

Asian Americans and Yellowface in
Twenty-First-Century Musical Theatre



Donatella Galella

FEELING YELLOW

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Feeling Yellow

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in Twenty-First-Century Musical Theatre

Donatella Galella

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For Arcadia

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Introduction

Yellowface Without Yellowed Faces

Yellowface took the stage at the 2015 Tony Awards ceremony. Donning a luminous Victorian gown with a gigantic hoop skirt and matching bonnet, cohost and queer musical icon Alan Cumming dressed as Anna from the then-current Broadway revival of *The King and I* (1951).¹ Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II's musical concerns a British governess teaching the king of Siam, his wives, and his children how to govern their country and understand the world. The Radio City Music Hall audience laughed at Cumming's unexpected drag performance. Then cohost and musical comedy legend Kristin Chenoweth crawled out from under his dress. The spectators again burst into laughter. Looking like Yul Brynner, the actor who originated the role of the king and played the part four thousand times, Chenoweth wore a bald cap and a rich, red costume with gold accents, and she stood with arms akimbo and feet planted shoulder width apart (figure 1). She did not wear yellow-brown makeup or tape back her eyes. Instead, her gestures and costuming sufficiently conjured Brynner's blueprint. The bald cap put a spotlight on her performance as such, with its pale color not quite matching Chenoweth's skin and not adhering seamlessly to her head. Her petite size, female gender identity, and white race rubbed up against her role, producing campy incongruity. At the same time, these dimensions resonated with the diminutiveness, effeminacy, and inefficacy often ascribed to Asian men. Then Chenoweth jokingly acknowledged that she would never be cast in *The King and I*. Cue more laughter.

Popular media coverage reveled in the cohosts' performances as Anna and the king. Broadway.com reported, "Alan and Kristin swapped gender roles while spoofing the Tony Award-winning revival of *The King and I*. Alan looked splendid in the iconic 'Shall We Dance?' dress and Cheno emerged from under his petticoat in a hilariously bad bald cap and King of Siam garb."² The *New York Daily News* similarly described this scene as one of the award show hosts' five most memorable moments.³ *Vogue* cited Chenoweth's coming out from under



Figure 1. Kristin Chenoweth dressed as the King of Siam and Alan Cumming dressed as Anna from *The King and I* while hosting the 2015 Tony Awards. (Charles Sykes/Invision/AP.)

Cumming's dress as one of the "Best GIFs from the 2015 Tonys."⁴ These reports emphasized comedy, costuming, and cross-gender rather than cross-racial performance. None of them dubbed Chenoweth's embodiment yellowface.

While true that white actors did not play Thai characters in the 2015 Broadway production, Chenoweth has in fact done so in this very musical in the past. In 1991 with the Music Theatre in Wichita, Kansas, she played the enslaved Burmese woman Tuptim, for which she wore "dyed hair and severe makeup" and "insisted that cast members call her 'Christy Chen.'"⁵ Back then, she more fully embraced explicit yellowface practices. But during her American Songbook concert at Lincoln Center in 2013, she confessed to the audience that she should not have played that part. Still, she reprised her performance of "My Lord and Master," suggesting that she had no qualms channeling an Asian character *without* the "dyed hair and severe makeup." By averring that her prior casting was inappropriate and performing in a concert decontextualized from the stage production, she showed racial sensitivity yet gave herself permission to sing this song in the twenty-first century.

Chenoweth's portrayal of Asian characters in *The King and I* minus the pseudo-Asian makeup exemplifies what I call yellowface without yellowed faces. Her direct address of yellowface as wrong paradoxically enabled it as

acceptable. Her clothing, bald cap, posture, and song conveyed Asian racialized embodiment. Her performances enacted white entitlement to Asian roles as part of a postracial fantasy. Finally, the authoritative laughter from audiences and reporters sanctioned yellowface without yellowed faces. Whether performing as Tuptim with makeup or the king without makeup, Chenoweth was in yellowface.

Yellowface works without yellowface makeup. While disclaiming more overt yellowface routines in the past, professional US musical theatre in the twenty-first century still perpetuates yellowface by using costumes, props, accents, sounds, and gestures that aestheticize and exoticize Asians and Asian Americans. It appears to reject more obvious racist caricature while holding on to control over the representation, employment, and epistemology of Asians and Asian Americans. It entangles non-Asian actors, who still play Asian and Asian American characters. It enlists Asian American actors, who still play sidekicks and stereotypes.

Feeling Yellow: Asian Americans and Yellowface in Twenty-First-Century Musical Theatre seeks to understand how theatremakers, critics, and spectators facilitate the violence of yellowface, as well as how Asian American artists, allies, and audiences redress racist harm. How have contemporary US stage musical productions gotten away with yellowface? Or, as playwright Lloyd Suh put it at the Beyond Orientalism forum co-organized by the Asian American Performers Action Coalition (AAPAC) in 2016, “How many times can I punch you in the face before I can’t, before I’m not allowed to do that anymore?”⁶ Escaping accountability, yellowface without yellowed faces makes for a gentler kind of racist performance that accords with postracial ideology and enables plausible deniability of ill intent. White audiences frequently consider this kind of yellowface harmless entertainment. They condone Asian impersonation in part because they do not believe anti-Asian racism to be systemic. However, yellowface is not a one-off or an accident but a pattern of racialization and discrimination. It is not an easily excisable element from the musical repertoire and the United States but a pervasive motif. Yet Asian Americans have developed creative ways to contest yellowface and stake their claim to the theatrical and national stage. Thus, the complementary question driving this investigation is: How have Asian Americans navigated, altered, and stopped yellowface? The subsequent chapters spotlight their new musicals, textual and directorial changes, agential choices onstage, community forums, protests, social media campaigns, feelings, and survival strategies. Here, Asian Americans are the protagonists.

Moving from more overt racialized performance to reforms and revenge, this book traces yellowface in musical productions in the United States from 2000 to 2025. The year 2000 marks not only the start of the twenty-first century

but also the closing of *Miss Saigon* (1991) on Broadway, a major crossroads that led to wearing less yellowface makeup and casting more Asian Americans in professional productions. Both sensitivities of multiculturalism and disavowals of race characterize this period. Reflecting the politics of Barack Obama's historic presidency, this quarter century formed the material conditions for making some progress in representation while not exactly making a seismic shift in power structures. Meanwhile, 2025 marks the end of an era, a move toward more openly white nationalist rhetoric and policies beyond the scope of this study that merits urgent work from the stage to the streets.

As the most popular American theatrical form, musicals make up the book's case studies because of how they shed light on power dynamics and lived experiences from race and class to gender and sexuality. Both entertaining and ideological, they are not neutral. Musicals move us, making us feel, sing, and dance along. As affect machines, musicals manufacture consensus for good politics and well-done performances, providing a unique vector to comprehend the persistent productions and pleasures of yellowface over time. They also prompt Asian American ambivalence: desire for communal joy after dejection from ongoing exclusion, as well as a critique of the rules by which Asians and Asian Americans gain permission to enter the theatre and nation-state. As memory machines, revivals of musicals perform race through repetition and revision in ways unlike other forms. Through rewrites that delete racist dialogue and new casts that diversify the characters, musical productions index real and perceived changes to dominant racial sensitivities.

Feeling Yellow contributes to musical theatre history and Asian American studies and joins the fight against yellowface. First, the book provides an overview of yellowface, Oriental stereotypes, and Asian and Asian American representation in US musical theatre. Next, I identify the mid-2010s as a turning point against yellowface. In the age of the internet and the first Black US president, cultural productions that cast white actors in Asian and Asian American roles increasingly faced backlash from artists of color and even mainstream media. This study documents activism by Asian Americans both for the historical record and for blueprints to use in the future because so-called casting controversies seem to happen again and again. Drawing from sociological studies, musical theatre discourses, and interviews with artists on the ground, I answer the question that I posed at the end of our conversations: Why does yellowface persist in the twenty-first century? These findings point toward the figure of the model minority and the compulsive happiness of musical theatre.

Moreover, I offer two key terms to comprehend contemporary yellowface and Asian American reactions: *yellowface without yellowed faces* and *feeling yellow*. Exemplified by Kristin Chenoweth's impersonation of the king of Siam,

yellowface without yellowed faces abjures straight-up made-up yellowface in favor of subtler yet still sticky embodiments of Asians and Asian Americans. Over-the-top impersonations labor to ironize racism, as if lampshading yellowface somehow excuses it. Contemporary yellowface without yellowed faces continues to use yellowface practices from before the twenty-first century. It tends to rely on clothes, movements, and sounds rather than makeup to do the racial heavy lifting while providing space to disavow these very things as racialized. Finally, musicals set in fairy-tale versions of Asia deploy multicultural postracial logics to enable non-Asian actors to play Asian characters. Because yellowface without yellowed faces appears less blatant, it may not register as harmful. In response, I theorize feeling yellow—how yellowface incites Asian American racialization through anger, immiseration, and alienation, a concept I consider in detail below. Nevertheless, I also suggest that Asian Americans can channel these feelings into inspirational art and collective action. *Feeling Yellow* accordingly speaks to multiple readers: to Asian American artists, scholars, and spectators by recognizing their creative, affective, and activist responses to yellowface, as well as to non-Asian musical theatre practitioners and historians by calling them in to reckon with contemporary yellowface and their responsibility to do antiracist work.

An Early History of Yellowface and East Asian Stereotypes

Non-Asians pretending to be Asian is hardly new. King Louis XIV hosted masques in which he portrayed the Chinese emperor and attendees dressed in Chinese-inspired costumes. Voltaire's play *The Orphan of China* (1753), adapted from the Chinese opera, featured designs that appeared more Turkish than Chinese. These early theatrical representations did not necessarily carry negative connotations, though they lumped together Asian cultures and authorized European understandings of Asia as true, cultural dynamics that Edward Said would dub Orientalism.⁷

Western images of Asians changed over time, depending on shifting political relationships and developments in scientific racism. In the 1600s, Portuguese missionaries described Chinese and Japanese people as white, and Europeans portrayed them with white skin. But in the eighteenth century, rococo chinoiserie began to depict Chinese men as effeminate and grotesque.⁸ With the rise of colonialism, Orientalism would come to posit a binary logic: the West as modern, masculine, and noble, and the East as backward, feminine, and sinister. While China lost some symbolic capital, Japan gained some with the forcible opening of its markets in 1853. By the end of the nineteenth century, Western scientists theorized races as biological and hierarchical. They postulated how cli-

mate affected skin color and categorized the Mongolian race as less evolved than white people—childlike, degenerate, and stagnant.⁹ They deemed Asians yellow, though at times they classified the Japanese as honorary whites. Later, during World War II, the US government dubbed Japanese Americans alien enemies to justify incarcerating more than 120,000 of them, illustrating the social construction and pliability of racial formation.

Yellowface became more formalized in the early 1800s, when the British Empire commenced its coolie labor system of hiring low-wage Chinese workers to replace enslaved Black people. In England, Joseph Grimaldi introduced “clown yellowface” in *Whang-Fong; or, The Clown of China* (1812) and continued as the silent, enslaved Chinese character Kazrac in the popular pantomime *Aladdin; or, The Wonderful Lamp* (1813).¹⁰ This comic servant trope may have paved the way for the John Chinaman figure. Chinese people immigrated to the United States to earn money, whether by panning for gold, working on the Transcontinental Railroad, or running laundries. To some working-class white people, these Chinese men posed a threat. Subhuman, they appeared to subsist on rice and rats. Minstrel Charley Backus’s “Burlesque Chinaman” developed in California mining camps before traversing the globe.¹¹ Several stereotypes emerged in songs, skits, and plays, including the “coolie” (the wage laborer competing with Irish Americans), the “deviant” (paradoxically both asexual and hypersexual houseboys serving and preying on white women), and the “yellow peril” (hordes of East Asians who seemingly look the same and jeopardize the US military and economy).¹² This last category also includes the evil mastermind Fu Manchu, invented by author Sax Rohmer in 1912, a character who is part of a lineage of Oriental despots who seek domination instead of democracy.¹³ In *Yellowface: Creating the Chinese in American Popular Music and Performance, 1850s–1920s*, Krystyn R. Moon articulates how “dialect, makeup, posture, and costuming comprised yellowface; when combined, these items marked the Chinese body as inferior and foreign.”¹⁴ Mixing oral blackface with Spanish (“sabee?”), yellowface diction did not reflect how Chinese immigrants spoke but racialized and estranged them. Foreign and subservient gestures included excessive bowing, shuffling walks, arms folded into sleeves, and index fingers pointed up. Men often donned a Chinese-inspired tunic and pants, a queue with shaved forehead, a cap, a long moustache, and buckteeth, not necessarily all at once. Yellowface makeup gained greater importance with the emergence of close-up shots on film to distinguish Eastern characters from Western ones. Associating Asian-ness with the epicanthal fold—although many Asians do not have this—white actors simulated monolid slanted eyes through makeup, tape, and prostheses.

White women performed yellowface somewhat differently. By performing as Asians, white American women in the early twentieth century demonstrated

their independence and cosmopolitanism.¹⁵ They wore softer makeup to beautify themselves, and they donned geisha makeup and wigs, even when playing characters who were neither geishas nor even Japanese. Asian and Asian American women often become comprehensible through contradictory stereotypes, in this case, the butterfly and the dragon lady.¹⁶ Delicate, submissive, and virginal, the butterfly forms the antithesis of the strong, manipulative, and sexy dragon lady. These tropes gender East Asia, represent Western desire and fear, and stand in for actual Asian women, who were largely barred from entering the United States until the mid-twentieth century.

Scholars across Asian American studies and theatre and performance studies have located an inclusion-exclusion dynamic that marks Asian American racialization. Lisa Lowe's foundational concept of *immigrant acts* names "the contradictions of Asian immigration, which at different moments in the last century and a half of Asian entry into the United States have placed Asians 'within' the U.S. nation-state, its workplaces, and its markets, yet linguistically, culturally, and racially marked Asians as 'foreign' and 'outside' the national polity."¹⁷ Drawing from Julia Kristeva's work, Karen Shimakawa likewise suggests that the Asian American body comes into view onstage through national abjection, acts of symbolically and materially incorporating and expelling Asian Americans.¹⁸

These dynamics play out via yellowface. Even as authenticity became more valued in realistic US theatre of the 1920s and 1930s, white audiences found Asian Americans to be deficient at portraying themselves. According to Shannon Steen, while blackface began to subside and "functioned as a costume for a national self, yellowface provided a matrix through which to exclude the foreign."¹⁹ In *Made-Up Asians*, Esther Kim Lee argues that from the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, yellowface served as a technology for exclusion that rationalized anti-Asian policies and enabled white actors to play (and be rewarded for playing) Asian roles.²⁰ Due to antimiscegenation rules, Hollywood typically cast white people to act as Asian romantic leads. But Asians and Asian Americans were not silent or invisible. For instance, Chinese government officials called for greater cultural accuracy and all-Chinese casting in *The Good Earth* (1937), while Anna May Wong and Philip Ahn costarred in *Daughter of Shanghai* (1937).²¹ Despite xenophobic laws, yellowface, and stereotypes pushing them out, Asians and Asian Americans made inroads, and this dialectic shaped their racialization and representation.²²

Historicizing Asian and Asian American Musical Representation

Asians and Asian Americans influenced US musical theatre going back to the nineteenth century. In 1852, the Tong Hook Tong Dramatic Company per-

formed Cantonese opera in San Francisco for Chinese immigrants and curious Westerners.²³ British operettas like *The Mikado* (1885) and musicals like *San Toy* (1899) found immense success in the United States. Euro-US American imaginings of Japan often took the place of Japanese music, such as at the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition, where the Japanese pavilion featured a band playing songs from *The Mikado*.²⁴ Chinese-themed musicals in New York and London from 1888 to 1931 tended to collapse Chinese, Japanese, and Arab people into a monolithic cultural identity; conjure Chinese-like music through pentatonic melodies, gongs, or the minor mode; place pseudo-Chinese musical gestures in the overture or at the start of songs to establish the setting before exclusively using Western styles; include pidgin English dialogue; feature characters fearing torture and death from Asians; and sometimes even have nothing to do with Chinese people beyond their show title, a kind of titular yellowface.²⁵ In *Little Johnny Jones* (1904), for instance, George M. Cohan made Chinese characters laughable, foreign, and villainous as a way to establish, by contrast, Americana.²⁶ Black Americans also donned yellowface, in part to suggest that they had a rightful place in the United States in contrast with Asians.²⁷ In musicals with Asian characters or Asian settings such as *In Dahomey* (1903) and *The Shoo-Fly Regiment* (1906), African Americans performed their own belonging and modernity while also lodging critiques of colonialism, racist violence, and prohibitions on interracial relationships.²⁸

By the mid-twentieth century, Asian and Asian American representation in US musical theatre became more sympathetic while still tending to draw from Orientalist logics. Performers like Dorothy Toy and Paul Wing, known as the Chinese Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire, sang and danced across the Chop Suey Circuit.²⁹ They demonstrated their technical skill, charisma, and integration into popular US culture while also capitalizing on perceived exoticism. In addition to *The King and I*, Rodgers and Hammerstein penned two other Asian-inspired musicals: *South Pacific* (1949) and *Flower Drum Song* (1958). Resonant with Cold War politics, these musicals framed Asians as juvenile and assimilable. John Weidman and Stephen Sondheim's *Pacific Overtures* (1976) posited a Japanese perspective on the United States threatening their ports. Like *Flower Drum Song*, this musical marked a historic opportunity for employing Asian American performers on Broadway. Meanwhile, yellowface continued in other musicals and faced protests by the Oriental Actors of America.³⁰ This period included several Asian-themed shows that flopped on Broadway: *Lovely Ladies*, *Kind Gentlemen* (1970), *Ride the Winds* (1974), *Chu Chem* (1989), and *Shōgun: The Musical* (1990), for which Japanese American Paul Chihara composed the music.

Miss Saigon formed a flash point for Asian representation and Asian American organization. Based on narratives from Pierre Loti's novel *Madame Chrysan-*

thème (1887) and Giacomo Puccini's opera *Madama Butterfly* (1904), *Miss Saigon* centers on an American man who impregnates and abandons a Vietnamese girl, who ultimately ends her own life against the backdrop of the American War in Vietnam. In 1990, as *Miss Saigon* prepared to transfer from the West End to Broadway, many Asian Americans objected to white Welsh actor Jonathan Pryce playing the Engineer, a mixed Vietnamese-French character. In solidarity with some LGBTQ+ activists and Black and Latinx/e actors, they also objected to the Orientalist content, from scantily clad sex workers to suicidal butterflies. They wrote letters to the Actors' Equity Association, published their dissents in newspapers, and protested performances. But few pundits took their side. There was even disagreement within the Asian American theatre community, since some actors wanted to hold on to their jobs in *Miss Saigon* and some audiences enjoyed the spectacle. Actors' Equity ultimately permitted yellowface. The producing team had claimed that they were unable to find a talented and top-billing male actor of Asian descent, when in fact they had not bothered to audition any. Producer Cameron Mackintosh defended the casting of a white actor on the grounds of free expression and artistic excellence, and he screeched at opponents for supposed reverse discrimination.

Yet the *Miss Saigon* protests should not be read as a failure. Pryce subsequently toned down the severe yellowface skin and eye makeup that he had used in the London production. After his Broadway tenure ended, Asian American actors replaced him. This milestone in US musical theatre history effectively changed the terms of acceptability: white actors could no longer adopt as much pseudo-Asian makeup without potentially facing harsh criticism. The organizing against *Miss Saigon* made way for more modest yellowface. Consider, for example, the 2005 off-Broadway musical *See What I Wanna See*, an adaptation of *Rashomon*. Creator Michael John LaChiusa notes that the design should include "a nod to the Japanese roots of these stories, but only in the aesthetic, not cosmetic, sense."³¹ When Idina Menzel and Marc Kudisch played Japanese characters with Japanese hair and makeup in the framing device, they did not encounter public backlash.³²

Over time, casting has become more inclusive, and Asian Americans have written original musicals. Actors B. D. Wong and Ann Harada, for example, appeared on Broadway in traditionally white parts in *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown* (1999) and *Cinderella* (2013), respectively. Famed *A Chorus Line* (1975) alumna Baayork Lee founded the National Asian Artists Project to cultivate passion and skills for musical theatre among young Asian Americans. The National Asian American Theatre Company has also reexamined musicals via Asian American casting. East West Players has staged many Sondheim musicals with all-Asian American casts, as well as new works such as *Interstate* (2022), a

semi-autobiographical queer and trans exploration by Melissa Li and Kit Yan.³³ On Broadway, Filipino American Robert Lopez wrote the music for *Avenue Q* (2003), *The Book of Mormon* (2011), and *Frozen* (2018). David Henry Hwang penned the books for *Aida* (2000) and *Tarzan* (2006), as well as new books for *Flower Drum Song* (2002, 2026). In 2015, *Allegiance* became the first original Broadway musical centered on Asian American experiences with Asian Americans among the creative team. Scored by Jay Kuo, *Allegiance* depicts Japanese American incarceration, family melodrama, and debate on whether to display US patriotism or resist conscription. With *KPOP* (2022), Helen Park emerged as the first Asian American woman to write music and lyrics for a Broadway musical, alongside Max Vernon and librettist Jason Kim. Hue Park and Will Aronson created *Maybe Happy Ending*, which premiered in Korea in 2016 before opening on Broadway in 2024. In the same era, the Great White Way revived Asian stories as told by white artists: *The King and I*, *Miss Saigon* (2017), and *Here Lies Love* (2023).

Facing Yellowface in the Twenty-First Century

The same cultural trends that have shaped how yellowface functions in musicals in the twenty-first century have also manifested across artistic media from ballet to Broadway. Performance facilitates imaginative play, where everyone seems to have the freedom to play someone different from themselves. Some animated films like *Kung Fu Panda* (2008) and the English-dubbed versions of Hayao Miyazaki's oeuvre feature white actors voicing Asian characters, human and animal. Non-Asian players can take on Asian avatars and even purchase Asian-inflected skins for video games such as *League of Legends*. Like these forms, opera exists further away from realism than do live plays and musicals, seemingly providing more justification for the ongoing casting of non-Asians in Asian roles, such as in the Metropolitan Opera's perennial production of *Turandot* (1926). By focusing on vocal performance and denying the racialization of voices, opera practitioners can insist on casting voices that allegedly sound the best and meet the vocal demands of the role. Furthermore, they can point to the scarcity of trained Asian and Asian American opera performers, though their numbers have been rising.

Circa 2010, yellowface seemed ubiquitous. After Katy Perry's geisha performance at the 2013 American Music Awards, as well as performances of overt yellowface on episodes of *How I Met Your Mother* and *Saturday Night Live* in 2014, NPR's *Code Switch* podcast aired a two-part segment with this framing: "Every few months, there's a renewed discussion about yellowface. You can set your watch to it. We hear of some star sporting eye make-up that makes them look

vaguely Asian, or we catch wind of some singer wearing kimonos or qi paos or some sort of traditional Asian outfit.”³⁴ Journalist Jeff Yang clarified, “This isn’t necessarily a sign that yellowface is becoming more popular”; rather, “we’re noticing it more.”³⁵ In this purportedly postracial period, there seemed to be an uptick in yellowface but also an uptick in calling out the broader phenomenon of whitewashing. This related term, *whitewashing*, encompasses white actors playing explicitly named characters of color as well as white characters that used to be of color either in real life or in the original narrative. Just like yellowface without yellowed faces, whitewashed roles tend to forgo garish makeup. Perhaps these whitewashed cultural productions stood out as more egregiously offensive when set in relief against the progressive promises of a Black presidency. In addition, social media provided new ways for minoritized voices to circulate more widely. In 2015 and 2016, #OscarsSoWhite trended in its criticism of the Academy Awards for nominating only white actors in consecutive years, thereby calling attention to the minimal recognition of actors of color and the few voters of color in the academy. Asian Americans launched social media campaigns including #StarringJohnCho, #MyYellowFaceStory, and #ExpressiveAsians to reimagine Asian Americans in leading roles, share how anti-Asian racism has affected them in the entertainment industry, and counter narratives about Asian Americans as emotionless.³⁶ Thus, journalists, fans, scholars, activists, and artists pushed back as they connected the dots between a series of high-profile cases to reveal a pattern of racial erasure.

The campaign against M. Night Shyamalan’s *The Last Airbender* (2010) mobilized the internet in the fight for intentionally casting actors of color. When the director adapted the *Avatar* animated series into a live-action film, he cast several white actors, including the lead, in this pan-East Asian and Inuit-inspired world. The television show had previously cast white voice actors without incident, but a new moment and format sparked change. Fans of the television show organized a letter-writing campaign through their LiveJournal group Aang Ain’t White.³⁷ They pointed out that Shyamalan’s racial dramaturgy set up the white actors as the heroes, while actors of color played the genocidal villains. Along with the Media Action Network for Asian Americans, they called for a boycott of the movie.³⁸ These fans also created the blog *Racebending in Cinema*, where they wrote specific critiques of Shyamalan’s film and broader critiques of whitewashing for denying employment to actors of color and conveying that only white peoples’ stories are worth telling.³⁹ In 2024, a new live-action *Avatar* television series was released with an Asian American cast, suggesting that the campaign’s concerted efforts helped shift dominant sensibilities.

The 2010s also saw the release of big-budget science fiction films in which reincarnation, robots, and postracial logics rationalized yellowface.⁴⁰ From

Cloud Atlas (2012) to *Ghost in the Shell* (2017), seemingly anybody could embody somebody else. Nonetheless, this deracinated liberalism paradoxically relies on the service and aesthetics of East Asians. With layers of racial disavowal, Scarlett Johansson could play Major Motoko Kusanagi, a Japanese character in a mechanical body based on the manga and anime versions of *Ghost in the Shell*. Much like how contemporary yellowface without yellowed faces softens Asian impersonation, the contemporary stereotype of Asians as cold androids performs similar work as apparently nonracialized or not that bad, in contrast with older images of Fu Manchu that may seem more vulgar today. As another techno-Orientalist trope, futuristic spaces in these films often look Asian without having Asian people. Asianness becomes the backdrop to support white leads, themselves simulating Asianness.

As yellowface and whitewashing incidents accumulated, mainstream media began to oppose these casting practices, a huge change since the battle over *Miss Saigon* two decades earlier. In 2016, *Vox* and *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* offered short videos on yellowface and whitewashing, with the latter asking, “How is this still a thing?”⁴¹ The *New York Times* created a slideshow titled “Whitewashing, a Long History,” highlighting an image of Emma Stone playing a Chinese–Native Hawaiian character in *Aloha* (2015).⁴² In addition, *IndieWire* published a piece called “25 Worst Cases of Hollywood Whitewashing Since 2000.”⁴³

Some white artists subsequently expressed regret for facilitating whitewashing, while others continued to downplay racial salience. In 2017, when white British actor Ed Skrein learned that the character he had been cast to play in a new *Hellboy* movie was originally Japanese American in the comics, he gracefully stepped back, and Daniel Dae Kim was recast in the role.⁴⁴ When promoting *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* (2021), Marvel Studios president Kevin Feige acknowledged that the studio should have found a way to mitigate Asian stereotypes in *Doctor Strange* (2016) and should have cast an Asian actor as the Ancient One instead of Tilda Swinton.⁴⁵ After initially refusing to participate in Hari Kondabolu’s documentary *The Problem with Apu* (2017), Hank Azaria registered the pain that his brownface performance had caused and decided to stop voicing the Indian character on *The Simpsons* (1989–). Meanwhile, Johansson, then the highest-paid female actor in Hollywood, framed her role in *Ghost in the Shell* as racially harmless and a win for feminism: “I would never want to feel like I was playing a character that was offensive. Also, having a franchise with a female protagonist driving it is such a rare opportunity.”⁴⁶ As creative retribution, Asian Americans sometimes joke about counting her as Asian, like in the improv show *Scarlett Johansson Presents: Asian American & Pacific Islander Heritage Month*.

Beyond Hollywood, struggles over pedestrian racial performance also

entered popular discourse. Snapchat released a filter that turned selfies into slant-eyed East Asian caricatures but then removed it after receiving backlash for this digital yellowface. From college campuses to newspaper columns, Americans gradually exhibited greater sensitivity to the baggage of ethnic Halloween costumes. In 2015, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts invited patrons to don kimonos alongside Claude Monet's painting *La Japonaise* (1876), which triggered both protests that deemed "Kimono Wednesdays" yellowface and counterprotests that deemed kimonos accessible to all.⁴⁷

In the world of ballet, many US companies have removed explicit yellowface from their annual productions of *The Nutcracker*. George Li debuted George Balanchine's tea choreography in yellowface in 1954, perhaps part of a way in for the first Asian dancer in the New York City Ballet. Influenced by the critical conversations surrounding the Seattle Gilbert & Sullivan Society's production of *The Mikado* in 2014, Pacific Northwest Ballet's artistic director Peter Boal eliminated the yellowface makeup, Fu Manchu beard, and rice paddy hat from the Chinese tea dance. He then took more steps toward inclusion by casting a Chinese American dancer and by reconceiving the character as the Green Tea Cricket. Boal and other leaders of major ballet companies consulted with Asian American dancers Phil Chan and Georgina Pazcoguin, who founded the advocacy group Final Bow for Yellowface in 2017, and signed their pledge to promote inclusion and eliminate "outdated and offensive stereotypes of Asians (Yellowface) on our stages."⁴⁸ Chan points out that yellowface in *The Nutcracker* spans caricatured East Asian makeup and geisha wigs to racialized choreography of bobbing heads, upward finger pointing, and shuffling feet. Taking a gentle approach, he believes that calling out racism as such would alienate those with privilege, and he does not always insist on casting Asian Americans. Instead, broaching the subject of yellowface "*as a matter of making good art* transforms the task from something that matters mainly to people of color, something to be fought for and maybe to be angry about—something that divides us—into a goal we all share."⁴⁹

At this inflection point, yellowface persisted on Broadway but with more pushback. Reporting for *Metro*, Matthew Lee drew attention to "Singapore Sue" in the 2015 revival of *Dames at Sea* (1966), asking, "Why is this Broadway musical featuring a racist song?"⁵⁰ Mixing up a plethora of East Asian stereotypes, the song centers on a sailor who loves a "Lotus Blossom Girl": she "winked and begged me to inspect her junk / Though it was damp and rotten," and she is forced into sex work and then strangled to death.⁵¹ The director subsequently removed the word *Oriental* as well as other Asian references in the lyrics, wigs, and accents, but kept the nearly all-white cast and Asian-style costumes, characters, and music. *Dames at Sea* perpetuated yellowface without yellowed faces. It ultimately flopped.

In school productions, yellowface and whitewashing are not uncommon, yet they garnered greater scrutiny in this moment. Consider for instance how licenses for *A Chorus Line* (1975) and *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* (2005) permit non-Asian actors to play Connie Wong and Marcy Park, respectively. By opening up the casting, the original creatives increase the odds of amateurs staging these works and therefore increase their profits. But in the fall of 2015, Lloyd Suh shut down a production of his 2012 play *Jesus in India* at Clarion University in Pennsylvania because the director had cast white students as Indian characters and had never actually signed a licensing agreement. Meanwhile, Clarion faculty and administrators pointed to the small percentage of Asian students enrolled in their university, championed their own artistic freedom, and portrayed Suh as the villain for punishing students for their race.

The 2010s thus marked a significant period for challenging the ethics and changing the performance practices of yellowface and whitewashing. Although white shenanigans kept popping up, as this book elucidates, Asian American theatre artists contested the terms of acceptable behavior. In the 2020s, several important Asian American satirical takes on yellowface took the spotlight, notably the novels *Disorientation* (2022) by Elaine Hsieh Chou and *Yellowface* (2023) by R. F. Kuang, as well as the Broadway mounting of David Henry Hwang's *Yellow Face* (2007) plus the DC-area premiere of Hwang and Jeanine Tesori's *Soft Power* (2018), both in 2024. But these theatrical works did not make for a happy ending. In July 2025, soon after Darren Criss became the first Asian American to win the Tony Award for Lead Actor in a Musical for his role as Oliver in *Maybe Happy Ending*, the producers announced his replacement by a white actor, Andrew Barth Feldman, the boyfriend of costar Helen J. Shen, who played Claire. To substantiate this casting decision, the artists and their defenders pointed to the universality of the musical's love story, the unmarkedness of the robot protagonists, and the equal opportunity for Asian American actors in contemporaneous Broadway roles such as Conrad Ricamora as Abraham Lincoln in Cole Escola's *Oh, Mary!* (2024). In this renewed Republican anti-DEI era, they reallocated resources back to whiteness by denying the racialization of Asian robots and presenting the playing field as even. Meanwhile, many theatre organizations including the AAPAC, artists such as B. D. Wong and Deborah S. Craig, and fans on Instagram critiqued this casting as yellowface and rehearsed arguments from earlier protests.⁵² They highlighted the culturally specific Korean dramaturgy in the locales, characters, and customs. They worried that casting a white actor would set a precedent to stop casting Asian Americans, who already experience discrimination in the industry. To help remedy this larger issue, Ricamora subsequently launched a scholarship to support young Asian American male actors.⁵³ A month later, the producers

announced that Criss would return to the role after Feldman's brief stint.⁵⁴ But then two months after that, the casting call for *Maybe Happy Ending* classified the roles of Oliver and Claire as open to any ethnicity.

Disavowing Anti-Asian Racism

Yellowface remains because many Americans do not consider anti-Asian prejudice to be pervasive and profound, and yellowface without yellowed faces further obscures racism. The Social Tracking of Asian Americans in the United States (STAATUS) Index, which annually surveys public perceptions of and lived experiences of Asian Americans, found in 2024 that only 38 percent of Americans agreed that Asian Americans are discriminated against, while another 38 percent believed them to be treated fairly, 11 percent believed them to be more advantaged, and 13 percent answered that they do not know how Asian Americans are treated.⁵⁵ Many perceive Asian Americans as model minorities with financial success and proximity to whiteness.⁵⁶ If anti-Asian racism does not seem to be a problem in the twenty-first century, then it need not be solved. Performing and taking pleasure in yellowface become acceptable. In this circular logic, yellowface must be okay because Asian Americans seem to be doing okay.

The artists interviewed for this book shared their corresponding explanations for why yellowface persists. David Henry Hwang reasons, "The use of yellowface in recent years is directly proportional to the degree to which people buy the model minority myth, because we are considered kind of white adjacent or honorary white; therefore, there is less stigma about actual white people portraying us."⁵⁷ Actor Raymond J. Lee reflects, "I think it persists because it's non-POC creators, and they think it's fine and no one's called them out on it," just as actor and AAPAC cofounder Cindy Cheung emphasizes, "They're not scared. They don't think they're going to get punished for it."⁵⁸ Actor, playwright, and equity advocate Christine Toy Johnson has come to realize, "If someone has never been mocked for the shape of their eyes, for the color of their skin, drawn in a horrible caricature, or been portrayed with grotesque makeup; if someone has never experienced that and hasn't had to think about it, chances are they don't."⁵⁹ Others like actor-director Austin Ku point to "inertia," artists and audiences following traditions passed down to them, "So then they still put it [yellowface] on anyway."⁶⁰ Many Americans may not know about histories of anti-Asian oppression such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. According to actor Lisa Helmi Johanson, "When people don't know the reality of that history, they're able to wave away things like yellowface as not being that big of a deal. It's just more eyeliner, you know."⁶¹ Playwright Lauren Yee similarly observes, "Unfortunately,

to some, playing in yellowface feels more like putting on a hat or a jacket than like putting on a full identity and everything else that consists of it.”⁶² Without more exaggerated makeup, the racial weight feels less heavy. Narratives of racial progress foster teleological understandings, as if US society necessarily and inevitably becomes more equitable over time. Mickey Rooney’s bucktoothed, comic yellowface performance in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* (1961) seems to be from a bygone era that tends to prompt more embarrassment in the present day, whereas yellowface without yellowed faces persists with greater ease. In addition, Asian Americans do not fit into a Black-white binary understanding of the United States, causing them to fall into what director Leigh Silverman calls “a kind of chasm in this country.”⁶³ In Claire Jean Kim’s racial triangulation formulation, US white supremacy figures Asian Americans as racially superior to African Americans yet eternally foreign.⁶⁴

In truth, Asian Americans face institutional racism. They encounter pedestrian symbolic violence like being told that they speak English surprisingly well or that they should go back to their country, rhetoric that places Asian Americans outside the United States. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, Asian Americans have increasingly contended with physical attacks. The second Trump administration has also ramped up the detainment and deportation of Asian immigrants and refugees, including those legally residing in the United States. Actor and AAPAC cofounder Peter Kim lamented, “When you look at anti-Asian violence, do people really care besides our own community?”⁶⁵ If non-Asians ignore anti-Asian xenophobia, then it makes sense that they would ignore yellowface too. Although Asian Americans make up a disproportionately large part of the professional class, they are the racial group least likely to be promoted to management positions.⁶⁶ When researchers posed as potential graduate students seeking mentorship from faculty, they found that faculty were most likely to respond to senders’ names that sounded like white men and least likely to respond to those with Chinese and Indian names.⁶⁷ The STAATUS Index has repeatedly asked Americans to “name a famous or prominent Asian American,” which in 2024 yielded the top response, “I can’t think of one” (52 percent), followed by Jackie Chan (9 percent), who is not even American.⁶⁸ When asked what kinds of television and film roles come to mind for Asian Americans, the plurality replied, “None come to mind,” followed by the answers martial arts practitioners and doctors.⁶⁹ The AAPAC has consistently found underrepresentation of Asian American actors on Broadway and off-Broadway relative to New York City’s population.⁷⁰ Casting scholar Brian Eugenio Herrera observes, “Every act of casting is then simultaneously a creative act of interpretation and also an administrative allocation of resources”; to which Ryan Donovan adds, “Casting is an unevenly distributed resource that showcases the bodies valued not just by Broadway but by US society at large.”⁷¹ Of the 269

new musicals that opened on Broadway from 2000 to 2020, 217 (81 percent) had all-white creative teams.⁷² According to a 2023 Pew Research Center survey, 63 percent of adult Asian Americans “say too little attention is paid to race and racial issues concerning Asians living in the U.S.”⁷³ Amid a field of relative invisibility, yellowface can shape popular understandings of Asians and Asian Americans.

Asian Americans themselves have been liable for perpetuating stereotypes and for assimilating to survive. Ethan Heard, associate artistic director of Signature Theatre, humbly reflects on collective responsibility: “I think [yellowface persists] partially because we allow it to. As a proud member of the AAPI community, I know I could be a more vocal advocate and fight harder for more AAPI representation. We need to keep coming together, summoning the strength to believe in ourselves, and advocating for our community.”⁷⁴ Director and producer Andy Lowe suggests, “The root of white adjacency for Asian American communities begins with creating tourist traps”; he adds, “It’s like, ‘Hey, please give us FEMA money to rebuild our substandard neighborhood you redlined us into after that earthquake. But hey, look at this pretty silk and these fancy plates! Oooh-ahhh. See, you don’t REALLY want to lynch us NOW do you?!’”⁷⁵ Asian Americans must agitate and educate.

While many scholars in Asian American studies have historicized, theorized, and critiqued yellowface across various media, many musical theatre critics and academics have avoided substantive engagement with this performance phenomenon. Minor Asian characters and anti-Asian elements often seem unremarkable. The term *yellowface* hardly ever appears in indexes of academic works. Some authors outright defend yellowface casting and Orientalist logics. For instance, musical theatre scholarship on *Miss Saigon* tends to applaud the megamusical’s artistry and serious themes, downplay unequal racial dynamics, and neglect to cite Asian Americans.⁷⁶ As Frank Rich, then the most powerful critic at the *New York Times*, enthused, “Watching Jonathan Pryce create riveting drama on stage in ‘Miss Saigon’ this week, I felt transported by the actor’s art, as practiced by a master operating with the uninhibited liberty that must be any artist’s birthright.”⁷⁷ With his privileged position and libertarian diction, Rich mobilized the personal pleasure that he derived from the yellowface performance to assert his response as proper. Karen Shimakawa argues that “for a large segment of mainstream Broadway theatre audiences, watching a white man in yellowface, with taped eyelids, blackened teeth, greased hair, and bronzed skin is *more* pleasurable, *more* comprehensible, and (for producers) *more* profitable than watching an Asian or Asian American male body onstage.”⁷⁸ Other Asian diasporic theatre scholars have written on the nuances of spectatorship, performers’ agency, whitewashing of US history, and the importance of *Miss Saigon* to Asian American theatre history.⁷⁹

Academics often envision musical theatre as inclusive and subversive. In *The Song Is You*, for example, Bradley Rogers places burlesque and minstrelsy at the heart of the musical and argues, “It is precisely through this complex play with identifications that the musical models how calcified structures of identity can be dissolved.”⁸⁰ In addition to this deconstruction work, musicals mark a significant contribution to US American culture by Jewish Americans.⁸¹ They also offer opportunities for queer artists, queer readings, and queer audiences.⁸² They can generate the joys of feeling extra and feeling seen. Then, when teaching and researching musical theatre, scholars at times use “pleasure as a way in,” per Stacy Wolf’s manifesto.⁸³

But what if, as Aaron C. Thomas invites us to consider, Broadway is not “already diverse, already equitable, already politically progressive”?⁸⁴ What if pointing out that identities and hierarchies are constructed is insufficient to dismantling power structures? What if *you* do not count as white? What if instead of the romanticized open doors of Ellis Island, the lens shifts to the notorious immigrant detention center of Angel Island? What if pleasure becomes a way to avoid accountability?

Musicals’ promise to produce pleasure can facilitate the disavowal of complicity with systemic racist violence. As David Savran observes of the genre: “No theatre form is as single-mindedly devoted to producing pleasure, inspiring spectators to tap their feet, sing along, or otherwise be carried away. This utopian—and mimetic—dimension of the musical (linked to its relentless reflexivity) makes it into a kind of hothouse for the manufacture of theatrical seduction and the ideological positions to which mass audiences can be seduced.”⁸⁵ By moving spectators to tap their feet and clap their hands, musical theatre cultivates collective pleasure and collective political projects. In his study of whiteness and Broadway musicals, Warren Hoffman suggests that “audiences become so hungry for entertainment that they willingly gloss over deeper issues, particularly racial themes.”⁸⁶

Musical revivals especially can conjure feelings of familiarity, comfort, and nostalgia.⁸⁷ Bryan M. Vandevender asks, “Who is served by a revival of a work mired in or bolstered by oppressive structures? Whose pleasure would a revival privilege? What violence could a revival precipitate?”⁸⁸ From 1998 to 2016, approximately four out of five Broadway theatregoers were white.⁸⁹ In the 2016 Public Religion Research Institute survey on American values, the majority of white Americans reported that they believed US culture to have worsened since the 1950s.⁹⁰ In “After the ‘Golden Age,’” a term that glorifies mid-twentieth-century musicals, musicologists Jessica Sternfeld and Elizabeth Wollman suggest that nostalgia and revisionism in revivals maintain hegemonic conceptions of Americans and the history of the United States.⁹¹ When old musicals have

newly revised books and lyrics and newly racially diverse casts, they can elide past and present material inequalities. By obscuring structural oppression or relegating oppression to the past, revised revivals, or revisals, can allay anxieties as if US society has already ended structural oppression. More interested in resuscitating intellectual property than pursuing social justice, producers opt for minimal changes to cause minimal offense. This approach of making small edits to new productions implies that dynamics like white supremacy are isolated and individual, not institutional. Instead of removing tiny fragments of eggshell that accidentally fell into the cake batter, the work of plucking out racism from musicals and the United States might mean starting over to bake something like *dan tat*, an egg custard tart born from colonial forces and locals in Hong Kong.

Happy feelings come to authorize musicals and dictate the appropriate response. Celebrating achievement in making musicals and assimilation in making Americans may render ongoing material differences less apparent. According to David L. Eng in his analysis of the Obama era, “queer liberalism does not resist, but abets, the forgetting of race.”⁹² The genre of musical comedy further allows some to dismiss charges of white supremacy, as those who take pleasure in the comedy place their own feelings above those who feel pain—*Can’t you take a joke?* The dissenter is met with derision, labeled as too sensitive or not sophisticated enough to enjoy the production. *You just don’t get the joke.* In the process, the policing of appropriate responses to musicals stifles minoritized deviance. Laughter can reveal just how good white people really feel, as they publicly luxuriate in racial privilege even as they imagine themselves beyond racism. Actor and activist blogger Erin Quill puts it bluntly, “Well, yellowface persists because it’s fun. It’s fun for white people.”⁹³ As Raúl Pérez contends in *The Souls of White Jokes*, white Americans use racist humor to produce “pleasurable solidarity” and solidify their power.⁹⁴ Kelsey Jacobson and Bethany Schaufler-Biback’s empirical audience research finds that feeling together “might feel good to audience members in its community-building and affect-sharing project. But feeling together also marks out boundaries of bodies in material, real, and socially constructed ways by also emphasizing *feeling different*.”⁹⁵ The pleasures of musical spectatorship and scholarship can obscure other ways of seeing, studying, and feeling musicals.

Feeling Yellow

I approach this book through feeling yellow, how yellowface representation hails Asian Americans. I aim to articulate the tensions between relishing and resenting musicals and the considerations of how a musical works differently for people with different positionalities. At the same time, I recognize race as not total-

izing; racial identity intersects with other identities, and some Asian Americans pardon yellowface, while some non-Asian Americans condemn it. In teasing out this theory of affect, the racialized unequal distribution of pleasure and pain, I rely on feminist queer of color critique. I use *feeling* and *affect* somewhat interchangeably, although for me the former connotes emotional sensory states while the latter connotes emotional and relational movement. When I first began grappling critically with my responses to musicals, I hesitated to narrate my experiences because I had been conditioned to think that theorizing my feelings did not constitute valid scholarship. Feminist critic and curator Jennifer Doyle has argued that art criticism prioritizes cool distance, although “explicit turns to emotion may in fact signal the politicization, the historicization of that self and of the feelings through which that self takes shape in relation to others.”⁹⁶ Feelings form a way of knowing. More specifically, feeling yellow provides a way to understand Asian American affect within white supremacy.

My concept of feeling yellow builds on the work of performance studies scholar José Esteban Muñoz. In “Feeling Brown,” he imagines race and ethnicity as “affective difference,” “the ways in which various historically coherent groups ‘feel’ differently and navigate the material world on a different emotional register.”⁹⁷ Muñoz theorizes the United States’ “‘official’ national affect” as “a mode of being in the world primarily associated with white middle-class subjectivity.”⁹⁸ Because economically privileged whiteness forms a default center, its feelings appear neutral, flat, and reasonable in opposition to those of marginalized others. This white baseline “reads most ethnic affect as inappropriate,” and specifically Latinx/e affect as “excess” and “hot n spicy.”⁹⁹ Muñoz does not outright reject these interpretations but embraces disidentification to denaturalize normative white affect and repurpose racist labels.¹⁰⁰ He calls for a “brown commons,” where “feeling brown is feeling together in difference.”¹⁰¹

Instead of seeming to be “too much,” as in Latinx/e representation, Asian Americans seem like “too little.” Between images of robots and model minorities, they appear hypoemotional.¹⁰² In *Reel Inequality*, Nancy Wang Yuen cites a casting director as saying, “Asians are a challenge to cast because most casting directors feel as though they’re not very expressive. They’re very shut down in their emotions.”¹⁰³ The diagnosis of not expressing emotions enough is arbitrary and constructed, based on an allegedly correct way and amount of feeling as dictated by white supremacy. When Asian Americans encounter yellowface, responses other than mirth can appear wrong and further marginalize this minoritized group, already viewed as too quiet through the perspective of a white lens. Rather than being read as lacking emotions, Asian Americans may be read as inscrutable, conjuring up yellow peril fears. But strategic withholding and passivity can serve as a counteraction and survival strategy.¹⁰⁴ In *Surface*

Relations: Queer Forms of Asian American Inscrutability, Vivian L. Huang asserts, “Performing inscrutably is a minor racial performative that signals social epistemologies other than white nationalist frameworks that narrate Asian American life as white aspiration or nonexistence.”¹⁰⁵ By disidentifying with the stoic figure, Asian Americans can call into question the legibility of emotions across racialized faces, recalibrate what constitutes an appropriate reaction, and question who decides such proprieties.¹⁰⁶ Anything but silent and unfeeling, Asian Americans have a lot to say about their emotions.

Feeling yellow reminds Asian Americans that they are not seen as raceless or white but racialized as Asian. It depends on both recognizing and rejecting white American assimilation and postracial logics. With a nonnormative affective relation to the world, Asian Americans, like other people of color, gain different knowledges through different feelings. In *Racial Feelings: Asian America in a Capitalist Culture of Emotion*, Jeffrey Santa Ana contends that “the Asian subject becomes Asian American from having *lost* the political naiveté of being oblivious to racism.”¹⁰⁷ Poet Cathy Park Hong posits Asian American “minor feelings”: “When minor feelings are finally externalized, they are interpreted as hostile, ungrateful, jealous, depressing, and belligerent, affects ascribed to racialized behavior that whites consider *out of line*. Our feelings are overreactions because our lived experiences of structural inequity are not commensurate with their deluded reality.”¹⁰⁸ When American millennials were asked in the summer of 2017, “When you think about [Trump’s] presidency, what emotion best represents the strongest emotion you continue to feel since the election?” the top three responses of Asian Americans were “disgusted” (25 percent), “embarrassed” (16 percent), and “fearful” (11 percent), while an almost equal number of white respondents felt either “disgusted” (16 percent), “embarrassed” (15 percent), or “hopeful” (14 percent).¹⁰⁹ Affect can be racialized and politicized. Asian American affect feels different.

I began theorizing feeling yellow when I started noticing casual anti-Asian racism in professional musical productions, and instead of being isolated occasions that I could hand-wave away, they seemed relentless. When I saw *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1985) on Broadway in 2012, the audience gave the most votes to Helena Landless as the murderer, meaning that I had to bear with Jessie Mueller in brownface for an additional number. In 2013, New York City Center Encores! staged *It’s a Bird . . . It’s a Plane . . . It’s Superman* (1966) with some non-Asian actors playing the Red Chinese villains, the Flying Lings.¹¹⁰ Later that year, at Madison Square Garden, *A Christmas Story: The Musical* (2012) ended with Chinese waiters singing “Deck the Halls” but replacing the letter *l*’s with *r*’s. I wondered: Why does this kind of representation keep happening? Why do the patrons around me laugh, while I languish? And why did no one warn me?

When watching the 2015 Tony Awards, I felt whiplash—one moment celebrating Ruthie Ann Miles as the first Asian American to win the Tony Award for Best Featured Actress in a Musical for *The King and I*, and the next, recoiling at Kristin Chenoweth impersonating the king. I heard laughter from the audience through the television screen and read my friends' running commentaries on Facebook with no mention of yellowface. A theory of feeling yellow makes visible how white supremacy produces happiness for some to preserve the status quo.

When I encounter yellowface in musicals, I feel yellow. I experience indignant anger, profound sadness, and racial alienation, typically in that order. Unlike Sianne Ngai's "ugly feelings," feeling yellow wields forcefulness and morality.¹¹¹ Because musical comedies promise to amuse me, I come to the theatre expecting to be entertained. I do not expect to be assaulted by the presence of a non-Asian performer embodying an Asian character. I am taken aback. Seeing injustice against Asian Americans triggers in me a particularly righteous form of anger. Once I surmount the shock, yellowface becomes no longer surprising but part of a larger pattern, and I turn to acceptance and immiseration. With deep sadness, I consider how the producers of these performances must think so little of anti-Asian oppression as to fortify it and at times deny what they are doing. Finally, as I take in the guffaws, applause, and other vocally positive responses of spectators around me—spectators who are mostly white, wealthy, and liberal—I experience distance across our identities, ideologies, and emotions. The gap between us widens. Feeling yellow intensifies as I am made acutely aware of my difference. The repetition of this racial affective economy in the theatre enacts Asian Americanness.

Experiencing the incorrect response can seem isolating. Feminist queer of color scholar Sara Ahmed offers: "Take the example of laughter in the cinema. How many times have I sunk desperately into my chair when that laughter has been expressed at points I find far from amusing! We do not always notice when others sink. One can feel unjustly interpellated in such occasions: the gestures of discomfort and alienation do not register; they do not affect the collective impression made by the laughter."¹¹² While quiet dissent may not move the majority, loud laughter moves the minoritized. Racialized representation can make the spectator of color painfully conscious of racism even in anticipation of a performance. Afro-Caribbean thinker Frantz Fanon famously wrote on how white supremacy sutures Black representation to his body: "In the interval, just before the film starts, I wait for me. The people in the theater are watching me, examining me, waiting for me. A Negro groom is going to appear. My heart makes my head swim."¹¹³ Fanon becomes mindful of how others see him, a realization that disrupts his enjoyment of a cultural production.

Compelled by the imperative to happiness, I resent this self-consciousness, as I am made to feel that my racial alienation is my own (un)doing. In *The Promise of Happiness*, Ahmed points out how happiness can obscure power inequalities and that when you point out such inequalities, you prompt unhappiness. Unhappiness becomes attributed to you. Once, at the theatre, I yelled out from my seat, causing some patrons to turn their heads. They probably saw my lack of appropriate audience etiquette, and not racism, as the problem. I sometimes wish that I were not so sensitive, that I could fit in and indulge in the designated-as-proper emotional experience of exuberance that musicals have promised me. As an un-American Asian American, I harbor ambivalence relative to the United States: discomfort with celebrating this nation and this national art form while still feeling ineluctably drawn to them. Even as I long for postracial bliss, I know that my longing exemplifies what Lauren Berlant refers to as “cruel optimism,” a desire for something impossible to obtain and actually detrimental to me.¹¹⁴ If I were to be included and feel like white musical theatregoers, my inclusion and feeling would not abolish systemic racism. For Asian Americans to gain entrance to the theatre, the price may be keeping quiet about charges of racism and playing the grin-and-bear-it model minority.¹¹⁵

Yet Asian American affect need not be cheerless. As a rogue response, feeling yellow can be fun! I can derive pleasure by playing the rebel, clinging to the emotions that I am not supposed to experience and express. What is more, there is something impishly gleeful about feeling yellow openly and potentially ruining a musical for a fan. As Ahmed’s figure of the feminist killjoy insists, “There can even be joy in killing joy. And kill joy, we must and we do.”¹¹⁶ I have found that making another person feel awful for their enjoyment of and complicity with racist musicals makes me feel better. This act redistributes pain more equitably. Perhaps paranoid readings can do reparative work.¹¹⁷

Although feeling yellow emerges from structures of oppression and racial difference, it can also create new conditions of possibility and new collectivities. By feeling together, Asian Americans can foster solidarity and use their affect to move others just as they are moved. Critical empathy can additionally educate a person with white privilege to understand a person without, though that empathy arguably still centers on whiteness.¹¹⁸ Feeling yellow mandates that historical and ongoing structural anti-Asian racism be taken seriously. It can generate new critical pleasures by redistributing misery and forming communities of fellow feeling. Per trans/queer abolitionist Eric Stanley, complaining can “[fashion] collectivity through the commons of hate.”¹¹⁹ As *Feeling Yellow* documents, Asian Americans channel their complicated emotions into organized performances and protests.

In writing this book, I have been conscious of how I would like the reader to feel along with me. I both criticize and empathize with white liberals and Asian

American artists doing harm reduction work. I mobilize the pathos of those for whom yellowface causes so much pain. I hope to make the reader gasp at reveals and laugh at racism. Mocking white supremacy can help take away its power. I remain mindful of the limitations of reforms. Casting Asian Americans in explicitly Asian roles is necessary though insufficient for racial justice. Their conditional inclusion often relies on the maintenance of yellowface without yellowed faces, acceptance of stereotypical roles created by white authors, and allegiance to this racist, xenophobic, settler colonial nation. But I also remain hopeful that artists, activists, audiences, and academics can imagine collective liberation beyond the canonical and national stage.

Methodology

My methodology consists of conducting dramaturgical analyses, providing historical context, interviewing artists, and theorizing race and spectatorship. I perform close readings of musicals' libretti, cast recordings, and video recordings to interpret Asian/American representation and racial dramaturgy, the rules by which race operates in the worlds created onstage. Documenting changes to these musicals over time indexes shifting political sensitivities. I also provide production histories as connected with larger societal trends, such as how political correctness and postracial discourses influenced the ways musicals circulated. Largely focused on New York and Southern California, I investigate Broadway, off-Broadway, regional theatre, and school productions. In addition to studying musicals, I look at their paratexts, from marketing and online message boards to a photo essay and a postshow panel. To gain insight from the artists themselves, I interviewed thirty theatremakers, almost all of whom are Asian American, and almost all between 2019 and 2024. The interviews reveal, for example, how actors negotiate repeatedly playing minor roles as they try to find dignity, humanity, and specificity—and pay their bills. Although I realize that existing studies privilege East Asianness, I have mostly selected examples of Chinese and Japanese representation to avoid flattening the colonial histories and brownface images of South Asians and Southeast Asians. Asian Americanness is an incoherent racial formation but also a political formation of solidarity, in which different actors of Asian descent play a range of roles, are racially read as Asian, and can work together to end anti-Asian racism.

Because comprehending and contesting the enjoyment of yellowface form a crucial component of my study, I give due attention to reception. I examine reviews, social media, blogs, and my own experiences in the theatre. While I recognize that (mostly white) newspaper critics do not necessarily represent audiences, their critiques indicate patterns in white habitus as well as minori-

tarian dissonances. Online posts from Facebook to Reddit further illuminate how theatregoers and practitioners talk about yellowface. Moreover, social media became an important twenty-first-century technology for Asian Americans to change the conversation.

But researching yellowface, especially via online content, runs into archival obstacles. Many blog posts from the mid-2010s have embedded videos that no longer exist and hyperlinks that redirect to current webpages, although the Wayback Machine helpfully provided snapshots of earlier iterations of websites. This disappearance is due in part to the ephemerality of the internet and to deliberate deletions. While some theatre companies never publicized images of yellowface, others removed past production stills and turned on the private setting for formerly publicly accessible videos.¹²⁰ On the one hand, scrubbing yellowface from the record mitigates the symbolic violence Asian Americans may experience when encountering these materials. On the other hand, yellowface practices might not seem so bad if they can no longer be seen or heard. The concealment of these archives parallels the erasures of literal yellowface makeup that entail yellowface without yellowed faces, enabling theatres to proceed but with less baggage. Also, at times, artists declined to share works in progress or documentation of their previous drafts, making more comprehensive textual investigations and comparisons a challenge.¹²¹

Conducting research for this book immersed me in feeling yellow. For instance, I came across footage of my mother-in-law performing in yellowface half a century ago. When suffering through yellowface performances and derisive laughter in person and in the archives, I developed a minoritized viewing approach. I waited impatiently for the Asian American actors to come onstage and searched for them in the margins of stage pictures. When reading reviews that deemed yellowface acceptable, I noted the use of passive voice to cloak culpability and declare normativity, and I wanted to scream, “acceptable to whom?!” Online comments full of outright hostility and mockery or postracial disavowals and ahistorical defenses piled up, making me feel furious, depressed, and non-existent. But when I found materials like an op-ed by an Asian American eighth-grader condemning yellowface or Asian American plays and musicals that send up white supremacy, I smiled, feeling hopeful and less alone.

This book also obliquely traces how I became more cognizant of yellowface. I remember watching Roundabout Theatre Company’s Broadway revival of *Anything Goes* on January 8, 2012. I loved the production so much that I bought tickets to watch it again with my sister six months later. This time, though, I felt uncomfortable when the white actors/characters pretended to be Chinese. I thought, Oh no! I have brought shame to my Chinese American family! Something had shifted. In between these performances, AAPAC issued its first report

on racial disparities in casting on New York City stages. That very day when I revisited *Anything Goes*, Erin Quill published an incendiary post about yellowface casting in the musical *The Nightingale* that spread like wildfire and sparked my own personal reflections, research, and protests. I felt compelled to theorize feeling yellow and to write this book—but not for the sake of uncritical navel-gazing or smug self-righteousness. I hope that humbly offering these memories invites the reader to reckon with yellowface and perhaps reckon with their complicity in the past.

Chapters

Every chapter begins with a mini case study to consider how yellowface remains possible in the twenty-first century, before attending to the main case study's history and then fast-forwarding to contemporary iterations, interpretations, and interventions. The writing generally follows a production-reception-circulation structure. The chapters move in chronological order from the 2002 Broadway premiere of *Thoroughly Modern Millie* and 2011 Broadway revival of *Anything Goes* to the campaigns against *The Nightingale* and *The Mikado* in 2012 and 2015, respectively, and finally to the 2018 debut of *Soft Power*. Nevertheless, the chapters overlap temporally. I track changes to the texts and attendant discourses, as more Americans became more sensitive to yellowface over time. Instead of recentring whiteness, the chapters spotlight the artistic, activist, and affective work of Asian Americans navigating these musicals. Not limited to my experiences as a spectator and scholar, feeling yellow provides a way to read their emotional registers, from one actor anxiously wondering what audiences are laughing at to another strategically deploying humor in their viral anti-yellowface blog posts.

My case studies share several commonalities. First, they remain popular. Even *Strange New Worlds* (2022–) from the *Star Trek* franchise imagines *Anything Goes* and Gilbert and Sullivan as part of the twenty-third-century musical repertoire. Most are musical comedies, amplifying the seemingly innocent pleasures of yellowface. Exemplary of Bruce Kirle's concept of musicals as open texts, the productions feature not just new casts and directors with new readings but also significantly revised libretti reflecting more progressive beliefs as well as the limits of progress.¹²² In addition, they are all adaptations of older texts: the 1967 film *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, the 1934 original Broadway version of *Anything Goes*, the 1843 Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale *The Nightingale*, the 1885 Savoy operetta *The Mikado* by W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan, and the 1951 musical *The King and I*. Apologists may excuse yellowface as an unfortunate relic of the past, yet that does not excuse twenty-first-century replications. Although contemporary updates attempt to white out explicit anti-Asian rac-

ism, the musicals cling to their pasts and socially reproduce racist logics. They reprise tropes from the late 1800s to early 1900s such as the coolie and dragon lady rather than the more contemporary model minority. In some cases, contemporary authors added yellowface. Yellowface undergirds the dramaturgy of each case study—not always in the sense of casting non-Asian actors to play Asians or Asian Americans in a straightforward way, but in that the scripts explicitly call for non-Asian characters to pretend to be Asians, sometimes with Asian American characters and actors standing right next to them. In *Millie* and *Anything Goes*, Chinese men play supporting roles, literally supporting the white protagonists' yellowface performances. Like the United States, these popular pieces of musical theatre need Asian Americans to work while pushing them aside and dressing up like them.

The first three chapters demonstrate different ways to perform yellowface in the twenty-first century: (1) performing stereotypes with a knowing, metatheatrical wink; (2) representing East Asianness through clothes like *samfu* or poses like folding arms inside of sleeves; and (3) staging China and Japan as imaginary and their people as multiracial and postracial. All three ways sideline Asians and Asian Americans. Chapter 1 examines how *Thoroughly Modern Millie* deploys ironic racism to make yellowface appear reasonable, comical, and, paradoxically, antiracist. With music by Jeanine Tesori, lyrics by Dick Scanlan, and book by Scanlan and Richard Morris, the 2002 Broadway show initially received wide acclaim, but in the mid-2010s Asian American students, parents, and teachers began to object to the musical's depiction of Chinese Americans and their schools' casting practices. Departing from the yellowface makeup of *Millie*, chapter 2 considers how the protagonists of *Anything Goes* forgo makeup in favor of Chinese things in the Roundabout Theatre Company revival. Originally on Broadway in 1934, *Anything Goes* has music and lyrics by Cole Porter and a book by Guy Bolton and P. G. Wodehouse that was heavily revised by Howard Lindsay and Russel Crouse and again later revised by John Weidman and Timothy Crouse. I document changes in performance choices like relying on racialized clothing, movement, and accent to convey yellowface without yellowed faces and script revisions like making the minor Chinese characters essential dramaturgical tools. I discuss major productions in New York in 2011, Washington, DC, in 2018, and London in 2021, and finally the revised 2022 licensable libretto. For the third chapter, I analyze how *The Nightingale* and *The Mikado* represent East Asian lands as fantasies with multiracial yet mostly white casts. Duncan Sheik composed the score and Steven Sater wrote the book and lyrics for *The Nightingale*, which received a workshop production at La Jolla Playhouse and starred white men as the emperor of China. I argue that Asian American organizing against the musical fomented the most important moment in the history of

racial casting politics since the debates between playwright August Wilson and critic-director Robert Brustein in 1996 and the battle over *Miss Saigon* in 1990. This crucial work set the stage for when Asian Americans pushed back on the New York Gilbert & Sullivan Players' production of *The Mikado*, prompting the company to both deracinate and diversify its staging in a revised production.

The final chapter brings the book full circle by returning to *The King and I* as satirized by *Soft Power*. With music by Jeanine Tesori, book by David Henry Hwang, and lyrics by Hwang and Tesori, *Soft Power* opened at the Ahmanson Theatre in Los Angeles in 2018. The play with a musical mobilizes and critiques the ideological and affective forces of musical theatre. The text counters yellowface, in part by putting Asian Americans in whiteface. *Soft Power* invites audiences to experience feeling yellow, whether it is a white spectator sensing the discomfort of being stereotyped when the shoe is on the other foot or an Asian American spectator registering the ambivalence of being included in a racist country.

Feeling Yellow: Asian Americans and Yellowface in Twenty-First-Century Musical Theatre is not simply a survey of musical productions with yellowface. It is a larger inquiry into the racialization of affect, the ways revivals rehearse and revise race, and the terms of inclusion for Asian Americans. Performing Asian-ness through hushed racialized markers via yellowface without yellowed faces accords with the purportedly postracial politics of the early twenty-first century, an insidious disavowal of ongoing systemic white supremacy. Rather than end with calls to tweak musicals or to enforce authentic casting, my book asks readers to consider the potentials and limits of musical, national, and liberal inclusion and wonder about another world with Asian Americans but without yellowface.

1: “They Don’t Know”

Ironical Racism and *Thoroughly Modern Millie*

In the meta Broadway musical *The Drowsy Chaperone* (2006), narrator and musical theatre enthusiast Man in Chair offers running commentary on a fictional 1920s show that comes to life in his lonely apartment when he plays the cast recording. Both a love letter to and a lampooning of musical theatre, *The Drowsy Chaperone* won five Tony Awards, including for Best Book, by Bob Martin and Don McKellar, and Best Score, by Lisa Lambert and Greg Morrison. Act 2 takes a sudden turn when Man in Chair accidentally plays the wrong record. In an Orientalist extravaganza parodying *The King and I* (1951), a white woman in Edwardian garb like Anna ponders, “What is it about the Asians / That fascinates Caucasians?” to which an Oriental despot played by a man in yellowface counters:

What is it about Caucasians that’s so odd?
They call a pretty lady a broad
They have hair upon their chest
And they only have one god
Impossible!¹

The lyrics position the East and West as equally strange. Before the musical can proceed any further, Man in Chair rushes onto the stage to stop the record. He apologizes repeatedly and appears embarrassed that the audience had to witness *The Enchanted Nightingale*. He denounces this “degrading piece of Chinoiserie,” and he calls the emperor’s accent “insulting.”² In *Embodied Nostalgia*, Phoebe Rumsey contends that Man in Chair offers a “more informed backwards glance (in the reflective nostalgia manner) as a way of explaining why musical theatre is meaningful to him, and by association—us,” and that “the inclusion of this moment also reminds [us] that this kind of exoticism and Orientalism is offensive and should be called out.”³ He models an affective pedagogy of shame and

sensitivity to feeling yellow. If, at first, the (mostly white) Broadway audience derives uncritical pleasure from the Chinese stereotypes and yellowface, then they should subsequently feel uncomfortable and perhaps remorseful. To show his own implication in these racialized power dynamics, *Man in Chair*, originated by white actor and co-librettist Martin, reflects on his mistreatment of his Latina cleaning lady, who had misplaced the record and to whom he speaks in fragmented English. Through satire and commentary, he invites spectators to think critically about the exotic escape and enjoyment that musicals can provide. Moreover, the larger-than-life performance style and breaking the fourth wall can prompt another kind of laughter at white nonsense, at Orientalist musicals, and at those who romanticize them.

Four years earlier, another paean to early musical comedies reliant on Chinese representation opened on Broadway: *Thoroughly Modern Millie*. Full of tap dancing, romance, spectacle, humor, and a blend of original and period songs like “My Mammy,” the musical ran for more than two years on Broadway and made a star out of Sutton Foster. Adapted from the campy 1967 film with Julie Andrews, the stage production follows Millie, a young woman who has moved from a small town in Kansas to New York City in 1922 with hopes to marry her rich boss, Trevor. She stays at a hotel run by Mrs. Meers, a white woman disguised as Chinese because she secretly abducts her orphan boarders and sells them into Asian sex slavery. Like *Anything Goes* (1934), the case study of the following chapter, *Millie* features two Chinese immigrant men (here: Ching Ho and Bun Foo), who help make the yellowface performance work. The heroes ultimately expose Mrs. Meers, and after some romantic mix-ups, Millie chooses her true love, Jimmy, who turns out to be highly affluent. With a book by Richard Morris and Dick Scanlan, lyrics by Scanlan, music by Jeanine Tesori, and direction by Michael Mayer, *Millie* had an all-white creative team.

Before covering the production history, I theorize ironic racism to understand the political work that the musical does. Emergent in the 1990s, this approach delivers jokes that are so racist that, paradoxically, they appear progressive. Under the label of satire, ironic racism seems to send up white supremacists. In *Millie*, Mrs. Meers’s visual, aural, and dramaturgical yellowface performance is over the top and held at arm’s length, inviting condemnations of her. She contrasts with Ching Ho and Bun Foo, who speak in Cantonese and sing in Mandarin, rescue a kidnapping victim, and defy foreign abjection, a rare opportunity for positive Asian American representation in musical theatre. At the same time, ironic racism reiterates stereotypes, generating the white pleasures of staging Orientalist tropes and savoring privilege. It can be difficult to know the political project artists intended and to control both the impact on audiences and the interpretation of amateurs in later productions. Unlike *The*

Drowsy Chaperone, *Thoroughly Modern Millie* lacks scripted commentary critiquing the racially loaded aspects of the show, and this absence opens up differing interpretations and feelings depending on one's positionality. I apply a multivalent understanding of ironic racism by honoring the originating artists' stated intentions to subvert anti-Asian representation while also analyzing the musical's political limitations, historical context, and critical reception. Reviews of the 2002 Broadway production provide a window into the general acceptance of a dragon lady in yellowface with her Chinese sidekicks. When *Millie* became available to license in 2007, it neared the top of the list of the most frequently produced musicals in US high schools.

But dominant sentiments changed, as more Asian Americans encountered *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, and more Americans developed greater sensitivity to racialized representation. As I covered in the introduction, conspicuous cases of yellowface and whitewashing in Hollywood in the mid-2010s sparked critical press coverage and social media outrage. In the second half of this chapter, I document the evolving discourse across newspapers, Reddit, and the Educational Theatre Association's Callboard, as Asian American high school students and parents experienced feeling yellow and spread those feelings. They began to critique the Chinese characterizations, human trafficking plot, and yellowface casting practices in *Millie*. The original creative team responded by defending their artistic and political intentions and offering guidance on future productions. Tracking these changes while thinking through the prism of ironic racism helps explain how the very same *Newsday* critic could say of a production in 2006, "Never mind the political incorrectness. 'Mammy' sung in Chinese? I dare you not to laugh, or at least smirk,"⁴ and then a decade later say of another production, "If the stereotypes weren't bad enough, the show's creators . . . go to virtual blackface with Al Jolson's 'Mammy' in Chinese. I'm not without a sense of humor, but I find this shtick offensive."⁵ At first, the critic privileges comedy, but then the musical's racism overwhelms any recourse to irony, exemplifying the malleability of ironically racist cultural productions. Indexing yellowface at the start of the twenty-first century, *Thoroughly Modern Millie* trades in troubling tropes but also celebrates Asian American inclusion and signals ongoing necessary work to be done.

Isn't It Ironic?

Ironic racism operates ambivalently and ambiguously, at once seemingly undermining white supremacy and reinforcing this racialized power structure. Jonathan P. Rossing, a scholar of rhetoric, observes, "Ironic racism results when a person (typically white) performs in a way that could be perceived as racist but

whose performance also implies either a subtle disavowal of racist meaning or an insincerity that suggests the person knows better.”⁶ Rossing’s diction encapsulates the slipperiness of this phenomenon—“perceived as,” “implies,” “subtle,” “suggests”—which depends on an audience interpreting intention, affect, and effect. When musicals boast racist jokes, claims to irony provide cover. The authors and the actors did not *really* mean it. They were just kidding. They may further profess that the joke was *antiracist* because it was utterly ridiculous and obvious that they themselves are not racist; they were scripting or playing characters to point out racism and make fun of the real racists. Ironic racism entails plausible deniability. As Tanya Rodriguez asserts, “racist implications survive the irony, and to enjoy the humor the audience members must harden their hearts,” as they “feel confident in their own rejection of genuine racism.”⁷ Positioning themselves above the political fray, such spectators might feel not implicated but sophisticated and superior for recognizing and rejecting racism and therefore feel free to laugh. While they may defend this humor as harmless or even progressive, others may feel hurt.

Circulating since the late twentieth century, ironic racism served as a strategy to manage anxieties about multiculturalism glossed as political correctness gone amok. When 1960s and 1970s activism for African Americans and other people of color, women, queer folks, and ethnic studies led to more civil rights and diversified college syllabi, right-wing institutions like the Heritage Foundation arose to protect white supremacy and patriarchy. Initially a neutral term, or one that leftists used to tease one another gently, *political correctness* became a popular pejorative by the 1990s. From mainstream newspapers like the *New York Times* to Bill Maher’s talk show *Politically Incorrect* (1993–2002), pundits accused inclusion-driven individuals and institutions of lowering standards, favoring minoritized people, and stifling free speech. According to communications studies scholar Moira Weigel, “Opposition to political correctness also became a way to rebrand racism in ways that were politically acceptable in the post-civil-rights era.”⁸ With exaggeration or quote marks, ironic racism enables and excuses racist expression.

Rossing offers contrasting examples that reveal the layers of ironic racism. In 2009, pop star Miley Cyrus posted a photograph of herself with some friends pulling back their eyelids and squinting. When accused of invoking an anti-Asian gestural vocabulary, Cyrus insisted on the photograph being innocent fun. Meanwhile, they contend that Stephen Colbert offered a subversive critique through his comic ultraconservative persona on *The Colbert Report* (2005–14). In 2014, Colbert reprised a yellowface mascot to present the Ching-Chong Ding-Dong Foundation for Sensitivity to Orientals or Whatever to satirize a nonprofit defending the Washington [racial epithet for Native Americans] football team.

By invoking racial stereotypes, Colbert ultimately sought to invalidate them. Rossing points to the comedian's explicit self-consciousness, "The performance seems to recognize that the problematic participation is precisely what enables the critique."⁹ But taken out of context, on Twitter, this scene triggered some Asian American activists to reprimand Colbert. Suey Park trended #CancelColbert, which did not lead to the cancellation of *The Colbert Report* but led to threats against Park and then apologies and explanations from Colbert. Performing the Oriental figure, even with metatheatricality and progressive intentionality, can sometimes do damage, exemplifying what Linda Hutcheon calls the paradox of parody: "In imitating, even with critical difference, parody reinforces."¹⁰

Whether an artist appears ironically racist is in the eye of the beholder. Knowledge of their political orientation may shape reception of their cultural productions. For instance, some may consider comedians like Sarah Silverman or Tina Fey not racist for uttering anti-Asian slurs or inscribing yellowface because, in the end, they vote for Democrats. In the discourse on ironic racism, the crude and crudely animated TV show *South Park* (1997–) appears as a major touchstone. White creators Trey Parker and Matt Stone may seem nonideological because they send up all sides. A sense of excess can further protect their work from being taken too literally and seriously. Since the character Cartman, for example, is so outrageously racist, antisemitic, and contemptible, comedy studies scholars Matt Sienkiewicz and Nick Marx suggest that *South Park* cannot possibly be racist but must be mocking racists: "to present racist characters in the current comedy environment may, paradoxically, testify to the creator's ultimate lack of prejudice."¹¹ "May" does a lot of work here, recognizing that such characterizations can reify unabashed racist and antisemitic expression as allowable and enjoyable. Instead of lacking a political position, flattening material power dynamics in a celebration of libertarian free-for-all attacks actually forms a kind of reactionary centrism. In a critique of Parker and Stone's blockbuster musical *The Book of Mormon* (2011), historian of Black performance Kellen Hoxworth notes how the musical deploys irony to situate spectators as wholly rational in relation to African abjection, despite their own embeddedness in racial, national, and secular beliefs. Taking cues from the musical and fellow audience members, they receive communal authorization. Meanwhile, just as with feeling yellow, "Feeling and believing outside of the dominant circulations of affective economies mark some subjects as essentially different, as those who must be excluded in order to maintain the commonness of 'common sense.'"¹² Sometimes white people just want to laugh at racist jokes without feeling badly about it. Another popular musical from this era, *Avenue Q* (2003), insists that everyone is a little bit racist and that ending political correctness would lead to harmony, at once recognizing discrimination while minimizing its impact. Some pro-

ductions fuel more blatant racism through the yellowface casting of Christmas Eve.¹³ Using a recipe of liberal orientation, good intentions, self-aware metatheatricity, and comic extremism, ironic racism can do some progressive work but can also enable artists and audiences to enjoy comedy at the expense of racialized others by disavowing potential political and hurtful meanings.

“Raspberries!”: From Screen to Stage

The original 1967 film *Thoroughly Modern Millie* is not a sentimental pastiche but a campy romp in which boarders tap dance to make the elevator work and Carol Channing’s rich, eccentric character Muzzy is shot out of a cannon while exclaiming, “Raspberries!” A box-office hit, the film also won recognition from the Academy Awards and the Writers Guild of America. Producer Ross Hunter had wanted to adapt the Julie Andrews–starring, long-running West End 1920s pastiche musical *The Boy Friend* (1953), but when he was unable to obtain the rights, Richard Morris offered to write a screenplay in a similar style. Morris had previously written the book for Meredith Wilson’s *The Unsinkable Molly Brown* (1960). For *Millie*, he found inspiration in *Chrysanthemum* (1956). Set in 1913, this British musical focuses on a young white woman named Chrysanthemum who is abducted into the slave trade in Buenos Aires but then dresses up as a “Chinese strip-dancer to enter Ma Carrot’s establishment, ‘The Skull and Chopsticks’” to seek retribution.¹⁴ Her song “Shanghai Lil” begins by insisting on her originality and authenticity, a cheeky reference to her disguise and perhaps to the 1933 film *Footlight Parade*, which similarly has a “Shanghai Lil” number featuring women in yellowface, an opium den, Orientalist orchestrations, and lyrics about sex work. Singing in both proper English grammar and “me Chinese-y” lexical yellowface, Chrysanthemum lists various places in Asia she has visited and sexual acts she offers like the “rickshaw delight.”¹⁵ Her very name conjures up the essence of East Asia. *Millie* subsequently combines the yellowface disguise, Orientalist tropes, and sex trafficking of *Chrysanthemum* with the star and he-is-rich-after-all love plot of *The Boy Friend*.

A wacky movie musical comedy, *Thoroughly Modern Millie* gives a light touch to its serious subject matter while platforming Chinese stereotypes. The 1920s-set story centers on Millie, a girl who moves to the big city, where she updates her style and pronounces her mission to obtain a job and marry her boss. *Millie* reflects the ethos of the New (white) Woman and plays with the genre Maya Cantu calls Cinderella musicals: “The plots of Cinderella musicals affirmed the working girl heroine’s honesty and pluck through the happily-ever-after outcome of a prosperous marriage—and not infrequently, a career, as well.”¹⁶ The film begins at the Hotel Priscilla with housemother Mrs. Meers chloroforming

a happy young woman who had been playing the banjo and singing of her rose-colored glasses. Costumed in a grayish purple matronly dress with Chinese-inspired trim at the hem and sleeves, a jade necklace, a dragon pin and broach, and chopsticks in her hair bun, Mrs. Meers does not exactly pretend to be Chinese but indulges in chinoiserie. She speaks in standard American English to her boarders like Millie, while she speaks pseudo-Chinese to the laundrymen who work for her and their white slavery ring. Dubbed Oriental #1 and Oriental #2 in the cast credits, these men speak only a handful of lines. They combine coolie and yellow peril tropes, as sinister Orientalist music with cymbals and woodblocks underscores their every appearance on screen. Played by Jack Soo and Pat Morita, who would later become iconic Asian American actors in the television series *Barney Miller* (1975–82) and film *The Karate Kid* (1984), respectively, they do a finger-pointing dance and don caps with queues, which sets up a joke about how all Chinese men look alike. Philip Ahn, another Asian American Hollywood legend, also appeared in the film, as Muzzy's driver, Tea. While his name is a Chinese commodity, at least he is not called Oriental #3. As the "good Oriental," he attempts to protect the protagonists from Mrs. Meers and her lackeys, and he is ultimately revealed as a father figure to Jimmy. These Chinese characters join a panoply of ethnicities that color the film, from a Jewish wedding to a Spanish butler, French music teacher, German pilot, and Italian acrobats, all of whom seem to be sleeping with their employer Muzzy, though Tea does not have such a sexualized relationship with her. Muzzy punches Oriental #1 and Oriental #2, while Millie and her friend Miss Dorothy kick the Chinese men and turn the whole assault into an acrobatic routine reminiscent of late nineteenth-century slapstick minstrel scenarios set in a Chinese laundry. The dangers seem not real but ridiculous, even as the film does physical and symbolic violence unto Asian Americans. Millie lives happily ever after with Jimmy, whom she discovers to be Miss Dorothy's brother and Muzzy's stepchild, enabling her to win both love and money.

Dick Scanlan developed the idea of adapting *Thoroughly Modern Millie* for the stage from his repeat viewings of the film. He spent the summer of 1988 at a beach house in Long Island that did not have cable; it just had *Caligula* (1979) and his taped-from-TV recording of *Millie*. A writer and actor from suburban Washington, DC, Scanlan felt connected to the protagonist, someone leaving their small town for the big lights of New York City. In 1991, he approached Morris, who held the rights, and his persistence led to their collaboration. They drafted the script over the next five years. Morris died from cancer, while Scanlan navigated complications from AIDS and reached out to his childhood friend and up-and-coming director Michael Mayer. In 1996, *Millie* had its first public reading at the National Alliance for Musical Theatre's Festival of New Musi-

cals. The original team had envisioned the show as a jukebox musical combining songs from the film with songs from the Jazz Age with tweaked lyrics, but they found the score lacking. They subsequently brought aboard Jeanine Tesori, who had gained attention for her off-Broadway musical *Violet* (1997). Although she confessed, “I had never seen the movie, and it didn’t sound like my kind of thing,” she wanted to work on a more commercial project and took interest in the female protagonist’s journey and historical New York setting.¹⁷ She researched period music and reorchestrated songs before beginning to write original music alongside Scanlan’s words.

Thoroughly Modern Millie underwent further development before opening on Broadway. A document from the creative team, “Casting ideas for music workshop, 4/98,” reveals more than a dozen actresses under serious consideration for the lead role, whereas only one and a half names appear under Ching Ho—“Ken Leung” and “Kid from NYU (ask Michael)” —suggesting an awareness of few Asian American actors.¹⁸ After this high-profile workshop with Kristin Chenoweth and Bea Arthur, *Thoroughly Modern Millie* had its world premiere in 2000 at La Jolla Playhouse in Southern California, with some new leads and new songs. The production experienced technical difficulties, and understudy Sutton Foster replaced Erin Dilly as Millie right before previews; nonetheless, it received glowing reviews and an extended run. Scanlan, Mayer, and Tesori continued to revise the show, resulting in more original numbers to enable more dramaturgical specificity. With investments from Fox Theatricals, the Independent Producers Network, Clear Channel Entertainment, and Whoopi Goldberg, *Millie* had a capitalization of \$10 million and almost two years of touring weeks already lined up when it debuted on Broadway in April 2002. The production garnered mostly positive reviews and six Tony Awards, and then it opened on the West End. Post-9/11, *Thoroughly Modern Millie* offered nostalgic pleasure and a love letter to New York City. It joined a trend in that nearly half of the musicals that opened on Broadway between 2000 and 2020 were based on preexisting films or songs.¹⁹

“They Don’t Know” Mrs. Meers

When the creative team adapted Mrs. Meers from screen to stage, they aimed for this yellowface dragon lady villainess not to do racist harm but to ironize racism. First, Scanlan provides dramaturgical rationales for Mrs. Meers to pretend to be Chinese. Because the hotel she manages is a front for a human trafficking ring, and the cops are on the lookout for Daisy Crumpler, Mrs. Meers creates an alter ego to disguise herself. Like her many boarders who are aspiring actresses, she herself has an acting background. In her breakout number, “They Don’t



Figure 2. Harriet Harris as Mrs. Meers in the 2002 Broadway production of *Thoroughly Modern Millie*. (Joan Marcus.)

Know," she brags of the canonical roles she nearly played, her performance as a "brilliant laundry cart-ist," and her ability to fool her residents.²⁰ But she is a failed actress. She seeks revenge on these young women, whose careers remain full of potential. The comedy thus comes from this absurd situation fueled by dramatic irony, since we in the audience know of her slavery shenanigans, and we know better than to accept her as authentically Chinese. We are in on the joke. Mrs. Meers also performs a kind of racial innocence. Scanlan explains, "She has no sense that it's offensive. She actually thinks that what she's doing is convincing."²¹ Moreover, she is an unabashed villain, whose behavior should be condemned, not celebrated and emulated. By scripting her as a criminal and an actress, Scanlan provides distance and permission for performing yellowface. This performance is not straight up casting a white woman to play an Asian character in an unremarked way but depends on explicit irony.

In a pre-Broadway workshop, Harriet Harris pushed the idea of playing Mrs. Meers as an over-the-top Chinese stereotype, such that excess becomes another way to justify yellowface. She is not a real Chinese woman but a self-conscious performance of a ludicrous one. Best known as Frasier's aggressive agent on the popular sitcom *Frasier* (1993–2004, 2023–24), Harris brought her broad performance style to the role of Mrs. Meers. On Broadway, she invoked a villainous Asian gestural vocabulary as she twiddled her fingers menacingly. She wore white makeup with red lipstick, jade jewelry, a black embroidered robe with wide sleeves, matching black pants and shirt with a mandarin collar and a print of green squiggles and Chinese-seeming red characters, and a black wig that had a chopstick and cigarette holder tucked into the bun (figure 2). She told *Newsday*, “I wanted to wear Chinese pajamas and an empress kind of black wig”—“complete with chopsticks,” the reporter notes—“to look like I was in the Peking Opera,” a description that is far from the Broadway stage costume but in line with an Orientalist perspective on Beijing opera.²²

Harris added an outlandish accent. Mrs. Meers's catchphrase, “Sad to be all alone in the world,” sounded like, “Sad to be awe arone in da whirld.”²³ In other parts of the libretto, the pseudo-Chinese accent is written into the grammar, such as, “Now where my rent?”²⁴ In a piece for the *Village Voice*, Michael Musto mused, “The accent would be a huge problem, except that the character is actually a frustrated actress and major be-otch *pretending* to be Asian,” a sensibility aired across most reviews and an indication that Scanlan's libretto successfully excused this performance.²⁵ Actors who worked with her emphasized how Harris was not quite doing a Chinese accent but doing something else that estranged her, highlighting her performance as purposely bad and held in quotation marks. Harris claimed that she first tested out the accent on her Chinese American costars Ken Leung and Francis Jue, “to see if they took offense at such bodacious political incorrectness. Their conclusion—once they'd stopped laughing—‘It's so wrong, it's OK.’”²⁶ The overkill facilitates authorization. Regaling journalists with this anecdote on more than one occasion, the white actress seemed to hold on to the approval of actual people of Chinese descent to feel more comfortable performing a Chinese stereotype. When Mrs. Meers drops her disguise, she also drops the accent. In the ironic treatment of racism through calculated dramaturgical and performance choices, performing yellowface becomes permissible. Harris's exaggerated style worked well with the script and yielded her the 2002 Tony Award for Best Featured Actress in a Musical, signaling aesthetic and ethical approval from the professional theatre community. Thus, a white woman in yellowface won this award thirteen years before the first Asian American actress would do so.²⁷

Finally, the artists behind *Millie* have emphasized their intention for Mrs.

Meers to offer a critique of racist representation through irony. By making this racist look ridiculous, they condemn yellowface and give audiences the satisfaction of laughing at this offensive buffoon. For Scanlan, her characterization is so absurd that it cannot be taken seriously. He compares this larger-than-life racial performance to the way he coped with anti-gay bullying as a child: "I would go home and imitate the imitation of me in the mirror—'Hi, my name is Dick Sssscanlan and I'm soooo excited!'—and I would think, That can't be the way I'm behaving, because I can imitate that and it doesn't feel like me."²⁸ Because the stereotype is performed and neither true nor natural, he perceives the difference between fiction and reality and believes that others develop that keen perception as well, ultimately ending their discriminatory behavior. In the licensed script, the stage direction guides the actor portraying Mrs. Meers "to embrace the offensiveness of her politically incorrect rendering of Asian, confident in the knowledge that, when contrasted with the actual Asian characters we meet later on, her depiction of a hateful stereotype will be busted as inauthentic and absurd."²⁹ In this instance of what Bess Rowen calls "affective stage directions," Scanlan encourages the actor to delve into the stereotype unabashedly and rest assured that this racist performance will ultimately be antiracist.³⁰ Juxtaposed with Ching Ho and Bun Foo, Mrs. Meers appears unbelievable in relief. Jue, who played Bun Foo opposite Leung's Ching Ho, shared that, along with Harris, "we were best buds and we loved—we had just the greatest time figuring out how to make this funny without relying on, you know, simple tropes."³¹ They crafted moments to copy and caricature Mrs. Meers's performance of Chineseness like a hall of racial mirrors. Jue reflected, "It's this brilliant moment of her Asian stereotype and a Chinese actor's character's imitation of an Asian stereotype that I think encapsulates how truly subversive and fantastic this show is at busting these stereotypes."³²

However, this interpretation of Mrs. Meers is not definitive. An example of ironic racism, the character and performance of her avail multiple simultaneous readings: they offer antiracist critique while reiterating racist tropes, and they can make spectators feel sophisticated for understanding on a meta level the problematic performance of Chineseness and feel above the racist fray while still enjoying the stereotype. Leslie Bow writes in *Racist Love: Asian Abstraction and the Pleasures of Fantasy*, "Caricature represents a specific type of humor whose pleasures lie not in nonsense or absurdity, but in eliciting the feeling of dominance, the d on the VAD scale measuring emotional response. At the same time, the visual rhetoric of ethnic humor claims to evade taboos surrounding race in its seeming triviality as 'just' a joke."³³ *Thoroughly Modern Millie* does not directly implicate the audience to provoke them into thinking critically about what exactly they find amusing. The stage direction cited

above glosses the real and the fake Chinese American characters as generically “Asian.” Spectators may be laughing at Mrs. Meers for being incompetent and racist, or they may be laughing at Chinese people for being forever foreigners; these are not mutually exclusive phenomena. When other actresses replaced Harris, audiences seemed to laugh at Mrs. Meers’s pseudo-Chinese accent more than at the actress’s heightened performance. Theatre scholar Megan Sanborn Jones observes, “while the audience may recognize the over-the-top costume and accent as ethnic parody, the laughter invoked still seems directed at the behavior itself.”³⁴ As Raúl Pérez writes in *The Souls of White Jokes*, “Part of what makes racist humor so powerful and insidious is that it appears as something other than it is—harmless and delightful rather than socially destructive.”³⁵ There is no explicit dialogue in which anyone ever calls out Mrs. Meers’s yellowface. Her transgressions and comeuppance relate to white slavery, not her yellowface. She may be the villain, but that does not prevent an audience from taking pleasure in her. They like Mrs. Meers, and they like that they are not like Mrs. Meers. Some later stunt casting also capitalized on the comedy of ironic racism. When Delta Burke took on the role, her popular television character as a lovable and clueless racist on *Designing Women* (1986–93) haunted her stage performance.³⁶ Her portrayal of another hilariously ignorant character can prompt a satisfied sense of knowing for spectators who recognize her, just as they recognize the tropes on which Mrs. Meers plays.

Yet Mrs. Meers offers satirical vibes rather than a clear target of satire. She dons a fake Chinese getup from costume to accent, yet her character is not a clear citation and subversion of an existing text, in contrast to the way *The Enchanted Nightingale* obviously references and parodies *The King and I* in *The Drowsy Chaperone*. Her desexualized dragon lady persona does not resemble, for example, Anna May Wong as Fu Manchu’s daughter in *Daughter of the Dragon* (1931). Because it is not apparent what precisely Mrs. Meers is sending up, her yellowface performance can appear as uncritical repetition. Without additional signifiers, how can an audience tell the difference between exaggerating a stereotype and exemplifying a stereotype? Rumsey similarly observes that “*Millie* does not offer this guidance” on whether “the Orientalism is supposed to be a spoof or parody of 1920s movie stereotypes.”³⁷ In a show that is a sentimental ode to classic musical comedies, Mrs. Meers can be more pastiche than parody. Her performance can also provoke nostalgia for an earlier time before so-called political correctness policing, when straight-up yellowface was more readily acceptable.

As a coordinator of a sex trafficking ring, Mrs. Meers rehearses a troubling Orientalist convention of scary Asians and Arabs abducting young white women that dates to the nineteenth century. This yellow peril plot is played with comic

racialized touches like, "If we're not shanghaied to Hong Kong!" and news that the most recent abductee "joined an all-girl repertory company for their Mongolian tour."³⁸ Through a kind of reverse racism, the plot device also obscures real historical dynamics. Per the Page Act of 1875, US officials assumed Chinese women to be sex workers, essentially preventing them from immigrating to the United States and ultimately contributing to societal figurations of them as sexual objects. The musical implicitly makes light (and white) of slavery in the United States, forgetting assaults on—and the survival of—Black women. In addition to preserving this aspect of the original film, *Millie* the stage show preserves jokes such as Mrs. Meers telling Millie that soy sauce can be used as a cleaner, "one of the mysteries of the Orient."³⁹ With lines like these and the stage direction "Covering the dropped accent with a geisha giggle, then back to the 'Chinese' accent," the libretto recapitulates Orientalist epistemology, lumping together different Asian countries and not so clearly in a critical way.⁴⁰

By point of contrast, David Henry Hwang's 2002 revision of Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II's *Flower Drum Song* (1958)—which played on Broadway the season after *Millie* premiered, though *Millie* ran much longer—carefully presented and countered Orientalist assumptions. Actor-scholar Kim Varhola analyzes moments such as "I Enjoy Being a Girl," when "Linda and the coolie dancers use the pointing index finger position excessively, holding the pose with the upper body while employing Western theatrical steps like arabesque jumps with the lower body . . . with wide cheesy grins emanating from the dancers as they knowingly move in a self-parodying fashion."⁴¹ The Asian American performers embellish racialized gestural vocabulary with aggressive flair while demonstrating their fitness for Western choreography and their self-consciousness about the racialized performance expectations placed on them. In "Chop Suey," they wear Chinese takeout boxes, literalizing their bodies as food for consumption. Moreover, they perform in the context of a Chinatown nightclub meant for white audiences within the musical, drawing attention to the racial power dynamics of spectatorship. Indeed, Wang Ta accuses his father of caving in to minstrelsy to cater to the tastes of white audiences. As authored by an Asian American playwright and embodied by Asian American actors, *Flower Drum Song* centers Asian American agency and critique in ways that the artists behind *Millie* claim to do.

Deciphering Mrs. Meers depends on her relationships with other characters. If her performance of Chineseness is so poorly done, then why do her boarders fail to see through her? Do they believe this is how Chinese immigrants behave? Because of the dramatic irony written into the musical, the women staying at the hotel do not wink or roll their eyes at the audience to indicate a deeper understanding. When they view Mrs. Meers standing next to Ching Ho and Bun Foo,



Figure 3. Left to right: Francis Jue as Bun Foo, Harriet Harris as Mrs. Meers, and Ken Leung as Ching Ho spray poison in a scene from the 2002 Broadway production of *Thoroughly Modern Millie*. (Joan Marcus.)

they accept them all as Chinese, whereas the audience should make a distinction. Interpreting Mrs. Meers's yellowface performance as wrong relies on her contrast with Ching Ho and Bun Foo (figure 3). The conceit of ironic racism as antiracist partially unravels with a closer look at these Chinese men.

Aiya: Representing Chinese Immigrants

The musical team dramatically improved on the portrayal of the Chinese characters from the original film. Scanlan had first considered turning them into Mafia, but he wanted to preserve employment opportunities for Asian American actors and figure out a way to subvert the racism in the text. First, he gave Oriental #1 and Oriental #2 Chinese-inspired names, Ching Ho and Bun Foo, and gave them backstories to justify why they work for Mrs. Meers. They recently arrived in the United States, and they are saving up money to bring over their mother from Hong Kong with the help of their new employer. Like Millie, they sing, dance, and aspire to the American dream. With few prospects back home, they are committed to making it big in New York. They reprise Millie's I-am/I-want song, "Not for the Life of Me," but in Mandarin, showing a parallel between the modern woman and the immigrant. In addition, the librettist-lyricist individuated the characters; while Bun Foo takes a more cutthroat

approach to human trafficking, Ching Ho falls in love with one of their victims, Miss Dorothy. Instead of advancing an explicit political agenda, Scanlan articulated the dramaturgical and emotional necessity of this choice: "it did not arise from a kind of intellectual conversation of, 'We would like to fight the yellow-face stereotype of emasculated Asian men.' Honestly, it emerged from the profundity and authenticity of Ching Ho's love for Miss Dorothy as dramatized by Ken, and how perfectly suited those two characters are for each other."⁴² For self-proclaimed Godfather of Asian American theatre Roger Tang, the conclusion, in which "the Asian guy ends up getting the Girl . . . earns the show beaucoup points in my book (and it gets a triple bonus for HOW it gets done, as it turns on its head previous approaches to Crushes-Held-by-Asian-Men-On-Pure-Virginal-White-Maidens)."⁴³ Ching Ho rescues Miss Dorothy, and Bun Foo helps save the day by providing evidence of Mrs. Meers's white slavery ring and revealing that he knows way more English than he had intimated. Theatre scholar Angela Pao argues that these Chinese brothers "counter two of the most deeply entrenched dominant culture characterizations of Asians and Asian Americans—the characterization of Asians in America as perpetual and inassimilable foreigners and the characterization of the Asian male as sexually undesirable."⁴⁴ At the very end of the Broadway production, a huge image appears on the curtain showing Ching Ho and Bun Foo reunited with their mother, wearing big smiles and holding US flags as the Statue of Liberty appears behind them. Instead of the abject villains from the film, they have become romantic heroes and warmly welcomed Americans. For some Asian American audiences, seeing them triumph over Mrs. Meers, find romance, and gain national inclusion does reparative work, especially in the context of *Miss Saigon* (1991), which had then recently closed on Broadway, and the dearth of Asian and Asian American representation in mainstream musicals.

For some Asian American actors, being cast in *Millie* was a dream come true. Francis Jue has repeatedly called the roles of Ching Ho and Bun Foo "revolutionary."⁴⁵ He had initially turned down acting in the first reading of the musical because he could not imagine how the adaptation could redress the racist source material. But then he admired the complexity of the characters and appreciated this job opportunity. Peter Kim, who made his Broadway debut when he replaced Jue, similarly found the musical to be smart and subversive when he first saw it: "I remember watching it and actually being delighted by these characters . . . because at the end, they win."⁴⁶ In addition, Varhola reflected, "*Thoroughly Modern Millie* for me was the epitome of my personal Broadway dream," because of its homage to classic Broadway musicals and the chance to play Gloria, one of Millie's friends.⁴⁷ *Millie* gave a series of Asian American actors the chance to work on Broadway and play Asian American characters with integrity.

The Broadway production cast Asian Americans as not only Ching Ho and Bun Foo but also their understudies, who formed part of a multiracial ensemble, resulting in a careful calculation of nominal diversity. The race of the actors appeared to translate to that of their characters. Played by Sheryl Lee Ralph, Muzzy becomes an explicitly Black character akin to Josephine Baker, and part of the surprise and comedy comes from the revelation that Miss Dorothy and Jimmy, originally portrayed by white actors, are her stepchildren. The ensemble typically included one African American man, one African American woman, one Asian American man, and one Asian American woman amid a sea of whiteness. Darren Lee understudied both the brothers, while JoAnn M. Hunter and later Varhola understudied Bun Foo. Thus, having an Asian American play Gloria became a strategic necessity. This track avoided yellowface while enabling a highly unusual gender swap for Bun Foo that would later become common in school productions of *Millie*. When Varhola went on as Bun Foo for a week, the music had to be transposed for her voice. An actress in the ensemble would not typically understudy a white male lead, so how did this decision become thinkable? Orientalist representation has often figured East Asian men as effeminate, likely contributing to an ease with imagining Bun Foo as a woman. Varhola wondered why the creative team did not cast an additional Asian American man in the ensemble or as a standby, theorizing that adding another actor of color “disrupts the balance of tokenism.”⁴⁸ The Gloria track covers Bun Foo and not Ching Ho because the latter ends up in a hetero romance with Miss Dorothy, while the former ends up in a kind of queer relationship with Trevor Graydon, Millie’s boss. But Varhola decided to play the character as a woman: “Because the blocking was such that this hunky Marc Kudisch [Trevor] was carrying Bun Foo in his arms, I decided to rip off my hat and let my hair fly,” an example of how, even while unpacking the politically charged aspects of this musical, Asian American performers find joy and make specific agential choices onstage.⁴⁹

The stage musical’s approach to Chinese languages similarly strikes an ambivalent note by admirably aiming for more well-rounded representation but not necessarily executing it with the deep care and knowledge required. After screening the *Thoroughly Modern Millie* film as part of a fundraiser for producing the stage musical, director Michael Mayer came up with the idea of having Ching Ho and Bun Foo speak in their native tongue, accompanied by projected English translations. The movie includes comparable moments, such as when a Chinese mailing address on a shipping container full of enslaved white women turns into English and says, “Send to Big Mary’s Tart Shop Peking.” According to Mayer, “With supertitles, these guys can have their own language and a kind of dignity that pidgin English doesn’t allow for.”⁵⁰ Scanlan agreed: “what the audience is expecting is, ‘Me no likey.’ They’re partially laughing at their

own expectations."⁵¹ On the one hand, enabling these Chinese immigrants to speak and sing in their own language and enabling English-speaking audiences to understand them allowed Ching Ho and Bun Foo greater freedom for and confidence in expression on their own terms. Because the brothers have newly arrived in the United States, it might make sense that they know little English, although it should be noted that Hong Kong was an English colony. On the other hand, framing pidgin English as undignified privileges US assimilationist values, and equating such diction with aural yellowface suggests not noticing the big differences between them. Jue asserts, "From my point of view, a coolie is a person, too. . . . People with accents are people, too."⁵² Asian American film scholar Sylvia Chong likewise raises the salient point that there is no correct way for Asian Americans to sound.⁵³ *Millie* already had precedence for another way of imagining Chinese Americans: the original movie includes Tea, a genuinely sympathetic character who speaks with an American accent, but he does not appear in the stage musical.

Scanlan's comments also presume a non-Chinese audience anticipating racist representation and a simplicity in conveying Chinese languages. When I first heard Ching Ho and Bun Foo speak in the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts' video recording of the Broadway production, I was confused and then delighted—not because I had thought they would say, "Me no likey," but because I had known from the cast recording that they sang in Mandarin, and yet I was listening to them in Cantonese and recognizing words here and there. Like Ching Ho and Bun Foo, my mother also comes from Hong Kong. With a translator, the creative team had initially scripted them to speak and sing in Mandarin, which they believed to be more lyrical and beautiful. However, that decision makes little historical sense. Leung persuaded them to change the dialogue to Cantonese since "it's more emotional."⁵⁴ He insisted, "It wasn't a disconnect for me because my parents, who speak Cantonese, have spoken Cantonese, they know Mandarin songs."⁵⁵ While this choice comes from Leung's personal experience, having characters from Hong Kong commune through Cantonese dialogue and Mandarin songs—in 1922 no less—is highly unusual. So is having Mrs. Meers communicate in both languages. The production hired a dialect coach, but even with such resources and good intentions, the delivery can fall short. Korean American actor Peter Kim humbly shared an experience of playing Bun Foo that changed his perspective on the musical: "I looked out into the audience and in the first three rows, I saw who I believe were Chinese tourists. And I thought, 'I should not be doing this show. I should not be in this,' because I knew that my language skills were not up to snuff."⁵⁶ Furthermore, out of the hands of these Broadway professionals, the portrayal of Ching Ho and Bun Foo can open chances to mistreat them and their languages. When Sutton

Foster, who originated Millie on Broadway, visited her high school and interviewed the Asian American student who played Bun Foo in their production in 2011, she asked whether he spoke Mandarin. He had to explain to her that his character speaks in Cantonese, but when he sings in Mandarin, he “kinda like BSed it a lot.”⁵⁷

While the creative team positioned Ching Ho and Bun Foo as a foil to Mrs. Meers’s yellowface performance, the characters retain stereotypical elements. On Broadway, audiences first meet them several scenes into the musical when they are doing laundry, conjuring both a history of Chinese men working as laundrymen and a history of this representation. Vincent Rodriguez III recounts a production of *Millie* in which his costar objected to the generic and ahistorical Chinese hats with queues that the brothers had to wear. But he mobilized the anger of feeling yellow to assert the character’s agency and collaborate with the director: “What if Mrs. Meers gave you this stupid hat? And stupid outfit? These aren’t your clothes. She made you wear them. . . . The first thing that happens when she leaves? Is that we take our hats off. And he lifts his hat in the air and dangles the tail, and he throws it on the ground like ‘I hate this.’”⁵⁸ Through their performance choices, actors can, to some extent, push back on their stereotypical roles and costumes. Still, despite their humanizing motives and heroic ends, Ching Ho and Bun Foo do sex traffic white women. They serve as sidekicks to Mrs. Meers and, musically, as sidekicks to the main storyline. They do not have any original songs. At La Jolla, they appeared in more numbers, including the opening “There’ll Be Some Changes Made,” a popular song debuted by Ethel Waters. This production contained more songs originated by Black performers. Rather than “They Don’t Know,” Mrs. Meers sang the lament “I Wants to Be a Actor Lady,” which had been part of the London production of *In Dahomey* (1904), performed by Aida Overton Walker. To be thoroughly modern, the characters perform musical blackness, even as that blackness becomes effaced by non-Black artists.⁵⁹

Ching Ho and Bun Foo’s big number is “Muqin,” a Mandarin translation of “My Mammy” with a few adjusted lyrics. Al Jolson’s performance in *The Jazz Singer* (1927), the first talkie, made the song iconic and an easily recognizable addition to *Thoroughly Modern Millie*. Mrs. Meers takes advantage of the brothers’ longing for their mother by promising to bring her over to the United States, although she does not intend to keep her promise, and she assumes that her employees do not fully understand her singing and speaking in English. The period minstrel song speaks to missing one’s mother, with an undercurrent of plantation nostalgia. Situated in the musical, the song enables the immigrant men to apologize to their mother for making her wait, articulate how they love her smile, and express how they miss home. For Jue, “doing that song was only

allowable if we did it completely sincerely and within the context of really desperately wanting to get our mother back," without ridiculing Black people and Black pain.⁶⁰ As one of the very few interpellated songs left in the show, "My Mammy" was important to the creative team for comic and dramatic reasons, as Scanlan described in a "Working in the Theatre" roundtable in 2002: "it's an extraordinarily funny sequence, and beyond that, Michael and I also think there's something really crazily subversive about it because 'Mammy' is this song that's so associated with racism and to have it onstage in such a completely turned-on-its-head way, it takes the onus off it, in a sense."⁶¹ Scanlan claims that the song is not racist but is "associated with racism," and that performing it in Mandarin "takes the onus off it." Loaded with the layers of ironic racism, "Muqin" cites blackface in ways that the artists find to be unproblematic, using both sentimentality and comic irony to facilitate disavowal.

But instead of unilaterally subverting white supremacy, "Muqin" largely reiterates it within a Chinese American context. First, Ching Ho, Bun Foo, and Mrs. Meers are enslavers, and Jolson sang with sincerity, so having them sing a proslavery song is fitting rather than deconstructive. Through "My Mammy," Mrs. Meers teaches the immigrants how to be American. David Roediger, Eric Lott, and others have historicized how working-class European immigrant men gained conditional whiteness and Americanness by corking up.⁶² They performed blackness to reify racial hierarchy and their place therein as precisely not Black and as belonging in the United States. Blackface minstrelsy also influenced authors like Bret Harte in representing Chinese people, and then Chinese Americans like Sui Sin Far mobilized minstrel tropes to reorient Asians as superior to Black people.⁶³ In Frank Chin's infamous essay "Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake," Chin historicizes inauthentic representation and US assimilation in part by pointing to missionary Charles Shepherd's *Chung Mei Home*, where, in the 1920s, Chinese American boys like his uncle performed in blackface to raise money.⁶⁴ These racial performances entangle white, Black, and Asian Americans.

As a white woman, Mrs. Meers performs yellowface and blackface, a kind of ultimate American at the top of the racial ladder, and she offers a racial lesson to Ching Ho and Bun Foo. Her Americanization pedagogy works because the characters cite Jolson's gestural vocabulary of kneeling and extending one arm with deep sentimentality, as a stage direction reads, "Sings a la Jolson."⁶⁵ By the end of the song, instead of singing "Muqin," they begin singing "Mammy" in English, and the projected English translations onstage suddenly turn into Chinese characters. These artistic decisions create multiple jokes that rest on racial incongruity and delightful surprise. Spectators can laugh at seeing white and Asian people performing blackface without blackened faces and without them-

selves feeling too badly. Some translation decisions suggest privileging legible proximity to “My Mammy” over precision in the language to provoke even more amusement. For instance, the English supertitle reads, “My heart strings are tangled around Siam-y,” which was “Alabammy” in the original song, but the Mandarin words more closely mean, “My heart forever longs for [my] hometown.”⁶⁶ Ching Ho and Bun Foo hail from Hong Kong, not Thailand. Perhaps from a white American empire perspective, all these Asian places and faces look the same. If blackface is the cost for Chinese Americans to enter whiteness and Americanness, then the entrance fee is too high.

Thoroughly Modern Millie celebrates self-invention in ways that elide Chinese American history. In a program note for the La Jolla production, Scanlan celebrates US American bootstraps, colonial narratives, and new opportunities for (white) women in the 1920s: “The same drive to find a better life is at the core of what the settlers were doing when they landed at Plymouth Rock.”⁶⁷ In other venues, members of the creative team explicitly connected this drive to immigrants, making false equivalencies between a white American woman moving to another state and a Chinese immigrant moving to another country: “there’s something about the idea that everyone in this show is an immigrant that really excited me.”⁶⁸ Ching Ho and Bun Foo have a happy ending: Ching Ho couples with Miss Dorothy, a rich white woman; Bun Foo earns a job as Trevor’s new stenographer; they bring Mrs. Meers to justice; and they bring their mother to the United States. In a federal policy era of what Viet Thanh Nguyen calls “racial emasculation,” getting the girl and performing blackface provide hegemonic ways for the brothers to remasculinize and naturalize.⁶⁹ But assimilation may be neither beneficial nor possible. Situated at Ellis Island, the final stage image conceals the main historical point of entry—or rather, barrier—for Chinese immigrants on the West Coast, Angel Island, where they were detained for a couple of weeks to a couple of years, with many of them ultimately turned away. Because of the Page Act of 1875 and the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, male Chinese laborers and almost all Chinese women were effectively prohibited from entering the United States. These xenophobic laws were still in place in 1922, so it would have been basically impossible for Ching Ho, Bun Foo, and their mother to immigrate. In addition, the Cable Act of 1922 revoked citizenship for US women who married aliens ineligible for citizenship, a reminder that Ching Ho and Miss Dorothy’s romance would contend with banal and legal discrimination. At the same time, Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans navigated bans through performance, such as paper sons rehearsing answers for their interrogations by immigration officials after the 1906 San Francisco earthquake destroyed many records.⁷⁰

While some readers may dub this insistence on recapping legal history to be

pedantic quibbling—it's a fun musical, not a history lesson!—it is important to understand the erased anti-Chinese historical context because many audiences downplay past and present anti-Asian racism and learn through musical theatre. Seeing Ching Ho and Bun Foo successfully assimilate counters negative images of Chinese Americans as not real Americans while obscuring anti-immigrant and anti-Chinese obstacles and presenting assimilation and the United States as fundamentally good. A US American fairy tale, *Thoroughly Modern Millie* ultimately works as a feel-good show in which white women and Chinese immigrants can procure middle-class jobs, marry rich, and gain societal inclusion. The musical celebrates the liberal conception of racism as individual rather than structural and the fantasy of the United States as a magnanimous melting pot. With Mrs. Meers locked away, anti-Asian racism disappears, and anyone can achieve the American dream. Through ironic racism and the juxtaposition with Ching Ho and Bun Foo, Mrs. Meers's outrageous yellowface performance on top of "My Mammy" becomes palatable, giving the appearance of progressive politics while also maintaining white supremacist representation and institutions.

Positive Press and Political Correctness

Most critics adored *Millie*. *Variety* described the La Jolla premiere as "Breezy, frothy and unapologetically joyful."⁷¹ In New York, critics compared the show with recent comedies like *The Producers* (2001) and coming-to-New-York narratives like *Wonderful Town* (1953) while contrasting *Millie* with *Urinetown* (2001), a pointed eco-satire that opened during the same season. When reviewers snubbed *Millie*, it was typically not because of its racialized representation but because of its lightness. Then-chief critic of the *New York Times* Ben Brantley panned the musical: "Watching this aggressively eager show is like being stampeded by circus ponies."⁷² Assessing reviews of *Thoroughly Modern Millie* provides a way to take the temperature of the almost entirely white critical establishment in not just their aesthetic preferences but also their attitudes toward Chinese immigrant representation. None of the articles published from 2000 to 2004 encountered during the course of this research mentioned the term *yellowface* because to do so would be to spell out and reckon with the histories and legacies of this performance practice. Its discursive absence reveals how ironic racism allows racism to endure in plain sight.

Almost every reviewer commended the musical for its more sensitive approach to making Ching Ho and Bun Foo thoroughly modern. In keeping with "modern sensibilities," Barbara D. Phillips wrote in the *Wall Street Journal*, "the two men are no longer nameless and offensive Chinese stereotypes."⁷³ Adam Feldman observed that they "have been written into sympathetic fig-

ures.”⁷⁴ Critics repeatedly pointed out the dramaturgical device of the Cantonese, Mandarin, and English translations, suggesting that Mayer’s idea effectively enabled the Chinese brothers to speak in their own languages and appeal to US audiences. Linda Winer asserted, “the movie’s boggling use of coolies as stupid pet tricks has been modernized with warmth, wit, and supertitles.”⁷⁵ Michael Phillips in the *Los Angeles Times* claimed, “The authors go a long, long way to correct the movie’s offensive stereotypes.”⁷⁶ Phillips went on to publish another article reflecting his calculation of how much racism is appropriate to keep in contemporaneous updated musicals. He praised the changes to *Millie* as fitting and funny: “around the time the ‘mammy’ and ‘Siam-y’ rhyme pops up, your skepticism about improving the Chinese characters’ lot vanishes. With that one idiotic rhyme, it’s clear the ‘Millie’ collaborators have figured how to grapple with the thorny, persistent question of race—and score a valuable cheap laugh or two in the bargain.”⁷⁷ Meanwhile, he found the changes to the 1999 Broadway revival of *Annie Get Your Gun* (1946) heavy handed. Theatre historian Bethany Hughes (Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma) notes of this production the removal of literal redface makeup and some anti-Indigenous references but continued casting of non-Native actors in Native roles and performance of the racialized Indian through wearing long braided black hair, showing more bare skin, and donning feathers and fringe, practices that resonate with yellowface without yellowed faces.⁷⁸ Brantley continued, “It’s possible that some theatergoers may object to perceived racism in the portrayal of Mrs. Meers’s Chinese assistants. . . . But Mr. Morris and Mr. Scanlan have made them virtuous chaps, after all, who have a worthy place in the New York melting pot. And the evening’s biggest laughs are garnered by the use of supertitles.”⁷⁹ By appealing to the humor and humanity of the Chinese brothers, these critics reassured readers that *Thoroughly Modern Millie* is not racist.

While disavowing charges of racial insensitivity, many reviewers singled out “My Mammy” and Harriet Harris’s performance as Mrs. Meers as the highlights of the musical. *Playbill*’s coverage of the West End production concluded, “Best of all are two laundry boys who soulfully sing ‘Mammy’ in Cantonese,” an unfortunate reminder that some spectators cannot distinguish between Cantonese and Mandarin.⁸⁰ John Kenrick chose not to name the song in his Musicals101.com post “lest it spoil anyone’s fun,” because the surprise number was “easily the biggest laugh I’ve heard on Broadway this season.”⁸¹ These critics and audiences reveled in minstrelsy. They also wrapped Harris with praise. In the *Daily News*, Howard Kissel enthused, “The musical’s chief asset is Harriet Harris.”⁸² *Newsday* called her “sublimely demented,”⁸³ just as *Show Business* similarly declared, “The deliciously demented Harris steals her every scene.”⁸⁴ Brantley reflected, “Ms. Harris, an audience favorite, seems to be enjoying her character’s

impersonation of an Oriental dragon lady"—recognizing the fun of yellowface and the layers of ironic racism.⁸⁵ In *Gay City News*, Christopher Byrne dubbed the yellowface "Chinese drag" and, in parentheses, continued, "It's all too silly to even suggest that this portrayal could be anything but inspired fun," attempting to neutralize dissident feeling yellow interpretations with queer pleasure.⁸⁶ The accolades for Harris contrast dramatically with the reviews for Pat Carroll's performance in that role at La Jolla, where critics deemed her "under-used,"⁸⁷ and "stuck with exactly one running gag."⁸⁸ She had not leaned in to the Chinese caricature like Harris did. Carroll was replaced, and Harris was rewarded.

Under the umbrella of political correctness, critics underscored the characterizations of Ching Ho and Bun Foo as well rounded, whereas they understood Mrs. Meers's yellowface as ironic. In her *Curtain Up* review, Elyse Sommer explained, "in a nod to political correctness she's a very American disgruntled actress and the two brothers are not only nice guys, but heroes."⁸⁹ Again and again, critics articulated that the musical "defly avoided political incorrectness by making Mrs. Meers a former actress,"⁹⁰ providing "an acceptable excuse for her pidgin Chinese accent and her trafficking in young women with no families."⁹¹ To them, this disguise and dramatic irony created sufficient distance; "in a welcome change, [Mrs. Meers] is no longer meant to be actually Asian, but rather an aging and embittered actress performing a hilarious burlesque of Asian stereotypes."⁹² She is not really Chinese but pretending to be Chinese or supposedly sending up anti-Chinese tropes, and these distinctions make her yellowface performance permissible, in line with the intentions of the artistic team.

Some other critics seemed to resent the demands of political correctness. Charles Isherwood characterized the Chinese immigrants and Mrs. Meers as "necessarily if somewhat heavy-handedly retrieved from un-P.C. stock villainy,"⁹³ just as Michael Feingold believed they "have been politically corrected with elaborate behavioral excuses that make not an ounce of sense."⁹⁴ Because of their new backstories, one as a vengeful actress and the others as saving up money to enable their mother to immigrate to the United States, these critics found the adaptations of the characters from the film version to be excessive or clumsy. Here, politically correct becomes a term of insult. On the other hand, Tang, who runs the *Asian American Theatre Revue*, clocked this negative usage and defended the revisions: "When ANY attempt to change an admittedly stereotyped and racist portrayal is termed 'politically correct,' it's time to bury the term. Dammit, isn't the whole point of our current enlightened times is to avoid being stereotyped and racist when you don't have to be???"⁹⁵

Journalists seemed to go out of their way to deploy Orientalist epistemology and vocabulary when discussing *Thoroughly Modern Millie*. Likely influenced by the musical's marketing, many of them called Mrs. Meers a "dragon lady." But,

at the opposite end of the Asian woman stereotype spectrum, some dubbed her “Madam Butterfly,” as her slavery ring code name was Butterfly.⁹⁶ In a profile of Dixie Carter, who later played Mrs. Meers, the opening paragraph labels her both a “dragon lady” and, paradoxically, “a villainess lotus blossom.”⁹⁷ These opposite terms lose meaning except to indicate that these are the few boxes in which US writers know how to place Asian women. In a dismal attempt at wordplay, some reviews incorporated the verb “shanghai” into summaries of the drugging and kidnapping plot, associating this practice with the Chinese, when, historically, the term arose because of the British and Americans impressing sailors. Another critic averred, “The plot makes about as much sense as a Charlie Chan episode. But who cares?”⁹⁸ Popular publications thus drew from yellowface media. In a *Variety* article about the run-up to the Tony Awards, a cartoon sketch depicted characters from *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, including one of the Chinese men with a queue, even though Ching Ho and Bun Foo do not wear a queue, since the practice ended with the Qing Dynasty in 1911. But as Sean Metzger has argued in *Chinese Looks*, the queue has been crucial to signifying Chineseness in early yellowface performances.⁹⁹ Ultimately, journalists’ lazy reliance on the few East Asian and Orientalist references at hand suggests that the Broadway musical did not substantially disrupt Chinese caricatures; instead, to some extent, the show gave license to reiterate them comfortably.

Few critics at the time offered antiracist pushback to *Millie*. In *Time Out*, Jason Zinoman noted the “slightly more PC subtext to the Asian characters,”¹⁰⁰ and Steven Oxman of *Variety* assessed, “Scanlan also does what he can to temper the racism of the movie,”¹⁰¹ implying that the figures of Oriental #1 and #2 continue to haunt the show. In his review, Julius Novick reflected on how his positionality shaped his response to *Millie*: “An Oriental white-slavery subplot is full of casual, meaning-no-harm ethnic stereotyping, also very ’20s—and very funny. (But would I think so if I were Chinese?)”¹⁰² The *New York Observer*’s John Heilpern offered the harshest comments: “this is the kind of provincial musical that finds the Chinese language—as in ‘No tickee, no shirtee’—inherently funny. Except here, our two comic laundrymen speak only Chinese. The use of supertitles for translation purposes is mildly amusing at first. This joke—the show’s *only* joke—reveals, at least the far-off glimmer of an Idea.”¹⁰³ For Heilpern, “My Mammy” formed a low point in the production, as the large pull quote for the review pronounced, “The Chinese laundrymen, poor sods, have to sing Jolson’s ‘Mammy’ in Chinese.”¹⁰⁴ He repeatedly identified Ching Ho and Bun Foo as laundrymen to draw the reader’s attention to recycled tropes characteristic of period musicals: “And here comes the dear old Chinese comedy turn, and here’s a jolly dance number that reminds of us another jolly dance number from another jolly show.”¹⁰⁵ Not exactly a sophisticated satire, *Millie* appeared

"clueless."¹⁰⁶ Citing this review at length illustrates meaningful critique at the time, counters assumptions that the critical establishment universally approved of *Thoroughly Modern Millie*'s racial politics, and foreshadows the criticisms to come. When more people began to express reservations, different explanatory narratives emerged. Angela Pao contends that some critics viewed the US national tour negatively and perceived Mrs. Meers as a racist caricature because they did not comprehend the nuances of the performance as satirical.¹⁰⁷ Members of the artistic team have suggested that productions beyond Broadway went astray from their original intentions.

Schooling *Millie*

Thoroughly Modern Millie became one of the most frequently produced musicals in high schools, according to annual surveys conducted by the Educational Theatre Association. When the license became available in 2007, the title debuted in the number three spot, following *Little Shop of Horrors* (1982) and *Seussical* (2000).¹⁰⁸ Music Theatre International (MTI) reported approximately seventy-five licensed amateur productions that year.¹⁰⁹ School productions are one of the primary ways that US Americans come to know musical theatre outside of Midtown Manhattan.¹¹⁰ *Millie* continued to rank among the five most popular musicals for years. It offers a lot of desirable qualities for high school students and their teachers: an award-winning, throwback musical comedy with a leading lady, large ensemble, tap dancing, and seemingly politically unchallenging material. On the MTI site, a column by critic Peter Filichia showcased *Thoroughly Modern Millie* as an easily producible show by repeatedly highlighting how the licensing package includes an audio guide on correctly pronouncing the Cantonese dialogue and Mandarin lyrics. Filichia explains that the actors playing Ching Ho and Bun Foo "must deliver their dialogue at a lickety-split pace that leaves no doubt that they were born in The People's Republic," emblematic of an artistic approach that combines careful accuracy with messy ahistoricity, given that the People's Republic did not exist in 1922, and Hong Kong was not part of China then.¹¹¹ Filichia also labors to allay anxieties about the sex trafficking plot: "that may be one reason why Scanlan and his composer and co-lyricist Jeanine Tesori wanted to treat the abduction issue in a farcical way: by having Mrs. Meers speak pidgin Chinese."¹¹² Here, by contrast, sensitivities seem to evaporate because the pseudo-Chinese performance should be played comically—notably, not satirically—without addressing other concerns that yellowface can raise.

The authors also created *Thoroughly Modern Millie JR.*, a shortened version for younger children to perform. In the character breakdown, they make accommodations for theatre programs with more girls and few students with Asian

heritage. Like with the Broadway understudy, Bun Foo can be played by a girl. Ching Ho and Bun Foo can be played by non-Asians (“While it’s nice to cast performers of Asian descent in these roles, it is not always possible”), and their mother can be played by “the principal, a local celebrity or parent.”¹¹³ The MTI website frames avoiding yellowface casting as merely “nice,” not righteous or required in the roles of the Chinese immigrants, and it seems to encourage ignoring race when casting their mother, for the sake of a delightful surprise for school audiences at the end. This approach confuses the dramaturgical intention that Scanlan has repeatedly articulated. If Mrs. Meers’s yellowface performance as a Chinese woman becomes acceptable because of its juxtaposition with the authentic casting and character work of Ching Ho and Bun Foo, then what happens when all of them are played in yellowface? After the 2014–15 academic year, *Thoroughly Modern Millie* fell out of the top twenty most-produced musicals.¹¹⁴ This timing coincided with the press paying attention to high schools where Asian American community members expressed feeling yellow when they encountered the musical’s racial representation.

In early 2014, the Dalton School, a highly prestigious private school in New York City, planned to replace its stage production of *Millie* with a concert version due to concerns from some students, parents, teachers, and administrators. The *New York Times* and *New Yorker* reported on their objections to the musical’s white slavery plot and depiction of Chinese characters, as well as the way the production included poor Cantonese pronunciations and prompted a cast member to text another student in a supposed Chinese accent, “Herro!”¹¹⁵ But with the approval of Scanlan and Tesori, Dalton put on a revised production that changed Ching Ho and Bun Foo to Charles and Brian, deracialized other Asian references, and eliminated the kidnapping plotline. A student spectator remarked, “Now that we’re in the twenty-first century, we should be more careful about these things,” a sentiment that comes up repeatedly, even though the *Millie* stage musical emerged just twelve years prior—as in the twenty-first century.¹¹⁶

A couple of months later, a production of *Millie* at Newton North High School in Massachusetts provoked more backlash. At a forum with administrators, students criticized the dearth of diversity in the season planning (“I think we program shows to entertain our white audience”) and casting (“What does it mean when the only roles for Asian students are these really stereotypical, demeaning, hurtful things? And what does it say when Asian students aren’t even given a chance to be in those roles?”)¹¹⁷ A mother shared that when she asked her son, who had performed in the school musical the previous year, why he did not appear excited to audition for *Millie*, he told her, “I’m not sure I’d want Ama and Agong to have to see it.”¹¹⁸ He did not want his grandparents to feel yellow, to feel like they were the butt of anti-Chinese immigrant jokes. Some teachers had

shared their concerns about the text earlier, and they spoke of the frustration of having their pain dismissed. They also pointed to the school's antibullying initiatives, which seemed for naught. Meanwhile, the administrators of the school and theatre program highlighted the attempts to make the Chinese characters fully realized and the historical background that they had offered to the cast and audience. But another educator shared with tears the sadness of feeling yellow: "I read the program notes and what it said to me was there are some really bad stereotypes in here but we made it a teachable moment and everybody learned a lot so it's ok. And it's not ok."¹¹⁹ Ultimately, the program director at Newton apologized. This affective outpouring and effective organizing from Asian Americans moved the dial.

Coverage of and contestation over the production at Newton North High School spanned an editorial, several articles, and multiple letters to the editor in the *Boston Globe*; local television; blogs; social media; and a piece in the UK's *Telegraph*. This broad coverage indicates that this incident was about more than a high school musical; it was about what counts as acceptable racialized representation and who decides. In 2014, the parameters were shifting. *Boston Globe* theatre critic Don Aucoin diagnosed Newton's *Millie* as "the latest loud collision between the past and the present, a frequent occurrence in theater as a dated canon meets an increasingly diverse population."¹²⁰ He provided context by connecting *Millie* to *Anything Goes*, *South Pacific* (1949), *Miss Saigon*, and *A Christmas Story: The Musical* (2012), and by citing data from the Asian American Performers Action Coalition (AAPAC) showing the few opportunities for Asian Americans onstage.¹²¹ Seen this way, anti-Asian racism forms a pattern, not an innocent blip. Moreover, Aucoin rebuffed claims that *Millie* subverts stereotypes: "Having recently seen 'Millie' in a different production at a Greater Boston high school where my daughter was in the cast, I must say that it's hard to detect nuanced stereotype-busting in the show."¹²² Still, some defended Newton North High School's "sensitive" approach and celebrated "the incredibly talented kids who sang and danced their hearts out."¹²³ When op-ed columnist Joan Vennochi wrung her hands over the "chilling effect" of censorship—for instance, equating antiracist protests of *Thoroughly Modern Millie* with homophobic protests of *Rent* (1996)¹²⁴—American studies scholar Jeffrey Melnick responded in a published letter by underscoring the troubling racial politics of the musical as epitomized by its usage of "My Mammy."¹²⁵ Several critics of *Millie* hypothesized that blackface would raise hackles in a way that yellowface typically does not, yet it is important to remember that *Millie* also features a kind of blackface.

Soon, more critiques of *Millie* emerged at high schools across the United States. In 2015 in West Palm Beach, Florida, Felipe Bomeny penned an op-ed for the Dreyfoos School of the Arts newspaper titled "Is 'Thoroughly Modern Millie'

Racist?” He answered yes by drawing on Edward Said, articles in the *New Yorker* and *Boston Globe*, and quotations from Asian American students like, “I love everything else about the musical; I just think the Chinese stereotyping, racist jokes and the comedic way the sex slave trade [was portrayed] were unnecessary and tasteless.”¹²⁶ Later that year, Jasmine Luca, Tai Joselyn, and other students effectively persuaded the Philadelphia High School for Creative and Performing Arts to stop its planned production of *Millie* by objecting to the racist origin text, musical adaptation, and yellowface performance practices. Instead of supposedly uncritical cancellation, they called for conversation: “We still have not had a significant schoolwide discussion about what was wrong with the musical. That’s important because some students asked why they should care if they aren’t Asian. We should care when something isn’t right.”¹²⁷ In 2019, Asian Americans protested two high schools staging *Millie* in Long Island with signs like “Say no to racist show!” and “Racism is not entertainment,” a Change.org petition with more than five hundred signatures, and letters to local officials. After watching the musical, Nick Liu, an Asian American middle schooler, reflected on the harm of casting white students in the Chinese roles and having them speak Chinese poorly: “to the primarily white audience it sounded like gibberish, and attempted conversations between the brothers were met with rowdy applause and laughter. I’m not sure what’s more offensive—actors speaking gibberish on stage and pretending it was Chinese or the audience laughing at a genuine attempt to make the show more realistic. . . . Some Asian students have already heard others saying to them, ‘I can speak Chinese now. It’s Ching Chang Chong.’”¹²⁸ He experienced feeling yellow in contrast with the approving guffaws surrounding him. One mother who was part of the protest told *Newsday*, “This is apparently a very popular play in high schools. But my goal is to make sure this show is never shown again—not on Broadway, not on Long Island, not anywhere.”¹²⁹ Gordon Zhang, chair of the Long Island Chinese American Association, expressed surprise that the schools would produce *Millie*, given the highly publicized uproar years earlier.¹³⁰ In the end, one superintendent promised that their school district would never again stage *Thoroughly Modern Millie*.

Across these case studies, having a significant local Chinese and Asian American population contributed to concerted organizing. Referencing Dalton, historian John Kuo Wei Tchen has observed the increase in wealthy, highly educated East Asian immigrants sending their children to “private schools that are putting on these plays or in public schools that are really not aware of the history of stereotypes,”¹³¹ so feeling yellow by witnessing yellowface and the figure of the Chinese laundryman “becomes part of the Americanization literacy process—learning racism by its constant re-performance.”¹³² For these spectators, this representation is neither normal nor satirical, so it incites pushback.

On her blog tracking and promoting protests of Newton North High School's production of *Millie*, Mia Wenjen noted that Newton's population is 11 percent Asian, whereas the nearby Boston suburb of Brookline has an 18 percent Asian demographic. She suggested that these statistics help account for why the latter took an alternative approach to its production a month earlier.¹³³ There, the director had changed Mrs. Meers into a southern woman and changed Ching Ho and Bun Foo into undercover cops because he "felt strongly the script was disrespectful."¹³⁴ On Long Island, more than thirty Asian American groups organized against the productions at Division Avenue High School and Huntington High School, in part thanks to information shared via WeChat, a major app with primarily Chinese users.

Online message boards offer another glimpse into shifting attitudes regarding racial representation. They provide forums not only for musical theatre fans to share news, ask questions, and debate their faves but also for musical theatre educators and directors to express their concerns and assist one another on season selection and stage production. On the *Millie* MTI Question and Answer web page in 2011, a user expressed their nervousness "about the whole chinese character spoof bit" because their rural, white community may misunderstand it and their new, small Asian community may feel offended.¹³⁵ Another user attempted to alleviate their worries: "We approached the whole show from a cartoon perspective and made everyone bigger than life . . . that way the tall blonde boys I had playing Ching Ho and Bun Foo fit right in! I didn't try to hide the fact that they were cacausion [sic], it would have just been silly and probably offensive. We just had fun, and they ended up stealing the show."¹³⁶ By emphasizing racial incongruity, innocent fun, and audience approval, this director framed the Chinese brothers as akin to Mrs. Meers's outrageous performance and therefore acceptable and pleasurable.

Launched in 2013, the Educational Theatre Association's online Callboard boasts more than twenty-one thousand members and several discussions concerning *Thoroughly Modern Millie*. From 2014 to 2016, teachers posted inquiries about practical elements of the musical, such as the level of dance intensiveness or ideas on how to design the elevator. But from 2016 to 2022, lively threads contained subject headers like "Conversations surrounding racist portrayals in *Thoroughly Modern Millie*."¹³⁷ Educators appeared less concerned about Mrs. Meers and more concerned about Ching Ho, Bun Foo, and the sex trafficking plotline, particularly in the context of school-age children and real-life Asian women. Some users pointed to approval of the Chinese immigrant portrayals from Scanlan, Jue, and Tang. But many others avowed that they would not stage the show until a more sensitive rewrite became available. One educator noted the extra yellowface that school productions tend to add: "I've seen productions

at schools where White students are playing the Chinese roles and it's not a good look."¹³⁸ Some asserted the importance of casting students with Asian heritage, although such casting does not necessarily remedy racial insensitivity: "we got a very big complaint from the family of our Bun Foo and even threatened to have the show closed."¹³⁹ Even if theatre teachers believed *Millie* to be benign, they grew increasingly sensitive to feeling yellow. One educator shared that their school had planned to produce *Mille* but pivoted right before auditions because another local school, probably Newton North, had recently attracted negative attention for their production: "ultimately we switched to Urinetown cause I knew I wouldn't have the energy to do the work of producing a musical AND being on the defensive after three days in a row of front page articles opinions in the Boston Globe."¹⁴⁰ Indexing changes in public opinion, these theatre educators understood that their season selection fostered training both in performance practice and in US racial literacy.

On Reddit, the Broadway and Musical Theater communities gather well over one hundred thousand users each, making these groups rank among the top 1 or 2 percent in size. In a 2019 thread about *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, two users who self-identified as Chinese argued back and forth on the extent to which the musical is racist. While one contended that "the core of yellowface is mocking Asians," "Ching Ho and Bun Foo are ridiculously racist caricature names," and "when we let things like this slide, the door is open for further racist behavior,"¹⁴¹ the other framed Mrs. Meers as an unlikeable villain and Ching Ho and Bun Foo as sympathetic heroes, but when considering "My Mammy," they concluded, "idk anymore."¹⁴² A thread from 2021 entails multiple people reflecting on how their high schools staged *Millie*.¹⁴³ Several of them revealed that white students played the Chinese brothers, which made some cast members feel uncomfortable. In one staging, they became over-the-top French stereotypes. In another, the director deployed the framework of "colorblind casting" to defend casting non-Asians, but the Reddit poster pointed out that while such an approach may work for Jimmy, it does not for Ching Ho and Bun Foo. Users repeatedly expressed their surprise that the musical premiered on Broadway in 2002, the not-too-distant past, when they had imagined that there would be greater racial sensitivity. Another ruminated on how attitudes toward *Millie* have changed over time: "We did this in 2010 and I remember members of our cast being offended that audience members from neighboring high schools were offended by the blatant racism. What's fascinating now is to see how those same people have seemingly turned the corner according to their social media for the better."¹⁴⁴ In more recent threads from 2022 and 2024, Reddit users contemplate possible adjustments to the "racial stereotypes" in *Millie*, lament the canceled Encores! production that might have redressed racism, and ponder when a revised script

will be available to license.¹⁴⁵ These conversations suggest, at least among these online participants, a growing consensus about the political problems with *Millie* and a desire for an updated version that will enable their enjoyment of the musical without feeling yellow.

Coming to *Millie's* Defense

Instead of reworking the text of *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, the creators and licensor initially offered further guidance on staging the musical. Circa 2015, the MTI site posted a letter from Scanlan because "there have been a small number of schools that have expressed concern that Mrs. Meers and Bun Foo & Ching Ho are portrayed as stereotypes that may be construed as offensive to the Chinese community. The schools asked if there is an alternative author-approved approach to these roles," wording that minimizes the misgivings, deploys passive voice, and names the Chinese rather than Chinese American or Asian American communities.¹⁴⁶ In the letter, Scanlan underlines that Mrs. Meers is meant to be stereotypical, not Ching Ho and Bun Foo. He bases the yellowface performance on Mrs. Meers being a criminal and an incompetent actress, yet he also opens contradictions. She delivers a bad performance—that is, immoral and inaccurate—but it is good enough to fool the police. Given the criminalization of Chinese people in this era, embodying Chineseness would, in fact, likely increase scrutiny. (Still, decades of data illustrate that US cops are incapable of solving the vast majority of crimes.)¹⁴⁷ The Chinese stereotype ultimately does not seem dramaturgically necessary because Scanlan offers two alternative disguises to accommodate directors who may feel uncomfortable with yellowface: a male actor could play Mrs. Meers in drag as David Crumpler, or a female actress could play Mrs. Meers as a southern belle contrasted with Daisy Crumpler, a tough broad from Brooklyn. Next, Scanlan clarifies that Ching Ho and Bun Foo should be played with "integrity," not with "exaggeration": "They should not be in 'coolie' costumes. When they speak in English, e.g. 'I love you, Miss Dorothy,' l's do not become r's," as he points to the original cast recording and the Chinese audio files that accompany the licensing package.¹⁴⁸ These instructions influenced how educators approached *Millie*, whether eliminating Mrs. Meers's yellowface getup or defending Ching Ho and Bun Foo's careful characterization.

In 2016, MTI audio-recorded and posted a roundtable with *Millie* creators Dick Scanlan and Jeanine Tesori, Ching Ho and Bun Foo originators Ken Leung and Francis Jue, MTI president Drew Cohen, and moderator John Kuo Wei Tchen to unpack the musical and, implicitly, continue plugging productions of it. They provided context for the characters, a platform for the Asian American actors to air their opinions, and assurances that casting non-Asians in these roles

in school productions is acceptable. When explaining the development of *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, Scanlan aestheticized Chinese representation. He pointed to Richard Morris's passion for chinoiserie in the original screenplay and added, "There was no political idea behind it."¹⁴⁹ He similarly depoliticized Harriet Harris's idea to lean in to the Chinese stereotype: "Harriet, being an actress, wasn't articulating it from a political perspective, she was articulating from a creative one . . . it was an impulse."¹⁵⁰ Here, the yellowface logics appear innocent. In addition, the panelists repeatedly framed Mrs. Meers as the villain and therefore not one to be admired and imitated. Cohen compared her to Archie Bunker from the 1970s sitcom *All in the Family*: "people were outraged because, 'How can you put a racist on television?' It's like, 'Don't you understand? We're making fun of this person. He's the fool.'"¹⁵¹ On the other hand, Norman Lear's work had more explicitly progressive messaging, and some audiences did identify with Archie's bigoted persona.

Jue, in particular, used this roundtable to meditate on *Millie*'s progressive approach while airing Asian American anxieties. He recounted, "friends of ours would come to see the show and they'd say, 'I think you guys are hilarious. I only had problems because I wasn't sure whether the audience was laughing at the same thing I was laughing at.' This bugged me a lot. I would ask Ken, 'How can we make sure that the audience is laughing at what we want them to laugh at?' I learned this from Ken: we can't control that. All we can do is intend what we intend."¹⁵² Because the musical avails ambivalent interpretations via ironic racism, Asian American audiences and actors may take pride in the triumph of Ching Ho and Bun Foo and pleasure in the racist ridiculousness of Mrs. Meers. But, feeling yellow, they may also feel uncomfortable and uncertain with white laughter that could be at their expense. Attempting to assert some control and "anticipating controversy with the future rights of the show," Jue rallied for more opportunities for their characters to judge Mrs. Meers and clarify their intention to subvert troubling assumptions about Chinese immigrants.¹⁵³ Due to this lack of clarity, he has received many inquiries from strangers seeking advice on how to stage the show with care. Listening to the Asian American actors and scholar on the roundtable, Tesori seemed to have a humbling learning experience: "I do hear that the yellowface is very painful and I have said it's been very enlightening for me because I don't think I understood what we were playing with as deeply as I do now."¹⁵⁴

Finally, Tchen asked the speakers what they think schools should know when producing *Millie*. Scanlan suggested that encountering cultural productions with stereotypes is an ordinary if uneasy experience: "I don't know exactly what to say to the parents. I see all kinds of work that provokes me, offends me, upsets me, and the next week I'll go back and see another kind of thing that I

know is going to do it all over again because it makes me think."¹⁵⁵ Jue lamented how some people view Ching Ho and Bun Foo in biased ways rather than accepting them as immigrants and humans. He cautioned that they should not have to bear the weight of representing more than one billion Chinese people; rather, schools should provide more chances for students of color to act onstage. For Jue, Tesori, and Cohen, opening up the casting of the Chinese immigrants to non-Asian students in school productions avails learning opportunities and addresses practical limitations. Jue insisted, "That's what school is for. Let's experiment with who we are."¹⁵⁶ Tesori added, "In the context of a learning institution, to develop empathy is to walk in the shoes of another. If that means that you say the lines and understand what racism is, you can hear it, that's why it's there," as she made a distinction between school productions and professional productions.¹⁵⁷ They went on to suggest that schools can produce *West Side Story* (1957), *Ragtime* (1998), and *Hairspray* (2002) without Latinx/e and Black students by employing different signifiers to stand in for race. At the time of their recording, the license for *Hairspray* included a note from the white authors that encouraged postracial thinking to facilitate more productions. As Cohen put it, "In a show that's about not looking only skin deep, we want to afford people the opportunity to play any role in the show if they're qualified for that role."¹⁵⁸ But four years later, with the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, MTI and the authors altered the contract to require "that the cast members in your production of *Hairspray* accurately reflect the character descriptions contained in the script. *Note: The use of make-up to portray Black characters in your production (e.g., blackface) is not permitted,*" signifying a new sensitivity to color-conscious casting.¹⁵⁹ If schools stage only musicals with roles that match their student body, then their students may develop a limited understanding of racialized experiences. But if they stage stories about race with white students playing people of color, they might learn shallow racial lessons, as they carry the baggage of historical performance practices like blackface and yellowface and replicate uneven power dynamics. Like *Hairspray*, *Millie* came to face changes as well.

Revisiting *Millie*

In June 2019, New York City Center announced a revised production of *Thoroughly Modern Millie* as part of its Encores! series, dedicated to lesser-known musicals often with brilliant scores and problematic books. Under the direction of Lear deBessonet, the production was scheduled to launch a new initiative "for directors and their artistic colleagues to put a personal stamp on a show they love and want to present through a new lens."¹⁶⁰ DeBessonet asked: "Do all works deserve to be seen again? . . . Should we be allowed to correct things that are,

thank God, not palatable to an audience now? I'm walking into a very rich set of questions without a preformed answer."¹⁶¹ Mindful of Asian American perspectives, she cast Ashley Park as Millie and commissioned Lauren Yee as a creative consultant.¹⁶² Park had done the role in high school in 2007 soon after recovering from leukemia and only later processed the musical's politics: "Things were being brought to my attention that I didn't even realize I had become numbed to, or a little complicit in, just in terms of the ways that they were handling certain racist and sexist things in the show."¹⁶³ She revealed, "It's one of the characters that I've loved, always, but I always figured I'd never play it just because of the race stuff."¹⁶⁴ Instead of whitewashing Millie, the production team envisioned her as a Korean American woman from Kansas navigating 1920s New York. Setting out to create an updated version for 2020, they underscored the musical's themes of women and immigrants remaking themselves.

The promotional and media discourse surrounding this production of *Thoroughly Modern Millie* both gestured toward the text's problems and framed those problems as a matter of perception. Scanlan explained his reasons for editing the musical:

in recent years, *Millie* has become controversial in ways that are understandable, but enormously painful for me and Jeanine [Tesorì] and Michael Mayer. The choices we made in *Millie* were made to shine a light on racism, not "wouldn't it be funny if these characters spoke Chinese?" We were doing an unexpectedly political thing, and I believe in 2002, that's how people experienced it. But we're not in a small town somewhere doing it in a high school to know how they're implementing it. The last thing you want to do when you write something is hurt somebody.¹⁶⁵

The librettist-lyricist believes that sensibilities have changed over time, and that amateur productions beyond his control can do harm. Across the press materials and reporting, the term "controversial" appears repeatedly to suggest that *Millie's* racism is up for debate. The *New York Times*, for example, avers, "Although popular, 'Millie' has become controversial, particularly in school settings, because of its depictions of Asians and Asian-Americans, which some people view as satirical, and others as racist,"¹⁶⁶ just as *Variety* uses passive voice to describe how the musical has "been called out for story elements that could be construed as problematic, particularly in its representation of characters of Asian descent."¹⁶⁷ This coverage also generalizes the Chinese immigrants as Asian, blurring history, dramaturgy, and aesthetics. This commentary suggests a lack of consensus regarding Mrs. Meers, Ching Ho, and Bun Foo, even as the Encores! creative team forged ahead to do reparative work.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic led to the cancellation of the Encores! production, Scanlan and Tesori have continued to make changes to *Millie*. The opening number establishes New York as a center for immigrants speaking various languages.¹⁶⁸ While some venues incorrectly reported that Yee updated the musical, she in fact made various suggestions and connected the team with Durra Leung, who translated the reprise of "Not for the Life of Me" into Cantonese so that Ching Ho and Bun Foo would consistently (and logically) speak and sing in Cantonese. The writers also considered having them speak in English for the audience while Cantonese subtitles appeared to signify that they were really communicating in Cantonese. Instead of "My Mammy," they sing a different ode to their mother, thereby avoiding blackface minstrelsy and gaining their first original song. Instead of white women being trafficked in Asia, the amended plot deracializes slavery. Kelvin Moon Loh, who had been cast in the City Center staging, shared his positive experiences workshopping the show over Zoom and in person. He doubled as one of the Chinese immigrants and Trevor Graydon, helping inspire the creative team to consider more Asian Americans in the leading roles to join Park. In one version, queer white artist Taylor Mac played Mrs. Meers, and in another, Asian American actress Deborah S. Craig portrayed her. When Craig received another opportunity, Loh stepped into his dream role as Mrs. Meers and produced a complex interpretation of her as "a gay Asian male drag performance," combining elements from Harris, Mac, and Craig; eliminating yellowface; queering the character; and opening new layers in the relationship between Mrs. Meers and Ching Ho and Bun Foo as fellow Chinese Americans of different generations.¹⁶⁹

In 2022, the authors pulled the license for performing *Thoroughly Modern Millie*. Two years later, MTI added a note to its website thanking teachers and others for their feedback and explaining that the title "is unavailable while the authors update the show to lend a fresh perspective for our 'thoroughly modern' times," suggesting revisions that will attend to racial representation concerns.¹⁷⁰ That same year, the musical played in Tokyo with an all-Asian cast. Mrs. Meers did not appear in yellowface. Back in the United States, the Muny, a major regional theatre dedicated to musicals, has been workshopping *Millie*. The roster for a lab in February 2026 included Sam Pinkleton as the director, white drag superstar Alaska Thunderfuck 5000 as Mrs. Meers, a Mandarin translator/instructor, and new names for Ching Ho and Bun Foo: Bào Lóng and Péng Fēi. As of this writing, *Millie* remains restricted in the United States, as the artists behind the show admirably recognize that the antiracist work continues.

Ironic racism can feel like gaslighting. While some creatives, critics, and audiences insist that a cultural production is racially progressive, another may

notice not only improvements and good intentions but also stereotypes, contradictions, and erasures. Feeling yellow registers these ambivalences. *Millie* indexes how the kind of yellowface that Mrs. Meers enacts, even with the shield of comic irony, became less acceptable, and how Asian American students, parents, artists, and educators have the power to demand more of Asian American representation.

2: Things, *Anything Goes*, and “the Chinese Must Go”

Where are they? As I watched the “Anything Goes” episode of *Encore!* (2017–20), I searched in vain for the Chinese characters and the yellowface plot while bracing myself for feeling yellow. In Cole Porter’s musical comedy *Anything Goes* (1934), romantic couples, disguised criminals, and Chinese Christian converts engage in madcap mix-ups aboard an ocean liner. In the uplifting Disney+ reality series *Encore!*, the casts of high school musicals restaged those musicals with a professional director, music director, choreographer, and actors filling out the rest of the parts. This episode brought back performers from the 1972 production at Los Angeles High School to reconnect, reminisce, and revive this classic musical. Since *Encore!* tended to spotlight whiteness, I was delightfully surprised to see an all-Black cast. But then I worried about having to see Black actors in yellowface when playing both Ching and Ling and the protagonists who take their clothing. When the Chinese men are thrown into the ship’s brig for gambling, lovesick leading man Billy and his crooked companion Moonface Martin hatch a plan to play Chinese and break up Hope and Sir Evelyn’s wedding. In the end, Billy pairs with Hope, and Sir Evelyn pairs with brassy evangelist and nightclub performer Reno Sweeney. In the behind-the-scenes rehearsal footage, the actors rehearsed a comical exchange about whether the missionaries practiced in “Indo-China” or “indoor China,” the episode’s only acknowledgment of the Chinese presence in the musical. While *Encore!* showcased *Anything Goes*’s iconic tap dancing and showtunes, the yellowface plot and Chinese characters perhaps did not seem memorable, or perhaps the television editors wanted to avoid potential backlash for their depiction. I felt relieved yet strangely disappointed. As this episode demonstrates, different iterations of *Anything Goes* provide snapshots of changing views toward yellowface, at first relying on Asian Americans but then ultimately erasing them.

This chapter explains how the happy ending of *Anything Goes* needs and exceeds Asian Americans; how white characters/actors perform yellowface

using technologies beyond makeup; and how directors, librettists, and actors have challenged anti-Asian representation in this canonical musical. The Chinese characters are largely silent, yet they are crucial tools that resolve the plot complications in most versions of the show. Although audiences might not register these men or remember them, their labor helps make *Anything Goes* work. Rather than recuperating normative subjectivity for these marginalized characters, I am interested in how they illuminate the conditions for the presence and absence of Chinese Americans. Scholar of queer studies and disability studies Eunjung Kim reminds us that “remedying objectification and dehumanization may end up simply prescribing subjectivity and agency in order to rehumanize othered bodies without questioning why the recognition of humanity relies on certain signs of subjectivity and agency.”¹ For Ching and Ling to be welcomed aboard the ship named the *SS American*, a symbol of the nation, they must relinquish their clothing, step aside, and facilitate yellowface. But their representation changes across different versions of the musical, while the boat setting and the engaged couples hold steady. Over time, adjustments to the libretto and to yellowface performance practices have lessened the musical’s overt racism, providing insight into what predominantly white producers and consumers find acceptable.

In professional productions of *Anything Goes* in the twenty-first century, non-Asian actors perform yellowface without yellowed faces through gesture, accent, diction, music, and principally costume. By not using heavy yellow makeup and eye prosthetics, these stagings largely avoid charges of racism while perpetuating racist logics and perpetuating the lifespan of this musical property. Performing Chineseness through these different things eases disavowal as well as the literal wearing and removal of racialized markers. This move also aligns with a longer history of Westerners constructing themselves and asserting control by objectifying East Asians. Using their own things at hand, Asian American actors and other antiracist artists have pushed back on the representation of Chineseness in *Anything Goes*. This chapter takes up Chinese things, not as an unspecific catchall, but as a theoretical move that encapsulates East Asians construed as commodities, as designs, as embodiment, as sounds, and as dramaturgical instruments. At times, passive voice is used to intentionally center objects.

In *Anything Goes*, anything does not go. The musical’s freewheeling sensibility applies to the implicitly white characters, not to the Chinese characters. On board the *SS American*, the musical forms a crucible for struggles over who is included and excluded as American and at what cost. When examining the reduction of Chineseness to clothing in twenty-first-century professional stagings of *Anything Goes*, I contextualize past production and consumption of Chi-

nese things as yellowface performance. After historicizing the 1934 Broadway production, with music and lyrics by Cole Porter and book by Guy Bolton and P. G. Wodehouse, with substantial revisions by Howard Lindsay and Russel Crouse, I provide an overview of scholarship on *Anything Goes* to prove the urgency for intervention in the field of musical theatre studies. In “What Do We Do with the Musical Theater Canon?” Sarah Whitfield advises, “We might strategically occupy canonical works, demystifying nostalgia to reveal what we are so dangerously nostalgic about” by pointing out these musicals’ power dynamics.² An untraditional take on *Anything Goes*, this chapter invites readers to look at the margins instead of, for instance, celebrating Porter’s witty wordplay. I track the Chinese characters and the yellowface practices across many mountings of *Anything Goes*, though I concentrate on John Weidman and Timothy Crouse’s libretto, revised for modern productions: the 2011 Roundabout Theatre Company Broadway revival, the 2018 multiracial staging at Arena Stage in Washington, DC, the 2021 revival of the Broadway revival at the Barbican Theatre in London, and finally the 2022 version currently available to license. Engaging with multiple versions of this musical might feel repetitive, but that purposefully simulates the repetition and revision that is racial formation. I also analyze a photo essay by Vincent Rodriguez III, who played one of the Chinese men in the 2012 national tour, in which he mobilizes objects like his costume to stake his presence as an Asian American, yet these objects simultaneously draw attention to his absence. Asian American actors who have performed in *Anything Goes* express feeling yellow, reminded of their national and theatrical abjection. I quote from interviews with artists; perform close readings of the revised scripts, productions, and multiracial casts; and assess contemporary critical reception.

In addition to illustrating how contemporary musical productions get away with yellowface without yellowed faces by using racialized things beyond makeup, *Anything Goes* raises broader questions about how textual, directorial, and performance changes to classic musicals mediate a revival’s historical conditions and what the terms are by which Asian Americans gain entry to the stage and United States. The late nineteenth-century racist taunt “The Chinese must go” becomes realized in a perversely progressive way, as the latest officially authorized *Anything Goes* script excludes the yellowface plot—along with the Chinese characters. Ultimately, Asian Americans experience conditional inclusion at the price of yellowface. Conceived as a structure of power, anti-Asian racism is not an aberration, a mistake, or an excisable element but something intrinsic to the dramaturgy of *Anything Goes* and to the history of the United States.

East Asian Things

Asian Americanists have excavated a long history of conceiving of East Asians as objects and East Asian objects as fundamental to Western formation and consumption.³ Oft cited as the first Chinese woman in the United States, Afong Moy sat on display in exhibits in the 1830s and 1840s as if she were an artifact alongside other Chinese curiosities. Building on Anne McClintock's concept of "commodity racism," Josephine Lee theorizes "decorative orientalism," which imagines East Asian people as things that can be bought, held, and worn by white consumers.⁴ In *The Japan of Pure Invention*, she contends that W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan's *Mikado* (1885) both was the result of and resulted in the circulation of japonaiserie, a case study discussed further in the following chapter.⁵ Mari Yoshihara analyzes how "the material culture of Orientalism packaged the mixed interests Americans had about Asia—Asia as seductive, aesthetic, refined culture, and Asia as foreign, premodern, Other—and made them into unthreatening objects for collection and consumption."⁶ Chinese porcelain and Japanese lacquer became parts of English and American identity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and Western imitations followed, a kind of commodity yellowface.⁷ Connecting japanning with yellowface and blackness, theatre historian Tara Rodman argues that the nineteenth-century performance of Black minstrel Thomas Dilward or "Japanese Tommy" was not "the impersonation of some notion of a Japanese person; rather, like the japanned object that mimics Japanese lacquerware, it is an impersonation of a Japanese thing."⁸

Performing yellowface with things is hardly new. By the late nineteenth century, yellowface practices became codified, with "costumes, wigs, properties, and scenery to create Chinese characters on the stage."⁹ Yellowface performers like Charles Parsloe donned queues to resemble those worn by Chinese men in the Qing Dynasty.¹⁰ In black-and-white stag films from the 1920s and 1930s, white women conveyed that they were portraying Asians by wearing kimonos and placing chopsticks in their hair.¹¹ So when twenty-first-century productions of *Anything Goes* performed yellowface with things aside from makeup, they rehearsed an earlier repertoire of embodying East Asianness.

Historicizing *Anything Goes*

While the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act effectively barred Chinese laborers from entering the United States, Chinese characters, costumes, settings, sounds, and references appeared on the nation's stages. This federal policy did not just prohibit entry through World War II; it built a policing apparatus to regulate immigration, it responded to and rationalized the prevalent physical attacks on Chi-

nese people in the United States, and it invisibilized deportations and bans as violence.¹² Other federal and local laws prohibited Chinese people from naturalizing as citizens, owning property, and giving legal testimony. Stage depictions of Chinese men transformed from “exotic curiosities and magical beings” to “bumbling domestic servants, unintelligible laundrymen, or cunning villains,” after they completed crucial work on the Transcontinental Railroad.¹³ Henry Grimm’s play *The Chinese Must Go* (1879), whose title comes from the rallying cry of the Workingmen’s Party of California, portrays Chinese men as effeminized laborers who undermine the white working class, dispense opium, and deserve to be beaten. Popular songs and skits depicted John Chinaman as unable to speak standard English, as uncivilized, and, ultimately, as unassimilable.¹⁴ Dozens of musicals with Asian themes emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, including Guy Bolton and P. G. Wodehouse’s *The Rose of China* (1919). Songs like Cole Porter’s “Let’s Do It” from *Paris* (1928) used slurs for Chinese and Japanese people. This US climate both hostile to and hungry for Chinese people colored *Anything Goes*.

Producer Vinton Freedley originally conceived *Anything Goes* while living on a ship and avoiding paying his debts. To write the book for this new musical set aboard a luxury liner, he commissioned Bolton and Wodehouse, with whom he had worked on *Oh, Kay!* (1928), and for the score, he reached out to Porter. But when a real-life fire on the SS *Morro Castle* in September 1934 led to the deaths of more than a hundred people, the scripted bomb threat on board did not seem quite so humorous, and Freedley found the libretto to be less than satisfactory. Russel Crouse reworked their treatment with director Howard Lindsay. Nevertheless, two elements that remained consistent across these drafts were the Chinese men and the yellowface getup in the final scene. In the 1934 premiere, the Chinese characters were named Ching and Ling and played by Asian American actors Richard Wang and Charlie Fang. They had previously appeared together on Broadway in the anti-imperialist Soviet play *Roar, China!* (1930). The cast also boasted William Gaxton as Billy, Ethel Merman as Reno, and Victor Moore as Moonface. At 420 performances, *Anything Goes* became one of the longest-running Broadway musicals of the 1930s. The show opened in London in 1935 with additional edits by Wodehouse.

Ching and Ling speak few lines and sing zero songs of their own. The published 1936 script, the principal basis for the initial Broadway and West End productions, does not specify whether they are Chinese nationals or Chinese American and whether they are truly Christian converts or phonies. They appear under the charge of Henry T. Dobson, who introduces himself with many appellations including “Moderator of the Chinese Anglican Church.”¹⁵ The musical evokes a history of missionary activity in China going back to the Jesuits in the

sixteenth century. In *Being Chinese, Becoming Chinese American*, Shehong Chen points out that “although there were only about 4,000 Christians among the Chinese in the United States in the early twentieth century, the Christian church played a significant role in the everyday life of many American Chinese.”¹⁶ For example, a YMCA in San Francisco taught Chinese immigrants (white) American ways of preparing food and hosting weddings as part of an educational process of assimilation. Later versions of *Anything Goes* add a scene of the minister and Chinese men engaging in catechism and US cultural lessons, but in the 1936 printed text, Dobson does not even introduce the Chinese characters. Their names are never uttered during the show. Instead, Ching and Ling are repeatedly referred to as Chinamen. When the minister is mistaken for Moonface Martin, public enemy number thirteen, he is escorted off the ship, while Moonface pretends to be the minister, offering Ching and Ling greater freedom. Still, nonsinging characters serve important dramaturgical functions.¹⁷

Ching and Ling provide opportunities to laugh at Chinese people. For instance, Moonface says, “Can young hopeme hung tao,” and asks them, “Did I really say something to you in Chinese?”¹⁸ Ling translates, “You said, ‘Come up and see me sometime’”—the humor of a white man faking Chinese words, of those words surprisingly meaning something, and of the Chinese men knowing this sexualized Mae West reference.¹⁹ The Chinese men speak in English, though often with dropped articles and present tense (e.g., “Shipman take away cards”).²⁰ They also speak in Chinese per the stage direction “The CHINESE argue with each other in Chinese,” though the dialect goes unspecified.²¹ Rather than practicing Christian piousness, these supposed converts gamble, resonating with stereotypical Chinese characters like Bret Harte’s Ah Sin in “Plain Language from Truthful James; or, The Heathen Chinese” (1870). Their gambling lands them in the ship’s brig with Billy and Moonface, who win Ching and Ling’s clothes in a game of strip poker. Billy stands next to Ling, treating him like a costume, and invites Moonface to do the same to Ching: “Mine fits. Try yours on.”²² They devise a plan to disgrace Sir Evelyn, a wealthy Englishman who is engaged to Hope but had confessed to sleeping with a Chinese girl named Plum Blossom years ago. When Reno, Billy, and Moonface pretend to be Plum Blossom and her family, they speak in pseudo-Chinese: “Piak tya huy fong mon toy pfui pfui, and double pfui!”²³ Billy instructs his coconspirators to “try to look Chinese,” while he does the talking.²⁴ He asserts that Sir Evelyn, “No sowee wild oats in China! Sowee wild rice!! All the same no good. Pretty soon—bye bye—come a little Orange Blossom,” a racialized-sexualized joke to explain that he unwittingly conceived a child by Plum Blossom (echoing the butterfly trope of a white man impregnating and abandoning an Asian girl).²⁵ Sir Evelyn’s uncle offers to write a check to stave off these premarital Chinese claims because he wants his

nephew and Hope to marry to combine their families' companies. Meanwhile, Sir Evelyn realizes that Reno, Billy, and Moonface are in yellowface, and he proclaims that he would much rather marry Reno than Hope. They ridicule Chinese clothing and people with jokes like, "I wish you'd get me out of these clothes before I open up a laundry."²⁶ The ingenue couple, Billy and Hope, and the comic couple, Evelyn and Reno, pair up when Billy's boss, Elisha, buys Hope's company, thereby saving it from bankruptcy, ending the marriage-business deal, and rendering the yellowface performance technically unnecessary. Ching and Ling serve as decoration, adding a touch of exoticism and convoluted yet amusing plot mechanics.

Subsequent screen versions of *Anything Goes* moved from Chinese spectacle to absence. The 1936 film featured Keye Luke and Philip Ahn as Ching and Ling, respectively. Luke had gained fame playing Charlie Chan's "Number One Son" (beginning in 1935) and would go on to play Kato in *The Green Hornet* (1940). Ahn also developed an extensive résumé, from playing romantic partners opposite Anna May Wong to playing Japanese villains. When he auditioned for *Anything Goes*, director Lewis Milestone "turned him down, saying he was looking for someone who spoke pidgin English. On his way out, Philip had a flash of inspiration. He sauntered back to Milestone's desk. 'You like . . . aligh,' he said. 'You no like me . . . aligh. Me no care. Hip sabee? Me go school . . . aligh.' The director broke into laughter and said, 'Okay . . . the part's yours!'"²⁷ To get his foot in the door, Ahn had to put on this vocal yellowface performance, even though Ching and Ling do not speak this way. As in the stage musical, the Chinese men played on the margins, but the film concludes with an added Chinese extravaganza, "Shanghai-de-ho." The number commences with a gong. Stars Ethel Merman and Bing Crosby appear in yellowface, mostly denoted by their Chinese-style costumes, in part because the film is in black and white, as ornately dressed chorus girls wave fans and carry conical hats on their backs. Again, the spectacle is not strictly necessary for the narrative but indulges in the pleasures of Chinese things. Roughly two decades later, the 1950s screen renditions of *Anything Goes* eliminated the Chinese characters. Shortened for *The Colgate Comedy Hour*, the 1954 television broadcast starred Merman, Frank Sinatra, and Bert Lahr and privileged showcasing hit Cole Porter songs over an elaborate book. The 1956 movie starred Crosby, Donald O'Connor, and Mitzi Gaynor and had a totally different show business plot, though it still took place on an ocean liner.

Rather than removing racism, the 1977 and 1987 rewrites entrenched it. Based on the 1962 off-Broadway production of *Anything Goes*, the 1977 Tams-Witmark script, which is still available to license, added more ethnic comedy and continued to treat Ching and Ling as minor characters. For instance, when

the minister says goodbye to Moonface as a fellow missionary who has been in “Indoor China,” he seems to combine Chinese and Japanese, “Oh’la, chin-chow, arigotow!” to which Moonface jokingly responds, “I don’t know, but I think it’s downstairs.”²⁸ The cast of characters list describes Ching and Ling as “First Chinese (Ching)” and “Second Chinese (Ling),” reducing them to their ethnicity akin to Oriental #1 and Oriental #2 in *Thoroughly Modern Millie* (1967).²⁹ Although Asian American actors had originated Ching and Ling on Broadway, white actors Jeff Siggins and Martin Cassidy played these roles off-Broadway. This additional yellowface challenges presumptions that casting practices become more inclusive over time and challenges what little sense the conclusion makes when the white characters take the clothing from Chinese men—now played by white men—to play Chinese men. In addition, this libretto specifies Chinese music and makeup when Reno enters impersonating Plum Blossom. But the most significant relevant revision is that this version uses yellowface to resolve the couples’ complications. To restore the Chinese honor lost from Sir Evelyn’s interracial sexual transgression, Hope offers her hand to Billy, who is pretending to be Plum Blossom’s relative, and Sir Evelyn promises to marry Plum Blossom, who is actually Reno. Hope and Sir Evelyn see through the Chinese disguises and use them to circumvent Hope’s mother, who had arranged their engagement. Thus, Ching, Ling, and their clothing become crucial plot devices; yellowface becomes not just normalized but necessary.

When Lincoln Center staged the first Broadway revival of *Anything Goes* in 1987, John Weidman and Timothy Crouse, son of Russel Crouse, altered the libretto in ways that both mitigated overtly racist representation and made racist reasoning even more decisive to the dramaturgy. They renamed Ching as John and Ling as Luke, emphasizing their Christian conversion with names from the Gospels, though John also evokes “John Chinaman.” Toshi Toda played John, and Stanford Egi played Luke, and both Asian American actors have continued theatre, film, and television work. Weidman and Crouse also removed the faux-Chinese dialogue and laundry jokes. More attuned to East-West power dynamics, Weidman had penned the book to the musical *Pacific Overtures* (1976), for which he, composer Stephen Sondheim, and director Hal Prince dramatized the westernization of Japan. Yet the librettists added other kinds of physical and symbolic racial violence. Instead of everyone playing strip poker, Reno hits John over the head with a bottle of champagne to steal his clothes. As in the previous script, the musical ends with the white protagonists performing Chineseness to pair Sir Evelyn with Reno and Billy with Hope. In an interview in 2021, Weidman acknowledged with thoughtful self-reflectivity that yellowface had not troubled him decades earlier: “We were busy trying to get the jokes right in other places and we were moving songs around so that the songs would feel more like book

songs. It's as if it wasn't an issue in 1988. I don't mean it didn't exist as an issue, but we certainly did not feel any imperative either moral imperative or artistic imperative to, to change it."³⁰ For him and Crouse, yellowface formed the "comic engine" of the final scene.³¹

In a major change to support the racial dramaturgy, the librettists reassigned the song "The G*psy in Me" from Hope to Sir Evelyn. The Englishman reveals that the reason why he had sex with a Chinese girl long ago was because his great-great-grandmother had had sex with a Romani person. Interested in the exotic, Porter drew inspiration from Latin American popular music, North African drumming, and Martinique dancers to expose the inner romantic-sexual longings of characters across his works, perhaps best epitomized by "The G*psy in Me."³² The song deploys tropes of the Roma as outside of history,³³ as closer to nature, and as hot-blooded.³⁴ Entangled in a biological racial logic of miscegenation, Sir Evelyn's Romani heritage explains his sexual appetite for Plum Blossom. The performance of yellowface in the wedding scene manifests his ongoing infatuation with the exotic, as Reno, Billy, and Moonface embody Chinese people. In the end, John and Luke serve as costumes to aid the white couples.

Academics on *Anything Goes*

Scholarship on *Anything Goes* typically emphasizes shipboard shenanigans, Cole Porter's score, resonances with US Depression-era culture, and transformations to its book and score. George Burrows dubs the SS *American* a "carnivalistic heterotopia," and David Savran details the queer pleasures of Porter's list songs.³⁵ In *Musical Theater and American Culture*, David Walsh and Len Platt contextualize *Anything Goes* by pointing to 1930s celebrity, criminal, and money worship. They contend, "the show continues to fulfill the American Dream by combining pleasure with endeavor; individual self-expression and happiness with wealth and success; and sex with love, romance, and relationship."³⁶ In the *Anything Goes* entry of *Fifty Key Stage Musicals*, Scott Miller insists, "the show remains just as subversive today" by satirizing religion, encouraging sexual liberation, and inverting high and low culture.³⁷ For these authors, the musical creates a paradise of desire where "anything goes," where there are no rules; everyone can channel an entrepreneurial spirit to transform themselves, con other players, and indulge in the erotics of sexual transgression and commodity consumption. As new versions of *Anything Goes* have been developed, several scholars have tracked changes to the plot and songs.³⁸

Various musical theatre histories use *Anything Goes* as a prime example of 1930s musical comedies that stress entertainment over explicit politics. In *A Critical Companion to the American Stage Musical*, Elizabeth Wollman states,

"One of the most quintessential of well-made if breezily diverting 1930s productions is Cole Porter's *Anything Goes*."³⁹ In *Studying Musical Theatre: Theory and Practice*, Millie Taylor and Dominic Symonds discuss the musical under the subheading "Pure escapist entertainment."⁴⁰ *Musical Theatre Histories: Expanding the Narrative* by Taylor and Adam Rush calls it "the most enduring musical" to open in the years following Jerome Kern, Bolton, and Wodehouse's *Princess Theatre* shows (1915–18), exemplifying the "farcical plots" of the time.⁴¹ Both *Studying Musical Theatre* and *Musical Theatre Histories* dedicate a separate section to summarizing the musical's storyline, but while the former book mentions Plum Blossom and the "Oriental" disguise, the latter, published more recently, does not.⁴²

Scholars rarely acknowledge the Chinese characters and even more rarely the yellowface. They often frame the way Billy adopts a series of disguises as American self-making, overlooking who has the privilege to perform as other people and at whose expense. The invisibilized, racialized labor of the Chinese men makes possible these theories and pleasures of the topsy-turvy performances in *Anything Goes*. When academics do mention these characters, they tend to claim that Weidman and Crouse fixed anti-Chinese racism in their 1987 revision for Broadway. Musicologist Geoffrey Block contends that rewrites of *Anything Goes* turn this haphazard musical comedy into an integrated book musical and "remove" "offending ethnic stereotypes" to align with dominant, contemporary tastes.⁴³ Allison Robbins similarly claims, "Most Broadway revivals update the dialogue to remove the 1930s topical humour as well as the racially insensitive treatment of the show's two Chinese characters."⁴⁴ Considering such removal to be total suggests a belief that racism is individual and not structural, that the revisions are sufficient, and that the yellowface plot need not be discussed. Others revel in the anti-Chinese humor of the musical. Ethan Mordden writes of the original Broadway production, "This creates one of [Crouse and Lindsay's] best jokes, on the appearance of a certain Plum Blossom (Ethel Merman in disguise), seduced and abandoned. Her deceiver is accused of 'taking Plum Blossom to rice fields' and bringing back 'Plum Tart.'"⁴⁵ Meanwhile, Raymond Knapp writes in *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity*: "Particularly troubling are the scenes in which Billy, Reno, and Moon Face disguise themselves as Chinese, quite as if this did not 'count' as racist in the same way as blackface."⁴⁶ James Moy mentions in *Marginal Sights: Staging the Chinese in America*, "One need only look to the 'Chinese' ninnies in the almost ubiquitous revivals of Lindsay and Crouse's *Anything Goes* (1934) for a brief and embarrassingly comic reminder of how even late twentieth-century audiences have viewed the Orient."⁴⁷ *Anything Goes* merits deeper antiracist critique.⁴⁸

Reviving *Anything Goes* and Wearing Chinese Clothes

The 2011 Broadway revival of *Anything Goes* tweaked Weidman and Crouse's revised book from the 1987 production and received wide acclaim. Directed and choreographed by Kathleen Marshall, the production starred Sutton Foster as Reno Sweeney and won the Tony Awards for Best Revival of a Musical, Best Performance by an Actress in a Leading Role, and Best Choreography. Martin Pakledinaz designed the costumes. After 521 performances, the production went on to two US national tours and the UK.⁴⁹ *Anything Goes* was produced by Roundabout Theatre Company, the nonprofit US theatre with the biggest budget and three Broadway houses. Since the mid-1990s, Roundabout has supplied more than one-quarter of the musical revivals on Broadway, including *Cabaret* (1998) and *Assassins* (2004).⁵⁰

Roundabout also boasts one of the worst racial diversity casting records. Thanks to *Anything Goes*, the percentage of roles that went to actors of Asian descent increased to 3 percent during the 2010–11 season, having been 0 percent or 1 percent in the previous four seasons.⁵¹ In this five-year span, less than 5 percent of the actors of color cast were given non-racially specific roles.⁵² A report on the 2017–18 season found that the company paid white actors \$6.09 for every dollar paid to actors of color.⁵³ These statistics suggest that the theatre tends to cast actors of color when scripts explicitly call for characters of color, and they tend to appear on smaller stages. The season after *Anything Goes*, Roundabout revived *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1985), an unfinished, metatheatrical musical that included white actors portraying Indian characters in brownface. To some extent, times have changed. Since the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, the theatre has produced more Black plays such as *Trouble in Mind* (1955) by Alice Childress and launched the Refocus Project to showcase Black, Latinx/e, Asian American, Pacific Islander, and Native American playwrights via staged readings. In 2024, Roundabout brought David Henry Hwang's *Yellow Face* (2007) to Broadway, a kind of reparations for yellowface.

In Roundabout's 2011 revival of *Anything Goes*, John and Luke both subvert and are subsumed by Chinese stereotypes. The minister introduces John and Luke as his “newest converts”; the former was a “compulsive drinker” and the latter a “compulsive gambler.”⁵⁴ In instilling Christianity, he makes distinctions between modern white Western culture and supposedly uncivilized Chinese culture, but Luke has the last laugh:

MINISTER: Christians don't use chopsticks, we use?

LUKE & JOHN: Fork!



Figure 4. Sutton Foster and other cast members in the “Anything Goes” number from the 2011 Broadway production of *Anything Goes*. (Joan Marcus.)

MINISTER: Christians don’t use rickshaws, we use?

LUKE & JOHN: Car!

MINISTER: Christians don’t use opium, we use?

LUKE: Martini!⁵⁵

Luke’s joke implicates Westerners in drug consumption too, and it replaced a reference to the Chinese men doing the minister’s laundry. Asian American actors Raymond J. Lee and Andrew Cao, who portrayed John and Luke, respectively, worked to bring more specificity and dignity to their roles. John is more cautious and clasps his hands, while Luke takes more risks and seems eager to join the US Americans on board. They both speak standard English. When the minister is forcefully escorted off the ship, John exclaims, “What’re we going to do?!”⁵⁶ He seems genuinely concerned about the minister, his own salvation, and Luke’s gambling.

John and Luke continue to play small but essential roles, demonstrating the dynamics of national abjection. Karen Shimakawa identifies Asian American-ness as a “constantly shifting relation to Americanness, a movement between visibility and invisibility, foreignness and domestication/assimilation.”⁵⁷ In a production still from the number “Anything Goes,” Reno dances center stage (figure 4). She is tap dancing, saluting, peering, and moving in the same direc-

tion as the background cruise ship funnels and as the mass of white naval uniforms on white people, aside from one Black performer upstage. Blocked by a sea of whiteness, John and Luke stand in the corner upstage right against the grain of the dancers. They wear *samfu*—loose-fitting, patterned blue and brown shirts with sewn clasps and wide sleeves along with trousers—characteristic of working-class Chinese men of the 1930s. Despite their racial, physical, and spatial marginalization, these characters are crucial to this stage picture as observers in awe, both included and excluded. Note that there is another Asian American performer upstage center, Daniel J. Edwards, but he is styled in cruise wear matching the blue and white hues of the characters designated as American. He understudied the roles of John and Luke.⁵⁸

The “Anything Goes” act 1 finale enacts this inclusion-exclusion dynamic. During this eight-minute, high-capacity tap number, which centers Reno, the Chinese men stand in the back, on the side, and on a staircase. After five minutes, Reno tests John and Luke on their fitness for Americanness. When she performs a series of quick steps, she invites them to do the same. John and Luke’s movements exactly match those of the rest of the company, reinforcing their assimilation into this group of Americans, which somewhat results in their own obscurity. They literally fall into line, demonstrating their virtuosity and conformity in doing this American dance. As they stand still, the cast sings,

The world has gone mad today and good’s bad today,
And black’s white today and day’s night today,
When those guys today the women prize today
Are just silly gigolos.⁵⁹

The lyrics revel in opposites, anarchy, and sexual freedom. And yet, the accompanying dance is rhythmically exact and visually polished, leaving no room for idiosyncrasies. Although tap draws from African American and Irish cultures, a stricter whitened style became a mainstay of Broadway.⁶⁰ The number concludes with the performers waving their arms, which move steadily from their torso level to above their heads in a celebratory gesture, as they all sing the show’s title on a triumphant note and in harmony. For the first time, John and Luke are no longer on the periphery of the stage; instead, they gain permission to enter the center-rear of the frame because they have demonstrated their Americanness. Lee reflected on how Marshall wanted John and Luke to be more than tokens: “I’m gonna have them in the big tap number. I’m gonna make sure that everyone knows that they’re part of this world, they’re part of the ship.”⁶¹ On the *SS American*, they are marginalized but then allowed into the United States, as they fall into their proper choreographed place.

John and Luke prove useful through their costumes. In her study of film noir, Homa King observes that “Chinese costumes and figurines sometimes appear at random or for what at first glance seem to be purely stylistic purposes,” but “ultimately they bear the burden of explanation for a multitude of cryptic enigmas that the narrative cannot resolve.”⁶² Similarly, the Chinese figures of *Anything Goes* are not accidental or just aesthetic but essential to the storytelling, as their clothing bears clues for the white protagonists to use to solve their problems. John and Luke’s clothes carry the weight of Chineseness, and Billy and Moonface—and Colin Donnell and Joel Grey, the white actors behind them in the Broadway revival—rely on them to perform yellowface without yellowed faces. By avoiding yellow-brown makeup, the white characters/actors avoid literal yellowface. But as Esther Kim Lee argues, “the costume has remained as the metonymy for the stage oriental that the audience is most familiar with and expects to see on Broadway.”⁶³ According to Sean Metzger, who analyzes the seams of clothing and race in *Chinese Looks*, “Like—but more often quite unlike—skin, clothing facilitates encounters between surfaces and becomes a field that may shape not only our appearance in the world but also our capacity to move through and experience it.”⁶⁴ While the Chinese shirts and trousers tend to keep John and Luke on the margins of the stage and the story, these clothes provide Billy and Moonface with the means to leave the brig early because the Chinese men will be released first. They can impersonate Plum Blossom’s family members and crash Hope and Sir Evelyn’s wedding. Through Chinese dress, it seems, all Chinese people look the same, as Billy and Moonface can be mistaken for John and Luke as well as Plum Blossom’s relatives.

While the men wear “the caps and pajamas of the TWO CHINESE,” an Anglicized and infantilized interpretation of John and Luke’s *samfu*, the stage directions describe Reno as “dressed a la Chinoise,” diction that commodifies Chineseness as a style that this white woman dons.⁶⁵ Like Metzger, with his invitation to consider “the skein of race,” Anne Anlin Cheng proffers ornamentation as “a conceptual framework for approaching a history of racialized person-making, not through biology but through synthetic inventions and ornamentations.”⁶⁶ Instead of considering some humans as separate from and above things, Cheng theorizes the “yellow woman” as a “kind of object-person who is radically undone yet luminously constructed” and who challenges celebrations of subjectivity.⁶⁷ Manifested by Sir Evelyn’s memory (radically undone by sex) and Reno’s Chinese clothing (luminously created by an invisibilized tailor), Plum Blossom as performed by Reno draws attention to the construction of gendered racialized personhood through surface things, on which the entire musical hangs. In the showstopper list song “You’re the Top,” Billy and Reno call each other different high and low white things, from a Shakespeare sonnet to Oval-

tine, but he also calls her “a dance in Bali,” suggesting the yellow woman.⁶⁸ This representation of Reno–Plum Blossom materializes a way of being a Chinese woman that exposes the role of clothing and the white pleasures of performing yellowface without yellowed faces. Unlike Billy and Moonface’s Chinese clothes, Reno’s black and gold Chinese gown has no textual source. Perhaps it came from her own wardrobe. The clothes give the white characters/performers greater ease to wear and remove racialized markers, and to disavow the performance as racist. Attending to the complicated power and performance dynamics at play reveals the fabric of race.

Instead of using makeup, prosthetics, or tape to have slanted eyes, Reno wore a veil, while Billy and Moonface wore eyeglasses with very thin black frames and black lenses. By concealing the eyes, the actors eschewed a more overtly racist yellowface practice typical of nineteenth- and twentieth-century yellowface performances; at the same time, this very need to obscure the eyes pointed out the importance of eyes to Asian racialization. Asian Americanist Traise Yamamoto has claimed, “Above all, the eyes are the physical marker that has been fetishized as the determinate sign of Asian difference,” although Asian people have a variety of eye shapes and eyelids.⁶⁹ These textual and production decisions conceived Chineseness as costumes and accessories manipulated by white performers. In *Racial Things, Racial Forms*, Joseph Jonghyun Jeon suggests that things can bewilder us, drawing attention to the eye of the beholder and to the very process of viewing and visualizing race: “The potential virtue of the thing is its ability to awaken us from complacency in the arrested moment when the object becomes something other, some strange thing unmoored from its normative context.”⁷⁰ The tinted glasses here are not meant to block out the sun but are defamiliarizing racialized things that perform yellowface without yellowed faces—obscuring older forms of yellowface while highlighting the very performance of contemporary yellowface.

The production also used gestural, musical, and vocal cues in moves that further objectified and abjected Asianness. Billy, Moonface, and Reno bowed their heads and adjusted their gaits to a mincing walk, citing a yellowface gestural vocabulary, perhaps like the three little maids from *The Mikado*. They often folded their arms into their sleeves when they were standing at rest, whereas John and Luke did not move in any of these ways earlier in the production. Racial performance also exceeds the visual. Building on W. E. B. Du Bois, Jennifer Lynn Stoeber underscores how “the sonic color line produces, codes, and polices racial difference through the ear, enabling us to hear race.”⁷¹ A short Orientalist musical phrase and orchestration accompanies Reno’s entrance, just as Billy and Moonface’s pseudo-Chinese accents consist of dropping articles and speaking only in the present tense.⁷² Grey’s performance was also haunted by his yellow-

face role as a Korean martial arts master in *Remo Williams: The Adventure Begins* (1985), for which he received a Golden Globe nomination for Best Supporting Actor. He elicited laughter for exchanges such as

MOON: Rich man cannot buy Chinese honor!

WHITNEY: I'll make it five thousand.

MOON: Chinese honor sold!⁷³

This comedy plays on the trope of Chinese honor and the Chinese accent, with dialogue that is almost the same as it was in the 1936 published script. But John and Luke did not speak in this manner in the Roundabout production. Luke for instance says, "Excuse me," to John, and then turns to the captain, "Captain, is there a casino on this ship? There is now!"⁷⁴ And yet, the yellowface performances of the white characters through their costumes, gestures, music, and accents are supposed to persuade other characters of their Chineseness, and the ruse ultimately pairs Reno with Sir Evelyn, and Billy with Hope.

By performing yellowface without yellowed faces, white actors maintain a kind of plausible deniability that foreswears earlier yellowface practices and covers up twenty-first-century anti-Asian racism with layers of clothing. Billy, Moonface, and Reno perform an idea of Chinese people shaped by stereotypes and things, and they were convincing to the other characters and hilarious for many people in the Broadway audience. In an instance of what Chris A. Eng calls "the absent presence of Asian labor," John and Luke provide the material conditions to make possible these romantic couplings and this spectatorial pleasure.⁷⁵ While their clothes play starring roles, the Asian American actors wait in the wings. Shimakawa theorizes, "If Asian American identity functions as a site of racial/sexual/national abjection, then it can only be represented (objectified) once it has been radically excluded; as 'ordinary' Americans, Asian Americans are often simply incomprehensible or invisible."⁷⁶ Asianness in the United States and on the *SS American* becomes legible as object or other; otherwise, it is assimilated, inscrutable, or invisibilized. The next section deliberately breaks up the flow of tracking productions of *Anything Goes* by demystifying an Asian American performer, his creativity, and his own things.

Focusing on Luke

In 2012, Asian American actor Vincent Rodriguez III published a photo narrative of his experiences playing Luke in Roundabout Theatre Company's first national tour of *Anything Goes*. Published in *Playbill*, his ninety-four images and captions provide a behind-the-scenes look at the production, with particu-



Figure 5. The soles of Vincent Rodriguez III's tap shoes from the 2012 national tour of *Anything Goes*. (Vincent Rodriguez III: Actor, Speaker, Teacher, Advocate, Entrepreneur.)

lar attention to his own body, his perspective, and his character's costumes. They also provide insights on feeling yellow, Asian American affects circulating between the performer and viewer. Rodriguez documents his presence in the musical, but in so doing, he paradoxically documents his absence from the stage. Furthermore, he claims US identity through gestures toward modernity, masculinity, and patriotism, moves that enable him to enter new spaces and that largely reaffirm conditions for Asian American inclusion rather than contest their parameters.

Rodriguez showcases himself and his marginalization. He displays his tap shoes with the caption, "I tap less than others do in the show so my tape lasts longer. (Reason for the tape: So we don't slip and fall during the tap number, 'Anything Goes')"

(figure 5).⁷⁷ With all their scruff marks, the tap shoes register his presence but also his absence. I find this image to be profoundly sad, making me feel yellow, although I do not think that this sentiment was Rodriguez's intention. The less-used, empty, upside-down shoes remind me of how infrequently he taps in the show (despite how much Rodriguez excels at dancing!) and how Asian Americans may not be accepted as fully American via this American idiom.



Figure 6. Vincent Rodriguez III's white spats over a black shoe. (Vincent Rodriguez III: Actor, Speaker, Teacher, Advocate, Entrepreneur.)

Part of this phenomenon of absent presence throughout this photo essay is the nature of Rodriguez capturing shots while he is not performing onstage. The actor documents the rest of the predominantly white cast as well as the time he spends watching the stage monitor, using physical therapy toys, checking email, and playing around with cast members. He reflected, "as anyone who has played Luke will tell you, it's very boring. You're not onstage very much."⁷⁸ Through the camera lens, he draws the viewer's gaze to his side projects, including a screenplay and a lip sync video, to stress his own creative authorship. The photo narrative itself was an artistic project for him to practice his skill as a photographer and director, telling a story of what it is like to be in *Anything Goes*. He found inspiration from fellow Asian American actor Raymond J. Lee, who had filmed several popular lip sync videos.

In the photo essay, Rodriguez repeatedly highlights his costumes to assert his Americanness instead of his Asianness, as if they are separate and separable. Accompanying a photograph showing another angle of his shoes but with spats on is the caption, "I love my spats. Both Marcus Shane (the guy who plays



my ‘brother’ John) and I have spats. It helped show that our characters were trying to be more progressive towards American customs. ie. my fedora, which you’ll see in the next photo” (figure 6). By wearing accessories associated with well-off, Western men at the turn of the century, Rodriguez as Luke subverts understandings of Chinese people as only coolies and forever foreigners. He stresses his capacity for American inclusion but at the price of assimilation. With pressed lips, he offers a self-assured smile (figure 7). In her theory of scriptive things, Robin Bernstein contends, “Unlike an incompetent performer who cannot decode a thing’s invitation to dance, a resistant performer understands and exerts agency against the script. Often, however, an action that appears to be resistant actually follows a secondary script within a thing’s range of prompts.”⁷⁹ Rodriguez stakes a claim to American modernity by wearing these clothes and resisting attempts to locate the Chinese in an unchanging past. Yet, his caption somewhat reifies the Orientalist notion that China is backward and conservative while US “progressive” values such as individualism are to be upheld. In the photo essay, he does not discuss his *samfu*, and when I spoke with him, he seemed unhappy about having to wear them, perhaps feeling yellow, reminded of the constrictions of Asian racialization.

Negotiating the spats and fedora versus the *samfu*, Rodriguez enacts what Tina Chen calls “Asiancy,” which “takes seriously the inscription of Asian difference, demanding that we not simply claim agency by occupying the status of the Asian American subject.”⁸⁰ He navigates rather than rises above racial-national politics as he wears the costume onstage and frames it backstage. In another photograph, the actor directly aligns himself with US nationalism by positioning himself alongside US flags and asserting his patriotic feelings in Washington, DC. The caption reads, “Had to make an important phone call during my big break in the show in Act II, so I had to step outside since our phones didn’t work inside the Kennedy Center. I also got a great photo out of it. (Notice the American flags. I felt so patriotic).” But instead of “big break” meaning his performance opportunity, it refers to the long duration when the character of Luke is offstage. Here, Rodriguez wears a white undershirt, having taken off his Chinese costume to keep it clean and unwrinkled. Because he is taking a selfie, he is physically to the side, suggesting his marginality, underscored by the fact that he is literally outside of the theatre. But he ultimately returns for the last tableau in the musical.

Although the production’s libretto does not mention John and Luke after the brig scene, in the final moments of the Roundabout revival, the Chinese men appear upstage on a staircase. While Billy and Moonface took the Chinese clothes, John and Luke took their tuxedos. Rodriguez documents the moment just before he appears onstage: “Now here is me in my little ‘sit and wait’ spot.



Figure 8. Vincent Rodriguez III sitting backstage. (Vincent Rodriguez III: Actor, Speaker, Teacher, Advocate, Entrepreneur.)

Everyone is onstage for the wedding except for Marcus & I. It's probably my favorite grooming prep for the show since I get to wear tails and gel my hair over. I love the 1930s look. #ilovegenekelly" (figure 8). He looks serious and suave. He is the dominant figure of this photograph, foregrounded by empty robes and slippers that highlight the absence of other bodies. While Rodriguez is centering himself, he and the actor playing John are actually missing a key scene onstage, the yellowface performance that unites the protagonists in marriage. Musical theatre scholars have argued that the marital union at the end of musicals represents a resolution of struggles and a larger union of Americans.⁸¹ As Josephine Lee observes with regard to the 1926 Broadway operetta *The Desert Song*, "encounters with oriental characters, whether literal or figurative, ensure the satisfactory closure of conventional forms of white romance."⁸² But John and Luke are not invited to the wedding. Still, the photograph and the caption indicate Rodriguez's pleasure in wearing "the 1930s look" like Gene Kelly, in accordance with his prior emphasis on his fedora and spats. Rodriguez's dream role is Don Lockwood in *Singin' in the Rain* (1983), based on the 1952 Metro-

Goldwyn-Mayer film, so he can re-create Kelly's dances in his various costumes. Rodriguez locates this clothing, period, and white masculinity in US identity and aspires to become part of it.

Like the spats and fedora, the tuxedo brings Rodriguez from the margins to the mainstream. When Luke and John don tuxedos, they gain greater access to the SS *American* and sing the final bars of *Anything Goes*. Chinese American vaudevillians like Lee Tung Foo, the Chung Hwa Comedy Four, and Prince Lai Mon Kim similarly donned tuxedos to stake their belonging onstage in this era.⁸³ In an analysis of the 2002 film *The Tuxedo* starring Jackie Chan, Metzger argues, "The tuxedo is literally a technology that facilitates [Chan's] entry into a wide variety of social worlds."⁸⁴ He continues: it "connotes specific notions about secularization, spatial condensation, capitalist industrialization, masculinity, and time."⁸⁵ The tuxedo is aspirational, as John and Luke appear to rise in social class. They are wearing not just any tuxedos but specifically ones that belonged to white men. Just as the *samfu* embodied the Chineseness that the white actors and characters appropriated to perform yellowface, the tuxedos embody Americanness. John and Luke appear to have transnational mobility through these new clothes, which condition their inclusion into this US community. But tuxedos were not the sole property of Americans. Following the end of the Qing Dynasty in 1911, Chinese men began mixing Chinese clothes with Western suits, coats, hats, and handkerchiefs.⁸⁶ Urban elite, especially in Shanghai in the 1920s and 1930s, wore tuxedos.⁸⁷ Scholar of Chinese studies John Zou suggests that in this period of political instability, "no clothing captured men's 'own,' authentic form."⁸⁸ Chinese men already troubled the East-West modern-antimodern binary.

When I shared my theorization of the photo essay with Rodriguez, he responded enthusiastically; however, he also explained his own differing interpretation. He said that when he comes back onstage at the very end in the tuxedo, he is performing with the subtext,

"Hey! Aren't these nice? And they fit me perfectly! And my hair is combed and everything!" So as actors playing our roles, we make choices, we justify the actions and blocking. You know we spun them [the actions and blocking given to us] positively. And actually, that is a theme that comes up in other shows. So you pointed out the injustice [of representation in entertainment], and I'm gonna tell you, as actors, we sometimes have to justify a lack of injustice. Our job is to make it seem like these characters are just parts of a real-life moment that is unfolding. So actors have to fill in those physical directions with our version of this character we created.⁸⁹

In order to deliver a good performance, Rodriguez focuses on the actor's craft and choices as well as the character's motivation. Forgoing the negative affects of feeling yellow, he must believe in the awesomeness of wearing the Western, modern, masculine clothes and being included. Although Rodriguez had observed that playing Luke is relatively boring, he also accepted his role:

I didn't say much in the show, but it was a lot of fun to create this character, and you know live onstage without speaking. That's a lot of what ensemble work is (when you're in the background of a scene when the lead characters on in the front forward the story with dialogue). But to do it in a principal role (instead of an ensemble member), I was like oh yeah, I know how to do this. I knew how to stay alive in my character back when I danced in the ensemble and even more so now while playing a principal role.⁹⁰

This acquiescence to the conditions of racial hierarchy depressed me, as it underscored the affective labor that Asian American performers do to survive in show business. They are often caught in a quandary of whether to accept small and stereotypical roles, which can buttress the logics of yellowface and provoke feeling yellow. According to Rodriguez, he took only non-ethnically specific ensemble parts for the first five years of his acting career, before performing in *Miss Saigon* at the Muny in Saint Louis. He made this choice because he has deep reservations about playing these Asian ensemble roles again and again and believes that doing so is "pigeonholing" yourself: "Some musical performers stop doing ensemble parts so they can focus on playing principal parts. Though, I was stopping myself from leading my career playing Asian roles in Asian shows, just so I could more focus on representing Asians in more white-centric roles and shows. I wanted to be part of the diversity that needed to continue to be pushed in the casting of musicals."⁹¹ He reminds me of Chen's advocacy "for reading strategies and performance tactics that enable us to identify as double agents those who are bound to a problematic representational history but equally bound to re-staging that history to make an intervention that re-scripts the possibilities of what we might perform into being in the future."⁹² Mobilizing feeling yellow toward productive ends, Rodriguez works to bring integrity and artistry to Luke, and to build a résumé for other projects that might imagine non-Asian and Asian American characters in new ways. Instead of dismissing Rodriguez as a "good" model minority for American identity and "bad" activist for radical resistance, I take seriously Takeo Rivera's concept of model minority masochism to consider these tensions interpellating the actor and myself into Asian Americanness.⁹³ Repeatedly playing these Asian parts normalizes certain

representation and restricts an actor's potential to explore and be cast in other roles. But it also pays the bills, enabling Asian Americans to survive.

Rodriguez demonstrates sensitivity to the material conditions that affect him as an Asian American performer, though he also upholds a bootstraps narrative of success: "If you really want it badly enough, you will make it work. Like how I got here was *not* a passing of a silver spoon, it was not, I had to ask for help—even when I really didn't want to—and like I said, I worked all those odd jobs, and it's been really hard. But the whole time, I *had* to believe that there's something bigger outside of me that's like, waiting."⁹⁴ Rodriguez does not condemn white supremacy and neoliberal capitalism for the precarity and competition that they encourage but frames the industry as a meritocracy and emphasizes his own hard work. Feeling yellow, being reminded of structural obstacles, gets in the way. In *Racial Feelings*, Jeffrey Santa Ana diagnoses that "the American Dream arises as a feeling that would be produced through upward mobility and economic success. Yet this aspiration is also about *feeling normal*, a yearning to belong in neoliberal America without regard to race, ethnicity, and national origin."⁹⁵ At our interview in 2015, Rodriguez had just been offered a principal role in the musical comedy television series *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (2015–19). He would soon live his Gene Kelly dreams in the show's number "I've Got My Head in the Clouds." His sacrifices, training, and past acting gigs seemed to have added up to this major opportunity to play a Filipino American bro and the white protagonist's object of affection, an image not often seen on screen.⁹⁶ Luke led to Josh Chan.

Recasting *Anything Goes* at Arena Stage

When Arena Stage produced *Anything Goes* in 2018, director (and then artistic director) Molly Smith wanted to make the *SS American* look more like the United States and to make the musical less racist. Her branding for this pillar of Washington, DC, and nonprofit regional theatres has been "Where American theatre lives," especially via multiracial productions of classic musicals.⁹⁷ Smith's concept deserves close attention because her recasting and rewrites influenced future iterations of *Anything Goes*. Up until this point in the company's history, dating back to 1950, Arena had staged only one play centered on Asian Americans, *Hold These Truths* (2007) by Jeanne Sakata. Produced at Arena in 2017, this one-person touring show recounts the life of Gordon Hirabayashi, who resisted Japanese American incarceration during World War II. For Asian Americans, classic white musicals rather than new Asian American plays provided easier entry to this "Center for American Theater." Arena has since included more Asian American programming, namely, the world premiere of *Exclusion* by Ken-

neth Lin in 2023. Members of the *Anything Goes* creative team called the musical racially insensitive, but they wanted to subvert the racism and produce a gold-standard musical with tap dance.⁹⁸ Smith underlined that *Anything Goes* is a genuinely funny musical that shows American self-reinvention and sends up Americans' fascination with celebrity con men, as she nodded toward the reality TV star turned president of the United States.⁹⁹ Staged during the winter holiday season, *Anything Goes* was expected to be a box-office success.

Smith sought a multiracial cast. She called back Asian American actors for the role of Billy, and at least one person cried because they had never been seen before as a musical leading man. The part ultimately went to Corbin Bleu, the Afro-Caribbean-Italian performer of *High School Musical* (2006) fame. Black actress Soara-Joye Ross accepted the part of Reno. White actors played Moonface and Sir Evelyn. Meanwhile, Hope went to mixed-Asian-white actress Lisa Helmi Johanson, and an Asian American actress played her mother, suggesting that their characters were likewise Asian American, not white or postracial. This family resemblance move is typical of Smith's color-conscious casting, in which the racial identity of the actor corresponds with that of the character. Dramaturg Naysan Mojgani researched the presence of Asian Americans in the 1930s to ground these decisions. Smith cast Asian American actors for not only John and Luke but also the minister, reflecting a history of converted Chinese Christians themselves becoming missionaries. Casting Asian Americans in principal roles beyond John and Luke recognizes diversity across Asian American experiences and avails life-affirming representation. Johanson became tearful when she recounted the experience of playing an ingenue, wearing gorgeous gowns, and waving at Asian American girls in the audience: "I made sure to say hi and I realized I never had that experience as a kid. . . . I never saw another Asian person in *Anything Goes* like that."¹⁰⁰ Finally, Arena's ensemble included several performers of color. In his program note, executive producer Edgar Dobie invited the audience to look at their fellow spectators in the round and recognize the racial diversity of Arena's patrons, actors, playwrights, and directors: "We take on the great responsibility of ensuring the stories we share, and those we share them with, are reflective of America."¹⁰¹

Arena's production stressed modern sensibilities. For the playbill, Smith and text director Anita Maynard-Losh penned an article titled "Times Have Changed: Reevaluating, Reinventing and Recreating the Gold Standard Musical and *Anything Goes*," as if anticipating potential objections from theatrical purists who want to preserve past versions of the text. They reminded audiences that the mid-twentieth-century "golden age" of musical theatre was "not the 'good old days' for everyone."¹⁰² They went on to explain their approach of casting more people of color, giving more agency to John and Luke, and changing some lines

“to address the issues of racism that are inherent in the piece,” which is noteworthy because they were willing to name racism and recognized it as intrinsic to the text.¹⁰³ They concluded in the program note, “How exciting to be part of the bold experiment that is part of America evolving and the theater evolving with it,” gently inviting the audience to join Arena in progressive movement.¹⁰⁴

In consultation with associate artistic director Seema Sueko, Maynard-Losh, Mojgani, the Asian American actors, and co-librettists Weidman and Crouse, Smith set about changing the script and staging to address anti-Asian racism. She dedicated the first week of rehearsals to table work, and she specifically provided space for the Asian American cast members to speak. Christopher Shin, who played Luke, had previously appeared in four other productions of *Anything Goes*. He recalled one time when he had to wear Fu Manchu facial hair, and the production team had no substantial discussion about John and Luke.¹⁰⁵ Julio Catano-Yee said that after he had been cast as John, he read the script and considered quitting the production because he had already done enough work that year to qualify for health insurance.¹⁰⁶ Haunted by stereotypes, they experienced feeling yellow. But Arena provided a safer space. When Smith encouraged Catano-Yee’s input, he expressed his discomfort with his character being hit with a glass bottle, so they dropped that stage direction. These white creatives empathized with Asian American affect. Shin explained the usual tendency to replicate rather than revise musicals: “There’s this idea that if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it. . . . So many of our great writers from these golden age musicals have passed on. It’s very rare to have changes made to these shows due to licensing and the estates. And that’s why I think it’s amazing that John [Weidman] and Tim [Crouse], who were around, were so willing not only to engage in conversation, but to make active changes to these characters and the script.”¹⁰⁷ Weidman and Crouse agreed to make some edits and supported more once they visited the theatre and saw the positive impact on the Asian American cast members. When reflecting on the Lincoln Center production decades prior, Weidman confessed, “one of the things I was most ashamed of was the fact that I had never made myself available to one of the actors playing one of these parts to say, ‘How do you feel about this?’”¹⁰⁸ He sought to make amends.

Arena’s production found ways for John and Luke to join the rest of the characters in running cons on one another. They have new lines explaining their motives when they first appear: they are Chinese Americans who are pretending to be recently converted Christians from China to enjoy free passage on this ocean liner and reach London, where they have jobs waiting for them.¹⁰⁹ Accordingly, John and Luke speak to each other in a way that implies they have been raised in the United States, but then they put on Chinese accents when speaking with crew members. They thus reveal Chineseness as performance.

They participate in extra scenes in which they do not have any lines, and they hide their faces with their fedoras when they are apart from the minister. At the top of act 2, Luke is drinking, smoking, stealing, and speaking lines normally assigned to other ensemble members. His gambling lands him and John in the brig, where they encounter Billy and Moonface. They hatch a plan that does not involve physical assault, gambling, or the protagonists dictating terms: Reno, Billy, and Moonface give John and Luke jewelry and tuxedos in exchange for their blue and brown Chinese *samfu*. They are all in on the game. John and Luke also have an added line in the finale reprise of “Anything Goes”: “Get a load of these clothes!”¹¹⁰ No longer pretending to be Chinese Christian converts, they speak American slang and wear Western clothes, signaling their assimilation into Western modernity.

The yellowface scene that concludes *Anything Goes* remained, albeit with a twist. Billy and Moonface interrupt Sir Evelyn and Hope’s wedding dressed in the Chinese clothes, and in the Arena version, John and Luke back them up in tuxedos. Billy’s revised dialogue adopts formal, sophisticated diction (“Do pardon us. We have just completed an extensive peregrination in order to confer most urgently with this English gentleman”), and actor Corbin Bleu used the same 1930s mid-Atlantic accent that he had employed as Billy throughout the musical.¹¹¹ The other characters stare at him in confusion, as if unable to comprehend a Chinese-clad person in a Black body speaking in this fashion. John and Luke hurriedly whisper in Billy’s and Moon’s ears, causing the non-Asian characters to alter their accents and physicality. While Billy carefully puts on a Chinese accent and clasps his hands, his performance also opens up interpretation as an over-the-top Chinese stereotype directed by John and Luke. This kind of excessive and exposed performance unveils stereotypes as unnatural.¹¹² Because Billy and Moon become legible as Chinese through not only their clothing but also their coached Chinese diction, accents, and mannerisms, the other characters in the scene accept them as Plum Blossom’s relatives. Again, they perform yellowface without yellowed faces. All the while, the audience laughed uproariously—at what, exactly? Maybe they were chuckling at the foolishness of those who interpreted Billy, Moonface, and Reno as Chinese. Or maybe they were savoring the Chinese stereotypes. Shin remarked that he could not think about that and still proceed with the scene night after night, just as Francis Jue and Ken Leung focused on their intention rather than the audience’s laughter in *Thoroughly Modern Millie*.¹¹³

Arena’s production of *Anything Goes* received raves. Across dozens of reviews, very few mentioned the multiracial cast or the Chinese characters. Without makeup, yellowface remained so normal that it was unremarked on. No audience members complained about the multiracial casting, as they had for

some Arena productions in recent seasons, like *Oklahoma!* (1943) in 2010 and *My Fair Lady* (1956) in 2012.¹¹⁴ The positive critical reception and relative silence on race and racism suggest on the one hand support for progressive changes and on the other post-racial indifference, in a new era of exclusion acts, immigrant raids, and Asian refugee deportations during the first Trump administration. The production increased opportunities for Asian American actors and characters, and it inspired Crouse and Weidman to make even more substantial changes to the text.

Re-Dressing *Anything Goes*

Anything Goes opened at the Barbican Theatre on August 4, 2021, toured the United Kingdom, and returned to London in 2022. This production was also filmed, screened, and distributed to entities like PBS's *Great Performances* and Digital Theatre Plus, enabling it to circulate even further to movie theatres, living rooms, and classrooms. Tracking the changes to this production via this recording is therefore especially important because it is more easily accessible than others and because it concretizes this version as the representative *Anything Goes*.

In a renewed Black Lives Matter era post-2020 and inspired by Arena's example, the creative decisions and popular discourse about *Anything Goes* suggested more sensitivity to racialized representation. While the Broadway production had featured all-white leads, the London production included Black actors playing the principal roles of Hope, Elisha, and Erma, Moonface's companion. When Sutton Foster was announced as the replacement for Megan Mullally as Reno, some people on social media opposed her casting by citing her performance of "And I'm Telling You" from *Dreamgirls* (1981) at the Café Carlyle in 2010 because they considered her comic imitation of Jennifer Holliday to be vocal blackface. Foster felt "mortified" and apologized to Holliday and to the *Anything Goes* cast: "It's hard as now I only have the perspective of today to look back and realise how insensitive and thoughtless that was, to make that choice to perform it that way—and I am just so sorry to anyone I have offended or hurt, especially her, as I revere her."¹¹⁵ Publicly pointing out the harm caused by blackface minstrelsy is important, and it interestingly contrasts with the relative silence regarding the Chinese characters, "The G*psy in Me," and Foster's yellowface performance in *Anything Goes* on Broadway, the same year as the release of her Café Carlyle album.

Kathleen Marshall's London production largely replicated her Roundabout Theatre Company production, with the same star, sets, and choreography, but this staging attempted to integrate John and Luke more and deracialize them more. When the Chinese men appear, it is not clear that they are Chi-

nese. Instead of the two men wearing blue and brown Chinese tunics with black pants, John wears a plaid jacket over a green vest with gray matching slacks and a cap, while Luke wears a brown dress jacket, vest, slacks, tie, and fedora, new costume designs by Jon Morrell. They look like the journalists seeking celebrities embarking on the ship. But they are still introduced as Christian converts to a white minister who had done missionary work in China. John and Luke have accents that make them sound like New York newsboys, performing their US American belonging. Like in the Arena production, they appear in more ensemble scenes, and in the finale, they finally sing, "It's deluxe, it's delovely," while wearing their newly acquired tuxedos and top hats.¹¹⁶ Instead of being hit over the head and playing strip poker, they engage in a mutual exchange with Billy and Moonface. Instead of Billy sizing up Ching, Luke sizes up the white men's tuxedos and exclaims, "Clothes make the man!" suggesting once again the performativity of costumes as part of racial formation and the theme of impersonation in the musical. Reno reveals that she obtained the key to free them from the brig, enabling all of them to participate in the wedding scene.

The London version eliminates physical and aural yellowface yet preserves the Asian plotline, with some adjustments to resolve the musical. Because John and Luke's clothing is no longer racialized as Chinese, the script and the Chinese men do more work to frame the white men as Asian. In earlier versions of *Anything Goes*, Sir Evelyn confesses to having gone to China and having slept with a Chinese girl, setting up the resolution to rearrange the couples and restore Chinese honor. But here, China has been changed to Singapore, perhaps to create more distance from the original script. Speaking with fancy English accents, John and Luke interrupt Sir Evelyn and Hope's wedding. While Sir Evelyn misinterprets them as representatives of his Hong Kong business interests, they pretend to be lawyers on behalf of Plum Blossom and her family. Akin to the Arena production, they authorize Billy and Moonface's performance as Asian men; the latter still wear dark glasses to cover their eyes, but John and Luke do not coach them to speak with pseudo-Chinese accents, bow excessively, and fold their arms into their sleeves. As Plum Blossom, Reno no longer enters with Orientalist music and Chinese-inspired clothing. Instead, she obscures herself with dark glasses, a large black sun hat, a feather boa, and sparkly fabric (all props and costumes from earlier parts of the production) while vampy music plays. Sir Evelyn recognizes her as Reno, and the happy couples unite. This *Anything Goes* has no more embodied yellowface, but the leading white actor-characters still pretend to be Singaporean for them to resolve the narrative.

This production suggested that race both mattered and did not matter. Multiracial casting in twenty-first-century musical productions invites artists and audiences to interpret the actors' racialized bodies in multiple ways: matching

that of their characters, whitening everyone, or dismissing race as no longer salient.¹¹⁷ Played by Jon Chew and Alistair So, John and Luke still read as Asians, whether as Chinese converts, Hong Kong business partners, or Singaporean lawyers. Their racialized bodies and the ghosts of Ching and Ling continue to carry the weight of racialized embodiment. When white actors wear John and Luke's clothes and conceal their eyes, the other characters still read them as Plum Blossom and her relatives, even though they do not adopt explicitly racialized markers. Sir Evelyn still cites his Romani heritage as his reason for having sex with a girl in Singapore, but Weidman and Crouse's book made another change: instead of Sir Evelyn saying, "There's something dark and savage in our blood," he says, "There's something wild and passionate in our souls."¹¹⁸ They removed the racialized connotations of "dark," "savage," and "blood," while retaining the idea that Romani have intrinsic qualities. As in the Arena production, having a multiracial cast in this 1930s setting draws from historical precedent while also taking historical liberties. Between Hope and Billy, Elisha and Hope's mother, and Erma plus nearly all the sailors, Black-white interracial relationships flourish without barriers or even commentary, if the spectator is to understand that the actor's race represents their character's race. Resonating with the lyrics of "Anything Goes," sexual freedom abounds. This libretto, like all the other revisions after the 1936 script, cuts the final verse of the song:

When ladies fair who seek affection
 Prefer c**ns of dark complexion
 As Romeos
 Anything goes.¹¹⁹

By eliminating this part, along with the anti-Black slur, the script avoids naming interracial intimacy but obliquely performs it instead. In this make-believe world, everyone receives equal treatment during a time when the US government largely banned mixed marriage and Asian immigration. This disjuncture parallels the tension between the highly specific 1930s references in the list songs and the dematerialization of race. The rules for reading race in this world appear unclear. The Black actors seem to play implicitly white characters, whereas the Asian actors play Asian characters. Those like Hope seem beyond race, while John and Luke remain racialized. With the greater inclusion of John and Luke and actors of color, and with the yellowface performance greatly reduced, the *SS American* forms a racially diverse nation with minimal racial baggage. For the Chinese men to be welcomed aboard, they must be more assimilated as Americans than ever before, and they must continue to facilitate the resolution with white characters impersonating Asians.

Reception and Race

The 2021 *Anything Goes* at the Barbican received unanimous raves, with many reviewers underlining the joy and escape that the show provided. Comments like “pure entertainment, a guaranteed two-and-a-half-hour grin”¹²⁰ and “Kathleen Marshall’s deliriously, defiantly, de-lovely production immediately joins the pantheon of great classic musical revivals such as the National Theatre’s 1998 *Oklahoma!*”¹²¹ celebrated the musical as depoliticized fun and as the pinnacle of musical theatre excellence, sometimes with wordplay on “You’re the Top” (e.g., “*Anything Goes* at Barbican Is the Top”).¹²² Several critics compared the context of audiences seeking relief from the Great Depression via the original *Anything Goes* with contemporary audiences seeking relief from the COVID-19 pandemic.¹²³ While a couple of reviews noted the new book by Crouse and Weidman, others argued for the relative unimportance of the storyline.¹²⁴ Lyndsey Winship of the *Guardian* wrote: “The genius of *Anything Goes* lies in the combination of seriously good music with a plot so gloriously inconsequential that a state of blithe, uncomplicated bliss is reached.”¹²⁵ Andrzej Lukowski from *Time Out* offered a historical understanding of *Anything Goes* before the popularization of integrated book musicals, “a different age when nobody much cared what musicals were *about* just so long as the talent was there.”¹²⁶

This critical reception suggests that race largely went under the radar. Critics did not engage with the cast as multiracial. The accompanying teaching materials for the recording of *Anything Goes* on the Digital Theatre Plus website also do not discuss race. Reviews featured more mentions of Cheeky the dog, portrayed by a stuffed animal puppet, than John and Luke. An exception is Choon Young Tan, a British East Asian journalist, who devoted significant attention to the Asian actors and characters on his blog: “It is refreshing to see and know that characters written as being Chinese are mostly accurately played, rather than being re-written and whitewashed.”¹²⁷ But he did not engage with the finale conceit of Billy, Moonface, and Reno playing Singaporean characters. Tan instead underscored the importance of seeing so many Asian actors in this musical from his perspective: “To the mainly White audience the presence of just a handful of people of colour on stage may not mean anything to them, but to those of us who aren’t it is an exciting and proud moment.”¹²⁸ The new libretto thus largely succeeded in deterring charges of anti-Asian racism and providing a framework for an exuberant theatrical experience.

Only a few critics expressed concern about Romani representation and the pseudo-Asian ending, but they did not push hard, whereas others singled out “The G*psy in Me” as brilliant. While framing the book as insignificant, Lukowski also said, “the only thing to prompt a real eyebrow-raise in 2021 is

the late number ‘The G*psy in Me’—it’s basically harmless, but I don’t think anyone would write it today.”¹²⁹ Reviewers explained away these elements of the script as relics from the past: “the musical’s concluding ruse definitely reflects its penning many decades previously,”¹³⁰ and “while parts of the storyline still feel a little outdated for 2021, particularly when it comes to Lord Evelyn Oakleigh’s storyline, Haydn Oakley leans into the wackiness of the role and earns the happy ending.”¹³¹ Other reviews held up “The G*psy in Me” as a highlight of the musical: “Haydn Oakley as Lord Evelyn who discovers his inner macho as the g*psy in him comes out (sensational)!”¹³² Despite the pervasiveness of anti-Roma sentiment and policies in the past and present, this number continues to exist in the musical and continues to thrill many audiences. The comic conclusion can sweep away the antiracist critiques of feeling yellow.

Whiting Out Yellowface

The 2022 licensed version of *Anything Goes* finally eliminates anti-Asian representation. Weidman came to understand that yellowface without yellowed faces is still yellowface. When asked why he thinks yellowface persists in the twenty-first century, he answered with humility and honesty: “Because people like me were allowed to get away with it.”¹³³ Concord Theatricals, which licenses the new script, proclaims: “This version, based on the 1987 Lincoln Center production at the Vivian Beaumont Theater, features a revised script, updated in light of contemporary sensibilities.”¹³⁴ While it is true that dominant attitudes toward yellowface have shifted, this diction elides Asian Americans and objections in the past and glosses present politics as pro-racial equity as opposed to an ongoing struggle between those supporting and opposing anti-Asian racism. In this new edition, Sir Evelyn confesses to having slept with an actress who was at his manor filming *The Fatal Frolics of Anne Boleyn*; he does not detail her race, but the movie title insinuates that she is white. The final wedding scene does not require the protagonists to pretend to be Asian. As a result, this edition also eliminates the Chinese characters. First, they served as comic decoration. Then, they served as dramaturgical tools. And now, they are released because their services for yellowface are no longer needed. They evolve from useful things to nothing, just as reforming Asian impersonation evolves from explicit yellowface with makeup to yellowface without yellowed faces to no yellowface at all. The Concord Theatricals site goes on to say, “In this version, the race of the characters is not pivotal to the plot. We encourage you to consider diversity and inclusion in your casting choices.”¹³⁵ Instead of providing designated opportunities for Asian American actors, or potentially having non-Asian actors play John and Luke, the script opens up casting. Recognizing a default to whiteness, the licenser note supports

racial diversity in casting, although such encouragement may not necessarily lead to casting actors of color, and such multiracial casting implies the universality of whiteness; moreover, the note does not provide guidance on how the casting of some people of color in certain roles and in relation to others could charge the racial dramaturgy in both innovative and destructive ways.

John and Luke have become Spit and Dippy. The stage directions for their entrance describes them as “wearing the cloth caps and coarse clothing of a couple of Cagney-esque New York street toughs,” akin to their costumes in the Barbican production, and Minister Henry T. Dobson introduces them as “denizens of Father Flanagan’s Boys Town.”¹³⁶ Weidman modeled the characters on the Dead End Kids, a group of young actors who played hardened boys from Broadway to Hollywood in the 1930s.¹³⁷ He changed their accents accordingly:

DIPPY: How 'bout that? The Feds pinched the wrong Rev!

SPIT: You can’t spell “genius” without the “G” in “G-man.”¹³⁸

Ethnicized as Irish, Spit and Dippy retain some of the same associations as the Chinese characters. They are likely recent immigrants; they are not fully integrated into white Americanness; and they are typed as gamblers, drinkers, and Christian penitents. Although the connection is not made explicit in the text, Irish Americans and Chinese Americans share histories; they worked on the Transpacific Railroad, and some Irish American women married Chinese men. When Spit and Dippy steal the minister’s wallet and pocket watch and swindle passengers in their gambling escapades, they join the other characters aboard as con men and do so without the loaded connotation of Chinese people as untrustworthy. Spit and Dippy have been written into more scenes, and they take greater initiative. For example, when locked in the brig, Spit has stolen the purser’s keys, and it is his idea to swap clothes. But now, these men are unnecessary to the wedding finale.

The popularity of the 2022 revised *Anything Goes* suggests that producers desire a dance-heavy, classic musical comedy without overt racism. White people tend to dominate musical theatre school programs and community theatre, so by erasing race, the new script enables more of them to stage the musical without doing yellowface. On September 12, 2023, Concord Theatricals listed sixty upcoming productions, from Ramona High School in Riverside, California, to the Muni.¹³⁹ On February 3, 2025, the site listed another hundred productions.¹⁴⁰ By contrast, the script based on the 1962 off-Broadway revival with Ching, Ling, and the yellowface plot had only a handful of slated productions.¹⁴¹ According to the director of marketing at Concord Theatricals, “customer feedback regarding *Anything Goes* (2022 Revision) has been overwhelmingly positive and it is

one of our top-licensed musicals.”¹⁴² He emphasized, “EDI (Equity, Diversity and Inclusion) is a key tenet for us at Concord Theatricals, but we know we can always do better and listen more. We work on an ongoing basis with our titles’ rightsholders to address concerns about these issues.”¹⁴³ In 2025, the American Association of Community Theatre surveyed nearly one hundred theatres, finding that *Anything Goes* was the second-most popular musical and that DEI initiatives informed season selection at 45 percent of them.¹⁴⁴ Revising racism helps decrease harm and increase business.

The new libretto of *Anything Goes* writes out anti-Asian racism at the cost of writing out John and Luke. The inclusion of Chinese men aboard the SS *American* rests on the exploitation of their clothes to make the plot work, just as the inclusion of Asians in the United States rests on the exploitation of their labor to make the country work. So if the yellowface goes, then so go the Chinese. Removing yellowface should feel like a win thanks to the advocacy of Asian American artists and sensitivities of their collaborators. Yet that also comes with a sense of loss, given the already few opportunities for Asian American actors between the musical canon and the short-lived Broadway runs of *Allegiance* (2015) and *KPOP* (2022). *Anything Goes* exemplifies an attempt to reform yellowface by using Asian-coded things other than makeup, directing Asian American actors to exert greater agency, and ultimately revising the script.

But John and Luke have not disappeared completely. The licensable script mistakenly includes their names five times in the stage directions. A PDF uploaded in 2023 by Class Act Productions, a community theatre and school in Texas, shows that someone crossed out Luke and John and wrote in Spit and Dippy. Even after sustained revisions specifically intended to expunge the Chinese men, they continue to haunt the musical. John and Luke live in between the lines, and they cannot be gotten rid of so easily. Performing ambivalent inclusion/exclusion, Asian Americans sing and dance in the margins.

3: “If You Want to Know Who We Are”

Asia as Multiracial/Postracial Fantasy
in *The Nightingale* and *The Mikado*

In 2018, aliens descended on the Theatre at Ace Hotel in Los Angeles. They performed *The Mikado* (1885) on Mars with neon green, kimono-esque clothes and high-pitched, robot-like digital vocal manipulation. Created and performed by Taylor Mac, whose pronoun is judy, *A 24-Decade History of Popular Music* chronicles US popular music over the course of twenty-four hours, enacting a queer utopia onstage and among the audience while confronting the exclusionary violence of the United States. Part of the 1876–85 segment, the *Marskado* featured Mac as Nanki-Poo, and a white male-presenting volunteer from the audience played Yum Yum, as the crowd roared with laughter at repetitions of the phrase “Tit willow.” According to judy, the *Marskado* “has all of the joy [of *The Mikado*], none of the cultural appropriation, and uses the material to critique economic disparity.”¹ Critics echoed this sensibility of “green being more acceptable than yellow face.”² Not exactly a critique of anti-Asian racism, this *Mikado* on Mars attempts to recuperate the Victorian operetta by deracializing the setting, costumes, and sounds. Yet pseudo-Asianness and white people continue to haunt this extraterrestrial scene. Moreover, conceiving Asians as aliens conjures up a legal history of prohibiting them from becoming US citizens with attendant unalienable rights. So often considered perpetual foreigners, Asians may just as well be martians.

This chapter examines yellowface without yellowed faces via multiracial but mostly white casts in otherworldly versions of East Asia. After historicizing and theorizing these phenomena of exotic and postracial fantasies, I analyze La Jolla Playhouse’s workshop production of *The Nightingale* by Steven Sater and Duncan Sheik in 2012 and the New York Gilbert & Sullivan Players’ (NYGASP) production of *The Mikado* by W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan in 2016. Based on Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tale set in China, *The Nightingale* boasted white men as the young and old emperor and only two Asian Americans in a cast of twelve. This casting decision led to the most important dispute in US theatre

since the 1997 August Wilson–Robert Brustein town hall on the very same topic: the racial politics of casting and the fair distribution of theatrical resources. The white creative team defended their artistic choices as reflective of their multicultural world. Just as they claimed that the locale is not really China, many Gilbert and Sullivan enthusiasts have long claimed that *The Mikado* is not really about Japan. When some Asian Americans lambasted NYGASP’s yellowface practices, the company carefully revised the script and recast with more actors of color; removed Japanese-inspired makeup, wigs, and costumes; deleted stereotypical references; and brought in Asian American consultants. In addition, the director created a framing device that explicitly signposts Gilbert’s vision as a fever dream. What are the implications of a multiracial cast singing the opening lines, “If you want to know who we are / We are gentlemen of Japan / On many a vase and jar / On many a screen and fan”?³ These well-meaning productions of *The Nightingale* and *The Mikado* mobilize a sprinkling of Asian American actors to authenticate their settings and carry out inclusion work while minimizing the salience of race and preserving white dominance over artistry, employment, and epistemology. With racial privilege, white actors can play East Asian characters yet claim that race no longer matters.

I trace the production histories of La Jolla Playhouse’s *Nightingale* and NYGASP’s *Mikado* but focus on the discourses surrounding these productions, from their promotional marketing to the protests against them. In both cases, Asian American artists effectively organized nationally using social media, blogs, and panels in unprecedented ways. They pointed out the contradictory, color-avoidant, and anti-Asian logics of the productions that erased them, and they demanded more opportunities for Asian American actors. In addition to positing these logos-based arguments, they appealed to pathos. I quote extensively from Facebook comments, blog posts, interviews, and articles to demonstrate how many Asian American theatremaker-activists were feeling yellow, expressing themselves in affectively and argumentatively compelling ways. At the same time, social media and comment sections served as spaces for those defending yellowface to offer their staunch support for postracial politics, white traditions, and sometimes outright anti-Asian bigotry. By studying how artists and audiences felt about yellowface in the early to mid-2010s, we can understand contestations over the very inclusion of Asian Americans in US musical theatre and the postracial ideology that marked the Obama presidency. Harking back to *Miss Saigon* (1991), *The Nightingale* marked a watershed moment in US musical theatre history because Asian Americans networked and said no to yellowface. A few years later, with *The Mikado*, Asian Americans could draw from their earlier organizing and prompt substantive change. This time, white theatre institutions started to listen. Alongside other egregious high-profile cases,

from *The Last Airbender* (2010) to *Ghost in the Shell* (2017), mainstream discourse shifted away from tacit acceptance of overt yellowface and whitewashing in professional productions. In the face of postracial fantasies, Asian American theatre activists insisted on the realities of racialization and staked their claim to the stage.

Exotic and Postracial Fantasies

Orientalist cultural productions have long imagined Asia as a semi-real place—a faraway fiction and a studied curiosity. Early Hollywood studios portrayed Asians as foreign to the United States, despite often shooting in the United States and casting Asian Americans.⁴ Rather than improve representations of Asian countries, they mitigated objections from Asian governments by reframing the settings as mythical. In *Hollywood Goes Oriental*, Karla Rae Fuller observes, “The connection between Shangri-La as a creation of fantasy and its placement on the Asian continent is illustrative of a persistent pattern of cultural containment as Western illusions, desires, and dreams are thrust into an Oriental realm.”⁵ To the West, Asian people and places appear exotic. Josephine Lee articulates “theatrical orientalism” as a condensation of different cultures from Egypt to East Asia that associates “the Orient with opulent excess, despotic power, magical objects, and fantasy.”⁶ In the nineteenth century, Westerners developed antiquarian research to know, control, and represent the East, as exotic details mixed with flights of fancy.⁷ For instance, some Europeans considered the *Arabian Nights* both fairy tale and ethnography. In Disney’s retelling of *Aladdin* (1992), the setting is Agrabah, a fictional South Asian/Middle Eastern-inspired kingdom presented as a faraway place with magic and barbarians. In 2015, Public Policy Polling found that 30 percent of Republican primary voters supported bombing Agrabah, which sounds both frivolous and frightening, given that most of them also supported banning Muslims from entering the United States.⁸ Dangerously mixing fantasy and reality, these imaginings of Asian worlds also tend to mix white and Asian people via casting.

In the United States, multiracial casting began as a politically progressive and artistically innovative policy. In the 1960s, companies like Arena Stage and the Public Theater experimented with casting more actors of color in classic white plays, thereby providing more opportunities for people of color and expanding ownership of the Western canon. The Non-Traditional Casting Project of the 1980s advocated for more employment of minoritized actors across four categories of casting: blind, societal, cross-cultural, and conceptual.⁹ Blind casting assigns roles based on objective merit. Societal casting reproduces the demographics of real-world locales. Cross-cultural casting places texts in new,

often non-white, settings. Finally, conceptual casting calls for certain roles to be played by actors of certain racial or ethnic backgrounds, genders, or physical abilities to unlock new dramaturgical interpretations and expose societal power dynamics.¹⁰ With a heightened awareness of race, spectators can gain further insights into the stories onstage and hierarchies offstage.

While the terms *nontraditional* and *colorblind casting* largely came to mean considering actors of color for implicitly white parts, ideas of pure merit and of looking past race ignore how unconscious biases and power structures favor white men.¹¹ In the 1990s, renowned African American playwright August Wilson famously argued against critic Robert Brustein. He critiqued how the casting of people of color as white characters reified the idea of whiteness as universal, solidified the white canon, and took away resources from Black theatres producing work by Black artists. Meanwhile, Brustein called for equality without equity, and he called Wilson a segregationist. With the presidential election of Barack Obama in 2008, racial progress registered visibly even as postracial rhetoric skyrocketed, color-conscious progressive policies receded, and racist state violence continued. For instance, the Affordable Care Act (2010) expanded health-care coverage to twenty million Americans, closing racial disparities while appearing race neutral. Ruling that certain protections for people of color were no longer needed, the Supreme Court struck down key provisions in the Voting Rights Act in 2013. That same year, Black Lives Matter launched, as cops continue to kill approximately one thousand people—disproportionately Black and Latinx/e—every year with impunity.¹²

Multiracial casting offers the appearance of diversity and inclusion but does not necessarily lead to systemic change. In multiracial productions of classic white works, audiences can read actors of color as turning white characters into characters of color, as continuing to play white characters as such, or as dismissing the pertinence of race altogether since they believe race to be no longer relevant.¹³ Lee considers the potential dangers of this political orientation: “this rhetoric of liberalism on the one hand promises inclusion and racial equality, but on the other hand not only fails to counter, but perhaps even serves to disguise racism.”¹⁴ In *The Problem of the Color[blind]: Racial Transgression and the Politics of Black Performance*, Brandi Wilkins Catanese similarly critiques how postracial ideology enables a forgetting of a racist past, present, and future: “American theater, then, is exempted from having to contemplate its own history and the extent to which past practices of race-based discrimination produced the supposedly color-blind institutions of the present, and more importantly, how some enduring practices perpetuate racialized inequities.”¹⁵ As Daniel Banks concludes in his keystone essay on integrated casting, “The playing field clearly needs to be balanced before US theater can seriously entertain a conversation

about a 'universal' casting policy; and audiences also need a broader understanding of history and the sociology of their own viewing."¹⁶

The Nightingale and *The Mikado* present a different casting scenario from classic white plays but follow the same postracial logics. Instead of explicitly or implicitly white characters, these pieces of musical theatre consist entirely of East Asian characters. In the La Jolla and NYGASP productions, multiracial casting forms a crucial part of the artistic intention and political orientation. If directors should cast without regard to race, if people of color get to play white people, if racism does not exist, and if the setting is not a real place, then white people and other non-Asians can play Asians. More than two-thirds of white Americans believe that the status of Asian Americans is more akin to white people than to people of color.¹⁷ This commensurability opens the door to white actors portraying Asians. Meanwhile, three-quarters of Asian Americans liken themselves more to other people of color.¹⁸ In her cognition-based study of casting, Amy Cook further observes the privilege of appearing unmarked: "White performers in America are given a kind of VIP pass to enter whatever character-door they want to because white America is not always presumed to be carrying its race around."¹⁹ A kind of casting colonialism, "whitewashing animates and extends the boundaries of Whiteness by claiming any and all racial difference. It uses liberal postracism to advance illiberal desires to symbolically plunder and gain representational territory," according to David C. Oh.²⁰ Multiracial casts in fantasy China and Japan paradoxically erase race while enabling white people to take on even more roles that would have gone to actors of Asian descent in more realistic portrayals. This multicultural world becomes Asian, whitened, and postracial, the complex layers of yellowface without yellowed faces.

In addition to upholding a diversity fantasy evacuated of material power dynamics to preserve white privilege, the rhetoric surrounding these musicals reflects the findings of sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva in *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*. White people tend to deploy the language of equal opportunity and to downplay the existence of systemic white supremacy, typically by using the frames of abstract liberalism and minimization of racism: "These frames then form a formidable wall because they provide whites a seemingly nonracial way of stating their racial views without appearing irrational or rabidly racist."²¹ For instance, they may suggest that art is apolitical, that there must be few qualified Asian American actors, that Asian Americans are practically white, and that race does not matter. These beliefs align with the pillars that uphold what Brian Eugenio Herrera calls the "mythos of casting": equity, artistry, and meritocracy.²² Bonilla-Silva also identifies a gap between ideal and reality; white Americans may acknowledge racial inequality, but then they are often unwilling to actively redistribute

resources to create equity. Calling out the casting in *The Nightingale* and *The Mikado*, Asian American theatremakers agitated to make others see them, see China and Japan, and see the systemic discrimination they face as real.

Adapting *The Nightingale*

Hans Christian Andersen grounded his fairy tale in chinoiserie. He took inspiration from a Chinese-style pavilion designed by a Danish architect in Tivoli Gardens. Published in 1843, “The Nightingale” concerns the isolated emperor of China, who hears tell of the beautiful and singular music of a nightingale. A kitchen girl leads him through the forest to the bird, which the emperor decides to cage in his court. When the emperor of Japan sends a mechanical bird as a gift, the nightingale flies away. But the machine, as well as the Chinese emperor’s body, breaks down. The nightingale ultimately restores his health, coaxes away Death, and promises to return with songs if the emperor keeps the bird a secret. The fairy tale airs anxieties about the Industrial Revolution while invoking Chinese tropes and, in some versions, slurs. The webpage of the Hans Christian Andersen Centre features an English translation that begins, “The Emperor of China is a Chinaman, as you most likely know, and everyone around him is a Chinaman too.”²³ In her analysis of dozens of illustrated versions of “The Nightingale,” Patricia Dooley finds a mix of Chinese and European commodities alongside Chinese figures with slanted eyes, coolie hats, Fu Manchu mustaches, and long fingernails, a yellowface repertoire.²⁴ She contends that Andersen combined Orientalism with his Romantic imagination: “the costly porcelain palace, the wonderful city, the elaborate and extensive gardens; draws upon Western stereotypes about the formality, richness, artificiality, and rigidity of high Chinese culture. On the other hand, Andersen opposes images of the simple fishermen, the kitchen maid, the green woods, the deep sea, and the nightingale to the stiff, unfeeling palace world.”²⁵ Librettist-lyricist Sater used to read the fairy tale as a bedtime story to his son; he brought the story to composer Sheik in 2001.

Prior to the Page to Stage workshop production at La Jolla Playhouse in 2012, *The Nightingale* experienced significant development in the national new play ecosystem. Commissioned by producer Martin McCallum, the musical received its first workshop at the prestigious Eugene O’Neill National Music Theater Conference in 2003. *Playbill* dubbed it “a take on the Hans Christian Andersen work in which a young Chinese emperor finds hope in a bird and a common girl” and named the members of the cast, which included white, Black, Asian American, and Native American performers.²⁶ *The Nightingale* had another workshop in New York City in 2005, and Sater and Sheik continued revising at the TheatreWorks Writers’ Retreat in Palo Alto, California, in 2007. Amid this

period, their rock musical *Spring Awakening* (2006) opened on Broadway, after having been developed at La Jolla. *The Nightingale* subsequently underwent a workshop at the American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco, this time with an all-Asian cast directed by James Lapine.

But in 2011, *The Nightingale* returned to a white-dominant, multiracial concept in a concert reading at Vassar College's Powerhouse Theater under the direction of Moisés Kaufman that set the stage for the version at La Jolla. The cast featured white Broadway stars: Michael Cerveris as the emperor, Harriet Harris (no stranger to yellowface, per chapter 1) as the empress dowager, and Michael Esper as the young emperor, suggesting a white family logic. The rest of the male characters such as chief eunuch were also played by white men, while Uzo Aduba was the sole Black performer. Finally, four Asian Americans, Kylie Liya Goldstein (now Kylie Liya Page), Kimiko Glenn, Arielle Jacobs, and Celina Carvajal (now Lena Hall) filled out the rest of the cast. The latter three are mixed Asian-white, and Glenn would be the only one to reprise her role at La Jolla. A concert staging with a multiracial cast might suggest lessening the importance of racialization, but the performance included an actor holding a red parasol and Harris wearing an East Asian robe, racialized props and costumes necessary for the Asian fantasy. The subsequent casting call for La Jolla's workshop did not specify that actors should come from certain racial or ethnic backgrounds to match the characters; nor did it explicitly encourage actors of color to audition. The cast of twelve ended up including white men as the older emperor (Jonathan Hammond) and younger emperor (Bobby Steggert); four more white men; Black women as the empress dowager (Charlayne Woodard), the fisherwoman (Eisa Davis), Feiyan (Corbin Reid), and an ensemble member; and only two Asian Americans, Princess Ssu-ming (Kimiko Glenn) and the nightingale (Nikki Castillo). Put another way: half of the Asian American representation consisted of a bird played by a child, resonating with racialized tropes of Asians being not quite human or mature (figure 9).

The story and sounds of *The Nightingale* shifted over time, as Sater and Sheik explored Chinese and Asian surfaces and deeper themes. Sater initially portrayed the emperor as a young man coming of age with a romantic interest, and Sheik connected the mechanical bird to modern music recording in contrast with the natural nightingale and live performance. But Kaufman helped them refocus on the main theme of regret and restructure the narrative to show the emperor looking back at his past, enabling the double casting of a young and old emperor. Both Buddhist, Sater and Sheik also noted parallels between the emperor's and the Buddha's journeys to visit commoners. For the La Jolla production, Sheik reorchestrated the songs "to have more of what he calls 'Asian-ness' . . . Asian music as interpreted by Western ears . . . cello, clarinet, piano



Figure 9. Bobby Steggert as the Young Emperor, Nikki Castillo as the Nightingale, and other cast members in the 2012 La Jolla Playhouse workshop production of *The Nightingale*. (© 2025 Craig Schwartz Photography.)

and Asian banjos, flutes and percussion instruments” instead of guitar.²⁷ Musicologist Ralph P. Locke observes that “foreign musical instruments [such as gongs and small bells], or Western ones that are used in ways that make them sound foreign, for example xylophone, which, played pentatonically, can signify East and Southeast Asia,” account for some of the main ways that Western scores evoke exotic locales.²⁸ On the other hand, Locke also argues that composers sometimes score exotic characters with Western-style music to make them more human, sympathetic, and relatable for presumed white audiences. In a promotional video for *The Nightingale*, for instance, an excerpt from “The Walls Are Tumbling Down” plays in the background, beginning with Asian-ish music before a male vocalist sings, sounding like the indie rock band Death Cab for Cutie. Musical theatre productions can also rely on visual design elements to frame Asian settings. Kaufman’s aesthetic approach called for more Chinese specificity in the puppetry, including a dragon.

The Nightingale is full of explicit East Asian references, despite later disavowals to the contrary. First, Sater reported, “we actually have done a great deal of research into Chinese history.”²⁹ In addition to the emperor and empress dow-

ger, the characters include Feiyan, a Chinese name meaning flying swallow. The script references the Mongol invasion and the Great Wall, and the program for the workshop production included information about the Forbidden City and the Qing Dynasty, setting the stage as China per Andersen's original fairy tale. Likely sung by the old emperor, "My Extraordinary Past" is infused with Western phrases and Asian allusions: "Shall we have ginger tea or blood / Shall we do zen today or ballet."³⁰ His bloodthirstiness conjures the trope of the oriental despot, akin to the mikado, as he contemplates sentencing a peasant to death and attending a public hanging. Having a white actor sing these lyrics does not evacuate their racialized meanings.

Initial marketing for *The Nightingale* explicitly described the musical as set in China, but leading up to and during the workshop, promotional materials began to deracialize the production. The logo featured silhouettes of a man and woman without clear cultural or racial markers. The landing page on the theatre's website showcased the male creators, from the composer and librettist-lyricist to the director and puppeteer. Its description of *The Nightingale* initially entailed "a young emperor in ancient China" and his "luxurious but constricted life inside the walls of the Forbidden City," but then eliminated all references to China and added universal themes with the tagline "A new musical about falling in love with the world."³¹ Despite this rhetoric, *The Nightingale* remained fixed in Asia. By having a multiracial cast, the musical could traverse postracial, mythical China.

Regardless of all the evidence of Chinese specificity and Orientalist influence, the artists and producers insisted that *The Nightingale* was a postracial fantasy, especially when La Jolla Playhouse received pushback on the casting, illustrating the contradictions that characterize color-avoidant politics. Sater explained, "It's not about Asia. What's really important to the piece is to have completely color-blind casting. Completely multicultural. Which is what we have. We have an African-American mother of a white son in our show now."³² Since US audiences often read Asian Americans as Asian and not American, this racial logic presumes that an Asian American cast would necessarily make the musical "about Asia" and not "completely multicultural." Rather, multiculturalism becomes somewhat ironically achieved through pretending to ignore race. An audience might clock an actress as Black but then forgo racial thinking upon registering a white actor playing her child. Now you see race and now you don't. Racial power dynamics do not pertain in the world Sater and Sheik describe as "mythic China," "contemporary fable," and "a fairy tale."³³ By emphasizing the lack of authenticity in Andersen's original story, they further justify the multiracial casting and Orientalist fabrication. Akin to claims that *The Mikado* satirizes England through a Japanese lens was an assertion by Sater that "Andersen was

writing a satire of the West, and setting it in China.”³⁴ China becomes a tool with which to recenter implicit whiteness. In an interview with KPBS, Christopher Ashley, then artistic director of La Jolla Playhouse, denied that the characters were written as Chinese and maintained that “culturally stereotyping . . . was certainly one trap we were trying to avoid.”³⁵ By refusing to certify the characters as Chinese while casting two Asian Americans, the production team believed that they had overcome race and racism. Sater explained, “we felt, as white creators, it was not, we would not presume to know, or to tell, the story of Asia.”³⁶ This sensitivity to cultural appropriation, however, precludes possibilities of collaborating with Asian Americans and recognizing Asian Americans as more than Asian. Meanwhile, some sources suggest that Sater and Sheik had abandoned the idea of an all-Asian American cast because, when they had had one before, cast members pointed out inaccuracies in the musical, such as how Japanese geishas would not belong in China, and they questioned why some characters sang lyrics with dropped articles.³⁷ But with a multiracial cast in a fantasy Chinese setting, they achieved less offensive racial impersonation, yellowface without yellowed faces.

Organizing Asian Americans

Just days before *The Nightingale* began previews at La Jolla Playhouse, Asian American theatremakers launched trenchant critiques of the casting that triggered widespread discourse, which is highly unusual for a workshop production. Coverage fixated on the casting of only two Asian Americans out of twelve actors and on the casting of white actors as the emperor of China. The blogosphere lit up with posts from *Angry Asian Man*, among others. Theatre news websites like *Playbill* and *Broadway.com* provided coverage, as did local television and radio news and national venues including the *Huffington Post*, *Chicago Tribune*, and *Los Angeles Times*, which published five articles about the issue. Asian Americans effectively organized online, via the Asian American Performers Action Coalition (AAPAC), and behind the scenes at La Jolla itself.

In *Theatre Blogging: The Emergence of a Critical Culture*, Megan Vaughan boldly claims, “The theatre blogosphere has made a more significant and far-reaching contribution to theatre—its practices as well as its profile—than anything else in the twenty-first century.”³⁸ While newspaper critics tend to be highly educated, wealthy white men whose opinions appear to be objective, bloggers wield greater possibilities for democracy, inclusivity, and explicit subjectivity. In addition, Asian American internet culture has had a disproportionately large impact on US society. To exemplify how “it is by challenging the injustices and inequalities of theatre (and there are many) that bloggers

make their most vital contribution," Vaughan devotes a section of her book to the 2016 UK production of Howard Barker's *In the Depths of Dead Love*, which cast all white actors in a historical Chinese setting.³⁹ One of the bloggers she showcases is Erin Quill.

On July 7, 2012, Quill ignited conversation about casting for *The Nightingale* with the post "Moises Kaufman can kiss my ass & here's why" on her blog *fairyprincessdiaries*. Within two weeks, she had twenty-five thousand hits from readers around the world. A Chinese-Irish-Welsh-American actress, Quill dedicates her blog to celebrating Asian Americans on stage and screen and condemning racism and sexism in the industry. Her writing style mixes images, memes, and gifs with bold, all-caps, and italicized words to set up expectations and then shock, conveying her righteous anger and playful humor. Quill reasons, "If you make somebody laugh, they remember it. If you make somebody feel ashamed, or you yell at them all the time, they're going to shut down. . . . I don't want anybody to come away from my blog feeling anything other than, 'OMG, she's *right!*'"⁴⁰ She strategically turns the negative valences of feeling yellow into emotional, comical, and logical techniques of persuasion to attempt to move her reader to her side. In her post, she firmly establishes *The Nightingale* as set in feudal China, as she posts an image of Empress Dowager Cixi. She suggests that Alvin Ing, Amy Hill, Jodi Long, and Christine Toy Johnson would be fittingly cast in the musical and that she herself might receive a call. But then boom: headshots of white men and a Black woman. While she celebrates the casting of Kimiko Glenn, she underscores the irony—"there are **NO CHINESE PEOPLE IN A SHOW SET IN CHINA**"—and recommends, "if you are simply going to use the concept of the fairy tale, just do not set it in China, Feudal China!"⁴¹ Quill knew that speaking up put her career at risk, but she thought about her newborn and told herself, "If you don't say anything, then he will grow up, and he will only be able to do those three male roles in *The King and I*, and nothing will change."⁴² Her post elicited nearly two hundred comments, mostly affirming her but a few objecting to her brash tone or expressing outright bigotry. She had lit a spark.

A couple of days after Quill's post, AAPAC issued a statement focused on fair employment. Using a measured tone, the coalition asked why the production team did not cast more Asian actors in this Asian-set musical, in contrast with *The Lion King* (1997) and *Bombay Dreams* (2004), which had cast primarily Black and South Asian American performers in their African and Bombay settings, respectively. AAPAC urged, "Stand with us in our opposition to minorities getting excluded from future projects under the seemingly benevolent guise of 'multi-cultural casting.'"⁴³ Rather than shouting and shutting down, the group offered consultation and collaboration with theatres to do better when it came

to casting Asian Americans. AAPAC's interventions build on a long history of Asian American actor activism, like the founding of East West Players in 1965.⁴⁴

AAPAC began in 2011 with a Facebook post: "Where are all the Asian actors in mainstream New York theatre?" Pun Bandhu, a Yale-trained actor, revealed that, after a decade of working in the city, he had finally received his first audition at Playwrights Horizons, a major off-Broadway theatre. Numerous comments conveyed similar experiences of not being seen. Nandita Shenoy reflected, "it was the first time I realized that there was something larger than just my own shortcomings at work," as she and other Asian American actors identified their treatment and emotions as not only personal but also part of a racialized pattern.⁴⁵ She later became a member of AAPAC's steering committee, which initially consisted of Bandhu, Cindy Cheung, Kimiye Corwin, Angel Desai, Siho Ellsmore, Christine Toy Johnson, Peter Kim, Julianne Hanzelka Kim, Nancy Kim Parsons, Kenneth Lee, Allan Mangaser, and Eileen Rivera. They continued the conversation in person with New York-based Asian American theatre artists. According to Cheung, "in the end, we arrived at the fact that cold hard data is hard to contradict. And we knew that this data would very clearly show how few opportunities we had to be onstage."⁴⁶ So the actors analyzed the racial distribution of roles for Broadway and large off-Broadway nonprofit theatres. In February 2012, AAPAC released its first report and gathered artistic leaders, casting directors, and agents to educate them and hold them accountable. It found that, over the five seasons between 2006 and 2011, only 2 percent of parts in newly opened shows went to Asian actors, although 13 percent of New York City is Asian, whereas 80 percent of parts went to white people, although only 33 percent of New York City is white.⁴⁷ Proving and publicizing systemic inequality, AAPAC hoped to shame theatres into more inclusive casting practices. Even though its mission centers on advocating for Asian American representation in New York, its members felt compelled to comment on *The Nightingale*, which became a major test case for them with employment data in hand. At the Consortium of Asian American Theaters and Artists conference-festival in 2014, Bandhu reported that La Jolla Playhouse, Center Theatre Group, the Old Globe, South Coast Repertory, and Pasadena Playhouse fared only slightly better than New York venues: they cast Asian Americans in 4 percent of roles.⁴⁸ However, Asian Americans make up 14 percent of the population of Los Angeles County and 11 percent of that of San Diego County.⁴⁹

Soon after AAPAC issued its statement, Christopher Ashley took to La Jolla Playhouse's Facebook page to stand up for *The Nightingale*. He explained, "It was our intention from the onset to create a multicultural cast in a reinterpretation of this Hans Christian Andersen classic fable, blending East and West, past and present," wording that privileges intention over impact and syntax that unfortu-

nately replicates Orientalist thinking of aligning the East with the past and the West with the present.⁵⁰ A couple of commenters who had seen the production expressed initial surprise at the multiracial cast but then muted the importance of race: "it didnt bother me. the story was told, it didnt matter if they were Asian or not."⁵¹ They denied charges of yellowface due to the lack of pseudo-Asian makeup and accents, and they suggested that anyone can play anyone in a mythical land telling a made-up tale. Another Facebook user championed meritocracy: "shouldn't the best performers be cast in each role, regardless of race? This is all sounding a bit too 'Affirmative Action' for me."⁵² One Chinese American actor found it fair play for white actors to portray Asian roles if Asian American actors can embody white roles.⁵³

But the vast majority of remarks voiced the hurt and fury of Asian Americans feeling yellow. They called attention to ongoing anti-Asian racism from physical violence to fewer acting opportunities, stressed that China is a real place, and insisted on the casting as yellowface without yellowed faces: "They don't have to have prosthetic eyelids, or yellow skin. They have the costume and the setting—they're Asian characters: Yellowface."⁵⁴ In one of the most-liked comments, actor-playwright Ken Narasaki lamented, "this kind of casting is something many of us thought was on its way out in the 1980s but 30 years later—an entire generation later—it is still a widespread problem—only designated shows are to be cast multi-racially and too often, they are the few shows that should be cast ethnically specifically."⁵⁵ Several people noted that nontraditional casting was initially conceived and intended to open up more roles for actors of color, not white actors. In answer to Sater and Sheik implying that they cannot achieve multiculturalism with an Asian American cast, actor-composer Jason Ma pointed out the diversity among Asian Americans across languages and lived experiences.⁵⁶ Actor Francis Jue theorized the racial dramaturgy of *The Nightingale's* casting schema: "a fable that takes place in feudal China can only be made universal and mythic if Asian actors are accompanied by actors of other colors. The hero of the story must be played by a white actor, to achieve the maximum amount of empathy from the audience. And only the most exotic and/or subversive characters may be played by Asians, because our race signifies something unknowable, something foreign, something other."⁵⁷ He critiques how whiteness makes stories seem timeless and relatable to other white people, in contrast with the racial load that actors of Asian descent must carry. Finally, Facebook commenters repeatedly raised a comparison with blackface, contending that La Jolla Playhouse would not cast white actors as Black characters in *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) or *The Color Purple* (2004). So, they asked, why would the company permit white people to play Asians? These arguments set the stage for the Asian American speakers at the ensuing town hall.

La Jolla leadership sought to do damage control. On July 12, 2012, the day after his initial Facebook post, Ashley announced on Facebook that the theatre would host a forum to discuss *The Nightingale* instead of having angry comments pile up on the internet. The day after that, he publicized that Christine Toy Johnson and Cindy Cheung from AAPAC and casting director Tara Rubin would participate. Members of the musical's creative team were conspicuously absent. Because it did not seem like the white artists were interested in listening to Asian Americans and having a good faith conversation, Johnson and Cheung threatened to leave the panel. Director Moisés Kaufman eventually agreed to join, along with Andy Lowe, who had worked in the company's production department for many years and cofounded San Diego Asian American Repertory Theatre. The subsequent Facebook comments included a chorus of pleas to livestream the postperformance discussion, suggesting that this casting incident was more than a local issue.

At La Jolla Playhouse itself, Asian American workers attempted to help their employer mitigate this public relations debacle while also holding their employer accountable. Lowe managed La Jolla's theatre-in-residence program, for which Seema Sueko's Mo'olelo Performing Arts Company was the inaugural recipient. After Lowe and Sueko became aware of the casting for *The Nightingale*, they joined with other arts leaders in San Diego to attempt to sway Ashley and managing director Michael Rosenberg. As employees, Lowe and Sueko were in vulnerable positions. Sueko urged Ashley and Rosenberg to make a public apology and promised that afterward, she "would commend that action, share the ways in which La Jolla Playhouse has supported Asian American artists in the past, and suggest we collectively move forward to advance better practices in the theater field."⁵⁸ But they refused. According to Lowe, "They didn't quite take us seriously and take the problem seriously. As far as they were concerned, they were like, 'this is innocuous. . . . It's a kid show, you know, with a kid story. You know, it's not harming anyone.' And they just really didn't understand."⁵⁹ By categorizing *The Nightingale* as children's theatre, they claimed a racial innocence that did not exist. Lowe went public with his critiques on his blog, pointing out the lack of Asian American collaborators or even consultants: "wouldn't an Asian American artist, born and raised in a western culture, schooled and trained in western theatre traditions, but influenced by Asian cultural roots, be ideal for interpreting a story like this, a western interpretation of Asian themes and aesthetics?"⁶⁰ He called on fellow Asian Americans, people of color, and white friends to speak out against the casting and to attend the conversation on July 22, 2012, following the matinee performance of *The Nightingale*.

Contesting Casting and Feeling Yellow

The panel brought together representatives of the Asian American theatre community, members of La Jolla Playhouse and *The Nightingale*, and interested audiences. While the *Los Angeles Times* reported the number of attendees as 150, others recalled a packed 400-seat house.⁶¹ Asian American artists from Los Angeles drove down to San Diego to express their anger and anguish and to lend their support to Lowe, Johnson, and Cheung. Although Ashley and moderator-diversity officer Jeanine Hillis framed this meeting as a space for sharing and listening toward mutual understanding, the spatial setup of two tables onstage facing each other, like in a debate, suggested opposing racialized sides as well as a false equal playing field. Whenever spectators applauded the Asian Americans, Hillis chastised them, cautioning that such reactions foster divisiveness. In establishing the rules for civil discourse, La Jolla shaped the terms and tone of the conversation.

Ashley, Kaufman, and Rubin began by both defending their artistic vision and acknowledging the pain Asian Americans had voiced. The artistic director emphasized the production as a workshop still in development and subject to change. But he also said sorry. Kaufman apologized as well. He named the shock he felt upon receiving criticism, because he had not thought he had done harm, and because of his reputation fighting for progressive causes, as he alluded to his work like the anti-homophobia docudrama *The Laramie Project* (2000). Still, he doubled down on the musical as set in "a mythical land" with "as many minorities as populate the American landscape."⁶² While he admitted that the set included Chinese lanterns, he highlighted Moroccan, Iranian, and Brazilian influences on the scenic and costume designs. Kaufman's explanation helped diffuse Chinese specificity, yet it raised other concerns about the geographic essentialism of Orientalist aesthetics. As the casting director, Rubin carried out Kaufman, Sater, and Sheik's desire for a diverse cast but without intentionally thinking through the racial dramaturgy of every character. She strongly implied that a certain Asian American male actor was unavailable for the production, as if relieving *The Nightingale* from responsibility. To Backstage.com, she remarked, "It's hard to imagine an occasion where colorblind casting wouldn't be appropriate."⁶³ Rubin had, interestingly, worked at the agency that cast Jonathan Pryce in *Miss Saigon* decades earlier. To these artists, yellowface, especially without yellowed faces, did not seem like a big deal. But for Asian American theatre artists, *The Nightingale* struck a chord because it prompted them to look back on both the little progress made to advance their representation and the racial lessons that white institutions took away: superficial diversity

and postracial politics. Avoiding the naming of race, the production's defenders cited the language of multiculturalism and multi-ethnicity.

Meanwhile, Lowe, Johnson, and Cheung countered the casting arguments with feeling yellow as Asian American affect and persuasive technique. All three are Chinese Americans who staked a claim to their very existence in the face of disavowal. Having watched the performance of *The Nightingale* just prior to the conversation, they realized that they were dealing with not only a casting problem but also Orientalist representation and the seeming approval of both by so many people in the audience. Cheung shared, "Watching the show was incredibly upsetting, but the anger also gave me a lot of fuel. I was shaking with rage at curtain call, and then we went immediately into the panel. I think that rage just sharpened my ability to get to the point."⁶⁴ They had to explain that this production featured yellowface, and that yellowface is bad. During the discussion, the racialized anger, agony, and alienation of feeling yellow manifested physically. With crossed arms or clasped hands, Johnson and Cheung adopted similar defensive gestures, signaling how they were listening but also bracing themselves as the La Jolla team spoke. At times, Johnson appeared so pained that she closed her eyes, while Lowe moved his gaze away from the panelists at the opposite table, and Cheung sat up straight and met their gaze. Their emotional displays show how yellowface has moved these Asian American artists, and their movement is, in turn, meant to move their audiences to feel for them and with them.

Lowe, Johnson, and Cheung humanized Asian Americans with different affective and rhetorical strategies. Lowe adopted a level-headed temperament and performed self-reflexive analyses on his individual anecdotes to make larger structural points. When asked how he first felt about the casting notice, he recounted that he said, "Oh. Of course," illustrating a resignation to the normalization of yellowface.⁶⁵ Just like how he had to be on his best behavior when growing up as part of the only Chinese American family in his neighborhood, he pointed out that *The Nightingale* may be a spectator's first encounter with purportedly Asian culture. So populating the cast with six white actors out of twelve and mixing up cultural references in the designs may have pernicious repercussions in performing symbolic violence through erasure.

Johnson mobilized pathos to make the audience feel her pain. When she first spoke, she struggled with her words because she was still deeply affected from having just watched the performance. She named this difficulty of discussing such an emotional subject, which for her was the invisibilizing of Asians, particularly casting white actors as the emperor of China and his son, not casting any Asian men, and manipulating faceless puppets with conical Asian hats: "To not be invited to sit at a table of a play that takes place in an Asian coun-

try is like a knife to the heart."⁶⁶ Her cutting simile physicalized feeling yellow. Against abstraction, the Asian American panelists offered context. While Kaufman insisted that the setting was not really China, Johnson and Cheung enumerated the many specific Chinese and East Asian references. Both underscored how nontraditional casting was not created to enable white actors to play characters of color. With AAPAC's numbers in hand, Cheung emphasized that only 1.5 percent of Broadway roles had gone to Asian American actors in the past five seasons.⁶⁷

Cheung continued the argument line about the absence of Asian men by mixing dry wit with gravity, thereby intensifying both. She recalled that Kaufman had said that the production team tried to cast "as many multi-ethnic actors as possible," which apparently translated to 50 percent white actors and no Asian men, "except for the puppets, even though we're not sure."⁶⁸ She prompted a lot of laughter while highlighting the absence of Asian men, the dominance of whiteness, and the absurdity of tabulating diversity in this way. She joked too that the musical took place in China, a real country, not Chi-no. She turned the pain of feeling yellow into the pleasure of making fun of racism. But on a serious note, Cheung asked Ashley, Kaufman, and Rubin, if this musical were set in Africa, "Would you have dared to do that, to cast a Caucasian male to play an African king?"⁶⁹ They evaded responding, perhaps because they realized that their answer was no, and they did not want to confront why.

Anti-yellowface activists often ask this kind of gotcha question, comparing yellowface to blackface. If modern US society has decided that blackface is harmful, then why is yellowface okay? The question exposes the limited Black-white binary of US race relations and the relative invisibilizing of anti-Asian oppression. When critiquing the casting of Pryce in *Miss Saigon*, David Henry Hwang similarly claimed that one would not cast a white actor to play Boy Willie in August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* (1987).⁷⁰ David Wannen of NYGASP would later deploy this line of critical thinking among those resistant to reforming yellowface practices in *The Mikado*: "I said, 'If we had been engaged and dressing up in African garb and costumes and trying to make ourselves look authentically African, would this still be such a conundrum to you?' And nobody could ever answer that question."⁷¹ These provocations can inspire startling realizations about racial performance and, thereby, inspire change. However, the logic of this argument implies that blackface and, to some extent, anti-Black racism are no longer permissible, although in fact they are persistent. Overt black cork makeup and oversized red lips may not be as common now, but like with yellowface without yellowed faces, non-Black people can perform stereotypical blackness with voice, gesture, and costume, and they can whitewash Black roles. At the same time, recognizing the different histories of Black Americans and Asian

Americans is vital. While blackface has rationalized slavery and evoked plantation nostalgia, yellowface has rationalized Asian exclusion. Instead of using blackface to score points and imply that anti-blackness is not as severe as anti-Asianness, Asian Americans should connect with Black Americans in the struggle for representative and material racial equality.

The audience responses to the panel revealed both staunch color avoidance to defend the casting and passionate color consciousness to clock it and oppose it. The first question, "What is the availability of talented, trained Asian American actors?" insinuated that there are none.⁷² Others in the audience quickly reacted—"Oh, don't go there" and "Everybody stand up"—while Johnson offered to show the contact list on her cell phone.⁷³ The person who asked the question bristled at the implication that they had asked a racist question; after all, by casting so few Asian American performers, the workshop production had authorized this belief that they barely exist. Sater spoke from the audience, vacillating between claims to represent the concrete ("the world in which I live, which is multicultural, and multi-ethnic") and the abstract ("I was not writing for a company of actors. I was writing for a vision in my mind").⁷⁴ Making a false equivalency, he contended that casting Glenn in a national tour of *Spring Awakening* was comparable to having a multiracial cast by her side in *The Nightingale*. To him, one Asian American playing an implicitly white German was the same as ten non-Asians playing Chinese. One attendee voiced their hope that the artists would not resolve the inconsistencies that Lowe, Johnson, and Cheung had raised by eliminating the Chinese references and thus the Asian American actors. Another spoke with such fire against the yellowface casting that he refused to sit down. Seeing race, an audience member offered an interpretation of the racial dramaturgy that the casting availed: "the perception of the world you have created is that it's ruled by white men, the darker-skinned Black women are to be feared, like the emperor's mother, the lighter-skinned Black women are to be loved, the Asian is the foreigner or the precious little nightingale, and there's no Latinos, Middle Easterners, Native Americans, or people of disabilities."⁷⁵ Far from mythical, the world of *The Nightingale* was shaped by white supremacy, patriarchy, colorism, Orientalism, and ableism. Against moves to depoliticize, many of these spectators insisted on the materiality of China and of systemic discrimination in the United States.

In the aftermath of the panel, artists and journalists continued to wrestle with *The Nightingale* but seemed to take anti-Asian racism more seriously, as they empathized with feeling yellow. Sheik relayed that the conversation "affected my thinking of the show. My head is spinning," while Steggert, who had played the young emperor, voiced his agreement with the Asian American speakers.⁷⁶ *Los Angeles Times* critic Charles McNulty acknowledged the dearth of

opportunities for Asian American actors, yet he also championed artistic freedom and suggested that the musical need not have a fully Asian American cast. He lamented, "The post-racial dream is indeed a long way off."⁷⁷ Given how post-racial politics flattens differences without fostering racial equity, whose dream is this? Insisting on the salience of race but with some humor, Ken Choy joked in *Hyphen* magazine, "If one drizzles Velveeta on a char sui bao, does it suddenly become not Chinese (granted, I don't know why one would want to do that)?"⁷⁸ In response to Sater's appeal to humanism during the casting conversation—"I have to address what's in my heart. And my artist vision of this piece. If artists exist for anything, it is to bring the humanity out in all of us"—Choy challenged, "So, could the implication of his statement be that Asian American artists don't touch his heart and reflect humanity to the same degree?"⁷⁹ He reported on Asian Americans leaving La Jolla dismayed, continuing to bear the heavy weight of yellowface. For the Japanese American periodical *Rafu Shimpo*, Guy Aoki railed against "The Idiots at La Jolla Playhouse and White Privilege," cautioning that he, and implicitly the Media Action Network for Asian Americans, would be keeping an eye on La Jolla and any other theatre that used multiracial casting to erase Asians.⁸⁰

Pulling Up Chairs and Building New Tables

Asian Americans responded with their own artistic interventions. In New York, members of the Ma-Yi Theater Company Writers Lab produced staged readings of short plays under the title *Orphans of the Nightingale of the Desert: A Bollywood Spectacular* (2014), referencing not only *The Nightingale* but also other yellowface and brownface incidents, from *The Orphan of Zhao* at the Royal Shakespeare Company to a Bollywood version of *Pippin* in Chicago in 2012. Inspired by *The Nightingale* and *Hamilton* (2015), Howard Ho created *The Nightingale Mixtape*, a ten-minute hip-hop piece that centers on a white emperor who is enchanted by a nightingale's sick flow and rhymes yet is unable to process her antiracist and anticolonial lyrics. Ho suggests that those with privilege hear what they want, not the critiques coming from people of color. Showing that a version of Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale can be staged with an all-Asian cast, Adventure Theatre MTC, the oldest children's theatre in the Washington, DC, metro area, commissioned Damon Chua to write *The Emperor's Nightingale* (2016). Set in 1720s China, the play embraced Chinese culture with specific songs, dance, puppetry, and calligraphy.

In the most explicit and extensive reaction to *The Nightingale*, *Chairs and a Long Table* by award-winning writer Han Ong depicts Asian American actors readying themselves for a town hall at Laguna Rep after the theatre casts a white

actor as the emperor of China in a new play. *Chairs and a Long Table* premiered in 2014 at Ma-Yi Theater Company, when a good deal of the audience would likely have been familiar with the incident at La Jolla. Peppered with jokes, the realistic drama shows the actors figuring out what would be most effective to make their case against yellowface—their acting credentials, their statistics documenting bias against employing Asian American actors, and, mostly, their affect. Feeling yellow, Angie appears emotionally fragile and recounts how she has not been cast in years, while she had played major roles in Chekhov in graduate school. Her colleague Brin offers Angie half-serious, half-comic direction, telling her to deliver her speech like Masha, and she performs a line reading, “Moscow, which means, Fuck You White People. Not angry but sad, like, White People, yet again you have disappointed me.”⁸¹ In addition to lamenting the dearth of opportunities, Angie resents having to play the role of a babysitter telling children to stop being racist when she would rather focus on her acting craft. Meanwhile, Bill adopts the role of the angry Asian man:

I mean, do you understand *what* they’re doing? To do a play. An Asian play. But retool it or recontextualize or whatever word they’re using as euphemism so that the roles don’t have to be cast with Asian actors. *We’re not doing a literal play about Asians. Asians are just the starting point. A jumping off point into ALL OF HUMANITY. So we’ll do this play, Asians As Abstractions. . . .* Let our anger have its proper stage. I mean this is my livelihood.⁸²

His righteous indignation makes vocal and visible Asian American subjectivity, in contrast with stereotypes of meek submissiveness. While the other characters find his outburst justified, they also find it off-putting and ineffective when imagining how white audiences would receive this negative tone and message. To convince white people that they should stop doing yellowface, Asian Americans often need to temper feeling yellow. Bill ultimately turns his anger into inspiration, shaping his speech into a call for theatre to reflect the rich, multiracial world in which we live, not too different from Sater’s concept for *The Nightingale* but with more Asian Americans. In highly gendered ways, Angie and Bill complement each other in mobilizing different affects of feeling yellow, the depressed woman versus the outraged man. For an audience at this Asian American theatre, *Chairs and a Long Table* plays out a cathartic fantasy of having Asian American characters saying all the right things. They express what many of us thought and felt about *The Nightingale*, using well-calibrated rhetorical and emotional maneuvers to protest yellowface—and without any pushback from racists. Instead of dismissing preaching to the choir, performance studies scholar David Román argues, “Community-based and community-identified

artists and audiences offer each other necessary opportunities to rehearse the constitutive reiteration of our own identities" in the face of oppression.⁸³ For others in the theatre industry, both in the world of the play and beyond, *Chairs and a Long Table* attempts to do persuasive and pedagogical work.

Ong's dramaturgy largely hinges on Crissie, the white consultant, representing white allies. Throughout the play, she stands in for the presumed white spectator on whom we see the effects of Angie's and Bill's affective arguments. Seemingly neutral and professional, she evaluates them, measures the appropriate amount of sadness and fury, and comes to empathize with the Asian Americans in feeling yellow. In her review for the *New York Times*, Alexis Soloski, another white woman, theorizes Crissie as exemplifying "how we should be won over by the characters' fervor"; although she believes "it would be difficult to leave 'Chairs' without feeling pretty wrathful on [the characters'] behalf," she concludes, "this is a distressing play rather than a galvanizing one. However well Bill and Angie acquit themselves in the coming confrontation, there's no sense that it will make much difference."⁸⁴ The play moved Soloski, even though she ultimately downplayed the characters' actions and affects. It is unfair to measure theatre for social change with the impossibly high standard of immediate change. Yet Soloski's review was the first and only time that the *New York Times* acknowledged the yellowface casting of *The Nightingale*. *Chairs and a Long Table* elicited empathetic responses, and the real town hall did prompt material change.

Since the workshop of *The Nightingale* and the attendant protests, La Jolla Playhouse has more actively included Asian American artists. In 2014, La Jolla and American Conservatory Theater coproduced *The Orphan of Zhao* featuring B. D. Wong and Sab Shimono, as if making amends for the Royal Shakespeare Company's production. Ashley cast Christine Toy Johnson in the musical *Come from Away*, which transferred to Broadway in 2017. Almost every season, the company puts a new Asian American play or musical on the main stage, including Hansol Jung's *Wild Goose Dreams* (2017), Lauren Yee's *Cambodian Rock Band* (2019), and Sam Chanse, MILCK, and AG's *The Family Album* (2026). After the 2020 uprising for Black lives, La Jolla Playhouse published an antiracism plan to provide more dedicated opportunities to artists of color, from slots in the season to stage management fellowships. In 2024, Eric Keen-Louie became the artistic producing director, diversifying the company at the top.

Sater and Sheik have taken a similar route with *The Nightingale*. In 2023, more than a decade after the workshop production at La Jolla, the musical returned in a revised concert version for one night at Joe's Pub, part of the Public Theater off-Broadway. The duo worked with director Zi Alikhan and producers Emma Wang, David Lai, and Elisabeth Siegel to "center the piece on a com-

pany of API-identifying actors and creatives.”⁸⁵ The marketing copy further leans in to the Chinese specificity by establishing the setting as “Ancient China” and naming the conceit as “a story of forbidden love between the young emperor of China and a radical young woman from outside the Forbidden City walls.”⁸⁶ In changing the creative team, producers, and cast as well as committing to a Chinese locale and characters, Sater and Sheik seem to have listened to their critics and turned *The Nightingale* into a color-conscious musical that employs Asian Americans. The protests worked. A few years after the La Jolla workshop, Asian Americans would mobilize again to speak out against yellowface in the New York Gilbert & Sullivan Players’ production of *The Mikado*.

Locating Titipu

“*The Mikado* is undoubtedly the most popular piece of musical theatre of all time,” the program note for NYGASP’s 2016 production boldly pronounces.⁸⁷ In brief, the operetta takes place in the fictional Japanese town of Titipu, where the mikado, the emperor of Japan, has declared that flirting is punishable by death. Nanki-Poo and Yum Yum love each other, but he is engaged to Katisha, while she is engaged to Ko-Ko. Ko-Ko must reckon with the order to execute Nanki-Poo without having to cut off his own head. In the end, the ingenues pair up, just as the older, comic characters pair up. The score boasts famous songs such as “Three Little Maids” and “As Someday It May Happen,” better known as the “Little List” song. The Gilbert and Sullivan Archive, created in 1993 (making it one of the longest standing websites today), catalogs nearly sixty recordings of *The Mikado*.⁸⁸ Across the United States, there are dozens of opera companies that regularly stage Gilbert and Sullivan, especially the box-office hits *The Mikado*, *HMS Pinafore* (1878), and *The Pirates of Penzance* (1879). Founded in 1974, NYGASP is “widely recognised as the leading professional G & S repertory company in the United States.”⁸⁹ With a \$2 million budget and all-white leadership, the company has performed in prestigious spaces like New York City Center and toured to schools and theatres all over the United States.

Scholars and fans of *The Mikado* debate whether the operetta is about England or Japan. Gilbert had explicitly proclaimed that the operetta made fun of the British government. When Prince Fushimi Sadanaru visited England in 1907, the lord chamberlain banned performances of *The Mikado*, igniting debate over the target of satire. In *Oh Joy! Oh Rapture! The Enduring Phenomenon of Gilbert and Sullivan*, Ian Bradley avers, “It was, of course, absurd to ban *The Mikado* on the grounds that it might offend the Japanese. Despite its setting, the opera is quite clearly about Britain.”⁹⁰ His diction (“of course,” “quite clearly”) underscores a righteous insistence on reading the text in this singularly correct way

while also betraying cultural anxieties. Proponents of this argument often point to the English-style score and Pooh-Bah's accumulation of job titles as a uniquely English phenomenon.⁹¹ Writing on nineteenth- and early twentieth-century British musical comedy, Brian Singleton asserts, "the Orient of popular culture was, in fact, England in fancy dress. It was an imaginary safe place in which to play out sexual taboos alongside issues of gender, class, and race."⁹² But musicologist Meinhard Saremba suggests that claims to searing satire are exaggerated: "As a writer [Gilbert] never really threatened middle-class convictions because his basic beliefs upheld bourgeois values."⁹³ After all, *HMS Pinafore* offers similar send-ups of English culture on board a Royal Navy ship. In *Quaint, Exquisite: Victorian Aesthetics and the Idea of Japan*, Grace Lavery identifies the multiple functions of disavowing Japan: "it reassures enthusiasts of the popular work that nobody is calling them racist; it demonstrates an intellectual savoir faire, by overcoming sullen literal-mindedness; and it locates a problem play in the relatively safe hermeneutic space of domestic satire."⁹⁴ She recommends, then, "finding a middle ground between truth-claim ('it's about Japan/England') and disclaimer ('it's not about Japan') . . . to describe the movement between a fantasy of knowledge and the fantasy of its dissolution."⁹⁵

The Mikado is about England, but also about Japan and about England's relationship to Japan. Gilbert and Sullivan researched Japanese movement and music and incorporated Japanese commodities such as fans and kimonos in their original production. Gilbert visited the Japanese Village in Knightsbridge, London, and invited some of the residents to demonstrate their customs to his cast. Sullivan modified the Japanese military song "Miya Sama," which serves as "an aural, pseudo-Japanese scrim" through which the audience perceives the narrative.⁹⁶ On how the opening number establishes pseudo-Japaneseness through not only music but also gesture and props, Raymond Knapp writes: "Even before the voices enter, the swirling, mostly pentatonic unison figures in the orchestra are already bringing into play one of the 'Japanese' modes established in the overture, linking it securely to the movement and appearance of the players themselves, as they shuffle and glide in their kimonos and work their fans. The specific notes they sing also link them to the language of the overture, and specifically 'Miya Sama.'"⁹⁷ This mix of English sounds with Asian settings created a recipe for commercial success for *The Mikado* as well as contemporaneous musical theatre including *The Geisha* (1896), *San Toy* (1899), and *A Chinese Honeymoon* (1899).⁹⁸ Music historian Claire Mabilat points to both the "essential Britishness of *The Mikado*" and the function of names like Nanki-Poo: "Although these names are intended as a joke, they are nonetheless derogatory and another illustration of the Victorian imperialist belief in British superiority and 'native' lowliness."⁹⁹ The libretto repeatedly characterizes Japanese people

as bloodthirsty and worthless. *The Mikado* wields a flexibility to affirm English identity and empire and to delight in yellowface and Japanese culture.

Champions of *The Mikado* often rely on the operetta's comic form and satire of English manners to repudiate charges of racist representation. In *The Japan of Pure Invention*, Josephine Lee observes that the operetta's "racial mimicry is seemingly without . . . malice or virulence. . . . This lightness gives *The Mikado* a certain adaptability and buoyancy in the present that, when coupled with Sullivan's memorable score, has carried many a production to success."¹⁰⁰ Artists and audiences playfully perform Japaneseness through objects like fans, feel liberated from the pressures of English modernity, and concoct ridiculous scenarios and scatological names, as they occupy a fantasy version of Japan that excuses them from aiming for authenticity. As popular entertainment, the operetta wields a seeming innocence. As an example of this reception, Gayden Wren concludes in *A Most Ingenious Paradox: The Art of Gilbert and Sullivan*, "the delight of *The Mikado* stems precisely from that lack of depth, and no amount of minor adjustments could do anything but, probably, spoil the fun."¹⁰¹ Despite disavowals of Japan and levity of tone, the operetta still represents Japaneseness. Reflecting on his own interpellation into the seductive ideology of songs like "Three Little Maids," Locke concludes: "Television news shots of skyscrapers and subway crowds in Tokyo have never succeeded in convincing me that the country is not full of (as if just outside of the camera's frame) groups of tiptoeing maidens with parasols."¹⁰² Even critics of Orientalist knowledge production find themselves caught in the sway of catchy tunes and exotic images.

Contesting *The Mikado*

These histories, defenses, and happy affects have facilitated numerous productions of *The Mikado*, but, more recently, Asian Americans have challenged the operetta. In 1990, Dorinne Kondo learned from a mailer that *The Mikado* was coming to the Claremont Colleges. She and fellow professor Samuel Yamashita organized teach-ins, pickets, and a coalition of Black, Chicanx, and LGBTQ+ students and staff, along with Asian American students and actors like Tzi Ma and Rosalind Chao.¹⁰³ Kondo pointed out how the colleges tacitly endorsed the operetta's Orientalist tropes while failing to platform Asian American plays. Building on a series of long-standing demands, the protesters' actions led to the creation of the Asian American Resource Center and, later, an intercollegiate department of Asian American studies. In 2004, Lee read a post on the Asian American theatre mailing list highlighting the overt yellowface advertised in NYGASP's production of *The Mikado* and asking whether there would be organized protests. No one responded. That silence prompted her research for *The Japan of Pure*

Invention. I saw this very production while in high school. At the time, the yellowface and Orientalist extravaganza did not register with me as problems. As an adult, I returned to NYGASP to see *Ruddigore* (1887) and *The Yeoman of the Guard* (1888). But in 2015, when playwright Leah Nanako Winkler wrote about a similar NYGASP mailer on Facebook and on her blog, she reached twenty thousand viewers within two days and ignited a campaign to contact the company and trend #SayNoToMikado.¹⁰⁴ I joined her call and emailed NYGASP leadership. What caused the climate and my position therein to shift over the course of a decade? How did yellowface become intolerable to more people? How did feeling yellow spread?

The first half of this chapter documented the powerful organizing of Asian American theatre artists in reaction to *The Nightingale* in 2012, a turning point at which yellowface without yellowed faces would no longer go unchallenged. But the show still went on with its white-dominant cast. *The Mikado* became an important test case that went one step further, as several companies changed their productions in light of antiracist objections. As before, blogs and social media enabled Asian Americans and their allies to express themselves and connect across the country. David Henry Hwang told Upworthy in 2015, "it is interesting to me how something that I kind of maybe mistakenly thought was part of the past suddenly came back to life . . . there is kind of another generation that's taking up these causes, and looking at that [the issue] differently even than my generation did."¹⁰⁵ Having not only Asian American academics and artists but also journalists in key positions helped launch and steer crucial conversations. They could bring to light, for instance, that *The Mikado* has never been a static text.

Despite originalists' fervent calls for adherence to the original Savoy production, *The Mikado* has undergone many changes many times over many years. Companies regularly insert topical references and update the little list of people who deserve to be executed. At least since the mid-twentieth century, producers have typically cut the N-word from two songs. NYGASP changed "There's the n-word serenader, and the others of his race" to "There's the orchestra conductor who insists on his own pace."¹⁰⁶ In 1987, Jonathan Miller set his English National Opera production by the 1930s English seaside. Nevertheless, white performers still indulged in racist gestures such as pulling back the corners of their eyes and making karate-chop motions.¹⁰⁷ Meanwhile, Asians and Asian Americans have challenged these stereotypes and white-only casting in their own reinventions of *The Mikado*. Theatre historian Tara Rodman contends that post-World War II stagings in Japan performed the occupied nation as cosmopolitan.¹⁰⁸ *The Mikado Project*, a 2006 play by Ken Narasaki and 2010 film adapted by Narasaki, Doris Baizley, and Chil Kong, satirizes an Asian American theatre company that

can financially stay afloat only if it stages Gilbert and Sullivan's operetta. In 2013, Rick Shiomi set the operetta in England but with Asian Americans performing nearly all the leading roles, in a coproduction between Mu Performing Arts and Skylark Opera in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Taking literally claims that *The Mikado* satirizes England, the opening chorus pronounces themselves "gentlemen of England," as they play cricket and drink in a pub.¹⁰⁹ Nanki-Poo becomes Franki Poo, and Pish-Tush becomes Chris-Tush. Later, artists and journalists positively cited Shiomi's production as proof that eliminating yellowface is possible. His approach was so successful that the Gilbert & Sullivan Very Light Opera Company in Minneapolis invited Shiomi to direct its production of *The Mikado* in 2019. In 2016 in Austin, Texas, Generic Ensemble Company premiered *The Mikado: Reclaimed*, which depicts incarcerated Asian Americans being forced to perform songs from the operetta while also hiding queer romance.¹¹⁰ These productions suggest that there are innovative ways to take up the abjection of feeling yellow to remake *The Mikado* by centering Japanese culture and Asian Americanist critique or, at the very least, doing less harm. More conventional versions of *The Mikado*, however, have greatly outnumbered these reimagined productions.

On July 13, 2014, Sharon Pian Chan made news by critiquing the Seattle Gilbert & Sullivan Society's production of *The Mikado*. In an opinion piece for the *Seattle Times*, she objected to the casting of thirty-eight white actors and two Latinos playing Japanese caricatures: "It's yellowface, in your face."¹¹¹ The newspaper subsequently published a slew of articles about *The Mikado*, including defenses from members of the Seattle Gilbert & Sullivan Society,¹¹² a centrist call for civility from critic Misha Berson,¹¹³ an explanation of racial illiteracy from future *White Fragility* author Robin DiAngelo,¹¹⁴ and a follow-up from Chan.¹¹⁵ The news went national, as Jeff Yang wrote for CNN, "despite my deep personal love of musical theater, I think these 'traditional' productions—yellowface productions—of 'The Mikado' have to end."¹¹⁶ Dedicated Asian American venues like *Reappropriate* and *Angry Asian Man* also weighed in on the conversation. Insisting "I am not a metaphor" and "Japan is not an imaginary place," Sean Miura stressed the materiality of history: "Lampooning White aristocracy by using Japan as a vessel does not justify contributing to the constant belittlement of my ancestors, my family, and myself."¹¹⁷ At *American Theatre* magazine, Diep Tran consistently provided a much-needed Asian American perspective on musicals including *Miss Saigon*, *The Nightingale*, and *The Mikado*. Roger Tang offered "In Case of Yellowface . . . Break Glass!" on his blog *Asian American Theatre Revue*, based on his presentation at the 2016 Consortium of Asian American Theaters and Artists conference-festival, another important space where artist-activists have organized.¹¹⁸ The Seattle Gilbert & Sullivan Society persisted in

its overt yellowface production of *The Mikado*, but, as of this writing, it has not staged this operetta again. Its website now features an "Inclusivity Resources" page that states, "Yellowface in any capacity is unacceptable, and particularly so in theatre," and that links to my "Feeling Yellow" essay.¹¹⁹ While the company rebuffed critiques in 2014, it seems to have listened, processed, and changed.

In 2016, Lamplighters Music Theatre reenvisioned *The Mikado* for its fifty-first anniversary season. Located in San Francisco, the theatre had staged the operetta four years prior without public incident. The company initially planned to set *The Mikado* in Meiji Japan with no Japanese costumes or makeup because of the westernization of Japan, enabling it to preserve its largely white cast and forgo literal yellowface in favor of yellowface without yellowed faces. But when it sought support from Bay Area Asian American theatre companies, Lily Tung Crystal, then the artistic director of Ferocious Lotus and now the artistic director of East West Players, felt uncomfortable recommending Asian American actors because Lamplighters would not commit to an all-Asian cast: "Our argument is that yellowface is yellowface if you have a non-Asian person in an Asian role. . . . It didn't matter what makeup or clothing they were wearing."¹²⁰ Lamplighters then planned to locate *The Mikado* in England. But whitening the setting did not sufficiently address concerns about the text. Ferocious Lotus issued an open letter asking the Gilbert and Sullivan-centered company how it would deal with the Orientalist dramaturgy. It received almost two hundred signatories, including Hwang. Lamplighters ultimately apologized, hired an Asian American consultant, cast more performers of color in the ensemble, and revised the script from an Italian Renaissance perspective, such that "We are gentlemen of Japan" became "We are gentlemen of Milan."¹²¹ Ferocious Lotus heartily endorsed the production, and *Il Ducato/The New Mikado* ran in 2016 and again in 2023. Lamplighters created a video essay contextualizing anti-Asian racism to help audiences comprehend problems with *The Mikado*. The video ended with a new version of the "Little List" song by Phil Wong that gently teased people who do not find the operetta racist and who would like to be unsubscribed from the theatre's list. Amid a backdrop of photos from the 2017 Women's March and 2020 Black Lives Matter demonstrations, Wong sang, "Continue to resist!"¹²² Asian American activism and creativity, combined with white allyship, worked to make amends and make a more antiracist *Mikado*.

The Harvard-Radcliffe Gilbert and Sullivan Players also sought to "rehabilitate" its 2016 production.¹²³ Founded in 1956, the undergraduate student troupe performs *The Mikado* every four years, and its fall shows are the biggest and most expensive theatrical productions on campus. Rather than revive its straightforward yellowface version, the group reset the operetta in an Orientalist kitsch hotel in 1960s Las Vegas, where the mikado seemed to force his workers

to perform Asianness. According to Harvard-Radcliffe Gilbert and Sullivan Players president Kathleen C. Zhou, this framing avoided direct yellowface, offered a critique of Asian commodification, and preserved the beloved music.¹²⁴ But other Asian Americans protested. In the *Harvard Crimson*, George S. Qiao and Christina M. Qiu argued, “Yellowface is not just a concoction of yellow make-up and kimonos; it is a manifestation of a social force. The racism in the play has been merely updated for a more sensitive 21st century audience.”¹²⁵ After watching a dress rehearsal, Qiao organized a demonstration calling for the production to close. He decried the white-dominant cast and the contradictory preservation of some Japanese references and deletion of others in a production that ultimately failed to engage critically with the text.¹²⁶ A review in the student newspaper agreed about the muddled directorial concept: “Rather than confronting the play’s historical racism, this revision ran away from it.”¹²⁷ In 2020, when it was time to put up *The Mikado* again, the group commissioned a student to write a new musical using the music of Sullivan. Its leadership did not rely on earlier claims about the operetta satirizing England or defend their 2016 reimagining. Instead, they acknowledged the operetta’s disrespectful representation of Japanese people and “decided not to produce *The Mikado* again for the foreseeable future.”¹²⁸ Along similar lines, and suggesting a broader cultural shift, the Georgetown Gilbert and Sullivan Society has not staged this operetta since 2012, although it had been a regular part of the repertory since the group’s founding in the 1970s.

These conversations about yellowface and *The Mikado* inspired some members of NYGASP to begin rethinking their traditional approach to the operetta. Executive director David Wannen humbly shared his earlier naivete, since he tended to use “the pat answer of, ‘Oh, it’s not about the Japanese,’ an explanation offered by W. S. Gilbert himself when he wrote *The Mikado*.”¹²⁹ He first encountered a direct critique of the NYGASP production on the blog *Nikkei View* in 2013, when Gil Asakawa compared its *Mikado* to blackface minstrelsy. In a comment resonating with Taylor Mac’s *Mikado* on Mars, Asakawa asserted, “I think it’s time to put ‘The Mikado’ on the shelf—or, if someone wants to produce it, have enough guts and cultural sensitivity to set the musical on another planet.”¹³⁰ In 2014, Wannen attended a retreat with the Association of Performing Arts Professionals that taught him more about equity, diversity, and inclusion. That same summer, the Seattle production of *The Mikado* sparked national news, prompting Wannen to suggest that his colleagues reconsider their own version. NYGASP members formed a committee and invited Christine Toy Johnson to offer her expertise as a cofounder of AAPAC and chair of the Actors’ Equity Association Equal Employment Opportunity Committee. But she was met with resistance:

I was basically asked to defend why I thought they needed to make any changes . . . one of the founders of the company said, "Oh, my wife is Asian, and she doesn't have a problem with it." . . . And at the end, they decided not to work with me on some things I had suggested. . . . One of the things they said was, "Well, this show, *The Mikado*, is such a big moneymaker for us, that for us to take it out of the season would be really terrible for our company."¹³¹

After some deliberation, the company decided to forgo the Japanese makeup but preserve the wigs and costumes—yellowface without yellowed faces.

Read the Comments: Protesting NYGASP's *Mikado*

When NYGASP announced the return of *The Mikado*, Asian American theatre artists were prepared to protest, and NYGASP was somewhat prepared for them. On September 15, 2015, biracial Japanese American playwright Leah Nanako Winkler detailed on her blog her reactions to receiving a mailer advertising NYGASP's *Mikado*. Because of the outrage and ink spilled over the Seattle production so recently, she had mistakenly assumed that a similar production would not occur in New York City. She called NYGASP three times and reached its artistic director and founder, Albert Bergeret. At first, she inquired as to the casting breakdown, and he replied in a way that sounded friendly and rehearsed. He pointed to two actors of Asian descent in the cast, contended that the roles in *The Mikado* are not intended to be played by people with certain racial backgrounds, and emphasized the company's expertise with Gilbert and Sullivan. Winkler yelled, "**YOU'RE GOING TO GET INTO DEEP SHIT FOR THIS**"; she regretted her outburst but in recounting this call for her blog also offered a critique of civility that demands angry women of color speak in prescribed ways to be heard:

I felt bad for losing my temper because I'm smarter than that. But mostly because I'm constantly punished for that. In my years working in the New York Theater scene, I've learned that any comments or views I voice about the so-called "difficult" issues must be veiled under the guise of the Liz Lerman Critical Response Process to have a chance at being digested by the academia infused art culture. Maybe if I said, "Excuse me sir, I have a neutral comment about the use of yellowface in your production of *The Mikado* would you like to hear about it?" the conversation would be more (buzzword) productive.¹³²

She voiced the rage of feeling yellow and the frustration of having to modulate. In the end, she called not for cancellation but for conversation, urging readers

to contact NYGASP leadership and the New York University (NYU) Skirball Center, which was slated to host the production. The company began receiving emails, tweets, and negative ratings on its Yelp and Facebook pages.¹³³ Meanwhile, Winkler sought advice from Sharon Chan from the *Seattle Times* and playwright Ming Peiffer, who reached out to her mentor David Henry Hwang, and soon other antiracist theatre advocates came together to plan next steps.

A flurry of responses over blogs and social media as well as news coverage from NBC to the *New York Times* turned NYGASP's production into a national case study for yellowface. A newly created Artists Against The Mikado Facebook group buzzed with activity. In a post for *2amtheatre*, Peiffer shared a feeling yellow response similar to Winkler's. She expressed the hope for progress that she had felt after AAPAC's RepresentAsian: The Changing Face of New York Theatre roundtable back in 2012, but then her writing burst into righteous anger and exhaustion: "Why must we once again go through the panoply of politically correct racial discourse to explain why [INSERT OUTDATED ASIAN MUSICAL HERE] is offensive. Is incorrect. Is *racist*. Notice I use the word 'RACIST' here, and not 'problematic,' because I'm done pussy-footing around this."¹³⁴ Channeling rage into her characteristic and hilarious use of gifs, such as Laotian American drag queen Jujubee proclaiming, "I will read you to filth!" Erin Quill offered more context in her *fairyprincessdiaries* blog. She and Lodestone Theatre Ensemble coleader Chil Kong had "viewed NYGASP's hideously shuffling, yellowfaced, pulling their eyes, rescinding their lower lip to make their front teeth look bigger, and of course, the unforgettable Axe Coolie laden production," in which a child in yellowface runs around the stage holding an axe and yelling "hi-ya!"¹³⁵ This enraging experience convinced Kong that Lodestone should produce *The Mikado Project*, in which Quill subsequently performed on stage and screen. For Quill, *The Mikado* is not intrinsically racist, and NYGASP cannot effectively use historical accuracy as an excuse; rather, she points to racist performance practices such as the addition of the "axe coolie," which has Chinese, not Japanese, connotations. Quill also bemoaned the dearth of diversity among the cast, especially considering the racial diversity of New York City.

Over the next few weeks, this incident also sparked online conversation about the contradictions of casting and the constitution of yellowface. Howard Sherman, who then led the Alliance for Inclusion in the Arts, noted that NYGASP's website asserts both that "there are no ethnically specific roles in Gilbert and Sullivan," and that *The Mikado*'s setting is "a fictitious Japanese town."¹³⁶ For *Reappropriate*, Jenn Fang similarly clocked the inconsistencies of representing Japan and disavowing Japan: "The Mikado's Japan cannot simultaneously be intended to be read as a totally imaginary, Japanese-inspired place that isn't

actually Japan, while also being—in the eyes of the players—as ‘authentically’ Japanese as possible.”¹³⁷ Furthermore, yellowface undoes claims to authenticity. According to her definition, yellowface expanded beyond the literal face: “NYGASP’s actors need not use actual face makeup to be wearing yellowface. In NYGASP’s performance of ‘The Mikado’ (as with most performances), the wigs and costuming are serving as yellowface signifiers.”¹³⁸ In her *American Theatre* article “Keep Your Hands Off of My Kimono, White People,” Tran concluded, “Stop wearing our clothes. Stop painting your faces. Stop pretending we don’t exist.”¹³⁹ She interprets yellowface as appropriation, as makeup, and as erasure because it aestheticizes East Asian cultures in service to white people. Jacqueline E. Lawton curated the series “Yellowface in the American Theatre” for the theatre industry commons HowlRound, centering Asian American responses to NYGASP’s *Mikado*. Director Desdemona Chiang wrote in her piece, “I don’t think that hiring Asian people makes *The Mikado* OK. In my opinion, the show was born out of a fetishistic impulse that reduces the Japanese culture to an object of curiosity, and I don’t think that can be validated or corrected by ‘appropriate casting’ without serious reconstructive dramaturgy.”¹⁴⁰ Sherman had similarly realized that “even with racially authentic casting, *The Mikado* is a problematic work.”¹⁴¹ For these antiracist thinkers, solving the racism of *The Mikado* is not as simple as wiping off bronzer and casting more actors of Asian descent.

On September 16, 2015, the day after Winkler posted, NYGASP issued a lengthy statement on its website doubling down on its traditional staging of *The Mikado*. After noting the careful consideration of its review committee, it cited the authenticity of its Japanese costumes as authorized by a Japanese adviser; insisted on the show *actually* being about England; and suggested that having Asian American actors would not work with the company’s repertory, in which the actors must embody “British sailors in *H.M.S. Pinafore* the next day and Venetians in *The Gondoliers* [1889] the day after that.”¹⁴² In the logic of unmarked whiteness, white people are entitled to all roles, whereas Asian Americans cannot play Asians or white people. The statement acknowledged that “some of Gilbert’s Victorian words and attitudes are certainly outdated,” but it repeatedly rebutted this mild critique by noting the updated references, asserting that “there is vastly more evidence that Gilbert intended the work to be respectful of the Japanese rather than belittling in any way,” stressing the “genius” and “universal humanity” of *The Mikado*, and celebrating how they “capture the essence of a foreign or imaginary culture without caricaturing it in any demeaning or stereotypical way.”¹⁴³ Here, there is no utterance of the term “yellowface.” But in shorter and more sensitive remarks for *Playbill*, NYGASP leadership recognized that “the practice of Yellowface makeup—using make up

to appear Asian—was the most offensive practice brought to light by the Asian-American community.”¹⁴⁴ They had decided to eliminate this makeup earlier, but they subsequently realized that their advertising materials did not clearly convey that change, since they had retained other Asian racialized markers. Citing the “outcry” in Seattle the previous year, they promised that they were taking concerns seriously.¹⁴⁵

The next day, less than forty-eight hours after Winkler’s blog post, NYGASP announced its cancellation of *The Mikado* on Facebook and removed its previous statement from its website. Signed by Wannan, who became the face of this more sensitive approach, the post proclaimed that NYGASP would replace *The Mikado* with *The Pirates of Penzance* that season and take time to revise the operetta: “We will now look to the future, focusing on how we can effect a production that is imaginative, smart, loyal to Gilbert and Sullivan’s beautiful words, music, and story, and that eliminates elements of performance practice that are offensive.”¹⁴⁶ This post received 160 likes and more than 500 comments, an inauspicious ratio.

Most commentators bemoaned NYGASP’s decision and blamed Asian Americans. As usual, several *Mikado* enthusiasts insisted that the operetta is not about Japan and not racist. They parroted the point that Gilbert and Sullivan had to set the operetta in Japan to satirize British society from a safe distance and avoid censorship. One Facebook user claimed that yellowface stems from Kabuki, so it is not a fair comparison with blackface. Some people told detractors to be less sensitive or to refrain from seeing the production if it made them uncomfortable. Because of Gilbert and Sullivan fans’ love for and identification with *The Mikado*, they often interpreted accusations of the operetta as offensive to mean that they themselves were being called racist. There were also some complaints about political correctness and censorship, not only pertaining to NYGASP’s announcement but also concerning some deleted comments from the Facebook thread. Some overtly racist remarks remained. In *Privileged Spectatorship*, Dani Snyder-Young observes, “Many white audience members live in segregated white bubbles and as such do not understand how and why people of color experience daily life in the contemporary United States differently than white people do.”¹⁴⁷ The typical Gilbert and Sullivan devotee is a highly educated, middle-aged, middle-class white man.¹⁴⁸ Instead of doing some self- and structural reflection about white privilege and institutional racism, some commentators lashed out and called critics children. Others asked facetiously whether only pirates would be cast in *Pirates*, or Italians in *The Gondoliers*. Connecting the dots across Orientalist operas, several offered what seemed to them illogical slippery slope arguments, asking whether *Madama Butterfly* (1904) and *Turandot* (1926) would be banned as well. In addition, commentators made sugges-

tions for preserving *The Mikado*, such as by taking away the yellowface makeup or casting some more actors with Asian heritage, but there was no consensus.

Meanwhile, Asian American theatremakers thanked NYGASP and clashed with racist commenters. The AAPAC steering committee sent Wannan a "Thank You For Doing Better letter" rather than their usual "Do Better letter."¹⁴⁹ Winkler reflected, "I appreciated their effort. Like I do think that they earnestly didn't think they were doing anything wrong when they were doing [*The Mikado*] . . . the reason it got canceled is because they were receptive to it. Like they decided to cancel it. Like we didn't force them to."¹⁵⁰ In the Facebook comments, allies joined users who appeared to be Asian American in trying to educate those who defended anti-Asian practices. For instance, Joy Meads, then the literary manager of Center Theatre Group, generously responded to an irate person by clarifying "it didn't take the asian community 130 years to protest the mikado, it has taken 130 years for those protests to be heard," before directing the person to read remarks by LeiLani Nishime for NPR and Krystyn Moon's book *Yellowface*.¹⁵¹ But that person chose violence in their reaction: "So with all the electronic devices for sound invented and produced by Asian companies it still took you 130 years to be heard?"¹⁵² Others, like playwright A. Rey Pamatmat, translated the subtext of comments defending traditional *Mikado* performances: "Because of your stupid social justice, I don't get to laugh at white people with funny eyes! You're so over-sensitive and stupid! I can't believe how much YOU'RE over-reacting!!!! YOU'RE THE WORST, AND YOU'RE MEAN, AND I'M BEING OPPRESSED, BECAUSE I WANNA WEAR A PRETTY DRESS THING WITH CHOPSTICKS IN MY HAIR AND RUN AROUND WITH AN AXE GOING, 'Hiiiiii-ya!' AND NOW I CAN'T!!!"¹⁵³ Flipping the script on feeling yellow, Pamatmat satirized white entitlement and racialized affect.

Even other arts and equity bloggers commented on the comments. On the *Bitter Gertrude* blog, Melissa Hillman joked that you can read social media posts about NYGASP's *Mikado* to play Racist Art Apologia Bingo! with examples like "G8: This is ART" and "B17: The one who points out racism is the REAL racist."¹⁵⁴ Jokes aside, she explained, "An issue these white people find acceptable—racism in performance—is being challenged, and they will fight as hard as they can to retain the cultural supremacy that entitles them to continue to define racist performance as 'acceptable.' They're fighting more and more furiously because they know they are losing."¹⁵⁵ For *OnStage*, Chris Peterson compiled and critiqued "The Worst Responses I've Seen Regarding 'The Mikado' Controversy." David Macaluso, who had played Ko-Ko in NYGASP's company, insisted that his yellowface makeup was comical and apolitical, and he focused on personal intentions instead of impact: "And while my makeup may be heightened for buffoonery's sake, as I have done with many characters of any race religion

and even species, it is not intended to be yellow face.”¹⁵⁶ Peterson responded by highlighting history, harm, and reception: “It doesn’t matter if it wasn’t your intention to perform in yellowface, you performed in yellowface and the long tradition of the design of these characters is more than offensive to Asian people everywhere.”¹⁵⁷ With rebuttal after rebuttal, many Asian American artists and antiracist allies refused to let yellowface go unchallenged and used internet platforms as spaces for debate and organizing.

Reimagining *The Mikado*

Following the cancellation, NYGASP convened an Asian American Advisory Committee. Led by NYU professor of musical theatre writing Robert Lee and actor Scott Watanabe, the committee consisted of Asian American artists, including Christine Toy Johnson and Erin Quill, who had critiqued *The Nightingale* and *The Mikado*. Cáitlín Burke, a longtime company member with Taiwanese and Irish heritage, felt honored to be part of the committee and openly shared her experiences, which moved her colleagues. NYGASP artist David Auxier-Loyola said he took an approach of “Please inform me. Educate me now.”¹⁵⁸ Although the committee did not feature scholars of Asian American theatre, Jonathan Ichikawa, a professor of philosophy at the University of British Columbia and a fan and performer of Gilbert and Sullivan’s repertoire, offered insights straddling multiple perspectives. At a forum NYGASP hosted the following year in preparation for the newly revised production of *The Mikado*, Ichikawa delivered a keynote on how “Perceiving racism is an *epistemic skill*”: “when racism is so obvious to a member of the Asian community, and a member of the G&S community says they don’t see it, there’s a temptation to interpret that as disingenuous. But it might not be. . . . We must also resist the temptation, on the other side, to suppose that activists who raise complaints we don’t understand are just making up excuses to be offended.”¹⁵⁹ Offering a bridge between white Gilbert and Sullivan enthusiasts and antiracist activists of Asian descent, he called for empathy and mutual understanding.

NYGASP spent a year reworking the script, set, costumes, choreography, and cast. With input from the Asian American Advisory Committee, the company revised the libretto and lyrics in ways that both muted overtly anti- and pseudo-Japanese characterizations and preserved Japanese reference points. They got rid of the “axe coolie,” “which company officials said they had not realized was a slur.”¹⁶⁰ The production team removed the term “Japanese” from troubling racialized ascriptions such as acting like a puppet or groveling abjectly: “I sit and wonder, in my artless Japanese way, why it is . . .” became, “I sit and wonder why it is . . .”¹⁶¹ In addition to deleting these essentialized descriptions, they neutral-

ized some loaded references. "I seized him by his little pigtail," a reference to the queue Chinese men wore, turned into "I seized him by the scruff of his neck."¹⁶² The script also replaced the Japanese words in songs like "Miya Sama" with English lyrics. Still, the characters repeatedly locate themselves in Japan and retain lines like, "The Japanese equivalent for Hear, Hear, Hear!" which maintains an alienated distance between the performers and their characters, raising the audience's awareness of non-Asian actors playing Japanese characters as envisioned by white English authors.¹⁶³ Other lines continue to carry racial baggage, including the recounting of Nanki-Poo's decapitation (his head "stood on its neck, with a smile well-bred, / And bowed three times to me!" conjuring the kowtowing and grinning Oriental),¹⁶⁴ and the classifying of Japanese people as "quaint" and "exquisite."¹⁶⁵ By eliminating the most obvious stereotypes, NYGASP mitigated offense while keeping the Japanese milieu.

Playing on this sense of Titipu as Japan but also not-Japan, Auxier-Loyola created a directorial concept of *The Mikado* as Gilbert's fever dream. He recounted words from the Asian American Advisory Committee: "You can even say you are gentlemen of Japan if you find the right concept set around this that eliminates the feelings of racism, cultural appropriation, and yellowface."¹⁶⁶ He wrote a framing device in which producer Richard D'Oyly Carte urges Gilbert and Sullivan to come up with an idea for a new operetta. The prologue foreshadows *The Mikado*, with Gilbert and Sullivan saying lines like an actress's singing is "yummy" (hence, the character of Yum Yum) and handling paintings, vases, clothes, lacquer boxes, and swords from the Japanese Village in Knightsbridge.¹⁶⁷ When the hilt of a katana accidentally hits Gilbert on the head—echoing a tall tale about this sword falling in Gilbert's office and inspiring him to write *The Mikado*—he is knocked unconscious, and the world of the operetta bursts into life onstage with a multiracial ensemble representing gentlemen of Japan. This dramaturgical conceit is almost the same as the beginning of David Henry Hwang and Jeanine Tesori's *Soft Power* (2018), discussed in the next chapter. But instead of pointed satire, this reframing of Titipu as make-believe unfortunately reifies ideas of Japanese people as unreal.

No longer pagodas and cherry blossoms, the new set for *The Mikado*, designed by Anshuman Bhatia, drew from Japanese material culture. The lacquer boxes became large platforms juxtaposed with London lampposts and shop signs, showing the mixture of Japanese and English elements. By grounding Gilbert's vision in these Japanese goods instead of in his encounters with Orientalist cultural productions, the prologue partially exculpates Gilbert and Sullivan yet replicates a historical dynamic of commodifying Japanese people. The Utagawa Hiroshige-inspired painting of a village that D'Oyly Carte and Sullivan inspect in the prologue forms the backdrop for Titipu. Instead of looking down



Figure 10. A scene from *The Mikado*. (© Carol Rosegg, *The Mikado* by the New York Gilbert and Sullivan Players [2016].)

on Japan, per other paintings in this tradition, the perspective comes from below or straight on.¹⁶⁸ Sitting in the orchestra of a proscenium theatre, the viewer takes on a position of equality or humility.

The costumes, however, lack the specificity of the set, leaning in to the directorial dream conceit. Actor-designer Quinto Ott combined Victorian English silhouettes, Japanese fabrics, generalized Asian styles, and fantasy. Forgoing kimonos, the women mostly wore English dresses but in bright colors and with open bustles, revealing the apparatus of the garment and perhaps suggesting the construction of culture and unfinished nature or fragmentation of dreams (figure 10). Katisha brandishes cherry blossoms on her shoulders, and they bloom when she falls in love with Ko-Ko, whose outfit combines a suit with a kimono and leather obi. Like a Chinese-European medieval wizard, the mikado dons a robe with British military uniform cord braiding, long Chinese opera water sleeves, and a Southeast Asian-looking golden dragon head helmet.¹⁶⁹ This combination of Japanese, Chinese, and Southeast Asian aesthetics evokes Gilbert's fantasy but also the reality of Orientalism jumbling different cultures.

For the NYGASP production team, the framing device firmly establishes *The Mikado* as Gilbert's dream and not a claim to an authentic Japan. Wannen explained, "there's a kind of wrongness in your dreams about things—different

elements are juxtaposed together in a hodgepodge or random fashion."¹⁷⁰ Auxier-Loyola added that the prologue "puts the show in context, as a conception that's going on in Gilbert's head. It's not set in a real Japan; it's an imaginary place. And then we removed race from the equation. Nobody wears a Japanese costume; they're Victorian or fantasy. There are no 'Asian' roles."¹⁷¹ Whiteness becomes glossed as "Victorian or fantasy," as Japan becomes an empty signifier. Reminding the audience of Gilbert's point of view, the actor playing Gilbert in the prologue doubles as Pish-Tush, the lead chorus member in the operetta. He holds a notebook, as if he is in the process of writing the libretto, and he often moves set pieces on- or offstage, as if directing the action. This clever conceit plays on the metatheatricality already present in *The Mikado* but here explicitly capitalizes on it to rationalize the white author's topsy-turvy portrayal of Titipu.

NYGASP also committed to inclusive production practices. On the advice of the Asian American Advisory Committee, NYGASP hired actor Kelvin Moon Loh as assistant director. Mindful of tokenizing, he reflected, "I didn't just want to be there as like, 'Oh, great, we solved it. We've hired an Asian person. Put them in a position of, quote, 'power' in the production and that was enough."¹⁷² Along with Auxier-Loyola, he worked with the company members to unlearn their racialized behaviors such as mincing walks, excessive bowing, and giggling behind fans. In the revised staging of "Three Little Maids," the young women skip, hold their bellies while laughing, and extend their arms in front while taking rhythmic steps forward as if they are cars in a train. One reviewer dubbed the new choreography "strangely conventional, more Broadway than Japanese," indicating success in deracializing or whitening the dances.¹⁷³ Loh believed in returning to the text and finding the humor there and not in the stereotypes: "I didn't want to approach this as kind of a guard dog."¹⁷⁴ Auxier-Loyola, on the other hand, laughed jovially about how Loh "dubbed himself the Asian police."¹⁷⁵ Still, they worked collaboratively with a focus on acting. Revisiting *The Mikado* gave the company more rehearsal time than usual and more chances to explore different choices rather than performing by rote. Loh urged NYGASP to not just hold open calls but also host auditions specifically for Asian Americans to make them feel welcomed, and Quill helped circulate that message.

Diversifying the Cast

Auxier-Loyola and Wannen prioritized casting more actors of color while downplaying embodied experiences of racialization. According to the director, his goal was to create "a racially diverse cast with colorblind casting," or put another way, "It was all to keep it colorblind and racially ambiguous."¹⁷⁶ A seeming contradiction, these statements articulate both seeing race and erasing race, Japan

and not-Japan, much like *The Nightingale*. While an all-white cast might appear glaringly white, a multiracial cast with some more actors of color both highlights racial difference and mutes the salience of race. Meanwhile, Wannen nuanced, "I'm not a big fan of the word 'colorblind' casting. We were certainly color conscious in our casting . . . we are careful not to imply that 'race doesn't matter.'" ¹⁷⁷ To him, casting multiracially helps deconstruct race, revealing gaps between the Japanese characters and the actors playing them, as well as gaps between the historical characters and the actors playing them, while also including actors of color. While this approach effectively reveals race and Titipu as fictions, it obscures Japan and anti-Asian racism as historical realities.

The company doubled the number of Asian Americans in its *Mikado* cast, from two to four, so they made up 10 percent of the cast, and they were not all relegated to the ensemble. Burke continued to play the villainess Katisha, while newly cast Quynh-My Luu played the ingenue Yum Yum. Katisha and Yum Yum are stock Gilbert and Sullivan women characters, one old and undesirable and the other young and beautiful, but they are also stock Asian women characters. Although Auxier-Loyola said that he did not consider the racial implications of casting certain roles in certain ways, images of the dragon lady and butterfly may have influenced him to see Burke and Luu as suitable for these roles. This is not to disregard the excellence of these actresses but to point out how politics shape perceptions of fit. In the hetero-gendered and racialized logics of Titipu, the leading women are Asian but the men are not, and the Asian women ultimately pair up with white men. Meanwhile, two Asian American actors in the ensemble authenticate the opening lyrics amid a mostly white multiracial cast. They do appear to be gentlemen of Japan and to resemble images on Japanese jars and fans, while most others do not. Yet they emerge from Gilbert's Victorian vision. Establishing an ambivalent racial epistemology, they help orient this world as both Japanese and beyond race. With a few additional African American actors, this cast became the most diverse one in NYGASP's forty-year history, a significant achievement. At the same time, NYGASP decided to double cast the leads, which enabled white company members to hold on to the parts that they had been playing for years, an example of what George Lipsitz calls the possessive investment in whiteness. ¹⁷⁸ Audiences could therefore experience performances with white actresses instead of Burke and Luu as Katisha and Yum Yum.

While the world of *The Mikado* occupies a space of race and erased race, the prologue appears to wield a different set of interpretive rules. Played by white actors in Victorian garb in an office setting, Gilbert, Sullivan, and D'Oyly Carte appear realistic, much like in Mike Leigh's 1999 film *Topsy-Turvy*. The racial identities of the actors seem to match those of the characters. But when Burke enters as Rosina Brandram and Luu as Leonora Braham, the actresses who

originated the roles of Katisha and Yum Yum in 1885, it is unclear whether the audience is meant to read them as people of color, as historical white people, or as purportedly postracial people. They embody historical figures, suggesting a whitening. They speak with English accents, which can presume whiteness, although histories of colonialism have led to people of color speaking English as well. As a mixed white-Asian actress, Burke reflected that she played Brandom as a white woman, but then for her portrayal of Katisha, she drew from the strength and pain of Japanese warrior women.¹⁷⁹ Auxier-Loyola had not calculated how he intended for spectators to read race into the prologue. As these gaps between directorial intention, audience interpretation, and performer's inner life intimate, the multiracial casting enacts an incoherent racial dramaturgy that renders race both material and meaningless. NYGASP can both claim a sensitivity to people of color and reclaim *The Mikado* as the property of white people, moving between color consciousness and color avoidance in inclusive, mildly antiracist ways.

"My morals have been declared / Politically correct"

The NYGASP production team sought to make *The Mikado* more comfortable for more people, and they largely succeeded in satisfying skeptics and purists.¹⁸⁰ The new version launched at the Kaye Playhouse at Hunter College on December 28, 2016, shortly after the US presidential election. Given Donald Trump's nasty anti-Asian rhetoric, it was important that the new production not amplify harmful stereotypes. The rewrite included a reference to Trump, at which several critics chuckled. Auxier-Loyola reflected, "The audiences seemed more thrilled at the end than with the old production, not because it was 'better' or significantly different, but because they saw everything from a new angle and perspective."¹⁸¹ Bergeret enthused, "Everyone loves *The Mikado* and our new production, with its celebrated premise of imagination, keeps the revered story alive and colorful."¹⁸² On Facebook, many NYGASP patrons expressed excitement for the new production and relief that the company did not change a single note of Sullivan's score. *The Mikado* performed well at the box office in New York in 2016 and 2019.

Many critics commended the new direction, prologue, scenic design, and multiracial casting for removing overt racism and clarifying the setting as fantasy. Executive editor of *Blogcritics* Jon Sobel marveled, "More important, and remarkable, various production elements and the company's added framing story allow the production to circle around 19th-century Japanese stereotypes, yet without changing the story."¹⁸³ In "A Politically Correct Mikado (with a Dash of Keystone Kops)" for *New York Arts*, Mari S. Gold recapped, "Out with the old

stereotypes of yellow face and Japanese costume. In with a multi-ethnic cast singing and prancing before a delightful set with a backdrop recalling Hokusai's *The Great Wave*.¹⁸⁴ Both acknowledging and universalizing his positionality, Michael Dale wrote in *Broadway World*, "This white reviewer will leave it to others to determine whether or not Auxier and his colleagues have axed every hint of racism out of THE MIKADO, but there can be no doubt that the re-imagined production bends over backwards in its attempts to be a rollicking entertainment that anyone can enjoy."¹⁸⁵ A user on Show-Score shared, "I worried a 19C work about Japan would be racist af, but NYGASP make it a delight."¹⁸⁶ Quill similarly commended the diverse casting, the removal of yellowface makeup and gestures, and the prologue setting up Titipu as a fantasy and not Japan.¹⁸⁷ She enthusiastically urged fellow Asian Americans and their families to see this *Mikado*, and the producers used her words for their marketing. Review headlines like "Rx for Political Incorrectness: Absurdity and More Diversity" from the *New York Times* and "Sparkling Production Rescues Light Opera from Guilt" from the *Columbus Dispatch*, when the production toured nationally, indicate how the white critical establishment welcomed this new production with alacrity.¹⁸⁸ The diction identifies anti-Asian racism as a malady, as mere political incorrectness, and as something that produces bad feelings for white people. Indeed, NYGASP altered a lyric with the mikado now singing about how he is "politically correct" instead of "particularly correct."¹⁸⁹ When conceived as individual rather than structural, white supremacy becomes easier to fix with some tweaks to the design, script, and cast.

But some NYGASP members, spectators, and critics expressed their objections to this new production. After Wannan announced the cancellation in 2015, some board members worried that the operetta would become unrecognizable, though they ended up embracing the new version. Meanwhile, he received several angry letters from patrons that "ranged from nostalgia for the old production sets and costumes to more of a political bent" and experienced some tense interactions during intermission with people accusing him of destroying *The Mikado*.¹⁹⁰ A couple of reviewers found the added prologue to be "superfluous" because "there was nothing remotely offensive" in the first place.¹⁹¹ On the other side, some members of the Asian American theatre community continued to experience the racial alienation of feeling yellow. One member of the Asian American Advisory Committee felt so uncomfortable that they left during intermission. For *OnStage*, Alex Chester lamented, "I just kept wishing for more diversity."¹⁹² While Tran enjoyed seeing actors of color in Victorian clothes, she and Winkler wondered what pleasures this operetta still affords minus the Orientalist trappings. The latter reflected that NYGASP "went to great length to cover up the racism of this piece," but she ultimately felt "sort of side-eye about it."¹⁹³

A multiracial yet postracial fantasy, *The Mikado* erased overt yellowface while preserving the white or purportedly postracial privilege to perform Japanese-ness. NYGASP accomplished what it had set out to do, to mitigate harm while keeping Gilbert and Sullivan alive. In the promotional note for more recent tours, the company proclaims, "The production represents a great deal of work between NYGASP and the Asian-American theatrical community in New York; and serves an example of a cooperative effort to promote diversity, equity and inclusive practice with classic works of art."¹⁹⁴ NYGASP effectively listened to some Asian American critics and adopted principles of inclusion. Its revision of *The Mikado* has proven an antidote to accusations of racism such that other companies have asked for permission to use its newly written prologue.

And yet, in *The Mikado*, the overture still paints a pseudo-Japanese scene, the characters still locate their identities in Japan, the authors still treat Japan as a make-believe place and a metaphor to recenter an implicitly white England, and the company still offers few opportunities to Asian American performers. NYGASP's 2024 restaging did not have any Asian Americans among the leading parts. Its rewrite facilitated a return to whiteness and to Titipu with Japanese and Japanese-inspired things rather than Japanese people. Wannan and Auxier-Loyola resumed their roles in the cast, playing the mikado and—fittingly for the director-choreographer and prologue author—Gilbert/Pish-Tush, respectively. Still, the company remains more racially diverse than it was a decade earlier. Some of the latest reviews and interviews did not mention race or the protests.¹⁹⁵ Perhaps for them, "they'll none of 'em be missed."¹⁹⁶

Keep Marching

Since the protests of *The Nightingale* and *The Mikado*, egregious yellowface in US American musical theatre has declined. The yellowface section of the *Asian American Theatre Revue* blog ends with the Saint Louis Muny's 2018 production of *Jerome Robbins' Broadway* (1989), in which non-Asian actors performed in the segment from *The King and I* (1951). In 2019, AAPAC, along with several Asian American theatres such as Silk Road Rising and East West Players, issued a letter to the Shed in New York critiquing *Dragon Spring Phoenix Rise*, a titular collage of Asian allusions, for casting a white actor as "the archetypal wise elder who is the keeper of ancient Chinese secrets and the father of 'Little Lotus.'"¹⁹⁷ With songs by Sia and writing by Jonathan Aibel (creator of the 2008–24 animated film franchise *Kung Fu Panda*) and Glenn Slater (lyricist of the 2010 Disney movie *Tangled*), the musical was led by Chinese-born director Chen Shi-Zheng, a reminder that Asian heritage does not always translate to Asian American sensitivities. In 2025, the team behind *Maybe Happy Ending* (2024) received

immediate pushback for replacing Darren Criss with a white actor, prompting the announcement that Criss would subsequently return to this South Korea-set musical.

Since AAPAC's first report in 2012, the organization has expanded its analysis of casting to cover racial demographics and disparities among directors, designers, and writers working on Broadway and in major nonprofit New York City theatres. From 2006 to 2012, an average of 2.5 percent of roles went to Asian Americans.¹⁹⁸ But from 2012 to 2019, Asian Americans claimed 6 percent of roles.¹⁹⁹ AAPAC has also found an increase in the percentage of implicitly white and non-racially specific parts going to actors of color.²⁰⁰ These numbers might suggest the impact of AAPAC, linear progress for Asian Americans, and reparations after *The Nightingale*, but the volatility of theatre seasons does not establish clear trends, and more roles do not necessarily mean better representation. Asian Americans received their biggest slice of the acting pie (9 percent of roles) during the 2015–16 season, due to the Lincoln Center revival of *The King and I*, which was responsible for more than half of the acting contracts for Asian Americans that year.²⁰¹ The years since then have boasted significant yet scattershot employers of Asian Americans for Broadway musicals: *Allegiance* (2015), *Miss Saigon* (2017), *KPOP* (2017), and *Here Lies Love* (2023).

Major institutions have recently recognized AAPAC's importance. In 2020, the Obie Awards granted the organization a Special Citation for Advocacy in the Field of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion. In 2022, the Tony Awards honored it for its visibility reports, public campaigns against yellowface, behind-the-scenes work to improve various theatre companies' racial diversity efforts, and AAPI Emergency Transportation Fund to ensure the safe commutes of theatre workers during a period of intensified anti-Asian attacks. While yellowface and white-washing in professional productions now face public outcries and therefore have fewer incidents, AAPAC has continued to address cases at the university level. Johnson recalled, "At one of our first meetings, we were writing a mission statement, and Cindy [Cheung] said, 'Well, why do we need a mission statement? It's not like we're going to be, you know, hanging around together for, you know, forever.'" ²⁰² Johnson laughed, recognizing that their ongoing work has continued to prove vital. Thanks to AAPAC, other Asian American theatremaker-activists, and their allies, it has become much harder to get away with yellowface.

4: After *The King and I*

Soft Power as Reversal and Reprisal

In 2014, when Kelli O'Hara was considering playing Anna in Lincoln Center's revival of *The King and I* (1951), *Playbill* asked readers via Facebook and Twitter who should play the king of Siam and then published a selection of their responses. Christine Toy Johnson, Raymond J. Lee, and Diane Phelan recommended fellow Asian American actors Jose Llana, Paolo Montalban, and Paul Nakauchi, who had all performed in the 1996 Broadway revival.¹ But others suggested non-Asian men, among them: Paulo Szot, because of his performance opposite O'Hara in Lincoln Center's 2008 production of *South Pacific* (1949); Michael Cerveris, because of his bald head being ghosted by that of Yul Brynner; and Raúl Esparza, because of his intense and irresistible charisma. *Playbill* and these theatre fans found yellowface casting to be perfectly acceptable, part of a history of white, Black, and Latinx/e actors portraying Asian and Asian American characters in Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II's oeuvre. At the 2015 Tony Awards, Kristin Chenoweth's performance as the king echoed this racial logic of normalizing yellowface and claiming Asian characters as white property. Ultimately, the part went to Japanese actor Ken Watanabe.

This book has been exploring how yellowface remains possible in the twenty-first century. But this final chapter asks: What are the necessary material conditions to make yellowface impossible? Enter David Henry Hwang, *Soft Power* (2019), and his speculative version of the future. Instead of softening yellowface by deploying ironic racism, performing Asianness through things beyond makeup, or recasting Asian worlds as multiracial fantasies to recenter whiteness, *Soft Power* centers Asian Americans. *Feeling Yellow* comes full circle by revisiting *The King and I* and reversing it. Rather than using racial and gender flipping for comic ends per Chenoweth as the king and Alan Cumming as Anna, *Soft Power* presents a more serious critique through such flipping. Hillary Clinton becomes the ignorant political leader, and Xūe Xíng, a Chinese man, becomes her teacher. And in the latest incarnation of the musical, Asian Americans take on both these roles.

In the play with a musical *Soft Power*, librettist-lyricist David Henry Hwang and composer-lyricist Jeanine Tesori satirize the premise of *The King and I*. Inspired by the ambivalence that the 2015 Broadway revival aroused in him, Hwang sought to point out its anti-Asian logics and parody white US Americans while simultaneously stirring sentimental responses. The show both celebrates and critiques the United States and seeks to raise the audience's awareness of how unequal racialized power dynamics shape cultural production and reception. *Soft Power* looks down on the nation's 2016 election of Donald Trump, gun violence, and xenophobic racism as it dramatizes a real-life anti-Asian attack on Hwang. These events prompt the production's hallucinated conceit, which situates China as civilization's savior via a Chinese musical from the future. In political scientist Joseph Nye's influential theory, some modern nations use soft power, such as financial investments, cultural entertainment, and affective ideology, rather than brute force, to gain influence.² In *Soft Power*, each iteration of the anthem "Democracy" indexes the artistic team's repeated attempts to move the audience emotionally and politically on multiple levels. A reprise is repetition with a difference: "Not only repetition, but also. . . ."³ With edited lyrics and reorchestrated music, a reprise offers alternative sonic and affective registers. Furthermore, *Soft Power* carries out reprisal, revenge for histories of yellowface and yellow peril, as an Asian American cast performs in whiteface. It enacts what Dorinne Kondo calls "reparative creativity," "the ways artists make, unmake, remake race in their creative processes, in acts of always partial integration and repair."⁴ Hwang and his creative team generate reparative creativity through examining the political concept of soft power and putting it into practice in musical theatre form. *Soft Power* affirms Asian Americans feeling yellow and invites non-Asians to feel along.

This chapter offers a production history of *Soft Power* and a literature review of the cultural impact and Cold War politics of *The King and I*, analyzes how *Soft Power* rewrites *The King and I* and reprises "Democracy," tracks Asian Americans doing whiteface, quotes from interviews with members of the cast and creative team, and assesses reviews. The white and Asian American creative team behind *Soft Power* feels ambivalent about democracy and attempts to conjure a set of contradictory feelings in the audience, including a longing for the inclusion of Asian Americans in the democratic project, a searing critique of the possibility of an inclusive US democracy, given its foundations in racism, and an awareness of musical theatre's political manipulation. They solicit the pleasures of patriotism and golden age musical theatre as well as prompt questions about democracy and propaganda. What happens when the will of the American people, via the electoral college, favors outright white supremacy? How do emotional attachments to liberal politics and to canonical musicals affect our very

understanding of cultural productions? How do our racial identities shape our perspectives? Many white critics came away with hope as they simultaneously dubbed the production a puzzlement, while some Asian American thinkers found the production to be a uniquely gratifying experience. Like *The King and I*, *Soft Power* might work so effectively and affectively in activating nationalist sentimentality that the musical hinders the ability to think critically, but reprises of “Democracy” might also inspire more radical feelings and formations.

Through reversal and reprisal, *Soft Power* deconstructs and demonstrates the emotional and ideological force of musical theatre. White American audiences can experience feeling yellow not through empathy at first, but through the painful estrangement of seeing themselves depicted in derogatory ways within a non-white-dominant world order, the uncomfortable sensation of the shoe being on the other foot. As the flip side of feeling yellow, *Soft Power* can also produce the pleasures of being a feminist killjoy, pointing out the problems with yellowface, with musicals, and with the United States. At the same time, the finale of feeling yellow encapsulates Asian Americans’ ire toward and grief for a country that may never accept them, as well as their unceasing hope for a more perfect union. All the while, *Soft Power* labors to arouse critical reflection on musicals as affect machines and inspire intentional action. The show attempts to explain how yellowface and whiteness work and why *The King and I* remains popular, and it does so in an embodied way that ultimately encourages us to imagine a repertoire without yellowface. Despite its radical critiques, *Soft Power* nevertheless embodies a belief that the American people and musical theatre can effect progressive movement. But musicals can be redeployed for conservative nationalist agendas.⁵ In the end, I reflect on the afterlives of *Soft Power* and my repeat engagements as I struggle with my own ambivalence toward US democracy and musical theatre and dream up a stage and society without anti-Asian racism.

Producing *Soft Power*

The most canonized Asian American playwright, David Henry Hwang has both deployed and flipped East Asian stereotypes. His plays tend to have formalist dramaturgy, dialectical thought processes, autobiography, metatheatricity, and ambivalent endings.⁶ In 1980, he received his first professional production from the Public Theater for *FOB*, partially because producer Joseph Papp sought to support Asian American artists and make amends for having cast non-Asian actors in Asian roles. This began Hwang’s career-long relationship with the Public. With *M. Butterfly* (1988), he became the first Asian American playwright to reach Broadway. Inspired by a news story and *Madama Butterfly* (1904), Hwang wove a titillating narrative that revealed the image of feminized

Asia as a social, historical fabrication that continues to seduce white men and Western audiences. While some scholars interpreted these plays as deconstructing Orientalism, others saw them as reifying stereotypes and capitalizing on spectacle.⁷ Hwang had initially conceived *M. Butterfly* as a musical but ended up writing it as a play. He later collaborated with Huang Ruo on a new version of *M. Butterfly* (2022), finally countering Puccini's opera with his own. He is the most frequently produced living American opera librettist. With works like *Bondage* (1992) and *Face Value* (1993), Hwang continued to explore race play, culminating with *Yellow Face* (2007). This documentary-style comedy centers on DHH, a version of himself, protesting the yellowface casting in *Miss Saigon* (1991) yet finding his role as an Asian American leader discomfiting, since he accidentally casts a white actor as a strong Asian American lead. At the dawning of Obama-era postracial discourse, Hwang envisioned fantasies of cross-racial performance and equity, but he concluded the play by critiquing political attacks on Asian Americans and suggesting that the work for liberation continues. He even targeted the ongoing casting of white actors as the king in *The King and I*. No stranger to Rodgers and Hammerstein, he had reworked *Flower Drum Song* (1958) for Broadway in 2002. While most of the score remained, Hwang radically altered the book, grounding it in Chinese American specificity and commenting on the pleasurable consumption of Asianness in mid-twentieth-century Chinatown nightclubs (and, implicitly, Broadway musicals). On a panel about revising libretti of classic musicals, Hwang commented that people did not object to "cases in which white people rewrote white people's musicals—*Anything Goes* being revised by John Weidman and Timothy Crouse, or *Crazy for You* being a rewrite of *Girl Crazy*. But, somehow, the idea of a person of color doing it and having some sort of political agenda all of a sudden made it a big, PC, artistic-freedom issue."⁸ Warren Hoffman asks in *The Great White Way: Race and the Broadway Musical*, if Hwang "wanted to create a musical that spoke to Asian American life, why did he not, perhaps with a collaborator, write a *new* musical as opposed to trying to resuscitate *Flower Drum Song*?"⁹

In 2014, Hwang received a co-commission from the Public Theater and Center Theatre Group in Los Angeles. Initially a broad comedy, the commissioned musical *Soft Power* reversed *The King and I*. The Lincoln Center revival had both brought him to tears and caused him to ruminate on the musical's troubling racial politics. He channeled feeling yellow into his art. He imagined: What if instead of a white nanny teaching a Thai king how to run his country, a Chinese media executive taught Hillary Clinton how to solve American gun violence? What if this executive asked DHH—again, a stand-in for the playwright—to write a Broadway show for China to gain soft power, just as Hwang had truly experienced? In the mid-2000s, Chinese agencies approached him to write on

their behalf, which inspired him to write about the literal and metaphorical dynamics of messy translations in *Chinglish* (2011).¹⁰ For *Soft Power*, Hwang reached out to his longtime collaborator Leigh Silverman, who had directed *Yellow Face*, and then, upon realizing that *Soft Power* should be a play with a full-fledged musical to capture the pathos and propaganda of *The King and I*, he approached Jeanine Tesori, who had composed *Thoroughly Modern Millie* (2002), to write the score. For most of his repertoire, content dictates structure, and another play serves as a template for his own. Combining form with function, *Soft Power* realized his vision to combat the musical Orientalism of *Madama Butterfly*, *Miss Saigon*, *Flower Drum Song*, and now *The King and I* through the very medium of an original Broadway-style musical.¹¹

But two tragedies changed the course of the project: in late 2015, Hwang was stabbed in the neck as he walked home with groceries, and in 2016, Donald Trump won the US presidential election. Silverman and Tesori encouraged Hwang to include more of himself and his attack in the script, and the stabbing took on metaphorical significance as an attack on democracy. The day after the election, Hwang thought, “This can be bad for the country, but it could be good for the musical.”¹² The musical premiered in spring 2018 at the Ahmanson Theatre via Center Theatre Group in association with East West Players, the oldest Asian American theatre company, and then transferred to the Curran Theatre in San Francisco. Trump’s anti-Chinese rhetoric and his administration’s policy of separating refugee children from their families formed the real-life backdrop. In this intensified xenophobic climate, the creative team revised the musical and adopted a more serious tone for the fall 2019 production at the Public Theater. The tightened libretto cut out targets for critique such as the US health-care industry and climate change denialism. It focused on anti-Asian racism, as the assault on the character of DHH became the center of the musical, resting on the dramaturgical scaffold of *The King and I*.

The Soft Power of *The King and I*

The King and I is a formative text for many Asian Americans. It is common to see the musical listed among the credits in an Asian American actor’s bio. Conrad Ricamora, who starred in *Soft Power* as Xūe Xíng, made his Broadway debut in the Lincoln Center revival. Experience with *The King and I* can open up more opportunities—such as in other productions of *The King and I*. For US audiences, *The King and I* might be their first encounter with Asian representation. Eve Oishi begins their theorization of perverse spectatorship—oblique ways of queer people/people of color seeing, searching for, and misperceiving themselves—by reflecting on the 1956 film version, which was the first time

that they saw Asians on screen: "On one level, I was seeing a story about a fictional Asia, starring actors in yellowface; in other words, I was witnessing the putting on of race. On another level, I was seeing and experiencing the fiction of my race in concert with a violent dynamic of sex."¹³ She finds this representation both pleasurable and harmful in providing ways of knowing herself and racialized Asian others. Gender studies scholar Tamara Ho similarly shares that *The King and I* offered the first example of Burmese representation that she can remember: "As a Sino-Burmese immigrant in 1970s California, I learned about the country of my birth by watching a Puerto Rican actress playing a Burmese concubine who protests her servitude to an Asian patriarch by transposing a famous novel written by a white American woman."¹⁴ Oishi and Ho highlight the racialized and gendered layers that make up performance, rather than a supposedly unmediated and authentic representation, as well as their relationship to that representation.

The King and I is part of my origin story too. To celebrate my tenth birthday, I wanted to see my first Broadway musical. I chose the jukebox musical *Smokey Joe's Cafe* (1995) because I already knew and enjoyed many of the songs. But the show was not available at the TKTS discount ticket booth. My father ended up buying tickets for *The King and I*. I was very disappointed to see what I considered a musical for old people. But when the curtain went up and I saw that shipyard set, I was absolutely mesmerized. Anna sang "I Whistle a Happy Tune" to her son, a kid just like me, except that he could whistle. The music comforted and enthralled me, since I had heard many of these songs before. I tried to wrap my mind around the swift scene changes, the intense colors, and the action happening right before me. My mom later recalled that the drumming in the performance had scared me. How could live theatre make me feel so much? When our family returned home, my father showed me his Yul Brynner autographs. My parents had seen one of his final performances in *The King and I* a decade earlier. Their interracial relationship resonated with the romance onstage. At the time, I did not know what a historic production this was as the first Broadway staging of *The King and I* without yellowface. Almost twenty years later, I watched the Lincoln Center production with my friend and fellow Asian Americanist Chris A. Eng. We had a very different experience. When Anna and her son felt scared of Southeast Asia and its people, we tittered, enjoying mocking yellow peril nonsense and communing together as Asian Americans, an affective phenomenon Eng calls "fellow yellow feeling."¹⁵ But then someone shushed us.

Recent biographies of Rodgers and Hammerstein tend to celebrate *The King and I* as a heartwarming musical and share the artists' biases toward the US government. William G. Hyland, a national security adviser to Presidents Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford, writes, "As in every Hammerstein script, there was

an optimistic message: that love and mutual understanding would conquer all, even racism.”¹⁶ His own anti-Asian proclivities peek through when he dubs the real King Mongkut “a tyrant, though a more enlightened one than most Asian rulers,” and he repeatedly characterizes Rodgers’s score as having an “Asian flavor.”¹⁷ Todd S. Purdum writes of both the special performance of *The King and I* and remarks by Rodgers and Hammerstein given on November 23, 1953, for the Anti-Defamation League in Washington, DC:

“I think the theater has a better right than almost any other influence in America, to speak for democracy,” Rodgers began.

Oscar chimed in. “We have no intolerance on the American stage, so we can plead for tolerance everywhere else.”

“In other words,” Dick added, “our house is in order. We’re at no loss in the theater for blistering names to call each other—but they’re never based on color or religion.”

“Another thing,” Oscar said, “nobody tells us what to write.”

“The public tells us what it likes—and that’s democracy for us,” Dick concluded.¹⁸

The musical duo insisted on American values of tolerance, democracy, and capitalism as represented by *The King and I*, despite the very real menaces of Jim Crow, McCarthyism, and, of particular relevance to these Jewish American artists, antisemitism. In *Oscar Hammerstein II and the Invention of the Musical*, Laurie Winer similarly valorizes “Rodgers and Hammerstein’s take on geopolitics in *The King and I*” and glosses over difference: “Their productions made audiences feel proud of not only what the country was but what it could be—that beacon of hope and fairness for which we strive yet find so elusive.”¹⁹ As scholars including Christina Klein, Mary L. Dudziak, and Penny Von Eschen have critically shown, the US government invested in antiracist imagery during the Cold War to appeal to other nations and portray itself as good—another deployment of soft power.²⁰ Both Purdum and Winer push back on critique. Purdum laments, “Some scholars went so far as to suggest that the romantic views of Southeast Asia—and of Western exceptionalism—promoted in *South Pacific* and *The King and I* had a hand in forming the mind-set that led to America’s misadventure in Vietnam.”²¹ Winer insists that “Hammerstein was clearly on the anti-war and anti-racist side of the arguments that defined American culture in his time and beyond.”²² Their diction and defensiveness without compelling evidence suggest the importance of these canonical musicals to white liberalism and US nationalism.

Historical, anti-Orientalist, and feminist critique has also shaped scholarly attention to *The King and I*. Bruce McConachie and others illustrate how Rodg-

ers and Hammerstein portrayed Asian people as immature and unable to govern themselves so as to rationalize US American policies ranging from military strategies in Korea and Vietnam to the adoption of Asian children.²³ Raymond Knapp notes the “child-oriented” and “primitivist repeated-note motive . . . as part of its ‘oriental’ musical profile,” and he argues that “by embodying the main roles through [non-Asian] Western actors, by slighting venerated historical figures, [and] by making Anna the impetus for reform, the show teaches us to disrespect as childlike a culture and people eminently worthy of respect in adult terms—even as it purports, without irony, to teach us the importance of respecting cross-cultural difference.”²⁴ In part because of the representation of King Mongkut as ignorant of Western customs and diplomacy, the Thai government banned the 1956 movie musical from public viewing.²⁵

“Getting to Know You” exemplifies the United States’ paternalistic treatment of Asia. The lyrics purport to be about Anna learning from the Thai children, yet the stage actions depict her teaching them and their mothers Western manners and changing them. According to Klein in *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945–1961*, “Getting to Know You” suggests equal exchange, yet “Anna’s influence, like American-guided modernization, results in local leaders governing themselves but always according to Anna’s precepts.”²⁶ Here is the benevolent imperialism of Anna singing “putting it my way, but nicely.”²⁷ Danielle Glassmeyer explains how *The King and I* models “sentimental orientalism”: “If we approach Asians as the children they are, and give them the love and education that we know they need . . . we will see the difference, as today’s nascent democrats become tomorrow’s adult democratic nation. Along the way, they will learn to love us as much as we have learned to love them.”²⁸ Through affective pedagogy, Anna makes Asians just like white people and encourages them to feel grateful for their colonial teachers. *The King and I* exemplifies the trope of a white woman saving the oppressed women of the king’s harem as an allegory for how the West could save Asian women and children from “Oriental” patriarchy.²⁹ Hammerstein wrote the musical while presiding over the board of Welcome House, an initiative to help Americans adopt mixed-Asian children whose existence resulted from the consequences of US military interventions. His extended family included the first adoptee from Welcome House. On the global stage, during Dwight D. Eisenhower’s presidency, a hospital ship named the SS *Hope* brought supplies to Southeast Asia through what was known as Project HOPE, which used “Getting to Know You” as its theme song.³⁰

The King and I embodies theatrical Orientalism with its amalgamated Oriental-sounding and -looking aesthetic, despotic king character, and framing of Asian people as children, and in its obverse mirror, it ultimately reflects US American epistemology.³¹ Hammerstein’s narrative drew from Margaret Land-

on's 1944 novel *Anna and the King of Siam*, itself based on the 1870s memoirs of Anna Leonowens. Rodgers did not research Thai music. In his autobiography, he pronounces, "Western audiences are not attuned to the sounds of tinkling bells, high nasal strings and percussive gongs, and would not find this kind of music attractive. If a composer is to reach his [sic] audience emotionally—and surely that's what theatre music is all about—he [sic] must reach the people through sounds they can relate to."³² The portrayal of Siam reveals more about the authors than about Thailand.

The musical suggests that Anna (and Americans) can embrace Thai people (and Asians and Asian Americans) when these "others" assimilate to whiteness and purportedly white Western values, namely, democracy. Andrea Most theorizes in her book *Making Americans* that "Anna teaches about democracy by using the conventions of the theater. Only when the Siamese can learn to perform in the manner of musical theater, the play implies, can they successfully transcend their otherness and become just like us."³³ This racial-colonial logic upholds white hierarchy and presumes that assimilation is possible and universally desirable, though racialized differences and other ways of being, performing, and governing remain. McConachie further argues that the incoherent casting of white, Black, Puerto Rican, and Asian American actors to play Asian and Asian American roles in Rodgers and Hammerstein's musicals led audiences to rely on "costumes, makeup, and the dramatic narrative" to determine the ethnic identity of characters and to interpret Asianness as superficial performance; therefore, "the lack of discernable casting conventions for Asian characters contributed to the audience's belief that Asian peoples already were or could easily become just like us."³⁴ Yellowface becomes a perversely liberal project of inclusion through flattening difference.

As the original king, Yul Brynner forged a model for yellowface performance and ethnic fungibility. Born to a powerful white Swedish businessman and Russian mother, Brynner claimed Mongolian ancestry through his Buryat great-great-grandfather on his mother's side. He made his Broadway debut as the Chinese lead opposite Mary Martin in *Lute Song* (1946). For the role of the king, he adopted a stilted accent and drew makeup inspiration from Kabuki theatre. According to his son, Rock Brynner, "Yul had never visited Siam . . . but his childhood had given him a deep familiarity with Asian reticence and deliberate inscrutability."³⁵ These experiences and characterizations suggest how Yul Brynner amalgamated Asianness from various cultures, personal experiences, and existing stereotypes. In addition, he narrated his ethnic background differently depending on the circumstance. Consider for example *The Yul Brynner Cookbook* (1983), which begins by declaring, "Everyone knows that Yul Brynner is the King of Siam," and includes recipes from Russia, China, Japan, Switzer-

land, and Thailand but interestingly not Mongolia.³⁶ In films, Brynner played a variety of “others”: an Arab, a Native American, a Japanese American, a Creole, a Jewish general, and an Indian sultan.³⁷ But he returned to the stage, reviving his performance as the king and continuing to perform this role until his death, leaving an iconic interpretation of the role while also leaving the door open to Asian Americans.

Asian American actors have protested *The King and I* since at least the 1968 production at New York City Center. Pickets held signs that said “‘A Puzzlement’—Why Doesn’t Richard Rodgers Cast Orientals in Oriental Roles?” and “Mr. Rodgers: Save On Yellow Greasepaint and Black Wigs—Hire Orientals.”³⁸ Until the 1996 Broadway revival, professional productions of *The King and I* featured non-Asian casts.³⁹ Even then, Martin Vidnovic played Lun Tha on Broadway in 1977 opposite Brynner and then played the king in the 2004 national tour. In 2015, the Asian American Performers Action Coalition (AAPAC) objected to the casting of a white actor as the king in the Dallas Summer Musicals production; the role was recast with Alan Ariano. In 2018, members of the Consortium of Asian American Theaters and Artists and others attending the Theatre Communications Group conference in Saint Louis protested the Muny’s production of *Jerome Robbins’ Broadway* (1989). When a white actress appeared onstage as Tuptim in an excerpt from *The King and I*, they shouted, “Boo yellowface!”

Even with (or perhaps because of) its yellowface legacy and Orientalist premise, *The King and I* remains popular. Bartlett Sher’s Tony Award–winning 2015 production, the fourth on Broadway, toured the United States and the UK. Having won accolades for reviving *South Pacific* at Lincoln Center, Sher seemed an apt choice as director. He showed sensitivity to Asian representation, insisting to media outlets that he had done his research and eliminated Orientalism.⁴⁰ But such an understanding suggests that anti-Asian racism is surface level and easily removable via casting Asians and implementing some Thai details. In her study of Asian “compression” in *The King and I*, Hye Won Kim shows that Sher rejected requests from Asian American actors to honor Thai specificity; he retained inconsistent accents and generic Asian bowing instead of Thai crawling.⁴¹ The veneer of authenticity, progressive messaging, dedicated work of Asian American artists, and iconic aspects of *The King and I* set up Sher’s production to both win Tony Awards and be lampooned at the Tony Awards. Widely accessible, the Lincoln Center revival has a cast recording and a PBS *Great Performances* video recording. Concord Theatricals, the licensing arm of the Rodgers and Hammerstein Organization, features images and videos from this version, keeping the franchise alive. The company also offers an hour-long youth edition with an accompanying promotional video featuring mostly non-

Asian children playing Thai characters, advertising “teacher-approved content,” and exhorting viewers to “make the world a better place!”⁴² The liberal lesson of ultimately erasing cultural differences continues to appeal. Yet the casting notice urges race-matching casting and bans literal yellowface makeup: “Many of the characters are Siamese or from surrounding countries and of Asian heritage. The actors should be cast accordingly. The use of make-up or prosthetics to alter an actor’s ethnicity is prohibited.”⁴³ The website sends mixed signals about yellowface without yellowed faces.

On February 5, 2019, Karen Shimakawa led a discussion with Sher and Hwang at the Asia Society in New York titled “*The King and I* Meets *Soft Power*.” Although Hwang offered a detailed account of how the Lincoln Center revival inspired his ambivalence and his reversal of *The King and I*, Sher did not engage with the substance. While he acknowledged his position as a white man and his politics as a progressive Democrat, he articulated his approach to the text as virtuous humanistic inquiry.⁴⁴ Through *Soft Power*, Hwang put his critiques into practice and hoped to be heard. After all, *The King and I* is about soft power. A Welsh woman uses an American novel to influence the king of Siam, who himself uses Western ways to defend against imperial incursions. A metatheatrical musical can highlight these cultural power dynamics.

Reversing *The King and I*

From the beginning, *Soft Power* explicitly discusses how musical theatre sways audiences. The show begins as a realistic play set during the 2016 presidential election. Xū Xíng, a Chinese producer played by Conrad Ricamora, commissions DHH, a representation of Hwang played by Francis Jue, to pen a musical adaptation of *Jiāng Cuò Jiù Cuò* (*Stick with Your Mistake*), a Chinese film, with the aim of increasing China’s soft power. *Soft Power* engages with assumptions and anxieties about China’s creativity. As Shannon Steen details in *The Creativity Complex*, “The possibility that China might exceed America’s creativity capacity has caused no small amount of concern, particularly given the potential to link it to China’s seemingly limitless work capacity.”⁴⁵ The characters experience soft power when they attend a performance of *The King and I* as part of a campaign rally for Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton. DHH explains how the musical fits an Orientalist tradition: “the white hero goes to some dangerous land and civilizes the backwards natives. The writers get all these details wrong. And the locals somehow speak with stupid accents—in their own country!”⁴⁶ And yet, the musical still makes DHH cry. Even as he can intellectually analyze the racist representation, he finds himself moved by the narrative and music. Zoe, Xíng’s white American girlfriend, played by Alyse Alan Louis, dubs this

phenomenon “the delivery system”: “And musicals have gotta be the best system ever. I mean, once those violins start playing, these shows go straight to our hearts.”⁴⁷ In earlier versions of *Soft Power*, Zoe had more lines teaching DHH and Xing to view *The King and I* critically, but this whitesplaining replicated the very dynamics of Anna and the king. In interviews, Tesori has invoked the concept of the delivery system, and as a white woman, Zoe channels her: “Because when you deliver something and you put a beautiful string section underneath it, it sways you.”⁴⁸ Xing embraces this machinery. For his Chinese musical adaptation, China will be the “I” while the whitened West will be the “other,” challenging the typical white savior narrative.

During this exchange, *The King and I* stays offstage. In an act of harm reduction and repair, Hwang and Tesori refuse to dramatize anti-Asian representation and instead rely on the audience’s familiarity with the yellowface performances and Asian stereotypes that haunt musical theatre. Drawing from Homi Bhabha’s theory of how stereotypes betray the anxieties of Western colonizers, Josephine Lee asks, “Must one reinscribe stereotypes in order to subvert them?”⁴⁹ *Soft Power* answers no. Although co-choreographers Sam Pinkleton and Sunny Min-Sook Hitt considered quoting Jerome Robbins’s iconic pseudo-Thai dance from “The Small House of Uncle Thomas,” they ultimately decided against replicating certain racialized gestures and triggering the discomfort that some Asian American performers felt in embodying such movement. The show also keeps Trump’s name out of the script, comparable to how Mongkut’s name never appears in *The King and I*. *Soft Power* imagines a fantastic future in which his brand no longer dominates headlines.

After Clinton loses the election, DHH is stabbed in the neck; as he nearly bleeds to death, *Soft Power*, the musical within the play, bursts into life onstage. In DHH’s fever dream, the twenty-two-piece orchestra tunes up, and Xing becomes the leading man. *Soft Power* does not present and does not pretend to present an actual Chinese view but instead presents a Chinese American envisioning of China. Hwang has claimed that Chinese people are not particularly bothered by yellowface.⁵⁰ The actors are not all of Chinese descent but are Asian Americans, racialized as a group and united in combating anti-Asian racism. Dialogue from previous scenes, *The King and I*, and other canonical musicals such as *The Music Man* (1957) and *Carousel* (1945) forms the blueprint for this hallucinated Broadway-style musical written by Chinese theatremakers fifty years in the future, when China has claimed global dominance after the United States has fallen into disrepair due to Republican governance. Speaking to and subverting Orientalist overgeneralization, Hwang’s stage directions specify that the scenic design should “be America. In the late-20th and early-21st centuries. . . . It should feel like a mish-mash to us—disorienting but not unskilled.”⁵¹

It should feel like Chinese artists conducted cursory research. It should feel like feeling yellow but reoriented to send up white American representations of Asia. Designed by Clint Ramos, the initial plane set piece references the ship that Anna boards in *The King and I* as well as the plane in *Nixon in China* (1987), another piece of geopolitical musical theatre with yellowface. Xíng lands at New York Airport, which does not exist, and he sees the Golden Gate Bridge, which does not exist in New York, jokes that poke fun at the sloppy tendency to lump together Asian geographies.

Soft Power inverts *The King and I*'s Siam by representing the United States as backward and bellicose. The first song, "Dutiful," conjures "I Whistle a Happy Tune." Just as Anna encourages her son to put on a brave face when they encounter half-naked Thai men carrying knives, Xíng reassures his daughter not to fear for him despite the United States' rampant gun violence. Upon landing, Xíng meets white American homophobic thugs who wield guns menacingly. Lindsay Livingston and Alex Trimble Young contend that "long histories of settler colonialism and chattel slavery . . . have produced the United States' exceptionally toxic gun culture" and articulated "whiteness, maleness, and violence as primary markers of full belonging in the civic community."⁵² In the rousing number "Good Guy with a Gun," the vice president defends not just personal gun ownership but American militarism abroad, as the administration plans to bomb China:

It's time to get real tough with folks
 So's we can liberate 'em
 Drop our bombs to help 'em
 And not because we hate 'em.⁵³

Hwang and Tesori's lyrics lampoon cries of freedom that try to mask the racism, colonialism, and Islamophobia that drive the killing of Asian people from Vietnam to Afghanistan.

In the song "Election Night," Xíng also learns about the vagaries of US democracy, from unchecked campaign spending to the electoral college. Far from being "easy, sensible, and smart," as the chief justice of the Supreme Court insists, the system is complex, inconsistent, and arbitrary:

CHIEF JUSTICE: Each of the fifty states receives
 A number of electors
 Equal to its total number
 Of Senators and Representatives
 XŪE: Wait!



Figure 11. Conrad Ricamora and cast members of the 2019 Public Theater production of *Soft Power*. (Joan Marcus).

CHIEF JUSTICE: The electors are pledged to vote
For the candidate of their party
Unless they choose not to.

xŪE: What?

CHIEF JUSTICE: The winner of the majority
Of votes in each state takes all the state's electors,
In a "Winner Takes All" system.

xŪE: Why?

CHIEF JUSTICE: The Electoral College ensured that smaller and rural
states
Had a disproportional say in selecting
A President

CHIEF JUSTICE & ENSEMBLE

Which in the early days of our great nation
Ensured they could keep their slaves⁵⁴

As the ensemble members in 1950s pastel dress dance and smile, "Election Night" highlights how white supremacy has always shaped the limits of American democracy through who can vote and how much their vote counts (figure 11). Xíng's reactions of confusion, horror, and bemusement work to denaturalize this way of governing as sensible. The number accurately if embarrassingly summarizes the electoral system, a major difference from *The King and I*, which mischaracterizes King Mongkut and Thailand.⁵⁵ The scene turns violent when Trump wins the election. His supporters chant "Make America great again!" and "Chinese go home!" as they hold tiki torches, a reference to the 2017 white nationalist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia.⁵⁶ They stab DHH, echoing the stabbing earlier in the play and the stabbing of Hwang in real life. As Elisabeth R. Anker argues in *Ugly Freedoms*, "freedom often is a form of violence."⁵⁷ In offering these heightened images of barbarity, *Soft Power* urges the audience to think critically about American exceptionalism, imperialism, racism, and democracy itself. If the winner loses the popular vote and campaigns on overt white supremacy, then is this really "the greatest system in the world," as the character of Hillary Clinton insists?⁵⁸

Or is American democracy a spectacle? When Hillary tries to convey her policy proposals backed by detailed charts, she fails to reach voters. Instead, she must tap and twerk at her rally at McDonald's to gain attention. According to Timothy Raphael in *The President Electric*, "Since the Reagan era, merely producing the bodies (empirical evidence, data, credentials, etc.) to support one's credibility as a candidate for surrogation is no longer sufficient and often irrelevant. The would-be king must *act* like a king."⁵⁹ He foreshadowed the efficacy of reality star-fascist Donald Trump. When they first meet, Xíng tells Hillary, "Your way of picking a leader just seems like a big, big show," a sentiment later repeated yet rejected in the song "Democracy."⁶⁰ In *Minor China*, Hentyle Yapp observes, "there are many failings of democracies that exceed opportunities for remedy in the project of liberal inclusion, such as redistribution, reparations, and social restructuring that could substantively (although not fully) ameliorate historical and ongoing injustices, particularly with regards to race."⁶¹ Despite these valid points, American spectators can reassure themselves that they are watching Chinese propaganda, softening these deep critiques of US politics.

While American ideals of equality appear to ring hollow, *Soft Power* imagines China as a utopia where Chinese Americans can live free from anti-Asian racism and women can live free from sexism, just as *The King and I* portrays the West as antislavery and antipatriarchal. DHH initially defends the United States because of his immigrant father's business success, but he concedes that his father contended with racist taunts and erased Chinese culture in DHH's upbringing. In

the song “Fuxing Park,” Xíng persuades DHH that China can be a free space for him. Together, they sing the word “free,” which floats and extends over instrumentals of woodwinds and violins like a breeze.⁶² *Soft Power* repeats and reorients Cold War and contemporary US political discourse that, according to Rey Chow, presents a “polarization of [US] democracy and [Chinese] authoritarianism.”⁶³ But in this case, DHH and the United States have much to learn from China’s apparently superior values. In line with this propaganda, Zhiyun Zhao suggests that *Soft Power* works as a transnational musical that borrows from Chinese ways to critique and improve the United States.⁶⁴ As Aihwa Ong identifies in *Flexible Citizenship*, “Chinese modernities are new racial imaginaries and regimes of domination that decenter Western hegemony in the global arena.”⁶⁵ Instead of reifying Western yardsticks for good citizenship and leadership, *Soft Power* invites American audiences to rethink the very way of measuring. Instead of Anna teaching Western manners, science, and governance to the king, Xíng suggests to Hillary that empowering ignorant, racist, sexist, antigovernment voters might not lead to the best form of government. In the tradition of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s pedagogical songs like “Do-Re-Me,” Xíng also uses a song to teach her about the four tones of Mandarin so that she can pronounce his name correctly. Titled “It Just Takes Time,” the song initiates their impossible interracial romance, as the couple bounds across the stage in a polka referencing “Shall We Dance?” Just as the king enslaves women, keeps a large harem of wives, and threatens to whip them, Hillary explains that American married couples wear rings “to show we’re owned.”⁶⁶ An autocracy, China seems strangely freer and offers lessons in governance.

Hwang dramatizes most clearly how power shapes epistemology, culture, and audiences’ perspectives in a metatheatrical scene that opens the second act. A panel of experts gathers to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of *Soft Power*. Descendants of the Chinese authors behind *Soft Power* dub Broadway musicals merely “regional folk art” about cats that their fathers “elevated.”⁶⁷ (But in reality, Broadway has “become accessible relatively recently in China.”)⁶⁸ The panel’s discourse satirizes musical theatre histories that claim that Rodgers and Hammerstein invented the integration of story, music, and dance, ignoring, for instance, Chinese theatre.⁶⁹ The fictional musical within *Soft Power* echoes not only mid- to late twentieth-century US musicals but also the Chinese socialist theatres of reform that themselves drew from movie musicals as well as Marxist theory, Russian aesthetics, and traditional Chinese instrumentation.⁷⁰ Chairman Mao’s musical theatre was not so separate from Rodgers and Hammerstein’s. On the panel, when the white American adjunct professor “who specializes in second-world nations” suggests that the Chinese artists appropriated American aesthetics and portrayed the United States inaccurately, the Chinese dismiss his

concerns, accuse him of having a political agenda, and threaten to censor him.⁷¹ They also push back on his characterization of the attack on DHH as “random” by offering the disturbingly plausible context that “religious fundamentalists at that moment in American history seized power. They began imprisoning minorities in concentration camps and attacking them in the streets.”⁷² During Trump’s second administration, ICE has terrorized, incarcerated, and killed immigrants and US-born citizens and turned a former Japanese American internment camp into a detention center. As Chinese propaganda, *Soft Power* purposefully leaves out China’s human rights abuses but hints at the dangers of authoritarianism. In reversing Orientalist knowledge production, these exchanges illustrate how those with the soft power of popular musical theatre can control how history is told.

Asian Americans Performing in Whiteface

Soft Power also turns racial hierarchy upside down through heightened performances of whiteface. In the initial stagings, Asian American actors played all the white American roles, except for Hillary. Akin to the black wigs and slanted eye makeup traditional to yellowface, they wore blond wigs, and in the Los Angeles production, they put on freckles and rouge, but they did not literally make their skin look white. The actors adopt whitened vocalizations from Tony Manero’s Brooklynese (“You makin’ fun of me?”) to California surfer accents (“Dudes! Welcome to McDonald’s. What can I get’cha?”), mocking how American depictions of Asia tend to mix up different accents.⁷³ Raymond J. Lee, who played the vice president, recalls, “How many times have I gotten, ‘Hey, Ray, do a generic Asian accent,’ and I’m like, what the hell is a generic Asian accent? So you mean like what Mickey Rooney did [in] *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* [1961], which I am not doing.”⁷⁴ In addition, Hwang gave the white characters ridiculous names like Bobby Bob, or their names referenced popular characters like Holden Caulfield, making up for indignities like *The Mikado*’s (1885) Nanki-Poo. Theatre scholar Arnab Banerji analyzes the purpose of “the Asian American actors play[ing] ‘symbols’ of mainstream ‘white’ culture. The reversal, hopefully, invites audiences to critically reflect on the biases that they harbour as consumers.”⁷⁵ When developing the gestural vocabulary for the white American characters, Pinkleton recalled, “The thing that I tried to do was be as lazy in thinking about white people as I see musical theatre being in thinking about non-white people.”⁷⁶ He demonstrated the white aristocratic “fancy arms” for Hillary’s campaign rally at McDonald’s, as he lightly held up his arms in front and to the side, bent his elbows, and curved his fingers pointing up. Silverman added, “I think what we were going for is the idea that you weren’t considered American unless you were

perceived as white.”⁷⁷ These layers of racialized performance resonate with Ju Yon Kim’s theory in *The Racial Mundane* of how white Americans in the early twentieth century feared East Asians as too different to assimilate into American culture yet also too good at assimilating and perhaps able to surpass white people.⁷⁸ Through whiteface, the Asian American performers play Chinese actors who out-white white Americans. By performing this racial excess, they racialize whiteness, which too often goes unmarked. If yellowface without yellowed faces allows for more genteel exclusion of Asian Americans, then whiteface without whitened faces exposes these racial dynamics through performing race beyond makeup, excluding white actors, and highlighting who has the privilege to script humanity and history.

To better understand the context and operations of whiteface in *Soft Power*, it is important to review additional examples. Scholars like Marvin McAllister and Faedra Chatard Carpenter have theorized how Black Americans use whiteface, from adopting whitened mannerisms and playing white characters to challenging racial hierarchy and creating new ways of knowing and seeing race.⁷⁹ They illustrate how whiteface is conveyed not just through white makeup and blond wigs but also aurally, linguistically, sartorially, and gesturally. In *Significant Other: Staging the American in China*, Claire Conceison studies examples of Chinese actors playing implicitly white American roles.⁸⁰ Aspiring for realism, they perform white Americanness through their costumes, accents, makeup, and hair such as beards. In Conceison’s estimation, these portrayals are often negative and one-dimensional, indexing changing attitudes from Chinese people and positions by the Chinese state in relation to the United States.

When Asian Americans perform in whiteface, they use similar tactics, but they hold a racial position that is triangulated with whiteness and blackness in the United States. Because they are often viewed as forever foreigners, their whiteface plays on perceptions of belonging as white Americans and not belonging as Asian Americans. At the same time and rather paradoxically, presumptions of honorary whiteness also enable Asian Americans in whiteface to perform similarity and difference. Moreover, whiteface performances tend to have metatheatrical frames that call attention to the very performance of race. They can make whiteness apparent, critique white privilege, reference and subvert racist representations of Asians and Asian Americans, and demand more jobs for Asian American actors. Richard Dyer’s key text *White* argues, “white people create the dominant images of the world and don’t quite see that they thus construct the world in their own image; white people set standards of humanity by which they are bound to succeed and others bound to fail.”⁸¹ Whiteface can unveil how whiteness works. When Asian Americans perform in whiteface, they demonstrate their proximity to and distance from an implicitly white human-

ity. These exaggerated whiteface performances differ from actors of color trying to blend into a mostly white cast playing white characters in, for example, *Much Ado About Nothing*.⁸² Such performances still avail racialized readings, but they often labor to erase race, not racism.⁸³ Asian Americans in whiteface draw attention to the very performance and construction of whiteness, often through exaggeration and metatheatricality. But this is not always or necessarily an anti-racist move.

Rodgers and Hammerstein incorporate whiteface in some of their Asian-themed musicals to mark the potentials and limits of Asians and Asian Americans assimilating into white Western culture. In *The King and I*, Anna introduces the enslaved girl Tuptim to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which Tuptim adapts into a dance narrative, "The Small House of Uncle Thomas." For the king, the performance is meant to show the visiting British dignitaries how civilized he is for approving of this Western abolitionist text; for Tuptim, it is meant to show the king how barbarous he is by paralleling slavery in the Confederacy with that in his palace. The visual and choreographic vocabularies, originally by Jerome Robbins, draw from Thailand, Cambodia, and Japan, as the dancers play Eliza, Simon Legree, and Eva. Some of them "wear whiteface makeup—in a kind of reverse blackface—to register the characters' racial difference from the performers, all understood within the drama as Thai."⁸⁴ In donning white makeup and staging this story, the Thai subjects suggest their fitness for democratic values, while the Asian aesthetics and embodiment suggest an irreconcilable difference. They also don black masks for Black characters like Topsy, resonating with the American tradition of blackface minstrelsy. Overall, as a show within a show, the dance highlights the layered performance of race, as the Thai people aspire for Western legibility and commensurability.

In another show within a show, the Chinatown nightclub performers in *Flower Drum Song* dance in "Gliding Through My Memoree," "which arrays Asian American women in whiteface with various European costumes."⁸⁵ The emcee, Frankie Wing, imagines himself a sailor singing of the white women with whom he had sex in different countries. Here, national dress, wigs, and props embroider whiteness onto the bodies of Asian American women. But instead of the tonal earnestness of "The Small House of Uncle Thomas," this number plays up racialized comic irony. For instance, Frankie reminisces about "a buxom, blue-eyed blond" from Sweden, embodied by an Asian American woman with a small chest, black eyes, and blond braids, per the 1961 film version.⁸⁶ This stark contrast both puts a spotlight on performing whiteness and distances Asian Americans from that whiteness.⁸⁷

Stephen Sondheim and John Weidman's *Pacific Overtures* (1976), another white-authored but Asian-centered musical, employs whiteface in more critical

ways from a purported Japanese perspective. The show's conceit bears a striking resemblance to *Soft Power*. According to Sondheim, "What we actually did was to create a mythical Japanese playwright in our heads, who has come to New York, seen a couple of Broadway shows, and then goes back home and writes a musical about Commodore Perry's visit to Japan."⁸⁸ Featuring an apparently all-Asian American cast and directed in a Kabuki style by Hal Prince, *Pacific Overtures* boasts the firecracker number "Please Hello," in which representatives from European countries come to demand trade and treaties with the Japanese in the mid-nineteenth century. Wearing white makeup, rouge, facial hair, and military dress, the Asian American actors embody the United States, Great Britain, France, the Netherlands, and Russia, as their musical styles reflect their national traditions. The American admiral sings to a Sousa-like tune, "Please hello, America back / Commodore Perry send hello."⁸⁹ His improper use of idiomatic language, subject-verb agreement, and verb tenses suggests his lack of facility with Japanese, flipping the script on popular media that tends to portray Asians as speaking "broken" English. In addition, the white representatives' lyrics reference national commodities—the Dutch sing of chocolate, windmills, and wooden shoes, for example—a kind of payback for commodifying Asians and their cultures. Ultimately, the Western diplomats threaten the Japanese with military weapons, thereby asserting and uncovering the unequal racialized power dynamics. Nevertheless, musicologist Ashley M. Pribyl concludes that "the show did little to alter the hegemony of white men in the higher levels of the Broadway hierarchy, perpetuating the notion that Asian stories can be told by white men (if they do enough research)."⁹⁰

Back to David Henry Hwang, whose backstage farce *Face Value* reacted to the yellowface casting in *Miss Saigon* in part by putting Asian American actors in whiteface. In the play, Randall and Linda plan to protest a new Orientalist musical called *The Real Manchu*. Randall complains: "In this day and age—a Caucasian—playing a Chinese! And in that horrible musical! Sets the country back fifty years. It's racist, sexist, imperialist, misogynist—And I didn't even get an audition."⁹¹ This joke represents what Esther Kim Lee calls the "paradox of Asian American acting": "Asian American actors have had to accept the reality of an industry that dehumanizes Asians by limiting them to stereotypical roles even while they attempt to assert their humanity, integrity, and truth as actors. Furthermore, they ironically have had to protest even for the right to play stereotypical roles in order to stay employed in theatre, film, and/or television."⁹² Because Randall and Linda do not want to be recognized in the theatre, they pretend to be white people by using white-coded phrases like "Howdy, pardners" and wearing whitened makeup.⁹³ Linda commands, "Whatever you do—don't forget—act white!" framing whiteness as a performance, not a natural given.⁹⁴

At the theatre, the Asian American actors luxuriate in the confidence and freedom that whiteness bestows on them, as other white people treat them better when they think that they are also white. Juxtaposed with this whiteface is the yellowface of white characters performing in the musical within the play, making both whiteface and yellowface overt and over the top. Racist yet ridiculous lyrics about Fu Manchu—like “He’s inscrutable / You can’t read him at all / He’s inscrutable / ’Cuz his eyes are so small”—sing instead of sting due to the metatheatrical and comical framing of racialized performativity.⁹⁵ By the end, all the characters engage in cross-racial performances and relationships, imagining another world of racial possibilities. Hwang’s play closed during previews on Broadway, but he continued to investigate the comedic, political, and material opportunities that whiteface avails to Asian Americans in *Yellow Face*, which cites *Face Value*, and *Soft Power*.

Soft Power resists Asian dehumanization in part through its opportunities for Asian American actors and sympathetic, three-dimensional characterizations of Xíng and DHH. Ricamora reflected, “Asian men don’t get the same opportunities to lead shows—we can be supporting.”⁹⁶ Insisting on the “whole humanity” of Asian Americans, he told a panel at BroadwayCon, “you don’t want to see my tricks for *Miss Saigon*, *Anything Goes* . . . or *The King and I*.”⁹⁷ When *Soft Power* opened in Los Angeles, Jue beamed with pride alongside the Asian American cast: “It’s something I never saw when I was young.”⁹⁸ He analyzed the privilege of white characters evoking individuality and empathy: “When I go to see ‘Death of a Salesman,’ I don’t assume that all white people are depressives and suicidal. . . . Yet when people see people like me on stage, they see somebody who represents something outside of their experience instead of someone they might share something with.”⁹⁹ During the rehearsal process, the creative team held weekly check-ins with the cast because they were self-conscious about being an almost all-white production team in contrast to the cast. Austin Ku, who played Bobby Bob, recalled that at one session, the actors cried as they poured out their stories of playing minor, obsequious Asian caricatures.¹⁰⁰ Silverman calls *Soft Power*’s casting a “revolution,” but “as per usual, I think that the invisibility of the Asian American community was on display.”¹⁰¹ It is rare for these actors to have the chance to play Asian American leads, Asians through the lens of an Asian American, or white American caricatures. *Soft Power* provided all three and proved that Asian Americans can excel at performing and producing golden age-style musical theatre too. Moreover, Hwang does not rest at writing noble Asian and Asian American characters whom white audiences should accept as the same as them and thus deserving of racial equity. Asian Americans do not need to measure up to a white, Western Enlightenment definition of the human,¹⁰² or of aesthetics.¹⁰³ Instead, Hwang changes the power dynamics and

calls attention to the perspective through which the audience views racialized representation.

A form of musical reprisal, *Soft Power* asks white audiences to experience what it feels like to be stereotyped and instructed to assimilate, paralleling Asian Americans feeling yellow when encountering yellowface. Pinkleton explains this reverse cultural appropriation: "My job is to connect with my gay white ancestors, and take from them and remix it and put it on different bodies."¹⁰⁴ For instance, the choreography of "Good Guy with a Gun" takes inspiration from Agnes de Mille's "Rodeo" and modern country line dancing, but then "in 'The New Silk Road' we're obsessed with official Propaganda Ballets created by China in the mid-20th century, and the angularity of communist imagery—all of the 'rugged individualism' from 'Good Guy with a Gun' suddenly turned into clean lines."¹⁰⁵ In "The New Silk Road," the white American characters physically assimilate into Chinese culture through choreographic reprisal. Assistant dance captain Daniel May touches on the difficulty of performing American whiteness:

In the dance lab, I remember Sam would throw out a really white American name, like "Jessica," and everyone would have to move around the space in the way a "Jessica" would move. That was one way we as a group of Asian dancers explored what "whiteness" or "American-ness" looks like in dance. I really struggled with how this can even be communicated. I wondered, is this even reading as "American," or are we just Asians in blonde wigs? Will they get that we're essentially performing whiteface? Some audiences got very offended by that aspect of the show, but I think that's the intentionally jarring nature of the story.¹⁰⁶

Because whiteness appears unmarked, its performance may be illegible, but exaggeration can heighten whiteness and even alienate white people unused to noticing their race and privilege. Hwang relatedly describes his artistic goals via the language of assimilation and appropriation:

one typically hears white people say things like, "I don't mind when Japanese people dress up like cowboys, so why should they be upset?" But appropriation needs to be understood in the context of a larger power dynamic between cultures. The notion of a powerful China (which, let's face it, many Americans fear) appropriating and stereotyping a weaker America, helps to more accurately replicate that dynamic. Where it comes to audiences of color, I hope the experience of seeing [*Soft Power*] proves empowering, validating the feeling of being dehumanized and stereotyped that we've experienced most of our lives, and also proves that we can create something just as beautiful and moving as those works we may find problematic.¹⁰⁷

Rather than trying to reason with or seek empathy from white audiences, Hwang wants to discomfit them, while affirming audiences of color. In the beautiful, moving, and problematic eleven o'clock number "Democracy," the cast and creative team open up an array of interpretations from people with different positionalities, as they encourage spectators to remember earlier lessons about *The King and I*.

Performing "Democracy"

The climactic song, "Democracy," demonstrates the efficacy of musical theatre as a delivery system for ideology, beginning with Hillary's blistering critique of democracy and ending with her unwillingness to let it go. After Xíng wins Hillary's heart and successfully convinces the vice president to follow China's lead, he invites Hillary to follow the New Silk Road, which references China's real-life Belt and Road Initiative.¹⁰⁸ She rejects him and sings a torch song instead:

So many times
It's left me battered and bruised
Disillusioned, in pain
Feeling
I've been used
I swear I'll give it up
Before it downright kills me
Then it comes back again
With promises that thrill me¹⁰⁹

The way Hwang and Tesori structure the song is such that the "it"—democracy—is a big reveal. Hillary characterizes democracy as an abusive lover that "leaves her screaming on the floor."¹¹⁰ This personification takes literally the harm done by democracy in a white supremacist, capitalist, ableist, cisheteropatriarchal nation in which a majority of white votes have not gone to a Democratic president since 1964.¹¹¹ This is the history of Chinese exclusion and Japanese American incarceration in a democracy. This is the violence done to DHH the character and Hwang the person. This is the pain felt by those who voted for Hillary Clinton. Despite losing the election and knowing that many Americans fervently support policies that hurt people of color, immigrants, refugees, women, queer people, trans people, nonbinary people, poor people, disabled people, and the planet, Hillary returns to her "man." As Sara Ahmed writes in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, "the failure of the nation to 'give back' the subject's love works to increase the investment in the nation. The subject 'stays with' the nation, despite the absence of return and the threat of violence, as leaving

would mean recognising that the investment of national love over a lifetime has brought no value.”¹¹² The song “Democracy” aptly cites “Something Wonderful,” in which Lady Thiang, the king’s first wife, sings of her husband, “You’ll always go along / Defend him where he’s wrong / And tell him, when he’s strong.”¹¹³ The song also resonates with “What’s the Use of Wond’rin’,” which justifies domestic violence in *Carousel*, and “And I Am Telling You I’m Not Going” from *Dreamgirls* (1981), which Tesori invokes in order to make Hillary sound “powerful” and to reference the context about not leaving a cruel partner.¹¹⁴

Soft Power is haunted by the real Hillary Clinton and *The King and I*.¹¹⁵ As secretary of state within the Obama administration, Clinton advocated for economic policies to keep China at bay. Like almost any other US presidential candidate, she believed in US exceptionalism. In the musical, Hillary still thinks that democracy can work if people are “wise enough / Just enough / Worthy of trust enough.”¹¹⁶ This is a tantalizing ideal. But history suggests that those with white privilege work hard to preserve that privilege rather than give it up.¹¹⁷ American democracy might be not broken but instead working as intended. Played by a white actress instead of an Asian American in whiteface, she may stand in for Tesori or Silverman. Hillary takes on a white innocence that does not explicitly tackle systemic racism. Like those who cling to the American flag for protection, she believes in a more perfect union and forgets that the union is built on genocide, dispossession, and slavery. This critique might be hard to accept, as liberal white audiences might identify with her and cling to canonical musicals. Indeed, white spectators may mistakenly believe that Hillary represents Anna, not the king, because both characters are white women and because they agree with the characters’ political alignment. In her power ballad, which builds in speed and intensity, Hillary ends by singing, “I believe in / Democracy” as the number buttons.¹¹⁸ She belts her conviction. When audience members erupt into applause, are they cheering for the performer? The character? Clinton? American democracy? Despite the righteous rebukes they just heard? An audience member might hear the incisive lyrics but be “swept away” by the music.¹¹⁹ Others might register the deliberately ironic tension between music and lyrics and sit with discomfort. Steen suggests that the song “might be construed as the cruel optimism of democratic potential,” of never achieving the liberating promises of democracy but believing such achievement to be possible.¹²⁰ Still others might recall that they are watching propaganda by Chinese artists as envisioned by DHH’s dream. Or they might vacillate among these thoughts and feelings.

The finale reprise of “Democracy” reproduces and reckons with the force of musical theatre as a delivery system for ideology. The fictional musical dissolves as, back in the world of the play, DHH awakens from a hospital bed and recovers from his stabbing. In the Los Angeles production, he breaks the



Figure 12. The company of *Soft Power* in the 2018 Center Theatre Group world premiere performing “Democracy (Reprise).” (© 2025 Craig Schwartz Photography.)

fourth wall to tell the audience that even though “the ballot box has given power to those whose America no longer includes people like me . . . I can still hear the music. A song, clinging desperately to hope.”¹²¹ The reorchestrated reprise sounds gospel-like and inspirational. Tesori has previously drawn from African American music traditions in musicals like *Caroline, or Change* (2003), but here, there are no Black characters, an absence that perhaps comments on erasure, even as blackness has historically underscored sounds of freedom and been indelible to defining US popular culture.¹²² Gone is the language about democracy abusing people. When the ensemble sings “Lift us up,” the music provides that lift.¹²³ With lots of repetition and few rhymes, “Democracy (Reprise)” feels straight from the heart. The scenic design references the US flag, as white stars on blue form a frame around the proscenium (figure 12). No longer decked out in blond wigs and whiteface makeup, the cast wears casual street clothes in muted reds, whites, blues, blacks, and grays. They stand straight, equidistant from one another, and take up the full stage space before they cross downstage to form a line. Upstage, the set pieces have gone away to reveal folded-up ladders, flats, and sound equipment. White lights shine on the actors, while house lights sweep over the audience members in this two-thousand-seat theatre. Specta-

tors can interpret these choices to eliminate spectacle as the artists of *Soft Power* expressing their authentic feelings about democracy. In this part of the unpublished script, the character names are replaced with the actors' real names, except for DHH.¹²⁴ This is no longer a show but a group of people onstage singing directly to the audience, as they join to perform the nation. DHH seems to be the actual David Henry Hwang telling the audience that despite all his criticisms of the United States, he still believes in democracy, Asian American inclusion, and the people's power to change. In the face of xenophobia and white supremacy, the Asian American cast claims their belonging and their conviction. Jue comments that often immigrants "have this radical faith in democracy, more than the people who have lived here and take it for granted."¹²⁵ As DHH, he sings "I still believe" in such a soft, high-pitched way that his voice might crack, voicing the fragility of democracy.¹²⁶ The ensemble supports him as they repeat "Won't give it up!" and the song buttons with a note of triumph as harps, drums, and trumpets ring out.¹²⁷ This is what democracy looks like and feels like.

"Democracy (Reprise)" captures this devotion to preserving democracy at a moment when it might crack. After the Supreme Court struck down a key provision of the Voting Rights Act in 2013, a crop of voter suppression laws appeared across the country.¹²⁸ Many Republicans have openly opposed democracy—particularly direct democracy—and embraced the vigilante violence of Kyle Rittenhouse. On January 6, 2021, the radical right attempted an insurrection at the US Capitol. A poll subsequently found that "nearly two in three (66 percent) Republicans say Biden's election win was not legitimate," a "majority (56 percent) of Republicans support the use of force as a way to arrest the decline of the traditional American way of life," and "roughly four in 10 (39 percent) Republicans support Americans taking violent actions if elected leaders fail to act."¹²⁹ In 2025, the political assassination of Minnesota House Speaker Melissa Hortman, a Democrat, barely registered with Republicans. This approval of antidemocratic violence against the Left is rooted in racism. Another study found that "the single survey item with the highest average correlation with antidemocratic sentiments is not a measure of attitudes toward Trump, but an item inviting respondents to agree that 'discrimination against whites is as big a problem today as discrimination against blacks and other minorities.'"¹³⁰ Meanwhile, a majority of Asian Americans support antiracist policies including affirmative action (70 percent) and Democrats such as Joe Biden (54 percent), and their voter turnout increased from 49.3 percent in 2014 to 59.5 percent in 2020.¹³¹ In this historical context, the depth and pervasiveness of white racial resentment can fuel the urgency to claim the United States for Asian Americans and to believe that voting harder is sufficient to achieve racial equity.

Yet *Soft Power* has another layer. As repetition and reorientation, "Democ-

racy (Reprise),” much like whiteface, attempts to draw attention to the theatrical frame itself. The song sounds sincere in its prodemocracy nationalism, but it is ironic as part of the delivery system and caustic in its searing indictments of the United States. The ensemble reminds the audience:

And I forget
 What I really should know
 I forget
 That it's such a big, big show.¹³²

The “it” refers to both democracy and *Soft Power*, how charismatic performance trumps good government and how the audience is still watching a show that quotes Xíng’s earlier remark to Hillary. They are watching American propaganda. They are still being emotionally, ideologically, and musically manipulated.

While the 2018 Ahmanson Theatre version makes “Democracy (Reprise)” a tonally consistent positive anthem, the 2019 Public Theater version tries to clarify Asian American ambivalence. Hwang’s stand-in character shares how the attack on him inspired him to write this show and to end it with faces that resemble his own singing about their country. Staged in the 299-seat Newman Theater, this production fostered greater intimacy. The house lights come up, the orchestra is revealed upstage, and the cast wears black jumpsuits over casual clothes, costumes that suggest the work that remains to be done for democracy. The stripping away of the musical’s elaborate sets and lighting design attempts to raise the audience’s consciousness of the very mechanisms of spectacle and to drive them toward antiracist action. Reflecting on his ambivalence about the theatre and theatre’s capacity for its own undoing, performance studies scholar Nicholas Ridout suggests, “It is in the imperfections . . . of its miming of the ideological structures of a given social organisation that theatre, perhaps, almost inadvertently, or with a coy slyness, discloses the weaknesses and blind spots in its own structures,” wielding the possibility for spectators to think critically about their relationality to political economies and to theatre itself.¹³³ Hwang cut the repetitions of “Won’t give it up,” choosing instead to end with DHH speaking in Mandarin and English, “Good fortune will follow. If we somehow survive,” recognizing past and present attacks on Chinese Americans, the real possibility of this country killing us.¹³⁴ No longer ending with a fast explosion, the song slowly descends to a resolution with clarinets, oboes, and violins on a hopeful yet somber note.

Asian Americans may never be full participants in American democracy and identity—and even if they could be, that incorporation would not necessarily dis-

mantle white supremacy and decolonize a settler nation—yet they sing, “Still I dream.”¹³⁵ Co-choreographer Hitt offers, “What are you going to do when you leave this theatre? Because democracy only works if we all participate.”¹³⁶ Raymond J. Lee reflects, “I liked when people were charged politically, socially, from the musical in whatever way they got out of it, whether it was I’m gonna write an Asian show, whether it was I’m going to be part of like, you know, Reverend Warnock’s . . . campaign.”¹³⁷ While holding the tensions of democracy, these artists hoped that audiences would make it more robust with the participation of more voters and election of more Democrats.

Soft Power is both for democracy and skeptical of it. Lee sings,

Look, this country's a disaster
 In so many ways
 But we have the power
 We have the power
 We have the power
 to change¹³⁸

In doing so, he captures this dual sensibility of conceding the problems of this abysmal nation and of refusing to concede to white nationalism. His relentless repetition and his vocal power amplify the power of the people, as he bends the notes of “change,” putting change into action. *Soft Power* thus comments on and tries to capture how Asian Americans vacillate between hope and despair as they experience inclusion and exclusion. It performs what Shimakawa names “national abjection,” “at times embracing/ingesting [Asian Americans], at other times violently (if often symbolically) expelling/excluding/segregating them.”¹³⁹ Although white US theatre institutions have embraced Hwang, white supremacy has also literally stabbed him in the neck. Dramaturgically both in and beyond the musical, with the actors playing themselves and their characters, the reprise realizes this national abjection sense of both/and. The finale encapsulates the multiple registers of feeling yellow. Even as the racism of yellowface, stereotypes, and the United States produces righteous anger and profound sadness, the Asian American performers play feminist killjoys pointing out these structural problems, yearn for a more inclusive country, and marshal those complicated emotions to mobilize the audience.

Soft Power further seeks to replicate Hwang’s emotional experience of watching *The King and I* and his consciousness about musicals as a delivery system for Orientalist ideology. As he puts it, “One of the big challenges was to create that complicated feeling at the end of the show where the show is inaccurate, where it may be advocating something that we don’t believe in, but it’s so well done

that it kind of sucks us in emotionally.”¹⁴⁰ Although most of the musical within the play satirizes US democracy, the concluding scene effectively if complexly advocates for it. Just as critics of *The King and I* might still weep in the end, so might critics of Trump still defend the supposed greatness of the United States.

The creative team wants audiences to feel ambivalent about American democracy and understand the role that musical theatre plays in subtly indoctrinating them. Hwang adds, “I want us to be aware of the problematic aspect of the initial Hillary version, a torch song about going back to her abuser, democracy. But I also want us to be hopeful at the ending, because I think a musical should be. I also want us to be aware of the mechanisms of the musical, the soft power of it, and the delivery system of it.”¹⁴¹ Silverman reflects:

you know you’re being manipulated, and yet we want you to be manipulated. We know democracy is fucked up, yet it’s what we have. And we want you to love it. We wanted both things to feel true and be held by the audience. And in a way we tell you we’re gonna do it that way. And then we do it that way. And then we reiterated that we did it that way. And some people felt excited to have that kind of complication and some felt confused because they’re not used to musicals ending in a complicated way . . . we just didn’t wanna let people off the hook.¹⁴²

The director and choreographers commented on the difficulty for audiences of holding multiple truths at the same time. Pinkleton notes, “many things can be true at once. And this makes people, especially white liberals I would suggest, short circuit. . . . The opinion that I have no time for is like, ‘Ugh, that ending is so naive. It’s so naive. You just say it works. Can’t you see it doesn’t work? Donald Trump is President.’ It’s like, yeah, it’s fucking complex. And like, how exciting that this argument can actually, I think, only be laid out as a musical.”¹⁴³ The artists behind *Soft Power* and the characters in *Soft Power* clearly and repeatedly communicate the effectiveness of the delivery system in promoting ideology, their critiques of and hopes for American democracy, and their intention to demonstrate musical theatre’s soft power. They also gesture toward the difficulty of asking audiences to grapple with these ideas and their own interpellation into political propaganda.

Responding to *Soft Power*

Critics reveal an array of interpretations and layers to *Soft Power*. Most reviews of the Los Angeles premiere expressed excitement and confusion.¹⁴⁴ Reviews of the off-Broadway production were similarly positive, although several white male

critics objected to it as “messy,” claimed “nothing quite jells,” and expressed “doubt whether even the creative team of ‘Soft Power’ could graph its plot.”¹⁴⁵ Jackson McHenry of *Vulture* was one of the few who grasped the artistic intention: *Soft Power* “finally redirects toward ambivalence. It’s a forceful ambivalence, though, backed by the full arsenal of the American musical, with strings and horns and a whole ensemble of actors, all deployed here not to deliver an ideology but to try to shake you out of one.”¹⁴⁶ The Broadway-style musical attempts to awaken the audience to the delivery system and their belief system.

Meanwhile, most critics interpreted the finale as solely pro-US American democracy. Helen Shaw writes, “There are some thrills in the show, not least the final image: a full-stage chorus line of the large, nearly entirely Asian cast, singing its (broken) heart out about America.”¹⁴⁷ Hwang scholar William C. Boles concludes about the Ahmanson production, “despite presenting a view of an America that has lost its way in voting for a candidate who vilifies Hwang’s ethnicity and ancestry, Hwang refuses to end the musical as an anti-American play. There is still hope, as expressed in the song ‘Democracy’ . . . to not give up on the values that have made the country great, in essence to not give up on democracy.”¹⁴⁸ Boles understands the bare directorial-design choices as the actors proclaiming their unvarnished truth, and he frames the United States as having “lost its way” rather than following its historical white supremacist path. Peter Marks, the former leading theatre critic for the *Washington Post*, dismisses the ending as “sentimental,” with an unearned or naive patriotism.¹⁴⁹ Jesse Green, then chief critic at the *New York Times*, calls “Democracy” “a full-out screamer of a tribute to democracy.”¹⁵⁰ He reflects, “it’s a strange complication that ‘Soft Power’ critiques the seductive persuasiveness of musicals—the ‘soft power’ of American culture—while also trading in it.”¹⁵¹ Green does not seem to realize that the authors did this purposefully. Also, it must be noted, critics like Green had written raves for the 2015 Broadway revival of *The King and I*, failing to clock the critiques of this Rodgers and Hammerstein show that *Soft Power* posits. *Variety* concludes: “In the end, Hwang and Tesori recognize and honor the yin and yang of both cultures, where belief in duty, democracy and musicals is essential.”¹⁵² Using a Chinese trope and an imagined East-West binary, this review ultimately does not question the politics of the United States and the power of musical theatre.

Privileged audiences tend to resist challenges to their ideology. Dramaturg Dani Snyder-Young writes, “white audience members interpret theatrical performances in ways supporting our existing worldviews, even if that requires ignoring substantial elements of the work we have seen. These patterns of white spectatorship fundamentally support white racial comfort.”¹⁵³ These patterns help explain some reactions from white audiences. During one performance at

the Ahmanson, when Hillary first sings of her lingering belief in democracy, a spectator yelled seemingly approvingly and without equivocation, "Woo!" On my way out of the theatre, I overheard a white person remark that the United States may be terrible, but at least it is not China. Some others have walked out of the musical. During intermission, Dorinne Kondo overheard a couple of white women condemn Singapore's government as repressive and declare that politics have no place in the theatre.¹⁵⁴ Although the Los Angeles and New York audiences included people of color, especially Asian Americans, in large part thanks to outreach by East West Players and Hitt, they still leaned white due to the theatres' subscriber bases. In *Disaffected*, Xine Yao reminds us, "To depend upon white feelings as the catalyst for social change reinscribes the world that enables their power," because Asian American artists appealing to white audiences reinforces white people as the arbiters of humanity.¹⁵⁵ The creative team have said that Asian Americans are their target audience, so their documented responses merit careful attention.

Soft Power has offered life-giving reparative creativity to many Asian American critics. In his review, Austin Yang writes, "There's a special feeling evoked by the justice that underlies the humor in *Soft Power*. When I see the 'white' ensemble played by Asians in blonde wigs, the generalization and simplification of American culture, the Chinese outsider pointing out the fallacies of American government, I laugh, but I also understand that they represent years of POC marginalization at the hands of white writers."¹⁵⁶ For Yang, the musical offers hilarious reversal and reprisal, the joys of being a killjoy, instead of resentful bristling or shame, which people defensive of the United States and *The King and I* might experience. Ana Paulina Lee concludes, "*Soft Power* compels audiences to imagine and enact political futures that are not driven by fear or hatred, but rather by the possibilities of life-making, art, and regeneration in the wake of the modern state and its racial regimes."¹⁵⁷ Kondo sums up the musical's intervention: "Above all, *Soft Power* stages an Asian American-critical race studies perspective that is absent from mainstream, white-dominant US theater, television, and film."¹⁵⁸ She adds, "I wish I could see it every day."¹⁵⁹

I have never identified with a piece of musical theatre like I have with *Soft Power*. I saw the production three times in Los Angeles (including one viewing with Kondo) and once in New York, not just for research but as a fan. As a Chinese American to the far left of Hwang, I felt alive and affirmed. I cried at "I Am," DHH's meditation on feeling like he is neither Chinese nor American but concluding that he is both, he is whole, and he is enough. The song resonated on another level for me as mixed race. At the same time, I laughed at references like how DHH realizes he is Chinese because he always grabs the check. I nodded along to the ridiculous yet legitimate send-ups of the United States. I also expe-

rienced ambivalence. When I watch “Democracy (Reprise),” I am profoundly moved—and resentful that I am moved. I appreciate the words that recognize the violence that the United States perpetuates and the music that recognizes that the American people can do better. I do not want to be included in a white supremacist settler state. But as much as I try to push away my national identity, I am pulled back into the American project. In 2023, I sat stoic, watching the recorded version of the musical in the Theatre on Film and Tape Archive at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, until I noticed that Jue repeatedly sang “This is America” while gesturing toward the Asian American cast members to either side of him and then laying hands on his own torso.¹⁶⁰ I teared up because I felt like he was singing to me: “You are America.” How is he making me cry after all these reprises and despite my painful self-awareness? To me, what is most remarkable about *Soft Power* is its simultaneous insistent belief in democracy, criticism of American democracy’s foundational investments in racism, and metatheatrical mindfulness of the musical’s emotional levers. It exposes how musicals indoctrinate us with not only patriotic belief in US governance but also uncritical pleasures in yellowface, how we so often give anti-Asian racism a free pass. The musical is about feeling yellow while making the viewer feel yellow. *Soft Power* makes me experience the forces of racialization and of musical theatre, even as I channel Asian Americanist critique and consider alternative ways of being together beyond the nation, and I hope *Soft Power* can prompt similar affects for and solidarities with others.

The Afterlives of *Soft Power*

Since 2020, *Soft Power* has circulated with more overt political purposes in a heightened anti-Chinese climate, as Republicans blamed the COVID-19 pandemic on China and Asian Americans. Jue recounted that he has lost track of how many times he has been spat on.¹⁶¹ After the misogynist anti-Asian spa shootings in Atlanta in 2021, an attack that the police deracinated and dismissed as the killer merely having a “bad day,” Hwang has come to terms with his own attack as being motivated by anti-Asian racism.¹⁶² Documenting a belief that Asian Americans are not really Americans, the 2022 Social Tracking of Asian Americans in the United States (STAATUS) Index found that 33 percent of Americans “agreed that Asian Americans are more loyal to their country of origin than to the United States,” a huge jump from 20 percent the previous year.¹⁶³ Only 29 percent of Asian Americans “completely agree that they feel like they belong and are accepted in the U.S.”¹⁶⁴ The *New York Times* used performance language in the article “As Biden and Xi Begin a Careful Dance, a New American Policy Takes Shape” to describe the United States censuring China

for its treatment of prodemocracy protests in Hong Kong, just as China characterized the United States as a politically unstable threat to the world.¹⁶⁵ *Soft Power's* insistence on Asian American inclusion and its analysis of geopolitics remain relevant.

The ambivalence of “Democracy” and its reprise also avails patriotic performances in different political arenas. As popular American discourse increasingly acknowledged anti-Asian racism, and since *Soft Power* was named a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, Hwang has received more platforms from which to share his personal story and musical. For the 2020 Democratic National Convention, the Asian American Pacific Islander Caucus invited Hwang to speak, and Ashley Park performed “Democracy.”¹⁶⁶ For the first time, an Asian American played Hillary, but outside of the musical. Then, Phillipa Soo sang the song for an American Civil Liberties Union fundraiser. At the Kennedy Center’s celebration of its fiftieth anniversary in 2021, the eleven o’clock number went to Hwang, Kelly Marie Tran, and cast members of *Soft Power*. Hwang introduced their performance of the songs “Democracy” and “Democracy (Reprise)” by speaking to “the role Asian and Pacific Islander Americans can play to address the challenges facing our nation today” as “we rededicate ourselves to the grand experiment of democracy itself.”¹⁶⁷ Tran and the other Asian American actors crooned their dedication “to keep fighting for life, liberty.” In this patriotic hymn, they pledged their allegiance to the United States and their hope for democracy to survive and include their voices. But, in keeping with the uplifting sensibility of this anniversary concert in Washington, DC, Hwang had changed some key lyrics from the stage version. “Look, this country’s a disaster / In so many ways” was transformed into, “Look, this country’s still hurting in so many ways,” casting the Biden presidency as a period for healing from the damage wrought by the first Trump administration and the attempted right-wing coup on January 6 earlier that year.¹⁶⁸ In the most significant lyrical change, Hwang turned “I forget that it’s such a big, big show” to its opposite, “I forget that it’s not just a big, big show.”¹⁶⁹ In the context of the nation’s capital and Biden’s presidency—and decontextualized from *Soft Power*—“Democracy” and “Democracy (Reprise)” became the buoyant anthems that some critics had interpreted the original stage versions to be.¹⁷⁰ In 2023, Hwang explained the changes: “Trump had been defeated at the ballot box, and democracy, while still flawed, had functioned successfully. Moreover, the celebratory circumstances, with elected officials and FLOTUS present, led us to soften some of the despair and irony of the number in the musical.”¹⁷¹

The intensification of anti-Asian (particularly anti-Chinese) racism, the threat of Republicans overthrowing the government, and the rekindled optimism of Hwang influenced another rewrite of *Soft Power*. A new production

directed by Ethan Heard opened at Signature Theatre in Arlington, Virginia, just outside of Washington, DC, right before the 2024 presidential election. The revised script repeatedly spells out the harmful impact of Trump's racist rhetoric. When the character of DHH is stabbed in the musical within the play, his dying words are, "I thought if I acted white enough, this country would accept me," and "Whenever there's trouble between America and Asia, people like me get hurt."¹⁷² At the same time, *Soft Power* offers stauncher critiques of Chinese censorship. "The New Silk Road" is no longer about China sharing green technology with the United States; it is about sharing surveillance technology to quash protest. Xíng persuades the Trump administration to ally with and imitate China to build a more orderly society, but Hillary continues to stand up for US ideals of freedom:

HILLARY: But China is not a democracy!

XŪE: Right! I told them in our country, people don't even vote.

HILLARY: And they liked that?

XŪE: A lot! Especially the part where our leaders serve for life!

HILLARY: That's terrible!¹⁷³

This dialogue chillingly resonates with Trump's real-life comments to conservatives at the time that, if reelected, "In four years, you don't have to vote again, we'll have it fixed so good you're not going to have to vote," since he would become, in his words, a "dictator."¹⁷⁴

In this political moment of fearing Republican fascism, Hwang and Tesori have become more protective of their country's precious and precarious democracy. DHH introduces "Democracy (Reprise)" with a vow for Asian Americans to "continue our fight—to belong" without ambiguity.¹⁷⁵ Designed by Chika Shimizu, the set for the Signature production features a mirror along the lower back wall, so audience members see themselves reflected as the people. This time, Grace Yoo, an Asian American actress, played Hillary, thereby yielding an all-Asian cast and recasting whom we imagine to be iconically American. Having an Asian American play Hillary also echoed the 2024 Democratic candidate for president, Kamala Harris. With an opportunity to put the first Asian American in the White House, the anthem felt like a get-out-the-vote effort for Democrats and democracy in this blue-leaning part of Virginia. Indeed, the playbill listed websites to learn about voting and Asian American advocacy. Heard asserts, "as we approach this next election, which both echoes 2016 and brings fresh fears, we need a story like this one, to reinvigorate our hope and belief in democracy, more than ever."¹⁷⁶ Streamlined at ninety minutes, this *Soft Power* minimizes the critical dialogue scenes about musical theatre as a delivery system for ideology.

More of a straight satire, the musical revisits Hwang's original vision of a reverse *King and I*. Tesori relays that *Soft Power* felt "unwieldy" at the Public: "It felt like the dance between content and form was not the same dance. One was doing the Watusi, and the other was doing a slick tango."¹⁷⁷ Now the show is clearer and more consistent in sending up but ultimately holding on to US democracy. The Signature production received glowing reviews, yet Asian American theatre critic Nathan Pugh concludes, "it's strange that for a show overflowing with ideas, Hwang only imagines voting as the way forward in politics, not revolution or even reform."¹⁷⁸

Later that fall, Trump won the presidential election, and since the inauguration, he has unleashed an avalanche of antidemocratic directives. He deployed the National Guard to intimidate residents in Democratic cities including Los Angeles and Washington, DC. He has attempted to freeze already appropriated congressional funding, to fire civil servants who do not pledge loyalty, and to defund entities from the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau to the Department of Education. His administration has flouted judicial rulings against its illegal and unconstitutional actions. On the global stage, Trump has renamed the Gulf of Mexico the Gulf of America and endorsed the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians from Gaza. Without congressional approval, he has also announced tariffs on China, among other nations. He gutted the US Agency for International Development (USAID), a decision estimated to lead to the unnecessary deaths of fourteen million people should cuts continue through 2030.¹⁷⁹ Back at home, the administration has ousted scientific and medical experts and dismantled public health policies, as eugenicist ideas and diseases spread. Trump has ordered bans on gender-affirming health care for trans people and bans on programs for diversity, equity, and inclusion. He has called for mass deportations of undocumented immigrants and an end to birthright citizenship, just as the conservative Supreme Court has ruled that ICE can racially profile people. ICE has been kidnapping children and killing immigrants and their allies with impunity. As part of this white supremacist, xenophobic project, Trump has also mandated whitewashed public education. The National Endowment for the Arts accordingly canceled the Challenge America grants to favor cultural productions that celebrate the Declaration of Independence. Trump purged the Kennedy Center board of its Democrats and installed Republican loyalists, who elected him as chairman. Deborah Rutter, president of the Kennedy Center when "Democracy" and its reprise had rung out just a few years earlier, stated in her departing remarks, "Much like our democracy itself, artistic expression must be nurtured, fostered, prioritized, and protected."¹⁸⁰ But Trump and his cronies have stifled free speech. Witnessing how democracy has led to this dismantling of democratic norms proves the prescience of *Soft Power*.

Soft Power offers lessons for the work ahead. Hwang and Tesori's text confronts the popularity of white supremacist xenophobia and the ideological sway of musical theatre. It also considers the possibility of collective change. The musical invites us to think about and feel how soft power works, although it might work so well that you might not even notice it working. But we can wake up and organize that power for good. Jue recounted the day after the 2024 presidential election, when the Broadway cast of Hwang's *Yellow Face* gathered for the Wednesday matinee performance:

People were in tears, and they didn't know if they could get through it, and why were we doing this and what it didn't matter anymore, you know. And we circled up before the show, as we always did, and I said to people, "This is what we do. This is one of the most powerful ways to fight back that we have, . . . live theatre, where we're actually breathing the same air, and we get to say these things, and people get to respond. . . . This is the way people's perceptions of us can change."¹⁸¹

Hwang's theatrical productions connect to and seek to change larger sociocultural dynamics. Instead of obeying in advance, artists, audiences, and activists can mobilize performance and political affect to resist fascism.

Feeling yellow, the immiseration and racialization of dealing with yellowface and anti-Asian racism, can hail Asian Americans into a political identity, not just a being but a doing, and circulate to inspire others in solidarity. Hwang's literal stabbing resonates with political scientist Wendy Brown's critique of wounded attachments, her push to want more beyond identity-based solicitations that reify the state: "How might democratic discourse itself be invigorated by such a shift from ontological claims to these kinds of more expressly political ones, claims that, rather than dispensing blame for an unlivable present, inhabited a necessarily agonistic theater of discursively forging an alternative future?"¹⁸² Rather than plead for antiracist state reforms on the basis of being a wounded Asian American, I wonder how reprises of "Democracy" and struggles over US democracy could make possible a stage for radical democracy, one where we participate, share, and have our basic needs met without white supremacy, without xenophobia, and without yellowface. We can exercise our imaginations beyond restoring this democratic nation and beyond recasting canonical musicals, to build something new with people of color at the center. In her analysis of white American mediocrity, African American theatre scholar Koritha Mitchell issues an important challenge: "white people can refuse to live according to the low expectations their country has of them. Will they?"¹⁸³ On June 14 and October 18, 2025, the No Kings demonstrations against the antidemocratic actions of the

Trump administration became two of the largest single-day protests in the history of the United States.¹⁸⁴ I neither want to underestimate the danger of this moment nor romanticize the impact of theatre for social change. But practiced hope and direct action matter.

As *Feeling Yellow: Asian Americans and Yellowface in Twenty-First-Century Musical Theatre* demonstrates, US musical theatre has made significant progress in repairing Asian American representation and providing more opportunities to Asian Americans. *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, *Anything Goes*, *The Nightingale*, and *The Mikado* indexed yellowface in their time, and they also improved with pressure from Asian Americans and their allies. Rather than presume inevitable evolution toward equity, their intentional activism, artistry, and affect labored to effect change. *Soft Power* brilliantly epitomizes critique of yellowface in musical form. But the work to efface yellowface and anti-Asian racism remains unfinished. Still, I dream.

Notes

Introduction

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Chapter 1

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Chapter 3

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