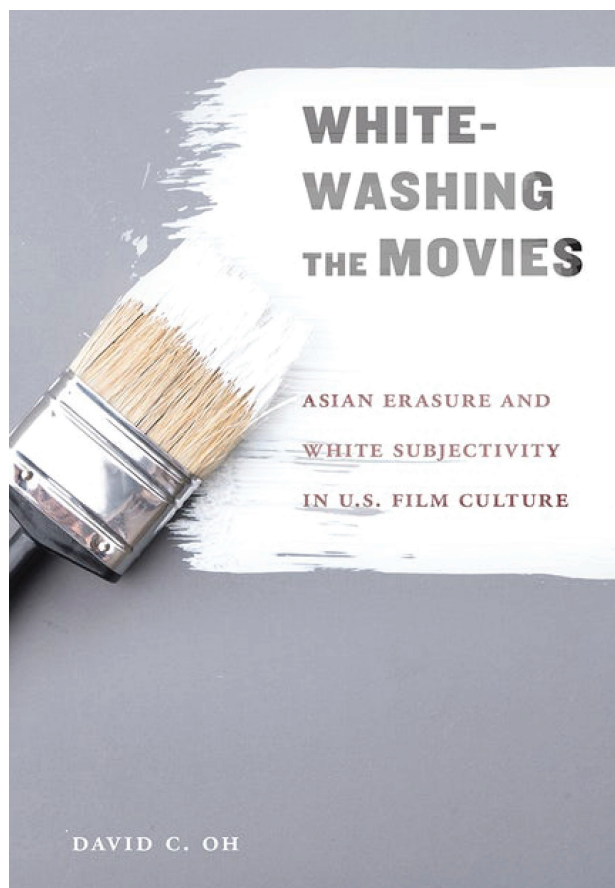


Book Review:

Oh, David. *Whitewashing the Movies: Asian Erasure and White Subjectivity in US Film Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2022)

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Amid the unending chorus proclaiming that “representation matters,” Asian Americans have found themselves in a contradictory situation. On the one hand, new movies and TV shows starring Asian American individuals, families, and communities are premiering at an increasing rate in what seems to be an unprecedented representational boom. On the other, Asian Americans continue to be visually erased from the media landscape through a number of long-standing racist practices. David Oh’s book *White-Washing the Movies: Asian Erasure and White Subjectivity in U.S. Film Culture* sets its sights squarely on the latter phenomenon by cataloging and giving evidence for how whiteness is connected to Asian American minimization in mainstream media. In doing so, the book reminds us that the insidious reach of white supremacy continues to deepen the historical oppression faced by Asian Americans, no matter how many new Asian American romantic comedies or indie dramas we want to celebrate.

The project begins by casting an exceedingly wide net across all forms of Asian American replacement and displacement in media, arguing that whitewashing comes in many different forms—including White actors taking on yellowface and pretending to be Asian, White actors invisibly replacing Asian characters with White characters, and White subjectivity being centered within narratives about Asian worlds. While this broad definition seems to discard previous distinctions between these different forms of Asian American symbolic erasure, Oh makes clear that this is because his ultimate project is simply to uncover the deep impact of White domination throughout multiple forms of Asian and Asian American media worlds. Indeed, whiteness itself is notoriously slippery and difficult to study, and the complexities of each case study examined here show us why. Rather than stay mired in the obvious cut-and-dried cases of whitewashing, Oh delights in the borderlands, including examples that might stretch previous definitions but that nonetheless give ample fodder for considering how whiteness continues to operate in contemporary media.

Some of these border cases include mixed-race Asian American actors and roles. A highly publicized case of whitewashing can be seen in the example of white actress Emma Stone being cast to play the role of the mixed-race Chinese, Hawaiian, and White character Allison Ng in *Aloha*. Stone's casting was roundly condemned, and Oh's analysis deepens the understandings of how this casting problem is exacerbated by the film's narrative construction of White masculinity and the U.S. military as benevolent forces of colonization. Other cases of mixed-race casting prove far more complex, such as Keanu Reeves portraying the "half-breed" white and Japanese character Kai in *47 Ronin*. This casting matches Reeves's own identity as a mixed-race Asian American, and the character's racial identity struggles are central to the film's plot. Yet Oh criticizes the film for whitewashing original Japanese legends of the 47 Ronin by including a mixed-race character, for casting a "Japanese-presenting" mixed-race actor as the villain of the story, and for depicting the "white-presenting" Reeves as the victim of racism. While Oh's analyses are nuanced and contextualized, these kinds of arguments reveal some of the more thorny aspects of criticizing whitewashing via mixed-race actors—after all, mixed-race Asian American individuals are always subject to the harm of being simultaneously "too Asian" and "not Asian enough," and the malleability of race means that categories like "Japanese-presenting" and "white-presenting" should be questioned rather than reified.

Oh does not shy away from critiquing other Asian Americans for their roles in perpetuating whitewashing. This might seem expected when looking at the satirical comedy *The Interview* (2014) and its famously inflammatory plot about two White Americans who befriend and then assassinate the North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, played by Randall Park. The film's Asian American actors Randall Park, Diana Bang, and James Yi unfortunately cannot save the film from its racial mockery and juvenile fantasies of White American masculine superiority. But allegations of whitewashing are a bit more surprising when turned to Asian American cinema, such as the chapter on *Shanghai Calling* (2012) and *Already Tomorrow in Hong Kong* (2015), both of which are directed by Chinese Americans and feature Asian American leads. Oh identifies whitewashing in the way that both movies depict Asian American leads partnered with White Americans who are superior in their local Chinese knowledge and linguistic fluency.

Part of the challenge with this book is that in order to make the case that whitewashing is a rampant scourge that takes many frequently overlooked forms, each chapter must repeat the same kind of analysis on a slightly different text. While this does ultimately serve to showcase the multifaceted ways that white supremacy expresses itself and gives useful frameworks, it also means that every chapter must conduct a fairly reductive and repetitive textual analysis—asking in what ways each film is racist or not racist, which often requires the work of pointing to the presence of tired stereotypes and tropes (the model minority, the yellow peril, the white savior, etc.). Oh does a heroic job coming up with alternative frameworks for these same questions—asking, is it hegemonic or counterhegemonic, conservative or progressive, problematic or subversive, racist or resistive?—but the end point is always the same, and the book ends up relying on a style of stereotype analysis that feels a bit outdated.

One of the novel and creative aspects of the book is Oh's experimentation in imagining what these same texts might convey if their White leads were replaced with Asian or Asian American actors and roles. What could it mean if the hero of *47 Ronin* was mixed-ethnicity Korean and Japanese, and experienced the discrimination faced by Zainichi Korean residents in Japan? What could it look like if *Aloha*'s Allison Ng was actually a mixed-race Asian, Hawaiian, and White actress, and her love interest was an Indigenous Hawaiian man instead of a White man? How would it change *Aloha*'s relationship to the US military and the racial dynamics of its central romance? Oh is careful to pay attention to the specificity of each case, acknowledging the subtle representational differences engendered by every casting decision and how it might interact with existing roles and narratives. Such imaginings are pedagogically useful in pointing to possible pathways out of the morass of White dominance, and may serve as a primer for media professionals who want to know how they can avoid mistakes of the past. They also help to gently redirect the tone away from a kind of stifling pessimism that risks making it seem as though no Asian American film could ever truly participate in subverting White supremacy. While this book already has a lot to offer on studies of whiteness, these forays into pure imagination bring the focus back to Asian American media studies and the dream of a representational future that is always just beyond reach.

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