Sanitizing Yellow Peril

How Asian Pornotroping Erects White Saviorism

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Abstract: This essay extends Black feminist theorist Hortense Spillers's (1987) concept of *pornotroping* to an Asian context, examining how cinematic tropes perpetuate Asian fetishization. Focusing on the hypersexualized portrayals, namely the Lotus Blossom and the Dragon Lady, as manifestations of *Asian pornotroping*, it explores how these depictions construct abject female Asian subjectivities. Through an analysis of the hypersexualized tropes in *Madama Butterfly* (1904), *Miss Saigon* (1989), and *The World of Suzie Wong* (1960), I argue that *Asian pornotroping* emerges as a legacy of Woan's (2008) concept of White sexual imperialism. This legacy not only incites and justifies White Saviorism but also imposes a destitution/sexuality matrix onto Asian subjectivities, signaled through physical features or cultural markers. Ultimately, *Asian pornotroping* obscures the colonial violence inflicted by the West on the Asia-Pacific in the 20th century, reinforcing a colonial narrative of a progressive, humane Occident contrasted against an underdeveloped, backward Orient.

Black feminist theorist Hortense Spillers (1987) coined the term "pornotroping" to describe how Black suffering is turned into a visual spectacle for entertainment, tantalization, and shock value. Alexander Weheliye (2014) expands on this concept, proposing that cinematic pornotropes visually inscribe abjection onto Black bodies, enfleshing them as sites of otherness and transforming them into eroticized commodities whose fetishization is inseparable from their racialized identity. These portrayals construct a framework where racialized bodies are othered and commodified, reinforcing a narrative of fetishization that is inseparable from their identity.

Inspired by Spillers' analysis, this paper examines the simultaneous racialization and fetishization of Asian women in Western cinematic productions. While Asia encompasses a multitude of diverse cultures with distinct histories, value systems, economies, and religions, cinematic portrayals often homogenize these differences into a singular, universal representation of "the Oriental woman" (Rajgopal, 2010, p. 144; Shimizu, 2000; Tajima, 1989). Transposing Spillers's concept to the Asian context, I introduce *Asian pornotroping* to analyze how Western cinematic tropes contribute to the fetishization and abjection of Asian women.

Asian pornotroping refers to the process by which stereotypical narrative tropes inscribe a destitution/sexuality matrix onto Asian subjectivities and bodies. This process employs organic (e.g., bodily features) and inorganic (e.g., clothing, furniture, language, cultural practices) ethnic markers to accentuate Asianness and its perceived destitution. In this paper, I radically appropriate the term "destitution" to encompass not only material deprivation that renders survival nearly impossible, but also a perceived moral and sexual depravity—an extreme lack of respectability—projected onto impoverished, racialized subjects by European colonial discourse. Expanding the term in this way highlights how imperialist imaginaries collapse poverty and sexual excess into a single racialized figure of abjection. This framework allows me to trace how Asian femininity is constructed not only as economically lacking, but also as sexually degraded, and thus in need of rescue, containment, or erasure.

Stereotypical tropes for Asian women can be classified into two archetypes: the Lotus Blossom and the Dragon Lady (Tajima, 1989). The Lotus Blossom archetype depicts passive, submissive, self-sacrificing, and hyperfeminine Asian women who exist primarily as "love interests for white men" (Tajima, 1989, p. 309). These characters are often portrayed as virginal prostitutes, readily available for white male sexual consumption. In contrast, the Dragon Lady archetype portrays domineering, seductive, and politically dangerous Asian women who wield their sexuality to manipulate white men, either for personal gain or as agents of "conniving Asian males" aiming to undermine Western civilization (Shimizu, 2000, p. 59).

Despite their apparent differences, characters in both archetypes often share commonalities: participation in sex work as concubines, prostitutes, or seductresses—professions that render their sexuality easily accessible. As my analysis will demonstrate, the Lotus Blossom and Dragon Lady are two sides of the same coin, distinguished by whether their sexuality is deployed for the benefit of white men or personal political agenda. These tropes construct abject Asian female subjectivities, assigning a perverse hypersexuality to Asian women as an inherent characteristic that starkly contrasts with the normative and morally superior sexuality embodied by white women on screen (Shimizu, 2000).

Such depictions are deeply rooted in the legacy of colonization and White sexual imperialism. White sexual imperialism refers to the systemic Western domination of developing nations that historically forced women in these regions into circumstances where sexual submission to white men became one of the few practical survival strategies available (Woan, 2008). This dominance was deeply intertwined with existing patriarchal structures in Asia, which had long conditioned women to occupy subordinated roles in both social and familial hierarchies. Colonial and imperial occupations exploited and intensified these entrenched gender hierarchies, leveraging them to facilitate and justify the extraction of Asian women's bodily, sexual and emotional labor. By framing this exploitation as culturally inevitable, imperial powers deepened women's subjugation and reconfigured patriarchal oppression to serve colonial objectives.

This intersection of patriarchal oppression and colonial exploitation laid the foundation for Asian pornotroping, embedding narratives of destitution and sexual availability into the racialized portrayals of Asian women. These portrayals not only naturalized the marginalization of Asian women but also reinforced colonial and imperial hierarchies under the guise of moral and civilizational superiority.

This paper argues that Asian pornotroping positions Asian women as helpless and sexually available, serving to incite, reinforce, and justify White Saviorism—a narrative framework that portrays white individuals as moral and heroic figures rescuing the "helpless Other." Through close readings of *Madama Butterfly* (1904), *Miss Saigon* (1989), and *The World of Suzie Wong* (1960), this paper shows how the pornotrope recurs across different media forms to obscure the brutality of Euro-American imperial violence in the Asia-Pacific. These cultural productions perpetuate a colonial discourse that frames the West as progressive and humane while depicting the Orient as patriarchal and backward (Said, 2019). In doing so, they sustain and legitimize European colonial dominance and later American global hegemony. This legacy is evident in policies and practices that perpetuate harm, such as discriminatory immigration laws, sexual/racial violence against Asian women, and the co-opted use of human rights discourse by neoliberal administrations. Rather than protecting marginalized communities, this discourse often justifies state intervention that polices sex workers and survivors of sexual violence, frequently to their detriment.

Historical Contexts: The Colonial Foundations of Asian Pornotroping

In this section, I trace the historical development of the submissive yet hypersexual "Pan-Asian" woman stereotype and situate it within real-life historical contexts. I examine how Orientalism shaped the Eurocentric lens through which Europeans viewed Asia and its peoples during colonization.

Madame Chrysanthème and Prostitution in Meiji Japan

European fantasies about "Oriental women" originated in colonial literature (Tracol-Huynh, 2010). These works emerged after Europeans established spheres of influence in Asia as traders in the late 17th century (RamageTeach, 2020). A critical entry point is *Madame Chrysanthème* by French naval officer Pierre Loti, published in 1887. Drawing from Loti's real-life experience of cohabitating with a young Japanese girl in Nagasaki in 1885 (Suzuki, 2023), the novel depicts a French naval officer's paid one-month marriage to a young Japanese geisha during the Meiji era.

By portraying Japanese women as simultaneously infantilized, hypersexualized, and subservient, *Madame Chrysanthème* articulates early Orientalist stereotypes that later crystallized into the cinematic archetypes of the Lotus Blossom. The novel's depiction of Japanese women as objects of fascination and consumption for European men reflects broader colonial attitudes that racialized and fetishized Asian women.

A deeper understanding of the historical context when the novel was written sheds light on the societal and economic conditions of the time. By 1885, the Meiji government legalized prostitution as a state-regulated industry, imposing taxes to generate revenue (Stanley, 2012). Many rural families, struggling with poverty, continued to sell their daughters into prostitution, both domestically and overseas, as they faced criminalized abortion and infanticide (Narayan, 2016). While these young women endured significant oppression and hardships in their roles as sex workers (Mihalopoulos, 2012), their incomes often supported their families, enabling them to fulfill cultural expectations as "dutiful daughters" (Stanley, 2012, p. 85). The young Japanese women who inspired Loti's novel may well have been resilient, breadwinning daughters from impoverished backgrounds, whose labor underpinned the rapid growth of a modernizing Japan.

Colonial Regulation of Prostitution in the Asian Colonies

In the European colonial discourse, native women across different colonies were portrayed as sexual trophies, each marked by distinct sexual traits (Tracol-Huynh, 2010). Women in Asia were characterized as both victims of their own culture and threats to Western morality (Howell, 2000), articulating the destitution/sexuality matrix central to Asian pornotroping. This racialized portrayal served to justify European colonial authority, imposing strict control over Asian women's sexuality (e.g., registration, regular health inspection, sanitary incarceration) under the guise of "paternalistic intervention" (Howell, 2000, p. 335). Such regulations entrenched these stereotypes and deepened economic precarity, positioning Asian women's suffering as natural within a colonial moral order. These colonial infrastructures helped construct both the Lotus Blossom and the Dragon Lady as an Asian female ontology.

In addition, children of interracial unions posed a threat to the racial boundaries essential for sustaining colonial authority and White privilege (Stoler, 1989). In response to these anxieties, colonial authorities often assumed custody of these children, who were portrayed as "[unhappy] beings by definition" (Stoler, 1989, p. 648). Racial prejudice was reframed through a veneer of pity, enabling a humanitarian logic that legitimized intervention. European feminist women played a key role in this process, advocating for the removal of interracial children from indigenous communities deemed degenerate and corrupting (Stoler, 1989). By casting racialized subjects as both pitiable and threatening, this discourse constructs an ontological framework that justifies their ongoing policing and exploitation.

Since the mid-1950s, the American military capitalized on this colonial legacy, employing indigenous women as sex workers and maids in Rest and Recreation centers around their bases (Enloe, 2000). Regulated through racialized and sexualized policies, prostitution had evolved into a full-fledged industry under its presence (Enloe, 2000; Tracol-Huynh, 2010), exemplifying current ongoing exploitation.

Eroticizing Destitution: Asian Pornotroping on Scene and Screen

Building on the historical contexts previously examined, this section analyzes how Asian pornotroping functions in three landmark Euro-American productions: *Madama Butterfly* (1904), *Miss Saigon* (1989), and *The World of Suzie Wong* (1960). These works collectively construct an eroticized image of Asian femininity shaped by imperialism, patriarchy, and poverty. Not only do these narratives hypersexualize Asian women, but they also framed the women as victims of their own cultures, in need of salvation through White Saviorism. By romanticizing racialized suffering, these productions reinforce the White Savior narrative while masking the systemic violence that creates the very conditions of destitution they portray.

Plot Summaries

Madama Butterfly. Premiering in 1904, *Madama Butterfly* is an Italian opera by composer Giacomo Puccini, adapted from Pierre Loti's *Madame Chrysanthème* (Van Rij, 2001). The opera tells the tragic story of Butterfly, a 15-year-old Japanese geisha, and Pinkerton, an American naval officer stationed in 1904 Nagasaki. Their contract marriage excites Butterfly, who converts to Christianity in anticipation of their union. Her conversion enrages her Buddhist relatives, who subsequently renounce her. Undeterred, Butterfly consummates the marriage, wholly believing in a future with Pinkerton.

Pinkerton soon departs Japan, leaving Butterfly behind. Remaining faithful, she rejects a marriage broker's offer to wed a wealthy prince and patiently awaits Pinkerton's return, giving birth to their son during his absence. Three years later, Pinkerton returns, now accompanied by his American wife, Kate, who offers to take the child. Heartbroken yet composed, Butterfly agrees to relinquish her son on the condition that Pinkerton visits her one final time. After securing this promise, she takes her own life.

Miss Saigon. Inspired by *Madama Butterfly*, this French musical by Boubil and Schönberg (1989) is set in Saigon near the end of the Vietnam War. The story follows 17-year-old Kim, an orphan forced into sex work at a brothel run by a hustler known as the Engineer. During the bargirls' contest for the title of "Miss Saigon," a disillusioned American GI Chris meets Kim, who is portrayed as an innocent virgin. Initially hesitant, Chris tries to pay her to leave, but after learning of her history of loss and displacement, he vows to take her to America. They fall in love and spend the night together.

The following day, the bargirls arrange a Vietnamese-style wedding ceremony for Chris and Kim, but their union is interrupted by Thuy, Kim's betrothed, an officer in the North Vietnamese Army. A confrontation ensues, during which Kim defiantly asserts that she is Chris's wife. Soon after, as Saigon descends into chaos, Chris is evacuated, leaving Kim behind. Clinging to the hope of his return, she hides from the new regime while raising their son, Tam. Meanwhile, in the United States, unaware that Kim has survived, Chris marries a white American woman named Ellen.

Kim's circumstances take a desperate turn when Thuy discovers her and Tam, threatening to kill the boy and send her to a re-education camp. In self-defense, she kills Thuy and flees to Bangkok with the Engineer's help. Three years later, Chris and Ellen arrive in Bangkok in search of his child. Upon learning that Chris has remarried, Kim pleads with the couple to take Tam so he can have a better life. She then takes her own life, dying in Chris's arms.

The World of Suzie Wong. This British-American romantic drama by Richard Quine (1960), follows Robert Lomax, an American architect who moves to Hong Kong to pursue painting. While staying at the seedy Nam Kok Hotel, he meets Suzie Wong, a bar girl who was abandoned by her family. Initially hiring her as his muse, Robert struggles with his growing feelings for her, torn between societal judgment and the romantic advances of Kay, a British banker's daughter.

As Robert gains a deeper understanding of Suzie's circumstances, their bond deepens. Together, they navigate social pressures and personal hardships, culminating in tragedy when Suzie's son dies in a landslide. In the end, Robert proposes to Suzie, marking a shift from their transactional beginnings to a romantic connection.

Ethnic Dress as Fetish: Staging Poverty and Desire

In all three productions, the use of ethnic costume in these productions does more than signify cultural identity—it visually codes Asianness as erotic, impoverished, and disposable. In *Madama Butterfly*, Butterfly is dressed in a kimono, and her relatives appear in traditional Japanese clothing. Similarly, Kim wears traditional Vietnamese garments, including "an ersatz Vietnamese wedding gown" (Shimakawa, 2003, p. 32). Suzie and her friends are costumed in tight-fitting cheongsam dresses. These outfits, as markers of cultural specificity and Otherness, anchor the characters' identities in visual codes of exoticism.

The costumed characters are bound by a fate of poverty and marginalization, associating Asianness with destitution. Butterfly's unexplained financial hardship leads her family to commodify her, offering her to Pinkerton in a transactional marriage reminiscent of sex tourism. Kim's situation mirrors this dynamic: orphaned and displaced by war, she is pushed into bar work as a means of survival. The broader context of U.S. military aggression is notably absent, shifting attention from systemic violence to Kim's individual tragedy. Suzie's sexual labor is similarly framed as inevitable, with no acknowledgment of the British colonial policies that shaped her vulnerability.

Across these stories, violence against Asian women is aestheticized and normalized, presented as an intrinsic and culturally specific fate. The deployment of ethnic costumes thus signifies not only racial difference but also eroticism and disposability, framing these women as exotic and tragic commodities.

Mapping the Tropes

Hypersexualized tropes are pervasive across these productions, firstly through the recurring figure of the Lotus Blossom. Butterfly and Kim epitomize this archetype: both are teenage girls, and their youth is used to signify virginity and innocence. This attractiveness, crowned by extreme youth, is neither noted as problematic by the producers nor critically addressed within the narratives. Instead, the audience is left to rationalize these sexual transactions, obscuring the exploitation of their age and vulnerability as natural or inevitable elements of their environment. Their infantilization echoes Loti's (1905) description of Japanese women as "dolls" (p. 20), accentuating passivity and a lack of agency.

Beyond their youth, Butterfly, Kim, and Suzie are characterized by unwavering fidelity to their American "husbands," even in the face of abandonment or alternative possibilities. This self-sacrifice reinforces their portrayal as emotionally dependent and lacking autonomy. Their devotion erases individuality, reducing them to vessels of longing whose lives and happiness hinge on the return of white men, thereby advancing the White Savior narrative.

In contrast, the Dragon Lady trope surfaces in Miss Saigon through the depiction of the Vietnamese bargirls. In the opening act, numerous women appear in "string bikinis" (Shimakawa, 2003, p. 32), performing overtly erotic gestures to attract American soldiers. The accompanying lyrics frame them as manipulative figures who view GIs as their "tickets out" of Vietnam (Boubil & Schönberg, 1989). These representations mark the women as opportunistic threats to national and racial boundaries, echoing colonial anxieties around miscegenation and cultural contamination.

Suzie, dubbed a "prostitute with a heart of gold" (Shimizu, 2008, p. 60), oscillates between both tropes. In the bar, she wields her sexuality to attract attention and money, taking on the qualities of the Dragon Lady. In her relationship with Robert, however, she reverts to the submissive and emotionally loyal Lotus Blossom figure. Her persistent sexual availability, in contrast with the white female characters who symbolize respectability and autonomy, reinforces a racialized dichotomy between eroticism and virtue.

Orientalist Logic and the Villainization of Asia

These productions reproduce Orientalist tropes that glorify Euro-American values while degrading Indigenous ones, framing Western intervention as redemptive and desirable. In *Madama Butterfly*, Butterfly converts to Christianity and praises it while mocking her maid's devotion to Japanese gods, calling them "fat and lazy" (Puccini et al., 1904). In *Miss Saigon*, the Engineer performs the satirical number "The American Dream," fantasizing about American excess: "The American dream... sweet as a new millionaire... fat, like a chocolate éclair... girls can buy tits by the pair." In *The World of Suzie Wong*, Suzie and her friends express delight in Robert's American imports, reinforcing the desirability of assimilation. Throughout these narratives, Euro-American culture is cast as modern, liberating, and aspirational, while Indigenous practices are dismissed as backward, irrational, or corrupt.

This dynamic is reinforced by the villainization of other Asian characters, particularly the patriarchal, possessive, and violent "Asian men." In *Madama Butterfly*, Butterfly's relatives disown and humiliate her for converting to Christianity. In *Miss Saigon*, Thuy embodies the oppressive patriarch: he refers to Kim in objectifying terms, shames her as a traitor, and ultimately threatens to kill her child. In *Suzie Wong*, Suzie is abandoned by both her father and the father of her child. These portrayals frame the suffering of Asian women as rooted in their own cultures, erasing the structural violence of imperialism and war. By positioning white men as saviors liberating Asian women from patriarchal oppression, these narratives obscure Western complicity in gendered violence and reproduce the illusion that Euro-American societies are free of misogyny. Ultimately, they sustain an Orientalist logic in which imperial power is framed not as domination but as benevolence, where the celebration of Occidental modernity relies on the portraying Oriental traditions as violent and regressive.

The Erased Mother and the Illusion of Rescue

In these productions, White Saviorism is exemplified by the adoption of mixed-race children by white couples. In *Miss Saigon*, the song "Bui Doi" describes these children as "conceived in hell and born in strife" (Boubil & Schönberg, 1989). The clinical term "conceived" erases the circumstances leading up to conception, reducing it to a biological act of reproduction. This language sanitizes the violence and exploitation embedded in these relationships, making questions about consent unfathomable within the narrative. Instead, the

song calls for American responsibility, declaring, “We owe them fathers, and a family, and a loving home they never knew” (Boubil & Schönberg, 1989).

Yet this condescending call for accountability ignores the devastation the U.S. military inflicted on native women, whose exploitation enabled the very familial bonds the musical seeks to normalize. Can one truly speak of fatherhood and family when these relationships were forged through sexual violence and exploitation? Can a home be considered loving if it is built on the erasure of indigenous mothers and their autonomy? By cleansing the violent origins of these children’s existence, the narrative recasts them as victims of circumstance in need of rescue by white “families.”

“Bui Doi” thus functions to justify the removal of children from their Vietnamese mothers under the guise of care. Robbed of motherhood, Butterfly and Kim both take their own lives, ostensibly so their children can live better lives with their white American parents. The productions offer no compelling rationale for their deaths, framing their self-abandonment as tragic lovesickness and further erasing their agency.

These deaths, however, serve a symbolic purpose: they sever the children’s ties to their Indigenous societies, eliminating any cultural or racial ambiguities that might complicate their assimilation into Whiteness. In doing so, they preserve the icon of the monogamous white nuclear family. This echoes colonial practices that institutionalized mixed-race children to reinforce racial boundaries, confining Asian women to the realm of disposable sexual objects.

The films analyzed in this paper reveal a consistent pattern: Asian pornotroping frames Asian women through intersecting narratives of racial otherness, hypersexualization, and victimhood. Across these productions, Asian women are depicted as both desirable and disposable, their worth tied to their function within Western male fantasies and imperial storylines. These representations do more than entertain—they construct a cultural grammar of racialized power that reinforces White Saviorism and colonial ideologies. By romanticizing Asianness as synonymous with sexual availability and passive suffering, these works obscure the structural violence and imperial exploitation that produce the very conditions of Asian women’s destitution.

The consequences of these portrayals extend far beyond the stage or screen. The stereotypes they normalize fuel real-world prejudice and contribute to an ongoing continuum of violence against Asian women globally. As the next section demonstrates, Asian pornotroping is not confined to the realm of art—it has tangible, often harmful impacts on the lives of Asian women, particularly in diasporic contexts across Euro-American societies.

Violence Made Aesthetic: The Real-World Impact of Asian Pornotroping

White Saviors and the Commodification of Colonial Ideologies

The portrayal of white men as saviors in cultural productions serves as a potent ideological tool to validate imperialism and colonialism. Shelby Steele (2006) defines “White guilt” as the discomfort experienced by white Americans when confronted with the legacies of racism and colonialism, particularly as these legacies erode their “moral authority” over racial and social justice issues (p. 24). This loss of perceived legitimacy creates a “vacuum of moral authority,” compelling white Americans to seek redemption by demonstrating that they are “not racist” (Steele, 2006, p. 27). However, this redemption often manifests as

performative acts that center themselves as saviors, reframing their complicity in systemic violence as benevolent intervention.

Asian pornotroping capitalizes on this logic, converting White guilt into a profitable storytelling device. These narratives recast colonizers and imperialists as compassionate rescuers, shifting focus from structural violence to individual heroism. By centering racialized suffering and White rescue, they offer audiences a vicarious sense of moral redemption.

The financial success of these productions reveals how colonial ideologies are commodified and consumed. Despite longstanding critiques of its Orientalism, *Madama Butterfly* remains a cornerstone of the opera repertoire, with over 900 performances at the Metropolitan Opera by January 2024 (Chiu, 2019; Metropolitan Opera, 2024). *Miss Saigon* was similarly lucrative, entertaining over 31 million people across 18 countries by 2011 (Chung, 2011), and setting a record £4.4 million in single-day ticket sales during its 2014 West End revival (Clark, 2013).

This commodification is particularly insidious in its ability to both entertain and legitimize. These narratives mask structural violence while presenting imperialism as morally redemptive, transforming the colonizer from oppressor to hero. By packaging imperial conquest as romantic salvation, Asian pornotroping offers audiences both escapism and absolution, allowing empire to be consumed as spectacle, empathy, and virtue.

Yellow Fever: The Racial Fetishization and Violence Against Asian Women

Asian pornotroping fuels yellow fever, the racial fetishization of Asian women that operates at the intersection of racism and sexism. This fetishization subjects Asian women to a continuum of violence, ranging from sexual racism in online dating (Williams, 2004), to street-level harassment and threats (Yuen, 2023), to racially targeted physical and sexual assault (Geranios, 2000; Kim, 2015), and even murder and terrorism (Chang & Yuen, 2021). Despite its racialized nature, such violence is often institutionally dismissed or erased (Kim, 2015), compounding Asian women's systemic invisibility, dehumanization, and marginalization.

The psychological toll of fetishization is equally profound. Women targeted by yellow fever often report feeling depersonalized and otherized, wherein they are simultaneously "treated like an object interchangeable with other objects" and held to distinct and racialized standards of physical appearance and sexuality (Zheng, 2016, p. 407). These experiences create persistent cognitive dissonance, forcing Asian women to question their value as individuals while expending "psychic and emotional resources" to navigate a world shaped by fetishistic desire and racial projection (Zheng, 2016, p. 409).

Militarized Prostitution and the Legacy of Asian Pornotroping

Sexual violence is a weapon of war (Frazer & Hutchings, 2019), and women's sex work has long supported predominantly male militaries (Vine, 2015). Militarized prostitution, a system historically intertwined with Asian pornotroping, continues in contemporary contexts. In camptowns around U.S. military bases in South Korea, poor Korean women and trafficked Filipino women work under exploitative conditions, including confiscated passports, arbitrary fines, and wages below minimum standards. These practices echo colonial regulatory frameworks, sustained by the same racist and sexist beliefs that have long justified the extraction of labor and intimacy from Asian women.

Recent crackdowns by U.S. and South Korean authorities have pushed this labor underground, exacerbating precarity rather than addressing systemic exploitation (Vine, 2015). This continuity reveals how Asian pornotroping extends beyond cultural production and into state structures of control. Like the stage or screen, the military re-enacts these dynamics, casting Asian women as simultaneously available and discardable, and reframing domination as protection.

Since the 1990s, global recognition of sexual exploitation in wartime as a human rights violation has grown (Frazer & Hutchings, 2019). However, this discourse is often co-opted to justify carceral and imperial interventions. In U.S. anti-trafficking movements, punitive policies are reframed as feminist and humanitarian (Bernstein, 2012). These campaigns depict Global South women as victims of "backward traditionalism" (p. 62), reinforcing the idea that they require rescue by Global North states. In this way, human rights discourse replicates the logic of Asian pornotroping by turning the suffering of racialized women into a vehicle for White redemption.

The persistence of militarized prostitution and punitive politics masked as humanitarianism show that Asian pornotroping is not confined to media. Whether through camptowns, anti-trafficking campaigns, or foreign policy, these systems reproduce racialized and gendered hierarchies. By framing domination as care, they allow state power to eroticize suffering and obscure structural violence.

Conclusion

This paper applies Asian pornotroping as an analytical concept that constructs a demure, hypersexualized, and subservient Asian femininity in service of the imperialist sexual, emotional, and narcissistic consumption. These narratives inscribe a destitution/sexuality matrix onto Asian women, framing them as both helpless victims and hypersexualized commodities. By reinforcing this dichotomy, such portrayals obscure the systemic violence of White sexual imperialism and glorify Western intervention as morally superior, perpetuating colonial hierarchies and erasing the complicity of Western patriarchy. This dynamic is not confined to the screen or stage but extends into real-world practices, such as militarized prostitution and the contradictions within U.S.-led militarized humanitarianism.

Future scholarship could employ this framework to examine how Asian pornotroping impacts portrayals of Asian men. Do these narratives also perpetuate emasculation, hypermasculinity, or exoticization? How do they intersect with the colonial legacy explored in this paper? Additionally, the internalization of these tropes by Asian individuals themselves remains a critical area of inquiry. Du Bois's (2008) concept of double consciousness offers a lens to explore how Asian individuals reconcile their identities with dominant Western portrayals or resist these narratives through activism and alternative storytelling.

Understanding the broader social, psychological, and systemic impacts of Asian pornotroping is vital to dismantling the colonial and patriarchal structures it sustains. By critically examining these narratives and their intersections with global systems of power, we can better address the enduring harm they inflict on marginalized communities and contribute to the creation of more equitable and inclusive cultural representations.

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