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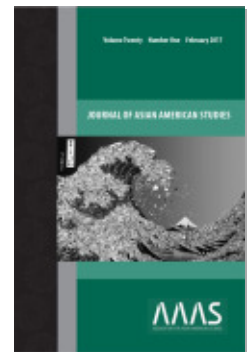
Whitewashing Yellow Futures in *Ex Machina* , *Cloud Atlas* ,
and *Advantageous* : Gender, Labor, and Technology in Sci-fi
Film

LeiLani Nishime

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WHITEWASHING YELLOW FUTURES IN *EX MACHINA*, *CLOUD ATLAS*, AND *ADVANTAGEOUS*

Gender, Labor, and Technology in Sci-fi Film

Leilani Nishime

ABSTRACT. This article examines racial transformation in three recent science films within the context of the entertainment industry practice of whitewashing Asian characters. It argues that the shift from yellowface to whitewashing in mainstream cinema manages anxieties about highly gendered transpacific labor migration under globalization. *Cloud Atlas* and *Ex Machina* portray a social logic that treats racialized bodies as prosthetic selves—disposable laboring avatars that inhibit white male subjectivity and must be abandoned for white females to transcend social barriers. *Advantageous* returns to these same themes, but, by centering the subjectivity of its Asian female lead, demonstrates the true costs of fantasies of a whitewashed future.

As the spate of online chatter about the whitewashing of Asian characters in the films *Ghost in the Shell* and *Doctor Strange* reached its peak in 2016, the discussion recalled similar outrage over other examples of Asian characters being transformed into white ones.¹ Examples include bio-pics such as *Lords of Dogtown* (2005), *21* (2008), and *Extraordinary Measures* (2010) and cartoon adaptations such as *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (2010). This last example spawned a popular website that coined the term “racebending” to describe a whole host of racially egregious representations including highly stereotyped and yellowface performance.

Merging multiple phenomena under the banner of racebending helps to highlight the convergence of popular Asian racial masquerades

and heightened concerns about globalization. However, smoothing over the distinctions between yellowface and whitewashing also obscures the shifts in U.S. narratives of globalization, transpacific labor migration, and technology that facilitated the move from one form of dominant (non) representation to another. Asian American scholars have convincingly rooted yellowface performances—where white actors are made up to play Asian characters—in the erotics of Asian difference.² The undertheorized practice of whitewashing, I argue, is indebted to a more ambivalent story of racial progress enacted through the transformation of Asian bodies into white ones, echoing shifts in both the rhetorics and practices of global labor migration. The prevalence of whitewashing enables science fiction films to imagine future technologies while disavowing the unequal transpacific labor practices that underwrite the production of those future technologies.

The case of *Doctor Strange* vividly illustrates the imbrication of whitewashing with narratives of racial uplift and globalization. In the wake of media protests, the studio released a statement arguing that their casting choices were protecting the sensibilities of their audiences. In the original comic on which the movie is based, the character of the Ancient One, a Tibetan man, was too steeped in outdated exotic stereotypes according to Marvel Comics and had to be altered for contemporary viewers.³ C. Robert Cargil, one of the screenwriters, also cited political reasons for the change, arguing that the original setting of Tibet would offend Chinese viewers and might result in a ban on the film and a loss of the lucrative Chinese market. In response to these forces, producers cast the white actress Tilda Swinton, a choice celebrated by fans as a symbol of gendered progress.⁴

The studio's public statements frame whitewashing as a corrective to the historical injuries of stereotyping and as a response to the growing influence of Asian markets. Within that frame, the studio can promote itself as an agent for social change by transforming an Asian stereotype into an empowered white woman to move the audience past racist representations and by acknowledging the power of Asian audiences. While this example might be noteworthy for the way in which Marvel publicly and explicitly defended its actions, the logics of the studio's argument circulates widely in everyday discourses of race. More disturbing still is the persistent and pernicious linking of whitewashing to stories of racial progress so that imagining a nonracist future means imagining a white future.

In *Doctor Strange* and so many other instances of whitewashing, filmmakers replace bodies marked as Asian with ones marked as white through casting practices. Enabled by the genre of science fiction, the films analyzed here—*Cloud Atlas* (2012), *Ex Machina* (2015), and the less widely distributed *Advantageous* (2015)—build the process of whitewashing right into the film

itself, giving audiences front-row seats to the suturing of whitewashing to liberal notions of globalization and the promise of future technologies. The inclusion of both Asian female characters and the practice of a variety of whitewashed performances makes this cluster of films a key moment of cultural convergence. While high-tech visual culture frequently features Asians as signifiers of what Jane Park calls a “yellow future,”⁵ these movies include ancillary Asian female characters as more than techno-orientalist window dressing. In these three films we encounter future worlds where technologies make it possible to replace biological bodies with synthetic ones. Through the technologically enabled magic of racial transformation—specifically Asian women becoming white women—we learn which bodies attain subjecthood and which are destined to be used and discarded. The racial flexibility promised by a disembodied cybernetic future works to empower the films’ white stars, but delivers a distinctively different message for its secondary Asian female characters. In the end, both *Cloud Atlas* and *Ex Machina* portray a social logic that treats racialized bodies as prosthetic selves—disposable avatars that inhibit young white male subjectivity and must be abandoned for white females to transcend social barriers.

The movies construct their story lines around technological innovation and, crucially, the shifts in labor that accompany those innovations. In these films, the automation of labor made possible through breakthroughs in robotics (*Ex Machina*) and bio-technologies (*Cloud Atlas* and *Advantageous*) promises to free (some of) us from our bodily limits. However, as Walter Liu argues, the primary beneficiaries of a technologically enhanced future have not yet been determined. That uncertainty gives rise to “anxious iterations of the repetitive, robotic, and reproductive” in images of China that express “contestation over technological modernity and who might best achieve (or represent) it.”⁶ In these films, Asian characters are not only robotic, they are robots. They are not only repetitively similar, but continuously reproduced as clones and robots who provide low-status labor. The films reconcile the contradictions between technology’s promise of high-status, disembodied labor and the perpetuation of low-status, embodied, “unskilled” labor under globalization by racializing, gendering, and therefore naturalizing labor stratification. Asian female bodies are figured as the product rather than the producers of technology, built to fulfill their role as devalued service laborers in the globalized future.

Even as the films depict its female characters as low-wage service workers, their spectacular focus on future technology diverts attention away from current labor practices predicated on the exploitation and vulnerability of Asian workers, especially the hyper-exploitation of Asian female domestic laborers. Instead, *Ex Machina* and *Cloud Atlas* focus on how

the damaged psychology of its white male stars betoken the “true” cost of labor transformed through technology and on the liberatory possibilities of new technologies for white females. They perform this sleight of hand by centering the perspective of their white male and female protagonists, de-emphasizing the narratives of Asian female exploitation to focus on stories of, albeit limited, white female empowerment.

I position *Advantageous* as a contrast to *Ex Machina* and *Cloud Atlas* not because it escapes those fears or offers an alternative narrative of Asian female empowerment but because it repeats the same tropes, with the same logic. However, unlike the other films, *Advantageous* allows us to feel the story, to understand racial transformation on an affective register—so the narrative may be the same but the story it tells is not. As Rachel Lee has argued, Asian Americanist critique has long been concerned with the not-quite-human, and it is particularly well positioned to help us understand anxieties about the biological in an era when bodies are increasingly understood in information and posthuman terms.⁷ By reading *Advantageous*, an independent Asian American-written and -produced film, as a popular critique of the two mainstream Hollywood films, we can recognize the widely distributed story lines of *Ex Machina* and *Cloud Atlas* as expressions of broader cultural fears of Asian global migration and technological advancement and whitewashing as an attempt to assuage those fears.

Whitewashing can be condemned for unfairly depriving Asian actors of film roles and for perpetuating the invisibility of Asians in U.S. media. Many protesting anti-Asian casting practices have also denounced Hollywood’s assumption that audiences could not accept Asian stars. However, the critique of whitewashing must also extend to the less obvious beliefs that subtend its practice. Instead of reading whitewashing as primarily bad representation or exclusionary practice,⁸ these films show us its social function as a tool to soothe concerns about bodily technologies and global labor through the “happy ending” of racial transformation. Ultimately, the devaluation of Asian female bodies and the denial of their subjective experiences underwrite these fantasies of new synthetic selves and rewrite racial erasure as a story of a utopic deracinated future.

Asian Racial Masquerade from Yellowface to Whitewashing

While whitewashing preoccupies much of the popular discussion of Asian representation in the United States, those discussions are frequently disconnected from the robust theoretical literature on yellowface performance, limiting our ability to recognize the links between contemporary racial

masquerade and transpacific labor. Asian American scholars have traced the rise of yellowface performance as a response to waves of Chinese immigration in the mid-1800s and the global recessions of the late 1800s.⁹ White labor groups scapegoated Chinese immigrants, simultaneously securing their whiteness, citizenship, and place on the labor hierarchy. They argued that Chinese people and culture were so distinctly alien that they were incapable of becoming citizens. Furthermore, their servile nature and inhuman ability to withstand hardship devalued labor itself and drove down wages. During the same period that Chinese people were the target of a host of legal restrictions, they were also the featured stars of highly popular musical and stage productions, roles almost exclusively performed by white actors in yellowface. Performance theorists Josephine Lee and Karen Shimakawa argue the allure of yellowface resides in the incommensurate gap between the performed race and the body behind it.¹⁰ The practice of yellowface performance, then, explains the seeming contradiction between the hunger for Chinese representation on stage and the fight to bar the Chinese immigration off stage. The audience's pleasure in the performance relies on the same discourses of absolute alterity that drove anti-Chinese labor movements. The practice of yellowface became a fetish, according to Sean Metzger's study of late nineteenth-century performance, that "substitutes for and conceals" racialized immigration fears.¹¹

Yellowface performance served a function beyond reinforcing racial distinctions. It also allowed audiences to treat Asian people and cultures as consumable signs, detached from history and power. In reference to critical praise for Jonathan Pryce's infamous yellowface performance in Broadway's *Miss Saigon*, Shimakawa writes, "The appeal of Pryce's performance, these reviews suggest, is not his ability to 'fool' audiences that he is raced Asian or Eurasian; rather, what is pleasureable is seeing the marking of (non-white, non U.S. American) race, ethnicity, sexuality, and nationality rendered as disembodied aesthetic spectacle."¹² This function of yellowface—to detach race, ethnicity, and sexuality from bodies—remained constant as racial masquerade shifted in the wake of Asia's economic rise.

While yellow peril images never disappeared completely, by the 1980s model minority stereotypes had surpassed them in mass media, and concerns about Asia as a military threat were largely replaced by fears that they were becoming an economic threat. So, too, did the practice of yellowface decline in frequency and intensity. Instead, popular narratives responded to anxieties about a dawning Asian Century with techno-orientalist representations of an Asian future.¹³ In the late twentieth-century cyber punk texts examined by Lisa Nakamura and Jane Park, the disembodied spectacle identified by Shimakawa becomes unmoored from particular bodies.¹⁴

Rather, they primarily appear as aesthetic traces or what Park calls “Oriental style.” Like Nakamura’s identity tourist,¹⁵ the usually white male protagonist of cyberpunk fiction can then appropriate the trappings of Oriental style, dispensing with the need to represent Asian bodies at all.

The phenomenon of whitewashing effectively melds these two modes of racial masquerade by both exploring the gap between racial performance and racial bodies and ultimately reducing Asianness to a series of detachable aesthetic traces. In a moment when U.S. economic hegemony seems to be threatened by both the economic power and mobile labor pool of Asia, whitewashing offers up a form of racial performance that cleaves race from specific bodies. As David Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta Niu argue in the introduction to *Techno-Orientalism*, media representations continue to respond to Asian economic threats by viewing Asian bodies as technologically infused and expendable.¹⁶ Yet the growing role of Asian media markets and, Aimee Bahng writes, the increasing participation of Asian countries in rhetorics of Asian futurity require a disavowal of the racism of earlier forms of techno-orientalism.¹⁷ How, then, does whitewashing in visual speculative film manage anxieties over Asia’s growing role in globalization, and how does it render acceptable, and even celebrate, narratives of the expendability of Asian bodies? By including whitewashing within the diegesis of the films themselves, the movies reimagine Asianness as an outer shell that can be shed or transformed on the path toward incorporation and self-possession, justifying the exploitation of bodies that resist or fail to be transformed.

Racial Transformation and the End of Asians

The film that most clearly illustrates an investment in the mythology of race as spectacle—a mythology rooted in yellowface performance—is the critically acclaimed “thinking man’s” science fiction film *Ex Machina*. Like so many other films fascinated by technology, *Ex Machina* centers on the moral dilemmas of its white, male, boy genius protagonist. A young white male coder, Caleb (Domhnall Gleeson), wins a contest to visit the isolated estate of another, slightly older, male coding genius, Nathan (Oscar Isaac). Once there, he finds out that he was sent to administer a Turing test to a white female android, Ava (Alicia Vikander).¹⁸ Almost the entire film takes place at the estate with only these three main characters and the house servant, Kyoko (Sonoya Mizuno). Kyoko is Asian appearing, female, and silent, and we learn early on that she cannot understand English, although the film gives no explanation as to why she cannot speak any other language. One

of the big twists at the end of film is hardly a surprise to Asian American scholars. The servant, like Ava, is also a cyborg.

As a supporting character, Kyoko primarily functions as a sacrificial lamb in the narrative. Ava enlists Kyoko's help in a plot to escape, but after Kyoko stabs Nathan in the neck, he beats and "kills" her. Ava then kills Nathan and traps Caleb. As the film ends, her machinery is still visible, so she peels off an Asian android's skin and applies it to her own body. For most film critics, the story and body that matters here is Ava's. Popular debates in the press over whether or not the film is misogynistic or feminist circulate around the triangle of Caleb, Nathan, and Ava and whether we should view the ending as Ava's triumph or an indictment of her cold-blooded nature.¹⁹ By centering Kyoko, however, Ava's liberation is neither a story of men who foolishly underestimate the females they exploit nor a tale of the duplicitous nature of women, even robot women. Instead, we see the dependency of white female empowerment on the disposition of Asian bodies.

Ava's exposed machinery confines her to the isolation of Caleb's mountain retreat. As a robot, she is marked as property, but once she dons the skin of the Asian android she can pass as human. The film ends as she leaves behind both the Asian robot who saved her life and her white male captors, boards a helicopter, and, the film implies, finds freedom. Although the circumstances and motivations differ, Ava's use of fragments of the Asian cyborg as a path toward empowerment fits into a longer history of white female appropriation of Asianness. In Mari Yoshihara's history of white women and orientalism, she details the long-standing practice of collecting Asian objects to build cultural capital. From the 1870s to the 1920s, a period that also saw the passage of the strictest immigrations laws against Asian people, Asian domestic goods entered the U.S. market followed by their swift uptake by white female consumers. Even though women were constrained from actual travel by gendered rules of propriety, they could demonstrate their worldliness and their status as "new" women by simultaneously appropriating Asian goods and expunging any actual Asian people. Yoshihara writes, "In other words, the entry of Asian objects into her American home parallels the journey of this white, upper-middle-class girl into a new form of femininity—a journey that takes place right in, or just beyond, her own home."²⁰ In *Ex Machina* Ava replays these uses of the Asian Other to exercise her own limited path through the strictures of gendered oppression. She achieves freedom over the dead body of the Asian robot and walks out of prison literally wearing her skin.

Ava chooses her new skin from a closetful of lifeless prototypes, so the skin of the Asian cyborg she wears is simply there for the taking. This fantasy of empowerment can be realized only in the absence of Asian

people, especially ones who might assert their own demands for recognition and self-possession. In the summer of 2015, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts (BMFA) offered an object lesson on the necessity of eliminating bodies marked as Asian in order for white women to enhance their status through the display of Asian culture. In tribute to the period of Asiaphilia studied by Yoshihara, the BMFA invited its patrons to “Kimono Wednesdays” to dress up in Japanese clothing. Museumgoers could imitate one of the museum’s most famous paintings, Claude Monet’s *La Japonaise*, itself a depiction of a white woman dressed in a kimono and wearing a blonde wig to emphasize the difference between her body and the costume. In response, Asian American protesters stood silently holding signs, using the presence of material Asian bodies to deter the patrons from abstracting and appropriating Japanese culture.²¹ Few could enjoy dressing up in front of the protesters, and Kimono Wednesdays was short-lived. Similarly, the pleasure of Ava’s escape would wither in the face of the Asian robot’s claim to her own skin. We would see that the film exacts a cost for Ava’s freedom, one paid by Kyoko and the nameless Asian robots that precede her.

Unearthing the narrative of whitewashing in *Ex Machina* requires the audience to read against the grain by making Kyoko the center of the film, but since *Cloud Atlas* employs racial masquerade throughout the film, it can explicitly portray the transformation of the Asian female body into whiteness within its primary story line. While *Ex Machina* obliquely positions female liberation, in both the physical and psychological sense, as white, *Cloud Atlas* makes that argument a part of its overt story line. The film, produced by the Wachowskis and Tom Tykwer, takes place over six time periods as characters from one time period reincarnate into other times and bodies. With so many simultaneous plotlines, a technologized Asia serves as convenient shorthand for the dystopic future. The story revolves around female Asian clones built to be servers in a fast-food restaurant. Their lives are pure drudgery. They only sleep, work, and survive off the same box of liquid nutrition every day. Their only hope takes the form of an annual quasi-religious “exaltation.” The film follows the story of one clone, Sonmi-451 (Doona Bae), as she realizes the true conditions of her work, escapes from that proscribed life for a brief time, and finally submits to imprisonment and execution.

Roh, Huang, and Niu argue that in the David Mitchell novel on which the movie is based, Sonmi-451 gains self-awareness through reading Western classics, reinforcing the belief that “only a Western-coded subject can truly realize liberal humanism in such an environment.”²² In the film version of the book, however, the directors move far beyond Sonmi-451’s intellectual colonization with scenes of the death of her Asian body and

her visual rebirth as a white woman. In order to translate the notoriously difficult novel to the screen, the Wachowskis and Tykwer chose to depict the theme of eternal recurrence visually by having the same actor play multiple characters.²³ While many of the movie's actors change races as they reappear as different characters across the multiple story lines, the editing of Sonmi-451's death tells a distinct story of the articulation of whiteness with femininity and liberation.

The actress Doona Bae plays both the starring role of Sonmi-451 and the supporting role of Tilda Ewing in whiteface makeup. Like the twinned characters of Ava and Kyoko, men dominate every aspect of Tilda and Sonmi-451's existence. While not a clone programmed for servitude like Sonmi-451, Tilda, nevertheless, faces few options. With the film set in a much earlier period, she also seems trapped, this time by her marriage to the wealthy hero, Adam Ewing (Jim Sturgess), who works for Tilda's father, the slave trader Haskell Moore (Hugo Weaving). Haskell criticizes and controls both Tilda and Adam, even as Adam begins to question the morality of slavery. Despite these similarities, Tilda and Sonmi-451 meet very different ends. Sonmi-451 appears to be doomed to her fate no matter what she does. After her brief escape, the state executes her in precisely the same way that she would have been killed had she never left the fast-food restaurant. Tilda, on the other hand, joins her husband Adam to confront Haskell. They both reject slavery and decide to move "back East" to join the abolitionists. For Tilda, their plan to leave their home also means freedom from the oppressive presence of her father. When Haskell forbids Tilda from leaving, she says, "I've been afraid of you my whole life, Father. I'm going with my husband."

The film makes a comparison between the endings for the two characters inescapable by editing their final scenes together. In the closing sequence before the film's brief epilogue, the setting switches back and forth between Sonmi-451's death and Tilda and Adam's confrontation with Haskell. We hear Haskell predict that Tilda and Adam will be "spat on, beaten ... lynched or crucified," and the film shifts time periods to play his words over Sonmi-451's execution (Figure 1). She is given a shot in the neck (Figure 2), and we see her head falling back in slow motion. In the moment of her death, the film returns to Tilda's face (Figure 3) so that Sonmi-451's doomed Asian body is reanimated as a white one. As the film switches between the scenes of Sonmi-451's execution and Tilda's escape, the extra diegetic musical score creates continuity, and Haskell's voiceover plays throughout, tying the two plotlines together. The film grants the freedom found in rebelling against the status quo—the ostensible message of the entire film—only when Sonmi-451/Tilda occupies a white female body.

The audience sees Sonmi-451's racialized body victimized by abuse and finally martyred. Tilda, by contrast, realizes a limited form of liberation as she moves from the tyranny of her father to follow the dreams of her husband. It is as if the film cannot imagine an Asian body occupying a space of female empowerment and must re-vision the role through the body of a white woman.



Fig. 1. Sonmi-451 awaiting execution.



Fig. 2. Sonmi-451's execution.



Fig. 3. Tilda's face replaces Sonmi-451's.

Technology and Racialized Transpacific Labor

Depictions of Asian women as servant-cyborgs in both science fiction films barely register for viewers, drawing as they do from both the globalized image of the Asian domestic worker and the familiar stereotypes of Asians as both sexually submissive and technologically advanced.²⁴ Concerns about the labor practices compelled through technological change, according to Victor Bascara, surface in science fiction as either a utopic erasure of Asian racial difference or as a dystopic reification of this difference.²⁵ These films prefer to have it both ways, positing the problem of racial difference and then erasing it through racial transformation. Yet, the specter of differential and exploitive labor as an integral aspect of new technologies haunts the margins of all three films.

With the advent of robots and clones in these films, physical labor becomes obsolete along with the necessity of any particular bodies to perform that labor. Yet, in our current global economy that, increasingly, detaches work from physical space or outsources it "elsewhere," service remains a place-bound and embodied form of labor. Instead of leading to a greater prestige for this irreducibly embodied labor, highly capitalized technologies are esteemed above the laboring body. The turn toward globalization has only accelerated the growth of a gendered and racially stratified labor market wherein women of color follow circuits of labor that form a global, poorly paid, frequently exploited underclass, a group Rhacel Salazar Parreñas has called "servants of globalization."²⁶ Asian females are a major part of the circuit, working as maids, nannies, and health care and sex workers.²⁷ Reimagining those bodies as literally disposable, as robots and recycled clones, provides narrative justification for the elevation of technologically advanced labor, cinematically coded as white and male, and the extreme devaluation of service labor, cinematically coded as female and Asian.

Kyoko in *Ex Machina* and Sonmi-451 in *Cloud Atlas* literalize the figure of what Neferti Tadiar terms the “domestic slave.”²⁸ They, along with the other clones in *Cloud Atlas*, eat, sleep, and live their work. Although Ava is also a robot, Nathan built her to challenge Caleb and fool him into believing she experiences human thoughts and emotions. Nathan built Kyoko to provide domestic and sexual services as a laborer without any need of leisure or personal time. Similarly, *Cloud Atlas* shows the clones engaged in repetitive and demeaning labor for abusive customers. Sonmi-451 must endure the groping of the restaurant patrons with genial indulgence, and the owner of the restaurant secretly awakens one of the clones for off-hours sex. Neither Kyoko nor the clones initiate sex but are merely completing another uncompensated task to add to their life of unceasing work. They are unable to even experience emotions without turning them into labor—service with a smile—so it is clear their bodies are not their own.

As beings created for the sole purpose of low-status service work, Sonmi-451 and Kyoko collapse the distinction between labor and the body. Nathan and Sonmi-451’s employers do not merely own their labor, as manufactured commodities they own Sonmi-451 and Kyoko’s bodies, time, and emotions. Tadiar argues that the demand for “flexible” labor turns into an “appropriation of the labourer herself.”²⁹ She further argues that “domestic helpers are paid not for a specific skill but rather for their gendered bodies—for their embodiment of a variety of functions and services which they are expected to provide at the beck and call of their employers.”³⁰ The consistent, though unremarked upon, depiction of technologically enabled service labor as Asian and female locates the source of labor exploitation in the racialized bodies themselves rather than globalized economic systems. Instead of seeing a system of migration and labor that marks particular bodies as raced and, therefore, subject to exploitation, we view certain bodies as inherently less valuable and, therefore, exploitable.

The films reinscribe Asian female bodies as expendable to smooth their narrative flow, a task made easier by their echo of existing extratextual perceptions of Asian female labor. While Asians may signal the future of technological advancement, the escape from the limits of the body promised by new technologies carries different valences depending upon the bodies in question. The four main characters in *Ex Machina* live in the insular world of their house on a mountaintop, but only one of them—the one marked as Asian and female—serves the others. In contrast, the two boy genius coders attempt to “become gods” by mechanically creating new bodies to replace bodily and feminized forms of reproduction. In *Cloud Atlas* the white boy genius composer creates the musical piece that gives name to the movie. His music then transcends his body and his time period

to link all the parts of the film together. Conversely, the Asian women in these films become disembodied only once their bodies are destroyed in the service of others. These narratives do little to dislodge the mythology of individual (read: white male) genius as the most valued producer of labor, and instead denigrate the disposable, embodied (read: Asian female) labor made more accessible through globalized technologies. Whitewashing in these movies accepts the equation of Asian female bodies and devalued service labor. The films' implied solution to the problem of low-wage labor migration, then, is to discard those bodies fated for exploitation in favor of the potential liberation of white womanhood.

***Advantageous* and the Body as Subject**

The commodification of Asian female bodies and the consequent failure to account for their experience is the predominant mode of representing Asian women in the technological future. As they are cyphers and symbols, the audience learns nothing about their inner lives. Tadiar writes, "Such stories [about Filipina domestic servants] demonstrate the way in which domestic helpers are considered bodies without subjectivity, that is, corporeal objects at the mercy and for the pleasure of those who buy them from the recruitment agency."³¹ The release of the independent film *Advantageous*, then, with its complex depiction of the inner life of its Asian female protagonist, is a deceptively radical departure from the deeply worn grooves of Asian female representation in science fiction film.

Advantageous powerfully retells this story in ways that, on the surface, may not seem to differ too widely from *Cloud Atlas* and *Ex Machina*'s tales of racial transformation. The film follows Gwen (Jacqueline Kim), an Asian female spokesperson for the Center for Advanced Health and Living—a large corporation that gives you the chance to be "the you you were meant to be" through "relatively painless" medical procedures. As the single mother of a young girl, Jules (Samantha Kim), Gwen teeters on the edge of middle-class comfort. She slips off when the corporation fires her in favor of a younger, whiter model at the same time an expensive preparatory school accepts her daughter as a student. The corporation then proposes that she take part in an experimental new procedure. In order to get her job back, she can abandon her body and have her mind downloaded into a younger and more racially ambiguous body (Freya Adams).

The film follows the plot of the other films, and Gwen ultimately trades in her Asian body for promise of a better whiter self, but the film's depiction of Gwen's full emotional and social life revises the meaning and impact

of her transformation. The emotional tone of her rebirth is elegy rather than celebration, compelling the audience to reexamine both the stakes and the promised rewards of whitewashing. *Advantageous* steers clear of aspirational counternarratives of aggressive, physically powerful, warrior women so popular in science fiction films like *Mad Max: Fury Road* and the *Alien* franchise. Instead, the near-future world depicted in the film closely resembles the stratified social landscape wrought by current neoliberal economic policies, and the film offers up a meditation on what is rather than what should be.

Advantageous lays bare the contradictory messages of the first two films discussed here. In those films, Asian female bodies mean everything and nothing. Their gendered and racialized bodies dictate their characters' meanings and motivations. At the same time, the movies easily discard their "worthless" bodies, often in vividly violent detail, so that they can "trade up" to more a valued white female body. Their characters function primarily as narrative conceits to propel the plot forward. When Sharon Chang wrote about her objections to the character of Kyoko in her blog, she received more responses than she had for any other post.³² Her comments section was filled with fans of the film who argued that the whole point was that Caleb and Nathan were not heroes, and their mistreatment of Kyoko should be understood as an indictment of their characters. While this is true narratively, the use and abuse of Kyoko to prove this point further dehumanizes her. Like the endless reiteration of scenes of rape and murder in Vietnam War films, these violations of Asian bodies exist to externalize the internal suffering of the white heroes of the film. They are tragic because they exemplify the lost innocence of the soldiers, not because they give us insight into the Vietnamese people traumatized by America's war in Vietnam.³³

The story line of *Cloud Atlas* denounces the treatment of the clones as unacceptable, yet the film also leaves the viewer with indelible images of the horrific objectification and violation of hundreds of Asian bodies. Toward the end of the story, we find that when the clones have finished a job cycle, their exaltation ceremony is an execution, or, more accurately, a slaughter. In a graphically violent scene, machines skewer the bodies of the all-Asian-female clone population with hooks and then hang them, beheaded and naked, in a slaughterhouse to be turned into the liquid food fed back to the clones. *Ex Machina* similarly ends with Kyoko firmly rooted in the Masahiro Mori's uncanny valley.³⁴ After Nathan hits her, a portion of her skin comes off of her face, and in her final scene her face is half machine and half skin. While Ava's costume exposes the machinery in her arms and torso throughout the movie, her face always remains intact.

As the story progresses we see less and less of Ava's machinery, and she becomes more humanlike, while the opposite is true for Kyoko, who begins the film intact and is unmasked by the film's end. The movies try to teach us about the potential for abuse in technological reproduction but do so through the feelings of disgust evoked by the violation and destruction of manufactured Asian female bodies.

Advantageous diverges from the other films with a visual depiction of Gwen that borders on the mundane. We see her listening to music, sitting with her daughter in the park, walking down the street, and talking on the phone. The images are unremarkable except for their contrast with the continually laboring bodies of the Asian females of *Cloud Atlas* and *Ex Machina*. In *Advantageous*, even though Gwen's employers tell her that she is too old to remain the face of their company—literally devaluing her body by cutting her salary and finally firing her—we also have lingering scenes of her putting up her hair and getting dressed. We see Gwen and her daughter spinning in circles simply because they enjoy the movement of their bodies. These small moments remind the audience of the pleasures of embodiment, of movement without purpose or profit.

These reminders, however, resonate with an audience only if they can imagine an inner life for the characters. For Kyoko and Sonmi-451, the filmmakers seem to actively resist the intimation of depth or feelings, not only showing the repulsive abuse of their bodies but allowing few opportunities for emotional display. When Caleb attempts to communicate with Kyoko, Nathan interrupts him to say, "It's a waste of time talking to her." With literally no voice, Kyoko does not attempt any other method of communication and never expresses any affect, remaining utterly deadpan through her choreographed/programmed dance routine with Nathan, for example. Although more expressive than the stoic Kyoko, Sonmi-451 is, nevertheless, strangely emotionless. Speaking in a monotone throughout her scenes, she never even gets a name. Even though the film builds to the moment she gives a speech urging resistance, she recites that speech quietly immobile in front of a microphone. In the midst of her climatic speech the camera turns away from her to film a battle scene, so though we hear her subdued voice, our emotions are triggered, instead, by the view of the male protagonist's injuries.

Despite the contrast between the films, *Advantageous* isn't a simple rebuke, asserting a depth and interiority that lurks beneath an Asian female scrim. Instead, the film limns the relationship between interior and exterior, asking to what extent identity is identical to or distinct from the body. In *Advantageous* Gwen experiences her race change, figured in the other films as an escape from the bonds of race into unmarked whiteness,

as an excruciating loss of self. Despite reassurances that she will retain the same mind with just a shell of a new body, after the transfer she says, "The pain never goes away." Her daughter, sister, and ex-lover all mourn her past existence, and she cannot access her previous self despite having the same memories and thought processes. While the film never flags race as a primary marker of identity, it does make clear that mind and body are intimately connected. Simplistic, color-blind arguments that we are all the same under the skin crumple under the complexity of a self that is constituted through particular bodies.

Shifting the narrative of racial erasure to centralize the experience of the person being erased exposes the audience to an alternative conception of both the "choice" and the impact of assimilation to a white standard. In the end, Gwen voluntarily decides to assume the body of a younger, multiracial woman who better fits the current image of her company, but ever narrowing options compel Gwen toward her decision to download into a new body. Her daughter's acceptance into a prestigious school appears to be the sole bulwark against a continual downward slide for them both, but without Gwen's salary and prestigious job as the representative of a large corporation, Jules would not be able to afford an expensive private education.

Much of the movie follows Gwen's attempts at finding an alternative to the procedure to pay for Jules's tuition while a sense of precarity permeates the atmosphere. The film opens with an explosion in a faraway high-rise, to which one of Jules friend's responds, "Not again." Everyday violence and insecurity also surface in the more domestic space of the home as Gwen and Jules attempt to identify a sound of crying. "Upstairs woman or downstairs woman?" Gwen asks, and Jules responds, "Both." At times the bare facts of her social and financial insecurity come to the fore of the story line. As Gwen unsuccessfully speaks to an employment agency about getting a new job, she spots a homeless woman of color sleeping in the bushes who tells her that she'd better take their offer to harvest her eggs. Throughout it all are brief references to the continual erosion of women's rights in this future world that makes it increasingly difficult for women to work or live outside of marriage. After asking for help from her much more powerful former romantic partner, her parents, and her sister and receiving none, Gwen finds herself without any social or economic safety net. Against this background, Gwen's decision to download her mind into another illustrates the illusion of individual choice in her decision to change races.

Advantageous also disrupts the triumphal narrative of empowered white womanhood. In doing so, it extends the latent critique of *Cloud Atlas*. That film ends as Tilda leaves with her husband, and she does so despite

her father's predictions of her future persecution as an abolitionist. Her freedom continues to be dictated by a dominant male, her husband, and her future seems uncertain. Rather than conclude the story at the threshold of freedom like *Ex Machina* or with the promise of tempered liberation in *Cloud Atlas*, *Advantageous* follows Gwen past the initial moment of her racial transformation. While she does regain her old job, she remains embedded in a precarious system, still subject to the whims of the market and without infrastructural support. The status afforded the women once they transform appears elevated in contrast to the debased Asian bodies they once inhabited but is not on par with the white men who continue to set the standards and rules. Like the portrayal of excessive Asian femininity used in midcentury movies to reprimand and contain white women, these images of abject Asian females police the limits of white female power.³⁵ *Advantageous* shows us how the framing of racial transformation as personal choice leaves intact the structures and culture that originally forced the choice.

Taken together, these three films delineate a shared cultural anxiety about the irreducibility of race and gender in the face of the supposedly universalizing power of future technological innovation. Asian females pose a particular problem given their association with both technology and the transpacific laboring body. *Ex Machina* and *Cloud Atlas* both grapple with the perpetuation of racially stratified work despite the promise of a new economy of disembodied labor, but they do so with a blinkered focus on the white male and female stars of their films. Rather than advocate for an alternative narrative of racial pride and female empowerment, this article turns back to these films to locate their anxious display of whitewashing and violent misogyny as responses to the contradictions of contemporary culture. In an imagined future of manufactured selves and exchangeable bodies, the films pose the transformation of exploited Asian females into liberated white females as a solution to the racial hierarchies guiding global job markets. In these films, the "happy" ending of a utopic technological future seems imaginable only through the erasure of transpacific migrating bodies. Instead of celebrating the false choice between Asian female exploitation and white female liberation, however, films like *Advantageous* can help us access the trauma of racial erasure—a trauma that persists despite the promise of future technologies—and recognize the complexity of longing for bodies treated as valuable beyond a simple commodity exchange.

Notes

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white characters as well as characters from their own communities. This practice minimizes the achievements and discredits the contributions people of color have made to American society.” Kent Ono and Vincent Pham make a similar argument in their book on Asian American media. Lori Lopez, on the other hand, focuses on ways fans negotiated racial identities and became politicized through their participation in protests against whitewashing. My goal is not to undermine these arguments (with which I agree), but to expand the scope of inquiry to look at the use of whitewashing to assuage concerns about globalization and technology. “What Is ‘Racebending’?,” Racebending.com, <http://www.racebending.com/v4/about/what-is-racebending/> (accessed September 22, 2016); Kent A. Ono and Vincent Pham *Asian Americans and the Media*, vol. 2 (New York: Polity, 2009); Lopez, Lori Kido. “Fan activists and the politics of race in *The Last Airbender*.” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 15, no. 5 (2012): 431–445.

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15. Lisa Nakamura, “Race in/for Cyberspace: Identity Tourism and Racial Passing on the Internet,” *Reading Digital Culture*, vol. 4 (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001): 226–35.
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17. Aimee Bahng, “The Cruel Optimism of Asian Futurity and the Reparative Practices of Sonny Liew’s *Malinky Robot*,” in Roh, Huang, and Niu, *Techno-Orientalism*, 165–66.
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28. Neferti Tadiar, *Fantasy Production: Sexual Economies and Other Philippine Consequences for the New World Order* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004).
29. *Ibid.*, 117.
30. *Ibid.*, 117.
31. *Ibid.*, 115.
32. Sharon Chang, "How 'Ex-Machina' Abuses Women of Color & Nobody Cares Cause It's Smart," *Multiracial Asian Families*, May 30, 2015, <http://multiasian-families.blogspot.com/2015/05/how-ex-machina-abuses-women-of-color.html> (accessed February 4, 2016).

33. The political viability of representations of gendered and racialized violence remains a controversial topic, too complex to address in full in this article. I draw from the work of Saidiya Hartman, Shawn Michelle Smith's discussion of lynching photographs, and Min Song's work on representation of the LA uprising here and expand on this argument in my article "White Skin, White Masks: Vietnam War Films and the Racialized Gaze." Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Leilani Nishime, "White Skin, White Masks: Vietnam War Films and the Racialized Gaze," in *American Visual Cultures*, ed. David Holloway and John Beck (New York: Bloomsbury, 2005); Shawn Michelle Smith, *Photography on the Color Line: WEB Du Bois, Race, and Visual Culture* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004); Min Hyoung Song, *Strange Future: Pessimism and the 1992 Los Angeles Riots* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005).
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