

MODERNITY'S RESCUE MISSION: Postcolonial Transactions of Disability and Sexuality

Résumé: Certains films internationaux portant sur l'infirmité entreprennent un « projet de modernisation » qui veut « secourir » le corps handicapé en le rescapant de son contexte original et en lui offrant un « remède » contre une condition médicale stratégiquement identifiée comme « pré-moderne. » Dans *Princess Mononoke* et *The Good Woman of Bangkok* le récit de l'infirmité devient crucial dans la formation de l'identité nationale et de la négociation de l'échange international de l'aide médicale. Dans les deux films, l'infirmité joue un rôle critique dans la constitution de hiérarchies entre les nations et à l'intérieur d'une même nation. S'élevant sur des allégories de bienveillance, ces hiérarchies sont souvent déployées en tant qu'actes charitables sous forme de délivrance apparemment « désintéressée » et « généreuse » des personnes handicapées qui ont été exploitées, maltraitées, ou expulsées par ceux qui n'ont pas été « édifiés » par la promesse de la modernité. Ces deux films démontrent que les transactions interculturelles des récits de l'infirmité perpétuent souvent ce mythe de délivrance, un mythe méritant plus d'analyse et de critique aussi bien du point de vue des études postcoloniales et que des études sur l'infirmité.

This essay considers the unique disability narratives in two contemporary international films, *Princess Mononoke* (USA, 1999), *Mononoke Hime*, Japan, 1997, Miyazaki Hayao), and *The Good Woman of Bangkok* (Australia, 1991, Dennis O'Rourke) to investigate the formation of national identity and the negotiation of international exchange. We explore the intervention of subaltern subjects through a discussion of Mononoke's gender and ferality juxtaposed with the social positioning of prostitutes and lepers in *Princess Mononoke*, as well as through an intersectional analysis of Yaiwalak Chonchanakun's gender, visual impairment, and prostitute status in *Good Woman*. While these narratives are enacted upon different historical stages, both films display a similar logic that positions modern society above nature or any pre-existing civilizations—a logic solidified by specific deployments of disability and other subaltern designations.

Disability studies scholarship has developed strong critiques of many oppressive strategies developed under the auspices of modernity to diagnose, exile, institutionalize, normalize, or rehabilitate people with non-normative bodies

and minds.¹ Characterized by a near-obsession with order and progress, people with impairments have been either actual targets or positioned as the symbolic focus of many modernization projects. Drawing from European and U.S. disability history and representations, for example, Lennard Davis's *Enforcing Normalcy* traces various ways in which the very development of the modern concept of normalcy has been based upon contrastive cultural meanings of disability.² Modernity, in other words, has depended upon the existence of disability to draw the boundaries between accepted and rejected subjects. Socially positioned outside the parameters of cognitive and physical normalcy, people with disabilities in modern Western contexts almost inevitably have been caught up in systems of charity, rehabilitation, or institutional confinement. Postcolonial scholar Dipesh Chakrabarty makes this clear in *Habitations of Modernity* by asserting that the "origins of modernity" and the historical process of becoming modern were not benign: "The fact that one is often ushered into modernity as much through violence as through persuasion is recognized by European historians and intellectuals. The violence of the discourse of public health in nineteenth-century England directed itself against the poor and the working classes."³ Yet even as disability-studies scholars have developed critiques of modernity's oppressive medical, rehabilitative, and normalizing processes—especially those targeting the bodies of people with disabilities—these discussions have primarily focused upon situations in industrialized nations. Bill Hughes, for one, has argued compellingly that modernity has been central to "the transformation of impairment into disability."⁴ Drawing upon the social model of disability, which distinguishes between the bio-physical nature of impairment and the social oppression of disability, Hughes sees the social rejection of people with impairments as a natural byproduct of modernity. Hughes, however, mainly focuses on the internal colonization of Western disabled people as part of the process of modernity.

In this essay, we want to shift this perspective to a more global context in order to explore the cultural deployment of impairment when two different cultures make contact at the point of disability. Specifically, we argue that Western or modern gestures to rescue people with disabilities in non-Western or "pre-modern" locations strategically function to produce hierarchies between different societies and nations. We are engaging with these admittedly problematic terms for two key reasons: first, to call attention to the highly constructed but powerfully hegemonic power of these concepts; and second, to point to the ways representations of disability tend to reify these binaries within and across national, racial, and ethnic boundaries. In other words, narratives of disability play a critical role in constructing hierarchies of "greater" and "lesser" development within and between nations. Trading upon modernity's mask of benevolence, these hierarchies are often signified by one group's charitable acts scripted as the "selfless" and "generous" rescue of disabled people who have been exploited, mistreated, or expelled by societies defined as "pre-modern"—that is to say,

groups automatically coded by a relative “lack” of development.

This narrative trajectory is employed in the Japanese animated film *Princess Mononoke*. Disabled and gendered sexual bodies are used in part as an agent in the transition from feudal Japan to a new hegemony that embraces modern social systems such as industrialization, gendered division of labor, institutionalization of people with diseases, and the militarization of men and women. In the context of the film, the community that has risen up against the existent power of the emperor strategically initiates projects to help marginalized populations in order to position itself as more humane than feudal society. Lady Eboshi, the monarch driving this modernizing vision, promises integration and greater equality to previously oppressed groups of lepers and prostitutes in her utopian community. In practice, however, her social structure segregates these people in new ways, in spite of their being central to her enterprise. Using claims of inclusion and cure, she justifies new forms of violence against natural forces, the need for expanded weaponry, and a tacit hierarchy positioning her as the benevolent and protective leader. In effect, her assumption of power is built upon specific groups’ differences and supported by their dependence upon her. Although the film concludes with the restoration of harmony between humans and nature, our analysis focuses on the logic of the new community leading up to the conflict between nature and modern industrialization.

The second film we examine, the widely known documentary *The Good Woman of Bangkok*, also deploys the powerful logic of cultural superiority to blur the issues of gender exploitation within the international sex market through the process and promise of “rescuing” the disabled protagonist. In his filmic narrative of Aoi (Yaiwalak Chonchanakun), a disabled Thai prostitute, the Australian director Dennis O’Rourke strategically manipulates Aoi’s visual (and visible) impairment to evoke a specific response from his audience as to the “double tragedy” represented by her “imperfect” body and her participation in sexual labor. Even as he attempts to reveal his involvement in her exploitation—both as her paying sexual partner, and as the director who positions her as the subject/object of his “compassionate” film—he invokes her history of disability to hint at an original innocence in Aoi. O’Rourke implies that her unique misfortunes, stemming from childhood social rejection and adult prostitution, render her more sympathetic to (mostly Western) viewers, and perhaps more deserving of rescue. Our point is that *Good Woman* purposefully dramatizes the victimization of its disabled protagonist to blur the exploitation enacted in the process of filmmaking itself, and as a result, the film suggests that Aoi’s social structures are more cruel and “uncivilized” than those of its first world viewers. While these two films differ significantly, they both exemplify powerful ways that narratives of modernity’s humanitarianism and charitable rescue—especially of disabled and sexually exploited people of color—serve and cloak modernist imperialist tendencies.

JUSTIFYING DEVELOPMENT THROUGH “UTOPIAN” SEGREGATION

Miyazaki Hayao’s *Princess Mononoke* unfolds in an indeterminate historical moment of medieval Japan, where a troubling tension exists between industrialization, feudal tradition, and the natural order. At the opening of the film, Ashitaka, a young prince from a far eastern community, tries to stop a monster boar from destroying his whole village. Although successful in killing the boar, Ashitaka is wounded and left with a scar, which functions as a fatal curse. However, the village oracle tells Ashitaka that the boar beast came from the far west where calamity has fallen, and that by travelling there he might find a way to lift the curse. She also gives Ashitaka the piece of metal found inside the body of the boar, which had transformed it into a monster. As the audience learns, this piece of metal signals the invention of rifles, the integration of armaments into war, and an imbalanced destruction of the natural world. The transformation of the boar into an almost unconquerable force of devastation, then, signals nature’s response to this misuse of power.

In due course, the prince journeys to the west where he discovers the source of the metal in Tataraba, an iron- and weapon-making encampment situated high on a protected plateau and run by Lady Eboshi. When Ashitaka explains his curse to Lady Eboshi, she remains unsympathetic. However, she reveals to him what she refers to as her “secret” in order to justify her continued destruction of nature. As Eboshi leads Ashitaka to her garden, an aerial perspective provides viewers with an understanding of the spatial structure of Tataraba: the outer area is reserved for men bringing supplies and performing peripheral labor; in the middle of the fortress, women who have been rescued from brothels by Eboshi do the grinding work of keeping the smelting furnace running; and in the deepest secluded corner, nestled at the edge of the cliff and guarded by lepers, is Eboshi’s secret garden.

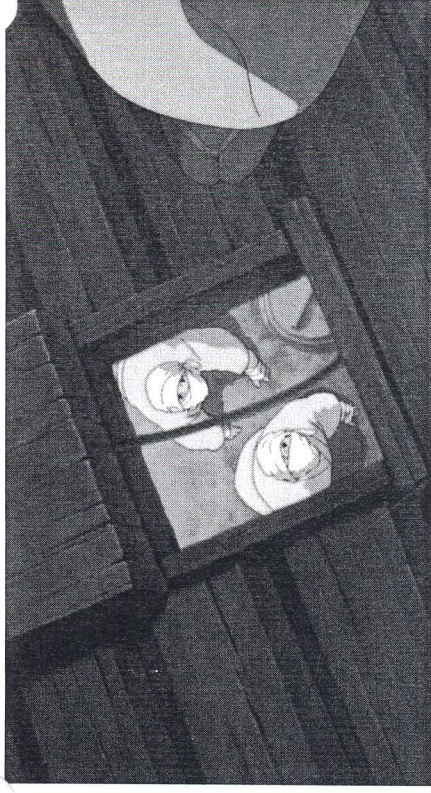
In a cloister on the far side of the garden, she shows Ashitaka her new guns designed by lepers—a new technology that will enable them to rule over nature. Eboshi tells them she wants the guns to be small and light enough for the women, so they can become soldiers in her two-pronged struggle against the nature gods and feudal samurai warriors. At this point, her secret remains unclear to Ashitaka, and at the sight of the guns, his burning scar causes him to become enraged: “You stole the boar’s woods and made a monster of him. Now will you breed new hatred with those guns?” His cursed arm, now possessed and animated by the boar’s rage, becomes infuriated with Eboshi when she admits she was the one who shot the boar, but Ashitaka restrains his right arm with all his strength. To mediate this conflict, the chief leper, Osa, tells Ashitaka not to harm the lady because she has been the only person willing to care for them, and to treat them as human beings. Eboshi’s humane rescue of the lepers—who are seen as cursed—is revealed as her secret, and through Osa’s identification with Ashitaka as a cursed person, this secret effectively subdues the prince’s

resentment. Notably, the chief leper's testimony about Eboshi provides the revelation of her benevolence. While her own claims of kindness could be construed as manipulative, Osa's narrative performatively constructs Eboshi's efforts as purely humanitarian and altruistic.

The fact that Eboshi's society establishes itself through discovering, collecting, and rescuing prostitutes and lepers from moral condemnation in feudal society suggests that constructions of disability are foundational to solidifying and promoting her modernizing project. Eboshi embraces an enlightenment reasoning by disregarding ancient laws and curses toward prostitutes and lepers. At the same time, she also exploits the stigma of disability to further her modernist initiatives by using her protection of these vulnerable groups to justify violence against nature, increased industrialized labor, and technological advancement in weaponry to support her war against her pre-modern foes. With this in mind, we would like to consider the following questions: How are we to think through scenes depicting historical transitions where disabled people are enshrined in the deepest seclusion but also considered essential to cultural progress? What value is exchanged in the relocation of disabled people and prostitutes—a process seemingly imperative to new social economic formulations?

We want to point out that the existence and rescue of lepers carries specific cross-cultural meanings. In *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault observes that as a result of segregation and confinement, leprosy ostensibly disappeared from the Western world (and Western consciousness) at the end of the Middle Ages.⁵ Historian Zachary Gussow argues that leprosy “re-emerges” in the non-Western world as a result of the political activities which situated leprosy as a disease of inferior others, a designation which invited international intervention. This reformulation, Gussow continues, was directly tied to the “interests of imperialistic movements.”⁶ The projection of this stigmatized disease onto other cultures works in two directions: it further conceals the disease's existence in the Western world, and lepers in colonized spaces become overly representative of their own cultures, a process which further constructs Western power.

In order for leprosy to disappear from Western thought, Foucault points out, practices of exclusion remained intact. This continuing structure pursued a “rigorous division which is social exclusion”—but this modern exclusion also depended upon the promise of “spiritual reintegration.”⁷ *Princess Mononoke* demonstrates how salvation by exclusion sustains Eboshi's segregated community. This new female- and disability-centered “utopian” community relies upon, and thus reinforces, the mistreatment of these people in the outside world. Eboshi's cloistered community is constructed around protecting its citizens from the hostilities of the outside world, but for this to be successful, these external threats must be continually remembered and reactivated. In effect, although Eboshi claims benevolence, her segregated community enacts the rationale of modern institutionalization, which promises protection to vulnerable populations,



Princess Mononoke: Lepers instructed from the roof by Lady Eboshi.

but actually serves a greater mission of protecting “normal” society from contact with its marked others.

This logic of segregation and institutionalization is mirrored by processes of internal colonization and imperialist expansion. The film gestures specifically toward Western imperialism in the figure of Eboshi. In the English-dubbed version distributed in the United States, Eboshi is the only character with a British accent, an implicit reference to the legacy of European colonization. This cultural translation enacted by U.S. distributors of the film bears testimony to the persistent signification of Western imperialism. In their summarization of post-colonialism, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin offer a historical backdrop to the conflicts between East and West, as well as between civilization and nature portrayed in the film: “As European power expanded, this sense of superiority of the present over the past became translated into a sense of superiority over those pre-modern societies and cultures that were ‘locked’ in the past—primitive and uncivilized peoples whose subjugation and ‘introduction’ into modernity became the right and obligation of European powers.”⁸ Ironically, the strong subjects of modernity have been established through systems of “caring” for “weak” colonial and internally segregated populations. Moreover, this separatist society peopled with stigmatized exiles justifies a new economic system dependent upon a massive destruction of nature, which the film sets up as the antithesis of human-centered civilization.

The power dynamic between Lady Eboshi and the lepers is illustrated visually in a scene where Eboshi tests a new gun designed by the leper workers. Eboshi stands on the roof of their building, where she dictates improvements from above through a window in the ceiling. This scene clearly positions Eboshi as the ruler of the community and demonstrates that her power grows from benevolent care, through which she inspires the loyalty of “undeserving” people



Princess Mononoke: Ashitaka (left) and Mononoke part ways.

who otherwise would not survive in the “natural order.” This power structure between Eboshi and her protected subjects is complicated by the existence of Mononoke, a feral human princess of the forest who resists Eboshi’s violence against nature. Mononoke signifies the inevitable resistance to modernity’s rejection of groups who refuse to or cannot be assimilated into its violent logic.

Lady Eboshi reveals this complication when she describes her plans for Mononoke to Ashitaka: “With the forest gone and the wolves with it, this will be a land of riches. That girl will be human...Mononoke, the wild girl whose soul the wolves stole. It is said the blood of the Deer God will cure disease. It could cure these people and perhaps even lift your curse.” Mononoke, who was abandoned by people and raised by wolves, fights with her Wolf God family against Eboshi to protect the forest and nature. Significantly, the name the village people have given her, Mononoke, means evil spirit, an appellation that reflects Eboshi’s demonization of her feral nature. More importantly, though, she is perceived as evil for resisting their attempts to civilize her. Mononoke provides an important counternarrative, however, to Eboshi’s modernizing project. As a feral girl who resists civilization, she demonstrates Ella Shohat and Robert Stam’s idea that tropes of empire are not only repressive: they suggest that because tropes function within a dynamic discourse, “they also constitute an arena of contestation; each is open to perpetuation, rejection, or subversion.”⁹ By embodying the feral wildness of nature, Mononoke rejects the civilizing mission of Eboshi and attempts to assert the indigenous powers of the animals and the forest itself. In many ways, the feral princess might also be thought of as a figure of disability resistance as well. In resisting the regulations of modernization’s bodily norms and embodied functions, she challenges the limits of variation such “progress” demands.

In the end, however, Eboshi’s predictions prove to be accurate. Although she learns that partnership with nature will be necessary to her survival, her outright

exploitation is replaced by a more systematic consumption. Moreover, the transition to modernity requires Mononoke to relinquish her feral status. She still remains outside the confines of the city, but she lays down her arms against Tataraba. In effect, humanizing the feral girl confirms and expands the project Eboshi begins by rescuing the prostitutes and lepers. Although Ashitaka still endeavors to find a way to live within nature without destroying it, in the end, Eboshi’s cloak of benevolence succeeds in seducing Ashitaka into partnering with her to rebuild the community after the landscape has been demolished by human wars and Tataraba’s continued battles with the nature gods.

Princess Mononoke reveals the parallel relationship between prostitution and leprosy in their shared taint of moral stigma. In this parallel, we see the closely attached cultural positions of disease, disability, and prostitution. Within western eugenic histories, prostitutes have often been institutionalized and branded with indeterminate diagnoses of feeble-mindedness. Similarly, in *Princess Mononoke*, a feudal, superstitious mortality is inscribed on prostitutes’ bodies. Although Eboshi treats the women with respect, the men consider the former prostitutes to be permanently defiled, believing this moral taint will infect the ironworks or the village itself. Although Eboshi claims to be modelling a new kind of society, its hierarchical formation depends in large measure upon reinscribing the stigmas previously imposed upon the bodies of lepers and prostitutes. The men of the village can assume their own superiority based upon prior notions of stigma. At the same time, the women and lepers gain feelings of usefulness and independence through their important labor and “redeemed” social status. But all three groups remain subjected to Eboshi: the men lack her seeming compassion, while the others will always be indebted to her for rescuing them. In this formation, her power becomes naturalized as benevolent, a pervasive cloak of its hegemonic impulse.

CONSTRUCTING WESTERN MASCULINITY THROUGH RESCUE

Unlike *Princess Mononoke*’s juxtaposition of prostitution and disability, *Good Woman* provides an opportunity to explore their combined effects and interplay. Parading the centrality of prostitution within an international sex market—which doesn’t only exchange sex, but mediates the exotic, racial, submissive nature of its female laborers—this film also scripts disability as central to the “tragedy” of prostitution. Dennis O’Rourke has referred to his film as “documentary fiction,” a term he uses to underscore the impossibility of achieving a pure “objectivity” as a filmmaker. Indeed, O’Rourke disavows claims to objective truth by revealing a complicated relationship between himself and Aoi from the outset: he has hired Aoi as a prostitute, and secured her participation as the subject of his film with the promise of purchasing her a farm.

Linda Williams suggests that by making their relationship an explicit part of the film, O’Rourke attempts to pose “the deeper and more important question of

the ethical relation of filmmaker-john to client."¹⁰ While we agree with Williams that O'Rourke deserves some credit for his transparency, in his construction of fiction/non-fiction, the filmmaker still carefully manipulates visual images and the chronological arrangement of the film to weave Aoi's story into the overall pattern of his film. In this structured narrative, we look specifically at O'Rourke's gesture to rescue Aoi, and how her intersecting identities of sex worker and "handicapped" person function to individualize the systemic issues of the international sex trade and position viewers (especially those identified with the Western, male filmmaker-john) as helpless to change the myriad problems depicted in the film.

This authoritative framing has been a major concern of many feminist critics of *Good Woman* since its original release. Some critics have traced how the film re-imposes an Orientalist, masculinist reading upon subaltern female bodies.¹¹ As well, theorists have discussed the limitations of both feminist and postcolonial theories in understanding the unique situations of subaltern women, especially those whose stories (like Aoi's) are mediated by a Western male gaze.¹² Martina Rieker points out that this mediation constructs specific excesses and absences of understanding: "What is excessive in the film is the camera's voyeuristic gaze of the seedy red-light districts, the bars and the interactions between foreign men and Thai women within them."¹³ This fascination with the locations of sexual transaction, however, curtails any substantive understanding of the multiple identities of these women and the way they define themselves in relation to their worlds. Building upon Rieker's insight, we suggest that Aoi's visual impairment (she is blind in one eye) is figured excessively in the film. Notably, few of the critiques of *Good Woman* mention the film's preoccupation with disability, when in fact O'Rourke features it as a key cause of Aoi's marginalization in Thai society, and as we argue, exploits the narrative of her "handicap" to negotiate (and increase) her value as a cinematic subject.

Disability, in Aoi's case, seems to influence the filmmaker's need to intervene in her life by purchasing her a rice farm—a not-so-subtle symbolic offering to return her to an idealized rural past. Her visible impairment is also used as a filmic marker to distinguish Aoi from the numerous other women working in the sex industry who are scanned repeatedly by the camera. This gesture of rescue by a male Australian filmmaker to a Thai sex worker demonstrates a problematic fantasy of superiority—one directly mirroring the unequal power exchange of prostitution. Interviews with other Western customers throughout the film suggest that a similar mentality of benevolence allows them to frame their own participation in prostitution as economic "help." As one Australian young man states: "I feel sorry for them because they have to resort to what they do. I think it's best that we do go with them because what we give them is their life. So I suppose if we do this, then it helps them and if it helps them it's not so wrong." The film, on one side, exposes the fraught mentality of Western consumers

justifying their participation in a politically and morally charged space. On the other side, what is notable in this framework is that while the director admits a similar motivation, he extends this problematic relationship by attempting actually to fulfill this male fantasy of rescue.

While O'Rourke calls attention to the flawed logic in such "self-reflexivity"—especially by revealing his own role as a "john"—he avoids analyzing the larger systemic inequality of global capitalism embedded in the transnational sex trade industry. Aoi's status as a prostitute with a disability in Bangkok is not defined by itself; it is demarcated within the contexts of the growing market of commercialized sexual services, the state and legal support behind it, and international tourism. Anne McClintock explains that in Thailand, "prostitution inhabits a twilight realm of legal ambiguity." Prostitution is criminalized, but the male "tour operators" and "entertainment managers" are sanctioned within the loosely defined "personal service sector." In this intentionally ambiguous legal framework, prostitution benefits the male state and is administered by "a system of international euphemisms: massage parlors, escort agencies, bars, R & R (rest and recreation) resorts, and so on."¹⁴ During her participation in O'Rourke's project, Aoi resided and remained in this interstice in which the negotiation, sexual service, and filming were all occurring simultaneously.

In *Feminism Without Borders*, Chandra Mohanty points out that international capitalism produces first-world citizen-consumers and third-world workers. She also formulates several questions pertinent to this discussion: "Who are the workers that make the citizen-consumer possible? What role do the sexual politics play in the ideological creation of this worker? How does global capitalism, in search of ever-increasing profits, utilize gender and racialized ideologies in crafting forms of women's work?"¹⁵ In effect, unequal international and gendered power relationships are reiterated in several forms in the film: by the everyday transaction of prostitution, by a Western ideology of help demonstrated in O'Rourke's gesture of absolute rescue, and by the production of the film itself.

The film opens in Aoi's home village in northeast Thailand, where an overview of her life is narrated by Aoi's "Auntie" (probably a close neighbor, not a relative). The film presents Auntie's first description of Aoi as "handicapped": "From the start, when she was born she was handicapped. At seven, she went to school...but she wasn't able to stay. She had to look after the younger children and work for her parents." During this monologue, the elder woman draws a portrait of Aoi's life in order to explain her ultimate work as a prostitute. Within the structure of this narrative, Aoi's "handicap" functions as an origin myth of sorts, implying that her ultimate work in prostitution is partly (tragically) a result of the stigma associated with her disability. In this sense, the film presents disability as evidence of her innocence—which contrasts starkly with the baseness (badness) of her fate of prostitution.

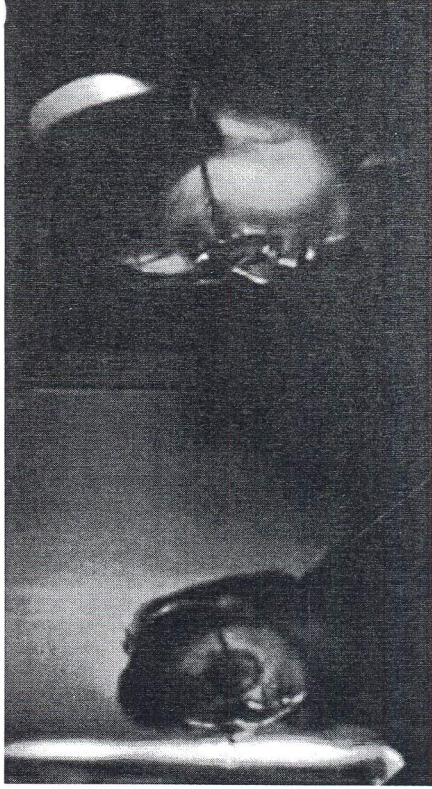
Following this introduction to Aoi, Dennis O'Rourke inserts his own



The Good Woman of Bangkok: Tourists in a Bangkok nightclub offer their opinions about Thai sex workers.

perspective on the international sex trade as an anonymous Western man. As if tourists themselves, viewers are presented with images of an arrival board at the airport, views of Bangkok from the backseat of a taxi, followed by a long segment in the red-light district featuring naked women dancing in bars and prostitutes on the streets with foreign clients. At the conclusion of these several scenes, the following text appears on the screen: "The filmmaker was forty-three and his marriage had ended. He was trying to understand how love could be so banal and also profound. He came to Bangkok, the mecca for Western men with fantasies of exotic sex and love without pain. He would meet a Thai prostitute and make a film about that." From here, the film moves to the comparatively quiet space of the hotel room where the filmmaker-john turns the gaze of the camera upon the sleeping, partly covered, naked body of Aoi. This double relationship O'Rourke develops with his subject has a double effect upon their complex association: it allows him to repeatedly exploit the intimacy of their space, but also, even as he visually solidifies Aoi's position as prostitute and film-object, he calls attention to her resistance to these attempts at "salvage" as part of their ongoing transaction. In its depiction of Aoi's life as a sex worker, *Good Woman* captures a new form of imperialism, which occurs on the personal level in the form of commercial exchange, as the basic structure of the Bangkok sex trade.

Near the end of the film, in his first concrete statement (beyond a few prompting interview questions), O'Rourke interrupts Aoi from behind the camera with his formal offer to rescue her from prostitution: "Okay, I'm going to buy this rice farm for you, and I want you to stop working. It's time you started caring about yourself." O'Rourke constructs the film narrative to culminate with his gesture of rescuing Aoi from prostitution with this "generous" offer. However, this chronology is misleading because buying a rice farm for Aoi was part of the



The Good Woman of Bangkok: Aoi listens to the director's offer of a rice farm.

original agreement they made before beginning to film the documentary.¹⁶ O'Rourke portrays this offer as his spontaneous response to her despair, which functions to suggest that they have established some intimate bond. O'Rourke orchestrates the film in order to bolster the perceived goodwill of his offer by persuading the audience of Aoi's goodness—in other words, by demonstrating that she deserves to be rescued. He achieves this in two ways: he uses her disability as an unjust social stigma that propels her into prostitution; and he distinguishes Aoi from other prostitutes by positioning them as voluntary workers. This binary of forced versus voluntary prostitution is common in sex-worker discourse and filmic representations about prostitution, and perpetuates the idea that one group is more at fault than another. In Aoi's case, her disability is crucial to establishing her innocence, and positions her story as more tragic than those of the other women working alongside her. Thus the filmmaker's highly individualized "intervention" fails to acknowledge the structural injustices and dangers at work in sex tourism. Instead of investigating the cultural, economic, and imperial structure of the Thai sex market, in which the trade of sex is normalized as a major source of national income and actively promoted to foreign tourists, O'Rourke focuses his film on an individual—on Aoi's "tragic" situation and his concern for her health and survival.

After offering to buy the rice farm, he continues, "But Aoi, this life you lead will kill you...I will do it [buy a rice farm] for you only if you go home...Aoi, I want you to promise me that you'll stop." His demand and desire for control over Aoi only invites her resistance, if not contempt. Aoi's response reflects her astute awareness of the motivation behind his "kindness": "I don't like anyone to think I need their help. If you want to help me, that's up to you. But don't expect anything from me.... There are some things I cannot do. I am sorry. Don't help me if you want something in return. I don't need that." Interestingly, Aoi's reaction

to his offer immediately follows a scene featuring a blind street band, in which one of the members announces with a microphone to passersby, "We are a blind band and we rely on charity." O'Rourke's comparison of the blind band's pursuit of charity and Aoi's blanket rejection of it again demonstrate her strong character, an orchestrated subjectivity which both invites and negates specific forms of Western rescue.

As a means of portraying the extent of her inner conflict, scenes in the hotel room are shot very close, often with a double image of Aoi, either from a mirrored reflection or her own image projected on a television screen next to her body. Within these intimate scenes, Aoi reveals the details of her young life. Although at the time of filming she is only twenty-five, she has much to recount: her husband leaving when she was two months pregnant, her father's gambling and resulting familial debts, her growing hatred of all men, and her dream of somehow leaving Bangkok to return home. The film transitions repeatedly from the raucous sex bars of Bangkok to scenes of Aoi's village—her aunt, mother, and son—to daytime scenes in the city with friends who work with her, then back to intimate interviews with Aoi. The transitions between the city and the countryside contrast the differences of urban versus rural worlds. Through this contrast, O'Rourke represents Aoi's wish to return as overly nostalgic, which implies that her daily life in Bangkok would render the final return impossible (also rendering moot his demand for her to go home).

In addition to providing her personal story, these close-up interviews allow the audience to gaze upon Aoi's eye, despite large glasses she wears to shield herself from this invasive gaze. At the same time, while O'Rourke puts her impairment on display, the fact that she is blind in one eye is revealed slowly. During a continuation of the interview with "Auntie," viewers learn more about her childhood experience of having an impairment: "People would tease her about her eye. She would cry and run home. By seven or eight she was so embarrassed she wouldn't go out to play. Her father asked her if she'd like to see a doctor and she went. But nothing could be done." Immediately following this scene, O'Rourke cuts to a very close shot of Aoi in the hotel room in which she is rubbing her left eye with a tissue, providing a visual close-up of her disfigurement. In fact, Aoi only mentions her impairment once during the film: "I am a woman with only one eye. And a woman who earns money for going with men." This fleeting statement of her identity as a prostitute with a disability comes as a voice-over accompanying a shot of Aoi standing on a Bangkok street in the daylight, looking off into the distance. Exploiting her look of despair, O'Rourke implies that her disability combined with her work in the sex industry represent a reductive "double victimization." Yet the statement might also be read as a self-identical explanation of her intersecting disability, gender, sexual, and cultural identities.

A final textual overlay concludes the film: "I bought a rice farm for Aoi and

I left Thailand. One year later I went back but she was not there. I found her working in Bangkok, in a sleazy massage parlour called 'The Happy House.' I asked her why and she said: 'It's my fate.'" After making his gesture of rescuing Aoi from her "fate," O'Rourke transitions from third-person filmmaker to first-person narrator. He now openly resides in the action of the narrative, signifying some transformation within him and his relationship to the audience. Through this sudden shift, O'Rourke conceals his personal process of alteration through the film's singular dedication to Aoi's failed rehabilitation—which would have entailed "escaping" prostitution. Through the process of filmmaking, the director manages to claim a subject position, while his failed rescue abandons Aoi to continued objectification. In other words, his selfhood is established through othering Aoi, a process perpetuated by the film's negation of her agency in the social, familial, and economic negotiations of prostitution. In the end, the film implies that Aoi has ostensibly given up, or perhaps sees herself as too damaged to escape, and this pretense of closure allows the filmmaker to assert his "superiority" (which simultaneously proves to be void), and to confirm Aoi's "inferiority" through his failed rescue.

Within the narratives of *Good Woman* and *Princess Mononoke*, people with disabilities, prostitutes, and feral subjects provide material evidence for the necessity of external intervention in "unhealthy," "pre-modern," or otherwise "underdeveloped" social contexts. Although modernity "promises" a form of integration to stigmatized bodies, in actuality, these subjects are constructed as being in need of rescue from their own culture. In many ways, disabled and stigmatized bodies are strategically positioned to prove the benevolence of modernity, and as such, they provide those in power with the negotiating tools to further their imperialist and colonialist goals.

In a poignant moment, Aoi articulates her own understanding of this insidious power relationship: "My friends tell me that...even if you have promised to buy me a rice farm, it's not a big thing. Compared with your film, it's not much. I'm sure you'll get much more from your film." Resisting the hierarchy perpetuated by the discourse of rescue, Aoi reframes the transaction as reciprocal by telling him, "I think it's all right; you're doing me a favour, I can help you too." Although constrained by the limits of her circumstances, Aoi's resistance to O'Rourke allows viewers to witness a reappropriation of her subjectivity through remaining in the sex industry. In O'Rourke's simplistic offer to buy Aoi out of prostitution, he obscures the challenges she would face if she left the city to pursue a life running a farm. In the process, the film is unable to portray Aoi's decision to stay in Bangkok as an assertion of agency, and instead implies that by refusing his offer, she is willingly participating in her own exploitation.

In parallel, the fictionalized *Princess Mononoke* situates Eboshi's colony as a protected, internally segregated utopia, but in order for Eboshi to maintain this construct, the threat to her rescued social exiles from pre-modern society outside

Tataraba's walls must be continually reasserted from within. Feminist film scholar Poonam Arora argues that films depicting minorities of non-Western cultures, regardless of the cultural background of the filmmakers, have often represented the "Third World" merely as Other. Within this context, those marginalized within the "Third World" are "positioned solely as the recipients of the viewer's sympathy, serving as one-dimensional symbols of the degradation rampant within the Third World."¹⁷ Arora's argument has to be contextualized by the textual specificity of her analysis, but her insights into the ways symbols of degradation are deployed remain key to reading representations of disability across cultures. Narratives of disability interplay within an ongoing production of ethnographical Others for uneven global consumption and interpretation.

Martina Rieker interrogates *Good Woman* as the representation of a third world Other through which the filmmaker seeks to encounter a transcendental experience: love.¹⁸ She asks, "What gets sustained and refigured in the attempt to locate a humanist essence within the commodification of human relations?"¹⁹ To answer her own question, she suggests that O'Rourke's obsession with human essence and his uncritical engagement with regard to Enlightenment narratives leads to a reinscription of the legitimating structures of capitalist modernity.²⁰ Problematic binaries such as Western/non-Western, first world/third world, modern/pre-modern constructions—which Shohat and Stam have called "tropes of empire"—continue to be deployed in these ongoing transnational constructions. Shohat and Stam point out that within colonialist discourse, familiar tropes of race, animalization, infantilization, the primitive, savagery, and the wild have been crucial contrasts to figuring Euro-Western superiority.²¹ Intersecting with these dehumanizing discourses, disability is often folded in as a constitutive element of such tropes. As demonstrated by these films, disabled people in "pre-modern" or "non-Western" locations serve to provide reliable ethnographic accounts of individual and collective experience, but these depictions persistently obscure the power relations at work within representation-making. Unfamiliar with immediate social contexts, non-local audiences are induced to sympathize with minorities within other cultures, but at the same time, to interpret that larger culture as somehow inferior. In the meantime, as the spotlight shines upon the seemingly inherent connection between disabled people's marginalized lives and these locations of "underdevelopment," external audiences are able to displace or ignore the material experiences of disabled people within their own societies, and resolidify their own identities as modern, "first-world" citizens.

In both *Princess Mononoke* and *Good Woman*, the female protagonists resist—and thus expose—the violence at the heart of modernity's benevolent gestures of inter- and intra-cultural rescue. Like Aoi, Mononoke rejects assimilation into the structures of modernity. These films also powerfully demonstrate the ways in which disability has been deployed to invoke sentimentality toward

marginalized people as a prelude to inviting intervention from Western systems and modern rehabilitation, as well as to mediate the hierarchical relationships among cultures and nations. Our essay has attempted to interrogate these often obscured discursive, cultural transactions of disability by calling attention to the exclusion, violence, and dehumanization enacted upon disabled bodies—especially under the guise of mercy, benevolence, or rescue.

As Bill Hughes points out, "When a person with an impairment encounters a discriminatory gaze—be it institutional or personal—she encounters—not a pure look—but an act of invalidation."²² As we have suggested, the superficial inclusion offered by such invalidating gazes is to become recipients of help or aid. In this gesture of rescue, modernity actually reveals its determination to maintain the inassimilable difference of the object of its gaze. Even more to the point, these films reveal an important power dynamic enacted by highly industrialized societies in their relationships to differently developed groups and nations. As disabled people within such contexts become the narrative focus, the larger culture is often positioned as somehow "lacking" as well—as inferior to the contrastive, more civilized, benevolent and caring modern or Western cultures. Transnational narratives of disability often perpetuate this myth of rescue, a myth deserving much greater analysis and critique, from both postcolonial and disability-studies perspectives.

NOTES

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3. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 30-31; emphasis in original.
4. Bill Hughes, "The Constitution of Impairment: Modernity and the Aesthetic of Oppression," *Disability & Society* 14.2 (1999): 155-172.
5. Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, Richard Howard, trans. (New York: Vintage, 1973).
6. Zachary Gussow, *Leprosy, Racism and Public Health: Social Policy in Chronic Disease Control* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1989), 19.

7. FOUCAULT, 7.
8. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 145.
9. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (London: Routledge, 1994), 137.
10. Linda Williams, "The Ethics of Intervention: Dennis O'Rourke's *The Good Woman of Bangkok*," in *The Visible Evidence Collection*, Jane Gaines and Michael Renov, eds. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 176-189.
11. See Williams, and Chris Berry, Annette Hamilton, and Laleen Jayamanne, eds., *The Filmmaker and the Prostitute: Dennis O'Rourke's The Good Woman of Bangkok*. (Sydney: Power, 1997).
12. Shohat, for example, has argued that although critical cinema studies has tended to critique colonialism, too often these analyses have suspended the subaltern woman theoretically between feminist criticism and postcolonial theory; see Ella Shohat, "Imaging Terra Incognita," *Public Culture* 3.2 (1991): 40-71.
13. Martina Reiker, "Narrating the Post-Colonial Everyday: An Interrogation of *The Good Woman of Bangkok*," *Visual Anthropology Review* 9.1 (1993): 116-22.
14. Ann McClintock, "Screwing the System: Sexwork, Race, and the Law," *Boundary 2* 19.2 (1992): 70-95.
15. Chandra Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 141.
16. Williams, 182-183.
17. Poonam Arora, "The Production of Third World Subjects for First World Consumption: *Salaam Bombay and Parama*," in *Multiple Voices in Feminist Film Criticism*, Diane Carson, Linda Dittmar, and Janice R. Welsch, eds. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 295.
18. Reiker, 116.
19. *Ibid.*, 117.
20. *Ibid.*, 118.
21. Shohat and Stam, 137-141.
22. Hughes, 164.

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