

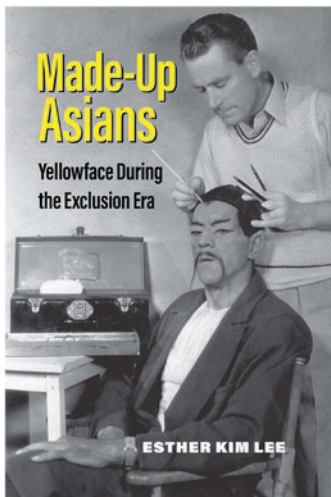
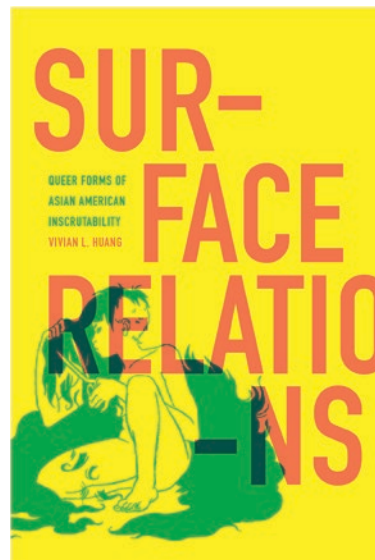
Concerning Books

Expressions of Surface

Asian American Forms in Pandemic Times

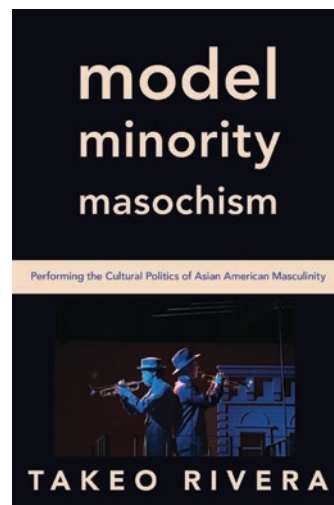
Crystal Song

Surface Relations: Queer Forms of Asian American Inscrutability. By Vivian L. Huang. Duke University Press, 2022; 240 pp.; illustrations. \$99.95 cloth, \$25.95 paper, e-book available.



Made-Up Asians: Yellowface During the Exclusion Era. By Esther Kim Lee. University of Michigan Press, 2022; 282 pp.; illustrations. \$85.00 cloth, \$34.95 paper, e-book available.

Model Minority Masochism: Performing the Cultural Politics of Asian American Masculinity. By Takeo Rivera. Oxford University Press, 2022; 224 pp.; illustrations. \$125.00 cloth, \$35.00 paper, e-book available.



In February 2020, a woman wearing a face mask was attacked in a Manhattan subway station by a man who pushed her against the wall and beat her after hailing her as “diseased bitch” (Brown and Sosa 2020). During the same weeks before social distancing measures were implemented across the United States, a man riding the train in Brooklyn was assailed by a fellow passenger who yelled at him to “move” multiple times before, having provoked no response, aggressively spraying air freshener at his motionless body (Avalos 2020). Writing from what is ostensibly the other side of the Covid-19 pandemic, I am still as struck by such incidents as I was when they first began to surface—innumerable accounts of apparently Asian people being harassed or assaulted in public spaces by others who felt their very presence was a hazard. These are far from the only shapes anti-Asian sentiment has assumed—merely some of the more spectacular. But they reveal something vital not only about the enduring anxieties associated with Asian Americans and disease—such that our participation in the biopolitical project remains contentious—but also about what Vivian L. Huang terms a “national fear and suspicion toward the silent, the nonvisible, the unreliable, the flat and flexible, and the distant” (185). The figure of the masked Asian woman, for instance—especially in a moment when mask wearing had not yet been mandated and thus resignified as a marker of social responsibility—reads simultaneously as, in Clare Ching Jen’s words, an exemplary citizen and a “risky subject”; the mask obscures and negates her subjectivity, invoking the faceless horde (2013:113). Jen’s work dates to the 2002–2003 SARS crisis—another coronavirus outbreak that originated in China—but if the past three years have shown anything, it is that the trope of the illegible and unknowable “Oriental” continues to induce racist rage.

As a child, I remember cringing when my parents would mask up for allergy season, a thing only Asian immigrants seemed to do. Years later, during those first few weeks of quarantine, I would take my daily walks and watch my neighbors cross the street to avoid me, and I feared that wearing a mask—to protect myself, and them, from possible transmission—would only make me more vulnerable. When innocence is impossible to prove, what and how does one perform instead? How do we make sense of Asian American racial form as its effects telescope across political invisibility and spectacular, hypervisible violence?

Considering together several recent works in Asian American performance studies—Huang’s *Surface Relations: Queer Forms of Asian American Inscrutability*, Esther Kim Lee’s *Made-Up Asians: Yellowface During the Exclusion Era*, and Takeo Rivera’s *Model Minority Masochism: Performing the Cultural Politics of Asian American Masculinity*—is an attempt to think through such questions of race, surface, expressivity, and strategy. Performance history and theory can help us take the pulse of contemporary anti-Asian violence and parse potential responses. While these texts do not specifically address Covid-related violence, together they advance our understanding of Asian Americanness—in and beyond pandemic times—by attending to the production of racial meaning through aesthetic and everyday performance.

To speak of surface and expressivity here is to consider anti-Asian violence—in particular, violent acts provoked by the apparent inscrutability of racialized people—in relation to issues of Asian American visibility and visibility. Huang’s *Surface Relations* names inscrutability as an effect of Orientalist discourse that produces the other as unknowable, “a surface that can or cannot be penetrated” (2). This flattening of personhood and exclusion from legibility is such that Asian American life seems to “only appea[r] through negation” (26). Indeed, as Huang puts it, “Disappearance has long been the expression, fate, and function of Asianness on a US national stage,” as demonstrated by the “theatrical and cinematic histories of yellowface performance and the whitewashing of Asian characters” (26). Lee ably elaborates on these histories in *Made-Up Asians*, offering an all-too-timely framework for analyzing yellowface in relation to the era of the

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Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 (which initially prohibited Chinese immigration to the US for 10 years, but would be continually renewed until the mid-20th century), to which the pandemic has brought new and necessary attention. The prolific legacy of yellowface, which Lee defines as an aesthetic modality and “technology of Asian exclusion” (4), reminds us that popular performance has long played an important role in creating and reinforcing particular repertoires of racial representation, with material consequences for Asian American life. Constructed as objects of comedic torture and abject undesirability, Asian Americans not only suffer the costs of being denied “sociopolitical viability” (2), but also struggle for opportunities to author their own representations. Indeed, part of what Rivera describes as “the paradoxical, contradictory affective investments cathected onto Asian America” (xv), and what Huang characterizes as a lack of “collective language and frameworks for making sense of their own experiences as racialized beings” (13), can be attributed to this persistent and oppressive dearth.

Scholars and activists responding to these circumstances, Huang notes, often “strategically employ a discourse of invisibility,” emphasizing the need to combat erasure (27). Visibility thus becomes the metric and method by which progress is measured and achieved. Recent movements such as #GoldOpen, which aims to mobilize Asian American buying power around films that feature “at least one authentically portrayed Asian Lead and/or an Asian Director who has helmed a film that’s critical to another New Majority community” (Kilkenny 2020), underscore an enduring optimism around the euphoric and reparative possibilities of popular representation. It is worth noting that multiple such films have achieved critical and commercial success during the pandemic, from superhero blockbusters (*Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*, the first Marvel movie to star an Asian diasporic cast) to indie genre anarchy (*Everything Everywhere All at Once*, A24’s highest-grossing film to date). A key ingredient of this antidote to invisibility is that Asian American actors are empowered to deliver “authentically portrayed” performances—or, as Lee defines authenticity in this context, to “actively participate in the creation of characters based to some degree on their experiences” (8). The sidelining of Asian American actors, Lee notes, has often been justified by casting directors on the grounds that they are “not very expressive” (185). Expressivity thus becomes the site on which Asian American claims to personhood and belonging are staked—as suggested by the social media backlash to one such director’s comments, marshalled around the banner of #ExpressiveAsians (185).

Illegibility, then, remains a liability. And while this vibrant optimism around the pandemic-era explosion of Asian American pop culture may seem irrelevant to the forms of violent abjection I describe above—indeed, unwarranted in the face of it—I want to pause on what these parallel phenomena mean for how we understand Asian American (in)visibility. Current debate seems to run along these lines: Is this a watershed moment for Asian American representation, spurred by a renewed sense of the need for public recognition? Or mere mass-market placebo effect, entirely disconnected from and insidiously obscuring the reality of racist violence?

Huang’s work on inscrutability and Rivera’s on masochism probe beyond the contours of this debate, acknowledging the allure of subject-based representation as well as its limitations. Rivera’s book begins by juxtaposing two notorious episodes in Asian American history: the 1982 murder of Vincent Chin by white autoworkers who—believing the Chinese American Chin to be from Japan—infamously shouted, “It’s because of you motherfuckers that we’re out of work” before bludgeoning him to death; and the 2013 hazing of Michael Deng, a fraternity pledge who subjected himself to the “Glass Ceiling,” a tragicomic staging of racial injury in which pledges were blindfolded, called slurs and shoved around by their Asian American brothers, and—in Deng’s case—tackled at full speed, resulting in a fatal head injury (xiv). Rivera reads these events together not to equate their racial meanings; indeed, Chin’s murder “helped define contemporary Asian American identity” in panethnic and resistant terms, whereas Deng’s death at the hands of other Asian Americans inadvertently advanced a different kind of “Bildungsroman,” one arguably more perverse but equally urgent in its political and theoretical implications (xiv). Namely, it exemplifies what he renders as masochism as an analytic and mode of race making. Masochism, for Rivera,

indexes “what it means for Asian Americanness to discover itself in the process of its own destruction” (xv). It describes a way of experiencing power, and it locates productive questions about racial form in what “the cudgel of normativity would label as ‘perverse’” (xv). Moreover, it helps us take seriously the liminality of Asian Americanness as that which toggles “between strategic inclusion and radical otherness,” and is thus “pulled doubly by the diametrically opposed moral authorities of assimilation and ‘good’ subjecthood and the resistant anti-model minority imperative of ‘bad’ subjecthood” (xxvi). In short, masochism helps us hold the constitutive contradictions—or, to use Rivera’s term, the “undoing” (xxvi)—of Asian American identity.

In treating Asian Americanness as constructed via inclusion as well as exclusion and othering, Rivera offers a reading of Deng’s death as a demonstration of “a yearning for *subjective* narrative,” for a politically coherent and socially intelligible Asian American self. “The liberatory potential of ‘the’ Asian American subject,” he argues, “is circumscribed by its very definition—and yet it possesses a fascinating, masochistic allure” (xv). Indeed, if we take Chin’s and Deng’s deaths as equally tragic and central to the fashioning of an Asian American identity—despite the former having assumed a far more legible shape—then we can recognize that the desire for subject-based representation, even paradoxically enacted through “the theater of sadomasochism” (xv), is crucial to understanding and valuing Asian American life and death.

Huang’s work on inscrutability likewise holds space for such complexities, asking what comes at the expense of putting a premium on expressive legibility. *Surface Relations* invites us to consider inscrutability not solely as a racist stereotype that presumes Asian impassivity, but also as a queer aesthetic modality that produces profoundly reparative and world-making acts. Rather than take representation to be the most obvious venue for repair, Huang challenges the ways in which “invisibility has become such a common grammar of Asian America that visibility has become the telos of Asian American public life, and, more broadly, of US cultural politics” (28). Against this grammar, she urges us to ask: if Asian Americans are forcibly vanished from public view, what, precisely, are the *terms* of this dominant episteme? Following this impulse, “Rather than merely advocate for the casting of Asian actors in Asian roles, might we not expand our frameworks for discussing Asian American visibility altogether?” How might we, to use Huang’s compelling phrase, “reframe vanishing otherwise?” (29–30). From this vantage point, we can acknowledge the desires of and for movements like #GoldOpen and #ExpressiveAsians, in all their messy cathexis with “*the* Asian American subject,” as well as their theoretical and material limitations.

Like masochism, inscrutability remains somewhat suspect—but for both of these aesthetic and analytic modes, it is precisely their perverse and uncertain effects that enable them to convey, with such eloquent ambivalence, the complexities of Asian American racialization. Returning to the 2020 attacks on the two New York subway riders, I want to consider how these works of performance history and theory help us think about anti-Asian violence. After all, these are corporeal encounters. That these particular attacks were seemingly sparked by looks and gestures—a face obscured by a mask, a refusal to move away—speaks to the vitality of a critical orientation that accounts for embodiment and affect. If mainstream Asian America’s default response to racial injury—onstage and onscreen or in the street—is most often framed in terms of visibility, we might also attend to the visual and visceral elements that choreograph such encounters.

The ambiguities of these accounts also invite us to sit with the contradictions that define Asian American racial form, and the constraints they impose on how we respond to racist violence. One witness to the first event, for instance, seemed surprised that the woman would try to defend herself at all: “What I didn’t expect was for the victim to chase after him. She was holding a glass bottle, seemingly in an attempt to attack or throw it at him,” and she “was very antagonistic to everyone around her after the conflict” (Brown and Sosa 2020). The subway rider, on the other hand, was commended by several news outlets for keeping his cool in the face of racist vitriol. (These commentators must not have seen a second clip, which has since disappeared from social media, of him shouting back at his assailant: “Why is that? Why can’t I sit next to you?” [Bensimon and Moore 2020]). One way we might attempt to make sense of these gestures under duress is

to note that neither achieves legibility according to the “moral authorities” of Asian America as Rivera defines them; that is to say, they do not paint portraits of purely “good” or “bad” subjecthood (xxvi). The man on the train, praised for his model-minority equanimity, did in fact confront his fellow passenger. Moreover, his unmoving body itself intimates other possibilities than passivity or compliance. After all, stillness—in the face of someone shouting at you to move—constitutes its own kind of refusal. Maintaining this remove puts into practice what Huang terms the “productive work of inscrutable signs, known for emptiness, silence, or absence” (14).

Still, the persistent association of Asianness with opacity makes performing inscrutability in such situations a risky endeavor. It substantiates the media narrative that this man was simply minding his own business and therefore a good subject—which, in the public eye, might save him from further scrutiny but also reinforce the belief that Asian Americans make easy targets. That the witness to the masked woman’s beating was surprised to see her put up a fight is deeply troubling on this front; her attempted self-defense, which might have been interpreted as the spirited resistance of a bad subject, registered instead as inappropriate and hostile. What becomes evident from these accounts is that masked or unmasked, taciturn or defiant, there is no right—that is, adequately and effectively resistant—way to respond to such assaults. We might instead read these responses as active negotiations with the contradictions and constraints of Asian American racialization—not as meetings of whole and legible subjects, but rather as moments of masochistic undoing or inscrutable obfuscation.

As an Asian American woman, I find myself returning to these incidents with a sense of fear and morbid fascination. Fear because—as my preoccupations here likely reflect—I’ve walked through the world, and not only for the past three years, acutely attuned to the unwelcome ways in which I myself might be appraised or ambushed. And fascination because—as I want to cover briefly in closing—the choreography of these encounters is at once far too familiar and also somehow surprising. I keep wanting to ask: in a moment churning with anxiety about contagion, why would someone go out of their way—literally—to approach a person they think contagious, to breathe their air and lay hands on their body? On this, Lee’s work is obliquely illuminating. Recounting the career of Joseph Grimaldi, whom she credits with creating the prototype of “clown yellowface,” Lee notes that the actor reportedly experienced “punishing pain” from performing his Chinese Clown routines (36), which were “so physically taxing that he was rumored to have broken almost every bone in his body” (26). Yellowface—which we might understand, like inscrutability, as a form of race-making through expressions of surface—is often conceived of as purely advantageous to the white performers who take it up. I cannot help but wonder, though, what it means for Gordon to have put his own body through these obliterating conditions. Does this resonate with the strange, seemingly self-sabotaging willingness of modern-day assailants to get so close to the bodies they deem contagious? How do we account for such perverse intimacies? In both cases, one *almost* concedes the not-so-otherness of the other. Both hint at an acknowledgment, on some level, that the bodies one seeks to touch and inhabit are not actually vectors of disease or objects deserving of violence.

Lee puts forth a call to reverse our usual methodological impulse: “In discussions of racial impersonation, there is often a knee-jerk reaction to inquire how it affects its victims,” she observes, “but in this book, I try to resist such a line of questioning as much as possible, and instead focus on the perpetrators” (20). I interpret this approach as an invitation to stay with and take to task the specificities and contradictions of racist violence rather than solely emphasize the need for reparative and resistant strategies. Perhaps we can read its perpetrators as enacting “both self and otherness” through touch as a means of claiming space and control, as dance scholar Susan Leigh Foster puts it (2005:85–86). If this is the function of extension and touch—within a Western episteme, at least—what of distance and withholding? If movement is, according to Foster’s account, what engenders a sense of interiority, what do stillness and inscrutability grant us access to—or prevent others from accessing?

Asian American performance studies help us mine the potency of such strategies that enact other ways of relating, against what Western understanding neatly cleaves into interior and exterior, self and other, surface and substance. In a moment when to be Asian American is to be invisible and overexposed at the same time, we might rethink expressivity as more than a demand for supposedly authentic and resistant representations; we might limn the contours of a mass of uglier feelings than that radiant affect we so often refer to as “feeling seen” allows when, crudely put, feeling seen might sometimes be the last thing we want. To champion expressive Asians might be to call for more varied and seemingly compromising expressions of all the promise and pitfalls of Asian Americanness, a thing we can only ever contingently name as such.

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