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HOLLYWOOD ASIAN

Philip Ahn and the Politics of Cross-Ethnic Performance

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presence throughout the studio era and the Television Age sustained the visibility of Asian Americans in popular media, who otherwise would have been completely absent except in yellowface. On the other hand, the careers of these performers comprise a composite of Oriental stereotypes retrospectively condemned by post-civil rights Asian American activists who have benefited from increased political agency and institutional access to independent filmmaking (which enabled corrective self-imaging). As a critical strategy to see beyond textual stereotypes and structured racism, I have thus far employed a transnational paradigm to reclaim Philip Ahn's legacy outside the confinement of U.S. racial politics and to underscore the diasporic hermeneutics of Asian American representations.

Now let us turn our attention from the diasporic actor to the bilingual, bicultural spectator, a hypothetical yet highly plausible figure capable of gleaning differentiated meanings from cross-ethnic performance. Yin Kim, Ahn's friend, casually commented, "I always laughed when I saw Philip play mean Japanese villains. He was Korean and one of the sweetest guys I ever knew." Here we find a perfect example of the subversive spectatorial pleasure articulated by Ella Shohat and Robert Stam: "In a kind of double consciousness, spectators may enjoy what they know to be misrepresentations." This pleasure of ethnic recognition is a subject I explore in the next chapter.

The Audience Who Knew Too Much

Oriental Masquerade and Ethnic Recognition among Asian Americans

ONE OF THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES that I have faced in my reading of Philip Ahn's career has been to see beyond my own cultural position and accommodate hermeneutic strategies outside the domain of Korean identity politics. As a scholar born and raised in South Korea who then immigrated to the United States in my late twenties, I am necessarily caught up in the process of developing a hyphenated, bicultural identity. Despite conscious efforts to immerse myself in America's diverse cultural traditions and to become a "Korean American," the educational pursuits, social values, and personal memories of my formative years in South Korea continue to affect my intellectual life significantly. Beginning with my elementary school years, I grew up learning about the patriot Tosan An Ch'ang-ho. In Seoul, I lived only twenty minutes away from Tosan Memorial Park and traveled down a boulevard named after him (Tosan daero) every day. Just as South Korean audiences lack the cultural memories of U.S.-born cinephiles and television addicts weaned on the Orientalist imagery of Charlie Chan, Anna May Wong, and Kung Fu (1972–1975), Americans (including second-generation Korean Americans) can hardly be expected to identify with the reverence Koreans feel for this national hero.

As discussed in Chapter 1, it is almost impossible for audiences with ontological ties to Korea to separate Philip Ahn's archetypal screen roles
(Japanese villain, Chinese educator, etc.) from his offscreen identity as the son of an icon in the pantheon of Korean nationalists. This knowledge generates additional meanings about his characters and the texts themselves—meanings that are part of a transnational, cross-cultural reading position that further enriches an understanding of the complexities and contradictions underlying the formulaic façade of American films from the studio era.

The scope of my book, however, is not limited to the Korean viewpoint. In this chapter, I mobilize Philip Ahn as a cross-ethnic signifier whose multivalent performativity provides an opportunity to theorize Asian American spectatoriality. My main task is to explore the relationship between the cross-ethnic performer and the bilingual, bicultural spectator. Although this spectatoriality is based on my own viewing position as a native speaker of Korean, it can encompass variegated ethnicities and language affiliations (Korean American, Chinese American, Japanese American, South Korean, mainland Chinese, Hong Kong Chinese, Taiwanese, Japanese, etc.), depending on the specific texts and scenes in question.

This chapter thus makes a contribution to both gender and ethnic studies by expanding feminist theories of masquerade and race/queer theories of passing to address Asian American performativity and spectatoriality. Psychoanalytic theory and Asian American studies have traditionally been considered incompatible or mutually exclusive because of the latter discipline's predilection for "talking about racial subjects as 'real' subjects" through material-based paradigms, such as sociology, anthropology, and history. However, as David L. Eng points out, "This unorthodox pairing...yields a more comprehensive understanding of the historical intersection of race, gender, and sexuality that produce a dominant image of the Asian American male subject in the U.S. cultural imaginary" by recuperating the immaterial, unquantifiable, and psychological elements of racial subjectivity and "reality." Whereas Eng mobilizes psychoanalysis in his study of Asian American masculinity to account for the significance of sexuality and sexual difference in racial formation, I am interested in applying masquerade and passing theories to highlight ethnic and linguistic differences among Asian American performers and spectators.

Asian American spectatoriality is a severely understudied subject. Peter X. Feng's essay, "Recovering Suzie Wong: A Fan's Nancy Kwan-dary," is a rare contribution to the topic. Feng argues that Asian American spectatorial pleasure in a racially retrograde Hollywood feature like *The World of Suzie Wong* (1960) depends upon a "strategy of selectively re-narrativizing elements of a star's performance." A resistant spectator, according to Feng, mentally traces over a racist narrative and recasts stereotyped characters "from scavenged bits and pieces of a film" in a way similar to the strategies employed in Helen Lee's experimental short film *Sally's Beauty Spot* (1990), which manipulates and reedits Nancy Kwan's images from *Suzie Wong* for the pleasure of the Asian American spectator.

Although a "resistant spectator" is an oft-recycled formation in the discourse of black spectatorship, Feng nevertheless puts a fresh spin on the text/star/spectator triad by foregrounding the ethnic star image as a site of resignification, a critical strategy that my own study shares. Feng builds up his conceptualization of Asian American spectatoriality from Stuart Hall's tripartite model, first postulated in his influential 1980 essay, "Encoding/Decoding." In this essay, Hall proposes three positions of reading or decoding media texts: *dominant*, *negotiated*, and *oppositional*. When the viewer decodes connotative meanings of the text in a way preferred and intended by the encoder, he or she is operating inside the sphere of *dominant* ideology. When the viewer acknowledges dominant definitions but adapts or retrofits them to his or her "local conditions" and rules, the spectator is engaging in *negotiated* reading. When the viewer resists intended or preferred meanings and reinterprets the text for the sake of his or her group interest, that spectator is following a path that runs in *opposition* to dominant ideology.

Hall's theory of oppositional or resistant readings was subsequently adopted by Manthia Diawara and bell hooks to account for African American spectatoriality in relation to Hollywood cinema. Although Diawara and hooks speak from different gender positions, both theorists see black spectatorship as a mode of resistance. Diawara in particular puts emphasis on the "ambiguous experience" that black spectators (regardless of gender and sexuality) encounter when the narrative pleasures of hegemonic texts serve the white male heterosexual spectator at the expense of their own subject position. According to him, resistant spectatoriality lies in anti-identification or an act of disavowal of racist representations of blacks. Quoting Frantz Fanon's famous line, "every spectator is a coward or traitor," he calls for the spectator who transforms "the problem of passive identification into active criticism which both informs and interrelates with contemporary oppositional film-making."

Hooks redeploy Diawara's formation of resistant spectatoriality from a black feminist perspective. For her, African American female spectators actively refuse to identify not only with the white male subject (the perpetrator) but also with the white female object of the phallocentric gaze (the victim). Locating the "oppositional gaze" in black female spectatorship, hooks elaborates:
We do more than resist. We create alternative texts, ones that are born not solely in reaction against. As critical spectators, Black women participate in a broad range of looking relations, contest, resist, revise, interrogate, and invent on multiple levels.6

Unlike Diawara's and hooks's conceptualizations, Feng's notion of resistant spectatorship is not confrontationally aligned against a "racist text." His concept of the text as the object of both critical inquiry and potential fetishization is more amorphous and fluid, taking into consideration those "star texts" that transcend the logic of narrative closure. Instead of denouncing the pleasures of dominant texts born out of white supremacist and/or sexist desires, Feng recuperates the differentiated pleasures that Asian American spectators derive from the imaginary renarrativization and recontextualization of ethnic star images.

Feng admirably expands resistant spectatorship theory by contributing an Asian American standpoint, as well as a focus on star discourse. However, his construction of a monolithic "Asian American" spectatorship is problematic precisely because linguistic and cultural differences, as well as interethnic political conflicts—especially the imperial domination of Japan over several nations during the first half of the twentieth century—divide Asian and Asian American identities into heterogeneous units. As Feng puts it elsewhere, "The label 'Asian' is not used in Asia—it is only used in the West."7 The historical and cultural ruptures among different ethnic groups point to the difficulty of applying a race-based concept of resistant or oppositional spectatorship to the particular case of Asian American viewing positions. Whereas Sidney Poitier, Eddie Murphy, and Whoopi Goldberg are all African Americans,8 James Shigeta, Lucy Liu, John Cho, and Dante Basco are, respectively, Japanese American, Chinese American, Korean American, and Filipino American—men and women whose different ancestral languages, cultures, and family immigration histories formed their screen personalities and testify to the heterogeneity that often gets lost in Hollywood's continuous reinvention and reinterpretation of the Oriental other.

Since the U.S. government abolished national origins quotas with the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, the heterogeneity of the Asian American population has increased dramatically. As Lisa Lowe points out, "[T]he majority of Asian Americans are at present Asian-born rather than multiple-generation, and new immigrant groups from South Vietnam, South Korea, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia, India, and Pakistan have diversified the already existing Asian American group of largely Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Filipino descent."9 The growing diversity and linguistic differences within the group further complicate Asian American spectatorship.

Although black spectatorship likewise inhabits a diverse range of categorical modalities in terms of gender, class, sexuality, and even color (light-skinned vs. dark-skinned African Americans), Asian American spectatorship engages a wider array of potentially disruptive ethnic and linguistic schisms. The history of Japanese colonialism in Asia further problematizes the dichotomy between the white colonizer and the nonwhite colonized, which dominates the discourse of postcolonial and ethnic studies. During World War II, the demeaning representation of the Japanese in American media no doubt enraged Japanese American audiences, but at the same time may have pleased many patriotic Asian immigrants from Korea, China, and the Philippines whose homelands were under Japanese colonial or occupational rule. For the latter group, the resistant or oppositional reading does not necessarily contest the "yellow peril" stereotypes, but rather reinterprets them according to the anticolonial interests of their own groups. Any attempt to theorize Asian American spectatorship should first acknowledge this historical and political chasm separating diverse ethnic groups.

Although the colonial/postcolonial dimension is particularly important in my case study of Philip Ahn (who was himself a descendant of the colonial diaspora), in this chapter I primarily focus on the impact of cross-ethnic masquerade and Asian American "passers" on bilingual and bicultural spectators. I have opted to replace the phrase "Asian American spectator" with the phrase "bilingual and bicultural spectator" to make it clear that I acknowledge that there are many Asian American audience members who are incapable of speaking their ancestral languages. Here, I am not trying to privilege Asian-born immigrants who speak dual languages over multi-generation Asian Americans who have assimilated into the mainstream. Rather, I am merely acknowledging multiple levels of cultural differences within Asian American groups despite my exclusive focus on a hypothetical spectatorial position that hinges on bilingual and bicultural capability. It should furthermore be understood that I have no intention of providing hard evidence of actual historical test subjects through an anthropological and sociological study of real audiences.

Although my observations are based partly on my own experience of viewing Philip Ahn's films and television shows, I am primarily interested in theorizing the textual construction of differentiated spectators. In lieu of the much-recycled model of resistant spectatorship, I use the theory of masquerade as a springboard for my discussion. Some readers might wonder how a theory heavily entrenched in psychoanalysis and feminism can be useful in
addressing the identity politics of Asian Americans. In an effort to substantiate my claims, I would first like to offer the following brief survey of this theory's genealogy before discussing its applicability to Asian American performance and spectatorship.

THEORIES OF MASQUERADE AND PASSING

Many feminist theorists have adopted the notion of masquerade to destabilize the phallocentric discourse of Freudian psychoanalysis and to explore a subversive alternative to the conventional gender hierarchy by claiming femininity as a mask or an artificial construct. The English Kleinian analyst, Joan Riviere, became the progenitor of masquerade theory when she published the now-canonical essay, "Womanliness as Masquerade," in the International Journal of Psychoanalysis in 1929. Influencing such poststructuralist theorists as Jacques Lacan, Luce Irigaray, Michele Montrelay, and Stephen Heath, this pioneering work has sparked an intellectual interest in masquerade as a theoretical concept that articulates the complexity and contradiction of femininity.

In a much-quoted passage, Riviere argues the following:

Womanliness therefore could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it—much as a thief will turn out his pockets and ask to be searched to prove that he has not the stolen goods. The reader may now ask how I define womanliness or where I draw the line between genuine womanliness and the "masquerade." My suggestion is not, however, that there is any such difference; whether radical or superficial, they are the same thing.

Riviere derives her theory from the behaviors of her female patients who, despite being in intellectual professions (such as a "propagandist" and a university lecturer), feigned excessively feminine attributes or joked defensively and became flippant after delivering successful public performances. Interestingly, Riviere observes that the intended audiences of this feminine masquerade were almost always father-figures and male co-workers whom these women desperately sought to please and placate as a reaction-formation to downplay their professional rivalry with these men. In Riviere's words, "[t]he woman's mask, though transparent to other women, was successful with men, and served its purpose very well."

Feminist film theorist Mary Ann Doane applied and expanded Riviere's work in her seminal 1982 essay, "Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator." Doane mobilizes masquerade theory for two purposes: first, to consider the filmic image of women looking and performing a masquerade, and second, to theorize differentiated female spectatorship vis-à-vis classical narrative cinema. For Doane, although "the woman as subject of the gaze is clearly an impossible sign" in mainstream texts, the image of the masquerading woman (aligned with an excess of femininity typical of such seductive manifestations as the femme fatale) does destabilize the hegemonic structure of the male gaze by defamiliarizing female iconography. Doane furthermore suggests the emancipatory possibility of masquerade in providing a different viewing position for female spectators caught between "the masochism of over-identification or the narcissism entailed in becoming one's own object of desire, in assuming the image in the most radical way." She goes on to say, "The effectiveness of masquerade lies precisely in its potential to manufacture a distance from the image, to generate a problematic within which the image is manipulable, producible, and readable by the woman."

Subsequent works by Judith Butler, Valerie Smith, and Michael Rogin have highlighted the cross-performativity of gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality as radical alternatives to prescribed, normative identities. Couching the term "masquerade" in different forms—"drag" for Butler, "passing" for Smith, and "cross-dressing" for Rogin—these theorists collectively emphasize the potentially subversive yet ambivalent implications of assuming identities of alterity through performance. Applying masquerade theory to the question of sexuality, Butler sees gender as "the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that conceal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being." In other words, gender is not an essence (being) but a socially constructed performance (doing) that naturalizes and reproduces heterosexual norms. Drawing on gay cultural practices, Butler privileges drag as a subversive form of performed parody that calls attention to the constructedness of heterosexual identities. She elaborates as follows:

As much as drag creates a unified picture of "woman" (what its critics often oppose), it also reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence. In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency.
Making similar inquiries about the potential subversion of identity, Valerie Smith turns her attention from drag (cross-sexual performance) to passing (cross-racial performance). In her article, “Reading the Intersection of Race and Gender in Narratives of Passing,” she examines the masquerade of light-skinned black characters in passing narratives by juxtaposing a classic example, John Stahl’s *Imitation of Life* (1934), against its more modern counterparts, such as Julie Dash’s *Illusions* (1982) and Charles Lane’s *True Identity* (1991). Although *Imitation of Life*’s narrative condemns passing by punishing a light-skinned daughter for her abandonment of dark-skinned kin and their communities, the more contemporary counterparts suggest the potential of passing as a subversive act to uplift the race. For example, in *Illusions*, Mignon Dupree, a black female Hollywood executive working in the 1940s, passes with the intention of bringing the suppressed histories of her people to the screen. Unlike the black daughter in *Imitation of Life*, Mignon maintains connections to the community through her close relationship with her black lover and mother, as well as her bonding with black female singer Esther Jeeter, who is hired to dub the voice of a white star. As Smith points out, Dash’s film stresses the “significance of masquerade in the production of cinematic illusion as well as racial and gender identity.”

In his book-length study of blackface as a form of racial cross-dressing for early Jewish entertainers, Rogen states, “Admiration and ridicule, appropriation and homage, transience and permanence, pathos and play, deception and self-deception, stereotyped and newly invented, passing up and passing down, class, sex, and race—all these elements in contradictory combination can play their role in masquerade.” Although Rogen acknowledges the postmodernist celebration of racial and ethnic masquerade as a subversive strategy to denaturalize the binary opposition of constructed identities, he balances his discussion with sensitive attention to the long history of segregation that excluded actual African American performers from theatrical and filmic productions centering on blackface.

The works of Butler, Smith, and Rogen are just a few of the many examples that demonstrate how the theory of masquerade can be modified and rearticulated according to different emphases: sexuality, (racial) passing, and blackface. Although black-white, cross-racial masquerade has received ample critical attention in the past two decades, cross-ethnic masquerade within the same racial group or between minority groups remains greatly understudied. Indeed, “Oriental masquerade” and “ethnic passing”—two prerequisites for the survival of early Asian American actors in Hollywood—need to be addressed within the overlapping lenses of film history and cultural studies. Although this chapter, which takes up this challenge to expand masquerade and passing theories, is exclusively confined to the career and filmography of Philip Ahn, its applicability across a broad range of disciplines rests on its ability to gesture toward the many other actors and ethnics that, however peripheral to mainstream cinema, prove to be just as vital to the understanding of representation, stardom, and spectatorship.

**Oriental Masks and Pidgin Performances**

Like other pioneering Asian American players such as Richard Loo and Anna May Wong, Philip Ahn was born and raised in the United States. He did not visit his ancestral homeland until 1959, despite his father’s lofty status in modern Korean history. As mentioned in Chapter 1, Ahn almost missed his Hollywood debut when director Lewis Milestone initially turned him down for a minor Chinese role in the Bing Crosby musical *Anything Goes* (1936) because of his perfect command of English. After the screen test, Milestone told the native Californian, “You’re the type we’re looking for, but you don’t speak the kind of English we want. We want that laundry man-pidgin-English.” It was not until Ahn faked pidgin English on the spot that the director changed his mind and offered him the role. This much-quouted episode in Ahn’s life attests to the fact that Oriental masquerade was a strategy that the actor was compelled to employ from his very first job hunt in Hollywood. Indeed, masquerade is a recurring diegetic motif throughout Ahn’s career and performances.

In several films, he plays the role of a masquerader. The Universal serial *Red Barry* (1938) textually inscribes the concept of Orientalness as masquerade in a literal sense. In this breakneck, thirteen-chapter serial, Ahn’s character, “Hong Kong Cholly,” oscillates between two identities—the pidgin-English speaking sidekick of the white detective hero, Red Barry (Larry “Buster” Crabbe), and the undercover foreign agent (working for a nationalist Chinese general) who can speak perfect English; this wavering within a liminal state reflects Ahn’s own screen career of Oriental charades. Indeed, Ahn’s first screen role in the low-budget Lon Chaney, Jr. vehicle, *A Scream in the Night* (1935), similarly registers the double identities of Chinese undercover detective Wu Ting, a clean-cut, elegant English speaker who poses as a shabby, foreign peddler to infiltrate an unsavory Singapore waterfront club serving as a criminal hideout. In marked contrast to his earlier appearance in a dandy Western suit at a hotel café with two American detectives (Inspector Green and Detective Jack Wilson, the latter played by Chaney), Wu Ting reappears later in the movie, this time wearing a Vietnamese hat, faux mustache, and dark makeup encircling his eyes—embodying the classic image
of a deceptive, sinister Oriental. Disguised as a pathetic pidgin-English speaker, Wu Ting approaches Butch Curtain (also played by Chaney), the notorious one-eyed bar owner and henchman for the film's chief villain, Johnny Fly (Manuel Lopez). The Oriental masquerader's gestures, mannerisms, and speech patterns ("me very solley, excuse please...me just want link [drink]...me come boat yesterday") are all grossly yet self-knowingly exaggerated. Philip Ahn's intentionally hyperbolic acting calls attention not only to the fact that his character Wu Ting is putting on an act for his secret investigative operation but also to the artificial construct of Oriental otherness itself. Wu Ting's camouflage foreshadows the hero Jack Wilson's masquerade as his look-alike Butch Curtain in the narrative, stressing the film's overarching themes of doubling, duplicity, and deception.

Likewise, Something to Sing About (1937), a low-budget musical produced at the "Poverty Row" studio Grand National, contains a self-reflexive moment that deconstructs the phoniness of Oriental masquerade. Philip Ahn appears as a studio houseboy, Ito, attending to Terry Rooney (James Cagney)—a New York bandleader who is making his debut in a Hollywood picture. Subservient and obsequious to the extreme, Ito speaks over-embellished pidgin English, habitually repeating stock phrases, such as "honorable master," "humble servant," and "ssanku, please." Discouraged by the exhausting wardrobe fittings, beauty sessions, and diction lessons, not to mention the manipulative schemes of studio executives and publicists, one evening Rooney confides the following to Ito:

ROONEY: You're the only one around this studio who will even deign to talk to me, and all you can say is "yes-a, sir."
ITO: (with flawless elocution) Would you rather that I spoke ordinary English, sir?
ROONEY: (surprised) Was that you?
ITO: (smiling) Yes, sir. My former employers felt that the accent lent a certain dignity.
ROONEY: Now look here, you're not going to stand there in all of this heat and tell me this Japanese lingo was an act.
ITO: Very much so!
ROONEY: Pull up a chair, sit down. I want to hear about this. Tell me about yourself.
ITO: I came here aspiring to be an actor.
ROONEY: Uh-huh. And they couldn't mold you, huh?
ITO: They didn't even try.

Although Ito immediately regresses to his usual lingo and mannerisms, this brief exchange of dialogue not only self-reflexively plays on the industry's racist tendencies but also exposes how Oriental otherness is very much a mask that can be worn and removed, just like femininity.

Reminiscent of the MGM musical, Singin' in the Rain (1952), Something to Sing About playfully exposes the "behind the scenes" constructs of Hollywood filmmaking and stardom. As soon as Rooney arrives in Los Angeles and disembarks from the train, the studio publicist Hank Meyers (William Frawley) orders him to pose with four swimsuited models for publicity shots. As Bennet O. Regan (Gene Lockhart), an executive at the fictional Galor Studios, opines, "In Hollywood, we create not only pictures but actors and actresses as well. We mold them." Rooney's physical appearance and voice are indeed molded into star-like shape during a two-week intensive makeover program. The profit-driven studio even keeps his runaway marriage confidential and spreads a false rumor of romance between Rooney and his onscreen leading lady.

However, although both Rooney and Ito engage in a form of role-playing to fit Hollywood's prescribed identities, race plays a determining factor for the assignment of each role (marquee stardom for the white hooper and that of personal assistant for the Asian would-be actor). Ito performs a verbal masquerade to mimic the ideal of an Oriental servant—a social act of passing that reflects both racial and class differences. The Japanese immigrant's performative downgrading of his class through language-based ethnic masquerade reflects Ahn's own marginal standing and survival tactics in the vertically stratified star system.

What is remarkable about the above-mentioned scene is that it is couched in a film that, although made only two years after Philip Ahn's Hollywood debut, prophesied his career path as a marginalized Asian character actor. Like Ito, Ahn at that time was an aspiring actor who had just debuted with small roles. Although Paramount cast him as a romantic lead opposite childhood friend Anna May Wong in the mystery thriller Daughter of Shanghai the same year (1937), the studios soon stopped fostering him as an ethnic star. Instead, they frequently typecast him as a hideous Japanese villain or a friendly Chinese sidekick in a series of propaganda and war films made during World War II. Discounting his exceptional roles as upwardly mobile Asian American professionals in Daughter of Shanghai (federal agent), King of
Chinatown (1959; attorney), The Big Hangover (1950; medical doctor), Shock Corridor (1963; psychiatrist), and Diamond Head (1963; public prosecutor), Ahn’s persona is primarily codified according to Oriental stereotypes—whether the monstrous “yellow peril” enemy on view in such films as Back to Bataan (1945), Betrayal from the East (1945), and Halls of Montezuma (1950) or the mystical martial arts guru, Master Kan of Kung Fu.

One of the physical features often singled out to describe Ahn is his mask-like face. In hindsight, the strong impression of his blank face (comparable to a tabula rasa) attests to the versatility required to impersonate diverse Oriental characters of different ages, personalities, and ethnicities in back-to-back roles. For example, in 1948, the forty-three-year-old actor played a geriatric Chinese restaurant owner named Ming Gow (in radical aging makeup) in The Miracle of the Bells; in that role he generously serves a hearty dinner as a gift to the main white couple (Fred McMurray’s Hollywood press agent Bill Dunnigan and Alida Valli’s actress-hopeful Olga Trocki) on Christmas Eve. Six years later, in The Shanghai Story (1954), Ahn seemed to have stumbled upon the proverbial Fountain of Youth for his role as the lecherous Ling Wu, a young Chinese army major who attempts to rape a married white woman, one of the thirty-seven unfortunate Westerners forcefully interned in Shanghai after the communist takeover. In 1952, he appeared as the lame, traditionally costumed septuagenarian Eitaro Shimizu in Japanese War Bride. Marie Windsor, the actress who played the xenophobic American sister-in-law of Shimizu’s granddaughter (the titular war bride), reunited with Philip Ahn two years later in Republic’s noir mystery, Hell’s Half Acre (1954); however, in that film Windsor’s character (a femme fatale named Rose) has an adulterous, interracial love affair with Ahn’s villainous Roger Kong.

Hell’s Half Acre features an intriguing, self-reflective moment when Donna, the female protagonist played by Evelyn Keyes, is interrogated by the Honolulu police chief (Kye Luke) and asked to identify Ahn’s character—a murder suspect—after spotting him at the crime site:

CHIEF DAN: Can you describe this man? Was he Chinese?
DONNA: Well...Oriental...It’s difficult for me...
CHIEF DAN: What you’re trying to say is that, to you, all Orientals look the same.
DONNA: I could have been wrong about that. He might be of a mixed nationality.

The diegetic identification of Philip Ahn as an “Oriental” or of a “mixed nationality” is indeed indicative of mainstream audiences’ confusion about his ethnicity. This confusion stemmed from discrepancies perpetuated by studio publicity, the wide range of screen roles he played, and Korea’s low profile in the United States, particularly during the period when the Korean American actor was most active. As a result, Ahn’s face was imprinted on the collective American psyche (or, at least, on the collective imagination of filmgoers) as something quintessentially Oriental: a composite of multiple Asian ethnicities.

Along with the use of aging makeup and traditional costumes, his accent—the stress and inflection placed on particular syllables and sounds—played a pivotal role in orientalizing Philip Ahn. Like those of Ito in Something to Sing About, Ahn’s employers (producers and directors) apparently “felt that the accent lent a certain dignity” to his screen persona. In many films, Ahn faked foreign accents, hiding his true identity as an American-born Asian. The actor’s younger brother, Ralph Ahn (who himself worked occasionally as an extra or minor actor in Hollywood film and television for several decades) recollects, “The only thing Philip had qualms about was that demeaning Oriental accent and he tried to avoid [using it]. Sometimes he interviewed for a part, put on an accent to get the part, then, when it came time to shoot, didn’t use it.” This interview clearly indicates that Philip Ahn’s Oriental masquerade was not voluntary but compulsory—a necessary if sometimes negotiable means of surviving the racist casting and representational politics of the mainstream film industry.

As Ito says, for most Asian American actors in Hollywood, “it was a long time between meals.” The so-called Big Three Asian male actors to emerge during Hollywood’s classical period of the 1930s to 1950s—Philip Ahn, Kye Luke, and Richard Loo—took secondary jobs to ensure a steady income: Ahn made furniture and ceramics, and then became a restaurateur, Luke was a graphic artist and then a voice actor, and Loo was in the printing business. Typically playing three to nine supporting roles a year, these actors were largely at the mercy of Hollywood producers and directors, who often (if not always) mobilized them as Oriental archetypes, rather than fully developed characters. Given this historical marginalization of Asian American performers, we might ask if there is anything subversive about their Oriental masquerades, anything that might restore a sense of ethnic self-esteem.

RETURNING THE RACIAL JOKE AND EMPOWERING ASIAN AMERICAN SPECTATORSHIP

To address this question, it behooves us to shift the focus of our discussion from image and representation to spectatorship and reception. Both Joan Riviere and Mary Ann Doane suggest that masquerade hinges upon the
presence of audiences. Riviere’s study reveals that target audiences of feminine masquerade are men with authority and power to whom masqueraders pose an intellectual or professional threat. It is noteworthy that Riviere observes that the woman’s mask is transparent to other women, whereas it works successfully with men. According to this logic, the audience of masquerade is divided into two categories: a dupe (one who cannot see through it and thus takes it at “face value”) and a clairvoyant (one who sees through it and discerns its artificiality).

If womanly masquerade hides the possession of masculinity (phallic power), as Riviere puts it, what precisely does Oriental masquerade work to conceal in the context of Hollywood cinema? Simply put, it is the possession of Americaness. As an actor of Asian extraction, Philip Ahn could pass as an Oriental (of diverse ethnicities, from Japanese and Chinese to Indian, Vietnamese, Burmese, and Eskimo) in appearance but not in speech: because of his flawless command of English as a native speaker, he had to put on a verbal act.

I therefore differentiate my conceptualization of masquerade from Riviere’s and Doane’s by shifting the emphasis from the visible to the audible. It is true that in his impersonation of Oriental characters Ahn incorporated many visual components and tactics, such as makeup, blank expressions, and hyperbolic or flamboyant gestures. However, aural or linguistic masquerade takes precedence as a determinant of differentiated spectatorial positions vis-à-vis his cross-ethnic performance, which I hereafter refer to as ethnic passing. Not only was Philip Ahn frequently cast in a wide range of roles, requiring him to substitute for other ethnicities throughout a prolific career that lasted four decades (of his more than 100 big screen appearances, he played a Korean character only five times) he also occasionally spoke Korean onscreen in place of other languages. For example, Ahn speaks his ancestral language while playing Chinese roles in Charlie Chan in Honolulu (1938), The Rebel (“Blind Marriage,” April 17, 1960), The Wild Wild West (“The Night the Dragon Screamed,” January 14, 1966), and I Spy (“Carry Me Back to Old Tsing Tao,” September 29, 1965; “An American Empress,” December 25, 1967). The inappropriate incorporation of the Korean language in place of Mandarin or Cantonese clearly indicates the textual normalization of the dupe position based on the assumption that American audiences would not be able to distinguish the differences between these languages and cultures. Despite the exclusion of bilingual or bicultural audiences as target consumers in the sphere of production, ironically embedded in these texts with is an unintended and accidental spectatorial position—the ethnic clairvoyant—for whom masquerade is all too evident or transparent.

Before moving to specific textual examples that illustrate my argument, I now examine the paradigm of passing laid out by Amy Robinson in her article, “It Takes One to Know One: Passing and Communities of Common Interests.” According to Robinson, passing is a “triangular theater of identity” that requires three major participants: the passer, the dupe, and the in-group clairvoyant. She elaborates as follows:

The moment of passing in drag is always a moment of collaboration. It is precisely the silence of the third term (the literate member of the in-group) that establishes the conditions for the successful pass. The perverse pleasure of duping the dupe, which transforms a painful scenario of collaboration into an occasion to make and remake community, is always and already a qualified pleasure.23
Robinson's triangular formulation corrects the shortcomings of Riviere's and Doane's bilateral configuration revolving around the masquerader and the spectator. Although both Riviere and Doane imply different spectatorial positions assumed by male and female audiences, they fail to fully convey the comprehensive mechanism of masquerade, which involves three parties, rather than two. Even though Robinson's theory specifically relates to racial and sexual passing, it is applicable to our discussion of ethnic passing among Asian Americans.

Similar to Robinson's triad, Philip Ahn's ethnic passing calls for three players: the passer/masquerader (the Korean American actor passing as non-Korean), the dupe (the mainstream audience who does not recognize his passing), and the in-group clairvoyant (the bilingual, bicultural spectator who spots the incongruity between the actor's role-playing and his true ethnic identity). I argue that this in-group recognition displayed by the third member of the triad hinges upon not only the foreknowledge of the actor's off-screen identities but also a familiarity with linguistic difference.

One of the early examples of Ahn's linguistic masquerade punctuates the final scene of Charlie Chan in Honolulu. In the film, Ahn plays an enduring yet nerdy son-in-law of the titular Chinese detective (played by white actor Sidney Toler in yellowface).

Two minutes into the film, Ahn's character, named Wing Fu, visits the Chan home to inform his "honorable" parents-in-law that his wife, Ling, is about to give birth. Thrilled by the news, Chan, his wife, and nine of their children rush to the maternity ward of the hospital. Jimmy (Number Two Son: Victor Sen Yung) and Tommy (Number Three Son: Layne Tom Jr.) daily behind and receive a message from the Homicide Bureau requesting that their father immediately report to the freighter Susan B. Jennings where a murder has been committed. Would-be detective Jimmy sees this as his opportunity to prove his ratiocination skills and decides to take the case himself. When he arrives at the boat, he is mistaken for his father and awkwardly embarks on an investigation. Chan belatedly learns about the summons to the freighter and hurries to the ship where he divulges both his son's mistaken identity as well as the identity of the murderer. After the case is solved, Chan receives a phone call from Wing Fu.

WING FU: 아버지세요? 아이 이제 돌아왔는데 짐 보이요. [Is that you, father? The baby came out and he is fine-looking.]
CHAN: Please, exercise self-control.
WING FU: 짐과 같이 생각이요. [He looks like Ling.]
The audience who knew too much

television programs made with lower budgets and less attention to cultural authenticity. Among several TV shows in which the actor speaks Korean in place of Chinese, an episode of NBC's I Spy (1965–1968) entitled “An American Empress” stands out not only for the duration of time allotted for speaking of the language but also for its narrative pretext, involving translation between faux Chinese and English. Originally broadcast on December 25, 1967, this episode is set in San Francisco’s Chinatown, a perennial setting of the “Home Orient” in many television westerns, crime dramas, and adventures.

After a series of touristic establishing shots of San Francisco (from the Coit Tower and the Bay to the ubiquitous cable car and Fisherman’s Wharf) come images of a Chinatown distinctively marked by exotic architecture and a sign in the foreground that reads “Lotus Ball Chinese Food,” as well as a generic Oriental tune on the soundtrack. The camera cuts to the interior of a souvenir shop where the espionage series’ main characters—Kelly Robinson (Robert Culp) and Alexander Scott (Bill Cosby)—are shopping for a child’s toy box, a gift for Scott’s nephew. In their vicinity, a beautiful Asian girl (Frances Nuyen) in cheongsam dress is trying on a pair of sunglass, which she likes but cannot afford. Noticing this, Robinson pays for the sunglasses and has the clerk give them to her as a gift. The mysterious girl (who later introduces herself as Mei Lin) thanks Robinson and reciprocates his act of generosity by presenting him with her ring. Robinson and Scott offer to give her a tour of San Francisco. To their surprise, Mei Lin (who claims to have lived in San Francisco most of her life) has never seen any of the city’s landmarks, including Alcatraz and the Golden Gate Bridge. At the end of their itinerary, a couple of Chinese bodyguards attack Robinson and Scott in a zoo and forcefully take Mei Lin away.

Suspicious of Mei Lin’s identity, the duo meets with a museum’s curator of antiques and discovers that Mei Lin’s ruby ring is a part of a Chinese royal jewelry collection, many items of which now belong to a local collector named Tu Po (Philip Ahn). Robinson and Scott visit the Tu Po residence to return the ring to its owner. A Chinese servant takes the American guests down to the cellar where the old master appears in traditional garb:

Tu Po: 이 손님들이 오고 반찬지 못한데 와서도 반갑다고 말해 치.
[Tell the guests that I am glad to see them in this humble place.]
Servant: My master, Tu Po, he says welcome to poor house.
Tu Po: 이 손님들이 왔어요. 반찬도 못해도 미안하다고 말해 치.
[Tell the guests that I am sorry that I cannot speak English.]
Servant: My master say sorry, English too bad for speaking to honored guests.
SCOTT: I speak Chinese.

SERVANT: (in Mandarin) Ke dong zhong wen ne. [He understands Chinese.]

TU PO: (to the servant) 아 그럴것 같으면 너 가라. [Well then, you can go.]
(to Scott) 아주 시간 맞춰왔어 [You came at the right time.]

SCOTT: (to Robinson) We've come just in time.

TU PO: (pointing to the two bodyguards tied to the wall, then handing a pair of bamboo sticks to Scott and Robinson) 이 손을 얼마였다. [Hit these guys fifteen times! Fifteen! These sons of bitches!]

SCOTT: Oh, yes, yes. These are the two guys who assaulted us, you see.

So he wants us to kind of be good drummers and beat on the skins.

ROBINSON: A little Buddy Rich?

SCOTT: A little bit of Gene Krupa, one time!

ROBINSON: (referring to the bamboo they've been given) It breaks up.

I don't like this. These are not right. No good.

TU PO: 이, 그림 다른 것 가격이요. [Then, bring another one.]

SCOTT: He says he's got another one. He'll give ya another one.

ROBINSON: I'm out of the mood now. No mood. No good.

SCOTT: (to Tu Po) No sengga.

TU PO: 그림 것 같으면 언제든지 생각나는 테로... [If so, whenever you are reminded of...]

SCOTT: He says anytime you want to, you can come on back.

TU PO: 당신이 가기 전에 국 중동여왕을 만나보고 가시야 합니다. [Before you go, you must see the Empress of China.]

SCOTT: He says before we leave, he wants to introduce us to the Empress of China.

The Empress of China turns out to be none other than Mei Lin, who has been exiled in the United States under the custody of Tu Po. In the following scene, Scott continues to translate what Tu Po says to Mei Lin for Robinson. Later Tu Po is murdered by the traitorous General Chang (Benson Fong), a communist who attempts to forcefully repatriate Mei Lin to Red China. Scott and Robinson save the day and rescue the empress, who then is transformed into an American college girl by the end of the episode.

In the above-quoted scene, Bill Cosby's character, Alexander Scott, acts as a bilingual translator facilitating communication between Tu Po and Robinson. I Spy was the first dramatic series on network television to star an African American male as a leading character. Originally, the role of Scott was to have been that of a bodyguard for Robert Culp's character, Kelly Robinson, an American espionage agent disguised as a professional tennis player. The role was upgraded to an equal (buddy agent/trainer) after the casting of Cosby. In many episodes, Cosby's knowledge and linguistic talents outshine Culp's physical and sexual prowess, capsizing the stereotypes of black and white masculinity (black-body-sports vs. white-mind-intellect). As a graduate of Temple University and a Rhodes Scholar, Scott is fluent in eleven languages—a talent that proves handy during the duo's global espionage operations. This deliberate interpellation, or hailing, of an African American character as a mediator between white America and the rest of the world—someone who translates racial, ethnic, national, and linguistic differences—is significant in the context of the Cold War. As Mary Beth Haralovich points out, I Spy represents "an official response to the U.S. Cold War predication of the 1950s" when racial discrimination gave American democracy a bad name. The black-white integrated partnership in the series flaunts not only the improved race relations of civil rights-era America but also the egalitarian citizenship of the "Free World." As a sort of living
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white character/audience and racial/cultural others whose alterity cancels out Cosby's own minority position and empowers his status. As Rogin points out in his study of Jewish entertainers' blackface performances, "the inclusion of some people is predicated on the violent exclusion of others."

There are many reasons to feel ambiguous about the subversive potential of masquerade. Postmodernist celebration of masquerade and passing as identity subversion might direct one's attention away from the actual historical and social conditions that gave rise to the discrimination and exclusion that compelled marginalized subjects to wear masks in the first place. However, we should not downplay the significance of the empowering pleasure (however qualified it may be) that the in-group spectator derives from the recognition of masquerade. These subversive moments of rupture establish imagined communities between masquerading actors and ethnic spectators through a shared knowledge of languages and cultures, as well as self-conscious distancing from the hegemonic narratives that distort and misrepresent their identities.

The parodic sketch comedy The Kentucky Fried Movie (1977) provides a good example of this self-conscious distancing. In the episode "A Fistful of Yen," Loo (Evan C. Kim)—a wonky-toothed, Bruce Lee-impersonating Hong Kong martial artist—is hired by the British Intelligence Agency to rescue a Chinese nuclear scientist (oddly named Ada Gronick, played by Ingrid Wang) who has been abducted by Dr. Klahn, head of a notorious criminal syndicate based in a remote mountain region of Central Asia. Flanked by bodyguards and concubines at the doorsteps of his ancient Chinese palace, Dr. Klahn (played by Hapkido master Bong Soo Han [Han Pong-su]) makes a majestic entrance. As the camera cuts between close-ups of Loo and Gronick exchanging winks, Dr. Klahn's offscreen speech in an untranslated foreign language fills the soundtrack.

The Dr. Klahn character is a flat-out parody of the classic Bond villain Dr. No, a half-Chinese who similarly hides a steel hand under a black glove. Although Dr. Klahn is Chinese, the language spoken in the scene is Korean:

[How pitiful it is that (the filmmakers) make me speak Korean! If Koreans hear this, they will think I am out of my mind. Anyway, I must do as I am told whatever the result may be. Oh, the many

Cosby/Scot's assimilation in mainstream America is maintained through an exclusion and juxtaposition of the feudal Oriental whose inability to speak English, exotic costumes, and primitive means of discipline accentuate the black subject's identity as a modern, mobile American. The civil rights subject (the model black citizen) is thus situated as the mediator between the

billboard, a pre-Benetton advertisement for racial tolerance, Cosby's Scott communicates to the world (in different languages) that people of color have equal access to democracy, freedom, and mobility in the United States.

Earlier in the aforementioned episode, Cosby's ability to comprehend Chinese saves Culp and himself from being arrested when the Chinese curator (James Hong) calls the police to report the duo as suspects in the jewelry theft—Cosby intercepts a phone call in Chinese that he is able to translate. Unlike the authentic utterances of the veteran American actor James Hong, Philip Ahn speaks Korean (with many grammatical glitches and awkward enunciation) in the given scene, opening up mulitlayered positions of identity. Culp's Robinson is undoubtedly positioned as the dupe, a diegetic representation of the dominant mainstream spectator with little understanding of other languages and cultures. Ahn is the passer who impersonates a Chinese character through cross-ethnic and cross-lingual masquerade. The Chinese servant (Allen Jung), the only actual Mandarin speaker in the scene, allegorizes the in-group clairvoyant, the bicultural spectator whose knowledge and complicity are indispensable for the successful pass. The presence of a fourth character, Cosby's Scott, complicates the otherwise comfortable triadic configuration. Cosby functions as an intercultural facilitator and ventriloquist who translates the language of Oriental others for the dupe (the mainstream audience/Culp). Cosby quickly takes the place of the servant, the in-group literate. However, he is another passer/masquerader who only pretends to be a cultural insider and simply recites his English lines. Bilingual spectators with a knowledge of Chinese and Korean recognize his inadequacy as the translator, thus exposing the constructedness of his interpellated identity as the assimilated, upwardly mobile, middle-class black position unique to the civil rights era.

Herman Cray defines the "civil rights subject" as:

black, largely middle-class benefactors who gained the most visibility as well as material and status rewards from the struggles and opportunities generated by the civil rights movement. This cultural figure embodies complex codes of behavior and propriety that make it an exemplar of citizenship and responsibility-success, mobility, hard work, sacrifice, individualism.

Cosby/Scott's assimilation in mainstream America is maintained through an exclusion and juxtaposition of the feudal Oriental whose inability to speak English, exotic costumes, and primitive means of discipline accentuate the black subject's identity as a modern, mobile American. The civil rights subject (the model black citizen) is thus situated as the mediator between the
pathetic things I have to endure to make movies in America. Not just
once or twice, either. Please excuse me, Korean fans.]}

What the independent production The Kentucky Fried Movie parodies in this
episode are not just big-budget Bond movies and the martial arts genre (in
particular, Enter the Dragon [1973]) but also the very mechanisms through
which Oriental masquerade and ethnic passing are perpetuated in main-
stream cinema. Actor Bong Soo Han speaks for Philip Ahn and other Asian
American actors who underwent similar “pathetic” and “pitiful” experiences
throughout their careers. He also directly addresses in-group audiences who
can understand what he is saying, creating an invisible community. Although
mainstream viewers may enjoy the scene’s visual gags, stemming from Loo
and Gronick’s flirtatious gestures, the bigger audio joke of the scene is inac-
cessible to them because of their lack of ethnic “reading” competency. As the
film’s producers and writers testify in the DVD commentary, The Kentucky
Fried Movie was a big hit in South Korea primarily because this scene pro-
vided extra pleasure and comedy to in-group audiences.

The pleasure inherent in joke-telling lies partly in the duping of in-group
illiterates. Throughout the history of the American motion picture and tele-
vision industries, Oriental characters and their linguistic or cultural differ-
ence have often been objects of ridicule, playing comic figures who facilitate
the bonding among white characters. Examples run the gamut from the early
sound western The Virginian (1929), which features a Chinese cook named
Hong (Willie Fung) whose nonstop, untranslated babble bewilders the cow-
boys and serves as comic relief, to Chinatown (1974), a neo-noir in which Jake
Gittes (Jack Nicholson) tells a classic “Chinaman joke” to his colleague.
Viewers of the television classic M*A*S*H (1972–1983) might recall
episodes in which the silly manners and antiquated customs of grossly carii-
tured, unconventionally named Korean farmers, peddlers, and “business
girls” (played by Chinese, Japanese, and Southeast Asian extras) are gently
(or, in the case of the bigoted Major Burns, vociferously) ridiculed by the doc-
tors and nurses of the 4077th.

The latent subversiveness of masquerade and passing manifests at the
moment when Asian or Asian American audiences return the joke and cele-
brate their accidental spectatorship. As an audience who “knows too much,”
their in-group literacy encompasses not only the cultural ability to discern
the diegetic rupture and contradiction created by ethnic passing but also the crit-
ical distance necessary to laugh back at (as opposed to laughing with) those
hegemonic cultural texts that have in their own way contributed to the institu-
tionalization of masquerade, misrepresentation, and countless stereotypes.