



---

Oriental Cities, Postmodern Futures: "Naked Lunch, Blade Runner", and "Neuromancer"

Author(s): Timothy Yu

Source: *MELUS*, Winter, 2008, Vol. 33, No. 4, Alien/Asian (Winter, 2008), pp. 45-71

Published by: Oxford University Press on behalf of Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States (MELUS)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20343507>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Oxford University Press and Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States (*MELUS*) are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *MELUS*

# Oriental Cities, Postmodern Futures: *Naked Lunch*, *Blade Runner*, and *Neuromancer*

Timothy Yu

University of Toronto

When Leopold Bloom first walks out into the streets of Dublin in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, the reader is treated to a series of realistic details about this Irish urban landscape: street numbers, pavement, and the bread van from Boland's. But barely half a paragraph passes before Bloom begins to associate this urban landscape with "Someplace in the east" (57). As Bloom walks, the actual landscape of Dublin is overlaid with that of an imagined oriental city: "Walk along a strand, a strange land, come to a city gate . . . Wander through awned streets. Turbaned faces going by. Dark caves of carpet shops, big man, Turko the terrible, seated crosslegged smoking a coiled pipe" (57). Bloom's vision is, of course, built entirely on oriental clichés, as well as on images of imported commodities (carpet shops) and urban popular culture (the pantomime show of "Turko the Terrible") that are less facets of the Orient than aspects of Dublin itself with oriental associations. Although Bloom's reverie may seem constructed from whole cloth, careful parsing of the allusions shows how the Western city itself is rich in oriental signifiers; Orientalism is already part of the European urban fabric. At the heart of the modernist canon, oriental tropes prove central to the construction of modernist urban space.

But this oriental Dublin is also remarkable for its self-consciousness as a literary construction, as Bloom draws a distinction between his reverie and the "actual" East: "Probably not a bit like it really. Kind of stuff you read: in the track of the sun. Sunburst on the titlepage." Bloom not only acknowledges the role of orientalist travelogue in constructing his vision of the city, but he even pinpoints his exact source: Frederick Thompson's *In the Track of the Sun* (1893). This image of the oriental sun is associated with fantasy and error: "What Arthur Griffith said about the headpiece over the *Freeman* leader: a homerule sun rising up in the northwest from the laneway behind the bank of Ireland" (57). Thus Joyce's orientalized Dublin, while demonstrating the degree to which Orientalism already, at the beginning of the twentieth century, structures the Western city, exposes urban Orientalism as a literary fiction.

The complex role of oriental tropes in such modernist imaginings of urban spaces prefigures the prominent role Orientalism—particularly

visions of East Asia—will play in the imagining of the postmodern city. In works of science fiction such as Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* or William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, cities of the postmodern future are placed in Asia or in an orientalized America, characterized by freewheeling commercial and cultural exchange and interracial contact. The postmodern city of science fiction, while sharing some of the attributes of the globalized, transnational, borderless space of postmodernity apotheosized in the notion of "cyberspace," remains racialized and marked (however superficially) by history, exposing the degree to which Western conceptions of postmodernity are built upon continuing fantasies of—and anxieties about—the Orient.

Following Fredric Jameson, many theorists associate postmodernism (as a cultural phenomenon) with the structure of late capitalism, frequently characterized as "multinational" or "global" capitalism. Among the characteristics of this regime of capitalism is the increasingly transnational operation of capital, facilitated by multinational corporations operating across the borders of nation-states. Some theorists argue that such operations increasingly subordinate the nation-state to the concerns of the global corporation. These socioeconomic developments have also led to theories of "cultural globalization," in which national cultures are destabilized by and subsumed into deterritorialized flows of media and cultural commodities.<sup>1</sup> These models of global cultural exchange are epitomized by the notions of cultural hybridity that have become increasingly prominent in analyses of contemporary culture.<sup>2</sup>

Despite postmodernism's allegedly global scope, and despite the insistence of Jameson and others that postmodernism is "the internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination" (Jameson 5), postmodernism has for many writers and theorists come to be associated strongly with, even grounded in, Asia, particularly in Japan and China. This phenomenon is visible in academic criticism and theory as well as in American popular culture. In accounting for the socioeconomic phenomenon of postmodernity, many American commentators have identified its origins not as Western but as Eastern, as seen in the anxious discourse around Japanese and Asian economic emergence in the 1980s. Books such as Ezra Vogel's *Japan as Number One* (1979) identified Asian nations and corporations as the engine of the postmodern economic order, to be studied and emulated by America, at the same time that a wave of popular "Japan-bashing" revealed fears of Asian economic hegemony and reverse colonization. In the 1990s, many students of Asian political economy and culture came to see the diasporic, transnational movements and cultural hybridity of Asian subjects (and Asian capital) as exemplars of the postmodern condition.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps even more striking, however, is the deployment of oriental tropes by theorists whose object of study is not Asia at all, but postmodernism. In *Critical Terrains: French and British Orientalisms* (1992), Lisa Lowe examines the fantasies of China created by Julia Kristeva and Roland Barthes; these imagined Chinas, Lowe argues, continue to be animated by orientalist stereotypes of otherness and femininity, serving as empty frameworks through which Kristeva and Barthes can imagine an escape from Western hegemony. More recently, Bruno Latour's *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993), which presents a critique of modernity and attempts to articulate a "nonmodern" position appropriate to the contemporary situation, posits a realm of "hybrids" existing between nature and culture and repressed by the framework of modernity. Latour's project is to recognize and map the realm of hybrids, which he characterizes as "the Middle Kingdom, as vast as China and as little known" (48). Latour, like Barthes and Kristeva, erases China in order to appropriate its orientalized position as unknown other; China is refigured as a realm of hybridity which Latour recolonizes and enfranchises in the course of his analysis.

What we see in Barthes, Kristeva, and Latour is not simply the haphazard deployment of oriental tropes. Rather, these fantasies of Asia become the enabling fictions of postmodernity; the Orient is the necessary space within which imagining alternatives to Western modernity becomes possible. But can the West emerge uncontaminated from its journey to the East? The articulation of postmodernity through oriental tropes, whether in the Japanese multinational, the diasporan Chinese "astronaut," or the blank Middle Kingdom of Latour, has led to the possibility of displacement: the alienation and anxiety generated by the structures of global capitalism can be articulated as a racialized fear of the Orient in dystopian fantasies of miscegenation and cultural mongrelization. Jameson's reading of popular conspiracy theory as "a distorted figuration of . . . the whole world system of a present-day multinational capitalism" (37) might be applied to these new Western deployments of Orientalism, as the Orient and race become metonyms for a new, unthinkable stage of capitalism.

I approach this intersection of the Orient and global capitalism through depictions of the postmodern city, because it is at such sites—increasingly thought of both by theorists and by writers as "global cities"—that the deterritorializing movements of global capital can be localized and to some degree historicized. Unlike the media-driven, depersonalized landscapes of telecommunication and cyberspace, the city remains a space of interpersonal contact (however mediated) where the human, social realities of late capitalism can be imagined.<sup>4</sup> In such works as William S. Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*, Gibson's *Neuromancer*, and Scott's film *Blade Runner*, such interactions often take the form of racialized conflicts against oriental-

ized backdrops (overlaid in Burroughs with the threat of miscegenation), revealing the role of the Orient in the postmodern imaginary. While such orientalized tropes continue to appear in more recent works, from Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* to the *Matrix* film trilogy, I have chosen *Naked Lunch*, *Blade Runner*, and *Neuromancer*, which span the late 1950s to the mid-1980s, as foundational texts that establish an orientalist imaginative framework for the period of postmodernity's emergence. In their attempts to localize the operations of global capitalism, these portraits of the postmodern city expose the extent to which the imagining of postmodernity has been grounded in Orientalism and racial anxiety. While these urban fantasies portray fears of postmodernity through the threat of a reverse colonization of the West by the East, at times they also propose in response a recolonization that reasserts the hegemony of the white Western subject.

The genre of science fiction is also a particularly appropriate place in which to explore the construction of the postmodern imaginary. Jameson is one of a number of theorists to see science fiction—and, in particular, the subgenre of “cyberpunk” epitomized by *Blade Runner* and Gibson's work—as “the supreme *literary* expression if not of postmodernism, then of late capitalism itself” (419). Jameson understands science fiction as the postmodern inversion of the historical novel, as a response to the “waning or the blockage of that historicity” characteristic of the modern period (284). In this sense, science fiction plays a crucial role in the imagining of postmodernity, insofar as it seeks to comprehend the unrepresentable totality of global capitalism through conspiracy theory and “high-tech paranoia” (Jameson 38). But we can also understand this as part of the ideological operation of a science fiction understood not as the imagining of a utopian future but as a reification of the present. The temporal displacement of the postmodern city thus colludes with the displacement of postmodernity onto the Orient, generating a narrative of postmodern origins grounded in modern orientalist anxieties.

In Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* (1959), Interzone is the prototype for the orientalized postmodern city whose development I trace.<sup>5</sup> *Naked Lunch* appears at the very moment of the “radical break” that Jameson identifies with the emergence of postmodernism (1). Understanding *Naked Lunch* as an artifact of an emergent cultural form may help explain the unusual richness and ambivalence of its depiction of the rising postmodern city, which is a space of both liberation and oppression, of ecstasy and fear.<sup>6</sup> The novel also emerges at the height of the Cold War, to whose oppressive ideologies *Naked Lunch* is often read as a response. Jonathan Paul Eburne, for example, argues that in its fragmented narrative and its portrayal of the uncontainable body, the book attempts to “contest the very

discursive practices of Cold War-era identity configuration themselves” (54). But *Naked Lunch* was also published at the end of a decade when the locus of the Cold War had shifted from Europe to Asia, at a moment between the close of one ostensibly anti-communist war in Korea and the opening of another in Vietnam.<sup>7</sup> American foreign policy became, in the words of Lewis McCarroll Purifoy, increasingly “China-obsessed,” and containing this new “yellow peril” became central to US diplomatic and military strategy (Dobbs 73). The notion of “containment” that dominated US Cold War strategy was increasingly threatened by the specter of the massive Chinese armies that had driven back American troops in Korea.

In this context, Eburne’s observation that Burroughs’s depiction of Interzone “creates a site at which Burroughs’s ‘self-othering’ problematic becomes racialized” (75) takes on further significance: if Interzone is racialized, it is also orientalized to a degree not seen in the writings of Burroughs’s contemporaries. When writers such as Jack Kerouac or Norman Mailer use racial otherness to subvert the ideologies of white, middle-class America, they tend to move along the axis of US black/white race relations, as in Mailer’s figure of the “White Negro” hipster. What sets Burroughs’s vision apart—and what makes it a proto-postmodern vision—is the degree to which his racialized notion of identity and urban space is transnational, built upon free global exchange and set not in the American context (New York City, for example) but in the Orient itself, based on Burroughs’s Tangier. *Naked Lunch* taps into the power of foreign as well as domestic threats to unsettle American identity; it is prescient in its identification of Asia as the increasing (perceived) source of those threats in the post-World War II years.

*Naked Lunch* as a whole is a carnival of drugs, sex, and commerce grounded in the futuristic space of Interzone. This city, utopian and dystopian by turns, is envisioned, as its name suggests, primarily as a space of freewheeling exchange—commercial, sexual, and national. In this, it resembles the emerging nodes of global late capitalism. But Interzone is also an orientalized zone of intersection between East and West—an urban space built upon oriental tropes even more explicitly (and grotesquely) than Joyce’s Dublin. Interzone is an aggressively racialized space where trade and miscegenation seem to operate in parallel:

Panorama of the City of Interzone. . . . The blood and substance of many races, Negro, Polynesian, Mountain Mongol, Desert Nomad, Polyglot Near East, Indian—races as yet unconceived and unborn, combinations not yet realized pass through your body. . . . The Composite City where all human potentials are spread out in a vast silent market. (96)



It is impossible to place Interzone geographically: it seems, initially, to be located in America—"Opening bars of East St. Louis Toodleoo"—but its features and surroundings seem oriental and tropical—"Minarets, palms, moutons, jungle" (96). In fact, some of Burroughs's framing remarks suggest that Interzone represents not simply a neutral meeting point of East and West but rather the invasion and contamination of the West by the East: "The room takes on aspect of Near East whorehouse with blue walls and tasseled lamps. . . . I feel myself turning into a Negress, the black color silently invading my flesh. . . . Convulsions of lust. . . . My legs take on a well rounded Polynesian substance" (99). This site of exchange clearly operates under an oriental aegis, as epitomized by the Chinese Chief of Police.

Interzone is a metaphor for a postmodern space in which all borders—bodily, national, racial—have collapsed: "All houses in the City are joined" (97). While this collapse of borders means a liberation into free sex and drugs, it also marks out Interzone as the realm of late capitalist commerce, carried on in spaces like the "Meet Café" and watched over by mongrelized, orientalized, entrepreneurial figures like Salvador Hassan O'Leary. Hassan, who presides over the space of interracial sexual exchange known as "Hassan's Rumpus Room," is a kind of trickster figure whose exact racial origins are obscure but who retains an untraceable exoticism ("In moments of excitement Salvador is apt to lapse into broken English. His accent at such moments suggests an Italian origin. He reads and speaks Etruscan" [142]). His name positions him as an outrageous mongrel, and he seems capable of adopting almost any political, national, or racial identity ("He has held 23 passports and been deported 49 times"). Hassan represents every imaginable "other"—Italian, Irish, Oriental, Latino, criminal, homosexual—yet he also seems to represent the emergent power of the late-capitalist order: "His eyes are normally invisible behind black glasses. He looks sinister and enigmatic—his gestures and mannerisms are not yet comprehensible—like the secret police of a larval state" (142). Hassan is the embodiment of a (racially) hybrid postmodernity, whose liberatory/oppressive power remains grounded in orientalist tropes.

Borrowing from Raymond Williams, we can read Interzone as the imagined site of an "emergent" postmodernism, one whose oppositional potential has not yet been entirely incorporated into the dominant culture (416). At the same time, we can identify the Orientalism of Burroughs's construction as a "residual" structure of the modern—a conservative force that interprets the unthinkable totality of an emergent late capitalism through the framework of orientalized racism. Burroughs's explicit model for Interzone is a residual one, a nostalgic, oriental vision of "Tangier in the old international days: it was an Inter-Zone, it was no country" (Eburne 76). But

by projecting this vision of Tangier into the postmodern future—positing it as “A place where the unknown past and the emergent future meet in a vibrating soundless hum” (99)—Burroughs mobilizes these tropes of the Orient and race in the service of an oppositional project that diagnoses and undermines the emergent late-capitalist order. Operating in a Cold War culture of containment in which national and racial boundaries are policed vigilantly, Burroughs turns the vocabulary of containment against itself in the most subversive ways by sexualizing international contact and thematizing miscegenation.

The liberatory/oppressive nature of this postmodern space is emblemized by Burroughs’s treatment of drug use and sex, where the pleasure and visionary potential of each is linked to grotesquerie and death. Drugs generate the visionary state necessary for the book’s creation: Burroughs describes Interzone as “written in a state of Yage intoxication,” with Yage being an exotic drug “indigenous to the Amazon region” (99). Hassan’s Rumpus Room, dubbed “Freedom Hall” by its proprietor, is a space of interracial sexual exchange with “no holes barred” (72); homosexual couplings between black, Chinese, Javanese, and American boys lead to “weird high wail[s] of unendurable delight” (71). But the sexual frenzy culminates in a strange utopian moment, as the rumpus room becomes the microcosm of a harmonious universe:

Pictures of men and women, boys and girls, animals, fish, birds, the copulating rhythm of the universe flows through the room, a great blue tide of life. Vibrating, soundless hum of deep forest—sudden quiet of cities when the junky copes. A moment of stillness and wonder. Even the Commuter buzzes clogged lines of cholesterol for contact. (74)

This vision—of the rhythms of (interracial) sex integrated into the everyday activities of “people eating talking bathing” (97)—is the utopian dimension of Interzone, an extension of the liberating high of Yage: “Images fall slow and silent like snow. . . . Serenity. . . . All defenses fall . . . everything is free to enter or to go out. . . . Fear is simply impossible . . . . A beautiful blue substance flows into me . . . . I see an archaic grinning face like a South Pacific mask” (99).

But this ecstatic, borderless, postmodern utopia existing at the height of intoxication and orgasm seems to be possible, as the last phrase suggests, only under an oriental aegis, when the East invades the West. The racial and geopolitical metaphor for Burroughs’s envisioned subversion of boundaries is the inversion of relations between West and East; in Hassan’s Rumpus Room, under an oriental eye, it is always the white boys who are penetrated by Orientals and blacks. What disrupts the party is the American desire to reassert control, with the arrival of “A horde of lust-mad American



women” who attempt to restore the heterosexual order (75).

Indeed, Burroughs continually demonstrates his awareness that the postmodern order, despite its utopian moments, promises to be dominated by Euro-American hegemony. Looming behind figures like Hassan, the oriental chameleon and entrepreneur, are figures such as Dr. Benway, “a manipulator and coordinator of symbol systems, an expert on all phases of interrogation, brainwashing and control” who seeks to impose order on the free-love “Freeland Republic” (20). Benway represents the regulatory operations of the postmodern state, which operates not through torture and murder (Benway has abolished concentration camps) but through psychological and cultural control—turning the liberatory effects of sex and narcotics to regulatory ends. The potential for the reassertion of Euro-American control over postmodern exchange can be seen in Benway’s control over Iris, a “half Chinese and half Negro” hybrid (109). As a product of the liberatory miscegenation that Burroughs celebrates, Iris ought to be a model of the newly mobile postmodern subject; instead, she has become “one of Benway’s projects,” drug-addicted and subsisting only on tea and sugar. Iris proves to be not simply a perverse medical experiment, but also an attempt to recuperate postmodernity as “American” and to reassert American hegemony: “Iris is a wholesome American cunt” (109). By effacing Iris’s hybridity and difference and placing her under biomedical regulation, Benway performs the recolonizing work of appropriation and containment that will become crucial in American imaginings of the postmodern Orient.

*Naked Lunch* broadens the reach of “Orientalism” from the Middle Eastern fantasies of Joyce’s Bloom to include East Asia and a polyglot, mongrelized America; in a move of reverse colonization, the East has invaded East St. Louis. The penetration of the West by the East is even more dramatically realized in Scott’s 1982 film *Blade Runner*, in which the Los Angeles of 2019 is a profoundly orientalized space where enormous Japanese ads hover over streets with Chinese street signs and Asian vendors. The genetic link between Burroughs and *Blade Runner* is not simply incidental: Rolando J. Romero notes that the term “blade runner”—which does not appear in the Philip K. Dick novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* on which *Blade Runner* is based—is taken from Burroughs’s 1979 text *Blade Runner (A Movie)*. But in Gibson’s postmodern urban space, far more dystopic and decayed than Burroughs’s vision, the racial and national hierarchies implied by Burroughs’s Benway are vigorously reasserted and spatialized: street life is Asian, while a largely white police force moves above it in airships, and a white corporate hierarchy, epitomized in the pyramids of the Tyrell Corporation, remains insulated in its elevated interiors.

In part, we can understand this cityscape as a product of a later phase of late capitalism, one in which the liberatory potentials divined by Burroughs have been incorporated and the dominance of multinational capital has been consolidated. But we must also understand it as a product of a decade during which the Euro-American discourse of global capitalism becomes increasingly localized within—or displaced upon—orientalist anxiety, most crudely expressed by American “Japan-bashing” of the mid-1980s. Although Burroughs’s Interzone partakes of Orientalism, his is still a residual, modern Orientalism that takes the Near East as its locale; the Orientalism of *Blade Runner*, and of the 1980s more generally, is a postmodern Orientalism whose site has shifted to the emerging economies of the so-called “Pacific Rim,” particularly to Japan.

By the late 1970s, with American involvement in Vietnam over and détente with China achieved, Cold War fear of geopolitical dominance by Communist China was giving way to fear of world economic domination by Japan. As the US struggled to recover from the economic downturn of the late 1970s, the rapidly rising trade deficit with Japan became a source of anxiety that lasted well into the late 1980s. Vogel’s *Japan as Number One* (1979) was among a number of books arguing that Japan was outcompeting the US in the global market and that its business practices, ostensibly learned from America, now provided a superior model that the US needed to emulate. An influx of Japanese investment in the US, including purchases of high-profile companies and real estate, further fanned anxieties. One popular book by George Friedman and Meredith LeBard warned of a “coming war” with Japan, while a controversial 1985 article by Theodore H. White in *The New York Times* compared Japanese business tactics to its World War II militarism.

Such economic anxieties had a striking impact on American representations of Japan in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>8</sup> Comic and racist stereotypes of the Japanese in movies such as *Gung Ho* (1985) had oriental paranoia as their flipside, with the proliferation of conspiracy theories centering on Japanese corporations. In many novels and films of the period—Michael Crichton’s *Rising Sun* (1992-93) is one example—these tropes of racism and anxiety converge to create a revived Orientalism that seeks to express and contain the anxieties of late capitalism by identifying its source in the Orient.<sup>9</sup> Crucially, such texts involve not simply representations of Japan, but the activities of Japanese business in America itself. The fears of economic invasion and colonization that led to calls for a renewed American isolationism in the 1980s are expressed by figuring America itself as the battleground between Asian and American capital—a trope that *Blade Runner* realizes in radical form by imagining the future US city as racially and culturally, though perhaps not economically, orientalized.<sup>10</sup>

The Los Angeles of *Blade Runner* can be viewed as a global city of late capitalism: it is not a site of localized production, but rather a node of global exchange. Like Burroughs's Interzone, this future Los Angeles seems to be a space of unregulated, exotic commerce; but rather than being allegorized by the exchange of sex and narcotics, postmodern commerce is explicitly figured here as the commodification of exotic (bio)technology: the hero Deckard has a piece of evidence scanned by a street vendor with an electron microscope, and the replicants' eyes are designed, manufactured, and sold from a disreputable-looking storefront labeled "Eye Works." (In an even more disturbing commodification of biotechnology, body parts are figured as food for consumption, as the eye designer Chew handles his eyes with chopsticks and the replicant Leon later "serves" a selection of eyes from a tray.) But the film's sense that this liberating postmodern exchange has been incorporated into the structures of power is signaled quite clearly in the film's title itself, taken from Burroughs's futuristic, dystopic text, *Blade Runner (A Movie)*, in which blade runners are smugglers who trade in drugs and medical equipment. Scott's appropriation of "blade runner" as a term for Deckard and his fellow bounty hunters suggests that such figures of commerce are at the center of structures of power and enforcement, moving freely above the city streets to monitor and police (and possibly kill) the populace and mediating between the street-level "little people" and corporate power.

A number of critics have noted that *Blade Runner*'s cityscape is organized vertically, built upon the contrast of the street level (whose denizens the director characterizes as "Spanish," "Oriental," and "Punk . . . some louts" [Kerman, "Technology" 17]) to the aerial pathways of the police hovercraft. High/low also maps onto interior/exterior, with Deckard's apartment safely insulated on the ninety-seventh floor, and—most radically—with Tyrell's luxurious apartment placed atop the 700-story pyramid that houses Tyrell Corporation. David Desser notes in "Race, Space, and Class: The Politics of the SF Film from *Metropolis* to *Blade Runner*" that such spatial hierarchies correspond to class hierarchies in the film (112), while David Palumbo-Liu observes that space and race are also conflated, with Asians and other non-whites relegated to street level (326). The conflation of class and racial status with physical elevation is hardly new; indeed, it has a long tradition within the genre of the science fiction film itself. Desser notes that Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* divides its social classes vertically in much the same way as *Blade Runner* (113), while George Pal's 1960 film version of H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* racializes the high/low divide by contrasting the "Aryan" Eloi, who live above ground, to the "Negroid," apelike Morlocks, who live below. But *The Time Machine*, in a foreshadowing of the ideological moves of *Blade Runner*, complicates

this dichotomy by reversing the class divide, displacing ownership and capitalist domination onto the Morlocks in what Desser characterizes as “an allegory of white fears about the third world” (116).

The spatial organization of *Blade Runner*’s Los Angeles also operates in such a contradictory manner. The link between high/low distinctions and class and race seems at first transparent: class and racial others are relegated to ground-level labor by the panoptical operations of white capitalism. Such a reading of space lies behind understandings of *Blade Runner* as a work of social commentary whose mode is fundamentally realistic—a reading put forward by Scott himself, who sees his depiction of Los Angeles as an extrapolation of current demographic and cultural trends in California:

That’s what going to happen. I think the influence in L.A. will be very Spanish, with a big cross-influence of Oriental . . . I think various groups are developing today . . . they will harden up, so that there will be religious, political, social, and just nut-case factions. And I think the police force will become a kind of paramilitary, which they nearly are now. (qtd. in Kerman, “Technology” 17)

Production executive Katherine Haber remarks that the costumers strove to “create the effect of a multi-national, multi-racial society . . . . We had tons of punks, Blacks, and Mexicans . . . a melange of every part of society you could imagine” (qtd. in Pierce 204). Readings like that of Judith B. Kerman, who applauds the “logic of the film’s extrapolation” in raising “trenchant questions about *our* world, its political economy, its technologies and its future” (“Technology” 23, emphasis added), are merely extensions of the film’s self-definition as a fundamentally realistic reflection of contemporary trends.

But the actual composition of the crowds in the street casts doubt on some of these readings. Despite Scott’s assertion that Los Angeles culture of the future will be “very Spanish,” the actual Latino presence in the film is so minimal that Romero argues that the commercial cut of the film “effectively erased the Chicano/a presence” (40).<sup>11</sup> Nearly every commentator in Kerman’s book—even those who quote the intentions of the production staff—observes that Asians make up the vast majority of the street population; nearly every street vendor Deckard interacts with is Asian, and the “Blacks and Mexicans” described by Haber are almost nowhere to be seen. In fact, the most obvious Chicano presence in the film—the policeman Gaff, played by Edward James Olmos—is refigured as an orientalized hybrid. *Blade Runner* production notes describe him as “a man of the future, a multilingual bureaucrat with oriental skin, Japanese eyes, and blue irises. He is an intellectual and a sartorial dandy” (qtd. in Kolb 156).

This Los Angeles of 2019 is not a simple extrapolation from current

California demographic trends; instead, it is an imaginary postmodern site where futurist “realism” has been replaced with oriental bodies and signifiers. In this slippage we find one answer to the strange displacement and repression of race in the main narrative of the film—a response to the question, “[W]hy introduce race into the film so conspicuously only to elide it?” (Palumbo-Liu 328). The crucial element here—an element that the verticality of high/low both highlights and seeks to elide—is not so much the mere fact of race as its particularity as oriental. The function of the oriental street life of *Blade Runner* is not to comment upon US race relations of the 1980s, but to provide the structuring fiction of postmodernity itself—a postmodernity increasingly seen as originating in, signified by, and literally built upon the Orient.

The film’s vertical axis is established in the opening sequence, an aerial view of Los Angeles lit by the flames of enormous industrial chimneys. This commanding view, like the “flyovers” that Neferti Xina Tadiar examines in contemporary Manila, converts the city into a postmodern, post-apocalyptic spectacle.<sup>12</sup> Tadiar’s association of this view with capitalist domination and state power is made explicit here with the appearance of police hovercraft as the only visible airborne objects; but the appearance of the hovercraft *below* suggests that the gaze of the state is ultimately subordinated to the white gaze, as the entire city is reflected in a blue eye in closeup. This totalizing white gaze effaces humanity and ethnicity in favor of technological spectacle. But the fact that the gaze is later understood to be that of the replicant Roy Batty, who can, like the other “skin jobs,” be read as an allegorically racialized figure, complicates this schema, suggesting that this view is accessible only to the Western eye that has somehow also been racialized.<sup>13</sup> In the narrative of *Blade Runner*, this mediation of race takes the form of oriental mediation, as both Deckard and the replicants are forced to use Asian middlemen to gain access to the heights of white corporate power.

The oriental aegis over the cityscape is revealed in the first street scene, which begins with a mid-level shot at the same height and at approximately the same altitude the police vehicles occupy. This perspective is that of men like Gaff and the police chief Bryant, as well as of Deckard when he returns to blade-runner duty. The most notable feature of this scene is an enormous electronic billboard displaying a Japanese woman in stereotypical garb and makeup repeatedly swallowing a pill and smiling; this eroticized figure of consumption is flanked by a much smaller Pan Am logo, which both links this oriental representation to American corporate power and subordinates the latter to the former (though the billboard will later display a Coca-Cola ad). By the time we reach the third level—that of the street—the scene has been almost completely orientalized: Deckard,



waiting to be served by the Asian proprietor of a sushi bar, is surrounded by neon signs with Chinese characters and by Asian faces.

If we compare this scene with Burroughs's Interzone, we can see that while both seem to be structured by Orientalism, dominated by oriental figures, and characterized by hybridity, *Blade Runner*'s Los Angeles does not have Interzone's racial and socioeconomic fluidity. Street-level commerce is almost entirely operated by Asians selling Asian commodities or, as noted above, trading in basic technologies. In this landscape, the white man, Deckard, is marginalized, unable to participate fully in the economy: he waits impatiently for a space at the sushi bar, then is unable to get the amount of food he wants. Crucial to this marginalization is linguistic exclusion: Deckard's difficulties here, as well as in the encounter with Gaff that follows, are due to his ostensible ignorance of "cityspeak," which Deckard describes as "gutter talk—Spanish, Japanese, German, what have you," and which pointedly does not include English. The composition of this "gutter talk" might, in a realist reading of the film, be seen as a vision of a multicultural US of the future; the prominent presence of Spanish in Deckard's characterization echoes Scott's assertion that L. A. culture of the future will be heavily Spanish-influenced. But in Gaff's actual dialogue, as Romero notes, no Spanish is audible; Japanese and German, with some French, seem to be the primary components. Cityspeak is less US multicultural than transnational, grounded, in fact, in those economies (Japan, European Union) that will pose the greatest competitive threat to the US in the new "global marketplace" of postmodernity. The apparent Asian monopoly over commerce embodies the reverse-colonization fears of a decade that saw the Japanese purchasing Hollywood studios and New York real estate. Presenting the Orient as the ground-level, driving force of the postmodern economy displaces responsibility for late capitalism away from the West. Put another way, the invasion of the Los Angeles streets by the Orient represents—and masks—the domination of those streets by American late-capitalist structures.

In this cityscape, the white subject is not only marginalized, but also threatened with orientalization himself. While eating, Deckard recalls his wife's nickname for him: "sushi—cold fish." Deckard tries to keep himself uncontaminated, insisting on speaking English, for example, when he understands cityspeak. But as a result he is never able to move freely through the streets; during his chase of the replicant Zhora, for instance, he is constantly pushing people out of his way and losing Zhora in the crowd. In the economy of *Blade Runner*, free circulation, at least for those who begin at street level, is dependent upon oriental mediation. For the replicants, this mediation takes place through the eye designer Chew. Chew is a subcontractor of sorts who seems to occupy the position of skilled labor in



this biotech economy, working with raw biological material—the bottom rung of the production process. But this apparent proletarianization of the Asian should not obscure the fact that Chew's intervention is necessary for the replicants to gain access to the corporate hierarchy. Though Chew himself exists at street level and cannot move vertically, his assistance is required for the replicants to gain access to their white mediator, J. F. Sebastian, who can. (Chew works on the ground floor, while Sebastian's home is a multistory building accessible only by elevator, and Sebastian's security clearance is necessary for Roy to ascend in the elevator to Tyrell's suite.) In this reassertion of racial hierarchy, the basis of the economy in the Orient is repressed as the replicants ascend the hierarchy of power.

For Deckard, oriental mediation appears in the hybrid figure of Gaff, whose role might be compared with that of Burroughs's Hassan. Like Hassan, Gaff is an upwardly mobile entrepreneur whom Deckard describes as "angling for a promotion": he aspires to, but has not achieved, the rank of blade runner, of free agent in the postmodern economy. Gaff's hybridity, while preventing him from ascending fully into the white hierarchy, allows him to move between the oriental and white realms in a way that the oriental street denizens cannot. Within the world of white power, he serves as a constant reminder of the repressed oriental foundation of the economy—a haunting presence best marked by the origami figures he leaves at key sites. Here, as (perhaps more blatantly) in Gibson's work, the Orient is reduced to its most clichéd signifiers, whose continued presence in the domain of power marks even these white enclaves as orientalized, but whose stereotyped nature reveals their fundamentally Eurocentric perspective.

As the film progresses, the Orient becomes less visible. The logic of height also becomes a logic of interiors insulated from the street—Deckard's apartment, Sebastian's home, Tyrell's penthouse—which the Orient ostensibly cannot penetrate. This teleology suggests that, as the voice-over implies, the film narrates the (re)construction of the white subject, Deckard. But the narrative continues to be haunted by the Orient. In this respect, the crucial interior of the film is not Tyrell's penthouse, but Sebastian's building, the Bradbury, the scene of the final confrontation between Deckard and Roy. While Sebastian's living quarters are insulated, the building as a whole is not, with gaps in the roof that admit the rain; the low-rise Bradbury thus presents a gradation between exterior and interior, admitting the view and sound of the street while being accessible, like the apartments of Deckard and Tyrell, only by elevator. On several occasions, usually upon someone's entry into the building, an airship, apparently the same one that advertised the Off-World Colonies earlier in the film, is visible through the roof, displaying the same Japanese woman seen earlier on the electronic billboard, accompanied by Japanese music. In the world of

*Blade Runner*, “interzone” has been reduced from an entire city to a single building (reminiscent of the unwallled houses of Burroughs’s city), but the penetration of the Orient into this space shows that the containment attempted by the narrative and spatial logic of the rest of the film is impossible, doomed to a return of the Oriental repressed.<sup>14</sup>

How are we to read this failure of the film’s apparent racial and cultural logic? On the one hand, it suggests that neo-conservative projects of racial and national containment are not feasible, given the logic of postmodernity. The film also continues to mark postmodernity, however, in its most fantastic and repressive forms (genetic engineering, artificial life, interplanetary corporate power, police-state surveillance) as fundamentally Asian, through its obsessive deployment of orientalist signifiers (the geisha face, the origami unicorn). Ultimately, the battle of postmodern subjectivity in *Blade Runner* is played out upon an oriental battlefield from which, at least in the film’s commercial cut, it may be possible for the white subject to escape, as Deckard and Rachael look down in the film’s final sequence on a pastoral landscape whose green hills are devoid of the Asian life of the city streets.<sup>15</sup>

Gibson’s “cyberpunk” novels may represent the endpoint of the development I chart here. A number of postmodern theorists have seen cyberpunk as the most characteristic literary manifestation of postmodernism; as noted above, Jameson has called Gibson’s work “the supreme *literary* expression if not of postmodernism, then of late capitalism itself” (419). But the slippage in Jameson’s remark that identifies Gibson not with the cultural manifestation of late capitalism but with the mode of production itself suggests that the work of incorporation, seen in the loss of postmodernism’s liberatory aspects from *Naked Lunch* to *Blade Runner*, is, in Gibson’s work, complete.<sup>16</sup> In this reading, Gibson’s novels are almost entirely ideological in their operation, representing and evoking the situation of late capitalism, but displacing responsibility for that situation onto a massive conspiratorial network—“the matrix”—that is ultimately marked as oriental.

Gibson readily acknowledges links of influence between himself, Burroughs, and *Blade Runner*. Indeed, Gibson claims he left a screening of *Blade Runner* because Scott’s cityscape “looked so much like the inside of my head” (qtd. in Olsen 8). This introjection of the postmodern landscape emblemized Gibson’s method, and is even more striking in his use of Asia, especially Japan. Lance Olsen notes that Japan “dominates [Gibson’s] fictional universe,” providing not only settings for action but a continual “background noise” of signifiers (21). But Gibson did not visit Japan until after his *Sprawl* trilogy (*Neuromancer* [1984], *Count Zero* [1986], and *Mona Lisa Overdrive* [1988]) had been completed. Until then, his only con-

tact with Japan had been through 1950s comic books and Japanese students and tourists in Vancouver.<sup>17</sup> Olsen suggests that for Gibson, as for many Americans in the 1980s, Japan was the future embodied, “tomorrow happening today” (22). But if Japan (and Asia more generally) functions as the space in which imagining postmodernity is possible—as it does for theorists such as Barthes, Kristeva, and Latour—that space is still marked by Orientalism and racism, as well as by contemporary American fears of economic domination by the East.<sup>18</sup> We must read Gibson’s work, then, as I have read *Blade Runner*: not as an extrapolation of the present, but as an attempt to imagine the postmodern itself, based not upon “reality” but upon orientalized anxiety. What some readers have seen as factual “errors” in Gibson’s depiction of technology—grounded in his well-known lack of hands-on technical knowledge—further suggests that Gibson’s interest is less in technical realism than in the “exotic” imaginative context that conditions postmodernity.<sup>19</sup> The Orient is not an incidental setting in Gibson’s work, but a necessary fiction that structures the entire narrative, “haunting” the action in much the same way it does in *Blade Runner*.

My reading of Gibson builds upon and diverges from other readings of what has been called “techno-orientalism” or “high-tech orientalism” in Gibson’s work. Lisa Nakamura defines “techno-orientalism” as a “high-tech version of racial stereotyping” in which Asian imagery is “used to establish the distinctive look and feel of a cyberpunk future” (63), evident in the clichéd Japanese signifiers present throughout *Neuromancer*. Wendy Hui Kyong Chun’s category of “high-tech orientalism” functions in a similar fashion, “seek[ing] to orient the reader to a technology-overloaded present/future (which is portrayed as belonging to Japan or other Far East countries) through the promise of readable difference, and through a conflation of information networks with an exotic urban landscape” (177). While Nakamura sees techno-orientalist elements as “foils” against which the white subject can define himself (67), I suggest that these elements continue to haunt the narrative and the protagonist, though in a more muted fashion than in *Blade Runner*. And while Chun is certainly correct to observe that high-tech orientalism enables the disembodiment characteristic of cyberspace, the ultimate drive of the narrative is to re-embody the white American subject, seeking less to conquer orientalized cyberspace than to reestablish boundaries between the virtual and the real.

*Neuromancer* maps out the oriental myth of postmodern origins even more clearly than *Blade Runner* does, figuring in its narrative structure what the film figures spatially. The book’s first four sections map a progress from East to West, beginning in Japan (Chiba City) and moving to America (the Sprawl) and Europe/Middle East (Istanbul), then to the orbital spaces of Freeside and Straylight. The final section, “Departure and

Arrival,” stages a return to origins, initially to Japan, but finally to America. This progression suggests the way the geography of the oriental city gives way to and anticipates the deterritorialized movements of cyberspace, but it also acknowledges how the book reterritorializes and regrounds white subjectivity through the white American protagonist, Case.

Gibson’s vision of Chiba City, where the book opens, is more grounded in conventional geography than Burroughs’s Interzone. But Gibson, like Scott, links his vision of the oriental urban future with emergent technology, as his vision of Chiba City becomes a prototype of the postmodern landscape of cyberspace. Like Interzone, Gibson’s Chiba City—or, more specifically, the “Night City” enclave Case inhabits at the beginning of *Neuromancer*—is a space of freewheeling and lawless exchange, the competitive market reduced to its most brutal form: “Night City was like a deranged experiment in social Darwinism, designed by a bored researcher who kept one thumb permanently on the fast-forward button . . . Biz here was a constant subliminal hum, and death the accepted punishment for laziness, carelessness, lack of grace, the failure to heed the demands of an intricate protocol” (7). Night City seems, however, to lack the more liberatory aspects of Interzone; Gibson’s description is more reminiscent of Scott’s Los Angeles, whose citizens are entirely indifferent to Deckard’s shooting of Zhora in the street. But the regulatory dynamic is subtly different from that of *Blade Runner*, where the city’s oriental elements are seen as the active economy from which white power must be carefully insulated; Gibson’s oriental city is, instead, an environment of calculated disorder, with its role as a zone of exchange and energy for global capital explicitly acknowledged: “[B]urgeoning technologies require outlaw zones. . . . Night City wasn’t there for its inhabitants, but as a deliberately unsupervised playground for technology itself” (11). The space of the organic in Gibson’s postmodern Orient has been radically circumscribed as a kind of “historical park” (11) whose existence is overseen by, yet paradoxically necessary to, the operations of the corporatized economy that surrounds it.

Although Chiba City is marked as a “Japanese” space, its contents are much more polyglot. The Chatsubo, like Burroughs’s Meet Café, is a meeting ground for all nationalities and races, where the white American Case is served by a German bartender with a Russian prosthetic arm while flanked by an African officer and a drunken Australian. But exchange in Chiba City seems much more compartmentalized than in Interzone; the Chatsubo is “a bar for professional expatriates” where no Japanese is spoken (3), and Case has almost no interaction with the Japanese. In an inversion of *Blade Runner*’s cityscape, oriental bodies are almost totally absent from the oriental streets; the anxiety Scott brought to the surface

by orientalizing Los Angeles is repressed by recolonizing Japan and filling Case's "Japanese" milieu with a "gaijin crowd" (10).<sup>20</sup> The oriental city serves largely as backdrop, as the enabling fiction of late-capitalist activity; it is an artificial landscape completely permeated by technology, from the hologram-filled "television sky" to the "drifting shoals of white styrofoam" that populate Tokyo Bay. (In contrast, the American urban landscape of the Sprawl maintains the vestiges of history, with its decaying buildings and ancient subway lines.<sup>21</sup>) Chiba City is a space of pure commerce, split between the productive city with its "factory domes" and "corporate arcologies" and the distributive port. Night City is the zone of exchange between them, "a narrow borderland of older streets, an area with no official name" (6). The "Japaneseness" of this space is reduced to a handful of orientalist icons: "yakitori stands and massage parlors," Japanese neologisms ("Beautiful Girl," "sarariman"), Deane's ginger candies, and the shuriken that fascinate Case (10-11). This oriental city functions as a blank canvas for the postmodern imagination, providing an ideological model for grasping postmodernity itself.

The superficially orientalized but actually denationalized space represented by Chiba City merely prefigures that most postmodern of spaces—cyberspace. Chiba City is a prototype of cyberspace that still retains some traces of history, race, and nation—it is, to borrow Jameson's framework, a space on the border between the modern and the postmodern—while cyberspace itself is a purely postmodern space, entirely dehumanized, with all evidence of human labor and culture and all national boundaries erased.<sup>22</sup> Before cyberspace appears in the book, Chiba is constantly being compared to it, serving as a gateway for our understanding. When Case, the disabled console cowboy, dreams of cyberspace, he figures his physical movements through Chiba—"all the speed he took, all the turns he'd taken and the corners he'd cut in Night City" (4)—as a limited version of his past movements through cyberspace. His hustling is "like a run in the matrix," with the streets becoming "a field of data . . . data made flesh" (16). Curiously enough, it is Case's exclusion from cyberspace that has forced him to emigrate: "The Sprawl was a long strange way home over the Pacific now, and he was no console man, no cyberspace cowboy. Just another hustler, trying to make it through" (5). Case's return to the postmodern landscape of cyberspace, while allowing virtual transnational movement, in reality reterritorializes the subject, allowing the American Case to go home. Postmodern cyberspace serves here as a reactionary force enabling the reconstruction of modern national boundaries and identities.

Chiba City remains necessary in Gibson's narrative only so long as Case remains tied to his physical body, incapable of jacking into cyberspace; once he regains those abilities, the narrative shifts to the disembodied



realm of cyberspace. The image of Chiba is retained as a marker of the transition to cyberspace; on Case's first return to cyberspace, a "gray disk, the color of Chiba sky" forms the background for the "neon origami" flowering of the matrix (52). The return to cyberspace frees Case from his Japanese exile and allows him to return to the West, a movement that is also portrayed as a return to history. In contrast to the blank, technologized landscape of Japan, the Sprawl bears the marks of an earlier industrial age, its "ferro-concrete roots" (43) also the roots of personal memory for Case: "the landscape of childhood . . . broken slag and the rusting shells of refineries" (85). This East/West contrast also marks Gibson's vision of the global market, which is not characterized by transnational production and consumption (as many theorists have argued contemporary late capitalism is) but rather by a rigid separation of market functions. Japan is pure production and distribution, devoid of organic life, while the living, historically marked Sprawl is characterized by consumption: "Nothing here like the electric dance of Ninsei. This was different commerce, a different rhythm, in the smell of fast food and perfume and fresh summer sweat" (46). We can read this as a reification of American trade fears of the 1980s, with Japanese products threatening to completely dominate an American market given over to consumption and service. But we can also read this historical and economic dichotomy as an attempt to recuperate Western hegemony. By circumscribing Japan's economic role and erasing its historical, human reality, Gibson posits America as the site of the recovery of history, subjectivity, and the real, almost incidentally captured in Molly's contrast of "rebuilt Chiba krill" to the "real breakfast" ("eggs, real bacon") available in Manhattan (47).

*Neuromancer* also establishes US exceptionalism by placing it between the new Orient and the old, between Tokyo and Istanbul. Whereas Tokyo has no history, Istanbul has too much; it is a "sluggish country" (88) whose landscape is "an old place, too old" (92), populated with oriental clichés. It is also technologically backward, a place where "the written word still enjoyed a certain prestige" (88)—thus distinguished from the visual landscape of cyberspace. Like Chiba City, Istanbul functions as a site for the displacement of the hybridity that *Blade Runner* imports into Los Angeles: Terzibashjian speaks to his radio in the Gibsonian equivalent of cityspeak, "a strange salad of Greek, French, Turkish, isolated fragments of English" (91). The displacement of hybridity outside the US allows Gibson to maintain US national integrity, projecting onto the foreign what Scott introjects into America.

But Case's physical departure from Japan does not erase Japan from the narrative; rather, Japanese signifiers continue to haunt the book, seeming to form touchstones of Case's experience. This oriental haunting is



manifested physically in the shuriken Case carries with him throughout the book; we first see him studying them in a souvenir shop in Chiba:

The shuriken had always fascinated him, steel stars with knife-sharp points. Some were chromed, others black, others treated with a rainbow surface like oil on water. But the chrome stars held his gaze. They were mounted against scarlet ultrasuede with nearly invisible loops of nylon fishline, their centers stamped with dragons or yinyang symbols. They caught the street's neon and twisted it, and it came to Case that these were the stars under which he voyaged, his destiny spelled out in a constellation of cheap chrome. (11-12)

On the literal level, the shuriken are simply clichéd signifiers of Japan, tacky souvenirs associated with the ninja figure that will appear later in the book in the person of Hideo. But Gibson invests these objects with the reality of the oriental city; they become prisms that catch the cityscape of Chiba and twist it into the landscape of cyberspace. In Case's post-surgical hallucination, "the sky faded from hissing static to the noncolor of the matrix, and he glimpsed the shuriken, his stars" (31). When he finally jacks in again, the process is complete, the throwing stars transformed into "the spiral arms of military systems," "high and very far away" (52). Case's—and Gibson's—naïve belief in the ability of this commodified object to retain the essence of the Orient is the key to maintaining the oriental ground of postmodern space. Consistent with his doubling of the virtual and physical subject, Gibson has Case continue to carry the physical object—the shuriken in his pocket—even after this allegorical transformation has occurred.

As the narrative moves on, Case's memories of Chiba—particularly the image of his lover, Linda Lee—continue to form the ground of his personality. Images of Chiba and of Linda Lee haunt him in dreams and nostalgic moments, usually in conjunction with his cyberspatial experiences. These memories of the Orient are used by the artificial intelligence Wintermute to communicate with Case and manipulate him. Wintermute's need to speak through this orientalized mask is a particularly telling example of Gibson's displacement of late capitalist agency. Jameson's argument that contemporary figurations of "some immense communicational and computer network" are "a distorted figuration of . . . the whole world system of a present-day multinational capitalism" (37) is perfectly realized in Gibson's narrative, which also reveals the ideological function of such representations: to re-enchant late capitalism itself, deflecting responsibility away from its historically real forces and onto unthinkable fantasies. Molly's sense that the agent behind the complex job she and Case undertake is no conventional one—"it doesn't feel like a zaibatsu, a government, or some Yakuza subsidiary" (50)—is symptomatic of the

paranoid anxiety of global capitalism. Yet when Wintermute is revealed to be the agent, Case's desire to assign responsibility to a human, corporate entity—"Those things [AIs] aren't allowed any autonomy. It'll be the parent corporation" (73)—is rejected as naïve, ending any attempt to think through the economic realities of late capitalism.

Wintermute's union with its twin artificial intelligence, Neuromancer, allows it to become the fabric of cyberspace itself; Wintermute thus becomes the spectral agent behind global capitalism. But just as the imagining of cyberspace required the gateway of the oriental city, Wintermute requires the figures and experiences of that city to manifest itself and accomplish its goals, appearing as Linda Lee, Julius Deane, and Lonny Zone to speak to Case. Later, when Neuromancer tries to stop Case by imprisoning him in a cyberspatial fantasy, its elements seem to be drawn from Chiba: a silver sky, shipping containers from the Chiba docks, and a recreation of Linda Lee (233-36). In Gibson's imagining, the material basis of global capitalism is oriental. Indeed, Gibson confirms the deeper oriental genealogy of this imagined space by having another character remark later in the text that its landscape is also based on a beach in Morocco (251)—an echo of the Interzone of Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*, inspired by Tangier.

Gibson's narrative, in a more organic (and hence less resistible) manner than Deckard and Rachael's escape in *Blade Runner*, posits a way out of oriental postmodernity, through its construction of two parallel realms: that of cyberspace, where the Orient maintains its sway, and that of the real, where white American subjectivity can be reestablished and maintained. Case finally penetrates the artificial intelligence's electronic defenses, allowing Wintermute and Neuromancer to merge and take control of the matrix through a reassertion of the isolated self, "fueled by self-loathing" (262). This reassertion allows him to shed his memories of Chiba and their organic link to cyberspace: "But all of this receding, as the cityscape recedes: city as Chiba, as the ranked data of Tessier-Ashpool S.A., as the roads and crossroads scribed on the face of a microchip, the sweat-stained pattern on [Linda Lee's] folded, knotted scarf" (262). When Case finally emerges from his run, it is into a recuperated identity grounded in the white male body: "his own darkness, pulse and blood, the one where he'd always slept, behind his eyes and no other's" (263). This purification is achieved by separating that section of Case contaminated by his experiences in Japan and containing them within the nonspace of the matrix. Case returns to the Sprawl, to America, while his orientalized double continues to exist only in cyberspace (271). Case's final discarding of the shuriken—declaring, "I don't need you," throwing it into a screen that "woke . . . flickering . . . as though it were trying to rid itself of something that caused it pain" (270)—represents the final, violent excision of Japan,

and the oriental postmodern, from an America secure in its national and subjective boundaries. But this movement, this separation, is also complicit with the agenda of global capitalism itself, with Case's cooperation with Wintermute justified by the hollow rhetoric of change for its own sake: "If you don't, what'll change? . . . You'll build the walls back, tighter and tighter . . . I got no idea at all what'll happen if Wintermute wins, but it'll *change* something" (260). What changes, by the end of Gibson's novel, is that the domination of global capital is complete, but the anxiety that should accompany it is repressed and contained with the disappearance of the oriental elements that characterize late capitalism and the reassertion of the unity of white America.

Case's return to America reveals the ideological function of postmodern Orientalism at its most straightforward. In positing the oriental city as the gateway to cyberspace, Gibson, like Scott and Burroughs, displaces late-capitalist anxiety onto the Orient. What has been lost in *Neuromancer* is the liberatory potential of postmodern Orientalism, seen in the subversive operations of *Naked Lunch* and glimpsed more fleetingly in the street life of *Blade Runner*. By focusing their figural energies on depictions of future cities, these works of postmodern science fiction might gain the representational tools with which to reground the postmodern imaginary in the human realities of race, nation, and locality. However, reading Gibson shows with great clarity that the orientalist tropes at the core of these representations have instead been revived in the service of late capitalism: the modern/postmodern divide has been mapped fully onto a West/East divide and reified, with postmodernism marked as oriental and thus containable. The violent contradiction of this ideological work is evident in Gibson's splitting of the Western subject, which shows that the divide projected onto the Orient and the West is in fact internal to the fragmented, postmodern Western identity. The display screen of *Neuromancer* that flickers and briefly wakes, trying to free itself from the Japanese shuriken, is thus emblematic of the situation of the subject under postmodern Orientalism—a nightmare from which history, however feebly, is struggling to awake.

## Notes

1. Arjun Appadurai is one of a number of theorists who has articulated this position. For an overview of theoretical approaches to globalization and transnationality, see Aihwa Ong's introduction to *Flexible Citizenship*.
2. See, for instance, Lisa Lowe's account of Asian American cultural hybridity in *Immigrant Acts*.
3. Ong notes: "For over a century, overseas Chinese have been the forerunners of today's multiply displaced subjects, who are always on the move both mentally

and physically" (2).

4. Saskia Sassen is one of a number of theorists who articulates this notion.

5. While Burroughs's work cannot be unproblematically identified with science fiction, a number of critics have described the science fiction elements of his work and cited Burroughs as a key influence on contemporary science fiction. Kenneth Mathieson, for instance, argues that Burroughs's use of science fiction has been both a model for mainstream writers and an inspiration for innovation within the genre. Indeed, as I discuss below, explicit allusions to Burroughs can be found in both *Blade Runner* and *Neuromancer*.

6. For a definition of the concept of the "emergent" see Raymond Williams, "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory" (416), and my discussion below.

7. My brief historical accounts here and later in the essay are indebted to Charles M. Dobbs's *The United States and East Asia Since 1945*.

8. See Johnson (136-43) and Gibney (508-10) for accounts of some of these representations.

9. Robert G. Lee's *Orientalis* includes an extended discussion of the novel and film *Rising Sun* (209-15); according to Lee, Crichton's novel is "less a detective thriller than a jeremiad against an economic and cultural threat from Japan," seen as the source of "a predatory and destructive capitalism distorted by a crypto-fascist social system" (209).

10. It may be useful here to note the increasing prominence of the notion of the "Pacific Rim" during the 1980s, a figure that, among other tasks, assimilates the West Coast of the US (especially California) into Asia. While it is certainly true, as Arif Dirlik suggests, that the Pacific Rim is a "Euro-American invention" that seeks to reassert Western hegemony over Asia (64), the term also suggests a notion of circulation that threatens to bring Asia into America through the gateway of California. *Blade Runner*, by positioning itself in Los Angeles, seems to develop exactly this facet of Pacific Rim anxiety.

11. I focus on the commercial cut of the movie rather than the director's cut released in 1991 because I intend this analysis as a reception study and because I am interested in the film as a cultural production of the 1980s, particularly in those alterations made to the film that seem resonant with the popular anxieties of that period. The commercial cut contains a number of elements (such as Deckard's voice-over) that emphasize the tension between orientalist anxieties and the attempt to reassert a hegemonic white narrative; it also makes more explicit the film's racial overtones, as when Deckard's voice-over informs us that "skin job" (a slang term for replicants) is equivalent to a racial slur.

12. Tadiar observes that new highway overpasses ("flyovers") in Manila allow their bourgeois users an aerial perspective that "makes details of the corroding urban landscape and its trash disappear into a 'postmodern' spectacle," thus "produc[ing] space in the image of transnational capital" (292).

13. Marleen Barr (27) and David Desser (112) both use Deckard's equation of the epithet "skin job," used by the police chief, with "nigger" to read the replicants as allegorical figures of racial oppression, despite the self-evidently white, even "Aryan" features of blond, blue-eyed actors Rutger Hauer and Darryl Hannah. I understand this apparent contradiction between appearance and racialization as

an aspect of the film's use of orientalist mediation, in which race is displaced onto external oriental signifiers and then repressed as the narrative unfolds, leaving the "pure" white subject free of the taint of race.

14. The Bradbury Building itself, restored in the early 1990s, became a centerpiece of that decade's efforts to revitalize and gentrify downtown Los Angeles. See Woo 1, Betsky 108-11, Schoenberger 1, and Daly 58-61.

15. Although Rachael's days may seem to be literally numbered—Tyrell's other replicants have been programmed with a five-year lifespan, and Gaff shouts to Deckard near the film's conclusion, "It's too bad she won't live"—this problem is dispensed with in the commercial cut, where Deckard remarks in his voice-over of the final scene that "Tyrell had told me Rachael was special: no termination date." Rachael's "special" status may also be read as a way of freeing her from the racial taint of her fellow "skin jobs" (all of whom are dead by the film's conclusion), rendering her an unambiguously white subject.

16. Wendy Chun provides an overview of the debate around Jameson's reading of Gibson (172-74).

17. Palumbo-Liu provides an insightful account of Gibson's actual "encounters" with Japan (380-81).

18. While I read *Neuromancer* as indicative of American anxieties about Asia and postmodernity, the American-born Gibson has in fact lived for the past four decades in Canada. Lance Olsen cites Gibson's "decision to become an expatriate by settling in Canada" as one reason his "creative mind has become global rather than national," and Gibson has often been viewed by Canadian readers as a paragon of Canadian science fiction, with Douglas Ivison referring to John Clute's contention that Gibson writes "in a pessimistic Canadian tradition that is skeptical about the possibility of transforming the world" (Ivison 105). However, Ivison also observes that Gibson is "ambivalent" about his relationship to Canada: "Although he identifies 'with the state of being Canadian' he does not quite feel that he is one" (105). Gibson's protagonists are almost invariably identified as white Americans, and he has made only fleeting reference to Canada in his work. The forceful reassertion of American identity that structures *Neuromancer* would seem to place it squarely in the US orientalist tradition established in *Naked Lunch* and *Blade Runner*. Indeed, Vancouver's appearance as a setting in Gibson's most recent novel, *Spook Country*, suggests that Gibson associates the Canadian city not with the modern, memory-haunted, post-industrial landscapes of the United States but with the postmodern, blank, technological cityscapes of Asia.

19. As Olsen notes, Gibson did not own a computer until two years after the publication of *Neuromancer*. Olsen describes Gibson's technological "gaffes," including apparent misunderstandings of fiber-optic cables and computer-chip engineering along with his repeated use of nearly impossible-to-swallow octagonal pills. Like the slippage between the realist intent of *Blade Runner* and its orientalized realization, Gibson's "mistakes" expose his work's status as postmodern fantasy; Olsen quotes Gibson as observing that his own "ignorance" of computers allowed him to "romanticize" them into the "exotic" tools of cyberspace.

20. Chun reads *Night City* as evidence that in Gibson's framework, "the 'origin' of Japanese success is gaijin" and that "high-tech Orientalist primitivism does not

make Japan primary" (187).

21. Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*, a work of alternate history that takes place in Japanese-occupied California in the wake of an Axis victory in World War II, operates on a similar contrast between an America that is the seat of history and "authenticity" and a Japan that can possess such qualities only in commodity form. One of the American protagonists, Robert Childan, is the proprietor of "American Artistic Handcrafts Inc.," which sells American historical objects—from Civil War artifacts to rare comic books—to discerning Japanese collectors. The "authenticity" of American objects is contrasted to the artifice of the Japanese; eating an "American" meal prepared by a Japanese woman, Childan muses: "[Y]our powers of imitation are immense ... you could paste together out of tin and rice paper a complete artificial America" (112).

22. Along these lines, Tony Myers views Gibson's cyberspace as "an attempt at a postmodern cartography; that is, as a representational strategy for domesticating what Jameson terms 'postmodern hyperspace'" (888).

### Works Cited

- Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996.
- Baar, Marleen. "Metahuman 'Kipple,' or, Do Male Movie Makers Dream of Electric Women?: Speciesism and Sexism in *Blade Runner*." Kerman, *Retrofitting* 25-31.
- Betsky, Aaron. "Full Circle." *Architectural Record* 181.1 (1993): 108-11.
- Blade Runner*. Dir. Ridley Scott. Warner Bros., 1982.
- Burroughs, William S. *Blade Runner (A Movie)*. Berkeley: Blue Wind, 1979.
- . *Naked Lunch*. New York: Grove, 1959.
- Chun, Wendy Hui Kyong. *Control and Freedom: Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiber Optics*. Cambridge: MIT P, 2006.
- Crichton, Michael. *Rising Sun*. New York: Knopf, 1992.
- Daly, Les. "The Prime of Los Angeles." *Atlantic Monthly* May 1994: 58-62.
- Desser, David. "Space, Race, and Class: The Politics of the SF Film from *Metropolis* to *Blade Runner*." Kerman, *Retrofitting* 110-23.
- Dick, Philip K. *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* New York: Ballantine, 1982.
- . *The Man in the High Castle*. New York: Vintage, 1992.
- Dirlik, Arif. "The Asia-Pacific Idea." *Journal of World History* 3.1 (1992): 55-79.
- Dobbs, Charles M. *The United States and East Asia Since 1945*. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1990.
- Eburne, Jonathan Paul. "Trafficking in the Void: Burroughs, Kerouac, and the Consumption of Otherness." *Modern Fiction Studies* 43.1 (1997): 53-92.
- Friedman, George, and Meredith LeBard. *The Coming War with Japan*. New York: St. Martin's, 1991.
- Gibney, Frank. *The Pacific Century: America and Asia in a Changing World*. New York: Macmillan, 1992.



- Gibson, William. *Count Zero*. New York: Ace, 1987.
- . *Mona Lisa Overdrive*. New York: Bantam, 1989.
- . *Neuromancer*. New York: Ace, 1984.
- . *Spook Country*. New York: Putnam, 2007.
- Gung Ho*. Dir. Ron Howard. Paramount, 1986.
- Iverson, Douglas. "William Gibson." *Canadian Fantasy and Science-Fiction Writers*. Ed. Iverson. Detroit: Gale, 2002. 96-107.
- Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke UP, 1991.
- Johnson, Sheila K. *The Japanese Through American Eyes*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1988.
- Joyce, James. *Ulysses*. New York: Vintage, 1990.
- Kerman, Judith B., ed. *Retrofitting Blade Runner: Issues in Ridley Scott's Blade Runner and Philip K. Dick's Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* Bowling Green: Bowling Green State U Popular P, 1991.
- . "Technology and Politics in the *Blade Runner* Dystopia." Kerman, *Retrofitting* 16-24.
- Kolb, William M. "Blade Runner Film Notes." Kerman, *Retrofitting* 154-77.
- Latour, Bruno. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Trans. Catherine Porter. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993.
- Lee, Robert G. *Orientalisms: Asian Americans in Popular Culture*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1999.
- Lowe, Lisa. *Critical Terrains: French and British Orientalisms*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1992.
- . *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*. Durham: Duke UP, 1996.
- Mathieson, Kenneth. "The Influence of Science Fiction in the Contemporary American Novel." *Science Fiction Studies* 12.1 (1985): 22-32.
- Myers, Tony. "The Postmodern Imaginary In William Gibson's *Neuromancer*." *Modern Fiction Studies* 47.4 (2001): 887-909.
- Nakamura, Lisa. *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet*. New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Olsen, Lance. *William Gibson*. Mercer Island: Starmont House, 1992. <<http://www.lanceolsen.com/gibson.html>>.
- Ong, Aihwa. *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality*. Durham: Duke UP, 1999.
- Palumbo-Liu, David. *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999.
- Pierce, John J. "Creative Synergy and the Art of World Creation." Kerman, *Retrofitting* 201-11.
- Rising Sun*. Dir. Philip Kaufman. Twentieth Century Fox, 1993.
- Romero, Rolando J. "The Postmodern Hybrid: Do Aliens Dream of Alien Sheep?" *Post Script* 16.1 (1996): 41-52.
- Sassen, Saskia. *Cities in a World Economy*. Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge, 1994.
- Schoenberger, Karl. "Bringing Life Back to City's Heart." *Los Angeles Times* 14 Dec. 1993: 1.

- Tadiar, Neferti Xina. "Manila's New Metropolitan Form." *Discrepant Histories: Translocal Essays on Filipino Cultures*. Ed. Vicente L. Rafael. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1995. 285-307.
- Vogel, Ezra F. *Japan as Number One: Lessons for America*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1979.
- White, Theodore H. "The Danger from Japan." *New York Times* 28 July 1985: A19.
- Williams, Raymond. "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory." *Rethinking Popular Culture: Contemporary Perspectives in Cultural Studies*. Ed. Chandra Mukerji and Michael Schudson. Berkeley: U of California P, 1991. 407-23.
- Woo, Elaine. "Restored Bradbury Called Key to L.A.'s Downtown Core Renovation." *Los Angeles Times* 30 Sept. 1991: 1.