

or complexity of their representations, are exemplary of Hollywood's erasure of Asian images on-screen. For Oh, it is precisely this ambiguity that allows contemporary Hollywood to hide behind notions of multiculturalism and racial flexibility, and thus claim that they "don't see race," sublimating Hollywood's decades-old practices of yellow-face into less obviously racist fantasies of white kids adopted into Chinese households (as in James Wong's 2009 *Dragon-ball Evolution*) or Japanese consciousness transplanted into a white body (such as Scarlett Johansson's in Rupert Sanders's 2017 *Ghost in the Shell*).

As Oh puts it, "[T]he difference from openly White supremacist discourses is in degree rather than type" (96). Oh refuses Hollywood's attempts at "subtlety," even though his stance results in a monograph that similarly lacks subtlety in its criticisms. The arrival of each relatively short chapter elicits a groan over Hollywood's formulaic approach to Asian erasure, but perhaps also a groan at Oh's checklist of grievances, including and especially the trope of white men sexually or romantically paired with Asian women.

Where Oh's approach has an air of freshness—and even subtlety—is in his aforementioned tactic that concludes each chapter. Here, he wonders, à la William Yu's #StarringJohnCho social-media campaign, how different or similar these whitewashed films would be had they simply cast Asian American actors to begin with. For instance, Oh considers how casting an actual multiracial Hawaiian actor in *Aloha* (as opposed to Emma Stone) could decenter whiteness, even if the film's complicity with US colonialism in Hawaii would remain untroubled. And if *The Interview* cast two Korean Americans as the bumbling American fools who arrive in North Korea, gone would be the self-mocking white heroism of James Franco and Seth Rogan—while introducing novel questions of ethnonationalism, combating perpetual foreigner stereotypes by distinguishing between Koreans and Korean Americans, and allowing for a Korean American man to have a romantic relationship with a Korean woman. Oh's approach is purely speculative. He doesn't interrogate actually existing challenges of casting and marketing, but relies simply on the radical imagination for a solution that is both painfully obvious and plainly impossible given Hollywood's commitment to whiteness.

Oh's speculative approach to Asian American representation is wielded primarily to criticize Hollywood racial norms. If there is a subject in *Whitewashing the Movies*, it is not Asian representation but whiteness itself, with Richard Dyer's *White: Essays on Race and Culture* a central influence.

Treating Asian American representation as conjectural is a sly rhetorical move to show how Asian American representation is not actually allowed to exist in film. That said, there's a fine line between Asian American representation not being allowed to exist and its not actually existing to begin with. After all, there is by now a substantial corpus of Asian American independent cinema, much of which embodies the very alternatives that Oh's speculative casting purports to invent. Why imagine the possibility of Southeast Asian American actors in political thrillers set in Southeast Asia when similar independent films actually exist? (See, for instance, Neill Dela Llana and Ian Gamazon's *Cavite*, 2005). Why concoct a scenario whereby Chinese Americans can "return" to China without the help of white characters when there is Peter Wang's *A Great Wall* (1986) or Lulu Wang's *The Farewell* (2019)?

In critiquing mainstream cinema's default to whiteness, Oh's radical imagination risks washing away an Asian American independent cinema that has for decades embarked on this same radical imagining. But if Oh's target is Hollywood, he strikes it with example after example, a repetitive bull's-eye that shows no mercy for the liberal hypocrisy and creative stagnation of Hollywood's "color-blind" racism.

BOOK DATA David C. Oh, *Whitewashing the Movies: Asian Erasure and White Subjectivity in U.S. Film Culture*. Rutgers University Press, 2021. \$120.00 cloth, \$29.95 paper, \$29.95 e-book. 210 pages.

BRIAN HU is an associate professor on the Television, Film, and New Media Faculty at San Diego State University. He is the author of *Worldly Desires: Cosmopolitanism and Cinema in Hong Kong and Taiwan*, and is the artistic director of the San Diego Asian Film Festival.

## MAGGIE ROBERTS

### *How Do We Look? Resisting Visual Biopolitics*, by Fatimah Tobing Rony

"What vocabularies or stories of justification occur in that moment when a person decides that he needs to kill another," asks Dr. Fatimah Tobing Rony in *How Do We Look? Resisting Visual Biopolitics* (11). Rony's latest book examines transnational images of Indonesian women, discussing how they are used for both harmful and radical ends in a process she calls "visual biopolitics" (4). Rony defines visual biopolitics as a "system, shored up by iconographies of justification found in photography, cinema, television, national monuments, and the internet, that underscores preexisting structural race and gender representations in language, politics, and the unconscious" (5). Within the Indonesian context, this refers to a series of visual codes and motifs used

to justify the exploitation and killing of Indonesian women throughout history, dictating who lives and who dies.

For Rony, the stakes are high because visual biopolitics have been weaponized against Indonesian women in the past; reworking this representation, then, becomes quite literally a matter of life and death. *How Do We Look* expands on the theorizations in her previous book, *The Third Eye*, which outlined a unique subjective space in which marginalized groups can critique the same visually encoded forces that attempt to subjugate them. Rony has now shifted her focus to the “fourth eye,” the witness. “The fourth eye,” Rony argues, “is . . . the eye that sees the violence of visual biopolitics, and how one’s self is constituted by it” (16). While the third eye critiques these harmful visual codes, the fourth eye survives them. The book thus probes a central paradox: how film and other forms of images can both reinforce and resist the harmful effects of visual biopolitics.

Rony’s first chapter discusses Annah la Javanaise, a young Javanese girl who was the subject of Paul Gauguin’s nude portrait *Aita tamari vahine Judith te parari* (“The child-woman Judith is not yet breached,” 1893–94). The image, Rony argues, is actually the combination of two different girls: Annah la Javanaise, and Judith, Gauguin’s European neighbor. While the named subject is Judith, the exploited body is Annah’s. Rony interprets this as an example of the violent effects of visual biopolitics: the brown body is marked as flesh “to be breached” while the white Judith remains unsullied. Rony argues that “the history of the two girls allow us to parse the relationships of sexuality, race, and primitivism that are latent in the painting” (31). So, while Annah is historically viewed as Gauguin’s muse, she is also his victim.

The predatory relationship reflected in the portrait speaks to a broader visual commodification of Javanese women—specifically, the image of the female traditional Javanese dancer in France—that Rony tracks from the late nineteenth century to the present day. Like Annah’s, these women’s bodies become visual cues for exotification. Rony traces how metaphysical meanings are used as propagandistic material to further a range of political goals, both domestically and internationally. During the 1966 Indonesian genocide, the New Order, an Indonesian authoritarian regime, targeted and killed traditional dancers for their perceived embodiment of the “evil feminist leftist dancer necessary for Indonesian historiography,” demonstrating the lethal consequences of oppressive visual biopolitics (17).

Rony also points out a possible moment of resistance between Annah and Gauguin by analyzing a series of

photographs taken by Gauguin and his European elite friends. They dress up in ridiculous outfits as a form of protest, cosplaying anarchic resistance, while the real defiance, Rony argues, is communicated in Annah’s gaze: somber, direct, and unrelenting. She is described as a phantom, “on her guard, among men who are proud to show off their spectacular Western subjectivity” (54). Gauguin can dress but not pose his subject; therefore, Annah rebels through her posture and gaze; this is the fourth eye.

Following Rony’s analysis of painting and photography, *How Do We Look* performs a close reading of two documentary films made by non-Indonesians: *Trance and Dance in Bali* (Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson, 1952) and *The Act of Killing* (Joshua Oppenheimer, 2012). The films differ in style and approach: the first is a traditional ethnographic piece about Balinese dancers, the second an art-house documentary in which ex-military leaders restage the violent crimes they committed during the rise of the New Order.

Despite these differences, Rony argues that both films create and reinforce visual biopolitics through sensationalizing and performance. The Mead film makes the Balinese practice of dancing into a spectacle, reinforcing the image of the dancing Indonesian woman with pungent doses of sensuality and exotification. Similarly, *The Act of Killing* reaffirms these damaging optics through reenactment in an act of “fascinating cannibalism,” where the media viewer “is entertained by the retelling of savagery” (12–13). Both films overexpose Indonesian cultural aesthetics, while refusing any context for what the viewer sees. This lack of a frame of reference works to reinforce difference within a constrictive colonial lens. Historical contexts, Rony argues, are key to deconstructing harmful visual biopolitics.

In the latter half of the book, Rony examines various films that, she asserts, resist visual biopolitics, beginning with *Mother Dao, the Turtlelike* (Vincent Monnikendam, 1995). This found-footage film splices together Dutch colonial footage shot in Indonesia and recontextualizes images from the archive by juxtaposing them through editing. For Rony, this practice is reminiscent of surrealism and the French avant-garde artistic movements of the 1920s and 1930s, when older images were manipulated and repurposed to convey new meanings. “*Mother Dao*,” Rony argues, “through its use of recontextualizing archival footage and principles of surrealism, is an indictment of visual biopolitics” (146). There is no direct correlation between the clips. Rather, the film challenges the hierarchy of images, unraveling its original imbued colonial meaning. Rony argues that, with *Mother Dao*, Monnikendam “raid[s] the archive,” subverting it and exposing its violence (134).

Rony's final chapter focuses on the collectivity of filmmakers and the pivotal role Indonesian voices play in resisting visual biopolitics. She dedicates the majority of the chapter to discussing an omnibus film project that she undertook with three other Indonesian directors: Upi Avianto, Lasja Fauzia Susatyo, and the project's founder, Nia Dinata. The film, *Perempuan Punya Cerita (Chants of Lotus, 2008)*, is split into four stories, each directed by a different woman. This model highlights networks of women, both thematically and production-wise, creating a "web of identification" in the film that complicates visual codes—recontextualizing the image of Indonesian women (156). For Rony, the goal is "to focus not on individual protagonists but on how all women's subjectivities are affected by each other: the I is the we" (157). The omnibus film, Rony argues, works to represent the complexity of Indonesian female identity.

Even though *How Do We Look?* uses images of Indonesian women to demonstrate both the restrictive and generative possibilities of visual biopolitics, Rony contends that

her thesis is not only relevant to the Indonesian context but applicable to other frameworks as well. She writes: "[W]hat I am describing can be used to interrogate other systems of visualizing power to create other acts of resistance" (11). Two summers after the murder of George Floyd and in the wake of nationwide calls for institutional and social reform within the United States, an understanding of the way that visual biopolitics operates, and its lethal repercussions, resonates differently. Rony's book suggests that deconstructing these visual codes and repurposing them to reject their established meanings—as based in colonialism, imperialism, and neoliberalism—is one way forward to a more equitable future. In destroying the signified image, one can reclaim one's own visuality.

BOOK DATA Fatimah Tobing Rony, *How Do We Look? Resisting Visual Biopolitics*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021. Cloth \$99.95; paper \$25.95, e-book \$15.31. 248 pages.

MAGGIE ROBERTS is a graduate student in Cinema and Media Studies at the University of Southern California's School of Cinematic Arts in Los Angeles.