

Historiography of Yellowface: Stage Make-up, Materiality and Technology

ESTHER KIM LEE

In April 2016, it was announced that the American actress Scarlett Johansson had been cast in a film adaptation of the Japanese manga series *The Ghost in the Shell* and that the producers of the film had experimented with computer-generated imagery (CGI) to make Johansson, a white actress, look Japanese on screen (Sampson 2016). Although the creators of the film ultimately backed away from the idea, the technological possibility prompted many to ask whether using CGI to modify the racial look of an actor would become the new frontier of yellowface. The convention of yellowface make-up, which alters the face of a non-Asian actor to look phenotypically 'Asian', has used the most innovative and creative technology available at any given time. And 'Asians' onstage and on screen were imagined fictional characters that were created by white writers, directors and actors.

Yellowface has a long history, one that began in European countries during the era of colonial exploration, and it is an acting convention that began in theatre. In most cases, the skin is darkened and the eyes are covered with prosthetics or pulled back with tape to make them look slanted. The make-up is accompanied by costumes and settings that signify fantasies of the exotic and faraway land. The history of the convention can be traced back to the first representations of 'Oriental' or 'barbarian' characters on European stages, and for centuries, it has remained an accepted and even a 'natural' way to stage Asian characters. Unlike blackface, which has all but disappeared in the twenty-first century, yellowface regularly makes its appearance in revivals of *The Mikado*, *Madame Butterfly* and other popular shows about the 'Orient'.

As I and others have written elsewhere, the convention of yellowface was questioned and challenged in the United States when Asian American actors began to protest it in the 1960s (E. Lee 2006; Kurahashi 1999; Shimakawa 2002; J. Lee 1997). The actors argued that Asian characters should be portrayed by Asian or

Asian American actors and framed their protests in terms of casting and employment opportunities. Those protests were the catalyst for what is now known as Asian American theatre, and the actors' opposition to what they saw as an unfair practice has been a guiding force in the growth of Asian American theatre for the past five decades. The East West Players, for instance, was founded in 1965 by actors who wanted to showcase their acting abilities to Hollywood producers and directors, and it is now one of the largest regional theatre companies on the West Coast. However, the growth and success of Asian American theatre has not led to the total discarding of yellowface. A new generation of actors are finding themselves in the same protest that began almost sixty years ago. It is true that awareness of the problems of whitewashing and yellowface has increased throughout those decades, and Asian American actors have more employment opportunities compared to their predecessors. For them, progress and protest are inseparable.

Nonetheless, what is missing in the protests and controversies surrounding yellowface is a substantive understanding of its history and historiography. Both those who argue that yellowface is a racist practice and those who claim it as an important part of European acting tradition engage with the topic with only a general and even incoherent sense of its historical narrative. There are many reasons for this lack of historical understanding, but in this essay, I identify three major historiographical interventions that can be made to both explain and explore yellowface as a historical subject. And in the last section of the essay, I provide a case study of how the interventions can be made in the construction of the history of yellowface.

First, a surprisingly meagre amount of research has been done on the history of yellowface. While there are dozens of books and articles written on the history of blackface, only a few articles and book chapters have been written on yellowface. The research that has been done cites specific performers and theatrical genres in describing the representation and reception of yellowface. Sean Metzger (2014), for instance, writes about the American actor Charles Parsloe (1836–98) in his creation of the 'Chinaman' characters in comedic plays, and Krystyn R. Moon (2005) focuses on Chinese-American performers in popular music and performance. Robert G. Lee (1999) describes examples of yellowface in minstrel shows in the mid-nineteenth century in his monograph *Orientalists*, which examines cultural stereotypes of Asian Americans in the United States. Such individual examples are invaluable in showing how yellowface has been used by performers in specific and anecdotal ways, but it is difficult to extract from the disparate studies a more coherent historical understanding of yellowface. More research is needed to establish the patterns and developments of yellowface as a historical phenomenon beyond the individual anecdotes. Without a critical mass of case studies of yellowface, it would be difficult to allow the plurality of contending interpretations that are essential in creating a complex and nuanced historical narrative.

Secondly, I argue that the historiography of yellowface has not been coherent or clear because it has lacked what the theatre historian Thomas Postlewait (2009: 7) calls an 'epistemological foundation'. As Postlewait notes, historical thinking 'depends upon certain categorical assumptions and presuppositions, such as concepts of time and space, principles of causality, ideas of contiguity, models of human behavior, and cultural ideologies' (2009: 98). Historians need these and other epistemological concepts in

thinking about and interpreting a historical event and to organize and structure the historical discourse. In other words, an epistemological foundation is necessary in framing how a historical event can be known and understood. I posit that there is currently no well-defined framework to explain what can be known about yellowface and how we know what we know. Indeed, what is yellowface? How do we recognize and categorize it? Yes, it is a theatrical convention that involves stage make-up and costumes, and it is rooted in the past that many find troubling. At the same time, it is part of European and Euro-American acting history, which requires its own set of historiographical questions. Additionally, what does it mean for Asian American theatre to be defined in opposition to yellowface? Is yellowface a convention that simply needs to disappear? Why has it been so persistent despite decades of activism against it, and what does the persistence signify? What is the best way to explain yellowface historiographically? What framework should be used to research the history of yellowface?

Indeed, yellowface as a historical subject requires an epistemological foundation built on these fundamental questions, and it should be studied from multiple perspectives with a diverse set of methodologies, which I identify as the third intervention. This intervention is an extension of the second one, but it is imperative to emphasize its importance separately. The questions of epistemological foundation are not only theoretical questions but also tied to the realities of conducting research or what Postlewait identifies as ‘the pragmatic matter of historical methodology’ (2009: 101). He emphasizes that concepts and procedures are ‘tied together throughout our historical study’ (101). How yellowface is known conceptually depends on the process or the methodology used to create that knowledge. In other words, *how* research is conducted in archives, databases and other sites of knowledge – both physical and virtual – determines the epistemological foundation of yellowface. As a start, there are several pragmatic challenges in researching yellowface. In the archives I have searched, for one, the term ‘yellowface’ is not a designated category, and it is not a searchable keyword for finding primary materials. As far as theatre archives are concerned, ‘yellowface’ does not exist in their catalogues, and researching it requires ‘some deep digging’ as one archivist told me.

The absence of yellowface in catalogues and as a keyword in the archival databases underscores the need to make it legible both as a concept and in the research process, and the two forms of legibility are inseparable. For example, if one were to consider yellowface as a character type performed by specific actors, it would be necessary to search archival databases for the actors’ names and the characters they played. Most archives privilege the cataloguing of individual actors’ names, and the more famous ones have their own archival collections. In such collections, the researcher can find a specific actor’s images, photos, reviews and biographies, all of which can be used to construct how the actor performed in yellowface and how the performance was received by critics and audiences. To cite another example, yellowface can also be understood within the framework of Orientalism as a visual representation of how the ‘Orient’ was imagined by the West. In such a case, yellowface used in theatrical productions would be examined in conjunction with comparable representations in paintings, home decors and China dish designs within the framework of what Josephine Lee describes as ‘decorative orientalism that fuses racial fantasy with the

consumption of commodities' (2010: 141). In such studies, the aesthetic design of yellowface would be a central area of focus for the researcher.

Another way to frame yellowface epistemologically and methodologically is to define it as an archetype, and this is the framework I will be exploring in the rest of this essay. Examining the history of yellowface as a history of an archetype can help explain how it has persisted and what that persistence means in the imagination of Asianness both on and off stage. Indeed, various iterations of yellowface can be seen in many different forms beyond the theatre: films, cartoons, postcards, jewellery, sweet wrappers, shooting targets and even Post-it notes. The simple gesture of pulling one's eyes upward to look 'Asian' can be seen as a performative iteration of the archetype. In his essay, 'The Persistence of the Archetype', Bert O. States defines archetype as 'the ghost of a former form, endlessly migratory, infinitely tolerant of new content, ever fresh, ever archaic' (1980: 334). An archetype is, in other words, paradoxical because it is both same and different, both an origin and a recurrence. The archetype of the mother, for instance, remains the same while it is made different with new and 'ever fresh' content as exemplified by specific characters such as Hamlet's Gertrude. Similarly, yellowface as an archetype is both 'ever fresh' and 'ever archaic'. From the early modern period to the internet age of the twenty-first century, yellowface make-up has been used by white actors to represent what they imagine as Asianness in both similar and different ways. The archetype has also migrated across historical times and geographical spaces in diverse forms and contents. For instance, the possibility of using CGI technology to transform the American actress Scarlett Johansson into a Japanese in the film version of *The Ghost in the Shell* is the 'ever fresh' take on an 'ever archaic' archetype of yellowface.

Framing yellowface as an archetype underscores the need to differentiate what has remained the same historically and what has changed during its evolution. The differentiation is not only about the visual images of yellowface but also about the materiality and technology of producing it. As a case study of yellowface as an archetype, I have chosen to examine stage make-up books from the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century because they provide solid and detailed evidence of the material and technology used in creating and producing yellowface for theatre actors. The books document what was, at the time they were written, considered new cutting-edge make-up technology in altering an actor's face. I also aim to analyse the use of specific make-up materials and techniques in creating racial, national and gender differences onstage. During a time when race was defined in terms of colour, facial make-up for the stage was a powerful mode of representation, and the dressing room was a site of creating social stratification in which subtleties of human difference had to be negotiated with each application of colour, lines, textures and shades.

THE HUE AND SURFACE OF YELLOWFACE

As documented by Krystyn Moon (2005), the invention of greasepaint in the mid-nineteenth century drastically changed the practice of stage make-up. Before the use of greasepaint, powder was used to alter skin colour, but with the increasing advancement in lighting technology, specifically gas lighting which was brighter

compared to candles or oil lamps, it became imperative for actors to wear longer lasting and more natural looking make-up. Greasepaint was created by individual actors or their assistants by combining some form of grease with powdered materials such as mineral pigments. Greasepaint was used by European actors before the nineteenth century, but it became a commercial product starting around the 1870s. According to Martin Harrison (1998), commercial greasepaint was invented by Ludwig Leichner (1836–1912), a Wagnerian opera singer in the 1860s in Germany. It was then brought to England a decade later. Leichner's greasepaint allowed actors access to ready-made make-up that was easy to apply and natural looking. It was also lauded for reducing the undesired effects of perspiration.

According to Harrison, Leichner created a number system for his greasepaint: No. 1 indicated the lightest colour, and No. 8, the darkest, was reddish brown and was used for 'Indian' characters. Harrison notes that the highest number in the range of colours increased from eight to twenty, and by 1938 it went up to fifty-four, out of which 5 and 9 were the most frequently used shades (1998: 140). During the turn of the twentieth century, different companies in both Europe and the United States manufactured and marketed their own greasepaint kits, but the general rule of Leichner's number system of 1 being the lightest continued throughout the twentieth century. A similar colour system is still used by cosmetic companies when they number foundation colours.

In 1898, The Dramatic Publishing Company based in Chicago published *Hageman's Make-up Book* written by Maurice Hageman, which was the how-to book for the set of greasepaints manufactured and sold by the company. The book lists eighteen colours with 1 being 'very pale flesh' and 18 being 'East Indian'. Here, I list the entire colour system to provide a full context for analysing how the numbers were designated.

- No. 1. Very Pale Flesh Color.
- No. 2. Light Flesh, Deeper Tint.
- No. 3. Natural Flesh Color, for Juvenile Heroes.
- No. 4. Rose Tint Color, for Juvenile Heroes.
- No. 5. Deeper shade color, for Juvenile Heroes.
- No. 6. Healthy Sunburnt, for Juvenile Heroes.
- No. 7. Healthy Sunburnt, Deeper Shade.
- No. 8. Sallow, for young men.
- No. 9. Healthy color of Middle Age.
- No. 10. Sallow, for Old Age.
- No. 11. Ruddy, for Old Age.
- No. 12. Olive, Healthy.
- No. 13. Olive, Lighter Shade.
- No. 14. Gipsy. Flesh Color.
- No. 15. Othello.

No. 16. Chinese.

No. 17. Indian.

No. 18. East Indian. (Hageman 1898: 13).

It is notable that the colour for Othello is No. 15, which is lighter than that of the Chinese, No. 16. Shakespeare's famed character Othello was often portrayed as having a 'tan' colour and was distinguished from the blackened faces of minstrel shows. Minstrel performers used burnt cork and other forms of make-up specific to minstrelsy in blackening their skin, and the black colour was not initially part of Leichner's or other manufactured make-up kits. The book excludes blackface make-up because minstrel actors practiced their own trade technique and convention in transforming their face for the stage.

Nevertheless, there were important similarities between blackface make-up and yellowface make-up on the nineteenth-century American stage. In describing the make-up technique for 'Chinese and Mongolians', which were often interchangeable in make-up books, Hageman recommends his readers to use No. 16 for 'groundtone'. He goes on to explain the process:

Sallow complexions. Small, almond-shaped eyes. Brown for lining. Eyebrows and eyelids slant upwards. High cheek bones and flat noses. Shaven crowns except the occiput, from which a braided cue descends. To have this cue rolled up on top of the head, when a Chinaman addresses you, is a sign of disrespect. When a coolie speaks to a superior, he will immediately unroll it, – at least in China. Chinamen under forty years of age do not wear any hair on the face. After that they sometimes wear a drooping, gray moustache and goatee, but always scanty ones. People of lower castes, however, never wear them. Savants, doctors and statesmen usually wear large, round eyeglasses, set in horn or brass. (Hageman 1898: 60)

In 1898, when Hageman's book was published, the most popular Chinese character on the American stage was the stage Chinaman. As Sean Metzger (2014) writes in his book *Chinese Looks*, the Chinaman character was best exemplified by the titular character of the frontier melodrama *Ah Sin* co-written by Bret Harte and Mark Twain in 1877. The comic actor Charles Parsloe developed and popularized the Chinaman character through comedic mannerism and jokes about his looks, especially his long-braided hair. Much has been said about Parsloe's costumes, props and mannerism, but his facial make-up has not received equal amount of attention.

In his examination of Parsloe, Metzger posits that 'the application of cosmetics did not produce a transformation equivalent to blackface' and that 'the enactment of yellowface for Parsloe seems to have involved a slightly different process, dependent on costume and the physical actions enabled through it' (2014: 43). Metzger puts much emphasis on the queue and argues that what he calls the 'queue routines' were the highlight of his enactment of the Chinaman character. I agree that the queue was essential to the comic effect, and it was the 'ethnic signifier' that made the character entertaining to watch. Moreover, the comedic actor was known mostly for his physical acts that were read as 'Chinese' by the audience. Such acts included stealing objects and stuffing them in his oversized

sleeves, chewing on his queue or tripping clumsily. While his physical acts are significant in interpreting the actor's performance choices, it is as important to pay attention to the cosmetic choices.

While Parsloe's yellowface was not as drastic as blackface, it is remarkable that multiple authors of make-up books published around the turn of the twentieth century made much effort to describe what they called 'Chinese' or 'Mongolian' make-up technique. In a make-up book published in 1905, the author, James Young, devotes two full pages to describing 'The Chinaman'. Young begins his entry by explaining the prevalence of the Chinaman character:

The Chinaman is a character that appears sufficiently often on the stage to justify the manufacturers of grease paint to prepare a special color for this purpose, labeling it in their catalogue, 'Mongolian'. (Young 1905: 119)

According to the images included in the entry, the Chinaman characters feature darker than average hue, and their hair and costumes are similar to those of Charles Parsloe. Figure 3.6.1.1 illustrates the type of make-up Young describes in his book.



FIGURE 3.6.1.1: James T. Powers (1862–1943) in San Toy at Daly's Theatre in New York City, 1900. Sarony/Museum of the City of New York. 46.246.245.

However, there is a significant difference between Hageman's 1898 publication and Young's 1905 publication. Hageman's heading for his entry is 'Chinese and Mongolians', while Young's heading is 'The Chinaman'. Young does not have a separate entry for 'The Chinese or Mongolians', and I can only assume that by 'The Chinaman', he meant all Chinese and Mongolian characters.

Another difference between Hageman's make-up instructions and that of Young is the addition of other Asian nationalities. The number system for greasepaint in Young's book ranges from 1 to 20 and is basically the same as Hageman's system until No. 16 for Chinese, but he adds two more categories to include additional Asian types. Also added is 'Negro' as the darkest tone in the new number system. 'Negro', in this case, refers to black characters such as Uncle Tom who appeared in staged plays or what Young calls 'legitimate negro impersonations' and is differentiated from 'The Minstrel Negro' that required burnt cork make-up (Young 1905: 85).

No. 16 Chinese

No. 17 American Indian

No. 18 East Indian, Hindoos [*sic*], Filipino, Malays, etc.

No. 19 Japanese

No. 20 Negro

Remarkably, the Japanese nationality is included as a separate category of flesh colour while 'Hindoos, Filipino, and Malays' are simply added to the pre-existing category of East Indian. Moreover, the colour for Japanese is listed as darker than that of Chinese or East Indian. Arthur H. Schwerin, the author of *Make-up Magic* published in 1939, states in his book that 'the make-up of the Japanese is very similar to that of the Chinaman', but at the turn of the twentieth century, authors of make-up books gave much attention to the supposed phenotypical differences between the two nationalities. And they used colour as the primary concept to singularize those differences. According to the make-up books, yellowface required flesh colours that were darker than the colour of Othello but lighter than Negroes. Within the entire spectrum of the greasepaint colour system, yellowface make-up – for both Chinese/Mongolian and Japanese characters – belonged in the darkest colour group.

During the turn of the twentieth century, China was weakened as a world power and Japan was on the rise, especially after it defeated Russia in the Russo-Japanese War in 1905. Because of this shift in power and America's fascination with Japonism (the influence of Japanese art, fashion and decor on the West), American writers and artists made much attempt in trying to understand the difference between China and Japan. In make-up books, the Japanese is described in more nuanced ways compared to the conflation and overt stereotyping of the Chinese or the Mongolian. Both Hageman and Young include in their books a separate section on Japanese characters, which they endeavour to distinguish from Chinese characters. In his explanation of the colour system, Hageman explains that different variations of the numbered shades can be custom ordered, and the example he gives is that of 'Japanese': 'Any other tint, – for instance "Japanese," which must not be confounded with "Chinese," as it is different in shade, can be manufactured to order' (Hageman

1898: 13). According to Hageman, the Japanese complexion is different from that of the Chinese:

They are a cleaner, healthier and sturdier race, although below the medium height. A special grease paint (not numbered) is made for them, which came in vogue with the advent of 'The Mikado'. Their eyes do not slant like the Chinese. Beards and moustaches are very scant, and seldom worn, except by officers and soldiers. (Hageman 1898: 60)

James Young echoes Hageman in crediting *The Mikado* for introducing Japanese characters to the European and American theatrical stages. The 1885 comic opera by Gilbert and Sullivan had a tremendous influence on the representation of Japanese culture (J. Lee 2010). Young, however, makes an important distinction between the Chinese and the Japanese characters. He states, 'Among the many features noted in the development of the Japanese is a desire to acquire the appearance of the cosmopolite, and as far as their physical limitations will permit they have succeeded' (Young 1905: 116). In other words, Japanese people were seen as more modernized and cosmopolitan. Unlike the Chinaman character, which was based on the white American's view of Chinese labourers, the Japanese characters were based on the white American's view of Japan, which was quickly embracing Westernization and modernization. After the forced opening of Japan in the 1850s, Japonism had a significant impact on European and American art and fashion, and Japanese people were seen as an advanced race in the Western understanding of human evolution.

One way the supposed Japanese superiority was represented through stage make-up was the use of rice powder. Young writes, 'The manufacturers will furnish a stick of Japanese flesh tint grease paint. After this has been rubbed in, carefully powder with soft, rice powder, as it will be more in keeping with the spirit of the part; it will remove the greasy appearance, and will not materially alter the shade of the grease paint' (Young 1905: 118). Powder, according to Young, was to be used as 'the beautifier'. Its function was to make the face look soft and natural. He concludes that powder represents the 'finishing touch' that completes the make-up. However, in his description of the make-up for the Chinaman, Young states, 'It is not absolutely necessary to powder the face; the shine thereon imparts a more natural effect, but the powder aids in perfecting the blending of the wig, which is so important' (120). In other words, the Chinaman character should have a shiny face, and the powder should be used only for enhancing the look of the wig. As far as I can tell, Young recommends rice powder for only the Japanese and the Chinese characters albeit for different purposes. Other ethnic characters are advised to use powder colours that match the greasepaint colour.

TOWARDS A HISTORY OF YELLOWFACE

The acting convention of non-Asian actors portraying Asian characters may be as old as the first encounters between the West and the East, but each iteration of the portrayal has been based on new technology. At the turn of the twentieth century,

greasepaint and rice powder were the cutting-edge technology, as CGI is in the twenty-first century. And like all technologies, they were tools to imagine a new reality and to educate the viewer to see things differently. The authors of the make-up books promoted their books as *educational* guidebooks for both amateur and professional actors and to elevate theatrical make-up as a legitimate artform. The publishers of James Young's *Making Up* claim that

The aim has been to produce an educational work, exhaustively treating of this fascinating subject, and they hope to convince its readers that nothing in the slightest degree approaching it has ever appeared. Not only are the materials, necessities and methods of making up thoroughly described here, but the valuable knowledge, so inculcated, is delightfully emphasized by and embellished with costly reproductions of rare photographs of theatrical folk, both on and off the stage, which have been procured with considerable pains and outlay. (Young 1905: n.a.)

The publishers' stress on newness, accuracy, details, materiality and method underscores their promotion of stage make-up as a form of science-based technology that can be used to gain and create new knowledge about theatrical characters. They conclude their message by quoting Cardinal Richelieu: 'Ye cannot know what ye have never tried'. The publishers ask the readers to try the make-up detailed in the book so that they may gain knowledge to play different characters more accurately and convincingly.

It is this emphasis on embodied knowledge that prompts me to think about how theatre historians can use the materiality of make-up to create an epistemological foundation for yellowface and how it can also be used as a pragmatic research methodology. For the actor who heeded the publishers' recommendation to try out the make-up, each application of greasepaint and power would have helped the actor transform into the character he or she desired to embody. More importantly, each choice of colour, texture, tone and lines would have marked racial and national stratifications on the actor's face and indicated whether the character should be comical, inferior or beautiful. And when the actor stepped on to a stage in front of an audience, her/his goal would have been to convince the viewers that the character was thoroughly 'real' and that she or he was the authority in portraying different racial types. The make-up books are, therefore, an essential part of an epistemological foundation and a pragmatic methodology that are needed to make yellowface known and knowable as a historical subject. They can illuminate how make-up as a form of technology has been utilized, constructed and produced to perpetuate images of Asians onstage and on screen and why such images have persisted.