Yellowface during the Exclusion Era by Esther Kim Lee (review)

Made-Up Asians: Yellowface during the Exclusion Era, by Esther Kim Lee. University of Michigan Press, 2022. xiii + 268 pp. $34.95 paperback. ISBN 97870472055432.

The history of yellowface has received steady interest among a small group of scholars from a variety of disciplines, and Esther Kim Lee's Made-Up Asians is a critical addition. Moving beyond the performances themselves, and the ways in which they reflect and reinforce stereotypes, Lee explores the theatrical technologies that undergird the entertainment industry and allowed white actors to embody characters of Asian ancestry. Costuming, makeup, and prosthetics facilitated the creation of supposedly authentic characters, all the while denying Asian and Asian American actors' opportunities to perform and potentially undermine stereotypes. Academics today recognize the inherent issues tied to yellowface, however, as Lee astutely notes, "[t]here is currently no well-defined framework to hold what can be known about yellowface in the U.S., or to articulate how we know what we know" (p. 5). This problem has real world impact in the entertainment industry and drives the metanarrative of Made-Up Asians. To support her argument, Lee contends that the development of these theatrical technologies coincided with the Exclusion Era, a period of rampant anti-Asian rhetoric in American popular culture that buttressed numerous anti-Asian governmental interventions and the rise of evolutionary racism. Additionally, the connections among American politics, science, and the entertainment industry are not solely problems of the past. Despite the efforts of Asian American artists, activists, and scholars, yellowface has persisted into the twentieth-first century and continues to be practiced through digital technologies such as CGI. Thus, while the technologies of exclusion have evolved over the past two hundred plus years, concerns surrounding the types of stories told by the entertainment industry and who participates in the creation and performance of those stories persist to today.

Made-Up Asians is organized both chronologically and thematically, beginning in the pre-Exclusion Era and continuing through the advent of special effects makeup in film. The first chapter looks at the racialization of the clown character, a tradition that has roots in English pantomime and commedia dell'arte that was imported to the United States in the early nineteenth century. During this period, actors used exaggerated costuming and elaborate makeup to play up the comedic effects of Chinese characters in productions such as Aladdin,

which later informed the portrayal of Chinese immigrants on the American stage. The next chapter pivots to the articulation of the "universal Chinese" (p. 56) in American theater, a caricature that Lee argues was developed through the racialization of the sciences in the late nineteenth century. Here, we see white actors borrowing physical types articulated in scientific publications that supposedly represented specific racial and/or national groups. Meanwhile, the ability of white actors to transform themselves using new theatrical technologies was seen as a reflection of their "talent and artistic skill" (p. 57). Asian entertainers, however, were mostly relegated to human curiosities, a type of amusement that was often used to reinforce racial hierarchies.

Lee's scholarly passion and rigor is most clearly demonstrated in chapter 3, in which she looks at the emergence of the theatrical makeup industry and its reliance on race science to develop and market new products. Both amateur and professional white actors used new makeup technologies to create stock characters, including racialized ones, that audiences could easily identify. To support this argument, Lee analyzes make-up guidebooks, which were part of the late nineteenth-century's disposable print culture, to show not only how the industry educated white actors about the tools necessary to become Asian on the stage but also the debates within the industry about what authenticity looked like. Most impressively, Lee has collected historic greasepaint tubes (p. 109), which appear on auction websites such as eBay, and are not typically found in archival or museum collections. The appendix also contains wonder- ful information on these rare guidebooks, which potentially could be used for teaching purposes with undergraduates.

The last two chapters bring readers into the twentieth century and explore two distinct phenomena, the appearance of white women in yellowface and the development of new theatrical technologies in response to film. The widespread use of yellowface among white women on and off the stage was part of an early twentieth century Japan Craze that impacted the entertainment industry as well as other forms of cultural production in the US. White women, unlike men, had to carefully navigate gendered notions of respectability, makeup use, and public spectacle. As a result, they created caricatures that played to notions of exoticism and allure and mixed yellowface technologies with makeup practices used by Japanese actresses who toured the US in the early twentieth century, most notably Sada Yacco. The film industry, however, needed a completely different type of makeup technology to convince audiences that white actors were authentically Asian. Lee notes that "photorealism demanded by film" meant that actors had "to resemble their characters as closely as possible" (p. 153). To do this, makeup artists moved away from focusing on skin color, which was irrelevant in black-and-white film, to the manipulation of eye shape to communicate racial otherness. Thus, the "Oriental eye" became the hallmark of new makeup technologies in Hollywood. Lee explains that "[b]ecause the makeup was applied to the actor's eye, it was important that it safely withstand perspiration, movement, and long wear. It also had to connect seamlessly to the actor's face while allowing the actor to express emotion with their eyes" (p.180).

Interestingly, these same technologies were used for film monsters that appeared at the same time too.

As part of the last chapter, Lee states that makeup technologies in film and later television and streaming services deserve additional, in-depth study, opening the door for a new generation of scholars to build on the small, but impactful yellowface literature. I also hope that Lee's work inspires other scholars to build on what she has done and take the analysis of yellowface in new directions. Yellowface is still with us, but, like the entertainment industry itself, is manifest in new forms.

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The Movies of Racial Childhoods: Screening Self-Sovereignty in Asian/America, by Celine Parreñas Shimizu. Duke University Press, 2024. xvii + 264 pp. $27.95 paperback. ISBN 9781478025658.

As mainstream films centered around Asian/American characters and stories become more common, what constitutes positive representation remains a site of contestation. In The Movies of Racial Childhoods, Celine Parreñas Shimizu offers fresh analyses of recent, mostly independently produced films representing "Asian/American" children, using the label to indicate her "focus on the imbrication of Asia and America" that acknowledges the connections and tensions between the two (31). By focusing on a rarely highlighted category of characters within lesser-known films, she expands the scope of literature surrounding the issue of Asian/American representation in media. As a grieving mother writing during the COVID-19 pandemic while isolated yet surrounded by anti-Asian sentiments, death, and grief, Shimizu dedicates her work to dealing with the loss of her own eight-year-old son and imagining what life could have been possible for him. Despite this personal orientation, with its interdisciplinary reach across topics of race, queerness, and psychoanalysis and its political timeliness, the work proves relevant for various audiences and is a valuable contribution to fields including Asian American studies, psychology, and media studies.

The most important theoretical concept organizing Shimizu's arguments is what she calls "agentic attunement." Defining it as "the act of attending to a child with their sovereignty, at that moment and in the future, in mind" (7), Shimizu deems understanding the concept crucial for reaching self-sovereignty in healthy adulthood for fictional children on screen and the real children of