

# Cyber Fantasies: Rina Sawayama, Asian Feminism, and Techno- Orientalism in the Age of Neoliberalism

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**ABSTRACT.** In the 21st century, neoliberalism and technological innovations in Asia produce techno-Orientalism, a “new” framework by which the West dominates Asia. In this process, Asian bodies are configured as inherently technological beings who exist solely for the production of information and neoliberal goods. Techno-Orientalism is a byproduct of the violence wrought by modernity. Yet, Rina Sawayama, a British-Japanese music artist, produces a new form of resistance that can be characterized as *diasporic Asian cultural production*. Her work challenges the white hegemonic masculine gaze by interrogating modernity in her lyrics, aesthetic, and performance. Sawayama’s aesthetic and music videos produce a new sense of Asian subjectivity via the “hacking” of Western epistemologies. Sawayama’s artistry provides a new praxis of counter-hegemonic resistance within the neoliberal era.

[Chorus]

Came here on my own  
Party on my phone  
Came here on my own  
But I start to feel alone  
Better late than never so I'll be alright  
Happiest whenever I'm with you online

[Verse 2]

Better together  
Ever the overrated touch  
I am connected  
I am the girl you want to watch  
Lips full of glitter glow

Spinning like mirror balls  
Phone in a strobe  
Stuck in a crazy cyber world

[Pre-Chorus]  
And she said  
I'm not here for love tonight  
The way you touch just don't feel right  
Used to feeling things so cold  
Cyber Stockholm Syndrome  
"Cyber Stockholm Syndrome" (Sawayama, 2017)

## Introduction

Rina Sawayama is a British-Japanese music artist who hybridizes J-pop, R&B, and cyber-punk, but her music aesthetically exceeds the bounds of these genres. In 2017, Sawayama released her critically acclaimed album entitled *Rina*. *Fader*<sup>1</sup> included Sawayama in their article "13 need to know artist in 2017;" she has been producing music since 2013 ("13 need to know artists in 2017," 2017; Clark, 2017). Western audiences have been perplexed yet infatuated with her audio-visual artistry. Unable to be pinned down by the Occident, *Rina* gives a new futuristic voice for Asian people throughout the diaspora. Sawayama intentionally uses her artistry and platform to produce a cultural production that challenges the subjectification of East Asian women brought by Orientalism, specifically the dualism of the fierce dragon lady/submissive lotus blossom. But, what allowed for her rise within this particular moment in time?

In the era of 21st century globalization and technological development, Asians are constructed as (hyper-)technological beings in both cultural and political terms. Prior to the technologization of Asian countries in this period, Orientalist logics framed Asian countries as backwards, primitive, and inferior to the West. Post-colonial theorist Edward Said (1987), writes that Orientalism, "create[s] not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe" (p. 94). Under an Orientalist framework,

the West constructs and over-determines Asian countries. It is the Occident that inscribes logics which produce the conditions for threats and that we must be eradicated and/or exploited for capitalist gain.

Through the incorporation of specific Asian countries (Japan, China, and now India) into capitalist institutions through globalization, however, techno-Orientalism manifested as a form of white panic over the perceived foreign threat to Western hegemonic primacy. "Techno-Orientalism" is a phrase coined by David Morley and Kevin Robins (1995) in *Spaces of Identity*, which they originally contextualized to the rise and commodification of Japan writing:

If the future is technological, and if technology has become 'Japanised', then the syllogism would suggest that the future is now Japanese too. The postmodern era will be the Pacific era. Japan is the future, and it is a future that seems to be transcending and displacing Western modernity. (p. 167)

Techno-Orientalism refers to a frame in which the nation-state, subjectivity, and geography have been relegated to Western neoliberal epistemologies. Techno-Orientalist logics arose after WWII and during the Cold War through the United States' "revitalization" and investment in Asian nations, particularly Japan and Korea, and with the hegemonic rise of China (Morley and Robins, 1995). Cold War logics evolved into subjugating techno-Orientalist epistemologies. By constructing Asians as unfeeling, robotic, and technologized, Western power was reaffirmed and the exploitation of Asian technologies and economies was legitimized (Said, 1978; Sohn, 2008). A contemporary example is the film *Ghost in the Shell* (2017). Directed by Rupert Sanders and starring Scarlett Johansson, both being white, it propagates Japan as an inherent technologically advanced society. Johansson plays a Japanese cyborg. The white-washing of the film serves a process of thief and interpolation of Masamune Shirow's seminal manga, which reifies techno-Orientalist epistemologies.

Despite this, Asians use techno-Orientalist themes within speculative fiction, music, and film. Thus, techno-Orientalism is simultaneously debilitating and liberating. How do we locate Sawayama's music within a larger frame of quotidian violence? How is her utopian aesthetic a means of subversion to neoliberal governance? What can we learn from *Rina* about Asian resistance and liberation?

### **Techno-Orientalism and the Hegemonic Rise of Japan**

In a techno-Orientalist framework, Western countries require the expansion of globalization to attain technology and information from a futuristic East Asia, which is a key way to secure a Western future. Techno-Orientalism is located within the neoliberal era of the present. In this age, the Orient is no longer a site to fear because it is barbaric, but it is required for the development and expansion of the West and feared because of its economic growth. Globalization thus becomes a tactic to ensure that an "Asianized future" does not displace Western modernity or dominance; a fear developed throughout the late 1900s as Japan and China, in particular, grew in economic and political strength (Roh et al., pp. 2, 2015).

Japan's development as a technological threat to the West occurred concurrent to the fetishization of Japan by cyberpunk theorists and artists. Within the age of techno-Orientalism, Japan manifested as a site of technological and futuristic innovation, but was simultaneously shrouded in ancient traditions and mystery. Japan is thus not only configured as Alien to the West, but also inherently technological and cyborgian in essence as Orientalism transforms into techno-Orientalism (Sohn, 2008).

The ways in which techno-Orientalism manifests in Asia are predicated on Cold War logics, a kind of Western militarized violence. Jodi Kim (2010) finds in *Ends of Empire* that the Cold War brought spatial and temporal distinctions for racialized Asian bodies via proxy wars. The United States' relationship with Asian nations is overdetermined by the

events of that era: “The Cold War, as a geopolitical, cultural, and epistemological project of gendered racial formation and imperialism undergirding U.S. global hegemony” (Kim, 2010, p. 4). The United States’ investment in nations like South Korea, Japan, and Vietnam is predicated on Western interests in the geopolitical sphere. The United States rebuilt Japan after World War II as a means of gaining capital and hegemonic power, which is a neo-imperialist and gendered project that undergirds U.S.-Japan relations. Okinawa is a focal point for empires to collide—Japan’s settlement and the US military occupation—both of which have brought gender-based violence to indigenous Okinawans (Yoneyama, 2015). The racialized, gendered dynamic produces a taxonomy of Asian subjectivity in that Asians are tools for the West. Within hegemonic systems, Asian women are pushed to the periphery of Empire. Their subservience and domination are used to further neo-colonial, white, hegemonic, masculine interests, which is evident in the advent of comfort women and the military sex industry (Yoneyama, 2015). Western nations, specifically white men, are invested in Asia because they perceive themselves as “saving” Asian women from an Orientalized depiction of violent Asian men, which propagates a racialized and heteronormative notion of Asia (Park, 2012). The political and economic rise of Asian principalities such as China, Japan, and India transform Oriental epistemologies via a disruption of white hegemonic power. In the attempt of Asian nations to secure capital, security anxieties manifest from white fears of emasculation or the loss of power. In a discursive response to maintain international white supremacy, a new form of othering occurs (Park, 2012; Agathangelou, 2016).

Thus, Cold War logics spectrally transform, haunt, and underlie techno-Orientalism. Asian subjectivity is always within a state of flux or being and exists in nonlinear spatio-temporalities as a result of Western modernities:

the Cold War between capitalism and communism is actually a “civil war” within the selfsame Western

modernity. As Odd Arne Westad argues, both the United States and the Soviet Union saw themselves as the successors of Western modernity and, the Cold War was waged over which one would be the sole rightful successor, and would thus be able to articulate its own conception of Western modernity and attempt to universalize it. (Kim, 2010, p. 24)

The spectral violence that manifests in Cold War logics, techno-Orientalism, and racial capitalism finds its origin in modernity itself. Thus, the Cold War is a lynchpin for the neoliberal era. The revitalization of specific Asian nations becomes a means of securing new means of neoliberal production. Asian countries, specifically in Southeast Asia, are locked in Cold War temporalities due to their history of colonization and neo-colonial geopolitical relationship with the West.<sup>5</sup> Yet within new technologized nations, racial capitalism produces industries such as sweatshops and call centers, equating Asian subjectivity with technology (Roh et al., 2015).

Kim (2010) articulates a methodological praxis to challenge these systems of domination through her theorization of Asian American cultural production:

Asian American culture as also engaging in a politics of refusal. In refusing the seductive will to total knowledge or revelation of the “truth” of the “Asian American experience,” what it means to be Asian American, or what the United States “really did” in Asia during the Cold War, Asian American culture enact what in anthropological term has been called “ethnographic refusal” (Kim, 2010, p. 6)

Although Kim’s (2010) work is germane to notions of America, it is also produced through a transnational lens. Applying her work to the Asiatic Diaspora as a whole, we

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<sup>5</sup> For more historical context about Southeast Asia and refugees refer to Yen Le Espiritu’s book *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refugees* (2014) and Judy Tzu-Chun Wu’s book *Radicals on the Road: Internationalism, Orientalism, and Feminism During the Vietnam Era* (2013).

begin to understand how we can collectively work to produce counter-hegemonic resistance. Additionally, as Asian scholars located within the United States, our frame of analysis cannot be separated from our positionality which begins these points of inquiry. Diaspora produces a condition of melancholia from loss which can be described as a process of subjectivization because loss is an overdetermined sense of self (Eng, 2010). Diasporic Asian cultural production thus rejects and critiques gendered and racialized quotidian violence. It is a refusal to become respectable and docile subjects. It is a refusal to have Asians be flattened and made into technocratic tools. It is a refusal to be integrated within liberal multicultural institutions. It is a refusal to be consumed by the white masculine hegemonic gaze. Furthermore, it attempts to bridge, build, and empower Asians across many geographic locations brought by diaspora. Diasporic Asian cultural production attempts to build transnational solidarity. Transnationality, here, comes from Lisa Yoneyama (2015) in *Cold War in Ruins*:

...transnationality means much more than mere movements across nation-states, borders, or exchanges among multiple national actors and locations. It comprises of insurgent memories, counterknowledge, and inauthentic identities that have been regimented by the discourse and institution center on nation-state. (p. 7)

Such cultural production is a “productive refusal.” Transnationalism is about producing radical connections within diaspora and across national borders through counter-hegemonic praxis; it is about the ability to produce new forms of sociality and liberatory visions for such a heterogeneous group. For Sawayama, transnationality is rooted in her production of “inauthentic” code which is scripted by Western modernity and diaspora.

## Rina Sawayama and Asian Feminist Resistance

Rina Sawayama is a young emerging Japanese British artist. She was born in Niigata, Japan. She later moved to London with her family where she continued her education. Sawayama studied sociology, political science, and psychology at Cambridge University in London. Like many other students of color at a predominantly white institution, she felt the brunt of racist attacks from stereotypes such as the forever foreigner:

When people found out that I was a home student, they did [not] know what to do. That was the first ever time that I really encountered white privilege and how people viewed me. When I [realized] that you can work as hard as you want but you will still get knocked down, that was really heartbreaking. (Davies, 2018)

Yet, she remained in school because she felt as if it made her family proud — a feeling of indebtedness many Asians have pertaining to family. Thus, she turned to music for catharsis (Myers, 2017).

Her music is produced within the frame of healing and finding new modes of social life within diaspora. Sawayama sought inspiration for music in J-pop, yet the current state of the genre could not describe her Asian feminist identity. It was as if she had to be hyper-sexualized like the girl group AK-B48, or infantilized-like singer Kyary Pamyu Pamyu, so she looked to the 90's J-pop queen Utada Hikaru (Kim, 2017; Davies, 2018). Utada's electric beats became the anthems of infamous J-RPG fantasy games Kingdom Hearts and Final Fantasy, which Sawayama would play to escape reality. When speaking about her music, Sawayama states, "People's ideas about the future are so reductive [...] What about the actual content of your music? How are you addressing any of our actual lived futures?" (Clarke, 2017). Sawayama's use of technology is an effective assertion of her fantasy of new modes sociality in Asian women that are no longer bound by the white hegemonic



masculine gaze. It can be categorized as a new wave of Asian feminism. Thus, her music is an act of diasporic Asian cultural production; it is a speculative fiction which re-appropriates techno-Orientalist epistemologies for her survival and liberation.

Sawayama's music videos, futuristic aesthetic, and lyricism deconstructs the West's normalization of Asian women's subservience. In "Cyber Stockholm Syndrome," she sings about her personal relationship with technology as a site of solidarity and support, specifically singing, "Came here on my own / But I start to feel alone / Better late than never so I'll be alright / Happiest whenever I'm with you online" (Sawayama, 2017). Here, she also demonstrates how she found an escape from white supremacy through music and the cyber world. Specifically, this song was a project of catharsis to escape whiteness in a different world (Clarke, 2017; Myers, 2017). This production confronts how the cyber realm is traditionally encoded as a sphere of white men's power as they control narratives of development, innovation, and technological "progress," establishing technocratic, intangible spaces of dominance. Sawayama's performativity thus becomes a means to subvert or "hack" the gendered racial formation forced upon Asian women. Hacking, here, "offers an eccentric mode of expression, a means to rupture[...]symbolic currencies and tendencies[...]which can be then decoded or scrambled" (Bui, 2014). Sawayama's "hacking" of techno-Orientalism is a process of unintelligibility that creates new modes of sociality in that her performance deconstructs Western norms imposed on Asian women. This emerges as people are unable to auditorily grasp and categorize her music. Hacking is produced from her sense of hybridity. She hacks the dragon lady/lotus blossom binary imposed on Asian women. She hacks the West/East binary via the production of diaspora.

In *A Cyborg Manifesto*, Donna Haraway (1991) expands upon how technology can be utilized as a means of subversion writing, "coded texts through which we engage in

the play of writing and reading the world” (p. 152). For Haraway, the cyborg exists in the liminal space between human and technology, which is similar to the configuration of Asians in a techno-Orientalist framework (Haraway, 1991; Roh et al, 2015). Here, the cyborg disturbs a Western understanding of what does/does not constitute the human self by disrupting normative forms of embodiment, subjectivity, and sociality (Haraway, 1991).

In her utilization of cyborgism in the music video for “Cyber Stockholm Syndrome,” Sawayama breaks the boundaries between what is technological and what is human, a subversion of the technologization of Asiatic bodies and a form of self-empowerment (Bui, 2014; Haraway, 1991). Sawayama becomes cyborgian through the digitization of her body and surroundings (her steampunk aesthetic, the futuristic background surrounding the car, and the scripting of binary code across her face), which operate as a manifestation of techno-Orientalist logics as she becomes one with technology the same way Asiatic bodies are digitized in the 21st century. Her choice to physically embody technology is thus an instance of overidentification used to disrupt the Occidental gaze and subvert techno-Orientalist norms. In *Digitizing Race*, Lisa Nakamura (2008) highlights the simultaneous debilitating and liberating use of technology on and by Asian bodies. In relation to race neutrality and the erasure of racial violence in the West, Nakamura (2008) states that “the ‘cyberspace model’...ignores these crucial differences. The reduction of all images to sets of binary code seems to pool them all into an undifferentiated soup of bits and bytes” (p. 7). Thus, the Western (white) relationship with technology hinges on a method of erasing difference, a model of racial neutrality that only white individuals are capable of accessing in that only white individuals can distance themselves from their race, whereas people of color are always already racialized and coded into particular stereotypes. Sawayama’s overidentification with technology, a source of Asiatic stereotyping, then, is a physical and metaphysical

embodiment that escapes the universalization of the cyber realm as understood by the West, instead using cyberspace to create her own sphere of agency.

Simultaneously, Sawayama's music disturbs racial and gendered norms, such as in the song "Valentine (What's it Gonna Be)":

[Verse 1]

Irresponsible, tired of taking control  
It's not impossible for us to have it all  
Your gendered principles were so incompatible  
But it's not impossible for us to have it all  
"Valentine (What's it Gonna Be)" (Sawayama, 2017)

Here, Sawayama directly interrogates the Western cultural production of white, heteronormative family structures that manifests during Valentine's Day, a micropolitical reflection of the West's macropolitical norms (Lowe, 2015). The line "your gendered principles were so incompatible / but it's not impossible for us to have it all" becomes an instance of Asian feminist praxis that refuses Western impositions of Asian women's subjectivity and what they are/are not allowed to "have" in terms of agency and fungibility (Sawayama, 2017). Technology is thus both a means of subjugation and a tactic of resistance; the digitization of her body and music operates in a non-linear temporality, occurring at an unknown point in time as an unknown futurity that operates outside of Western spatio-temporal logics (Bui, 2014; Chang, 2012).

In tandem with this, Sawayama's insertion of herself and her relationship to Asian feminist praxis in her music and music videos becomes a form of digitized embodiment. Edmond Chang (2012), professor of English at Ohio University, articulates how "hacking" challenges the West's framing of "cyberspace" as a site of disembodiment and distancing from personal identity. Sawayama, like other "hackers," refuses to "giv[e] into the fantasies of *disembodiment* that so often characterizes cyberspatial narratives and subjectivities[...]*we recover cyberspace as metaphor and model that encourages and embraces*

intersectionality, interconnectivity, and intertextuality” (Chang, 2012, p. 77). The Western illusion of the definition of cyberspace necessarily becomes a form of *disembodiment* within the libidinal economy: it is a place in which the manifestation of (white) furtivity — desires of power — occur, such as through the production of Western narratives of dominance over Asian countries that manifest and spread rapidly through cyberspace (Bui, 2014; Chang, 2012). Sawayama’s physical and metaphysical embodiment in her music is thus a disruption of the Western fantasy of detachment from personal identity, culture, and loss. Her utilization of J-pop in her hybridization of music genres is thus an attempt to reclaim cultural and identarian ties lost in the process of Asiatic diaspora (Eng, 2010). Her interweaving of J-pop with R&B and cyberpunk becomes a means of embodying and producing multiple aspects of her identity as a Japanese-British individual, a “hybridity” of Japanese and British cultures through musical exchange and contact (Lowe, 1991; Lowe, 2015). Her music is thus also a transnational challenge to Occidental socio-political norms as her work is not as strictly J-pop or normative Western genres.

### **Conclusion: Techno-Orientalist Futures of Freedom**

While techno-Orientalism is a manifestation of Western fears of Asian futurities, Sawayama’s hybridization of genres creates new visions not only of Asian feminist resistance, but also of music in its unintelligibility to the West. Sawayama’s collusion of cyberpunk with other genres confronts “what it means to be gendered and raced in an age when technology transcends...borders” (Allan, pp. 153, 2015). In this instance, Sawayama’s music “transcends” the borders dividing music genres in that her music is undefinable in a static genre. The attempt to categorize her music, then, becomes a product of whiteness that attempts to code Asian work into Western discourse. Instead, Sawayama’s work pushes the boundaries

of what constitutes music and, with it, the limits of Asian feminist resistance. In tandem with this, Sawayama writes:

[Chorus]  
Away-ay-ay I go  
See me flying in my spaceship to the moon  
Away, away from you  
Singing to my own tune  
Cause baby all I needed is time  
Time out  
“Time Out (Interlude)” (Sawayama, 2017)

Here, Sawayama’s music envisions a world and time outside of Western modernity. The lyrics imagine “flying away” from the Occident, towards a space where she can “sing to [her] own tune” by being herself without the imposition of Western norms. Tied to this, a “time out” disrupts the linear temporality imposed by modernity, instead envisaging a non-linear relationship towards time and non-normative futures. In this way, space and technology are a means of liberation for Asian Diasporic subject like Sawayama. Her fans are known as “pixels,” which allows us to participate in her performative resistance. Diasporic Asian cultural production can be future explored with other female artists, like Korean American singer and DJ Yaeji, Filipina artist K Rizz, and Japanese American singer and songwriter Mitski.

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