

Orientalism and the Legacy of Racialized Sexism: Disparate Representational Images of Asian and Eurasian Women in American Culture

Kendall Matsumoto | Stanford University

The representation of Asian women in popular media and cultural artifacts has historically underscored reductive and damaging stereotypes of hypersexualization and objectification. For Eurasian women (half white, half Asian), however, whose racial difference is only partial, media representation takes a starkly contrasting form that leads to entirely different popular perceptions. This article explores how forces of misogynistic objectification have disparate impacts on Eurasian and fully Asian women in contemporary American culture and society. Using contemporary media analysis, prominent celebrity case studies, and personal interviews, I argue that contemporary entertainment media objectify and sexualize both Asian and Eurasian women to generate public allure; however, these media use Otherness as a medium for the sexualization of fully-Asian women, whereas the ambiguous Eurasian racial appearance leads to a deracialized sexualization that allows both agency beyond race lines as well as cultural and racial erasure. This deracialization, however, comes with double-edged implications for Eurasian belonging: while it may seem that Eurasians have greater access to hegemonic American media and audiences, they lack a sense of belonging within pre-established racial paradigms. Their biracial identity thus has highly-nuanced implications for professional mobility, individual erasure, and community belonging.

I can't escape the fact that I am an Asian woman: my physical appearance prevents that. As an Asian American woman of full Japanese ancestry, the outside world always will, from the moment I am laid eyes upon, instantly recognize my racial identity and hold me to it. To Euroamericans, I will always be inescapably Other despite my family's perfect English and four generations in this country. While friends and strangers alike often attempt to appreciate my cultural heritage, my skin crawls when I inevitably hear the words "exotic" and "beautiful" used together to describe not only my culture but my own appearance or body. Men I do not

know—utter strangers—smile and attempt to speak to me in a foreign Asian language, asking my name or my age, in demeaning and objectifying tones. It has become painfully clear to me that my Asian identity and my identity as a woman are deeply entangled, causing reductive and dehumanizing stereotypes. Unfortunately, I am not alone, nor is this experience isolated.

These stereotypes are not solely products of contemporary social politics; they have historical and political roots that have curated a one-dimensional, hypersexualized image of Asian women. This pervasive imagery is reinforced and perpetuated by familiar portrayals

of Asian women in mainstream American entertainment media, where sexualization and racism work together as sociopolitical tools to reduce Asian female celebrities to exotic objects of desire. While fully-Asian women often fall victim to the dual specter of these coalescing dynamics, the treatment of half-Asian women—specifically, Eurasian (half-white, half-Asian) women—in cultural artifacts and media is noticeably less restrictive.

In this article, I argue how forces of race, misogyny, and objectification have disparate impacts on Eurasian and fully-Asian women in contemporary American culture and society. Asian American women experience rampant sexualization that is inextricably linked to their racial identity. While the confluence of race and gender constrain Asian American women, Eurasian women experience both personal agency as well as ethnic and cultural erasure due to an ambiguous appearance free from racialized exoticization. Such biracial identity grants freedom from the historical and contemporary burden of the Western gaze that restricts, demeans, and objectifies Asian women. Using contemporary media analysis, prominent case studies, and personal interviews, I examine how sociopolitical legacies have shaped disparate perceptions of fully Asian women and Eurasian women. By examining the role of Otherness in the process of sexualization, I interrogate the pathways by which hegemonic institutions commodify Asian female bodies for consumption by mainstream audiences.

Historical Roots of the Sexualization of Asian Women

The exotic, overly-sexualized Asian archetype is the result of a long historical legacy. It is the byproduct of Orientalism—the

stereotyped view of Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa that embodies colonialist attitudes of Western superiority (Said). Coined by scholar and author Edward Said in his 1978 book *Orientalism*, the term describes the conception of the Middle East and Asia—the Orient—as an entity constructed by the Western gaze. Built upon militaristic conquest and consisting of sociopolitical, cultural, and aesthetic inventions, this reductive understanding is designed to provide Western power with a contrived sense of knowledge and superiority (Said). This power dynamic persists in American mainstream media: present-day popular cultural artifacts capitalize on the suffocating confluence of racism and sexism, resulting in monolithic, highly reductive archetypes: in the case of women, predominantly the flattened, objectified “geisha” figure.

In the Orientalist framework, Asian women become repositories of Western fantasies as a result of the larger conception of the geographical region itself. The Orient represents not merely a site of historical occurrences, but, rather a site for collective imagination that leads to both exploration and exploitation. As Meyda Yegenoglu writes in *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism*, “latent Orientalism reflects the site of the unconscious, where dreams, images, desires, fantasies and fears reside,” allowing the Orient to become “an object of *knowledge* and an object of *desire*” (23). Innate in this construction of the Orient, Yegenoglu argues, is the notion of sexuality and sexual utility. Just as the region becomes an available canvas for exotic Western fantasies, Asian women are flattened to empty vehicles for sexual desire. Thus, as Yegenoglu asserts, the discussion of Orientalism itself is

painfully incomplete without the recognition of the role that sexualization plays; “sexual difference” is in fact “of fundamental importance in the formation of a colonial subject position” (1-2). This sexual colonial subjugation is a byproduct of equating the allure of the Orient as a region with the sexual allure of its women. As a result of this large-scale conceptualization of the Orient, Asian women themselves become the victims of a militaristic violence. Yegenoglu defines this character as “the figure of the ‘veiled Oriental woman’” which signifies “the Oriental women as mysterious and exotic” as well as “the Orient as feminine, always veiled, seductive, and dangerous” (11). This conflation is dangerous: because the Orient is a territory to be conquered, women of Asian descent also become a goal of conquest.

The history of the United States in Asia has shaped a colonialist attitude towards Asian women that is grounded in Western superiority, racism, and sexism. In times of occupation, white American men viewed and treated local women in dehumanizing, reductive ways that sexualize their racial and cultural identities in order to fulfill men’s pleasures. In fact, as scholar Sunny Woan writes, “the sexual conquest of Asia’s women correlates with the conquest of Asia itself” (282). Woan explores the interconnection between race and sex in the eyes of imperialistic white men: Asian women are simultaneously sexually objectified as a result of misogyny as well as racially exoticized as a result of white supremacy. These two dynamics hinge on one another. In fact, in profoundly vulgar language, “while occupying the islands, the American soldiers referred to the Filipinas as ‘little brown fucking machines powered by rice’” (Woan 283). Said himself also elucidated these

dynamics in the 1970s, asserting that “[The local] women are usually the creatures of a male power-fantasy. They express unlimited sensuality, they are more or less stupid, and above all they are willing” (qtd. in Woan 282). The referenced “willingness” of Asian women speaks to their perceived submissiveness as sexual vehicles, characters in white men’s “power-fantasy” who lack personal agency or dignity. The extremely profane nature of these characterizations speaks to a lack of respect afforded to Asian women of the region as self-sufficient, complex individuals. Even the very words used to refer to Asian women and the precise role they play in relation to white men are humming with a violence still painful to read.

Disturbingly, this violence does not persist merely in words or recorded histories; it remains extant for women of Asian descent far removed from this historical chapter. Although these times of militaristic aggression seem distant, this constructed archetype persists in our contemporary moment as a result of Orientalism’s powerful legacies. Evidently, Orientalism and the racialized sexism it birthed survives beyond occupation: “As a result of White imperialism, ‘Asians and members of the Asian Diasporas have existed and still exist through a colonized experience’” (Woan 284). Imperialistic forces persist in the American cultural consciousness as mechanisms for reducing Asian women to sexual utility. Even contemporary Asian American women such as myself, living at great geographical and temporal distance from the birth of this Western male conception of the Orient, experience the legacy of colonialism’s violence. We see this violence at all scales: in interpersonal interaction as well as canonical public images. Analysis of Orientalism’s profound and consequential

legacies, therefore, is of urgent necessity.

In present-day contexts, modern scholars have substantiated American media's continued exoticization with theoretical understandings of race and assimilation for Asian individuals in America. As Columbia University's Stacey J. Lee elucidates, "As permanent outsiders, Asian Americans are forever associated with their country of origin. While the descents of European immigrants have become accepted as authentic Americans, Asian Americans are always considered to be foreigners regardless of the number of generations their families have been in the United States" (Lee qtd. in Yan Hai and Dong 91). My family, for example, despite four generations in this country, will perpetually be associated with Japan—our country of origin—simply because of our physical appearances and the historical legacies they conjure. This "perpetual foreigner" designation not only alienates Asian American families, it positions Asian American women as exotic objects rather than complex members of American society. As a result of this inescapable Orientalism, Asian women experience objectification, sexualization, and reduction in entertainment media, preventing them from achieving genuine membership as legitimate citizens (Yan Hai and Dong 91). Furthermore, for Asian American women, this "foreignness" may be the primary reason for which they are viewed as desirable. In other words, Asian women are considered appealing, but only through the medium of their exotic Otherness: their identity is "authenticated as being exotic and Oriental because it was valued as such" (Yu 160). The "Oriental" racial identity of Asian women shapes their treatment by hegemonic media: it is their

very sense of perpetual foreignness that contributes to their "value" as objectified, sexualized figures in the American cultural vocabulary.

Another modern scholar, Celine Parreñas Shimizu, reflects upon the perverse impact of Orientalist representations that pervade the acclaimed Broadway musical *Miss Saigon*. *Miss Saigon* follows the problematic if not sweeping love story between an American soldier, Chris, and the young Vietnamese prostitute, Kim, he meets while occupying the country under military force. The very plot line is built upon the sexual utility of Asian women within the context of American military aggression, relying on canonical representations of Asian women as vehicles for pleasure. Shimizu remarks of the personally significant yet painfully universal experience of reckoning with this culturally ubiquitous archetype: despite her potent "misrecognition or 'that is not me' identification" with this "representational construct" that serves to embody "imperialism and sexism," she recognizes the "possibility of my being misidentified for her" (Shimizu 252). This imagery continues to affect Asian women who continually face these representations within the American cultural vocabulary. The precise dynamic that Shimizu articulates poses a universal challenge for Asian women in the Diaspora—particularly in the arts—unique to their racial identity. When confronted with reductive representations of sexual utility, contemporary Asian women must navigate the personal reverberations of Orientalism's legacies. Shimizu's insights ground theoretical understandings of representation with personal experience; in doing so, she sets up an important framework through which to consider how cultural artifacts uphold

sociopolitical legacies in our current society. This relationship—between representational images and contemporary individuals—frames my own experience and thinking when exploring how historical forces of exoticization, xenophobia, and objectification persist in our cultural imagination with personal, real life consequences.

Eurasian Women: Racial Ambiguity as Agency and Erasure

While fully-Asian women endure the confluence of sexism and racism as a result of their appearance and assumed cultural identity, Eurasian women experience media portrayals divorced from the context of their racial identity. Eurasian women still fall victim to hyper-sexualization and objectification; however, lacking the foreign appearance of fully Asian women, Eurasian women find both an agency that allows them to evade reductive forces of Orientalism as well as a dynamic of erasure that disregards their racial or cultural identity.

This double-edged Eurasian experience of evasion and erasure in American media stems primarily from racial ambiguity in physical appearance: because the American public has difficulty pinpointing the ethnic identity of Eurasian women, they are simultaneously exempt from the suffocating racism that plagues Asian women and entirely unrecognized as ethnic individuals. In psychological experiments, researchers corroborated this central ambiguity: they found it took significantly longer for participants to racially identify images of mixed-race faces than monoracial faces, concluding that mixed-race people are “seen as ambiguous, and categorization of them will present a perceptual challenge not experienced in categorizing persons who more

clearly ‘fit’ into the commonly-used existing categories” (Chen and Hamilton). Ultimately, this dynamic is the root cause of the complex, double-edged experience for Eurasian women in U.S. media: their inability to be “placed” by public perception—unlike monoracial Asian women—simultaneously prevents them from both being pigeonholed into reductive racial perceptions as well as being recognized for their racial identities at all. Half-Chinese, half-white artist Kip Fulbeck even qualifies mixed-race identity as “the haziness, the blurrings, the undefinables” (13). These “undefinable” Eurasian women find a freedom from racialized sexualization in their professional lives, but they are also never authenticated with their full racial identity because media portrayals refuse to acknowledge it—or, perhaps, cannot even categorize it.

Personal interviews of Stanford University undergraduate students of wide-ranging ethnic backgrounds reaffirm this “haziness” and its implications for both the agency as well as the erasure of Eurasian female celebrities. These interviews provide perceptions from media-consuming, culturally literate young people whose impressions are valuable data points in understanding how the public understands American media’s portrayal of Eurasian celebrities. Most interviewees could not identify the ethnic identities of prominent Eurasian female celebrities including Vanessa Hudgens, Olivia Munn, and Chrissy Teigen, simply admitting they appear “ethnically ambiguous”; in fact, many expressed shock to hear that the celebrities were half-Asian: “I genuinely thought Vanessa Hudgens was Latina after *High School Musical* ... you’re sure she’s not?” one male student declared. Others expressed vague recognition that these actresses had part Asian ancestry, but could

not recall when their Asian identity was central to their professional presence in media: “They’re kind of accepted as any other white actress in Hollywood,” remarked one 18-year-old female. These young voices speak to the pervasive dynamic in which mainstream audiences fail to recognize the complex racial identities of Eurasian women. Their half-Asian identities are unnoticed and even erased by the entertainment media that so fervently recognize their identities as sexualized women. In a painful paradox, however, the erasure of their race seems to grant Eurasian celebrities—including Munn, Hudgens, and Quinn—access to wide-ranging roles and fame in mainstream American media.

Racial Otherness as a Mechanism for Sexualization in Media

For Asian women, race is central to their presence in popular culture. In cultural artifacts and mainstream media alike, colonial history has shaped enduring societal images of Asian women as one-dimensional sexual vehicles, primarily for white male commodification and pleasure. One glaring example of this representation is the highly acclaimed 1997 novel *Memoirs of a Geisha* by Arthur Golden, a white American author who based this memoir-style story on a real-life Japanese geisha, Mineko Iwasaki. The best-selling novel sold roughly four million copies in just four years in the United States and was even adapted into a 2005 Rob Marshall film that grossed over \$57 million in U.S. theaters. The film’s commercial success is perhaps due to its capitalization on highly-accepted Asian tropes in American media. Specifically, according to critic Kimiko Akita, “Through exoticization and sexualization of Japanese culture and geisha,” Golden ensured “the West would

continue to view the Orient as exotic and the Oriental as Other” (3). By alienating both the physical region as well as its people, this Western perspective essentializes all individuals of Asian descent into a foreign, exotic monolith. In addition to the book’s flagrant representation of Asian Otherness, the movie adaptation cast Chinese actresses in distinctly Japanese roles, further reducing all Asian women to a singular type. The prominence of these reductive cultural artifacts speaks to the institutionalized nature of such stereotypes in the American consciousness: Otherness and Orientalism are clearly culturally legitimate mechanisms for the sexualization of Asian women and the consumption of their representational images.

In addition to canonical literary representation, Asian women face the suffocating intersection of race and gender in the commercial arena as well. In numerous advertisement campaigns, many companies capitalize on the deeply ingrained notion of the hyper-sexualized Asian woman in order to generate allure for their product. In a 1999 ad, for instance, Skyy Vodka depicts a young Asian female in a sexy iteration of a traditional Mandarin dress kneeling above a topless white woman sprawled leisurely on a bamboo mat (Figure 1). The white woman nonchalantly and expectantly holds a glass as the Asian woman carefully pours vodka from the Skyy bottle, concentrating intensely to serve her client. The bodily postures of each woman in this advertisement elucidate their power relation: the relaxed, carefree, and entitled body language of the white woman gives her personal agency and power, whereas the Asian woman’s highly-restricted, submissive position objectifies her into a sexualized, decorative vehicle at the service of white pleasure. In a more recent advertisement by Motorola for the “Sharper



Figure 1
Skyy Vodka ad: Inner Peace (Dirk)



Figure 2
Motorola RAZR ad (Le)

than Ever” Razr cell phone, Motorola capitalizes on the mysterious, exotic allure of this Asian prototype to create a similar appeal for their product (Figure 2). In this image, Asian tropes of the high hair bun and sharp blade are expressed in highly sexualized terms—with attire reminiscent of dominatrix characters. While slightly more subtle than the Skyy Vodka ad, this commercial tactic still draws on the damaging archetype of the exotic Asian woman as an aesthetic tool lacking personal depth or agency. Most recently, and perhaps most subtly, an international advertisement launched by Asiana Airlines and the Seoul Metropolitan Government for a New York advertisement campaign draws on similar tropes (Figure 3). The advertisement—which was eventually pulled amid criticism for sexual undertones—aims to spur American tourism to South Korea by using American notions of sexualized Korean women and exotic Asian experiences. The image shows the repeated silhouette of a Korean woman wearing a

traditional hanbok dress suggestively pulling on her attire with the tagline “Unforgettable Experience in Seoul,” as images of popular Seoul tourist attractions are layered in the backdrop. By collaging the woman’s body with images of tourist attractions, the advertisement effectively conflates an Asian woman’s physical form with sites of attraction: just like these sites, the woman’s body is available for public—primarily *Western*—consumption and enjoyment. The image also builds upon the legacy of sex tourism in Asia by exploiting the historical association between Asian women and sexual utility. While certainly more subtle, this advertisement crafted specifically for American audiences capitalizes on the pervasive American understanding of Asian women serving as an object for exotic allure, as expressed by New York residents interviewed by the publication the *Korea Times*. One engineering graduate, Alex Costilhes, stated that he “thought she was undressing” and that the



Figure 3
Seoul Korea ad (“Korean Tourism”)

tagline “gives it a sexual connotation,” while another woman remarked that she can “see how it might play into the Western fetishization of East Asian women” in order to “draw white men to come to Korea for tourism” (“Korean Tourism”). These advertisements, although seemingly less flagrant in their displays of exoticism, all demonstrate the predominant American view of Asian women: they gain “attractiveness from being different” (Yan Hai and Dong 88). In other words, their sexual allure is a direct result of their racial Otherness, leaving the two inextricably linked. The legacies of Orientalism unequivocally seep into canonical representations of Asianness in mainstream media; as a result, reductive archetypes are reproduced and reiterated in society’s contemporary culture.

In addition to its prevalence on the commercial side of American media, this stereotypical imagery also affects actresses of Asian descent in Hollywood. As a prominent case study, Constance Wu is among the most

notable Asian American actresses in mainstream American cinema. With her two biggest breaks, ABC’s sitcom *Fresh Off the Boat* and the 2018 blockbuster film *Crazy Rich Asians*, Wu has risen in recognition—yet within her racial context. Although she has been hailed as an important figurehead for Asian American representation in Hollywood—which remains in desperate need for improvement—Wu has also fallen victim to forces of exoticization herself. Among her many magazine photoshoots, for example, a *Fashion Magazine* cover shows her in full hair and makeup that accentuates her exotic Asian identity, while she poses suggestively with one finger on her bottom lip (Figure 4). The pairing of this aesthetically Asian costumery with the tagline that emphasizes racial identity indicates the incapability of her race in her professional career. Wu even remarks on this dynamic herself, most notably at the 2018 Women’s March in Los Angeles. Wu made an



Figure 4
Constance Wu for *Fashion Magazine* (Abadian)

impassioned indictment of the damaging stereotypes against Asian women: “I march today for Asian-American women who have been ignored, or judged or fetishized or expected to be a certain way to fulfill a certain idea of what a sweet girl should be” (qtd. in Madani). Wu’s call for change speaks to the deeply pervasive societal forces in American media that “fetishize” Asian women, reducing them to a monolith of submissive, “sweet” girls who are simply the “sex object of white males” (Yan Hai and Dong 91). Wu is no stranger to these damaging contemporary media portrayals; she is pigeonholed into a position of the sexualized, alluring, exotic Asian American actress. Her prominence in popular culture is possible only within the context—and the costumer—of her Asianness, a limitation that

white and even biracial actresses can evade.

One highly disturbing element of this persistent phenomenon is that Orientalism and objectification claim a positive slant. The very Otherness of Asian women generates an allure that may appear advantageous or at least flattering; however, the appeal of this sexualized Asian female imagery stems from deeply oppressive sociocultural paradigms. As author R.O. Kwon writes in her *New York Times* op-ed, “Stop Calling Asian Women Adorable,” Asian women lead an existence that is perpetually perceived through the lens of their racial Otherness, even if they are described in seemingly positive terms. Kwon asserts that these demeaning terms are in fact a symptom of “an acceptable variety of racism” which “dresses up its violence in praise.” Asian women seeking advancement in professional settings relentlessly confront reductive perceptions that demonstrate an “unwillingness to recognize Asian people as full human beings.” The inextricability of race and gender, in the case of Asian women, is a function of extreme reduction and dehumanization. Although this dynamic strips the dignity, depth, and humanity from Asian women, American entertainment media excuse this treatment because it is at least shallowly complimentary. This “praise,” however, is a dangerous conception of Asian women as submissive and subhuman, perpetuated by a self-sustaining feedback loop of seemingly “positive” stereotypes.

Half-White Privilege: Freedom from Negotiating Race

While fully Asian actresses exist within the confines of their racial identity—and the centuries of racial social-constructing—Eurasian female celebrities in mainstream media experience commercial representations that are

conspicuously race-free, albeit highly sexualized. Their ambiguous, mixed-race appearance frees them from the confines of Orientalism that burdens fully Asian women. Prominent case studies of such celebrities include Olivia Munn and Vanessa Hudgens. Munn is a widely-known American actress and model of half-Chinese ancestry who finds recognition in cinema, the commercial world, and red carpet stages. In her *Maxim* magazine cover feature, Olivia Munn poses provocatively in a bikini, next to the sexually suggestive words “Wet and Wild,” which further enforce her role as a sexually pleasing image targeting male consumers (Figure 5). She is undeniably serving as an object embodying sexual allure; however, this flagrant sexualization occurs without reference to her racial identity as a half-Asian woman; it is entirely irrelevant to the purpose of this portrayal. This representation stands in stark contrast to Constance Wu on the cover of *Fashion* magazine (Figure 4), in which her racial identity becomes central to her aesthetic and sexual allure. Munn’s physically ambiguous appearance allows her freedom from this restrictive dynamic, but it also leaves her part-Asian ancestry entirely unrecognized, perhaps even erased.



Figure 5
Olivia Munn for *Maxim* Magazine (Lim)

In a similar vein, Vanessa Hudgens—a popular young half-Filipina actress and singer—also dominates American mainstream and commercial media with her aesthetic appeal, but she does so without mention of her half-Filipina identity. In the *Cosmopolitan* magazine cover featuring Hudgens, her body language as well as the accompanying text reduce her individual worth to her sexual utility (Figure 6). This objectification is unequivocal; however, it is prominent in a way that leaves her half-Asian identity untouched. Whereas Constance Wu’s sexual appeal is inseparable from her race, Hudgens evades this racialized sexism simply because she is not beholden to a reductive racial perception. In fact, her big



Figure 6
Vanessa Hudgens for *Cosmopolitan* Magazine (Watts)

break in American cinema was her role as the Hispanic protagonist, Gabriella Montez, of the blockbuster trilogy *High School Musical*. Her passability in the role speaks to the profound mobility of Eurasian actresses: Constance Wu, for instance, could never assume the role of Gabriella Montez because of the absurdity of a fully Asian-appearing actress playing a character with a Hispanic surname. On the other hand, this Eurasian agency speaks to a lack of grounded racial identification in media portrayals: Hudgens is not validated as a half-Asian woman if she is continually cast in cross-race roles. Thus, the ambiguous Eurasian identity—although still sexualized—grants agency and access; at the same time, however, this mobility is indicative of a larger dismissal of Eurasian racial identity.

Another prominent example of Eurasian agency occurs in one of popular culture's most prominent artifacts: the hit reality TV show *The Bachelor*. This fiercely popular dating series, which watches one bachelor interact with many eligible women before falling in love and proposing to one, demonstrates the prevailing romantic and sexual tropes of the American public in conjunction with identity politics. In particular, Season 20, which aired in 2016, featured a half-Filipina, half-white contestant, Caila Quinn. Quinn can be seen in Figure 7, a widely distributed image in major news and entertainment media including *The Washington Post* and NPR. Quinn appears notably “white passing,” possessing an appearance that offers no clear ethnic guidance, despite her mixed race identity. Although she was among only a handful of non-white contestants that the show has ever seen, Quinn found herself at front of the race to be the next star in *The Bachelor's* sister show of the same premise, *The Bachelorette*. Quinn



Figure 7
The Bachelor's Caila Quinn (McNeal)

would have been the franchise's first bachelorette of color at the time. Although she was not selected—the role went to Jojo Fletcher instead—the conversation about her perceived whiteness sparked debate on Eurasian identity. Akemi Johnson, a journalist with NPR, asserts, “Anointing her as the first bachelorette of color would be a safe, predictable choice for the franchise” because Quinn visually appears to fulfill white beauty while claiming an underrepresented ethnic identity. For Eurasian women in roles that emphasize their beauty and sexual allure, their appearance perhaps places them in a unique, privileged position: “As objects of beauty, these women are benefiting from two helpful stereotypes about female desirability” (Morning, qtd. in Johnson). Johnson qualifies these two contributing stereotypes, explaining that one alone is not as desirable as their combination: “One is whiteness as the persisting standard of beauty. The other is Asian women as sexualized, exotic and submissive.” In other words, Eurasian women capitalize on the benefits of two versions of beauty: their whiteness grants them access to mainstream America, while their Asianness grants them an exotic allure. For the show in particular, Quinn appeases public demands for increased

diversity while still maintaining the access and inclusion of a white-appearing woman. At the same time, however, Quinn's perceived whiteness leaves her rich ethnic background unrecognized and invalidated. Quinn, in her subtle ethnic Otherness, thus balances both agency as well as erasure.

Moving Forward: Reframing Perceptions of Racial Identity

Asian and Eurasian women, while separated by only a partial ethnic difference, experience profoundly contrasting treatment and portrayal in mainstream American media. They both fall victim to flagrant sexualization, but their disparate degrees of racial recognition distinguish their experiences. At the hands of violent political histories that constructed persisting racial politics, Asian women suffer from sexualization that operates *through* their exoticized race. Eurasian women, in contrast, endure a more neutralized sexualization that simultaneously grants them freedom from Orientalism while leaving their full racial identity unauthenticated. Thus, although only distinguished by a half-white racial background, Eurasian women find reprieve from a cruel paradigm that levels racialized restrictions on Asian women. Because of an enduring colonialist history, monoracial Asian women such as myself face the impossible task of disentangling their identities as women from their identities as Asian individuals.

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Ultimately, in order to erode this disparity between portrayals of Asian and Eurasian women, the national racial consciousness must re-calibrate: we must stop considering physical appearance to be the sole indicator of racial or cultural identity. In addition to eroding the exoticized Asian archetype, we must recognize that one's cultural identification does not always align with their physical appearance, and thus media should not hold individuals beholden to a certain cultural portrayal based solely on physical appearance. By curating and promoting canonical representational images of Asian women that are free from racialized sexism, perhaps media portrayals will focus more on personal dignity and individuality. Once figures such as Constance Wu can rise to cultural prominence without explicit, inextricable ties to their historically colonized racial identity, the contemporary sociocultural perception of Asian women may shift as well: perhaps my personal appearance can be "beautiful" without being "exotic." This distinction does important work to dismantle historical legacies of oppression and colonization of Asian bodies. By eroding the link between race and sexual appeal, we can begin to pry away the grips of Orientalism, effectively freeing members of the Asian Diaspora from colonial frameworks.

Note

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