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AIMING TO PLEASE: NAVIGATING INTERSECTIONAL REALITIES

PRISCILLA KAR YEE LO

42 Pages

As a product of a Chinese immigrant family in North America, I was perpetually reminded to be practical about my future. But after over a decade as a health care professional, I began to feel dissatisfied with the direction of my life. I turned to creative outlets to find a voice and to explore my identity as a woman of colour. To create work as an act of remembrance of the collective intersectional adversity minority women continue to face. I was drawn to glass because it is inherently paradoxical, constantly in a state of fragility and permanency. This mirrors the hegemonic constraints that still linger and influence the world. My work highlights the astute way in which our inherent patriarchal society has affected the Asian female position within its structure and how it maintains control through cultural and social expectations and normalized gender roles. My visual language contains artifacts of patriarchy from my childhood that have since become pop culture icons. The symbolism of these images is far removed from their original medium and their patriarchal foundation, making them easy to manipulate and go undetected while subtly reinforcing social norms and binary systems. Ultimately, I view my work as a nostalgic and whimsical, yet mischievous way of documenting where women, particularly immigrant women, are placed within a societally prescribed racial framework. I hope to initiate discourse about the continual existence of an inherent system of patriarchy and how the present continues to propagate the injustices of the past.

KEYWORDS: Culture, Gender, Glass, Hello Kitty, Intersectionality, Race

AIMING TO PLEASE: NAVIGATING INTERSECTIONAL REALITIES

PRISCILLA KAR YEE LO

A Thesis Supportive Statement Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

WONSOOK KIM SCHOOL OF ART

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AIMING TO PLEASE: NAVIGATING INTERSECTIONAL REALITIES

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As I sit here and reflect on the last three years of this process, stressing over all the things I still need to do to get through to the finish line, it feels impossible to thank all the people who have made this journey possible and endurable on just one page. For all those who have watch me shed a tear (or many), be vulnerable, be a salty brat, or work until you wonder if I actually sleep yet still held out a helping hand, I sincerely say thank you with a *ketow* 磕頭 (a sign of deep respect consisting of kneeling and bowing until the forehead touches the ground). I am truly indebted to you ㄟ\O_.

P. K. Y. L

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SECTION I: ARTIST STATEMENT (EXTENDED VERSION FT. HELLO KITTY)

Growing up in a Chinese immigrant family in North America, I was perpetually reminded that I was different from the other kids in my all-white neighbourhood, these reminders were rarely overt or explicitly racist. Instead, they were micro-aggressive and obscure reinforcements of existing racial stereotypes and power dynamics. One of my first memories of Canada was when I was eight years old arriving at my childhood home in February when the snow was piled higher than I could reach. When I turned to my parents to express my childhood wonderment, because I had never experienced snow before, I was told in English “Ok, it is time to shovel the snow”. Though both my parents spoke English, and I studied at a Christian British bilingual school in Hong Kong that taught both English grammar and conversational English, they usually spoke to me in Cantonese at home. After several attempts to answer them in my native language, and continuing to receive replies in English, I realized that my parents, in their efforts to expedite my assimilation, decided they would only speak to me in English at home until they deemed my English “proper”. At the time, my childhood innocence could only understand this “teaching” tactic as a cruel attempt to effectively force me to learn a second language, much like throwing a child in the water to teach them how to swim.¹ This event taught me more than how to speak English without an accent. It firmly reinforced the importance of assimilation. I was supposed to perform up to both my parents and societal expectations. This seemingly harmless childhood memory perfectly illustrates how hegemonic ideologies are achieved and maintained. According to Antonio Gramsci, by coercing the oppressed into subservience through force or creating a narrative that causes the oppressed to understand their situation is normative, hegemonic principles of race, class, gender, and sexuality are reinforced.² When this “common sense” notion of inferiority to

¹ This is how I learned to swim.

² Antonio Gramsci, “Americanism and Fordism” in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, edited by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971).

whites is internalized, it provides a stringent set of boundaries for minority women to self-identify. This memory also indirectly reinforced the negative stigmas surrounding “fresh off the boat” immigrants. Though my parents were only trying to protect me from future discrimination, the consequences of this lesson reached much further. From that moment on, I knew I was different than the other kids in my predominately white neighbourhood. My upbringing, my surroundings, my experiences would lie outside of the “norm”, and my goal as a good daughter was to strive for what society expected of me. As an adult, I realize “home-culture” plays a small, if not equal, part along with historical context and visual culture in shaping Asian American female identity and how these variables subtly reinforce negative and oppressive Asian controlling images.

After a decade as a respiratory therapist, I felt dissatisfied with the direction of my life, and this intensified after I worked in Saudi Arabia. I faced an alarming level of racism and misogyny there, with which I still struggle to reconcile. The labour force there is predominantly Asian and Asian women and in particular were treated as dispensable and inferior. For the first time in my life, I truly understood what it meant to be a second-class citizen. It became clear to me that structural intersectionality, specifically where race and gender meet, plays a large role in the complex systemic oppression of individuals who deviate from social norms. The social and cultural structures, like white supremacy, patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism, define controlling images rather than individual identities. These systems of oppression intersect one another and rely on one another to justify their existence. Historical macro-structures of power and dominance through politics, racial hierarchy, and culture clearly influence gender and inequality and shape our experiences as women of colour.³ I turned to creative outlets to speak out about this collective adversity that minority women continue to experience. I was drawn to glass not only because of how empowered I felt when manipulating hot lava at the end of a stick, but

³ Karen D, Pike and Denise L. Johnson, “Asian American Women and Racialized Femininities.” *Gender & Society* 17, no. 1 (2003): 34.

because of this temperamental material inherent paradoxicality, simultaneously existing as a liquid and a solid. The duality of glass, which is constantly in a state of fragility and permanency, subtle yet strong, mirrors the hegemonic constraints that still linger and influence the world. Glass is alluring yet practical, it can withstand the hands of time, but can be shattered in an instant. I use this material in my work to remind the viewer of these dichotomies and their similarities to how intersectionality affects women of colour.

My work highlights the shrewd ways patriarchy and its intersections with other complex systems of domination affect Asian women's identities within its structure. I use a visual language populated by some of the patriarchal artifacts from my childhood that have since become pop culture icons. These artifacts offer tangible evidence of the subtle way complex systems of domination maintain their structure through visual cultural, controlling images, social expectations, and normalized gender roles. On the surface, these icons are devoid of an overt misogynistic agenda disguised as playthings, but the ideologies behind these objects continue to affect the way females behave and process experiences. Much like Jean Baudrillard's simulacra, the symbolism of these images became detached from the original meaning and patriarchal foundation. This makes them easy to manipulate and circulate undetected.⁴ These childhood relics are often dismissed as trivial, but the signs and symbols they reflect, subtly reinforce the features and expectation that orient colonized and gendered bodies within a patriarchal binary gender social system.

The globalization of the iconic Hello Kitty character has internationally spread "kawaii (cute) culture", which has an undeniable relationship with the creation, maintenance, and propagation of controlling images specific to Asian female stereotypes in the West.⁵ Hello Kitty is a recurring image in

⁴ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2019), 6.

⁵ Christine Reiko Yano, *Pink Globalization: Hello Kitty's Trek across the Pacific* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

my work because she is a universally recognizable pop culture symbol that exemplifies the visual language used to shape Asian female identity. This is characterized by cuteness, meekness, submissiveness, and a playfulness that can be interpreted as provocative. Hello Kitty's cross-generational appeal blurs the line between innocence, vulnerability, infantilization, and sexuality. I believe that "stereotypes are not a false representation, but rather, an arrested representation of a changing reality".⁶ I highlight the intersectionality of being a minority woman by employing Hello Kitty and other pop culture icons that double as controlling images, in hopes to advance this changing reality. While controlling images continue to shape shift to accommodate generational views, I see my work as defiance of this. I aim to take back a symbol of oppression to create a counter narrative that serves to empower Asian females. Ultimately, I view my work as a nostalgic and whimsical, yet mischievous way of documenting where women, particularly immigrant women, are placed within a societally prescribed racial framework. I hope to initiate discourse about the continual existence of an inherent system of patriarchy and how the present continues to propagate the injustices of the past.

This essay aims to examine the historical background, both prior to Western contact with the East and after the West's "discovery" and ultimately colonization of the East, which solidify certain controlling images surrounding Asian women. By examining how visual culture has normalized these characteristics which in turn reinforces the racial hierarchy in which Asian immigrants in North America are forced to exist within, I hope to come to an understanding of the role we all play a role in these confines. I want to explore the cost of assimilation and how this has shaped Asian female identity. Finally, I want to address the possibility of reconciliation through art, and how my work helps to strengthen our ability to create a counter narrative and help start constructive discourse about this issue.

⁶ Nancy N. Chen, "Speaking Nearby:" A Conversation with Trinh T. Minh-Ha," *Visual Anthropology Review* 8, no. 1 (1992): 82-91. <https://doi.org/10.1525/var.1992.8.1.82>.

SECTION II: HISTORICAL CONTEXT

BWD (Before Western “Discovery”)

Genetic and archeological evidence clearly demonstrate that the three major East Asian ethnic groups, Chinese, Korean, and Japanese share common ancestry. Approximately 3000-3600 years ago, around the time of the Shang Dynasty (1600-1046BC), migration of Han Chinese people and the mixing of these migrants with the local indigenous people caused the distinct genetic split between these three groups.⁷ There is strong evidence supporting an exchange of materials, people, and culture between these groups as early as 300-700 AD. In fact, the first recorded history of Japanese people exists in Chinese chronicles.⁸ Extensive writings in all three languages, after 700 AD, show there is heavy cultural exchange between Korea and Japan, China and Korea, and also Chinese to Japanese via Korea. This Sinosphere of influence resulted in similar traditions, language, religion, culture, and values within this region, which later spread to countries in Southeast Asia.⁹ Thus, an inherently patriarchal structure, based on Confucian ethics, is present in both public and private spheres of all Asian cultures.

Females in aristocratic families in imperial China, for example, were educated through text such as the *Four Lessons For Women* (女四書), which set the foundation for female’s role within society.¹⁰ Based on Confucian’s teachings, these texts promoted the three obedience and four virtues (三從四德). The three obedience refers to how a women must obey her father, then her husband, and finally her

⁷ There is in fact less than 1 percent difference in the genetic diversity of these three groups Shuhua Xu, “Common Ancestor of Han Chinese, Japanese and Koreans Dated to 3000 – 3600 Years Ago.” *On Biology*, accessed June 6, 2019, <https://blogs.biomedcentral.com/on-biology/2018/04/10/common-ancestor-of-han-chinese-japanese-and-koreans-dated-to-3000-3600-years-ago/>

⁸ China developed a system of language and literacy prior to the Japanese and Koreans. Jared Diamond, “In Search of Japanese Roots,” *Discover Magazine*, accessed October 10, 2019, <http://discovermagazine.com/1998/jun/japaneseroots1455>).

⁹ Southeast Asian countries include Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines.

¹⁰ Written by four females over the span of 1600 years

Xiang Wang and Pang White Ann A., *The Confucian Four Books for Women: A New Translation of the Nü Sishu and the Commentary of Wang Xiang* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

son once she is widowed. While the four virtues¹¹, outline the fundamental criteria that make women “wise and worthy wives and good mother (賢妻良母)” and ultimately desirable.¹² There are a handful of examples of strong females in Chinese history, like Empress Wu Zetian, who interrupted the Tang Dynasty and came into rule (from 690-705AD) after the emperor and her son died. But many of these stories were distorted and laced with falsehood because official record of their history was written well after their deaths.¹³ What remains are fables written by those in power, to maintain a tight grip on acceptable behaviour for Asian women.

When Easty Met Westy

Roman trade along the Silk Road not only introduced new cultures and religions to China but also exported stories of the mysterious, dangerous, and opulent “Orient” to the West.¹⁴ Major cities along this route slowly became seedier and cities with large populations of transient occupants fomented violence and conflict between locals and foreign traders. This, along with the unstable political climate at the time, caused the closure of Chinese borders to all foreigners in 878 AD, which remained closed till the thirteenth century.¹⁵ When borders reopened, traders and explores quickly flooded into the East. Marco Polo became the first foreigner, after four hundred years of mystery, to returned to the West from Kublai Khan’s China, full of hypersexualized stories of the Khan’s harem and

¹¹ The four virtues include: wifely virtue/integrity (婦德), wifely speech/words (婦言), wifely manner/appearance (婦容), and wifely work/duties (婦功).

Four Books for Women. Accessed December 11, 2019.

<https://www2.kenyon.edu/Depts/Religion/Fac/Adler/Reln471/fourbookwoman.htm>.

¹² Editor. “Ancient China’s ‘Virtuous’ Women: Three Obediences and Four Virtues.” 风流中国, August 21, 2017.

<https://culture.followcn.com/2017/08/21/ancient-chinas-virtuous-women-three-obediences-four-virtues/>.

¹³ Written by Confucians who were strict patriarchist that believed women should not be in a position of power Sheridan Prasso, *The Asian Mystique: Dragon Ladies, Geisha Girls and the Myths of Exotic Oriental* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2006, 34.

¹⁴ Emperor Tai Zong, during the Tang Dynasty made many policies that allowed for religious tolerance.

Emily Mark, “Tang Dynasty,” Ancient History Encyclopedia, accessed December 10, 2019,

https://www.ancient.eu/Tang_Dynasty/.

¹⁵ Dawn Jacobson, *Chinoiserie* (London: Phaidon Press, 1999), 12.

the courtesans who would prostitute themselves outside the Beijing palace walls.¹⁶ Polo was influential, so most literary works about his adventures in the East became more fantastical and exaggerated as they reached Western audiences. During the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644AD), the boarder was closed again in 1368 by Emperor HongWu, who in efforts to unify a divided China, deemed international trade as a threat to the regime.¹⁷ For another 200 years, the West would have no other authoritative text about China to refute the myths of the “Orient”. When the boarders opened in the sixteenth century, and the stories brought back to the West were mostly based on missionary experiences, distorted with religious judgement on customs and practices foreign to Christian upbringing. During the second wave of European Colonialism in the late 1800s and 1900s Britain, France, Portugal, and the Netherlands expanded towards Asia. Young aristocrats and explorers, tainted by the previously distorted image of the East, flooded into the area, hoping to get a taste of the hedonistic and opulent Asia. Power dynamics began to change and the natives along with their traditional crafts and wares became objects of exploitation to Europeans. Products exported from the East captured the imagination of the West, and in the 1700s, “Chinoiserie” became a symbol of fashion and class.¹⁸ In Europe, the “Orient” became associated with luxury, refinement, and opulence. It is ironic that hundreds of years of craftsmanship pass down generationally would be reduced to trinkets and objects of trophies in the drawing rooms of the rich colonizer.

¹⁶ Marco Polo and Manuel Komroff, *The Travels of Marco Polo the Venetian: Rev. from Marsdens Translation* (New York: Ed. for the Armed Services, 1930)

¹⁷ Mark Cartwright, “Ming Dynasty,” Ancient History Encyclopedia. Accessed December 9, 2019, https://www.ancient.eu/Ming_Dynasty/.

¹⁸ Prasso, *Mystique*, 40.

From Colonization To Immigration (on the boat, off the boat)

After winning the Opium Wars, the great powers of the West, Britain, and France, forced open the gates to Asia.¹⁹ Western influence became even stronger in the East. Exacerbated by social Darwinism of 1890s, the infancy of a global racial hierarchy quickly starting to take shape.²⁰ Western cultures, however, rarely intersected with the “native” Asian society, except sexually. Europeans living in eastern trade post, like Shanghai, mostly encountered the Chinese in their roles as diplomats or “the help.” And because European men outnumbered their female counterparts in these colonies, significant social exchanges, of the sexual nature, instead occurred between white men and Asian women. These mistresses were seen as inferior in the West because they were seen as sub-human, so naturally these relations were shunned and continued to fuel the over sexualized image of the “Orient” female in Europe and the Americas. Writers like Gustavo Flaubert and later Gerard de Narval wrote about their travels to the East, but mostly focused on their sexual escapades, while famous painters like Eugene Delacroix provided a visual fabric filled with harems and slave markets of the East.²¹ Pierre Loti, a French naval officer and novelist, wrote his famous novel *Madame Chrysanthème* in 1887, which would later serve as a basis to Puccini’s opera *Madam Butterfly*.²² With only images of opulence, mystery, and seductive Asian women, especially during the time of Victorian era when “proper English women were

¹⁹ The first Opium War (1839-42) was between China and Britain, resulting in the Treaty of Nanjing which gave Britain the port city of Hong Kong. The second Opium War (1856-60) was fought by the British and French against China, resulting in the Treaty of Tianjin which gave more port city access to the west, and legalized opium distribution.

Kenneth Pletcher, “Opium Wars,” Encyclopædia Britannica, accessed September 5, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Opium-Wars>

²⁰ Social Darwinism, a concept based on the “survival of the fittest” but in the case of cultures, refers to the sophisticated and development of the West when compared to the paganism and savagery of the East. The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. “Social Darwinism.” Encyclopædia Britannica, accessed October 2, 2019. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/social-Darwinism>.

²¹ Prasso, *Mystique*, 46.

²² Ibid

admonished not to enjoy the act of sex” it is no wonder the Europeans had such a distorted view of the “Orient”.²³

With Europe’s strong hold in the East, America also wanted a piece of this opulent pie, so they forcibly opened the borders of Japan with the Perry Expedition.²⁴ By opening the Japanese trade route, the “Japonisme” movement exploded in the West. The fascination with all things Japanese touched artist like Claude Monet, who painted a life size portrait of his white wife in a Japanese Kimono.²⁵ At the height of this movement, the West was introduced to Madame Sadayakko, a well-known Japanese geisha who served as a Prime Minister’s mistress.²⁶ She soon became an international sensation, performing her act all over America then Europe. She was even invited to perform in Buckingham Palace by the Prince of Wales²⁷. During this time, the most recognizable visual representation of Asian culture was a high-class sex worker. This further cemented the stereotype of Asian women from the “Orient” during this time; enigmatic, exotic, hypersexualized woman who was sexually available for white men for the right price.

After the wars in the late nineteenth century, treaties were signed to allow a significant increase in the export of cheap Asian labourers. Some of these men were auctioned off in slave markets alongside their African counterparts and shipped to the frontiers of America. The Gold Rush on the west coast and the expansion of the railway fueled a need for cheap male labourers. But to maintain control on Asian population and to ensure they did not take root in America, women and children were highly restricted from entry. Of the Chinese immigrants in 1870, 7.2 percent of them were women, and

²³ Prasso, *Mystique*, 46.

²⁴ The Perry Expedition was considered “Gun Boat Diplomacy”, American naval ships arrived on the coast of Japan flexing its might without engaging in combat. The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. “Matthew C. Perry.” Encyclopædia Britannica, accessed May 16, 2019. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Matthew-C-Perry#ref1115075>.

²⁵ Claude Monet, *La Japonaise*, 1876.

²⁶ Prasso, *Mystique*, 43.

²⁷ Back in Tokyo, society had very negative views about a geisha as the representative of their culture in the west. *Ibid*

majority these women worked in prostitution.²⁸ As more “yellow” labours invaded this predominantly white landscape, fear, objection, and overt racism set in. This “Yellow Peril’ phenomenon forced Asian men to take up service jobs like the ones they back in their colonized homeland, effeminate and domestic positions like cook, laundry worker, or house boy. This ensured no “real” (masculine) jobs were taken away from white men. This same fear sparked the introduction of the Page Act of 1875, which effectively eliminated Chinese female immigration based on their perceived sexual conduct. At the time, it was popular public opinion that Chinese women (presumably prostitutes) carried “especially virulent strains of venereal diseases, [will] introduce opium addiction, and entice young white boys to a life of sin”.²⁹ The Act, specifically designed to target Chinese females, required potential immigrants to answer questions like “Do you go to the United States for the purposes of prostitution? Are you married or single? What are you going to the United States for? What is to be your occupation there? Have you lived in a house of prostitution in Hong Kong, Macao, or China? Have you engaged in prostitution in either of the above places? Are you a virtuous woman?”.³⁰ The Page Act was the first restrictive immigration law in America, it was later followed by the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 dramatically ended the import of Chinese labourers and excluded an entire ethnic group from entering the United States. These Acts set the social and political tone in which visible racism towards the Chinese became sanctioned by the American government, effectively providing a legal foundation for a racial hierarchy where whites sat comfortably on its throne.

The twentieth century saw many wars and technological advancements, and it became clear America, as a dominant power of the West, would take over the propagation of the Asian myth.

²⁸Rosalind S. Chou, *Asian American Sexual Politics: The Construction of Race, Gender, and Sexuality* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 16.

²⁹Sucheng Chan, *Entry Denied: Exclusion and the Chinese Community in America, 1882-1943* (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1991), 138.

³⁰Georg Anthony Peffer, “Forbidden Families: Emigration Experience of Chinese Women under the Page Law, 1875-1882,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 6, no. 1 (1986): 28-46.

America's continual military involvement in the Pacific during this period and their monopolistic control over media and pop culture, shaped the modern framework of a universally understood racial order.

Visual Culture and Fetishization (all aboard the appropriation station?)

“American images are global images” – Sheridan Prasso³¹

According to Guy Debord, society and the relationships which exist within it have increasingly become motivated by images.³² These symbols and signs, a mere representation of reality, are so prevalent and pervasive due to the popularization of visual media.³³ The invention of film and television allowed the everyday person to connect on some level to a shared human existence. Popular culture and media, in turn, shaped (warp) our understanding social norms and relationships, which Debord would argue, impoverished human perceptions and quality of life.³⁴ Hegemony is largely undetectable because it is “naturalized to culture”, reinforced by visual media, culture, and everyday practice.³⁵ Visual culture has undeniably influenced Asian female tropes and social and political climate continue to confine and define our identity. These controlling images circulate with such ferocity, they permeate our consciousness and create unconscious biases and accounts of women of colour.

Throughout history, European travelers, writers, artist, and explorers (all male) brought home fascinating tales of sex and mystery, which formulated Western construct of the “Orient”. A new territory full of sexually compliant females and land ripe for conquer and rule.³⁶ Puccini's 1904 opera

³¹ Prasso, *Mystique*, 78.

³² Guy Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (London: Verso, 2011)

³³ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018).

³⁴ Debord, *Spectacle*.

³⁵ Chou, *Sexual Politics*, 49.

³⁶ Matthew Bernstein and Gaylyn Studlar, *Visions of the East: Orientalism in Film* (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers., 1997)

Madame Butterfly debuted and started a legacy that would influence many visual representations of the same basic storyline and define controlling images that still haunt Asian women today.

Puccini's opera tells the classic colonization story of a young Asian woman of questionable morals with a heart of gold, falling in love with a white male saviour. After a short but seemingly passionate exchange, the saviour returns to his white tower, leaving the broken-hearted and pregnant Asian woman in a socially compromising predicament, tainted by the white man, and ostracised by her community. *Madame Butterfly* gives birth to their child and is condemned to a life of hardship and shame, awaiting her saviour to return. When he does, it is not to save her but to take their "illegitimate" child away to a better life.

During the time of this opera's popularity, America became the new imperial power in the Pacific, colonizing the island of the Philippines by forcibly removing Spanish occupation.³⁷ As the first Governor General of the Philippines (1901-1904), William Howard Taft would often refer to Filipinos as "little brown brothers" in need of close supervision to be raised to American standards in terms of education and civilization.³⁸ Taft would later become the 27th President of the United States of America, which furthered this sense of national paternalistic racism towards the East as a whole. The story of *Madame Butterfly* is not only an implicit display of power imbalance between East and West, but also reinforces Western cultural superiority, female inferiority, and gender dependence. As the "master-text of Orientalism", this story establishes the two extreme tropes the West has conjured for Asian females.³⁹ One is of sexualized infantilization, the "Lotus Flower", which makes them subservient and ideal for plundering. The other is of a refined maturity with a hint of wantonness, the "whore with a heart of gold", making them capable of the ultimate domestic self-sacrifice. It is interesting to note that

³⁷ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. "Fighting in the Philippines and Cuba." Encyclopædia Britannica, accessed October 22, 2019. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Spanish-American-War/Fighting-in-the-Philippines-and-Cuba>.

³⁸ Praso, *Mystique*, 49.

³⁹ Bernstein, *Visions of the East*, 160.

while these images continued have significant cultural influence, it is not until after the Vietnam War that this classic tale of Asian female colonization return with major success as the hypersexualized Broadway musical, *Miss Saigon*.⁴⁰ Almost 100 years later and after losing the Vietnam war, Americans craved mass media images to reassert their global dominance and masculine superiority. To rationalize the excessive force and violence the American public saw in the media during the war, stories like *Miss Saigon* served to relieve “the collective national ... anxiet[y] about military and masculine prowess” and “revaloriz[e] the patriarchal nuclear family”⁴¹. The intersection of race, gender, and sexuality creates a power dynamic that not only “remasculates” Western men and reconfirm their positions within the racial hierarchy, but also sustains the Asian female stereotypes of being submissive and perpetually sexually available to be used and disposed of by white men.⁴²

On a surface level, fetization of Asian females can seem flattering or dismissed as a personal preference. But it renders Asian women to be “hyperfeminine, passive, weak, quiet, excessively submissive, slavishly dutiful, sexually exotic, and available for white men”⁴³. This makes them especially vulnerable to mistreatment from men.

⁴⁰ *Miss Saigon*: musical by Claude-Michel Schönberg and Alain Boublil (both wrote *Les Misérables*). Première at the Theatre Royal, London, in 1989, and Broadway in 1991.

⁴¹ Bernstein, *Visions of the East*, 161.

⁴² “Remasculate” is defined as “engendering feelings of masculinity or dominance which Western men may have found diminished in their own cultures” Praso, *Mystique*, 5.

⁴³ Pike and Johnson, “Asian American Women,” 36.

SECTION III: CONTROLLING IMAGES

Hollywood's Constrains on Asian Females Through the Years

Discourse and authority, according to Michel Foucault, is based on power dynamics and social relationships framed by language and behaviour.⁴⁴ Many scholars argue that "Orientalism" is a colonial invention by Western powers as a way to define "the others" but also acts to reinforce western ideologies of race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation.⁴⁵ In contemporary times, this language and behaviour is made accessible to the masses and fortified by print and visual media, with Hollywood as its the main proprietor. Representation of the East have historically been loosely based on truths and riddled with lies. These controlling images are meant to keep women of colour inline by objectifying them and using these images to justify their racial and gender subordination. By defining a group into existence through language, laws, and images, the dominate group makes the inferior group a reality and removes any agency from these groups.

An early example of these controlling images is the "Dragon Lady". This trope first appeared in print in 1934 in a cartoon series by Milton Caniff called *Terry and the Pirates*.⁴⁶ The image, however, has roots in Edmund Blackhouse's "HISToric" works about the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), *China Under Empress Dowager*⁴⁷ and *Annals and Memoirs of the Court of Peking*.⁴⁸ Blackhouse accounts of Empress Tzu Hsi, after her death during a time of civil unrest and recline of her regime, were nothing more than pornographic falsities which illustrated her as an evil "Dragon Lady" riddled with sexual deviance.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Carla Willig and Wendy Stainton-Rogers, *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research in Psychology* (London: Sage Publications, 2008), 91-108.

⁴⁵ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003).

⁴⁶ *Terry and the Pirate*, Chicago Tribune Syndicat cartoon series about a "Dragon Lady" pirate gang leader "capable of seducing, humiliating and attempting to murder the strip's hero". This cartoon was so popular, it inspired a radio series in 1930, a film in 1940, and a TV series in 1952.

Prasso, *Mystique*, 80.

⁴⁷ 1910

⁴⁸ 1914

⁴⁹ In his 1943 memoir, *Decadence Mandchoue*, Blackhouse wrote that the Dowager has "an abnormally large clitoris, which she was in the habit of rubbing on the anus of her partner."

Prasso, *Mystique*, 32.

During Victorian era, these narratives were quite scandalous. Many female artists, missionaries, and courtesans at the time wrote accurate accounts of the Empress, describing her as pensive and serene. These reports, however, were completely ignored by historians at the time. “Instead [they] relied on Blackhouse’s falsified accounts, and then cited each other, creating a web of falsehood that passed as scholarship for decades”.⁵⁰ This “dragon lady” persona, along with the others mentioned in the previous section, would continue to haunt Asian women as Hollywood perpetuated these tropes in many Asian themed films. Anna May Wong, the most internationally famous Chinese American actress of the early 1900s, was “Playing slave girls, prostitutes, temptresses, and doomed lovers, and carried on those roles in dozens of films throughout her career”.⁵¹ Along with her portrayals of the “Dragon Lady” and the “Lotus Flower” archetypal type, Wong engrained these images of Asian females in Western consciousness. As discussed in the previous section, the innocent submissive Asian adolescent was already popularized by *Madame Butterfly*, but Wong’s rise to fame in her debut on the big screen at the age of seventeen, in the 1922 film *The Toll of the Sea*, solidified the notion of the “Lotus Flower” archetypal.⁵²

With the surge of “war brides” in the 1950s, following the Second World War, the images of Asian females on the silver screen extended from the innocent “Lotus Flower” to the self-sacrificing devoted wife. In many ways, Hollywood served as a platform where “Americans tried to grapple not only with issues of biracial couples and racism, but also with humanizing the Japanese following their demonization during the war.”⁵³ The political climate at the end of the 1950s and the continual development of white feminism in the United States, further romanticize the notion of an eager to please and vulnerable Asian wife especially when compare with the newly empowered white female.

⁵⁰ Prasso, *Mystique*, 33.

⁵¹ Prasso, *Mystique*, 79.

⁵² *Toll of the Sea* was a revival of the *Madame Butterfly* story set in China instead of Japan.

⁵³ Prasso, *Mystique*, 88.

As America moved towards legalizing biracial couples in 1967, the images of Asian females in the media became even more hypersexualized. The 1960 film starring Nancy Kwan, *The World of Suzie Wong*, depicts a prostitute with a “heart of gold” in Hong Kong who becomes romantically involved with a white American artist. One of the dominant themes of this movie pits Asian femininity against white female femininity, both contending for the hearts of white men.⁵⁴ Marrying the “bossy white girl at home” would confine the artist to a life of predictably, while “rescuing his China Doll, he could escape the confines of his own world – and find the exotic realm of the Orient.”⁵⁵

All these Hollywood tropes would amalgamate into one female character with a martial arts twist in the 1980 epic miniseries, *Shogun*. Based very loosely on the fictional story of William Adams (Blackthorne), an English naval navigator shipwrecked on the island of Japan in 1600, and Hosokawa Gracie (Mariko), the alluring and sexually promiscuous wife of a noble Japanese Samurai. Hosokawa later converted to Christianity and was canonized by the Catholic Church in 1862.⁵⁶ Though there is little historical record to even suggest the two met in real life, this love story became so popular, it was remade in 2003 with Tom Cruise as *The Last Samurai*⁵⁷. It is interesting to note that the original 1980s miniseries showed Mariko in full frontal nudity on prime-time television, which was not permitted for a white actress at the time. Because this was seen as a display of exotic “Oriental” practices, much like native population around the world showcased in anthropology documentaries, it continued to contribute to the hypersexualized mystique of the “Oriental” female.⁵⁸

The Asian actresses who play these characters in Hollywood have been criticized for perpetuating Asian female tropes, but all have the same reply, “when you are just starting out, you

⁵⁴ Prasso, *Mystique*, 79.

⁵⁵ Prasso, *Mystique*, 95.

⁵⁶ Joy Alari and Ching Kin Min, “Home,” BellaOnline, accessed December 11, 2019, <https://www.bellaonline.com/articles/art172576.asp>.

⁵⁷ Prasso, *Mystique*, 67.

⁵⁸ Prasso, *Mystique*, 69.

don't have much choice about the roles you get."⁵⁹ But with the influx of Asians in Hollywood in the 90s and 00s, the harder edges of these stereotypes begin to blur, and Asian women, especially those with martial arts abilities, played more prominent and equal roles on both the big and small screens. After a hundred years under Hollywood's limelight, which in turn influenced film and media industries around the world, the perceptions of Asian females portrayed in these fictional characters are engrained and transferred to expectations of real Asian women of the everyday.

Why, Hello, Kitty, Kawaii!

When examining the visual images and historical context that influenced existing Asian controlling images, one cannot ignore the phenomenon of *Kawaii* culture and the universally recognized character, Hello Kitty. The origins of *Kawaii* (cute) culture emerged during the latter half of the twentieth century, during a time of growth in Japan's international economic power when *shoujo* (premarital) females became its primary domestic consumer.⁶⁰ *Kawaii*, as defined by Kinsella, is "childlike; it celebrates sweet, adorable, innocent, pure, genuine, gentle, vulnerable, weak", but also relates to the verb *kawaigaru* meaning to give loving care⁶¹. "The concept of *kawaii* thus reflects fundamental relationalities of the helpless and helper, the kept and the keeper, the dependent and the dependable"⁶². The growing independence, sexuality, and influence of *shoujo* females caused public concerns and moral panic, especially "with the emergency of public bad girls *shōjo* by the 1990s, the *kogyaru*."⁶³ Society looked for ways to police and maintain the innocent image of the cute maiden girl.

⁵⁹ Prasso, *Mystique*, 81.

⁶⁰ Christine R Yano. "Kitty Litter: Japanese Cute at Home and Abroad." in *Toys, Games, and Media* (Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004), 55–72.

⁶¹ Sharon Kinsella, "Cuties in Japan," in *Women, Media, and Consumption in Japan* (University of Hawaii Press, 1995), 220-221.

⁶² Yano, "Kitty Litter," 56.

⁶³ Christine Reiko Yano, *Pink Globalization: Hello Kittys Trek across the Pacific* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 58.

Hello Kitty, created by the Sanrio company in the 1970s, became the central icon of *kawaii* culture in this cultural climate, allowing women to be ambiguously at once “childlike” and “maternal”.⁶⁴ This in allowed Hello Kitty to have a multigenerational fan base, increasing its marketability. From products meant for the “girl child”, like lunch boxes and toys, to the devoted mother, in houseware items and stationery, and even to the budding sexuality of pubescence, with Hello Kitty tampons, condoms, and “female massagers”. Hello Kitty is so powerful a symbol that she is recognizable by her tilted bow or the outline of her ears alone. This proliferates the implied meaning of what the kitty represents in a cultural context and normalizes Asian female tropes. One defining feature of the Hello Kitty is the absence of a mouth, which Sanrio explains is because they want people to “project their own feelings onto the character.”⁶⁵ However, Hello Kitty’s “mouthlessness” is “often associated with the Asian (American) female stereotype as demure, quiet, passive”.⁶⁶ Hello Kitty is the ultimate symbol for *Kawaii* culture, portraying femininity, obedience, decency, yet playful and provocative. But by invoking a sense of “sentimental and maternal materialism” of wanting to own and protect *kawaii* items, it also subtly reinforces the opposite side of this femininity and obedience.⁶⁷ Dominance completes this complex power dynamic, fortifying the position of Asian women within the normalized racial hierarchy. “Cuteness” has long been used as a successful marketing technique because it causes empathetic and maternal responses especially in female consumers.⁶⁸ In Japan (and other Asian countries) this empathy towards the vulnerability of *kawaii* symbols is also mixed with the desire to identify with this sense of

⁶⁴ Sanrio company started out as the Yamanashi Silk Company in 1960, later expanded to the small gifts industry and created Hello Kitty in 1974.

“Company History: About Sanrio.” Sanrio. Accessed December 11, 2019.
https://www.sanrio.co.jp/english/corporate/about_s/history/.

⁶⁵ Rob Walker, *Buying In: the Secret Dialogue between What We Buy and Who We Are*. Random House, 2009.

⁶⁶ Tomoaki Morikawa, “Hello! Exploring the World of Japanese Americans through Hello Kitty.” *American Quarterly* 67, no. 4, (2015), 1217–1223, doi:10.1353/aq.2015.0079.

⁶⁷ Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (New York: New York University Press, 1996)

⁶⁸ Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989)

cuteness.⁶⁹ Thus, “kawaii represents a temporary state of abnegation” of one’s own identity and reality, while becoming what is expected of them, “the kawaii object that calls out for other’s people’s nurturance.”⁷⁰ The yearning dimension of belonging highlights the desire of humans to adhere to social norms⁷¹. The complexity of gender identity and stereotypes, especially when it intersects with race and sexuality, is amplified by humans need to belong. Hello Kitty’s popularity and sustainability through the decades is fed by this intricacy.

Model Minority

The sections above reveal the visual landscape in which Asian female identity exists. The Asian feminine qualities that have been exemplified in popular culture includes many faces; the innocent Hello Kitty or “Lotus Blossom”, the virtuous and devoted housewife, the strong and conniving “Dragon Lady”, and the sexy and desirable “whore with a heart of gold”. One might argue that these virtues are highly valued in Western culture, but it keeps Asian females firmly “in their place.”⁷² There has been a dramatic growth of Asian immigration in the middle and upper classes since the 1960s when the social climate at the time outwardly protested discrimination.⁷³ As a response to this anti-discrimination, “white scholars, political leaders, and journalists developed the model minority myth in order to allege that all Americans of colour could achieve the American dream... not by protesting discrimination... as African Americans and Mexican Americans were doing, but by working as ‘hard and quietly’ as [Asian] Americans supposedly did”⁷⁴. Considered to be high achievers by “pulling up their bootstraps”, Asian Americans

⁶⁹ Yano, *Pink*.

⁷⁰ Yano, *Pink*, 56.

⁷¹ Elspeth Probyn, *Outside Belongings* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2015)

⁷² Prasso, *Mystique*, 102.

⁷³ The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, signed by President Johnson, allowed educated middle-class immigrants to enter America.

⁷⁴ Rosalind S. Chou and Joe R. Feagin, *The Myth of the Model Minority: Asian Americans Facing Racism* (Boulder: Routledge, 2016), 15.

have since been placed closer to the top of the racial hierarchy by whites who are firmly at the top⁷⁵. As immigrants to a new country, not wishing to “rock the boat”, many Asian parents only see the short sighted “material benefits in being considered higher on the racial hierarchy”⁷⁶. Familial influences often make it difficult for Asians to escape from the bonds of “model minority”, which has many detrimental effects. During a study done by the National Coalition of Asian-Pacific American Community Development between 2008-2009⁷⁷, Asian Americans have seen a 38 percent increase in poverty, while general poverty amongst the various races observed, only grew by 27 percent, and African American poverty only grew by 20 percent. It is interesting to note that of this 38 percent, 60 percent of these Asian Americans are born in the United States⁷⁸. Another study done during this period showed that Asian Americans were faced with a disproportionately high rate of unemployment when compared to their racial counterparts, and this was particularly true in the “highly educated group” with undergraduate degrees⁷⁹. It is evident that “model minority” trope contradicts facts, but facts rarely matter when this narrative is maintained by social perceptions and is utilized as a method of discipline.

⁷⁵ Chou and Feagin, *Myth*.

⁷⁶ Chou, *Sexual Politics*, 186.

⁷⁷ “The Great Recession” lasted from December 2007 to June 2009.

Robert Rich, “The Great Recession,” Federal Reserve History, accessed December 12, 2019, https://www.federalreservehistory.org/essays/great_recession_of_200709

⁷⁸ “Spotlight: Asian American and Pacific Islander Poverty,” National CAPACD, accessed August 16, 2017, <https://www.nationalcapacd.org/data-research/spotlight-asian-american-pacific-islander-poverty/>

⁷⁹ Marlene Kim, “Unfairly Disadvantaged?: Asian Americans and Unemployment during and after the Great Recession (2007–10),” Economic Policy Institute, accessed December 12, 2019, <https://www.epi.org/public>

SECTION IV: CONTINUAL POWER OF CONTROLLING IMAGES

“If I like their race, how can that be racist?” – Jerry Seinfeld (1994)

The Theory of Oppression

In the “colour blindness” era of contemporary society, where the “colour blindness” is meant to support “anti-racism” practices, the results often have opposite effects. “[Sociologists] argue that as the mechanisms that reproduce racial inequality have become more covert and obscure than they were during the era of open, legal segregation, the language of explicit racism has given way to a discourse of colorblindness... they fear that the refusal to take public note of race actually allows people to ignore manifestations of persistent discrimination.”⁸⁰ According to Patricia Hill Collins, an American academic specializing in race and gender, oppression and power succeeds through a complex “matrix of domination”⁸¹ (later termed as intersectionality) that is “structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal.”⁸² The structural aspect of power refers to “large-scale, interlocking social institutions”, which includes legal systems, labour markets, and educational organizations.⁸³ The disciplinary aspect of power refers to how these social structures condition its people to obey the rules (in this case the racial hierarchy) and codes of conduct (the way Asian Americans are perceived and how they should act within this racial framework). Discipline with regards to racial constructs, seem not only to involve punishment but a system of rewards and positive reinforcements. The idea of “model minority” becomes a constraint in which Asian Americans strive to live up to. Being as “near white” as possible in the eyes of

⁸⁰ Adia Harvey Wingfield, “If You Don't See Race, How Can You See Racial Inequality?” *The Atlantic*, September 15, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/09/color-blindness-is-counterproductive/405037/>

⁸¹ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015)

⁸² Chou, *Sexual Politics*, 14.

⁸³ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*.

the system allows them to reap some of the systemic advantages whites have access to. Thus, control is just as much externally enforced as it is internally reaffirmed. According to Gramsci, hegemonic ideologies are achieved and maintained by coercing the oppressed into subservience either with force or by creating a narrative that causes the oppressed to understand their situation is normative and common sense.⁸⁴ History, political systems, home culture, and popular culture work hand in hand in reinforcing hegemonic ideals of racism, classism, and (hetero)sexism. Visual culture and normative belonging become the coercive force that hold the other domains of power in place. The interpersonal element represents day to day practice, though a “microlevel of agency”⁸⁵ exist at this level, resistance to these hegemonic ideals is difficult because they are “often so pervasive that it is difficult to conceptualize alternatives to them.”⁸⁶ Many feminist scholars like Karen Pyke, Denise Johnson, and R. W. Connel, to name a few, have all theorized that there exist a hierarchy of femininity. Connel describes white, heterosexual, middle class women as “emphasized femininity” and this perpetuates the idea that some women are superior to others.⁸⁷ Pyke and Johnson argue that “white women are constructed as monolithically self-confident, independent, assertive, and successful... same ruling traits associated with hegemonic masculinity” and that hegemonic femininity “serves as a handmaiden to hegemonic masculinity.”⁸⁸ When the same narrative is supported by peers, authority figures like parents, and popular culture, it becomes much more difficult to create a new definition for the Asian female self.

⁸⁴ Gramsci et al., *Americanism and Fordism*, 1971.

⁸⁵ Chou, *Sexual Politics*, 14.

⁸⁶ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 284.

⁸⁷ Raewyn Connell, *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009)

⁸⁸ *Ibid*

Pressure on the Home Front

The social norms and home cultures that exist in the homeland of many Asian American immigrant parents play a role in reinforcing heteronormative gender ideals and hierarchy. The concept of filial piety (孝) is the core foundational principle within the hierarchy of Chinese families. As a central value within Confucius's teachings, this became a compulsory moral obligation in Chinese society but also served to legitimize the Chinese patrilineal, patrilocal, and patriarchal family system.⁸⁹ Filial piety is an important concept which contributes to how Asian American females are coerced into accepting social expectations and stereotypes that are set by their western upbringing. From the perspective of immigrant parents, seeing the existing negative stereotypes and discrimination in their new foreign home, protecting their children, and ensuring they have a comfortable future became a driving force to live up to the "model minority" myth. With education and hard work seen as the ultimate "equalizer" in these new surroundings, parents exerted immense pressure on their children to do well academically.⁹⁰ Even when faced with overt cases of racism, Asian American parents persuade their children to remain docile to not "rock the boat."⁹¹

Gender socialization adds another level of complexity to Asian American children's upbringing, specifically for females. Gender, as feminist philosopher Judith Butler proposes, "[is] a construction that conceals its genesis, the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural functions."⁹² Balancing the old world with the new, Asian immigrants not only reinforce patriarchal and heteronormative ideals of their past but also absorb racial and gender norms of their new surroundings. Asian female success is defined not only by their academic achievement, but their ability to secure a comfortable future through reifying compulsory heterosexuality and attracting a

⁸⁹ Aris Teon, "Filial Piety (孝) in Chinese Culture," *The Greater China Journal*, March 12, 2019, <https://china-journal.org/2016/03/14/filial-piety-in-chinese-culture/>

⁹⁰ Chou and Feagin, *Myth*, 15.

⁹¹ Chou and Feagin, *Myth*, VIII.

⁹² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2006)

husband⁹³. The toxic mixture of living up to the model minority myth and striving for the American dream has also reinforced the Western ideals of beauty. “Appearing less Asian” becomes an important part of Asian American female body image, especially at points where Western standards of beauty intersect with Asian home cultural views. White characteristics like pale skin, double eye lids, and a “more obtuse nasofrontal angle” are all preferred by Asian women.⁹⁴ The partiality to white skin in Asian culture has fueled a multi-million-dollar Global Skin Lightening Products Market, according to studies done by Statistics MRC and is expected to double in the next ten years.⁹⁵ This obsession is not only driven by the need to assimilate to white standards of beauty but also the stereotype in Asian culture that farmers and labourers that work mainly outdoors are darker, thus associating white skin with wealth and status. The most common cosmetic procedures for Asian females are eyelid surgery, nose reshaping, and breast augmentation, all of which aim to Anglicize Asian facial and body features.⁹⁶ Homi Bhabha speaks of “colonial mimicry” as “an injunction for the colonized to assimilate to colonial standards but that the injunction is in effect an impossible one since the colonized, by virtue of their racial difference, will always fail in their mimicry.”⁹⁷ Encouraged by Asian parents and their “home culture” to participate in surgical procedures to assimilate to “whiteness”, make drastic means of physical manipulation common practice. Falling into the constraints of western beauty illustrates how Asians play an active role in perpetuating social norms and the racial hierarchy they are subjected to.

⁹³ Chou, *Sexual Politics*, 31.

⁹⁴ Y. Gao et al., “Comparison of Aesthetic Facial Criteria between Caucasian and East Asian Female Populations: An Esthetic Surgeon's Perspective,” *Asian Journal of Surgery* (September 11, 2016), <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1015958416301798>

⁹⁵ Statistics Market Research Consulting Pvt Ltd, “Global Skin Lightening Products Market Is Expected to Reach \$8011.17 Million by 2026,” PR Newswire: press release distribution, targeting, monitoring and marketing, August 26, 2019, <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/global-skin-lightening-products-market-is-expected-to-reach-8011-17-million-by-2026--300906859.html>

⁹⁶ Chou and Feagin, *Myth*, 152.

⁹⁷ Homi Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” *October* 28 (1984): 125-133, <https://doi.org/10.2307/778467>

The Cost of Assimilation

The act of assimilation can be broken down to two distinct parts, an element of comparison and one of mimicry. Comparison is achieved through accepting social norms and evaluating where one stands with regards to these standards. Influenced by the need to belong, Asian American females strive hard to achieve societal expectations, only to realize they are “set up” for failure. Assimilating to the norms created by a racialized hierarchy will always end in failure simply due to inherent racial difference, as Bhabha points out. Added to this failure is the home culture expectation of plurality, to maintain their minority culture of differences.⁹⁸ It becomes an everyday psychic labour of constant measurement, approximation, and inadequacy that then “reconfirms the stigmatism attached to minoritized individuals.”⁹⁹ It is interesting to note that it is often the those “nearest to white” or those who have achieved “model minority” that are most prone to constant comparison and anxiety as they are acutely aware of anything deviating from social norms.¹⁰⁰ The problem with assimilation is that there is a sense of self loss at every point of mimicry, making individual Asian female identity harder to forge and maintain. The cyclical nature of acculturation reconfirms the superiority of the dominate race within the hierarchy, but this is only one side of the problem because it does not account for the everyday incorporation and internalization of failures. The National Alliance on Mental Illness data show that of all racial, ethnic, or gender groups, Asian American girls have the highest rate of exhibiting symptoms of depression.¹⁰¹ Research also shows that in the population of females between ages fifteen to twenty-

⁹⁸ Anne Anlin. Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation and Hidden Grief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 69.

⁹⁹ Chang, *Melancholy*, 81.

¹⁰⁰ “Stereotype threat” refers to how minorities are scared to do the things that will some how confirm a negative stereotype in combination with the anxiety of being consistently looked at through the lens of those stereotypes. Claude M. Steele, “Thin Ice: Stereotype Threat and Black College Students,” *The Atlantic*, August 1, 1999, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1999/08/thin-ice-stereotype-threat-and-black-college-students/304663/>

¹⁰¹ Jei Africa and Majose Carrasco, “Asian American and Pacific Islander Mental Health,” February 2011.

four, Asian Americans have the highest suicide rate.¹⁰² There is limited research in this topic but there are commentators that blame these alarming rates solely on the pressure they feel from their “home culture” where success is measured by academic/workplace achievements.¹⁰³ This assumption fails to address the reality of the everyday discrimination Asian Americans face that is not covert, and not always white imposed. The problem is intensified because the Asian American females that are brave enough to go against the cultural stigmatism of mental health and seek help are often met with white counselors who have little understanding of the immense pressures they face to succeed as “model minorities.”¹⁰⁴ The counselors have a hard time relating to the pressures Asian American females feel because they too have been ingrained in years of the “model minority” myth associated with it. Faced with an overwhelming sense of “just get over it”, “pull up your bootstraps”, and “you’re Asian (insert positive Asian race-ism), it’s not that bad” from both home front and society, Asian America females are at the mercy of the “cultural attachment to coercive normality.”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² Eliza Noh, “Asian American Women and Suicide,” *Women & Therapy* 30, no. 3-4 (2007): 87-107, https://doi.org/10.1300/j015v30n03_08

¹⁰³ Elizabeth Cohen, “Push to Achieve Tied to Suicide in Asian-American Women,” *CNN (Cable News Network)*, accessed December 12, 2019, <http://www.cnn.com/2007/HEALTH/05/16/asian.suicides/>

¹⁰⁴ Chou and Feagin, *Myth*, 120.

¹⁰⁵ Cheng, *Melancholy*, 81.

SECTION V: ART AS A POINT OF RECONCILIATION AND HARM REDUCTION

“Stereotype is not a false representation but rather an arrested representation of a changing reality” –

Trinh T. Minh-ha¹⁰⁶

Asian American females, with no one to turn to either internally within their family nor externally in their community, often individualize and internalize discrimination and the stress resulting from social expectations and stereotypes. Whether it be fear of “rocking the boat”, cultural stigmatism, or filial piety, “most lessons from discriminatory incidents do not pass on to family members and friends”, making a counter narrative hard to create and even more difficult to sustain. African Americans, “with nearly four centuries of experience with systemic racism, as well as a stronger resistance culture and counter-framing that enables them to better resist the racial hierarchy”, when compared with Asian Americans.¹⁰⁷ An effective means of developing this counter narrative is to share information about accumulating discrimination from one generation to another, and to educate others about the reality of Asian tropes and controlling images.

Contemporary art has been used by artists as a form of social commentary and may also be a way to help shape the counter narrative in all racial groups. An example of this is Kara Walker, an African American artist known for her works which “complicate traditional narratives of power and repression”¹⁰⁸. Her work, *A Subtlety or the Marvelous Sugar Baby*, features a large-scale sugar sphinx exaggerated with black female stereotypes and a procession of black boy attendants made of molasses installed in the Brooklyn’s legendary Domino Sugar factory. This work is meant to invoke a sense of

¹⁰⁶ Chen, “*Speaking Nearby*,” 82-91.

¹⁰⁷ Chou and Feagin, *Myth*, 34.

¹⁰⁸ “Curatorial Statement - Kara Walker,” Creative Time, accessed December 12, 2019, <http://creativetime.org/projects/karawalker/curatorial-statement/>

“giddy discomfort”, treading between “both racist objectifications and strangely cute and compelling”, reminding the audience of not only its overconsumption of sugar but also the historical involvement of the sugar industry in the slave trade.¹⁰⁹ “Her work leads viewers to a critical understanding of the past while also proposing an examination of contemporary racial and gender stereotypes,” and viewers fall comfortably into racial tropes and colonial performances in their interactions with the installation.¹¹⁰ Walker uses art not only as a method of social commentary, but as a palatable way to inspire conversations about uncomfortable subjects like race, gender, heteronormativity, and hegemony. Using everyday objects and universally recognized symbols specific to race, she calls attention to the way symbols subtly shape and reinforce systemic oppression and educates their audiences through exposure and conversation.

In today’s “colourless society”, where it is has become a social faux pas for the public to see race, we fall into the danger of people hiding behind this “raceless society” ideology, allowing them to turn a blind eye to the realities of systemic oppression. Placed in a racial hierarchy as the “model minority” by the oppressor, Asian Americans are seen to have “escaped” racial tension due to their perceived success or are paraded as “poster children” and tokens of assimilation, making discrimination even more covert and harder to break away from. It is only through examining the historical context of Asian female stereotypes and understanding our role in perpetuating them, which allows Asian females to break free from conformity. My work satirically uses recognizable symbols of *Kawaii* culture and girly childhood memories and trinkets to inspire audiences to look beyond the cuteness, with the hopes that they realize the absurdity of the reality in which I exist because of the duality in my upbringing. By manipulating mass produced mould made objects with racial and gender connotations, like Hello Kitty, I can reorient, redirect, and reframe the societal prescribed framework for Asian American females. My

¹⁰⁹ “Kara Walker.”

¹¹⁰ “Kara Walker,” Walker Art Center, accessed December 12, 2019, <https://walkerart.org/collections/artists/kara-walker>

work invokes a simultaneous feeling of discomfort and alluring attraction to cuteness, which is mirrored in the dualistic properties of glass, fragile yet practical, and the contradictions I felt growing up in a Western society, while rooted in my Chinese heritage. Ultimately, I view my work as a nostalgic and whimsical, yet mischievous way to initiate conversation about the continual existence of an inherent system of advantages and disadvantages within society. Sparking conversation about where women, particularly women of colour, are placed within this socially prescribed racial framework, in hopes of “unarresting” the representation of the changing reality of Asian American females.

Unbearable Wearable Series

Kitty Constraints and Centrefold Shoot

From the stories of Marco Polo’s adventures in the East, to late nineteenth century European colonialism, the West has always hypersexualized females of the “Orient”. The controlling images of Asian women from the East are enigmatic, hypersexualized, exotic, and sexually available for white men to exploit for the right price. As a result of the various laws created by the American government throughout its history, these controlling images became systemically sanctioned and normalized. *Kitty Constraints* is a piece inspired by the Atlanta massage parlor shootings of 2021, where a young white man shot and killed eight people, six of which were Asian females. The collars, existing in both plastic and glass, are marked with Hello Kitty imagery to dance the line of playful innocence and provocative kink. I wanted the viewers to feel a sense of discomfort as they come to the realization that these controlling images of Asian females follow us from childhood to adulthood as we attempt to navigate our own identity and sexuality. My bold centrefold photoshoot with the *Kitty Constraints*, blatantly confronts the unfortunate reality of having to debate whether these shooting specifically targeting Asian women were motivated by sexuality or racially driven. Only proving society continues to turn a blind eye at the intersectional realities of being an Asian female in America. I wish to highlight the detrimental

effects of western society's hyper-sexualization of Asian female minorities through these intense and provocative photos. It is important that we realize the controlling images attributed to Asian females are both internally and externally enforced. The need for social belonging invisibly chains us to these images in tangible ways. The collar was specifically designed to leave impermanent impressions on the neck around the area that houses the vocal cords. These imprints endure even though the impressions fade after removal. Even when we are empowered to remove these bonds and find our own identity to escape these bindings, the trauma of these experiences leaves scars we have to endure.

A social remembrance of this collective trauma, according to Paul Ricoeur, becomes an important part of processing and mourning racialized experiences to create a counter narrative.¹¹¹ Asian American families, however, often lack this effective means of passing on collective memories.¹¹² Because of their position as “model minorities” and the pan-Asian cultural concept of filial piety, Asian immigrants are taught not to “rock the boat”. Thus, the pain and stress of discrimination remain individualized and internalized instead of being passed on as collective experiences. This weight makes it harder not only to process this racism, but more importantly, to resist the realities of the racial hierarchy. Internalizing racial trauma then contributes to the normalization of the constrictive stereotypical images prescribed to Asian females. While the idea of “model minorities” on the surface may seem safe, it locks us into a power dynamic that plays into white supremacy and patriarchy. Playing with controlling images in pop culture, I wanted to document the relationship that Asian women have with white racial hierarchy. With this photo series, I want to encourage a discourse about the importance of collective memory because through documentation, remembrance, and sharing, we can come to understand the of the residual effects of this history and create a counter narrative to break free of these social structures.

¹¹¹ Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

¹¹² Chou and Feagin, *Myth*.

Gilded Memories Interactive Series

My Little GroomMe line

The first demonstration of gender specification happens during early childhood when social-environmental analysis in children relies primarily on parental influence and their predefined surroundings. Toys are an integral part of childhood development, but also serve as a symbol of cultural and gender expectation by dictating play behaviour. This series aims to address the visual cues, specifically in gender-specific toys, which function as a part of a wider system to maintain power within an androcentric social structure. “Hair play” is a toy marketing technique distinct to female gender-specific toys. By having brushable hair, the toy aims to trigger an empathic and motherly response from female consumers. This sentimental sympathy has become so entangled with societal views of morality that it effectively neutralizes the reality that these performative actions produce and sustain the naturalization of white racial hierarchy. The *My Little GroomMe* line aims to address the early visual cues in childhood toys that “marks the sublimation of aggression [male social dominance] into sympathetic desire”¹¹³. As we normalize the desire to groom our playthings, we women are being groomed to fulfil a role set out by a male dominated society to keep us in our place as caretakers and nurturers. All the ponies in the series are dressed with human hair. It is interesting to note that human hair extensions are often sourced from Asian countries because our hair type is stronger and can withstand the chemical processing required to dye and set the hair to the consumer’s needs. It is ironic that in most Asian cultures, hair is tied longevity and prosperity, making the cutting of hair taboo. The hair is shed to uphold an unrealistic standard of beauty dictated by Western culture because the need for financial stability overpowers these traditions. This is the ugly reality of global capitalism and the way the West exploits extractive industries in the East.

¹¹³ Lori Merish, *Sentimental Materialism Gender, Commodity Culture, and Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), p.3.

The *Always with Wings* line is a tongue and cheek response to 90's menstruation product advertisements. The selling point of these products glorified the "freedom" the user would experience, all the while supporting an undertone of shame related to getting your period. Hide mensuration at all costs because society associates it with the unclean. This natural process which marks when a girl comes of age and becomes a woman is also tied with a nonsensical power that spoils food, brings about misfortune, and conjures natural disasters.¹¹⁴ From a very young age we are taught this shame to control the power that brings forth life. Thus, the lead crystal glass 'wings' serves as a metaphor for freedom, but this freedom is contained and controlled in a closed patriarchal system and no real liberation is possible beyond a glossy and fragile façade.

Kitty Consumables Series

Kitty Pop, Fall in Line, Chalice and Ciborium Set (ft. In Kitty We Trust)

The binary construct of consumer culture shapes all gendered identities through mass media influences. It is also the primary method by which racialized patriarchy defines, imposes, and enforces femininity. The sentimental narratives used to promote female consumption subtly define a paternalistic role, which simultaneously allows the consumer to be the caretaker and the voluntary dependent. By dangling a false sense of ownership, power, and autonomy, mass culture manipulates females to fall in line with normalized political and social hierarchies. "Commodity capitalism has been identified as a (if not *the*) principal material expression of American civic culture and 'freedom'", and immigrants, needing to assimilate, register this relationship as the physical embodiment of the Americanization and thus Westernization.¹¹⁵ All the pieces in the *Kitty Consumables Series* engage with

¹¹⁴ Sady Doyle, *Dead Blonds and Bad Mothers: Monstrosity, Patriarchy, and the Fear of Female Power*. (Brooklyn: Melville House Publishing, 2019), 9.

¹¹⁵ Lori Merish, *Sentimental Materialism Gender, Commodity Culture, and Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 12.

addiction. Dependency on sugar, on medication, and on religion are all examples of how society choose to consume things without questioning the effects. Overconsumption and addiction are at the heart of capitalism and colonization and feed our unconscious desires to support these systems because they are a quick fix. At every stage of womanhood (child, maiden, crone), regardless of culture, there are clearly defined roles and behaviours prescribed by society, disguised as a logical and naturalized basis of civility. The boundaries these performative gender scripts create are amplified when class, race, and culture intersect. *Kitty Pops* began with my fascination with the psychology behind societal ties of oral fixation and female sexuality. As the audience consumes the candy ring pops, they are forced to invest the time in reflecting on where the line between innocence and vulnerability blur with sexuality, especially when it comes to Asian women. The three hypersexualized renditions of Hello Kitty are a satirical critique on the Confucius' phrase “非禮勿視, 非禮勿聽, 非禮勿言, 非禮勿動” (Look not at what is contrary to propriety; listen not to what is contrary to propriety; speak not what is contrary to propriety; make no movement which is contrary to propriety), which later influenced the 17th century carving of the iconic three wise monkeys by Hidari Jingaro and the popular maxim “see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil”. *Fall In Line* is a commentary on how social beings consume these indoctrinations of femininity. If the Kitty Pops represent childhood stages of femininity, Fall in Line sets the tone for how normalized gender roles are enforced at the maiden stage. The “right” kind of femininity serves as prescribed medicine which remedies nonconformity. When we habitually enact culturally prescribed ideologies, we become addicted and blind to the patriarchal structures that confine us. There is a long history of controlling images surrounding old women, Crones for a lack of a better term, who live on the outer boundaries of society. They are old and ugly or too pretty and sexual, with knowledge or assets beyond societal expectations that are labeled witches or dragon ladies, and something to fear. These women with independent social or economic power are negatively generalized into being conniving and ruthless, but men have always exercised their power over women in this way. Patriarchy is not just a systemic

structure, but rather a foundational spirit that manifests itself in sexist ideology and misogynistic social control. Like religion, patriarchy uses artificially created rituals, tools, and rules to control, discipline, and subdue their female subjects. The *Chalice and Ciborium set with In Kitty We Trust*, denotes the way society consumes indoctrinations of femininity. Mass culture ritualistically conforms to societally instituted ideologies of femininity in the same way that it absorbs religious beliefs because it provides a sense of comfort and purpose. Through conforming to these doctrines, we are as much sheep as we are lambs.

Mirage of Power Series

Weapons of Mass Conditioning¹¹⁶

“Female monstrosity is threaded throughout every myth ... they always speak to the qualities men find most threatening in women; beauty, intelligence, anger, ambition ... women have always been monsters, too, in the minds of great men, in philosophy, medicine, and psychology...”¹¹⁷ These monsters often inspire fear, and this fear manifests itself into the society’s need to control us. A cage, after all, keeps women confined and protected, but also protects the world from us. The *Weapons of Mass Conditioning* piece symbolizes this irrational fear and the false sense of power attributed to our monstrosity. It is ironic that controlling images of Asian women are often weak and servile, but when we do not fit nicely into these images, we are often feared as cunning and deceitful. But like these ornate glass daggers, we are not dangerous, until you break us. The objects themselves are inherently phallic and framed in a way to contextualize them as trophies. An interesting habit in contemporary culture, often portrayed in mass media, is the West’s obsession with collecting (appropriating) “Asian artifacts”, from katanas on a mantle to red paper lanterns in a hipster bedroom. These daggers are a satirical nod

¹¹⁶ On-going collaboration with Hoseok Youn.

¹¹⁷ Doyle, *Dead Blondes and Bad Mothers*, xi-xii.

to this bizarre practice. When we see white people do this, we often laugh (cynically) because we can quickly identify this behaviour as brand of senseless appropriation and the hundreds of years of colonization that is implied with this ability to take without understanding. I choose an iconic florescent pink to serve as a backdrop to frame these weapons to suggest the tacky and repulsive way in which society gender specific colours and relate it to various controlling images, most of which dance uncomfortably between playfulness and sexuality. Patriarchy is sold as “natural” and normal, but male dominance is an illusion and inherently unsustainable. We are threatened and coerced through these normalizations to stay within the confines set for us. When we embrace the monsters they have created and own the power they attribute as a reason to fear us, we can destroy the gilded cage they have placed us in for so long.

SECTION VI: CONCLUSION

After three long years of living the reality of all the things I speak about in my artwork, I think of a particular event that really sums up why I think my work is so critical and relevant during this moment in history, when Asian hate crimes are all over the news. I took a class of university art students I teach to see my thesis exhibit and observed their reaction. All the female identifying students understood my work instantly. The few women of colour in the class approached me and told me that not only did they identify with my work, but that it made them sad. I realized they were sad because they too understood the ridiculousness of my reality and that my experiences validated their own. The white male students made comments like “oh that’s cool” or “why hello kitty?”, and even when I explained to them why I choose those specific icons they only have a superficial understanding of my artistic choices. On some level, I excuse their reaction because the system their ancestors created has made it so they would never experience the world as we do. I can only hope that they eventually learn enough empathy to accept the reality of other people’s struggles and that in doing so it does not diminish their own. But I am not here to change the world, I am not so arrogant to think that I can. To me, it is more important that my work speaks to other women of colour. When you spend too long in a world that tells women of colour that standing up for yourself is overreacting and pointing out injustices is being oversensitive, you start to gas light yourself into believing it. My work serves as the voice which confirms our shared experiences and validate our cynical laughter and collective eyeroll. WE ARENT CRAZY, YOU ARE...

mic drop

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