

Representability and Relationality: *Yellow Face* and the exemplarity of a model

Fulvia Sarnelli¹

¹Università degli studi di Messina, Italia

E-mail: fulviasarnelli@gmail.com

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Abstract—This essay starts from the idea that the correlation between Asian American subjectivity and exemplarity is an instance of race relations in the American context. The model minority myth represents Asian Americans as an example of successful assimilation into American society and simultaneously signals their exclusion from mainstream norms and ideals. In this essay I explore issues of representation, representativity, and access to narratives of identity choice by reading *Yellow Face*, the 2007 play written by David Henry Hwang. I first consider Hwang’s parody of identity politics and his staging of the racialization of bodies in contemporary “postracial” American society. Next, I discuss how dynamics of envy (Ngai 2005) enable a series of disidentificatory and antiproprietary practices, which ultimately disavow the iteration of a preestablished model subjectivity. Finally, I focus on the “melancholic condition” (Eng and Han 2000) as a political strategy of building and preserving communities within and beyond racial, class, and national boundaries. — *David Henry Hwang, yellowfacing, model subjectivity, Asian American exemplarity, envy and racial melancholia.*

Abstract—L’articolo parte dall’idea che la correlazione tra soggettività asiatica americana e esemplarità sia una declinazione della questione razziale nel contesto americano. Il mito della minoranza modello rappresenta gli asiatici americani come un esempio di assimilazione di successo alla società americana, segnalando simultaneamente la loro esclusione dalle norme e dagli ideali del gruppo dominante. In questo saggio, esploro questioni di rappresentazione, rappresentatività e accesso alle scelte identitarie, attraverso una lettura di *Yellow Face*, il play del 2007 scritto da David Henry Hwang. Considero innanzitutto come Hwang costruisca una parodia delle politiche identitarie e metta in scena la razzializzazione dei corpi nella società americana “post-razziale”. Nella seconda parte, mi occupo di dinamiche di invidia (Ngai 2005) e di come esse rendano possibili una serie di pratiche di disidentificazione e anti-appropriazione, che finiscono per interrompere l’iterazione di modelli prestabiliti di soggettività. Infine, mi focalizzo sulla “condizione melanconica” (Eng e Han 2000) come strategia politica di costruzione e preservazione delle comunità all’interno e oltre i confini razziali, di classe e nazionali. — *David Henry Hwang, yellowfacing, soggettività modello, esemplarità asiatica americana, invidia e malinconia razziale.*

For [Nancy] Kwan, being the only Asian pinup of note since Anna May Wong, in the

nineteen-twenties and thirties, must have been a burden. David Henry Hwang—the most successful Chinese-American playwright this country has

produced—must, at times, feel similarly burdened.
Hilton Als, *The New Yorker*

In November 2020, *Searching for Anna May Wong*, the short documentary film directed by Denise D. Chan (2020), premiered in Los Angeles. By tracing the journey of young actor Natasha Tina Liu in the Hollywood industry and featuring interviews with many Asian American movie and theatre actors and actresses, the documentary tries to answer the question: “If trailblazing actor Anna May Wong were still alive today, would she still face the same racism and challenges she experienced during her time in Hollywood?”¹ Born in Los Angeles to second generation Chinese American parents, who ran a laundry in the Chinatown area, Anna May Wong is considered the first Asian American actress. Her long and varied career in the American film, television, and radio industry, spans an era when Asian protagonists in Hollywood movies were typically performed by white actors in yellowface. Wong starred in classic movies, such as *The Toll of the Sea* (1922), *The Thief of Bagdad* (1924), and Josef von Sternberg’s *Shanghai Express* (1932), in which Warner Oland played the Eurasian Henry Chang and Wong’s sexually charged scenes with Marlene Dietrich fed rumors about a lesbian liaison. For the most part, in truth, sensual performances in Wong’s career were limited by American anti-miscegenation laws, which prevented her from sharing an on-screen kiss with any person of another race, which means that she could only be kissed sexlessly by a child or greedily by a rapist Japanese general. Although she was frustrated with being constantly underpaid and always typecast as either a “Madam Butterfly” passive young woman or as a “Dragon lady” murderous villainess, Wong eventually became an icon to Asian people of North America. Conversely, *Time* reports that she was ostracized in China: “whenever she appears in a movie, the newspapers print her picture with the caption Anna May again loses face for China” or called her “the female traitor to China,” blaming the actress for the stereotypes in her roles (Corliss 2005).²

Despite Wong’s long career of unremitting identification with China and embodiment of nationhood, leading Asian roles were given to white actresses in yellowface. Whereas white actors playing “Oriental” characters were

required to apply spirit gum to give their eyes a higher slant, she experienced the impossibility of resisting her ethnic identity in her entire career. Wong came to embody images of the Orient and exotic portrayals of China in Hollywood films, being caught in what Karen J. Leong calls the *China mystique*, the cultivation of “a romanticized, progressive, and highly gendered image of China, the new China” (Leong 2005: 1), which served to recast American orientalism according to the geopolitical and social changes that the United States underwent in the international context of the 1930s and 1940s. Bringing Wong’s story to today’s context and merging it with many stories of Asian American actors and actresses, *Searching for Anna May Wong* is the last of a series of recently released works about the challenges that Asian American creatives still experience because of the underlying racism behind the yellowfacing and whitewashing casting in the movie and theatre industry.³ In a 2020 press conference, while discussing the current condition of underrepresentation of Asian American artists, the documentary’s producer Quentin Lee and some cast members shared a few ideas about future possibilities for a change. The first idea is that Hollywood is a business, therefore Asian American presence should be implemented by adopting capitalist values and means (grit, jostling, marketshare, and box office logic). A second common belief anchors the betterment of both representations of Asian America and opportunities for Asian American artists to the breakthrough of a generation of talented Asian American playwrights, decision makers, and directors, who would tell Asian American stories through an Asian American cast.⁴ Far from new, the idea of turning to the “talented tenth” foregrounds some old questions about the role of community-based art: shall art produced by colored artists be exemplary and representative of the community? And conversely, are artists of color allowed to transcend their identity locus through art?

Whereas the idea of exceptional individuals who

3 See also Charles Yu’s novel *Interior Chinatown* (Yu 2020), which won the 2020 National Book Award for Fiction.

4 The interview can be watched on <https://www.asianamericanmovies.com/searching-for-anna-may-wong>. The long history of erasing Asian actors in films made the release of *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) full of expectations. The romantic comedy is an escapist fantasy with a predictable happy ending which, as has been repeatedly noticed, eases collective anxieties about Asia and Asian Americans through the universal rhetoric and aesthetics of ultra-luxury capitalism. However, the movie has also been heralded as a landmark case for Asian American visibility, for it is the first Hollywood-produced movie with an all-Asian cast since *The Joy Luck Club* was released in 1993.

1 The documentary is available for streaming on asianamericanmovies.com.

2 Her negative reputation persisted despite Wong’s public expression of her fondness and longing for a closer connection to her Chinese heritage, and her fundraising campaigns during World War II. See A. B. Chan (2003) and Crewe (sd).

can lead the rest resonates with both the American way and the international capitalist ethos, the belief that only prominent figures inside the community can help the community rise does not sound very much in tune with the logic of a multiculturalist, postracial society; or does it? In the wake of the 2008 presidential election of Barack Obama—the (singular) black man who made it to the White House—postracial discourse flourished in American media. In its different articulations, postethnicity and postracism promote the narrative of a society in which social and economic inequalities due to race and ethnicity would be reduced to the point that they no longer matter. As a result, ethnic and racial categories central to identity politics would become a matter of choice rather than ascription (Hollinger 1995). As is well known, such logic shifts all the emphasis on the definitive and definitional potential of “culture matters” in identitarian choices (Bhabha et al. 2002; Harrison and Huntington 2000).

I have started this essay with *Searching for Anna May Wong* as a way of foregrounding the ongoing currency of the issues of representation, representativity, and access to narratives of identity choice that I will explore in *Yellow Face*, the 2007 play written by David Henry Hwang (2009). Since *M. Butterfly* was first performed in 1988, Hwang has been considered “the most successful Chinese-American playwright *this country has produced*,” as Hilton Als (2014) writes in *The New Yorker* (emphasis added), or, as Hwang himself ironically puts it, “the official Asian American.”⁵ *Yellow Face* is an autobiographical satire, which was conceived as a “mock stage documentary that would poke fun at some of the absurdities of the multicultural movement” (Hwang 2008b). In discussing the play, I am interested in the emotional release simultaneously produced and suspended by widely circulating contemporary representations of what I would call Asian American *model subjectivity*. I will trace how feelings and emotions become means of political contestation that move subjects to action. By “model subjectivity,” I mean a subject position determined by the model minority myth, but that foregrounds matters of interpellation and agency beyond the mobilization of stereotypes by considering power dynamics from within as well as from without the Asian American community. I argue that by overusing racial stereotypes at all levels of

representation, including in interactions between Asian Americans, Hwang’s *Yellow Face* provides the means for distancing our perspectives from the narratives that such stereotypes narrate. Thus, the play shifts the audience’s attention from images to the social and political struggles of subjects, and brings up questions such as: what does it mean to be hailed as an—or *the*—Asian American ideal and example, by both white and Asian America? How do subjects negotiate “the trauma of a racist capitalist system that keeps the individual *in place*” (Park Hong 2020: 93), through the model minority paradigm and the national myth of individual triumph?

The pervasive staging of stereotypes in the play also points to the historical legacy of racial representations in the United States. In my attempt to explore the unstable nature of the sociopolitical dialectics of being and becoming—the physical body and the social, historical, and cultural embodiment—within the context of cultural representations of Asian Americans, I will read the “minor feelings” of envy and melancholia as affective ideologemes of a racialized set of discourses. Following Fredric Jameson, Sianne Ngai defines “affective ideologemes” as “concepts that becom[ing] the site and stake of various kinds of symbolic struggle” take on “the form of a ‘value system’” (Ngai 2005: 8). Accordingly, I will first attempt an analysis of the characterization of the three main characters in the play—DHH, his father HYH, and Marcus G. Dahlman aka Marcus Gee—and will argue that the play invites an analysis of why specific models of subjectivity, collectivity, and agency are emphasized over others within both the Asian American community and mainstream America. I will then move to my second part, in which I shall discuss Hwang’s undermining of exemplarity through an ironic representation of the ever feminized feeling of envy and a mocking emulation of his own position as Asian American role model. Finally, borrowing David L. Eng and Shinhee Han’s concept of racial melancholia, I will suggest a few ideas on encounters and intimacy with communal potentiality across positions of race and class.

DHH-HYH-MARCUS

Yellow Face is a two-act play, which weaves together the author’s personal story and historical events of his time with his opinions and feelings, as well as with excerpts of media headlines and quotations of public figures, thus inventively blending facts and fiction, information and interpretation. There are multiple intertexts in the play and three main characters, surrounded by few actors, who

⁵ Hwang refers to himself with this expression in many public events and interviews. See for example the discussion with Dr. Amanda Rogers in London on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HozDl1dcGwk>

play different roles of different races and genders. At the opening of act one, Hwang draws from his own public and artistic experience as a spokesperson for Asian American actors: DHH, Hwang's alter ego in the play, recaps his frustrating role as a leading voice in the 1992 campaign against the casting of Welsh actor Jonathan Pryce as the Eurasian pimp in a Broadway staging of the musical *Miss Saigon*, produced by British Cameron Macintosh. Although the protest failed (not only was the production a big success in New York, but both Pryce and Lea Salonga won a Tony award), Hwang made of the opposition to the yellowface casting the subject for his unsuccessful 1993 play called *Face Value*, in which two Asian American protesters make themselves pass for whites in order to disrupt the opening night of a controversial and offensive musical that stars a Caucasian actor in yellowface makeup. During the auditions for the play within the play, DHH ends up giving the Asian lead role to Marcus G. Dahlman, a white actor scouted from a play about the loyalty dilemma of a Japanese American soldier during World War II, in the mistaken belief that Marcus is part Asian. When DHH later realizes that the reason why Marcus *does not look* Asian is that he *is not* Asian American, he would like to dismiss Marcus but discovers that firing him for his whiteness would be against anti-discrimination law. Therefore, DHH reinvents Marcus, by publicly creating for him a fictional Asian identity based on his alleged Russian family roots: Marcus is reborn as Marcus Gee, a Siberian Asian Jew, who not only fully embraces his new identity and participates in the social activism of the community, but also becomes a sought-after Asian American actor. At the end of the first act, Marcus is given the lead role in the big production of *The King and I*, while DHH becomes increasingly angry and obsessed over what he perceives as Marcus's usurpation of his position as symbol of Asian America and community role model.

In act two, the play shifts from a parody of identity politics to a more serious documentation of racism and the effects of both stereotypes and racial politics in the everyday lives of Asian Americans. The second half of the play foregrounds the political context at the end of the 1990s, when a sort of national witch-hunt was directed against Asian Americans, suspected either of espionage to China, as in the case of Wen Ho Lee, or of violating the political campaign finance law through fundraising activities for the U.S. Democratic Party. This is the case of Hwang's father, Henry Yuan Hwang (HYH in the play), who as the founder and CEO of Far East National Bank, in 1996 went under investigation for his bank's

role in soliciting Chinese contributions in support of President Clinton's campaign for re-election. The accusations of treacherous behavior are proved preposterous, while HYH continuously professes his love of America: much to his son's despair, HYH believes that *Miss Saigon* is a wonderful musical, for he identifies with the narrative of the land of opportunities, claiming that he migrated to the United States to pursue his American Dream. When other members of the Asian American community, including Marcus, see their loyalty questioned and find themselves under pressure from the government, DHH persuades Marcus to publicly confess that he is Caucasian. Thus, by reenacting the internal motif of the play and its intertexts—a white man in yellowface who has the ability to deceive his spectators, including the American government—and projecting it outside the theatre so that it shows the racial nature of the prosecution, Marcus's whiteness deflates the case. *Yellow Face* closes on HYH's disillusionment with the American Dream while he dies of cancer, DHH's search for his own face as he attempts to write a happy ending for Marcus, who is revealed to be a fictional character, and Marcus's letters from a Chinese village he has chosen as his newly adopted country.

Throughout the play, DHH is the most clearly defined character: as an autobiographical representation of David Henry Hwang, he is a worldwide famous playwright and respected community member. However, despite his authoritative public stance, he is intimately burdened with a confusion about his own feelings on the racial issues of the present time. In the course of the play, this confusion evolves into a disconcerting disorientation about being an Asian American. While protesting *Miss Saigon*, DHH has doubts about rebuking the musical's production for its artistic choice and backs up from the "Rosa Parks moment" of his community (YF 28). Instead, he decides to process his bewilderment by writing a play. In *Yellow Face*, *Face Value* is advertised by DHH himself as "a comedy of mistaken racial identity" which poses the question: "Is race a construct which is still useful or is it mythological?" (YF 34). As the question migrates from one text to the other, *Yellow Face* tries to look at racial dynamics by considering different possible permutations within the idea of yellowface.

Yellow Face enacts many Asian American stereotypes, not only pertaining to the model minority paradigm. Addressing the fraught legacy of Asian American cultural representations in a playful and irreverent way, the audition scene reproduces the gender stereotype of Asian feminization, thereby displaying how pervasive it still is and how easily it can be perpetuated also among Asian

Americans:

DHH: [. . .] For *M. Butterfly* we were looking for a Chinese transvestite who could sing and dance! And we found lots of them!

STUART: Yes we did.

DHH: So why is this so much harder? All we're looking for is a straight, masculine, Asian leading man.

STUART: I'll tell Miles to keep looking.

DHH: Tell him—there are hundreds of masculine Asian leading men out there. Dozens!

STUART: He keeps asking if you know any. (*YF* 36)

Hwang's use of citations here summons the cultural and theoretical horizon of *M. Butterfly*, thus setting the ground for another story of disguise and entangled desires. This time the tone is boldly ironic: in a rather comical evocation of *M. Butterfly*'s plot, not only is the "straight, masculine, Asian leading man" actually a white guy, but DHH's self-celebrating desire "[t]o make some fresh Asian face into a Broadway star" (*YF* 36) puts a yellow mask over Marcus's white face. When the producer invites him to pay attention to the body as a locus of meaning, DHH condemns his comments for their implicit racism, but ends up restoring the power of the visual to detect the truth, only from a different eye:

STUART: But guys, does he—? Does he look Asian to you?

DHH: What do you mean, "look Asian"?

STUART: Well, he doesn't seem to possess—any Asian features . . . at all.

DHH: And what exactly are "Asian features"?

STUART: He's got dark hair, but—

DHH: Short, high cheekbones, slanty eyes?

STUART: David—

DHH: I gotta say, I find your questions sort of offensive. Asian faces come in a variety of shapes and sizes—just like any other human beings. Which we are, you know. [. . .]

DHH: I have to cast this in a way that feels right to me. And I can tell an Asian when I see one. (*YF* 41)

DHH strives to reject any assumptions of an Asian identity based on body features. However, his effort boomerangs on him, becoming the source of his troubles as the Asian American protest leader who ends up reproducing the yellowface paradigm in his own work. Moreover, the insertion of Marcus's lack of corporeal difference in the white universalist category of "human being" recreates a disturbing racial epistemology. DHH's own racial stereotyping, although apparently removed from the body, claims self-evident signs of authenticity

in Marcus, who in that precise moment is created as a racialized subject.

As race is still sought in the visibility of the body by both Asian American and white characters, corporeal qualities are conveniently turned into subject positions. Throughout the play, Marcus is created by DHH a number of times: a white unknown actor, Marcus is made into an Asian American first by DHH's desire to find the paradigmatic interpreter for his community-based art and later by his need to conceal his own casting mistake; subsequently, by urging Marcus to confess that he is Caucasian, DHH reconverts him into a white man; finally, Marcus is revealed to be a fictional character created by DHH in order to give materiality to his father's dream of a world where "you can imagine who you want to be—and, through sheer will and determination, become that person" (*YF* 109), "a world where he [HYH] could be Jimmy Stewart. And a white guy—can even be an Asian" (*YF* 111).

Presented as a beautiful multicultural fantasy of post-racial identity, HYH's dream is both another Hollywood masquerade and a celebration of capitalism. For HYH, money represents the tangible proof that signals his American becoming. He believes in the opportunities offered by a country which made possible for a low-class Chinese immigrant like himself to achieve a successful life through his hard work: "I looked around, at my office on the thirty-ninth floor, my house the swankiest part of San Marino, my Mercedes, my kids all in top colleges—and I thought, now, I am finally living my real life—here in America" (*YF* 33). In his attempt to demonstrate the value and beauty of a life that could imitate the movies he loved as a child in China, HYH succumbs to a colorless universalism and patriotic celebration based on globalized capitalism: he wears Armani, drives a Mercedes, buys many useless technological devices, delights in international big theatre productions. Embodied in Jimmy Stewart, the American Dream that HYH's "real life" mirrors is revealed to be a performance of nationality, wealth, and masculinity. In fact, HYH denies the persistence of racial discrimination in the United States only to be betrayed, in the second act of the play, by its omnipresence in the material experience of individuals.

Act two brings on stage Wen Ho Lee's accusation of espionage and the 1996 Congressional investigation of the Chinese government's alleged effort to influence American politics through improper fundraising. This political background shows, as Esther Kim Lee states, "how the scandal was a 1990s version of the 'yellow peril', one that characterized China as the biggest threat

to the United States” (E. K. Lee 2015: 111). By drawing parallels between the infamous case of Wen Ho Lee and that of his father, and between both and Ethel and Julius Rosenberg’s executions, Hwang questions the narrative of an all-encompassing capacity of assimilation into American democratic citizenship and culture. There is no final dissolution of the assumed contradiction between racialized bodies and national belonging. In an interview with a reporter identified as NWOAOC (Name Withheld on Advice of Counsel), DHH tries to defend his father’s loyalty to America. The conversation becomes a Foucauldian moment, in which an unnamed embodiment of a power-knowledge dispositif reveals how discourses of the body produce subjectivities:

NWOAOC: Mr. Hwang, your father is a Chinese banker.

DHH: Chinese American.

NWOAOC: Exactly.

DHH: There’s a difference.

NWOAOC: [...] Does your father see himself as more American, or more Chinese?

DHH: That question makes no sense.

NWOAOC: On the contrary, I think it’s quite relevant.

DHH: How about you? Do you see yourself as more American or more white?

NWOAOC: That’s not the same thing.

DHH: No?

NWOAOC: Not in the least.

DHH: Why not?

NWOAOC: Because there’s no conflict between being white and being American.

DHH: Did you really just say that? There’s a conflict—between being Chinese and being American?

Despite the intended irony of the (much more) extended exchange targeted to detect the assimilability of HYH, namely the personification of the self-made man and the character who mostly identifies with the American way of life, the conflation of “whiteness” and “Americanness” is irredeemable. If act one mocks the model minority paradigm through a comical representation of DHH as “Daddy’s little boy,” who is as artistically gifted as unqualified for a scientific, business-oriented job, act two represents HYH’s multicultural fantasy of Asian American achievement as a paradox unable to withstand racial categorizations. HYH’s American Dream remains the symbol of an incomplete Americanization, as discrimination based on the racialization of bodies readily overcomes free affiliation rights.

In the concluding pages of the play, once the investigation has been quelled, Hwang reports the following declaration that Rocco Palmieri, former aide to Republican

Senator Fred Thompson, posted on realclearpolitics.com:

The Chinese won the first round. But we were on the right track. 9/11 threw this country into an extended distraction phase. Once Osama bin Laden and his cronies have been brought under control, this country will wake up and realize—while we’ve been expending our time and resources in the Middle East, our real enemies have been taking advantage of this window to make themselves even more formidable. The Chinese investigations aren’t over, not by a long shot. They’re merely on hiatus until our next war begins—because America’s real enemy in the twenty-first century—will be China. (YF 87)

In the context of the investigation, the prophecy about America’s real enemy discloses that behind the rhetoric of a new Cold War, the actual interests of the United States lie in a capitalist competition. Hence, by connecting the War on terrorism to a fight with China over economic supremacy and showing the consequences of both on the domestic enemies—Asian Americans and Middle Eastern Americans—Hwang’s play gathers multiple communities in a shared history rooted in geopolitical and economic interests, which also captures the contemporary legacy of racialized politics in the United States. Despite all effort at preserving HYH’s postracial dream as a righteous fantasy, *Yellow Face* closes on the experienced materiality of America’s racial history. Hence, postracism and postethnicity remain mere ideals for a new set of ethical fights.

ENVY, IRONY, EXEMPLARITY

Yellow Face could be seen as an ironic enactment of the dialectic between identification and desire and its role in the construction of subjectivities, a theme that Hwang has extensively explored in other works. The play thematizes dynamics of “wanting to be” and “wanting to have” through an interplay between various individuals, who are tested against each other as possible role models or ideals. Whereas Jimmy Stewart’s all-American heroic and military aura exerts a seductive fascination on HYH, Marcus’s emotional connection with Asia and its authentic soul provides a perfect counterexample: in a sort of frame narrative to the play, Marcus’s letters to David narrate his journey to China in search of a sense of purpose. The letters recount Marcus’s slow acceptance among the Dong, an ethnic minority found mostly in southern China, via the songs that the entire village sings in a ritual of communal belonging. At first considered

an outsider, one day Marcus is invited to join in: “it’s so much a part of who they are—of who I’m not. And yet all these songs once came from somewhere else—sorta like me” (*YF* 61). The dynamics of inclusion and exclusion and of affiliation and identification with one’s acquired country or people create a mutually implicating parallel not only between the characters of HYH and Marcus, but also between nations—the United States and China—and communities—Americans and the Dong, Americans and Asian Americans, Asian Americans and the Dong. Marcus feels rejected by white America and welcomed by Asian Americans, but only until he passes for a Siberian; afterwards, when his Caucasian identity is disclosed, the community turns away from him. Similarly, his final acceptance by the Dong is revealed to be the overly sentimental, hopeful happy ending that an author not so gifted at finales has written in celebration of his dead father’s dream of integrating descent and consent in American citizenship.

No doubt, there is a clear echo between HYH and Marcus, as both characters embody a postracial set of values grounded in the liberal right to choose one’s identifications and identities;⁶ such right is continuously tested and historically disproved in the play. In what follows, however, I would like to draw attention to the relationship between DHH and Marcus, for it enables a different experiment with doubling. In *Yellow Face*, Hwang plays with the idea of exemplarity as a fixed concept that forces Asian Americans to become a copy of the national myth of individual triumph, and therefore singles them out as a uniform, successful, and accountable model for other minorities. Simultaneously, as Eng and Han argue, the iterated reproduction of the model functions as a marker of ethnic otherness, which “estrangle[s] Asian Americans from mainstream norms and ideals (as well as from themselves)” (Eng and Han 2000: 677). Mediated through the figure of HYH, whose American Dream stereotypically materializes only as a prescribed model of economic integration while he never achieves a subject position that is politically and culturally represented, the relationship between DHH and Marcus falls outside the psychoanalytic terms of identification and desire. Rather, I suggest that *Yellow Face* leads to more productive discussions when considered within the affective framework of envy and emulation. The envy that the two characters feel for each

other ironically creates a mirroring effect, which distorts normatively established paradigms of exemplarity for racialized identities.

Sianne Ngai defines envy as an affect that “lacks cultural recognition as a valid mode of publicly recognizing or responding to social disparities, even though it remains the *only* agonistic emotion defined as having a perceived inequality as its object” (Ngai 2005: 128). As an always feminized (penis envy) and proletarianized (class envy) minor feeling, envy is recast in the ideologemes of hysteria and resentment, thus turning the subject’s public reaction to social injustice in the external world into private dissatisfaction, individual deficiency, or pathological flaw. Opposing such cultural attitudes of moralizing and shaming, which strip envy of its polemical mode of engaging institutionalized forms of inequality, Ngai focuses on the relational quality of the affect and on the antagonistic nature inherent in dynamics of envying and emulating others. She asserts that since Freud’s theorization of the female identity formation, emulation has often been conflated with identification.⁷ By subtending feelings of envy, the equation is mistakenly translated into the desire of a lacking subject to *be like* an ideal or idealized object, while “[i]nstead of being a means of altering one’s self in deference to another, emulation can be a form of aggressive self-assertion” (: 142). Consequently, Ngai holds that envy on the one hand has the ability to catalyze the transition from singular to plural subjects and on the other hand discourages acts of identification.⁸ I read Hwang’s parodic emulation of himself and his ironic representation of aggressive self-assertions as a means of moving away from the model subjectivity. I will try to show below that in *Yellow Face* feelings of envy circulate among characters, rather than possessing a unidirectional vectorial orientation; thus, the play suspends a naturalized and almost mechanical identification with a preestablished and transferable mode of being Asian American.

Throughout the play, DHH resentfully complains about what he perceives as Marcus’s attempts at imitating him, by stealing both his public and private life. In fact, when DHH receives a “Visionary Warrior Award” for his activism within the community, Marcus is awarded the

7 See Freud *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. Trans. James Strachey. New York: Bantam, 1965.

8 Ngai’s analysis situates itself in recent feminist debates concerning the topic of perceived aggression between women. She maintains that because of its agonistic, relational nature, envy enables women to escape patterns of totalization and, simultaneously, it helps form group alliances by combining multiple individual subjects into a single force.

6 Compare with Hollinger, who writes: “Postethnicity prefers voluntary to prescribed affiliations, appreciates multiple identities, pushes for communities of wide scope, recognizes the constructed character of ethno-racial groups, and accepts the formation of new groups as part of the normal life of a democratic society” (Hollinger 1995: 116).

“Most Promising Newcomer Warrior”; Marcus is contended by ethnic political associations, journalists, and fans for the insightfulness of his speeches, which are bursting with DHH’s own ideas and words; as Marcus becomes an Asian American leader, DHH is accused of having abandoned his political life; finally he dates DHH’s ex-girlfriend, Korean American Leah, who believes Marcus a Eurasian. Having been disguised as an Asian American by DHH and accepted as such by the community, Marcus increasingly molds his own beliefs and behavior after the example of DHH. The construction of DHH as an exceptional example of racial subjecthood reproduces the implicit correlation between Asian American subjectivity and exemplarity: being Asian American can only be acknowledged in terms of being a model. Hence, Marcus strives to prove himself a distinctive one.

Marcus’s successful mimeticism, however, generates DHH’s feelings of envy. He becomes obsessively and hysterically jealous of Marcus’s popularity as well as angry at a white man’s appropriation of his ethnic identity. Yet, what DHH tries to protect is a social role that he simultaneously desires to resist. At the beginning of the play, he is recognized within and without the community as an Asian American role model, whose name has a weight and some power to be both wielded and exploited. As a public figure, he finds himself split between the political requests of his community and the national expectations of the American postracial moment. His Tony Award acceptance speech, for example, becomes the occasion for a celebration of the US transformed cultural landscape, which prefigures a break in racial discrimination: “Asians have consistently been caricatured, denied the right even to play ourselves. Well, it’s a new day in America. We’re entering the 1990s, and all that stops now!” (YF 22). However, as noted earlier, his public stance does not always mirror his personal beliefs. At the end of the play, DHH confesses to Marcus: “Years ago, I discovered a face—one I could live better and more fully than anything I’d ever tried. But as the years went by, my face became my mask. And I became just another actor—running around in yellow face” (YF 110–111). Like his father’s and Marcus’s, DHH’s mainstream success is a performance. In *Yellow Face*, all subjective categories seem to bring acceptance or induce imitation by others as long as they iterate authorized versions of otherness. Wearing masks becomes a constraining, tentative response to a multiplicity of interpellations and expectations, which speak through the rhetoric of exemplarity.

Nevertheless, Hwang’s fictional self does not become

an allegory of *good* exemplarity. Despite his public face, privately DHH is portrayed as a much more flawed, comic individual: he is self-centered and self-serving, often hesitant and hypocritical, at times seeking refuge from his problems in alcohol or sex, and for the most part looking pitiful and goofy. Ironically, the play summons DHH as the unquestioned and widely recognized embodiment of an Asian American model, who stirs admiration by both white and Asian America, while also depicting DHH’s acts and behavior as troubling, problematic, and surely not ideal. Inasmuch as envy leads to antagonism and irony reverses the idealization of the model, *Yellow Face* builds critical agency by supporting such strategies of *non*-identification. Marcus, in fact, does not become a copy of some pre-existing positive model, but by emulating DHH, he transforms DHH—a non-exemplary, self-mocked character—into a model *for a white man*. Shifting the perspective: if DHH’s ironic de-idealization questions the embedded narrative that defines Asian American subjectivity as a model for minorities, Marcus’s envy dismisses the idea of whiteness as the only desirable subject position. Thus, the play foregrounds envy’s critical capacity of “transforming X into something nonsingular and replicable, while at the same time enabling acknowledgment of its culturally imposed desirability” (Ngai 2005: 161–162).

In most of the play, Marcus seems to act as DHH’s double in order to preserve his chosen ethnic identity; in so doing, he becomes a valid, even better, example. In fact, Marcus does not show any sign of animosity towards DHH and his repeated attempts to get rid of him: first DHH fires Marcus, then he tries to make Marcus look bad, and finally he demands a corrective intervention from Marcus’s own mother. On the contrary, Marcus remains annoyingly “all good and noble” (YF 104) until the end: he keeps soliciting DHH’s support to all community actions since he recognizes the other’s value and respects his authority. Marcus does not necessarily show a desire to replace DHH in the community, rather to be part of it. This exchange is a case in point:

MARCUS: David, do you have a problem with anything I’m saying?

DHH: No, it’s not what you’re saying—

MARCUS: It’s that I’m the one who’s saying it? Doesn’t that make your position kind of racist?

DHH: This is not that hard! In order to be Asian, you have to have at least some Asian blood! [...]

DHH: You come in here with that, that face of yours. Call yourself Asian. Everyone falls at your feet. But you don’t have to live as an Asian—every day of your life. No, you can just skim the cream,

you, you, you ethnic tourist!

MARCUS: You're right. I don't have to live Asian every day of my life. I am choosing to do so.

DHH: Funny thing about race. You don't get to choose. If you'd been born a minority, you'd know that.

MARCUS: David, are you familiar with the Chinese concept of "face"?

DHH: Am I—? Of course—It's, it's, you know...

MARCUS: Basically, it says that the face we choose to show the world—reveals who we really are.

DHH: I knew that.

MARCUS: Well, I've chosen my face. And now I'm becoming the person I've always wanted to be. (*YF* 71-73)

While Marcus's imitative behavior is not reducible to the identification with a model, DHH's irritation with Marcus is expressed against the latter's appropriation of his symbolic property—his Asian Americanness and his position within the community. When Marcus's yellowface performance becomes successful to the extent that it exemplifies Asianness better than the model, the discursive threat of racial colonization escalates DHH's antagonism toward Marcus.⁹ In the above exchange, DHH claims an essentialist idea of race materialized in Asian blood, thus apparently endorsing the connection between genetics and identity that he utterly denies in the first part of the play. On the other hand, though, by defining Marcus as an ethnic tourist and rejecting his idea of choosing ethnicity as a lifestyle, DHH links racial subjectivity to the material and conceptual consequences of race and argues against a liberal human subject, whose whiteness entitles him to choose an identity, even a non-white one. Thus, the play brings into sharp focus the multiculturalist distinction between ethnic assimilability and racial exclusion (R. G. Lee 2010). Multiplying the models and equally accepting and distancing itself from all of them, *Yellow Face* reveals their constructed and politically contingent nature. Yet, by reasserting that some performances are not only more successful than others, but the only legitimate ones, the play manifests the enmeshments in subject positions as

9 I believe that *Yellow Face* only tangentially meets Bhabha's understanding of colonial mimicry. Although the dynamics in the play contain both mockery and a certain threat ("mimicry is at once resemblance and menace" Bhabha 1994: 86) as two strategies that in disclosing the internal ambivalence of power "also disrupt its authority" (Bhabha 1994: 88), relationships of power and authority in the play cannot be easily described in the dualistic terms of the colonial and the colonized. The hegemonies with which Hwang deals have more unstable, fractured, and blurred boundaries.

well as the disjunctions and differences among them. Hwang disavows an understanding of Asian American subjectivity as both an exclusively racial embodiment and a generalized raceless theory.

MELANCHOLIA, CLASS, ENCOUNTERS

In these final remarks, allow me to focus one more time on Marcus's choice of living in yellowface, since the representation of a white man who takes ethnicity as his prime identity by pretending to be Asian, poses the question of which subjects are able to "assimilate into the regimes of whiteness" (Eng and Han 2000: 677) from yet another angle. Marcus loves being Asian American because his new identity provides him with a community, which initiates him into a collective subjectivity and, therefore, into politics. DHH invents Marcus's Siberian American identity during an event with students at the Asian American Resource Center hosted by Gish Jen, a writer whose stories are often set in multicultural contexts:

STUDENT 3: Marcus, as an actor of Jewish Siberian heritage—have you faced a lot of barriers?

DHH (To Marcus): Sure you have. You can tell them.

MARCUS: Well, uh, before this, my career was sort of going nowhere. I mean, directors just didn't seem to know what to do with me.

STUDENT 1: Bastards!

MARCUS: Last November, I went in on this commercial call. They had me back five times. Five times! And in the end, you know what they told me? They said I didn't "look right."

STUDENT 2: That is so racist! [...]

STUDENT 3: Was growing up hard for you?

DHH (To Marcus): Yeah, it was, right?

MARCUS: Well, yeah—see, when I was seven, my parents moved to this fancy neighborhood because it had good schools. But that made me sort of . . . the poor kid in town.

STUDENT 2: I know what that's like.

MARCUS: You do? Um, thank you.

STUDENT 1: Bastards!

MARCUS: You really wanna hear this?

DHH: Trust me, they do.

MARCUS: See the other kids all knew the truth about me. So on the outside, I was trying to fit in with everyone else, but inside, um...

STUDENT 2: You knew they were lookin' down on you!

MARCUS: That's right! God, this is so weird, I've never even... and in public like this...

STUDENT 2: Marcus, we've all been oppressed!
(YF 45-47)

Marcus's minor class difficulties are presented as disturbingly easy to translate and understand in racial terms. The irony that marks the interplay between the students' coarse chanting against racism, DHH's efforts to deceive them, and Marcus's misunderstanding of both the reason of their support and his privilege as a white kid, exhibits and explodes these interdependencies, precisely implicating one set of preoccupations in and with another.

Significantly, apart from this exchange, class antagonism seems to be absent from *Yellow Face*. Yet, Marcus's feelings of not fitting in white America because of his socioeconomic status become the reason why he embraces an ethnic identity and community. Being the element that triggers the conflicts, class difference is absolutely central to the play, albeit mostly invisible. Hwang, in fact, reframes all conflicts in the play by using the familiar, well-proven rhetorical model of race. This strategy on the one hand connects the two paradigms, revealing a general matching of forms of marginalization, and on the other hand signals and confirms a peculiar resistance from American culture to represent class inequalities without mediation. When in order to save the community from the government's accusations Marcus removes the racial filter from his story and reveals that he is a white man, he loses his people's support: Leah breaks up with him, fellow activists dispense with him, and fans simply forget him. Although such a conclusion points to the incommensurability of class and race, Marcus's success ultimately lies in his embracing an activist project that allows him to process his failed assimilation into American society and culture. This processing finds support in the language of group exclusion from dominant norms and democratic ideals, rather than individual loss.

David Eng and Shinhee Han call racial melancholia the non-pathological structure of feeling that underpins everyday conflicts and struggles with experiences of immigration, racialization, and assimilation. They move away from Freud's definition of melancholia as the disordered psychic state of an *individual*, who is incapable of processing the loss of the loved object and therefore remains in a state of mourning without end. For Eng and Han melancholia addresses the estrangement of minoritarian groups from ideals of whiteness, heterosexuality, and middle-class status, as well as from affiliations with the "original" Asian cultures, which become compelling fantasies that can only be obtained through partial imitations. Whereas Freudian theory understands the melancholic's inability to get over loss in negative terms,

for melancholia preserves the lost object as loss, Eng and Han (following José Esteban Muñoz) "focus on the melancholic's absolute refusal to relinquish the other—to forfeit alterity—at any costs" (Eng and Han 2000: 694). In their view, the subject's melancholic attachment to the unattainable object is a refusal to sacrifice the real conditions of any marginalized existence, a sacrifice that would subscribe to the narrative of the national postracial order.

The melancholic condition is then that of an ethical "holding on" to identity, a mechanism that fosters self-reconstruction: "There is a militant refusal on the part of the ego—better yet, a series of egos—to let go, and this militant refusal is at the heart of melancholia's productive political potentials" (: 696). Marcus's choice of an Asian identity points to Hwang's militant refusal to bypass the conditions of race and class inequalities and allow all differences to disappear through a finite process of mourning; instead, Marcus reconstructs himself in sharing the struggles of a community. Thus, the happy ending that DHH imagines for him among the Dong consists in keeping alive the encounters with minoritarian communities, on a transnational basis: "I joined the 'big song,' and found the thing I had lost. A reason to hope. And now, I can go home" (YF 112).

In *Yellow Face*, feelings of envy and melancholia become resources of intimacy and relationality that bring together a series of unresolved subjectivities. The multiplication of such feelings, constructions of identity, and subject positions creates a dialogue between DHH and Marcus, that is between the author and his fictional character. Their exchange ultimately compels the two figures to constantly question and redefine what it is that they supposedly exemplify. Teasingly split or doubled in Hwang's character and DHH's character (the character of an author-character, who anyway circles back to Hwang), Marcus is an ironic personification of community-based art, whose Caucasian identity amplifies the paradoxical tone of the play. In the end Marcus does not occupy DHH's place; rather he transforms his author, accomplishing, albeit inwardly, the role usually expected from the art devoted to raise the community's consciousness. At the end of the play, DHH is left reflecting on who he wants to be, a reflection, which in one last interference between the inside and outside of the text, is entrusted to his future works. In an interview with the Asia Society, Hwang describes the logic of his play as an interrogation about

to what extent we as Asians play our ethnicity at certain times in our experience, when do we do

that, why do we choose to do that, and then also can we choose our ethnicity in some sense. Can a white person who is very involved in Asian things and Asian American things be in some sense Asian American? (Hwang 2008a).

In *Yellow Face*, Hwang critically explores the conditions and possibilities for an Asian American sense of collective self in multicultural times. Through dynamics of envying, the play offers an unstable set of good and bad examples, or no example at all, thus enabling a series of dis-identifications that ultimately disavow the iteration of a preestablished model subjectivity. Melancholic strategies, on the other hand, pave the way for contingent group formations with political potential for social recognition.

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