

Refrain

The Second Beginning in the Wong Time (Intersti-racial Comic Melancholia)

Life is too serious to be taken seriously. This game of pictures [Hollywood] will not whip me. I shall change with my rhythm.

My doctor insisted I come here [Sierra Madre Lodge, Pasadena] to rest and continue treatments until a complete recovery is effected. . . . Having done a great deal of thinking while laid up and am going to overcome the habit of worrying all the time about things that are not worth the bother.

Being up in mid-air and detached from the earth if only temporary [sic], gives one a chance to sort out one's thoughts and keep the lovely ones, and tossing out the worthless ones.

—ANNA MAY WONG

I finish writing this book at a moment when the always-on-the-go-until-breakdown Anna May Wong is making yet another comeback and another rebeginning—this time posthumously, invoked by her twenty-first-century legacy bearers. Besides nationwide US recognition in the form of a 2022 quarter coin bearing her image (as part of the US Mint's American Women Quarters Program), a biopic is in the works, starring and executive produced by the British Chinese actress Gemma Chan, with a script written by the Tony Award-winning Chinese American playwright David Henry Hwang, based on Graham Russell Gao Hodges's 2004 biography, *Anna May Wong: From Laundryman's Daughter to Hollywood Legend*.

This historical moment of anticipation is fueled by the campaign for diversity, equity, and inclusion, or DEI. After centuries of exclusion, marginalization, and scapegoating as “perpetual foreigners,” a history that once again raised its ugly

head with the soaring anti-Asian hate crimes unleashed by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is unsurprising that diasporic Chinese and Asian American communities turn to Wong as a trailblazer and a role model to combat racism and sexism, promote self-empowerment, and restate the obvious—namely, that Asian Americans have been essential contributors to every aspect of the American lifeworld.

This pressing agenda must confront two sticky issues, however. First, campaigns for antiracism and social justice do not follow a unilineal progressive trajectory, but rather go through serial setbacks and resurgences. Second, Wong's own career was characterized by constant frustrations braided with rebeginnings. Both her individual career and the collective social justice campaigns throw into disarray the linear teleology (from victimhood to vindication, or from failure to success). Indeed, failures and rebeginnings are at the heart of the struggles against race-gender hierarchies and broader exclusionary systems.

In this Refrain, I am inspired by Wong's career episodes (including stallings, detours, cul-de-sacs, ebbs and flows, retrainings and reiterations) to speculate about another rebeginning, as Wong herself has envisioned—as a serial rebeginner.¹ Emulating her multiple rebeginnings, I set forth a “second beginning” of this book to underscore the multi-perspective research we urgently need, not only to fully account for Wong's legacy but, more importantly, to understand her as a linchpin in the broader landscape of performer-worker studies that I advance in this book.

I use this “second beginning” to speculate what-might-have-been and what-could-be-again. That is, while acknowledging sociohistorical and political constraints that produce setbacks, I deploy rebeginnings to resist determinism, reimagine potentials, reshuffle linear temporality, and fracture single-perspective time-space into mosaic anachronotope. It is through serial rebeginnings that the past, the present, and the future overlay and intertwine, that “here” and “elsewhere” interconnect and shape each other, and that the what-if possibilities become palpable and salient, for Wong as much as for her present-day interlocutors. In this sense, Wong's legacy ultimately consists in recruiting us to co-labor with her across space and history, to meet her greetings “halfway” (as Jane Gaines suggests), and to imagine possible rebeginnings.

This book has moved from Wong “putting on a show” at the center of screen and stage to her “shifting the show” from the margins and background to her carrying on the show (for “the show must go on”) elsewhere and in different forms of media, despite being excluded from high-profile Hollywood productions. The book has also examined three contemporary Asian American media works to track their speculative meeting with Wong's greetings, bearing out intergenerational feminist mutual anticipation *and* engendering a critical spectatorial sensibility. In this Refrain—the book's own second beginning—I speculate about Wong's comeback as a comedienne. Wong's comedic performances sporadically surfaced in her oeuvre, signaling the diametrical opposite to her one-thousand-death fame. In the second beginning that follows, I revive Wong's truncated career as a comedienne, imagining what might have been, what could be again, and why it matters.

This second beginning builds upon the main body of the book by further flipping the script of pathologized “Oriental” femininity so as to recast racial melancholia through a comic lens, thereby envisioning a joyful agential authorship even as it is also marginalized, detoured, thwarted, and constantly recalibrated.

This second beginning opens with Wong’s double replacement *and* spectral presence in *Flower Drum Song* (dir. Henry Koster, 1961)—a landmark musical comedy about Chinese American assimilation. I then flash back to two instances of her vivacious slapstick performances to theorize what I call intersti-racial comic melancholia in the Wong time. Despite her abject “thousand-death” reputation, Wong’s versatility for diverse genres was noted by British writer Evelyn Waugh, who, in May 1930, wrote, “I should like to see Miss Wong playing Shakespeare. Why not a Chinese Ophelia? It seems to me that Miss Wong has exactly those attributes which one most requires of Shakespearean heroines.” He further commented, “I cannot see her as Lady Macbeth, but she seems to me perfectly suited for the role of Juliet or to any of the heroines of the comedies.”² While Shakespeare’s comedies are not identical with film comedies, and his comedy heroines are not necessarily comic themselves—and, of course, Juliet and Ophelia are profoundly tragic characters—Waugh’s comment does point up Wong’s wide spectrum of performance skills. And Wong did perform Shakespeare’s comic “shrew” in 1930, in a Mary Pickford sendup that could have catalyzed a whole separate career of burlesquing white femininity and debunking white male authorship.

By speculating about Wong’s alternative career as a comedienne, I not only question the narrative that keeps pathologizing her as a victim of her times, but also propose two ways of reenergizing racialized stardom and its role in performer-worker studies. First, I bring comedy studies and critical race and ethnic studies into cross pollination, foregrounding the ludic and carnivalesque insurgence from racialized and gendered burlesques. Second, I posit the concept of intersti-racial comic melancholia to capture the paradox of comic melancholia that is interracial and interstitial, that is, residing in the co-laboring and potential synergy between differentially marginalized performer-workers. This refrain concludes by calling for lateral branching-off that refuses to flow with linear temporality. Ultimately, this second beginning reenvisions the wrong time as the Wong time, as Wong’s anachronotopic life-career has modeled for us.

AUNTY LIANG’S “CHOP SUEY” SONG: IMAGINING WONG’S DUET WITH JUANITA HALL IN A MELTING-POT MUSICAL COMEDY

On July 17, 1960, Wong wrote to Fania Marinoff and Carl Van Vechten with great excitement, for she had been offered “one of the leads” by Ross Hunter in the film adaptation of *Flower Drum Song*. Hunter had recently produced *Portrait in Black*, which featured Wong as a housekeeper (see chapter 3). *Flower Drum Song*, a novel by Chinese American author C. Y. Lee set in San Francisco’s Chinatown

after World War II, had already been adapted into a Broadway musical by Gene Kelly in 1958. The Hunter-produced film was slated to begin shooting in February 1961, according to Wong's letter. This "lead" would have been Wong's biggest role since the 1940s, *and* a comic role in an all-Asian-cast musical celebrating the newly minted hybrid Asian American identity in postwar America.

Sadly, Wong's high expectation was not to be realized. Her long suffering of frustrations and precarity resulted in failing health that had already landed her in the hospital for an emergency blood transfusion in 1953.³ On February 3, 1961, she was found dead at home, right before the filming of *Flower Drum Song* started. She was replaced by the Juilliard-trained, light-skinned African Irish American actress Juanita Hall in the comic role of Auntie Liang, making the film's main cast all-Asian but one. Before playing in *Flower Drum Song*, Hall had won a Tony award for portraying Bloody Mary (a Tonkinese/Vietnamese woman) in the 1949 Broadway show *South Pacific*, a role she reprised in the 1958 film version. In the same year, she also played Auntie Liang in a mixed-race cast in the Broadway version of *Flower Drum Song*. She made Liang a comic, bubbly optimist actively seeking assimilation into America, and eventually awarded US citizenship. In the Broadway show, upon graduating from citizenship school, Hall's Auntie Liang proudly performs the song "Chop Suey," leading the mixed-race cast, celebrating the Chinese American community as a lively ingredient newly accepted into the American "melting pot"—chop suey style.

On the surface, Hall's casting as Auntie Liang seems to be an anomaly in a narrative that centers San Francisco's Chinatown residents and new Chinese immigrants. This is doubly curious since the Broadway show's director, Gene Kelly, reportedly intended to "keep an all-Oriental [sic] cast as much as possible instead of using makeup on a Caucasian man to look Chinese."⁴ Kelly's desire for an "all-Oriental cast" did not materialize. His Broadway show featured a predominantly Asian but mixed-race cast. Playing down Hall's African Irish American heritage, the music composer of *Flower Drum Song*, Richard Rodgers, stressed the theatrical illusion of Chineseness cocreated by the performers and the audience: "The ethnically mixed cast certainly didn't lessen the total effect; what was important was that *the actors gave the illusion of being Chinese*. This demonstrates one of the most wonderful things about theatre audiences. People want to believe what they see on a stage, and they will gladly go along with whatever is done to achieve the desired effect."⁵ To put it simply, the enveloping musical vibe emulsifies differences between races, between ethnicities, and between performers and the audience.

In a different take from Rodgers's "melting pot" rhapsody, musical theater scholar Kathryn Edney argues that Hall's insertion in the Chinatown narrative subtly transformed the drama into one about African American desegregation. Coming on the heels of the 1954 landmark case of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* that abolished public school segregation, Hall's performance of "Chop Suey" in the Broadway show reframed the song "in terms of how African

Americans fit within the larger white society,” even though the song within the narrative concerns Chinese assimilation into American society.⁶ Debunking the illusion of postwar assimilation, Anne Anlin Cheng argues that Hall/Aunty Liang’s exuberant vocal performance of “Chop Suey” in the film version indicates the “very *mode* of national exclusion” through “pathological euphoria,” that is, “the solicitation of euphoria (and here the euphoria of being a hyphenated subject, the ‘Asian-American’) as a means of alleviating the pains of exclusion” from the nominal American diversity.⁷

How would Wong have approached Aunty Liang if she had lived to play this role? Would she be as comical and embracing of the postwar ideology of the “melting pot”? Or would her already pathologized status reinforce Cheng’s argument of assimilation as “pathological euphoria”? Or would she insist on her neither-nor interstitial position and defy easy categorization, even if such categorization is updated to include a hyphenated both-and identity? We will never know the answers to these questions. However, as a landmark almost-all-Asian musical film that sharply contrasts with Wong’s oeuvre, which only tokenized her (sometimes along with a few other Asian-heritage performers),⁸ *Flower Drum Song* invites a discussion around how Wong’s spectral presence entails significant vertical *and* lateral connections. To put it differently, what if Wong had met her vertical successor Nancy Kwan, the female lead in this film; and what if she and Juanita Hall had duetted on the “Chop Suey” song?

Nancy Kwan, a Hong Kong-born Eurasian dancer-actress, can be seen as Wong’s successor, given that her fame rose in the US exactly when Wong’s life was waning. Kwan shot into stardom with her wildly successful Paramount debut film *The World of Suzie Wong* (dir. Richard Quine, 1960), which led to her starring role in *Flower Drum Song* the following year. As Wong’s successor, she also became famous for portraying exoticized “Oriental” or Americanized femininity (with the aid of sartorial makeover). The vertical lineage between Wong and Kwan underlies Celine Parreñas Shimizu’s short film *The Fact of Asian Women* (see chapter 5).⁹ These two iconic yet racialized female performers have received similar criticism for their “contaminated desires” (Anne Anlin Cheng’s term) in portraying stereotypical “Oriental” femininity. Commenting on Kwan’s typecasting, Cheng argues that Kwan in *Flower Drum Song* possessed no agency as “an actor under contractual injunction to performance,” and under the gaze of the film producer and director. By contrast, her character, the vivacious Chinatown nightclub singer-dancer Linda Low, exudes whiteness and hyper-femininity in her “I Enjoy Being a Girl” number, demonstrating subversive power through “improper and inappropriate joy.” Such subversive power, Cheng argues, is strictly “confined within the frames of this performance” and does *not* extend to Kwan the performer.¹⁰

Whether a gender-race-disadvantaged performer-worker is capable of agency despite systemic marginalization is a question that fundamentally connects Wong

and Kwan across history. Unlike Cheng, who posits a clear-cut distinction between extradiegetic overdetermination (for Kwan) and the diegetic space of subversive performance (for Linda Low), my book has located Wong's paradoxical agency in her strategic navigation of the different spaces on screen and stage, and her interweaving of on- and off-stage/screen spaces. Furthermore, Wong's reiterative and interlocutory greetings set in motion a vertical genealogy constellating herself, Kwan, and many other marginalized women performer-workers past, present, and to come.

Equally important are Wong's lateral connections and impact. Her narrow miss of the comedic Auntie Liang in *Flower Drum Song* compels us to wonder what she could have done in an all-Asian musical comedy, at the cusp of a new era that saw the rallying for a diasporic Asian American communal identity and the new US legislation regarding Asian immigration and naturalization. On the flip side, her replacement by Hall also calls on us to ponder a potential interracial relation between marginalized (albeit differently racialized) performer-workers. While Hall's casting in the film enabled her to reprise the role of Auntie Liang that she had created in the Broadway version, this seemingly straightforward self-adaptation should be rerouted to take into account Wong's spectral presence. Such rerouting inspires the possibility of interracial re-mediation and co-mediation of this comedic role. That is, we can reconsider Hall's filmic portrayal of Auntie Liang through the lens of Wong's signature performance styles and, conversely, speculate how Wong might have interpreted this role through the lens of Hall's comedic performance.

This interracial reframing of Auntie Liang allows us to speculatively fructify Wong's rebeginning as a satirical comedienne whose comedic acting was already demonstrated in her early-career intermittent slapsticks. Two instances I study below show how Wong's comedic performances burlesque white femininity and upend white male authority, and thereby challenge the American racial imaginary. Bringing together comedy studies and critical race and ethnic studies, I theorize her comedic power in terms of interstitial comic melancholia.

BUSTING THE BUG AND SLAPPING THE PIE: ANNA MAY WONG'S INTERSTI-RACIAL COMIC MELANCHOLIA

Race and comedy are intricately linked in America, according to critical race studies scholar Albert Laguna. "Race is a kind of 'American style' of comedy at its core," and "[c]omedy [of race] stages the mechanics of racialization."¹¹ Yet comedy studies has been considered incompatible with critical race and ethnic studies, because comedy's reliance on caricaturization flies in the face of "activists . . . fighting for recognition of personhood, to be taken seriously, not as jokes or as

one-dimensional comic figures.”¹² Laguna’s braiding of comedy studies with critical race and ethnic studies offers a theoretical framework for reanimating Wong as a subversive comedienne.

Sidelined and truncated as they were, Wong’s slapstick performances are ripe for anachronotopic reappearance. She began acting as a comedienne when recruited in 1926 by Hal E. Roach Studios for two-reel “star comedies” that were “smartly dressed, produced on the scale of the best in dramatic features,” and featured “a real star cast.”¹³ The recruitment of Wong, Lionel Barrymore, Theda Bara, and “other headliners” was described as “the talk of the industry and this coup firmly established Roach as one of the most prominent figures in the short products.”¹⁴ A *Variety* report announced: Wong, “Chinese actress, under contract to Hal Roach for Oriental comedy.”¹⁵ Exactly *which* “Oriental comedy” was left unidentified. An August 1926 contract with Roach Studios shows that Wong was to play the “Heroine” in an “untitled” film (production no. S-15) at the pay rate of \$250 per week.¹⁶ Comedy short S-15 was released on November 28, 1926, under the title *On the Front Page*, featuring—not Wong, but Lillian Rich as the Countess.¹⁷

Wong did appear in another Roach two-reeler comedy as a “Baroness,” in production no. S-17, at the same pay rate. This film was released on April 24, 1927, as *The Honorable Mr. Buggs* (dir. Fred Wood Jackman).¹⁸ Her character, a “serio-comic adventuress,” seems to have an ambiguous racial identity.¹⁹ Named Baroness Stoloff in some publicity, she was nonetheless described as a “Chinese siren, who gives herself a good time separating folks from their cherished valuables.”²⁰ In the film, Wong’s jewelry thief, now named Wanda (still a racially unspecific name), “a high flying jailbird wanted by the police,” is costumed in a low-cut, light-colored metallic sheath dress with a voluminous, dark-colored, sequined cape extravagantly fringed with white feathers. Her headdress is a bandana-shaped hat with a mass of irregular spikes, decorated with two large shining ornaments in the front. Slinking under the cloak of darkness after a heist in this extravagant non-“Oriental” “costumed costume” (Jane Gaines’s term), she flees into hiding in the house of Mr. Buggs, a rare-insect collector.

Slapstick ensues as Mr. Buggs’s plainly dressed girlfriend (Priscilla Dean) and her aunt show up. After some visual gags, with Wong/Wanda single-handedly flinging Mr. Buggs down a flight of stairs, she is eventually dragged upstairs by the latter to be hidden away in a room so as to avoid misleading his girlfriend. This leads to Wong/Wanda’s most comedic performance: her solo fight against a bug that has escaped from Mr. Buggs’s box and crawled up her leg into her dress. This bodily humor is first witnessed by Black butler Dusty (played by Oliver Hardy in blackface) through a keyhole—a view shared with the film audience. The audience thus adopts Dusty’s “Peeping Tom” perspective, watching Wong/Wanda trying in vain to swat the bug under her sheath dress by patting up her own body and then slapping herself on the nape (video 6.1). A cut then takes the audience inside the room to watch her circling around, kicking her legs frantically, her arms on her

VIDEO 6.1. Wong as a comedienne in *The Honorable Mr. Buggs* (dir. Fred Wood Jackman, 1927) (credit: Aurore Spiers).



To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.189.6.1>



waist as if trying to lift the dress or to shake out the bug. Finally, Mr. Buggs comes upstairs and tries to scare the bug out of her dress by banging on a gong—only to be pushed out the door by Wanda/Wong.

When the bug finally drops out after much commotion and toppling of objects, Wong/Wanda is instantly hurled into another fight—this time with her immaculately tailcoated “rival pickpocket” (played by the Japanese actor Sojin)—over a brooch she has stolen. After confusion escalates, with all the characters chasing and bumping into each other through multiple doors that open frantically left and right, the cops arrive, arresting the two thieves played by Wong and Sojin, leaving the white characters in restored peace, with the home space resecured by the “Black” butler.

Independent of the obligatory, law-and-order ending deployed to eliminate the racialized, criminalized, and invasive elements, Wong’s comedic acting is noteworthy for playing up a flurry of bodily humor arising from increasingly frantic corporeal contortions. Diametrically opposite to her trademark somberly paced, melancholic death acts (see chapter 1), Wong’s comedic performance offers a rare glimpse into her skill of playing for laughs—in this case, partially in collaboration with Sojin. Their duet comic effect is enhanced by the fact that these two Asian-heritage performers both donned hyperbolic Western costumes—a drastic departure from their exotic “Oriental” images in the Douglas Fairbanks vehicle *The Thief of Bagdad* (dir. Raoul Walsh, 1924), which was a big hit within and outside the US just three years earlier.

On top of the intra-Asian visual gags, the film also stages an illusory interracial comic connection between Wong’s racially ambiguous jewelry thief and the butler played by Hardy in blackface. Dusty is not only the first to encounter Wong/Wanda when she barges into Mr. Buggs’s house, but also the first to see her exaggerated bodily reaction to a crawling bug. His perspective shot framed by the keyhole (vicariously shared by the audience) evokes the Peeping Tom trope, now racially as well as sexually charged, with a comic twist. Upon witnessing Wong/Wanda’s animated physical contortion accentuated by her constraining sheath

dress, Hardy/Dusty's body also becomes instantly hyperactive in sync. He pounds the floor with excitement while looking up at the camera, then suddenly dashes downstairs with an exaggerated gait.

Such hyperbolic performance undoubtedly behooves the genre of slapstick comedy. However, the fact that such bodily humor is first performed by and transmitted between a racialized performer (Wong) and a racialized character (Dusty) suggests that a minoritized performer/character is perceived as more prone to letting their bodily integrity be disrupted by external stimuli. Hardy's broad caricaturization certainly reinforced the stereotyping of African American characters as primitive and childish. Commenting on the animated body of racialized subjects, Sianne Ngai writes that African Americans are subjected to "the disturbingly enduring representation . . . as at once an excessively 'lively' subject and a pliant body unusually susceptible to external control."²¹ She further argues that "animation turns the exaggeratedly expressive body into a spectacle for an ethnographic gaze—a spectacle featuring an African-American subject made to move physically in response to lyrical, poetic, or imagistic language."²² Interestingly, Ngai points out that "animation's affective connotations of vivacity or zealotry do not cover every racial or ethnic stereotype." While African American bodies tend to be portrayed as excessively animated, Orientalized bodies are more likely to be marked by "pathos of emotional suppression rather than by emotional excess." Yet such differential racialization only goes to show "the extent to which animation remains central to the production of the racially marked subject."²³

Taking a different perspective than Ngai's diagnosis of affective racialization through corporeal animatedness, Anne Anlin Cheng describes the effect of racialization and the formation of a racial identity in terms of melancholia. She states that "there has always been an interaction between melancholy in the vernacular sense of affect, as 'sadness' or the 'blues,' and melancholia in the sense of a structural, identificatory formation predicated on—while being an active negotiation of—the loss of self as legitimacy."²⁴ She further suggests that "racial melancholia . . . has always existed for raced subjects both as a *sign* of rejection and as a psychic *strategy* in response to that rejection."²⁵ For Cheng, the concept of racial melancholia conjoins the African American "ambulatory despair" (expressed in the "sorrow songs" of the slaves) and the Asian American "manic euphoria" (as expressed in the pro-assimilation "model minority" desire in *Flower Drum Song*). Both despair and euphoria stem from the experience of loss and sadness that "conditions life for the disenfranchised and, indeed, constitutes their identity and shapes their subjectivity."²⁶

If Ngai's "animatedness" captures how affective racialization is visualized, Cheng's "racial melancholia" describes the psychic process of racial subject formation. Notably, both concepts stem from comparing and twinning African American and Asian American experiences of racialization, which lead to divergent performance styles—hyperactivity and impassivity, sorrow and euphoria. Ngai's

and Cheng's comparative interracial approach is thought-provoking for my consideration of Wong's comedic act in conjunction with that of Sojin and of Hardy in blackface in *The Honorable Mr. Buggs*. Yet merely pairing Asian American and African American experiences of racialization could not adequately describe what happens in this comedy, for two reasons.

First, Wong's comedic act in the 1920s predated the establishment of Asian Americans' "model minority" status by at least four decades. Given the Chinese Exclusion Act, the "yellow peril" discourse, and Wong's famous pathos-laden, tragic persona, her animated bodily humor was an anomaly, contradicting both the impassive "Oriental inscrutability" and the "manic euphoria" (*Flower Drum Song* style). The question, then, is what we might make of Wong's seeming anomalous animatedness, which anchored the racialized bodily humor in *The Honorable Mr. Buggs*. This brings me to the second difficulty with simply applying Ngai's and Cheng's interracial approach to this short comedy: there is no actual African American performance in this film—an exclusion covered up, yet also rendered conspicuous, by Hardy's blackface caricature. In other words, there is *no* shared interracial animatedness or melancholia on the screen.

The film, nevertheless, does offer an *illusion* of interracial proximity between Wong/Wanda and Hardy/Dusty, suggesting that Wong, the racialized performer, could be performing the bodily humor as both Asian *and* Black, generating an in-between racial feeling that I call intersti-racial comic melancholia. The seeming oxymoron—comic melancholia—conjoins comedy/euphoria and tragedy/melancholia as two sides of the same coin of affective racialization and what Anne Anlin Cheng calls the "psychic strategy in response to" racialization. Wong's intersti-racial comic melancholia that straddles Asian and Black is indicated in her spirited whole-body movement in attempting to shake out the bug. The way she twists and kicks her legs evokes the Charleston she performed just a year earlier, in 1926, in the "East Is West" segment of Columbia's *Screen Snapshots* series.²⁷ Promising to "offer a glimpse into the Heart of the Movie World revealing intimate and Unusual Views of Your favorite Stars 'On Location' and in the Privacy of their Homes,"²⁸ the "East Is West" segment casts Wong, "our only Chinese movie star," as "a real Chinese bloom" nestled in a sunny garden, who bursts into "a peppy Chinese dance" that turns out to be the Charleston.

At the same time, Josephine Baker was making a splash in France, first with the Charleston in 1926 at the Folies Bergère in Paris, then with her famous 1927 "Danse Sauvage" in a banana skirt. In August 1928, while visiting the Netherlands, she was filmed by Fox Movietone News going native in a full Dutch outfit, including wooden clogs, *and* performing the Charleston for a large crowd, comically kicking off or dropping her clogs while being egged on by a Dutch woman to continue the dance.²⁹

These performances were not causally connected. Yet their convergence reflected the exotic dance craze in interwar Euro-America. The Charleston craze linked Wong and Baker through their comically animated bodily movement.

Wong's appropriation of the Charleston, which originated in African American dance movements, not only enabled her self-fashioning as a flapper in the *Screen Snapshots* segment, and inflected her comedic act in *The Honorable Mr. Buggs*, but also rendered her comedienne persona intersti-racial: in between Asian and Black, and in between racialized somatic choreographies. Such intersti-racial comic performance undoubtedly draws upon practices of racialization. Yet it also suggests that differential racialization aiming to segregate different ethnic groups can be problematized when the codes of racialization are mixed and interspliced. Wong's intersti-racial comic performance enacted precisely the intersection between feeling yellow and feeling Black (appropriating Muñoz's concept of "feeling brown, feeling down"). In so doing, her intersti-racial comic melancholia suggests a tentative answer to Muñoz's question: "How does the subaltern feel? How might subalterns feel each other?"³⁰

Wong's intersti-racial comic act took on strengthened carnivalesque power in her short burlesque of Mary Pickford's *The Taming of the Shrew* (dir. Sam Taylor, 1929). Included in the British revue film *Elstree Calling* (dir. Paul Murray, Adrian Brunel, André Charlot, and Alfred Hitchcock, 1930), Wong's skit both evokes the antebellum minstrelsy of burlesquing Shakespeare and works to delimit, transgress, and parody Pickford's idealized white femininity. Produced by British International Pictures as a star-studded "big talking singing & dancing cine-radio revue" intended to compete with Hollywood's revue films, *Elstree Calling* features an extra layer of mise-en-abyme, being a film framed as a variety show for television broadcast. The opening plays out the comic mishaps that ensue when the unreliable televisual signal fails to reach the diegetic audience. The film, therefore, melds together vaudeville, film, and the burgeoning television industry, six years before BBC began regular television transmissions. This hybrid setup renders Wong's short burlesque part film, part stage performance, and part television show, tinged with unique liveliness.

Wong's three-and-a-half-minute skit was directed by Alfred Hitchcock.³¹ A review following the film's preview at the Alhambra Theatre in London on February 6, 1930, dismissed Wong's skit: "All you see of Anna May Wong is in trunks throwing custard pies in a burlesque on 'Taming of the Shrew' which starts well with Donald Calthrop as Fairbanks and then falls to bits." Half a century later, an April 1986 UCLA film program stated that Hitchcock "should be thoroughly ashamed of himself." Yet what if we switch away from Hitchcock's auteurship and refocus on Wong "in trunks throwing custard pies"—with carnivalesque gusto?

Wong recreated a key scene from Pickford's film, *The Taming of the Shrew*, played on a similar set, with stairs in the center background leading up to an arched doorway at the top, where the shrew's room is located, just off screen. Also as in Pickford's scene, the shrew (now played by Wong) is introduced through her stupendous destructive power. The skit opens with the British actor Donald Calthrop as the pompous Petruchio entering the stage on a motorcycle, proceeding to show off

VIDEO 6.2. Wong spoofs Mary Pickford's *The Taming of the Shrew* in *Elstree Calling* (dir. Paul Murray, Adrian Brunel, André Charlot, and Alfred Hitchcock, 1930).



To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.189.6.2>



his taming skills by whipping the motorcycle into an autopiloting circling motion. He then tells Baptista that he—Doug (referencing Douglas Fairbanks, who plays Petruchio in Pickford's film)—has come to “woo” “Mary” (referencing Pickford), which he then corrects to “Katherine” (the original shrew in Shakespeare's comedy). Baptista responds by calling him “Mr. Woo” (possibly referencing Wong's 1927 film *Mr. Wu*, discussed in chapter 3), and offers a tongue-in-cheek “happy be thy speed” in wooing his daughter.

As Calthrop/Doug/Woo/Petruchio strides up the stairs with a pompous holler, he is instantly showered with an avalanche of tumbling wheels, furniture, and baskets (video 6.2). Wong's shrew then storms to the archway, pie in hand, clad in the skimpy, metallic exotic dance costume that she had displayed in *Piccadilly* and that has practically become shining armor in this skit. Fuming and gasping, she kicks away a chicken (a motion that underscores her bare legs “in trunks”) and scolds ferociously, not in Elizabethan English but in her ancestral Taishan dialect. As Baptista laughs hysterically at his daughter's tantrum, an extreme close-up shows Wong's shrew widening her eyes, hurling a pie with full force. Petruchio ducks and the pie lands squarely on Baptista's face, causing him to fall back onto the still autopiloting motorcycle and being summarily carried away. A cut back to Wong shows her shrew carrying on fuming, kicking away another chicken and launching another pie, this time successfully hitting the suitor, who spends the rest of the skit being repeatedly targeted to the extent that his facial features become completely white-plastered and disfigured—a whiteface caricature that spoofs white actors' racial masquerade through yellowface, blackface, brownface, and so on. Finally, “Shakespeare” himself appears on the scene, amused with his characters warring and wallowing in chaos. Iconoclastically, the moment he announces his identity he receives a resounding pie-slap that throws off his trademark hair—which turns out to be a toupee, leaving him bald and powerless. This Taishanese-spouting, part-bikini-clad part-armored shrew is not to be tamed—even by the author who has created her. Or, rather, this pie-hurling “shrew” is not Shakespeare's creation after all; she has created herself, utilizing the visual gags afforded by the modern

slapstick comedy and vaudeville to poke fun at white male authorities. Thus, Wong enacted what was likely the very first “Oriental” parody of a Shakespearean play that literally threw the white order into pie-plastered disarray.

Wong’s spoof built upon intersti-racial performance of “Oriental” (dis)play and blackface minstrelsy all at once. Studies of the linkage between Shakespearean burlesque and minstrelsy have shown paradoxical connections between racial caricaturization and parody, or between white supremacy and subversion.³² In a similar vein, Terri Simone Francis anchors Josephine Baker’s “fractured” authorship in her oppositional burlesque “signification.”³³ Drawing upon the theatrical tradition of Shakespearean burlesque, Wong’s comic act ineluctably, even if unintentionally, traded in the racializing minstrelsy practice. Yet if Josephine Baker turned minstrelsy on its head, Wong rerouted minstrelsy through her “Oriental” (dis)play and what I have elsewhere theorized as “yellow yellowface,”³⁴ forging an intersti-racial comic performance, applying pressure to blackface and yellowface all at once, thereby destabilizing racialization that segregated different racial and ethnic groups.

Not only did Wong’s burlesque dethrone the white theatrical canon, but it also sent up Pickford’s “American sweetheart” image, which Pickford herself was seeking to transform into one of more sophisticated femininity.³⁵ With a boyish, lithe figure accentuated by her skimpy metallic costume, Wong both modeled the 1920s flapper girl and evinced the 1930s androgynous glamour ideal, countering Pickford’s frilly white femininity. Here Wong’s intersti-racial comic act dwelled between “yellow yellowface” and whiteface, partially mimicking Pickford only to upend white femininity. In a publicity stunt for *Elstree Calling*, two compare-and-contrast photos by the Lumière North American Company (based in London) show Wong in a full shot, clad in the skimpy costume (figure 6.1).³⁶ The left picture frames her in the center, facing the camera, eyes narrowed and looking daggers from under her trademark bangs, arms defensively crossed in front of her chest, body straight and taut with tension. The right picture introduces a few differences that dramatically transform her entire body language. Dressed in the same costume, she is framed slightly to frame right, turning gently toward the left, gazing into a mirror held up in her right hand, while her left hand gently combs her hair—or, rather, a bobbed, wavy blond wig! She primps with an amused look, as if pleased with her own playful white masquerade. The blond wig, mimicking Pickford’s trademark blond hair (sans the long curls), visualizes Wong’s expropriation of the role of the white shrew.³⁷ This Asian-to-white intersti-racial performance raises a key question: Did Wong become nominally white merely by adopting a blond wig and coquettish body language, or did Pickford and the ideal white American femininity become de-essentialized as a gender-race construct that relied upon exclusion of the nonwhite for its own demarcation?

The caption of the publicity photo exploited precisely this ambiguity by stating, “Anna May Be Mary! The Wong Version of Pickford!” Punning on Wong’s

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MISS ANNA MAY WONG AS SHE REALLY IS: A STUDY OF THE CHINESE SCREEN STAR.



MISS ANNA MAY WONG TRANSFORMED INTO AN IMITATION OF MISS MARY PICKFORD—SAVE FOR COSTUME: THE CHINESE SCREEN STAR WITH A GOLDEN WIG.

ANNA MAY BE MARY! THE WONG VERSION OF PICKFORD! 1930

Miss Anna May Wong's latest "talkie" venture is the modern burlesque version of the Pickford-Fairbanks screen presentation of "The Taming of the Shrew," and is a feature of the British "talkie-revue," "Elstree Calling," which is now being produced by British International Pictures. Miss Anna May Wong—transferred by means of a golden wig into a "Celestial" imitation of the "World's Sweetheart"—plays Katherine, and

Mr. Donald Calthrop is Petruchio as played by Douglas Fairbanks. It will be noticed that no attempt has been made to imitate the costume worn by Miss Mary Pickford, for the Oriental dancing "armour" in which Miss Anna May Wong appears in our photographs has no resemblance to any dress ever worn by Miss Mary Pickford either in "The Taming of the Shrew" or any other picture.

Photographs by L.N.A.
—reproduced by U.F.A.

FIGURE 6.1. "Anna May Be Mary! The Wong Version of Pickford"—publicity for Wong's burlesque of Mary Pickford's *The Taming of the Shrew* in *Elstree Calling* (1930) (credit: Crawford Theater Collection (MS 1387). Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library).

middle name “M/may” to pique the audience’s curiosity about Wong’s potential transgression of the domain of white femininity, this caption also ultimately denied Wong the white privilege. For the “Wong version of Pickford” was the “wrong version,” which decisively (albeit playfully) rendered Wong an inferior copy of the original Pickford. As the publicity text reassured the white readers, Wong, despite being touted as the “‘Celestial’ imitation of the ‘World’s Sweet-heart,’” was no Pickford; and her costume, “the Oriental dancing ‘armour,’” bore no resemblance to Pickford’s costumes in the *Shrew* film or any other films. In other words, the publicity stunt put on display the “Orientially” armored Wong crowned with a blond wig only to stress the bizarre incongruity, thus rendering her burlesque intriguing and potentially transgressive, yet ultimately disposable as a comic gag that could not really touch the “original” white femininity reserved for Pickford. Such reinforced exclusion of the racialized Other illustrates the colonial discourse that Homi Bhabha pithily summarizes as the “ambivalent world of the ‘not quite/not white.’”³⁸

And yet it is precisely by leveraging this composite image and its amalgamation of ostensibly incommensurable elements (such as the visual clash and the surprise outburst of Taishanese) that Wong succeeded in contaminating and upending purist identity ideology, and thus challenged the hierarchization and exclusion such purism aimed to justify. Burlesquing Pickford’s white shrew penned by Shakespeare, Wong’s performance evoked the minstrel tradition and its injurious racialization of African Americans. But she also dismantled white racial masquerade, replacing it with her intersti-racial comic performance that dethroned white male authorship, spoofed the white feminine ideal, and desegregated the compartmentalizing racialization of nonwhite racial/ethnic groups. Wong’s intersti-racial performance can thus be understood as “feeling yellow, feeling W(r)ong”—a racial affect that responds to Muñoz’s call for the subalterns to engage in “feeling each other.”³⁹

“STEAL AS MANY LAUGHS AS POSSIBLE” AND WAIT TO REBEGIN

In a 1930 article, Wong wrote that the Chinese managed to “steal as many laughs as possible,” believing “that some day [*sic*] in some eon fate will turn the page, and that they will ‘come into their own.’”⁴⁰ She also observed, tongue-in-cheek, that Chinese women retained their youthful look because they remained “unruffled through life,” for “worry is a non-productive institution,” and they were “inclined not only to put it off continuously, but eventually to relegate it to someone else.”⁴¹ Here Wong not only countered the Western stereotype of the scheming and “inscrutable Oriental” by underscoring the significance of good humor (that her own comments also illustrated); more importantly, she reimagined temporality, especially the seemingly empty and passive time of waiting.

Waiting to “come into their own” is not some essentialist “Chinese” fatalism; nor is the act of “steal[ing] as many laughs as possible” a mere survival coping mechanism. Rather, laughing while waiting signals a method of deviating from and dwelling outside linear teleological temporality, echoing what Berlant calls a “dissociative poetics” and “a potential hub” that allows “damaged” people of color to navigate systemic negativities, and to bear unbearable relations.⁴² It further resonates with Muñoz’s understanding of waiting as “being out of time, or at least out of a linear mapping that is straight time” and “straight time’s choke hold.” He considers waiting as integral to the experiences of people of color, queer and trans people, and people with disabilities: “There is something black about waiting. And there is something queer, Latino, and transgender about waiting. Furthermore, there is something disabled, Indigenous, Asian, poor, and so forth about waiting. Those who wait are those of us who are out of time in at least two ways. We have been cast out of straight time’s rhythm, and we have made worlds in our temporal and spatial configurations.”⁴³ Muñoz jokingly calls this “CPT (colored people time)” that is “desiring, and anticipatory in the queerest utopian of ways.”⁴⁴

Juxtaposing Wong’s with Berlant’s and Muñoz’s ruminations on subaltern people’s anticipatory waiting, I suggest that subversive jokes, laughter, and what I call the intersti-racial comic melancholia work hand-in-hand with “colored people time” not only to queer and warp temporality but, more specifically, to curve temporality, to be anachronotopic, or to create what I call the “Wong time.” Appropriating the long-running pun of *Wong* and *wrong*, the Wong/wrong time queers *and* curves the straight time so that her truncated comedic act could return as a rebeginning—one that is not in the straight future. Rather, the future, freighted and pulled by the potent past, fractures from the straight time and curves around to meet and fructify the past. Wong’s intersti-racial comedic act, which occurred only intermittently and barely went beyond the “first beginning” of her decades-long performance career, is but one example of all that could have been. It catalyzes our speculative reimagination of what might be again in the curve of Wong time.

Anna May Wong’s life-career constellates recursive episodes. They make up a multifaceted mosaic, a shapeshifting kaleidoscope, a meandering, endless labyrinth with multiple entries, throughways, cul-de-sacs, departures, returns, and nooks for agonizing, waiting, resting, laughing, and rebeginning.

At the end—is another beginning, for us and for our historical companion.