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## Feeling Yellow: Responding to Contemporary Yellowface in Musical Performance

### Donatella Galella

*When encountering non-Asians masquerading as Asians in yellowface in twenty-first-century stage musical performances, I feel righteously angry, profoundly sad, and racially alienated. Yet musical theatre promises pleasure and enables the disavowal of complicity with systemic racist violence, as patrons, performers, and producers use their enjoyment to rationalize racial hierarchy. How does racial identity shape reactions to musicals? In turn, how do these reactions shore up and take down structural racism? This article theorizes “feeling yellow,” how Asian Americans are moved and made in response to representation. Though grounded in racial inequality and difference, feeling yellow ultimately wields the potential to generate new pleasures by using feminist queer of color critique to redistribute misery and form communities of fellow feeling.*

**Keywords:** *affect, yellowface, musical theatre, Asian American, feminist killjoy*

I braced myself before seeing the 2013 New York City Center Encores! production of *It's a Bird . . . It's a Plane . . . It's Superman*. An organization devoted to staging rarely revived musicals, Encores! employs a full orchestra and performers with minimal rehearsal time to showcase usually beautiful scores set against usually truncated and dubious books.<sup>1</sup> Best known for *Bye Bye Birdie*, Lee Adams and Charles Strouse debuted *It's a Bird . . . It's a Plane . . . It's Superman* on Broadway in 1966. The henchmen pitted against the all-American superhero at the height of the Cold War are the Flying Lings, Red Chinese acrobats who turn to villainy because they resent how audiences would rather watch Superman fly for free than pay to watch them. Knowing that City Center Encores! preserves much of the original texts, I was prepared to endure pentatonic music and anti-Asian jokes as the white Man of Steel battered the Chinese characters to save Metropolis. I was not, however, prepared to face yellowface, the practice of typically non-Asians performing stereotypical Asianness through racialized makeup, hair, costume, accent, diction, gesture, movement, and music.<sup>2</sup> When reading the program, I noticed that the names of some of the actors behind the Flying Lings seemed to be racialized as white. I briefly gave them the benefit of the doubt. As a mixed-race Asian American named Donatella Galella, I empathize. I felt anxious as I

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waited for the actors to enter the stage so that I could locate identity in their faces, a reductive yet routine way of deducing race. Anxiety turned into dismay, as I registered a white actor embodying one of the Flying Lings. Instead of donning bronzer and eye prostheses, the more blatant markers of yellowface, he matched the other performers in wearing black changshan with yellow-gold trim. Relying upon the costumes to do the labor of signifying Asianness, the production gave the performers greater ease to put on and take off racialized markers.

Seemingly everyone around me laughed at and lauded the Flying Lings' acrobatics, martial arts demonstrations, dearth of lines, violent defeat by Superman, Orientalist music, and yellowface. Meanwhile, I felt angry, upset, and alienated. I pointedly did not chuckle, smile, or clap, wishing that my refusal would have an impact on others, yet the applause and guffaws drowned out my silence. I became acutely aware of my racialized difference, especially as I leaned forward to scribble my thoughts, when a white woman near me gestured for me to stop. Perhaps I impeded her view, or I was taking this musical comedy too seriously with my note-taking and ruining her enjoyment. David Savran observes of the musical genre:

No theatre form is as single-mindedly devoted to producing pleasure, inspiring spectators to tap their feet, sing along, or otherwise be carried away. This utopian—and mimetic—dimension of the musical (linked to its relentless reflexivity) makes it into a kind of hothouse for the manufacture of theatrical seduction and the ideological positions to which mass audiences can be seduced.<sup>3</sup>

By moving spectators to tap their feet and clap their hands, musical theatre cultivates collective pleasure and collective political projects. Musical revivals in particular can conjure feelings of familiarity, comfort, and nostalgia.<sup>4</sup> Presuming a dominantly white audience, producers use that lens to imagine an enjoyable production. How then can I account for my distinct displeasure?

This essay theorizes what I call “feeling yellow,” how representation hails Asian Americans. In teasing out this theory of affect, the racialized unequal distribution of pleasure and pain, I rely on feminist queer of color critique. I use *feeling* and *affect* somewhat interchangeably, although for me the former connotes emotional sensory states while the latter connotes movement between states and enables multiple registers. When I first began grappling critically with my emotional responses to musicals, I hesitated to narrate my experiences because I had been conditioned to think that theorizing my feelings did not constitute legitimate scholarship. Feminist art critic and curator Jennifer Doyle has argued that art criticism prioritizes cool distance, although “explicit turns to emotion may in fact signal the politicization, the historicization of that self and of the feelings through which that self takes shape in

relation to others.”<sup>5</sup> Feeling yellow provides a way to understand Asian American affect within white supremacy. In writing this piece, I have been conscious of how I would like the reader to feel along with me. Although thoroughly investigating the conditions of possibility that make contemporary yellowface permissible is beyond the scope of this essay, I focus on yellowface in musical theatre because the genre promises to produce pleasure and, through this, facilitates the disavowal of complicity with systemic racist violence. The performative repetition of this racial affective economy in the theatre enacts Asian Americanness. My essay similarly turns back on itself, as I wonder what I can do with feeling yellow. My conclusion returns to Encores! and posits the potential for mobilizing feeling yellow to generate new critical pleasures by redistributing misery and forming communities of fellow feeling.<sup>6</sup> I search for comic turns of resistance and suggest that feeling yellow can roughly ruin the enjoyment of those with racial privilege.

My concept of feeling yellow builds upon the work of performance studies scholar José Esteban Muñoz. In “Feeling Brown,” he imagines race and ethnicity as “affective difference,” “the ways in which various historically coherent groups ‘feel’ differently and navigate the material world on a different emotional register.”<sup>7</sup> In Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s crucial sociological work *Racial Formation in the United States*, race is a social construct with real consequences as a historical, changing category and technology with which to apprehend and value varying bodies.<sup>8</sup> Within the racial structure of white supremacy, governing logics preserve the power of those with white privilege. White people have the privilege of walking down the street without being stopped and frisked, as well as the privilege of receiving more jobs with less experience. Structural racism moves racialized people in different ways. When United States millennials were asked in the summer of 2017, “When you think about [Trump’s] presidency, what emotion best represents the strongest emotion you continue to feel since the election?” the top three responses of Asian Americans were “disgusted” (25%), “embarrassed” (16%), and “fearful” (11%), while whites felt almost equally “disgusted” (16%), “embarrassed” (15%), and “hopeful” (14%).<sup>9</sup>

Muñoz theorizes the United States’ “‘official’ national affect” as “a mode of being in the world primarily associated with white middle-class subjectivity.”<sup>10</sup> Because economically privileged whiteness forms a default center, its feelings appear neutral, flat, and reasonable in opposition to marginalized others. This white baseline “reads most ethnic affect as inappropriate,” and specifically Latinx affect as “excess” and “hot n spicy.”<sup>11</sup> Muñoz does not outright reject these interpretations but embraces disidentification to denaturalize normative white affect and repurpose racist labels.<sup>12</sup>

Instead of seeming to be “too much,” as in Latinx representation, Asian Americans seem like “too little.” Between images of robots and model minorities, they appear hypoemotional.<sup>13</sup> In *Reel Inequality*, Nancy Wang Yuen cites a casting

director as saying, “Asians are a challenge to cast because most casting directors feel as though they’re not very expressive. They’re very shut down in their emotions.”<sup>14</sup> The diagnosis of not expressing emotions enough is arbitrary and constructed, based upon an allegedly correct way and amount of feeling as dictated by white supremacy. When encountering yellowface, Asian American responses other than mirth can appear wrong and further marginalize this minoritized group already viewed as too quiet through the perspective of a white lens. By disidentifying with the stoic figure, Asian Americans can launch trenchant critiques that come as a surprise, calling into question the legibility of emotions across racialized faces and recalibrating what constitutes an appropriate reaction.

Feeling yellow reminds Asian Americans that they are not seen as raceless or white but racialized as Asian. It depends on both recognizing and rejecting white American assimilation and colorblindness. With a nonnormative affective relation to the world, Asian Americans, like other people of color, gain different knowledges through different feelings. In *Racial Feelings: Asian America in a Capitalist Culture of Emotion*, Jeffrey Santa Ana contends that “[t]he Asian subject becomes Asian American from having *lost* the political naiveté of being oblivious to racism.”<sup>15</sup> Santa Ana describes this experience, especially for mixed-race Asian Americans, as “feeling ancestral”: “on the one hand, the dialectical tension between a politics of color blindness in neoliberalism and, on the other, cultural memory in the empathetic and often painful identification with heritage and genealogy.”<sup>16</sup> Theorizing loss and internalization, Anne Anlin Cheng has similarly argued that racial melancholia “provides a critical framework for analyzing the constitutive role that grief plays in racial/ethnic subject-formation,” and performance takes pride of place in her case studies.<sup>17</sup> Asian American affect feels . . . off.

When I encounter yellowface in musicals, I feel yellow. I experience indignant anger, profound sadness, and racial alienation, typically in that order. Unlike Sianne Ngai’s “ugly feelings,” feeling yellow wields forcefulness and morality.<sup>18</sup> Because musical comedies promise to amuse me, I come to the theatre expecting to be entertained. The exclamation point in *Encores!* suggests fun! Moreover, liberal narratives of the United States foster teleological notions of racial progress, that the moral arc of the universe inevitably bends toward individual rights, abstracting actually existing uneven power dynamics. At *Encores!* in the twenty-first century, I do not expect to be assaulted by the symbolic violence of seeing a non-Asian performer embody an Asian character. I am taken aback. Seeing injustice against Asian Americans triggers in me a particularly righteous form of anger. Once I surmount the shock, yellowface becomes no longer surprising but part of a larger pattern, and I turn to acceptance and immiseration. With deep sadness, I consider how the producers of these performances must think so little of anti-Asian oppression as to fortify it and deny what they are doing. Finally, as I take in the laughter, applause, and other vocally positive responses of spectators around me,

spectators who are mostly white, wealthy, and liberal, I experience distance across our identities, ideologies, and emotions. The gap between us widens. Feeling yellow intensifies as I am made acutely aware of my difference.

Experiencing the incorrect response can seem isolating. Feminist queer of color scholar Sara Ahmed offers,

Take the example of laughter in the cinema. How many times have I sunk desperately into my chair when that laughter has been expressed at points I find far from amusing! We do not always notice when others sink. One can feel unjustly interpellated in such occasions: the gestures of discomfort and alienation do not register; they do not affect the collective impression made by the laughter.<sup>19</sup>

While quiet dissent may not move the majority, loud laughter moves the minoritized. Racialized representation can make the spectator of color painfully conscious of racism even in anticipation of a performance. Afro-Caribbean thinker Frantz Fanon famously wrote on how white supremacy sutures black representation to his body: “In the interval, just before the film starts, I wait for me. The people in the theater are watching me, examining me, waiting for me. A Negro groom is going to appear. My heart makes my head swim.”<sup>20</sup> He becomes mindful of how others see him, a realization that disrupts his enjoyment of a cultural production.

Compelled by the imperative to happiness, I resent this self-consciousness, as I am made to feel that my racial alienation is my own (un)doing. In *The Promise of Happiness*, Ahmed points out how happiness can obscure power inequalities and that when you point out such inequalities, you prompt unhappiness. Unhappiness becomes attributed to you. Yelling from the mezzanine would upset propriety, likely leading patrons to see me, and not inequality, as the problem. Not wanting to feel left out, I want to relish the designated-as-proper emotional experience of exuberance that musicals have promised me. Even as I long for this postracial bliss, I know that my longing exemplifies what Lauren Berlant refers to as cruel optimism, a desire for something impossible to obtain and actually detrimental to me.<sup>21</sup> If I were to be included and feel like white musical theatregoers, my inclusion and feeling would not abolish systemic racism. For Asian Americans to gain entrance to the theatre, the price is keeping quiet about charges of white supremacy and playing the grin-and-bear-it model minority.<sup>22</sup>

While musicals produce intense pain for others, they also produce intense pleasure largely for the privileged. Writing on the work of performance artist Anna Deavere Smith, Ann Pellegrini reflects, “Other members of the audience will be hailed and placed differently, the subject-positions they move and are moved into, as multiple, precarious, and richly varied as the history of identifications they bring

to the performance and move out from.”<sup>23</sup> In the 2016 Public Religion Research Institute survey on American values, the majority of white Americans reported that they believed United States culture to have worsened since the 1950s, the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>24</sup> In “After the ‘Golden Age,’” a term that glorifies mid-twentieth-century musicals, musicologists Jessica Sternfeld and Elizabeth Wollman suggest that nostalgia and revisionism in revivals maintain hegemonic conceptions of Americans and the history of the United States.<sup>25</sup> When old musicals have newly revised books and lyrics, they can elide past and present material inequalities. By obscuring structural oppression or relegating oppression to the past, revivals can allay anxieties as if United States society has already dismantled structural oppression. According to Bryan M. Vandevender, scholar of musical revivals, several of the works that *Encores!* produces “feature ethnic slurs and cultural attitudes towards race and gender that would be considered impolitic by present-day standards. Consequently, the script consultant is charged with removing or revising dated material without altering the musical’s original dramaturgy.”<sup>26</sup> Rather than conceive the dramaturgy itself as mired in systemic oppression, *Encores!* adopts a liberal individualist framework that conceives white supremacy and hetero-cis-patriarchy as merely outdated “slurs” and “attitudes” easily remedied with an eraser.<sup>27</sup> When playwright David Ives said that he scrubbed from the libretti for *Encores!* productions all of the wife-beating jokes, domestic violence disappears.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, preserving this dramaturgy in a celebrated staging might imply sanctioning such violence. *Encores!* artistic director Jack Viertel insists that patrons transform into an audience of the past, as “they accept the politics of another time.”<sup>29</sup> But who are “they”?

In the case of *It’s a Bird . . . It’s a Plane . . . It’s Superman*, the pleasure derived from stereotypical Asian representation and yellowface comes from white privilege and exists at the expense of the displeasure of Asian Americans. Figured as laughable villains, the Flying Lings enable airing of anxieties of yellow peril, as white Superman prevails over them. Furthermore, there is a subversive pleasure in getting away with yellowface. Scholars and critics rarely discuss the Flying Lings and yellowface in this musical, as if they are not to be taken seriously. As a result, they reproduce the silencing of Asian American dissent at the theatre. When they do explicitly engage with racial politics, they often go to lengths to support contemporary yellowface. Steven Suskin wrote in his *Playbill.com* review of the *Encores!* production:

One of the problems with *Superman* from the present-day vantage point was its non-PC use of a team of Chinese acrobats (“The Flying Lings”) as terrorists. This is handily solved, here. The four Lings remain Chinese acrobats, but only two of them are Chinese and any offensive stereo-types have been erased . . . What’s more,

their two big acrobatic scenes—impressive feats mixed with outsized laughs—earn ovations.<sup>30</sup>

First, Suskin articulates anti-Asianness as merely non-political-correctness rather than racist. He claims with ease that the “non-PC use” is “handily solved” by having “any offensive stereo-types” “erased” and two out of four Chinese characters played by non-Chinese (white) actors. According to Suskin’s racist math, four minus two equals zero.<sup>31</sup> For him, some straight-up yellowface paradoxically cancels out racism. In fact, the Chinese stereotypes from the original 1966 script mostly remained intact.<sup>32</sup> In addition, the qualifier “from the present-day vantage point” prioritizes a hegemonic white arbiter of morality and evacuates how minoritized people have determined that such Asian characters and yellowface did symbolic violence in earlier periods. Moreover, Suskin contends that because many spectators applauded and laughed at the Chinese characters who were embodied with such dexterity, their depiction and embodiment by white actors is not troubling. Instead of superseding structural racism, the “outsized laughs,” in fact, reveal how the good white people really feel, as they publicly luxuriate in racial privilege even as they imagine themselves beyond racism. Happy white feelings come to authorize the production and dictate the right response. Ahmed writes, “So much inequality is preserved through the appeal of happiness, the appeal to happiness. It is as if the response to power and violence is or should be simply to adjust or modify how we feel.”<sup>33</sup> The genre of musical comedy further allows some to dismiss charges of white supremacy, as those who take pleasure in the comedy place their own feelings above those who feel pain—*Can’t you take a joke?* The dissenter who feels yellow receives derision, labeled as too sensitive or not sophisticated enough to enjoy the production. *You just don’t get the joke.* In so doing, the policing of appropriate responses to musicals stifles minoritized deviance. A theory of feeling yellow makes visible how white supremacy preserves pleasure for the privileged in order to preserve hierarchy.

So what can I do with these feelings? First, Asian American affect need not be cheerless. In *Acts of Gaiety*, Sara Warner counters images and histories of dour lesbians, and asks, “What has been sacrificed in privileging bad feelings to the exclusion of more positive affects?”<sup>34</sup> Asian Americanists such as Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns and Celine Shimizu have documented more upbeat and empowered responses to the sexualization of Asian women in the 1991 Broadway musical *Miss Saigon*.<sup>35</sup> Although feeling yellow emerges from structures of oppression and racial difference, it can also create conditions of possibility to imagine otherwise and form new collectivities.<sup>36</sup> Ahmed suggests, “There is solidarity in recognizing our alienation from happiness, even if we do not inhabit the same place (as we do not).”<sup>37</sup> By feeling together, Asian Americans can foster solidarity and use their affect to move others just as they are moved. Critical empathy can additionally

educate a person with white privilege to understand a person without,<sup>38</sup> though that empathy arguably still centers on whiteness.<sup>39</sup>

As a rogue response, feeling yellow can be fun! I can derive pleasure by playing the rebel, clinging to the emotions that I am not supposed to experience and express. What is more, there is something impishly gleeful about feeling yellow openly and potentially ruining a musical for a fan. I have found that making another person feel awful for their enjoyment of and complicity with racist musicals makes me feel better. This act redistributes pain more equitably.<sup>40</sup> After the show, the fan confronts another's misery, which disrupts their glossy emotional memory of that musical. I feel proud: *I did that!* Perhaps paranoid readings can do reparative work.<sup>41</sup> Ahmed adds that to go against the "happiness duty" and speak "with consciousness of racism, is to become an affect alien. Affect aliens can do things with alien affects, and do things we must."<sup>42</sup> Ahmed's figure of the feminist killjoy is an affect alien. She ruins the enjoyment of cultural productions by pointing out how they socially reproduce hierarchies. She typically bears the brunt of criticism rather than the production or the hierarchies receiving blame. But as a feminist killjoy, "There can even be joy in killing joy. And kill joy, we must and we do."<sup>43</sup>

In 2015 I had another experience of feeling yellow with New York City Center Encores! but this time I wielded feminist killjoy strategies to redistribute misery and find happiness.<sup>44</sup> Encores! presented a panel, helmed by artistic director Jack Viertel, titled "Sexism. Racism. Show Tunes. Discuss." featuring performances of overtly sexist and racist songs from classic musicals as well as discussion by lyricist Sheldon Harnick, composer Jeanine Tesori, and actor-director Ruben Santiago-Hudson. To critique normative portrayals of heterofemininity, the Encores! organizers enlisted Margo Siebert to perform "I Enjoy Being a Girl" from *Flower Drum Song*, a Chinatown-set musical by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II originally starring Asian Americans and white actors in yellowface in the 1958 Broadway production. Cheng has analyzed the 1961 film version, in which she argues that Asian-white performer Nancy Kwan as Linda Low luxuriates within but also in excess of gendered and racialized interpellation, and she "is coded by the movie, both visually and verbally, as 'white.'"<sup>45</sup> What can be made of a roundtable in 2015 dedicated to unpacking patriarchy and white supremacy literally casting a white woman in this Asian American role? No one responsible for this panel had considered sexism and racism intersectionally; instead, the organizers focused on white women and black men. There were no women of color on stage. As this contemporary yellowface performance unfolded before me, I felt yellow, yet I did not feel the usual anger and grief. I felt excited, and when the panel asked for questions, I leapt out of my seat.

Playing upon the presumption of my model minority cool-headedness, I thanked the artists before I invited everyone to think about sexism and racism together and asked why Encores! had chosen a white woman to sing "I Enjoy

Being a Girl.” Silent, the speakers looked stunned. Reorienting the smug pleasure of musical theatre artists, producers, and audiences who felt they have moved past old-fashioned systemic oppression of white women and people of color, I felt such satisfaction in bursting their bubble. Harnick said that he had not understood my question, and after Viertel explained it, Harnick, the author of *Fiddler on the Roof*, claimed that he has never taken into consideration race and ethnicity when writing musicals. Viertel both recognized the failure of the panel to address my question and became defensive. Meanwhile, Tesori welcomed the critique and remarked that she would like to take a class with me, and when I disclosed that I am a professor, we laughed. Perhaps misreading my mixed-race Asian Americanness, Santiago-Hudson expounded on how rare and admirable it is for people to stand up for those unlike themselves. I felt encouraged and exhilarated by these affirmations from esteemed artists. When the event ended, one of the organizers defended their yellowface decision by telling me that they had asked the author of the critical play *Yellow Face*, David Henry Hwang, to participate, but he declined, thereby placing the responsibility for preventing anti-Asian American racism on Asian American shoulders. Then, a group of young women of color approached me to thank me for my intervention, and we bonded over sharing similar reactions to Siebert’s rendition of “I Enjoy Being a Girl.” Feeling yellow contains the spark for solidarity and remembrance of historic and ongoing structural inequality—and it can be fun, too.

Feeling yellow in response to representation incites Asian American racialization through anger, immiseration, and alienation, yet it also inspires critique to spread those bad feelings and thoroughly enjoy doing so. These individual experiences that are so often dismissed indicate larger structures of racial inequity, and Asian Americans have found in others these shared feelings from which to build collective strategies of resistance. I enjoy being an antiracist feminist killjoy.

## Notes

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3. David Savran, “Toward a Historiography of the Popular,” *Theatre Survey*, vol. 45, no. 2, 2004, p. 215.

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5. Jennifer Doyle, *Hold It Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art*, Duke UP, 2013, p. 72.

6. I am grateful to Patrick McKelvey for articulating my project as the redistribution of misery.

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11. 70.
12. José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, U of Minnesota P, 1999.
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15. Jeffrey Santa Ana, *Racial Feelings: Asian America in a Capitalist Culture of Emotion*, Temple UP, 2015, p. 149.
16. 175.
17. Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief*, Oxford UP, 2001, p. 14.
18. Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, Harvard UP, 2005.
19. Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, Duke UP, 2010, p. 42.
20. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Grove Press, 1967, p. 140.
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31. I believe that Suskin's math is also wrong because he interpreted a mixed-race performer as white.
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33. Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, Duke UP, 2017, p. 60.
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37. Ahmed, *Promise* 87.
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