xenophobic racism impacts South and Southeast Asian Americans. While recent events circulating around the intersection of Islamophobia and xenophobia are particularly urgent to cover, I picked this particular history as it more directly links to perceptions of how my identity and body as an East Asian woman are read.

²⁷ *Page Act of 1875*, 141, 18 Stat 477 (1873); *Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882*, 126, 22 Stat 58 (1882).

²⁸ See Lisa Lowe, *Intimacies of Four Continents* (Duke University Press, 2015).

and children, thus also securing a 'racial barrier' between white colonists and black slaves.²⁹ Chinese women's sexuality therefore became a tool for Western ideals of civility and family. Yet many Chinese women who immigrated to the US around that time were also deceived and kidnapped, or trafficked into serving this group of Chinese men. Eventually, they also established white clientele, and racial stereotypes began to emerge that Chinese women were luring white men towards sin, which expanded the trope of people in the sex industry being irresponsible and dangerous.³⁰

Perceptions of racial difference became entangled with questions of national identity and hence eligibility for citizenship. The discourse of Yellow Peril started to circulate after Chinese labourers migrated to white settler colonies.³¹ Chinese contract workers were criticised for allegedly being unfair job competition and also threatening American ideas of independence and freedom. As Asian bodies were intended to create exclusive and disposable labour as a way to shore up value for white settlers, the continued presence of Asians in the US became threatening. In 1882, the *Chinese Exclusion Act* was passed,³² restricting the entry of Chinese workers into the United States and introducing the process of "naturalisation" into citizenship status. In the 1890s, the Government also mandated a Chinese registry.

Citizenship worked as a technology of racialisation and gendering.³³ Other historical acts, like the *Gentlemen's Agreement of 1907*, discontinued passports for Japanese labourers to the US and Hawaii. However, it allowed women and children to join husbands, resulting in over 10 000 women emigrating to the US as arranged "picture brides".³⁴ This practice was looked

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ See Aki Uchida, 'The Orientalization of Asian Women in America' (1998) 21(2) *Women's Studies International Forum* 161.

³¹ On a history of Chinese invasive fiction in American print and visual culture in the 1880s, as tied to foreign immigration, industrial capitalism, and empire, see Edlie L Wong, 'In a Future Tense: Immigration Law, Counterfactual Histories, and Chinese Invasion Fiction' (2014) 26(3) *American Literary History* 1.

³² *Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882*, 126, 22 Stat 58 (1882).

³³ See Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Duke University Press, 1996) 11; see also Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 'Cartographies of Struggle' in Ann Russo Mohanty and Lourdes Torres (eds) *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Indiana University Press, 1991).

³⁴ See Kei Tanaka, 'Marriage as Citizen's Privilege: Japanese Picture Marriage and American Social Justice' (2009) 31 *Nanzan Review of American Studies* 131; At 133, Kei notes that picture brides comprised only about

down upon as decidedly immoral by white Americans, adding to anti-Japanese sentiment at that time. Yet, after World War II and the domestic internment of over 110 000 Japanese Americans,³⁵ the US Congress passed the *War Brides Act*,³⁶ where US soldiers serving abroad were allowed to bring Japanese wives home. Many imagined Japanese wives to be virtuous homemakers.³⁷ Today, the fantasy of having an overseas Asian wife continues through the “mail order bride” industry, which continues to both commercialise foreign women and put them in vulnerable positions.³⁸ In this industry, women can literally be returned and exchanged.³⁹ We will explore the legacies and lived impacts of Orientalist fantasies and colonial sexual mythologies around Asian women in the next section.

IV ‘YOU LOOK SO EXOTIC’: HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL LEGACIES OF SEXUAL IMPERIALISM

Your eyes are like almonds. I want your hair! Asian women are all so beautiful. I just want to try
having sex with an Asian woman.⁴⁰

While not all women of colour experience racialised sexism in exactly the same way, as women of colour, our bodies are still constantly under scrutiny. Exotification comes with fetishisation and fixation on looks and their currency, such as skin colour, hair, body size, eye shape, or other body parts. This appears in ways that people may obsess over Asian women’s almond eyes, silky black hair, and petite, delicate figure.⁴¹ This also appears in ways that our

one quarter of the population of immigrant women, but their arrival in large groups was so public that they came to represent all Japanese immigrant women.

³⁵ See, eg, Lye, above n 25; Wu, above n 12; see also Lawson Fusao Inada (ed), *Only What We Could Carry: The Japanese American Internment Experience* (Heyday Books, 2000).

³⁶ *War Brides Act of 1945*, 591, 59 Stat 659 (1945).

³⁷ See Evelyn Nakano Glenn, *Issei, Nisei, War bride: Three Generations of Japanese American Women in Domestic Service* (Temple University Press, 1986).

³⁸ See Tomoka Nakamatsu, ‘Faces of “Asian Brides”: Gender, Race, and Class in the Representations of Immigrant Women in Japan’ (2005) 28 *Women’s Studies International Forum* 405.

³⁹ For further discussions on contemporary changes in immigration patterns and the feminisation of Asian immigration and how these trajectories produce different lived experiences and stratifications, see Linda Trinh Võ and Marian Sciachitano (eds), ‘Introduction: Moving beyond “Exotics, Whores, and Nimble Fingers”: Asian American Women in a New Era of Globalization and Resistance’ (2000) 21(1/2) *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 1.

⁴⁰ These are quotes from my own personal experience.

⁴¹ See, eg, Uchida, above n 30; Tony Rivers, ‘Oriental Girls’ (1990) *Gentleman’s Quarterly* (British ed) 158 cited in Sunny Woan, ‘White Sexual Imperialism: A Theory of Asian Feminist Jurisprudence’ (2008) 14(2) *Washington and Lee Journal of Civil Rights and Social Justice* 279.

bodies are oftentimes simultaneously seen as unwanted, such as Asian eyes being thought of as slanted, small, and sinister. Historically, Asian American women have been limited to ‘racialized and sexualized representations as evil dragon ladies, exotic, erotic lotus blossoms, whores with hearts of gold, submissive mail-order brides, and compliant model minorities’.⁴² Western masculine fantasy imagines Asian women as hyperfeminine and hypersexual and adopts racial stereotypes of Asian-ness, like the model minority myth, in an attempt to fix Asian women as sexually compliant and passive.⁴³ Below, I unpack several cultural and historical legacies of sexual imperialism as tied to the statement, ‘You look so exotic!’⁴⁴

The “Lotus Blossom” and “China doll” stereotypes objectify East Asian women as compliant, subservient, and delicate. Similarly, the current appropriations and historically inaccurate reductions of “geisha” into a sexualised identity also project fantasies of Asian women as commodities of sex. Imagined as decorative objects or toys, these tropes commodify Asian women into passive objects — made to be seen, played with, or touched. The emphasis of these stereotypes on submission and docility paints them as lacking agency and capacity to give consent. These assumptions can’t possibly imagine Asian women to make their own decisions or have power over their bodies.

White supremacy exploits race, gender, and sexuality as commodity culture. Bell Hooks analyses desire, sexuality, and the “Other” through the British phrase, ‘getting a bit of the other’; she discusses a scene in which a group of young, white men talk about their plans to try having sex with as many different women across non-white racial or ethnic groups as possible.⁴⁵ These young men perceive having sex with the “Other” as a way to engage in new,

⁴² Võ and Sciachitano, above n 39, 7.

⁴³ See Sumi K Cho, ‘Converging Stereotypes in Racialized Sexual Harassment: The Model Minority Meets Suzie Wong’ in Adrienne Katherine Wing (ed) *Critical Race Feminism: A Reader, Second Edition* (New York University Press, 2003) 349–366.

⁴⁴ “Exotic” has also been an analytic in critical mixed race studies and Black feminist thought. See eg, Bell Hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (South End Press, 1992); Chandra D L Waring, ‘They See Me as Exotic... That Intrigues Them: Gender, Sexuality and the Racially Ambiguous Body’ (2013) 20(3/4) *Race, Gender & Class* 299; Rebecca Chiyoko King-O’Riain, ‘Multiracial’ in Cathy J Schlund-Vials, Linda Trinh Võ, and Scott Wong (eds) *Keywords for Asian American Studies* (New York University Press, 2015) 174, 174–177.

⁴⁵ Bell Hooks, ‘Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance’ in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (South End Press, 1992) 21–39.

different experiences — the exotic turns ethnicity into ‘spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture’.⁴⁶ Edward Said’s theory of Orientalism offers a useful starting framework for examining the specific exotification of Asian women. As “Oriental” was used as an adjective by the West to describe the East, Said describes Orientalism as both a system of knowledge as well as imperial project and practice. As an invention, Orientalism is ‘willed human work’ where the intelligibility and identity of the so-called “Orient” was a ‘series of knowledgeable manipulations in which the Orient was identified with the West’.⁴⁷ The ‘orientalising’ of Asian women is a historical process where race, gender, class, immigration status, and empire all play a role.⁴⁸ The ‘eroticising of geography’ gendered projects of imperialism.⁴⁹ Since trade routes opened up in the 1200s, notably the Silk Road, white adventurers sought to find exotic goods in the Far East — not only spices and fabrics, but women as well. As seemingly faraway cultures and places begin being defined by objects and artefacts, these so-called exotic aesthetics end up getting imposed onto people and their physical appearance. As Ella Shohat writes: ‘From the early days of the voyages of discovery, through the adventures on the imperial frontier... globalization has long been embedded in gender issues and sexual discourses.’⁵⁰

The ‘East meets West’ narrative is centuries overdone, and both literature and film play a role in the historical and ongoing construction of Asian women as subservient.⁵¹ In 1887, Pierre Loti wrote the novel, *Madame Chrysanthème*, about a French officer going to Japan to find a ‘dainty’ and ‘delicate’ woman ‘not much bigger than a doll’.⁵² This becomes the main

⁴⁶ Ibid, 21.

⁴⁷ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (1st Vintage Books, 1978) 48; see also Sylvia Shin Huey Chong, ‘Orientalism’ in Cathy J Schlund-Vials, Linda Trinh Võ, and Scott Wong (eds) *Keywords for Asian American Studies* (2015) 182–185.

⁴⁸ See Uchida, above n 30.

⁴⁹ Ella Shohat, ‘Introduction’ in *Talking Visions: Multicultural Feminism in a Transnational Age* (MIT Press, 2001) 1–63.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 49.

⁵¹ See, eg, Gina Marchetti, *Romance and the “Yellow Peril” Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction* (University of California Press, 1994); see also Patricia Park, ‘From Chrysanthème to Bootiefly’, *Bitch Magazine* (online), 2014 <<https://bitchmedia.org/madame-butterfly-effect-timeline>>.

⁵² Patricia Park, ‘The Madame Butterfly Effect: Tracing the History of a Fetish’, *Bitch Magazine* (online), 30 July 2014 <<https://bitchmedia.org/article/the-madame-butterfly-effect-asian-fetish-history-pop-culture>>.

basis for Puccini's 1904 opera, *Madame Butterfly*.⁵³ The gist is that an American soldier travels to Japan and takes on a Japanese wife. He leaves her to return to legitimately marry a white American woman, and she ends up killing herself. This storyline repeats itself in various films with settings across locations throughout Asia.⁵⁴ Later, the 1989 musical, *Miss Saigon*, resets the narrative in Vietnam.⁵⁵ The problem with the *Miss Saigon* and *Madame Butterfly* storylines is that in these novels, plays, and films, Asian women from different places end up homogenised and literally depicted as ornamental objects created for the sole purpose of white men's pleasure. Later works like *Sayonara* and *The World of Suzie Wong* embellished the "Western soldier seeks Asian bride" narrative by adding a saviour element — Asian women needed to be rescued and protected by white men.⁵⁶ As it turns out, these fictional tales and stories are also a big part of history.

Sunny Woan traces this exotification of Asian women to histories of white sexual imperialism in the context of wars in East Asia, including the Philippine-American War, World War II, and the Vietnam War. Throughout history, sexual violence against women is used as a wartime weapon and women are seen as part of the "spoils of war". During World War II, Japan enslaved over 200 000 women across Asia, including Korea, China, Taiwan, Indonesia, and the Philippines to provide sex for its troops in areas called 'comfort stations'.⁵⁷ After Japan surrendered to the United States, US occupation authorities approved of continuing the system for US troops, setting up a network of brothels under a "Recreation and Amusement Association". Military presence impacts local economies — for women who are poor, the sex

⁵³ Maria Degabriele, 'From Madame Butterfly to Miss Saigon: One hundred years of popular orientalism' (1996) 10(2) *Critical Arts* 105, 106.

⁵⁴ Such films include *Toll of the Sea* (1922) starring Anna May Wong, who plays the character, 'Lotus Flower'.

⁵⁵ See Celine Parreñas Shimizu, 'The Bind of Representation: Performing and Consuming Hypersexuality in *Miss Saigon*' (2005) 57(2) *Theatre Journal* 247.

⁵⁶ Park, above n 51; see also Peter Kwan, 'Invention, Inversion and Intervention: The Oriental Woman in *The World of Suzie Wong*, *M. Butterfly* and *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*' (1998) 5 *Asian American Law Journal* 99; Jing Yang, 'The Reinvention of Hollywood's Classic White Saviour Tale in Contemporary Chinese Cinema: *Pavilion of Women* and *The Flowers of War*' (2014) 28(2) *Critical Arts* 247.

⁵⁷ UN Commission on Human Rights: Subcommittee on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights, *Update to the Final Report on Contemporary Forms of Slavery: Systematic Rape, Sexual Slavery and Slavery-Like Practices During Armed Conflict*, 52nd sess, Prov Agenda Item 6, UN Doc E/CN.4/Sub.2/2000/21 (6 June 2000) 17, cited in Mary De Ming Fan, 'The Fallacy of the Sovereign Prerogative to Set De Minimis Liability Rules for Sexual Slavery' (2002) 27(2) *Yale Journal of International Law* 396.

industry then offers an opportunity to make a living. US military presence in Asia led to the creation of local sex industries as well as sex trafficking rings.⁵⁸

United States participation in wars against and within Japan, Korea, the Philippines, and Vietnam have created national imagery that is represented in US pop culture and is subsequently internalised by any Americans who may not really know any Asians or Asian Americans. Asian nations and the people therefrom are then perceived as both dangerous as well as desired objects of conquest. Some of the first encounters soldiers ever had with Asian women were centred on the belief that these women were there to serve them sexually. Many women suffered horrible working conditions including assault and violence; however, institutions became more interested in ensuring women as commodities to serve military clientele than in the women's wellbeing. This historical violence carries on its legacy today in different, large-scale ways, such as in international human trafficking or the pornography industry. For example, in a content analysis study of 31 pornography sites depicting the assault and torture of women, more than half showed Asian women as the victim and one-third showed white men as the perpetrator.⁵⁹

Women of colour are depicted as always wanting sex or being available for sex, but not in a way that actually reflects our desire, our wants, or our needs. Hypersexualisation is often imposed as hyper-heterosexuality — erasing the many ways women of colour express and identify their sexuality.⁶⁰ The myths that equate “exotic” with promiscuous are embedded within a system of rape culture — cultural practices that excuse or tolerate sexual violence by ignoring, trivialising, or normalising it. The ideology behind “exotic” is rooted and entrenched in the legitimisation of violence. While on the surface it seems complimentary, and at worst a casual faux pas, the historical and current impact of exotifying Asian women has targeted us for sexual violence. Further, these expressions of violence and abuse go

⁵⁸ Woan, above n 41.

⁵⁹ Jennifer Lynn Gossett and Sarah Byrne, ‘Click Here: A Content Analysis of Internet Rape Sites’ (2002) 16(5) *Gender and Society* 689, cited in Sunny Woan, ‘White Sexual Imperialism: A Theory of Asian Feminist Jurisprudence’ (2008) 14(2) *Washington and Lee Journal of Civil Rights and Social Justice* 279, 292.

⁶⁰ See Shimizu, above n 55, 248: ‘I define hypersexuality as the inscription of a pathologically intense and excessive propensity for sexuality as if it were a natural characteristic, one directly linked to a particular raced and gendered ontology.’

unchecked with stereotypes that lead to real, lived harms. As rape myths are reinforced and enabled through racial history and stereotyping, the conditions that make Asian American women more vulnerable to sexual violence are enabled because of the way our culture evaluates race, gender, and sexuality.⁶¹

V TALKING BACK: ON COMPLICITY AND RESISTANCE

While the irking question of ‘Where are you *really* from?’ and comments of exoticness are often used to remind Asian Americans we’re not really from “here”, wherever here is, this question also warrants my own reflection on my history of migration and my relationships with land and space. Racially categorised as a “perpetual foreigner”, my belonging on this land, to this nation, and in this space, is constantly in question. I still struggle to make sense of what being Taiwanese American really means as my relationship to nationhood and space has been about trying to seek belonging and acceptance. I am not seen as fully American, yet when I visit Taiwan, it is clear that I am not Taiwanese. I seem to always be from somewhere else. My reply to ‘Where are you *really* from?’ has often been to assert and prioritise my belonging to the United States and reinforce my claims of belonging through my citizenship.

In the Americas, with the exception of Indigenous peoples, nobody is really from “here”. We’re all *really* from somewhere else. For some of us, our families immigrated here by choice at some point in history. Some people migrated here to seek refuge because their homes were no longer safe. Others came here because they were forcibly enslaved. Across these various histories, the reasons for ending up in the US can be painful and traumatic, liberating, both, or many other reasons in between. White supremacy has never completely accepted the presence of Asians in the United States, and history demonstrates this through institutionalised exclusion, internment, objectification, and hate crimes.⁶² Yet, despite knowing that I am unwanted, I still find myself thinking — hoping — that if I can change the “non-American” parts of myself, I can finally experience the benefits of belonging. And so, I attempt to remove my “Asian-ness”.

⁶¹ Incite!, *Dangerous Intersections* <<http://www.incite-national.org/page/dangerous-intersections>>.

⁶² Soya Jung, ‘On Asian American Privilege’ *Race Files* (online), 23 January 2014 <<http://www.racefiles.com/2014/01/23/on-asian-american-privilege>>.

When I am asked the question, “Where are you really from?” I purposefully erase my roots and reply that I am from the United States. The way I construct my identity and prioritise my “American-ness” is dependent on, and complicit in, historical and ongoing projects of US imperialism and colonialism,⁶³ which also structure my experiences of identity. Colonisation involves the extension of domination of one group over another, targeting Native groups from US states and territories impacted by global capitalism and groups indigenous to lands they were stolen or displaced from.⁶⁴ In the US, colonialism involves the global extension and expansion of US power in overseas sites like Asia and the Pacific Islands, as well as control over Indigenous peoples and nations.

For Asian Americans, we have both hoped for and lamented the US as both a site of liberation and of oppression. Simultaneously, we also constantly negotiate our many different experiences of power and privilege. Despite a complicated relationship with this country, for those of us who hold the privilege of US citizenship and call the United States home, we must find new ways to locate belonging and continue fighting towards justice and equity in ways that divest from “American-ness”. While protecting whiteness is not new, with the current US administration it becomes particularly urgent for Asian Americans to rethink what our “American-ness” means as both a possibility and an obstacle to dismantle white supremacy in ways that link together anti-black racism, settler colonialism, and xenophobia. We must ask difficult questions about how our own political and economic opportunities are haunted, limited, yet also enabled by histories of settler colonisation, Black enslavement, and US imperialism.

It can be really difficult to think through and admit that this space is contested space — that we are tangibly contributing to the racialised oppression of another group of racially marginalised people. While all communities of colour are oppressed by white supremacy, the histories of oppression are not the same and cannot be compared. This is not to erase, ignore, or deny ways that settler colonialism has also disenfranchised, harmed, and killed

⁶³ Bonita Lawrence and Enakshi Dua, ‘Decolonizing Antiracism’ (2005) 32(4) *Social Justice* 120, 120–136.

⁶⁴ Linda Tuhiwai-Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (Zed Books, 2nd ed, 2012).

people of colour throughout history. For example, transatlantic slavery is a product of both white supremacy and settler colonialism. It is an imperialist project that took Indigenous people from their land and sent them to places that were stolen from other groups of Indigenous people. Slavery is stolen people forced onto stolen land.⁶⁵

Our attempts to transform and improve our own oppressive conditions can make us complicit in the oppression of others. As our experiences are bound up in white supremacy and imperialism, we need to pay attention to how they support themselves and each other. In the US, white supremacy is supported by anti-black racism, racism that treats different communities of colour as perpetual foreigners, and the elimination of Native peoples.⁶⁶ As an Asian American, I could have the illusion of freedom and equality by participating in both anti-Black racism and the displacement of Indigenous sovereignty.⁶⁷ In addressing my own responses to experiences of “everyday racism”, I also need to be attentive in how I participate in other cultural narratives premised around histories and policies of exclusionary practice. While state and institutional power is necessary in providing for everyday, material conditions, if we start letting go of the idea that recognition of our “American-ness” is the only possibility towards freedom, perhaps then we can imagine new pathways to freedom that connect us to the movements for black lives, Native sovereignty, and immigrant rights.

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⁶⁵ Tuhiwai-Smith, above n 64, 27.

⁶⁶ See Andrea Smith, ‘Heteropatriarchy and the Three Pillars of White Supremacy: Rethinking Women of Color Organizing’ in Incite! (ed) *Color of Violence* (Duke University Press 2006) 66-73; Patrick Wolfe, ‘Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native’ (2006) 8(4) *Journal of Genocide Research* 387.

⁶⁷ Soya Jung, ‘The Racial Justice Movement Needs a Model Minority Mutiny’, *Race Files* (online), 13 October 2014 <<http://www.racefiles.com/2014/10/13/model-minority-mutiny/>>.

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