

Debora Bang

Science of Race & Gender

Dr. Autumn Barrett

May 12, 2017

The Issue of Modernity: The American Colonization and Subjugation of the East Asian Diaspora

I. Introduction

How has the embodiment of Western “modernity” in East Asia played into the American appropriation and eroticization of Eastern aesthetics? This clashing duality, in which the former culture is fetishized and deemed inferior, can be approached from the oxymoronic lens of the “*American Orient*” (Weir 3): a representation of a false consciousness of the East¹ construed through a distorted Eurocentric lens.

America’s idealized imagination of the Far East is far from a recent phenomena: The false idea and consciousness of the region stems from the European invention of the “Orient.” This fascination and eroticization of a feminized “other” served as a contrasting duality to Western civilization. Through this distorted, Eurocentric lens, the feminization of the Far East solidified Western norms—their image, ideas, personalities, and experiences—as a culture that contrasted, and as such, was far more superior to that of its Asian counterparts. This “orientalist” subjugation “[invited] colonial conquest, whether commercial, cultural, [or] sexual”—a result of unequal power dynamics and relations that play all throughout the “West versus East” narrative (Weir 13). The *American* perspective of the “orient,” however, is more subtle; whereas the

¹ The “East,” in this essay, refers to the “Far East,” or East Asia.

overarching European lens viewed the East as a culture to be purified and colonized, the American orient sought to appropriate and, therefore, culturally objectify Asian culture as “spiritual” and “artistic[,] complementary to their own beliefs” (Weir 10).

This essay will attempt to examine the American eroticization and appropriation of the Far East and its justifications in relation to the conflicting embodiment of American modernity in East Asian culture—and how this incongruous duality limits the East Asian diaspora by creating a dependency on Western ideals.

II. A History of Scientific Rationalization

How exactly did the Western culture rationalize their superiority? Viewed from a Eurocentric perspective, “race” was “often seen as ‘natural’ or as having some inherent biological component” (Baker 1). As such, contemporary racial categories were, and still are, established through scientific “facts”: Naturalists and biologists proved non-whites as being naturally inferior through “quantitative” and “objective” studies, like Samuel Morton and his idea of cranial capacity in relation to “moral and intellectual endowments” (Baker 14). This scientific racism was further institutionalized through academia with the implementation of anthropology as a legitimate form of evidence—this resulting knowledge used to inform social and political history.

In terms of the American social narrative, the prominence of science as a “rational” alternative to religious and moral reasoning, thought of as fact rather than fiction, allowed colonizers to codify and institutionalize the slavery of African Americans through laws and labor.

Emphasizing the biological *differences* between whites and non-whites, the rationalized “racial inferiority” allowed plantation owners to take advantage of the enslaved African labor that its economy relied on. The creation of the American School of Anthropology only cemented this idea of inferiority: social scientists introduced the novel theory of *polygenesis*—making the claim that “Negroes” and “Whites” were different species altogether. The prominence of this school of thought was justified through “quantitative” data, theorized by American anthropologists Josiah Nott and George Gliddon as “species variation”: “facts” which were used to justify inferiority and, therefore, the necessity of slavery. These ideological elements of race were fully developed with the introduction of legislation through the U.S. government—which, of course, were justified through academic, anthropological studies.

The social construct of race has always existed in the U.S.²: these ideologies were merely “fractured”—glued together by political processes and legislation (Baker 17). During the convergence of African American inequality in the 1890’s and the restructuring of the working class around the same period, the U.S. government codified the South’s racial ideologies—manipulating the scientific and anthropological studies of racial inferiority to ensure their continued economic and political power. The legitimization of anthropology as an academic institution and a “reliable” source of quantitative data evolved and matured as a discipline through three main figures and approaches: Powell’s governmental, Brinton’s linguistic and evolutionary, and Putnam’s archaeological. All these standpoints had the same

²Lee Baker’s “From Savage to Negro: Anthropology and the Construction of Race” (1998)

subjective agendas in mind: to emphasize the “natural” differences and *inequality* of racial categories.

III. The Naturalized “Other”

How does this emphasis on the natural tie into the colonization and resulting modernity of the East Asian diaspora? The introduction of natural science in combination with the biases of the scientists who explored this concept of Western thought, was “favorable to division”—its logical fallacies producing multiple conflicting dualities that reestablished set Eurocentric norms (Douglass 9). The notion of Cartesian dualism, a binary opposition between the mind and the body, was used as the basis of scientific racism and bio-determinism for ethnologists and anthropologists alike. Whereas the feminized body was seen as a material evil, the mind represented superiority—a rationality that surpassed the physicalities that the body implicated. Based on such beliefs, anthropologists and social scientists made subjective claims about biological inferiority—one of these claims being the feminization, or the “lack of manhood” (Douglass 7). A popular racial ideology that arose out of this gendered intersectionality was the notion that a lack of masculinity equalled a “less-evolved” or less “civil” being. As such, feminized bodies were considered appropriate justifications for “less-evolved” beings—and, therefore, could be treated as less than human.

As such, the imposed feminization of the East—contrasting that of the West—created an opposing binary, the former a Western imagination that existed only to reestablish Eurocentric norms and values and, through such, Western superiority. After all, these reductionist dualities—

feminine versus masculine, mind versus body—were used to emphasize the natural, or “the sub-humanity, non-intellectuality, and emotionality,” of the presupposed inferior peoples. Michael L. Blakey aptly frames this Cartesian simplification as that of “Man and Nature, White and Other”: Whereas non-whites, or the “Others,” are identified through their inferior naturalism, the “European diaspora is shown to be motivated apart from nature, by spiritual or moral, [intellectual pursuits]” (Blakey 16). Through the “overemphasis of naturalism in nonwhite societies, biological determinism, another form of scientific rationalization, continued to perpetuate the unalterable notion that “biology [equaled] destiny” (Oyěwùmí 1).

But what sociological rationalization preceded that of natural, scientific knowledge? If, according to Baker, the social construct of race has always existed, what was the predecessor of this “intellectual theology”—this justification for colonial racism? (Blakey 15)

Even prior to scientific justification, there was a persisting belief that certain races were fundamentally inferior—objectifying indigenous peoples in order to perpetuate a Eurocentric subjugation. The “flora, fauna, and people [of these inferior cultures] were all commodities to be collected”—and with that mentality, missionaries traveled abroad, hoping to “save” the souls in the “interests of both the Christian faith and empire” (Qureshi 234). This saving of souls, in reality, was a hypocritical excuse to kill and plunder, an imposition which “laid down the dishonest equations *Christianity = civilization, paganism = savagery*”—a rationale that erased any colonialist or racist consequences against its victims: “the Indians, the Yellow peoples, and the Negroes” (Césaire 33).

IV. Colonialism and its Ties to Modernity

“The essential thing here is to see clearly, to think clearly [and] to answer clearly the [question]: what fundamentally is colonization?” poses Aimé Césaire in his “Discourse on Colonialism.” Through the previously mentioned scientific and religious justifications, the European colonization of foreign lands worked to fetishize and acquire their “rightful” land and its peoples, creating a “porno-tropic tradition” through which Europeans projected their eroticized fantasies (McClintock 22).

One of the main ways these imperial ambitions materialized in East Asia was through Christianity: The early nineteenth and early twentieth century saw a rise in Western missionary activities and scholarship in the area—predominantly by and through “ various denominations and missionary-built institutions” (Park et al. 1). These missionaries’ colonial conquests were largely successful due to the imbalance of power relations between them and their East Asian subjects. The East’s embrace of societal modernization led to an influx of cultural “modernity” that opposed the idealized and self-imposed understanding of bourgeois modernity historically associated with the development of capitalism. Christian missionaries were able to convert massive populations of these East Asian countries, especially in South Korea, under the guise of modernity—and for women, an added false pretense of gender equality. This new, Western religion introduced a new type of cultural modernity focused on the self, where “self-exploration and self-realization were its primary concerns” (Gaonkar 2).

Through this exploration of the self flourished the idea that imagination trumped reason—that “there were no aesthetic limits that could be transgressed, no moral norms that could not

be subverted” (Gaonkar 3). This, in combination with the militarism and nationalism that ran parallel to these religious conquests, produced a conceptual “West”—reaffirming a superiority of “whiteness,” and modernization. Thus continued the conflicting binary of what cultural theorist Stuart Hall refers to as “The West and the Rest”: a historical, rather than geographical, construct that oversimplified the differences between western and non-western societies, “developed” and “underdeveloped” countries—reinforcing the Eurocentric views of superiority and primitivity.

V. The American Fetishization and the East Asian Oppression

East Asia, through this western-centered social construct, was defined as the “The Rest”—an “other”ness that produced an *orientalist* representation of the East. While the European Orient blatantly manifested itself, portraying the East Asian peoples as needing to be physically colonized, the American Orient was more obscure: Their idea of the “Orient,” placed in opposition to the “Occidental,” appropriated ideas of primitivity, using a feminized rationalization to exotify and romanticize Asian aesthetics—notably seen in Western and Hollywood films as well as works of literature and art. This cultural objectification prized the East’s “spiritual [and] artistic” nature, viewing this “idealized fantasy [as] complementary to their own [Westernized] beliefs” (Weir 15). A particular example of this objectified aestheticism can be seen through American poet Ezra Pound’s approach to Confucius’ writings. His ambiguous or, rather, inaccurate translations of the Chinese philosopher’s doctrines were “utilized [in an] ‘opportunistic’ manner” to imbed his own beliefs—“a liberal discourse supporting the rights of the individual” (Lan 91).

The embodiment of American modernity in East Asia, however, was seen through the evolving psychogeographic structure of the countries' economy and culture, especially its infrastructural changes. Spurred on with the introduction of new technology, these advancements required a sensory and cognitive adjustment to “new experiences of space and time, speed and movement, self and other” (Kern 1983). This industrialization saw a drastic change in the colonial soundscape, with the addition of technologies like the radio, gramophone, and street noise. What followed was a formation of modern subjectivities, which adopted American ideals.

Described as “friendly, rich, brotherly, [and] Christian,” this American prototype became the ideal for what East Asian societies, particularly South Korea, referred to as “Modern Girls/Boys.” Influenced by the popularity of Hollywood films, music, and jazz, these new bearers of modernity, clashing with Confucianist traditions, were physical manifestations of the erasure of East Asian identity. The Asian body, exoticized and feminized by the “American Orient,” struggled to live up to unattainable Americanized beauty standards, leading to “anxiety and feelings of deficiency”—an inferiority complex that arose out of the process of bodily modernization (Yoo 435).

Such collective processes resulted in a “double consciousness, [a] poisoned gift of modernity for all,” for those who strove to be modern—an imperial construction of identity that disintegrated their notions of selfhood through a “gradual loss of secure identities previously embedded [in] social institutions” (Haltunnen 201).

VI. Colonial Modernity: A Living Structure

This process of colonial modernity in East is not restricted to the past or within its colonized history—instead, it should be seen as “a living structure that has been continuously, albeit disproportionately, actualized and reproduced” in present social and geographic constructions (Lee et al. 3). In order to accurately understand this continued modernization, it is important to acknowledge the multiplicity of modernity—a development that spans across various time periods and locations. As such, East Asian societies are still under the subjugation of colonialism—its orientalist oppression still glaringly pronounced in its institutionalized societies and individual bodies.

“Colonization drives the colonized to seek a new self-identity”—and in the case of East Asian societies, their search for a new social order and cultural identity, apart from traditional Confucianist hegemonic epistemology and ethics, “created room for the western modernity [as what seemed to be] the only solution”. This individualized modernity transformed these nation’s values, attributing Western goods and appearances as the “royal road to modernization”. This solution was “injected [as] a ready-made good”—and how well an individual possessed and consumed these products determined their value (Yoo 425). The colonized individuals became “obsessed with exhibiting oneself in modernity”—a collective desire for their bodily existences to exhibit what Frantz Fanon refers to as a “white mask.” Such individualistic aspirations, however, clashed with the overall encompassing identity of the East Asian nation-states, whose societies and values were inherently differently than that of the Western world.

These ingrained contradictions limited, and continues to limit, the economical and political achievements of the colonized East, aptly described as having a “Western crust but a Confucian core” (Hwang et al. 13). In addition, the imposed ‘West versus East’ colonial binary, created to cement Western superiority, has made it impossible for non-Western cultures to live up to Eurocentric modernization and its ideals. After all, the foundation of the contemporary East Asian diasporic identity is based upon this unequal power dynamic—the embrace of which continues to impose an inferiority on its individuals, culture, and nations as a whole.

Works Cited

- Baker, Lee D. *From Savage to Negro: Anthropology and the Construction of Race, 1896-1954*.
N.p.: U of California, 1998. Print.
- Blakey, Michael L. "Man and Nature, White and Other." *Decolonizing Anthropology: Moving Further Toward an Anthropology for Liberation*. By Faye V. Harrison. Arlington, VA: Association of Black Anthropologists, American Anthropological Association, 1991. N. pag. Print.
- Césaire, Aimé. *Discourse on colonialism*. NYU Press, 2000.
- Douglass, Frederick. *The Claims of the Negro, Ethnologically Considered: An Address Before the Literary Societies of Western Reserve College, at Commencement, July 12, 1854*. Rochester [N.Y.: Lee, Mann & Co, 1854.
- Gaonkar, Dilip Parameshwar. *Alternative modernities*. Vol. 1. Duke University Press, 2001.
- Hall, Stuart. "The West and the Rest: Discourse and power." *The Indigenous Experience: Global Perspectives* (1992): 165-173.
- Halttunen, Karen, ed. *A companion to American cultural history*. John Wiley & Sons, 2008.
- Hwang, Suk-Man, and Jinho Lim. "Unfinished modernity or another modernity? The South Korean case." *Korean Social Science Journal* 42.2 (2015): 73-88.
- Lan, Feng. *Ezra Pound and Confucianism: Remaking Humanism in the Face of Modernity*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005. Print.
- Lee, Hyunjung, and Younghan Cho. "Introduction: Colonial Modernity and Beyond in East Asian Contexts." *Cultural Studies* 26.5 (2012): 601-616.

McClintock, Anne. "Imperial Leather: Gender, Race and Sexuality in the Colonial Context." (1995).

Oyěwùmí, Oyèrónké. *African Gender Studies: A Reader*. New York: Palgrave, 2005. Print.

Weir, David. *American Orient: Imagining the East from the Colonial Era through the Twentieth Century*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts, 2011. Print.

Park, Chung-shin, and Chǒng-sin Pak. *Protestantism and politics in Korea*. University of Washington Press, 2011.

Qureshi, Sadiya. "Displaying Sara Baartman, the 'Hottentot Venus'." *History of Science* 42.2 (2004): 233-257.