Shanghai, 1936: Film camera held up to her right eye, the tall slender woman registers the scene around her. She stands in a busy Chinese thoroughfare, pivoting to capture on film every moment of the ceremonial procession. The camera does not disturb her perfectly coiffed bangs and long hair knotted in a bun at her nape. Her elegant, pale, patterned cheongsam flows to her ankles. Her height and activity make her, not the procession, the center of this street scene.

This scenario with Chinese American actress Anna May Wong in control of the camera is evocative. The filming of “My China Film” encapsulates one of her finest moments as a cultural worker crafting an alternative to the mainstream culture. Wong created “My China Film” as her response to being rejected, in favor of Luise Rainier in yellowface, for the lead role in Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer’s award-winning film about Chinese peasants, The Good Earth (1937). Immediately after that casting disappointment, she traveled to China for the first and only time in 1936 and had her visit there filmed. In contrast to the major Hollywood studio production The Good Earth (1937), “My China Film” is Wong’s Chinese American artifact. Anna May Wong: Performing the Modern centers on a diverse array of entities, such as “My China Film,” as well as encounters with other artists, such as Afri-

---

1. Since the movie does not have an official title, I call it “My China Film.” Wong repeatedly refers to it as “my film” in her letters to Van Vechten and Marinoff.
can American performer Josephine Baker, in order to show Wong’s cultural production and self-fashioning. Scrutinizing Wong’s oeuvre outside of Hollywood A-list films opens up a whole new understanding of her career as an ingenious creative artist.

Wong stars in this book because she embodied the dominant image of Chinese and “oriental” women between 1922 and 1940. Wong played groundbreaking roles in American, European, and Australian theater and cinema to become one of the major global actresses of Asian descent between the world wars. Born near Los Angeles’ Chinatown in 1905, Wong made more than sixty films that circulated around the world, headlined theater and vaudeville productions in locations ranging from Sydney to Paris to New York, and, in 1951, had her own television series, The Gallery of Madame Liu-Tsong, produced by the now defunct DuMont Television Network. The sheer


number of films, theatrical productions, magazine covers, and iconic photographs rendered Wong ubiquitous. Global cultural and political interest in the “orient” propelled her fame in locales such as Germany and Mozambique. Her contemporaries noted her celebrity, for she was introduced on the 1957 American television show *Bold Journey* as the most famous Chinese [-descent] woman in the world.\(^5\) Although she is no longer a household name, I argue that Wong remains an important twentieth-century performer because her work shaped racial modernity.

As an Asian American, there was nothing authentically “oriental” about the very American Wong, who, until 1936, had never been to China. Yet decades before the civil rights–generated category of Asian American existed, Wong grappled with how to be an Asian American actress.\(^6\) In the early 1920s, Wong, alongside Japanese actor Sessue Hayakawa, challenged “yellowface,” the film and theatrical casting norms that bypassed Asians in favor of Europeans and European Americans made up to look “oriental.”\(^7\) However, even if Wong’s starring roles in early 1920s films fractured yellowface casting and marginally improved the standing of Asian Americans in Hollywood films, the racial order signaled by laws such as the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, Western fantasies of the oriental, and racial segregation haunted her for her entire life, denying her an opportunity to become an A-list Hollywood actress in major studio productions such as *The Good Earth*.

Despite her talent, Wong could not forge a viable Hollywood career. In the late 1920s she left the United States for Berlin, and from Africa to Australia she found appreciative audiences. Her multifaceted performances—on stage and off—had broader social significance, however, as a transnational form of interpretation that re-envisioned dominant notions of race, gender, and modernity. By contextualizing her work within the global reach of twentieth-century Western imperialism, as well as race relationally formed, this book reveals how, as a cultural worker, in her most important creative roles, she reflected the possibilities, the absurdities, and the limitations of racial and gender strictures.

---


Methodology and Approach

The central argument of this book is that Wong’s work shaped racial modernity, which made her one of the most significant actresses of the twentieth century. Rather than tracing stereotypes (oppression by power from the top down) or subversion (power from the bottom up), this book focuses on the imbrication of race and gender into modernity, paying close attention to the cultural work of self-fashioning and creation. In my first book, *A Feeling of Belonging: Asian American Women’s Public Culture, 1930–1960*, I examine Wong’s low-budget B-list Hollywood films as exemplars of gendered modernity and Asian American cultural citizenship. That research led me to *Anna May Wong: Performing the Modern*, a serious evaluation of key moments in Wong’s extraordinary career as a global symbol of the oriental. Whereas most previous scholarship has highlighted select films such as *Piccadilly* (1929), biographical details of her life, or cinematic stereotypes, this book focuses on the deliberate self-fashioning of her personas, incorporating as well as transgressing dominant ideals about womanhood, acting, and race and thereby thrusting these issues into an international public sphere. This “cultural work,” as I call it, encompassed not only her film and theatrical roles but also the roles that she performed in everyday life as a celebrated actress on a world stage. This scholarly intervention draws on new research, such as the footage of “My China Film,” which compels me to consider her as a cultural entrepreneur who rewrote categories of representation and produced multicultural audiences as she went along.

In this book I re-evaluate one of the major frameworks for understanding transnational racial difference, orientalism, by juxtaposing female African American and Latina performances of the “oriental” against Wong’s in order to explore a more complex view of race. The normative way to study racial difference would be to focus solely on one group, in this case Asian American, and to compare that group to white European or European American culture. However, I here break out of that dualism by exploring, in conjunction with Wong, the cultural work of female performers from other racial groups. Women from various ethnic and racial backgrounds portrayed the oriental. Hence, film studios summoned Wong to portray not only Chinese women but also Southeast Asian and Pacific Islander women. Likewise, in Paris, Josephine Baker played Tonkinoise (Vietnamese), Arab North African, and Hawaiian women. In Hollywood, Dolores del Río embodied the Pacific Islander Princess Luana in *Bird of Paradise* (1932) and Lupe Vélez depicted

---

8. Lim, *A Feeling of Belonging*. 
Ming Toy in *East Is West* (1930) and danced hula in *Honolulu Lu* (1941). This book explores race as a relational construction by investigating how these women deployed the racial markers of the oriental. It is crucial to remember that for all of the actresses, including Wong, playing oriental roles necessitated cross-cultural performance.

What is at stake? I situate this work as part of the feminist recuperation of women’s experiences, and, moreover, racial minority women’s responses to gender being unmarked as white. As decades of scholarship have established, this is not compensatory work but analysis that transforms how we conceptualize history. Body politics still have ramifications for people’s lives. What is at stake in this examination of Wong’s career is the very writing of history: who can speak, who can be a subject, and how it can be done. In doing this work, I wish to validate creative and risk-taking scholarly inquiry. It is my fondest hope that this book inspires fledgling artists who have not had access to figures such as Wong to apprehend the past and, by extension, the future as a place of doing differently.

I consider Wong as a consummate artist, assembling a vital and extraordinary archive of her labor, chiefly outside of Hollywood cinema and including European film, Australian vaudeville, photography, and American television. Much of the lore around Wong centers on her never being kissed in any Hollywood film or her dying a thousand cinematic deaths in works such as

---


the Fu Manchu films. If you view only widely circulated Hollywood films such as *Daughter of the Dragon* (1931) or *The Good Earth* (1937), it is easy to misinterpret Wong as an abject, almost famous film star who colluded with Hollywood in creating the worst of oriental typecasting. In contradistinction, I have written here, if you will, an anti-mainstream-Hollywood rendition of carefully curated moments in Wong’s career. Rather than focusing solely on sources promoted by the dominant culture, such as those produced by Hollywood studios (which are far more abundant and easier to locate but limited in scope), I mined the historical archive to include artifacts generated by Wong and her community, both in the United States and abroad, such as self-made films, letters, personal theater program collections, newspapers, and photographs. These freshly uncovered sources compel me to re-envision Wong’s opus. Housed in London, Wong’s pan-European films project the breathtaking range of her talent as a starring film actress. Her letters to photographer and writer Carl Van Vechten and his wife, actress Fania Marinoff, and her self-made China film reveal her process of crafting her art. Her letters, juxtaposed against the Van Vechten portraits, hitherto unexamined except for the famed tuxedo portrait, exemplify her process of self-fashioning. Film and theater reviews throughout the world showcase Wong’s sly sense of humor, filtered through the writers’ oft-times admiring eyes. Through these materials, one can see Wong at the forefront of newly fabricated media forms, transitioning from silent films to the “talkies” and, finally, to television. In addition, she pioneered productions in color in both film and television: Two-Tone Technicolor in the film *The Toll of the Sea* (1922) and color in the National Broadcast Company’s (NBC’s) *Producer’s Showcase* (1954–1957) television series.

A nontraditional imaginative archive anchors this book. It includes moments of encounter between Wong and other artists of the time such as German Jewish philosopher Walter Benjamin and Josephine Baker. Despite Wong’s cultural importance, the traditional historical archive has been limited. Surviving family members have refused to grant interviews, there are no diaries, and the letters from Wong to Van Vechten and Marinoff serve as the only available extensive correspondence. Therefore, I have turned to an in-depth analysis of Wong’s encounters—actual ones such as that with Benjamin as well as ones that require feats of historical imagination to actualize, such as her witnessing Baker’s performance in Paris.

This book pinpoints particularly salient moments of Wong’s work rather than exhaustive biographical details because I believe that her career, not romantic passion, was the driving force of her life. Historian Karen Leong
Anna May Wong, by Carl Van Vechten.

[Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Carl Van Vechten Collection
[reproduction number LC-USZ62-135267].]

concur in her excellent chapter on Wong, declaring that Wong’s single status was “an expression of freedom from gender norms in both the Chinese and American communities.”

Looking at my diverse range of sources leads me to conclude that Wong derived her emotional satisfaction from her career as well as from friendships and family. Wong declared that “work is the best Therapy

12. Leong, *China Mystique*, 82.
of all.” Her siblings were paramount—later in life she lived with her brother Richard in Santa Monica, California, traveled with him and her sister Ying to China, and persuaded her sister Lulu (Lew Ying) to accompany her to Berlin. Later, in Los Angeles, Wong reported being a “happy sister these days.” She never got married nor did she have children. Yet, rather than promoting the feeling that she must have been exceedingly lonely, the letters that she wrote to Van Vechten and Marinoff reveal rich networks of friends in Los Angeles and New York. Those epistles recount her meeting up with Australian actress Judith Anderson (eerie in her Academy Award–nominated role as Mrs. Danvers in the film *Rebecca* [1940]), staying with Kitty Clements in New York City, and lunching at Paramount Pictures, even when no longer under contract. Wong’s letters to Van Vechten and Marinoff become most intimate and revelatory in the 1950s, a period covered in the Epilogue of this book. Of course, although not mentioned in her letters, there exist hints of possible romance. Biographer Graham Russell Hodges links her to director Marshall Neilan in the 1920s, and in the 1930s to producer and songwriter Eric Maschwitz. In Chapter 2 of this book, I hint at the tantalizing possibility of a liaison with English actor Laurence Olivier, and, in my first book, I noted that there were rumors of her involvement with German actress Marlene Dietrich. However, the letters reveal that her joys and sorrows derived first and foremost from her career, from the friendships that she built from her work, and from her family, her siblings in particular.

At its heart, this book is a work of cultural history. It owes much to performance studies and to film studies for key concepts such as “performativity” and “the modern,” which undergird it. Yet those modes of analysis are not primary. The concept of “performativity” denotes the plethora of repeated acts and gestures that render gender and race socially intelligible. “The modern,” especially in reference to actresses, emphasizes surfaces and aesthetic modes. While both frameworks denaturalize the racialized, sexualized, and gendered body, they tend to individuate, ahistoricize, and depoliticize the subject. Centering the narrative on Wong herself makes this book very different

---

14. Anna May Wong to Carl Van Vechten and Fania Marinoff, February 17, 1952, CVVMC.
from the articles by scholars such as Laura Mulvey or Anne Anlin Cheng that deploy Wong’s films to prove or disprove theoretical stances, particularly psychoanalytical ones, on race, gender, politics, and film theory. In contradistinction, my approach focuses on self-fashioning and cultural work as politicized cultural modes of representation and links the work of American racial minority women to a material global history of race, gender, sexuality, class, and politics. The concept of “self-fashioning,” derived from literary scholar Stephen Greenblatt’s *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, describes the process of constructing one’s identity and public persona according to a set of socially acceptable standards. Acts of self-fashioning, originally examined in studies of the Renaissance-era upper class, have been extended by scholars to elucidate race and gender through figures such as African American writers Frederick Douglass and Nella Larsen and Latina film stars. A focus on self-fashioning and cultural work situates an individual within a larger social structure and is an illuminating lens through which to view Wong’s career. As a work of cultural history, this book foregrounds the broader context of politics, such as Western imperialism or the Cold War, through juxtaposing Wong against figures such as Josephine Baker.

Like a variety revue, this book presents vignettes of key moments of Wong’s cultural work and analyzes their deeper meanings. It is not a traditional bildungsroman or biography. In their typical forms, both genres privilege teleological and progressive narratives, such as “coming into voice” or “going from oppression to liberation,” that do not fit the ever-changing nuances of Wong’s cultural work. Hodges’s biographical book-length treatment, *Anna May Wong: From Laundryman’s Daughter to Hollywood Legend*, does a laudable job in its attention to Chinese reactions to Wong throughout her career, but the sheer volume of detail at the expense of analysis makes me
lose the forest for the trees. Instead, I here follow innovative models of race and performance historical scholarship. Hye Seung Chung characterizes her monograph on Korean American actor Philip Ahn, Wong’s co-star in films such as *Daughter of Shanghai* (1937), as a “discursive critical biography” that uses Ahn as a case study in a larger examination of Asian and Asian American representation.\(^{21}\) I argue that this approach, which I share, authorizes the writer to eschew the psychological and motivational analysis implicit in conventional biographical modes, instead showing such public figures as part of the structural, ideological, and cultural configurations of particular racial minority groups. Linda Hall’s pathbreaking work on Mexican actress Dolores del Río interrogates the “interaction between the individual and the constructed image,” an approach analogous to what I call cultural work, which enables an author to reveal both the star iconography and the steps that the actress took to achieve it.\(^{22}\)

Several scholars do the vital analytical work of showcasing particular aspects of Wong’s career. Leong’s *China Mystique* elucidates the “gendered embodiment of orientalism.”\(^{23}\) Leong’s chapter on Wong is complemented by chapters on Pearl S. Buck and Mayling Soong, which, as a whole, demonstrate the centrality of American cultural fascination with China. Film and theater scholar Sean Metzger interrogates “the discursive production of a wardrobe—to get readers to think differently about existing categories such as race and Asian American.”\(^{24}\) Metzger’s chapter on Wong parses the politicized meanings of the *qipao* (cheongsam). In her important article on screen passing, film scholar Yiman Wang insists that Wong is not a performer who naturally plays Asian American roles but one who employs tactics such as screen passing or ironic ethnic masquerade in ways that can be understood as subversive of dominant racial stereotypes.\(^{25}\) My analysis in this book is formed in dialogue with these works.

Instead of a simplistic story arc leading to a happy Hollywood ending or, as was common in the case of Wong, a tragic Hollywood denouement, this book makes multidimensional the challenges she faced as well as her responses to them. It seeks meaning by situating these discontinuous moments within larger historical contexts as well as analyzing them through theoretical and

---

conceptual frameworks. This is not a conventional biography uncovering the
development of a single life. Rather, it features Wong as a historical subject
cast in relation to other figures. *Anna May Wong: Performing the Modern* is
structured like a globally circulating vaudeville variety show starring Wong and
featuring a variety of supporting acts, locales, and stage sets. What is gained by
this approach is a contingent and episodic narrative that is less conventional,
but one that more accurately reflects the complicated dynamics of history.

The leading part in this story goes to Wong. Baker plays the main sup-
porting role, with additional support by Mexican actress Lupe Vélez and
and a cameo appearance by Mexican actress Dolores del Río. The relational
formation of race and analogous work in self-fashioning instigates the other
women’s inclusion in this story: all of the women played oriental roles in
films and/or theatrical performances. Other supporting characters include
Van Vechten, Benjamin, and European American photographer Edward Stei-
chen. Wong stars not only because she was a key figure in the United States
but also because she enjoyed global fame as the ultimate “oriental” actress
from Australia and China to France.

Orientalism

The gravitational force of orientalism exerts its pull on this entire book as a
source of both opportunity and limitation not only for Wong but also for other
groundbreaking individuals in theater and cinema, including Baker and Vélez.

University Press, 2014); Bennetta Jules-Rosette, *Josephine Baker in Art and Life: The Icon and
the Image* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007); Anne Anlin Cheng, *Second Skin: Josephine
Baker and the Modern Surface* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Jennifer Boittin,
*Colonial Metropolis: The Urban Grounds of Feminism and Anti-imperialism in Interwar
Paris* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010); Phyllis Rose, *Jazz Cleopatra: Josephine
Baker in Her Time* (New York: Doubleday, 1989). Since she changed her citizenship to French
and remained in Europe, Baker, unlike Wong, continued her European career into the post–
World War II period. For more on Josephine Baker’s 1950s politics, see Mary L. Dudziak,
1994, 543–570. On Vélez and del Río, see Clara Rodriguez, *Heroes, Lovers, and Others: The
Story of Latinos in Hollywood* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2004); Victoria Sturte-
Trap*, no. 22 (Spring 2005): 23; Alicia Rodríguez-Estrada, “Dolores del Río and Lupe Vélez:
Images on and off the Screen,” in *Writing the Range: Race, Class, and Culture in the Women’s West*,
ed. Elizabeth Jameson and Susan Armitage (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press,
1997); Michelle Vogel, *Lupe Vélez: The Life and Career of Hollywood’s “Mexican Spitfire”* (Jef-
ferson, NC: McFarland, 2012); Hall, *Dolores del Río*; Joanne Hershfield, *The Invention of Do-
lores del Río* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).
As Edward Said’s landmark study *Orientalism* established, European fascination with the “orient” was central to European culture, politics, and nationalism and was frequently invoked as a justification for colonialism.\(^\text{27}\) The orient refers to geographically mutable and often unspecified places ranging from what is now Turkey and Russia to the “Middle East,” the Arab world (often including Arab North Africa), and the Far East. As the foil to modernity, the orient functioned as a mirror for Europe’s own desires and ambitions. Building on that European orientalism, U.S. orientalism geographically shifted focus to the eastern Pacific. U.S. orientalism combined the European version with the myth of the American frontier.\(^\text{28}\) According to the frontier myth, American national formation was unique because class-based conflict could be solved by the promise of economic opportunity in the so-called “empty” lands in the West. As the U.S. nation-state borders reached the Pacific Ocean, historian Frederick Jackson Turner famously lamented that the United States had lost its frontier and thus its basis for class harmony. Colonizing the Pacific (the Philippines, Hawaii, Guam) through American imperialism imaginatively extended into the Pacific the function of the American West as safety valve for class conflict. Settler colonialism became naturalized and normalized as part of the American nation-state.\(^\text{29}\) In addition, it compelled the migration of workers from Asia to the United States and its territories. In cinema as well as in journalism and the arts, American orientalism took the form of the yellow peril, namely the fear of Asian migration and the concomitant hordes of Asians taking over the United States. Both Hollywood and European versions of orientalism would affect Wong’s career. As theater scholars Karen Shima-

---

INTRODUCTION

kawa, Josephine Lee, James Moy, and Robert Lee have eloquently argued, no Asian American actor/actress steps onto a stage free of the oriental stereotypes against which he or she must struggle to be seen. The transnational reach of Hollywood and European film meant that these viewpoints would circulate around the globe, including in locales such as Australia and South Africa. Wong’s career contested, accommodated, and, most importantly, denaturalized various forms of orientalism.

In this book, orientalism refers to the discursive formation of otherness as well as the “orient” as an imagined amalgamation of “Eastern” cultures that loosely reference the area ranging from North Africa and Turkey to the Middle East to East Asia and the Pacific Islands. Orientalism manifested itself in films of the 1920s such as Old San Francisco (1927) and the Fu Manchu films, which showcased the sinister aspects of racial difference. Like the European version, American orientalism was fascinated with China in particular as evidenced by the treaty ports and Shanghai concessions, thus strengthening U.S. orientalism and Wong’s cinematic career.

In the 1920s, general interest in exotic otherness through the female body meant that acting opportunities in film and theater opened up to include a few select women of color in starring oriental roles. The feminized embodiment of orientalism was crucial to this casting. Patriarchal tropes combined with colonial discourse to create the female oriental in need of male Western control and mastery, creating opportunities for actresses such as Wong, Baker, Vélez, and del Río to perform “oriental” roles. American and European interest in the orient expanded to the Pacific as colonial ventures in China, Southeast Asia, and the South Pacific intensified. As cultural historian Adria Imada argues, in the context of U.S. imperialism and settler colonialism hula “helped to broker this process of incorporation and integration.” Through these actresses’ performances, we see the paradoxes of the modern.

This book’s interpretive vitality derives from the tension between the colonial/exotic/oriental roles the women were expected to play and the cultural work that they did to fashion alternatives. What is vitally important is that these alternatives render the category of the oriental unstable. I see Wong as a versatile artist, game enough to produce bad performances of the oriental that undercut any notions of authenticity while vitally engaged with self-fashioning

30. Shimakawa, National Abjection; Robert Lee, Orientals; Moy, Marginal Sights; Josephine Lee, Performing Asian America.
32. Imada, Aloha America, 6.
and presentation of self. Women represent the ultimate modern subjects precisely because of their ability to inhabit multiple temporally complex subject positions such as those of self and other, primitive and civilized, oriental and Western. As these bodily regimes of modernity apply to everyone, it is a matter of whose body becomes visibly marked as such. Yet such an ordering of bodies is how modern Western societies organize and categorize their populations. By mapping these women’s responses to the challenges that they encountered, I explore the edges and limits of modern culture.

Modernity

Changing conceptions of modernity, race, gender, and geographic mobility are central to understanding the significance of Wong’s career. For Anna May Wong: Performing the Modern, modernity signals the changes in the Enlightenment-derived liberal subject as manifested in modern society’s central organizing principles of racial and sexual difference. For those who do not bear the dominant markers of national belonging—in the case of the U.S., nonwhite and female—such narratives of belonging and citizenship are frequently renegotiated through acts of modernity. As scholar David Theo Goldberg has argued, “If premodernity lacked any conception of the differences between human beings as racial, modernity comes increasingly to be defined by and through race.”


35. Arjun Appadurai, Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Dipesh Chakrabarty, Provincializing Europe:
colonial nations, the colonies supplied both the material and ideological underpinnings for European modernity. In addition to colonial superpowers such as Britain and France, Italy, the Netherlands, and Portugal were concurrent colonial powers. Whereas American modernity developed not only vis-à-vis imperial ventures but also in response to settler colonialism and to racial minorities within its nation-state borders, for European countries, colonial subjects chiefly resided outside. Wong’s American modernity, combined with her racial and, by extension, colonial difference, made her a fascinating puzzle for European and colonial audiences.

As bodies under modernity became distinguished by racial difference they also became marked by sexual difference. The twentieth century was a critical era for the changing roles of women. With the passage in 1920 of the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution granting the right of women to vote, women’s roles in the public sphere were newly visible. These changes in the modern era were signified by the creation of the private and public spheres, the rise of industrial labor, and the shifting roles of religion and family in society. All of those currents converged in the United States at the concept of the “New Woman” and globally at the concept of the “Modern Girl,” both beautifully exemplified by Wong on- and off-screen. The flapper, one of the most popular incarnations of the New Woman and Modern Girl, emblematized modernity by finding new pleasures and autonomy in the public sphere away from the control of the patriarchal family. Women’s reconfigured sexual, familial, and public roles, combined with their function as the main subjects of consumer culture, made the New Woman and Modern Girl significant figures of both promise and anxiety. As a career woman and a fashion icon, Wong represented the seductive dangers of the New Woman and Modern Girl even when cast as the oriental siren.


Wong’s career as a mass media celebrity through films, mass-circulating magazines, and consumer culture arrived at a crucial time in the 1920s. In the twentieth century, categories of difference were promoted, among other ways, through the circulation of motion pictures, images, and the commodification of the body. As eminent cultural historian Warren Susman points out, by 1922, “an exceptional and ever-growing number of Americans came to believe in a series of changes in the structure of their world, natural, technological, social, personal, and moral.”38 One way that Americans (and the rest of the world) understood this rapidly changing world was through the motion pictures. Actresses such as Wong became critical to comprehending societal transformations. As a performer, she was both symptomatic of and contributed to these changes. As Wong moved through the twentieth century, her work unfolded on new media, such as multi-language film and television. The intertextuality of film, advertisements, photography, and television displayed the shifting terrain of modernity.

In Berlin, no less an intellectual than German philosopher Walter Benjamin attempted to work through the puzzle Wong represented; his 1928 interview with her in Berlin reveals how difficult it was to fit her into dominant constructions of Chinese heritage in light of her New World modernity. Wong and Benjamin enter into a conversation with each other, and that encounter, which reverberates in his writings and in her films and letters, becomes a current in the circulation of modern culture. Yet, as I explore through Benjamin and Wong’s meeting, the supposed openness of cosmopolitan culture courses up against the edges of racial mores.

The Book

The geographical scope of this book encompasses American as well as European empires that laid out the performance routes for Wong, including stops in Europe, the United States, Australia, South Africa, and China. As such, this work takes up the challenge of transnational history and U.S. history both within and outside of nation-state borders. This study focuses on a critical period when new gendered narratives of modernity, national belonging, and cosmopolitanism were in formation: from 1928, when Wong began acting in Berlin, to 1939, with the performance of her vaudeville act in Australia, and concluding in the 1950s. Although power and politics are continually

articulated through culture, this book insists on the historical perspective, for race and its cultural meanings are not universal throughout time and location, but are mutable, contingent, and particular in time and space.

Six chapters arranged chronologically and geographically present Wong’s ventures as an actress. The narrative arc of the book delineates Wong’s changing relationship to power, beauty, and ingenuity. At the start of her career, Wong’s youth and beauty subjected her to attention from luminaries such as Benjamin and actor Laurence Olivier and gained her starring roles in film and theater. As she aged and her beauty became less hegemonically appealing, she received fewer film roles. Yet, through the accumulation of work experience, she became skilled at finding ways to practice her craft through different media. The trajectory of this book traces Wong coming into herself as a worker and as an increasingly versatile actress. The book centers on the late 1920s, the 1930s, and, finally, the 1950s because those are the years when Wong improved her repertoire as an actress, honed her skills in finding jobs, and seized work opportunities in different countries in order to practice her craft. To me, these actions are the most interesting part of her life story.

Never daunted, Wong time and time again turned to different media and different countries: She starred in theatrical productions with Olivier in London, sang French chansons in Paris vaudeville, hired a cinematographer and made “My China Film,” starred in Paramount Pictures’ B-list films with Philip Ahn, and worked in television productions such as the DuMont Television Network’s The Gallery of Madame Liu-Tsong. Her increasing repertory range yet loss of studio prestige can be seen most clearly in the Good Earth casting debacle. The Good Earth symbolized an especially cruel casting rejection because of the vast scope of MGM’s production resources and because Depression-era America exhibited a strong interest in the hardships of good Chinese peasants. Wong rose to arguably her greatest power as a cultural producer when she made “My China Film” to oppose MGM’s Hollywood depiction of China. Yet, because she was aging and because of the changing political climate marked by the impending Second World War, The Good Earth would be her last chance to star in a major Hollywood studio A-list film before the casting of the Flower Drum Song in 1961. Had she starred in The Good Earth, her name would be ubiquitous today.

Chapters 1–3 of this book focus on European and American modernities. Chapter 1, “‘Speaking German Like Nobody’s Business’: Anna May Wong in Berlin,” establishes how, in 1928, Wong journeyed to Europe to star in films that were coproduced in Germany, France, and England. Berlin was Wong’s first European destination. There, she fascinated German philosopher Wal-
ter Benjamin. Benjamin’s interview with her evinces the struggles of one of the most lauded European architects of modernity in puzzling through the conundrum presented by Wong’s simultaneous oriental yet modern cosmopolitan body. This chapter sets the stage for the entire book by exploring the tensions between Wong’s Chinese heritage, European expectations of racial difference as filtered through colonial otherness, and New World modernity. Wong rose to the challenge of being a modern American through trying to establish a career in Europe by “speaking German like nobody’s business.”

Although at first glance Anna May Wong’s and Josephine Baker’s performances displayed primitivism, exoticism, and decadence, Chapter 2, “American Moderns in Europe: Anna May Wong and Josephine Baker,” probes deeper in order to explore how both women utilized dance movements, fashion, voice, and improvisation—skills gained while training in U.S. racial minority communities—to disrupt colonial culture. Wong and Baker, I argue, not only challenged the binary opposition of the primitive and the civilized underlying modernity; they also created a distinctly new form of the modern. Chapter 3, “‘I Can Play Any Type of Oriental’: Anna Watches Josephine at the Casino de Paris, 1932,” focuses on both women’s depictions of oriental roles. This chapter has two interlinked aims: first, considering France as a site of transnational performance, and second, explicating Baker’s performance of the oriental, which was intertwined with Wong’s. Comparing Baker and Wong demonstrates how racial modernity is a relational process. Examining the women’s differing trajectories reveals that the African American body could fit into the French nation-state narratives, whereas the Chinese American one could not.

The next chapter considers the early 1930s and the creation of gendered race and ethnicity as relational categories in the United States. Chapter 4, “Glamourous American Moderns: Anna May Wong and Lupe Vélez,” centers on the United States at a time when Dolores del Río and Anna May Wong emblematized ideal beauty and Lupe Vélez starred as an all-American model for 1932 Coca-Cola and 1934 Lux Soap advertisements. The chapter focuses on the central role that race plays in the development of modern aesthetics in image making and shows the overt as well as the more subtle forms of racialization that appeared through glamour photography and advertisements. One of the book’s most exciting pieces of historical detective work comes to light in the final portion of this chapter. Wong’s correspondence with Van Vechten provides invaluable insights into how Wong fabricated her own image.

Chapters 5 and 6 of this book feature Anna May Wong as a mature cultural worker and move geographically from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Most of the creation of Wong’s Chinese persona happened in Europe and the United States, and thus it is fascinating when that persona is on display in the Pacific.
Chapter 5, “‘My China Film,’” analyzes one of Wong’s triumphal moments as a cultural worker forging an alternative to the mainstream culture. This chapter reveals what happened when Wong’s Western-bred Chineseness encountered the actual China.

Chapter 6, “Anna May Wong in Australia,” examines Chineseness, Americanness, and modernity in a settler-colonial Anglophone transnational context. Wong’s portrayals of glamorous racialized modernity were the reason why she was brought to Australia in 1939 to perform on the Tivoli Theatre circuit in Sydney and Melbourne. Her visit functioned as a touchstone to examine the various meanings of Chineseness in the late 1930s both from the perspective of mainstream Australian society as well as that of Chinese Australians. In the late 1930s, Australia was considered a backwater at the edge of empire, lacking the prestige of London or Paris. In order to practice her craft, Wong was forced to go to a secondary locale because World War II preempted Western Europe as a possible worksite.

The book concludes with Wong unveiling “My China Film” for the American Broadcasting Company (ABC) television audience in 1957. American Cold War agendas regarding China not only prompted ABC to revive and promote Wong’s movie; they also were made overt through the critique of Communist China and the celebration of a vanished non-Communist past that Wong had captured in her film. As a new medium, television became a way for aging Hollywood stars to revive their careers.

This book imagines otherwise in terms of Wong’s cultural encounters and engagement with racial modernity. Women of color in film such as Vélez and Wong have provided inspiration for me and for numerous artists. Examples include Rita Aida Gonzalez’s *The Assumption of Lupe Vélez* (1999), Patty Chang’s performance piece *The Product Love* (2009, based on Wong and Benjamin’s encounter in Berlin), and Cheryl Dunye’s *Watermelon Woman* (1996), a film whose eponymous African American actress offers Dunye’s cinematic protagonist a lineage as an artistic and lesbian forebear.

In this current political era, when civil rights are under attack, I hope that

---

this book provides a reprieve through an alternative genealogy of race and gender. It is a sobering reminder that racial progress, however defined, does not move forward in a straight line. Wong’s cultural creations, however, point to an earlier historical moment of possibility and creativity. It shows us how she and other women of color performed the modern despite facing extraordinary racial and gendered obstacles.