

# Performing Asian/American Women

Labor, Resistance, and (De)Compression in *The King and I* and *KPOP*

*Hye Won Kim*



*KPOP* (2022), which sold out in a version that initially ran off-Broadway, was the first musical on Broadway to focus on South Korean culture. It featured the first Asian American woman composer; showcased the Broadway debuts of 18 performers of Asian descent; and had a creative team that included more Asian and Asian American artists in principal and associate positions than any previous Broadway shows. Yet, *KPOP*'s Broadway run was, for a variety of reasons, but perhaps emblematically, highly abbreviated. When Ruthie Ann Miles won the 2015 Tony Award for Best Performance by a Featured Actress in a Musical for her role as Lady Thiang in the 2015 revival of *The King and I*, she became only the second woman performer of Asian descent in the six-decade history of the Tonys to win an award, 24 years after Lea Salonga, from the Philippines, won for the role of Kim in *Miss Saigon*. What does the absence of Asian American women practitioners in Broadway's musical

theatre history and as Tony-award winners signify?<sup>1</sup> What do the many “firsts” *KPOP* boasted denote? What does the role that Miles was recognized for reveal about the Broadway musical theatre industry, which in many ways is the epitome of commercial theatre? In what ways do *KPOP*’s women practitioners and Miles embody a history of Asian American musical theatre performers? How have Asian American women—who are often cast in hypersexualized roles—contested and reinvented the representation of Asian Americans on Broadway?<sup>2</sup>

I begin with these questions to advocate for *theatrical plenitude*, a term that I propose to build on Viet Thanh Nguyen’s notion of “narrative plenitude,” a coinage that delineates how “dominant Americans exist in an economy of narrative plenitude with a surfeit of stories, [while] their ethnic and racial others live in an economy of narrative scarcity” (2016:203–04). The commercial theatre of Broadway holds considerable potential to impact AAPI representation, given its broad cultural significance. The space deserves critical attention as it reflects the prevailing power dynamics of one of America’s major industries, and there has been mounting tension between the desire to increase AAPI representation regardless of the limitations and imperfections and the imperative to showcase culturally specific narratives. To understand the need for theatrical plenitude in Broadway musicals, it is crucial to recognize the theatrical scarcity that pervades Broadway, and the inordinately limited and usually stereotyped roles reserved for Asian and Asian American women. Laura Hyun Yi Kang’s methodology of examining “Asian women” can help map the transnational circulation of Asian and Asian American women on Broadway (2020:16). Kang assesses how Asian women, through their bodies, “surface” critical social issues, as did the “comfort women” who were enslaved by Japanese imperial troops during World War II. I critically focus on their bodies, especially as they embody epistemological anxieties, incoherence, and the inchoate histories and assumptions of Broadway that are effectively inscribed onto them.

Miles, who identifies as both Korean American and mixed-race; Q Lim, a Korean American performer who played one of the King’s wives and served as understudy for Tuptim in the 2015

*Figure 1. (previous page) Act 2 finale triumphantly ending with “Blast Off” with RTMIS and F8 all wearing white. Julia Abueva, Bohyung, Amy Keum, Kate Mina Lin, Min, Joshua Lee, Kevin Woo, Jiho Kang, James Kho, Eddy Lee, Abraham Lim, Zachary Noah Piser, and John Yi in KPOP (2022) by Jason Kim, Helen Park, and Max Vernon, directed by Teddy Bergman at Circle in the Square Theatre. (Photo by Matthew Murphy and Evan Zimmerman; courtesy of Joey Parnes)*

*Hye Won Kim (Kennesaw State University) is Assistant Professor of English and Asian Studies. Her research and teaching interests focus on the transnational circulation of modern and contemporary drama, theatre, and performance, with particular attention to the intersections between critical race theory; gender and sexuality studies; visual culture; sound studies; and performance studies. Her book South Korean Musical Theatre: Transnational Encounters is under contract with Oxford University Press, and she has published in Modern Drama, Theatre Journal, The Cambridge Companion to K-Pop, Studies in Musical Theatre, and The Journal of Popular Culture, among other publications. bkim132@kennesaw.edu*

1. Only 14 Asian Americans and 1 Asian American theatre group have won Tonys—six women, four performers. In 1959, Miyoshi Umeki was nominated for Best Leading Actress in a Musical for her role as Mei-Lin in *Flower Drum Song*; in 2017 and 2019, Eva Noblezada was nominated twice for Best Actress in a Leading Role in a Musical for *Miss Saigon* and *Hadestown* respectively. B.D. Wong in 1988 was the first performer of Asian descent to win a Tony for the Best Performance by a Featured Actor in a Play for his performance as Song Liling in *M. Butterfly*.
2. I specifically focus on Asian American women in Broadway musical theatre. It is important to note that the Pacific Islander and Native Hawaiian communities have distinct histories that deserve further examination in their own right, and therefore, my research does not encompass those groups. However, when discussing the larger community of Broadway practitioners of Asian descent, I use the term Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) to recognize and unite the diverse Asian, Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander communities. This is particularly important given the relatively small size of the community compared to Broadway’s white community.

Lincoln Center production of *The King and I*; and Jessica Wu, a Canadian-born Asian American, multihyphenate theatre creative who began her Broadway career as a musical theatre performer, all have performed racially stereotypical roles written by white creators. On the other hand, Luna, who starred as MwE in *KPOP*, and Helen Park, who wrote the songs and lyrics to the show, have created new Asian women characters, repudiating Broadway's orientalist tropes, and offered a new sonic landscape. Despite the dearth of Asian characters, the Asian and Asian American women who do perform on Broadway exercise agency through creative decisions they make regarding their roles—for instance, by resisting entrapment in their hypersexualized orientalist characters—and thereby interrupt the deleterious images most musicals present. It is imperative to accept and work with what we might see as transitional performances of racialized hypersexuality until theatrical plenitude is achieved in an industry that is always in flux. Though these roles are sometimes highly problematic, they provide Asian American women performers with jobs. From 2017 to 2020 there were even fewer culturally specific stories on Broadway that centered on Asian and Asian American narratives than in previous years.<sup>3</sup>

Asian and Asian American women exemplify the histories of BIPOC subjects in a web of power relations. Asian American performers on Broadway often embody colonial genealogies demarcated by racially specific roles (e.g., in *The King and I* and *Miss Saigon*). *Hamilton* (2016) represents a historical advance whose emphasis on diversity was evident through its “inclusive casting,” which is when performers are hired without regard to race or disabilities, or under a system previously referred to as “colorblind” or “nontraditional casting.” Despite producers’ intentions to diversify, “inclusive” casting among the AAPI community, including *Hamilton*, typically has involved performers of Asian descent playing white characters (Anne Boleyn in *Six*) or involved characters whose race is inessential to character building (Eurydice in *Hadestown*). Moreover, the transition to focusing on diversity was celebrated primarily by established Asian American women performers, and did not necessarily create *more* roles for Asian and Asian American performers (AAPAC 2021). *KPOP*, on the other hand, became the second Broadway musical written by Asian Americans to center on an Asian narrative (after *Allegiance* in 2015); the first to focus on South Korean culture (hereafter Korea), generating an unprecedented 18 Asian and Asian American Broadway debuts; and offered visual and sonic breakthroughs in Broadway musical theatre.<sup>4</sup>

Yoonha Choi, an international producer at CJ ENM Performing Arts based in NYC, explains that since the pandemic, Broadway producers seem to be engaged in a more visible effort to focus on diversity, equity, and BIPOC-centered narratives (Choi 2022). The Broadway League hired the first Director of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in 2021, and Black-focused narratives proliferated.<sup>5</sup> Yet the increase only pertains to Black representation, as the roles available to other BIPOC groups decreased, and Asian American performers remained the least likely to be cast (AAPAC 2021).

Nguyen emphasizes the need to create an economy of narrative plenitude in AAPI representation, and that in a literary environment of narrative scarcity and inequity, the majority group, which is in most cases white, controls and limits the production of narratives so that we encounter

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3. Demands that Asian/American performers take only roles that reflect a radical break with the past fail to acknowledge the realities and exigencies they face and would leave Asian/American performers jobless.

4. Critical work on Asianness and American musical theatre by scholars such as Dan Bacalzo, Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns, Anne A. Cheng, Broderick Chow, Chris A. Eng, Donatella Galella, Raymond Knapp, Dorinne Kondo, Esther Kim Lee, Josephine Lee, Bruce McConachie, Angela Pao, Karen Shimakawa, Celine Parreñas Shimizu, Yutian Wong, and Miseong Woo has established a foundation for studying AAPI representations in American musical theatre (see, for example, Galella 2018 and 2019; and E. Lee 2022). Josephine Lee's *Race in American Musical Theatre* (2023) is the first full-length work to address Asian Americans, and Donatella Galella's book in progress on yellowface in American musical theatre will be the first to address yellowface in US musical theatre.

5. Musicals and plays with Black-focused narratives—such as *A Strange Loop*, *Paradise Square*, *Black No More*, and *Ain't No Mo*—proliferated in New York City theatre. For scholarship on BIPOC representations on Broadway, see, for example, Herrera (2015), Forsgren (2019), and Asare (2020).



Figure 2. Ruthie Ann Miles as Lady Thiang in her solo “Something Wonderful” in *The King and I* (2015) by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II, directed by Bartlett Sher at the Vivian Beaumont Theatre. (Photo by Paul Kolnik; courtesy of Lincoln Center Theater)

relatively few stories about minority groups and fewer stories produced by BIPOC artists themselves (2016:203–04). The Broadway musical theatre industry enacts a similar paradigm. When, for a variety of reasons, *KPOP* closed after just two weeks, the temporary increase in jobs came to an end; the fundamental limitations remain.

We need more Asian and Asian American narratives on Broadway—good, bad, or mediocre. The right to be rewarded for mediocrity is what Nguyen exemplifies as one measure of equality (2018). There have been only two productions of shows written by Asian and Asian American playwrights that develop Asian-focused

narratives: *Allegiance* (2015) and *KPOP* (2022).<sup>6</sup> The short-lived *Shogun: The Musical* (1990) did appear on Broadway, but only the music was written by an Asian composer—Paul Chihara; John Driver wrote the book and lyrics. The off-Broadway *Here Lies Love* (2013), an immersive disco pop musical that depicts the life of former Philippine first lady Imelda Marcos, played by Miles, recently announced its Broadway premiere in the Summer of 2023 at the Broadway Theatre; it was written by David Byrne and Fatboy Slim, non-Asians.<sup>7</sup> Off-Broadway shows about Asians and Asian Americans—such as *Comfort Women* (2015), *Green Card* (2016), *Cambodian Rock Band* (2018), and *Soft Power* (2018)—were staged in the past decade, and while the latter two might be considered musicals, *Cambodian Rock Band* by Lauren Yee and Dengue Fever is labeled “a play with music” (Yee n.d.); and *Soft Power*, written by David Henry Hwang with music by Jeanine Tesori, is billed as “a play with a musical” (Hetrick 2018). Neither was a Broadway musical or marketed as musical theatre.<sup>8</sup>

To make their mark, Asian and Asian American performers have little choice but to appear in Broadway musicals that include Asian or Asian American subjects written and produced by non-Asians, however much Asian American communities criticize these productions. Shows such as Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II’s *South Pacific* (1949), *The King and I* (1951), and *Flower Drum Song* (1958); Stephen Sondheim’s *Pacific Overtures* (1976); and Claude-Michel Schönberg and Alain Boublil’s *Miss Saigon* (1989, London; 1991, New York) provided Asian roles on Broadway, but also had detrimental consequences for Asian Americans.<sup>9</sup> In particular, images of Asian women as hypersexual fantasy figures were featured in the narratives, and the singular popularity of their Asian-themed productions has meant that their Asian-focused narratives have catered to Broadway’s

6. *Maybe Happy Ending* by Hue Park and Will Aronson will make its Broadway premiere in the 2024/25 season.

7. For a critical analysis of the fetishistic attachments prevalent in popular accounts of Imelda Marcos in the American cultural imaginary in *Here Lies Love*, see Chow (2019) and Eng (2019).

8. *Soft Power*, with music by Jeanine Tesori, was created for the mainstream American audience to replicate the absurdity, but also the appeal, of *The King and I*’s cultural appropriations (see Fung 2018).

9. Stephen Sondheim’s *Pacific Overtures* (1976) was mostly well-received as a landmark opportunity for Asian American artists (see E. Lee 2006).

mainstream audience, which historically has been predominantly white. Since the 1998/99 season, on average 80% of Broadway audiences have been white; during *The King and I*'s 2015/16 revival season 77.3% were white (Hauser 2019). The attribution of this hypersexuality to Asian American women seems ineluctable since Asian-centric narratives such as *The King and I* traditionally have been produced by white men and have reinforced the racial expectations of mainstream audiences.<sup>10</sup> Asian women's roles in Rodgers and Hammerstein's musicals were created explicitly so white US audiences could experience "foreign" cultures. Asian American women often become visible on Broadway only when they perform hypersexuality and shift Asian Americanness into Asianness.

In this context, I follow David Palumbo-Liu (1999) and Kang (2020) and insert the slash between Asian and American to demonstrate the choice the Asian/American women performer must make between the terms that mark the tension in the linkage of being Asian and American women on Broadway. The split in Asian/American women also exemplifies what such scholars as Rey Chow (1998), Kandice Chuh (2003), Ju Yon Kim (2015), Lisa Lowe (1996), and Karen Shimakawa (2002) have argued as an epistemic violence: Asian Americans, both presented as constituent elements of US identity and marginalized as the racial other, have been foundational to the formation of US Americanness. Subsequently, as Celine Parreñas Shimizu (2007) further intervenes with the slash, I too use it to capture the conflation of being Asian and Asian American for women performers on Broadway.

## Musical Orientalism

### *Asian/American Compression*

Josephine Lee explains how *theatrical orientalism* imagines a "vast geographical and cultural amalgamation" of different Asian countries that builds a "fictive Orient" on the American stage, presenting "a familiar set of racial habits associating the Orient with opulent excess, despotic power, magical objects, and fantasy" (J. Lee 2022:11). Even Broadway musicals that attempt to decolonialize these tropes must deal with the residue or traces of the racist musicals that most white audiences have internalized as representing Asia. Orientalism itself remains prevalent in representations of Asian and Asian American women, who are easily conflated in Broadway musical representations that construct stereotypical images of them as exotic figures. I reformulate this conflation as a "compression" because these images exert pressure and amplify the tension marked on Asian/American women characters and their social bodies. One can see hypersexuality in the perversely innocent Liat and the crude Bloody Mary in *South Pacific*; in the submissive Lady Thiang, who surrenders her role of wife and mother to a white woman in *The King and I*; and in Linda Low and Kim, the seductress and the virginal prostitute with a heart of gold, respectively, in *Flower Drum Song* and *Miss Saigon*. Such compressed musical orientalist visions of Asian women's hypersexuality have been categorized under the *lotus blossom vs dragon lady* dichotomy.

Another instance of compression occurs when Asian/American ethnicities stand in for one another. Asian/American performers have protested fiercely against oriental stereotypes and white performers appearing in yellowface on Broadway. This white use of yellowface is distinct from the manner in which Asian/American performers portrayed Asian identities other than their own, which often reflected an act of solidarity among ethnic groups. In the 1960s they began to build coalitions; identify themselves racially as Asians; refuse to be compartmentalized ethnically; and promote their rights as a group.<sup>11</sup> This response correlated with efforts of other BIPOC groups that emerged from the black civil rights movement. Esther Kim Lee explains that theatre activists' goal in forming coalitions was "to protest 'oriental' stereotypes; to increase awareness of Asian

10. I employ Celine Parreñas Shimizu's definition of hypersexuality as a "constructed non-normative sexuality that is perceived as natural, attached to a specific raced and gendered ontology" critically to engage with Broadway musicals through the performances by Miles, Q Lim, and Wu (Shimizu 2007:31).

11. For the historicization of yellowface in theatre, see E. Lee (2022).

American actors' wide-ranging talents; and to demand that they be allowed to play all roles, both Asian and non-Asian" (E. Lee 2006:25). Yet the largely uniform representations of Asian and Asian American women in Broadway productions continued to have deleterious ramifications, and many performers remain conflicted about playing other nationalities because they rarely can secure appropriate roles. Eva Noblezada, an American performer of Filipino and Mexican descent who debuted as Kim in the *Miss Saigon* 2017 revival, expresses her frustration in playing a Vietnamese woman: "Being in *Miss Saigon* gave me such a f\*cked up 'myself identity' because I didn't know who I was. I was a Filipino playing a Vietnamese woman and everyone in the cast felt the same" (Visaya 2022). Wu notes, "Broadway's institutionalized racism and archaic canon is the reason I've played an Asian prostitute over a dozen times. Not just a prostitute. A specifically 'Asian prostitute.'" Wu had spent her performing career perpetuating Asian stereotypes and clichés onstage and explains how she became "desensitized" playing roles that objectified and minimized Asian women; she accepted these roles because they were the only ones offered to her. "A dancer's still gotta eat" says Wu (2022a).

A multihyphenate award-winning NYC-based playwright, director, songwriter, and dramaturg who started her Broadway career as a musical theatre performer, Wu was one of the 211 elected delegates in the virtual room at the Actors' Equity Association (AEA) first ever convention in April 2021, when the organization lifted membership restrictions for performers who were not US citizens or lacked green cards. Wu shared with me the words she had prepared to present at the conference. Taking the center of the virtual room, she raised her voice to elicit full attention:

My name is Jessica Wu, eastern chorus delegate [...] To expect an immigrant to produce a green card as the only acceptable form of work authorization is laughable and illegal. It took me 19 years to get my green card. I joined Equity in 2004 and with every single offer I'd get a call from my own union telling me I wasn't allowed to take that job despite having a valid work visa. A staff member once incorrectly told me I could be deported for taking a contract. Immigrant artists like me have been trying to join Equity for decades. Equity's policies have been telling us we don't deserve to stand in solidarity with you. That we don't deserve rights and protections. That we don't belong here. This discrimination must end now. (Wu 2022a)

A significant accomplishment that marked a pivotal juncture in Broadway history, the proposal to allow international migrant artists with valid work visas to join AEA was one of 44 approved out of 51 brought to the floor for debate.

Wu was the central advocate for the rights of international migrant artists. Limitations on AEA membership have disproportionately affected BIPOC artists and caused a significant loss of employment, wages, and work-authorization status; led to a dissemination of incorrect and detrimental information regarding immigration and work authorization; and damaged immigration prospects. But it also resulted in harassment, discrimination, terror, and trauma for job applicants and in working environments (Wu 2022b). AEA initiated the restrictive policy in the 1980s as a protectionist measure to secure US American jobs on Broadway; in practice it did irreparable damage to BIPOC and international migrant performers in an industry that continued disproportionately to favor white performers (Pierce and Weinert-Kendt 2021). The discriminatory restrictions helped justify the exclusion of international migrant performers and provoked the compression of musical orientalism. The relaxed membership rules provide a critical opportunity for BIPOC communities that had been excluded from the industry.

## **Broadway Musical Theatre and *The King and I***

Despite Rodgers and Hammerstein's best intentions, their contribution to the golden age of American musical theatre actually stifled the causes of inclusivity and equity. Their shows have been critically examined by scholars such as Bruce McConachie and Raymond Knapp, whose scholarship regarding projections of orientalism and problematic gender and race depictions in Rodgers and Hammerstein's shows has illuminated the way their lyrics subtly justify colonial notions of national

development in Asian countries (McConachie 1994; Knapp 2005). Many scholars dismiss Margaret Landon's 1944 novel *Anna and the King of Siam*, on which *The King and I* is based, as racist and exploitive in its sexual commodification of Asian women, and I postulate that Miles, Q Lim, and Wu's intervention constitutes a reinvention that could promote theatrical plenitude.

For decades, in Broadway musicals, we have seen an ongoing cycle of problematic cultural appropriation and the deliberate exoticization of cultures that implies North Atlantic superiority over its Pacific counterpart. This "superiority" apparently presumes North Atlantic characters survive while so many Asian principal characters in musicals white men produce die or suffer exile. Musical performer Conrad Ricamora puts it bluntly: "I specialize in characters who die" (in Haun 2015). His statement resonates with the words of Anna May Wong from almost a century earlier, as reinvented in Elizabeth Wong's play *China Doll*: "When it comes to dying, I'm the expert. I've died a thousand different movie deaths. You see an Oriental woman can fall in love with a white man, as long as she conveniently dies" (Wong 2005:314). The reason for this is simple: the dominance of white men onstage and behind the scenes. According to the 2017/18 study released by the Asian American Performers Action Coalition (AAPAC 2020), 79.1% of writers of Broadway plays and musicals were white; 9.6% Black; 6.2% Asian American; 2.8% MENA; 2.3% Latinx; and 0% indigenous. In the entirety of the 2017/18 New York City theatre season, 20.8% of productions were written by BIPOC writers, and 6.2% was a record-breaking number for Asian American writers that season (AAPAC 2020). The revival of *The King and I* amassed positive reviews and an enthusiastic audience response in a Broadway season in which 80% of ticket buyers were white and the average ticket buyer a 44-year-old white woman. In addition, the survey found that 93.8% of Broadway directors were white and an astounding 100% of Broadway musical directors were white. The majority of producers and investors are still white men (AAPAC 2021). These statistics expose the exclusionary system of Broadway's musical theatre. These dominant whites fulfill Broadway audiences' expectations that Asian characters will be subjugated, sacrificed, or seen as expendable.

It comes as no surprise that Miles, Q Lim, and Wu all have performed in *The King and I* in their careers. To recognize their creative choices as political critique and to understand the social structure that prompts such decisions, it is useful to revisit how *The King and I* encapsulates a US imperialist vision that enforces biases about how Asians should be represented in mainstream US musical theatre. The 1951 Broadway production and subsequent film adaptation, which was not included in the Library of America's collection of "Broadway Classics" (Maslon 2014) because of its problematic implications, are set in the 1860s and tell the story of Anna Leonowens, a British schoolteacher who travels to Siam (Thailand) to teach English to the royal children. Notably, *The King and I* and its well-known songs are still banned in Thailand for their inaccurate and condescending depictions of the monarch and the royal family. One of the most celebrated yet problematic Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals, *The King and I* has long been criticized by scholars and protested by AAPI activists and practitioners for its cultural appropriation, orientalist exoticization, and practice of yellowface (E. Lee 2006:30–31; McConachie 1994; Goldstein 1989).<sup>12</sup> The role of the King of Siam generally has been offered to AAPI performers since the 1968 revival's yellowface controversy. But Wu confirms that on the 2004 national tour, Martin Vidnovic, a non-Asian who played Lun Tha in the 1977 Broadway production, again performed the King in yellowface wearing heavy bronzer to darken his skin and eyeliner to de-emphasize his Western double eyelid, not to mention the pseudo-Asian accent he used to articulate his scripted broken English lines (Wu 2022b).

The deceptive illustrations of primitive Siam and the cultural appropriation of Thai culture that drive the plot prevail. Knapp criticizes the show's reliance on exoticism, its infantilization of Siam to establish Anna's Western identity "as superior to that of the culture she encounters," and the way

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12. Esther Kim Lee notes that Asian American performers protested the 1968 revival of *The King and I* and filed complaints against the casting of eight white performers for nine Asian parts, including understudy roles, as well as the oriental stereotypes of the musical (see E. Lee 2006; see also McConachie 1994, and Goldstein 1989).

it teaches Americans “to disrespect [Thai culture as] childlike”; Donatella Galella finds it “troubling that this white woman has to come and ‘civilize’ the king”; Dorinne Kondo calls *The King and I* “the problematic Orientalist warhorse”; and Josephine Lee notes how the show is a “Tin Pan Alley version of Asia” that endorses a fascination with “an Oriental harem” (Knapp 2005:249–50; Galella and Lee in Lyman 2018; Kondo 2018:22). With this problematic history in mind, Miles and Q Lim subverted some of the orientalist trappings of prior productions in the 2015 revival.

## Asian/American Women and the Labor of Resistance

The 2015 revival of *The King and I* was a Lincoln Center Theater production, directed by Bartlett Sher, that ran for 499 performances from 16 April 2015 to 26 June 2016 at the Vivian Beaumont Theatre. It was nominated for nine Tony Awards and garnered four, including Best Revival of a Musical. Critics were unanimous in their praise of Miles for her performance of Lady Thiang. Ben Brantley of the *New York Times* described her as “first-rate,” asserting that her song “Something Wonderful” “could be the show’s anthem”; *Variety*’s Marilyn Stasio applauded her performance as displaying “great dignity” and noted that she moved the house to tears; *Vulture*’s Jesse Green called her “powerfully moving”; and Robert Kahn of NBC New York proclaimed her rendition as “achingly effective” and “precious” (Brantley 2015; Stasio 2015; Green 2015; Kahn 2015). Yet Lady Thiang remained the silenced and submissive Asian woman, referred to very little and allowed her own voice in only a few lines and just the one solo song, “Something Wonderful.”<sup>13</sup>

The practice of locating contentious issues in the past can be problematic, and to disregard the creative team’s efforts to make these issues resonate for their contemporaries also would be misguided. To make the production “as timely” and “resonant” as possible (in Smith 2018), Sher strove to develop a voice for vulnerable women such as Lady Thiang, and emphasized principles of gender equality when giving directions to Miles. Compared to Anna, Lady Thiang remains mostly silent; however, with Sher’s direction, Miles departed from the stereotype of the submissive Asian woman and asserted her agency through the solo. During one of Miles’s callbacks, Sher sent her home, asking her to reinterpret Lady Thiang as a strong person—someone like “Imelda Marcos and Hillary Clinton” (Miles 2020); he also requested that she refrain from crying when she sang the solo. Owing to Sher’s direction, and by virtue of Miles’s exquisite mezzo-soprano voice, “Something Wonderful” was presented with extraordinary emotional power that allowed the audience to have sympathy for Lady Thiang. In Miles’s estimation, “[w]e compromised a lot, but Sher gave me confidence as an Asian American woman [...] Within the limitations, his directions were truly powerful” (2020).

In contrast to those who produced earlier revivals, Sher assiduously tried to avoid what he refers to as “decorative Orientalism” (in Smith 2018) and extensively researched the original notes Rodgers and Hammerstein used in previous productions of *The King and I*, even going so far as to collect all the napkins on which they had jotted down their ideas (Miles 2020). Nevertheless, while Sher stressed the importance of women’s rights, he also downplayed Thai culture, and Lady Thiang remained the subservient and suffering Asian woman as she told Anna that she can have the King because Anna was the one who could save him. During rehearsals, the cast asked: “How do we authentically tell this story, written by two white men, that was based on a book by a white woman who lived in Thailand, as Asian actors?” (TheaterMania 2018). Sher, a white man, reminded the cast that the show was not about “being Thai” (Q Lim 2020b; Miles 2020). Indeed, Ricamora, who in the 2015 revival played Lun Tha, opposite Ashley Park as his love interest Tuptim, describes

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13. Lady Thiang is visible in most scenes, but stands voiceless. Miles claims she had limited lines to build her character, and just one solo. In the 2015 Broadway revival script, compared to Anna’s extensive dialogues, Lady Thiang’s short entrances and dialogues barely comprise one scene. In scene 2, when she enters and is introduced by the King, she has three lines. In scene 4, in the schoolroom, she has six short sentences in broken English. In scene 5, even when she builds to her solo, she has only eight lines, her largest total.



how Asian/American musical theatre performers are “always trying to make these characters more three-dimensional when they are sometimes not written that way, or not as fully fleshed out as the white characters” (TheaterMania 2018). Ricamora’s comment laments the continuing lack of commitment on the part of musical theatre creators and directors to create substantive, credible, and fully realized AAPI characters despite attempts such as Sher’s to promote authentic representations of Asian cultures.

During rehearsals, *The King and I* director and cast, which consisted of 55 performers of Asian descent, clashed over issues of authenticity. For example, the “Thai expert,” well-versed in royal Thai mannerisms and hired by Lincoln Center Theater, taught the cast how Thai people would enter a room on their knees and exit on their knees backwards in the presence of the royal family.<sup>14</sup> In a decision that the Asian/American performers challenged, Sher omitted these gestures because of time constraints; if he kept these movements, the production would run more than the planned three hours. As the cast continued to question him about preserving the authenticity of Thai culture, Sher emphasized that *The King and I* was not about being Thai and was written by two Jewish white men (Anon. 2020; Q Lim 2020a). Miles pointed out that entering and exiting the stage on their knees was relevant to the plot because Anna sings about how the gesture of crawling resembles that of toads eating dust in “Shall I Tell You What I Think of You?” She refers to bowing as “a disgusting exhibition” of a “ridiculous position,” and exclaims how all the people are “Toads! Toads!” (O’Hara 2015). Miles, Q Lim, and most of the ensemble were invested in offering an authentic representation of Thai culture. Miles strongly expressed her view that guests of the royal family needed to perform the gesture because Anna sings about it. Sher was receptive when hearing Miles’s opinion, but he ultimately was adamant that Thai crawling be replaced by bowing, because that would provide enough of a generic Asian gesture for the primarily white audience to recognize (Miles 2020; Q Lim 2020b).

Musical performers make choices each time they act onstage. Through their interventions, embodiments of Asian women metamorphose into something more than mere reenactment: performers transmit a new sense of social identity. Yet within the confined trajectory of Lady Thiang, how did Miles offer resistance? The multifaceted collective memories, personal histories, and cultural values remaining in Miles, Q Lim, and Wu’s bodies encapsulate the histories of Asian/American women performers onstage. How were their embodied memories of social identity enacted in their performances and what do their performances reveal about the social structure of Broadway musical theatre?

Miles intensively researched Thai culture, and Q Lim referred to the results of her research as “the bible.” To learn how Thai men and women related and acted in different spaces of encounter, Miles collected videos and Thai television dramas. She also found video clips on Thai etiquette in the Thai language, which provided her with details of how Thai people act in specific circumstances, down to the smallest detail of how to position one’s feet. She also purchased rare copies of Leonowens’s books to gain as much information as she could about her view of Thai royal culture. Miles wanted to genuinely understand Thai culture so she could hone the voice of Lady Thiang.

With the imperative to portray Lady Thiang as a strong woman, but with limited music and dialogue to facilitate such a portrayal, Miles strove to work against musical orientalism by representing Thai culture as authentically as she could. In several scenes, the King touches his children’s foreheads to show affection; but after learning that in royal Thai culture the head

14. During the early stages of rehearsals, the “Thai expert” taught the cast about royal Thai mannerisms. Miles supplemented this instruction with additional research to gain a full understanding of the cultural context and motivation behind royal customs. While the expert was present for the first four weeks of rehearsals, some cast members who joined later, like Q Lim, did not receive the instruction. To address this, Miles shared the information with Q Lim (Miles 2020; Q Lim 2020b).

was considered a holy place, Miles informed Sher that the King would never touch someone's head. Sher was aware that Thai culture was being misrepresented through his choices, but as a director he felt that having the king touch a child's forehead provided Thai-ness for white American audiences (Miles 2020). The dialect coach for the production, while proficient in American dialects, did not know Thai. Q Lim notes that she had the cast elide the r's and pop the t's to conform to Broadway's generic Asian accent. Ricamora attests to this practice and explains how Asian performers call it "ching chong" when directors ask them to sound more Asian or Chinese. With *The King and I*, he was frustrated by the lack of attention to dialects (in Vincentelli 2022). Sher, for the sake of the audience, also asked cast members to tone down and unify their accents to match that of Ken Watanabe, who spoke the King's lines in English with a thick Japanese accent. Miles and Q Lim's labor of resistance was to retain Thai accents, rather than misrepresent Thai culture by following the instructions of the director and dialect coach (Miles 2020).

An ensemble member, who asked to remain anonymous, referred to the disagreement with the dialect coach as a "half-war." The conflict arose when she advised the cast "to pick any old accent," or to copy "your grandma's accent," without regard for authenticity (Anon. 2020). Most cast members found her direction problematic, as they felt it important to use authentic Thai accents. Miles states

I didn't want to do a blend of Thai and Japanese [accents...], I wanted to give a performance that has some credibility [...]. If a Thai person were to come see the performance, they would feel that we had made an effort and say "they tried." It was important for me [...] I am not okay with generic accents anymore. (Miles 2020)<sup>15</sup>

By contrast, *KPOP*'s creators refused to conform to conventions regarding Asian women, and the show brought to the surface tensions in the still predominant orientalist vision of Asian women in Broadway musicals.

## ***KPOP***

Whereas *The King and I* focused on Asian/American women in stereotyped roles in relation to condescending white men who emblemized the colonial period, *KPOP* marks a turning point in focusing on Asian/American performers who emerge from and reflect the culture they represent. *KPOP* celebrates Asian and Asian American performers who try to break into Broadway; addresses the scarcity of AAPI representation there; and highlights the struggling Asian/American artists who have been excluded. The show offers new possibilities for Asian women characters. *KPOP* subverts the white-savior narrative of *The King and I* and *Miss Saigon* and features contemporary multifaceted Asian characters such as MwE, a solo K-pop singer; and RTMIS, a K-pop girl group that breaks free of oriental tropes of the suffering Asian woman. The show (which also includes the fictional boy band F8) gives voice to Asian/American women performers without forcing them to negotiate the stereotypes of Asianness carved out by the dominant culture. These leading performers own their narratives.

In their performances, Luna and Park retold, re-presented, and reclaimed their roles on the Broadway stage; disrupted the imposition of musical orientalism; and ultimately offered a new direction that might, if emulated, transform the visual and sonic environment of Broadway. If Miles, Q Lim, and Wu carefully made politically charged decisions to redefine their characters' attributes in authentic ways, Luna and Park positioned Asian women characters in lead roles repudiating what

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15. Again, it is worth emphasizing that Asian/American performers almost never have final say regarding the degree of cultural authenticity in production, and often have to engage in compromise simply to acquire or retain a role; as in *The King and I*, they often have to try to inject a modicum of authenticity into a musical that is inherently inauthentic.

had heretofore been standard on Broadway.<sup>16</sup> With respect to the troubled history of Broadway's racial dynamics, I here focus on how performers transmit the embodied actions of Asian/American women and subvert musical orientalism. Moreover, Luna—a real-life K-pop star from Korea, formerly of the group f(x)—and the fictional RTMIS specifically undermine the global circulation of stereotypical and hypersexualized images of K-pop girl groups.

If *The King and I* justified imperialism and colonialism, imposing Western culture by means of the English language, *KPOP* decolonizes, using language as a means of cultural control. Park, the show's co-composer and lyricist—and the first Asian American woman to write music and lyrics for a Broadway show—wrote the songs in both English and Korean, as many K-pop songwriters have long done. And *KPOP* produced Broadway's first bilingual *Playbill*. Given the vexed history of colonialism and orientalism on Broadway's stage, even seemingly neutral decisions or expectations reinforce stereotypes—using surtitles, for example. *KPOP* did not provide surtitles but rather retained untranslated Korean.

Conceived by Jason Kim and the Woodshed Collective, *KPOP*—book by Jason Kim, music and lyrics by Helen Park and Max Vernon, presented by Ars Nova in collaboration with Ma-Yi Theater Company and Woodshed Collective—premiered at ART/New York on 5 September 2017 and ran until 21 October. The off-Broadway show won the Richard Rodgers Award and three Lucille Lortel Awards, including Outstanding Musical, Outstanding Lead Actress in a Musical (Ashley Park), and Outstanding Featured Actor in a Musical (Jason Tam); and it was nominated for three Drama Desk Awards. *KPOP* was immersive theatre—audience members were offered a guided tour of an imagined Korean hit-song factory in the two-story building. *New York Times* critic Ben Brantley described the musical as “synthetically sweet and perversely addictive as the real thing,” a “multistranded, multichambered immersive performance,” and a “movable junk-food buffet” (Brantley 2017). *Vulture* referred to the experience as a “delicious spectacle” (Holdren 2017). With such reviews, *KPOP* was a hit during its prepandemic run.<sup>17</sup>

After five years, *KPOP*'s Broadway transfer had a press preview on 11 October 2022 and began its public preview performance on 13 October at Circle in the Square. The show's opening night on Broadway was initially set for 20 November 2022, but was postponed to 27 November because of Covid-19 within the company. The only original musical on Broadway in the 2022/23 season, *KPOP* is a history-making production in many categories of AAPI representation, including being only the second AAPI Broadway musical written and performed by Asian and Asian American practitioners. The Broadway production differed from the ART/NY one in that it was set up like a mockumentary. The audience witnesses the conflicts and process of staging an upcoming American debut concert in New York by the fabricated boyband F8, girl group RTMIS, and MwE. While the off-Broadway audiences moved in and around the show, the Broadway version moved around the audience. The audience immediately becomes the show's 19th cast member as Ruby (Jully Lee), the CEO of RBY Entertainment, enters downstage from the backdoors of the theatre. With the house lights on, she is followed by Harry (Aubie Merrylees), the only white character, and the Camera Operator (Major Curda), and asks, “Do you think I should be up there? [meaning with the audience] They're really...close” (J. Kim 2022:1).<sup>18</sup> At this metatheatrical moment, the audience, who will construct the show in collaboration with the cast, becomes part of the narrative. Harry reaffirms the audience's role: “Okay, everybody” he says. “Standby. And that would be your cue. 5,4,3,2, we're rolling,” and the house lights dim.

16. In my forthcoming book, *South Korean Musical Theatre: Transnational Encounters*, I elaborate on *KPOP*'s divergent narratives, including how the production articulates what the K-pop genre aspires to be from the perspective of the K-pop industry, and how RTMIS, MwE, and F8 epitomize the Asian/American body.

17. For a detailed depiction of *KPOP*'s off-Broadway staging in relation to Asian American performance, see Conley (2019).

18. All quotes from *KPOP* are from the unpublished libretto supplied to me by Helen Park; citations going forward will indicate page number.

Jason Kim elucidates how *KPOP* mirrored his experience immigrating to the US at the age of nine, and provided opportunity “to think about what it means to be a Korean American here”; and offered a setting “where music meets identity” (in Herman 2017). Although the Broadway show was a revamp of the off-Broadway version, Kim cleverly only implied its identity politics. The show offered multiple narrative approaches to K-pop, Broadway, and AAPI representation aimed at the broader Broadway audiences; contrapuntal readings for audiences: a look into the K-pop music industry; the newest beat of K-pop; the way international migrants, especially Koreans, assimilate into the US; and the Asian/American experience.

The production’s promotion strategy pivoted starkly after Jesse Green’s critical review in the *New York Times* on 27 November 2022 calling the show “thinly delivered” and connected by “only the feeblest of threads” with “their link to the drama severed” (Green 2022). Green’s review stirred controversy within the AAPI community because he criticized the show and the K-pop genre with what the producers referred to as “casual racism.” Green wrote, “Come hear the band. (Actually, there are only three instrumentalists),” and mocked “the aggressive mimicry of the K-pop performance style” and “the squint-inducing lighting.” This pan in the *Times* was the show’s death knell. The official announcement that *KPOP* would close on 11 December was released on 6 December. On 8 December, *KPOP*’s official Instagram account read “*KPOP*: Experience Broadway Our Way” (kpopbroadway 2022b). Subsequent posts included the phrase “Broadway. Our Way”; and the last performance was promoted as an “AAPI Community Performance,” featuring a postshow panel discussion moderated by Kimmy Yam, with David Henry Hwang, Hansol Jung, Pun Bandhu, John Yi, and Helen Park. The discussion’s initial emphasis was on the K-pop phenomena, but *KPOP* is not only about K-pop music; it is also about becoming Asian American and being Asian/American.

## Doubly Subversive Asian Women

MwE and RTMIS decompress the constrictive images of Asian women as hypersexualized, submissive, exotic, and infantilized.<sup>19</sup> These women deconstruct the perverse lotus blossom versus dragon lady dichotomy routinely dramatized onstage, and redefine the racialized gender representations of Asian/American women by relocating narratives of a suffering past in the living present.

The five members of RTMIS—Julia Abueva (Sonoma), Bohyung (Tiny), Amy Keum (Ivy), Kate Mina Lin (Miyeon), and Min (Riya)—plus Jully Lee (Ruby) and Luna, were among the 18 performers who made their Broadway debuts in *KPOP*. This array of new Asian and Asian American performers and characters who embody divergent personalities, especially the seven women, interrupted the fantasy of a white America. In addition, RTMIS and MwE are doubly subversive in dismantling the prevalent stereotypical *aegyo* (cuteness) image of K-pop girl groups.

*KPOP* revolves around three K-pop acts—MwE, RTMIS, and F8—who are signed to RBY Entertainment, run by Ruby. They come together for a one-night-only US debut concert, where the audience gets a glimpse into their personal struggles and aspirations. Ruby discovered MwE at age nine and through rigorous training propelled her to stardom. However, in responding to the pressure of demanding practices and the allure of fame, MwE battles to find her own voice. This struggle is highlighted in the ballad “Bung Uh Ree Sae,” which translates as “Mute Bird,” a song that MwE writes with her boyfriend Juny, who teaches guitar to young students. MwE proposes to Juny but when Juny asks MwE to walk away from Ruby, MwE decides to leave him and strike out on her own as a music artist. MwE’s celebratory moment of independence arrives with her act 2 finale, “Phoenix.” Wearing a sparkling silver bodysuit with wing-like ornaments, MwE glides forward on the thrust stage out into the audience. The floor shines with hues that radiate like an aura. The instrumentation builds gradually and in the split second MwE hits the high C in the chorus,

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19. While the character of Connie Wong in *A Chorus Line*, a small role originally created for and by Baayork Lee, marked a pivotal moment for Asian American women on Broadway, she nonetheless is delineated as small and child-like, and exemplifies the infantilized Asian woman.



Figure 3. Girl group RTMIS—Julia Abueva (Sonoma), Bohyung (Tiny), Amy Keum (Ivy), Kate Mina Lin (Miyeeon), and Min (Riya)—presenting aegyo with finger hearts singing “Supergoddess” in *KPOP* (2022) by Jason Kim, Helen Park, and Max Vernon, directed by Teddy Bergman at Circle in the Square Theatre. (Photo by Matthew Murphy and Evan Zimmerman; courtesy of Joey Parnes)

her glittering white shawl floats up in the air under lights, with a set piece that evokes a cascade of feathered wings levitating over her. At performances I attended, the audience spontaneously stood in awe as Luna sang the vocal hook. I was sitting close to the first row and saw her muscles strain each time she moved. I saw her wink at me, an individualized fan-service element in K-pop culture. MwE is a resilient Asian woman embodying the lived experiences of both Asian and AAPI women.

RTMIS and MwE challenge the commonly held stereotypes of K-pop girl groups, particularly the notion of aegyo. I build on Gary Sherman and Jonathan Haidt’s definition of cuteness as being as “much an elicitor of play as it is of care,” something that is as “likely to trigger a childlike state as a parental one” (2011:248), and identify aegyo as a powerful affective social performance that evokes social interaction and engagement integral to fan-service in K-pop.<sup>20</sup> One finds aegyo in diverse contexts: some idols use winks, others make finger hearts. It’s aegyo that the *Times* spotlights in the title of Green’s review: “In ‘KPOP,’ Korean Pop and Broadway Meet (Too) Cute.” *KPOP*’s producers Joey Parnes and Tim Forbes complained about the title in their letter to the *New York Times*, requesting an apology from the paper. The *Times* declined to issue an apology, stating Green’s review was fair. They wrote that the review “plays to harmful stereotypes and historic infantilization of Asian people [...] immediately devaluing and diminishing them” (Culwell-Block 2022).

20. *Aegyo* can be observed in similar but distinct patterns across East Asia: In Japan, *kawaii* refers to the idealization of childlike innocence, characterized by fragility, and inexperience, and in Taiwan, the concept *sajiao* is a form of infantilized speech pattern employed by women, often characterized by a nasal tone of voice. See Keith and Hughes (2016).

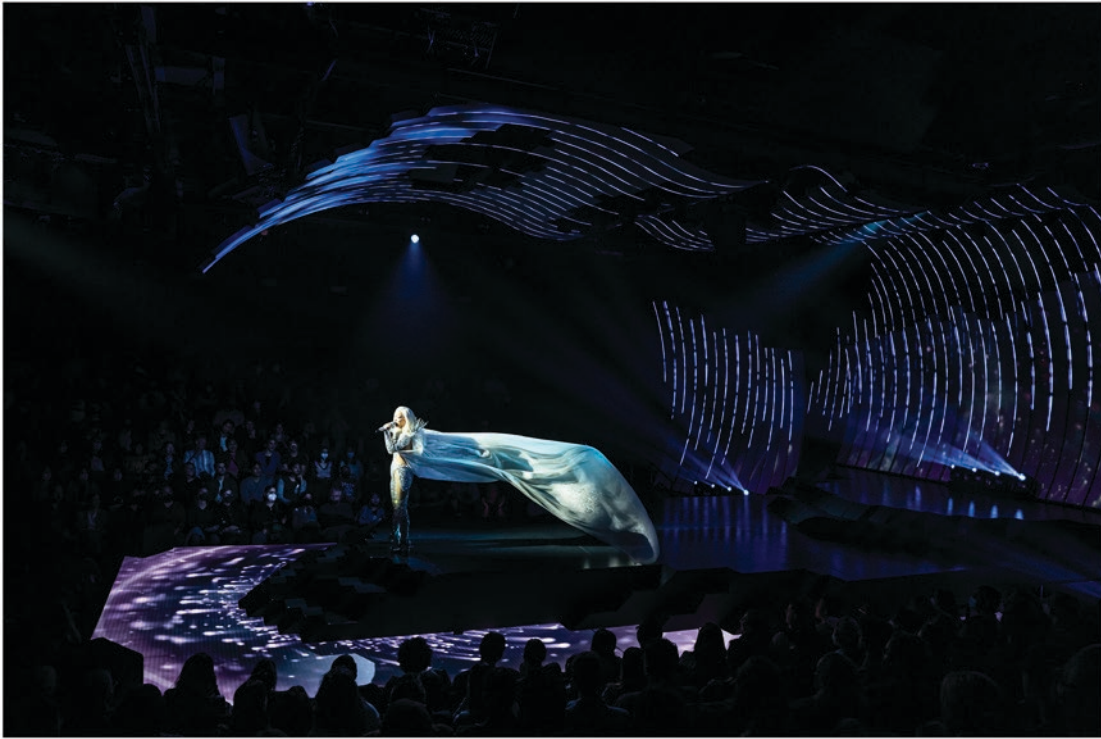


Figure 4. *MwE*, played by Luna, sings “Phoenix” in a silver bodysuit with wing-like ornaments attached in KPOP (2022) by Jason Kim, Helen Park, and Max Vernon, directed by Teddy Bergman at Circle in the Square Theatre. (Photo by Matthew Murphy and Evan Zimmermam; courtesy of Joey Parnes)

Aegyo in K-pop is a strategy intentionally infantilizing women’s bodies, but the social performance also has come to function as a critical tool for fan engagement. Aegyo in first-generation girl groups such as S.E.S. (formed in 1997) and Fin.K.L. (1998) connoted a nonsexual innocence. In contrast, in the second generation—groups such as Wonder Girls (2007) and Girls’ Generation (2007)—sexualized aegyo was blatantly predominant. Both the first- and second-generation girl groups complied with patriarchal cultural norms. Girls’ Generation propagated patriarchal gender ideologies that subordinated young women to men by using aegyo, which positions young women as hypersexualized, submissive, and infantilized fantasy figures for the male *oppa*, meaning elder brother, for consumption, a process that can be associated with the Lolita complex (see, e.g., Epstein and Turnbull 2014). In second-generation girl groups, aegyo reinforced the male-female dichotomy. Nowadays, the aegyo narrative has expanded to include the emergence of the *ssen-unni* (strong sister).

The *ssen-unni* phenomenon offers a critical perspective regarding Korean women in current K-pop culture. The term “unni” connotes “older sister” in Korean and indicates a sense of respect, kinship, and hierarchy; “ssen” is an adjective meaning “strong.” In K-pop, *ssen-unni* suggests “a charismatic female star who can be trusted and looked up to, someone who will serve as a role model with her particular fearlessness,” and become a subject of desire who replaces the male *oppa* (Lee and Yi 2020).

*Ssen-unni* performances often challenge patriarchal norms. For instance, Mamamoo, a girl group that debuted in 2014, embraced a “corset-free movement” and performed in sweatshirts, baggy pants, and white sneakers (Park 2019). In BLAƆKPIŨK’s 2019 hit single “Kill This Love” music video, the group performed gun-shooting choreography against a backdrop of explosions and ruins, reminiscent of the iconic character Lara Croft from the *Tomb Raider* video game franchise turned into films. Groups such as Mamamoo and BLAƆKPIŨK foreground strong

women, adding new dimensions to the aegyo discourse. Performances that feature ssen-unni displace aegyo cuteness away from infantile hypersexuality and its oppressive implications, because ssen-unni performances cater mostly to women spectators.

Rather than choosing between aegyo and ssen-unni as most girl groups do, in *KPOP MwE* and *RTMIS* refuse to be categorized as merely cute, sexual, or strong. They present multifaceted Asian characters who are strong yet vulnerable, unafraid to show their deepest feelings, and fearless. This diversification is exemplified in a scene where a projection displays a video montage of each *RTMIS* member receiving the news from Ruby of their selection as *RBY* trainees: Sonoma “jumps with joy”; Ivy “looks shocked”; Tiny nods as if she knew it all along; Riya does a fist pump; and Miyeon is in tears—showing an array of Asian women character types and responses.

In their execution of aegyo, the members of *RTMIS* assert their individuality and ownership with unique gestures: Miyeon, the youngest member, displays the “Korean V” and finger hearts; Riya imbues the performance with her straightforward, dry wit; and *MwE* demonstrates aegyo through a heart-shaped arm gesture, one leg extended out and lifted.<sup>21</sup> Each owned their own aegyo.

*KPOP* radically reformed Broadway’s audience demographics. The show’s audience consistently varied more in age and identity than any Broadway audiences I have encountered. At each of the four *KPOP* performances I attended in November 2022, I saw an unprecedented number of Asians, but also could easily spot brown and black spectators. The average age was diverse. I interviewed a white male couple in their 50s–60s; a heterosexual white-haired Korean American couple in their 70s; a black queer couple in their 20s; a 12-year-old black girl, wearing pink sparkling ribbons tied in her hair and a pink fur jacket, who came with her mother; a young brown woman in her early 30s who came by herself; and young teenage girls of diverse races and ethnicities screaming from the front seats.

These women blur the representations of Asian/American women as well as K-pop girl groups. As Jason Kim elaborates, “this show is not necessarily about Asian Suffering, with a capital A and S. It’s not about infantilized men or hyper-sexualized women; it’s not fetishizing” (in A. Lee 2022). Park explains that “People thought K-pop girl groups were cutesy and weird, not relatable at all, just exotic, and the boy bands were kind of feminine or so serious. I was totally in disagreement. For me, K-pop is a wide spectrum and communicates so many different layers of emotions” (in Macabasco 2022). Park deliberated whether to showcase K-pop’s expected stereotypes and exoticism, but chose to present the breadth of K-pop culture: “To me, K-pop is more than just idol music, but also the deeper roots of K-pop, including ’90s and early 2000s ballads that had a personal significance to my musical upbringing” (Park 2022a).

## A New Sonic Capture

My heart started pulsing in sync with the 128 beats per minute of the music when Min, a former member of the disbanded K-pop girl group *Miss A*, opened *KPOP* as Riya—a member of *RTMIS*—with the song “This Is My Korea.” Riya sang swung eighth notes in Gb major as she swiped both hands upward towards the center of her body, then briskly spread both hands in an outward motion with palms down and stretched toward the floor on the accented second downbeat of the quarter note of the 18th measure.<sup>22</sup> Wearing white platform sneakers and a short lavender fur jacket over a short, teal-blue A-line dress with three narrow yellow stripes and a conspicuous black heart on the front, she danced with sharpness but ease and confidence. Riya casually vocalized in perfect pitch, but what caused my eardrums to vibrate and affected my entire body was when she sang in Korean: “반만년이란 긴 시간의 기다림” (Waiting for five thousand years).

21. The “Korean V” is a hand gesture similar to the peace sign, in which the index and middle fingers are raised and separated to form a “V” shape, with the remaining fingers being clenched. This hand gesture is prevalent among the younger generation of all genders in Korea and is often used in photos to indicate pride or victory. In the realm of K-pop, it is a type of aegyo, performed as a form of fan service.

22. Swing eighths are eighth notes divided into triplets, where the second eighth note occurs two-thirds into the beat, making the first note twice as long as the second.

The drum beat compressed as the sampled psychedelic drum loop intensified; the backdrop opened to reveal the charismatic F8 (pronounced as “fate”), the fictitious boy band. Jun Hyuk, played by Kevin Woo, a former K-pop idol of U-KISS, appeared in a mustard-colored collar shirt under a burgundy-striped blazer. Jun Hyuk, the leader of F8, posed grinning center stage. His bangs were parted, the latest trend in Korea, and with his right hand he stroked his chest to the beat. He sang the syncopated lyrics, in Korean: “아침에 눈뜰 때마다 너무나 원했던/소중한 너의 품에 안아주고 싶어/언제나 내 맘속에 넌 살아 숨쳐” (I wanted it every morning when I opened my eyes / I want to be in your arms, my precious / You are always alive and breathing in my heart). RTMIS and F8 came together and sang the vocal hook in unison with point moves choreographed by Jennifer Weber, creating a “K” with their hands as the visual hook:

This is my Korea  
 This is my story-a  
 A new category-a  
 To make you dance and clap your hands

This unexpected sonic encounter with Korea on Broadway was exhilarating; *KPOP*'s soundwaves resonated throughout my body as I felt how “sound is experienced in the touch—of sound wave to eardrum, of vibration to emotion” (Kapchan 2017:2). With Park's choice to write bilingual song lyrics, multisensory *KPOP* added its own unique auditory landscape to Broadway musical theatre. Like K-pop songs, the musical's songs and dialogue, as well as the *Playbill*, are in English and Korean. Park explains, “As someone who grew up in both Korea and America, I've always had this pressure to conform to one language and culture or the other [...] I think K-pop music and culture has created this magic where you feel that it's okay to be bilingual” (in Putnam 2022). Significantly, the Korean lyrics and dialogue are not translated.

## Language as Asian/American Resistance

K-pop sounds are political statements “emblematic of the social, historical, political, and technological soundscape of the industry” (H. Kim 2023). Racial dynamics represented in the K-pop phenomenon have been interrogated in depth by Suk-Young Kim (S. Kim 2020a; S. Kim 2020b), yet K-pop as a sonic event has been largely neglected in academia, where ocular centric analyses have been dominant (H. Kim 2023). In this light, *KPOP*'s sonic design represents a site of power relations, and it is imperative to analyze the libretto's sonic epistemology, as the musical's sonic resistance subverts and deconstructs dominant power structures.

This is not a new phenomenon. Broadway musical theatre has attempted to be multicultural and intercultural since at least *The King and I*, which includes some spoken Thai, and *Miss Saigon*, whose revivals included inauthentic Vietnamese, but whose 2017 revival tried to be more respectful by using actual Vietnamese words (Tran 2017). Both *In the Heights* (2021) and revivals of *West Side Story* (2009, 2020) exemplify the interplay between Spanish and English. Steven Spielberg, director of the Academy Award-winning film version of *West Side Story* (2021), rejected English subtitles on screen “out of respect” because the Spanish “language had to exist in equal proportions alongside the English with no help” (in Acuna 2021).

In musical performance, it is common to retain the source language of a work for reasons of musicality. This is particularly evident in opera, where the linguistic choices are often tied to the composer. For instance, the operas of Giuseppe Verdi are performed in Italian, while those of Gilbert and Sullivan are performed in English; Richard Wagner's in German; jīngjù (Beijing opera) in Chinese; and changgeuk (Korean traditional opera) in Korean. These languages often are retained because operas tend to resonate in historical memory as encapsulations of national culture, as well as with audience expectations. But they also are retained because translation significantly alters the timbre, tone, and vocal techniques of songs. Each language is generated differently in the resonating spaces, especially the oral cavity, during vocal production.



From the postcolonial purview—when unequal power relations between cultures and their languages exist, as occurs in the US and, more precisely, on Broadway—speaking and singing several languages in juxtaposition onstage can offer a form of resistance to the hegemonic language. Moreover, the power dynamic encoded in a hierarchy of languages, using language to maintain cultural control, is at the crux of colonialism. Scholars such as Marvin Carlson (2006); Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (1995); Gayatri Spivak (2003); Emily Apter (2006); and others have argued for decades that language is a basic instrument of colonial authority. In postcolonial, multicultural, intercultural, and transnational theatre generally, but also in some Broadway musical theatre productions, producers impose source languages upon target cultures to maintain cultural hegemony (H. Kim 2016). Most importantly, source and target languages rarely have equal status (Asad 1986; Niranjana 1992). *KPOP*'s unconventional bilingual libretto is ideologically loaded; it is in itself a form of critique.

On *KPOP*'s bilingual stage, translating Korean lyrics into English becomes a way of making the foreign subject acceptable to the target, mostly white, American Broadway audience—the “more conventional audience,” as Green noted (2022). That is, to producers who front the investment money, a Broadway show seems viable only when it caters to a white, English-speaking audience. But *KPOP* took another way. *KPOP* not only foregrounds Korean, but is articulated through Asian and Asian American performing bodies. *KPOP* differs from previous Asian-centric musicals in that Park and her colleagues insisted on presenting the linguistic and cultural collage of contemporary Koreans in the US. But for all that, Korean comprises roughly only 10% of the show. Still, some, such as reviewer Jesse Green, insisted that “those who aren't hard-core fans of the [K-pop] genre or don't understand Korean [...] will have a harder time enjoying this one” (2022). But Green's opinion is not the majority view. Most English-speaking audience members I interviewed did not think that the Korean was an obstacle because the Korean phrases are inserted as extensions to the English lines.

At the four shows that I attended that November, when I asked audience members if the language was a barrier to understanding the show's plot, I received a range of responses, but most were not put off by it: Cori Dussman (25) from Middletown, NJ, who was an avid fan of *f(x)* and Luna, cried throughout the show and felt every emotion the performers (especially Luna) were expressing; Nicolas Hermick (23) and Leo Carmody (23), both performers, came to support their friend who starred in the show, and their inability to understand Korean didn't bother them, but rather made the performance feel more authentic; and an anonymous young woman in her 20s wished she could understand Korean, because she missed details and funny moments that were not translated, but this didn't interfere with her understanding the plot (Dussman 2022; Hermick 2022; Carmody 2022; Anon. 2022). I overheard one young couple complain openly after the show that the abrupt, awkward shift in languages disrupted the flow.

Park and Jason Kim's choice to use Korean in a bilingual production dismantled racial hierarchy. Translating Korean into English would have domesticated the foreign language, putting it under the authority of the dominant culture. To translate becomes a process of assimilation and subjugation from the colonial perspective. Retaining Korean therefore became a way to resist assimilation. The intent is clear in a short exchange. Late in the play, Brad (Zachary Noah Piser) intervenes when Harry requests English translation: “No. No one translates. No one has to. Learn some Korean, Harry” (78).

## Disrupting the “Ching Chong” Dialect

Luna is not fluent in English. She delivers MwE's lines with a thick accent, and she found it difficult to memorize the script (Park 2022a). Yet I was thrilled to hear awkward English uttered with extreme confidence. I deeply felt every minute detail of her emotions through her strong, authentic foreign articulation. *KPOP* rejected using “ching chong,” which reduces all actual Asian accents for the benefit of Broadway's white American audiences. Luna was not asked to reformulate her Korean accent. Performers with discernible accents would prefer to perform in their own voices but, as Q Lim explains, Broadway producers require English-fluent Asian Americans to perform using the generic Asian accents white dialect coaches teach (Q Lim 2020a).

Park refused to relinquish cultural control and impose the dominant language on the production or blend AAPI dialects into a generalized “other” that misrepresents diverse BIPOC cultures. With such a practice—long-standing on Broadway and in Hollywood—the production loses its dialogic complexity by conflating diverse histories and cultures. In this context, Luna’s strong accent and her use of Korean, as well as the Korean song lyrics, represented what may have been an unfamiliar and for some unwanted sound on Broadway, but a necessary progressive one nevertheless.

## The Future’s Standing Right in Front of YOU

Miles won a Tony for *The King and I*, but *KPOP*’s run was cut short after a mere 17 regular performances.<sup>23</sup> There are several reasons *KPOP* closed. First, Broadway has struggled since the pandemic, and had to contend with several cancellations and many permanent closures (*Diana*, *Ain’t No Mo’*, *Almost Famous*). Only two shows—the musical *Six* and the play *The Lehman Trilogy*—maintained strong sales. Their resilience can partly be attributed to their success on the West End before their New York premiere. Second, Covid-19 illnesses caused several preview cancellations, adding financial strain to the production. Third, the surge of the omicron variant resulted in the cancellation of *KPOP*’s pre-Broadway engagement at the Signature Theatre in Washington, DC, which prolonged the preview period, and increased operating costs. Lastly, Park and Jason Kim suggest that a disconnect between the show and its promotion strategy might have contributed to low ticket sales, as the marketing company was traditionally focused on Broadway and had no experience in marketing to the kind of diverse crowd that supported *KPOP* (Yam 2022; Seymour 2022). But it is also possible that—in the absence of more targeted promotion and favorable conditions, and the mediating support of a sufficient number of AAPI critics—Broadway generally was not ready to embrace a wholly Asian-focused musical.

Despite its short run, *KPOP* clearly contributed to a theatrical plenitude of AAPI representation on Broadway. It was a celebratory triumph for the community, a watershed production that resisted Broadway’s musical orientalism. *KPOP* offered a new visual and sonic paradigm that disrupted the norms of the predominantly white American Broadway stage. After learning about the abrupt closing of the show on 6 December, Park sent me a deeply emotional essay she had written, later published in *Playbill*. “Yesterday, the producers of *KPOP*, a show that I’ve worked on for the last eight years as composer and music producer, announced that the show is losing too much money and will close. This is hard to fathom. [...] I made it my mission to stay authentic to this complicated, unique experience of mine, of being in between two languages, two cultures, two worlds” (Park 2022b). I could feel the turmoil embedded in each word of her short essay and could see how wrenching the events that led to the early closing were for her.<sup>24</sup>

When Green denounced “Halfway”—a song sung by Brad, the only multiracial character and the newest addition to F8—as a love ballad addressed to a girl, it was traumatizing to Park. The song represented Brad’s struggle as a mixed-race Asian American, and expressed his internal conflict in having to choose between his cultural identities. Charged with identity politics, the song answers the question that encapsulates his dilemma: “do I have to be Brad today or do I have to be Byung-Woo?” (J. Kim 2022). “Halfway” was Park’s mixed-race son’s favorite song, as the six-year-old saw himself represented as “fully human” on a Broadway stage (Park 2022b). When Ruby fires Harry from her production, he utters, “You’re making a mistake. I would’ve made you human. I would’ve turned you into art” (J. Kim 2022:90). Harry embodies the archetypal white male of Broadway, and his response manifests the abjection of Asian women who are deemed fully human only when approved by white Broadway. If they refuse, the Asian body cannot become “art.” To counter this figuration, *KPOP*’s act 2 finale triumphantly ends with “Blast Off”—the whole cast wears white, as

23. *KPOP* played 44 previews and 17 regular performances, from 13 October 2022 to 11 December 2022.

24. The musical’s title, likely chosen to capitalize on the popularity of the genre, might not adequately convey the complexity of its approach to this liminality, and may have misled audiences to assume the show delivered only lightweight pop.

if to say that Asian/Americans are part of white America. *KPOP* provided an alternative definition of what it means to assimilate in the US, here by having characters creatively retain their culture through language, while also attempting to make the culture accessible to mainstream audiences.

It is unfortunate that Salonga and Miles won Tonys for their roles in problematic musicals that reinforced hypersexual stereotypes of Asian women, and that Asian/American women performers have had to enact such roles to be successful. The industry “[m]ust do better” (Wu 2022b). In the name of AAPI solidarity, it is critical for the Asian American community to pursue theatrical plenitude on Broadway, but with cultural sensitivity. As Park remarks, “there’s a universality in the specificity” (in Macabasco 2022).

*KPOP* failed to fully subvert the normative ideology of Broadway. Yet as a sign of 21st-century progress, the show resisted the superstructure. It explored and unsettled the power relations that often pervade Broadway musical theatre, and complicated heretofore fixed images of Asian women. *KPOP* created possibilities for multiple narratives. Benefitting from AAPI women performers such as Miyoshi Umeki, Baayork Lee, Joan Almedilla, Angel Desai, Ann Harada, Ann Sanders, and Lea Salonga, who have amplified AAPI representation on Broadway, and with Miles, Q Lim, and Wu’s interventions, *The King and I* provided a transitional platform for *KPOP*’s women performers to redefine Asian/American representation on Broadway, marking a new beginning. Will the still white-dominated Broadway industry cultivate the theatrical plenitude of Asian American narratives? Will Miles’s dream to direct and produce her own version of *The King and I*, based on her carefully researched “bible,” come to fruition? That would certainly fulfill *KPOP*’s promotional phrase: “The Future’s Standing Right in Front of You” (kpopbroadway 2022a).

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