

Disorienting Futures: Asian/America in Science Fiction

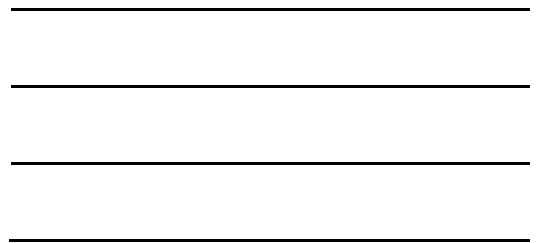
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The big-budget science fiction film looms large over the field of modern cultural production. Its influential symbolic function in the popular imagination is far more impactful than mere gross revenue—though there is plenty of that, too. Part of the allure of the science fiction genre lies in its re-imagining of familiar worlds, projecting what is known into alternate universes and temporalities. This projection often looks to the future, and as such deals with what is to come: an ideal space for exploring and amplifying current social anxieties. Science fiction is thus inherently political, since its world construction cannot be read without a consideration of the possible impacts for imagined identity in a rearranged sociopolitical system. Such structural reconfigurations, which deal in identity and environment, are necessarily political presentations even if not overtly claiming to be so. Science fiction film is a particularly useful medium for considering the ways in which the genre presents these political aspects, since its visuality and mass-market appeal are often invested in the use of aesthetic codes with instantly readable meanings. These aesthetics of familiar newness can take many forms, from *the Matrix*'s running lines of green code to the smooth, clean, Silicon-Valley world of Spike Jonze's *Her*. Cutting across various films with disparate storylines, the symbolic function of an aesthetic of the new can remain consistent: to (re)inscribe a politics built on the familiar by writing it with the look and feel of the future.

There is an optimistic strain in science-fiction writing that stakes a claim for future-oriented world-construction as inherently progressive. Ursula K. LeGuin, speaking on behalf of science-fiction writers at the National Book Awards, proposes that society will want “the voices of writers who can see alternatives to how we live now, and see through our fear-stricken society and its obsessive technologies to other ways of

being...and even imagine some real grounds for hope...we will need...poets, visionaries, the realists of a larger reality.”¹ Despite LeGuin’s wistful call for artists who can “see through,” who can use their artistic powers to pierce our obscuring obsessions with technology, what one sees in popular science fiction is often a reification and amplification of what is familiar. What does the science-fiction visionary create? What is the “larger reality” given to the audience member? The screen reflects back a slightly altered but ultimately comprehensible version of our world with singular interventions through the figure of the white male superhero, the inventor, the space pilot who navigates a radically weird world but looks a lot like the reassuringly lovable Chris Pratt. In other words, mainstream popular science fiction films do not primarily offer deep alternatives to “the way we live now,” but reflections and distortions of a current, recognizable world-system. The aesthetic of “newness” that is built around a deeply digitized future in mainstream sci-fi is used to present older cultural tropes.

Big-budget science fiction films, with their emphasis on surface spectacle and their constant reintegration (and rebooting) of older cultural elements, are expressions of a postmodern impulse toward historical and generic pastiche. Linda Hutcheon offers this useful summation of the ways in which, more broadly, postmodernism aligns with the elements of science fictional films: “What I want to call postmodernism is fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical, and inescapably political. Its contradictions may well be those of late capitalist society, but whatever the cause, these contradictions are certainly manifest in the important postmodern concept of ‘the presence of the past.’”² Though Hutcheon’s definition works in rather broad strokes that must be adjusted

¹ “Ursula Le Guin,” Youtube video, 6:08, posted by “The National Book Foundation,” Nov. 20 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Et9Nf-rsALK>.

² Hutcheon, Linda, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge 1988), 4.

according to the specific work at hand, and the specific time period of its production, the central concept of the “presence of the past” remains a useful one. The “presence of the past” is both within the text itself (the mixture of different historical atmospheres in the text’s construction) and within the viewer’s reception of the work. As Frederic Jameson reminds us, “Texts come before us as the always-already-read; we apprehend them through sedimented layers of previous interpretations.”³ Thus the pastness within the present of the text’s reception is both contained within the text itself, and brought to the text by the reader’s inevitable imbrication in a broader network of cultural production and awareness. This pastness manifests in the often cyclical and referential nature of the postmodern work, its meta-awareness of its place in a long line (or cycle, rather) of cultural productions, and the overtones of nostalgia that are often intertwined, sometimes ironically but not always, with the aesthetics of these cultural works.

Frederic Jameson’s writings on postmodernity and technology offer a more focused frame for thinking about sci-fi’s generic investment in the often nostalgic (political) past. While Jameson’s critical interventions are specifically Marxist, his observations can be more broadly applied and serve as useful starting points, as when he observes that “it [SF] is only incidentally about science of technology...It seems to me that *SF is in its very nature a symbolic meditation on history itself* [emphasis in text].”⁴ He further elaborates that science fictional works detach the subject from a strong sense of orderly linear history, “for if the historical novel ‘corresponded’ to the emergence of historicity...science fiction equally corresponds to the waning or blockage of that historicity, and, particularly in our own time (in the postmodern era) to its crisis and

³ Jameson, Frederic. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 9.

⁴ Jameson, Frederic, “In Retrospect” in *Science Fiction Studies* (1974), 275.

paralysis, its enfeeblement and repression.”⁵ In the postmodern moment, science fiction is an expression of the capitalist subject’s detachment from grounded-ness in a history that moves forward. The vagueness of a futuristic look and feel can be applied to many different stories, creating an aesthetic of the new that does not necessarily carry the political weight of the new, since this re-imagination of the world floats away from historicity. Thus science fiction’s construction of the future can include, without necessarily critically comprehending, a broad awareness of the past. This vagueness is part of the pleasure of science fiction film, whose visual pastiches can carry, simultaneously, multiple temporalities. As Arjun Appadurai argues, picking up the thread of Jameson’s arguments, transnational flows of culture can lead to “nostalgia without memory,”⁶—an unspecific nostalgia for, perhaps, a past that has never quite existed, a past that can be picked up and cherished beyond its original intended context. It is not difficult to imagine how this past without memory can be pleurably evoked in the construction of the future as well.

Comparing the blank, “postmodern” outer shell of a computer screen to the evocative and functional shape of the older industrial smokestack, Jameson further argues that modern technology’s non-representative capacities reflect the postmodern moment’s sheer overwhelming scope and incomprehensibility.⁷ For Jameson, technology fascinates the modern subject “because it seems to offer some privileged representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and

⁵ Jameson, Frederic, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press 1991), 285.

⁶ Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 30.

⁷ Jameson, Frederic, “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism” in *New Left Review* (1984), 79.

imaginations to grasp—namely the whole new decentered global network of the third stage of capital itself.”⁸ Taking his point in a slightly broader sense, one might say that the stakes of representing technology are tied to the sense of one’s place in the radically disorienting modern world. Popular science fictions, whose worlds seem futuristic precisely because they are usually interwoven with increased digitization, are cultural spaces in which the protagonist (and his audience) seek to make sense of the alien(ated) world. In many of these films, a secure sense of place is tied to older forms of making meaning through familiar world-political systems. These systems often depend on clear hierarchies in which the identities of the characters can be slotted neatly—humans against the threat of technology that cannot be grasped, humans versus alien races whose technologies are incomprehensible, and world catastrophes against which even technology is powerless.

This drive toward meaning-making takes place within the flexible but demarcated boundaries of science fiction film as a recognizable genre. Like its often-interwoven cultural cousins, the western and the gangster film, the science fiction film offers a pleasurable litany of familiar objects, tropes, and characters: the alien, the spaceship, the robot. Yet as film critic Vivian Sobchack points out, science fiction is also often too varied and historically unbounded to have as distinct an iconography as the western or gangster film. There is no single symbol whose inclusion is integral to the recognition of the genre—as Sobchack argues, it is possible to have science fiction with neither aliens nor cyborgs nor rockets, but what is a gangster film without a gangster?⁹ The very nature

⁸ Ibid., 80.

⁹ Sobchack, Vivian. *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 65.

of science fiction's postmodern rethinking of past, present, and future leaves the genre ready to accommodate a wide range of histories and cultural markers.

Yet, while the science fiction film may lack a specific, definitive component integral to its definition, all science fiction films must be marked by some indicator of “strangeness”—some signal, however small, that the world depicted in the film is not identical to the perceivable contemporary world outside the movie theater. It is here that we can begin to trace a line of thought in science fiction films that borrows from the epistemological project of a particular Western historical formation: Orientalism. Such films borrow the idea of marking ‘strangeness’ and unfamiliarity from the Orientalizing impulse of historical Western thought, an especially apt move given the historically intertwined anxieties of science fictional imagination and the West’s relationship to Asia. This Orientalism in the genre is complicated by science fiction’s frequent collapsing of space and time, using the evocative power of the imaginative genre to bring the alien into uncomfortably close contact with the familiar. As such, it echoes the racialized history of Western political and imperial thought. As Anne Cheng notes about such racialized thought, “Racism is hardly ever a clear rejection of the other. While racism is mostly thought of as a kind of violent rejection...segregation and colonialism are internally fraught institutions not because they have eliminated the other but because they need the very thing they hate or fear.”¹⁰ The science fiction genre often uses Orientalized imagery to construct its worlds, from the virtual training dojo in *The Matrix* to the smatterings of Mandarin in *Firefly*. The presence of Asia suggests both radical strangeness and the instant legibility of this strangeness—thus also suggesting the paradox of the valuable, coveted, but frightening Asia of European colonial and neocolonial desire.

¹⁰ Cheng, Anne. *The Melancholy of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 12.

Science fiction's Orientalizing can take a range of forms, from the explicit and specific lifting of Asian visual cues (as in *Bladerunner*'s hellish Orientalized noir-Los Angeles) to a more amorphous, nonspecific borrowing of an Orientalizing mindset. As Robert Lee writes, recalling Edward Said's original formulation of Orientalism, "Orientalism, like other theories of domination and difference, relies heavily on establishing authority over the Other through knowledge of and access to the Other's language, history, and culture as a privilege of the colonial agent. The power of knowledge lies in the authority to define the colonized subject and determine its fate."¹¹ The unknown, in Orientalist thought and in much of science fiction, represents the potential for control through knowledge, a potentially threatening field of power that must be first known in order to be grasped. Science fiction films that use 'otherness' to structure what is known and unknown to the reader often rely on instantly comprehensible visual cues of illegibility and chaos—such as Chinese writing, which can be imagined as a cultural-imaginative progenitor of alien scrawls. This reliance on the legible cultural meaning, which is not necessarily attached to a specific historical reality, aligns neatly with the form of the blockbuster science fiction film. When the text must build a world for its viewer within the constrained space and time of a feature film, the tools of the borrowed past's instantly-understood 'strangeness' rise to the fore, marking both the thrill and the insidious potential of the fictional future. The film must show its viewer that s/he has been plunged into a world that is both exceedingly strange and quite familiar.

¹¹ Lee, Robert G. *Orientalists: Asian Americans in Pop Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), 114.

In cult-popularity sci-fi films like *Bladerunner* and *The Matrix* that deploy Orientalism's visual and symbolic cues, the West's historical conception of "otherness" or the potentially frightening unknown recalls the specific past of the "yellow peril," a central theme in European and American political thought at the end of the 19th century and into the 20th. The resonance of certain sci-fi films with yellow peril discourse is a clear illustration of the way in which, more generally, science fiction's exploration of present concerns allows a political spirit that dominated an earlier time to be subsumed under a different aesthetic in the contemporary moment, finding expression in a political climate that may look different but shares many of the same origins. The yellow peril discourse that often haunts science fiction is highlighted by Jack London's 1904 invective against the rising tides of men in Japan and China: "The menace to the Western world lies...in the four hundred millions of yellow men...who are splendid fighting animals, *scientific and modern*, [who] constitute that menace to the Western world which has been well named the 'Yellow Peril [emphasis mine].'"¹² But the perceived danger of the yellow peril lies not only in the East's numbers, but in the inscrutability of its Asian masses—for "if Europeans [and their cultural cousins, Americans] had no monopoly on knowledge, or worse, if those inscrutable to Europe could themselves scrutinize Europe, then the empire and its civilizational justification were doomed."¹³ Together, the force of sheer numbers, inscrutability (and therefore potential uncontrollability) and the particularly modern automata-like quality of the Asian laborer equipped the yellow peril

¹² London, Jack, "The Yellow Peril" in *Yellow Peril! An Archive of Anti-Asian Fear* (Verso: London, 2014).

¹³ Hevia, James, "Specters of the Great Game" in *Yellow Peril! An Archive of Anti-Asian Fear* (Verso: London, 2014).

to, in the eyes of many Western thinkers, topple the rightful order of imperialist hegemony.

Yellow peril discourse was (un)coincidentally contemporaneous with an era of rapid industrialization and modernization. The colossal scale and potential of industrialization gave rise to the specter of a future that was mechanized, further alienated, and unknown, sparking the imaginations of popular science fiction writers like H.G. Wells and Edgar Rice Burroughs. These early science fiction works were imbued with the often apocalyptic sense of imperialist expansion to other worlds that could easily be imagined as stand-ins for the rapidly closing Western frontier at the edge of the Pacific. As Gary Okihiro points out, the potential clash between West and East was framed by the idea that “America’s westward march continued into the Pacific, extending to Asia, where the ‘Far East’ became the nation’s ‘Far West.’”¹⁴ There is thus a clear logical resonance between science fiction’s interest in expansion to other worlds, and the perceived need for a new American frontier, perhaps knee-deep in the threatening yellow tides of Asia. (It is no accident, for example, that Jack London was both a vocal proponent of yellow perilism and an early writer of science fiction.) While yellow peril discourse is no longer directly expressed, it remains an inflection on current understandings of racialized positioning of power on a global stage.¹⁵ Now largely suppressed in its earlier legalistic forms, yellow peril discourse is a kind of political

¹⁴ Okihiro, Gary, “Perilous Frontiers” in *Yellow Peril! An Archive of Anti-Asian Fear*, 195.

¹⁵ Okihiro goes on to point out that “the concepts of the yellow peril and the model minority, although at apparent disjunction, form a seamless continuum...Moving in one direction along the [conceptual] circle, the model minority mitigates the alleged danger of the yellow peril, whereas reversing direction, the model minority, if taken too far, can become the yellow peril. In either swing along the arc, white supremacy is maintained and justified through feminization in one direction and repression in the other.” “Perilous Frontiers”, 199.

investment that can find its expression through the world-constructing ethos of modern-day science fiction, building off of its resonance with earlier forms of the genre

***Pacific Rim* and Strange Dangers**

At this point it is useful to look more closely at a specific example to discuss the mechanisms and effects of the recurring past within the aesthetics of the “future.” This pastness is expressed specifically through the film’s Orientalizing use of yellow peril’s cultural resonance as an indicator of the potentially overwhelming fictional future. Guillermo Del Toro’s blockbuster film *Pacific Rim* (2013) offers a striking illustration of the way in which an aesthetic of the new can be used to create a world imbued with an old and familiar politics. More specifically, its presentation of the modern masculine subject within a science-fictional world resurrects the specter of the yellow peril over the film and its cultural progenitors and heirs. This evocation of yellow peril is tied to a nostalgia for cultural tropes synchronous with yellow peril politics: the masculine hero and frontier violence.

Pacific Rim was a successful box office smash, grossing over \$411,000,000 worldwide¹⁶ while also benefiting from the auteur aura that Del Toro (as a Hugo, Nebula, and BAFTA-winning critical darling) casts over his projects. Part of the film’s appeal surely lies in its awesome visual effects, which hearken back to predecessors like *Godzilla* but on a shinier, more colossal scale. The story is relatively simple but obviously compelling to its viewers—many of whom wrote in online forums about seeing the film multiple times and dressing as the robots and monsters at conventions across the

¹⁶ “Pacific Rim,” IMDB.com.

country. In this film, a has-been pilot named Raleigh (Charlie Hunnam) unites with promising rookie Mako (Rinko Kikuchi) to take down colonizing monsters called kaiju who arrive through an inter-dimensional rift in the floor of the Pacific Ocean and terrorize cities along the Pacific rim. Raleigh and Mako fight in “jaegers,” building-sized humanoid robots controllable by an intimate neural bridge between the two pilots in the jaeger’s giant chamber of a head. The program is led by Marshal Stacker Pentecost and his team, including the “kaiju groupie” mad-scientist Newt (Charlie Day). This configuration of characters reflects more than the pleasure of seeing an attractive cast on screen. Though Del Toro suggests that his protagonists’ actions against totally inhuman Others (the kaiju) present an “uncomplicated heroism,”¹⁷ the characters’ identities and their relationship to the brave new-old world envisioned by *Pacific Rim* reflect the complicated presence of the past and its political structures in a science-fictional future.

Pacific Rim’s yellow perilism is not immediately explicit, especially since the cast seems, at first glance, to be a reassuringly “multiethnic” mix: several white male protagonists, a black male protagonist, an Asian female protagonist, and a few ambiguously raced supporting characters. Even the film’s name seems to augur a shift away from nationalistic conceptions of power toward a new transnationality. However, a closer look at this transnational alliance reveals that the film’s politics reflect an Anglo-American centered worldview that began alongside yellow peril discourse. The cultural identities of the main characters¹⁸ map onto the power structures of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, in which America, England, and its colonial-cultural outposts (ie.

¹⁷ Del Toro, *Rolling Stone*.

¹⁸ In Stacker’s origin story, he becomes head of the jaeger program, backed by the United Nations, by helping the Americans. He is prompted to do so by his sister’s explicit invocation of the alliance between the US and the UK in World War I.

Australia) formed the crux of white industrial and imperial power. As Jameson reminds us, these power structures do not have to be specific or historically exact to recall the past: one can understand global politics in pop culture as a mix of culturally convenient, lingering older systems.¹⁹

Because science fiction film's character development is often limited, especially in big-budget productions focused on visual spectacle (often the most popular and widely seen of the genre), it is not difficult to read the characters of *Pacific Rim* as ciphers for political alliances. Their status as political indicators is mirrored in the visual presentation of their jaeger robots—a heavy Soviet exterior for Russia, a multi-limbed Chinese robot that recalls the threatening numbers of the 'yellow peril.' The major players in this film are representatives of a traditional 20th century Western-focused political stage, recalling the World Wars, the Cold War, and other historical associations detached from the specificity of history. Arjun Appadurai perfectly describes this kind of impulse when he writes that “the past is now not a land to return to in a simple politics of memory. It has become a synchronic warehouse of cultural scenarios, a kind of temporal central casting, to which recourse can be taken as appropriate, depending on the movie to be made, the scene to be enacted.”²⁰ One might add to this list: the aliens to be annihilated. *Pacific Rim* draws heavily from this “warehouse of cultural scenarios,” without ever tying itself to a particular past—because it doesn't have to in order for its vision of the future to be understood. As in the traditional discourse of yellow peril, power is controlled by a Western, male-dominated military alliance and threatened by an unknowable other: the kaiju, an excellent mimic of Western military technology as Japan and China were (and

¹⁹ Jameson, Frederic. *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 3.

²⁰ Appadurai, 30.

are) feared to be. Modernizing and westernizing Japan, represented through the figure of Mako Mori in the film, is present. However, this presence is limited by her status as rookie, which makes her dependent on both Raleigh and Stacker as teachers. Western paternalism in the East is also literally expressed through the adoptive father-daughter relationship between British-American Stacker and Japanese Mako. Though the characters may look different from one another (a central tenet of much science fiction), their mindsets are molded in the same Anglo-centric cast.

The film's setting clearly underscores and delineates its yellow perilist overtones. While the news-reel that opens the film establishes *Pacific Rim*'s consonance with the present world of the filmgoer, its use of its Hong Kong setting as bewildering and threatening marks it as a cultural heir of yellow peril discourse. In a turning point of the film's plot, the white scientist Newt is ordered to venture out of the military complex, with its reassuring Western order imposed by patriarchal Stacker, into the disorienting city. This Hong Kong is precisely the rainy, neon-lit tangle of strangers that *Bladerunner*'s Decker encounters in Los Angeles: a city indifferent to the needs and fears of the white man at the center of the narrative. Newt is immediately so lost that he must use pictographic logos to navigate. Unlike the stable, almost loving shots that centrally showcase the spectacular violence of the kaiju/jaeger battles, here the camera moves frenetically, without a central subject, panning and tracking Newt's small and lost figure as he moves in the rain. These shots deny the viewer a sense of orientation in the Orientalized city, and instead shift relentlessly.²¹ Newt's anxiety and unease with the unyielding and obfuscating city are palpable. His attempts to find the kaiju flesh he needs reflect the fear that Western science (Newt's domain) might fail in the face of Chinese

²¹ *Pacific Rim*, 00:55:28.

superstition (the traditional medicine market driven by trade in kaiju flesh). Before Newt can get what he needs from the black market dealer, he is forced to flee underground into a public shelter, a laughably inadequate defense against the kaiju, where Newt is the only white face in a sea of Chinese background characters. When he emerges from this brush with death, triumphant, once again singular and distinguished by his bravery, he is deemed worthy of the dealer's help.

Newt's perspective helps illuminate the relationship to the Asian setting that the film cultivates for its audience. While Raleigh is positioned as the main hero of the film, it is with Newt that the audience might be most expected to identify. As a character whose job is to make sense of the kaiju, an enthusiastic nerd, and a "groupie" whose fear of the kaiju is mixed with awe and love, Newt seems to resonate most with *Pacific Rim's* fans. In this sense, his journey through the threateningly unknowable Chinese city is truly an expression of yellow perilist fear: fear that the "yellow hordes" predicted by Jack London will crush him to death as they scramble away from the monsters, fear that the unsympathetic city will never lead him to the source he needs—fear that, even armed with the best that Western science has to offer, humanity will be swallowed up by unknowable threats tied to the dense tangledness of both Asian and postmodern confusion. The future here is not just terrifying because it is menaced by the kaiju; it is threatening because Anglo-American heroes may be too mired in the perceived disorder of Asia to do anything about it.

Newt's plot centers around a Western epistemological project: to know the kaiju. His obsession with kaiju flesh is presented as quirky and unusual, but cast in a rational, scientific (Western) light through the military base's sanction and through Newt's

contrast with another character: Hannibal Chau, the black-market kaiju flesh dealer.

While Newt's quest for knowledge is in service of the state and the military, Hannibal is linked to the antirational Asian city through his participation in an underworld economy of alien flesh. From his opulent hidden headquarters to the gaudy gold plating of his shoes, Hannibal embodies excess. With a name borrowed from his "favorite character and second-favorite Szechuan restaurant in Brooklyn,"²² Hannibal Chau/Chow evokes Chinese foodways, which in Western culture since the 18th century have been often considered synonymous with the perverse and grotesque. Writing on the intertwining of Chinese food and Chinese underclass status in the West, Andrew Coe notes that "white employers were curious about whether their Chinese cooks really ate lizard pie and rat catsup...the stereotype of Chinese food as odd, smelly, and repulsive was so ingrained."²³ This cultural association of Chinese food as both repulsive and invisible is reflected in *Pacific Rim*'s treatment of Hannibal's enterprise within the mazelike city. Much like the flesh of the kaiju that he sells, or the ribs of the beasts that have been incorporated as building materials into *Pacific Rim*'s imaginary Hong Kong, the repulsive nature of the kaiju flesh exists in an economic substratum, below the surface of legitimate state and military enterprises. This deep imbrication of monstrous flesh with the world beyond the military base contrasts with a rational world order that makes the destruction of the alien threat possible—the invisible Asian inhabitants of the city are shown only as Hannibal's lackeys, as a mindless threatening crowd cowering in a public shelter, or as devotees of a religion that, incomprehensibly to Newt, worships the kaiju. Hannibal himself is ultimately punished by the narrative, and his arrogance is played for grotesque laughs.

²² *Pacific Rim*, 00:57:56.

²³ Coe, Andrew. *Chop Suey: A Cultural History of Chinese Food in the United States* (London: Oxford University Press, 2009), 134.

Swallowed by a dying baby kaiju, Hannibal the consummate consumer is finally put in his place. His attempts to voraciously and indiscriminately inhabit two cultures at once, exploiting both, become untenable. The narrative's juxtaposition of these two men, Newt and Hannibal, thus offers two competing visions of a male-dominated Western epistemological project (knowing the Orientalized other) and rejects Hannibal's approach as too closely imbricated with monstrous flesh—and thus out of its proper place.

The echoes of yellow peril discourse that run throughout the film structure the narrative's presentation of the appropriate response to the interdimensional threat: one dominated by "proper" masculine violence and an understanding of unknown, alien spaces as wholly threatening, worthy only of annihilation. Though Mako's presence, as the only female character of color, seems to offer some promise of relief from the film's resurrection of yellow peril discourse, this promise is ultimately undercut. Mako is not only the only female character *of color*, she is the only major female character in the film at all. The world of *Pacific Rim* is ultimately a masculinist fantasy of violent response to the overwhelming environment of the unknown. As a cipher for Japan, Mako's presence and junior status is multiply dependent on her ties to Western paternalism: first through her position as Stacker's adoptive daughter, then through her subordinate rookie standing in the hierarchy of the base²⁴, and finally through her romantic relationship with a more experienced pilot, Raleigh. As a catalyst for Raleigh's emotional connection to his mission, as the mechanic who resurrects Raleigh's fighting vessel *Gipsy Danger*, and as the source of an affective backstory, her narrative function is effectively fulfilled. By the

²⁴ Even the terminology of the base (Marshal, Ranger, etc.) is borrowed from the Western, a traditionally hyper-masculine genre. Thus the resonance of the Western seems to preclude a major feminine presence at the base.

end of the film, she falls unconscious, leaving Raleigh to complete the mission and to actually effect the destruction of the kaiju dimension that resolves the film's main plot.

Mako's rookie status and her position as the perfect mechanic/helpmate function to preempt the threat of "techno-orientalism" laid out by Jane Chi Hyun Park. Hovering behind Mako's characterization in the film is the culturally resilient trope, descended from yellow peril discourse, that "techno-orientalism is based on the idea that the West resents the East for its ability to appropriate and improve on Western technology—to beat the West at its own game."²⁵ In the film, this resentment and fear is displaced onto the kaiju, who are excellent mimics and use this mimicry to effect devastation at a colossal scale. But the film's floating, loosely-evoked associations with historically West-focused political alliances, world-orders, and ideologies also recalls the idea that "Japan's success at producing and manipulating technology thus destabilizes the rational foundations of modern Western culture by revealing its power—a power grounded in technological prowess—to be culturally and racially *transferable*."²⁶ Thus the film's opening problem is not just the arrival of the kaiju, but the failure of white manhood to use Western military power to defend an American outpost in Alaska. Mako's presence is a neutralized reassurance that racial transference, expressed through her mechanical skill and her 'drift compatibility' with the white male protagonist, can be turned to productive ends for the Western state. While this focus on her skill rather than her sex appeal (though there is plenty of that too) is refreshing in a field littered with *Transformers* sequels, this focus on her instrumentality also helps to assuage the vague fear associated with a tech-savvy Asia. Mako's position in the base's hierarchy as both privileged

²⁵ Park, Jane Chi Hyun. *Yellow Future: Oriental Style in Hollywood Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 8.

²⁶ Park, 8.

progeny and promising rookie, combined with the audience's view of her violent childhood through flashback, combine to reflect the U.S.'s political positioning of Japan after WWII, heading into the Cold War. In this historical moment, as Naoko Shibusawa writes, the U.S. began transitioning Japan from deviant enemy (WWII) to malleable, docile political ally through an emphasis on Japanese women and children. The pop culture image of Japan shifted from a focus on the hypermasculine kamikaze pilot to the helpful, welcoming Japanese woman.²⁷ Mako, despite being a capable character in the world of the film, perfectly fits this position. The fact that she is the only Japanese character, the only woman, and the only junior member of the team further emphasizes this association with a shifting American cultural construction of Japan.

In a sense, the two major Asian presences in the film—obedient, resilient Mako and the threatening city—embody the lingering duality of Asian/Americans in American pop culture. As Robert G. Lee argues, “The model minority [the dominant paradigm for understanding Asian America] has two faces. The myth presents Asian Americans as silent and disciplined; this is their secret to success. At the same time, this silence and discipline is used in constructing the Asian American as a new yellow peril.”²⁸ The potential for disruption of a Western world order is always present. Mako, as the skilled mechanic who can understand the workings of the jaeger better than anyone else, is the flip side of the kaiju mimic. Both can access the workings of military technology, and both are presented as preternaturally skilled at reproducing this technology (or its effects). The end to which such technology is deployed marks the difference between Asian as threat and Asian as loyal helpmate and model minority.

²⁷ Shibusawa, Naoko. *America's Geisha Ally: Reimagining the Japanese Enemy*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

²⁸ Lee, 190.

Cancelling the Apocalypse

As might be expected of a big-budget sci-fi film like *Pacific Rim*, the jaeger team triumphs in the end. Here, the threat from the inter-dimensional rift can be seen as an extreme expression of what Jameson theorized as “postmodern hyperspace,” which “has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world.”²⁹ The dimension from which the kaiju originate is totally Other, making it not only difficult but literally impossible for the human subjects to imagine themselves within it. Its threat comes from its total resistance to human knowledge, thus making it an extreme version of the Hong Kong setting in *Pacific Rim*. The kaijus’ invasion of earth is a precursor to their colonization, an attempt to understand human beings so they can destroy human life. Their intrusion is a literalized expression of what critic Robert G. Lee describes as the racialized presence of ‘alien’ foreigners in the body politic: “Aliens, outsiders who are inside, disrupt the internal structure of a cultural formation as it defines itself vis-à-vis the Other; their presence constitutes a boundary crisis.”³⁰ This boundary crisis, expressed in early 20th century America through immigration restrictions against Asians, finds re-expression in the science fiction genre through stories of alien invasion. The kaiju in *Pacific Rim* erupt from a rift in the Pacific: the alien threat originating from within the familiar. As Raleigh’s voiceover notes, “When I was a kid, whenever I’d feel small or lonely, I’d look up at the stars, wondering if there was life up there. Turns out I was looking in the wrong

²⁹ Jameson in *New Left Review*, 83.

³⁰ Lee, 3.

direction. When alien life entered our world it was from the deep beneath the Pacific Ocean, a fissure between two tectonic plates.”³¹ This fear of “looking in the wrong direction” recalls the rhetoric of the yellow peril, which drove Western countries to look obsessively across the Pacific—it also mirrors the rhetoric of Japanese internment, when the status of Asian America was codified as an internal threat driven by perceived alien loyalties.

Conversely, Raleigh’s heroic mode of action is to destroy the kaiju dimension without even attempting to know it. When postmodern hyperspace is framed as an alien world, the issue of unknowability (precisely Jameson’s postmodern lack of mappability, understanding, comprehension, and control) gets amplified such that the hero’s response must be total annihilation. The kaiju dimension is the extreme end of postmodernity’s spectrum of disorientation and alienation, which is first expressed in the film’s threateningly chaotic Asian setting. Just as Newt must deal with the disorienting and alienating space of Hong Kong, which through its aesthetic presents itself as totally resistant to his interpretation, the other Western male heroes must deal with the broader threat of the interdimensional rift—a space from which issues a radical strangeness that defies any attempt at communication or connection.

This threat prompts the film’s response through its male protagonists, which is primarily a fallback onto nostalgic modes of masculine response through violence. In this sense, the film’s resolution is a modernized version of frontier violence which translates the frontier of the American West into both a reimagined version of itself (the Pacific Rim) and a vaster version, the interdimensional rift that demarcates the boundary of the

³¹ *Pacific Rim*, 00:00:47.

knowable world. In this future, the same masculine violence that has permeated the world for centuries is still an adequate, even automatic response to a new threat.

Indeed, the powerful legibility of the jaegers hearkens back to Jameson's "representable" smokestack rather than the blank postmodern shell of a machine like a computer. In their humanoid, masculine shape, with giant helmets that house the two pilots as the machine's obvious "brain," the jaegers offer the reassurance of a massive, but understandable, technological intervention in a fleshy kaiju threat. As Despina Kakoudaki explains, "The dream of the perfectly seamless future machine—responsive, intuitive, versatile, self-sufficient—coexists easily with the nostalgia for an old-fashioned understandable machine, one that performs according to classic notions of mechanicity, of replaceable parts, visible functions, and rustic, working-class good looks."³² In this schema, it makes perfect sense that the film would first position its hero, Raleigh, in a working-class construction setting—smudging his features with the dirt and oil of the industrial age before dropping him in the cockpit of a jaeger. The affective link between his earlier work in construction (and his "working-class good looks") draws along with it the nostalgia for hands-on, old-fashioned, "manly" work. This nostalgia works powerfully to allay the fear that might otherwise accompany an interaction with a robot of the jaeger's size.

The jaeger, building-sized and built to withstand the forces of nature, might have easily conjured the uneasy sense of the factory that Kakoudaki describes, borrowing from earlier cultural theorists like Jameson: "The scale of the factory dwarfs the body of the worker, adding a literal basis to the metaphorical sense of being engulfed or absorbed

³² Kakoudaki, Despina. *Anatomy of a Robot: Literature, Cinema, and the Cultural Work of Artificial People* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 110.

into a machine of gigantic proportions, [with] inhuman rhythm and unchangeable processes of industrial machinery...And, most important, the scale of a mechanized factory does not allow workers or spectators to encompass or understand a process in its totality."³³ The overwhelming scope of modern capital, expressed through mechanical forms like industrial machinery and its humanoid counterpart, the robot, recalls Jameson's description of "postmodern hyperspace"—too vast to be comprehensible, and thus terrifying.

However, the figure of the jaeger allays this threat. Kakoudaki notes that the cultural significance of the robot as a mechanized docile body always includes within this signification the possibility of revolt.³⁴ In *Pacific Rim*, the jaegers are constructed so that without their human pilots, they are literally without their heads. They are controllable only by humans—and only humans who are highly individualized, thus undercutting the association of mindless multiplicity that, for example, the sinister robots in *I, Robot* evoke. What makes the pilot 'most human,' their memories and their ability to empathetically connect to another human, also makes the jaeger mobile. Doing away with the artificial body's potential for revolt by intimately linking it to human control, with no room for ambiguity, is a useful set-up for a narrative universe invested in pursuing a secure, hierarchized world order (exemplified by the military base versus the chaotic city). Along with this sense of complete and intimate control of the jaeger comes its function as what Kakoudaki calls an "ego-enhancing" machine.³⁵ The jaeger does not push back against human control, and will never be able to assert a concerted yet mindless agency of its own (unlike the kaiju, who are clones controlled by a remote

³³ Kakoudaki, 161.

³⁴ Kakoudaki, 126.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 77.

authority and therefore terrifyingly opaque to the scrutiny of an individualizing mindset). Instead, its function is to bolster the heroic manhood of its most exemplary pilots: the hypermasculine marshals Stacker and Herc, and the younger generation headed by Raleigh. As Raleigh explains to the audience, while heroic music swells in the background, “There are things you can't fight, acts of God. You see a hurricane coming, you have to get out of the way. But when you're in a Jaeger, suddenly, you can fight the hurricane. You can win.”³⁶ Against the threatening vastness of the interdimensional rift and the chaotic illegibility of beleaguered Hong Kong, *Pacific Rim* offers its perfect machine with an ideal masculine fighter at its heart.

Pacific Rim's success means that a sequel is already being written. It is thus poised, like so many of its big-budget peers, to eke out a continued and perhaps unnaturally long lifespan onscreen through a multi-film franchise. The sci-fi film franchise is a way to anchor “new” takes on the future without having to deviate from a familiar and beloved configuration, so that a new generation can, for example, encounter *Star Trek* in a cultural climate already saturated with Kirk/Spock. The popularity of sci-fi franchises and their big-budget reboots is a conduit for a deep nostalgia expressed through the aesthetic of the “future”—recognizable in familiarly futuristic settings like the planet Tatooine or through new-old gadgets like the lightsaber. These futuristic films are oriented toward the past through cultural referents, political schema, and nostalgia more generally. The pleasure of watching a popular big-budget sci-fi film lies partly in knowing that this particular fight between the robot/spaceship/alien/lone gunman hero has been played out before, and will be played out again.

³⁶ *Pacific Rim*, 00:08:58.

By referencing the science-fiction films of the past through its aesthetics and “creature feature” focus, the pleasure that *Pacific Rim* offers is the recognition of a past conception of the future, rather than the future itself. A postmodernist theorist like Jameson might specifically ground a critique of popular sci fi films in terms of capitalism, with futuristic aesthetics emptied of historical specificity and political content that might drive the engine of historical change forward. It is also possible to further apply this cyclical postmodern conception of history to a racialized politics. By looking at the echoes of yellow perilism in a film like *Pacific Rim*, one begins to see how the referentiality beloved of popular science fiction can also carry forward problematic political and racial systems. The potential for a critical revision of these systems through future-oriented world-building is often obscured by the combined pleasures of nostalgia (for familiar modes of sci-fi and for known futuristic “looks”) and action (the pure adrenaline rush of seeing a huge robotic hand punch through a well-known skyscraper in Manhattan). Despite the surface progressiveness of a future-oriented narrative, postmodern science fiction is often rooted in cycles of familiar, unspecified nostalgic history, which recall familiar world-political systems of power. As *Pacific Rim* demonstrates, the response to threats that stems from such nostalgic recalls of past power configurations can use the sense of a threatening tide of yellow peril to highlight the heroic nature of violent Western masculinity. As such films distill the threat into a conflict between alien and self, it indeed becomes possible to imagine reaching through history to cancel the apocalypse.

On Such A Full Sea: Collective Voice

While the apocalypse as huge explosion lends itself well to the visual rewards of the big screen, the novel form can express a different kind of societal decay: lingering, quiet, and slow. Chang-Rae Lee's dystopian sci-fi foray *On Such A Full Sea* weaves this sense of muted societal implosion with the concerns of collectivity and one's sense of place explored in *Pacific Rim*, albeit from a different angle. One of science fiction's most familiar tropes—the singularity of the hero in an alien world—is complicated by this novel's exploration of Asian America's place in constructing a vision of the future as rigidly separated by class and privilege. The novel format, along with Lee's collective narrative voice and the journey of his protagonist, offers a blurred alternative to the clear ideological boundaries and good vs. evil fights of *Pacific Rim*. Throughout the novel, Lee's vision of a world separated by class and labor rings eerily similar to our own, while the dystopian framework allows the novel to work through many of the issues of desire, aspiration, and limitation tied to Asian American identity.

Techno-Orientalism and its attendant unease over the status of Asian American presences in the Western cultural landscape, does not simply disappear in the hands of an Asian American author. Indeed, this work has caused some critical confusion over its inability to be slotted neatly into generic categories, reigniting a critical debate over what "Asian American literature" should contain and how it can intersect with other genres like science fiction. Mark Jerng notes of Lee's writing that "as if in anticipation of desires within the larger literary field to impose specific contexts for constructing race as

meaningful, Lee disrupts conventional assignations of where and when race signifies.”³⁷

Unlike the narratives of intergenerational conflict, wartime trauma, and American-dream striving that have come to mark something of an Asian American literary canon, *On Such A Full Sea* offers a more nebulous view of race in (imagined, science fictional) America. In a postmodern move, it makes use of historical legacies such as Orientalism, but does not tie them to any specific deep history or clearly delineated moment in time. Within the novel’s dystopian framework, Lee has room to struggle toward the articulation of Asian America’s place in a symbolic mirror of our own world.

In *On Such A Full Sea*, protagonist Fan leaves the safety of her insular community, B-Mor, which is populated by “clans” of immigrants from “New China” now several generations removed. Her departure from her job as a fishery worker and the tight-knit, kinship-based living structure of B-Mor’s clan system is prompted by the disappearance (or governmental kidnapping) of her young lover Reg. Reg is a biracial (black/Chinese) agricultural worker whose genes are said to be “C-free” and untainted by the slow cancerous illness that will eventually take everyone in the novel’s world. Fan’s journey takes her through the destitute, ungoverned Counties and into the posh, protected world of the ultra-rich and ultra-striving Charters, where she searches for her long-estranged brother Liwei/Oliver. By using Liwei’s connections in pharmacorps and his status as a former B-Mor resident who tested into the Charter system, Fan hopes to find Reg—who has probably disappeared into pharmacorps/governmental labs for testing and experimentation. A parallel subplot, delivered through the collective “we” narrating the novel, traces the development of uneasiness, nascent political activism, and unrest in the

³⁷ Jerng, Mark C. “Nowhere in Particular: Perceiving Race, Chang-Rae Lee’s *Aloft*, and the Question of Asian American Fiction” in *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* (2010 Vol. 56), 186.

formerly tranquil B-Mor, whose focus on industrious, acquiescent, hopeful labor in service of the Charters marks it with many of the tropes of the ‘model minority’ myth.

The model minority stereotype assigns Asian/Americans³⁸ in America a shifting status relative to whites, upholding the economic and educational success of Asian Americans as proof of their assimilative ability. Such championing also upholds the narrative of American success as self-driven, often rooted in familial integrity and patriarchal authority—a “by-the-bootstraps” version of success that often elides structural problems and institutional responsibility. As Gary Okihiro sums it up: “Whites upheld Asians as ‘near-whites’ or ‘whiter than whites’ in the model minority stereotype, and yet Asians experienced and continue to face white racism...in educational and occupational barriers and ceilings.”³⁹ It is difficult to imagine Lee’s construction of his tripartite dystopia—Charters, B-Mor, and Counties—without keeping in mind the historical figuration of the Asian model minority as both a symbolic and economic buffer between whiteness and blackness on the American racial spectrum, as Asian America is often interstitially figured. Lee’s depiction of Asian America through B-Mor in a dystopian context, rather than a strongly historical one, alludes to the erasure contained with the myth of the model minority. Even the opening lines of the novel ironically gesture to this erasure by using paralipsis: “It is known where we come from, but no one much cares about things like that anymore. We think, Why bother? Except for a lucky few, everyone

³⁸ I use the term “Asian/American,” emphasizing the slash between these two rather than a hyphen, as a nod to David Palumbo-Liu’s history of Asian/America. In Palumbo-Liu’s work, this identity exceeds too-easy amalgamation or hyphenation. The slash recognizes Asia as a category that inflects Asian/American identity, and reminds us that the familiar term “Asian-American” also draws from broad circles of reference and is not purely a simple hybrid. The presence of Asia should not be erased by an over-emphasis on the American context.

³⁹ Okihiro. Gary. *Margins and Mainstreams: Asians in American History and Culture* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994), 62.

is from someplace, but that someplace, it turns out, is gone.”⁴⁰ The irony in this opening move, of course, comes from the way that Lee’s narration activates a consideration of origins while ostensibly “not caring” about it. While saying it does not matter, the narration devotes the first several pages of the novel to this question of “someplace” and belonging. By opening his novel with an allusion to the “lucky few” (perhaps white America, perhaps the more privileged members of Asian America) who do not have to contend with origins, he places importance on the idea of origins. Through this act of paralipsis, the novel also evokes the idea of erasure and abstraction, especially with regard to history and sense of place. As Victor Bascara writes, “model minority standing paradoxically eliminates minority status and renders formerly concrete difference abstract. The ideal of abstraction thus becomes useful for legitimating American expansion and incorporating difference.”⁴¹ Historically, the elision of Asian American heterogeneity through the model minority myth has served to discipline both Asian Americans and other minority groups, notably black people. Lee’s writing of *B-Mor* is an attempt to probe this myth, its mechanisms, and the extent to which such a narrative of homogeneity and success through insularity can be tempting and limiting.

The collective nature of Lee’s narrator in *On Such A Full Sea* moves the novel beyond a straightforward (and potentially less interesting) repudiation and reversal of Orientalist tropes or white racism against Asian/Americans. Critics like Sheng-Mei Ma have noted the complicated imbrication of Orientalism in any attempt to disavow it: “In order to construct ethnicity, one must first destruct what is falsely reported as one’s ethnic identity...[Asian American texts] are marked by the spirit of contestation in the

⁴⁰ *On Such A Full Sea*, 1.

⁴¹ Bascara, Victor, *Model-Minority Imperialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 11.

attempt to wrest out of Orientalist grips an autonomous ethnic self.”⁴² Yet as Lee’s novel asserts, the nature of this “self” can be interpreted multiply. Collective narration allows the text to work through the task of Asian American identity formation on two levels: through the figure of the individual (Fan) and the group (the B-Mor residents who seem to be narrating). Perhaps this choice of collective narrative voice, which lies outside the dominant paradigm of the individualistic realist novel, can be read as an example of what critic Patricia Chu calls “accomplishing its [the text’s] politics through its aesthetic strategies.”⁴³ Evoking Asian America’s aesthetic grappling with the legacy of Orientalism’s symbolic, mimicking hordes, she further argues that “the goal [of ‘ethnic’ literatures] was no longer to mimic established forms at a level that would prove ethnic capacity to produce something like the African Shakespeare...that is to say, a seeming failure to mimic was rather a decision to reject.”⁴⁴ On the level of the text, Lee’s collective narrative voice both acknowledges the Orientalized legacy of Asian Americans as threatening mimics, while pushing back against the ideal of “assimilating” to the model of either the individualistic realist novel or the familiar mode of assimilationist immigrant narrative.

As Robert G. Lee, Gary Okihiro, and other scholars of Asian America remind us, the yellow peril and the model minority are two different sides of the same coin. As with the figure of Mako in *Pacific Rim*, the same qualities that make for a “docile,” model-

⁴² Ma, Sheng-Mei, *The Deathly Embrace: Orientalism and Asian American Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), xi.

⁴³ Chu, Patricia, “The American Genome Project: A Biopolitical History of the Contemporary Ethno-Racial Novel” in *American Literary History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 206.

⁴⁴ Chu, 27.

minority laboring populace also contain the seeds of yellow peril's danger and threat.⁴⁵ Lee gives a playful nod to this idea through the figure of the fish—the main export of B-Mor to the rich Charter settlements. The fish, with their identical bodies and schooling behavior, are an animalistic version of the yellow peril's Asian “hordes,” this time turned to profit between the Asian American community and the mostly white Charters. When a rumor spreads linking B-Mor fish to cancer in the Charters, “suddenly nobody had much of a taste for our fish...An existential threat. For what would we do to support ourselves if the Charters, chasing the dream of being C-free, finally deemed our products to be unacceptable?”⁴⁶ This economic relationship's wavering stability can be read as a commentary on the dangers of constructing Asian American identity totally within and against a white “mainstream” standard. Just as fish prices can plummet because of rumors of disease, the success built by dependence upon white approval of the industrious model-minority can be overturned at any moment, tipping into the yellow peril.⁴⁷

In its explorations of the relationships and power balances between these three levels of settlement, Lee presents a world that is built off of extant model minority and Orientalist stereotypes. Much of the disaster looming over the novel is calibrated similarly to the fish crisis: fine-tuned and incremental, rather than explosive. The novel's spare settings and collective narrative voice offset the traditional exoticized, overstimulating Asia usually present in science fiction novels.⁴⁸ Its scenes of Chinese cities invert *Pacific Rim*'s threatening yet glamorous Hong Kong, which is neon-lit and

⁴⁵ The potential transformations from docile helpmeet to enemy are also uncoincidentally found in the figure of the robot, who is imagined as ultra-logical and therefore an excellent worker—but also potentially outside of human control.

⁴⁶ Lee, Chang-Rae, *On Such A Full Sea* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2014), 120.

⁴⁷ Clearly, Japanese internment comes to mind here—the swift excision of civil rights from one of America's “model minority” populations.

⁴⁸ Compare this novel, for example, to Paolo Bacigalupi's *Windup Girl* (2010), whose focus on the precarious future of corporate agriculture is set in a threateningly dense and impenetrable Thai city.

packed with capitalist frenzy. Lee's New China is bleak, gray, industrial—threatening in its own way, perhaps, but a far cry from the imagery of dense, exotic, glitzy Chinatowns that still haunt many descriptions of Asian and Asian American spaces: “in our case a gravel-colored town of stoop-shouldered buildings on a riverbank in China, shorn hills in the distance. Rooftops a mess of wires and junk. The river tea-still, a swath of black. And blunting it all is a haze that you can almost smell...”⁴⁹ This muted, monochromatic landscape does not invite the outsider's thrilled, desiring, yet wary gaze, the way Del Toro's rain-gleaming Hong Kong does. Here, B-Mor's nostalgia for “New China”⁵⁰ explicitly precludes the Orientalist nostalgia and frontier violence made possible by *Pacific Rim*, since in Lee's world, violence is slow and the enemy uncertain. Lee writes, “By the time they [the B-Mor “originals” or predecessors] departed, Xixu City was made uninhabitable...the water fouled beyond all known methods of treatment...it was as though the people themselves were burning, as if from the inside, exuding this rank, throttled breath that foretold of a torturous, lingering demise.”⁵¹ Against this slow, racialized, and class-specific degradation, a jaeger would be useless—the novel, unlike *Pacific Rim*, refuses the heroic mode of action and violence so stunningly enacted by Raleigh Becket and the military base.

Indeed, there is very little space given to any kind of nostalgia for frontier violence and masculine might, unlike what the body of the jaeger makes possible. *Pacific Rim* realizes Raleigh's childhood fantasy of being “invincible” and withstanding even natural disasters while bolstered by the mechanical body. In doing so, its most exciting and focused fight occurs all over the city of Hong Kong, on a colossal scale in which

⁴⁹ *On Such A Full Sea*, 1.

⁵⁰ Not quite the same, perhaps, but definitely tied to the China known to readers.

⁵¹ *On Such A Full Sea*, 19.

whole buildings are smashed and even steamships are used as the jaeger's makeshift weapons. This allows the white hero and his Asian helpmate to loom over and dominate a space that, if they were without the jaeger, would dwarf them. This is one kind of approach to fractured postmodern space, which defies the perceptual grasp of a single human. *On Such A Full Sea's* protagonist Fan embodies another possibility of moving through this space.

The text insists on Fan's small size and embodied presence, emphasizing this latter through her hidden pregnancy. Proving Fan's strength, unlike that of a character like Raleigh, depends paradoxically on working with and against her frailty as a raced, gendered body moving through hostile and unmapped space. This emphasis on embodiment and the fragility of a body (definitely not shielded by a jaeger) comes through Fan's first day on her own: "She was knocked into a ditch half filled with rainwater, her temple striking a partly buried chunk of curb. She would have cried out from the pain running from the top of her thighbone to the point of her hip but the blow to her head was a thunderclap and all she could do was numbly move her fingers."⁵² This injury sets the stage for her interactions with Quig, who is perhaps the closest thing that the novel offers to a traditional masculine, patriarchal figure. Though he rescues Fan from the ditch, he later barter her to a Charter family as a kind of "human pet" in exchange for well-digging equipment in order to provide for his makeshift clan in the impoverished "Smokes." The sense of pressure, weariness, and futility attached to Quig's role as patriarch offers a bleak alternative to the visually triumphant violent masculinity of the mainstream sci-fi film. As Quig recounts his story to Fan, the reader learns that his image as the manly, rough-and-tumble "ruler" of his abject Smokes kingdom has been a

⁵² Ibid., 40.

choice of necessity, after frontier robbers brutally murder his wife and child. Quig's baptism through literal frontier violence as he passes from his former Charter life to his destitution in the Counties is not one that can be reenacted through cleansing violence, the way Raleigh can avenge his brother's death by killing yet more kaiju. Because of the way the novel floats from character to character, tracing Fan's journey, there is no space for redemptive violence on Quig's part. The violence he does enact is neither generative nor rewarding. He is reduced to the bartering of human life in order to provide for himself—this is emphatically not the heroic and romantic masculinity offered by the compact and dynamic format of the mainstream sci-fi film. When Fan later rescues him from a cannibalistic Counties family, the usual hierarchy of power and vulnerability between the adult man and young woman is inverted. Even the sale of Fan as a “helper” or pet, which depends on Orientalizing her difference from Charter families and capitalizing on her desirability as an exotic “object,” cannot be read as a clear balance of power on Quig's part and non-agency on Fan's, as she quickly adapts to her role and uses it to locate her brother in her new Charter surroundings.

Recalling novels like Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, which similarly features a young female minority character battling for survival in the unfamiliar, Fan's picaresque journey through the disorienting landscape of *On Such A Full Sea* tests what approaches are possible for a purportedly vulnerable body—triple imperiled by pregnancy, the threat of sexual violence, and racialized lack of experience. Throughout the text, Fan's success is imagined with bated breath by the B-Mor community even as her adventures unfold for the reader. Her success at navigating the Counties and the Charters is one way for the collective narrators to exceed the B-Mor dictate of

dependence on Charter (symbolically white) standards. If Fan's abilities to narrowly escape fatal encounters read as 'unrealistic,'⁵³ this may be because her narrative is invested in staking a symbolic approach of acceptance, flexibility, and adaptability to unknown spaces. This takes the threatening "adaptability" associated with Orientalism's fear of the Asian mimic, and turns it into a survival tool for those potentially considered too weak to survive on their own.

While critics of the novel often note Fan's lack of interiority, the narrative itself is set up to preclude our investment in the established literary notion of "selfhood." Thus, while reviewers criticize Fan's lack of "an individualized self—a central figure in possession of an interior life with which readers may develop emotional rapport—[a lack] that enervates the narrative momentum,"⁵⁴ this criticism must be balanced against the novel's goals and interests, especially its emphasis on migration and collectivity. Indeed, the pluralized narrative voice gestures away from individualized empathy for Fan as the major metric of the narrative's success. As the same reviewer earlier noted, in fact, "the concept of the self, indeed its existence, is one that the tribe [B-Mor] has largely repressed in favor of a false stability."⁵⁵ This is, of course, partly a survival strategy. The growth facilities of a labor colony like B-Mor, and the continued political stability of such a dependent outpost, rely on collective self-effacement in Lee's world.

This destabilization and de-prioritization of the interiorized, individualized self also evokes a major link between neo-Orientalist narratives like *Pacific Rim* and more experimental, arguably Asian-American texts like *On Such A Full Sea*—an investment in

⁵³ "Unrealistic" is, in any case, a strange charge to level at a novel that never claimed realism in the first place.

⁵⁴ Fan, Jiayang, "New America and Old China in Dystopian Novels" in *Virginia Quarterly Review* (Spring 2014, vol. 90), 226.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 226.

global transnational “citizenship” and the migratory patterns of both people and capital that, in their circulation, form the concept of the Pacific Rim. In such economies, the category of singular, individualized identity necessarily falls under question, as individuals navigate the multiple demands and contexts of transnational circulation. This issue of global “citizenship” is of particular interest in the Chinese context that *On Such A Full Sea* illuminates. With the transition of Hong Kong from British imperial control, the growth of Chinese-speaking “outposts” in Singapore, Malaysia, and Taiwan, and the economic growth of China in the face of perceived American stagnation and decline, the question of the circulating individual in an often hostile world of global capital awakens more anxieties than ever.

In *Pacific Rim*, the individual is both tied to a particular national identity (like Mako and Japan, Raleigh and the U.S., the Hansens and Australia) and available to inflection by forces that transcend particular national loyalty (they are all united by their investment in Western military practices). Ultimately, however, these transnational practices serve to bolster the sanctity of the national(ist) imaginary—thus the story hinges on the literal protection of shores from a threat that arises from the liminal space linking these different countries: the depths of the Pacific Ocean. *On Such A Full Sea* offers no such neat resolution, though both texts express anxieties surrounding transnational and imagined border crossings, and the increased circulation that accompanies a “globalized” world marked by violence. Compared to *Pacific Rim*, however, the novel’s concepts of nationality are more abstract, and superseded by the linkages between class and “ethnicity” (B-Mor and its immigrant classes, for example). The mentions of “New China” and B-Mor’s past are clearly consonant with what Aihwa Ong, in dialogue with

the work of scholars like Arjun Appadurai, notes as “Chineseness” in circulation. She writes, “An essentializing notion of Chineseness continues to dog the scholarship [on the nation-state] because the Chinese past, nation, singular history, or some ‘cultural core’ is taken to be the main and unchanging determinant of Chinese identity.”⁵⁶ This unchanging “cultural core” informs both the Yellow Peril trope of the eternal, inassimilable alien in American spaces, as well as the Yellow Peril’s converse: the model minority which is able to draw from a supposed culturally continuous core of “Confucian” family solidarity and patriarchal integrity for success. Yet Ong also complicates a straightforward relationship of imposition from the West onto the East by describing the “self-orientalizing projects” of Asian powers like Hong Kong, China, and Singapore. In these power plays and postures, “Grand orientalist statements [of regional power stemming from cultural unity]⁵⁷ are dialectically linked to the petty orientalisms generated by transnational corporate and advertising media, which make pronouncements about Oriental labor, skills, values, families, and mystery.”⁵⁸ Thus Orientalism in an age of transnational circulation can also become internalized and used to smooth the flow of goods, capital, and labor.

Lee’s novel, which draws Fan through all of the novel’s economic worlds, is clearly in dialogue with this idea of transnational flow—a concept that is also operative, albeit quite differently, in *Pacific Rim*. More specifically, it is in the ultra-rich Charter territories that Lee zeroes in on the idea of “flexible citizenship” put forth by Ong. In the

⁵⁶ Ong, Aihwa. *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 111.

⁵⁷ Think, for example, of the late Lee Kuan Yew’s pronouncements on Singapore’s economic success, or the overtly “Orientalizing” and self-aggrandizing presentation of the Beijing 2008 Olympics’ opening ceremonies.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 111.

Charters, which are marked by “the tireless drive to excellence...[and] the compulsion to build and to own,”⁵⁹ entrance is granted to the top 2% of test scorers from B-Mor. From there, these former B-Mor prodigies can enter the endless rat race of Charter economic ascension. Of course, this also conjures up an association with the model minority stereotypes of the present day, in which Asian/American success at standardized testing is held up as a harbinger of American national failure or besiegement.

Fan ends up in a Charter settlement with her estranged brother Oliver, whose success at Charter life is tinged with a nostalgia for his lost (perhaps never properly remembered) familial B-Mor life. As someone who floats between his identities as a Charter success story, and his unshakeable B-Mor background, Oliver prompts the reader to think through modes of citizenship and belonging. As Ong describes it, “Although citizenship is conventionally thought of as based on political rights and participation within a sovereign state, globalization has made economic calculation a major element in diasporan subjects’ choice of citizenship.”⁶⁰ One might think of “conventional citizenship” as the kind of national belonging expressed by the jaegers, in which the pilots’ physical and emotional identities map neatly onto their national(istic) military duties. Lee gives us the other model in Oliver, who is among the 2% of B-Mor residents to “test out” of his old citizenship and into a new one. Yet this leaving is not without psychological price, even though its economic benefits accrue spectacularly for Oliver later in life. Oliver struggles to acclimate himself in an economy ready to accommodate, but not wholly welcome him, in which “everyone knows how hard it is for any Charter kid to do well, but he was a newcomer with surprisingly indifferent foster parents who

⁵⁹ *On Such A Full Sea*, 207.

⁶⁰ Ong, 112.

were more interested in keeping [as a pet] rather than raising him, and so he realized that there was just himself, that he was the only person who would educate this unfledged boy.”⁶¹ His B-Mor education insufficient, he begins to pick up the skills that also echo those of a successful transnational capitalist in the 21st century Pacific Rim: “He was able to determine who possessed expertise or useful knowledge, and then glean from them whatever he could, even if they were against him...”⁶² Oliver’s inability to make do with his B-Mor education in a new environment, and his acquisition of this new exploitative skill, recall Ong’s formulation that “citizenship becomes an issue of handling the diverse rules, or ‘governmentality,’ of host societies where they [migrants] may be economically correct in terms of human capital, but culturally incorrect in terms of ethnicity.”⁶³ Oliver’s struggle to carve out his place in a new set of rules is a striking illustration of this dilemma of the transnational subject, who both desires and fears the realm of cutthroat capitalist success, and who is both exploited and exploitative in turn.

Finally, in the novel’s ending, Lee calls into question the nostalgia and “continuous cultural core” that has undergirded both the stereotype of Orientalism and the model minority. The narrative does so by undercutting Oliver’s nostalgic vision of recreating B-Mor within a Charter space. Having been severed from B-Mor at a young age, Oliver wishes for B-Mor’s sense of kinship and safety—again, Appadurai’s “nostalgia without memory” seems apt—and to do so, enlists Fan in reconstructing a family courtyard, along with the house’s attendant kinship structure. This plot development quite clearly evokes the model minority myth’s claim that the Chinese family (or Japanese or Korean, for that matter), despite being uprooted or migratory, will

⁶¹ *On Such A Full Sea*, 367.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 368.

⁶³ Ong, 113.

always settle in its new land and recreate the conditions of Confucian/Asian patriarchal insularity that ensures the family unit's success.⁶⁴ But Oliver's ultimate betrayal of Fan reveals the often gendered familial exploitation and emotional sacrifice that undergirds this homogenous myth of 'effortless' or ingrained success.

Just as his early survival strategy of taking whatever is useful from those around him is tinged with rapaciousness and disregard for others, his beautiful nostalgic dream of rebuilding B-Mor for himself cannot exist without his cancer research—which, we find out, is ultimately dependent on the government programs that kidnapped Fan's lover Reg for research into his C-free genes. Thus Oliver's longing for family security is tied to practices with a deep cost, the same practices that threaten B-Mor's clan cohesion. As Oliver's funds begin to run dry and his lifestyle is threatened, he ultimately decides to barter the pregnant Fan (and her child's genetic link to Reg) to government labs for a large payoff and his own security. Oliver thus trades enflashed, real family continuation for the chance to construct an unbroken nostalgic dream of family. In refusing a neat ending to this novel and instead launching Fan on yet another leg of her journey, one which we as readers do not see, Lee opens the question of the Asian American character beyond the two operating stereotypes that have dogged it since its inception: the Orientalist yellow peril and the model minority. By reflecting the concept of "flexible citizenship," this novel prompts readers to consider the broader context of transnationality that operates in any construction of the national self—and the choices and costs that accompany the quest to fashion self-identity.

⁶⁴ Wu, Frank, "The Model Minority: Asian American 'Success' as a Race Relations Failure" from *Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 39-77.

Sympathy for the Other

These two texts, *Pacific Rim* and *On Such A Full Sea*, use the conceptual tools of science fiction to explore the place of the “alien” Asian/American, reifying or transforming older tropes that have been used to understand and affix the “foreign” body. Both do so in complex ways—despite the problematic politics of *Pacific Rim*’s techno- and neo-Orientalisms, for example, it is impossible to deny the powerful visual pleasure of the big budget sci fi film. Both of these texts infuse their investments in identity with a postmodern nostalgia for the past that has never been fully known or experienced, because it is not tied to a linear or concrete sense of history. Here, of course, the genre also helps. The science fiction text allows these images and tropes to bridge their historical pasts and the future of representation and political agency, existing in the fictional liminal space of “testing out” and imagination. Science fiction, as *On Such A Full Sea* shows, also allows a way to think beyond the traditional realist representation of minority experience, which too often breaks down into sentimental empathy. The explicit refusal of the reader’s individual identification with Fan in *On Such A Full Sea* marks it as a text that works away from the sentimental modes of empathetic suffering familiar from watershed Asian American fictional works, such as the autobiographical novel or memoir of intergenerational immigrant conflict.

As science fictional texts, these two cultural products are striking examples of the ways in which collective identity is parsed, offering arenas in which to work out anxieties about the postmodern subject’s place in the world. At stake here are not only the specific representations of Asia and Asian bodies in American cultural contexts, but also the way

in which audiences of these texts are prompted to imagine their own futures—whether by using Orientalism’s threatening “Other” as a conceptual tool for marking postmodernity’s ungraspable scale, or by understanding the interconnected possibilities of transnational imagining through the figure of the migratory, flexibly positioned “global citizen.” The construction of identity through science fictional texts circulates in an economy of identification, in dialogue with both the specter of the posthuman/cyborg body, and the white body’s historically constructed alien Other: the raced body. Just as earlier neo-Orientalist texts such as *Bladerunner* destabilized the category of the human, gesturing toward a racialized and labor-dependent system of meaning for “full humanity,” more recent science fiction films like *Pacific Rim* grapple with the question of properly channeled racial identification as something that can, if all goes well, reify institutions such as heterosexual love and military protection. Thus Mako, whose energies as a Japanese citizen have been redirected in service of a Western military alliance, undergirds both heterosexual reproduction (in her ending kiss with Raleigh) and the strengthening of Western martial power through an infusion of properly trained Asian subordination. Her positioning as such is emotionally confirmed for the audience in the highly sentimentalized scene of her rescue by Stacker—the ever-present background of her vulnerable childhood falls in line with the pathos of the child heroine familiar to viewers and readers from a Western sentimental tradition.

As Lauren Berlant lays out in her discussion of sentimentality and empathy, “In a sense, the sentimental bargain has constantly involved substituting for representations of pain and violence representations of its sublime self-overcoming that end up, often perversely, producing pleasure both as a distraction from suffering and also as a figure

for the better life...”⁶⁵ Though Berlant writes of an earlier moment in American racialized fiction, one can see clearly how the politics of sentimentality are also powerfully operative in *Pacific Rim*: the way the film’s spectacular violence depends on the specter of Hiroshima, but refuses such identification through its construction of Mako as sympathetic, serviceable subject. This refusal of historical violence allows for the film’s presentation of multi-cultural alliance as something smooth, dependent on individual connection (drift-compatibility between pilots). The individualist sentimental mode can draw certain subjects into a fantasy of nationalistic unity that transcends the ugly truths of historical nations, while denying access to others who do not even have to be named or shown—Orientalism’s evocation of the trembling Asian masses denies these subjects the access to sentimental empathy that individual characters’ suffering allows. The (in)ability to feel properly, as always, is a powerful disqualifier of improper subjects, especially those without much screen time in the necessarily truncated medium of sci fi film.

Perhaps this is why Chang Rae Lee’s *On Such A Full Sea* has proven so difficult to reconcile with familiar modes of sentimental identification—for, as *Pacific Rim* shows, even those well-known sci fi modes that ostensibly showcase empty, violent spectacle above all else still make room for the politics of empathy to direct the audience’s ultimate reading of the text’s identifications and Othering. It would be easy to imagine a version of *On Such A Full Sea* that cultivated sympathy through the more familiar mode of audience identification, especially since it comes from an author whose other works have explicitly engaged the field of Asian American literature. As Patricia Chu notes, writing about Maxine Hong Kingston’s seminal role in the definition of the (Asian American)

⁶⁵ Berlant, Lauren. “Poor Eliza” in *American Literature* vol. 70, Duke University Press, 1998, 664.

‘ethnic novel,’ “In her emphasis on the political significance of sentimentality and its ability to generate narrative interest—over whom will the nation weep? Whose story will they tune in to hear?—Kingston similarly posits the journey of racialized bodies into civic equality as one supported by particular kinds of narrative production.”⁶⁶ Asian American literature has often leaned on the power of identification through revelations of pain and suffering, though this suffering is often simultaneously exoticizing—see the wartime traumas laid out in Amy Tan’s popular books, for example. Kingston’s underscoring of sentimentalist empathy marks the same journey into “civic equality” that the heavy sentimentality of early racial novels like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* supposedly allowed, per Lauren Berlant’s analysis. Yet Berlant also warns her reader away from the efficacy of sentimentality as a solution for suffering, in particular the minority body’s suffering: “Sentimentality, unlike other revolutionary rhetorics, is after all the only vehicle for social change that neither produces more pain nor requires much courage. . . . In these ways the very emphasis on feeling that radicalizes the sentimental critique also muffles the solutions it often imagines or distorts and displaces them from the places toward which they ought to be directed.”⁶⁷ This is not to argue, of course, that *On Such A Full Sea* should be read in the direct lineage of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*—or even Kingston’s work, for that matter. Yet all these texts are weighed according to a metric of sentimental identification that mainstream American audiences love to consume.

On Such A Full Sea refuses the sentimental realist mode,⁶⁸ leaning instead on the tropes of dystopian distancing and collective narrative voice (recalling conventions such

⁶⁶ Chu, Patricia. “The Trials of the Ethnic Novel: Susan Choi’s *American Woman* and the Post-Affirmative Action Era” in *American Literary History* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 531.

⁶⁷ Berlant, 664.

⁶⁸ A mode that, as *Pacific Rim* demonstrates, is capable of inflecting every genre.

as the Greek chorus), and in doing so perhaps refuses the too-easy emotional catharsis and amelioration promised by the sentimental novel. The character “emptiness” at the novel’s heart can thus be read another way—as an experiment toward rethinking the tired tropes of both the yellow peril and the model minority that does not rely on the success of the audience’s identification with one character or another. In other words, this movement away from empathetic identification within a character’s fictionalized interiority helps the text open up a host of other issues in an often productively disorienting way. Sentimental fiction has undoubtedly helped bring Asian American writers to visibility, and such sentimental texts have an undeniable affective power, but science fiction’s particular efficacy in testing new modes of imagining subjects gives Lee’s text a productive way out of the familiar narrative.

The cost of sentimental identification with “Others” in American culture has always been the easy erasure of those who do not fit such narratives of purification through suffering and feeling, as well as the denial of full humanity to populations whose chosen members are representable as “full” individuals *only* on the page or screen. The Asian/American subject and an Orientalized world-building aesthetic in science fiction are inevitably tinged by the dual, interconnected histories of yellow peril and model minority tropes, both of which deal in economies of privilege and identification. As such, Asian/America provides a particularly legible way to think more broadly about science fiction’s use (and refusal) of empathy as a way of building worlds both fictional and reflective of the world around its readers. As *Pacific Rim* and *On Such A Full Sea* demonstrate, the science fictional text’s engagement with both a generally available past—the postmodern past floating full of history, and yet detached from concrete

detail—and, of course, the future, allows the genre to grapple more fully with the question of not only minority representation, but all the attendant stakes of subjecthood and structural violence that attend such investments. Looking more closely at Asian/American subjects and cultural markers, and the ways in which science fiction makes use of the historically constructed (il)legibility of Asian/America, brings us closer to an understanding of the ways in which violent histories are subsumed, only to re-emerge in our imagined futures.

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