

**Poetics of Cross-Cultural Relation:
Critical Performances by Artists kate-hers RHEE and Patty Chang**

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This article explores anti-racist, feminist performance and video art by kate-hers RHEE and Patty Chang. Parodic performances of awkward sexual encounters in works such as RHEE's The Chocolate Kiss (2013) and Chang's The Product Love (2009) embody and deconstruct identity formation within transnational German and Asian American contexts. I explore how RHEE and Chang distinctly challenge sexist and racist stereotypes and the objectification of Asian women, while problematizing cultural categorization through (mis)translations and poetic relations. The article illuminates how these artists complicate Asian American identities via variegated explorations of critical race theories and connected histories of cross-cultural representation.

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The landscape of your word is the world's landscape. But its frontier is open.

— Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*

The Urgency of Cross-Cultural Studies

Amidst the coronavirus pandemic and perilous rise of reactionary racism and nativist movements around the world, cross-cultural studies assume new urgency. Within the humanities, great strides have been made in studies of art and literature by historically marginalized figures, including non-Western European artists and artists of color. While invaluable expanding Western European and North

American-dominated canons, many of these contributions tend to be nation-based and sometimes essentialize identity by portraying national cultural production as monolithic. My discipline of art history, even when aiming to be “global,” too often remains bound to stylistic analyses articulated by German archeologist and art historian Johann Winckelmann in his eighteenth-century writings on ancient Greek, Greco-Roman, and Roman art. Challenging these formalist limitations, scholars of feminist art, performance studies, and queer theory, have radically re-imagined the field’s current potentials (Jones, *Self/Image*; Jones and Silver). Building on this research, I foreground previously overlooked artists – Asian American women in particular – and study how their artworks perform *intersectional* identities. Pioneering scholar of civil rights activism Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality, highlighting “the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed” (1245). Philosopher and poet Édouard Glissant urges us to take into account “each and every identity [as] extended through a relationship with the Other,” constituting what he defined as “the Poetics of Relation” (11). A timely cross-cultural approach to art history would pivot around this poetics of relation, exploring relationships within and between artworks, artists, subjects, and audiences, as well as across geographies and generations.

This article examines intersectionality and poetics of relation in performance and video art by kate-hers RHEE and Patty Chang. Both artists tackle bigotry and the objectification of Asian women in Germany and the United States. Artworks including RHEE’s *The German Speaking Project* (2008) and *The Chocolate Kiss* (2013-), and Chang’s *The Product Love* (2009) embody and deconstruct identity formation within transnational contexts (primarily German-Asian-American in these cases). I analyze RHEE and Chang’s parodic performances of awkward sexual encounters as exposing and unraveling sexist and racist stereotypes. I also examine how their works problematize cultural categorization through reflections on linguistic development and translation. Furthermore, I situate these artists’ praxes in historical intercultural contexts. For instance, I consider *N-Kissing Bondage* (2018), RHEE’s collaborative performance with African American artist

Daniel Dodd-Ellis, vis-à-vis mid-twentieth-century exchanges between Black and Asian artists and intellectuals. The final part of the article focuses on the historic subject of Chang's *The Product Love*, Anna May Wong (1905-1961), Hollywood's first Asian American actress. The actress's struggles with systemic racism, transnational circulation, and hybrid identities illuminate the persistent lack of Asian American cultural representation, while fostering intergenerational understandings of contemporary anti-racist, anti-sexist performance and video art.

kate-hers RHEE / Speaking Between

Multidisciplinary artist kate-hers RHEE defies any simple ethnic categorization, reminding us of the ridiculous limitations of the selective "identity boxes" we encounter on institutional forms. RHEE was born in South Korea, adopted as a baby and brought to the midwestern United States, where she was raised by Anglo-American parents and with a sister (also Korean by birth). In childhood and adolescence, RHEE struggled with her fractured identity, diasporic position, and self-conscious situatedness as a non-white, non-Black person within her hometown: an extremely segregated Detroit suburb with few people of Asian descent. After attending art schools in Chicago, Illinois, and Irvine, California, RHEE moved to Germany, where she currently resides in Berlin.



Figure 1. kate-hers RHEE, *The German Speaking Project (das deutschsprachliche Projekt)*, 2008. Image courtesy of the artist.

In *The German Speaking Project (das deutschsprachliche Projekt)*, a durational performance and conceptual art piece undertaken shortly after RHEE first relocated to Germany, she spoke only non-native German for a prescribed period of time, lasting from February 1 to May 31, 2008. RHEE envisioned the project as “an interrogation of nationhood intending to examine aspects of identity that are bound up with language, while enabling another kind of ‘foreign Other,’ to facilitate integration into German society [by] examining aspects of identity, confidence, self-worth, and personality that are bound up in language” (RHEE, *The German Speaking Project*). RHEE made daily video recordings of herself speaking freely and to the best of her ability in German about her progress and general experiences in Berlin. Collectively, these daily video diaries demonstrate RHEE moving from a frustrated, infantile-like state to more sophisticated reporting on her progress. In the early recordings, RHEE projects a childish demeanor, while in later videos, she speaks with confident maturity, revealing how language informs selfhood.

The German Speaking Project demonstrates how individuals are limited by language and their (in)abilities to verbally articulate their subject positions. When considered in light of Glissant’s “Poetics of Relation,” *The German Speaking Project* tells a broader story of colonization and diasporic movement. For the duration of the project, RHEE rejected her native language of English, which she received as an infant after being separated from her would-be mother tongue of Korean. More recently, during a residency in South Korea, RHEE attempted a similar *Korean Speaking Project*, which she admits was much harder and less successful in terms of her ability to gain fluency. As a “native” English speaker, RHEE more easily adopted German with its numerous cognates and relatively less foreign grammatical structures. The artist’s experiences as a South Korean-born, adopted American, and, most recently, voluntary German émigré, align with Glissant’s reflections on *creolization* as a critical form of relationality. “What took place in the Caribbean, which could be summed up by the word creolization,” Glissant writes, “approximates the idea of Relation for us as nearly as possible. It is not merely an encounter but a new and original dimension allowing each person

to be there and elsewhere, rooted and open, lost in the mountains and free beneath the sea, in harmony and in errantry” (34). RHEE’s *German Speaking Project*, rooted in the artist’s elective rejection of English and, before that, her early migration away from Korean, acts out the poetics described by Glissant in his descriptions of how language spreads with the expansion of cultures around the world (23). While it is important to acknowledge that Glissant’s writings spring from the aftermath of slavery in the Caribbean, his theories of creolization provide generative modes for thinking through cross-cultural relations on a world-wide scale. *The German Speaking Project* complicates the centuries-old imperialist flow of language expansion, resisting oppressive patterns of colonization and power hierarchies (e.g., the international spread of English accompanying British imperialism) through first rendering vulnerable and then granting agency to RHEE as a subject who can initially hardly speak, but soon gains fluency and cultural capital.

The German Speaking Project, which vastly enhanced RHEE’s German language speaking abilities and local socialization, reveals language as a necessary component of subject formation and professionalization while laying the groundwork for the artist’s future projects about German culture. RHEE’s *Schicke Möpse* (2015-2016), comprised of illustrations, designed T-shirts, and the related video *I Love the Way I Look!*, utilizes parody towards a feminist critique of preposterous beauty ideals. The project departs from the figure Beshine, a German model reported to have the largest fake breasts in the world. Each breast weighs approximately twenty pounds, about the size of a small dog. The German word for Pug, *Mops*, as RHEE observes, is often used as a euphemism for boob/tit/breast, so that “Schicke Möpse!” would be the equivalent of saying “Nice tits!” in English (RHEE *Schicke Möpse*). Taking this phrase and Beshine’s image as her starting points, RHEE’s project parodies the beauty ideals embodied in *Schicke Möpse* by subverting traditional artistic conventions, utilizing multiple modes of communication, and effectively translating between styles and media. The project began with sketches of Beshine, provocatively posed and smiling.

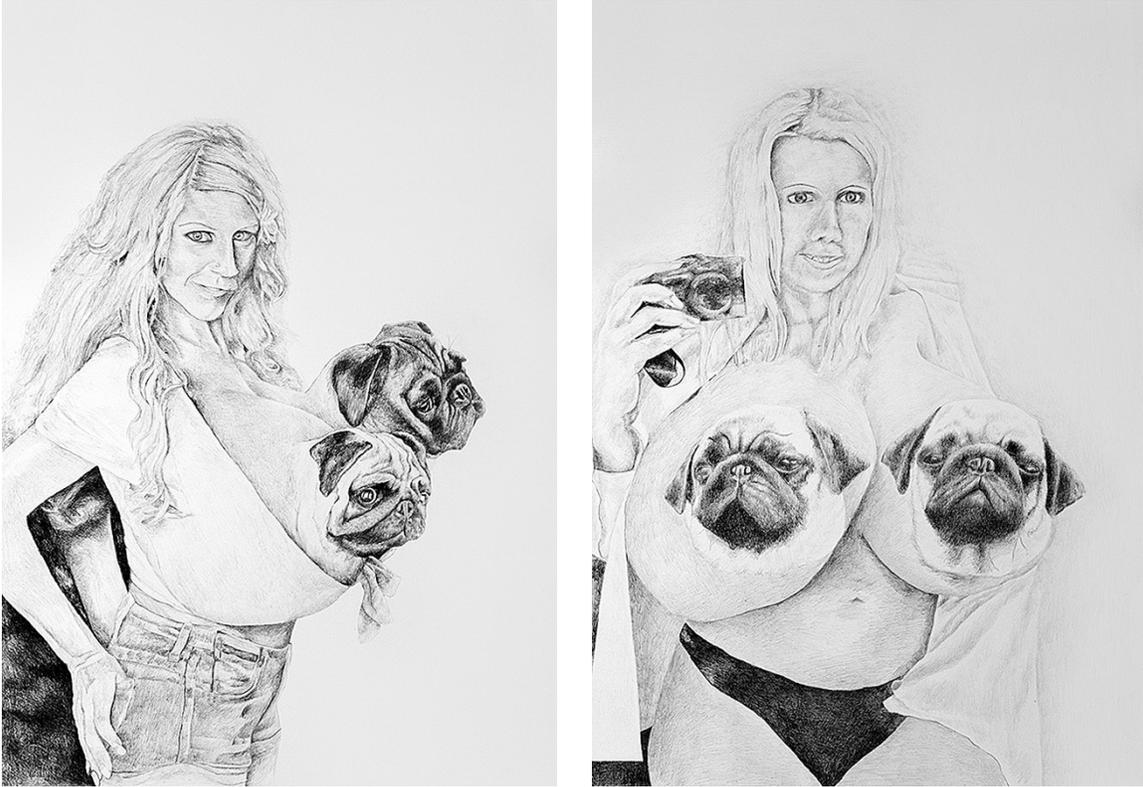


Figure 2.1-2.2. *kate-hers RHEE, Schicke Möpse, 2015-2016. Image courtesy of artist.*

The model's gigantic, protruding breasts blossom into two pug faces. The drawings, executed with graphite on paper, resemble Renaissance preparatory sketches. Fine lines mimetically render the classical motif of human-animal hybrids, mimicking the longstanding Western art educational practice of drawing from live nude models. However, unlike the neoclassical reclining or contrapposto nude with downcast eyes prevalent during the Renaissance, RHEE depicts Beshine semi-clad in short-shorts or underwear and opened shirts, from side and front, looking confidently at the viewer.

Viewers of *Schicke Möpse* get held accountable for their gaze, much like the scandalized viewers of Edouard Manet's *Olympia* (1856), as discussed by art historian Timothy Clark. Breaking with classical and neoclassical traditions, the central figure in Manet's *Olympia* appears starkly naked (versus softly nude) and stares directly at the viewer, who was likely male at the time the painting first appeared in the Parisian salon (Clark). RHEE pushes the female figure's sexually charged *looking back* further. In one frontal sketch, Beshine holds a camera,

threatening to take a photograph of the viewer. Like Olympia's cat, Beshine's pugs also look out from the picture plane. Fusing Beshine's breasts and pugs, RHEE literally extends the sexual pun shared by Manet's *Olympia* (while *möypse* is German slang for breasts, *chatte* is French slang for vagina).

Much ink has been spilled over *Olympia*'s scandalous gaze, her dirty flesh, "toad"-like hand, accompanying cat, and medium-specific aesthetics (e.g., relatively flattened perspective compared with classical and neo-classical precedents), leading art historians to uphold the painting as an icon of modernist art (Clark, 98). Far less attention has been given to the painting's Black attendant, who gazes upon Olympia, albeit with notable exceptions. In 1992, artist Lorraine O'Grady powerfully spotlighted the Black figure in Manet's painting at her College Art Association presentation and subsequent article entitled "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity." Widely anthologized, O'Grady's text continues to spark discussion about the overlooked position of non-white women in feminist art histories (Jones, 208-220; Frueh et. al., 152-170). Recently, however, art historian and curator Denise Murrell, foregrounded Laure, who modeled as the attendant in *Olympia* and other paintings by Manet, along with numerous Black models that played such important roles in Western European art history. Murrell's 2018 exhibition and accompanying catalogue, *Posing Modernity: The Black Model from Manet and Matisse to Today*, reminds viewers that the Black servant represents the flip side of Western modernity: the possession of Black bodies, namely African slaves, so oft depicted in European painting from the Renaissance onwards.

In conjunction with *Schicke Möypse*, RHEE designed, manufactured, and sold T-shirts with a drawing of two pugs placed across the chest. The artist later released the video, *I Love the Way I Look*, a parodic infomercial based on "true life" breast augmentation testimonials found online. The video contains numerous women (and one man) clad in *Schicke Möypse* T-shirts, explaining how happy they are with their new shirts. In one instance, the person offering testimonial has her face blurred and speech disguised, as commonly presented in true-crime reality shows. In a distorted voice, she states: "After I got my *Schicke Möypse* T-shirt, I



Figure 2.3. *kate-hers RHEE, Schicke Möpse, 2015-2016. Image courtesy of artist.*

met someone and he just proposed to me. We set our wedding date for next year. He doesn't know that I didn't have my *Schicke Möpse* T-shirt naturally. But take it from me, get a *Schicke Möpse* T-shirt if you want to be truly happy." The testimonials of satisfied customers are intercut with scenes of RHEE cheerily undertaking mundane housework like vacuuming. Here, RHEE mocks the trope of happy housewife popularized in the United States in the 1950s through advertisements and popular entertainment. *I Love the Way I Look!* satirizes the immense societal pressures placed on women pre-liberation, when they were expected to focus their aspirations on obtaining a wedding ring (which in turn hinged on unrealistic beauty standards) and fulfilling their roles as "happy homemakers."

In addition to feminist critique, RHEE addresses racism and integrates critical race theories in art projects that consider Asian, Asian American, African, and African American identities within the United States and her adopted home of Germany. RHEE's *Chocolate Kiss* series takes as its starting point the popular German candy, *Schokokuss* (Choco Kiss), which was called *Negerkuss* (Negro's Kiss) or *Mohrenkopf* (Moor's Head) prior to the 1980s, and is still frequently referred to by the original offensive name (RHEE *And then there were none*). In



Figure 3. kate-hers RHEE, *The Chocolate Kiss Project*, 2018. Image courtesy of artist.

The Chocolate Kiss Project, presented in 2018 at the Torrance Art Museum in California and at oMo artspace in Berlin, RHEE performed the stereotype of Asian women as submissive and parodied the fetishization of Asian women as sexual commodities. The artist donned a portable kissing booth, made of cardboard and decorated in pink and red (colors associated with brothels and the sex industry), and offered Choco Kisses to participants, which, mimicking the German party game *Mohrenkopf weitergeben* (Passing on the Moor's Head), she passed from her mouth to theirs. Participants received a pink badge of honor aimed at symbolizing their dedication to anti-discrimination and anti-sexism. RHEE's performance, which entailed a physical exchange between artist and audience but did not include monetary exchange, subverted the typical dynamics of sex work, while building on a long history of feminist performance art. VALIE EXPORT's

Tapp und Tastkino (Tap and Touch Cinema) stands as an apt precedent. In this 1968 performance, the Austrian artist walked through a film festival wearing a movie theater-like box and inviting spectators to reach in and touch her breasts. *Tapp und Tastkino* challenged the highly sexualized, purely visual representations of women's bodies commonly presented in films. Likewise, RHEE's boxy costume and parody of sexist spectacles perform a critical resistance to the objectification and commodification of women both in and out of the art world.

The Chocolate Kiss Project should further be reflected on in relation to performances by Asian women artists staged in the 1950s and 60s. In the 1956 exhibition of Gutai, a Japanese avant-garde group, member Atsuko Tanaka displayed a performative work by wearing a costume made of painted lightbulbs and electrical cords. In *Cut Piece*, first performed in 1964, artist Yoko Ono, a member of international avant-garde collective Fluxus, invited audience members to come on stage and cut off her clothing with a pair of sharp scissors. RHEE adapts and combines the strategies of these pioneering performance artists, wearing an absurd costume that nearly transforms her into an object, while inviting intimate exchange with audience members. RHEE's performance occupies a more empowered position than Ono's in *Cut Piece*, wherein the artist sat passively while her clothes were cut off, or Tanaka's *Electric Dress*, which encompassed the threat of the performer being electrocuted or cut by her costume's glass bulbs. RHEE's utilization of a comical circus-like form (the kissing booth), creates an intentionally humorous display aimed at demonstrating the foolishness of racist and sexist expectations.

In 2018, RHEE and collaborator Daniel Dodd-Ellis, a Berlin-based African American musician, performed *N-Kissing Bondage* at the ACUD Galerie in Berlin. The performance began when Dodd-Ellis, hair braided in corn rolls and donning a do-rag, entered the gallery, strutting confidently around the room "performing Black masculinity for spectators," as explained in an email dated 11 November 2019 (RHEE). RHEE followed, performing "Asian femininity" by coyly posing for the audience. She wore high-heeled black boots and a Halloween costume called Sexy Ninja Queen that she bought on-line, as well as heavy makeup including



Figure 4. kate-hers RHEE, *N-Kissing Bondage*, 2018. Image courtesy of artist.

false eyelashes that she batted furiously. Dodd-Ellis took RHEE's hand and paraded her around, before the performers sat on two chairs in the middle of the room. Dodd-Ellis tied RHEE's wrists with rope, and gently secured an open-mouthed bondage gag on her head. He stood, took out a tray with ten Choco Kisses, and gestured for RHEE to stand too. Dodd-Ellis then pulled RHEE around by the rope toward the audience, asking spectators loudly "Wanna kiss? Who wants a kiss?" Audience members were reluctant to respond, so Dodd-Ellis entered the crowd with RHEE, asking spectators directly. Finally, one woman relented. Dodd-Ellis put a Choco Kiss in RHEE's mouth, which she then passed through her bondage gag into the woman's mouth. Dodd-Ellis gave the woman a

fortune cookie as a reward for participating. The performers continued like this until ten participants had eaten a Choco Kiss from RHEE's mouth and received a fortune cookie.

While taking place in Germany, *N-Kissing Bondage*, performed by expatriate Black and Asian American artists, should be situated within a longer history of Afro-Asian cross-cultural relations, such as African American and Chinese cultural exchanges, of which there are many. In 1934, for instance, Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes visited the semi-colonial treaty port of Shanghai in mainland China and expressed empathy towards the injustices he witnessed there. He likened the oppression of local Chinese people by their British, American, French, and Japanese occupiers to the oppression of African Americans in the United States during the Jim Crow era. Hughes' 1937 poem, "Roar, China!," sounds a powerful anti-colonial rallying cry:

Roar, China!
 Roar, old lion of the East!...
 A long time since you cared
 About taking other people's lands
 Away from them.
 THEY must've thought you didn't care
 About your own land either—
 So THEY came with gunboats,
 Set up Concessions,
 Zones of influence,
 International Settlements,
 Missionary houses,
 Banks,
 And Jim Crow Y.M.C.A.'s...
 Smash the iron gates of the Concessions!
 Smash the pious doors of the missionary houses!
 Smash the revolving doors of the Jim Crow Y.M.C.A.'s.
 Crush the enemies of land and bread and freedom!

Stand up and roar, China!...

In 1959, African American activist and writer W.E.B. DuBois visited the People's Republic of China (established in 1949) and met with China's Communist Party Chairman Mao Zedong. As observed by scholar Robeson Taj Frazier, DuBois and other African American civil rights leaders looked admiringly (albeit with limited perspectives) to communist Chinese society as a potential alternative to the racist and unjust social climate in the United States. Subsequently, the Black Panther Party (founded in 1966), under Minister of Culture Emory Douglas, drew inspiration from Maoist propaganda posters that imagined an international socialism thriving among the world's previously colonized and oppressed peoples.

While operating in distinct temporal and geographical contexts, RHEE and Dodd-Ellis, like these figures before them, seek to expose and overcome racism while forging relations across cultures. Whereas Hughes, DuBois, and Douglas utilized realism in writing and graphic design to represent oppression and promote resistance, RHEE and Dodd-Ellis challenge entrenched racist and sexist perspectives through confrontational performances that critically enact stereotypes. *N-Kissing Bondage* took place as part of "I am not a Fortune Cookie," a multi-media event organized by Vicky Truong in response to the earlier party, "Happy Ending," thrown during Berlin's Gallery Weekend in 2018. The "Happy Ending" party took place in a Vietnamese restaurant and included hired Asian women dressed in bathrobes handing out fortune cookies and offering massages to attendees. As argued by RHEE, the party "objectified and sexualized East Asian women, reducing them to background ornamentation" (RHEE, *N-Kissing Bondage*). *N-Kissing Bondage* parodied the art world party (and other such entertainment spectacles) through Dodd-Ellis and RHEE's self-consciously absurd displays of racialized sexuality and aggressive confrontations with audience members. Unlike "Happy Ending" party goers, who could passively gaze upon and receive massages from objectified women, *N-Kissing Bondage* attendees, through Dodd-Ellis and RHEE's persistent urging to participate in the performance, became starkly aware of, and uncomfortably unstable in, their positions as spectators.

The planner of “Happy Ending,” Dandy Diary, had previously offended people in another instance when he re-released his own version of H&M’s “Coolest Monkey in the Jungle” sweatshirt, which the fast-fashion brand pulled after an attendant advertisement featuring a Black boy wearing the sweatshirt became widely criticized as racist. RHEE writes:

Shortly after H&M pulled the Coolest Monkey in the Jungle hoodies, because of an advertising gaffe, in pairing it with a young Black boy model, Dandy Diary re-printed their own, selling them on their label. Their shallow reason was merely, ‘We found it unfortunate that after a few days it was all forgotten.’ However, they never talked deeply about ‘it,’ meaning H&M’s institutional racism and cultural insensitivity. Can they explain how the action of wearing a re-print of the H&M hoodie at a fashion show in Berghain in front of a mainstream white European crowd confronts racism in a meaningful way? In fact, by selling these hoodies for an exorbitant price of 70€, they are employing H&M’s blunder for their own economic benefit. If Dandy Diary was really sincere in the desire to combat racism, how about donating part of the earnings to Black Lives Matters or another anti-racist organisation? (Ibid).

In response, RHEE and Dodd-Ellis, who performed wearing the controversial “Coolest Monkey in the Jungle” sweatshirt, exaggerated the stereotypes placed on people of African and Asian descent. The performers acted out stereotypes attached to Black men (as violent and highly sexually charged) and Asian women (as passive and sexually obedient) in their uncomfortable but at times tender and sexually playful exchanges with each other and audience members.

In *Lost in Translation: Orientalism, Cinema, and the Enigmatic Signifier*, art historian Homa King argues that stereotypes develop in response to individuals’ own mystifications by foreign “others,” generated as defense mechanisms and insufficient means of addressing one’s lack of knowledge about foreign cultures and peoples (3-4). Aiming to raise awareness of racist and sexist attitudes, RHEE

and Dodd-Ellis consciously over-performed stereotypes. Furthermore, by demanding the direct participation of viewers, the artists unsettled their mostly white German audience members, who may usually passively absorb stereotypical images rampant in mainstream media and popular culture. RHEE and Dodd-Ellis purposefully made reluctant audience members uncomfortable, provoking them to not only look at or receive pleasure (as one would from a massage), but also awkwardly engage with the performers in semi-sexual acts. Awkwardness, as observed by scholars in relation to feminist art, holds the potential to bolster political activism through humanization (Smith, and Stehle). *N-Kissing Bondage* supported its anti-sexist and anti-racist aims through awkward encounters, and by rewarding participating audience members for their vulnerability (usually reversed in artist/viewer relationships, wherein artists render themselves vulnerable to unaccountable onlookers). Finally, RHEE and Dodd-Ellis repurpose the fortune cookie (which has become an ironic symbol of Chinese culture given its hypothesized Japanese origins and popularization in the United States) from an exotic souvenir (as it was effortlessly received along with massages at the “Happy Ending” party) into a marker of awkward, intimate, and meaningful exchange between artist and audience member. The performers countered the easy digestion of superficial cultural symbols and constructed stereotypes, offering relationality as an alternative to racist action and inaction.

Through their collaborative performance, RHEE and Dodd-Ellis further collapsed the common tendency within the United States to pit Asian Americans as “the model minority” against African Americans, in what political scientist Claire Kim has theorized as pernicious racial triangulation. Myths of “model minorities” contrasted against “underperforming minorities” also appear in Germany, where, for example, some writers uphold people of Vietnamese and Korean origins as more successful than their Turkish counterparts (Stefan Berg et. al.).

RHEE writes of her *Chocolate Kiss* series:

I’ve been challenged by some (mostly white Germans) who consider it taboo, out of my league, or simply not authentic to be making work about “Blackness.” I consider my role in naming and performing with

the snack [Choco Kiss] as an instigator in underlining the culpability of those German speakers who continue to use the term. This seemingly harmless candy title has important social implications in how we perceive and treat not only Black people, but all people who are considered outside of the mainstream, foreigners, non-white people, queer, or non-Germans. (RHEE, *The Chocolate Kiss*)

RHEE's projects utilize humor, parody, absurdity, and spectacle to confront racist and sexist behaviors that persist today. The artist's performances act as modes of resistance, subverting race-based fetishes through exaggeration and calling attention to the nonsensical constructions of stereotypes. Moreover, in absorbing and communicating in foreign languages and collaborating with other artists and audience members, RHEE privileges a relationality that fosters increased understanding across presumed national, racial, and gender divides.

Patty Chang / Translating Touch

Like RHEE, artist Patty Chang tackles issues of sexism and racism through transnational performances and video works. Chang became well known for



Figure 5. Patty Chang, Shaved, 1998. Image courtesy of artist.

intimate corporal pieces, such as *Shaved* (1998), in which the artist, sporting an old-fashioned updo and undergarments, shaves her pubic hair with Perrier while blindfolded. In *Melons (at a Loss)* also from 1998, Chang stares into the camera and tells stories related to a commemorative plate she received following her



Figure 6. Patty Chang, *Melons (at a Loss)*, 1998. Image courtesy of artist.

aunt's death. As Chang speaks, she balances a plate atop her head and slices through her bra with a large kitchen knife to reveal a melon, which she then seeds (placing the seeds on the plate), scoops, and eats. Her works, which often reference love, family, death, and bodily functions, twist conventions of feminine beauty and defy stereotypes of Asian women as passive subjects.

Chang was raised in northern California's San Francisco Bay Area by mainland Chinese-born parents who grew up in Taiwan before they immigrated to the United States. In recent years, she has created numerous works in and about Chinese culture, both familiar and foreign. In such projects, Chinese culture is presented not as a unified entity, but as a multilayered discursive site of ever-shifting geographies and diverse perspectives represented through personal encounters and exchanges with individuals from varied communities.

Chang's sprawling project, *The Wandering Lake* (2009-2019), departs from

Swedish explorer Sven Hedin's 1938 book of the same title chronicling his travels to a migrating body of water in the desert region of Xinjiang in western China. *The*



Figure 7.1. Patty Chang, *The Wandering Lake*, 2009-2019. Image courtesy of artist.



Figure 7.2. Patty Chang, *The Wandering Lake*, 2009-2019. Image courtesy of artist.

Wandering Lake includes documents of Chang's own research on and travels throughout the region; video footage of the artist urinating through funnel devices

into bottles (and delicate glass reconstructions of those bottles); washing a deceased beached whale; conversing with members of the Uighur minority group; and singing to her newborn baby in the company of her ailing father. Grappling with international travel, discussions with locals in Xinjiang, the birth of her son and death of her father, the multi-media *Wandering Lake* crafts what Glissant described as the Poetics of Relation, weaving between historic and ethnographic research and personal actions and encounters.

Such poetics of relation also play out in Chang's 42-minute two-channel video installation *The Product Love – Die Ware Liebe*. Chang's video installation responds to a meeting between Walter Benjamin and Anna May Wong, and a related article the German philosopher subsequently penned. Published in 1928 on the front page of the leading German literary review, *Die literarische Welt*, Benjamin's relatively little-known article, "Gespräch mit Anne May Wong: Eine Chinoiserie aus dem alten Westen" ("Interview with Anna May Wong: A Chinoiserie Out of the Old West") discusses his encounter with and impressions of Wong in flowery, Orientalizing, and infantilizing language. *The Product Love*



Figure 8.1. Patty Chang, *The Product Love – Die Ware Liebe*, 2009. Image courtesy of artist.

grapples with the difficulties of translation, while responding to the exoticizing language within Benjamin's article as well as to racism in interwar cultural

industries, especially Hollywood, in which Wong worked and faced severe discrimination and career limitations.

The Product Love's first video alternates between three translators struggling to translate Benjamin's article into English. "He writes sort of poetically



Figure 8.2. Patty Chang, *The Product Love – Die Ware Liebe*, 2009. Image courtesy of artist.

too, so it's" one of the translators starts to explain, with a flip of the wrist. The translators' varied attempts are intercut with non-descript still shots of urban Chinese landscapes and architecture; a glimpse of the characters Chang casts as Wong and Benjamin in the second video; and the mundane movements of a folder labeled "Walter Benjamin Archiv" within an institutional office setting. The video highlights one particular passage in the article that each translator reads somewhat differently: in response to Benjamin's question of how Wong would express herself if she were not an actress, Wong replies "Touch would" (written in English in the otherwise German-language article), after which everyone at the meeting knocks on the table at which they sit. One translator reads Benjamin's interpretation, "touch would," as incorrect, hypothesizing Wong meant "touch wood" and that the knocking on the table enacted the superstition of "knocking on wood" (implying *let's hope Wong never has to stop acting*). Another translator reads "touch would" as meaning Wong would express herself through touch (if she weren't acting), and

that the knocking on the table assimilates a German means of expressing satisfaction following a performance, like applause. Chang plays with these various interpretations springing from the English cognates “would” and “wood,” while teasing out the sexual implications of “touch wood” coinciding with Benjamin’s seeming infatuation with the actress (Pollack).



Figure 8.3. Patty Chang, *The Product Love – Die Ware Liebe*, 2009. Image courtesy of artist.



Figure 8.4. Patty Chang, *The Product Love – Die Ware Liebe*, 2009. Image courtesy of artist.

The second video depicts an all-Chinese cast and crew preparing for and shooting a soft-core pornography film starring actors playing Benjamin and Wong. The video begins with the Chinese actors being made up to look like Wong and Benjamin, recalling the old cinematic practice of “yellow face” (ubiquitous, like “black face”) and Hollywood’s correlating anti-miscegenation codes (aligned with state and federal laws). Wong frequently lost parts to white actresses, including, most painfully, the role of O-lan in Pearl Buck’s *The Good Earth*. O-lan, which Wong longed to play, was instead given to Luise Rainer, a German actress, who starred with the male lead, Wang, played by Austro-Hungarian-born American actor Paul Muni. One of Wong’s biographers, Graham Russell Gao Hodges, writes:

A ‘yellow face’ extravaganza, *The Good Earth* is now painful to watch.

Just a few of its racially offensive features include Muni using gibberish to represent the Chinese language, crowds of character actors who look and sound as if they belong in a western, and [Tilly] Losch as a sing-song girl wearing outfits and performing dances that she undoubtedly learned from watching Anna May in Europe in previous years. Anna May could not have understood the studio’s plans for the movie. MGM’s rejection of her hurt immediately and in time came to symbolize Hollywood’s misuse of her career (138).

Chang’s project reverses “yellow face” through a concentrated effort at “white face.” Makeup artists attend to the Chinese actor, applying a thick mustache, wig, and cosmetics while referencing a famous portrait of Benjamin, appearing deep in thought, on the cover of *Reflections*.

Writing on *The Product Love* and other projects by Chang, art historian Jane Chin Davidson astutely observes how the artist’s “projects reveal the way in which performance video can represent the Chinese subject in complex ways that problematize Chineseness as the historical identity constructed by 1920s and 1930s cinema” (56). The second video, like the first, highlights comical translations with sexual innuendo that extend to colonialist discourse. A crew member who speaks mostly in mandarin Chinese (*putong hua*) shifts to accented English when



like culture that he want to touch the very sensitive place.

Figure 8.5. Patty Chang, *The Product Love – Die Ware Liebe*, 2009. Image courtesy of artist.

he describes Benjamin's complex feelings for Wong:

That he [Benjamin] treat the body of May Wong just like to treat the culture of Eastern. Eastern culture. So he just want to flirt or want to touch the. How to say? There's some parts that make May Wong feel good. How to call that in English? Some parts of the woman's body that feel good when sex. G-point. G point, G-spot. He just want to touch the G-spot of May Wong. And just like culture that he want to touch the very sensitive place. (Chang, *The Product Love*)

A fellow crew member adds (in Chinese with English subtitles): "And then in this section, we can reveal the characteristics of Benjamin as an intellectual, whatever his nervousness, neurosis and awkwardness, all can be revealed." These lines intimate the filmmakers' sophisticated reflections on Benjamin's desire for Wong, which they relate to the purported positive intentions of colonialist expansion and attendant Orientalism and sexual exoticization (i.e., the desire for the Westerner to get close to and make feel good or sexually gratified the Eastern culture or subject).

The film unfolds as an awkward soft-core porn scene between the two

actors, stilted as they lay together, undress, and proceed to have sex, Benjamin



Figure 8.6. Patty Chang, *The Product Love – Die Ware Liebe*, 2009. Image courtesy of artist.

atop Wong. Moments of enjoyment appear, but illusions get broken quickly as a director comes into the frame to adjust the actors' gestures, leading, in one instance, to Benjamin seemingly uncomfortably stroking Wong's foot and leg. As Benjamin kisses Wong's foot, the camera pans out, and the scene, so obviously contrived, turns quickly to farce. Soon after, Benjamin and Wong appear post-coitus; Benjamin fans the lovers' naked bodies, and then turns his backside to the camera, rendering Wong invisible in a shot resembling classical reclining nude portraits. Yet unlike the countless patriarchal and/or Orientalist versions of reclining nudes in the canon of art history (see, for one example of many, Henri Matisse's *Reclining Odalisque* made in 1927 following the painter's travels in Morocco), Chang foregrounds the male "white" (disguised Chinese) body as the primary nude offered for visual delectation.

After first seeing *The Product Love*, exhibited in an early iteration at the (now closed) alternative art space Arrow Factory in Beijing, I became inspired to further study Benjamin's article on Wong. I obtained a copy of the original text from the library and hired a professional translator to help me translate the German into English. The translator, Sanders Creasy, completed the translation in roughly a

week (a reportedly rushed job, but one carried out with all of the translators' tools, unlike those spontaneous translations performed in *The Product Love*). When sending me his translation, Creasy offered a number of caveats:

I should warn you-- the piece is somewhat odd...In general he [Benjamin] has an idiosyncratic style. And this piece strikes me as particularly strange, frequently attempting a kind of poeticism that comes off as awkward most of the time. And then there is a kind of orientalism/paternalism threaded throughout that only adds to the strangeness. I consciously tried to leave some of the awkwardness in the translation.

Creasy's warning, like the accounts of the struggling translators in *The Product Love*, serve as a reminder of the subjectivity inherent to translation, and of the inevitable loss translation incurs (we are reminded of the oft-cited Italian wordplay, *Traduttore, traditore/Translator, traitor*).

The recognition of Benjamin's "orientalism/paternalism," especially when read in light of *The Product Love*, reveals how exoticization might inform both sexual desire and the desire to understand/ explain a foreign culture. Creasy translates the contested "touch would" passage as: "May Wong can no longer imagine her life without film, and when I ask "What means of expression would you grasp at, if film were not available to you?" her only response is "touch would [sic]" and everyone beats merrily on the table" (213). The next passage reads: "May Wong turns question-and-answer into a swing set: she lays herself back and flies up, plunges down, flies up, and it seems as though from time to time I give her a push. She laughs, that's it" (Ibid.). Benjamin pairs this paternalistic language with Orientalizing references, opening the article with: "May Wong—the name sounds colorfully embroidered, powerful and light as the diminutive chopsticks that constitute it, which unfurl into odorless blossoms like full moons in a bowl of tea" (Ibid). Throughout the article, Benjamin seeks to spotlight Wong's youth and Chinese identity.

Simultaneously, certain descriptions reveal the impossibility of identifying

the actress in culturally homogenous terms. Following the “touch would” and swing set passages, Benjamin writes of Wong’s dress:

Her dress would not be at all out of place in such playground games: dark blue coat and skirt, light blue blouse with yellow cravat over—it makes you wish you knew a line of Chinese poetry about it. She has always worn this outfit, for she was born not in China but in Chinatown, in Los Angeles. When her roles call for it, though, she readily dons old national attire. Her imagination works more freely in it. Her favorite dress was cut from her father’s wedding jacket; she wears it sometimes around the house (Chang, *The Product Love*)

These observations on Wong’s fashion, paired with Benjamin’s failed wish to find a poetic Chinese translation for his characterizations, show the impossibility of categorizing the actress using any fixed notion of identity. Despite Benjamin’s repeated references to Wong’s *Chineseness*, as well as to her child-like qualities, the article demonstrates the actress’s own desire to transcend such categories. Benjamin reports Wong’s frustration with being so frequently typecast as an immature party girl. “I don’t want to play flappers forever,” he quotes the actress as saying, “I prefer mothers. Once already at fifteen, I played a mother. Why not? There are so many young mothers” (Ibid.). Embodying theories of intersectionality and creolization, Wong persisted at the intersection of multiple identities (woman, Chinese, American), none of which could be contained.

Anna May Wong / Hybrid Haunting

The historic figure of Anna May Wong serves as a friendly ghost ally who can extend our understanding of contemporary feminist and anti-racist performance and video art. Born to second generation Chinese American parents near Chinatown in Los Angeles, Wong’s humble roots as the daughter of launderers exist far from the glamour she would come to inhabit as Hollywood’s, and the world’s first Asian American film actress. Yet, Wong’s rise – from the child of those who washed others’ clothes for a living to a starlet decked out in cutting-edge

cross-cultural fashions – exemplifies the American and Hollywood dreams with their attendant promises, paradoxes, and specious façades. Wong's transformation into a transnational actress signals a success story tied to the fashionable multicultural diversity of Los Angeles in the interwar period. Simultaneously, Wong's life and career reveal the exclusionary racism underlying both the American dream and Hollywood's so-called golden age.

Wong's first starring role as Lotus Flower in the 1922 film *The Toll of the Sea* enacts attendant cinematic codes, dramatizing concurrent anti-miscegenation laws. The silent film depicts Lotus Flower, a young Chinese woman, who rescues an American man, Allen, after he washes up on the shore near her home. The two fall in love, and Allen promises to marry Lotus Flower and take her back to the United States. But, faced with familial and peer pressure, Allen breaks his promise, returning alone to the United States, where he promptly falls in love with a long-time Anglo-American sweetheart, whom he marries instead. Lotus Flower, who has since born Allen's son, eagerly awaits his return. Allen's wife encourages him to return to China to explain himself to Lotus Flower, and the married couple travel to China together. In the heart-wrenching conclusion, Lotus Flower gives her son to Allen's wife, telling the boy this American woman is his true mother. *The Toll of the Sea* tells two love stories; one ends happily with the wedded Anglo-American couple and their new baby, but Wong's story ends in misery. This co-existence of happy and tragic endings exemplifies the limitations of the American dream, which played out both in the narratives of Wong's characters and the reality of her career.

Wong achieved world-wide recognition through her performances, but as scholars have noted, she was frequently typecast in Orientalist and sexist roles (Davidson, 71; Hodges, 57), often playing the stereotypical "China Doll" (demure ingénue) or "Dragon Lady" (bewitching femme fatale), and seldom received starring parts (Lotus being an anomaly). Wong's tremendous career hurdles coincided with the rise and aftermath of the United States federal Chinese Exclusion Act (passed in 1882 and not repealed until 1943), deep-rooted local anti-Chinese sentiment (in 1879, 98% of voters in Los Angeles County voted against Chinese immigration), and California's anti-miscegenation law prohibiting

interracial marriage (passed in 1872 and not repealed until 1948). The anti-miscegenation law posed a major obstacle for Wong as Hollywood's codes strictly forbade interracial couples from partnering and kissing on screen. Fed up, in 1928, Wong sojourned in Europe, where she played leading, sexually liberated roles, breaking free from Hollywood's stereotypes and her family's Confucian values. In 1936, she traveled for the first time to China, emerging as one of the most international figures of the early to mid-twentieth century.



Figure 9. Cover image featuring Anna May Wong. On Liang You/Young Companion, no. 34 (January 1929).

Wong cultivated a sartorial sensibility that distinctly combined Chinese and Euro-American fashions. Embracing gender-defying garments, Wong's favorite item of clothing, as described by Benjamin, was a jacket she made from her father's traditional Chinese wedding coat. A portrait of Wong appearing on the internationally circulating Shanghai-based lifestyle magazine *The Young Companion* (*Liangyou*) exemplifies Wong's hybrid style. The January 1929 issue featured Wong as its cover star, fashioning her as an icon of an emerging Chinese modernity and cosmopolitanism. Wong's hybrid identity reverberated in the magazine's bilingual title in a font combining Chinese characters and art deco style. She highlights her multiple identities, autographing the cover portrait, "Orientially yours" (in English) and using both her English and Chinese names – Anna May Wong and *Huang Liushuang*. In signing her Chinese name, Wong follows traditional Chinese conventions, writing the characters from right to left, and placing her family name before her given name. Wong's cultural identity existed as more than double (American and Chinese), bolstered by her travels and performances. Inside the magazine, a spread featuring Wong explains: "The cover girl is now in Berlin starring in many pictures. The photographs shown here were sent in by her courtesy" (*Young Companion* 25). The story emphasizes Wong's ability to circulate transnationally, not only physically, but also via the modern media of photography and film.

The actress's early life was spent mostly in her first home at 351 Flower Street, an address today situated across the street from the Westin Bonaventure Hotel (1974-1976), designed by architect John Portman. In *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Marxist literary critic and historian Fredric Jameson deems the Bonaventure Hotel, with its "reflective glass skin" and labyrinthine interiors, to be quintessentially postmodern for the building's creation of a world unto itself and rejection of local contexts and histories (42). What would it mean to map the initial home address and subsequent haunts of Wong, a transnational figure marginalized both in and after life? The strand of "critical postmodernism" promoted by certain art historians would likely discourage the issues of identity and biography this article foregrounds. But "cognitively mapping"

(Jameson 51) Wong's local and global movements would critically chart historical roots of continued racism and nationalism, while plotting other, open and cross-cultural ways of being. Jameson penned his formidable theory of postmodernism nearly thirty years ago, and scholars since have struggled to re-name our current cultural logic. Are we *post-post-modern*, or *global* (both unsatisfying terms)? Amidst this intellectual crisis—and more pressingly, the crisis of present-day politics—cultural anthropologists, fan studies scholars, and scholars of feminist and ethnic minority studies have urged us to interrogate the merit of Roland Barthes' "The Death of the Author," appearing as it did in 1967, just as marginalized voices (female, Black, Asian, Chicano/a, LGBT) finally began to be heard.

Open Ends

This article, rather than present cultural identities as singular entities, has instead featured artists' undoing of simplistic binaries through a number of strategies, including parodying stereotypes, subverting racial triangulation, and flipping artistic conventions/modes of representation. The primary figures presented – RHEE, Chang, and Wong – are all, importantly and intentionally, Asian American women. My focus on art by Asian American women intervenes into the still Western European/Anglo-American- and male-dominated terrains of modern and contemporary art and mainstream culture, namely Hollywood (with some token, but thankfully quickly growing, exceptions). At the same time, these women's vastly different upbringings, trajectories, and cultural outputs remind us how unwieldy labels such as 'Asian American' remain.

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