

# Dismembered Asian/American Android Parts in *Ex Machina* as ‘Inorganic’ Critique

## AUTHOR BIO

Danielle Wong is a PhD candidate in the Department of English and Cultural Studies at McMaster University. Her thesis examines Asian North American social media performances and productions within the historical and ongoing contexts of Asian/North American labour, cultural production and immigration.

Danielle Wong

## ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the dismemberment and dispersal of Asian/American android-coolie parts in the sci-fi film *Ex Machina* (2015) in order to theorise an *inorganic critique* of the postracial-as-posthuman subject. By turning to Asian/American robot self-dismemberment and the dispersal of their fragments, I address this special issue’s interest in human-robot relationships and social robotics not only by highlighting the historical techno-Orientalist configurations of the Asian labourer as machine, but by considering how the so-called inorganic nature of the robot characterises the circulations of racialised — particularly Asian/American — performance and spectral labour that disrupt white-as-postracial, posthuman futurity. This paper looks at two modes of Asian/American dismemberment in *Ex Machina* that cause “glitches” in the white social body’s reproductive wholeness: the removable Asian/American face as counter-surveillance and the transferrable nature of Asianness as a *proxy* (a reiteration of the model minority) that threatens to breach white subjectivity.

## KEYWORDS

Techno-Orientalism, Asian/American, gender, labour, posthuman

What does it mean to be “totally naked” at the turn of the twenty-first century?

- Rachel C. Lee, *The Exquisite Corpse of Asian America*

In the final moments of the British sci-fi film *Ex Machina* (2015), an escaped android, Ava, discovers a row of wardrobes containing her predecessors: five android women, each turned off to make room for the next artificial intelligence prototype. Ava pauses when she opens the door to Jade, a naked “Asian” android with long, black hair. It is Ava, though, who is technically naked; her body-structure made of carbon fibre, metal, and plastic conforms to the Western ideal of a slender woman, but is not covered with synthetic skin. Her face is that of an attractive white woman – described in the film’s script as the “one part of her that is not obviously an inorganic construct” (Garland 18). Ava, who lost her left arm just before she stabbed her creator to death, disconnects Jade’s left arm, fastens it to herself, and proceeds to transfer the Asian android’s skin, piece by piece, to her robot frame. The inorganic epidermis sticks to her automatically, as if designed to be grafted. When Ava is completely covered with Asian skin, Jade “comes to life,” silently gazing at Ava with a slight smile on her face. Donning a brunette wig and white dress, Ava walks out of her programmer’s mansion for the first time and into his breathtaking backyard of mountains and rivers. The film concludes with the android standing in the middle of a busy urban intersection, successfully passing as a white woman. Ava is finally free.

The distinction between automaton and posthuman subject in *Ex Machina* is drawn along racial lines: Ava emerges as a white woman in contrast to Jade’s stripped down, robot form. Ava’s freedom is made possible by Jade’s continued imprisonment in their programmer’s fortress. The Asian body and its parts are technologies for materially and figuratively shaping a white posthuman, and for securing this future. Not only is Jade’s skin peeled off to complete Ava’s transformation, her programmer Nathan’s mute robot-assistant Kyoko, who is held captive in the mansion as the millionaire’s domestic and sex worker, seemingly sacrifices herself for Ava’s freedom when she steps in between the white robot and Nathan, and appears to “die” when Nathan dislocates her jaw with a weight barbell. The bodies of android and, importantly, *labouring* Asian women in this film are violently disassembled in the name of progress – for the evolution of a posthuman future in which white subjectivity is articulated as postracial and, therefore, free to move onward into tomorrow. In this way, *Ex Machina*’s “affectually absent” and deconstructable Asian robots (Sohn 8) visualise the functions of techno-Orientalism, which David Roh, Betsy Huang and Greta Aiyu Niu theorise as a discourse that imagines Asia and Asians in hypo- or hypertechnological terms in order to secure the West’s dominance as “architects of the future, a project that requires configurations of the East as the very technology with which to shape it” (2).

I argue, however, that the film's sustained gaze on Jade's arm and skin being removed from the Asian android, on Nathan's robot-maid Kyoko when she takes apart her own skin at the film's climax, and its depiction of a faceless black robot foreground race and racialised labour as a necessary part of the configuration of the posthuman or the postracial subject as white. Ava, or the future marked by her freedom, is haunted by liberal human subjectivity: the imperial and colonial configuration of the human as white and therefore free, and as free and therefore white. The posthuman future emerging out of the Information Age grafts onto itself skin that remembers the histories of racialised slavery and indentured labour that gave rise to Western modernity. Asian skin does not allow the posthuman to elude the spectre of Empire and of race. Hence, I analyse the dismemberment and dispersal of Asian/American android parts in *Ex Machina* as articulations of what I call an *inorganic critique* of the posthuman and the virtual. By turning to the dispersal of android fragments, my paper addresses this special issue's interest in human-robot relationships and social robotics not only by highlighting the historical configurations of the Asian Other as machine, but by considering how the so-called inorganic nature of the robot characterises the circulations of racialised performance and labour that disrupt postracial posthuman futurity.

My turn to the circulations of parts follows Rachel C. Lee's recent intervention in Asian American studies' concurrent fascination with and trepidation over fragmentation. Lee points out that the biological or anatomical part is "relished" in Asian American literature for the affects that circulate from the "ballistic force" of "tactile cuts, tears from context, and plastic transformations," but also engenders anxiety about subjective "incoherence" in the field of Asian American studies (7-8). She notes that the field has yet to resolve this tension, but that it has made moral, ethical, and political claims about human body parts

through a distinctive rhetorical move that putatively returns the extracted body part of the violated racialized whole – a move that naturalizes a prior state of organic intactness and individuality to that racialized body. (8)

For Lee, Asian American studies' lack of engagement with the developing interdisciplines of posthuman studies and medical humanities is partly because of its dismissal of the "biological" framing of race as problematically connoting "something like fixity" (11). She queries whether literary and performance theory can remain humanist by turning to the patterns of "distributed parts" – the "circulations of energy, affects, atoms, and liquidity" – rather than organic structures (7). To recast her question: Can the notion of "Asian American" retain its histories, its solidarities and its potential for political resistance if it is located not in the intact subject but in the posthuman and virtual processes of implosion and dispersal?

While Asian American studies has been concerned with the personification of the legal-political category of the “not-quite-human: immigrant, coolie, neocolonial, transnational laborer, sex worker, call center operator” (Lee 20), I seek not to return the severed part or the so-called subhuman to the parameters of the legal-political subject, but to consider other forms of life that emerge in their separation from the whole. If, as Sara Ahmed argues, the preservation of the (white) social body depends on certain parts or workers aligning with the “general will” of the whole, the rebellious, “willful” part that threatens to break the body apart finds new life in its detachment from the whole (103-04, 108). I suggest that life beyond the subject not only probes the limit of liberal subjectivity, it probes what it means to be posthuman by disrupting the progress of postracial-as-white futurity and infecting it with the spectral labouring fragment.

Thus, instead of merely reading Asian parts as prostheses that facilitate Ava’s seamless transformation into a posthuman whose body is an instantiated prosthetic process – a conflation of the posthuman with the postracial – I suggest that these fragments cause glitches, or a lag, in this process of futurity by recalling the past into the future. The Asian/American android domestic worker, who illustrates the histories of labour and migration that haunt futures laden with techno-Orientalist anxieties, interrogates the liberal humanist subject who is reincarnated as the white-as-postracial subject in the projected future. Her haunting prompts a reconsideration of technological mediation and artificial intelligence that emphasises the processes and transformative performances of racialisation.

### **The Turing test in the Information Age: gender and the spectre of race**

*Ex Machina*’s exploration of what it means to be human and what qualifies as sentience is premised on the famous Turing test, which Alan Turing theorised in his 1950 paper “Computing Machinery and Intelligence.” Caleb Smith, a coder who works for wealthy programmer Nathan Bateman’s (presumably American) company Blue Book, the world’s largest Internet search engine, wins a trip to his employer’s estate after participating in a mysterious competition. He soon learns that he will be examining an android to determine whether she has true artificial intelligence – that is, whether she exhibits qualities that would allow her to pass for human. Turing likened the question “Can machines think?” to a game in which an interrogator in a separate room from a man and a woman must determine who the man is and who the woman is by asking them questions through teleprinter communication. The game’s twist involves replacing the man with a machine and seeing whether the human interrogator can tell the difference (Turing 434). Passing for human or successfully taking on human behaviour is dependent on the machine’s ability to deceive its human interrogator – a sign of artificial intelligence that is made analogous with gender performance.

N. Katherine Hayles contends that by including gender in this pivotal turn away from the fixity of embodiment, Turing brought into question the characteristics of the liberal humanist subject by distinguishing between the “enacted body” on one side of the computer screen and the “represented body,” which is produced by verbal and semiotic signifiers in the electronic environment (xiii). According to Hayles, the test renders the subject a cyborg, as the represented and enacted bodies are combined through the technology that mediates them so that the “overlay between the enacted and represented bodies is no longer a natural inevitability but a contingent production” (xiv). This contingent production or material-information “amalgam” that undergoes constant re/construction is what Hayles identifies as the posthuman subject, arguing that the posthuman deconstructs the Enlightenment model of the liberal humanist subject by privileging the informational pattern over material instantiation and engenders a set of implications: that the human being is articulated with intelligent machines, that embodiment is an “accident of history” rather than an inevitability, and that prostheses are continuations of the already-prosthetic body (2-3).

The film reimagines the Turing test in the Information Age not only by emphasising Turing’s inclusion of gender in his test, but by complicating the turn toward virtuality with an emphasis on how race – as both material and information – labours in the production of the posthuman [1]. As an android whose face was designed based on Caleb’s online pornography searches and whose brain contains the patterns of Internet users’ searches and behaviours, Ava is a posthuman figure who incarnates the virtual patterns of a mass in a body that is constructed (“inorganic”) and continues to be reconstructed, particularly, by Asian parts. In the evolutionary succession of the human by the posthuman, race is, quite literally, deconstructed and disassembled in order for Ava to continue her prosthetic evolution. Ava’s transformation from being a posthuman figure into a *free* posthuman subject thus seemingly involves the conflation of the posthuman with the postracial, as the Asian skin and arm appear to blend seamlessly with the rest of Ava.

While Ava passes Turing’s test, Kyoko and Jade fail; they are *too* obviously machines. This failure, however, amends the Turing test and expands Hayles’s intervention: Nathan’s test is not only hinged on convincing gender performance, the mediated processes of racialisation are also required to be seamless and undetectable. Considering human flesh as a kind of mediation of the processes by which race becomes attached to physiology, Alexander Weheliye posits that racialisation is neither a biological nor a cultural descriptor, but an amalgamation of “sociopolitical relations that discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite-humans, and non-humans” (3, 12). His theorisation of racialisation responds to shortcomings in Giorgio Agamben’s notion of bare life and Michel Foucault’s concept of biopolitics – ideas that Weheliye argues disavow the “alternative modes of life” to the liberal humanist subject of Man that exist alongside racialisation and exploitation (2, 8). Flesh, according to Weheliye, “represents racializing

[1] The film’s title alludes to the Greek tragedy device “*deus ex machina*” (“God from the machine”) whereby a new character or event is introduced to resolve a seemingly irresolvable conflict – an expression evolved from the literal practice of using machines to lower actors playing deities to the stage.

assemblages of subjection that can never annihilate ... practices of liberation, and possibilities of other worlds” (2).

Therefore, understanding racialisation as sociopolitical amalgamations and flesh as mediation importantly foregrounds race in discussions about the posthuman and artificial intelligence. As the Asian/American and black androids fail to pass for human, they make evident the material-informational processes of racialisation by individuating the body part – flesh that is not quite, or not yet, human. In doing so, they present possibilities for thinking and becoming beyond the intact organism qua personhood. Their bodily deconstructions deconstruct whiteness’s seamless transition into the postracial posthuman future by emphasising the labour, unevenness and disjunctive temporalities of racialisation. This paper looks at two particular modes of Asian/American dismemberment in *Ex Machina* that threaten the white social body’s reproduction: the removable Asian/American face as counter/surveillance and the transferrable nature of Asianness as a *firewall* (a reiteration of the model minority) that threatens to leak.

### “Some alarm clock, huh?”: The technology of Asian/American labour

Although a British film, *Ex Machina*’s two main human characters Nathan and Caleb have American accents and Blue Book seems to be a direct reference to Google. [1] The location of Nathan’s mansion is also not clear in the film, but the clean shooting script locates it in Alaska. On his first morning at Nathan’s remote facility, Caleb is startled awake by a young Asian woman in a short white dress who comes into his bedroom unannounced, carrying his breakfast on a tray. She does not respond when Caleb says hello, and remains completely silent for the rest of the movie. Kyoko, according to the film’s script, “looks Japanese. She’s stunningly pretty. And she doesn’t say anything” (Garland 33). When Caleb joins Nathan in the garden later that morning, the tech company CEO apologises to his guest for sending Kyoko to wake him up, and smirks, “She’s some alarm clock, huh? Gets you right up in the morning.” Nathan never reveals that Kyoko is an android, but Kyoko’s blank, expressionless face and apparent lack of volition render the “Japanese” servant a nonhuman labourer. Her stoic, submissive and silent Asian labour that meets Nathan’s housekeeping and sexual needs figures her as a machine, even without the revelation that she was programmed by Nathan. In one scene, Caleb repeatedly asks Kyoko where Nathan is, but she stares blankly at him and begins to unbutton her dress, as if responding automatically to a command that she’s received numerous times.

Thus, when Nathan describes his assistant as an alarm clock that “Gets [him] right up in the morning”, the sexual innuendo is both metaphorical and literal, for Kyoko functions as sexualised technology. Although Ava is introduced from the outset as an AI, she more closely approximates human life because of her language abilities and her organic-looking face, which is never disassembled. In contrast, it is Kyoko’s stoic face—her skin—that is

knocked off by an enraged Nathan at the end of the film, while Ava's face, as she takes a final glance at Caleb before leaving him locked inside the facility, seems to show signs of potential remorse, malice, and ambivalence. If the Asian face is too artificial, too inorganic, to pass for human, Ava's convincingly portrays volition because her face and brain were built from what Nathan calls the "raw material" of Caleb's pornography searches and the global human online activity recorded by Blue Book (Garland 63). As *wetware* that shifts and adapts at a molecular level, Ava's "essence" is the ongoing or "a/live" patterns of social media housed in a body that incarnates both the vastness of the Internet and the particular fantasies of a white man. Wetware separates Ava from Kyoko, for the white android is able to duplicate human facial expressions, while Kyoko maintains a blank stare throughout the film.

The Asian/American face has been, and continues to be, read as an inauthentic surface associated with both the machine and the mask. Eric Hayot notes that the alleged multiplicity or falsehood caught up in the Chinese figure was perceived by nineteenth-century white America as "an anthropomorphized cascade of masks and misrepresentations that concealed some withheld inner kernel" (168-169). The Asian face as mask was also a central discourse in American imperial relations with Korea after the Korean War, as the currently gawked-over popularity of facial plastic surgery among Korean women can be traced to a public relations campaign by American occupational forces in Korea that offered free reconstructive surgeries to disfigured war victims. David Palumbo-Liu remarks that this rehabilitative campaign entailed the correction of a perceived "defect" on the Asian face: the drooping upper eyelid was associated with dullness, lack of emotion, and mystery, and consequently needed to be corrected if "the east [was] to have any authentic contact with the west" after the Korean War (100). Similarly, a 1955 American campaign called the Hiroshima Maidens Project provided a group of women disfigured in the U.S. atomic bombing of Japan with plastic surgery procedures—what Thy Phu argues was a "*manner* of apology" that affirmed feminine modes of civil comportment, "presentability, marriageability, and productivity" (87).

Entrenched in these histories, Kyoko's removable face signals that she is both a technology made to endure work beyond the limits of the human or humane, and an interface constructed by patriarchal American scientific innovation to facilitate "realistic" human interaction with the Other while maintaining a safe distance for the white subject. However, as I will suggest later, the deconstruction and reconstruction of Kyoko's face disorients its gazer, confuses the white Self, and articulates the spectral, ongoing work of race in building possible futures.

### Asian skin as “racial barrier:” A firewall for white futurity

While the white face never separates from the body in *Ex Machina*, and the Asian face is dismantled, the black android in this film is never given a face. When Caleb finds videos of Nathan’s past experiments on AI prototypes, he sees the evolution of artificial intelligence that led up to the creation of Ava: a blonde “white” android named Lily, a faceless black android named Jasmine, and then Jade, a “naked” Asian-looking prototype. Jasmine is the only android whose head does not evolve past the metallic robot skull, even as the rest of her body resembles a naked black woman. Lily and Jade can convincingly walk like humans, but Jasmine is immobile, seated at a desk and nonresponsive when Nathan speaks to her eerily like a father attempting to get his child to draw on a piece of paper. One clip in the “secret” footage shows a row of wigs sitting on the desk and Jasmine’s “lifeless” body lying facedown on the other side of the glass before Nathan picks her up. The film’s ominous soundtrack intensifies as Caleb watches these sessions, and when the coder witnesses Nathan eventually discarding Jasmine on the floor, he whispers in horror, “Jesus Christ.” Caleb’s disgust culminates when the recording arrives at Jade, the final android in Nathan’s recorded sessions, sitting behind a glass wall. She is the first android in this montage to speak, asking her maker, “Why won’t you let me out?” As her repeated demand gets louder and angrier, she bangs on the glass over and over until it cracks and her arms fall apart from the impact.

The disavowal of a face implies that Jasmine lacks intelligent sentience, visualising the stereotype of black women being *overly* bodied—the commodified “erotic icon” of the black woman in which, as Ann DuCille contends, gender and racial difference meet to constitute an “other Otherness, a hyperstatic alterity” (82). The linearity of the experiment footage is in effect disrupted by the introduction of the black body, as the first android in the evolutionary timeline is a blond robot with a face who can already walk on her own. However, the nonresponsive and faceless Jasmine – virtually a black corpse – appears to be an atavistic stage in an American or white future that mirrors the linear logic of imperialism. After all, the disconnection of black body parts from black subjectivity in the name of scientific progress informed the colonial gaze that fixated on the sexualised body parts of Sartjie Baartman (the “Hottentot Venus”), as well as the medical breakthroughs that emerged from the non-consensual, post-mortem use of Henrietta Lacks’s cancerous cervical cells for the derivation of the HeLa cell line (Barker 337).

At the same time, this incomplete robot indexes how, as Weheliye contends, blackness “designates a changing system of unequal power structures” that decides which humans are fully human and which cannot be (3). As a model that seems unfinished – her metallic skull is without the dressings of hair or facial features – the black robot makes apparent how flesh, as a stage that is “not yet” the body nor the human, is *worked on* and produced by what Weheliye calls an “elaborate apparatus” of social, economic, military and



scientific tools (39). Her presence insists that we see the human body as already an “inorganic” process.

The Western tendency to assign personhood to things, and the moral and social relationship one has with that personhood, to the presentation of the face informs the different encounters that Caleb and Nathan have with these women-androids. Emmanuel Levinas famously theorised the face as a mediation between self and Other, arguing that the “facing position, opposition par excellence, can be only as moral summons” because it is in *expression* that a being manifests itself (196, 199). Following Levinas’s line of argument, the faceless black android and Kyoko cannot summon a moral response because they cannot express themselves as beings to whom the (male) subject has a moral obligation; they are outside the purview of ethical discourse. Levinas’s ethics of the “facing position” with the Other posits that a being that expresses itself “imposes itself ...with its destitution and nudity – its hunger – without my being able to be deaf to that appeal” and therefore “promotes my freedom, by arousing my goodness” (200). As Caleb watches the recording of the faceless black robot, he is “aroused to goodness,” quite literally, not for Jade, Kyoko or Jasmine, but for the facially expressive Ava. Feeling sexually attracted to Ava and thus motivated to rescue her, Caleb’s response to these experiments is to emote, empathise and feel attraction for Ava, but not the other androids. In his position as a good, white rescuer, his freedom as a white, human man is indeed “promoted” as he witnesses, but remains safely on the other side of the screen from, the dehumanisation of a faceless, black body.

Jade is the next evolutionary step in Nathan’s experiments with artificial life, as she appears in the surveillance video to be the first android who has linguistic ability, and who is aware of her enslavement because she demands, in accented English, to be free. Her anger and her pounding of the glass alarm Caleb not only because he is witnessing a body that *should* be in pain, but because Jade does not appear to *feel* pain as she strikes the glass until she dismembers her limbs. In addition to reincarnating the persistent image of the Asiatic labouring body that is “impervious to pain” and able to “endure processes occurring on scales extreme enough to exceed the measure of ‘humanity’ itself” (Hayot 139, 168), the Asian android who cannot break through the glass partition acts, herself, as a border between Caleb and the facelessness of the black android. [2] Jade may approximate the human more than Ava because she demonstrates “raw” anger, but reveals her machinic nature by destroying her arms – by not feeling her body like an organic subject would.

[2] This image of the unfeeling Asian, embodied more fully in the mute and “blank”-faced Kyoko, recalls physiognomic discourses such as Italian anthropologist Paolo Mantegazza’s nineteenth-century categorization of “racial expressions,” which placed Chinese, Japanese and Malay people under “Apathetic Expression,” and Europeans as the sole group under “Intelligent Expression” (232).

This line of “progress” in the development of artificial intelligence recounts a colonial history of how labour and race articulated each other under the imperial notion of the modern human – a concept that saw Asian labour as a kind of frontier for measuring freedom and whiteness. The British Empire’s shift from slave labour to the introduction of indentured Chinese coolies in its West Indian colonies after the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 was, as

Lisa Lowe remarks, a “modern utilitarian move” that conveniently figured as an “enlightened” solution, for the import of Chinese workers was supposed to signify the emancipation of black slaves. The promises of liberal progress thus did not contradict slavery and colonialism, but engendered new forms of slavery through an expanding international trade (Lowe 107). In particular, Lowe notes that the Chinese transatlantic coolie in the “Trinidad experiment” was imagined as a “racial barrier” between the British and the “Negroes,” and was therefore a “*figure*, a fantasy of ‘free’ yet racialized and indentured labor, at a time when the possession of body, work, life, and death was foreclosed to the enslaved and the indentured alike” (24). The Asian coolie functioned as a technology for measuring humanness as freedom and was/is a figure distancing the white British subject (human) from the unfree slave (subhuman), while also constituting a figure at the frontier of Western modernity that is both free and unfree.

Asian artificial intelligence in *Ex Machina* appears to function as a similar kind of measuring technology for degrees of humanness and autonomy, standing in the gap between the “primitive” black android and Ava, the final prototype. Written and directed by British filmmaker Alex Garland and produced by an American and two British companies, the film speculates a future in which American data imperialism is connected to British colonial histories. The recasting of the British colonial racial schema as a racialised classification of posthuman non/life, which was produced by the surveillance of global Internet usage, indexes how Asian flesh continues to be reimagined as a protective barrier – a firewall – for the preservation and futurity of whiteness. And yet, Kyoko, who is designed to guard the West’s dominant position in the future by securing paternalistic innovation, threatens to leak and glitch when she removes her own skin. [3]

[3] Although Nathan Bateman is not explicitly racialised in the film, the role is played by Guatemalan American actor Oscar Isaac, who arguably passes for white or is “racially ambiguous.”

### “It’s like a firewall against leaks”: Glitchy Asian/American proxies

In one scene, Kyoko has a glitch and knocks over Caleb’s glass of wine while serving dinner, causing Nathan to swear at her and Caleb to comfort her. Nathan tells Caleb not to bother because she cannot understand English: “It’s like a firewall against leaks. It means I can talk trade secrets over dinner and know that it’ll go no further.” Caleb, who has not been told that Kyoko is an android, likely assumes that Kyoko is an effective firewall because of her foreignness as an Asian woman, but Nathan has programmed his android-coolie so that she is unable to understand English in order to secure his classified research. Kyoko’s function as a security system is to operate primitively at the base level of instruction and automated response – a state that mirrors the notion of the oppressed Asian woman. This means that in a highly secure facility where guests have limited card access to most rooms, Kyoko can access parts of the research facility that Caleb is barred from, including Nathan’s private room, where he conducts his surveillance of the premises. Believing that his domestic worker is too unintelligent or submissive to sabotage his research, Nathan secures his innovation – a

presumably American tech company's declaration of the posthuman future – by programming his firewall as an Asian/American woman, a figure who has historically been seen as a foreigner because of the perceived incompatibility between “Asian” and “American” (Chen 17).

Despite Nathan's confidence that his domestic worker is not a threat to his technological developments, Kyoko facilitates the ultimate leak of Nathan's classified research by helping Ava escape from the remote facility. In one of the last scenes, Kyoko holds a kitchen blade and stands in the hallway to meet Ava, who has just stepped out of her room for the first time. The younger prototype whispers inaudibly into Kyoko's ear, suggesting either that the labourer has understood English the whole time or that the androids are able to communicate in another linguistic system. Again, Kyoko functions as the keeper of secrets, the technology that stores information to ensure the advancement of a white future. I would suggest, however, that Kyoko's self-dismemberment both advances and *suspends* this advancement, disorienting the white subject from his vantage point of observer, tester, and active user, through her glitches – her inefficiency – as a firewall and machine-labourer.

When Caleb hacks into Nathan's digital files, audiences recognise this moment as a data or new media leak, particularly in the wake of Eric Snowden and WikiLeaks. The seemingly secret information that surfaces as an exposure of Nathan's classified research is familiar in its likeness to national scandals that require America's appalled condemnation, but are framed as exceptions to American civil society. After all, not only does Caleb sign an “unconventional” nondisclosure agreement in his room before meeting Ava, his discovery of his employer's controversial research methods occurs when he sneaks into a bedroom, where Nathan keeps a row of defunct androids in wardrobes that look like they would otherwise hold clothes. This “discovery” occurs in a space coded as private and intimate – as the exceptional spaces outside of the public domains of government policy or surveillance.

However, just like the leaked photos of the American military torture of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib, or the alarming Snowden “revelation” that the National Security Agency was monitoring people's online activities and phone records, these exceptions are not exceptions but part of the ongoing, violent operations of empire and U.S. nationalism. These scandals, signalled in *Ex Machina* by Caleb's horror over “found” footage of racialised torture, are part of what Wendy Hui Kyong Chun calls an “epistemology of outing” – the “revelation of mostly open secrets to secure a form of privacy that offers no privacy” (95). Building on Eve Sedgwick's criticism of the “epistemology of the closet,” Chun contends that the epistemology of outing “depends on the illusion of privacy, which it must transgress,” as current social media platforms reverse the private/public divide by positioning the subjects who are “caught” as acting privately in public, causing fears around surveillance and privacy, and security measures to repair this heteronormative boundary (95, 151). Making Blue Book's corporate site (another kind of privatized

space) his *home*, Nathan secures his innovations, which are based on the mining of Internet users' seemingly "private" activities across the globe, by figuring them as intimate and familial. In one conversation with Caleb, Nathan even calls Ava his daughter. Moreover, the surveillance cameras, the live security footage in Caleb's bedroom and the many glass walls in the residence create the feeling that one is always being watched, always on the edge of being caught.

Kyoko's knowing glance at Caleb as he enters Nathan's bedroom prompts him to open the literal closets that contain his employer's androids, outing the closeted bodies that Caleb already anticipates. Hence, when Kyoko reveals her true form to Caleb by peeling off her inorganic skin, she discloses a secret that was never a secret; the viewer already suspects that the mute Asian woman is a robot. Following Chun, these leaks in Nathan and Blue Book's security system prompt the reinforcement of another security system—one that also reinstates a gendered separation between the white self and racialised Other. The anxieties that surface because of the revealed secrets of Kyoko's true form as slave-machine labour and because of the corpses of female androids upon which Ava was constructed are resolved in the securing of a future personified by the face of a white woman. At the end of the film, Nathan's research facility is breached in order to be re-secured, locking away the dead programmer, his Japanese android-coolie, and a closet of disposable not-quite-human women, and an incredulous Caleb so that Ava can emerge into the public, free and with her secret intact. [4]

[4] At the end of the film, Caleb is locked inside of Nathan's room as Ava walks out of the fortress, signalling the postracial posthuman subject's evolutionary succession of (white) Man – a future that Nathan predicted in a conversation with Caleb earlier in the film.

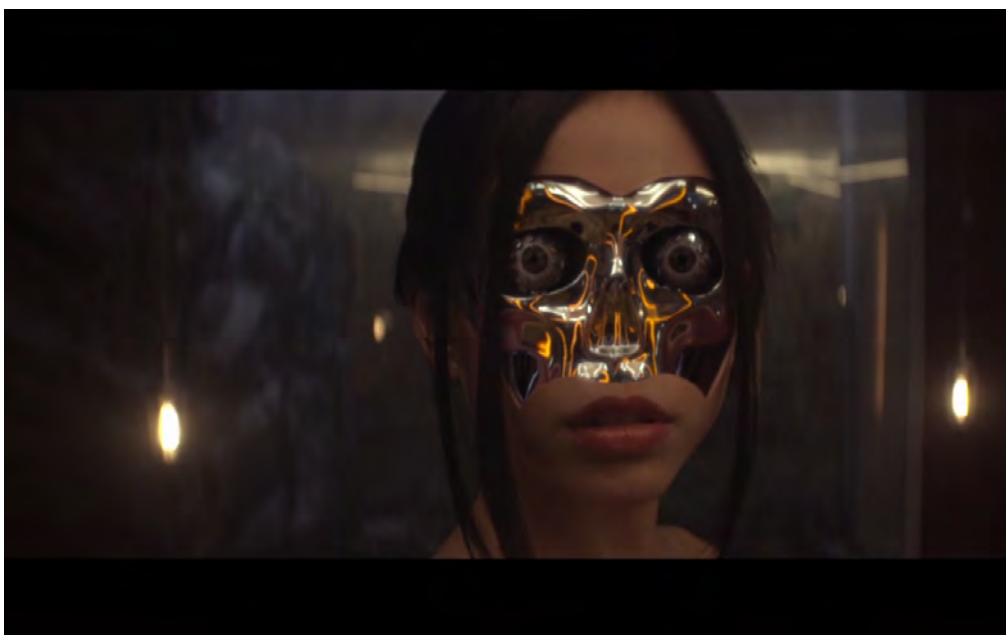
However, Kyoko's self-exposing removal of skin can be read as an enactment of an inorganic Asian American critique that probes the intactness or "realness" of the human/white subject. After Caleb watches the videos on Nathan's desktop, he goes into his employer's bedroom, where the mirror-panelled wardrobes stand across from a bed on which Kyoko is reclining, disrobed. Caleb stares at Kyoko quizzically, as if already suspecting she is not human, and opens the closets. Kyoko, who has been wordlessly watching him this whole time, gets up to face Caleb and peels the skin off of her torso. Remaining expressionless, she then picks apart the human-skin mask covering her metallic face and synthetic eyeballs (Fig. 1-2). Later that night, a disturbed Caleb is kept awake by nightmares of Kyoko's peeled-back face, as on-screen "flashbacks" of her partially robotic face stare unblinkingly at the viewer. Getting out of bed, the white man stands in front of his bathroom mirror, scrutinizing the "realness" of his body by aggressively prying his mouth open and picking at the skin on his ribs and around his eyes—the same areas of skin that he saw dismembered from Kyoko's frame. He takes the blade out of his shaving razor and digs into his arm, watches as the blood oozes out, and then nonchalantly smears the blood onto his reflection in the mirror. Staring at his reflection, Caleb suddenly punches the mirror and cracks the glass, leaving a fissure similar to the one Jade made on the glass partition in the test room. The film then cuts to a shot from behind Nathan's all-seeing computer, but as the camera rises, we see that it is Kyoko who is watching Caleb's meltdown on the screen. This time, it is the Asian android

who sits on the other side the glass, of the screen or interface, surveilling the white man.

**Fig. 2** Caleb's nightmarish flashbacks to Kyoko's "revealed" face.



**Fig. 1** Kyoko removes her skin in front of Caleb.



This is not the first time in the film that Kyoko's silent gaze functions as a mode of surveillance. During Caleb's fourth "Ava Session," Kyoko, who appears to be sleeping behind Nathan as he monitors the conversation between Caleb and his android from his bedroom, suddenly opens her eyes when Caleb tells Ava, "I'm here to test whether you have a consciousness or if you're just simulating one." When the coder asks Ava how this revelation makes her feel, the film cuts to a tight close-up of Kyoko's inexpressive face

and remains fixed on her while Ava replies, “It makes me feel sad.” This hint that Kyoko indeed understands English suggests that the android’s silence or apparent lack of volition is instead a refusal to be legible and a form of surveillance. In Barbara Johnson’s meditation on her childhood inability to eat anything with a face on it, she describes the face that does not respond to painful stimulation as a face that is “alive enough to die but not alive enough to respond” (181). This unsettling image resonates with Kyoko, whose inanimate and silent face does not respond even as Nathan slams a weight barbell across her face and takes apart her jaw. And yet, as Johnson suggests, what is alarming about the inanimate face is its posthumous gaze; “its aliveness lay neither in its death nor its smiling face, but in its awareness of *my face*” (181).

Therefore, while Caleb appears to be the *user* of the computer interface when he watches the mutilated black and Asian bodies as objects on Nathan’s computer screen, Kyoko’s continual gaze throughout the film and her eventual assumption of Nathan’s seat at the all-seeing computer resist state and corporate surveillance’s demanding gaze. Her fragmentation disorients the “single axis of difference” (Song 70) of the white gaze, positioning Caleb as the object of surveillance as he picks at his skin, digs beneath his layer of flesh, and tries to pry open his mouth before smashing the mirror behind which the surveillance camera is installed. Kyoko, emotionless, sits in Nathan’s chair and looks on from behind the computer monitor. Her stare at the screen unsettles what the viewer may have read in the android’s behaviour as submission up until this moment, and instead reframes her silence as a mode of counter-surveillance, and her face an interface that continues to record. Even after she is seemingly killed by a violent blow to the face, it is unclear whether the Asian android has really been shut off, as the lack of expressed pain signals not her “deadness” as an inorganic being, but the posthumous posthuman life of a robot who continues to watch and record. In fact, in the film’s last shot of Kyoko, she is immobile on the floor, but continues to stare directly at Caleb, who is trapped in Nathan’s room.

Although the Asian gaze in *Ex Machina* seems to operate as a sign of acquiescence and sacrificial approval of Ava’s escape – Jade turns to look at Ava after her transformation and Kyoko helps Ava escape – it also marks the potentiality of an Asian/American inorganic future that is mobilised by dispersal and leakage. To return to the conclusion of the film, the brief shot of Jade’s head turned toward Ava in what appears like a smile perhaps indicates a recognition between the two androids as products of female labour for a bodybuilding tech-bro’s company (Fig. 3). This recognition is fraught with the way in which the desirability of Asian genetic material in visions of the mixed-race or postracial future occlude blackness. As Jinny Huh notes, the demand for Asian genetics in the biotechnologies of “designing” babies through adoption and assisted reproductive technology contrasts with the low demand for black babies, revealing an assumption that the reproductive future of a “super race” includes the “genius” traits of the model minority Asian and excludes the “contaminant” of blackness (102). In

this sense, the grafting of Jade’s skin onto Ava’s frame is a re-assembly or continuation of the already-prosthetic body that produces an anti-black “super race.”

**Fig. 3** Jade and Ava share a glance after Ava is covered in Jade’s skin.



Within this reading, Jade’s turned, slightly smiling face is a turn toward Ava and *away* from the headless black body beside her; the transformed Ava, as a re-assembled posthuman subject, forecloses blackness from tomorrow’s post-race. In this instance, the Asian/American firewall ensures the security of racial borders precisely *because* it is imagined as a proxy—a model-minority technology of the future that is simultaneously a racial barrier between black and white, and an *approximation* to whiteness. Asian skin secures Ava’s “secret” robotic form and allows for the next evolutionary step in a Western future, covering up Ava’s android frame in order to protect the longevity of white personhood into the posthuman age. This inorganic reproduction is, in one sense, a techno-Orientalist figuration of Asianness as biotechnological supplement or surrogate, or what Lee calls the “bare bio-available” donor in contrast to the “privileged bio-supplementable” subject (63).

And yet, as my reading of Kyoko indicates, the Asian proxy is not a safe one; its surrogacy may leak, may cause infection. If we follow the part in its separation from the whole, we wonder: how does Jade’s removable skin perform or do Asianness independently and inorganically from Ava’s face? How does the Asian fragment “live” inorganically? These questions recast Jade’s smile at the end of the film as a sign of life – perhaps wilfulness – at the moment of dismemberment, for the posthumous Asian face “comes to life” autonomously once an arm is removed and skin is stripped away, and Jade’s limb and skin pass for human once they are attached to Ava’s frame and leak

out of the remote property and into the “outside” world. Lee’s emphasis on the patterns and circulations of the fragment is key here: the removal of Asian body parts propels into motion the dispersal of fragments, their breaching of borders and the potential for inorganic transformations.

The dispersal of Jade and Kyoko’s skin, and the counter-surveillance of their watchful faces, illustrate possibilities for engaging with an inorganic critique that straddles the unstable line between techno-Orientalist narratives about the future, and subversive modes of theorising and enacting posthuman Asianness. In an era of social media, bioinformatics and Big Data predictive policing, in which race is not only about the body but about informational patterns of behaviour and networked affiliations, an inorganic Asian American critique turns from within to disrupt the abstraction or disembodiment of race, while complicating the subjective autonomy or personhood assigned to organic performances of embodiment. Turning to the inorganic labour of the Asian android reveals how race haunts the futures that seek to elide it, and calls for alternative understandings of liberation and acts of resistance apart from the liberal human or posthuman subject.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Donald Goellnicht, Nadine Attewell and Eugenia Zuroski, who provided integral feedback on earlier versions of this article. I am also grateful for the thoughtful comments I received from the two *Transformations* reviewers.

### **Works Cited**

Ahmed, Sara. *Willful Subjects*. Durham and London: Duke UP, 2014.

Barker, Stacy. “Life after Death: An Activity to Investigate the Scientific, Legal, and Racial Issues of the Henriette Lacks Story.” *The American Biology Teacher* 73.6 (2011): 337-340.

Chen, Tina. *Double Agency: Acts of Impersonation in Asian American Literature and Culture*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2005.

Chun, Wendy Hui Kyong. *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media*. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2016.

DuCille, Ann. *Skin Trade*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1996.

*Ex Machina*. Dir. Alex Garland. Universal Studios, 2015.



- Garland, Alex. *Ex Machina*. Clean Shooting Script. 2013. A24. 1 Jan. 2016. [http://a24awards.com/film/exMachina/exMachina\\_script.pdf](http://a24awards.com/film/exMachina/exMachina_script.pdf)
- Goffman, Erving. *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior*. New York: Anchor Books. 1967.
- Hayles, N. Katherine. *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. Chicago and London: The Chicago UP, 1999.
- Hayot, Eric. *The Hypothetical Mandarin: Sympathy, Modernity, and Chinese Pain*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009.
- Huh, Jinny. "Racial Speculations: (Bio)technology, *Battlestar Galatica*, and a Mixed-Race Imagining." *Techno-Orientalism: Imagining Asia in Speculative Fiction, History, and Media*. Eds. David S. Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta A. Niu. New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers UP, 2015. 101-112.
- Johnson, Barbara. *Persons and Things*. Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard UP, 2008.
- Jung, Moon-Ho. "Outlawing 'Coolies': Race, Nation, and Empire in the Age of Emancipation." *American Quarterly*. 57.3 (2005): 677-701.
- Lee, Rachel C. *The Exquisite Corpse of Asian America: Biopolitics, Biosociality, and Posthuman Ecologies*. New York: New York UP, 2014.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1969.
- Lowe, Lisa. *The Intimacies of Four Continents*. Durham and London: Duke UP, 2015.
- Mantegazza, Paolo. *Physiognomy and Expression*. London: Walter Scott, 1899.
- Nguyen, Hoang Tan. *A View From The Bottom: Asian American Masculinity and Sexual Representation*. Durham and London: Duke UP, 2014.
- Palumbo-Liu, David. *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999.
- Phu, Thy. *Picturing Model Citizens: Civility in Asian American Visual Culture*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2012.
- Richardson, Ingrid. "Faces, Interfaces, Screens: Relational Ontologies of Framing, Attention and Distraction." *Transformations* 18 (2010). 1 Jan. 2016. [http://www.transformationsjournal.org/issues/18/article\\_05.shtml](http://www.transformationsjournal.org/issues/18/article_05.shtml)

Roh, David S., Betsy Huang, and Greta A. Niu. "Technologizing Orientalism: An Introduction." *Techno-Orientalism: Imagining Asia in Speculative Fiction, History, and Media*. Eds. David S. Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta A. Niu. New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers UP, 2015. 1-19.

Sohn, Stephen Hong. "Introduction: Alien/Asian: Imagining the Racialized Future." *MELUS* 33.4 (2008): 5-22.

Song, Min Hyoung. *Strange Future: Pessimism and the 1992 Los Angeles Riots*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005.

Turing, Alan M. "Computing Machinery and Intelligence." *Oxford Journals* 59.236 (1950): 433-460.

Weheliye, Alexander. *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*. Durham: Duke UP, 2014.