

***Techno-Orientalism: Imagining Asia in Speculative Fiction, History, and Media*, edited by David S. Roh, Betsy Huang, Greta A. Niu.**

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Since David Morley and Kevin Robbins termed the phrase in their 1995 essay “Techno-Orientalism: Japan Panic,” “techno-Orientalism” has come to inspire a range of scholarship on the relationship of discourses of high technology with what Colleen Lye has termed “Asiatic racial form,” particularly from the perspective of the United States and the United Kingdom. A range of other scholars have since developed the framework—such as Lisa Nakamura, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, Stephen Hong Sohn, Toshiya Ueno, among many others—but David S. Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta A. Niu’s *Techno-Orientalism: Imagining Asia in Speculative Fiction, History, and Media* represents the most ambitious attempt to crystalize techno-Orientalism beyond a mode of stereotyping, aiming to elevate it to the status of an analytic. Roh, Huang, and Niu have curated a broad collection of interdisciplinary essays that demonstrate the potential of techno-Orientalism, either as a epistemic-racial project or as a strategy of reappropriation.

Techno-Orientalism’s task is principally definitional, elucidating techno-Orientalism as “the phenomenon of imagining Asia and Asians in hypo- or hypertechnological terms in cultural productions and political discourse” (2). The text primarily (but not exclusively) focuses on US perceptions of East Asia, departing from both the UK’s perception of Japan found in Morley and Robbins, as well as Europe’s description of the Middle East in Edward Saïd’s foundational

Orientalism. But like its predecessors, *Techno-Orientalism* is less concerned with producing an area studies project than it is describing a discursive tendency, a broader *dispositif* of otherness. In this regard, it has long been tempting to regard techno-Orientalism as merely “Orientalism, but with technology,” but taken as a whole, this volume gestures towards a heuristic depth to techno-Orientalism beyond what would seem to be a cosmetic addition to Saïd’s well-worn critique.

This is in spite of the fact that the notion of the “techno” is not consistent throughout the text. Although Roh, Huang, and Niu’s version of techno-Orientalism inherits Saïd’s core premise—“Orientalism is a style of thought based on an ontological and epistemological distinction between ‘the Orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the Occident’ (Saïd 2)—the editors depart from Saïd in establishing techno-Orientalism as more dynamic, bidirectional, future-oriented, and most importantly, globalist. As the editors write in the introduction, “while Orientalism defines a modern West by producing an oppositional and premodern east, techno-Orientalism symmetrically yet contradictorily completes this project by creating a collective, futurized Asia to further affirm the West’s centrality” (7). The “techno” of techno-Orientalism, then, comes to signal Orientalism’s relationship to economic globalization and to a form of temporal asymmetry: an Asianness characterized by the juxtaposition of cultural retrograde with technical hyper-advancement. However, in their conclusion, the editors, echoing Wendy Hui Kyong Chun in her 2009 essay “Race and/as Technology; or, How to Do Things With Race,” gesture to Heidegger’s articulation of *techne*, a “revealing,” which then doubles down and “completes” the work of Orientalism per se. This implies that Saïd’s Orientalism was *not techne*—perhaps an *episteme* instead—and that techno-Orientalism bears an element of

practice that Saïd's Orientalism did not (which is contentious, given Saïd's insistence on the material outcomes of Orientalist thought).

Yet, many of the essays nevertheless display a critical potential for techno-Orientalism, which is a feat considering the editors' choice to prioritize breadth over depth in the curation of this volume: almost every chapter is a mere twelve pages long. The horizontality of *Techno-Orientalism* is double-edged; although each essay frequently ends right as its author reaches the beginning of a profound point, the diversity of essays pays off, extending the critical reach of techno-Orientalism inventively far. The book is divided into two sections: the first nine chapters encompass the "Iterations and Instantiations" section, focused primarily on representational and historical examples of techno-Orientalist otherness across media starting with the beginning of the 20th century. The next six comprise the "Reappropriations and Recuperations" section, which focuses on Asian and Asian diasporic deployments of Asian futurity, as well as reparative readings of techno-Orientalist texts (such as Julie Ha Tran's recuperation of William Gibson's Bridge Trilogy). Disciplinarily, the essays range from historical-archival, to literary historical materialist, visual studies, media studies, and of course, the technocultural.

Many of the strongest essays are those that rigorously interrogate the relationship between the "Asian" and the "technological" within Euro/North American cultural imaginations. A line from Victor Bascara's essay "*Looking Backward, from 2019 to 1882*" makes a notably arresting claim to this effect: "Orientalism can... be paralleled to robotics, in that both are rationales for extracting value by discursively producing objects against which subjecthood is defined" (58-59). Similarly, Seo-Young Chu's "I, Stereotype: Detained in the Uncanny Valley"

suggests that the “uncanny valley”—Masahiro Mori’s notion of feeling utterly disturbed at the humanoid or android that is almost but not quite human—intersects with techno-Orientalist “yellow peril” depictions of Asian bodies in the U.S. in the mid-twentieth century. The more historically-leaning essays in the first half of the book also make the intervention of applying techno-Orientalism to the military apparatus; Kenneth Hough’s “Demon Courage and Dread Engines,” for example, describes U.S. reactions to the Russo-Japanese War as a form of proto-techno-Orientalism that focused Japanophobia primarily in Japan’s sudden ascent into military-industrial supremacy. Sometimes, the “techno” refers to the medium itself, as it does in Steve Choe and Se Young Kim’s “Never Stop Playing: *StarCraft* and Asian Gamer Death,” a compelling examination of the varying racial valences of white American videogame play (as healthy leisure) and Asian videogame play (as excessive, monstrous, and suicidal).

Still, some essays eschew techno-Orientalism per se in favor of critiquing (or redeeming) Asian futurity, whose relationship to techno-Orientalism is not entirely clear. Incidentally, this is to the volume’s benefit; perhaps the most astonishing essay of the entire volume is Aimee Bahng’s “Cruel Optimism of Asian Futurity and the Reparative Practices of Sonny Liew’s *Malinky Robot*,” a queer-globalist reading of Liew’s comic series depicting the science fictionalized margins of neoliberalized Singapore. Belonging to the second section of the book, Bahng’s essay effortlessly harmonizes visual, literary, queer, and economic-materialist lenses to capture Liew’s ability to intervene into the discourses of Singapore’s hypercapitalist economy of speculation. It is difficult to say whether Bahng’s essay is, strictly speaking, a critique of techno-Orientalism in the way that the aforementioned ones are, except that the Asians in *Malinky Robot* exist in a science fictionalized version of Singapore. Yet, the inclusion of this essay and

others in the second section implicitly beg the question: is techno-Orientalism still techno-Orientalism (or Orientalism) without the Western gaze?

Roh, Huang, and Niu ultimately seem ambivalent on this point; techno-Orientalism can operate as a heuristic for the age of global capital, but techno-Orientalism ultimately remains a “technology” of containment. Despite previous essays indicating the redemptive, reappropriated potential of techno-Orientalism and/or Asian futurity, the editors conclude the text with a pessimistic assessment of techno-Orientalism as “a form of pathology, necessitated by the ‘Rising East’ rhetoric and rationalized by the neoliberal logic of (Asian) humans as mortal engines of modernity and economic growth” (226). Although not inaccurate, the book’s conclusion seems slightly at odds with the critical potential and breadth of the essays that precede it, which altogether seem to suggest that techno-Orientalism, as a “technology” of knowledge, may in fact have application outside of the “West,” and perhaps, even removed from the so-called “Orient.” Nevertheless, Roh, Huang, and Niu’s collection remains vital in an age of magnified surveillance and racialization, and unambiguously establishes that the critique of techno-Orientalism is both imperative and here to stay.

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