

Prelude

The completion of this book coincided with a juncture of profound irony. On the one hand, Anna May Wong (1905–61), the pioneering Asian American female performer, received unprecedented recognition not only for her indelible contribution to American cinema, but also as an exemplary woman of color whose face was newly memorialized on a quarter coin issued in 2022,¹ and whose figure found a new embodiment in the red dragon–gowned Barbie doll in Mattel’s Barbie Inspiring Women series, released for the Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month of 2023.² On the other hand, the COVID-19 pandemic that brought the world to a prolonged halt in 2020 also unleashed anti-Asian hate in Euro-America,³ resulting in skyrocketing crimes against East Asian–presenting persons and communities who became the easy target of a racist surge. How do we square the enthusiastic media celebration of Wong and other prominent Asian-heritage North Americans with the rampant violence against those who look like them? To put it more bluntly, how did anti-Asian hate become so infectious and egregious even as the mainstream media and popular culture were vigorously promoting Asian North American legacies? Most importantly, what can Anna May Wong teach us regarding her and our never-ending battles against die-hard racism, sexism, and patriarchal nationalism that underpin the exclusionary, hierarchizing system as a whole?

Wong is a prime example for probing these pressing issues, for she embodied the conundrum of being excluded and idolized all at once; and her life-career emerged from tirelessly and resourcefully navigating this conundrum.⁴ Nearly one hundred years ago, just nine years after her screen debut in 1919, Wong already felt the frustration of a stalling career in Hollywood due to the latter’s discriminatory nature compounded with the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882–1943). In 1928, she made

her first cross-Atlantic trip, landing in Berlin for a one-picture contract, which led to a series of film and theater engagements in Germany, France, the UK, and Austria. Her first European trip from 1928 to 1930 turned out to be a career-defining period that established her international celebrity in interwar Europe and spurred further trips to Europe in the mid-1930s, to China in 1936, and to Australia in 1939. Throughout her peripatetic life-career, Wong crossed nations, oceans, media forms, and technologies in a resilient search for more fulfilling work in a more equitable work environment. She appeared in over seventy films and television shows, in addition to extensive theater work (encompassing Broadway, the British legitimate theater, and vaudeville shows in Euro-America and Australia) and some radio shows. Her work off camera and off stage were just as important, representing her painstaking retraining and hustle in response to changing media terrains and audience expectations, as well as to the dramatically shifting Sino-American relationship from interwar cosmopolitanism through World War II to Cold War.

A globe-trotter *and* a transnational migrant worker during the era of Chinese Exclusion, Wong charted out a cross-media world, fostering and greeting her multinational audiences then, now, and into the future. Her life-career bears witness to the mainstream society's simultaneous discrimination and idolization, both due to her misfit "Oriental" femininity. Furthermore, her cross-media world shows us methods of critiquing and navigating the conundrum of being included as the good object and being excluded as the bad object all at once. My entry point to Wong's brave cross-media world is the glaring gap between her words of barbed humor and the stultifying mainstream media coverage of her. I give two "scenes" below, juxtaposing Wong's voice with the journalistic voice to underscore her engagement with and defiance of the latter's inclusion/exclusion rhetoric. The two scenes are structured in reverse chronological order to mirror my research trajectory of retracing her life-career.

SCENE 1

Wong (shortly before arriving in Australia for her vaudeville shows in 1939):

"People insist on looking at me as a freak—something akin to a five-legged dog or a two-headed calf. I want to be an actress, not a freak. I want to feel that people go to see my pictures because I perform well, not just because I am an Oriental. [Coming to perform in Australia will allow me to find out whether] I have anything really to offer the public or whether I must just go on being regarded as a freak."⁵

Journalist: Wong was "agreeably decorative" except when performing "Half-Caste Woman," which gave her an "opportunity for harsh and intense acting."⁶

Wong returned to Hollywood on September 1, “after a mediocre season for Tivoli Theatres,” “not well known Down Under,” “not a boxoffice draw.”⁷

SCENE 2

Wong, after playing opposite Lon Chaney in *Bits of Life* (dir. Marshall Neilan, 1921), announced her arrival as a “considerable spot of yellow that’s come to stay on the silver of the screen.”⁸

Journalist: Given the newly popular “yellow” added to the “screenland color symphony,” there would be “plenty of roles ahead for this little Chinese actress, who brings a much-needed freshness to the screen, a breath of lotus flowers.”⁹

FROM STAR STUDIES
TO PERFORMER-WORKER STUDIES

These scenes foreground a consistent pattern in Wong’s life-career: the ongoing negotiation, contention, and co-constitution between her self-narrativization and journalistic (mis)representation. By constructing scenes such as these, I composite a mosaic and polyphonic portrait of Wong with pieces gleaned from her four-decade-long career (1919–61), which I have assembled, deciphered, reimagined, and reanimated over the course of a decade of my own life-career. Braiding our two disparate yet reverberating lives, I turn to Wong’s cross-media world for insights about precarity, labor, subversion, collaboration, and agency in our current media environment and political climate. I ask how we might reenergize her challenges and contributions to Euro-American film and media industries and societies at large, and what strategies we could develop to parse out the irony plaguing her life-career as both a hypervisible icon of “Oriental” femininity and an invisibilized female performer of color.

It is important to note that Wong, now canonized as a pioneering Chinese American stage and screen performer, has received much attention as a darling subject for scholars, documentary makers, and fiction filmmakers alike.¹⁰ Three biographies, one compendium of her oeuvre, and many scholarly works have illuminated various dimensions of Wong’s legacy, including cosmopolitanism, costume and fashion, racial stardom, racial modernity, and European reception.¹¹ Most of this scholarship focuses on a prominent slice of Wong’s life-career, without an overarching engagement with her career trajectory across multiple media platforms, geopolitical locations, and historical periods. This book deploys a multidimensional, multi-sited, and longitudinal approach to foreground Wong’s physical, intellectual, and affective labor undergirding her agency, which I understand in terms of reiterative authorship. My ultimate goal is to reorient glamour-driven,

hierarchizing star discourses, transforming them into labor-centered, de-hierarchizing performer-worker studies.

Any recuperative celebration of Wong's accomplishments against all odds must stay vigilant to the fact that the "odds" she struggled against are still with us, as amply demonstrated by the vengeful resurgence of xenophobic, anti-Asian violence during the pandemic. Despite the US government's repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943, racism, sexism, and other structural hierarchies have continued to fuel patriarchal white supremacy and settler colonialism. My study, therefore, focuses on Wong's travails, perseverance, and resourcefulness as the very foundation that anchors and politicizes her much-adulated, glamorous cosmopolitanism. It is in illuminating her tireless, yet oftentimes seemingly futureless, labor as an itinerant and minoritized cross-media performer that I locate her disruption of the white-male-dominant entertainment industries during and beyond her lifetime.

In this study, I reject both victimology (that habitually nails her as the victim of her times) and triumphalism (that enthuses over her singular and individual victory over the crippling system). Diametrically opposed as they may seem, victimology and triumphalism share the neoliberal presumptions of individualist agency, unilineal teleology, and presentism. That is, they both distinguish Wong through her individual strength and art—which went unnoticed during her conservative times but have supposedly come to light in our more progressive present time. In short, her individual merits are credited for elevating her to a model minority par excellence who finally wins the battle—in our enlightened historical hindsight.

Countering this neoliberal approach, I stress Wong's decades-long labor and paradoxical agency, which fully recognized constraints and precarity and yet persevered in leveraging all resources—not only for career building, but also with the effect of challenging ideologies and practices responsible for systemic inequities and exclusionism. Wong's paradoxical agency stems from her signature meta-performances of gender-race stereotypes.¹² I theorize such meta-performances as "Oriental" (dis)play, which simultaneously flaunts and undermines stereotypes, along with the underlying Orientalism and heteronormative patriarchy. Wong's paradoxical agency is cumulative, interactive, rooted in a cross-media career that was precarious, peripatetic, and labor-intensive. The concept of paradoxical agency provides a generative framework for studying the long-obscured legacy of other minoritized female performers. Indeed, it is only by piecing together such a genealogy that the notion of paradoxical agency can gain traction and become a transformative sociopolitical force.

My study of the exemplary case of Wong, therefore, lays the groundwork for a field of performer-worker studies that builds upon Danae Clark's groundbreaking study of Hollywood actors' "labor power" by "resituat[ing] labor at the heart

of cultural theory.”¹³ Despite her ambitious efforts to “map the terrain of actors’ labor and subjectivity, to locate the various sites in which actors’ labor power and subjectivity is constructed, fought over, and played out,” Clark admits a lack of integration between her historical and theoretical analysis, due to “the lack of information available on specific actors/stars in relation to specific events.”¹⁴ Furthermore, while emphasizing the “actor as worker” as “a prerequisite term in formulating the actor’s subject identity,” she lumps “race, age, talent, ethnicity, beauty, and sexuality” together as so many “factors” that “enter into a theory of actors’ subjectivity as some of the many discourses that circulate around the figure of the working actor.”¹⁵ As a result, Clark’s theorization of actors’ subjectivity remains inadequate for the task of addressing racialized and sexualized performer-workers like Wong and their labor struggles in Hollywood’s hierarchizing system.

This book shares Clark’s goal of retooling and politicizing star studies. But it does so by using performer-worker studies to amplify marginalized voices, so as to reinsert nonwhite and gendered labor as the very foundation for star glamour. Striving to integrate theorization and historicization, my analysis of Wong’s precarious labor conditions benefits from studies of freelance and contract talents in Hollywood’s studio era by film historians Kate Fortmueller and Emily Carman. Fortmueller shows that the term *freelance* emerged in 1924 to designate a condition of labor; it “provided a shorthand to distinguish short-term from long-term contracts, . . . also a way of describing how actors navigated their career paths and built their livelihoods by moving between roles on stage to roles on screen and taking on multiple, short-term, project-specific contracts.”¹⁶ Both Fortmueller and Carman find that while some name-brand talents leveraged the freedom afforded by freelancing to maximize their career development, many freelancers were extras and working actors. Carman specifically points out that ethnic actresses like Wong and Lupe Vélez rarely enjoyed a long-term studio contract.¹⁷ Throughout this book, I detail the precarity besieging Wong’s labor struggles, resulting in no contract, aborted contracts, or short-term contracts with Paramount in the 1930s and with Production Releasing Corporation in the 1940s, both for lower-budget B movies. Her condition compels our attention to the ways in which labor (even when not fruitful in the conventional sense) underpins performer-worker studies.

My performer-worker approach hinges upon Wong’s cross-media performative agency—not only in the foreground as the leading lady, but more importantly in the margins and the background as a supporting and ancillary performer, and in her labor-intensive retraining and rebeginning after being excluded from the mainstream film industry. My critical move from the center to the background and the margins is mirrored in the structure of the book, and is grounded in Wong’s mosaic life-career. A mosaic is a nonhierarchical composite, each facet being constitutive of the whole, yet not blending into it, contrary to the assimilationist camouflage. This multifaceted and quasi-cubist composite encourages

multiple roaming perspectives, annulling a single fixed, linear perspective and its rigid demarcation of the foreground and the background, the center and the margins, the major and the minor. The mosaic reminds us that every single facet is equally important, for the entire mosaic emerges only as a result of the constellation and co-relation of all facets. And yet the recognition of the entire mosaic does not erase the singular and unassimilable significance of each facet. Thus, the mosaic inspires a method of deconstructing the naturalized media-industrial and social hierarchies—between capital and labor, stars and workers.

My critical move from the center to the background and the margins metaphorically adopts an anamorphic lens that refutes the frontal linear perspective and retrains our eyes for a different episteme of noticing.¹⁸ As we learn to decipher Wong's presence in the face of systemic exclusion and marginalization, we produce a perspectival shift that transforms the very structure of knowledge production. This further enables us to valorize Wong's broad-spectrum labor, including (re)training, collaborating or co-laboring, traveling, waiting, and learning to be resourceful and strategic in negotiating gender-race constraints and other forms of prejudices that underpin the entertainment industries and societies at large.

The other prong of my use of performer-worker studies is to engage with Wong's voices, or what I call her "greetings" to the world. Wong's labor in this sense yields affective politics. As an anticipatory interlocutor, she not only addresses her contemporary audiences and readers across the Atlantic and the Pacific, but also co-labors with her diachronic viewers in fostering race-gender-conscious critical sensibilities.¹⁹ Centering the active encounter between the enunciative film and the existing as well as potential spectatorial positions, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam parse the "question of address" into "Who is speaking through a film? Who is imagined as listening? Who is actually listening? Who is looking? And what social desires are mobilized by the film?"²⁰ To these I add that Wong's audience address often deviates from and subverts the film's intended audience interpellation. She not only gears her gender-race performances for her real-life audiences that were predominantly white and monolingual, but also mobilizes ironic meta-performances to recruit more discerning and possibly multilingual viewers who might not have been the targeted audience, and who could learn to tune into her subversive *détournement* of stereotypes.

As Wong keeps inspiring new generations of viewers, media makers, and critics (such as myself) in our ongoing navigation of migration and dislocation, precarity and labor, and the creation of lifeworlds on the go, this book emerges from my interlocution with her diachronic greetings. I co-labor with her as my historical "companion" in order to reanimate the "potential history" she embodies.²¹ To fully comprehend the impact of Wong's transnational and diachronic audience address, I take into account, but do not limit myself to, empirically documented reviews

and audience responses. That is, I frame historically grounded research with critical interpretation and speculation, as necessitated by the lacunae and ideological biases inherent in institutional archives.

A SPECULATIVE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE ANACHRONOTOPE

The majority of documented commentaries during Wong's lifetime came either from white reviewers, who mostly rehashed fetishistic Orientalism, or from Chinese reviewers who tended to evaluate her on the basis of her contribution (or perceived failure to contribute) to Chinese ethno-patriarchal nationalism. Limited coverage could be found in Chinese American and Japanese American newspapers and magazines. The extent to which Wong's films were shown in Chinatown theaters, and how they were received by first-generation immigrants who were not necessarily fluent in English, remains to be investigated.²² Overall, reviews by minoritized communities are scarce. It is, therefore, unsurprising that Wong's nuanced subversive "Oriental" (dis)play of gender-race stereotypes often went unnoticed; and it is impossible to gauge how effective her meta-performances were, *if* we simply rely on published commentaries.

Such lacunae are symptomatic of the systemic exclusion of misfit voices in institutional archives. To address a similar problem, feminist and critical Black studies scholars have deployed the method of speculative historiography, which is increasingly used to reimagine feminist media studies. I am inspired by Adrienne Rich's call for a "re-vision—the act of looking back" as "an act of survival,"²³ by Canadian novelist and playwright Daphne Marlatt's powerful trope of "a historical leak, a hole in the sieve of fact that let the shadow of a possibility leak through into full-blown life,"²⁴ by Black feminist scholar Saidiya Hartman's concept of "critical fabulation" as a method of producing a "recombinant narrative,"²⁵ by film scholar Allyson Nadia Field's method of "looking and thinking adjacently" beyond extant cinema so as to reconstruct a lost film and media history "out of surviving archival ephemera,"²⁶ and by the "Speculative Approaches to Media Histories" special issues of *Feminist Media Histories* edited by Field.²⁷

The method of speculative historiography allows me to reanimate what dominant archives have failed to recognize, but also have failed to completely eradicate. It leads me to envision an alternative spatiotemporal ordering, namely the "anachronotope," which works to disrupt and derail the reproductive mechanism of gender, race, and other power inequities. *Anachronotope*, a combination of *anachronism* and *chronotope*, designates disjointed, recursive, and nonhierarchical time-spaces that throw teleological progressionism into disarray, and instead invest in what is rendered passé and marginal. The

anachronotope characterizes three dimensions of Wong's challenge to Orientalist and heteropatriarchal futurism.

First, her reenactment of gender-race stereotypes was inherently anachronotopic in that the stereotypes, preceding her career, were hand-me-down types and were, by definition, out of time-and-place. However, since they were naturalized to typify Oriental femininity, it takes Wong's ironic meta-performances to make the types doubly anachronotopic, thereby to expose their artificiality predicated upon racism and sexism. Second, Wong's famous self-styled "thousand deaths" on the screen should not be simply understood as her victimization by white supremacy that rendered her the disposable *femme fatale* (although this was certainly true). Viewed from an anamorphic perspective, her histrionic screen deaths could signal an exit from the white heteronormative narrative. Straying from colonialist reproductive futurism, she charted out an alternative spatiotemporality, or anachronotope. Third, the anachronotope helps us understand Wong's authorship as cumulative yet episodic intermedial citation (including self-citation) across decades and continents—a recursive process that defies a neoliberal individualist success narrative and that is intertwined with actual and *anticipatory* audience interactions.

Wong's anachronotopic investment in alternative spatiotemporalities requires a historically grounded speculative approach that is attentive to the potentialities in between the stereotypical images and in between the documented archival voices. I develop the archival-speculative method into a three-pronged semiotic-affective reading strategy to parse out Wong's anachronotope. The three prongs are, respectively, "reparative reading," the Marxist act of politicizing a text, and an affective understanding of the experience of racialization.

Eve Sedgwick proposes "reparative reading" as a corrective to the "paranoid reading" that applies an "x-ray gaze" to anticipate, expose, and minimize surprises, and that merely serves as "self-defeating strategies for *forestalling pain*."²⁸ Feminist economic geographers such as J. K. Gibson-Graham similarly criticize paranoid reading for defeatist "affirm[ation of] an ultimately essentialist, usually structural, vision of what is and reinforce[ment of] what is perceived as dominant," such as "neoliberalism, or globalization, or capitalism, or empire."²⁹ "Reparative reading," on the contrary, according to Sedgwick, is "additive and accretive," and "founded on and coextensive with the subject's movement toward what Foucault calls 'care of the self,' the often very fragile concern to provide the self with pleasure and nourishment in an environment that is perceived as not particularly offering them."³⁰ For Gibson-Graham, the reparative approach suggests "a different orientation toward theory," one that "disinvest[s] in our paranoid practices of critique and mastery" and moves toward "an ethical practice" of "co-implication" involving "changing ourselves/changing our thinking/changing the world."³¹ "Reparative reading" thus posits an "ethics of thinking" that produces the ground of possibility.³²

The ethics of reparative reading enables me to recuperate Wong's ostensibly abject reinscription of gender-race stereotypes, recasting it as anachronotopic and paradoxically agential meta-performances. My reparative reading of Wong is akin to Miriam J. Petty's study of 1930s African American performers such as Hattie McDaniel, Bill Robinson, Louise Beavers, Fredi Washington, and Lincoln Perry. As she argues, these performers' stereotype-dominant "problematic stardom" (Arthur Knight's term) actually "expressed agency and negotiated ideas about their lives and identities through acts of performance and discourse that incorporated and exceeded the cinematic frame."³³ Terri Simone Francis studies another "problematic" African American (turned French) star, Josephine Baker, and reaches a similar conclusion regarding Baker's "fractured" authorship through her oppositional burlesque "signification."³⁴ While building upon Petty's and Francis's work, I also find myself leaning toward a more speculatively reparative reading. Unlike Petty and Francis, who heavily depend upon the African American press to substantiate the "problematic" performers' authorship and agency, I find the Asian American and diasporic Chinese press inadequate due to its overall fragmentary and superficial coverage of Wong and her performance career. My mobilization of these resources, therefore, must (whenever possible) be combined with the methodological intervention of speculative reparative reading that focuses on Wong's paradoxical agency inscribed in her meta-performances as well as obscured paratexts.

This leads to the second prong of my interpretation strategy: the Marxist act of politicizing a text. Tony Bennett describes the task of Marxist criticism as "that of *actively politicizing* the text, of *making its politics for it*, by producing a new position for it within the field of cultural relations and, thereby, new forms of use and effectivity within the broader social process."³⁵ In film studies, Jane Gaines implicitly mobilizes such critical positioning when she reconstructs Dorothy Arzner as a queer film director "in the name of" Arzner.³⁶ Echoing Gaines, "in the name of" Wong, my critical repositioning alongside deep contextualization seeks to wrestle her legacy from the overarching power structure and politicize it "within the broader social [and historical] process." Given the die-hard systemic power inequity, the work of political repositioning is necessarily continuous, refuting teleological progressionism. Wong's anachronotope invites precisely such a nonteological vision of an equitable lifeworld in improvisation.

My reparative reading and political positioning are supplemented by the third prong, which aims at an affective comprehension of Wong's audience address that consciously fosters relational and emotional resonance with viewers. Asian American theater critic Josephine Lee writes that there is a "pleasure" for Asian American actors in reenacting stereotypes; the pleasure lies in "shar[ing] with us as audience the thrill of being inside what is deeply shameful."³⁷ Through the shared thrill, "even though the role of the stereotype is familiar and detestable, the casting of the Asian body is enough to ensure a kind of welcome disruption,

an *illicit pleasure that sets up a key tension between stereotype and performer*.³⁸ The “illicit pleasure” catalyzes emotional recognition, bonding, and communion between the Asian American performer and her resonating viewers. Wong’s subversive gender-race meta-performances become affectively impactful precisely because they produce the contact realm of shared minoritarian experiences.

Here I draw on José Esteban Muñoz’s understanding of racial difference as “affective difference” and, more specifically, the Latina affect of “feeling brown.” He writes that “different historically coherent groups ‘feel’ differently and navigate the material world on a different emotional register.”³⁹ And such “minoritarian affect” is always “partially illegible in relation to normative affect performed by normative citizen subjects.”⁴⁰ Pushing beyond Spivak’s question “Can the subaltern speak?” he asks: “How does the subaltern *feel*? How might subalterns *feel each other*?”⁴¹ He further describes the subaltern feeling of/for each other as the dynamic of “recognition [that] flickers between minoritarian subjects.”⁴² Such inter-minoritarian recognition, or what he calls the “sharing out of a brown sense of the world” beyond the (self-)identified brown community,⁴³ brings into being a contactive and resonating realm.

Muñoz’s affective approach to racial(ized) experiences, crystallized in “feeling brown,” echoes Wong’s self-positioning as a “spot of yellow” that came to stay on the “white of the screen” (quoted in scene 2 at the beginning of this prelude). Owning the “yellow” stigma enables her to inhabit and feel “yellowness,” and to “navigate the material world on a different emotional register,” as Muñoz would say. Wong’s “feeling yellow, feeling W(r)ong” not only echoes Muñoz’s formulation of “feeling brown, feeling down,” but also foregrounds her constant struggles with her affect of belonging, or, more exactly, impossible belonging—that is, not quite part of a single fold, but always in between. Charged with mixed feelings such as non-belonging, frustration, fatigue, anger, repulsion, and persistence, “feeling yellow, feeling W(r)ong” does not suggest self-indulgence in individual experiences. On the contrary, akin to Muñoz’s shareable “brown sense of the world,” Wong’s “yellow” affect lends to a call-and-response between her and other subalternized performer-workers and audiences. Such affective resonance gives rise to a race-gender-informed relational ethics that encourages critical spectatorial sensibilities in viewers in different places and times.

To these (potentially) empathetic audiences, Wong’s reenactment of the stereotypes comes across as fundamentally subversively pleasurable, as Josephine Lee argues. It offers inside jokes, invites sideways glances of mutual recognition, and cultivates an ability to discern between images and listen between the lines, even between different languages, dialects, and accents. Such subaltern feeling of/for each other facilitates an interactive and affective political understanding of raced and gendered experiences that is capillary, embodied, performative, complicit, pleasurable, and agential all at once. It is through fostering the potential intra- and

inter-minoritarian rapport that Wong's struggles percolate into an affectively agential authorship.

SITING/CITING AUTHORSHIP: THE CHIROGRAPHIC,
THE SONIC, AND THE EPISODIC

Wong declared her authorship as early as 1921, when she defiantly announced her arrival on the scene as a “considerable spot of yellow that’s come to stay on the silver of the screen.” She transvaluates racial shame into indelible recoloring, even contamination, of the hegemonic whiteness. She flaunts her “yellow” objecthood, converting it into the flamboyant center of white spectatorial attention. Evoking Roland Barthes’s concept of “punctum,” etymologically meaning “trauma,” Wong’s “spot of yellow” ruptures the white screen, piercing and wounding the viewer, arresting their gaze, making them aware of “a kind of subtle beyond—as if the image launched desire beyond what it permits us to see.”⁴⁴ Fast forward to 1931: three years after meeting with Wong in 1928 in Berlin, Walter Benjamin similarly ponders a beckoning spot from a historical photo to a later viewer. In his 1931 essay “A Little History of Photography,” he contemplates photographer Karl Dauthendey’s 1857 self-portrait with his fiancée: “No matter how artful the photographer, no matter how carefully posed his subject, the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency [*Zufall*], of the here and now, with which reality has (so to speak) seared the character of the image, to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy [*Sosein*] of that long-forgotten moment the future nests so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it.”⁴⁵

Miriam Hansen locates this photo’s *Sosein* in “the young woman’s gaze off, past the camera and past her fiancé, absorbed in an ‘ominous distance.’” As her gaze “leaps across time” to meet the beholder’s gaze, Hansen observes “photography’s constitutive relation to death,” for the photographer’s fiancée and Benjamin both died by suicide.⁴⁶ My study, however, shows the life-giving and life-reviving meeting between Wong’s historical *Sosein* and her resonating publics across space and history; and their meeting is mediated by Wong’s performative beckoning, as emblemized by her act of rupturing and “searing” the “silver screen” with her “spot of yellow.” Wong’s beckoning toward what Barthes calls the “subtle beyond” derails systemic objectification of the raced and sexualized “Oriental” woman, semiotically and affectively repurposes the media works despite her ancillary position in most of them, and ultimately creates alternative venues of relation-making with her variant publics.

Indeed, a hallmark of Wong’s authorship, as I have suggested previously, consists in her “greetings” to the world through all her activities on and off the stage-screen, in her engagement with media publicity, other media professionals, musicians,

artists, friends, and her international audiences across history. Her greetings take the reiterative form of gifted photos, interviews, contributions to newspapers and magazines, correspondences, and her screen/stage performances. They constitute an epistolary gesture, desiring connections and responses through *distance*, rather than direct contact and intimacy. This distanced yet engaged epistolary stance underlines Wong's life-career as a peripatetic and cross-media performer-worker.

Of special significance is Wong's decades-long correspondence with the New York-based art critic, photographer, and Harlem Renaissance proponent Carl Van Vechten and his wife, Fania Marinoff—a Russian-born American actress. Intriguingly, while Wong's letters to Van Vechten and Marinoff from the late 1920s until her death in 1961 are well preserved in the Van Vechten papers at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University, the latter's letters to Wong are yet to be discovered. This half-picture allegorizes the uncertain reception and speculative nature of all of Wong's epistolary greetings. On the one hand, the lack of access to Van Vechten's and Marinoff's letters to Wong echoes our difficulty of second-guessing how her audiences react(ed) to her work, rendering the efficacy of her subversive performances hard to empirically verify. On the other hand, freed from an empirical response, her epistolary greetings in various forms, which have survived and are available for audiences spatially and temporally removed, become essential for shaping critical spectatorial sensibilities. Thus, her epistolary greetings across time-space are inherently speculative and anachronotopic—that is, invested in different spatiotemporalities that challenge Orientalist and heteropatriarchal reproductive futurism.

One of Wong's most striking epistolary gestures is her consistent tongue-in-cheek signature as "Orientially yours" in her autographed photos. While a photo is not a conventional letter, her gifting of it to a selected recipient makes it a pictorial letter for communication and friendship. Inscribing a mass-reproduced photo with a handwritten greeting ("Orientially yours"), followed by her English and Chinese autographs, Wong combines a commercial image with a personal greeting that itself is reiterated through multiple gifted photos, therefore a-singular. Wong's authorship hinges upon precisely such reiterative self-citation across time, space, and media form, producing a cumulative signature that is self-referential, nonlinear, and anticipatory of anachronotopic resonance.

Here I outline two sites of Wong's epistolary greetings and citational authorship: the sites of the chirographic and the sonic. Chirographically, she handwrote her pictographic Chinese name in film diegesis, and in her gifted photos, work contracts, and travel and immigration documents. The last character of her Chinese name (霜 or "frost") became a decorative detail embroidered in her outfits, hats, clutches, and other accessories. More implicitly, this character, romanized as Tsong, homophonic with Song, doubled as the title and the titular character of her German debut film, *Show Life* (aka *Song*, originally titled *Schmutziges Geld* or *Die Liebe eines armen Menschenkindes*; dir. Richard Eichberg, 1928).

Such chirographic self-referentiality literalizes her *signature* performance. Seemingly splicing together her performer-worker persona with her fictional character, Wong's authorship displayed her "Oriental" exoticism while also beckoning the knowing audience to appreciate her double-entendre "spot of yellow" on the "silver of the screen."

Wong's self-citational authorship also found expression in versatile vocal performances. This vocal "signature" stemmed from her multilingual skills and reiterative singing and chanting across different versions of a film, or across film, theater, and television. In her first talkie, *The Flame of Love* (aka *Hai Tang*; dir. Richard Eichberg, 1930), she played the female protagonist Hai Tang, an "Oriental" entertainer, in all three versions of the film (German, English, and French). She acquired German and French to deliver her lines; she also performed the opening song in German and English in respective versions. Thus, Wong engaged in a form of self-dubbing across the nearly identical German and English versions.⁴⁷ Her self-citational linguistic versatility debunks the exotic Chinese stereotype, foregrounding cosmopolitanism predicated upon labor-intensive training.

A more extended example illustrating Wong's cumulative vocal performances is her reenactment of a Chinese poem in her ancestral Taishan dialect in different media forms across her career. She learned the poem—"Furonglou song Xin Jian" 芙蓉樓送辛漸 (Seeing Off a Friend at the Hibiscus Tower), written by a Tang Dynasty poet, Wang Changling 王昌齡 (698–757)—early in her career from Kwan Man Ching 關文清 (Moon Kwan) (1896–1995). Kwan was a fellow Taishanese and a film producer-director and poet who studied filmmaking in the US, worked as a technical advisor for Hollywood productions including D. W. Griffith's *Broken Blossoms* (1919) and William Nigh's *Mr. Wu* (1927), and frequently traveled between China and the US for film-related business. Kwan recalled that it was on one of these trips that Wong, "a smart and inquisitive young actress," asked him to teach her Chinese music and poetry so that she could perform them at white parties. Kwan taught her some Tang Dynasty poems, as well as how to play two traditional folk songs on a moon zither (*yueqin*) 月琴.⁴⁸

Wong was to chant the poem "Seeing Off a Friend at the Hibiscus Tower" in Taishan dialect four times, from her first American talkie, *Daughter of the Dragon* (dir. Lloyd Corrigan, 1931), to a TV episode at the end of her career. In *Daughter of the Dragon*, Wong played the daughter of Fu Manchu who chants this poem to seduce Sessue Hayakawa's Scotland Yard officer, whom she has costumed in a heavily embroidered "Chinese" gown appropriate for his "Eastern rank" (video 0.1). A year later, Wong reiterated the vocal performance in a short Paramount revue film, *Hollywood on Parade* (dir. Louis Lewyn, 1932), in which she played herself chanting this poem to a bewildered white MC who stood in for the mainstream monolingual white audience beguiled by the "inscrutable Oriental," not only visually, but also sonically (video 0.2).

VIDEO 0.1. Wong, as Fu Manchu's daughter, chants a Tang Dynasty poem, "Seeing Off a Friend at the Hibiscus Tower," in Taishan dialect in *Daughter of the Dragon* (dir. Lloyd Corrigan, 1931).



To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.189.0.1>



VIDEO 0.2. Wong, as herself, reenacts the poem "Seeing Off a Friend at the Hibiscus Tower" in *Hollywood on Parade* (dir. Louis Lewyn, 1932).



To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.189.0.2>



Wong's third iteration of the poem occurred in *Tiger Bay* (dir. J. Elder Wills, 1934), a British colonial film in which she played a club owner who takes the law into her own hands in order to rescue her abducted white foster sister. To escape the law's punishment, she commits suicide as an "Eastern" "way out of imprisonment." She cuts her wrist with a poison-laden ring, then retreats to a chair in the background, as the sheriff turns his face away in the foreground. She sits, composed, chanting the poem while waiting for death to descend, as the camera slowly tracks in to reveal her impassive, stony face until she closes her eyes (video 0.3). More than two decades later, Wong reiterated this poem one last time in ABC's Western TV show *The Life and Legend of Wyatt Earp*, in which she played the eponymous character in an episode, "China Mary" (dir. Roy Rowland), aired on March 15, 1960. Once again, her Chinatown matron character executes the law (this time killing her own anti-white criminal son instead of letting the legendary Earp handle the case), then chants the poem in front of an altar, facing the camera, as Earp enters the background (video 0.4).

Wong's reiterative vocal performances of this poem in Taishan dialect across three decades illustrate her sustained cumulative and self-citational authorship. That she learned the poem in her early career, then carried it from the big screen to the small screen, both in character and as herself in the behind-the-scenes revue



VIDEO 0.3. Wong, as a club owner, reenacts the poem “Seeing Off a Friend at the Hibiscus Tower” in *Tiger Bay* (dir. J. Elder Wills, 1934).

To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.189.0.3>



VIDEO 0.4. Wong, as “China Mary,” reenacts the poem “Seeing Off a Friend at the Hibiscus Tower” in an episode of the ABC TV show *The Life and Legend of Wyatt Earp* (dir. Roy Rowland, 1960).

To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.189.0.4>



film, suggests her cultivation of a Chinese or “Oriental” female persona that not only caters to Anglo-American audiences, but also accentuates the ironic meta-performative quality.

Crossing three decades, Wong’s Taishan dialect chanting of the poem forms a personal archive and a time capsule. Each reiteration is a portable set piece that is out of place and time (i.e., anachronotopic) vis-à-vis its narrative context. Such recursive temporality seems to reinforce the stereotype of the “inscrutable Oriental” and “perpetual foreigner,” contradicting the compulsion to become an assimilated Asian American. Yet, by refusing easy alignment with a telos-driven Asian American or diasporic Chinese identity, her anachronotopic vocal performances stake out a recursive and (self-)citational authorship that anticipates Jane Gaines’s criticism of the “auteur theory’s politically retrograde idealism.”⁴⁹

Wong’s reiterative and (self-)citational authorship stems from her episodic career—a precarious career that waxes and wanes, puncturing our wish for a success or a victim narrative. The significance of the episodic pattern far exceeds a simple symptom of precarity. Feminist film historian Melanie Bell deploys the term *episodic* to productively revalorize below-the-line women movie workers’ shifting and non-continuous life-careers resulting from their obligatory multitasking as wives, mothers, and workers.⁵⁰ Wong differs from the women workers in Bell’s study in that her episodic career had to do with racial as well as gender discriminations; and her

family obligations were toward parents and siblings, while her insistent singlehood was subjected to salacious media scrutiny (more in chapters 1–3). Thus, a different conceptualization of the episodic pattern is in order.

From a white journalist's perspective, Wong's episodic career was flippantly mystified as a unique magic power—a backhanded compliment. In 1939, British film and television commentator John Newnham marveled at Wong's "miraculous Oriental ability to disappear and reappear at will," while "few other actors could leave without having the Hollywood studio doors closed to them."⁵¹ To step back into starring roles, all that the "Chinese puzzle" (i.e., Wong) needed to do was to return to Hollywood and give the producers "one of her bland smiles." Such magic power, Newnham opined, had to do with her unique ability to combine "Western mentality with Chinese looks," earning her "a corner entirely her own," thus enabling her career of "reappearance phases."⁵²

Newnham's Orientalist mystification of Wong's peekaboo ability drastically glossed over the reason for Wong's repeated "disappearance" from Hollywood—namely, the racist and sexist ceiling that severely constrained her work opportunities and conditions. He also ignored the fact that Wong rarely obtained starring roles in Hollywood and was frequently passed over for Caucasian actresses made up in yellowface for the plum parts. However, Newnham's flippant narrative did contain one important observation: his acknowledgment of Wong's episodic fading in and out, which countered a teleological success story.

Two years prior to Newnham's article, Wong had already reflected upon the multiple "beginnings" of her career, suggesting her grappling with precarious work conditions. She was quoted in a 1937 article describing her star-making career in Europe from 1928 to 1930 as the "second beginning," after her 1919 screen debut in Hollywood, and her 1937 return to Hollywood as the "third beginning," following her China trip.⁵³ In another interview two months earlier, Wong explained why she conceived her reappearances as new "beginnings": "Every time I make a new public appearance I regard it as a fresh beginning. I like to approach my work as something entirely new—as though it were all strange to me. Then I get a different outlook and a new interpretation."⁵⁴

Wong's conversion of the precarious situation (that led to her constant traveling for better work opportunities) into vantage points of fresh beginnings bespeaks her perseverance and resourcefulness despite systemic gender-race discrimination. This conversion also hinges upon her labor-intensive retraining, including acquiring new skills in languages, singing, and dancing; adapting to different media forms and technologies; and expanding into performance techniques appropriate for talkies, vaudeville, legitimate theater, and television. As Asian American cultural critic Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu points out, Wong partakes in the "broader history of immigration and labour"; she labors "not as a star, but as a cultural entrepreneur, who, for all her zipping around the globe, was just a worker chasing after better jobs."⁵⁵

Equally important as the hustling to get back into business (or busy-ness) is its flipside, the labor of waiting while keeping up hope—waiting for her Form 430 (Application of Alleged American Citizen of the Chinese Race for Preinvestigation of Status) to be approved so that she could travel overseas *and* return to the US (under the Chinese Exclusion Act, 1882–1943), waiting for theater producers and studio executives to respond to her inquiries and suggestions, waiting for work opportunities to materialize, and waiting outside of linear and straight time (to borrow a concept from Jose Esteban Muñoz, as discussed in the “refrain” of this book). Waiting emerges as a recurring theme in her thirty-year-long correspondence with Carl Van Vechten and Fania Marinoff. Wong’s agency and authorship, therefore, must be understood as being inextricably bound up with obstacles, constraints, disappointments, and being out-of-time-place or anachronotopic—all congealed in the state of waiting. Wong’s waiting is not dead empty time. For as she waited, or as she seemingly disappeared from one medium or one country, she often showed up in another country—retraining, venturing into a different medium, consulting behind the camera, orchestrating wartime China-relief campaigns. Such branching out intertwined with waiting, constituting the very *modus operandi* of Wong’s episodic, multi-sited and cross-media career.

To better understand the subaltern affective politics of the episodic, I turn to Lauren Berlant, who describes the episodic as “dissociative poetics” and “a potential hub” that allow “damaged” people of color to navigate systemic negativities, and to bear the unbearable relations. In a study of Black legal scholar Patricia Williams’s essay “On Being the Object of Property,” Berlant notes that the essay is structured as a series of episodes of Williams’s encounter with sexualized racism and racialized sexism.⁵⁶ The episodic pattern “dedramatiz[es] narrative into episode, epic into moment, and structure into gestures”; it offers a “cooling chamber” that “give[s] subordinated bodies in the present a shot at *not having the past reproduced in the contemporary nervous system*.”⁵⁷ “An episode is [also] a potential hub, organizing offerings for *potential lines of flight, social relations, affective structures, and skills at paying attention*.”⁵⁸ Probing different ways of relating to (and distancing from) the systemic pressure, the episodic allows Williams to experience and address sociopolitical negativities through “dissociative poetics,” “as though a circuit breaker within the overwhelmed sensorium is constantly snapping and repairing.”⁵⁹ Thus, the episodes of alternating engagement and dissociation facilitate a multiperspectival stance, enabling the objectivized Other to carve out a space for “incommensurable knowledges and attachments,” which in turn prevents the colonialist objectivizing gaze from becoming the single determining force for the existence of subjects of color.⁶⁰ Thus, the episodic makes it possible for a subject of color to “better show up even for these *relations that one also finds unbearable because one must bear them*.”⁶¹

Through this lens, we may understand Wong’s episodic, transnational, and cross-media career as encapsulating precisely her efforts to bear and *bare*

unbearable relations and pressures. With the aid of the “dissociative poetics” of the episodic, she simultaneously engaged with and distanced herself from the white-dominant entertainment industries. Dwelling in the elastic tension with these industries, Wong crocheted a peripatetic and precarious career among the US, Western and Northern Europe, Australia, and China.

Importantly, Wong was not the only diasporic and peripatetic Chinese performer who built an episodic career by actively negotiating the uneven terrain of white entertainment industries. Among her contemporaries were the Hawaiian-born Chinese French Etta Lee; the better-known Hawaiian-born Soo Yong; the Philadelphia-born Chinese African American Lady Tsen Mei (aka Josephine Moy); the Missouri-born Olive Young (aka Yang Aili), active in the Shanghai film industry and early Hollywood; the barely documented Bessie Wong; and the Chinese Australian Rose Quong. Wong shared screen and stage with Etta Lee, Bessie Wong, and Rose Quong at different points in her early career, although they did not appear to form long-term relationships. In comparison with these contemporaries, Wong’s career stands out with its four-decade *longue durée* and cross-media ventures. Yet, given her and other diasporic Chinese performer-workers’ shared experience of marginalization and objectification, Wong’s episodic career and reiterative gender-race hyper-performances do not suggest a *singular* case of paradoxical agency, but rather shed light on an obscured yet concatenated history of diasporic Chinese female performances that partook in, challenged, and reoriented the white-male-dominant regime of visibility. This history hovers on the edge of the system, and crucially shapes the center stage—the way a frame delimits and structures a painting.

STRUCTURE: RACKING THE FOCUS

Wong’s mosaic, peripatetic, and episodic life-career refutes a teleological narrative, be it rags to riches, anonymity to glamour, victim to victor, or abject minority to model minority. Rather, it is the physical, intellectual, and affective labor that underpinned her work, from her family laundromat to the screen and the stage, and further, off the screen and the stage. Echoing Lauren Berlant’s criticism of the genre of bionarrative (or biography) that presumes “a normative notion of human biocontinuity,” I bring the important questions Berlant raises to bear on my study: “What does it mean to have a life, is it always to add up to something? Would it be possible to talk about a *biography of gesture, of interruption, of reciprocal coexistences* (and not just amongst intimates who know each other)? Shouldn’t life writing be a primary laboratory for theorizing ‘the event?’”⁶²

Guided by these questions, I devise a structure in this book that mirrors Wong’s mosaic precarious creativity, the ebb-and-flow of rebeginnings and interruptions, “reciprocal coexistences” with the media industries, and greetings to the publics. I rack the focus to alternately illuminate her hypervisible *and* invisible work. The

five main chapters unfold in an order that moves from star studies to performer-worker studies, from the foreground and the center to the background and the margins, from appearance through disappearance to reappearance on the screen and the stage, and, ultimately, from the industrial capital-labor hierarchy to multifocal mosaic articulation.

Chapter 1, “Putting on a Show: Anna May Wong’s ‘Oriental’ (Dis)play on the Screen,” engages with Wong’s most visible agential performances as the leading lady in her Hollywood and European films. The films I study are sampled from her interwar vehicles made in the US and Europe, a Paramount B movie made after her 1936 China trip, *Daughter of Shanghai* (dir. Robert Florey, 1937), and a wartime Poverty Row film, *Lady from Chungking* (dir. William Nigh, 1942). At the heart of this chapter is a theory of Wong’s “Oriental (dis)play,” which I define as a mode of ironic hyper-performances that simultaneously displays and dis-plays or deconstructs stereotypical Orientalist femininity. I demonstrate that Wong actively negotiated media techniques and technologies, especially those concerning the production of raced and sexualized bodies. Mobilizing the method of seeing beyond the visible/legible through the anamorphic lens, I decipher punctum cinematic moments where she, through her fictional characters, subtly enlisted her resonating viewers (both diegetic and extradiegetic, both contemporaneous and diachronic) in the act of (dis)playing gender-race stereotypes.

Chapter 2, “Putting on Another Show: Spotlighting Anna May Wong in Theater,” extends Wong’s leading-lady performances to her theatrical works. These include *The Circle of Chalk* (1929) at the legitimate New Theatre (now Noël Coward Theatre) in London, *On the Spot* (1930) at the Forrest Theater (now Eugene O’Neill Theatre) on Broadway in New York City, *Princess Turandot* (1937) at summer stock theaters including the Westchester Playhouse in New York and the Westport Country Playhouse in Connecticut, and numerous vaudeville shows throughout the US at different times, in the UK and Northern and Southern Europe in 1933–35, and in Australia in 1939. I study the ways in which Wong’s theatrical works were assembled, produced, performed, and received by drawing upon scripts, photographic records, theater producers’ accounts, publicity programs, critics’ reviews, and Wong’s own letters and accounts, gleaned from archives and library special collections in the US, the UK, Norway, Italy, and Australia. This chapter also argues for Wong’s instrumental role in shaping the visual grammar of glamour photography that was emerging in the early 1930s. While glamour photography has come to be associated with whiteness, especially white femininity, Wong’s contribution reveals the raced and gendered bedrock of Western visual modernity. To borrow Wong’s words, the “silver of the screen” is predicated upon none other than the “spot of yellow” that she reenacted satirically.

Chapter 3, “Shifting the Show: Labor in the Margins,” racks the focus, moving from the hypervisible to the less visible, from the center-stage leading lady to the supporting performer-worker in the margins and background on the big

and small screens. Mobilizing Jacques Derrida's notion of the *parergon* (i.e., the edge of the frame that defines the painting), I excavate and theorize how Wong's physical, intellectual, and affective labor behind the apparent glamour helped to shape the mainstream entertainment industry. I further argue that Wong's performances in the margins destabilized the central white drama. This chapter fleshes out performer-worker studies. By grounding glamour in labor, cosmopolitanism in migratory precarity, and enduring legacy in anachronotopic, episodic rebeginnings, this chapter insists on understanding Wong's trailblazing significance as consisting in her largely obscured resourceful labor in the margins. This refocus on the margins offers a method for studying the broader landscape of the racialized and gendered work of minoritized female performer-workers.

Chapter 4, "The Show Must Go On—in Episodes (Now You See Her, Now You Don't)," turns to Wong's exclusion from the screen altogether by the yellowface casting of MGM's mega-production *The Good Earth* (dir. Sidney Franklin, 1937), which forced a major career turn *and* enabled two rebeginnings, as illustrated in three media works spanning two decades (1937–57). Here I reject the victim discourse that, while undeniably true, simply states the obvious and reinforces the trauma without offering a constructive perspective. To move beyond this deadlock, I underscore Wong's strategies of converting precarity into growth points of building new skills, venturing into media forms beyond film, and traveling extensively for better work opportunities. At the same time, I do not subsume her precarious work conditions to a teleological success narrative; rather, I emphasize her agency as being imbricated with precarity—hence the importance of attending to her episodic career marked by constant frustrations, disappearances, and rebeginnings.

Chapter 5, "Encore the Performer-Worker: Meeting Anna May Wong's 'Greetings,'" turns to the two-way call-and-response engagement between Wong and her international audiences of different ethnic and lingua-cultural backgrounds, during and after her lifetime. I make a methodological move of going beyond empirical reception studies to focus on the *potential* as well as actual dialogue between Wong's "greetings," on the one hand, and the diachronic audience's critical engagement on the other. The examples I study are three media works produced by contemporary Asian American documentarians and media artists. They are Celine Parreñas Shimizu's and Yunah Hong's documentaries, respectively titled *The Fact of Asian Women* (2002) and *Anna May Wong: In Her Own Words* (2010), and Patty Chang's installation work *The Product Love* (2009). Wong's ability to recruit audiences diachronically demonstrates her sustained inspiration of present-day struggles for a more equitable media and sociopolitical environment.

In writing this book, I consider myself among the many resonating viewers who see in Wong a historical companion; and this book is my response to Wong's greetings, which encourage us to be always gritty and witty, and to envision a concatenated world both here-and-now and elsewhere and in other times. Recalling

Wong's multiple rebeginnings, the book closes and reopens with its own "second beginning," which I call a "refrain." Here I (re)turn to Wong's little-documented and largely truncated career as a comedienne in her early career, imagining that in another time-space, she might just as well come back again as a comedienne.

Flashing back to Wong's hyper-animated youthful body tearing down the white domesticity in *The Honorable Mr. Buggs* (dir. Fred Jackman, 1927), and speculating what she (and we) might have made of the missed musical-comedy opportunity in *Flower Drum Song* (dir. Henry Koster, 1961) at the end of her life-career, this book invokes yet another beginning, the "Wong time"—where what is abject might also be comic, what seems "yellow" might actually be "intersti-racial" (in between "yellow," Black, and Brown), what goes into oblivion might still breathe, and what was out-of-time-place and anachronotopic might just be taking on a new life (again). At the end is another beginning, one that bursts through the seams of the race-gender straitjacket into an unruly life, death, and rebirth again.