

[< Back](#)

Journal of American Drama & Theatre

Volume 36 Issue 1

[Visit Journal Homepage >](#)

MADE UP ASIANS: YELLOWFACE DURING THE EXCLUSION ERA. Esther Kim Lee. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2022; Pp. 268.

By Xiaojiao Xu

Published: December 11, 2023

[Download Article as PDF ↓](#)

Esther Kim Lee's recent scholarly book presents essential reading in Asian American and theater history. In *Made-Up Asians: Yellowface during the Exclusion Era*, Lee proposes the framework of yellowface and contends that it intentionally created and sustained Asian exclusion in American society. Instead of focusing on how Asian people in and beyond America reacted to yellowface performances, Lee focuses instead on the technology of yellowface, used mainly by white actors and actresses to don Asian characters during the Exclusion Era in the United States between 1862 and 1940.

Made-Up Asians traces the origin of yellowface to British pantomime—when Joseph Grimaldi (1778–1837) performed as a Chinese clown in *Whang-Fong; or, the Clown of China* (1812), which was written by Charles Isaac Dibdin Jr. at Sadler's Wells. Kazrac, Grimaldi's most popular character was the famous prototype of "clown yellowface," presented in *Aladdin; or, the Wonderful Lamp* (1813) as a Chinese slave assisting Aladdin to gain wealth and power, epitomizing Britain's fantasies about 'the Orient' as exoticism and opportunism. Later, as Britain attempted to expand the opium trade in China during the Opium War (1839-1842), Victorian theater featured increasingly pejorative representations of China and Chinese people, usually emphasizing physical torture. British versions of Chinese culture largely influenced people in the United States. The Americanized *Aladdin* (1815) created an Americanized character with traits deemed local, which influenced "Chinaman" characters; these depictions changed over more than a century: from clownish and comic to menacing and vile, channeling reactions toward Chinese people that led to the Chinese Exclusion Act.

Chapter two focuses on "scientific yellowface," linking yellowface and race science. As immigration flourished, changing metropolises in the United States, nineteenth century citizens sought guidance on how to comprehend human and cultural differences. Meanwhile, as Lee examines, phrenology and physiognomy became popular: just in time to cater to American audiences' curiosity about the 'Mongolian race,' including Chinese and Japanese peoples. Race science cast the Anglo-Saxon race, or the Caucasian race—which often denoted whiteness—as most noble. Directly linked with physiognomy, theater embraced this ranking by concentration on actors and actresses' physical looks—presenting the beauty of whiteness. Accordingly, nonwhite actors were primarily regarded as lowbrow performers and entertainers. While white actors were believed capable to "portray all humans" (67), including "the yellow race," portrayals of Asian characters echoed descriptions in race science texts, shows Lee, emphasizing the Mongolian fold, eyebrows, nose, and broken English, instead of observance of real Asians in everyday life. These "made-up Asians," to quote the book's title, together with exhibitions of "exotic Asians," reinforced white Americans' sense of normality and superiority. Lee's scholarship is extensive with detailed examples.

Chapters three, four, and five elaborate on the development of yellowface makeup. Chapter three, for instance, examines how "private yellowface" evolved via theatrical makeup guidebooks. After the Civil War, the American stage presented myriad international and ethnic characters, a craze that influenced amateurs' private performances. Scant sources for costumes and makeup led Samuel French to provide an all-in-one service package for amateur actors, from guidebooks reprinted from British authors to license rights and scripts. Most importantly for Lee's research, French published the first step-to-step makeup guidebook: *How to "Make-Up: A Practical Guide to the Art of "Making-up"* (1877), which thoroughly explained how to stage Asian characters. The invention of greasepaint in the late nineteenth century pushed forward makeup technology to create supposedly "natural" makeup for Asian characters. However, this version of naturalism did not result in bringing Asian and Asian American actors into the industry, nor observing Asian people in everyday life. Instead, based in race science, such "natural" portrayals stereotyped and excluded Asians from immigration and naturalization into the United States, while enriching white actors for range and professionalism.

During the Exclusion era, when Asian women faced harsh immigration obstructions, stage representations of tragically beautiful Asian women became most popular. Blanche Bates—a white American actress whose career was already established in New York City before performing the tragic female leads in *Madame Butterfly* (1900) and *The Darling of the Gods* (1902)—exemplifies this trend. Lee's scholarship reveals that Bates's influence was so profound that she was regarded as America's model for representing East Asian female characters. Bates promoted her artistic excellence by denying universality and staging otherness. Chapter Four shows how the technologies of cosmetic yellowface relished fictional tragedies of Asian women on stage, while real-life experiences of Asian women were ignored.

- [Back to Top ●](#)
- [Untitled ○](#)
- [Article ○](#)
- [References ○](#)
- [Authors ○](#)
- [Keep Reading ○](#)

By the end of the Exclusion Era, the prosthetic Oriental eye became the most critical aspect of yellowface makeup, analyzes Lee. The film industry's photorealism led performers to look as much like their characters as possible in close-up shots, pressing on the evolution of yellowface makeup. Wearing "Chinese" greasepaint was not enough for early black-and-white films since actors still looked too white—hence not "Chinese" enough. To highlight their racial difference, the Oriental eye, with its epicanthic fold, emerged as the most significant marker. For example, Boris Karloff impersonated Fu Manchu in *The Mask of Fu Manchu* (1932), among the most infamous examples of the yellow-peril trope, with the prosthetic Oriental eye created by the Makeup Department at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM). The invention of the more natural epicanthic fold continued, with foam latex technology coming out around 1944 and moveable fake lids in 1970. These technologies further alienated and excluded Asian and Asian Americans from stage and screen, reinforcing European heritage and Hollywood's norm of whiteness. As Chapter Five concludes, only those who were considered white could perform Asian characters; their performances reiterated that Asians deserved to be excluded from citizenship and American society.

Esther Kim Lee's work demonstrates how yellowface has profoundly influenced the twenty-first century. As a technology of exclusion, yellowface blocked possibilities for Asian American actors and actresses to be cast in leading roles—and theater history. While whiteness is reinforced when actors remove their yellowface make-up, the real sufferings of Asian and Asian Americans gets obscured, sunk into oblivion. *Made-Up Asians* is an invaluable read that dissects the historical construction of yellowface and its persistence in contemporary times.

References

Lee, Esther Kim. *Made-Up Asians: Yellowface during the Exclusion Era*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2022.

About The Authors

Xiaoqiao Xu is a lecturer in Modern Chinese Literature and Cinema at the University of British Columbia. Xiaoqiao Xu's research covers a wide range of topics, from late imperial China to modern China, with a particular focus on women's literary and theatrical productions. Her work explores the intersectionality of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity, challenging the neatness of the contrast between the old and the new. Xiaoqiao analyzes female gazing and recurring objects, as well as female playwrights' engagement with gender politics to gain a deeper understanding of the roles women played in Chinese society. In her current research, she examines women's engagement with religion, particularly Buddhism and Daoism.

Journal of American Drama & Theatre

JADT publishes thoughtful and innovative work by leading scholars on theatre, drama, and performance in the Americas – past and present. Provocative articles provide valuable insight and information on the heritage of American theatre, as well as its continuing contribution to world literature and the performing arts. Founded in 1989 and previously edited by Professors Vera Mowry Roberts, Jane Bowers, and David Savran, this widely acclaimed peer reviewed journal is now edited by Dr. Benjamin Gillespie and Dr. Bess Rowen.

Journal of American Drama and Theatre is a publication of the [Martin E. Segal Theatre Center](#).



[Visit Journal Homepage](#)

Table of Contents

Community Circles and Love Triangles: Gun Violence and Belonging in Oklahoma! and West Side Story
More than a Props List: Redefining Material Culture as Survival and Pleasure in Lynn Nottage's Ruined
Decommissioning the School-to-Prison Pipeline: Anna Deavere Smith's Notes from the Field and Dominique Morisseau's Pipeline
The Politics of Trance: Victoria Woodhull and the Radical Reform of Platform Mediumship
PERFORMANCE IN THE ZÓCALO: CONSTRUCTING HISTORY, RACE, AND INDENTITY IN MEXICO'S CENTRAL SQUARE FROM THE COLONIAL ER...
MADE UP ASIANS: YELLOWFACE DURING THE EXCLUSION ERA. Esther Kim Lee. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2022; Pp. 268.
BEYOND TEXT: THEATER AND PERFORMANCE IN PRINT AFTER 1900. Jennifer Buckley. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2019; Pp. 278.
EMILY MANN: REBEL ARTIST OF THE AMERICAN THEATRE. Alexis Greene. Guilford, CT: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2023; Pp. 391

[Previous](#)

[Next](#)

Attribution:

This entry is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International license.

- [Back to Top](#) ●
- [Untitled](#) ○
- [Article](#) ○
- [References](#) ○
- [Authors](#) ○
- [Keep Reading](#) ○

© 2023

Martin E. Segal Theatre Center, The CUNY Graduate Center

365 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10016-4309 | ph: 212-817-1860 | mestc@gc.cuny.edu



- Back to Top ●
- Untitled ○
- Article ○
- References ○
- Authors ○
- Keep Reading ○