

The Asian/Alien in American Legal Policy and Science Fiction

by Erin O'Malley

When we read science fiction, we become capable of imagining a future divorced from the past, and yet we still encounter humanity's domination of aliens and other-worldly creatures that are reminiscent of our lived histories of violence. Science fiction is more often than not the imaginary of the nation, a hyperbolization of America's greatest strengths and most terrifying fears. Lisa Lowe writes that "the question of aesthetic representation is always also a debate about political representation, and it is for this reason that I seek to bring the immigration term alien into conversation with the depiction of Asians as aliens in early 20th science fiction comics.¹ I turn to the figure of the Asian alien, by which I am mean the Asian who is (alien)ated from citizenship by legal measures aimed at maintaining an American nation for which American is a proxy for whiteness, as well as the extraterrestrial alien who is racialized as Asian as a tactic of othering Asians within popular culture, because the language surrounding the Asian and the alien are genealogically inseparable from one another.

In the context of migration, an alien is defined as "any person not a citizen or national of the United States."² This alien is therefore defined by *what it is not* rather than *what it is*. It is only possible to name the alien in the context of migration by its hollows: the privileges of citizenship that are not afforded to them. Thus, the linguistic void of the alien of the law creates a condition in which the term's absorption of the archive of popular culture is compounded. Enter the science fictional alien and its multitude of representations spanning novels, comic books, films, video games, and other media. As opposed to the alien of the law, we know exactly what

¹ Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 4.

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the science fictional alien is: “An (intelligent) being from another planet; an extraterrestrial.” The science fictional alien may not directly invoke the alien of the law because its definition is already full. Without a positive, concrete definition of the alien of the law, the science fictional alien collapses into this alien, filling its hollows with interplanetary warfare and space invasions. While the connotation of foreignness is inherent in the word alien in both its legal and science fictional senses, the overflowing transfer of science fictional representations to the legal alien is problematic because it underscores the xenophobic rhetoric that legal aliens are unassimilable intruders upon the nation. As legal scholar Gerald Neuman notes, “It is no coincidence that we still refer to noncitizens as ‘aliens,’ a term that calls attention to their ‘otherness,’ and even associates them with nonhuman invaders from outer space.”³

In considering the joint meanings and implications of the word alien, both I center my attention on the comic *Buck Rogers in the 25th Century* for two reasons. Firstly, although science fiction had been previously popularized as a cornerstone subgenre of pulp fiction, the birth of *Buck Rogers* in January 1929 marked the syndication of the first American science fiction comic.⁴ From that point, *Buck Rogers* became the progenitor of this now form of comic that would come to be a staple in American popular culture. Secondly, while some scholars have considered the role of the yellow peril in shaping *Armageddon 2419 A.D.*, the novella off which the *Buck Rogers* comics are based, and the *Buck Rogers* comics themselves, they have done so only briefly and mainly in an effort to contextualize the emergence of the subgenre of yellow peril science fiction.⁵

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⁴ Philip Francis Nowlan and Richard Calkins, *Buck Rogers in the 25th Century* (Neshannock: Hermes Press, 2008), 8.

⁵ See “From Yellow Peril to Japanese Wasteland: John Hersey’s ‘Hiroshima,’” “Asians and Asian Americans in Early Science Fiction” by John Cheng

Indeed, the rise of modern American science fiction is tied to the yellow peril as Carter Hanson writes of how “American science fiction writers appropriated ‘the invasion motif’ from British writers, who had imagined German invasions to express their nationalism,” developing this motif from fear of Chinese migration to the West Coast and South.⁶ While [] is credited with coining the term science fiction, Hugo Gernsback is recognized as popularizing the term.⁷ Often referred to as the father of modern science fiction, Hugo Gernsback published the first issue of *Amazing Stories*, the first English language magazine devoted to genre of science fiction, in 1926.⁸ Just two years later in August 1928, *Amazing Stories* published Philip Francis Nowlan’s novella *Armageddon 2419 A.D.*, which became the inspiration for the comic strip *Buck Rogers in the 25th Century*, also authored by Nowlan.

As I have previously intimated, literature is crucial to the body politic—who gets to have an American body and who does not—insofar as it is literature, among other cultural art forms, that co-constitute the politics of a nation. A threat to the American public turned fiction sub-genre, the yellow peril encompasses the massacres of Chinese migrants on the West Coast in the late 19th century and the wildly popular pulp fiction stories in which Asian bodies were tortured, scorched, blasted, and creatured. The term “yellow peril” is said to have been coined by Kaiser Wilhelm II.⁹ In 1895, the year of Japan’s emergence as a formidable world power after winning the First Sino-Japanese War, Kaiser Wilhelm II commissioned the artist Hermann Knackfuß to create a visual rendering of “the powers of Europe . . . unit[ing] in resisting the inroad of Buddhism, heathenism and barbarism for the Defence of the Cross.”¹⁰ [describe painting] Titled

⁶ Carter F. Hanson 312, “1920’s Yellow Peril Science Fiction: Political Appropriations of the Asian Racial ‘Alien’”
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⁸ *Hugo Gernsback, Father of Modern Science Fiction: With Essays on Frank Herbert and Bram Stoker*
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¹⁰ Wilhelm's letter to Czar Nicholas II., Jagdhaus Rominten 26 September 1895, in: Grant, *The Kaiser's Letters* 1920, p. 19.

“die gelbe gefahr,” Knackfuß’s painting popularized the language of the yellow peril, giving a name to a shape of hostility that had surfaced in history as early as with the first Greco-Persian War in 499 BC during which [evidence of ancient Greeks saying something questionable about the Persians].¹¹ For the West to encounter an unyielding representative of Asia is to be met with Asian invasion. This is what the ideology of the yellow peril purports. However, “the idea of the yellow peril does not,” as Gary Okihiro notes, “derive solely from the alleged threat posed by Asians to Europeans and their ‘holiest possessions’—civilization and Christianity—but from nonwhite people, as a collective group, and their contestation of white supremacy.”¹² Okihiro’s comment on the centrality of the preservation of white dominance to the yellow peril emphasizes the yellow peril’s function as a metaphor of color that racializes a conflict (East vs. West) primarily concerning the geography of the nation-state.

Indivisible from the fear of Asian immigration to the U.S. was the fear of an America devoid of the ideals upon which it was founded: racial and religious homogeneity. The Naturalization Act of 1790 states that “any alien, being a free white person” is eligible to become a U.S. citizen, ruling out people of color from inclusion as American subjects.¹³ What becomes moreover clear in the continued development of the legal scaffolding of who can and cannot be a citizen is the assumption that whiteness is synonymous with one’s ability to assimilate within the nation. Passed by congress in response to worries of French invasion, the Naturalization Act of 1798 specifies the whiteness of alien status and the limitation of the rights afforded to this class of persons:

And be it further enacted, that all white persons, aliens, (accredited foreign ministers, consuls, or agents, their families and domestics, excepted) who, after the passing of this act, shall continue to reside, or who shall arrive, or come to reside in any port or place

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¹² Gary Okihiro, *Margins and Mainstreams*, 120.

¹³ [Naturalization Act of 1790](#)

within the territory of the United States, shall be reported. . .¹⁴

That the language of this act uses an appositive to revise “white persons” to mean *white aliens* is no accident. It is one thing to define an alien eligible for citizenship as a free, white man, as the Naturalization Act of 1790 does. It seems another to reduce the white person, a subject accountable to no one, save the occasional god, to the category of alien, a **subject** who, even when perceived as assimilable, is named for the abnormal notion that one is strange for not being American. Though the Naturalization Acts of 1790 and 1798 produce a chiasmus of sorts in their **shift** from defining an alien as a white man to defining a white man as an alien, the meaning of these phrases is dependent upon which words occupy the subject and object positions of their sentences. [continued section on legal history]

In *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World-Supremacy* (1920), Lothrop Stoddard, a member of the Ku Klux Klan and the American Eugenics Society, writes: “This extended discussion the evil effects of even white immigration has, in my opinion, been necessary in order to get a proper perspective for viewing the problem of colored immigration. For it is perfectly obvious that if the influx of inferior kindred stocks is bad, the influx of wholly alien stocks is infinitely worse.”¹⁵ Stoddard clarifies that he is referring to Asian immigration here, going on to say, “Leaving all other parts of the colored world out of the present discussion, three Asiatic countries—China, Japan, and India—together have a population of nearly 800,000,000,” and it is these “Asiatics [who] are potential immigrants into white territories.”¹⁶ While I consider the alien in the contexts of immigration and science fiction, it is necessary to note that the term alien was not widely used to refer to extraterrestrials and other creatures of science fiction in the early 20th

¹⁴ [Naturalization Act of 1798](#)

¹⁵ *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World-Supremacy* 267

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century. However, the word's evocation of a negatively connoted foreignness dates back to the Middle English used in the 14th century. For example, in verse 14, psalm 13 of the Wycliffe Bible, "Make thou me cleene fro my priuy synnes; and of alien synnes spare thi seruaunt," the word alien is used to evoke a meaning of "synnes" (sins) that is now translated as "enemy".¹⁷ Rooted in this etymology of evoking the unfamiliar, alien emerged as a term of science fiction amongst the words "foreign," "odd," "weird," "strange," and "beastly," eventually taking on its science fictional meaning in addition to its pre-existing definitions."¹⁸ While the term alien was only just starting to circulate in science fiction pulp publications and comics in the early 20th century, the juxtaposition of this word against text and imagery suggestive, often explicitly so, of Asian bodies.

Buck Rogers opens with Buck waking up in the year 2419 A.D. While Buck had been surveying an abandoned coal mine that smelled of a "peculiar gas which defied chemical analysis," the roof of the mine had caved in, trapping him inside. Rogers concludes that the gas must have "preserved. . . [him] in suspended animation." The first volume of *Buck Rogers in the 25th Century* from 1929 to 1930 centers around Buck and Wilma's adventures in fighting against "the Mongols," a yellow peril enemy characterized and coded as Chinese to mimic Dr. Fu Manchu.¹⁹ Nowhere in *Buck Rogers*, however, are the Mongols identified as aliens. Despite Wilma's description of the Mongols as "Cruel, inhuman super scientists," no explicit mentions in which the Mongols are stated to be aliens appear in the comic, even though planets beyond

¹⁷ *Bible* (Wycliffite, L.V.) (Royal) (1850) Psalms xviii. 13

¹⁸ Cheng 11 Asians and Asian Americans in Early Science Fiction. The Oxford English Dictionary cites a usage of alien in reference to an extraterrestrial in a 1931 issue of *Wonder Stories*: "Arnim and Britt watched the ten-foot tall aliens stride across the short stretch of deck to the entrance lock of their own vessel." N. SCHACHNER & A. L. ZAGAT in *Wonder Stories* Aug. 307/1

¹⁹ citation about fu manchu

Earth enter Buck's adventures in the 25th century after the Mongols have been defeated.²⁰ In fact, the text locates the surfacing of the Mongols squarely within the geography of reality:

“Historians tell us that many years ago, the Mongol Reds, from the Gobi Desert, conquered Asia, from their great airships, held aloft by gravity repeller rays . . .”²¹ By situating the advent of the Mongols on the land of the Gobi Desert, which stretches across the border between Mongolia and China, Nowlan opens *Buck Rogers' Mongols* up to allusions of the imperial (and thus threatening) pursuits of the Mongol Empire, as well as the racial category of the Mongoloid/Mongolian. Together, these allusions root Nowlan's conception of the Mongols in the twin traditions of Orientalist biological and historical myth-making, traditions in which the West's viscerally unsettling imagination of the East—for example, the yellowness of flesh or the animal suggestion of claw-like hands—became the East's very definition.²²

The yellow peril-era fear of Asian invasion was, as many have noted, linked to the vastness of Genghis Khan's rule, which at one point reached as far west as Poland.²³ For example, in 1904, the London periodical the *Nineteenth Century and After* published an article reflecting on previous pieces in the publication that had all but declared the greatest danger of the yellow peril to be China and Japan “wag[ing] war against the white races, Christianity, and European civilisation, as in the days of Genghis Khan . . .”²⁴ In a scene from *Buck Rogers* moments before the final showdown between the Mongols and the Americans, a panel of the comic shows us a sea of rice hat-wearing, scimitar-wielding robots (described by the text as

²⁰ Philip Francis Nowlan and Richard Calkins, *Buck Rogers in the 25th Century* (Neshannock: Hermes Press, 2008), 19.

²¹ Philip Francis Nowlan and Richard Calkins, *Buck Rogers in the 25th Century*, 19.

²² Cite said

²³ Gina Marchetti, *Romance and the "Yellow Peril": Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies In Hollywood Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 2.

²⁴ O. Eltzbacher, "THE YELLOW PERIL." *Nineteenth Century and After* 55, (1904): 910.
<https://proxy.library.upenn.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.proxy.library.upenn.edu/scholarly-journals/yellow-peril/docview/1294425106/se-2?accountid=14707>.

“mechanical men”) who are led by three Mongol men. One man prostrates himself in front of the army’s general, who sits on what resembles an early prototype of the modern tank. Speaking to the general, the man on his knees says, “Hail to thee! O, Genghis Khan of the 25th century.”²⁵ As a symbol of the yellow peril, Genghis Khan invokes the terror of history’s materiality: that the past might happen again. William Wu writes that the yellow peril evolved in part from the fear held by the “Europeans who survived a Mongol whirlwind from the Gobi Desert seven centuries ago,” recalling again the mutuality of the Mongol Empire with the Gobi Desert.²⁶

Furthermore, Nowlan’s choice to name Buck Rogers’ enemy the Mongols was one that is informed by the anthropological terminology of the “Mongoloid”/“Mongolian” and its genealogy of scientific racism. Borrowing Christoph Meiners’ term Mongolian, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach introduced the Mongolian as one of the five races in the second edition of *On the Natural Variety of Mankind* published in 1781. Blumenbach’s division of the human species into five races was based on the differences he perceived among human skulls. English biologist and anthropologist Thomas Huxley later published “On the Geographical Distribution of the Chief Modifications of Mankind” in 1870 in which he theorized the existence of nine races based on phenotypical characteristics. These nine races, Huxley posited, could be divided into four supercategories: Negroid, Mongoloid, Australoid, and Xanthocroi. Though the terms “Mongolian” and “Mongoloid” originated as scientific descriptors, the language of scientific racism played a key role in describing populations excluded from the nation. For example, in 1858, legislation was first introduced California that banned “Negroes, Mongolians, and Indians” from attending public schools. The state legislature then amended its code to establish separate

²⁵ Philip Francis Nowlan and Richard Calkins, *Buck Rogers in the 25th Century*, 177.

²⁶ William F. Wu, *The Yellow Peril: Chinese-Americans in American Fiction 1850-1940*, 11.

schools for “children of Mongoloid or Chinese descent.”²⁷ In naming Buck Rogers’ enemy the Mongols, Nowlan hails the Mongols with language that situates them within the space of a nation that refuses to recognize them.

As the geographical reality of their origin and the resonances of scientific racism present in the name “Mongol” suggest, what renders the Mongols an alien species is not the usage of some extraterrestrial language nor any kind of origin within an intergalactic nebula. Rather, it is an ascription of inhumanity—a bestial divergence (whether physical or ontological) from a personhood defined by whiteness— as it is used to mitigate the exclusion of Asians from the American body politic that alienates the Asian. Here, I use the word *alienate* to evoke both the legal exclusion of Asians and their aesthetic representation as enemy invaders who are so monstrous they must come from another planet. When citizenship is reiterated as a right belonging only to white men, the names that claim the bodies that fall outside of this privileged group intensify in their insistence on deviation, deciding them to be more foreign, and thus, more terrifying. As Chinese men are barred from entering the United States, an illustrator jaundices their skin as he sketches a newspaper cartoon.

The first way in which the Mongols are sidelined to this inhumanity is through their superhuman depiction as invincible to disease. When Buck and Wilma journey to Hong Kong²⁸ to seek an audience with the Celestial Mogul, they are quarantined in a prison-like cell, the reason for which they learn from a guard, who tells them, “You are all from the outside world and full of germs. You must spend several days under the antiseptic rays before you approach his celestial majesty.”²⁹ In the same tier, Buck and Wilma press the guard as to when they will be

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able to speak with the Celestial Mogul, to which he responds, "Patience! His Aseptic Majesty is 230 years old, thanks to our perfected medical science, and may not be hurried but you shall see him soon."³⁰ In the following panel, we discover that the reason Buck and Wilma must remain in their luxurious imprisonment is because they must be treated with antiseptic rays. When Wilma asks why they are being treated with antiseptic rays despite not being ill, and their physician explains, "Because you've been living in the natural, not the aseptic state and you contain latent germs and diseases," both of which would contaminate the city if Buck and Wilma entered the city without being subjected to the aseptic ray.³¹ The depiction of the Mongols as immune to the sicknesses to which American bodies are susceptible draws from the racialization of Chinese bodies as able to withstand far worse labor conditions than white bodies. Describing the Chinese laborer, Edward Ross, a 20th century eugenicist, writes, "Now, it is precisely in his power to withstand the poisons with which close-dwellers infect one another that the Chinaman is unique . . . under bad conditions the yellow man can best the white man because he can better endure spoiled food, poor clothing, foul air, noise, heat, dirt, discomfort and microbes."³²

When these characteristics are then given the name "Mongol," a term referring the sub-humanness of Asians, however, we see how superhumanity and subhumanity work together to create a complete portrait of inhumanity. Describing Fu Manchu, the stock character from whom Nowlan and most other writers of yellow peril fiction borrow, Timothy Fong writes, "On one hand, he possessed superhuman intellect and ambition, and on the other, he was subhuman in his immorality and ruthlessness."³³ Rachel C. Lee likewise terms the characterization of the Asian

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³² Edward Alsworth Ross, *The Changing Chinese: The Conflict of Oriental and Western Cultures in China* (New York: The Century Co., 1911), 46-47

³³ Timothy P. Fong, *The contemporary Asian American experience : beyond the model*, 175 1998

body for both its “animal and superhuman capacities” an *impossible biology*.³⁴ Not only are the bodies of the Mongols impossible in their contradictory subhuman/superhuman alignments, but so too are their intellectual capacities: “The woman physician who had charge of us looked about twenty five years old, but she told us she was one hundred twenty one. She had finished her medical course at fourteen, and had been practicing one hundred and seven years.”³⁵ In this off-panel text, Nowlan brings together the Mongol physician’s impossibly youthful appearance with her an equally impossible intellect in a way that parallels Fu Manchu’s characterization as a union of cunning and cruelty as previously noted by Fong. Furthermore, it is this union of characteristics that render the Mongols inhuman. The Mongol physician explains that “As citizens of the Aseptic city who are a part of “the medical nobility,” she and these other noble Mongols are essentially able to live forever.³⁶ Thus, it is in their immortality that they become aliens.

Although the *Buck Rogers* comics never explicitly name the Mongols to be extraterrestrials, contradictions arising from the comics’ source material, *Armageddon 2419 A.D.*, complicate the alien nature of the Mongols. In January 1929, a newspaper advertisement promoting *Buck Rogers* described the comics as “A Story of America Overwhelmed by a Super Race from Outer Space of America Rewon by the Resourcefulness of the Surviving Americans who turned fearful New Secrets of Science Upon Their Foes.”³⁷ Here, this advertisement seemingly contradicts the canonical details of the *Buck Rogers* comics. To understand why the Mongols were named “a Super Race from Outer Space” despite the comics’ location of the

³⁴ Lee, Rachel C., *The Exquisite Corpse of Asian America: Biopolitics, Biosociality, and Posthuman Ecologies*. 13

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Mongols' origins at the site of the Gobi Desert, we must return to *Armageddon 2419 A.D.* In Nowlan's novella, a man named "Anthony" Rogers wakes up from almost 500 years of being suspended in a state of animation after having been exposed to radioactive gas. He then finds that America is now governed by the ruling class of the "Han Airlords," an elite Asian race seemingly named for the major Chinese ethnic group, and eventually leads an American uprising to eradicate the Hans. It is not until we reach the novel's epilogue, however, that we learn of the true otherworldly nature of the Hans:

Since the war we have learned that the Hans sprang from a genus of human-like creatures that may have arrived on this earth with a small planet (or large meteor which is known to have crashed in interior Asia in the Twentieth Century, just prior to The Great Collapse. The theory is that these creatures (and certain queer skeletons have been found in the 'Asiatic Bowl') with a mental superdevelopment, but a vacuum in place of that intangible something we call a soul, mated forcibly with the Tibetans, thereby strengthening their physical structure to almost the human normal, adapting themselves to early speech and habits, and in some strange manner intensifying even further their mental powers . . . And I do know that there was something inhuman about these Hans. I had many months of intimate contact with them, and with their Emperor in America. I can vouch for the fact that even in his most friendly and human moments, there was an inhumanity, or perhaps an 'unhumanity' about him that aroused in me the urge to kill.³⁸

Once again we see the how characteristics of superhumanity and subhumanity, an uncanny intelligence and the absence of a soul are what make the Hans foreign to the Americans. This time, though, we encounter the revelation that these characteristics of superhumanity and subhumanity stem from an origin beyond planet Earth, proving the Hans to be an inconvertibly alien species. Observing Nowlan's characterization of the Hans as [an] "'inhuman,' truly 'alien' species . . . ," Carter Hanson suggests that the alienation of the Hans was necessary "to justify [their] extermination."³⁹

³⁸ 194-195 *Armageddon*

³⁹ Carter F. Hanson 312, "1920's Yellow Peril Science Fiction: Political Appropriations of the Asian Racial 'Alien'"

As I have previously noted, the *Buck Rogers* comics differ from *Armageddon 2419 A.D.* in that they never disclose the Mongols as having any kind of extraterrestrial origin, making it all the more curious that a newspaper advertisement for the comic might intimate that the Mongols may not be fully human creatures. In the 1978 introduction to *Armageddon 2419 A.D.*, Donald A. Wollheim states, “During the first two years of syndication, the plot of the strip followed the adventures in this book fairly closely, but as time went on new adventures and characters were introduced, until today’s strip bears virtually no resemblance to the novel now reprinted.”⁴⁰ Thus, it becomes irrelevant that the *Buck Rogers* comic never names the Mongols to be aliens when its transmedia and political context do. []

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