

Designed Bodies: A Historiographical Study of Costume Design and Asian American Theater 

Esther Kim Lee

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter focuses on the costume designer Willa Kim as a case study of costume history in American theater and situates her historiographically in the study of Asian American theater and performance. A brief examination of Kim's career unsettles how theater historians have understood race, representation, and body politics. The current assumptions about the body and how it should be understood as a theoretical concept are mostly performer based. Much attention is given to an actor's or a dancer's body, but little has been written about the costume that is usually inseparable from the performer onstage. Using Willa Kim as a touchstone, this chapter examines the absence and presence of costume design in theater and performance scholarship and argues for more integration of design studies in the discourse of the body and performance.

Keywords: Willa Kim, costume design, Asian American theater, race, representation, body politics, Korean American

IN this chapter, I use the costume designer Willa Kim's career and designs as a case study to examine costume history in American theater and to situate her historiographically in the study of Asian American theater and performance. Willa Kim is, at once, Korean American, Asian American, woman, and an international artist who has designed for human bodies of all forms for over fifty years. A brief examination of her career unsettles how theater historians have understood race, representation, and body politics. The study of the body in performance has recently proliferated, and it is certainly necessary to move away from text-based study of performance toward an embodied one. However, it is critical to reexamine how the body is defined and assumed in performance history and historiography. The current assumptions about the body and how it should be understood as a theoretical concept is mostly performer based. Much attention is given to an actor's or a dancer's body, but little has been written about the costume that is usually inseparable from the performer onstage. A critical history of costume design and designers is particularly lacking. Costume designers must understand how performers act and move their bodies, and great designers can make the costume the most essential part of the body

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and the performance. Theater is inherently collaborative, and the visual language of the production should be documented and analyzed as rigorously as the scripted language or the performer's body in action. Using Willa Kim as a touchstone, I examine the absence and presence of costume design in theater and performance scholarship and argue for more integration of design studies in the discourse of the body and performance.

Willa Kim: A Case Study

Willa Kim (b. 1917) has had an extensive career as a costume designer in the United States for over fifty years, receiving numerous awards including two Tony Awards and two Emmy (p. 363) Awards. Known for her perfectionism in the stage design community, she has revolutionized costume design and technology for theater, ballet, opera, commercials, fashion, and figure skating. Born in California in 1917, Willa Kim is the daughter of Korean immigrant parents: Soon-kwan Kim, an independence activist against Japanese colonial rule in Korea, and Nora Koh Kim, who immigrated to the United States in an arranged marriage. Her brother, Young-oak Kim, is a World War II hero who was the first Asian American to command a US combat battalion, and the Korean American Studies Center at the University of California, Riverside, is named after him. Willa Kim grew up in Los Angeles and studied art and fashion illustration. While working at Paramount Studios as a designer for cinema, she met artists and designers who influenced her to move to New York in 1945 and she became a costume designer. In 1955, she married the French American writer William Pène du Bois and settled down in New York City. Kim is credited with inventing customized painted costumes and with being a pioneer in using synthetic fabric—namely Lycra Spandex—on dancers. It was her technical innovation and artistic creativity that made her a highly successful costume designer. With a solid reputation and wide network, she has never lacked work during her long career. Willa Kim was also known for her social life in the world of dance and theater. For instance, a picture of Willa Kim is featured in the October 1971 issue of *McCall's* magazine in an article about three busy career women who also managed to “throw parties.”¹ In the picture, Willa Kim is seated with a large spread of Korean food, including *kimchi*, *bulgogi*, and romaine lettuce in place of napa cabbage. She smiles at the camera wearing an outfit she designed: “ruffled shirt that was the prototype for a costume for one of the male dancers.”² Kim has been widely recognized in the design community and the Asian American community, but her name has been virtually missing in the scholarship of both theater history and Asian American studies.

The only major work to document Willa Kim's work and career is *The Designs of Willa Kim*, written by Bobbi Owen. The book was published in 2005 by The USITT (United States Institute for Theatre Technology) as the inaugural volume in the USITT Monograph Series.³ In introducing the volume, the series editor Del Unruh states, “This monograph on the career of Willa Kim is the first in what is projected to be an on-going series documenting the work of our best American theatrical designers.”⁴ The publication of the volume celebrates Kim as one of the best American theatrical designers, and featuring her first in the monograph series confirms her legendary status in American theater.

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However, with the exception of Owen's monograph, not much has been written about Willa Kim in academia. Designers in general have been consistently absent in theater and performance studies, and the USITT's monograph series is an important yet rare contribution to theater scholarship. Theater historians tend to focus on playwrights, actors, and directors in their research and teaching, and designers are studied only when they are part of major theater movements that feature other theater artists and theorists.⁵

Designers are absent not only in theater and performance studies but also in area studies. With her biography and stellar accomplishments, she would be expected to receive more attention in Asian American studies and women's studies. At the very least, she should be included in the study of Asian American theater. Willa Kim is currently the only Korean American and one of two Asian Americans in the American Theater Hall of Fame, which honors "those who have made outstanding contributions to the American Theater." The other Asian American artist in the Hall of Fame is Ming Cho Lee, the highly influential designer who is known as the "Dean" of American scenic design.⁶ Other Asian American (p. 364) designers, such as Loy Arcenas and Myung Hee Cho, have worked in major productions and have received awards. A number of Asian American stage designers have consistently been active and successful in theater, opera, and ballet, but little attention has been paid to their careers and accomplishments outside of the design industry. Despite the highly successful Asian American designers, the narrative that has dominated Asian American theater history focuses on actors and playwrights, with some mention of directors and producers. I am guilty of perpetuating this narrative, and I have to admit that I did not learn about Willa Kim until the end of the research process for my book *A History of Asian American Theatre*. For the book, I relied on the network of Asian American theater artists for access to interviews and research materials, and none of the over seventy artists I spoke to mentioned Willa Kim. The only designer I interviewed for the book was Loy Arcenas, who was, at the time, turning his attention toward supporting new Filipino American playwrights. I learned about Willa Kim from the journalist and drama critic Terry Hong's article on Korean American theater in New York City.⁷

Most Asian American theater artists continue to have difficulty finding opportunities in mainstream theater (in which I include Broadway, Off-Broadway, and regional theater venues), and any success in those venues is seen as a major breakthrough. While there are many ways to define success in theater, Broadway productions and the Tony Award nominations are commonly considered an important measure of success in American theater. Using those measures, Willa Kim ranks at the top in Asian American theater. The only Asian American playwright to be produced on Broadway and receive a Tony Award is David Henry Hwang, and B. D. Wong is the only Asian American actor who has been nominated for and received a Tony Award. Willa Kim, in contrast, has received seven Tony Award nominations and was awarded two during her career (for *Sophisticated Ladies* in 1981 and *The Will Rogers Follies* in 1991). Moreover, she has received all of the major lifetime achievement awards a costume designer can possibly receive in the United States.⁸ With the exception of Ming Cho Lee, there is no other Asian American theater artist who has achieved the scale of Kim's success in theater. With a career that spans from the 1940s to the early part of the twenty-first century, Willa Kim seems to occupy a

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different dimension in theater in comparison to other Asian American theater artists. Why, then, is she basically absent in Asian American studies and theater history? How should Willa Kim's career and accomplishments be explained in the context of Asian American theater? Why didn't the interviewees for my book mention Willa Kim, or why didn't it occur to me to ask about designers? Why was she absent in the narrative that my interviewees were collectively telling of Asian American theater?

Willa Kim was certainly in my scholarly blind spot, and this chapter is my attempt to explore how her presence requires epistemological shifting of the historiographical paradigm I have presumed and used as a theater historian. The essay is not a biographical study of Willa Kim nor does it provide formal analysis of her design work. Rather, her presence and absence in the narrative of current Asian American theater history are scrutinized to explain why costume history should be incorporated into the studies of theater, dance, and performance. In particular, focus is given to how the concept of the body is theorized in theater history and historiography and how design is absent in the theories of body in theater and performance. Moreover, Willa Kim and her career provide an opportunity to further question categories used in the study of Asian American theater and to understand how success is measured for minority theater artists in the United States.

(p. 365) Willa Kim is a versatile designer whose designs have ranged from everyday clothing trends (such as bellbottom pants for a 1970s play) to fantastical creations (such as the octopus-inspired costume for Caliban in the ballet version of *The Tempest*).⁹ On Broadway, she has designed straight plays, such as Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* (produced in 1986), that required period clothing. Production photographs show actors wearing clothes true to the look of Connecticut in 1912 during which the play is set. But she is most recognized for her work in ballet, opera, and musicals that featured nonrealistic and conceptual costumes. Even with costumes specific to a period, Willa Kim's design has been described by critics as more than replica of known styles. The critic Robert Brustein best summarizes the general assessment of Kim's period costume design when he describes her costumes as "characterization in themselves."¹⁰ Brustein does not explain what he means, and he writes only one sentence on costume design in his long review (which is typical of drama critics). It seems that for many critics and colleagues of Kim, what sets her apart from other designers is her ability to capture with her costumes what can be described as essential yet transcendental qualities of characters or the performers. Willa Kim's process has been described in equally mystical ways by her colleagues. Bobbi Owen's book includes many anecdotes of how Kim uses her instinct and how others find her process mysterious. Owen quotes Judy Adamson, a draper who has worked with Kim, as saying:

No one quite understood why the position of those spots [on Kim's design] was so important until the costumes were together on stage in the musical number for which they were made, and suddenly their relative positions made sense. They were in exactly the right place on a group of dancers who were different heights.¹¹

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Owen credits Kim's "instinct" for having "a kind of 'perfect pitch' when it comes to color and shape": "Her instinct is uncanny—and unfailing."¹²

It is remarkable to see Willa Kim and her work discussed by her contemporaries in ways that describe her—and by extension her designs—as mystical and otherworldly. For example, the director and choreographer Tommy Tune describes her and her design as "really dreamy" and calls her "Girl of My Dreams":

For years I had a recurring dream in which a beautiful woman floated past me in the clouds. She was veiled in gossamer. She paused mid-flight to whisper in my ear, "Shhhhhhh, IT'S A WILLA KIM" and floated on. For years I had this dream, then Willa Kim designed *The Will Rogers Follies* for me and then the dream mysteriously ceased! I guess it's because she became REAL. Willa Kim won the Tony for that show. She's really dreamy.¹³

The designer Tony Walton, in his Foreword to Owen's book, is equally profuse when he describes her as "a creature of limitless elegance and grace—who paints and draws like a dream and is relentless and entirely admirable perfectionist."¹⁴ According to Bobbi Owen, Willa Kim's signature design elements have been "a whiff of period" and "a suggestion of a place."¹⁵ The reoccurrence of the adjective "dreamy" and its synonyms in praise of Willa Kim raises the question, what does it mean? Does it connote the exotic or "oriental," terms that often get attached to artists of Asian descent? Given the overly poetic phrases attached to Willa Kim, it is more than probable that her ethnicity and gender contributed significantly to the support and opportunities she found during her career. As a designer, Willa Kim may have had an advantage in finding work in mainstream theater. Unlike Asian American (p. 366) actors, who are limited by their physiognomic traits, and playwrights, who are expected to write autobiographical stories, designers can often let their work speak for itself. Most likely, Kim encountered racism and sexism during the time and in the industry she worked, but her ethnicity probably did not have a devastatingly negative effect as it did for Asian American actors. In fact, she may have been readily accepted as a costume designer because of her ethnicity and gender.

I am not discrediting her unquestionable talent or effort, but I do speculate that her ethnicity and gender helped, rather than hurt, her career. It is likely that for many in the theater community, she was an immensely talented "oriental" woman who designed beautiful and "dreamy" costumes with her "instinct." Before analyzing Kim's place in theater history, it is critical to first contextualize Asian American theater in costume history. Willa Kim has been in the historiographical blind spot precisely because costume history has been absent in the constitution and documentation of Asian American theater. Artists who founded Asian American theater did so in opposition to the "oriental" conventions in acting and playwrighting, but they did not directly address the conventions in costume design. Conversely, Asian American theater has been missing in costume history of the performing arts especially in the context of "oriental" conventions of theatrical costumes.

“Oriental” Convention in Costume Design History

I use the term “oriental” to echo the concept of orientalism famously articulated by Edward Said to define how the West has imagined and romanticized the East as exotic, mysterious, and weak. At the same time, “oriental” is an aesthetic style that describes a historically specific convention in theater. Since its beginning, American theater has been influenced by traditional European theater that used elaborate “oriental” settings, costumes, and makeup as theatrical conventions.¹⁶ For centuries, fantasy and illusionism dominated European theater, and the exotic orient (however loosely it was defined) was a popular visual trope. Asian characters, or the stage oriental, appeared on the European stage since the beginning of European colonialism. In his article “The Global Parasol: Accessorizing the Four Corners of the World,” Joseph Roach links seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European colonial curiosities and desires to visual representations of the world on maps and theatrical stages:

On the stage and (cartographic) page at the beginning of the long eighteenth, the four corners of the world were represented synecdochically or metonymically in the form of selected costumes, sets, properties, and (where racial difference is concerned) makeup—hence the powerful symbolic importance that emanate from accessories. [...] To accessorize a costume is thus to furnish it with the supplementary but nonetheless crucial items that serve to identify or locate the wearer.¹⁷

According to Roach, London actors and actresses representing characters from exotic foreign lands wore accessories on their otherwise stock dresses “generally conventionalized within contemporary European norms.” The accessories and decorations that signified foreignness included “the palm tree, the Chinese garden, the turban, the scimitar, the face made (p. 367) up in back, the feathered headdress, and especially the parasol.”¹⁸ Roach’s example is one of many in the European theater tradition that influenced how the foreign, the other, and the “orient” were represented through costume onstage.

To cite another example, Voltaire’s *Orphan of China* (1755; adapted into English by Arthur Murphy) was one of the first European plays to feature a Chinese character. The play opened in Philadelphia’s Southwark Theatre in 1767 and presented the first stage image of a Chinese character to American spectators. According to James Moy, the actors playing Chinese characters wore “Middle Eastern dress in a vaguely ‘Oriental’ mode of representation.”¹⁹ Because the majority of the American spectators at the time had never seen a real Chinese person, the Middle Eastern ensemble of costumes would have been an image that most of them could accept as approximately oriental.

With the increase of the Asian (mostly Chinese) population in New York City in the late-nineteenth century, at least two different images of the “orient” emerged, and stage costumes and makeup corresponded with them. Images available from this period provide more concrete examples of oriental costumes and yellowface makeup. The costumes were not as vague and conflated as they were in the eighteenth century, but they were a combi-

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nation of authenticity and fantasy. The first type was based on the perception of real Asian clothing, but onstage, certain features were accentuated for theatrical effect. In political cartoons, comedy theater, and minstrel shows, stereotypical images of Asians such as the Chinese coolies were caricatured. Actors playing the comic Asian character wore yellowface makeup, which consisted of pulling the eyes to create a slanted look and browning the skin. The performers playing Chinese coolies also wore the queue (braided plait of hair) worn by Chinese men loyal to the Qing Dynasty. Theatrical costumes based on Chinese laborers were intended to look clownish, and their overall appearances were popular topics for racist jokes.²⁰ Sean Metzger, in his study of the actor Charles Parsloe in the nineteenth-century American theater, categorizes the practice of yellowface as “conventional associations of signs and meanings that purportedly convey “Asian-ness.”²¹ Metzger explains the use of the queue as a signifier of Chineseness on the nineteenth-century American theater:

This long braid appears more than any other signifier in various nineteenth-century visual portrayals of Chinese immigrants. Robes and blouses added to popular images of Chinese men; however, these outfits varied dramatically in cut and color. Actors on stage also used facial makeup, which may have included some simulation of epicanthic folds, but these cosmetic details would be lost to spectators in large performance spaces and were, at least in one case, perceived as inaccurate. By contrast, the queue could be seen from a distance. Moreover, its ubiquity in print media meant that it would have been easy for urban audiences to recognize it as a signifier of Chineseness.²²

Metzger emphasizes that the entire ensemble of the costume became codified to represent Chineseness, and yellowface makeup was rarely practiced without orientalizing the rest of the body.

The second type of oriental costume catered to spectators of legitimate theaters as part of the *chinoiserie* and *japonaiserie* fads (popularity of art, decorations, and commodities from China or Japan respectively). It featured elaborate costumes and makeup created for theatrical performances, world fairs, or museums. Such images were partly based on actual performances and displays of Asian men and women who visited the United States and Europe to perform their cultures. For example, tours by Chinese opera troupes made particular (p. 368) impact on the perpetuation of the image in American theater.²³

Josephine Lee, in her book, *The Japan of Pure Invention: Gilbert and Sullivan's The Mikado*, demonstrates that the creation of the Japanese Village in Knightsbridge, London, in 1885 and the musical inspired the Victorian “craze” for anything Japanese in art, fashion, decor, crafts, songs, and gestures. The longevity of *The Mikado* in production into the twentieth century has contributed to the continual popularity of the Japanese kimono and items (such as the fan) on American and European stages.

In the first half of the twentieth century, the first type of oriental costume became less pervasive because the Chinese population decreased in size and assimilated.²⁴ However, the second type continued to dominate both the stage and the screen as the Far East in-

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creasingly became the dramatic setting of choice. Best exemplified by plays such as *Madame Butterfly* (1900) by David Belasco and *The Yellow Jacket* (1912) by Harry Benrimo and George G. Hazelton, plays, musicals, and operas of the early twentieth century often featured vague Eastern settings and elaborate costumes with yellowface makeup. Actors playing the characters were European Americans with very few exceptions. Major characters were almost always played by white actors in yellowface makeup. A few of the only notable exceptions were the Chinese American actress Anna May Wong, the Korean American actor Philip Ahn, and the Japanese actor Sessue Hayakawa, who played major roles, albeit mostly in films. The theatrical convention of elaborate oriental costume and yellowface makeup continued into the mid-twentieth century with popular musicals such as *The King and I* (1951), and the practice was readily borrowed by producers of film and television.

Audiences expected to see major Asian characters (both serious and comical) played by white actors whose made-up and dressed-up appearances signified something more theatrically “authentic” and “natural” than that of real Asians. In other words, they preferred to see the stage oriental, not the real Asian. For instance, when Japanese American actor Mako auditioned for the role of the Bandit in the American television version of the Japanese film *Rashomon* in the early 1960s, the casting director told him: “You gave a great reading, but as a real Japanese, you’d be too conspicuous. All of the other actors are white made up to look Japanese.”²⁵ By the mid-twentieth century, the theatrical practice of yellowface makeup and elaborate oriental costumes on white actors had become an accepted and naturalized convention, and having a real Asian body on stage was simply too jarring.

The Faces and Bodies of Asian American Theater

The yellowface makeup began to be challenged in the late 1950s in the United States, starting with the musical *Flower Drum Song* by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein. Produced on Broadway in 1958, the musical featured a mostly Asian American cast and was set not in some far-away land but in San Francisco’s Chinatown. For the first time, Asian American actors played Asian American roles in a major musical. The musical was the first Broadway show to open doors for Asian Americans in terms of both casting and storytelling. However, it was not completely free of the conventions of orientalization. Chinatown was exoticized, and a variety of oriental costumes—especially for female characters—were introduced. For (p. 369) instance, the character of Linda Lowe, a nightclub dancer, wore revealing versions of oriental clothing in dance sequences (such as in “Fan Tan Fanny,” in which oriental-looking fans were part of the exotic and erotic wardrobe of the dancers).²⁶

Many have criticized *Flower Drum Song* for perpetuating the model-minority myth of Asian Americans and for ignoring the realities of ghettoized Chinatowns. But in theater history, the musical is significant for featuring for the first time Asian American actors in

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major roles in American mainstream theater. The musical signaled the beginning of the end of yellowface, which reflected decades of racism and exclusion in American theater. As I have written in *A History of Asian American Theatre*, Asian American actors in the 1960s began to organize activist groups to protest the practice of yellowface on Broadway. In New York City, the members of Oriental Actors of America (OAA) specifically targeted shows that cast Asian characters with white actors. In the early 1970s, they filed a formal discrimination complaint with the New York State Division of Human Rights against the Repertory Theater of Lincoln Center. In the complaint, they contended that the Repertory's shows, *Good Woman of Setzuan* (a play by Bertolt Brecht), *Lovely Ladies*, *Kind Gentlemen* (a musical by John Patrick, Stan Freeman, and Franklin Underwood; based on the play *The Teahouse of the August Moon*), and *Narrow Road to Deep North* (a play by Edward Bond), had "Oriental themes and characters, which required preferential casting of Oriental actors."²⁷ They did not complain against the Asian themes and characters, which were mostly stereotypical. Rather, they focused their protest on casting. The message was clear: Asian characters had to be played by Asian or Asian American actors, and to do otherwise would be racism. They were protesting for the right to play oriental roles in oriental costumes. In other words, the oriental body would remain, but real Asian faces would replace the yellowface. With this focus on the face, the actors disregarded the fact that yellowface was inseparable from the rest of the body dressed in the oriental costume and decorated with oriental accessories. Yellowface was an established convention in Euro-American theater, and Asian American actors were simply stepping into it instead of supplanting it. To be fair, oriental roles were the only ones available to Asian American actors who wanted major roles in theater. Unlike African American actors, who found first acting opportunities in blackface minstrelsy, Asian American actors did not have to put yellowface makeup on their real faces, but the main signifier of the stage oriental was not the face but the costumed body.

Asian American actors demanded in the 1970s that they were the only ones who should be allowed to embody Asian and Asian American characters, including the archetype of the stage oriental. Their protests influenced the creation of Stephen Sondheim's musical *Pacific Overtures* (1976), which was the second Broadway show to feature an all-Asian American cast.²⁸ The musical is considered one of Sondheim's most daring experiments in casting, but it was also a way to test the effectiveness of having Asian American actors embody Asian characters created in the convention of stage orientalism. The director of the musical, Harold Prince, was fully aware of the recent protests by Asian American actors and decided to cast all roles (including white ones) with Asian American actors. And he made the distinction between Asian and Asian American actors and maintained that he would cast the show with Americans of Asian descent: "This is an American musical done by Americans playing Asian roles, and that's intentional."²⁹ Prince and Sondheim used the aesthetics of Japanese Kabuki theater to tell the story of Japanese-US relations. While the cast was Asian American, the story was not about their experiences: the set, costume, and makeup indicated a world far from the realities of their America. Florence Klotz's costume design included American (p. 370) uniforms with kimono sleeves, floor-length white hair, and others inspired by Kabuki theater. The makeup was also Kabuki inspired. Some

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actors painted their faces white and drew dark, high eyebrows, while others (especially those playing American characters) did not. In order to learn the techniques and styles of Japanese theater, Prince and Sondheim spent two weeks in Japan, “rushing around to all the Noh and Kabuki plays they could find.”³⁰ This shallow knowledge of Japanese theater resulted in a visual stunning but essentially Western (more specifically, Sondheim) style of theater.

The decision to cast the show with Asian American actors made sense to Harold Prince precisely because the show was an “amalgam of Japanese and Western styles.”³¹ To him, Asian American actors embodied the transnational experiences articulated in the musical. However, most of the actors had no training in Kabuki theater or American Broadway musical theater. In fact, Prince acknowledged that he and the casting director Joanna Merlin had a difficult time finding Asian American male actors to fill all sixty-one parts.³² Moreover, most critics and audiences did not appreciate the under-rehearsed performances by inexperienced actors; nor did they like the complex historical commentary delivered by the musical. (Having Commodore Matthew Perry dressed as the Kabuki “demon” didn’t help either.) However, they unanimously appreciated the visual aspects of the show. For instance, *Pacific Overtures* was nominated for ten Tony Awards, including those for best musical, book, original score, actor (Mako), and director. Of the ten, it received two Tony Awards: for scenic design and costume design.

Yellowfaces were replaced with real Asian faces, but what made the most impact to the audiences of *Pacific Overtures* were oriental setting, costumes, and makeup. Because most of the cast lacked Broadway experience, they were not recognized for their artistry, and it was as if Asian American actors brought nothing more than their faces to the musical. Despite the emphasis on their cultural identity as Asian Americans, their life experiences were not reflected in the story of the musical. In short, their Asian American identities and subjectivities were buried behind elaborate oriental costumes and makeup.

By the end of the 1970s, the practice of yellowface began to disappear in American mainstream theater, and plays written by Asian Americans began to receive recognition. In 1988, David Henry Hwang became the first Asian American playwright to be produced on Broadway with his play *M. Butterfly*. Three other works by Hwang have been staged on Broadway: *Golden Child* (1998), a revised version of *Flower Drum Song* (2002), and *Chinglish* (2012). The first three works by Hwang were nominated for the Tony Award for excellence in writing: *M. Butterfly* and *Golden Child* for best play (*M. Butterfly* won the award) and *Flower Drum Song* for best book for a musical. The three works received other recognitions, but the only other award for which all three were nominated was costume design: Eiko Ishioka (*M. Butterfly*), Martin Pakledinaz (*Golden Child*), and Robert Longbottom (*Flower Drum Song*). Not incidentally, all three works feature elaborate traditional Chinese costumes.

Other shows with Asian themes that have done exceptionally well in the category of costume design in Tony Awards include: *The King and I* (winner in 1952); *Rashomon* (nominated in 1959); *The World of Suzie Wong* (nominated in 1959); *Lovely Ladies*, *Kind*

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Gentlemen (nominated in 1971); and the revival of *South Pacific* (winner in 2008). Is it a coincidence that most of the shows that featured Asian American performers in oriental costumes since the 1950s were nominated for the Tony Award for best costume? In twentieth-century America, theatrical shows set in Asia (or some variation of the “orient”) have been consistently popular. Every time an Asian body has appeared on the Broadway stage, the oriental costume (p. 371) worn by the actor has received an unusual amount of attention. I argue that the connection between the Asian or Asian American actor and the oriental costume on Broadway has been not coincidental but essential. Moreover, such costumes have been popular not only because they provide visual pleasure to the audience with exotic spectacles. Rather, they are popular because the costumes reflect a long-standing convention necessary to make Asian-ness legible onstage on Broadway and in other mainstream venues. The practice of yellowface makeup has gradually disappeared because of Asian American actors’ protest and because it no longer reflected the changing cultural values. However, oriental costumes have not been perceived as offensive as yellowface by both Asian American and mainstream theatergoers.

It can be argued that costumes are more neutral than yellowface makeup: The latter forcibly changes the look of the actor’s face by distorting the eye to create the slanted look in order to represent the dominant culture’s perception of the oriental. The face looks caricatured and artificial. Furthermore, browning the skin recalls blackface makeup, a practice with a well-known history now seen as categorically racist and appalling. In contrast, a costume can be an actual piece of clothing from Asia, or it can be celebrated for its beauty and tradition in an Asian culture (as in the kimono in Japan). But the fundamental purpose of the two as theatrical conventions is the same: both reflect the history that has privileged the white body in performance. White actors have had the free license to literally dress up and make up in any race as they wished and to interpret the racial character as they saw fit. Asian American actors in the 1960s and 1970s interpreted yellowface as a metonymy for the stage oriental embodied by white actors, and in many respects, it was so. But having Asian American actors embody oriental conventions does not mean that problematic representations have disappeared. Even with the yellowface gone, the costume has remained as the metonymy for the stage oriental that the audience is most familiar with and expects to see on Broadway. While protesting yellowface practice, Asian American theater artists embraced oriental costumes probably because clothing was seen as an innocuous way to market and consume Asian-ness in mainstream theater. By wearing the oriental costumes and embodying the conventionalized Asian-ness, Asian American performers finally had the opportunity to appear in major roles onstage.

Asian American Costume Designer

The founding ideals of Asian American theater were fundamentally political because its purpose was to oppose the accepted conventions of privileging white actors and Euro-American plays and to challenge the industry that excluded minority artists. At the same time, the convention of oriental costumes was not challenged by those who founded and led the Asian American theater movement. For example, when Mako began to lead the

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East West Players (the first Asian American theater company) in 1965, one of the first plays the company presented was *Rashomon* by Fay Kanin and Michael Kanin, a British play originally written for white actors in yellowface. How, then, should costume design and designers be included in the history of Asian American theater? Is costume design apolitical and open to interpretation by whoever uses it or views it? If so, does the costume designer have political agency? And what does it mean to call Willa Kim an Asian American costume designer?

(p. 372) Willa Kim's career as a costume designer began in the 1950s before the emergence of Asian American consciousness and Asian American theater as a movement. The dominant narrative of Asian American theater history is founded on the notion that Asian Americans and their stories need to be represented onstage and that Asian American theater artists deserve the same opportunities as any other theater artists in the country. Asian American theater, as a whole, was created because artists could not find opportunities in mainstream theater. "Asian American" as a panethnic category was used in order to make theater artists visible and to align Asian American theater artists with other artists of minority groups. The founding agenda for Asian American theater was, in a sense, the opposite of Willa Kim's trajectory as a designer. In the 1960s and the 1970s, Asian American theater was created as a way to critique the white-dominated mainstream theater, while Willa Kim was very much the insider of the very same mainstream theater.

Willa Kim may have been left out of the historical narrative of Asian American theater, but in reality, she has designed for productions of Asian American plays. She was the costume designer for the 1972 production of Frank Chin's *Chickencoop Chinaman* at the American Place Theatre, the first Asian American play produced in New York City. In 1981, she designed for the production of David Henry Hwang's *Family Devotions* at the Public Theater. Willa Kim has never worked with an Asian American theater company, and the productions are only two out of over 150 shows Willa Kim designed during her career. However, both *Chickencoop Chinaman* and *Family Devotions* are historically significant in that they were produced at the beginning of the careers of two of the most important Asian American playwrights. The fact that Willa Kim was involved in the production should not be an easily forgotten part of that history. More importantly, the two plays are representative of Asian American plays of the 1970s and 1980s, when the majority of Asian American writers wrote in the genre of realism. As Josephine Lee notes, theatrical realism can be used to denote "authenticity" and "realness" of representation, but it is also a political strategy against stage orientalism.³³ By showing "real" Asian American characters without exotic settings or costumes, their subjectivity as Americans can be made legible. For example, production photos of Frank Chin's *Chickencoop Chinaman* show the cast wearing outfits reflective of the 1972 fashion with wide pants and turtleneck sweaters. The images of the actor Randall Duk Kim wearing Willa Kim's costume in Frank Chin's first play signify one of the most important moments in Asian American theater history.³⁴ Had Willa Kim designed mostly for Asian American plays during her career, it would be easy to categorize

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her and even celebrate her as an Asian American costume designer, but the vast majority of her work has expanded well beyond Asian American theater.

It is difficult to include Kim in the narrative of Asian American theater because her range as a designer has exceeded expectations and transcended infrastructural categories of American theater. She has had a clear preference for nonrealistic works and found plays more challenging than ballets and operas. In an interview, she emphasizes that her work is best “when it’s very imaginative and unrealistic.”³⁵ Asian American theater, on the whole, is based heavily on realism in the politics of representation. Kim, on the other hand, prefers to move away from realism and focuses on innovation and technology of design. This meant that within her oeuvre, some of Kim’s costumes could be described as “oriental” or even yellowface. In 1969, for instance, Willa Kim was asked to design (p. 373) for Gian Carlo Menotti’s *Help! Help! The Globolinks* and Igor Stravinsky’s *Le Rossignol* at the Santa Fe Opera Company. The former was a parable, and the set and costume design by Willa Kim was abstract, and the latter, the opera by Stravinsky, was a Hans Christian Andersen story set in ancient China.³⁶ Production photos show non-Asian performers in Kim’s Asian-inspired costumes wearing makeup to look Asian. Bobbi Owen writes, “Willa Kim’s Asian heritage, which has often been cited as underpinning her composed yet witty style, was clearly valued by Bliss Herbert [the director] for this production.”³⁷ “Composed” and “witty” are not the usual descriptors for Asians, but Owen uses them to describe how Willa Kim’s ethnic heritage was the source of her extraordinary creativity. Whether she was seen as a good designer because she was Asian or she played to the expectations of others by creating works that were oriental and exotic may never be answered in a satisfactory way, but the two possibilities seem to have coexisted and fed on each other. Ultimately, what remain as historical evidence are production photos that exhibit Willa Kim’s versatility and range that include designs in the tradition of stage orientalism. And her colleagues and critics assumed and concluded that her art stemmed from her “Asian heritage.”

In reviews and interviews with Willa Kim, very little is made of her Korean American background, and the narrative of her career lacks direct references to her ethnicity. When her Korean heritage is mentioned, it is done in a cultural sense (as in food) or in the context of her family (specifically her famous brother). Both Anna May Wong and Philip Ahn, who found mainstream success as actors in film before the Asian American Movement, have expressed difficulties caused by racism and stereotyping. Their biographies are fascinating because of the fame they achieved despite social barriers. Willa Kim’s biographical narrative, on the other hand, lacks such race-based roadblocks, or at least, she seems to not care about them even if they did exist. In a 2004 interview in *American Theatre*, she is asked, “Were you from the first or second generation of Chinese Americans?” but she does not correct the interviewer. She answers, “I am second generation. I was born just outside of Santa Ana in Orange County, a Republican stronghold right now, unfortunately.”³⁸ Kim takes the time to specify her preference for political party while not bothering to explain that she is actually Korean American.

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The narrative that takes full account of her life and career would need to balance the celebratory acknowledgment of her undisputable success and the lack of political perspective that makes the reception of her success ambiguous. As a costume designer, Willa Kim has had the flexibility to work in a wide range of forms and genres of performance around the world, and the vast variety of work she has created makes it difficult to analyze her in the context of Asian American theater, which emphasizes dialogue-based realistic plays. Kim has worked in opera, ballet, Broadway musicals, plays, ice-skating, film, television, and even the Olympics. Kim was the designer of costumes for the dancers in the performance of Beethoven's *Ode to Joy* during the opening ceremonies for the XVIII Winter Olympic Games in Nagano, Japan, in 1998. Her work in international venues grew as her reputation as a top designer and innovator of design solidified.

Dance historian Yutian Wong explains in her study of the Japanese dancer Michio Ito that the trope of the "international artists" is often used to "deracialize" their identity:

The desire to reclaim Ito is accomplished through the trope of internationality as a process of deracialization overlaid with the desire to domesticate his racial otherness. This desire both (p. 374) distances Ito from the perceived limitations of race, ethnicity, or Japaneseness as a definitive qualifier of his artistic production, while assuming that the categories are in and of themselves limiting. The politics of whiteness, as that which remains invisibly central and absented from racial, ethnic, and national otherness, are never enunciated.³⁹

A similar process of internationalization has taken place in creating a narrative of Willa Kim, and all sectors of the theater community have, for one reason or another, participated in deracializing her. For the mainstream design community, Willa Kim's ethnic background was mostly irrelevant because it was her work, not herself, that would be represented onstage. For Asian American theater artists, their focus has been to find opportunities for actors and playwrights and to remedy racist representations of Asian images onstage. In that framework, their political agenda had to precede aesthetic achievements, and it was often more urgent to tell Asian American stories onstage than to be concerned with innovations and creativity in design. With the trope of the international artist, Willa Kim's work can escape the scrutiny of political correctness and the paradigm that has dominated Asian American theater history. Even the costume designs that can be described as oriental can be categorized as art that transcends culture, race, and nation.

Toward a Historiography of Costume Design in Asian American Theater

Willa Kim presents a dilemma for scholars of Asian American theater. She is an Asian American artist whose successful career should be celebrated, and her design for plays by Frank Chin and David Henry Hwang should be recognized as important contributions. At the same time, her legacy as a designer has solidified as an artist of "Asian heritage" who has designed "dreamy" costumes with her "instinct." Moreover, she has designed

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many costumes that are unequivocally in the tradition of stage orientalism and convention of yellowface. Within the stipulation of what constitutes Asian American theater, she is too multifaceted and contradictory to impose any categorization. Without an appropriate category, Kim could not be made visible and comprehensible in theater scholarship. Perhaps Willa Kim has been in my blind spot because I had to narrow my historian's perspective in researching Asian American theater. The specificity of Asian American theater requires me to acquire a kind of myopic vision of history and to find historical truths in details. In order to study someone like Willa Kim, however, it would be necessary for historians to use hyperopic vision that can encompass all of the venues she worked in: theater, dance, opera, ice skating, the Olympics, and commercials. The convention of stage orientalism and yellowface may have been challenged and mostly eradicated in theater, but the tradition has continued in other variations in dance and opera. It would be even more critical to understand the innovations she made in costume and textile technology. Most theater historians simply do not have the critical vocabularies and knowledge to fully research and articulate design and designers. With my narrow focus, it is not surprising that I could not see and understand Willa Kim and her designs.

I have begun widening the historiographical focus with this chapter by providing a history of oriental conventions in costume design and describing the strategic choices made by (p. 375) founders of Asian American theater to fight against yellowface makeup while accepting oriental costumes. The separation of the face from the body was necessary for Asian American actors to find acting opportunities, but the meaning of the separation deserves further examination, particularly in the context of costume history and theories of body. Scholars who have written about the Asian American body onstage have not made clear what they mean by the body.⁴⁰ Often, when the Asian American body is discussed, it refers mainly to the face. Because of the specific history of yellowface and how it was instrumental in the creation of Asian American theater, the face has become the main trope of the body. Particularly, the Asian eyes have come to signify Asian-ness, as the yellowface makeup is defined primarily as the slanting of the eyes. While focusing on the face, scholars and artists have not paid as much attention to the body or the costume that give it meaning in performance. The body without the face does not have signification in Asian American theater history. In contrast, in African American theater, the color of the skin or the shapes of certain body parts have been central in the discourse of body politics and performance. In Asian American theater, a rich discussion of the Asian American body in its entirety has been absent, and with it, costume history and designers such as Willa Kim have been left out of its narrative.⁴¹

The inclusion of costume history and designers in the scholarship Asian American theater requires the broadening of definitions and contextualization. The historiographical shifting also needs the recentering of what is assumed to be most significant in Asian American theater history. If costume history were to function as the center of Asian American theater, Willa Kim's career would stand out as the representative success story, but more importantly, costume would be inseparable from how the body in performance is understood. Such shifting and recentering would align Asian American theater in history in ways that would make new interpretations possible. For instance, one of the first theatri-

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cal representations of Asian-ness was Afong Moy, who was called a “Chinese Lady,” and in 1834 she and her “room” with Chinese items were put on display in a touring exhibition promoted by the Carne Brothers in New York City. After paying fifty cents, viewers could watch her walk on her bound feet and speak Chinese.⁴² In advertisements and newspaper announcements, Afong Moy’s bound feet are described as the most curious spectacle, but her elaborate costume is always highlighted as a noteworthy part of her performance. “She will be richly dressed in the Chinese costume,” announces an advertisement in *New York Times* in the July 9, 1936, issue. Her costume covers most of her body with a long skirt and sleeves, and in her room, she looks like another form of decoration.⁴³

In the discourse created around Afong Moy, her costume is essential to how her identity is described, and her body is inseparable from her costume and the exotic things that surround her. As Josephine Lee notes, commodity orientalism and decorative orientalism dominated how Asian-ness was introduced to Europe and the United States in the nineteenth century.⁴⁴ Afong Moy’s body had little meaning without her costume and her “room.” In stark contrast, African and African American women’s bodies have attracted imperialistic attention when they were without clothing. From Saartjie “Sarah” Baartman (Venus Hottentot) to Josephine Baker, the naked skin and exposed body parts of the black female body have been fundamental to the discourse of blackness and primitivism. Anne Anlin Cheng makes an accurate observation in her comparison between Afong Moy and Baartman in her book *Second Skin*:

That is, the primitive black woman is all about exposed nakedness, while the “Oriental” woman is all about the sartorial excess, the excessive covering and ornamentation that (p. 376) supposedly symptomizes the East’s overly developed, effeminized, corrupt, and declining civilization. [...] Where Baartman was stripped down for the white male gaze, the demure Moy was fully clothed and sat, herself ornament-like, among layers (tablecloths, draperies, paintings, panels, and so on) of Victorian fantasies of Chinese decorations.⁴⁵

Cheng goes on to describe the Victorian fascination with fabric as a form of orientalism, but her discussion of Moy is only a few pages in a book entirely about Josephine Baker.

The comparison between the Asian body and the black body is fascinating, but what is startling to me as a theater historian is the vast lack of scholarly writing on Asian and Asian American bodies in comparison to the numerous books and articles written on the black body. Moreover, in African American performance history, there is an unyielding continuity in the history of the black body from Baartman to twenty-first-century performances. When it comes to the study of the body, the history of Asian American theater and performance is disjointed and full of epistemological gaps. I argue that focusing on costume history is one way to fill those gaps and to shift the historiographical paradigm of Asian American theater. There is much potential in examining how costumes have been as important as skin color and body shape in the performance of Asian-ness. By exploring such potential, Willa Kim’s work in all of its complexities will be made truly meaningful in theater history and historiography.

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(p. 379) Masequesmay, Gina, and Sean Metzger, eds. *Embodying Asian/American Sexualities*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009.

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Notes:

(1.) Bobbi Owen, 35.

(2.) Owen, 6.

(3.) Since the publication of the book on Willa Kim, at least seven additional monographs on individual designers have been published by USITT. See http://www.usitt.org/store_category.asp?id=1 for a full list of the books.

(4.) Owen, 112.

(5.) For example, the lighting designer Adolphe Appia (1862–1928) is one of few designers included in theater history textbooks, but his work is made historically significant only in connection to Richard Wagner's opera.

(6.) The second monograph USITT published in its series is *The Designs of Ming Cho Lee*.

(7.) Terry Hong, 69. The article focuses on contemporary Korean American actors and playwrights, and Willa Kim is mentioned as a pioneer Korean American theater artist.

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(8.) To name only a few awards she has received: the Irene Sharaff Lifetime Achievement Award from Theatre Development Fund (New York) in 1999; Patricia Zipprodt Award for Innovative Costume Design from Fashion Institute of Technology (New York) in 2003; and the Distinguished Achievement in Costume Design from USITT in 2005. For a full list of all of the awards, see Owen, 91.

(9.) In 1980, Willa Kim designed the costumes for San Francisco Ballet's production of *The Tempest*, including the Caliban costume. She received her first Emmy Award for the broadcast of the ballet on PBS in 1981.

(10.) Owen, 65. Owen quotes Robert Brustein's review of *The Front Page* (written in 1928 by Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur and produced on Broadway in 1936) in the magazine *New Republic*, in which he writes, "Jerome Dempsey as the rotund, orotund mayor, equipped (by the costume designer Willa Kim, whose period designs are characterization in themselves) with tailcoat and fez, bouncing languorously about the stage like a huge beach ball on the surface of the pond." Robert Brustein, "Robert Brustein on Theater," *New Republic* (January 5, 1987): 25-27, 26.

(11.) Owen, 61.

(12.) Owen, 61.

(13.) Quoted on the back cover of Owen's book.

(14.) Owen, 7.

(15.) Owen, 11, 29, and 88.

(16.) In the rest of the essay, I use the term "oriental" without quotes, but I define it specifically to connote a theatrical convention with all of its historically complex ramifications.

(17.) Joseph Roach, 98.

(18.) Roach, 95.

(19.) James S. Moy, 9.

(20.) For examples of the jokes, see Robert G. Lee, *Orientalists: Asian Americans in Popular Culture*.

(21.) Sean Metzger, 627.

(22.) Metzger, 635.

(23.) For studies on the reception of Chinese theater in America, see Daphne Lei, "The Production and Consumption of Chinese Theatre in Nineteenth-Century California" and

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chapter 4 in John Kuo Wei Tchen, *New York before Chinatown: Orientalism and the Shaping of American Culture: 1776–1882*.

(24.) The Chinese population decreased because of a series of anti-Chinese laws that were passed. The anti-Chinese sentiment reached its peak in the 1870s and 1880s and contributed to massacres and massive deportations. By the early twentieth century, new immigration virtually ceased, and those remaining in the states lived in ghettoized areas while their descendants increasing assimilated into the American culture.

(25.) Irvin Paik, 14.

(26.) These nightclub dance scenes were based on actual nightclubs in Chinatowns that reached the height of popularity in the 1930s and 1940s. Owners of the nightclubs, who were Chinese Americans, promoted the exoticization of Asian female performers to attract white patrons. Arthur Dong's documentary film *Forbidden City, USA* (1989) provides an accurate history of the nightclub and its influences and Asian American performers.

(27.) Margarita Rosa, A26. The OAA initially lost the case but won the appeal.

(28.) The musical tells the story of the "opening" of Japan to the West with the arrival of Commodore Matthew Perry of the US Navy in Tokyo Bay in 1853. The musical also makes commentaries on the exchanges between the two countries and ends with scenes set in modernized Japan of 1975.

(29.) Lillian Ross, 24–27.

(30.) "A New Musical Brings Japan to Broadway," 13.

(31.) Ibid.

(32.) In order to stay true to the Kabuki tradition, Harold Prince wanted to cast all roles, including the female ones, with male actors. But there were only a handful of Asian American male actors who could sing, dance, and act at the level of Broadway theater. Prince was adamant about his intention. When others tried to convince him to audition Puerto Rican actors "who look Oriental," he stayed committed to Asian American actors. One exception was Iaso Sato, an acclaimed Japanese actor. And there were three Asian American actresses in the cast: Kim Miyori, Diane Lam, and Susan Kikuchi.

(33.) For an extensive discussion on realism and Asian American spectatorship, see chapter 2 in Josephine Lee's *Performing Asian America: Race and Ethnicity on the Contemporary Stage*.

(34.) Production photos of Frank Chin's play can be seen in Frank Chin, *Chickencoop Chinaman/The Year of the Dragon: Two Plays*.

(35.) "Twenty Questions: Costume Designer Willa Kim," 128.

(36.) Images of the costume are reprinted on pages 32–33 in Bobbi Owen's book.

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(37.) Owen, 33.

(38.) "Twenty Questions," 128.

(39.) Yutian Wong, 149.

(40.) I include myself in this group of scholars. For significant works that discuss representation of Asian American bodies onstage, see Dorinne Kondo's *About Face: Performing Race in Fashion and Theater*, Karen Shimakawa's *National Abjection: The Asian American Body Onstage*, and Josephine Lee's "Racial Actors, Liberal Myths." Other studies of the Asian American body address sexual and gender politics as exemplified by the anthology *Embodying Asian/American Sexualities*, edited by Gina Masequesmay and Sean Metzger.

(41.) One exception to this absence is Priya Srinivasan's *Sweating Saris: Indian Dance as Transnational Labor*, which examines the labor of Indian women dancers and the importance of their dancing bodies in *saris*.

(42.) James S. Moy discusses Afong Moy in his *Marginal Sights: Staging the Chinese in America*, 12.

(43.) The picture can be seen online at the National Women's History Museum website. <http://www.nwhm.org/online-exhibits/chinese/4.html> (accessed May 28, 2013).

(44.) See chapter one in Josephine Lee's *The Japan of Pure Invention*.

(45.) Anne Anlin Cheng, 151-52.

Esther Kim Lee

Esther Kim Lee is associate professor in the School of Theatre, Dance, and Performance Studies at the University of Maryland, College Park. She is the author of *A History of Asian American Theatre* (2006), which received the 2007 Award for Outstanding Book given by Association for Theatre in Higher Education and the editor of *Seven Contemporary Plays from the Korean Diaspora in the Americas* (2012). She was the editor of *Theatre Survey*, the flagship journal of the American Society for Theatre Research. She is currently working on a book project on the Chinese American playwright David Henry Hwang.