

Encore the Performer-Worker

Meeting Anna May Wong's "Greetings"

... tout texte est d'une certaine manière une lettre d'amour [any text is in a certain way a love letter].

—JACQUES DERRIDA

In the previous chapters, I have analyzed Wong's signature performances, characterized by what I call the "Oriental" (dis)play—a double-entendre strategy of displaying "Oriental" femininity to mainstream viewers while simultaneously (dis)playing and rupturing the same stereotypes for critical viewers who share(d) her interstitial position. By tracing Wong's longitudinal parodic signature performances that permeated even her minor roles and off-screen activities, I refocus on invisibilized labor to formulate performer-worker studies with the ultimate goal of reorienting Euro-American film and media cultures. A critical link in my labor-centered and de-individualistic performer-worker studies is Wong's synchronic *and* diachronic "greetings" that invite and foster a shared critical interstitial sensibility.

This chapter, therefore, fleshes out Wong's "greetings" to the world, and the world's responses to her. I understand the call-and-response as not causal or lineal, but rather rife with surprise encounters, tension-ridden engagements, and circuitous resonances, resulting in complex cross-spatial and cross-time interlocution. Taking a cue from Derrida's observation, quoted above, that any text is in a certain way a love letter with an anticipated recipient (the beloved), I use the concept of "greetings" to encapsulate Wong's proactive and nuanced recruitment of supportive publics through various modes of performances and audience address. The publics she addresses include international colleagues, friends, audiences, reviewers, critics, and fans

Simultaneously, I take seriously Derrida's questioning of a text's or a love letter's sure arrival at a destination—an assumption predicated on the singularity of the sender, the receiver, and the message. To the contrary, Derrida derails destination into "destinerrance"—"a fatal possibility of erring by not reaching a predefined

temporal goal in terms of wandering away from a predefined spatial goal.”¹ Destinerrance is inevitable, as it “arises from the feature of iterability that Derrida associates with any sign, trace, or mark, even prelinguistic marks.”² Iterability means that the sender, the message, and the receiver are all infinitely divisible, thus deviating from a singular identity or entity, with unexpected results. The postcard bearing the love message intended for the loved one is available to anyone who has access to the postcard: “The recipient, however fortuitously he or she may come upon that postcard, is transformed into someone else, put beside himself or herself, dislocated, by reading it. I become the person to whom those words seem to be addressed, their fitting recipient.”³ The fortuitous destinerrance of the message, therefore, produces surprise relationships while losing some intended relationships, leading to in-flux positions.

Wong’s greetings to her public are no love messages on open postcards. On the contrary, as I have argued throughout the book, they are carefully encrypted, opaque, flexibly addressing differently located audiences with variant sensibilities. Still, in extending greetings to the public elsewhere and in other times, she inevitably acknowledged *and* speculated in the contingent destinerrance of her greetings. In this context, destinerrance means that there is no guarantee in how her greetings will be met, by whom, and in what ways, especially posthumously. Wong’s greetings to the public, therefore, entail throwing her performances into multiple time-spaces, encountering her contemporary audiences, *and* projecting a speculative relation with audiences elsewhere and yet to come. Such speculative relation building makes her a historical “companion” whose “potential history” beckons our response and engagement—and through responding, we transform ourselves.⁴

In her study of early twentieth-century female film workers who suffered erasure, Jane Gaines states that “what might have been” might become “what could be again.”⁵ “What could be again” is never a mere present-day realization of “what might have been,” but rather the potential history’s reanimation and transformation through the present spectatorial interventions. In other words, it is through the encounter between Wong’s speculative greetings and the public’s speculative responses to her as a historical companion that a relationship becomes possible, which in turn reconstitutes both Wong’s legacy and the responding public’s self-positioning. The speculative and contingent nature of the encounters effectively pushes beyond empirical reception studies, the limitations of which are laid out in this book’s Prelude. Specifically relevant to this chapter is that empirical reception research tends to focus exclusively on a discrete historical period, that of Wong’s lifetime, which risks disregarding her posthumous legacy as a historical companion.

Two critical insights become possible through the speculative approach. First, Wong’s greetings to the world invest in a resonating public that is yet to come, but also acknowledge that the meetings with her greetings are contingent, rather

than planned. Second, contemporary historians, critics, and motivated viewers speculatively construe and build out Wong's legacy by creatively reworking her elliptical and widely disseminated traces. They further ferment such encounters into media-oriented and sociopolitical interventions. Centering the contingent yet ineluctable encounters between greetings and responses, this chapter reinforces Wong's anti-teleological, anachronotopic salience that is both out-of-time-place *and* across diverse time-places.

This chapter first revisits two instances illustrating Wong's poignant greetings to her American and international publics, then analyzes how her greetings are met by three Asian American media practitioners who mobilize diverse media technologies to re-mediate and reanimate Wong's legacy. Imbricating the past and the present, these media works embody the present-day media practitioners' interlocution with Wong's greetings.

WONG'S GREETINGS TO THE WORLD

Wong's four-decade-long performance career traversed disparate Euro-American-Australian film, theater, television, and radio industries. Her reiterative authorial position gives rise to "greetings" that have shaped and shifted the variegated reception horizons. As laid out in the previous chapters, her greetings take a range of forms, including her signature performances; correspondence with film and theater practitioners, musicians, writers, photographers, art critics, and friends; travelogue writings and filming; multilingual interviews; gifted photos with Chinese and English autographs; and off-screen and off-stage work, such as educating and entertaining Hollywood's white crews and casts with her performative Chinese expertise and fund-raising for China War Relief. In view of Wong's wide-ranging greetings during and after her lifetime, her international professional network and audience circles could be understood as emerging from her hailing.

As Celine Parreñas Shimizu argues, film is "a relational medium" through which "authors, spectators, critics all anticipate each other in their relationships as historically situated subjects."⁶ Wong's address to audiences, both actual and anticipated, catalyzes precisely such relationality with responsive spectatorial sensibilities. In this process, film and other media apparati morph into potentially empowering relation-building vehicles. Two instances I have referenced at different places in the book serve to remind us of Wong's solicitation of relationality based on critical sensibility.

The first instance is her self-announced arrival on the scene as a "considerable spot of yellow that's come to stay on the silver of the screen" at the beginning of her career.⁷ This prideful challenge to film's literal and symbolic white-centric aesthetics, however, was defused by the journalist who cannibalized Wong's "spot of yellow" into "a much-needed freshness to the screen, a breath of lotus flowers," which would add to the "screenland color symphony."⁸ To wrestle Wong's challenge from

the dispossessing and expropriative “color harmony” means that we must reanimate her voice, first and foremost by recognizing her address to a resonating audience that she speculatively anticipated.

The second instance illustrating Wong’s direct relation-building with her audience came two decades later, in 1939, when her career staccatoed yet persisted across space and media platforms. As her burgeoning power of provocation in 1921 became seasoned with witty sarcasm in 1939, she criticized her Euro-American audience for seeing her as “a five-legged dog or a two-headed calf,” urging the Australian audience to see her as “an actress, not a freak.”⁹ Resisting the Euro-American pathologizing fetishism of her “Oriental” femininity, Wong directly “greeted” her Australian public, challenging them to be more discerning and intelligent in appreciating her performance skills *as* performance skills.

Respectively marking the “first beginning” of her career and the lull that followed the “third beginning,” these two instances encapsulate Wong’s provocative reaching out to her anticipated audiences. This interlocutory stance has fermented a politically conscious spectatorial sensibility among marginalized media critics and practitioners. In this process, “what might have been” and “what could be again” (to borrow from Jane Gaines) become mutually constitutive through an anticipated yet difficult call-and-response. The three media works I study here all demonstrate painstaking reckoning with and re-mediation of Wong’s legacy. They are Yunah Hong’s *Anna May Wong: In Her Own Words* (2010), an hour-long documentary featuring an actress, Doan Ly, vocally reenacting passages gleaned from Wong’s correspondence and interviews; Celine Parreñas Shimizu’s short documentary *The Fact of Asian Women* (2002), which similarly deploys reenactment to probe the possibility of performative agency through relational filmmaking; and Patty Chang’s *The Product Love* (2009), which comprises a two-channel video installation and one video loop. This work grapples with Wong’s ambivalent legacy by staging failed translation and stunted affect, and by doctoring Wong’s film section to resignify her overdetermined iconic fetish value. My analysis devotes more space to Chang’s *The Product Love* due to its textual complexity, radical recontextualization, and multilayered engagement with the fantasy surrounding Wong.

All three works explore the position of ethnic Asian female media workers within and outside mainstream film and media industries across history. Here, media practice, criticism, history, and spectatorship converge to address three questions: (1) What can an early twentieth-century Chinese American female performer-worker like Wong teach us today? (2) What kinds of mutual interactions could become possible between a historical companion and contemporary social agents? And (3) how does our interlocation with Wong as our historical companion help us write feminist and decolonial film and media histories?

Pondering similar questions, Jane Gaines speculates “historical coincidental relations across times and cultures.” She celebrates “a symmetrical ‘eloquence of the same,’” “the power of matched things, of finding resemblance between ourselves

and earlier others,” and “a politics of ‘she too’: ‘She too’ was burdened with family responsibilities, ‘she too’ was unacknowledged in her time, and ‘she too’ could not get the job for which she was qualified.”¹⁰ For Gaines, the reiteration of “she too” in “historical coincidental relations” suggests that the past and the present are both historicized and reconstituted in their mutual recognition. The erased historical figures “need us in order to exist historically, . . . not just as lost figures of the past, but as *provocative images in and for the present*.”¹¹ Thus, echoing Shimizu’s theorization of film being relational and anticipatory, Gaines posits a gesture of being “*in anticipation*” that is shared by feminist scholars, the moving-image evidence, and the pioneering filmmakers, when they meet “halfway,” supplementing each other’s aspirations.¹²

Gaines’s co-constitutive and halfway-meeting approach guides my analysis of the three contemporary Asian American re-mediations of Wong. Two important differences distinguish my study from Gaines’s, however. First, I emphasize that the meeting of the historical companion with the present, though anticipated, is a difficult one that requires labor-intensive self-reflection; and the results cannot be guaranteed (per Derrida’s notion of *destinerrance*). In other words, the call-and-response may not always be a straightforward recognition of “she too,” but could also stem from the painstaking process of learning to tune into an uncanny wavelength, as in “She speaks to me; but I am not sure about what and how, and I struggle to find a way to respond.” In different ways, the three media works inscribe this difficult contact that is at once intimate and friction-laden, anticipated and struggled with. It is through this contact that Wong’s salience comes across time and space as palpable, affective, and momentous.

My second difference from Gaines is that Wong’s contemporary interlocutors I study in this chapter are not just feminist film historians; they are two media practitioners (Hong and Chang) and one critic-practitioner (Shimizu). Since media making is the chosen mode of engaging with Wong, I pay special attention to the operations of the (multi)media form and technology. Specifically, I explore how the digital turn, which has democratized media authorship and transformed our media ecosystem, might enable today’s feminist and decolonialist practitioners to construct their audiovisual responses to Wong’s greetings.

IN HER OWN WORDS: FROM VENTRILOQUIZED HISTORICAL ALIGNMENT TO THE ARCHIVE EFFECT

Korean American documentary maker Yunah Hong’s *Anna May Wong: In Her Own Words* was made a few years after the first feature-length documentary about Wong, *Anna May Wong, Frosted Yellow Willows: Her Life, Times, and Legend* (dir. Elaine Mae Woo, 2007). They differ significantly in the position of enunciation. Woo’s documentary chronicles Wong’s life-career from a third-person perspective that assembles talking-head interviews, audiovisual illustration, and a voiceover

narrative (by none other than Wong's veritable Chinese/Hong Kong American successor in Hollywood, Nancy Kwan). Hong's documentary utilizes some talking-head interviews, but mainly channels Wong through contemporary Vietnamese American actress Doan Ly's reenactment of Wong's own words gleaned from her correspondence, interviews, and screen-stage performances. Ly, reenacting Wong, frequently addresses the camera and the present-day audience in an attempt to simulate Wong's greetings to her public. The reenactment, laced with talking-head interviews, is interspersed with black-and-white archival photos and film footage. The documentary ends abruptly with a freeze-frame showing Wong herself walking toward the camera—a moment lifted from her 1936 China travelogue footage in Shanghai (see chapter 4).

Recognizing her own struggles as a first-generation Korean American immigrant filmmaker mirrored in Wong's life-career, Hong recuperates Wong as a fellow woman warrior to offer a personal yet also politically motivated response to Wong's greetings. She gestures toward a genealogy of Asian American female media workers that renarrativizes American film history. Hong's film takes advantage of relatively affordable digital technology to felicitously splice together the past and the present, presenting them as a uniform audiovisual discourse. Hong explains that Ly reenacts Wong's words and songs to promote the audience's "sense of Anna May Wong."¹³ That is, Ly, as Wong's proxy, reanimates the long-deceased Wong and her long-silenced voice, thus heuristically bringing the latter up close to the contemporary audience. This strategy of reenactment, according to Hong, facilitates the audience's identification with the absent Wong.

But does this seamless time travel, via Ly's vocal-visual reenactment, really enable what Gaines calls a "halfway" anticipatory meeting between the past and the present? The answer is both yes and no. The documentary flattens the complexity of the past, short-shrifting Wong's nuanced experiences that largely predated the civil rights movement so as to fit them into today's identity politics. The move to de-historicize the past and graft it onto the present is manifested in a formal feature of the documentary. Not only are Ly's vocal-visual enactment and the talking-head interviews shot with a digital video camera, but Wong's archival photos and film footage are also re-mediated digitally. Thus, the digital technology levels the past and the present, erasing their differences and enabling their alignment. Indeed, the reenacted past is audiovisually indistinguishable from the present, as the reenactment sequences and the present interviews are shot in the same style—crisp sound and full color with high-definition resolution.

Furthermore, Wong's words drawn from her letters and printed interviews were originally unvoiced, and her vocal performances on the stage were unrecorded. Ly's vocal reenactment of Wong is, therefore, a form of ventriloquism, which does not *refer to* Wong's voice or stage performance, but rather serves as a proxy—possible and desirable only because of the absence of Wong's voice. Thus, Hong's reenactment forfeits "its indexical bond to the original event," and instead produces

a “fantasmatic” “mise-en-scène of desire” to animate the past, as Bill Nichols would argue.¹⁴ Such ostensibly effortless re-presentation of the past produces an illusion that the past is completely knowable and readily available. And the contemporary Ly becomes a transparent conduit for the past Wong, paradoxically by replacing Wong and erasing their differences. As a result, the documentary makes it impossible to historicize either the past or the present. On the one hand, the nuances of Wong’s experience prior to the 1960s are subsumed by post-civil rights Asian American identity politics. On the other hand, present-day digital media technology becomes naturalized. De-historicization of both the past and the present defuses Wong’s power of engaging with and challenging contemporary audiences at a deeper level.

Yet the documentary also inadvertently accomplishes something different. Despite the seemingly seamless stitching of the past and present, the shifting media ecosystem inevitably tears apart the uniform digital surface to reveal the divergence between the “inconceivable” past (*à la* Gaines) and the present, and thereby foregrounds the question of what Wong can teach us beyond symptomizing entrenched systemic inequity. Commenting on the power and limits of digital technology, Anna Everett advances the notion of “digitextuality,” arguing that the digital framework “has introduced new visual and aural media codes that draw extensively from the medium specificities of film, video, and radio while introducing new characteristics and imperatives that are properties of digital technologies alone.”¹⁵ However, digitextuality by no means guarantees the merging of different media technologies and formats. Instead, digitextuality must accommodate, and sometimes even foreground, the divergences between media technologies, particularly when they are compressed into a single space.

Such media divergences within the digital framework come to the fore in Hong’s documentary when Wong’s black-and-white film footage is replayed silently or with a few spoken lines, only to be overlaid with contemporary commentators’ voiceover sound bites. The jarring juxtaposition of the archival footage with the sound imported from the present time calls attention to digitextuality that accentuates the gap between different media technologies and different times. The resulting effect counters Hong’s goal of bringing Wong up close to the contemporary audience via reenactment. Rather, it leads to what Jaimie Baron describes as “temporal disparity,” associated with the “archive effect.”¹⁶ Visualizing Wong’s life-career elliptically, the grainy black-and-white imagery reveals inevitable temporal distance and lacunae, cuing the feeling of absence and irretrievability that undermines the apparent ease of re-presenting the past through full-color reenactment. In other words, the film cannot re-present the past without reinforcing the archive effect of loss. The complicated past thus remains shrouded in “temporal disparity,” diverging from the reenacted past and the full-color present; it looms as a ghostly receding horizon that insists on our attention yet also resists easy assimilation, be it through reenactment or digital re-mediation.

Contrary to the plenitude and easy accessibility promised by the digital episteme that enables Hong's documentary, the archive effect, combined with digitextuality that heightens divergent media technologies, adheres to the engrossing reticence of another temporality. The documentary's concluding shot freeze-frames on Wong walking up to the camera, smiling broadly but silently in close-up. This silent freeze-frame stands in stark contrast with the film's eloquent opening that showcases historians and critics readily commenting on Wong, followed by Ly's effortless vocal reenactment of Wong's Chinese song "Moli hua" 茉莉花 (A Jasmine Flower). Yet the silence does not mean that the past seals itself off from the present. In the context of Wong's 1936 silent travelogue footage, "Anna May Wong Visits Shanghai, China," from which the freeze-frame shot is lifted, Wong was speaking before turning to directly face the camera while carrying on talking, presumably addressing Newsreel Wong, who filmed her. As Hong's documentary ends abruptly with a freeze-frame of Wong smiling at the camera, the arrested energy enhances her vivid facial expressions, as if she is addressing us across time, even if inaudibly. This suspense compels us to tune in and ponder what Wong would have said to us today, and how her anticipatory greetings are simultaneously channeled and obfuscated by the digitally rendered full-color reenactment and eloquent talking heads.

Thus, despite the de-historicizing reenactment that levels the past and the present, Hong's documentary paradoxically evokes "temporal disparity" that denaturalizes the plenitude of reenactment and the digital episteme. As we recognize the illusion of re-presentation, and turn our attention to the underlying mechanics of mediation, we become more conscious of Wong's inaudible greetings from a different time, *and* of the documentary's own technological and sociopolitical conditions. How does the irreducible past greet, challenge, and reshape the present? And what strategies might today's media critics and practitioners develop to meet the past "halfway" in a self-reflexive and mutually constitutive manner? Hong's documentary raises these questions without addressing them. To pursue these questions, I turn to Celine Parreñas Shimizu's short documentary *The Fact of Asian Women*.

THE FACT UNDER (DE)/(RE)CONSTRUCTION: THE METAPROCESS OF REENACTMENT

Inspired by Frantz Fanon's *The Fact of Blackness*, Shimizu's *The Fact of Asian Women* critically reexamines Hollywood's stereotyping of Asian American femininity across the long twentieth century. A feminist media critic and practitioner with a Filipino American background, Shimizu shot the film in 2001 in San Francisco with a small budget and a crew of women of color. Her short documentary mobilizes self-reflexive camerawork and lighting to problematize conventional Hollywood techniques that contribute to creating a hypersexualized Asian female mystique.¹⁷



VIDEO 5.1. Lena Zee impersonates Wong in *The Fact of Asian Women* (dir. Celine Parreñas Shimizu, 2002) (credit: Celine Parreñas Shimizu).

To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.189.5.1>



Working *through* (rather than simply against) Orientalist stereotypes, Shimizu casts three contemporary Chinese American actresses to reenact emblematic scenes, respectively featuring Anna May Wong, Nancy Kwan, and Lucy Liu in three corresponding films: *Shanghai Express* (dir. Josef von Sternberg, 1932), *The World of Suzie Wong* (dir. Richard Quine, 1960), and *Charlie's Angels* (dir. McG, 2000). The contemporary actresses also vocally reenact Wong's, Kwan's, and Liu's interview excerpts. Following these reenactments, *The Fact of Asian Women* stages the three contemporary actresses in full costume on San Francisco streets, walking and displaying themselves the way they think Wong, Kwan, and Liu would do. Such imaginary, anachronistic, and hyperbolic reenactment creates a disjuncture with the present-day San Francisco, provoking pedestrians' befuddled gazes. Finally, Shimizu invites the actresses to reflect on their filming experience and, more specifically, on their approaches to reenactment. These interview sessions, edited into the documentary, take place in retail stores of the actresses' own choice.

Actress Lena Zee impersonates Wong, first reenacting a scene from *Shanghai Express* and then acting out how she imagines Wong would walk in downtown San Francisco. Zee's retro Oriental costuming and hairstyle, heavy makeup, stiff and mechanical slow gait, stony stare, and utterly expressionless face make her a zombie-like walking curiosity that both attracts the pedestrians' attention and puzzles (even repels) them (video 5.1). In her interview, Zee explains that she imagines and enacts Wong's stiffness, rigid asexuality, and constrained body language due

to the latter's self-defensive gestures in response to a hostile environment. Zee's interpretation of Wong's asexuality contradicts the common fetishization of Wong as an icon of Oriental feminine hypersexuality.

However, the point of this documentary is not which interpretation is historically accurate, but rather how Zee (along with the other two contemporary actresses, Angelina Cheng and Kim Jiang) utilizes the platform to meet and reckon with the legacy of Wong (as well as those of Kwan and Liu), while reflecting upon their own positioning in contemporary American popular media culture. Such negotiation and self-reflection unfold through performative re-presentation that brings out layered visual, vocal, and intergenerational affective engagement filtered through the present-day actresses' circumstances, experiences, and embodied understandings of gender and racial politics in popular media. It centers the present-day actresses subjecting their own physical bodies to contact and contestation with the Orientalist feminine stereotypes enacted by previous generations of ethnic Chinese performers. Thus, the corporeal body—along with costuming, hairstyling, and body language—becomes the very site of past-present meeting, greeting, friction, and mutual reconstitution.

Not only do the contemporary actresses drastically reshape their physical appearances and mannerisms to project their understanding of the earlier performers, but their (re)enactment also leads to their own bodies being perceived as puzzling spectacles that provoke contemporary pedestrians' gazes and bewilderment in downtown San Francisco. In other words, such performance/reenactment subjects the material medium—the contemporary performers' corporeality—to real-life vulnerability. As Shimizu puts it, "moving like Anna May Wong constitutes a kind of pathological asexuality for Lena Zee; strutting like Nancy Kwan results in a particular kind of sexual availability for Angelina Cheng that leaves her shaken on the streets; and Kim Jiang's donning dominatrix gear to evoke Lucy Liu reveals the caricature quality of contemporary Asian female roles."¹⁸ In staging the dramatic misfit of asexualized or hypersexualized Asian females in the real-life environment, the documentary reminds us of the compromises Wong, Kwan, and Liu must have suffered in playing stereotypical Oriental femininity.

Importantly, such suffering is not submissive or joyless. I have argued throughout the book that Wong's own reenactment of gender-race stereotypes constituted strategic "Oriental" (dis)play that produced subversive pleasure. Tuning into such subversive pleasure, we may recast the present-day actresses' reenactment of the earlier ethnic Chinese actresses as, potentially, similarly pleasurable and ironic, even though (or precisely because) it is experienced as awkward, disjointed from reality, and campy. This pain-to-pleasure flip demonstrates how working *through* (not simply against) stereotypes and engaging with the complicated historical legacy might generate marginalized yet situated agency.

As Shimizu argues, Asian American film spectators (including Wong, Kwan, Liu, and the contemporary actresses, who all start as film viewers) who encounter the often hypersexualized “Oriental” femininity in mainstream cinema do not “simply learn and accept these images,” but rather “converse with and challenge them in a dialectical process.”¹⁹ Mainstream media’s power of exploiting hypersexual Oriental femininity, therefore, not only “repress[es] our experience but also compel[s] our film practice and our speech” as rejoinders.²⁰ *The Fact of Asian Women*, as a rejoinder, aims to “recognize not only the pain but also the pleasure provoked by these images,” and such pleasure “may be available for viewers even in the most unexpected representations.”²¹ Shimizu argues that Asian female performers may find pleasure in *authoring* themselves as sexual beings.²² Through the younger generation’s embodied (re)enactment of the previous generations’ (perceived) performance styles, *The Fact of Asian Women* foregrounds precisely the encounter between different generations of Asian American women, and their shared subversive pleasure across time.

One method that facilitates this intergenerational affective meeting and reckoning is what Shimizu calls the “metaprocess of relational filmmaking.”²³ By inviting the contemporary actresses to engage bodily and analytically with earlier Chinese-heritage female performers, the filmmaker, the performers, and the spectators anticipate and constitute each other across history, acquiring agency through interactive coauthorship that connects filmmaking, performance, and spectatorship. Through anticipation, negotiation, and contestation, the “metaprocess of relational filmmaking” distinguishes Shimizu’s strategy of reenactment from the reenactment in Yunah Hong’s documentary.

Hong strives for seamless alignment between the present and past by encouraging spectatorial conflation of Wong and Doan Ly. Her goal is to make Wong accessible and relatable for the contemporary audience. Shimizu, on the other hand, uses reenactment to inscribe encounter, discrepancy, even disidentification between the past and the present, while insisting on their relational engagement. Notably, it is the similar disidentification with her roles that enabled Wong’s own ironic enactment of gender-race stereotypes. Ultimately, *The Fact of Asian Women* is not concerned with making the past legible to the present-day audience. Rather, Shimizu deploys the “metaprocess of relational filmmaking” to bring the filmmaker, the performers, and the spectators into a vigorous and difficult interplay. In this process, the past and the present meet, challenge, and constitute each other, as the filmmaker, the performers, and the spectator-critics find their voices through a diachronic conversation. This, then, cracks open the overcharged, stereotypical “Oriental” femininity for new pleasurable and subversive reworking. Key to Shimizu’s metaprocess is not only the contemporary actresses’ reenactment of preexisting film scenes, but also their speculative reinterpretations of their predecessors’ psychosomatic states. Such

speculative reinterpretation and enactment undergird Patty Chang's 2009 installation work *The Product Love*.

FAILED TRANSLATION, STUNTED AFFECT,
SPECULATIVE ENACTMENT:
TRANSMEDIATING WONG'S OUTLINE

Chang's *The Product Love* registers multilayered efforts to reckon with Wong's problematic representations, forged by German director Richard Eichberg and critic Walter Benjamin. In this installation work, Chang works to empty out Wong's Orientalist iconography, distill it into an outline, and refill it with new meanings and possibilities. Different from Shimizu's endeavor to foster marginalized voices and instill agency into generations of Asian (American) performers' self-authored "sex act," *The Product Love* underscores aphasia, stuttering, arrested temporality, and stunted affect. It exposes the intractable difficulty and urgency of sense making through speculative reinterpretation from Wong's time to the present day.

The Product Love is composed of two video installation channels (forty-two minutes) and one short film loop, forged out of layered intertextuality, speculative enactment, reinvented film footage, and juxtaposition of apparently unrelated imagistic and linguistic references. The title "The Product Love" evokes Bertolt Brecht's play *The Good Person of Szechwan*, originally titled "Die Ware Liebe" (The Product Love, or Love as Commodity), which puns on "die wahre Liebe" (the true love).²⁴ This is also the play Wong expressed interest in when meeting with Brecht in June 1942 during the latter's sojourn in Santa Monica.²⁵ The wordplay and intertextual reference highlight the treacherous ambivalence besieging interracial and cross-cultural intimacy. Infatuation, enchantment, and desire for communication are revealed as being simultaneously "true" (*wahre*) and subjected to commodification (*Ware*) under the Western male gaze. In other words, *The Product Love* evokes what Saidiya Hartman calls the "scenes of subjection" where terror and surreptitious pleasure coexist, even when they occupy drastically disbalanced positions in the system of exclusion and dispossession.²⁶ More specifically, Chang's critique also resonates with what Asian America critic Leslie Bow calls American "racist love" directed toward Asianized proxies—"love" predicated upon anxiety and desire.²⁷

Channel One, "Translators," reworks Walter Benjamin's German essay "Gespräch mit Anne [*sic*] May Wong: Eine Chinoiserie aus dem alten Westen," based on his 1928 meeting with Wong in Berlin.²⁸ It stages three native English speakers—one Asian female, one white female, and one white male—struggling to translate the essay into English. Shot in Los Angeles, Wong's birth city, this video compels the viewer to toil along with the three translators who painstakingly pore over Benjamin's German text, and to share their frustration as they

all fail to render into legible English Benjamin's tortuous syntax and impenetrably florid verbiage, which are symptomatic of his attempt to grasp the enigmatic Wong, whom he dubbed "Eine Chinoiserie aus dem alten Westen," or the "Chinoiserie [Chinese-style European décor] from the Old West." While recognizing Wong as a modern "walking contradiction to existing stereotypes about Chinese women," Benjamin, echoing contemporary German media coverage, contributed to "reinforc[ing] those very stereotypes [about Chinese femininity]."²⁹

The failed translation of Benjamin's essay in Chang's Channel One is particularly ironic in view of Benjamin's famous essay "The Task of the Translator," originally written in 1921 as the introduction to his translation of Baudelaire. In this essay, Benjamin foregrounds the difficulty of translation, for translation is an art that must not simply convey the original meaning, but also, more importantly, creatively fulfill the kinship between languages and facilitate the rebirth of the "pure language." By staging the ultimate failure of translating his writing on Wong, Chang's "Translators" video channel exposes Benjamin's Orientalist male gaze and (failed) attempt to make sense of Wong. Contrary to Benjamin's messianic vision of a "pure language," Chang's video forces translation into stutter and aphasia, which may then, paradoxically, give way to alternative sense making in resistance of the fixating white male gaze.

If the "Translators" video channel grinds the translation of Benjamin's essay to an aphasic halt, Channel Two, "Actors," dooms interracial intimacy by speculatively enacting how Wong and Benjamin's 1928 meeting could have devolved into an unfeeling carnal encounter. Shot in Hangzhou, a southeastern Chinese city that Wong visited during her 1936 China trip, the "Actors" channel shows two Chinese actors, made up as Wong and Benjamin, woodenly going through motions suggestive of a soft-core pornographic encounter under the direction of a diegetic Chinese crew. This whole process was staged for Chang's meta-mediatic camera. The double mediatic gaze pushes Wong's objectification (enacted by the Chinese actress) to the extreme, so as to body forth and confront the entrenched gender-race discrimination in Benjamin's 1928 meeting with Wong and, more generally, in Wong's precarious relation to the white male-dominant society.

Taking place on a bed surrounded with retro "Oriental" décor, the sex scene features Wong's Chinese impersonator dressed in a cheesy bright-yellow qipao, contradicting Benjamin's description of Wong's modern Western attire composed of a blue coat, a skirt, a light-blue blouse, and a yellow tie. The Chinese actress is subsequently stripped down to naked fleshly existence. Passive, tepid, voiceless, and unresponsive to the touch of the actor impersonating Benjamin, she resembles an inanimate prop in the entire mock sex scene, contrary to Wong's witty eloquence that both teased and upended Western Orientalist assumptions, as suggested by Benjamin's description. The relationship between the two Chinese actors, and between them and their characters, becomes perverted as the impossibility of a relationship due to mechanical motions.

Furthermore, the Chinese actors are also alienated from the diegetic male Chinese crew who directed and filmed the mock sex scene, and whose filming was in turn filmed by Chang for her installation project. Facing Chang's camera, one Chinese male crew member disregards the two actors' utter apathy and opines, in Mandarin Chinese, that the Oriental woman maternally encouraged Benjamin's desire due to the latter's lack of self-confidence, and that Benjamin's desire for Wong symbolized his flirting with the Eastern culture by touching its sensitive spot. The other man in the crew tries to translate the East-West heteroerotic economy into English for Chang, with awkwardness that echoes the failed translation in the "Translators" channel, and makes the description of the sexual encounter comically blunt. Mediated and amplified through Chang's own camera, the sex scene embodies stunted affect that not only satirizes the Orientalist fantasy, but also flips spectatorial voyeurism into embarrassing discomfort. Such discomfort further instigates radical disidentification from the representation.

During an intermission in the impassive sex scene in the "Actors" channel, the actor who impersonates Benjamin, complete with the Benjaminian mustache and hair, decides to vigorously fan himself and the actress's half-covered, motionless body laid out on the bed. This detail, out of place and farcical given the Benjamin connection, nevertheless visualizes the humid, hot summer typical in Hangzhou City in southeast China where the video was made. The location and the culturally specific practice of hand-fanning, combined with the actor's sweaty half-naked body and Chinese looks (despite the attempted Benjaminian makeover), force the viewer to inhabit the cognitive dissonance between the Chinese actor and Benjamin, between the impassive sex scene and Benjamin's essay. On the other hand, however, the viewer is also invited to recognize their uncanny underlying similarity—namely, their shared East-West binary that results in caricaturist Otherization. Thus, Benjamin's 1928 essay based on his meeting with Wong is turned inside-out as its underlying race-gender power inequity is literally stripped naked through speculative enactment in the "Actors" channel.

Chang lunges another heavy-handed stab at Western "racist love" (à la Leslie Bow) in the third component of *The Product Love*, a three-minute film loop and a photographic installation housed in a gallery room adjacent to the two-channel video installation. Cryptically titled "Laotze Missing," the film loop is a transfer from video documentation that references and reconfigures a key scene from Wong's first German film, *Show Life* (dir. Richard Eichberg, 1928). It was toward the end of filming *Show Life* that Wong met with Benjamin, who then penned the enigmatic essay dismantled in Chang's two video channels. Unlike the video channels that are projected onto an entire wall in high-definition saturated colors, the black-and-white low-resolution film loop is projected in thumbnail size on a large blank wall from a reel-to-reel Eiki projector in the middle of a dimly lit, empty room (figure 5.1). Additionally, unlike the two channels that translate and enact the 1928 Wong-Benjamin meeting in present-day Los Angeles and



FIGURE 5.1. The projection setup of “Laotze Missing,” a three-minute film loop in *The Product Love* (created by Patty Chang, 2009).

Hangzhou, the film loop “Laotze Missing” remains anchored in the 1928 film *Show Life*. The film loop’s aesthetic, temporal, and spatial disconnect from the two video channels evokes what Jaimie Baron describes as “temporal disparity” and the “archive effect.”

By revisiting and literally *un*-tracing a scene from *Show Life*, “Laotze Missing” does not just return to the past “scene of subjection,” (à la Saidiya Harman), but also shows how the past could be transformed into an outline that can in turn be re-signified. Echoing what Anne Anlin Cheng calls the “residue of the fetish” that exceeds immediate ideological labeling, Wong’s outline, as a residue of her stereotypical figuration, is an opaque form that is conspicuously empty (or emptied out), passive on the one hand, and stubbornly present and beckoning on the other. This outline inspires an imaginary that could reparatively meet and resonate with Wong’s greetings.

The scene from *Show Life* that Chang *un*-traces and re-signifies in “Laotze Missing” is borderline sadistic. It shows Wong’s character Song, the nonwhite lovelorn and self-sacrificial woman, being literally cornered and circumscribed, subjected to knives thrown and landing around her body, delineating her outline (video 5.2). The white male knife thrower, John, first sadistically motions to target her, making her cower in terror. He then violently drags her up and forces her to stand straight against the door, and proceeds to limn the outline of her figure on the door with white chalk. He subsequently pushes her to screen right, and proceeds to throw knives at the chalk outline. As she watches the knives accurately land right on the edge of her outline on the door, literally cutting out her figure while casting long, dark shadows that slash across her outline, threatening to (symbolically) impale her body, the initially terrified Song now turns to the man with an admiring,



VIDEO 5.2. Wong as Song in a sadomasochistic scene in *Show Life* (dir. Richard Eichberg, 1928, black and white, 9.5mm Pathé Baby transfer).

To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.189.5.2>



rapturous gaze in a luminously lit close-up shot, her chest heaving with fear-turned-excitement. Within the same close-up shot, her rapture morphs back into terror; a cut to a medium shot shows the man grabbing her, violently thrusting her against the wall into the chalk outline, now encased with knives. The next medium close-up shot frames her face restrictively flanked by two knives just above her shoulders, her face twitching with the fear of capture tinged with hope for mercy in response to the man's taunting question "Are you afraid?" When the man proposes a "double turn" of knife throwing as an entertainment stunt, however, a close-up shot—angled from the man's perspective, markedly disconnected from the previous sequence of shots—shows her responding with a (misplaced and mis-genred) radiant happy smile, her head still encased within the chalk outline, the flanking knives no longer visible.

In this "scene of subjection," Wong's face and body turn into the site of contending emotions, vividly diagrammed through the quasi-magnifying lens of the camera and the luminous, amber-tinted lighting.³⁰ Wong's tour-de-force performance of terrified vulnerability mixed with masochistic submission is reminiscent of her tear-drenched performance in *The Toll of the Sea* captured in extreme close-up framing, which I liken to a quasi-camera study of an "Oriental" performer's emotive abilities (see chapter 1). Struggling with the white Orientalist "racist love," Chang's film loop rewrites the "scene of subjection." She literally *un*-traces the straitjacketing dagger-edged outline so as to visualize speculative emancipation.



FIGURE 5.2. The projection stutters just before the knife-throwing man pushes away Wong's character, Song, in a scene from *Show Life* (dir. Richard Eichberg, 1928), reworked by Patty Chang in "Laotze Missing."

Her film loop begins with the original film moment where the white man forcefully outlines Wong/Song's figure on the door. The loud Eiki projector noise sets into relief the eerie silence of the original footage. Then, instead of having him push her away, the projector pauses, making clicking noises for a few seconds, then plays the film backwards at a reduced speed. As the frames flicker through in the reverse order, we see the man slowly, almost lovingly, erase the chalk outline around Wong/Song, as if releasing her from bondage.

Once the chalk marking is completely erased, the projector pauses for a split second, then replays the original film footage so that Wong/Song is once again forcefully encased in the chalk outline. Just as the man lays his hand on her shoulder to push her away, the projector pauses, making harsh clicking noises for a prolonged twenty-four-second duration as if struggling through a jam (figure 5.2). This cacophonous suspense forces the viewer to reread the "scene of subjection" as potentially embryonic of a showdown between the two characters despite their drastic inequity. Alternatively, it also makes one ponder the possible intimacy in that touch before motion resumes and turns the touch into a brutal shove. The suspenseful stillness thus transforms Wong/Song from a panicking victim into a defiant rival or a semi-anticipating playmate. When the film finally resumes, showing Wong/Song pushed to screen right, gazing back at her outline on the door, the projector loudly "jams" again for another twenty seconds, accentuating the uncertainty and ambivalence assumed by the emptied-out chalk outline under her gaze (figure 5.3).



FIGURE 5.3. Wong's prolonged gaze at her outline as the projection pauses again in "Laotze Missing."

After prolonged dwelling on the suspenseful moment, the film resumes at slightly accelerated speed, then pauses abruptly at a close-up framing showing Wong/Song's rapturous admiration morphing into terror in reaction to the man off screen, leaving the audience speculating the next crisis moment. This scene in *Show Life* ends with her agreeing to participate in the man's "double turn"—that is, to become the human target for his knife-throwing stunt in the variety show. Serving as the human target around whom the white man is to trace an outline with his projectile knives at his stunt show, Wong's body is literally reduced to the white male's violent projection.³¹ Indeed, just as the stunt show intrigues the diegetic audience with razor-edge suspense, the film itself teases its predominantly white audience with a sadomasochistic drama that teeters between two sets of possibilities—the white man either really impaling her *or* successfully outlining her body with the knives; Wong/Song being either terrified at being harmed *or* desiring to just narrowly survive thanks to the white man's precise marksmanship. Her passivity as a human target seems to deplete her ability to address the audience or exercise any form of agency.

However, as I argue in chapter 1, by accomplishing "puro arte" and putting on a perfect show of vulnerable and self-effacing "Oriental" femininity, Wong's pleasure in hyper-performance gains the potential of reverse-contaminating the white male's sadistic desire and "reorienting" (à la Sara Ahmed) the colonialist and heteropatriarchal pleasure economy. If this potential is Wong's greetings to her audience, then Chang's film loop effectively meets and reactivates her greetings by un-tracing and reinventing the 1928 film scene.

Countering the original film sequence that exploits and naturalizes white sadism, Chang's film loop jams its mechanism. It not only reverses, pauses, and stutters, but also denaturalizes the image flow with the loud projector noise, the clicking jamming sounds, the flickering low-resolution quality, and the crude framing of a small square projected on the dim, empty wall. The surfacing of the crude mechanism of the apparatus forces us to contemplate the significance of the Wong-shaped chalk outline (performatively and mechanically traced, un-traced, and retraced), and to recombine all the audiovisual details of pausing, stuttering, and reiteration. All of this works to collapse the unilinear temporality, to produce what I call anachronotope. Dwelling on the anachronotopic reshuffling of naturalized processes, viewers can learn to reanimate their multiple meanings and potentials that exceed the overarching white-male-colonialist sadistic narrative.

Watching the film sequence being played in reverse, the un-tracing of the chalk outline, a viewer of Chang's anachronotopic film loop experiences a surprising feeling of liberation that is impossible in the original film narrative. Yet this feeling was already potentiated in Wong's strategic "Oriental" (dis)play of stereotypes, which pushed back against race-gender constraints. Furthermore, the film loop continues to grapple with the chalk outline in the second long pause, arresting Wong/Song and the white man in the prolonged act of staring at the chalk outline (figure 5.3). Singled out from the original film, flanked by Wong/Song and the white man, the chalk outline becomes the central object of contemplation for Wong, and for us, the extradiegetic audience. An index of Wong's body, the emptied chalk outline registers her physical trace, suggesting disembodied presence, apparition, and imprint on public memories. Its uncanny emptiness is pregnant with meanings and affect—as an enigma, or the "residue of the fetish" (à la Anne Anlin Cheng).

This frozen frame visually evokes the quasi-tableau moment in *The Pavement Butterfly* (discussed in chapter 1) that features Wong's character (center) gazing at her life-size portrait (frame left) created by the Parisian painter, while being gazed at by the painter (frame right) unawares. This quasi-tableau calls attention to the interchangeability between Wong, her character, and the portrait, all of whom are displayed for the white painter's gaze. Still, Wong and her character's intense gaze at the portrait of herself as the Other prefigures Chang's freeze-frame in which Wong/Song gazes at the chalk outline, channeling the audience's attention. In both cases, the portrait and the outline seem to become animated and gaze back at Wong and her character *and* at us, the audience.

The emphasis on Wong's gaze at her own figuration (whether a portrait or a chalk outline) as the uncanny self-Other complicates the axes of desire projection. We are prompted to go beyond the white-male-dominant heterosexual scopophilia to discern Wong's desire for and/or bewilderment with her doppelgänger, or the "residue of the fetish." Such intense relating with the self-Other

makes possible her self-authorship, even if diegetically the white man owns the authorship. Furthermore, the outline or the portrait gazes back, not only at Wong and her character but also at us, suggesting a charged spectral presence, a history that beckons to be met, reckoned with, and rewritten. By liberating a detail such as this from a colonialist film, and speculatively reworking it, we can hope to activate Wong's signature performances and meet her nuanced audience address "halfway" across history.

In summary, Chang's *The Product Love* guides us to grapple with Wong's problematic representation through failed translation in the "Translators" channel and stunted affect in the "Actors" channel, both exposing the precarious nature of interracial intimacy and intercultural communication as determined by the Orientalist gender-race inequity. More importantly, *The Product Love* mobilizes the figure of the outline in the film loop "Laotze Missing" to explore ways of unleashing a past moment, re-signifying it, and meeting its greetings so as to facilitate alternative meaning making and relation making. This is also how critical spectatorship comes into being. While not guaranteeing fundamental power reconfiguration, the critical spectatorial consciousness keeps searching for decolonizing and generative connections across time and space.

MEETING ANNA MAY WONG'S GREETINGS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

The three Asian American media works I have studied here illustrate difficult and different engagements with Wong's greetings in the age of independent media making, partially facilitated by digital technology, and explicitly inspired by postcolonial and intergenerational feminism. In each instance of speculative (re)enactment, certain details of Wong's signature performances are released from the original contexts, gaining anachronotopic salience, thus resurfacing in double exposure—through the lenses of the past and of the present where her calls meet responses. This double exposure construes a stereoscopic composite image of Wong, which befits her mosaic transnational and cross-media performances that I have unpacked throughout the book. This stereoscopic composite image scrambles and superimposes different temporalities and spaces, prompting us to examine border-crossing, diachronic, and cross-media shifts on the one hand and, on the other, to scrutinize gender-race politics and geopolitics specific to different times and locations.

Through the gyrating lens that refracts and re-composites Wong and her works in the age of digital technology and independent feminist Asian American (multi)media practices, we—the contemporary critics, historians, makers, spectators, and fans—explore methods of meeting and responding to the greetings of Wong, our insistent even if opaque historical companion. In the process of reanimating Wong's spectral presence with afterlives, we also learn to historicize our own position and better understand the potentials and perils of our own

media ecosystem—in connection with and contradistinction to that of Wong’s time. Through examining Wong’s strategic “Oriental” (dis)play and her multi-registered audience address, and through speculating “what might have been” and how it “could be again,” I pivot back to our own relation to and accountability for our historical companions.

By tuning in to the greetings Wong sent to her publics then and now, we foster critical discernment that is reparative, speculative, and affective all at once. In practicing what Eve Sedgwick calls the “reparative reading,” we may, finally, hope to get in touch with the necessarily opaque “minoritarian affect,” to “*feel each other*,” and to experience the “recognition [that] flickers between minoritarian subjects,” as José Esteban Muñoz speculatively anticipates.³² That is, echoing Muñoz’s “feeling brown, feeling down” and following Wong’s scathing witticism, may we dare to imagine how we might “feel yellow, feel W(r)ong?”