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“Speaking German Like Nobody’s Business”: Anna May Wong, Walter Benjamin, and the Possibilities of Asian American Cosmopolitanism

SHIRLEY JENNIFER LIM

In the summer of 1928 in Berlin, Germany, the noted German Jewish philosopher Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) and Chinese American actress Anna May Wong (1905-1961) shared an unlikely encounter that set in relief European and American conceptions of modernity as well as white European intellectual and American racial minority cosmopolitanisms. On July 6, 1928, Benjamin published the results as “Gespräch mit Anne May Wong” (“Speaking with Anna May Wong: A Chinoiserie from the Old West”) on the front page of the leading German literary review to which he was a regular contributor, *Die Literarische Welt*.¹ The resulting article reveals the complexities of Wong’s Asian American cosmopolitanism. Benjamin justified his choice of a non-literary figure to his audience by explaining, “As everyone knows, May Wong has a central part in the great film now being directed by Eichberg.”² Benjamin’s essay, juxtaposed against a cache of Wong’s writings, neither of which have yet to receive serious scholarly attention, are significant not just for what Benjamin says about Wong, or for what Wong reveals, but for how they intervene in constructions of cosmopolitanism and racial and gendered difference.³ It is precisely this complex blend of Wong’s American modernity, Chinese heritage, and fashionable European sensibility, the seemingly contradictory aspects of which Benjamin stumbles over during the meeting, that were critical for Wong’s cinematic success.

The film that brought Walter Benjamin and Anna May Wong together was *Song/Show Life/Schmutziges Geld* (1928).⁴ German director Richard Eichberg cast

Wong in this, and other films, such as *Hai-Tang/Flame of Love/The Road to Dishonour* (1930), that were co-produced in Germany, France, and England and subtitled or shot in multiple languages so that they could be screened throughout Europe and, most crucially, in the colonial world—hence the multiple titles of the films. These films played not only in France and Germany but also in locations such as Mozambique and South Africa.⁵ Thus, Wong became a transnational symbol of cosmopolitan femininity. Moreover, her star persona constructed a new pan-European cinema that could be construed more broadly as global cinema. Wong undoubtedly found these starring roles in European films appealing because of the rise in Hollywood's exploitative orientalist roles as well as the whole host of race-based laws that circumscribed her life in California.

In elucidating a complicated moment of transnational American racial modernity, I wish to historicize Sau-ling Wong's call to denationalize Asian American studies. In her pathbreaking article, "Denationalization Reconsidered: Asian American Cultural Criticism at a Crossroads," Wong defines denationalization in three main ways: the easing of cultural nationalist concerns in Asian American studies, the permeability between Asian Americans and Asian Asians, and the diasporic perspective.⁶ "Denationalization Reconsidered" has been a critical article for Asian American studies for in it Wong not only outlines the critical shifts in the field but also warns against an unmediated celebration of the dynamics of denationalization. By shifting the geographic focus of transnationalism to Europe, I do not want to create new orthodoxies but wish to signal configurations of spatial mobility and subjectivity that differ from trans-Pacific ones. By translocating denationalization to Europe as well as to the interwar period, I trace the creation of one aspect of what Wong terms the "more cosmopolitan" Asian American population.⁷ Thus, I do not focus on the contemporary movement of transnational capital but I highlight a different kind of "capital"—namely that of cultures and bodies in circulation during an era of imperial cosmopolitanism. Here, empire refers not only to the forced opening of China, Africa, and other locales to European trade, but also to the increase of colonial subjects in Europe, both of which were central to the creation of a European cosmopolitan culture at this time.⁸ Throughout this essay, I map how cosmopolitanism signifies a vast array of processes, positions, and problematics ranging from the creation of racialized cultures of empire in the metropole to the process of becoming a modern subject for both Walter Benjamin and Anna May Wong, to the cinematic global circulation of Wong's Asian American body.

Asian American critique is central to showing the contradictions in the construction of liberal subjecthood and modernity in terms of the nation-state and cosmopolitanism.⁹ Thus, by delineating the perils and promises of the term during the interwar period, this project aims to enrich the spatial and temporal configurations of Asian American cultural critique. This interaction between Anna May Wong and Walter Benjamin offers the possibility of thinking through concepts of denationalization, such as cosmopolitanism, as imperfect processes. Wong is

someone who is never simply American; her own project of self-denationalization becomes marked at this moment. Cosmopolitanism allows Wong and Benjamin to enter into a conversation of cosmopolitanism which reverberates in his writings and in her films and self-fashioning. Yet, as both of their life histories delineate, the supposed openness of cosmopolitan culture breaks down under racial duress.

Examining Walter Benjamin's conversation with Anna May Wong exposes questions concerning the relationship between Asian America, modernity, race, gender and cosmopolitanism. Thus, this essay is not about Benjamin *per se*; rather, it involves the decentering effects of his contact with Wong. Even though this conversation takes place in Berlin, it links notions of cosmopolitanism to the discourse of race in the transnational American context. I use the concept of transnational American racial modernity to refer to the ways in which empire and American domestic racial hierarchies are intermeshed.¹⁰ As such, Benjamin's and Wong's conversation not only tells us about Europe at this moment, but more importantly, it also helps us rethink the United States' configuration of transnational racial modernity.

The Possibilities of Anna May Wong, Walter Benjamin, and Cosmopolitanism

Walter Benjamin conceived of the encounter with Anna May Wong that resulted in "Gespräch mit Anne May Wong" as a free-flowing conversation in which Wong could muse as she pleased. It does not read like a typical news account of an interview with a film star, for we are not even privy to Benjamin's questions. Instead, it was a meeting that unfolded over the course of an afternoon. As Benjamin wrote in the essay, "At first nothing much came of it, and we all had time to form a picture of one another." Meeting with Wong gives Benjamin the opportunity to ponder a wide range of topics related to film and worldliness. A small drawing of Wong in profile, but no photograph, accompanied the front-page essay. Benjamin explains right away who was present: "there was the *romancier* [novelist], . . . asked whether she practice[d] her roles before a mirror; there was the artist, whom May Wong indicated on her left, and the female American journalist, whom she indicated on her right, and there was Anna's sister, who was accompanying her."¹¹ However, as indicated in the above quotation, although the other participants did ask questions, their interlocutions disappear as the meeting progresses. Throughout the encounter, Wong and her film career, as filtered through Benjamin, were the main topics of conversation. This quotation appears at the beginning and it is the only time, aside from the title, that Benjamin uses the name Anna—which he uses not to refer directly to her but in reference to her sister. Instead, throughout the discussion, he calls her by her middle and last names, May Wong. In all subsequent press reportage, Wong reveals that May is a name she chose for herself, believing that Anna Wong did not have the same harmonious flow as Anna May Wong, which made the latter a better name for an actress. Yet Benjamin's continued insistence on using May Wong

as her name instead of Anna or Anna May raises an issue. Could it be that he found Anna too western of a name, too northern European, and instead preferred to use the more melodic and “oriental” name May? From the beginning, Benjamin signals that at least one of the lenses through which he views her is an “oriental” one.

Walter Benjamin’s “Gespräch mit Anne May Wong” articulates how the construction of cosmopolitanism flows through Anna May Wong’s body. Benjamin introduces her to his audience as a global traveller. As he states in the essay, “there was the inhabitant of this room, an influential and worldly woman, who wanted to offer us the gift of her last hours before her departure.”¹² Benjamin’s choice of terms such as worldly and departure all denote Wong as being the opposite of provincial. Wong’s imminent travel signals her cosmopolitanism, in this case her departure for London, where she would make films such as *Piccadilly* (1929) and star in the play *A Circle of Chalk*.

Walter Benjamin’s essay on Anna May Wong stands out within the body of his work both in its subject matter and its style. Three years after the rejection of his Habilitation dissertation (the passing of which was necessary to become a full professor in the German academic system), 1928 is the point in Benjamin’s career when he was becoming a public intellectual whose writings forged the intellectual parameters of twentieth-century modernity. He had recently traveled to Paris to interview writer André Gide, begun the renowned arcades project, and published his Proust translation.¹³ “Gespräch mit Anne May Wong” is striking for the ways in which he seeks to understand avant-garde European culture through the paradox of a Chinese American star in a leading German-made film with pan-European and global ambitions. In the article, Benjamin (who had not yet seen her films) reads Wong’s staging of self as a manifestation of cosmopolitanism. Yet, stylistically, “Gespräch” is not as journalistic in tone as his other *Die Literarische Welt* pieces such as “Toys and Play” (June 1928) and “Conversation with André Gide” (February 1928), nor his other writings of the time, but reads much more like poetic musings on a subject he cannot master or contain. Although “Gespräch” marks the only words we have from Benjamin on Wong, Benjamin’s other writings, such as *On Hashish*, indicate his indirect stakes in orientalism.

One of the conversation’s most compelling features is how it marks the process of Walter Benjamin becoming a global intellectual through his meeting with Anna May Wong. During this stage of “modernity under empire,” Benjamin needs encounters with otherness in order to position himself as a cosmopolitan and modern intellectual. Just as African masks helped shape Pablo Picasso’s art or African American performer Josephine Baker’s dances inspired Jean Cocteau and Ernest Hemingway, in order to work through the modern, Benjamin required Wong.¹⁴ Moreover, Benjamin invokes Goethe to describe their meeting of cultures: “Do many aristocratic Germans”—as they say so beautifully in “Götz,” when they want to make conversation—“now study in Bologna”?¹⁵ At first this remark reads as irrelevant to a conversation with a Chinese American actress taking place in Berlin. However, the

deeper context elucidates how it complements cosmopolitanism. Benjamin quotes from Goethe's play *Götz von Berlichingen mit der eisernen Hand* (*Götz of Berlichingen with the Iron Hand*), with which the readers of *Die Literarische Welt* probably would have been familiar (Benjamin also commented on the play in his article "Goethe," published in *Die Literarische Welt* in December, 1928).¹⁶ What is fascinating is that he places those phrases in quotation marks, so he is probably saying the words to her, but it also leaves open the possibility that she is speaking them to him. By citing Goethe, Benjamin is alluding to how Goethe defined the concept of "World Literature" as a universal literature that transcends national categories, which then provides an intellectual and philosophical foundation for his ideas on cosmopolitanism.¹⁷ Thus, Benjamin works through his conceptualization of cosmopolitanism through his encounter with Wong.

Anna May Wong's cosmopolitan career in Europe provides scholars with a new way to think about Sau-ling Wong's call for denationalizing Asian American studies.¹⁸ Although cosmopolitanism indexes Anna May Wong's ability to "speak German like nobody's business," it also registers racial particularity and alienation from the American nation-state. Cosmopolitanism, then, provides a useful means to consider the global impact of someone who has previously been considered local and bounded within the confines of ethnic-Asian America or diasporic Chinese culture. Cosmopolitanism's academic salience has increased because of its ability to characterize global flows of people and cultures beyond nation-state paradigms. Yet, cosmopolitanism's analytical strength is also its challenge; its fluid, situated, and historical meanings do not yield a static definition. Attributed to Diogenes, modified by Kant, and more recently promulgated by critic Martha Nussbaum, one strand of cosmopolitanism refers to the "worldwide community of human beings." As other recent works have argued, however, rather than being "some known entity" with the aforementioned genealogy, there are multiple forms of cosmopolitanism "awaiting realization" that "sometimes work with nationalism" rather than being its opposite, or are "local and embodied" rather than universal.¹⁹

In some ways, as Walter Benjamin's invocation of the word "worldly" signals, Anna May Wong gracefully performed the cosmopolitan persona within the Eurocentric framework of the era. Then, as now, Europe holds a privileged place for claims to cosmopolitanism. As Eurocentric cosmopolitan culture reached its pinnacle and its supposed universality through the imperialist project, it became increasingly critical for those aspiring to enter its ranks to master speaking European languages such as German and French—Wong "speaking Swahili," for example, would not have had the same caché. Moreover, as indicated in Benjamin's recitation of the artistic cosmopolitan crowd that was present during the encounter, Wong mingled with illuminati such as Marlene Dietrich and Leni Riefenstahl in Germany, Paul Robeson, Laurence Olivier, and Somerset Maugham in London, and Carl Van Vechten and Fania Marinoff in New York. According to Wong, her fame spread to cities such as Shanghai in the 1930s, "where there are more cosmopolitan [people]," whereas those living in

the Chinese countryside typically did not know about her or her films.²⁰ Thus, for Wong, cosmopolitanism encompasses knowledge of western films and culture, and the occupation of western spaces—Shanghai as a colonial treaty port city replete with western sectors—where such encounters are possible. At this particular moment during the interwar years, it is the global production and reach of her cinematic persona that render Wong cosmopolitan.

For Anna May Wong, the global film industry provided a critical opportunity for her to become an international star, an opportunity that would not have been available had she remained in the United States. In his essay, Benjamin reported that “We do not learn very much about this film, of course. ‘But the role,’ she says, ‘is perfect. It is a role that belongs to me like no other before.’” This revelation from Wong is poignant for it implies that she felt that her previous Hollywood roles had not “belonged” to her. In other words, she had to leave the United States and come to Europe in order to find an acting role that suited her. In this context, the language of belonging is very much connected to nation-state citizenship. The encounter also reveals how Anna May Wong came to Europe through cosmopolitan Hollywood. Wong had met author Karl Vollmoeller in Hollywood and he persuaded Eichberg to cast Wong in *Song* (1928), which was based on Vollmoeller’s novel.²¹ Benjamin clarified for his readers that “Vollmoeller wrote it specifically for her. And for that reason, it will have a great deal of passion and misfortune, for she loves to play scenes of sorrow. Her weeping is famous among her colleagues. They come all the way out to Neubabelsberg [in the Berlin suburbs] to see it.”²² The numerous close ups of Wong’s face ensured that film audiences around the globe would be able to witness her ability to play “passion and misfortune.” Wong’s expressive facial gestures and eloquent eyes as well as her reported ability to cry on demand proved irresistible for fans of silent film, including Benjamin.

Anna May Wong’s early European films were shot in multiple languages, were meant to be a building block of “Film Europe,” and were intended to circulate as cosmopolitan currency around the globe. *Song* was co-produced by British International Pictures, and its setting (intentionally) transcends location—in fact, it is difficult to attribute to any one nation-state. In the film, Wong wears a headdress, with beads hanging from her arms, which references an unspecified eastern culture; however, her skirt displays a western cut and patterns. She dances a modern dance, moving from side to side as she holds the edge of her skirt. Her costume hints of the Middle East in its beading and veil, but does not contain any references to east Asia. As film scholar Tim Bergfelder has conveyed, in these films, Wong’s Asianness is not fixed in terms of nation or costume and is mediated by dancing western dances such as the “shimmy.” This overall ambiguity and lack of national specificity thus functions as part of a larger strategy of making Wong’s star image exportable to numerous countries with differing racial codes and meanings.²³ Wong’s gestures and movements, born out of the Chinese American community in Los Angeles, tutored in Hollywood, and refined in Europe, became exported to the world as signifiers of the

oriental. The fact that films such as *Song* and *Hai-Tang* played in locations such as Mozambique, Australia, and South Africa speaks to the appeal of Wong as a global figure of exotic otherness.

Yet, as Walter Benjamin displays throughout the conversation, as a Chinese American, Anna May Wong presents a conundrum for the possibilities of cosmopolitanism. Although her actions comply with Eurocentric definitions of cosmopolitanism—a quality that attracts Benjamin to Wong—they also cause him to stumble when he tries to reconcile them with her Chinese face and American colloquialisms. When confronting the paradox of Wong’s Chineseness and Americanness, Benjamin becomes baffled and reverts to the national to invoke the racial. For example, he describes her clothing at the meeting as follows, “Her outfit would not be at all unsuitable for such garden games; a dark blue suit, a light blue blouse, a yellow tie over that—one would like to know a Chinese verse to describe this. She has always dressed this way, for she was in fact not born in China but in Chinatown in Los Angeles.”²⁴ It is striking that the conjunction of Anna May Wong’s modern western clothing yet racialized Chinese body causes him to struggle for words. It is clear that he admires her cosmopolitan clothing, figure and femininity. However, Benjamin’s desire is to at first find a “Chinese verse to describe this.” Acknowledging her birth in Los Angeles’ Chinatown indicates that that that kind of phrase would not quite suit her. An eloquent man of letters, Benjamin is stymied by the paradox of Wong’s cosmopolitan western modernity and racialized Chinese body. Although he invokes the national to describe the racial, he wants to merge her Chinese and western identities. In fact, the subtitle of this essay, “A Chinoiserie from the Old West,” indicates his fascination with her complicated and contradictory star image.

Anna May Wong’s life provides a provocative study for cosmopolitanism because she spatially and temporally tampers with its categorizations. The “citizen of the world” strand of cosmopolitanism implies an elite white male subject because it is predicated upon privileged imperialism—only opening the doors of travel only to some—and also on modern nation-state models of citizenship determined by race, gender and place of birth. In contrast, Anna May Wong’s American citizenship, combined with her Chinese diasporic origins, presents us with a different spatiality of cosmopolitan dynamics than that of the typical European center-colony model in that it forces (at minimum) a triangulation of spaces and cultures. Imperialism, and the subsequent flows of culture between colonies and European centers, gave cosmopolitanism its claims to universality. Thus race and difference were imbricated into the supposedly universal construct of European cosmopolitanism. As Pheng Cheah notes, “[Homi] Bhabha and [James] Clifford argue that the implementation of cosmopolitical culture on other soil leads to its hybridization with native cultures, thereby subverting imperialism’s cosmo-political-cultural project. Indeed, they make the further claim that hybridization constitutes a site of resistance to the neotraditionalist, nativist cultural face of national liberation movements and

postcolonial nation-states.”²⁵ Cheah and others interested in racial difference and cosmopolitanism have analyzed the flows of culture between the cosmopolitan European metropole and the colony. However, they do not take into account the triangulation of flows of culture that includes the United States as a critical node in the creation of a cosmopolitical culture.

As an American, Anna May Wong thus presents additional complications to this dynamic of cosmopolitanism because her culture is not “native culture” and her relationship to Europe is more complex than that of a colonial subject to the metropole. The United States’ deeply racialized history begins pre-nation-state as a slave-holding colony of Spain, France, and Britain, grafted upon which are the US nation-state’s colonial ventures in Asia, the Pacific, and the Caribbean, the continued genocide of indigenous peoples, and the reterritorialization of Mexico. In the twentieth century, the United States is the preeminent modern nation-state precisely because of its global flows of people and cultures. Anna May Wong’s Chinese heritage in particular subjects her to the slipperiness of American racial categories vis-à-vis national citizenship and affiliation. Moreover, her career in Europe helps us rethink the creation of Asian American racial categories. If “denationalization,” to use Sau-ling Wong’s critical phrase, “entails a relaxation of . . . what is Asian American and what is Asian,” then Anna May Wong “relaxes” the Asian American diasporic experiences to include Asia and America as well as the relationship between Asian America and Europe.²⁶

Whereas European cosmopolitanism was rendered universal through imperialism, the United States was rendered cosmopolitan not only through colonialism and conquest but through transnational European migration. As American intellectual Randolph Bourne observed in “Trans-National America” (1916), “What we have achieved has been rather a cosmopolitan federation of national colonies, of foreign cultures, from which the sting of devastating competition has been removed.”²⁷ Yet, under Bourne’s formulation, America as a cosmopolitan nation is still a Eurocentric one. In the same article, Bourne also discusses how the migrations of the Jews, Greeks, Scandinavians, and Germans allowed what was formerly colonialism to grow into cosmopolitanism. Bourne’s articulation of American cosmopolitanism also involves the consolidation of whiteness at the expense of marginalizing, or effacing, the other (Asian Americans as well as Latinos, Native Americans and African Americans). If Europe achieved cosmopolitanism through the imperialist project, then the United States achieved Eurocentrism through the expulsion of the racial minority other. What is important to note, however, is that by the twentieth century, the urban centers of the United States had become loci of cosmopolitanism. Hence, under Bourne’s formulation, it could be argued that as an American, Anna May Wong was already “cosmopolitan” before she went to Europe.

Although for centuries Europeans had exhibited performers of color, in the aftermath of World War I, modernity’s obsession with “primitive” and oriental

cultures encouraged striking numbers of African and Asian diasporic musicians, writers and artists to create visible cultures in Europe.²⁸ World War I highlighted the evils of modern civilization; consequently, in the post-war 1920s, many white Europeans sought redemption through the supposedly “primitive and exotic.” The presence of Wong alongside African American artists and performers like Josephine Baker and Paul Robeson in the capitals of Europe (London, Paris, Berlin), underscore how European interest in oriental and black cultures was also mediated through American racialized bodies.²⁹ Indeed, in 1928, Baker was seriously considering relocating from Paris to Berlin and making the latter city her performing capital, which exemplifies the cultural currency of otherness at this time.

As a citizen of a nation-state that is both colonial and post-colonial (i.e., the US), Anna May Wong’s life history adds complexity to the Eurocentric imperial models of racial spatiality. As a Chinese American, her citizenship is made tenuous by laws such as the Cable Act (1922) that would strip her of her citizenship if she were to marry an “alien ineligible for citizenship” such as a Chinese immigrant. Her ability to travel and “be at home in the world” is also circumscribed by race-based migration laws such as the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. Wong brings all of that historical baggage with her to Europe. Temporality is another way Wong’s case makes us rethink cosmopolitanism. The term orientalism tends towards nostalgia, the past, and the non-modern, whereas cosmopolitanism gestures towards the modern and contemporary. Of course there are slippages, contradictions, and overlap between the terms. In fact, as a modern cosmopolitan Chinese American “flapper,” Wong’s persona exposes those slippages and contradictions.

There is also a simultaneous incommensurability yet hyper-compatibility between the terms Asian American and cosmopolitanism. On the one hand, the concepts are incommensurable because Asian American is an ethnic-specific category, while cosmopolitanism is conceived in opposition to ethnic particularity. On the other hand, the terms Asian American and cosmopolitanism are hyper-compatible because of the particular position of Asians in the Americas. The American citizen has been defined historically against the Asian immigrant. Thus, Asian immigrants are simultaneously bodies to be integrated into the national political sphere and foreign objects always subjected to their alien origins.³⁰ In material terms, this subjection to alien origins translated into American racial codes which legally barred Asian immigrants from becoming American citizens; alien land laws that forbade non-citizens from owning land; anti-miscegenation laws that forbade “Mongolians” from marrying whites; and a whole host of official and unofficial segregation practices that regulated everything from swimming pools and movie theaters to jobs and residential housing. The production of the United States as a nation-state is predicated upon drawing the lines of belonging and exclusion. Yet, the “alien origins” of Asian Americans renders them ambiguous in terms of nation-state subjectivity, hence creating the possibility of extra-national affiliation,

including cosmopolitanism. Paradoxically, it is that “foreigner-within” conception of the Asian American that allows for cosmopolitanism.

It is not surprising that Walter Benjamin misreads Anna May Wong, for she emerged out of a specific racialized performance tradition that created an alternative American modernity. Growing up in Los Angeles just outside of Chinatown and Hollywood, Wong, and many other Chinese Americans, capitalized on early cinema’s fascination with race and otherness.³¹ Movies about Asia were filmed around Los Angeles and numerous members of the Southern California community were part of Chinese American Hollywood, forming a branch of the Chinese Screen Actors Extras Guild and developing community networks for finding jobs in Hollywood. Though without the broader ethnic community context, Benjamin reports on this modern background in his article, “For she [Wong] had been interested in film from very early on. She still remembers the first time she went to the cinema. School was out because of an epidemic. She bought a ticket with her pocket money. Hardly had she returned home when she tried out everything she had seen in front of a mirror.”³² Benjamin’s essay shows how Wong herself was constituted through the movies. Benjamin’s words paint an evocative picture of Wong creating her own subjectivity through the “cinematic lens” of the mirror. Thus, Wong’s location in Los Angeles proved critical to her future for it gave her the means to fulfill her interest in cinema through Hollywood.

Anna May Wong was also an active participant in constructing her image as an “authentic” Chinese subject through cinema. Wong often donned clothing in order to feel and become oriental. As Benjamin notes, “[W]hen her roles call for it, she is glad to wear traditional clothing. Her imagination has a freer rein [literally works more freely] in them. Her favorite dress was cut from her father’s wedding coat, and she also wears it at home from time to time.”³³ What is particularly interesting about this quotation is that the dress cut from her father’s wedding coat is actually not a traditional garment *per se* but one that is refashioned and repurposed. Yet, Benjamin places it the realm of the authentic by linking it to Wong’s Chinese father. Since authenticity is fundamental to modernity’s discourse on orientalism, Chinese Americans playing “authentic” Hollywood-style Chinese people ruptures the seamless construction of the modern. Despite her lack of Chinese authenticity, Wong would nonetheless be expected to represent that culture. Through the strategy of self-fashioning, she could try out differing strategies for performing the female racial minority body. Wong learned how performance could contain subversive elements and how one could inhabit multiple temporalities simultaneously. Wong’s racial and cinematically-mediated modernity also compels Benjamin to engage in dialogue with her cosmopolitanism and not simply view her through an orientalist lens.

Yet, with Anna May Wong as the subject, cosmopolitanism could dangerously veer into a version of orientalism through poetic national containment. Benjamin resorts to metaphor when prose is not sufficient to describe her. Although Wong was a second or third-generation American-born actress who had not been to China,

Benjamin continually insists on linking her with Chinese aphorisms.³⁴ The opening line of the article reads: “May Wong—the name resonates with color around the edges, it is sharp and light like the tiny specks that open into scentless full-moon blossoms in a bowl of tea.” Words like specks, a possible reference to chopsticks, as well as “bowl of tea” and “full-moon blossoms” all immediately situate Wong’s “orientalness” not only for the literary weekly’s audience, but also for Benjamin himself. Moreover, the words Benjamin invokes are very feminine, at least in western discourse—blossoms, moon, and tiny specks. Benjamin is thus using language to invoke poetic descriptions of Wong. It is striking that regular prose cannot define the paradox that her Chinese American cosmopolitanism presents. Wong’s racialized body calls into question the notion that cosmopolitanism can belong to anyone.

Walter Benjamin’s description of Anna May Wong’s physical movements during the interview also reveals her resistant nature, suggesting that she was possibly uncomfortable with the way in which he “translated” her. He writes, “May Wong turns question and answer into a kind of swinging: she leans back and rises up, sinks down, rises up, and I fancy that from time to time I am giving her a push. She laughs, that is all.”³⁵ This quotation suggests that Wong refused to articulate what Benjamin wanted and expected to hear. The phrase “giving her a push” could be construed as a helpful gesture, especially in the context of swinging, but could also be interpreted as invasive. Could it be that she is refusing to answer the question, instead swinging up and down, and back and forth? He hints as much when he says that she laughs—that is all. It is possible that she laughs instead of answering his questions because she knows her answer is not what he wants to hear. The expression “that is all” could mean “that is all” in the sense that it allows her to evade any further response, or that she does not retort or reply critically but leaves it as a laugh.

Speaking German Like Nobody’s Business

What, then, do Anna May Wong’s own words reveal about her time in Berlin? In a letter to Carl Van Vechten and Fania Marinoff dated September 26, 1929, Wong comments on her film career in Germany: “So all I’ve accomplished since I saw you is speaking German like nobody’s business as I have to speak both German and English in the new film. It’s been most interesting to master what formerly seemed like an impossibility but we sometimes even surprise ourselves at what we can do.”³⁶ Wong’s presentation of self as an American comes out in her formulation of mastering “an impossibility” with a “can do” attitude. The phrase “like nobody’s business” demonstrates her fluidity with American colloquial language, not surprising given her Los Angeles birth, upbringing, and adult life. Her terminology “all I’ve accomplished” can be considered a statement both of pride and false modesty. “Speaking German Like Nobody’s Business” can be interpreted as saying to her friends that nobody thought a Chinese girl from Los Angeles could “speak German,”

at all and look at me, here I am doing it extremely well. Here, “speaking German” refers not only to the actual acquisition of German language skills, but also to the successful adoption of European cosmopolitan behaviors. For Wong, acting in German-produced films was clearly a challenge, but one that she relished, for it gave her entrée into the world of an international film star.

In a 1934 *Los Angeles Times* interview published after favorable American attitudes towards China emerged, Anna May Wong explained how her sojourn in Europe paradoxically made her more “Chinese,” especially now that it was culturally safer to claim the term in the United States. In this context, “Chinese” indexes a range of temporal and racial positions. Deploying “Chinese” in a cosmopolitan sense allows us to explore the contradictions posed by Wong’s restaged persona. According to her own formulation, she left the United States a young female American flapper and came back a cosmopolitan and worldly Chinese woman. As she stated for the *Los Angeles Times* in 1934, “My next milepost was in Berlin. The first picture in which I appeared made a hit. Crowds waited in the lobby for me to come out. Weaving my way through that pack of admiring fans, I seemed suddenly to be standing at one side watching myself with complete detachment. It was my Chinese soul coming back to claim me. Up to that time I had been more of an American flapper than Chinese.”³⁷ Wong reported later in the interview that the more she studied French, German and music, the more Chinese she became. This is not entirely surprising for in London, Paris, and Berlin, European valorization of the oriental not only worked to control the oriental but also worked to give some performers, such as Wong, status and admiration. Thus, while in Europe, Wong realized that playing “the oriental” could be of great use to her as an actress. Moreover, in the 1930s, the image of the Chinese in the United States became much more positive, thus allowing her to claim her Chinese heritage in more public ways. Although Benjamin’s admiration of her “oriental” beauty was not the only factor that prompted Wong to realize that she could capitalize on her Chinese heritage in order to advance her career, it was nonetheless influential. Thus, Wong’s reclamation of the Chinese aspects of her American persona took place in Europe—that is, outside the United States and China.

Anna May Wong’s “orientalist performance” and her reclamation of her Chinese heritage ties into the conundrum of Asian American cosmopolitanism. In some ways, her invocation of the term “Chinese” is a sign of her inability to comfortably claim Eurocentric cosmopolitanism. One can also make the case that by publically embracing her Chinese identity, Wong also shifts the semantics of cosmopolitanism away from a Eurocentric universal center. Anna May Wong’s career in Europe shows us the limits and possibilities of Asian American cosmopolitanism. The dynamic of an American citizenship in which people of Asian descent are perpetually expunged paradoxically offers Wong as an example of cosmopolitanism because of the impossibility of full national affiliation. However, Wong is in a very different subject position than that of a privileged white male Protestant subject voluntarily “choosing” to be cosmopolitan, who has the privilege of choice according

to the liberal model of the citizen-subject. For the white male, who is the typical unmarked subject, cosmopolitanism has the sense of being at home everywhere in the world. Sau-ling Wong's work cautions us against celebrating the limitless possibilities of denationalization, including cosmopolitanism, for we do not live in a classless or borderless world. Moreover, her theoretical contributions help us think through how class and nation-state borders regulate the body, drawing racialized lines that continually cordon off whiteness: "For every vision of a borderless world extrapolated from the European Union or NAFTA, there are countless instances of political struggles defined in terms of national borders and within national borders. By definition, a world where most travel requires passports and visas is not ready for 'world citizenship.'"38

Unlike an elite white man, Anna May Wong travels because she is working, not because she has the privilege of being on a grand tour. Instead of being at home everywhere, she is at home nowhere, especially in her home town of Los Angeles where she was subjected to racial segregation, migration restrictions, and anti-miscegenation laws. That sense of displacement and expulsion, even within her supposed home country, gives her a certain longing to explore other geographic possibilities and find home elsewhere. Wong's yearning for China and desire to claim belonging speaks to her lack of home in the United States or Europe. In some ways, Anna May Wong is not making a liberal choice; she is forced into cosmopolitanism by virtue of limited "choice." However, at the same time, she is also excluded from cosmopolitanism's freedoms.

As a German Jew, Walter Benjamin could not completely assume the position of the elite white male cosmopolitan subject. Although he required figures like Anna May Wong in order to define his own cosmopolitanism, his inability to remain in Germany under National Socialism and his subsequent migration to Paris shows another dynamic of racial identity trumping all seemingly neutral categories of cosmopolitanism. Jewishness, like Chineseness, supersedes categories of nation-state belonging as well as cosmopolitanism. In 1940, Benjamin obtained a visa to migrate to the United States, and attempted to flee to Spain which would serve as a conduit out of Europe. However, after being told at the Spanish-French border that he would be deported back to France, Benjamin committed suicide with an overdose of morphine.

Anna May Wong's racialized body reveals the fact that not just anyone can claim cosmopolitanism. Likewise, Walter Benjamin's struggles in fully characterizing Wong suggest the conflict between racialized American modern femininity and Eurocentric cosmopolitanism. The end of the Weimar Republic and the rise of National Socialism spelled the end of the possibility of Wong making films in Berlin. Wong's letters to Carl Van Vechten show her continued interest in returning to Britain, France, and Germany in the post-World War II period. However, that never happened. Although cosmopolitanism appears to be a neutral and open category, under the weight of racialized categories, it fragments to the point where it cannot

be realized. Although Wong capitalized on American and European interest in the exotic, it came at a tremendous psychic and physical cost. In many ways, she was never at home in the world, dying of cirrhosis of the liver at the age of fifty-six.

Notes

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¹ Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1991), 34, footnote Ernst Bloch, “Erinnerungen,” *Über Walter Benjamin, mit Beiträgen von Theodor W. Adorno et al.* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1968), 22.

² Walter Benjamin, “Gespräch mit Anne May Wong,” *Die Literarische Welt*, July 6, 1928, 2. This translation was performed by Jeff Fort specifically for this project. The pages refer to the English translation provided by Fort, not to the *Die Literarische Welt* original. The entire essay appeared on the front page, published on July 6, 1928.

³ For Anna May Wong’s life, see Karen Leong, *China Mystique: Pearl S. Buck, Anna May Wong, Mayling Soong, and the Transformation of American Orientalism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005) and Shirley Jennifer Lim, *A Feeling of Belonging: Asian American Women’s Public Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2006). For more works on Wong, see Celine Parrenas Shimizu, *The Hypersexuality of Race: Performing Asian/American Women on Screen and Scene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); Yiman Wang, “The Art of Screen Passing: Anna May Wong’s Yellow Yellowface Performance in the Art Deco Era.” *Camera Obscura* 60 (2005): 159–191; Sean Metzger, “Patterns of Resistance?: Anna May Wong and the Fabrication of China in American Cinema of the Late 30s.” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 23 (2006): 1–11; Graham Hodges, *Anna May Wong* (New York: Palgrave, 2004); Philip Leibfried and Chei Mi Lane, *Anna May Wong: A Complete Guide to her Film, Stage, Radio, and Television Work* (New York: McFarland and Company, 2003); Anthony C. Chan, *Perpetually Cool: The Many Lives of Anna May Wong, 1905-1961* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003).

⁴ *Song/Show Life/Schmutziges Geld* (1928) directed by Richard Eichberg, co-produced in France, England, and Germany.

⁵ *O Brado Africano* and *South Africa Film and Screen*.

⁶ Sau-ling Wong, “Denationalization Reconsidered: Asian American Cultural Criticism at Theoretical Crossroads.” *Amerasia* 21 (1995): 1-27 (1-2).

⁷ Ibid., 12.

⁸ Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: Norton, 2006).

⁹ Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 4; Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993); Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); Sucheng Chan, *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History* (Boston: Twayne, 1991); Erika Lee, *At America's Gates: Chinese Immigration During the Exclusion Era, 1882-1943* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

¹⁰ Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease, eds., *Cultures of US Imperialism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993); Shelly Streeby, *American Sensations: Class, Empire, and the Production of Popular Culture* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002); Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

¹¹ Benjamin, "Gespräch," 1.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ David S. Ferris, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

¹⁴ Simon Gikandi, "Picasso, Africa, and the Schemata of Difference." *Modernism/Modernity* 10.3 (2003): 455-480; Jean Cocteau devised Josephine Baker's infamous banana skirt. See Bennetta Jules-Rosette, *Josephine Baker in Art and Life: The Icon and the Image* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 49-50; Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

¹⁵ Benjamin, "Gespräch," 3.

¹⁶ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Gotz von Berlichingen*, 1773.

¹⁷ David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

¹⁸ Here I invoke the term modernity to refer to both the hegemonic dominance of modern institutions, such as the imperial nation-state built upon racial and sexual difference, as well as the process of becoming modern. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); Paul Gilroy, *Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

¹⁹ Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins, eds., *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); Carol A. Breckinridge, Sheldon Pollack, Homi L. Bhabha, and Dipesh Chakrabarty, eds., *Cosmopolitanism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 2.

²⁰ *Bold Journey, Native Land*. Filmed in 1936, screened on ABC on February 14, 1957 at 9:30 pm.

²¹ Karen J. Leong, "Anna May Wong and the British Film Industry." *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 21(2006): 13-22 (14).

²² Benjamin, "Gespräch," 2.

²³ Tim Bergfelder, "Negotiating Exoticism: Hollywood, Film Europe and the Cultural Reception of Anna May Wong," in "*Film Europe*" and "*Film America*": *Cinema, Commerce and Cultural Exchange, 1920-1939*, Andrew Higson and Richard Maltby, eds. (Exeter, UK: University of Exeter Press, 1999), 317.

²⁴ Benjamin, "Gespräch," 4.

²⁵ Pheng Cheah, "Given Culture: Rethinking Cosmopolitical Freedom in Transnationalism," in *Cosmopolitics*, 293.

²⁶ Sau-ling Wong, "Denationalization Reconsidered: Asian American Cultural Criticism at a Theoretical Crossroads," reprinted in *Postcolonial Theory and the United States: Race, Ethnicity, Literature*, Amritjit Singh and Peter Schmidt, eds. (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2000), 122-134 (129).

²⁷ Randolph Bourne, "Trans-National America," in *The History of A Literary Radical and Other Papers* (New York: S.A. Russell, 1956). Originally published in the *Atlantic*, 1916, 276. Marilyn Fischer, "A Pragmatist Cosmopolitan Moment: Reconfiguring Nussbaum's Cosmopolitan Concentric Circles." *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 21.3 (2007): 151-165.

²⁸ Tyler Stovall, *Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light* (Boston: Mariner Books, 1996); Brett A. Berliner, *Ambivalent Desire: The Exotic Black Other in Jazz-Age France* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002); Jeffrey H. Jackson, *Making Jazz French: Music and Modern Life in Interwar Paris* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Bennetta Jules-Rosette, *Josephine Baker in Art and Life: The Icon and the Image* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2007).

²⁹ Sue Peabody and Tyler Stovall, eds., *The Color of Liberty: Histories of Race in France* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003). For more on black internationalism, see Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

³⁰ See fn. 9.

³¹ Gina Marchetti, *Romance and the “Yellow Peril”: Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), 1; Robert Lee, *Orientalism: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1999); Henry Yu, *Thinking Orientalism: Migration, Contact, and Exoticism in Modern America* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2001); Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003).

³² Benjamin, “Gespräch,” 5.

³³ *Ibid.*, 4.

³⁴ Like many other Chinese Americans of her generation, due to Chinese immigration exclusion, differing official migration histories exist in the official records. Chinese migrants routinely claimed “paper son” status in order to be allowed into the United States. Thus, they could be actual sons/daughters/wives, or fictitious ones. Depending on which set of paper one wishes to believe, Wong was either second or third generation Chinese American.

³⁵ Benjamin, “Gespräch,” 4.

³⁶ Anna May Wong to Carl and Fania Van Vechten, September 26, 1929. *Carl Van Vechten Manuscript Collection*, Beinecke Library, Yale University.

³⁷ Harry Carr, “‘I am Growing More Chinese—Each Passing Year!’ says Anna May Wong to Harry Carr,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 9, 1934, H3.

³⁸ Wong, “Denationalization,” 19.