

VAUGHT, EMMY C., MA. *Cute Racist: On White Trans Women's Appropriative Embodiment of East Asian Aesthetics* (2021)
Directed by Dr. Daniel Coleman. 108 pp.

This thesis investigates modes of white self-making that construct whiteness in relation to an East Asian other. In certain instances, the absorption of East Asian cultural practices into white transgender women's gendered expressions extends beyond mere cultural appropriation. A problem rests instead in embodiment and self-making. I present the term "appropriative embodiment" to describe processes by which social groups, such as white trans women, make use of a privileged or majoritarian component of their identity, whiteness here, to ameliorate or better navigate oppression that stems from a minoritarian facet of their identity, transness and womanhood here. This thesis works from interviews with three distinct white trans women to explore the structure of appropriative embodiment as a co-construction of both whiteness and East Asian femininity through the white gaze. I question how and to what end white trans women make use of East Asian aesthetics and use these interviews as reference points for recognizing imperial legacies. This thesis views white trans women's appropriative embodiment of East Asian aesthetics as a practice occurring within a white supremacist global structure.

CUTE RACIST: ON WHITE TRANS WOMEN'S APPROPRIATIVE EMBODIMENT OF
EAST ASIAN AESTHETICS

by

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A Thesis

Submitted to

the Faculty of the Graduate School at

The University of North Carolina at Greensboro

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

Greensboro

2021

Approved by

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to take space to express my endless gratitude for those of you who have helped me in bringing this thesis from a handful of vague ideas into a tangible, meaningful piece of research. First, I thank Dr. Daniel Coleman for your invaluable guidance, for helping me direct and make sense of my ideas, and for your constant uplifting. Without your expertise and kindness, I do not believe I could have finished this thesis with the same satisfaction. Dr. Danielle Bouchard, as well, thank you for your mentorship on both pedagogy and this work. Your unwavering support has kept me sane. Likewise, I thank Dr. Etsuko Kinefuchi for imparting your experience and insight. It proved a critical role in the shaping of this research. I thank anyone else who has supported me in any capacity. The role of a community can never go understated, and I view my own achievements as the results of my community. And of course, I thank Grape. This is the second thesis you have put up with me writing, and I could not ask for someone more supportive. I could write another thesis on what your support means to me, so thank you for every single thing.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

This thesis turns a critical eye to acts of embodiment and becoming by white trans women. In certain cases, the absorption of East Asian aesthetic themes into one's personal feminine style extends beyond merely cultural appropriation. Friends and colleagues consistently gawk when I tell them of the white trans woman I encountered on Facebook who chose the name Kyoko for herself. In this case, cultural appropriation accounts for only part of the problem. The rest of the problem exists in the realm of embodiment, wherein Kyoko could not only appropriate the aesthetic of how she might imagine East Asian women, but also apparently a Japanese woman's name. I refer to "appropriative embodiment," a process of embodiment whereby a marginalized person subverts or overcomes their oppression by appropriating some cultural product of a group oppressed along a different axis than that being overcome. For example, a white trans woman subverting cisheteronormativity by appropriating East Asian fashion may navigate her oppression as a trans woman, but she ends up reproducing oppression along the lines of race. I argue that white trans women evade criticism as racist in their use of East Asian aesthetics toward fashioning personal femininity and feminine modes of becoming. This functions within a larger system wherein anti-Asian racism often flies under the radar of scrutiny as well as a single-oppression system of activism and social critique that prioritizes the individual liberty of white trans women to embody femininity however they feel. The potential harm they cause non-white people matters not, so long as their feminine expression represents their "true self." I imagine Kyoko may claim to admire what she perceives as a Japanese culture, but her naming herself after a Japanese woman moves beyond the realm of cultural appropriation and works within established systems of violence and aestheticization of Asian femininity.

Though, I implicate myself in this critique. Between my undergraduate education and my foray into graduate school, I lived and taught in Mapo-gu, Seoul, South Korea for two years as an English teacher. At the time a closeted transgender woman with enough standing within the white middle class to afford my own neocolonial excursion abroad, I half-ignorantly fulfilled my place in an established history of United States' purposeful and imperial presence in South

Korea. I justified my place in South Korea as a teacher of English, unable and unwilling to recognize how my position abetted Western occupation at a cultural-linguistic level. Through the workings of whiteness as pseudo-universal,¹ I felt on an unconscious level entitled to my occupation there. However, on a gendered level, I felt ineffably estranged. I perceived around me a hyper-femininity which I could not attain but which I wanted terribly. Whether this femininity stemmed from my own views as a Western outsider tainted by the Orientalist imagination of the so-called East, Korea's widespread valuation of beauty or simply my own repressed femininity latching onto anything I could not at the time have, would prove difficult to determine. For all intents and purposes, the three functioned in tandem. As a foreigner with no permanent roots in the country, I could not really start any meaningful social transition—even after returning to the United States, it would take me about a year and a half before I took that plunge. Additionally, I feared even minor expressions of femininity would only result in derision from my students and colleagues (my students, after all, mocked me for wearing a yellow button-down shirt once). To channel my growing frustration and inability to do anything meaningful about it, I spent my free time going clothes shopping.

At the time, I lived alone. Most of my friends had moved to another part of the country or back to their own. With much less else to do in my free time and with a growing need to express my femininity, I spent at least one night per week, usually a school night so I could avoid the marginally larger weekend crowd, looking for and occasionally buying women's clothes. I took much of my fashion inspirations from screencaps of an anime I was watching at the time, *Yawara! A Fashionable Judo Girl*, which I kept in a folder on my computer labeled "Fashion inspo." My favorite outfit consisted of a pleated navy skirt and a sailor's top, very school-girl style, and very cute in my mind. That outfit, and a few other choice items, as well as shaving my legs and face, gave me the first taste as an adult of what I would later learn to call gender euphoria. The idea of trying to go out looking "like a girl" terrified me, even if I only wandered the streets, but I would occasionally put on subtly feminine items. Wearing sparkly pink socks that hardly anyone noticed made me feel more confident. I found a sense of gendered freedom in my wandering around Seoul, either in building up courage to enter a women's clothing outlet or

¹Thomas Nakayama & Robert Krizek. "Whiteness: A strategic rhetoric," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 81, no. 3 (1995): 291-209.

through my minimal expressions of femininity in a busy district of a city where I remained relatively anonymous.

When I returned to the United States, I brought those clothes, especially the schoolgirl outfit, back with me. At the time, I discovered autonomous sensory meridian response (ASMR), videos wherein someone attempts to evoke a tingling sensation in the viewer-listener by creating a variety of soft sounds. Whereas some describe ASMR as a function of the erotic,² a friend introduced it to me and I used it as a form of relaxation. I listened to some form of ASMR nearly every day for a brief period, sometimes while I did work and sometimes while doing nothing at all, as it helped me feel as though I had something close to a hobby. At this same time, I had come out to friends and some colleagues. In my second year of my Master's program at North Carolina State University, I asked my friends to start calling me Emmy, short for Emerald. Femininity still eluded me, but I made small attempts to embody it. In addition to the clothes I brought back from Korea, I also tried emulating some of the most feminine people I knew and knew about. One of my first favorite "ASMRtists," TingTingASMR, a Chinese American, impressed me with her consistently stylish makeup. She often used highlight under her eyes, in the inner half, a beauty trend I had seen South Korean women enjoy as well. Searching for my own sense of makeup style, I copied her. It made me feel more feminine. Applying the highlight under my eye and seeing myself in the mirror, I found more of that coveted euphoria.

Friends complimented me on it, even occasionally referring to it as a "classic" style of mine. No one pointed out that I had appropriated an East Asian style of makeup. Who would? South Korean makeup and skincare products have occupied a top spot in the global beauty market for years,³ so the sight of a white woman emulating general East Asian beauty styles fell right within the norm. Likewise, even if anyone had noticed my subtle cultural appropriation, they may have refrained from calling it out. After all, I had only recently come out as trans, and most would hesitate before criticizing a trans woman on how she expresses femininity so as to avoid the label of "bigot." In some ways, that hesitation represents exactly what I want to counter with this

² Johannes D. Kaminski. "Audio erotics," in *Erotic Literature in Adaptation and Translation*. ed. Johannes D. Kaminski (Oxford, England; Legenda Publishing, 2018): 91-109.

³ Marian Liu, "Beyond beauty: Korean makeup provides 'cosmeceuticals.'" *CNN* (April 11, 2018). Accessed online: <https://www.cnn.com/2018/04/11/health/korean-makeup-beauty-health-benefits/index.html>

project. White trans women's appropriation of East Asian aesthetics too often flies under the radar and evades criticism as a practice of racism. In other ways, this project serves as a form of self-reflection and an exploration in the question of femininity. I have since stopped appropriating East Asian aesthetics in my fashion and makeup, but that does not necessarily preclude the possibility of other forms of racist feminine embodiments. I keep this in mind.

In the years since coming out, I have encountered multiple communities of other transgender people, plenty of white trans women among them. For many who remain closeted, their identity can only exist in the online realm or in the space between physical and online, in photos of them at home wearing feminine outfits in which they would never dare venture into public. Strikingly, I have found that my fellow white American trans women, like I did in my early attempts at feminine expression, routinely practice appropriation of East Asian, primarily Japanese, but also Korean and Chinese, aesthetics. I have encountered white trans women online using *katakana*⁴ in their Twitter bios, folding-fans in queer bars, schoolgirl outfits in the lewd photos they post online, the works.

Recently, creators Lana and Lilly Wachowski of *The Matrix* (1999), revealed that they wrote the hit sci-fi flick as an allegory for transitioning while they were still closeted.⁵ Having watched the film for the first time in the past year or so, I picked up on the allegory rather directly. Morpheus telling Neo at their first meeting, "You've felt it your entire life, that there's something wrong with the world. You don't know what it is, but it's there like a splinter in your mind, driving you mad,"⁶ could only ever have been about a quiet, unnamed dysphoria. Less known about the film, however, is its blatant and unabashed appropriation of cyberpunk aesthetics, sometimes down to near identical shots, from the Japanese animated film *Ghost in the Shell* (1995).⁷ Some argue that the anime speaks directly to specifically Japanese anxiety over rapid technological development, and therefore an American audience could never truly grasp its message or significance.⁸ Yet, the Wachowski sisters famously pitched *The Matrix* as a live action semi-adaptation of *Ghost in the*

⁴ *Katakana*: A Japanese writing system.

⁵ "The Matrix is a 'trans metaphor', Lilly Wachowski says." *BBC News* (Aug. 7, 2020). Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-53692435>.

⁶ Lana Wachowski & Lilly Wachowski, directors. 1999. *The Matrix*. Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video.

⁷ Josh Oreck, director. 2001. *The Matrix Revisited*. Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video.

⁸ Hikawa Ryūsuke, "Deciphering the universality of Oshii Mamoru's *Ghost in the Shell*," in *Nippon* (June 8, 2017).

Shell. Their film, which sparked its own larger franchise, featured very little Asian representation or narrative, despite its Japanese aesthetic inspiration and heavy use of generalized Asian martial arts such as Kung Fu and Tae Kwon Do, as well as Chinese film techniques such as the use of wire action. I call attention to *The Matrix* as a prominent example of white trans women appropriating aesthetics, and little more, of an East Asian production for the sake of creating a deracinated narrative of transgender becoming. I acknowledge the absence of femininity per se in this appropriation, aside from *Ghost*'s portrayal of a female android as its main character, while at the same time understand it as part of a larger phenomenon by which white trans women utilize East Asian aesthetics, quite often Japanese aesthetics, for personal or artistic expression of trans womanhood specifically.

This project reconceptualizes white trans women's feminine embodiment as necessarily inscrutable within trans-affirming spaces. The belief within queer circles that there exists no incorrect or harmful way for trans people to present femininity works as a surface-level statement, yet it fails to capture white modes of self-making that enact harm on non-white groups. Considering such a possibility, I examine methods by which white trans women describe and enact their femininity in relation to East Asian femininity. In part, this project moves beyond the strictly visible forms of white identification with East Asian subjectivity. For example, none of this study's participants wear legibly Asian clothing articles such as kimono, hanbok, or qipao, aside from one participant's donning of a Japanese-style school-girl outfit. Rather, each takes on a unique relationship with East Asian femininity different yet methodically similar to one another. In particular, I examine their descriptions of their own self-presentation, often as cute or as deliberately feminine, as it relates to the narrative they put forth about Asia and how they see themselves embodying Asian aesthetics. I chose each participant based at least somewhat on visible presentation, so this is not to say that cultural appropriation is completely irrelevant. In part this project moves beyond the limits of cultural appropriation as a lens and beyond the strictly visible forms of white identification with East Asian subjectivity. Though cultural appropriation figures into this analysis to some extent, I offer the concept of *appropriative embodiment* as a tool for recognizing counter-interpellative processes members of a marginalized community enact through visual as well as iterative and narrative components as harmful to other communities.

This thesis views the construction of anti-Blackness as foundational for the creation of the United States and much of the Western world's global power. Anti-Blackness functions as a process interconnected with the genocide of Native Americans as well as Asian labor exploitation. Hortense Spillers argues that the creation of Blackness around a sexual fungibility, wherein Blackness exists not as a body but instead as commodified flesh, serves as the basis for the United States' white supremacist structure.⁹ Through the historic stripping of the Black body to mere flesh, white supremacy casts Blackness outside of the realm of sociality and outside the capacity for embodying gender. C. Riley Snorton furthers this idea, exploring how the construction of biological human sex and gender operated as a tool for constructing Blackness as deviant.¹⁰ That is, the Black male and Black female body exist within a white supremacist framework as fungible, mere interchangeable flesh. Spillers argues the colonial encounter between Europe and Africa, and Europe's subsequent enacting of chattel slavery disrupts African social and familial modes of living.¹¹ In this sense, the reduction of Blackness to flesh enacts a debodilying, a form of social death, as well as a sustained prevention of autonomous reclamation. Concepts such as Black sociality, Black family structure, and Black gender cannot co-exist with the view of Blackness as fungible flesh.

Whiteness makes use of this fungibility in both the contrasted creation of itself as well as the development of the colonized land that would come to be called the United States. A dichotomous view of race emerges that figures whiteness as embodied, fully social and normative, contrasted against Blackness, the socially dead flesh. The processes through which Latinx, Asian, and Indigenous people get racialized is often flattened because of the ongoing reckoning with the Black/white binary of the United States. Yet, the lens through which we understand race-making as a process of rendering flesh fungible interacts with other forms of racialization in the United States, particularly Asian racialization. Among white imperial projects, there exists as well a form of labor fungibility between racialized groups. Lisa Lowe thinks through the introduction of Chinese indentured servitude into British West India to make

⁹ Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics*, 17, 2 (1987): 64-81.

¹⁰ C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis, MN; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

¹¹ Spillers, "Mama's Baby," 68.

up for the loss of Black slave labor.¹² The British plan to use Chinese labor came not out of moral obligation to end chattel slavery but instead out of convenience and an existing view of Asian labor as amenable to EuroAmerican production demands. On the first hand, Britain moved toward abolition in order to forestall a large-scale Black revolution, not out of a sudden turn to righteousness. On the other, Britain embraced Chinese labor for cost-effectiveness and because they believed Chinese people could more suitably work sugarcane in India. This meant a transition from slavery to a similar process of “racialized and coerced labor, at the time when the possession of body, work, life, and death was foreclosed to the enslaved and indentured alike.”¹³ Given this history, we might understand racialized exploitation amongst Black and Asian groups alike as disparate yet deeply interconnected processes. As Lowe notes, “the importing of Chinese and Indian workers was imagined as a means to replace the slaves” amidst abolition, while “the colonial profits of the plantation system were expanded in the imperial East Indies and China trades in goods and people.”¹⁴ Processes of racialization and racial labor exploitation in the United States borrow and perpetuate the same processes in Europe. For this, we might view European and American colonial projects as much in the same, a singular EuroAmerican imperial mission. The interconnectedness of these varied racializations indicates a labor fungibility that sees non-white groups as potential plantation-hands. Which group would occupy the position came only as a matter of economic and imperial expediency.

I join Anne Cheng in her use of fungibility, too, as she argues that such a lens allows for viewing Asian racialization as a form of what she calls *ornamentalism*, the reduction of Asian women specifically into the realm of the decorative and the aesthetic.¹⁵ She argues that the process of ornamentalism reduces Asian women to a state of *perihumanity* through association with the decorative. Or, in her words, “Ornament becomes – *is* – flesh for Asian American female personhood.”¹⁶ Sitting with this analysis allows for the interrogation that this thesis aims to accomplish. That is: In recognizing Asian female personhood as interchangeable with the

¹² Lisa Lowe, *Intimacies of the Four Continents* (Durham, NC; London, ENG: Duke University Press, 2015): 23

¹³ Lowe, *Intimacies*, 24.

¹⁴ Lowe, *Intimacies*, 162.

¹⁵ Anne Cheng, *Ornamentalism* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 3.

¹⁶ Cheng, *Ornamentalism*, 22. Emphasis in source.

ornamental or the decorative, I can better frame appropriation of Asian feminine aesthetic by white trans women as an act that directly implicates Asian and Asian American women.

Fungibility takes on yet another meaning here, as I borrow from Spillers in using the term to describe an objectification of Asian and Asian American people. Further, fungibility captures the particular view in white America of Asian countries as virtually interchangeable, as a singular homogenized culture. Where Japan, China, and Korea merge into a singular idea, we see Asian fungibility. Even in decolonial writings, China comes to represent the whole of Asia. Lowe works through C. L. R. James' use of "Chinese" in his memoir as a rhetorical stand-in for Asian indentured servitude broadly, extending beyond only East Asian but including India as well.¹⁷ The view of Asian countries as interchangeable or as represented only by China and Japan undergirds the homogenization and construction of Asian countries as virtually indistinguishable and thereby interchangeable.

The United States military involvement in Asia also contributes significantly to the construction of Asian-ness in the United States.¹⁸ As an example, the "systemic creation of red light districts in Asian countries where US troops were sanctioned" that American GIs frequented for sex.¹⁹ This resulted in not just individualistic seeking out of Asian women for sex to be sure, as "these practices became integral to military culture and discourse through ritualized retellings of these experiences."²⁰ In other words, the construction of the Asian woman as a sex object exists as a state-sanctioned, institutionalized form of racialization meant to spur morale amongst footsoldiers in the American imperial project. Reckoning with such a history proves indispensable for understanding the formation of white America's imagining of Asian-ness.

Asian Americans as well as Asians abroad face a distinct history of racialization through pathologization as well. For example, the present historical moment in which growing

¹⁷ Lowe, *Intimacies*, 164.

¹⁸ Erin Khuê Ninh, "Without Enhancements: Sexual Violence in the Everyday Lives of Asian American Women," in *Asian American Feminisms & Women of Color Politics*, ed. by Lynn Fujiwara & Shireen Roshanravan (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2018), 70, 74.

¹⁹ Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, "Asian American and Women of Color Feminisms," in *Asian American Feminisms & Women of Color Politics*, ed. by Lynn Fujiwara & Shireen Roshanravan (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2018), 49.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

antagonism toward China accompanies the spread of COVID-19 echoes similar pathologizing of Chinese immigrants, whom white America viewed as potential contaminants, in the 19th Century.²¹ We see the alignment of Asian-ness and sickness with the association of China with pollution,²² as well as in the fear-mongering over monosodium glutamate, otherwise known as MSG, the ostensibly dubious and threatening chemical found in Asian cooking.²³ Taking the incessant pathologizing of China with the view of Asia as fungible, that Asian countries exist virtually interchangeably in the white gaze, the supposed sins of China fall on the rest of Asia, or at least of East Asia.

On Tuesday, March 16th, 2021, a white terrorist shooter in Atlanta, Georgia purposefully sought out and killed 8 people, six of whom were Asian women. It did not matter whether they were Chinese. Following a year of increased anxiety about Asian Americans on top of the already racialized view of Asian women as ornamental sex objects, the shooter killed eight people, targeting Asian women outright. The reduction of Asian people to the ornamental, to a fungible and homogenized mass synonymous with contagion has real world consequences, real manifestations of violence and murder. The constructions of stereotypes, typically stemming from American soldiers' recollections of their sexual exploits while occupying various Asian nations, all feed directly into this violence. Stochastic terrorist killings do not come from nowhere. They originate in the daily racializations and objectifications of targeted groups.

Much in the same way that E. Patrick Johnson argues, "White Americans also construct [B]lackness," so too do white Americans construct Asian-ness.²⁴ Whiteness, and by extension white supremacy, can only thrive in relation to Blackness or Asian-ness in negation of whiteness. The creation of racialized Others, based on various forms of racial fungibility, sustains the myth of white as norm. Most often, our construction of Asian-ness takes the form of stereotypes such as through the model minority myth, itself rooted in anti-blackness, the "lotus blossom," or

²¹ Wenxian Zheng, "Standing up to Racial Discrimination," *Phylon*, 56, no. 1 (2019), 7-32.

²² John Copeland Nagle, "How Much Should China Pollute?" *Vermont Journal of Environmental Law* 12, no. 3 (2011): 591-632.

²³ Robert Ji-Song Ku, "Monosodium Glutamate." In *Dubious Gastronomy: The Cultural Politics of Eating Asian in the USA* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2014), 159-89.

²⁴ E. Patrick Johnson. *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2003).

“dragon lady.”²⁵ However, erin Khuê Ninh notes that Asian American women’s representation within the last decade has taken on a more “masculine,” tech-centered approach.²⁶ With this in mind, the description of East Asian femininity by white trans women takes on an Orientalist, timeless profile most aligned with imperial and fetishized stereotypes than more contemporary, though still harmful, Asian American representations. The production of East Asian femininity through white trans women’s descriptions of themselves enacts a co-production that draws from and reproduces imperial stereotypes about East Asia while at the same time produces an iteration of whiteness that sees itself in conversation with Asian femininity, yet does not explicitly draw from any particular stereotype but a cluster of descriptive elements such as shyness, sexual bottomhood, passiveness, and delicateness. In this way, a white trans feminine production that fits no particular Asian or Asian American stereotype scheme yet calls itself or draws from so-called Asian aesthetics works to reify our understanding of white Americans’ formation of what it means to be Asian. The whiteness that these acts create then might best be understood as an imperial femininity. Further, this process blurs the distinction between East Asian and Asian American subjects, as their points of reference make use of Asian American subjectivities as well as geographically East Asian subjectivities. Blurred though it is, I view this as an Orientalist process of homogenization and replication of the “perpetual foreigner” trope ascribed to Asian Americans.

I use the term co-production for two distinct purposes and meanings. On the first hand, co-production refers to a dual production wherein certain white trans women’s feminine embodiment acts and the language ascribed to those acts constitutes a material white femininity and at the same time constructs, especially through language, East Asian femininity. When white women act and dress in ways that make them feel shy, passive, and delicate, and attribute that same manner of dress and behavior to East Asian inspiration or achieve it through utilization of East Asian aesthetic forms available to them, they effectively categorize East Asia as shy, passive, and delicate. Their own embodiment of these traits, whether through clothing, makeup, hairstyle, or, in virtual spaces especially, memes, white women also effect a shy, passive, and delicate form of white femininity. Here, the term co-production lends itself to mean dual

²⁵ Ninh, “Without Enhancements,” 74.

²⁶ Ninh, “Without Enhancements,” 75.

production, a creation or construction that is double-ended. Then again, I use co-production in its more literal sense, noting the feminized construction of East Asia (and whiteness, as I argue) as the result of both white women as well as East Asian cultural outputs themselves. In particular, I draw on Yano's genealogy and critique of Japan's exporting cool-cute style in an effort to bolster the nation's global reputation post-World War II.²⁷ Additionally, I draw from Ueno's assertion that certain efforts by Japan have resulted in a form of "reverse Orientalism," or in other words a self-Orientalism.²⁸ Indeed, pink globalization has played at least a notable part in bringing East Asian, not just Japanese but also Korean and Chinese, media into popular consumption by Western (read: Colonial) audiences. Anime filtered through Western studios, Korean and Chinese dramas made available on Western streaming services such as Netflix, and so on result in an expected uptake by white Americans. Through this consumption and subsequent emulation, there exists a restructuring and realignment of East Asian femininity in accordance with Western views, both through de-narrativization as well as its filtering through a white Western lens—referring to white (trans) women who claim to embody Asian aesthetics or to the work of American studios in localizing Japanese, Korean and Chinese stories for American audiences through both subtitling and dubbing.

Amidst this co-production, I recognize *kawaii*'s history as an aesthetic of subversion in Japan. Yano, in writing on Hello Kitty and the global success of the Sanrio company, speaks to the use of Hello Kitty and other *kawaii* icons as politically subversive. She argues that, toward the end of the 20th Century, the alignment of cuteness with "cool" school-girls represented an association between cuteness and a politics of rebelliousness.²⁹ That is, school-girls rejected "school rules"³⁰ meant to regulate Japanese youth's dress and behavior. A school-girl's use of *kawaii* accessories came across as an ironic symbolization of the impressionable child "she was leaving behind."³¹ Keeping this history in mind, I recognize Asian or Asian American people may not necessarily view white American appropriation of *kawaii* as particularly problematic. Indeed, I do not intend

²⁷ Christine R. Yano, *Pink Globalization: Hello Kitty's Trek across the Pacific*. (Durham, NC; London: Duke University Press, 2013), 1.

²⁸ Chizuko Ueno, "In the feminine guise: A trap of reverse orientalism," in *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal. English Supplement*, 13 (1997), 3-35.

²⁹ Yano, *Pink Globalization*, 53.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

to represent my imagining of what Asian people will consider offensive or otherwise. Rather, I write from a position as a white trans woman who takes issue with certain components of trans self-making as an iteration of white self-making that exploits the white imaginary idea of East Asian aesthetics.

In short, I argue that white trans women's formation of a feminine self constitutes a co-production of both whiteness and East Asian-ness. Through both stylistic and narrative modes of embodiment, white trans women end up reproducing whiteness that seeks to emulate, sometimes successfully and sometimes not, an imaginary East Asian aesthetic. This process also perpetuates a view of East Asia as that which is produced by white trans women. If white trans women act and dress in ways that make them feel shy, passive, and delicate and go on to attribute that very manner of dress to East Asian inspiration, then they have effectively categorized East Asia as shy, passive, and delicate, while effecting a form of whiteness that conforms to those attributes as well.

I feel frustrated with myself for ever having fallen into these acts of appropriative embodiment, however seemingly insignificant. That frustration with myself and my peers motivates those elements of this project that I view as partially self-critique. In turn, I used this thesis to launch a series of interviews with women who represent a similar demographic to mine, white transgender women who have in some way practiced appropriative embodiment of East Asian aesthetics. My interviews with them, three in particular, serve as a basis from where I interrogate appropriative embodiment within the realm of an Orientalist society that deems the Asian as feminine. Further, interviews grant insight into the relationship between anti-Asian racism and white expressions of femininity by those deemed within the cisnormative, transphobic narrative as necessarily unfeminine, white transgender women. This thesis takes as its primary argument that when white transgender women engage in appropriative embodiment through use of East Asian aesthetics, they enact a racial subject making that figures Asian femininity as ornamental, submissive, and hypersexual.

Literature Review

This project, “Cute Racist: On White Trans Women’s Appropriative Embodiment of East Asian Aesthetic toward Personal Femininity,” will follow in the theoretical wake of numerous critical race and queer scholars. Particularly I recognize race, gender, and sexuality as disparate yet inextricably linked. I take Orientalism as a foundational construction to the United States’ understanding of Asian and Asian American gender identity and expression. In particular, the work of Edward Said as well as Reina Lewis provides useful frameworks for recognizing the construction of Asia and Asian people in masculine and feminine white imaginations.³² Building from the historic precedent for understanding the feminization of Asia that they lay out, I turn to Asian sexual subjectivity. The work of David Eng and Mel Chen serve as a basis for understanding both the necessarily feminized position of Asian Americans as well as the impossible space that Asian masculinity represents.³³ I draw on the work of Judy Tzu-Chun Wu and Shireen Roshanravan briefly to provide context for how Asian feminisms attempt to counter the workings of Orientalism.

Further, this project makes use of Richard A. Rogers’ typology of cultural appropriation and argues that appropriative embodiment exists within what he describes as cultural exploitation.³⁴ More recently, Christine R. Yano and Leslie Bow have documented histories and sociologies regarding the spread of East Asian aesthetics through cuteness. I draw on the work of Sianne Ngai who helps us to understand cuteness as an aesthetic of the powerless, itself exercising a power response by inciting mimesis.³⁵ I recognize the spread of East Asian cuteness as both a function of what Yano calls “‘pink globalization’—the transnational spread of goods and images labeled *kawaii* ... from Japan to other parts of the industrial world, with a focus on the United

³² Edward Said. *Orientalism: 25th Anniversary Edition*. (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1978); New York, NY: Vintage Books Edition, 1994); & Reina Lewis. *Gendering Orientalism*. (London, England: Routledge, 1996).

³³ David Eng, *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001); & Mel Chen, “Everywhere Archives: Transgendering, Trans Asians, and the Internet,” *Australian Feminist Studies* 25, no. 64 (London, ENG; Routledge 2010): 199-208.

³⁴ Richard A. Rogers, “From cultural exchange to transculturation: A review and reconceptualization of cultural appropriation” *Communication Theory* 16. (2006): 474-503.

³⁵ Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Boston, MA: First Harvard University Press, 2012).

States.”³⁶ Additionally, it builds on the work of queer of color scholars who work against single-oppression models of queer resistance. Cathy Cohen and Jin Haritaworn identify the inherent pitfalls to homonormative and white-centric queer theory that inevitably harms people of color.³⁷ This project takes from Nakayama & Krizek, who describe whiteness as a rhetorical blank check, whereby it is often experienced as both a cultural absence and as universal. I view identity as a multi-faceted experience formed by both the external, such as performativity à la Butler and Goffman,³⁸ as well as internal psychic processes such as an impulse toward the feminine, drawing on Serano’s contributions,³⁹ and toward passing. That said, while recognizing the importance of outward passing through physical appearance including the use of clothing, I also draw from C. Riley Snorton’s view that passing contains a psychic element, wherein one knows oneself as one’s own gender.⁴⁰ Lastly, I follow the example Tanisha C. Ford sets in viewing fashion as a site of social knowledge in order to provide precedent for my analysis on white trans women’s choice of clothing and makeup in self-presentation.⁴¹ All these authors and the larger bodies of research they represent, taken together, form a picture of trans gender expression that begs further interrogation. These authors and those in conversation with them will serve the basis for my analyses. This literature review offers a closer look at these authors’ arguments as relevant to my interrogation of white trans women’s appropriation of East Asian aesthetics. More pointedly, by taking their work into consideration, we can navigate Orientalism, Asian sexual subjectivities and commodification and their culmination in what I am calling appropriative embodiment.

To understand popular white American’s understanding of Asia and Asian identity, we must start with Said’s *Orientalism*. Said’s work interrogates Orientalism, providing a basis for

³⁶ Yano, *Pink Globalization*; & Leslie Bow, ““Racist Cute: Caricature, Kawaii-Style, and the Asian Thing,” *American Quarterly* 71, no. 1 (2019): 29-58.

³⁷ Cathy Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?” *GLQ* 3 (1997): 437-465; Jin Haritaworn, “Love,” in *Queer Lovers and Hateful Others: Regenerating Violent Times and Places* (London, ENG: Pluto Press, 2015): 84-124.

³⁸ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*. (New York, NY: Routledge, 1990); & Erving Goffman, “Performances: Belief in the Part One is Playing,” in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1956) 17-76.

³⁹ Julia Serano, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*, 2nd Edition (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2007, 2016).

⁴⁰ Snorton, “A New Hope.”

⁴¹ Tanisha C. Ford, *Liberated Threads: Black Women, Style and the Global Politics of Soul* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

understanding the so-called East's function, pejoratively referred to as "the Orient," as a rhetorical stand-in for the people, land, and general cultural practices of Asia, as well as some North African countries.⁴² At its heart, Said argues that Orientalism works as a power-system of knowing by which the so-called West, countries in Eastern Europe as well as the United States, study and develop a knowledge body about the so-called East. The construction of this knowledge body assumes typical and predictable forms. The result is an historic power imbalance between the West and East, positing them as diametrically opposed. Within an Orientalist framework, the East, or "the Occident," is superior to the inferior West, or "the Orient."⁴³ Though much of Said's analysis centers Orientalism toward "Arabic" and Semitic states, he recognizes that Orientalism within the United States typically and historically centers East Asian countries.

Throughout his work, Said identifies how Orientalists, Europeans engaged in the creation of knowledge about "the East," have historically abided by principle dogmas that remain relatively unwavering through various iterations of the system. These dogmas, as Said understands them, allow me to situate this project of understanding white trans women's appropriation of East Asian aesthetics, both real and imaginary. I use Said's four dogmas as an analytical touchstone, drawing from his presentation of them and using them in my analysis of the interviews with white trans women to consider how, if at all, their appropriation contributes to an Orientalist view of East Asia. Much of my interrogation of the participants centers their engagement with Orientalist production. Said presents the dogmas as follows:

One [dogma] is the absolute and systematic difference between the West, which is rational, developed, humane, superior, and the Orient, which is aberrant, undeveloped, inferior. Another dogma is that abstractions about the Orient, particularly those based on texts representing a 'classical' Oriental civilization, are always preferable to direct evidence drawn from modern Oriental realities. A third dogma is that the Orient is eternal, uniform, and incapable of defining itself; therefore it is assumed that a highly generalized and systematic vocabulary for describing the Orient from a Western standpoint is inevitable and even scientifically 'objective.' A fourth dogma is that the Orient is at bottom something either to be feared (the Yellow Peril, the Mongol hordes,

⁴² Said, *Orientalism*, 49-50.

⁴³ Said, *Orientalism*, 205.

the brown dominions) or to be controlled (by pacification, research and development, outright occupation whenever possible.)⁴⁴

These dogmas provide the most basic touchstone for understanding how white imagination configures Asian identity. I call attention especially to his last point, that Orientalism calls for Western control over its Eastern counterpart. In particular, Said outlines the linking of the East and its people to feminine, as opposed to the West's apparent masculinity. Indeed, in addition to Orientalist's view of the East as possessing "feminine penetrability,"⁴⁵ Said argues that Orientalism operates as a male field. In this context, maleness or masculinity operate on two levels as Said understands: 1) our primary cultural contributors to Orientalism were men, 2) that in relation to the masculine West, the East represented a homogenous land of penetrable, conquerable femininity. As we shall see, such a view stands as not only racist and colonialist, but also, taking Reina Lewis' account of women Orientalists into consideration, as markedly untrue.⁴⁶ However, the second understanding of Orientalism as a masculinist production aligns with the majority of work in Asian studies, especially in the feminization of Asian subjects which I invoke within this thesis. In turn, Asian people have come to experience a complex feminine sexualization. Chizuko Ueno argues that Japan, in certain instances, has Orientalized itself, and succinctly summarizes Said's thesis, "Now, if we consider that Oriental men have been feminized, Oriental women have been doubly feminized," continuing with an even more succinct analogical expression, "the Occident : the Orient :: men : women :: culture : nature."⁴⁷ In other words, Orientalist knowledge production favors the West as masculine, aligned with all that Western masculinity entails, and the East as a geographical embodiment of feminine immanence.

Style, or aesthetic, occupies a central concern in this project. Here I take a moment to issue something of a disclaimer. Typically, style and aesthetics refer to two distinct branches of study. Aesthetics especially constitute a broad and complex philosophical field, in which this project has no intention of engaging. Rather, "style" and "aesthetic," and "fashion" occasionally will

⁴⁴ Said, *Orientalism*, 300-301.

⁴⁵ Said, *Orientalism*, 206.

⁴⁶ Lewis, *Gendering Orientalism*.

⁴⁷ Ueno, "In the feminine guise," 4.

maintain an interchangeability within this thesis. One exception to this is my reference to Sianne Ngai's work specifically on cuteness. Ngai argues that cuteness, alongside "zany" and "interesting," constitute one of three major aesthetic categories. To Ngai, cuteness functions through an inherent yet complex power dynamic, whereby the observer holds power over that which they call cute, both parties separated by a rhetorical distance.⁴⁸ In turn, the cute thing holds power over the observer through its ability to invoke sympathy as well as move the observer to mimesis, effectively lessening the power differential. Baby talk, whereby a guardian of a baby imitates cute cooing and baby sounds in order to level with the baby, best exemplifies this mimesis.⁴⁹ Her outlining of cuteness provides useful for considering power dynamics at play regarding white trans women's attitudes toward Asian fashion styles they describe as "cute." Aside from this indulgence of Ngai's work on the aesthetic of cuteness, this thesis by and large uses aesthetic and style interchangeably.

Reina Lewis approaches Orientalism from a slightly different and more distinctly feminist perspective than Said, noting that masculinist histories erase the work of women, even when that work contributes to imperialist productions. Lewis challenges Said's assertion that Orientalism operated entirely as an expression of European masculinity, drawing on the visual artist Henriette Browne as well as other Orientalist women lost to sexist re-writings of history.⁵⁰ As a matter of recognizing the stakes, here I note that my research involves white trans women as subjects. I fear I risk masculinizing them by associating their feminine productions with Orientalism's masculinist tradition. Trans women already face masculinization as the alternative to portrayal as hyper-feminine,⁵¹ so to masculinize white trans women any further would feel morally dubious. However, I draw on Lewis' account of a particular feminine Orientalism and recognize that the productions of Orientalism in which white trans women might engage would generally, not essentially, constitute a feminine iteration of Orientalist expression. In other words, Lewis illuminates the complex relationship between European women, themselves dealing with sexism and derision on the basis of being women, and Orientalist production, an artistic outlet whereby women could potentially make a career out of racism. This complex relationship parallels my

⁴⁸ Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 67.

⁴⁹ Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 60-67.

⁵⁰ Lewis, *Gendering Orientalism*.

⁵¹ Serano, *Whipping Girl*, 15.

own view of white trans women's appropriative embodiment as making use of feminine Orientalist constructions in order to forge a feminine self. That feminine self constitutes an imperial, white femininity that exists only in relation to non-white femininities.

This project also borrows from Lewis for what she calls "cultural cross-dressing,"⁵² itself an extension of Said's assertion that Orientalists have historically appropriated the cultural garb of nations they have occupied or visited as a show of worldliness. As a term, cultural cross-dressing carries a host of implications that align with my interrogation of white trans women's making use of East Asian fashion. Put simply, cultural cross-dressing refers to a phenomenon by which European women wore the clothing of colonized or otherwise racialized cultures as a form of recreational luxury. Lewis notes that "the pleasures of cultural cross-dressing must be forfeited when Western clothes are necessary to signal their Europeanness and inculcate respect or discipline."⁵³ In other words, European style clothing was appropriate for serious occasions and sometimes to establish oneself as European in the presence of non-Europeans, but so-called "Oriental clothes," which indicated a level of worldliness and exoticism, would perform best with casual acquaintances or at home. Lewis' "cultural cross-dressing" establishes a precedent for identifying the contextualization of clothing as well as the privilege by which white women could relish in the clothing of their racialized counterparts. I use this precedent to ground my look into white trans women's appropriation of East Asian fashion in an imperial history.

As a result of feminizing Asia, Asian sexual subjectivity has taken on a distinctly feminized role through Western eyes. David Eng, for example, opens his introduction to *Racial Castration* by asserting that to exist as Asian within the United States equates to "the antithesis of manhood."⁵⁴ Compared to the hyper-sexualized trans woman, whose penises occupy central concern in mainstream discourses, Asian men's penises seem to occupy a place of impossibility in the United States' racial imagination. Eng posits that the process of racial castration has rendered Asian men sexually aberrant from white heteronormativity. For Eng, the search for the Asian man's penis, and thereby sexuality, remains ongoing.

⁵² Lewis, *Gendering Orientalism*, 146.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ David Eng, "Racial Castration," 1.

Mel Chen offers a particularly intersectional framework for understanding the construction of the impossible Asian masculinity, drawing from Asian trans men who appeared in various media from *Oprah* to personal YouTube videos. They identify Asian femininity as “both modest and oversexualized,” in opposition to Asian masculinity, which Chen describes as a “queer, sinister impossibility, harking back to the days of the Yellow Peril and Second World War anti-Japanese sentiment (if not also a feminized, ‘pale’ relation to white masculinity).”⁵⁵ Drawing from Thomas Beatie’s public appearances as a pregnant man, Chen notes that he, as an Asian trans man, exists in the public’s eye as gendered, racialized and sexualized, confounded further by his marriage to a straight white woman. His position speaks to a reversal of expectations for Asian men, “that they be feminized, queered, desexualized, or otherwise submissive,” resulting in disgust and confusion from American spectators.⁵⁶ This perverse feminization of Asian masculinity operates as a living Orientalism. The construction of Asian identity as inescapably feminized extends to the subsequent feminization of all things Asian, as well. Chen’s work on trans men in particular highlights how race, gender and sexuality all collaborate to reveal a constellation of impossibilities within the United States’ imagination: The impossibility of Asian masculinity sits at the heart of that constellation.

I also consider the myriad ways that Asian American and Asian feminisms work to counter the stereotypes and Orientalist constructions through which white America understands and creates them. Judy Tzu-Chun Wu counters the narrative of Asian Americans as a model minority, which frames them as passive, apolitical and hypersexual.⁵⁷ Figuring Asian women as especially cornered by this framework, she documents numerous Asian political movements, often in coalition with Asian women’s movements abroad, as a means of working against the view of Asian women as “the antithesis of political activism.”⁵⁸ Similarly, Shireen Roshanravan offers the term *racial third space* as an interruption of the Black/white racial binary in the United States, as well as to counter the model minority myth’s inherent anti-Blackness. She calls for coalition with Black activists and scholars as a matter of disrupting both systems of anti-

⁵⁵ Chen, “Everywhere Archives,” 200.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Tzu-Chun Wu, “Asian American,” 46-47.

⁵⁸ Tzu-Chun Wu, “Asian American,” 47.

Blackness as well as Orientalist logics.⁵⁹ When white trans women engage in acts of appropriative embodiment of Asian aesthetics, they not only perpetuate various stereotypes and enact white supremacist racial constructions of Asian femininity, they also work against the Asian women activists and academics who aim to refute the logics of Asian racism and anti-Blackness. Trans women's engagement in appropriative embodiment reduces Asian women to tropes and obfuscates their legitimate political and coalitional work.

Then, this project is one about cultural appropriation in many ways. My specific view is that appropriative embodiment occupies one form of appropriation, though it may operate in tandem with others, while at the same time moving beyond cultural appropriation as a primary lens for critiquing the self-making and embodiment processes that those in dominant social groups. Richard A. Rogers, in outlining four major forms of appropriation: cultural exchange, cultural dominance, cultural exploitation, and transculturation. Of these four types, cultural exploitation carries the most relevance to this project.⁶⁰ Then, cultural exploitation refers to the taking of cultural products by colonizing or dominant cultures from the colonized or subjugated for use by the dominant culture, ultimately harming the cultural product's origins in a variety of possible ways.⁶¹ The process I call appropriative embodiment exists within this form of exploitation, with two key stipulations. The first is that appropriative embodiment approaches appropriation as a tool for "constituting culture, identity, and agency," as Rogers cedes is a possibility,⁶² for a marginalized group. The second is that some of the appropriated cultural products may be imagined products devised by the dominant group's imagined picture of the subjugated.

The story of the United States as a consumer of Japanese cultural output owes much of its history to what Christine R. Yano refers to as "pink globalization," or "the transnational spread of goods and images with labeled *kawaii*"⁶³ ... from Japan to other parts of the industrial world, with a

⁵⁹ Shireen Roshanravan, "Weaponizing our (In)visibility: Asian American Feminist Ruptures of the Model-Minority Optic," in *Asian American Feminisms & Women of Color Politics*, ed. by Lynn Fujiwara & Shireen Roshanravan (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2018): 261-281.

⁶⁰ Rogers, "From cultural exchange," 477; As a side note: Cultural dominance, which subsumes the process of cultural assimilation, is also of key interest to us as we consider anti-Asian racism's push for Asian Americans toward assimilating.

⁶¹ Rogers, "From cultural exchange," 486-7.

⁶² Rogers, "From cultural exchange," 477.

⁶³ Yano defines *kawaii* as "cute" in English, but notes "different cultural nuances."; Yano, *Pink Globalization*, 6.

focus on the United States.”⁶⁴ Yano bridges the spread of cuteness, as represented by pink and Hello Kitty, with notions of femininity and sexiness through “fetishization of schoolgirls in Japan (including their uniforms), practices of *rorikon*,⁶⁵... and commercialization of these two,” adding, “the sexy is not such a far reach from *kawaii* in contemporary Japan.”⁶⁶ In other words, Yano argues that pink globalization continued the feminization and sexualization of Japan through the spread of *kawaii* as an aesthetic on a mass consumer scale within the United States. Her analysis of pink globalization allows me access to a global capitalist history whereby the consumption of Japanese popular culture items and symbols has become well established within the United States. Additionally, Yano interrogates the playful marriage of cute and cool, foregrounding the use of femininity toward various manners of subversive play, including sexually, by American gay and lesbian subjects.⁶⁷ I anticipate coolness coming up in relation to cuteness during participant interviews, so Yano’s work offers a starting point for engaging in these concepts.

Leslie Bow, in conversation with Yano, calls attention to the popularity of Asianized “things”—figures and images that caricature Asian people that, unlike similar figures caricaturing African Americans such as golliwogs, evade criticism as racist through their appeal to cuteness. She implicates cuteness, “particularly as *kawaii*-style” as rendering “things intimately knowable through the aura of innocence.”⁶⁸ In order to make sense of the ambivalent appeal that objects anthropomorphized to resemble and mock Asian people, Bow calls attention to the “racist cute.”⁶⁹ Working through the framework of the racist cute, the author argues that cuteness provides an aesthetic for anti-Asian racism. Whereas Bow refers to Asianized objects as the racist cute, perhaps my focus on white transgender women who don Asian aesthetic might speak to the phenomenon of the “cute racist.” Both Yano and Bow historicize and document the spread of cuteness as it places Japan specifically on a global consumer scale, with greater emphasis on

⁶⁴ Yano, *Pink Globalization*, 6.

⁶⁵ “‘Lolita complex’; a fixation upon young girls as sexual objects.”; Yano, *Pink Globalization*, 6.

⁶⁶ Yano, *Pink Globalization*, 6.

⁶⁷ Yano, *Pink Globalization*, 200.

⁶⁸ Bow, “Racist Cute,” 33.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

the United States. Further, they both recognize cuteness, or *kawaii*,⁷⁰ as problematic in its life among non-Asian Americans for its perpetuating the feminization of East Asia within the white Orientalist imagination.

For the most part, I argue that white trans women evade criticism for their appropriative embodiment of feminine Asian aesthetics. I also argue that a single-oppression framework, which presumes white queer innocence, contributes to their evasion. Queer of color critique Queer theorist Cathy Cohen identifies single-oppression approaches to activism as inherently flawed for their tendency to reproduce other forms of oppression than that which they aim to combat.⁷¹ Jin Haritaworn concludes his chapter, “Love,” so named for his criticism of white leftists’ emphasis on “love” generally as a coalitional movement, by recounting the experience of a self-identified trans Arab. Haritaworn quotes Charlie Haddad’s account of a group conversation wherein a white trans man openly states he faces more transphobia from Arab people. Haddad recounts feeling as though the white trans man’s feelings and experiences with transphobia trumped his own feelings as stigmatized through racism, even as an Arab trans man himself.⁷² In documenting this account, Haritaworn concisely conveys the sidelining of racism in favor of addressing anti-queerness.

Further, this project recognizes anti-Asian racism as distinct from yet harmonious with anti-Blackness. As many scholars note, the United States functions on the establishment of anti-Blackness.⁷³ Part and parcel of this process, the creation of Blackness as masculine alongside the creation of Black masculinity as necessarily deviant operates as a foundational principle for understanding masculinity and femininity. The label of womanhood and all it entails, through its construction around whiteness as ideal, has long eluded Black women, who white people have historically framed as objects existing outside the ideals of womanhood and, rather, as queer

⁷⁰ Within this thesis, I will use *kawaii* to refer specifically to Japanese cuteness aesthetics. For instances that call for a more general and all-encapsulating reference, I will use *cuteness*.

⁷¹ Cohen, “Punks,” 440.

⁷² Haritaworn, “Love,” 121-122.

⁷³ I refer here to Hortense Spillers, Saidiya Hartman, Dean Spade, Morgan Bassichis, and Roderick Ferguson generally. Each of these scholars have produced consistent work that emphasizes the multitudinous expressions of anti-Blackness integral to the United States. As a white theorist, I offer them endless gratitude.

deviations from normative and natural gender expression.⁷⁴ Conversely, Orientalism contributed the conflation of Asian identity with femininity to the anti-Black fabric of the United States' white imagination.

If Asian represents the deviantly feminine and Black represents the deviantly masculine, then whiteness must be understood to represent the sexual and gendered ideal. This thesis draws in part on the work of Nakayama & Krizek, who argue that "Whatever 'whiteness' really means is only constituted through the rhetoric of whiteness."⁷⁵ Further, in their recognition of whiteness as perceived as invisible or cultural absence through its status as a global dominant culture, the authors argue that views of whiteness as natural allow for the eluding of recognizing power.⁷⁶ I view whiteness as a rhetorical tool whereby white subjects marginalized along other lines may view themselves as merely oppressed along such axes as gender and, at most, occasionally oppressors along the axis of race. In other words, this thesis recognizes that white subjects often view whiteness as a cultural absence as well as, perhaps contradictorily, a universal and natural culture. This universality/absence allows for an evasion of addressing power relations within whiteness, especially where minoritarian subjects experience gendered oppression, despite the impulse to view whiteness as sexually normative. In other words, white trans women function not as such but instead only as trans women, with their racial identities obscured and rendered irrelevant to their otherwise minoritarian status.

This view raises a multitude of questions. How do white women make use of East Asian femininity and to what end? What exactly about Asian femininity, rather than white or Black or indigenous femininities, appeals to certain white trans women? Which historical processes inform their self-making? How does the fungibility of Asian countries, as well as the United States' vast imperial histories with them, contribute to white trans women's imaginings of those countries? How does it contribute to their appropriative embodiment of aesthetics they associate with East Asia?

⁷⁴ Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe.," Kyla Schuller, "Vaginal Impressions: Gyno-neurology and the Racial Origins of Sexual Difference," in *The Biopolitics of Feeling: Race, Sex, and Science in the Nineteenth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press): 100-133

⁷⁵ Nakayama & Krizek, "Whiteness," 292.

⁷⁶ Nakayama & Krizek, "Whiteness," 300.

For the purpose of opening even a basic line of inquiry into these questions, we must first establish the shape of our understanding of identity broadly as well as gender. This project works under an Althusserian paradigm in which we are always already gendered, racialized, sexed, and otherwise made into social subjects. I also draw from Erving Goffman's outlining of identity as performance. In particular, he identifies "expressive equipment" with which we signal to others information about ourselves.⁷⁷ This equipment includes mutable objects such as clothing, posture, and speech, as well as more immutable characteristics such as racial appearance and other corporeal traits.

Further, I draw from Butler's work on performativity, putting it to use in my analysis of white trans women's feminine self-making as a form of racial construction. Whereas Butler focuses on gender as performative, I direct this concept elsewhere, making use of its very premise. That there is no original basis for any social identity—Butler names women and men⁷⁸—reveals both that there is no original representative of any gender nor is there any original representative of any race. In other words, repetitive stylized acts in the name of womanhood or in the name of emulating Asian-ness then create that very womanhood and Asian-ness which they purport to enact.⁷⁹ That my analysis of trans self-making remains superficial due to its emphasis on fashion would be specious, as it is what that fashion and how participants speak on their fashion reveal that are ultimately up for discussion here. Butler's performativity aligns well with my use of E. Patrick Johnson's writing on appropriating Blackness. That which whiteness calls Black it is, that which whiteness calls Asian it is. This is not to say that there are no instances of blatant, non-rhetorical appropriation. I reached out to one trans woman who declined an interview because she has posted multiple photos of herself in a qipao. One of my interviewees has, following our interview, Tweeted that she bought a seifuku, a Japanese-style school-girl uniform. One could not argue, except those prone to obfuscation and deliberate abstraction, that these are only rhetorical acts of appropriation. Yet, an analysis of trans self-making as it relates to the construction and perpetuation of East Asian-ness as understood through the Western imagination demands an interrogation of the performative. There is no original East Asian femininity, but to a

⁷⁷ Goffman, "Performances," 24.

⁷⁸ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 188.

⁷⁹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 191.

white actor hoping to use that femininity to her advantage only the possibility of emulating her interpretation of that femininity exists. Problems arise significantly when considering what that interpretation entails, where it comes from, and what repetitive, stylized acts make up the emulation.

At the same time, I sit in the contradiction Julia Serano establishes in her break from Butler-esque theory. Serano argues that “certain aspects of femininity (as well as masculinity) are natural and can both precede socialization and supersede biological sex.”⁸⁰ This project acknowledges a natural impulse toward actions and embodiments that have come to be called feminine (or masculine). I also look to Serano who documents how trans women’s femininity becomes viewed as sexually deviant or perverse, a spectacle, or an over-performance in response to over-determination as masculine.⁸¹ Her insight speaks to trans hyper-visibility and helps to locate some of the daily oppression that trans women face and must overcome. Just as this thesis on appropriative embodiment is concerned with the perpetuation of oppression, it is also concerned with the overcoming of oppression.

As a last point on transness, this thesis sits with C. Riley Snorton’s defense of the psychic as one form of passing. Snorton points to the psychic as instrumental for gendered self-making, arguing that even when misidentified or misgendered, a trans person’s psychic understanding of themselves as trans constitutes a form of passing that potentially works in tandem with so-called “failures” to perform one’s gender in accordance with how society expects. These failures may stem from mutable objects or, as Snorton addresses more deliberately, from semi-rigid physical traits.⁸² Indeed, this thesis subscribes to the idea that passing is highly subjective while at the same time understanding that trans people can take efforts to pass more consistently, such as styling oneself in accordance to their gender through clothing and manners of speech. One’s style of dress constitutes a major facet of passing and existing while trans, as well as imperative in gendered self-construction.⁸³ On the topic of fashion, I take inspiration from

⁸⁰ Serano, *Whipping Girl*, 6.

⁸¹ Serano, *Whipping Girl*, 32.

⁸² Snorton, “A New Hope,” 88.

⁸³ Aubri Drake, “Clothes Make the Gender/Queer,” in *Nonbinary: Memoirs of Gender and Identity*, edited by Rajunov Micah and Duane Scott (New York; Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 2019): 165-72.

Tanisha C. Ford, who writes of “soul style” for Black women as a form of self-expression linked with socio-political activism. Ford points to the marriage of “traditional African designs” and “western dress” as the emergence of a visible “cultural concept of self.”⁸⁴ Her work on “soul style” and its derivatives further illustrates the importance of fashion in navigating oppressive social systems. Albeit one glaring difference begs attention in that Ford focuses on Black liberation movements, whereas I address the use of appropriated fashion for self-making by a marginalized group (trans women) drawing on privileges granted by an intersecting cultural identity (whiteness). Ruminating on this difference, I turn to Ford’s citing of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Student activists wore overalls to signal affinity and solidarity with the Black working class. Additionally, Black women found safety in the androgenizing overalls, whose design impeded attempts at sexual assault by white men. However, SNCC drew a degree of ire for allegedly appropriating the aesthetic of Black working class people.⁸⁵ The use of overalls mimicking the dress of rural Black people’s work clothes for the sake of political utility and personal safety by Black college students certainly meets the qualifications I have laid out for appropriative embodiment. Only the cultural identities and stakes differ dramatically.

These differing stakes raise questions about acceptability of appropriation when performed by marginalized groups. For example, how might power factor differently into white cis women’s appropriation of East Asian cuteness aesthetics versus white trans women’s? What different stakes might appropriation hold? Some of these questions may exist outside the purview of this thesis, yet they warrant thoughtful attention. But a scarce amount of literature has addressed the issue of white trans women as cultural appropriators, much less has any literature worked through that appropriation toward an understanding of white trans women using Orientalist legacies to navigate a masculine overdetermination within the United States’ cisheteropatriarchy. Further, academic knowledge makes little of the idea that trans women exist and navigate society as sexual subjects. All of my participants identify in some way or another as not straight. In working through my conversations with them, I recognize an absence of writing on trans women as lesbians, bisexual, or pansexual. This thesis aims to fill these gaps.

⁸⁴ Ford, *Liberated Threads*, 59.

⁸⁵ Ford, *Liberated Threads*, 77-84.

Method and Analysis

To assess white transgender women's appropriation of East Asian aesthetics, I first identify major recurrent constituents of East Asian aesthetics. This thesis understands East Asia as comprising Japan, North and South Korea, and China primarily. Though I begin this thesis with an account of my experiences primarily in Korea, the nation only comes up in the chapters of this thesis when participants group it with other East Asian. In a similar vein, I acknowledge a vast and complex amount of imperial relations between the United States and multiple East Asian nations. Yet, Japan and China come up specifically in this study's interviews, and for that reason I focus nearly exclusively on them and the imperial relationships between those nations and the United States. Further, I lightly draw on the work surrounding *kawaii* as well as cuteness more broadly. I largely rely on self-report interviews from white trans women as they relate their understanding of their own embodied styles in relation to East Asian aesthetics. Elements of the school-girl uniform, also called a sailor outfit, *gyobok* in Korean, or *seifuku* in Japanese, contribute to a general American understanding of East Asian fashion. Across uniforms these typically include knee-high socks, pleated (short) skirts, and tops with bows or ties.⁸⁶ I understand, especially in relation to Japan, the popularization of East Asian cuteness as situated within what Yano dubs "pink globalization."⁸⁷

The subjects of my interviews include exclusively white transgender women. I understand "transgender" as synonymous with Julia Serano's understanding of the word "transsexual." She defines the latter as, "anyone who is currently, or is working toward, living as a member of the sex other than the one they were assigned at birth, regardless of what procedures they may have had."⁸⁸ Further, I recognize the transgender experience as occurring outside of the male-female dichotomy. This project in particular focuses on transgender women. I only interview trans women who have begun transition, or, using Snorton's verbiage, who pass on at least a psychic level. Again I draw from Serano, who defines "transition" as "the process of changing one's lived sex, rather than in reference to any specific medical procedure."⁸⁹ As this project embarks

⁸⁶ Kinsella, "What's behind the fetishization of Japanese School Uniforms?" in *Fashion Theory*, 6, no. 1 (Routledge, 2002): 230

⁸⁷ Yano, *Pink Globalization*.

⁸⁸ Serano, *Whipping Girl*, 31.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

on an analysis of established forms of appropriated embodiment, participants' taking at least one step toward transition, even so seemingly insignificant as a secret cache of women's clothing, remains pertinent. Each participant volunteered for inclusion in the study. However, with a sample five of five at most, I hand-picked white transgender women from the United States based on their presentation via their social media, perhaps exclusively Twitter, profiles. This allowed me to screen for online appropriation of East Asian aesthetics, such as in their names, "handles," biography or About sections, posts, and photos. I interviewed two white transgender women who earn money doing sex work, one of whom speaks of her experiences in relation to her feminine presentation.

To reach out, I sent potential participants a message approved by the IRB indicating my research goals, intent, qualifications for the study, risks and harms. That message is as follows:

Hello, my name is Emmy Vaught and I am a student at the University of North Carolina – Greensboro. I am conducting research on white trans women's use of style, aesthetic and fashion as tools for feminine self-making. Particularly, I am interested in white transgender women who present themselves with cute, pretty or otherwise feminine aesthetics. I am sending you this to ask you whether you would participate in a single 30-60 minute interview with me to discuss your own personal style and aesthetics. There will be no compensation or reimbursement for your involvement, and of course your involvement is entirely voluntary. You must be 18 or older to participate. If I use excerpts from your interview, I will use a pseudonym to refer to you in my write-up and analysis. If you agree, we can conduct the interview over Zoom, using a unique link, on a day and time that fits your schedule. Thank you for any consideration you give and I look forward to hearing back from you.

Each interview took place via the teleconferencing system Zoom due to the necessity of quarantining for the COVID-19 pandemic, and lasted from 30 minutes to an hour. I conducted these interviews in the months comprising fall 2020. Further, I have provided each participant a copy of an Adult Consent Form, approved by the IRB, for their own personal records. All subjects will remain anonymous following their participation and the completion of this thesis. At the conclusion of each interview, I asked participants whether they would like to share photos of themselves in typical outfits. All of them agreed to either send me photos for use or granted permission for me to use anything they have posted to social media. I only include photos of one participant, and I blur her face and any other identifying information such as tattoos to maintain

anonymity. The interview included only a few pre-written questions, with follow-up questions based on participants' responses. The interviews serve as a basis for interrogating how participants see themselves in relation to their fashion, how they see fashion as it relates to femininity, and how they see their fashion and themselves in relation to East Asian aesthetic, and other relational combinations.

After conducting the interviews, I conducted two rounds of coding following in a qualitative sociological tradition. The first round fulfilled the role of identifying basic, concrete sub-themes. The second round worked toward understanding those sub-themes as part of larger, more abstract themes. Major themes of interest include gendered performance, descriptions of Asian-ness, submissiveness, emasculation, among others. These questions and particular themes offer value to my research in their connectedness to the work of scholars with whom I am in conversation.

Overall, this project recognizes Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's identification of "Japanese-ness" as a (white) American trait, rather than a Japanese American one.⁹⁰ It looks at the particular subgroup, trans white women, in their embrace of "Japanese-ness" as well as the aesthetics of other East Asian countries. Viewed through this lens, I understand the appropriative embodiment of East Asian aesthetic into white trans women's personal style as a continuation of white privilege contrasting mounting social and historic pressures on East Asians to assimilate into mainstream, white American culture.

Chapter Breakdown

I organize the chapters according to interviewee, drawing from three major participants to enter conversations about aesthetics of cuteness and submissiveness, area studies, slur reclamation, and the use of anime girl memes amongst white trans women. Each chapter allows for my elaboration on particular facets of history, with special attention to the imperial relationships between the United States and Japan as well as China. Thinking through these interviews, I interrogate how each participant enacts appropriative embodiment of East Asian aesthetic in some form.

⁹⁰ Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015): 101.

In the first body chapter, “Through Imperial Eyes: Fashion as Insight for the Workings of Western Empire,” I introduce Morgan, a white transgender lesbian who works as an actress in pornography. The first section, *Navigations*, considers how she uses cute gendered expressions to navigate social environments. I draw on her formative experiences with cuteness and how she wields it as an aesthetic, opening up conversation about cuteness as non-threatening. Her use of cuteness stems a great deal from her consumption of Japanese media, especially manga and anime. In that context, I explore how appropriative embodiment figures into her presentation by way of constituting her own femininity alongside the perpetuation of Western views of Asian femininity. The second section, *Through Imperial Eyes*, delves further into the rhetoric Morgan uses in describing her sense of style, as well as some outfits themselves, and how they implicate Asian femininity into her portrayal of submissiveness. It also provides a historical context for Japan under the gaze of the United States, dually tracing the genealogy of the Japanese school-girl uniform as well as U.S. imperial involvement in the nation’s “gendered racial rehabilitation,” a term I borrow from Jodi Kim.

In the second body chapter and third chapter overall, “Choosing Femininity: Area Studies and Gender Presentation as Orientalist Vehicles,” I center Alexandria, a pansexual trans woman with an academic background in Chinese women’s political movements. The first section, *Gendering Presentations*, examines Alexandria’s use of femme and butch as aesthetic labels rather than historically lesbian identity terms. I make use of discourse on what femme means and think through the ways Alexandria does or does not embody it. The second section, *Area Studies and Self-Discoveries*, moves on from her gender presentation outright and instead addresses her time abroad in East Asia as part of her study of Chinese policy. I use her experiences as a springboard for examining the discourse on area studies as Orientalist, as well as how Western feminist thinking tends to portray Chinese women’s liberation movements. The final section, *Reclamation*, interrogates her self-naming in a target language and an intended process of reclaiming the Chinese anti-LGBT slur, yīnyáng rén. With that slur, based on the yin-yang symbol, as a basis, I work through the concept of appropriative embodiment with the lens of yin and yang, considering how certain elements of fashion function in the same way as whiteness.

The penultimate chapter, “The 'Me' in 'Meme': Usage of Anime Memes in Trans Self-Making and Community Building,” locates Amy, a white trans woman who describes herself as “extremely online” and the trans-centric anime girl memes she makes. Through close readings of her anime girl memes, I examine how Amy understands herself in relation to the memes as well as the genealogical history of media such as anime and manga. As Amy uses the anime girl format to deal with frustrations she associates with her transness, I turn my attention to other participants’ perspectives on anime girl memes as popular amongst white trans women online. I conclude the chapter with a reflection on the importance of transfeminine self-making within a society that rarely affirmatively portrays trans women with sexual agency.

CHAPTER II: THROUGH IMPERIAL EYES: FASHION AS INSIGHT FOR THE WORKINGS OF WESTERN EMPIRE

Introduction: A Witness for Morgan

Morgan and I met virtually some time ago. However, aside from following each other on Twitter for a couple of years⁹¹, we have never really interacted much. When I started recruiting for interviews, she was one of the first people I thought of. Morgan is a transgender white lesbian in her early 20s who dresses markedly cute. She tweets occasionally about anime and manga, as well as about her girlfriend, another trans woman. She seemed a perfect candidate to begin this process. At the time of our interview, she had about 70 thousand Twitter followers, a number which has already shot to more than 80 thousand. Professionally, Morgan works in porn, making money both through scripted shoots with other porn stars and through her own, more self-directed content that she posts on OnlyFans. We met via Zoom on an afternoon early in September. We live not far from each other in North Carolina, and had it not been for the COVID-19 pandemic and quarantine, we would have spoken in person.

Before our interview, Morgan mentioned feeling excited. Prior to our conversation, she says, she had never had an opportunity to “talk in depth about why dressing cute means so much to” her. Reflecting on that comment, and the at times sensitive nature of her desire for deep listening, as well as her mention of abuse in our interview, I take a moment to acknowledge the ways in which my conversations with participants act as a form of bearing witness.⁹² Though my intent here is to identify the means by which racism operates with regard to feminine self-styling, I recognize that trans women face considerable serious forms of oppression. Julia Serano speaks on the over-representation of trans women as feminine and how that representation functions as an optical tactic to further our subjugation and neutralize any potential threat we pose to the gendered order of society.⁹³ This approach to trans representation presupposes that trans

⁹¹ The mutual following between two people on a social media platform is often referenced as “being mutuals.” This term will come up throughout this thesis.

⁹² E. Patrick Johnson writes of research that “emphasizes empathy, collaboration, intersubjectivity, and sharing of emotional labor” in his introduction to *Black. Queer. Southern. Women.: An Oral History* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2018): 12. He draws from the work of Della Pollock, who also informs my approach to ethnographic and interview-based research.

⁹³ Julia Serano, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*, 2nd Edition (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2007, 2016): 41.

women's ascent into womanhood necessarily depends on our repetition of stereotypically feminine acts. To be a trans woman in these portrayals means to be superficially feminine, as though truly men playing with feminine materiality all along. Serano argues that these portrayals also double as a misogynistic attack, furthering the sexualization of trans and cis women alike.⁹⁴ Then, to be a feminine trans woman such as Morgan in such a highly visible, highly sexualized position as hers is to exist as a public vulnerability. I understand our interview, in part, as a process of managing that visibility and as a form of community building. From one trans woman to another, I feel my own identity allowed space for her to explore her own femininity and sense of cuteness honestly and openly in a way that she may not have with a cis researcher. This space for exploration and understanding can coexist with critique and analysis; indeed, it must.

This chapter, as well as the others, maintains the spirit of bearing witness. At the same time, I critically examine historic racism and imperialism's role in shaping white American attitudes toward East Asians particularly. I organize my time and analysis with Morgan according to three major themes, which serve as the sections of this chapter. The first, *Navigations*, introduces Morgan's general approach to fashion and self-presentation. She shares her history as an interpellated subject, raised incorrectly as a boy, and the measures she takes to establish herself as her own person in the social world. It interrogates how those attempts draw on Asian-ness and the problems that entail. The second section, *Through Imperial Eyes*, forms the basis and crux of this chapter's argument as it contextualizes her view of East Asian fashion within a historical context. I argue that her outlook relays a larger cultural attitude toward East Asia that stems from American imperialism and a push for global assimilation into Western standards of womanhood.

Navigations

Growing up I would see cute things and think "I can't wear that. I'm a 'boy.'" Then when I came out as an adult and I lived by myself, I c[ould] kind of experiment with the types of clothing I always thought was cute and stuff, and there's no one to tell me that I can't do it. I think that's a big part of it, like, doing that thing you always wanted to do but you couldn't. So I think that's a big appeal of the cutesy clothing. Also growing up in abusive situations where you feel like you have to act strong in those instances as a child where you can't kind of like... be.. what's the word I'm looking for. Fuck what's the word... do you get what I mean? Like, not insecure but like... vulnerable! You can't

⁹⁴ Serano, *Whipping Girl*, 45.

really feel vulnerable. But now I can! I feel like the cutesiness adds to it, so I can kind of like not pretend to be like super strong and I can feel vulnerable. I guess people can look at me and tell that I'm not strong, and that kind of feels good in a way. Where people don't have the expectations of me anymore to be strong and masculine and all that shit. I can't really raise my voice anymore. It's kind of like being the person I wish I could have been as a child, in terms of personality and not having to force myself to be a certain way.

Morgan grapples with the idea of vulnerability in its relation to her childhood assignment as “a boy.” She viewed cuteness as unattainable due to the implicit gendered interpellation associated with those designated male at birth. Superficially, it seems her own psychic processes kept her from reaching out to her cute desires, speaking to a degree of self-policing typical of patriarchal norms.⁹⁵ In recalling experimentation with cute clothes she implies that there was someone, an unnamed and probably composite enforcer of gender conformity, who would have told her “No” had she ever expressed desire to wear cute clothing. At a base level, Morgan describes her affinity for cute clothing in its freedom, in not having to dress in accordance with others’ expectations. Yet, the appeal of doing something simply because she couldn’t fails to hold up as the main or whole draw to cuteness. In the first place, it fails to explain her childhood interest in cute clothes. In the second, she later describes her current self as “being the person I wish I could have been as a child, in terms of personality and not having to force myself to be a certain way.” Morgan consistently associates cuteness with a freedom to feel vulnerable. She contrasts cuteness to masculinity, which she exemplifies through the raising of one’s voice and associates with strength. That vulnerability, locked and unattainable in the masculinity she once embodied and difficult even to name, now aligns with her personality and manner of dressing. In other words, Morgan associates cute clothing with vulnerability, with everything *not masculine*. If masculinity means strength, and her sense of cuteness clashes with masculinity, then we get the impression that cuteness comprises a freedom of vulnerability and a degree of weakness, or at the very least the lack of an expectation for strength.

On cuteness as an aesthetic that necessarily reflects the workings of power, Sianne Ngai lays out various descriptors through which we might understand the workings of cuteness. Some of these descriptions align with participants’ own apparent understanding of cuteness, particularly its

⁹⁵ C. Riley Snorton, “‘A New Hope:’ The Psychic Life of Passing,” *Hypatia*, 24, 3 (2009): 77-92.

association with submissiveness, powerlessness, and expression through the diminutive.⁹⁶ However, I focus here on her position that cuteness effects a “want to be like” in the viewer.⁹⁷ In other words, that which can be judged as cute contains through that very judgement the ability to inspire some degree of mimesis in the judge. As a basic example, Ngai cites a parent’s inclination toward addressing babies through baby speak, itself an expression of both the power dynamic between adult and baby as well as the power of cuteness to inspire a mimetic closing of the power distance between the two. Likewise, I am drawn to the recognition that cuteness can function as a sexualizing process while simultaneously negating any threat the cute object may otherwise hold.⁹⁸ Yano notes that “the sexy is not such a far reach from kawaii in contemporary Japan,”⁹⁹ and I would extend that sentiment to include American audiences consuming and emulating kawaii, and even cuteness more broadly to a certain degree. Both of these articulations provide a lens through which we can situate Morgan’s own call to cuteness as well as her use of it in sexual situations and in making herself visible in sex work.

Fashion rather directly illustrates the workings of a “want to be like” particularly in that its use-value lies in a viewer’s self-stylization. Typically, to see clothes and subsequently appraise them as cute is to want to wear those clothes for their cuteness, and to wear cute clothes is to embody the cuteness identified in the clothing. Indeed, where Ngai posits that cuteness functions primarily in the material and through visual style, we may take both “material” and “style” quite literally.¹⁰⁰ When Morgan speaks of seeing cute clothes as a child but not being able to wear them due to her assignment as a “boy,” it is in the wearing and embodying of cute clothes as an adult that she finds gendered liberation. At the same time, that liberation comes with the ability to feel vulnerable, itself already strongly associated with cuteness as an aesthetic. In this case, cuteness originates in the clothing itself, yet through its call to mimesis eventually transfers onto the viewer, Morgan, who--in a markedly liberatory sense--takes on characteristics of cuteness. Morgan describes feeling a freedom in vulnerability and by extension a freedom in cuteness.

⁹⁶ Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Boston, MA: First Harvard University Press, 2012): 64, 100, & 59.

⁹⁷ Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 67.

⁹⁸ Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 72.

⁹⁹ Christine R. Yano, *Pink Globalization: Hello Kitty's Trek across the Pacific* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2013): 6.

¹⁰⁰ Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 59.

Though, her use of cute aesthetics extends beyond vulnerability. This view may strike a reader as somewhat alarming in its readiness to view the cute as a lifeless life form that evidently travels from object to subject. However, we must instead view it as a relationship that occurs between object and subject, the viewed and the viewer. Fashion then represents the ultimate closing of the distance representative of the power dynamic between viewer and viewed. To wear clothing one has judged as cute is to open up the possibility of being appraised as cute by another. Then, dressing cute carries with it all the same implications that Ngai associates with cuteness, that is for Morgan, vulnerability.

Yet, at the same time, her cute fashion shapes her sex life. She says on wearing cute clothing in sexual environments, “For sex stuff, [cute clothing] just makes me feel submissive and cute, and I kind of like giving off the vibe—I guess I kind of like the contrast between the cute and then being kind of slutty, that aspect during sex.” At a glance one might take away from Morgan’s association of cuteness with sexuality that she treats cuteness as fetish. However, that she revels in the apparent contrast between her self-described slutty behavior and her cute submissiveness hints at a larger, yet perhaps less sinister than fetishistic, thought pattern at work here. Morgan’s liking the contrast between what she dubs slutty behavior--which I will call sexual--and her cute presentation takes on new and somewhat contradictory meaning in light of Ngai’s argument.

That is: We may better understand what Morgan calls a contrast between the cute and the sexual instead as the realization of an always already possible sexualization inherent to cuteness. Then, if the contrast between the cute and the sexual never actually existed, we must name it as a fiction that eludes recognition by disguising itself as a truth. What it means to acknowledge this implicit link may exist outside the scope of this thesis. For now, suffice it to say that such a contrast goes a long way in elucidating the various complexities and contradictions hidden beneath our aesthetic world. Additionally, Morgan’s description of her own cute self-styling for sexual contexts aligns well with Ngai’s assertion that cuteness both removes threat and sexualizes. Morgan makes various allusions to how her style waters down or subverts particular behaviors such as swearing or what she describes as being “slutty.” In addition to her quote above, Morgan adds:

I like to feel cute during sex, and I like to feel vulnerable I guess; that makes me feel nice for some reason. Let's see, yeah, I think I mostly like the contrast for sex. Like, another thing is I swear a lot, so I feel like the cute contrast kind of waters down me swearing every word, things like that.

In one sentence Morgan again ties vulnerability to cuteness, echoing previous descriptions of the affective component to her style. However, what she sits with is the idea of another contrast, now between her swearing, presumably in a sexual context but potentially in other platonic social contexts, and her cute appearance. That cuteness tends to imply an infantilism lines up with the description of it as contrasting more the adult verbiage of swearing. Her description of the contrast as watering down her swearing reflects one potential application of Ngai's sexual-unthreatening dual function. To be sure, no apparent threat readily exists in the act of swearing, but it has seen plentiful correlation with aggression. Cuteness here acts as a way of neutralizing any potential readings of Morgan as aggressive while at the same time allows a certain freedom to present herself sexually without the stigma attached to trans lesbians who dare to do so.

Trans women, and particularly trans lesbians, often face portrayal as aggressive.¹⁰¹ Both mainstream and trans exclusionary feminist discourse paints trans women as sexually aggressive men hoping to gain access to private women's spaces, such as bathrooms. Serano notes that this sort of portrayal operates in order to vilify trans women and cast us out as a threatening Other.¹⁰² For a trans woman, engaging in acts that negate any potential threat may function on a level as seemingly yet not unwarrantedly dramatic as life or death. Morgan's description of cuteness in watering down her swearing, though seemingly trivial, indicates some degree of awareness on her part of fashion's role in impression management.

Morgan's awareness extends beyond fashion, to be sure, as evidenced in her rationale for dyeing her hair pink. When I asked her about hair and makeup, she first posed the idea of dyeing it, saying, "I'm gonna dye my hair pink--pastel pink. I've wanted to do that for a long time, but I've avoided it because of work and not knowing how they'd react, but I don't really care right now and sometimes I get happy to piss them off, so I'm dyeing it pink." I later followed up and asked why she wanted to dye it pink, to which she explained:

¹⁰¹ Sara Ahmed, "An Affinity of Hammers," *TSQ* 3, no. 1-2 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016). 22-34.

¹⁰² Serano, *Whipping Girl*, 48-49.

Ah, well, I identify as a lesbian. I like pissing men off. I like doing things to my body that they don't like me to do. I feel so constrained because of my work and expectations, and whenever I talk about making any kind of changes to my body I'm met with these gross 40 year old men that want control over my body, and any kind of changes they're like, 'you're ruining [your] body.' And I'm like, 'I'm gonna do all this shit to piss you off and I don't care what you think anymore.' So that's a big motivation. I also just really like pastel colors. I don't really have any pastel clothes but I really like pastel pink and shit like that... [Another] big influence was how people would treat me and how they want me to be like this all (sic) natural kind of small, petite girl. It kind of psychs me out a bit, gives me a bit of dysphoria. But also, I guess it's another anime thing where I've just watched a lot of anime and I sometimes feel like I look too straight. Like before when my hair was brown I was like, 'Do I look super straight? Can people not look at me and figure out that I'm gay?' Maybe I wanna give people more visual indications, especially gay people who are usually like—a lot of us are autistic as fuck, we don't pick up on social cues.

In short, Morgan's choice to dye her hair pink simultaneously signals to other lesbians and rebels against men who seek to control her. This tracks indeed within the confines of heteronormativity wherein looking visibly lesbian, whatever form that takes, constitutes an act of revolt against the heterosexual male gaze. What strikes me as worth interrogating is Morgan's referencing her pink hair as "another anime thing." Certainly, the tendency to portray anime characters with pastel pink hair permeates the medium. The main character of the *yuri*¹⁰³ series known in the United States as *Bloom Into You*, Yuu Koito, comes to mind as an example. That Morgan chooses anime over, for example, the stereotype that lesbians often dye their hair unnatural colors in the first place rules out the possibility that she engages in a disidentificatory process. Instead, we must view her use of anime, a Japanese media, as the basis not only for her sexual expression but also for her navigation of the male gaze. This brings me again to the term around which much of this thesis centers: appropriative embodiment.

¹⁰³ *Yuri*: "Girls' love;" A term for the genre of manga and anime that features intimate female-female romantic or sexual relationships. Brenner & Wildsmith note that yuri does not serve as an umbrella term for any Japanese lesbian media but rather depicts a specific iteration of the lesbian genre. Additionally, some lesbian manga writers distance themselves from the term due to both its coinage by a man as well as its sometimes pornographic connotations. I choose to use *Bloom Into You* as its exemplar for a few reasons: The protagonist has pastel pink hair, and the show, as well as its source manga, perfectly embody the themes of longing, forbidden love and intense relationship characteristic of yuri. For a deeper dive into U.S. LGBTQ consumption of yuri and its boy counterpart, yaoi, refer to: Robin E. Brenner & Snow Wildsmith. "Love Through a Different Lens: Japanese Homoerotic Manga Through the Eye of American Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Other Sexualities Readers" in *Mangatopia: Essays on Manga and Anime in the Modern World*, ed. by Timothy Perper & Martha Cornog (2011): 89-118.



Figure 1: Bloom Into You manga cover.

As I define it, appropriative embodiment refers to the use of appropriated aspects of another culture, whether real or imaginary, by someone in a majoritarian group to navigate oppression along an axis in which they face oppression. In this case, it describes Morgan's use of Japanese tropes and styles as a white person to ameliorate harm from the sexist attitudes and comments from men who wish to control her body. Another layer also comes into play, as she mentions feeling dysphoric from others' projection that she should be a natural, petite girl. Then, in dyeing her pink to emulate an anime-based lesbian expression, she manages to combat both the male gaze and the dysphoria it induces. In terms of a deracinated gender and sexuality, appropriative embodiment may well represent a wholly affirmative process. Through a more intersectional lens, however, the use of anime becomes potentially problematic. It points to an attempt at embodying a fictional Japanese lesbian femininity, one that may not represent anything other than a collection of tropes. Morgan quite certainly recognizes that in embodying anime tropes she is not embodying what might otherwise be called an authentic Japanese lesbian femininity. However, her whiteness complicates this embodiment in the sense that linking her gendered expression to a Japanese character archetype means a linking of other modes of her femininity to Japanese femininity, a linkage most on display in a particular choice of clothing of hers that occurred a few months following our conversation.



Figure 2: Morgan dons a Japanese school-girl outfit.

After our interview, Morgan tweeted about getting, in her word, a *seifuku*, or a Japanese school-girl outfit. She regularly posts photos of herself wearing the outfit, often in sexual or sexually suggestive settings. I have included a non-sexual photo of Morgan wearing the seifuku (image B) to illustrate a specific use of *kawaii*, which we must recall entails cuteness as well as infantilization, in a sexual context. To argue that Morgan is alone in using a Japanese school-girl uniform in such a way would mislead readers. Rather, the widespread sexual use of school-girl uniforms, as well as other anime trope-inspired styles such as the cat girl and maid outfits, by white trans and cis women alike influenced the line of questioning that led to this thesis in the first place. The widespread use of sexualized, legibly Japanese clothing by both American and Japanese women¹⁰⁴ no doubt contributed to Morgan's own donning of the seifuku (Figure 2).

¹⁰⁴ Sharon Kinsella, "What's behind the fetishization of Japanese School Uniforms?" *Fashion Theory* 6, no. 1 (Routledge, 2002): 224-225.

*Kogal*¹⁰⁵ of the 1990s and the archetypal depictions, often written by men, that spawned from them furthered the popularity of school uniforms in mainstream Japanese and international fashion. We return to this history later, but for now suffice it to say that portrayals of high school girls in their uniforms enacting counter-authoritative, superficially anti-patriarchal behaviors in television and film secured the school uniform's position as a fashionable and often sexualized item that school-girls and non-school-girls alike could enjoy. Karen Kuo attributes American fascination with the submissive Japanese woman to popular cultural depictions of Japan, and "the aestheticization of submissive and sacrificial Japanese femininity" as portrayed in the white parodies of Asian femininity in *Madama Butterfly* and *Madama Chrysanthemum*.¹⁰⁶ Though less tied to the sailor suit outright, that fascination is almost certainly at play here, especially considering Morgan's use of an iconically Japanese feminine garment to express submissiveness. Regardless of specific influences, her uptake of the fashion belies an imperialist and capitalist power relationship between the United States and Japan. At its most basic level, the use of Japanese school-girl attire in sexual situations links sexualization with age play. Rather, recognizing this link opens up a broad array of potential analyses, many of which fall outside the scope of this work. However, I also open this space for interrogating the use of Asian aesthetics in her construction of bottomhood, both sexually and aesthetically. Nguyen Tan Hoang forms an analysis of bottomhood, a racial, sexual, political and aesthetic category outside of normative categorization.¹⁰⁷ Though Nguyen's work centers gay Asian men, he cites readings on lesbian femme/butch culture and practice as formative and highly influential in developing his analysis. With that in mind, I borrow from his framework and in turn apply it somewhat full circle, in Morgan's case, to a self-described transgender, femme lesbian. Further, I followed up with Morgan during the writing of this chapter and clarified she considers herself a bottom as a social and sexual identity.

Further, Nguyen acknowledges the potential application of bottomhood as "a framework for critique that can be mobilized for minoritarian political projects beyond the scope of Asian

¹⁰⁵ *Kogal* references a particular style of fashionable and somewhat rebellious Japanese school-girls.

¹⁰⁶ Karen Kuo, *East is West and West is East: Gender, Culture, and Interwar Encounters Between Asia and America* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2012): 149

¹⁰⁷ Nguyen Tan Hoang, *A View from the Bottom: Asian American Masculinity and Sexual Representation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014): 3.

American and queer studies and politics,”¹⁰⁸ as well as devotes a chapter to considering bottomhood in its feminine alignment as an affirmative social position for Thai trans women.¹⁰⁹ Indeed, for some, Nguyen argues, “the abject space of bottomhood and femininity can be a powerful mode of accessing social and sexual recognition.”¹¹⁰ I view Morgan as one such example and recognize her embodying bottomhood as a necessarily counter-hegemonic act of feminine and sexual self-making. However, through her use of East Asian aesthetic as a means to such an end, an empowering act becomes one of racist perpetuation and Orientalist play.

Affirmative perspectives on bottomhood aside, Morgan’s use of Asian fashion in cultivating an aesthetic of submissiveness perpetuates Asian racism, through its reification of the implicitly assumed link between Asian-ness and bottomhood and thereby femininity. Beyond the potential for social recognition, the appeal of an aesthetic of bottomhood for white trans women reads clearly. Just as Nguyen notes that Asian men are often viewed as failed men, so too are trans women across races.¹¹¹ As bottomhood thrives on its alignment with femininity, someone such as a lesbian trans woman who intends to establish herself as a feminine subject may certainly find refuge in such a position, a framework which extends in Nguyen’s view to lesbian intimacy models as well as gay men’s.¹¹² Likewise, Morgan’s vocation in porn, both in her scripted and self-directed content, most certainly incentivizes establishing a presence as a bottom, or put more crudely, as the person “getting fucked.”¹¹³ Yet in using East Asian attire, specifically her seifuku, to build such a presence results in a strengthening of the alignment between bottomhood and that particular item of clothing and all of its associations. The seifuku, carrying with it cuteness and age play and Japanese-ness, meets bottomhood and, through the same avenues that made wearing a school-girl uniform sexually possible in the first place, reaffirms imperial stereotypes about Asia as feminine and penetrable.¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁸ Nguyen, *A View*, 3.

¹⁰⁹ Nguyen, *A View*, 183.

¹¹⁰ Nguyen, *A View*, 157.

¹¹¹ Nguyen, *A View*, 9.

¹¹² Nguyen, *A View*, 194-5.

¹¹³ Nguyen, *A View*, 7.

¹¹⁴ Said, *Orientalism*, 206.

We must at this point consider the role of performativity in establishing a co-construction of both white and Asian femininity. Judith Butler draws from mimetic and repetitive gendered acts to argue that gender itself is performative, and based on no particular model.¹¹⁵ In other words, there is no original man and there is no original woman. Rather, acts done in the name of a certain gender constitute the very gender the actor purports to enact. I extend the concept of performativity and consider how it applies to white and Asian femininities specifically with Morgan as a contextual reference. Where Morgan identifies her particular behaviors and modes of feminine presentation as Asian or like the necessarily Japanese media anime, she enacts a dual construction of white femininity and Asian femininity. In the first place, she reaffirms her own self as a gendered subject who makes use of repetitive stylized acts in the name of her womanhood. In the second, she implicates Asian femininity into her own gender, effectively characterizing herself in white femininity against a generalized feminine Asian Other. There exists no original East Asian femininity. Rather, East Asian femininity is constructed in part by white Americans as well as East Asian women embodying their own femininity. This is the case for the Japanese high-school girls whose self-expression morphed into a cultural hyper-symbolism.

E. Patrick Johnson, on the appropriation of Blackness, writes, “Performance becomes a vehicle through which the Other is seen and not seen.”¹¹⁶ In other words, for a white person to enact Blackness through appropriation relies on an essentialized view of Blackness as characterized by the very act that purports to represent it. Appropriation works as a repetitive, stylized performance of another race that represents the appropriated race through its absence. With Morgan in mind, that which she calls East Asian in reference to her own feminine style thus constitutes a performance of East Asian femininity defined by an absence from East Asian women. As Edward Said notes, Orientalists reduce Asian representation to that which is driven by an absence of its subject.¹¹⁷ In other words, Morgan’s routing traits such as submissiveness and vulnerability through East Asian aesthetic, as in her use of the school uniform, effectively shapes East Asian femininity in the image of those traits. Much in the same way that cute

¹¹⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1990): 188.

¹¹⁶ E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2003): 9

¹¹⁷ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 117

clothing exists as a commodity that can impart its cuteness onto the wearer, so echoes the relationship between the white actor and the Asian Other. If to be cute parallels the white imagination's idea of what it means to be Asian, then the closing of the power gap through commodification allows for a sort of "cultural cross-dressing," to borrow from Reina Lewis,¹¹⁸ that reduces "Asian" to a commodity and strips it of subjecthood.¹¹⁹

Taking the structure of performativity and appropriation into account, I view Morgan's wielding of cuteness as a means of navigating expectations placed on her for being both trans and a woman, and the narrative she builds around it, as a form of performativity. Her style makes up a significant portion of her cuteness, and can thus be recognized as a production of white femininity. That she makes use of Japanese aesthetic outfits in the construction of her own cute white femininity thus enacts a second or dual production that situates Japanese femininity into a visual schema of cuteness. Her own whiteness allows a greater agency in achieving this co-production, undoubtedly. For this reason we must view these acts of cute self-stylization through available and established visual artefacts, such as the Japanese schoolgirl uniform, as an iteration of appropriative embodiment. As much as her style enacts a white femininity, so long as it makes use of Japanese aesthetic, it also reproduces ideas about Japanese femininity.

Performativity also implies that the actor names the identity which they aim to embody. Although style choices help Morgan in dealing with the male gaze and unwanted dysphoria, some of them hint at and end up perpetuating larger racist histories. In the next section we look at how Morgan describes her approach to cuteness in reference to a homogenized East Asian fashion sensibility and how clothing that is not necessarily legible as Asian in the way her seifuku is might figure into this analysis by way of verbal narrative. I consider how imperial and aesthetic histories inform her view of Japanese fashion in particular. With those histories in mind, I return to considerations of appropriative embodiment as a co-construction.

Through Imperial Eyes

¹¹⁸ Reina Lewis, *Gendering Orientalism*. (London, England: Routledge, 1996): 146.

¹¹⁹ More on the commodification of Asians and Asian aesthetics in Leslie Bow, "'Racist Cute: Caricature, Kawaii-Style, and the Asian Thing,'" *American Quarterly* 71, no. 1 (2019): 29-58.

I feel like Korea and Japan and China kind of have, they kind of have, how to describe it... it's like they're like takes on Western fashion in this kind of idealized version of cutesy Western aesthetics, they kind of min-max¹²⁰ it or something and make it extra cute. They'll take prairie dresses and shit like that and then take a lot of influence, it feels like, from clothes from a hundred years ago, shit people would wear.

Looking at the photos Morgan provided, I feel these two (Figures 3 and 4) best encapsulate her description. Both of them black and white, somewhat represent Morgan's view of Asian fashion as well as her description of a cutesy "prairie" style, its provenance we locate closer to 200 years ago than the 100 she names. The first, a buttoned overall skirt over a polka dot blouse with a thin black ribbon tied around the collar, very vaguely resembles a Japanese schoolgirl outfit, if only as spiritually inspired. That is to say it maintains these elements: somewhat conservative skirt, blouse, and ribbon or bow. Yet it more closely strikes the viewer as, by Morgan's description, influenced by Western clothes from a colonial era. To say that it is definitively and decidedly East Asian in appearance would be a far cry, bordering on too scrutinous or paranoid a reading. To be sure, I would never argue that the first outfit (or the second) constitutes blatant cultural appropriation. The second outfit even more closely resembles Morgan's description of clothes styled after the fashion of "100 years ago," resembling a cute and modern version of a prairie outfit. Historical accuracy aside, the loose-fitting blouse with drawstring collar and long skirt with its casual folds does ambiguously call back to an American cottage, prairie-esque lifestyle of the American colonial period. All the same, either outfit feels quite traditional in its own ways, evoking a conservative, modest femininity. Yet neither of the outfits stand out as an ultra-chose iteration, masterfully or amateurly done, of Asian fashion. It is possible these articles of clothing came from an East Asian clothing brand, where Morgan states she gets some of her clothes. However, nothing about them implicitly suggests that, and they could have as easily come from Amazon or as gifts. Rather, the East Asian element comes through her description of her clothing as drawing inspiration from East Asian aesthetics, particularly Japanese through anime though she also lists China and Korea alongside Japan in describing Asian style. For Morgan marks Asian fashion by its reference to Europe or more broadly the West. At a few points in our interview, she brings up anime, which I consider briefly in the preceding section

¹²⁰ Gaming term meaning to maximize a desired statistic or trait while minimizing another, thus prioritizing one desired trait over the less desired.

and again in a later chapter. At this point, though, suffice to say that when prompted to name an anime that features cool-girl and cute-girl tropes, she provides only one example in *Rose of Versailles*, an anime set in France about Marie Antoinette. The quote that begins this section best captures this view of Asia's existing in relation to Europe.



Figure 3: Morgan in a polka-dot blouse and dress.



Figure 4: Morgan in monochromatic "prairie" clothing.

In this context, Asian fashion includes primarily “Korea and Japan and China” and functions as a filter for making Western styles more cute. Asia then is not marked by interdependent histories but is rather understood in its relationship to the United States. Korea and Japan and China become homogenized in this process, wherein all three purportedly cutesify otherwise forgotten Western clothes. Morgan laments, “You can’t really find [the style described above] in stores here.” To her, the East Asian style represents an idealized representation of Western aesthetic history, for example American prairie (read: Colonial) days. Then, Morgan’s embodiment extends beyond cultural appropriation, in fact it hardly touches appropriation as a visual mimesis outright, and instead makes use of narrative to draw connection between her own feminine expression and East Asian style. As I now explore, Morgan’s self-fashioning more than makes use of narrative, but it also reveals ongoing processes of global assimilation wherein the United States asserted its iteration of womanhood as superior, encouraging women of East Asian countries, especially Japan, to embody Western femininity.

We can trace a great deal of American involvement in the development of what we might call modern Japan, beginning in the 1800s. Prior to the world wars, Japan felt the gaze of foreign powers such as the United States, as well as France and Britain, and developed in part with that gaze in mind. One area of particular interest to this thesis is that of the uniform, originally donned by members of Japan's military. The uniform, inspired by characteristics of European military garb, served as a way to demonstrate nationalism as well as a way to "meet the gaze"¹²¹ of foreign observers. Japan's military uniform became a reference for designing boys' school uniforms in the late 1800s. Girls' uniforms would follow suit nearly half a century later, implementing more feminine design aspects such as a skirt into the typical ensemble. In the early 1900s, when Japan would fight in the Pacific War as well as both world wars, society tended to view schoolchildren, especially boys, as prospective soldiers. Thus, the visibility of students in public wearing what were viewed as pre-military style uniforms would come to represent Japan's pre-war political system. Following the world wars, Japan would experience an intensification of foreign pressure, particularly from the United States.¹²²

Jodi Kim writes on "gendered racial rehabilitation," a multifaceted process whereby post-war Japan was made and made themselves in the image of American gender norms. "Japanese women were thus encouraged to look upon American women, who had themselves been disciplined and contained... within the confines of a heteronormative bourgeois domesticity, as their role models," she summatively argues.¹²³ The United States' imperial hold over Japan, beginning with its domestic internment camps and continuing through its manipulation of Japanese government and establishing the former axis power as a "junior ally"¹²⁴ during the Cold War, worked to domesticate Japan. Domestication meant emasculating patriarchal leadership as well as ensuring "the construction of a proper 'Japanese womanhood' modeled on the white American heteronormative feminine bourgeois ideal."¹²⁵ This process implicates imperial views of Japanese women, as in the example of the view that for Japanese women to emulate American

¹²¹ Kinsella, "What's behind," 216-217.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Jodi Kim, *Ends of Empire: Asian American Critique and the Cold War*. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004): 136.

¹²⁴ Kim, *Ends of Empire*, 99.

¹²⁵ Kim, *Ends of Empire*, 100.

women is an act of “denaturing,”¹²⁶ or defanging of an imperial enemy, but not deracination. Rather, in emulating Western womanhood, Japanese women could come close but never attain whiteness. Likewise, Americans felt as though what Kim calls gendered racial rehabilitation worked as a retaliation against the supposed racial conspiracy against whites. The myth that Japanese people engaged in such conspiracy originated in WWII propaganda meant to garner support for Roosevelt’s internment camps as well as American imperial occupation of Japan, serving ultimately as revitalization of white supremacy. Abroad, the myth of racial conspiracy served as a factor in the infantilization and feminization of Japan, and Asia at large. The impetus for Japanese women to emulate western womanhood predated WWII, but met new urgency following the second world war and entering the Cold War, when Japan as a nation felt it necessary to embody a more progressive national identity. That identity, by way of American intervention came about through the emulation of the U.S. and its values toward proper womanhood.

In May 1947, U.S. occupation authorities imposed a new constitution in Japan, which served as a defanging of the nation. In the first place, the new constitution “preserved the emperor system (while stripping him of temporal political authority,)”¹²⁷ effectively establishing a visible patriarchal figurehead to then emasculate through the revocation of power. Among other amendments, the constitution’s Article 9 renounces war as a means for solving international disputes, thereby neutralizing Japan’s threat to the United States.¹²⁸ The imposition of the constitution joined an array of other American-led efforts to reform the nation, benefiting the neo-imperialist project of the United States and figuring Japan as its junior partner, or otherwise as its Asian counterpart during the Cold War.

Following WWII, the school uniform, once symbolic of nationalism and an antebellum youth identity, became associated with strong identity, nonconformity, counterculture and neuroticism.¹²⁹ Images depicting schoolgirls in particular in sexual or otherwise horrific scenes originated in the early post-war era were often meant as critiques of American and European

¹²⁶ Kim, *Ends of Empire*, 102.

¹²⁷ Kim, *Ends of Empire*, 105.

¹²⁸ Japan const. Art. IX (1947).

¹²⁹ Kinsella, “What’s behind,” 219.

moral influence.¹³⁰ Schoolgirls, both fictional and real, have since faced an onslaught of sexualization following such depictions, eventually leading to the hypervisible *kogal* phenomenon in the 1990s, which I briefly describe in the previous section. Kogal, a portmanteau of the Japanese words for high school and girl, describes a particular style of girl rather than any generic high school girl. Tadashi Suzuki and Joel Best describe kogal as “urban,” and “particularly attuned to matters of style, identifiable by their clothing and grooming choices.”¹³¹ Whereas high-school girls made up a slim margin of the general population, media including newspapers, television, and books centered these girls’ experiences and often associated kogal with Japanese society itself. These depictions over-represented the girls as engaging in multiple forms of prostitution with older business men and ensured that their supposed materialism rather than economic instability contributed to this behavior. As a result, kogal were often thought of as deviant and indicative of a societal moral collapse.¹³² The school uniform, forged in the image of European uniform, became symbolic of sexual nonconformity.

As Kinsella notes, “the uniformed citizen of the early twentieth century has finally run his full historical course by transforming into the specter of the high-school girl prostitute in a sailor suit in the 1990s.”¹³³ To be sure, the uniform’s evolution from masculine to deviantly feminine echoes a particular aesthetic transness, whereby the apparent representatives of the nation shift from male soldiers to supposedly materialistic prostitute girls. In some ways, especially through the over-portrayal of kogal by patriarchal media, this process speaks to Chizuko Ueno’s articulation of a reverse Orientalism, whereby social analysis from within Japan works to feminize the nation.¹³⁴ On the other, and in the context of gendered racial rehabilitation, such a shift speaks to the apparent success in feminizing Japan.

¹³⁰ Kinsella, “What’s behind,” 222.

¹³¹ Tadashi Suzuki & Joel Best, “The emergence of trendsetters for fashion and fads: Kogaru in 1990s Japan,” *Sociological Quarterly* (Winter 2003), 44, no. 1: 62.

¹³² Suzuki & Best, “Trendsetters,” 62 & 72.

¹³³ Kinsella, “What’s behind,” 236.

¹³⁴ Chizuko Ueno, “In the feminine guise: A trap of reverse orientalism,” in *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal. English Supplement*, 13 (1997): 5.

Kuo coins the relationship between white Americans and Asian people as a “mutual gaze”¹³⁵ in which both parties observed and imagined the other’s gender and sexual formations in their own development of a modern national identity. She cites as a key example Japanese feminist Baroness Shidzué Ishimoto, whose relationship with American feminism, as Kuo represents through Margaret Sanger, relays a grand and complicated relationship between the two nations. On the first hand, Ishimoto’s work according to Kuo spoke to a situatedness between adherence to traditional family roles and progressive, modern feminisms. Sanger’s work, on the other hand, “reveal an underlying ambivalence about Japanese women’s potential as feminists, sometimes reiterating stock Orientalist views of Japanese women as passive aesthetic objects of beauty.”¹³⁶ This view showed up as mainstream American feminists thought of Japanese as well as Asian women in general as apolitical and largely as exotica rather than international allies on the feminist front. Although both Asian women and white American women found themselves fighting against the Victorian model of womanhood, the Orientalist gaze tainted white feminists’ approach to Asian women, as their unwillingness to see beyond imperial stereotypes of their Japanese counterparts forestalled meaningful international coalition.

Thinking on this process of gendered racial rehabilitation, I return to Morgan’s remarks that Korea, Japan and China engage in a cutesifying process, taking old western clothes and rendering them cute. If we consider the long historic process behind the evolution of American and European military uniforms into iconic Japanese schoolgirl uniforms, this is not entirely untrue, at least for Japan and in that one instance. Further, though, I relay Morgan’s sentiment to Said’s articulation that Orientalism involves the dogmatic view of the East as perpetually situated in the past. Rather than describing East Asian fashion as perhaps avant garde or cutting edge, Morgan’s understanding is that it stems from centuries-old western attire. A few times, as well, Morgan describes her style as modest. Taken at face value, she paints the picture that cute, modest clothing constitutes Asian fashion. I view these comments as indicative of the legacy of gendered racial rehabilitation that persists through understandings and articulations of East Asian aesthetic as routed through Western style.

¹³⁵ Kuo, *East is West*, 9.

¹³⁶ Kuo, *East is West*, 142.

The clothes' provenance in East Asia seems at least partially a side concern for Morgan, who follows up her description of Asian clothing as cutesified American prairie fashion with the expression of slight frustration, "You can't really find [cutesified colonial American clothing] in stores here. Well you can, but it's kind of hard." To be sure, Morgan's lamentation with the difficulty of finding that sort of clothing in the US also calls for careful consideration. In *East is West and West is East* Kuo notes how East Asian countries often represent the imaginary ideal, successful image of a failed United States. The failure of the American Empire shows up as success when viewing Japan. Further, Japanese women have long represented outdated femininities to the dogmatic American Orientalist gaze, always viewing Asia as stuck in the past.¹³⁷ In describing East Asian clothing as both cutesified as well as reminiscent of colonial America, Morgan not only calls on specific histories of American imperialism like the one outlined above, but also reaffirms Kuo's assertion that Japanese women, or more broadly, East Asian femininity represents outdated modes of womanhood. In other words, Asian clothes while fashionable remain confined to the past. Then, in lamenting the inaccessibility of cute, modest clothing in the United States and turning instead to East Asian styles that meet her expectations, Morgan effectively draws on not only the long imperial relationship between the United States and Japan, but also on the view of East Asia as successful--in terms of fashion--where the United States fails.

Conclusion

Some, though certainly not all, of Morgan's feminine presentation relies on what I call appropriative embodiment. That she blends a mix of clothing from various sources including East Asian, for which she demonstrates a preference, calls to mind Lewis' concept of cultural cross-dressing, and the how European women would wear garb from Orientalized locations in specific contexts to appear more worldly yet dress in European clothing when the context or company called for professionalism.¹³⁸ Certain aspects of her presentation we might read as constituting outright appropriation, as in her use of the school uniform. Others, though, stretch the imagination of what we might call appropriation. For this reason, we turn to Morgan's description of herself and her style. Through naming particular fashions as Asian or inspired by

¹³⁷ Kuo, *East is West*, 152.

¹³⁸ Lewis, *Gendering Orientalism*, 136.

elements of Asian-ness, such as her tracing her inspiration to dye her hair to anime, Morgan reveals how she navigates the world as a trans woman in pornography. Her appropriative embodiment of items and styles she considers Asian allows for a rebellion against transmisogyny at the expense of perpetuating Asian stereotypes, made possible through her whiteness. I spent the second section of this chapter illustrating how her attitude toward a homogenized East Asia and its take on clothing draws from a long history of American and European influence over Asian progression into modernity and the complex power relations that arise in that history.

I return to my interview with Morgan in chapter IV in a critical look at online white trans communities and the use of memes. First, however, I turn to my interview with another participant, Alexandria. In the next chapter, I consider issues such as slur reclamation, area study, and self-naming and their relationship to coming out and developing a feminine presentation.

CHAPTER III: CHOOSING FEMININITY: AREA STUDIES AND GENDER PRESENTATION AS ORIENTALIST VEHICLES

Introduction: Recognizing Alexandria

Unlike Morgan, Alexandria and I had not known each other prior to our conversation. Part of my recruitment process entailed reaching out to trans women on the Internet, primarily through Twitter, who I felt embodied the particular aesthetic I wanted to address. As a matter of fact, the mysterious algorithm directed her to me in the form of a suggested follow. Her account is less popular, as indicated by follower count, than other participants such as Morgan and Amy, but I include her as a way to illustrate the wide-reaching phenomenon of white queer Orientalist uptake and reproduction. I followed her after viewing her tweets and media and determining that she fit my criteria. Shortly after, she followed me, and I sent her my request for participation. She quickly accepted, and we settled on a time and date. On Sept. 10, 2020, we met at 4 PM EST and talked for roughly an hour via Zoom. During our interview, Alexandria revealed that she was an American living in Vancouver. Whereas the COVID-19 pandemic had made my meeting with Morgan perhaps more complicated and inhibited by the necessity of conducting an interview online when practicality would have allowed for an in-person conversation, the normalization of video conferencing technologies such as Zoom allowed for a greater inclusion of participants. Alexandria's position as an American in Canada would have rendered an in-person conversation between us impossible.

Though Alexandria and I had only known each other very briefly, I found myself relating to her in multiple ways. Certain elements of her story of trans self-discovery as well as her life outside of transness echoed mine. As she shared her experiences with me, I recognized her. At the very least, I view her as someone quite similar to the version of myself I described in this thesis' introduction. If I may indulge in a brief auto-ethnographic exercise, I call back to my own time in South Korea. I attended my first Pride event with a few friends in Seoul during the summer of 2017. At the time I had not yet come out as trans but rather masqueraded myself as bisexual as a way of establishing community with other LGBTQ+ peers. During the event I picked up a fair amount of free swag including a rainbow pin that reads 왜, the Korean word for "why." A Korean friend of mine explained that the combination of the word against the rainbow flag background

sent a message more or less along the lines of “gay, so what?” and a common expression amongst some gay youth in Seoul. The pin made its way onto my own denim jacket, a garment I viewed as an indicator of my status as somewhere in the LGBTQ+ acronym. Donning political or identity based patches and pins on jackets draws from a long history of punk and queer cultures, and I felt my 왜 pin adequately advertised my status as both *not straight* as well as, ignorantly, worldly. A potential conversation starter, the pin boasted my connection to both queerness in an abstract sense as well as my connection to Seoul. I now view that connection, teaching English, as a form of neocolonialism. Then, that pin represents in reality my own privileged colonial position as well as a phony connection to the gay scene in Korea. Part of this chapter interrogates a similar phenomenon in Alexandria’s use of a rainbow yin-yang patch.

With this parallel experience in mind, I call back to the introduction to this thesis and the idea that much of this work comes not only out of critique for other white trans women but also for myself and my own Orientalist actions. I remember this as I analyze Alexandria’s position, and once again ensure room for generosity in my reading of our interview. I avoid a paranoid reading and instead engage in what Eve Sedgwick calls reparative reading.¹³⁹ Indeed, I do not engage with Alexandria with the assumption that she is lost or secretly maliciously racist, but rather as someone similar to me and, I imagine, to other white trans women. This chapter speaks to the more interpellative side of this thesis, one that calls me to identify and work through forms of Orientalism and appropriative embodiment that white trans women including myself have engaged in.

This chapter comprises three sections: *Gendering Presentations*, *Area Studies and Self-Discoveries*, and *Reclamation*. The first section considers Alexandria’s use of “femme” and “butch” as stylistic descriptors to establish a baseline understanding for how she describes her gendered presentation. The second, *Area Studies and Self-Discoveries*, addresses the participant’s work studying political movements in China and Taiwan and compares that work to Edward Said’s outlining of academic Orientalism as well as other conversations and critiques of area

¹³⁹ Eve Sedgwick. “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You’re So Paranoid You Probably Think this Introduction is About You,” in *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997): 6.

studies. The final section, *Reclamation*, draws from Alexandria's experiences in coming out as trans within the context of both gendered presentation and her academic work. I center the importance of self-naming and slur reclamation in the third section in order to work through the complexities of appropriative embodiment and how it manifests itself within and beyond cultural appropriation.

Gendering Presentations

So in the very beginning I was dressing very androgynously wearing a lot of flannel, wearing this beanie¹⁴⁰ a lot (laughs), and that was kind of my strategy early in transition. I was kind of afraid that if I dressed more explicitly feminine it would make me stick out more and people would realize my, I don't know, more gender nonconforming attributes or something. So I figured if I dressed very androgynous that would help me both blend in and—especially living in Vancouver and the pacific northwest, very androgynous clothing is very common among women. So if people see a woman who is androgynous it isn't a red flag thing. Seeing a woman who is very explicitly femme is the more kind of ... it's less common to see a woman in very hard femme type things like a full beat, heels, that sort of thing. It's not as common as maybe other places in the US or Canada. So I very much had a strategy of blending into the crowd and wearing a lot of very androgynous like jeans, t-shirts, things like that, minimal makeup. Even though I worked very hard on makeup at the very very beginning and realized it was just better if I didn't wear makeup—or a full beat of makeup. But as time went on and as HRT¹⁴¹ started doing its work I found that I could wear very feminine things and I had enough feminine attributes that I didn't look strange to people I just looked like a cis woman who was very femme. So at this point I don't really dress androgynous anymore, just cause I feel no pressure to. Just flannels are nice and all but I just don't feel any need to wear them anymore or to be androgynous or sort of butch like that.

Thus Alexandria describes her evolution from dressing androgynously to a more, in her terming, “femme” presentation. At the start of our interview, Alexandria defined herself as pansexual, boasting a pansexuality pride flag in the background of her room. This will provide some context as we go forward. I first identify her situating her presentation in Vancouver, where “it's less common to see a woman in very hard femme type things like a full beat [of makeup], heels, that sort of thing,” as an important setting. Contrasted against the abnormality of the feminine woman,

¹⁴⁰ As she says this, she points to the beanie on her head.

¹⁴¹ Common abbreviation for hormone replacement therapy.

androgynous women dominate Vancouver's collective schema of how a woman ought to present. Or, at the very least, androgynous women occupy Alexandria's understanding of Vancouver's collective schema. This matters in the sense that, had she remained in the United States, or any of the "other places in the US and Canada" where more feminine presentations ostensibly constitute the norm for women, she may have begun with femininity rather than androgyny. Instead, she donned clothing that would allow her to navigate the world relatively inconspicuously, using androgyny as a method of blending in and avoiding calling attention to herself as a newly out trans woman. I keep this in mind, as well as the possibility that had she begun transition elsewhere she might have worn femininity from the get go, as I take a look at her use of femme in relation to androgyny and butch aesthetics.

As a matter of understanding terminology, I turn now to her use of femme and butch, as well as androgyny, as terms that merely describe aesthetic and seemingly little else. For Alexandria, femme, androgyny and butch seem to exist purely as aesthetic categories in which she finds herself using or discarding in various stages of her transition. My work here is not to determine the validity or credibility of a pansexual woman's use of historically lesbian descriptors--rather, I acknowledge that she uses these terms for some reason or another. Whether by virtue of pansexuality or transness or general queerness, Alexandria feels attached to femme and butch as aesthetic dynamic descriptors, as evidenced by her consistent use of these terms throughout our interview. Certainly, a woman, bisexual or pansexual or lesbian, in a relationship with someone other than a cisgender man, has any right in my view to use femme and butch as potential identity descriptors. What I call into question here, then, is the use of these terms as purely aesthetic markers, as opposed to their encapsulation of social, sexual and romantic roles as well as an accompanying aesthetic.

Femme/butch social dynamics have existed as a lesbian subculture for decades, garnering their fair share of discourse and controversy amongst feminists.¹⁴² Ardill and O'Sullivan note one view of femme/butch as descriptors of mere presentation and behavior, "roles, in other words."¹⁴³ They

¹⁴² Susan Ardill & Sue O'Sullivan. "Butch/Femme Obsessions" in *Feminist Review* (Spring 1990): 79-85.; Sue-Ellen Case. "Towards a Femme-Butch Aesthetic" in *Discourse*, 11, no. 1 (Fall 1998): 55-73.

Cite a few of the femme/butch sources, especially the Ardill and O'Sullivan and the Case

¹⁴³ Ardill & O'Sullivan. "Butch/femme," 80.

go on to consider a proverbial lesbian who engages in the act of “femmeing it up” and raise questions such as, “are we also assuming, implying or guessing that she takes certain emotional positions in her relationship or that she will behave in a particular way in bed?”¹⁴⁴ Here, the very notion of femme and butch as purely aesthetic and behavioral descriptors comes under scrutiny much in the same way I scrutinize Alexandria’s use. I do not believe that when Alexandria mentions “femme days” and “butch days” she is speaking to anything, even behaviorally, beyond her manner of appearance. Further, Alexandria describes her wardrobe in musing that she is “pretty sure I will always have a very versatile wardrobe where I have different types of, different outfits on different ends of the femme-butch spectrum,” specifically name femme and butch not as mutually exclusive counterparts but rather as a spectrum. We might imagine that androgyny falls somewhere toward the middle of that spectrum, if not a little closer to butch based on Alexandria’s grouping of the two terms.

Where a spectrum view of femme/butch may allow for a vocabulary of defining Alexandria’s experimental journey through gendered presentations, the opposite view holds femme and butch as counterparts that must maintain mutual exclusion. Case notes that the historically held schema of femme/butch necessitates their coexistence as a coupling, wherein one cannot exist without the other.¹⁴⁵ One cannot subscribe to this view and agree to the idea that butch and femme exist along a spectrum; this much is somewhat obvious. Then, the opposite must also be true: One cannot view butch and femme as poles of a spectrum and at the same time view these terms as complementary identities. In arguing against the view of femme/butch as purely aesthetic terms that might fit along a spectrum, Harris and Crocker argue in favor of femme as a “sustained gender identity.”¹⁴⁶ They argue that their view seeks to balance too stable theories of femme/butch, such as the idea one can be born femme, with too flexible ones, such as seeing femme as “one of many costumes.”¹⁴⁷ Going forward, I consider the balance between stable and flexible views of femme/butch and wonder where exactly Alexandria falls.

¹⁴⁴ Ardill & O’Sullivan, “Butch/femme,” 81.

¹⁴⁵ Case, “Towards a Femme/Butch,” 56.

¹⁴⁶ Laura Harris & Elizabeth Crocker, *Femme: Feminists, Lesbians and Bad Girls* (Routledge, 1997): 5.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

Her descriptions of presentation seem to distance herself from butchness, outside of describing her “lazy” days, as well as androgyny, outside of wearing it as a means of survival. On the surface I am inclined to identify Alexandria’s use of femme and butch (and androgyny) as overly flexible, treating each term as easily wearable and just as easily discardable. This calls us to sit with the view of femme and butch as merely aesthetic descriptors, in accordance with Alexandria’s use of the terms, despite the potential implications for what that might mean to a lesbian world outside of this thesis. Yet, with the distance Alexandria places between herself and butchness/androgyny, and considering her use of androgyny as determined by the gender norms of her geographic position, one may view her embodiment of femme as still queer and still balancing stability with flexibility. Perhaps she would always come around to femininity as the most comfortable mode of expression. That she describes certain days as “femme days” or “butch days” speaks to her maintaining a spectrum or flexible view of the terms.¹⁴⁸ Yet, I view her femme embodiment, by her own descriptions, as her home for gendered presentation and her so-called butch embodiments as aberrations from that, which by her own account stem not from a drive toward gender presentation but rather laziness or social navigation.

I open this chapter with a consideration of how Alexandria uses femme and butch and androgyny because I believe her view speaks to a growing trend of treating the terms as purely aesthetic. To treat femme and butch as merely descriptors of the visual amounts to a reductionist stance that ultimately strips them of their historic use. Though I personally subscribe to the camp that sees femme/butch as terming lesbian, or even broadly women loving women, counterpart roles, I recognize that Alexandria’s use differs. Likewise, how she understands her gender and feminine self informs every piece of our interview and subsequently this chapter, so including a brief breakdown of that view in its larger context serves our understanding of Alexandria in subsequent sections. Lastly, I think on Harris and Crocker’s description of femininity as read through femme as “transgressive, disruptive and chosen.”¹⁴⁹ Though I imagine they might view Alexandria’s approach to femme as too flexible for their liking, I feel as though Alexandria adequately embodies a femininity that is transgressive, disruptive, and chosen. Perhaps to choose femininity,

¹⁴⁸ Recently, femme and butch have come to serve as labels for varied embodiments of gender, not necessarily limited to lesbians despite originating from lesbian subcultures.

¹⁴⁹ Harris & Crocker. *Femme*, 3.

for some, can only occur after experimenting with other modes of expression. As trans women, our femininity in my view will always be transgressive, it will always be disruptive, and it will always be chosen. In the next section, I move from such an affirmative reading and consideration of Alexandria's presentation and instead turn to her academic work in area studies as it represents the legacy of Orientalism.

Area Studies and Self-Discoveries

Quite frankly, about midway through my interview with Alexandria, I wondered whether I had misjudged her. She made very little mention of Asia or of kawaii or any of the qualities I deemed typical of white trans appropriative embodiment of East Asian aesthetic. I wondered if she might just dress femininely without implicating East Asia at all. Then, however, she recalled two summers abroad in Hangzhou, China, and Taipei, Taiwan respectively. She informed me that she visited either country as study abroad trips in extension with her academic work. Alexandria majored in East Asia studies and used her opportunity in graduate school to concentrate on Chinese women's political movements. This spoke to me as a literal engagement with Orientalism in its modern iteration, area studies. Further, her studies only came up because I had pressed her about her interest in a "Korean style skirt" that she saw online before buying for herself. Unpacking her connection to her specific academic field as well as the apparent link between that and her cultivated style forms the basis for this section. I begin with a brief look at Chinese women's political movements and work through Alexandria's place in studying them by drawing on the work of Said, as well as other recent work on area studies. Then, I critically engage with Alexandria's developing a feminine presentation as rooted in her experiences within area studies. Though I cannot say much about Alexandria's work outright, I use this space to speak to white academics' roles in creating knowledge about China. Said refers to "modern Orientalists--or area experts, to give them their new name"¹⁵⁰ as well as "academic Orientalism."¹⁵¹ He argues that area studies and those within it fulfill the historic role of Orientalizing Asia. He goes on, identifying academics' role in serving as experts on policy, history and a variety of other disciplines specializing in their chosen country. This, like classic Orientalism, speaks to the

¹⁵⁰ Edward Said. *Orientalism: 25th Anniversary Edition*. (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1978; New York, NY: Vintage Books Edition, 1994): 107.

¹⁵¹ Said, *Orientalism*, 199.

perpetuation of a power dynamic that holds EuroAmerican nations in dominion over Asian and African countries. Indeed, the very drive to hold knowledge of a place or people from an outsider standpoint certainly functions as a practice of maintaining imperial power. Even if Alexandria does not fancy herself an informant and rather approaches her subject with nothing but enthusiasm, love, and appreciation, her work--should it meet the expectations of her field and see publication--inevitably serves the function of relaying potentially useful information on policy and history to EuroAmerican interests. Likewise, the very possibility for Alexandria to engage in East Asia studies hinges on an imperial history that led to program funding in the first place. With this unavoidable power dynamic at play, Alexandria's work as an area expert on Chinese women's political movements can only ever exist as an iteration of academic Orientalism.

Further, Keguro Macharia critiques area studies from his perspective as an Africa-based queer scholar. He argues that area studies precludes the possibility of existing as a field amongst thinkers in and from the area of interest. Although Macharia specifically speaks on the deracinating effects of Africa-focused area studies, writing from Nairobi, he extends his critique to the practice broadly. In doing so, he denounces "the notion of an 'area studies' model that centers the United States as the place to which information flows."¹⁵² Through Western academics' organization of the world geographically and through assemblages of knowledge, area studies speaks to a form of intellectual perpetuation of colonialism.¹⁵³ Despite "earnest US-based scholars"¹⁵⁴ who believe themselves to study in good faith and to work against imperial knowledge structures, Macharia argues that the very organization of their discipline renders even good intentions counterproductive.

Keeping in line with Macharia's argument, I reiterate that even if Alexandria works and travels from an internal place of good intentions and "enthusiasm for all things Asiatic",¹⁵⁵ her status as a white academic from the United States negates those intentions and at best leaves them futile. This, of course, is the most generous possible reading of her involvement in area studies.

¹⁵² Keguro Macharia, "On Being Area-Studied: A Litany of Complaint," GLQ, 22, no. 2 (April 2016): 187.

¹⁵³ Macharia. "Litany of Complaints," 188.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Said. *Orientalism*, 51.

In doing some cursory research on Alexandria's specific expertise, Chinese women's political movements, I came across the work of Lingzhen Wang, who documents the role of Chinese socialist women's liberation movements. She strongly critiques Western discourse on the topic, arguing that too often Western feminists ask "Why has socialism not liberated women in China?"¹⁵⁶ This question represents the highly "individualistic, autonomous, and essential female cultural values"¹⁵⁷ that Western feminisms typically promote. Further, Wang traces the genealogy of Western feminisms to imperialist, neoliberal and capitalist expansion policy. In other words, academic work about Chinese women's social movements, especially the socialist women's movement, tends to do the work of disparaging socialism broadly and reaffirming the value of individualistic, capitalist institutions. Though much more can be said about area studies as innately Orientalizing, I turn now to her experience traveling and its role in her self-discovery and formation of her gendered self. Alexandria mentions a "Korean-style skirt" in describing the type of clothing she prefers. When I ask her what about the skirt speaks to her, she responds:

I don't know, I've always had an appreciation for kind of—as someone who in college and stuff majored in East Asia studies and took a lot of courses about Japan and China and consumed a lot of media, and also went abroad and lived in East Asia for an amount of time I have a real appreciation for fashion in East Asia, in places like Japan, Korea, China, Hong Kong. So the skirt very much spoke to that kind of aesthetic, that kind of femme aesthetic that I find that a lot of women's fashion in Asia is very simplistic, it's very I don't want to say bare bones but it's very staple-tight, solid color things, and I don't know I just found the design and everything of the skirt very appealing to me.

In the first place we must acknowledge that she locates her interest in particular clothing items in relation to her academic history and experience living in East Asia. Not only does her travel to China and Taiwan enable the imperial, Orientalizing process of knowledge-making for Western academia, it also allows her the opportunity of an encounter with East Asian fashion. In something of a generalization, Alexandria describes the clothing in "Japan, Korea, China, [and] Hong Kong" as fitting a feminine aesthetic that makes use of simplicity. One might expect an area expert to describe these locations with a bit more nuance and discretion, but I digress. I have

¹⁵⁶ Lingzhen Wang, "Women's Liberation" in *Afterlives of Chinese Communism: Political Concepts from Mao to Xi*, ed. by Christian Sorace, Ivan Franceschini, & Nicholas Loubere. (ANU Press, 2019): 316.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

already written on the association of East Asian clothing with femininity in Chapter II, and I take this opportunity to focus instead on the importance of Alexandria's imperial encounter in her formation of a stylized feminine self. Alexandria's very existence in East Asia was predicated on her status as a scholar of East Asia. If we agree that area studies necessarily perpetuates imperialist processes, then it follows that we might understand the perpetuation of those processes as a condition that allowed for Alexandria to encounter the "staple-tight" Asian clothes that would so appeal to her. This raises a number of questions I address in the next section. In what way does the academy enable white self-making? What might academic adjacency to a culture lead to in terms of action and embodiment? In what ways does whiteness prevail through consumption of non-whiteness?

Reclamation

Indeed, the academy exists not only as a site for classic Orientalist study, but also as one of self-determination. Toward the end of our interview, I informed Alexandria that I would be using a pseudonym for her in order to maintain anonymity and asked if she had any preference for one. She replied that she had no real preference but has used her "Chinese name" in the past as a way of obscuring her identity in writing. She explains, "I figured the point of an anonymous name is to make it seem like you wouldn't be able to tell who the person behind it is, so it was the name I already had off the top of my head so I figured if I used that they probably wouldn't imagine some white girl in grad school." In this explanation, Alexandria both associates herself with her Chinese name while acknowledging its distance from her own cultural and racial identity. The use of the Chinese name as an authorial pseudonym precludes the possibility of "some white girl in grad school" as the writer behind the work.

Yet, in distancing herself, Alexandria also clarifies a genuine connection to it, saying, "It's not a lie, it's my actual name, like I picked out my name, it means something to me." Indeed, Alexandria recalls setting out to name herself after a very feminine name common in Chinese dramas and film but meeting her professors' hesitation. "They were just like, 'Are you sure you want this name? This isn't a name a man is supposed to have.' ... I ended up compromising with them about a name." I paraphrase rather quote here so as to maintain anonymity as much as possible. Alexandria admired the name taken from Chinese female protagonists for both its

meaning, “little peach,” and the beauty of the characters in the name. Her professors encouraged her to adopt a more masculine syllable at the end, which she used for some time before coming out as trans. After coming out, she ceased using that name and instead started going by the more feminine variant she had wanted in the first place. Using a target-language name in foreign language courses is common enough, yet two elements of Alexandria’s self-naming deserve some critical attention. In the first place, I consider how her academic setting made way, or didn’t, for gender exploration. In the second, I reflect on her deadnaming her Chinese name and opting for a more feminine name once she transitioned.

The act of naming oneself holds tremendous importance for many, if not most, trans people. A name, like one’s pronouns, constitute a portion of gender presentation that allows trans people to navigate more freely in society as their gender. Along with the donning of a new name comes the killing of the old, hence the term dead name. In other words, a dead name generally¹⁵⁸ refers to the name a trans person received at birth alongside their wrongful sex assignment which they no longer use. In many ways, the act of killing a name symbolizes the killing off of a past iteration of the gendered self. The taking of a new name conversely represents the welcoming of a new self, one more appropriately aligned with the actor’s gender and social presentation. We might compare the act of choosing a new gendered name to that of choosing a target-language name. In either case, the name serves as a tool by which others might beckon someone. The introduction of choice here suggests a give and take relationship with interpellative social processes, wherein one can understand themselves as a social subject but also exert some degree of willpower as to what kind of social subject and how others might address them. Certainly, the very act of transitioning parallels this relationship. Though one must be a gendered and sexed subject, to transition means acknowledging the interpellative relationship between self and society. In taking on a gendered name, it presumably and ideally serves in every setting where the actor exists as their authentic gendered self. In contrast, however, a target-language name stops outside of the classroom except in rare instances where one might use it in a country or community that speaks that language. Likewise, whereas taking on a new gendered name typically means deadnaming one’s prior name, taking on a target-language name rarely if ever means deadnaming one’s native language name.

¹⁵⁸ Instances exist where trans people may take on a new name and deadname that one in favor of yet another new name. Additionally, not every trans person takes on a new name upon transition or ever.

Then, Alexandria's taking on a new name suggests at the very least a use for changing her name. Although she may have used her Chinese dead name while studying abroad, she makes no mention of where she used her newly claimed Chinese name, as she came out after both trips had already passed. The only hint she gives as to its use is in her using it as a publication pseudonym, which occurred during her stint in graduate school. A benevolent reading would place her in at least one Chinese language class during that time, granting some use to the new moniker. Yet, the question remains as to whether she did not use that name in any class, or even, if she did, why she feels attached to it outside of the classroom. I think back to Kyoko, who I mention in this thesis' introduction, and wonder if the classroom might be a convenient excuse for Alexandria to give herself a Chinese name.¹⁵⁹ Any use of a target-language name outside of the classroom seems to me a form of embodiment that mimics cultural roleplay and at the same time speaks to an extended view of the self as within the imitated culture. Further, Alexandria's assertion that "it's [her] actual name, like [she] picked it out, it means something to [her]" suggests a connection to her identity as a language learner beyond the classroom. In deadnaming her original Chinese name rather than simply using the new one in new contexts, or simply using her English name, she places an importance on her identity as a scholar of Chinese women's liberation movements. Yet, beyond her retaining her connection to China by way of the name she uses for her studies, Alexandria also embodies a particular relationship with China through clothing choices.

I actually have a patch I was gonna put on which is a ying—yin (laughs) a yin-yang symbol, but instead of white it's a pride flag, it's the rainbow. I really wanna put it on. And that's a whole story . In mainland China there's certain slurs they use towards gay people, trans people. And one of the slurs they use is *yīnyáng rén*, which literally means "yin-yang person" and the reasoning behind that slur is an androgynous presenting person a trans person someone who blends the elements of masculine and femininity in a way that cishet society in China sees as (air quotes) "unreasonable" or "strange," are called yin-yang people . Like, "You're both. You're both a masc and a femme together in a stigmatized way." So, it is very—it is a slur to say, "Oh you're a yin-yang person." So having that symbol very much kind of, I mean I'm not a Chinese person I don't live in that culture, but as someone who is kind of adjacent in the sense academically who's had a lot of friends who are Chinese and queer and lived in those spaces, I thought it would be

¹⁵⁹ I also wonder if perhaps I should deadname the name I used while learning Spanish and instead insist that Spanish speakers *me llamen Esmeralda*. Though, perhaps even in making this aside I have effectively done that which I critique in Alexandria. This begs the question: How deep is a name, anyway? Perhaps this might serve as a topic for future work.

an interesting way to reclaim that slur. In the sense that I am kind of this yin-yang person, but in a positive sense.

Thinking on Alexandria's reclamation of 阴阳人 (yīnyáng rén), I first turn to her description of the rainbow yin-yang patch, a physical representation of the slur. Prior to the statement above, Alexandria describes her denim jacket where she wears pins and patches that advertise her pro-feminist, queer positions. Likewise, she describes the jacket as "very femme" due to its being cropped. She notes that she has not yet put the patch on the jacket but intends to, in a way mimicking the processional act of slur reclamation. That she describes her jacket and its accoutrement as one way she expresses her queerness, the yin-yang patch's eventual inclusion amongst buttons such as one reading "Smash the Patriarchy" and another in a heart shape featuring the trans flag ultimately places yīnyáng rén amongst feminist and trans identity markers. That Alexandria describes the jacket as both "very queer" and "very femme" then implicates that slur amongst her queer and femme, or feminine, experiences. The act of using a patch, or any accessory, to reclaim a slur seems on its own somewhat innocuous, if not subtly counter-hegemonic. The issue arises, however, at Alexandria's own admission that she is "not a Chinese person" and does not "live in that culture." Where the patch speaks to the embodiment of a particular slur, yīnyáng rén, which Alexandria uses to describe herself at the end of the quoted section above, the question of appropriation arises. Is Alexandria's self-described academic adjacency to China enough to warrant the reclamation of this slur? For instance, she spent some time in both Southern China as well as Taiwan, albeit before she came out as trans. It stands to reason that at some point during her experience she may have had the term leveraged toward her or about her, even unbeknownst to the speaker. Though, I argue that the term's specific Chinese context would render her reclamation an act of appropriative embodiment if not flat out cultural appropriation.

Yet, little academic knowledge exists on yīnyáng rén. As a frame of reference, searching the term both with and without accents on JStor turns up only three results, only one of which makes explicit reference to yīnyáng rén as a slur. Project MUSE similarly turns up but four, with only one entry that does not overlap with JStor's results and directly addresses the slur. These scarce mentions of yīnyáng rén do not expand on the concept beyond more than a few sentences or, at most, a paragraph. Part of this may stem from the fact that its use is relatively confined to China,

infrequently evoked by Chinese-American diasporic subjects. That yin-yang theory takes root in Confucianism¹⁶⁰ means the slur in its namesake may have died out as an effect of pressure for Chinese immigrants to assimilate into dominant American culture, particularly Christianity. This is not to make any definitive remark on its colloquial use within Chinese-American communities, but rather to elucidate the lack of reference to it in American academia. What that lack means on a large scale I cannot exactly say. Though, I can only speculate as to its genealogy and suffice it to note that the term sees common enough usage in China yet barely scrapes the surface of American gender and sexual discourse.

As a matter of comparison, I turn to Yiu Fai Chow's brief essay on Kiki, a Chinese transgender sex worker who uses the slur *renyao* to describe herself. Kiki introduces herself only slightly jokingly as *dabo renyao*, which more or less translates to big boobed shemale, and generally takes on *renyao* as her primary identity term.¹⁶¹ Though I say "shemale," Chow notes that *renyao* takes on a specific meaning that combines *ren* (human) and *yao* (monster) to form a derogatory term akin to shemale or hermaphrodite. Further, "Kiki is appropriating this otherwise problematic term to embrace the problematic,"¹⁶² as a way to play with conceptions of humanity and monstrosity. Where society views masculinity as most human and transness as monstrous, her use of the term speaks to the different roles she takes on in her daily life. For Kiki, *renyao* carries a multitude of experiences that comprise her life.

Alexandria describes *yīnyáng rén* as a term that applies to people who embody both masculinity and femininity and takes that term on as a self-descriptor. At the start of our interview, I asked her to tell me how she identifies. She replied that she identifies as "a woman, as a trans woman," with the woman aspect often more central than the trans. Her experience of identity, in her words, is "very binary." With that in mind, her reclamation of *yīnyáng rén* may come off as a little specious. *Yīnyáng rén* refers most often to effeminate men, as well as trans women who are viewed as such, and intersex individuals.¹⁶³ However, it also applies to women, and can do so

¹⁶⁰ Robin R. Yang "Dong Zhongshu's Transformation of Yin-Yang Theory and Contesting of Gender Identity" *Philosophy of East and West*, 55, 2 (April 25, 2005): 209-232.

¹⁶¹ Yiu Fai Chow. "Yao, More or Less Human," *TSQ*, 5, no. 3 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018): 465

¹⁶² Chow. "Yao," 467.

¹⁶³ S. Pearl Brilmyer, Filippo Trentin, Zairong Xiang. "The Ontology of the Couple: or, What Queer Theory Knows about Numbers," *GLQ*, 25, no. 2 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019): 243.

affirmatively, as in the case of the footnoted female inmate with “an angular figure and hair cut like a male” who “was admiringly referred to as a hermaphrodite [yīnyáng rén].”¹⁶⁴ The existence of the female inmate who appeared male¹⁶⁵ suggests a certain subjectivity wherein yīnyáng rén is not exclusively derogatory, ultimately providing a degree of precedent for Alexandria’s reclamation. The description of that inmate also opens our understanding of the term to one that views any LGBT person as (improperly) embodying masculinity and femininity, again providing rationale for Alexandria’s attempted reclamation.

By engaging with a reading of yīnyáng rén as a term that addresses queerness, or transness more specifically, as an iteration of monstrosity, one better understands its potential for reclamation. Susan Stryker’s essay, “My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage,” published in *GLQ* in 1994,¹⁶⁶ stands as the journal’s second most read entry as of 2019.¹⁶⁷ The article opened up a genre of trans studies that would align transness with monstrosity. Drawing on Stryker’s work, Benny LeMaster argues that such an alignment takes on an ambivalent form, in some instances affirmative and in others harmful. “On one end, the monster has been used as a metaphoric means of articulating a dehumanized trans subject; in particular, trans women.”¹⁶⁸ Through this view, trans people exist as both victims and perpetrators of monstrosity, dehumanized through various rhetorics. On the other hand, LeMaster acknowledges something of a disidentificatory uptake of monstrosity by trans people that enables self-making and signification. Both ends of this spectrum of ambivalence capture both yīnyáng rén and renyao in their simultaneous dehumanizing and affirming. In other words, both derogatorily describe queerness as a dualness, one that combines either balanced forces such as yin and yang or oppositional ones such as humanity and monstrosity. The reclamation of either, by Kiki or Alexandria, speaks to the opening up of new possibilities and modes of signification.

¹⁶⁴ Philip F. Williams & Yenna Wu. *The Great Wall of Confinement: The Chinese Prison Camp Through Contemporary Fiction and Reportage* (University of California Press, 2004): 120.

¹⁶⁵ I use this description rather than referring to this person with any other identity terms solely due to the limited knowledge about them available to me.

¹⁶⁶ Susan Stryker. “My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage.” *GLQ* 1, no. 3 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994): 237–54.

¹⁶⁷ Susan Stryker. “More words about ‘My Words to Victor Frankenstein.’” *GLQ* 25, no. 1 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994): 39.

¹⁶⁸ Benny LeMaster. “Transing Dystopia: Constituting Trans Monstrosity, Performing Trans Rage in Torrey Peters’ *Infect Your Friends and Loved Ones*.” *The Popular Culture Studies Journal*, 6, no. 3. (2018): 98.

Alexandria's claim to monstrosity or to corrupted duality does not fall under my purview of critique, though. Rather, her whiteness' enabling her to find affirmation in a culturally Chinese reference to that corrupt duality or monstrosity does.

As the slur does not see use in the United States in the sense that white Americans do not refer to gay or trans Chinese people as *yīnyáng rén*, the question of appropriation is somewhat more troubling. Take for example a different term, ladyboy, which Americans specifically and derogatorily use to reference *kathoey*, or transgender Thai women. If Alexandria in some way set out to reclaim ladyboy, the specifically anti-Asian element of the term should immediately call into question the legitimacy of her reclamation. Unlike ladyboy, however, *yīnyáng rén* carries no explicitly anti-Asian sentiment but rather targets almost exclusively gay and trans Chinese people due to its use as a slur in China. This complicates how we might otherwise approach a case of appropriation. I return to the concept of appropriative embodiment and use it as a categorical marker of Alexandria's attempt at reclaiming *yīnyáng rén*.

Unlike Kiki, she does not use the (re)claimed slur in her initial introduction, but rather only uses it to refer to herself in explaining her rationale behind wearing the rainbow yin-yang patch. In a sense, then, we can view her claim to *yīnyáng rén* as justification for what might otherwise be viewed as appropriation, her donning of the yin-yang patch. I view both the reclamation of *yīnyáng rén* and the appropriation of the yin-yang as dual processes mutually reliant on one another. Thematically, it may help to take cultural appropriation as the yin to slur reclamation's yang. Considering yin-yang theory as an analytical lens, I turn to Robin R. Wang's interpretation of Dong Zhongshu's writing on yin-yang not as harmony but rather as imposed unity. Wang argues that the view of yin and yang's relationship as unity rather than harmony provided a philosophical and Confucianist underpinnings for the subjugation of women in China. Rather than viewing women's yin equal to men's yang, the view of yin-yang as unity over harmony suggests that yang, embodying masculinity, exerts dominance over yin. The relationship between subordination and domination, women and men, yin and yang works through complementary relationships and not, as frequently theorized, through equality.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁹ Robin R. Wang, "Dong Zhongshu's Transformation of *Yin-Yang* Theory and Contesting of Gender Identity," *Philosophy of East and West*, 55, no. 2 (April 2005): 216.

This relationship applies to a few items of interest. The first, as I note, Alexandria's use of the patch as a means of slur reclamation. I situate slur reclamation as the yang because it provides the impetus and motive independent of its means. That is, the use of the patch is secondary to the slur reclamation. Without it, Alexandria may have found another outlet for reclaiming yīnyáng rén. Yet, slur reclamation may also serve as the rationale for potentially inevitable cultural appropriation. Perhaps Alexandria would don the patch without any prior knowledge of yīnyáng rén, though I can only speculate. Reclamation and appropriation exist in a unity, reliant on each other yet unequal.

Similarly, we might apply this to appropriative embodiment, taking yang as representative of the minoritarian identity that calls for embodiment and yin as the majoritarian identity along which appropriation exists. In this instance, yang represents gender through Alexandria's sexuality, transness and womanhood. To cast womanhood here is not impossible. As Louise Edwards demonstrates, yin and yang often take on a gendered subjectivity wherein women may embody yang in particular circumstances, such as that of a woman boss.¹⁷⁰ It follows of course that race, Alexandria's whiteness, constitutes yin. One may argue in favor of an opposite positioning, structuring whiteness as the dominant in yang and trans womanhood as the subordinate in yin. Certainly such an analysis may yield intriguing results, and I could not deny such a reading outright. However, in the context of appropriative embodiment, I view outside social forces as primary indicators of an identity aspect's placement. That is to say that yang is not Alexandria's identity as a pansexual trans woman outright but rather the overwhelming force of cisheteronormativity enforced by those *unlike* her in terms of gender and sexuality that calls for a structured embodiment of those identities. Conversely, yin is not Alexandria's whiteness outright but rather those *unlike* her in whiteness, who her appropriative act ultimately harms.

Much like Alexandria's taking of a name in a new language, her appropriation of the yin-yang and the slur it symbolizes for her ultimately reaffirm her role as a white intellectual. Ruth Frankenberg writes on the construction of whiteness as a marker of the other, "not so much void

¹⁷⁰ Louise Edwards, "Aestheticizing Masculinity in *Honglou meng*," in *Changing Chinese Masculinities: From Imperial Pillars of State to Real Men*, ed. by Louie Kam (Hong Kong University Press, 2016): 91.

or formlessness as norm.”¹⁷¹ This aligns with Nakayama & Krizek’s conceptualization of whiteness as a rhetorical absence that makes itself against what it is not.¹⁷² Through an understanding of whiteness as defined by difference, a norm held against racial Others, I identify Alexandria’s self-making, informed by her exposure to Chinese cultural practices,¹⁷³ as ultimately a construction of whiteness. If we take her denim jacket as a symbol, we might work through this recognition better.

As a starting point, Alexandria identifies her jacket as both “femme” and “queer,” and, redundancy aside, I argue for the view of the denim jacket as a canvas whereby whiteness already exists within the fine craftsmanship of its material being. She makes note of pins and patches representing her transness and status as a feminist. As she showed me the jacket over Zoom, I made note of a few others: a Union Jack flag, a Canadian maple leaf symbol, one featuring the titular character from *Spongebob Squarepants* in drag, and a few indistinguishable ones. (Whereas the maple leaf might easily allude to her time in Canada and the Spongebob just as easily translate to an ironic declaration of transness, the Union Jack sticks out here due to its otherwise unclear relevance to Alexandria’s self-presentation. Neither in our interview nor in anything she has said of herself online has she made mention of Great Britain.) Some of these pins allude to elements of her identity whereas others seem only to allude to her transnational experiences and interests.¹⁷⁴ Of note, the two geographical references on her jacket, to Canada and Great Britain, both constitute a significant portion of the who in the Western subject. The yin-yang patch, then, evidently bridges these two genres, advertising both her experiences in China as well as her queer identities.

¹⁷¹ Ruth Frankenberg. *White Women Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (University of Minnesota Press, 1993): 198.

¹⁷² Thomas Nakayama & Robert Krizek. “Whiteness: A strategic rhetoric,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 81, 3 (1995): 291-209.

¹⁷³ I use the phrase “cultural practices” in much the same way as Frankenberg, referencing processes and activity rather than particular things; Frankenberg. *White Women*, 194.

¹⁷⁴ A conversation about experience and interests as elements of identity awaits, but not here.

That Alexandria elaborated on her decision to include the rainbow yin-yang but not on her inclusion of the otherwise inexplicable Union Jack¹⁷⁵ speaks to Frankenberg's description of the function of whiteness "as both norm and core."¹⁷⁶ In other words, the inclusion of the Union Jack seems to warrant no explanation in sharp contrast to the inclusion of the yin-yang. Alexandria's rationale, her academic alignment and time spent abroad, amounts to a view of whiteness as always contaminated by the Other and never the contaminator. Whiteness changes its shape with each new cultural encounter, it collects a new pin or a patch, but the white subject makes little to no mention of how the Other's exposure to whiteness shapes the Other.

Conclusion

We must take into consideration how processes of self-making enact a construction of whiteness, even and perhaps especially when the act of making borrows from other cultural practices. The workings of appropriative embodiment ensure clarity and resolution for a person oppressed along some axis while they make use of the privilege afforded to them by a different axis. For Alexandria, her role as an area studies expert paved the way for her transition and eventual self-making as a feminine woman. That role, though eventually liberating for her, can only exist within imperial systems whereby the organization of knowledge prioritizes the West as supreme. One might argue that Alexandria due to her work was, as Edward Said describes the typical Orientalist, "consequently a racist, an imperialist, and almost totally ethnocentric."¹⁷⁷ Still, prior to coming out, Alexandria recalls being treated like a man and feeling driven "up a wall." This masculine overdetermination of her pre-transition self echoes the experience of many trans women, who find various methods for working through it. In acknowledging this I draw again from Said, who qualifies his barrage of labels in adding, "Some of the immediate sting will be taken out of these labels if we recall additionally that human societies ... have rarely offered the individual anything but imperialism, racism, and ethnocentrism for dealing with 'other' cultures."¹⁷⁸ Alexandria made use of her experiences and education to work through her gender presentation. No one could reasonably fault her for wanting to do so. Yet, this does not mean we

¹⁷⁵ I recognize the possibility that Alexandria may have had personal reasons for not explaining the Union Jack. Additionally, as we spoke to her time in East Asia, the fact that she owned the patch and her plans to add it to her jacket did not come entirely out of left field.

¹⁷⁶ Frankenberg, *White Women*, 204.

¹⁷⁷ Said *Orientalism* 204.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

can readily excuse her, or any like her, from the consequences of her self-making process. It does not mean looking beyond the global-historical context of imperialism that paved her path. To be sure, we must always consider whose legs we tug down in order to pull ourselves up. In the next chapter, I explore this in more detail, interrogating the role and ramifications of anime girl memes.

CHAPTER IV: THE ‘ME’ IN ‘MEME’: USAGE OF ANIME GIRL MEMES IN TRANS SELF-MAKING AND COMMUNITY BUILDING

Introduction: The Meme Maker

After speaking with Morgan and Alexandria, I ran two more interviews. Both of them turned out relatively unuseful for this particular project when compared with the fruitfulness of the prior interviews. The first of these two, Opal, would tell me very little about her feminine presentation aside from her fondness for thigh high socks. Though I pressed on about her socks, thinking they might come from an affectionate view of schoolgirl uniforms and Japanese high school girls’ popularizing tall socks,¹⁷⁹ she yielded very little in the way of elaboration. Aside from one brief derailment into online “anime trans girl jokes,” which I excerpt in the *Memes and Community* section of this chapter, Opal did not fit my criteria. The other participant may have been of significant interest if I had instead shaped this project around cultural appropriation broadly. Evidently, I had wrongly credited East Asia as her fashion inspiration when in fact she traced her aesthetic sensibilities to an admiration for hip-hop. Certainly, such a claim coming from a white woman would demand critical analysis in another project. Unfortunately, her love for baggy clothing and the slit she stylishly shaved into her eyebrow land outside the scope of this thesis. Perhaps I can return to her another time.

Still without any solid interviewees, I needed to find someone quickly lest I squander too much time. I reached out to every trans woman I could through social media. For example, one white trans woman went viral for a day or two on Twitter wearing a qipao, and she denied my request to interview her. With each passing day feeling a little more hopeless, I stumbled upon a white trans woman on Twitter whose media tab¹⁸⁰ consisted almost entirely of selfies and anime girl memes. As I looked through the photos, some of the memes seemed familiar. I realized a handful of them had shown up on my timeline before, evidently liked or retweeted by someone, or some people, I followed. I reached out to the woman behind the account, Amy, who quickly agreed to join me in an interview.

¹⁷⁹ See Chapter II, “Through Imperial Eyes: Fashion as Insight for the Workings of Western Empire.”

¹⁸⁰ Twitter’s userface at the time I write this thesis organizes profiles into four tabs. The media tab includes every tweet that contains a photo, video or otherwise posted originally on the account.

We met for about one hour on October 29, 2020, at 3 PM EST. I imagine our conversation might have lasted longer than that, except that I had told her it would only take between thirty minutes and one hour, so at the hour mark I ended the conversation out of respect for her time. Our conversation covered a variety of topics relating to her experience as a trans woman in Florida¹⁸¹ and as a popular online personality. Of most interest to me, though, she creates memes featuring anime girls as a side hobby. Most of this chapter focuses on those memes and what they might tell us about white trans women's relationship to East Asia, or more specifically Japan. Amy also speaks quite beautifully on trans issues, and in many moments I find myself agreeing with her. Certain concerns, such as swimming and going to the beach, overlap with her use of memes. This chapter takes what Amy tells us of her experiences as trans and engages with her use of memes as both personal outlets and community building tools. I first look at how Amy describes certain trans experiences and compare her descriptions to some of her meme output, taking memes as a form of online self-presentation. How she understands herself as a content creator informs some of that analysis. Then I turn to a consideration of memes as a community device amongst white trans women especially, returning to my interview with Morgan, and reflect on the potential and existing ramifications of these images toward anti-Asian racism.

Memes and Presentation

"The memes have existed outside of me for a while. I guess I came across them and saw what people were doing with them and I saw the communities they were especially being used in, not being necessarily trans friendly or whatever else. So part of it was trying to reclaim the format because I think the format is funny. But I don't know, I think you see like a lot of that kind of stuff in like white circles more so than you see it in like circles with queer people of color, and I've definitely spoken about that with people, and a lot of that is people don't make a lot of dark-skinned anime representation. There is some for sure, but it's hard to find good representation that's not playing on racist stereotypes or anything like that. So I think that's probably why you see it more in white online circles than you do in other circles. But I generally try to keep them friendly. I do go out of my way to look for images with people of color and stuff, cause I think representation is important. One of my bigger posts from a while back was from like, I think it's like

¹⁸¹ Again I sit with the recognition that the normalization of video conferencing technologies such as Zoom in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic allowed for a geographically larger range of potential interviewees. In light of the difficulty of finding willing participants, I realize something. Perhaps had the pandemic not occurred, I might only have had the chance to talk with Morgan. Then, this thesis would have taken a drastically different direction and final shape.

mommy e-thot, tradwife, and the doomer girl¹⁸² making out and they're all obviously portrayed as white so I like made a comment underneath asking someone to redo it where at least one of them is not white. Honestly no one ever did."

Amy speaks to her experience in both discovering and turning toward creating anime girl memes. According to her, people using the meme format promoted anti-trans ideology and as a result she set out to "reclaim" the format due to its potential for humor. She quickly turns to addressing the lack of representation for darker skinned Internet users, claiming that pre-existing images of anime girls suiting what she calls a "pastel anime tits aesthetic" with darker skin are few and far between. In looking through her Twitter posts, she seems sincere in her desire for better representation for people of color, as she occasionally posts characters with darker skin tones. In her own work, Amy tends towards, as she says, "cat girl stuff" and "a lot of yuri, cause [she's] gay and it's relatable." I lead this section with the above excerpt alongside an original meme she posted online, as I view it as a strong embodiment of the essence of her overall content. The first tool Amy provides for understanding her memes comes from her assertion that "a lot of times [her] text posts just look better in impact font over anime titties." As we read them, we may keep in mind that the text precedes the image rather than vice versa. The first meme reads: "Yes I'm a PAWG / Without this fat ass how would I be an influencer?" laid over an image of what appears to be an anime girl, or at least a character drawn in anime style.¹⁸³

The use of "PAWG," a slang acronym that references a "phat ass white girl." On a brief cursory lookover, the character depicted suits the PAWG archetype well enough. Her light skin gives at least an appearance of whiteness, and her legs and butt (and breasts) are large in comparison to her petite body. Yet, she boasts a considerable amount of East Asian traits: dark hair, light skin, a sexualized version of what looks to be a qipao, and the appearance of a closed folding fan propped against her face. Additionally, the character sports a cat tail and cat ears, fulfilling the cat girl archetype. In other words, the character is legibly yet unspecifically East Asian. This appears to contradict Amy's lament for a lack of representation for people of color. Indeed, it seems to fill the very lack she addresses. The image and the text clash over racial representation.

¹⁸² These are all character archetypes within a larger meme category called Wojaks.

¹⁸³ From here on out, I will refer to characters drawn in anime style as "anime girls" unless some other specification is necessary.

It serves this thesis to spend some time considering what it might mean to choose an Asian reading over a white one and a white reading over an Asian one.

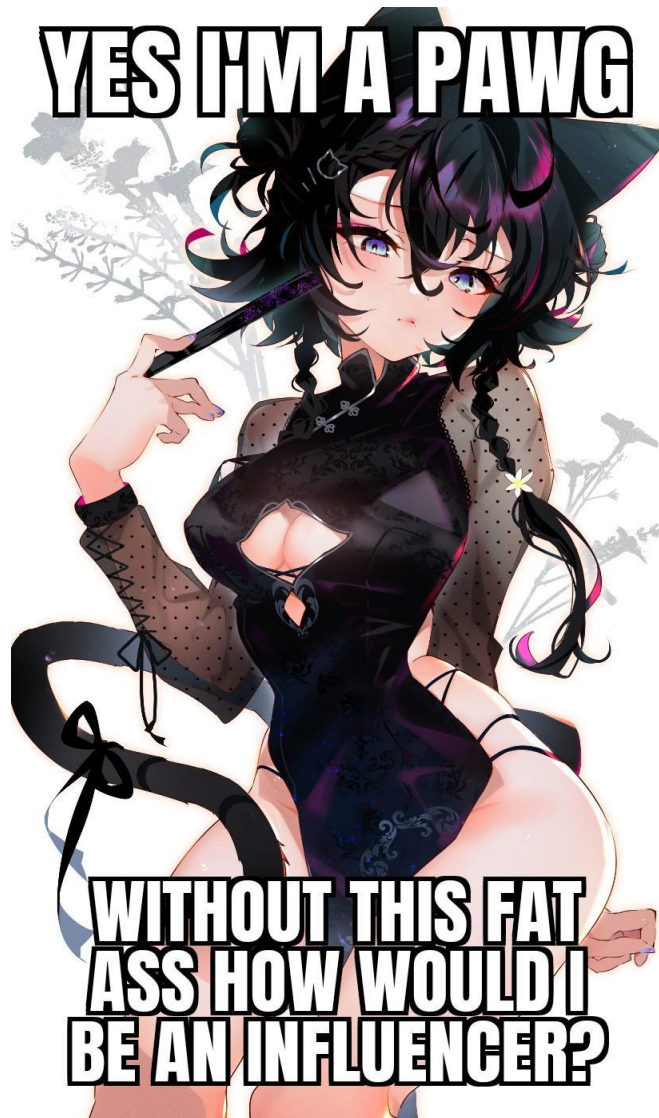


Figure 5: The “PAWG” meme.

To read the meme as East Asian, that is: to view the character as East Asian, means to call into question part of Amy’s approach. As creator, Amy notes the apparent lack of characters of color at her disposal. Yet, the very fact that she uses anime girls in her memes establishes something of a baseline identity for those girls. Anime as a Japanese media necessarily implies a Japanese

nationality, or at the very least East Asian ethnicity, unless otherwise indicated.¹⁸⁴ The character's design in the meme above contains no indication of whiteness. Indeed, everything from her clothing to her hair codes her as some sort of East Asian, albeit somewhat unspecified. Taking her, and most other anime girls in these memes, as Asian then contradicts Amy's critique. In fact, Amy's lamentation goes beyond simple contradiction and perpetuates a problem that E. Tammy Kim identifies wherein "people of color" often becomes a rhetorical stand-in for Black and brown people, obfuscating issues specific to Black and brown communities.¹⁸⁵ In this case, the rhetoric befuddles the place of East Asians in coalition with other non-white communities, lumping them in with whiteness or as "people of color, but not really." Certainly, the term "people of color" stems from the historic degradation of non-white races on the basis of, among other phenotypes, skin tone. Yet, the term "people of color" references a coalition that includes varied non-white races. With the recognition that "people of color" often functions as a stand-in for "Black" rather than speaking to its historic coalitional function, Amy's placement of the term PAWG over the anime girl makes more sense when held against her claim about the lack of non-white meme representation.

Yet, lumping East Asians in with whiteness works in much the same way as colorblindness, wherein one might overlook problems unique to East--as well as Southeast, in many overlapping cases--Asian people, such as what Anne Anlin Cheng terms *ornamentalism*. Cheng argues that the aestheticization of Asian and Asian American women within the United States reduces them to a state of *perihumanity*, a term that captures Asian women's "in-and-out" relationship with humanity and femininity: "She represents feminine values but is often not considered a woman at all."¹⁸⁶ That is to say: Asian women often face reduction to the material and the fetishistic, sexualized but never sexual, decorative and cute. Sitting with ornamentalism, I draw on Bow's work on Asian caricature and consider the portrayal of Asian girls and women through anime-style renderings, as well as their eventual uptake and use by white women. Bow argues that particular kitsch items caricaturing Asian people often evade critique as racist due to their appeal

¹⁸⁴ Characters in *Rose of Versailles*, for example, are all French. Likewise, a meme later in this chapter features *Neon Genesis Evangelion*'s Asuka Langley Soryu, a half-Japanese and half-German girl.

¹⁸⁵ E. Tammy Kim. "The Perils of 'People of Color,'" *The New Yorker* (July 29, 2020). Accessed online: <https://www.newyorker.com/news/annals-of-activism/the-perils-of-people-of-color>

¹⁸⁶ Anne Cheng. *Ornamentalism* (Oxford University Press, 2019): 2-3.

to cuteness, dubbing the phenomenon “racist cute.” She argues that cuteness, often associated with kawaii-style, appeals to our sense of affection and complicates “the association between caricature and harm.”¹⁸⁷ I view anime girl memes as an extension of the racist kitsch items Bow critiques and in their exclusive use of anime girls and Asian femininity locate them within the process of ornamentalism.

Yet I more readily accept a white reading of the meme, especially due to the inclusion of “PAWG” and call attention to the identification of the speaker in the meme as “an influencer.” Amy states that her memes, and online presence in general, function as an exaggerated presentation of herself. De Kosnik views social media as a site for identity performance that doubles as an information platform.¹⁸⁸ With about 17 thousand followers, Amy sees herself as not “quite an Internet personality” but still an aspiring influencer, making full use of both the conceptualization of social media as a site for performance as well as a platform. Considering her online presence and her admission that some memes are simply text posts plastered over a pastel anime girl, one might readily read this with Amy as the speaker in their mind. In certain ways, she fits the part. Early in our conversation I pointed out her headphones. Pink with cat ears, Amy describes them as “e-girl” headphones and only wears them when she streams or plays video games.¹⁸⁹ Like the memes, Amy did not popularize the headphones but rather has noticed their success in helping others gain online popularity and in turn jumped “on the bandwagon,” as she states. By that description Amy provides a stronger sense of the means she takes to achieve her aspiration. In that case, her choice of character tracks decently well with her message. The character fulfills the cat girl archetype that Amy seems to approximate through the use of her headphones, and has a proportionally large butt. In short it appears the meme humorous in its execution, like most of Amy’s work, functions as both a form of self-expression as well as a somewhat comedic tool for disseminating her thoughts.

¹⁸⁷ Leslie Bow. ““Racist Cute: Caricature, Kawaii-Style, and the Asian Thing.” *American Quarterly* 71, no. 1 (2019): 38.

¹⁸⁸ Abigail De Kosnik. “Is Twitter a Stage?: Theories of Social Media Platforms as Performance Spaces,” in *#identity: Hashtagging Race, Gender, Sexuality, and Nation*, ed. by Abigail De Kosnik & Keith P. Feldman (University of Michigan Press, 2019): 20-35.

¹⁸⁹ “E-girl” refers to girls and women on the Internet with large followings. While streaming themselves playing games and other similar content, they cultivate a particular style. Some draw on the popularity of the cat girl archetype.

A white reading also tracks with Wiggins' assertion that memes can work toward identity formation and maintenance through various processes. He extends Giddens' work on embeddedness and disembeddedness, the placement or lifting of subjects out of original contexts, to the meme.¹⁹⁰ If one views the meme's speaker as a white woman, the included character serves only as ornament, eye candy, a distraction device that aids (or hinders) the meaning of the text, the true intended focus. Amy's claim that her text posts "just look better in impact font over anime titties" backs this up. The character then is irrelevant to the point or perhaps disembedded from the context that her design suggests. Despite her clothing and artistic style, the pairing of her with the PAWG identification plucks her away from any original racial context. It does the work of unmaking in order to remake. Her clothing then comes off not as Asian-coding but instead as a form of appropriation. Everything from her sexualized traditional garb to her cat tail and ears only serve a sexualizing, rather than racializing, function. The question then arises as to why choose an anime girl at all?

These memes, especially the one that opens this section, play on the cute designs of their characters. Many of the anime girls that feature in these memes echo the elements Sianne Ngai associates with cuteness: "the infantile," in their diminutive form and comparatively large eyes, "the feminine," and I add the sexual by way of their designs' emphasis on large butts and breasts as well as the often lacy or sheer clothing, and "the unthreatening"¹⁹¹ by way of their relaxed or calm expressions and the consistent use of pastel color schemes. They directly represent a feminine style that one remotely familiar with their Japanese provenance should immediately associate with Asian-ness. The question remains as to why choose anime girls rather than American cartoon girls as a vehicle for representing one's femininity. I maintain that the status of Asian women as confined to the ornamental as well as the global "rise of Japanese aesthetic since the 1970s known as kawaii-style"¹⁹² portray the thingified Asian, the anime girl, as symbolically representative of the feminine.

¹⁹⁰ Bradley E. Wiggins. *The Discursive Power of Memes in Digital Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2019): 117.

¹⁹¹ Sianne Ngai. *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*. (Boston, MA: First Harvard University Press, 2012): 59

¹⁹² Bow. "Racist Cute," 38.

Ultimately, one cannot view the character in the meme as either completely East Asian or completely white. Instead, reading the meme relies on the recognition that a white woman created it and as a result functions as the speaker. The character represents the speaker, Amy, and her views inasmuch as they remain relevant. Her proportionately large butt accentuates Amy's self-identification as a PAWG. The character's cat ears and tail parallel Amy's cat ear "e-girl" headphones, an accessory she links to successful online influencers. Yet the character's silk clothing, dark hair, and other features that code her as Asian fall by the wayside, cast as superfluous decoration to the white declaration of identity. Cheng notes that "ornament refers to the insignificant, the superfluous, the merely decorative, the shallow, the excessive."¹⁹³ To view the character in the above meme as some type of East Asian set against a caption that could only describe a white speaker means viewing the character as the ultimate expression of the ornamentalized Asian woman. Reduced to a sexual caricature meant to capture sexuality and cuteness in one, the character exists through the process Bow identifies as the "thingification"¹⁹⁴ of Asian people. The anime girl in these memes serves merely as decoration or, in certain instances, emphasis on the overlying text. Aside from, as Bow suggests, their appeal to cuteness, their status as pre-existing characters in many cases or as legibly character-esque¹⁹⁵ helps these characters evade recognition as part of racist memes. Ultimately, these memes make use of established stereotypes and ideas about Asian femininity to establish the creator's sense of feminine identity, both reaffirming those stereotypes and constituting a form of white femininity that echoes them as far as they remain useful.

Insofar as anime girl memes provide a tool for white trans women to express themselves femininely, they function as a vehicle that constructs Asian femininity and white trans femininity simultaneously. A particular co-construction of two ostensibly disparate femininities plays here, wherein a viewer may associate the cute, sexual, and decorative femininity with the person who posts or shares the meme as well as with the artistic stylization used for the sake of that femininity. Amy refers to her online presence, including her use of anime girl memes, as an

¹⁹³ Cheng, *Ornamentalism*, 15.

¹⁹⁴ Bow, "Racist Cute."

¹⁹⁵ Thinking on the "Yes I'm a PAWG" meme, I am personally unfamiliar with the character and cannot find any information about her origin. However, the similarity in her design to more well known characters evokes the impression that she exists in some unfamiliar anime or manga.

exaggerated version of herself, showing the world only cartoonish depictions of herself¹⁹⁶ and what she considers her main traits. That she uses anime girls, inherently linked to Japanese femininity or at the very least the United States' view of Japanese femininity, suggests a certain exaggeratedly feminine value.

Much work exists interrogating David Cronenberg's film *M. Butterfly* (1993), adapted from David Henry Hwang's 1988 play of the same name. The film reveals a considerable deal about Western, particularly American and French, views of Asian-ness and gender. David Eng calls attention to the film's musings on the West as masculine and the East as feminine. For this reason, both internal and external to the film's narrative, the white lead René Gallimard (Jeremy Irons) so readily accepts Song Liling (John Lone) as a woman.¹⁹⁷ Further, Dorinne K. Kondo writes of the play that it makes use of "already written images--the narrative convention of 'submissive Oriental woman and cruel white man'"¹⁹⁸ as assumptions worth challenging in Hwang's play and, I add, subsequent film.

The film itself follows the exploits of French diplomat Gallimard on his assignment in China. Early on in his occupation, he meets opera singer Song Liling, with whom he shares a 20-year passionate yet illicit romance. The film slowly reveals that Song works as an undercover spy for the Chinese Communist Party, and the final act goes even further in revealing that she had been "a man" the entire time. Following the reveal, the two leads share a final intimacy en route to Gallimard's imprisonment, as he shared myriad French government secrets with Song over the course of their relationship. I call attention to this scene for a number of reasons. For one, it features the first and only instance of Song's nudity in front of Gallimard. Whereas such reveals in media often focus on showing the trans woman's, or man in disguise, penis, Cronenberg opts instead not to and shows only Song's butt. Further, though Gallimard sees Song's penis in the scene, a final confirmation of Song's manhood, the audience sees only his butt. This itself corresponds to Nguyen Tan Hoang's articulation that American media often portray Asian

¹⁹⁶ Even Amy's Twitter profile picture has, at the time of writing this, been an anime-style rendering of her that a follower made and gifted her for as long as I have been aware of her online presence.

¹⁹⁷ David Eng, "Introduction: Racial Castration," *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001): 1.

¹⁹⁸ Dorinne K. Kondo, "'M. Butterfly': Orientalism, Gender, and a Critique of Essentialist Identity," *Cultural Critique*, no. 16 (Autumn 1990): 6.

masculinity by way of the anus, thereby establishing a visceral association between Asian masculinity and “lower” or subordinated gendered status.¹⁹⁹ Even in the final moments of their relationship when the film attempts to flip the Orientalist power dynamics, Asian masculinity, as represented by the first instance of Song’s butt instead of his penis, does not evade framing as anything other than an empowered bottomhood. The association of Asian sexuality with the anus, as Nguyen argues, confines Asian masculinity to a subordinate position even when that sexuality takes on an empowered position over white sexuality.

Yet more relevant to this chapter’s argument, at the beginning of their final conversation, Gallimard looks at Song in disgust and remarks, “You’re nothing--you’re nothing like my butterfly.” Song looks at Gallimard and responds, “Are you so sure? Come here, my little one.” Refusing to look at Song, who has maintained an interested and powerful gaze over him, Gallimard mutters, “I’m not your little one.” Song replies, standing, “Ah, my mistake. I am your little one. Correct?”²⁰⁰ and precedes to undress. Gallimard’s nickname for Song, “Butterfly,” taken from his performance as Madama Butterfly in the opera of her namesake, reveals an ornamentalist view of Asian femininity, associating her with a bug known for its beauty and docility. Song challenges this, and in referring to Gallimard as his “little one” employs a rhetoric of cuteness and infantilization indicative of the ongoing power shift. Gallimard’s resistance indicates a frustration with his newfound placement as subordinate. That Song takes on, somewhat sarcastically, the title of Gallimard’s “little one” speaks to the relationship and power dynamic a French man might have expected from his occupation of China. This interaction reveals a Western view of Asian femininity and masculinity alike as necessarily subordinate to whiteness, especially white masculinity. Gallimard’s discomfort when that view distorts represents a larger EuroAmerican view of Asia, an unsettledness when the cute thing becomes powerful. Then, we might take away from the film as a core argument that a white view of East Asia whenever possible reduces East Asian masculinity and femininity to the realm of cuteness.

¹⁹⁹ Nguyen Tan Hoang, *A View from the Bottom: Asian American Masculinity and Sexual Representation*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014): 6.

²⁰⁰ Cronenberg, David, and David Henry Hwang. 1993. *M Butterfly*.

Such a reduction plays on the fungibility of Asian cultures in the white gaze. I viewed *M. Butterfly* using an Amazon Prime membership, which allowed me a look at some other reviews and opinions of the film. One read, “The acting in this movie is subtle and real. One almost forgets that John Lone is a man. The plot draws you in until it hits you with the plot twist at the end. If you love Japanese culture (or at least looking at it), this movie is for you. Just have a few tissues handy at the end!” The commenter’s assertion that John Lone “almost” makes us forget he is a man echoes Eng’s and Kondo’s arguments that the view of Asian-ness as feminine contributes to the ruse. Yet, the commenter also recommends the film to lovers of Japan, or at least lovers of looking at Japan. The movie makes it very clear it takes place in China. When Gallimard first meets Song, he compliments her “utterly convincing” performance, unaware that in Chinese opera men typically play women’s roles. Song retorts by asking Gallimard if he knows of Japan’s imperial treatment of China, taking strong offense at the suggestion that she might pass as Japanese. This internal critique of the Western view of Asia as fungible seems to evade the commenter’s perception. Her remark suggesting the film takes place in Japan quite clearly speaks to a homogenized view of Asia, where Japan and China operate as fungible. Her parenthetical addendum also echoes much of this chapter’s focus on ornamentalism, suggesting one need only appreciate the aesthetic of “Japan” to enjoy the film. It reduces the plot, its commentary on the imperial relationship between EuroAmerica and Asia, to a visual Orientalist spectacle. Asian ornamentalism often means a reduction to cultural fungibility, where China and Japan (and Korea and so on) exist as virtually the same, often represented through the aesthetic of the decorative or the cute.

Their cuteness lends them a use-value as commodities for processes of self-making. Ngai describes cuteness as “an intensification of commodity fetishism”²⁰¹ in that it contains elements of kitsch as well as irresistibility, evoking fantasy in the viewer. That these memes make use of the sexual and cute certainly evoke a degree of fantasy in the viewer, if not in the creator as well. It comes as little surprise that Amy uses them in part to garner a larger following online, quite literally using them as a commodity. Their poses, expressions, and sometimes settings as well as captions that imitate point-of-view dialogue provide enough material that an onlooker can easily picture the scene as suggested and imagine themselves in it. Then the characters in these memes

²⁰¹ Ngai. *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 62.

also represent an objectified femininity, completely nonhuman while at the same time presented as a symbol for both the white trans woman subject and the imaginary feminine Asian subject. Much in the way Cheng uses perihumanity to describe the view of Asian women as so often reduced to the ornamental, I extend this frame to capture the characters in anime girl memes. They exist as mascots, in this case, for trans women to align themselves with exaggerated femininity. Yet, by virtue of their origin as *anime* girls per se, often dressed in legibly traditional East Asian garb, the characters cannot exist as anything other than East Asian. Their existence occupies a double-space as representations of both white trans and East Asian femininity. With this in mind, I turn to how Amy sees herself in relation to the memes and work through some of her perspective. This again returns to appropriative embodiment as a form of co-production. In Amy's online self-presentation, her memes enact both a construction of her own white femininity as well as an unnamed or disembedded East Asian femininity.

Amy attributes her draw toward anime girls and their potential for meme first in the humorousness of the format. Many, if not all, successful memes contain an element of humor, so this comes as little surprise. Yet, she also views her work in making them as a form of reclamation due to their popularity amongst primarily white, anti-trans online communities. To be sure, I do not critique her identifying a bigoted community and salvaging its desirable practices. Rather, I direct attention to her use of the word "reclaim" in this context.²⁰² To reclaim something suggests an original ownership or association with the reclaimed object in the first place. I have to imagine she references anime girl memes that specifically perpetuate transphobia to some degree. Though, she makes no mention of any such memes.²⁰³ She describes herself as having "always watched anime" and having "been part of that culture," by which she means anime culture. I read her reclamation of anime girl memes not as reclamation of a format used against trans women, much in the way someone might reclaim a slur, but instead as an assertion of her connection to anime and whatever she deems "that culture." Her own whiteness also complicates her apparent reclamation, given that she identifies white communities as the group

²⁰² I spend an entire section considering white "reclamations" of East Asian cultural practices in Chapter II: "Choosing Femininity: Area Studies and Gender Presentation as Orientalist Vehicles."

²⁰³ I have no doubt they exist, but with regard to Amy, they did not come up explicitly.

she witnessed using the format coupled with the fact that enjoying anime as a medium does not entitle one to reclaim elements of its cultural output.

Much in the same way that Christine Yano identifies the spread of kawaii-style through pink globalization, Andrew C. McKevitt traces anime's genealogy within the United States:

The impact of anime consumption on local U.S. communities began in 1977 when enthusiasts in Los Angeles established the first anime fan club. Over the next dozen years, these devotees built social communities at the local and national level around this foreign cultural product, reorienting individual and group identities according to a new awareness of transnational and global interconnectedness. until 1989, when entrepreneurs founded the first U.S. anime import company, thus turning the corner toward anime's commercialization, fan communities existed solely because of grass-roots, "do-it-yourself" initiatives. U.S. anime fandom in its first decade was a form of intercultural relations at the level of middle-class, non-elite private citizens. It was also an aspect of the U.S.-Japan relationship mediated almost exclusively through the exchange and consumption of anime texts.

McKevitt identifies early iterations of American anime consumption as representative of international relations comprised almost entirely of exchange of cultural commodities. Yet, the cultural commodity from Japan function both as media representing Japan on a global scale as well as easily palatable (to American audiences especially) depictions of ethnically ambiguous narratives. Numerous scholars of anime have identified the "nonculturally (sic) specific"²⁰⁴ design of many anime characters as a major factor in their global success. Yet while the popularity of anime could in some way be attributed to localizations and American studios' practices of denationalizing the source material, works such as *Akira* (1988) presented more "authentic" Japanese characters and settings, which appealed to American fans of the medium. Though, certain series and movies such as *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1995) portrayed characters legible as either Japanese or white, allowing "these Japanese creations to be simultaneously Western and transnational."²⁰⁵ Until the early 21st Century, only devoted anime fans seemed to enjoy the work when it more "authentically" (read: not denationalized) represented Japan and

²⁰⁴ Andrew C. McKevitt. *Consuming Japan: Popular Culture and the Globalizing of 1980s America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2017); & Susan J. Napier. *Anime from Akira to Howl's Moving Castle: Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation, 2nd Edition* (St. Martin's Griffin, 2005): 24.

²⁰⁵ McKevitt. *Consuming Japan*, 182

their idea of Japanese culture. With that said, though many anime series make use of ethnic ambiguity or lose ethnic specification to international localizing teams, I maintain that anime characters reflect Japan inherently unless otherwise stated. However, I do acknowledge that these ethnically ambiguous characters' inclusion in denationalized narratives may also factor into why memes using their image fly under the radar of detection as racist. Yet, processes such as the creation of visually ambiguous characters such as global super-success *Dragon Ball Z* (1989) and sequel *Dragon Ball Super* (2015)'s Android 17, who has straight black hair and blue eyes, in tandem with localization efforts, which include changing cultural references to those more recognizable to local audiences and even changing main character names,²⁰⁶ constitute another form of co-construction. That is, the two operate in tandem to create an image of Japan, and East Asia more broadly, that appeals to Western audiences in its appeals to Eurocentrism. That certain series or productions made use of Western preferences for light skin and blue eyes does not sever the characters' ties to their national provenance.



Figure 6: Android 17, or c.17, a character from *Dragon Ball Z*.

Further, Mari Yoshihara identifies white middle-class women who engage heavily with anime as “agents of the culture of Orientalism” without ever having to travel to Japan.²⁰⁷ In other words,

²⁰⁶ Two notorious examples come to mind. I think of *Pokémon* (1997) and its altering of the Japanese snack onigiri to “jelly donuts” despite the drastic visual difference. As far as changing character names goes, the titular character of *Sailor Moon* (1992), had her Japanese name, Usagi Tsukino, changed to Serena Tsukino in the English dub.

²⁰⁷ Mari Yoshihara. *Embracing the East: White Women and American Orientalism* (Oxford University Press, 2003): 18.

white American women's consumption of anime drew on the aesthetic of Orientalism and allowed for consumption and engagement with Orientalist frames of thought without the need for access to expensive art or literature. Adding onto that, I view the steady creation and consumption of anime girl memes as an extension of this engagement with Orientalism in its reproduction of Japan and Japanese women and girls as exaggeratedly feminine and cute.

Yet I also make space for the possibility of true relation between white trans women and anime girls. For example, Amy states, "Part of being a trans person is knowing that your body isn't proportionally correct, and I think a lot of it is looking at things that would make anyone dysphoric, even cis people, and then being like, 'No that's me, I'm that now.'" Here, she outright identifies one to one with anime girls, albeit through a bridging of the distance between her "proportionally" incorrect body and the apparently ideal body of the anime girl. She adds, "I can identify with having unrealistic depictions of myself out there, and a lot of it is just aspirational, like, 'What if my titties could be that big one day?'" thus introducing a dual element of both relating to the impossibly proportioned bodies of anime girls and an aspiration to achieve those proportions. In this reading, the anime girl and her impossible proportions aid Amy, and perhaps others, in ameliorating the dysphoria that comes with viewing one's trans body as proportionally incorrect. A coping mechanism, in other words, which allows for a white trans woman to insert herself into the narrative within the meme and imagine herself as the featured character.

Memes as a coping mechanism smoothly applies to a number of the memes Amy shares on her Twitter account. During our conversation, Amy mentioned that, living and growing up in Florida, she no longer feels safe going to the beach as a trans woman. "It's always a drag to ask a trans person to go to the beach," she says, to my agreement. Aside from the fact that "it makes tucking impossible," with our bodies on semi-full display, we run a higher risk than usual of encountering someone who does not have our best wishes in mind. Amy laments the loss of swimming as a hobby, remarking that "growing up, [her] brother would always say [she] was a fish because [she] was always in the water," and that now she never goes swimming anymore. In this sense, she speaks to a concern she feels relates to most trans people and expresses deep longing to be able to return to the beach or go swimming. Toward the end of our conversation, Amy told me I could use any image she posted to Twitter, including her selfies and memes. In

looking through them, I found the meme included here. It features a character in Amy's usual pastel anime style set against an ocean in the background. She holds her hand over her eyes as a visor with what immediately appears as an annoyed expression on her face. The overlaid caption reads: "Ugh you dragged me out to the beach / And you're not even going to raw me?" evidently addressing the viewer. This once again plays on establishing a fantasy potential for viewers. In the first line of the caption we see an immediate parallel to Amy's assertion that "it's always a drag" to get a trans person to the beach, indicating that the character potentially functions as a visual stand-in for Amy herself. The second line insinuates that only having the viewer "raw"²⁰⁸ her would make a beach trip worthwhile.

The use of the anime girl here once again serves as an ornament to Amy's post, accentuating the apparent frustration, lived or imaginary, of being brought to the beach and not having sex. Noticeably, and unlike many other entries, her proportions appear somewhat realistic, aside from her characteristically large eyes, themselves contributing to the view of the character as cute, despite her annoyed expression. That she can appear simultaneously cute and annoyed, itself a diminutive or cuter iteration of anger, echoes Cheng's argument that the angry Asian woman cannot exist. Rather, Asian women's "anger exists on the American public stage in a peripheral, miniaturized, and cutified cartoon version"²⁰⁹ exactly as in Figure 7's depiction. Here, Amy makes use of the anime girl not for the sake of relating to her impossible proportions but instead for her placement on a beach and annoyed expression. The character herself does not matter, whether the artist intended to depict her as annoyed as opposed to squinting in the sunlight does not matter. What matters is Amy's use of her as a decorative object in presenting her own narrative of annoyance with going to the beach and her sex fantasies, evidently.

²⁰⁸ Raw is a sex term that refers to having intercourse without the use of a condom.

²⁰⁹ Cheng, *Ornamentalism*, xi.



Figure 7: The beach meme.

The use of memes as a coping mechanism offer valuable potential for working through problems of identity. Wiggins offers the claim that “the process of appropriating internet memes for the purpose of identity co-construction may ameliorate feelings of low self-esteem and anxiety, perhaps only temporarily, but functionally.”²¹⁰ He uses co-construction to reference personal identity making processes as well as community making ones, which I address in the next section. Though I acknowledge the usefulness of anime girl memes in combating low self-esteem or anxiety over, for instance, going to the beach, I must also apply the framework of

²¹⁰ Wiggins. *Discursive Power*, 121.

appropriative embodiment to these processes. What white trans women find useful for feeling better about our place in the world should not come with the price of further stigmatizing and ornamentalizing Asian femininity. I now turn to a consideration of how these memes function in terms of white trans community building and sociality, drawing on interviews with other trans women participants.

Memes and Community

My fashion is at least in one part inspired by a lot of the, like, (pause) anime trans girl jokes and stuff like that, even though I actually don't watch anime and don't like it... I don't totally get [anime trans girl jokes] quite as much, but when I was considering if I was trans and I did research, the places I stumbled on were one part Tumblr and one part Reddit. All the trans girls on Reddit are obsessed with anime, pretty much. And so there's lots of memes with anime girls and lots of jokes about wearing thigh-highs and cat ears and stuff like that. I saw an explanation of it that makes some amount of sense. It's: When you're questioning it's an easier jump to make, and you're more comfortable with it, to say, 'I like this character,' 'I like this fake anime girl,' than, you know, 'I want to be a woman in real life.' It's a scarier jump.

I open this chapter with a retelling of some of the difficulty in finding participants whose experiences spoke directly to this thesis' central concerns, working through two volunteers before finding analytic potential with Amy. One of those volunteers, Opal, acknowledged anime girl memes as a facet of white trans online communities much in the same way that Amy identifies their popularity within white trans virtual spaces. Unlike the rest of the participants, Opal does not use Twitter but rather Tumblr, where I came into contact with her. She notes that out of Tumblr and Reddit, users on the latter more frequently inundate the platform with anime content, including memes, jokes, and references to thigh-highs and cat ears. I have to wonder what she might make of Twitter. She locates the appeal of anime girl memes in the questioning stage of one's transition, when a potential trans woman works through her identity. If her explanation that anime girl memes serve as a temporary stand-in for accepting/declaring oneself as a woman holds any water, it must come with the acknowledgment that white trans women's online spaces make use of the memes even after coming out. Such a reading is specious in that it may apply to some trans women some of the time but cannot possibly function as a totalizing theory. We might consider Amy's assertion that representation in the characters' impossible proportions as well as the aspirational element of wanting similar bodily features. In her

explanation, relation to anime girl memes depends on the view of trans people as freakish, or as having “incorrect” corporeal proportions. Other participants, Morgan and Alexandria, have alluded to feeling some level of this. Morgan addresses her difficulty in viewing herself as anything other than “this big and hulking, intimidating figure” when buying clothes, as the internalized view of herself as such tends to result in her buying clothing too large for her to wear. Alexandria too alludes to some degree of freakishness in her want to reclaim *yīnyáng rén*, a term capturing the duality between humanity and monstrosity. Though, I cannot rightfully agree that this feeling of freakishness can account for the full use of anime memes by white trans women. Rather, I argue that anime girl memes exist as a vehicle for a wide range of white trans experiences, wherein the users make use of the highly feminized, ornamental caricature originally representing East Asian, typically Japanese, women as a way of presenting associating themselves with that same femininity. The ambiguity of character design, such as through characters’ light skin and eye colors, allows for a deracinating and disembedding of the characters so that the creators or sharers of the meme can see themselves represented.

Perhaps I must make room for affirmative readings of white trans women’s use of anime girl memes. After all, appropriative embodiment speaks to a dual process, and though I position the appropriative element as most in need of critique, the embodiment piece also calls for some consideration. As an example, I return to my interview with Morgan. She describes her relationship with her girlfriend through reference to anime memes and character archetypes-- though, notably, she does not often share anime memes. In thinking through her perspective, I take time and space in these pages to consider the usefulness of anime girl memes as well as how they feed into a construction of both white and East Asian femininity. When I ask Morgan how cuteness appeals to her, she responds:

Let’s see... I guess [dressing cute] makes me feel more submissive kind of, which I like that kind of counter when, for instance my girlfriend if she’s dressing in like jeans and shit—and she’s really tall compared to me, and there’s a kind of tall and short element to that—so if I’m dressing real cute I feel nice cause I’m tagging along with this hot tall girl. That kind of thing. It feels very anime-ish, cute kind of thing. It makes me feel really good about myself.

I introduced Morgan in the first chapter of this thesis, where I devote time to a deeper analysis of narrative in terms of self-making and appropriative embodiment. Here, I consider some of her comments on anime and anime memes in relation to how she sees herself and her girlfriend. Morgan describes cuter iterations of her presentation as relative to her girlfriend's contrasting appearance. Where Morgan dresses in ways that make her feel affirmatively submissive, her girlfriend's style comes off as more nondescript. Against her girlfriend's jeans and height, Morgan emphasizes her own diminutive stature. At the same time, Morgan establishes a contrast between cool and cute, where she embodies cuteness and her girlfriend cool, or as she says, "hot." Other than the establishment of dichotomy through contrast, what stands out in the above excerpt is her description of herself and her girlfriend as "anime-ish." It demands some attention to work through what that means exactly.

To be sure, anime and manga comprise a great deal of East Asian cultural consumption in the United States. Further, a survey of LGBTQ manga readers in the United States found that 87.2% of women within that study enjoyed reading yuri, or girl love, manga. (Also of note, 56.4% of LGBTQ women enjoyed reading yaoi, or boy love, manga.)²¹¹ Readers cited a variety of reasons for enjoying yuri, including romance, lack of gender expectations, and the absence of other options.²¹² As Morgan identifies herself as an enjoyer of both anime and manga, it comes as little surprise that she would relay the image of her girlfriend and herself through an "anime-ish" lens. When I asked her if she could think of any characters in particular, she faltered and alluded instead to yuri memes. On Twitter, she says, she encounters a lot of memes "where there's usually a girl who's cool and she's usually more masculine, like there's usually in *shoujou* anime usually that one strong, mysterious girl who they make look a little more boyish or something." One might assume she intends to align her view of her girlfriend with the boyish, mysterious girl character type. She adds that her relationship gives her the feeling as if she exists within one of "those images where there's like one girl and then there's another girl and she kind of has her pushed against the wall and stuff." I have included Figure 8, which Amy made, to illustrate the type Morgan describes. Though I could expound some on the meme itself and its disembedding

²¹¹ Robin E. Brenner & Snow Wildsmith. "Love Through a Different Lens: Japanese Homoerotic Manga Through the Eye of American Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Other Sexualities Readers" in *Mangatopia: Essays on Manga and Anime in the Modern World*, ed. by Timothy Perper & Martha Cornog (2011): 102.

²¹² Brenner & Wildsmith. "Love Through," 108.

of highly recognizable anime leads from their original narrative or even character profiles, I instead devote this space to a consideration of what it means for lesbian trans women to use yuri anime memes as their foremost reference of representation.



Figure 8: The Neon Genesis Evangelion meme.

Morgan locates herself in the archetype of the shy girl in contrast to her cool girlfriend, who she sees in the boyish, lesbian-coded girl archetype in anime and manga (and memes). Considering McKevitt's suggestion that American LGBTQ women consume yuri due to the lack of representation in other media, I argue that space exists for an affirmative view of white trans women, specifically lesbians in this instance, locating themselves in the yuri genre. The value of trans women finding any sort of representation, even if through denationalized characters disembedded from their original narratives into memetic images, cannot be understated. If truly no other options exist for trans lesbians to identify ourselves in various media, then perhaps the allure of impossibly proportioned cartoon characters makes a fair amount of sense. Trans representation in American media seems to oscillate between men with 5 o'clock shadows

wearing dresses and pearls to the casting of actual trans actresses who look more like their cis costars than the trans women you might meet at a club. Julia Serano identifies trans women's representation as constituting either "pathetic" or "deceptive."²¹³ The pathetic trans woman archetype refers to someone who so pitifully fails at passing that no one sees her as a woman, despite insisting she is one "trapped inside a male's body."²¹⁴ The deceptive trans woman, on the other hand, draws on the view of us as passing for the sake of tricking men into sex or gaining perverted access to private women's spaces. "Trap" memes play on this archetype, stemming from the slur "trap," which suggest that trans women are merely feminine men who seek to trap other men (or women) into sex. (Some of Amy's memes contribute to the trap genre, such as Figure 9, more strongly fitting her description of meme-making as a reclamation than other entries.) Yet, the use of trap memes in general contributes to the harmful, dichotomous archetypes about us.²¹⁵

Academia does not help. Scarce work exists on trans women as sexual agents, much less as lesbians. Too often, it feels as though the men who love us (and lust for us) provoke more interest than the romantic and sexual perspectives of trans women ourselves.²¹⁶ Maybe the cultural zeitgeist adapted too quickly to the idea of asexual trans women²¹⁷ as a supposed reality over stigmatizing portrayals of us as sexual predators. The importance of representation for trans women as sexual subjects rather than objects perseveres. Morgan finds that representation in yuri, raising questions about the appeal of East Asian feminine productions per se, but at the same time indicating a certain resilience in carving that representation out for herself.

²¹³ Julia Serano. *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*, 2nd Edition (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2007, 2016): 36.

²¹⁴ Serano. *Whipping Girl*, 38

²¹⁵ The 2019 documentary *Disclosure* (dir. Sam Feder) wonderfully details various forms of trans representation throughout American media, bringing this conversation more directly into the cultural zeitgeist.

²¹⁶ I refer here to the infamous inclusion of Geoffrey H. Nicholson. "On Being a Transamorous Man," *TSQ* 7, no. 2 (2020): 268-271.

²¹⁷ Stone, Sandy. "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto." *Camera Obscura* 10 (1992): 160.



Figure 9: The trap meme.

Working against the pigeonholing of trans women as either pathetic or deceptive amounts to no small task. Taking Morgan as an example, I also acknowledge how pornographic depictions both aid and hinder the work of transgender sexual agency and self-making. Morgan, in brief reference to her profession, says, “For work and stuff, I usually get kind of typecast based on [her] appearance. I accept the work, but I don’t usually like the storylines they come up with.” She speaks here not only to her typecasting due to her diminutive yet “proper” appearance but also to her status as a trans woman in porn. Evading rehashing details of her typecasting, she tells me, “You can use your imagination about what kind of stuff they figure out for me.” The “they” enacting their will on Morgan refers to her producers and agents, against whom she contrasts her independent work through OnlyFans. I bring up Morgan’s experience in the field because porn represents one category where trans women exist outside the pathetic/deceptive dichotomy. Rather than as hopeless or sneaky perverts, porn--particularly, the kind produced by the “they” in Morgan’s statement--typically depicts trans women as commodified fetish objects.

The view of trans women as sexual fetish applies not only to white trans women. Aren Aizura draws from film depicting trans women to argue that trans women of color most especially face reduction to abstraction, whereby their value exists on a global economic scale only within the realm of sex work.²¹⁸ That Aizura draws mostly from Southeast Asian trans women strikes as no coincidence, given that Filipina and Thai trans women often serve as the face of sex tourism.²¹⁹ The work of locating oneself as a trans woman in an affirmative portrayal through such outlets as memes functions against the view of trans women as either pathetic/deceptive sex pests or fetishized porn categories. Memes such as any included in this chapter portray the speaker as, in some way, in control of her sexuality without falling into the pathetic/deceptive dichotomy and barely evade categorization as pornographic in that they do not rely on objectification or fetishization of trans women outright. Perhaps one exception exists in the final meme included, yet I more readily view it as a conversation between two women in which the speaker reassures the reader that she need not worry about her genitalia. In such a reading, this subverts the portrayal of trans women as deceptive. The meme positions the reader in such a way that they (or, to the target audience, she) feels nervous that her passing might have deceived their prospective sex partner, evidently another woman--cis or trans. The negation or outright subversion of harmful trans categorizations comes as much needed and, in certain ways, as groundbreaking. Recognizing trans women as non-stigmatized sexual agents, and as lesbians no less, reconfigures how society sees us and, potentially, how we see ourselves.

That too often these memes make use of East Asian or generalizable Asian feminine aesthetics and reinforces harmful stereotypes about Asian femininity comes as a shame, to be quite blunt. White trans women's use of these memes as ornaments in establishing their own visible sexual agency perpetuates harmful stereotypes about Asian femininity. Certainly, as I reiterate throughout this thesis, no degree of appropriation by white trans (lesbian) women should fly under the radar simply due to their own marginal identities. Such a view would constitute a single-oppression model against which scholars such as Cathy Cohen and Jin Haritaworn

²¹⁸ Aren Aizura. "Trans feminine value, racialized others and the limits of necropolitics" in *Queer Lovers and Hateful Others: Regenerating Violent Times and Places* (London, ENG: Pluto Press, 2015): 131.

²¹⁹ "Smash Sex Tourism!" *Off Our Backs* 27, no. 3 (1997): 9.

warn.²²⁰ Though a shame that anime girl memes feed into white trans women's appropriative embodiment of East Asian aesthetics especially in crafting a feminine persona online, they reveal the possibility for community building.

Conclusion

Amy's use of memes as a tool for navigating self-doubt and frustrations that come with her transness suggests that trans women can navigate those experiences and open us to possible methods that do not perpetuate the ornamentalizing of Asian femininity. Likewise, Opal's view of memes as a common language of trans Reddit users as well as Morgan's ability to see her trans lesbian relationship in anime memes speaks to an ever-growing online trans community. Perhaps I write too optimistically in suggesting that one day that community may open itself to non-white trans women's experiences too and not rely on anime memes as a conduit. The memes, both exploiting East Asian femininity and often excluding darker skinned trans people all too often serve the needs of white trans community. Yet, if white trans women can acknowledge these issues and the way we too frequently make use of East Asian aesthetic in our self-making and community building processes--and I believe we can--then ideally the existence of those processes alludes to a queer futurity that enables the best of our communities.

²²⁰Cathy Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" *GLQ* 3 (1997): 437-465; Jin Haritaworn, "Love," in *Queer Lovers and Hateful Others: Regenerating Violent Times and Places* (London, ENG: Pluto Press, 2015): 84-124.

CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

This project understands the personal as expressive iterations of imperial histories. I begin with my own experiences as a white trans woman who engages in what I call appropriative embodiment of East Asian aesthetic and move through three distinct interviews with other trans women. In starting with myself I allow this thesis to work as something of an interpellative project, one that hails me into this work. I also view Asian racialization in the United States as interlocked with anti-Blackness and racialized labor exploitation. Typically, the white American understanding of race simplistically operates as a Black/white dichotomy. Though work exists to counter that notion, we should also recognize how the construction of Blackness and the construction of Asian-ness ultimately interact and function in tandem within a white supremacist global framework. The use of Chinese indentured servitude interlocked with chattel slavery as forms of labor fungibility, in which non-white races exist in the imperial order as a workforce reserve, suturing Black racialization and Asian racialization. This thesis centers white trans women's self-making as iterative structures of Asian racial construction. I draw from Anne Cheng's use of fungibility, in conversation with Hortense Spillers, in order to bridge these seemingly disparate modes of racialization. The alignment of Asian female personhood with the ornamental operates alongside the construction of Blackness as mere flesh in order to create personhood as whiteness.

Each chapter centers one participant, each of whom also demonstrates appropriative embodiment in some fashion. The first, Morgan, routes her sense of cuteness through references to both submissiveness and Asian-ness. Her use of rhetoric about Asian style in its relation to her own fashion opens a dialogue about the United States' historic and imperial impositions of femininity onto Japan, in particular. On the first hand, cuteness as an aesthetic lends itself to social navigations that ameliorate public stress and anxiety associated with trans womanhood. Through presenting herself as cute, Morgan reduces others' perception of her as threatening, granting greater mobility and "watering down" behaviors such as her swearing. On the other, her framing of cuteness as aligned with submissiveness and East Asia, especially Japan, echoes particular stereotypes of Asian femininity that draw from Orientalist logics. Though her sense of fashion rarely speaks to a visual appropriation, Morgan's description of her clothing indicates some level

of success in the United States' imperial effort to lead Japan through a gendered racial rehabilitation following World War II. The iterative element of appropriation speaks directly to attitudes about the cultures one implicates in her self-making.

The second, Alexandria, finds herself a scholar of Chinese women's liberation movements, which calls into question the role of white American academics in area studies. Her description of her style makes use of the view of identity terms femme and butch as merely aesthetic descriptors existing along a spectrum, with androgyny occupying space in the center. In distancing herself from butch presentation, though acknowledging she has "butch days," opens a dialogue about the use of these terms. Historically lesbian specific, yet more commonly used amongst non-heterosexual women in recent years, femme and butch describe particular modes of relationality, behavior and social roles within lesbian communities. Her use of these terms then balances her own identity as a pansexual trans woman with her development of a consistent gender presentation. Her understanding of herself as femme, a situated queer femininity, informs my analysis. I view the tension between femme/butch as lesbian identity labels and as aesthetic descriptors synonymous with feminine and masculine as a potential avenue for inquiry in further research involving a wider variety of participants not limited to white trans women.

Further, Alexandria's academic history includes studying abroad in both China and Taiwan, where she learned the phrase *yīnyáng rén*, a general Chinese slur for LGBT+ people. Alexandria aims to reclaim the slur by way of wearing a rainbow yin-yang patch on her jean jacket. I question her place to do so, working through the global functioning of whiteness and the imperial encounter. We keep in mind how her whiteness allows her to study Chinese politics, itself an act that demonstrates an inherent power gap between the studier and the studied. In many cases, Western feminist work on Chinese women's movements functions as anti-Chinese propaganda, even coming from enthusiastic consumers of Chinese cultural products. Additionally, Alexandria's want to reclaim the anti-LGBT slur raises numerous questions about her alignment with China. She readily acknowledges her whiteness as problematizing her relationship with China yet sees herself connected by way of her studies. The question of whiteness as global mobility ends the chapter.

The third chapter centers Amy primarily, who makes anime girl memes as a hobby. These memes reflect a form of thingification of Asian women and reify the power of ornamentalism in the white construction of Asian femininity. Her use of memes as decorations or supplements for her Twitter posts makes use of Asian femininity's confinement to the ornamental. That she draws on fictional, cartoon characters specifically does not exempt her from this line of criticism, but instead it demonstrates what Leslie Bow calls the "thingification" of Asian people. Asian femininity, through anime girl memes, exists as a character whose only purpose is to invite fantasy and make a white trans woman's thoughts and jokes more visually appealing. The chapter concludes with a return to Morgan, as I offer an affirmative reading of white trans women locating themselves within the *yuri*, or girl's love, visual genre. In thinking through Morgan's assertion of sexual agency by way of anime memes, I acknowledge a severe shortage of both mainstream recognition of as well as academic attention to trans women as sexual subjects outside of stigma or fetish. Specifically, scarce work exists exploring trans women as lesbians. The importance of media that allows trans women, especially trans lesbians, to locate themselves can never go understated. Yet, the allure of Japanese cartoon femininity rather than American cartoon femininity, as an example, cannot fully be explained within the scope of this thesis. In a future project, I see vast potential for exploring trans lesbian representation and, in light of an expected shortage, the ways trans women make use of non-representative media and to what ends.

In writing this thesis, I set out to determine the ways in which white trans women engage in appropriative embodiment of East Asian aesthetics as forms of feminine self-making and how those modes of self-making draw from and replicate logics of Orientalism as well as Asian sexualization and racialization. This thesis works as an attempt at answering questions about how and for what reason white trans women make use of East Asian femininity, as well as how they understand its appeal. The particular historical processes behind Asian femininity's allure to white American trans women also directs my analyses. The question of appropriative embodiment as an individualized act within a larger imperial framework opens up the possibility for far greater intellectual pursuits. To be sure, this thesis touches on only a small portion of the United States' imperial relationship with Asia. The question of the imperial and the extent of its reach on American and Asian daily lives informs this thesis and remains an important question

for further research. For example, I begin this thesis with my own account of living in Korea as a closeted white trans woman. Yet, no participants made much reference to Korea except in grouping it with other nations in homogenized references to East Asia. One possible avenue for further work rests in the United States' past and present occupations of Korea, as well as its military involvement in the Korean War. The relationship between the United States and East Asia, or South Asia and Southeast Asia, informs a tremendous deal of American Orientalism. To be sure, similar projects may someday interrogate the relationship between white trans women's self-making and Korea, Vietnam, the Philippines, India, or myriad other locations. Perhaps my future work can draw from such a potential.

In recognizing the specific attention to China and Japan, I raise the question as to what exactly about Chinese or Japanese femininity speaks to white trans women rather than femininity associated with other Asian countries. Further, how do we balance the prioritizing of China and Japan, and I argue Korea even if not within this thesis, as particular cultural sites with the view of East Asia as fungible and homogenized? What other imperial processes figure into white women's creation of a feminine self? How do white trans women's modes of appropriative embodiment change when the appropriated becomes Black or Latina femininities? How might one launch into larger scale projects interrogating white trans women as they engage in appropriative embodiment without seemingly targeting trans womanhood outright or reproducing anti-trans sentiment? Is it possible for white women to embody femininity in a way that does not somehow reproduce racialization or imperial histories? And how? In what ways can this study or its processes apply to white cis women?

As I state above, this project opens me up to numerous research avenues. I envision myself first and foremost adapting pieces of this thesis and its chapters into potential journal publications. Additionally, I feel as though interviews with East Asian American trans women would have benefited this project. Questions of Asian femininity and its existence in the white gaze guide my research in multiple ways. A larger project with an expanded participant group would work beautifully in exploring the full extent of appropriative embodiment's ramifications on the daily lives of Asian American trans people. Though, I feel my own transness factored as a major reason for my participants' trusting me. If I were to do work with Asian American trans women,

I imagine I would want to co-produce the study with an Asian American trans woman. I value the comfort of participants and would never want to reproduce any sort of voyeuristic or rhetorical oppression in an interview or any following stage of the research process.

Likewise, I use this thesis to push forward the concept I call appropriative embodiment. I imagine an academic life outside of this thesis for that term, even if only I make use of it. Herein, I conceptualize the term as necessarily relating to gendered embodiment, as I cannot envision an instance of appropriative embodiment wherein gender becomes irrelevant. Though, perhaps someone will someday identify an ungendered phenomenon where the lens of fits. Appropriative embodiment as a term captures the nuances of marginalized people making use of their privileged identities and can thus only exist within an intersectional feminist paradigm. White trans women do not hold sole ownership of this sort of act, and I intend to apply this lens to other groups in the future.

Beyond that and perhaps working with appropriative embodiment, I intend to look deeper into lesbian modes of self-making, centering but not necessarily confining myself to femme/butch relationships and aesthetics. I imagine making use of cis and trans lesbians and not confining potential participants to whiteness, depending on the project. My interview with Morgan especially reaffirmed my own interest in pursuing such a line of research; much of her statements on her identity as a lesbian only made it as far as my transcription of our conversation. Yet the existence of trans women as lesbian sexual subjects deserves academic attention and I feel, as a trans lesbian, hailed into that line of inquiry.

I end this thesis much in the same way I end Chapter Three. That is: I end here affirmatively. Tremendous potential exists for trans self-making. Appropriative embodiment represents only one expressive model, one that white trans women do not need in our processes of becoming. A possibility exists for us to live and devise a femininity that does not reproduce stereotypes or harmful constructions of Asian femininity. I envision a future when not only can trans women embody femininity freely, but also when white trans women's embodiment does not double as a construction and limiting of our Asian siblings.

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