



Stock photo of a woman touching her face.

Face Time, Pandemic Style*

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There's a young Chinese man barking at me—he can't be more than twenty years old, I'm guessing—after I finish my lecture on gender and contemporary art. Even with the lag of a nonsynchronous translation, it's clear he's pissed. There I am at the lectern, Chinese-American cis woman with a toddler's grasp of Cantonese. There he is in the audience: glasses, flattop, jowls. I strain to catch the halting paraphrase of the translator rendering his words in English: . . . *you . . . can . . . not . . . be a fem . . . i . . . nist . . . your ges . . . tures are too fem . . . i . . . nine . . . look . . . how you . . . are . . . tou . . . ching your face . . . look at all . . . your lip-u-stick . . . you must be mar . . . ried . . . what . . . does . . . your hus . . . band think . . . of this??* It's almost funny, the heat of his response, his finger accusing the air. The assumptions and laughable clichés. He's word-spitting in a mother tongue unspoken by the guest lecturer. Then again, his accompanying pantomime of femininity speaks volumes, as hysterical as it is misogynistic: See how he sweeps the back of his hand over his cheek and below his chin, now tilted high like an arrogant bird! Behold this graceless performance of female narcissism! Spread fingers stroke his neck, lavish across the dull planes of his face. Eyelashes flap one, two, three, like a heroine in a silent melodrama. And here comes the toss of invisible hair, digits combing phantom locks. Such a luxuriant, absent mane he has—swinging!

The occasion precipitating this outburst was an art-history lecture series in China sponsored by the Ford Foundation in the early aughts. We were in Chengdu that day, among the last stops on a monthlong itinerary. I had been invited to teach critical approaches to the field with another art historian, and feminist methodology was my chosen presentation. It was a fabulous if romantic opportunity, a prospect of transnational solidarity between Chinese and diasporic scholars in the so-called global turn. Gender performativity was *it*. Whether or not Judith Butler had been translated into Mandarin by this point, I don't recall, but teaching such material to Chinese students could only be gratifying, to say the least.

* For Mel Y. Chen and Julia Bryan-Wilson, and the students in the 2020 spring graduate seminar "Picture Industry" at Yale University. This essay was written before news of the state-sponsored murders and vigilante killings of Georg Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Tony McDade, and too many others. The mask is off.

Or at least until this man's peculiar burlesque. I admit, *his* interpretation of gender performance still stings, although I can also admit it may have simply been the obnoxious response of an outlier. Up to this point on the tour, the worst reactions were boredom and head-scratching—not venom or rage—which is why, for years after the fact, I had mostly forgotten about the encounter. Teachers consign such episodes to the pedagogical back burner. If we're being generous, we archive them as a category of hard-won experience, those fabled "teachable moments" directed to some fabled instructional future. When we're less than kind, we share such WTF events with sympathetic colleagues, laughing and shaking our heads at the youth. A student will act out from time to time, after all. We deal.

Still. It's been hard not to think of this man recently, to ponder where he is now, what he's doing, if he's even alive. I wonder about his chauvinist vogue. His deep-rooted Chinese-ness versus my watered-down Asian-Americanness. I wonder about his invisible drag while picturing his fingers caressing his face. And I wonder what else this performance might insinuate about where all of us are right now, particularly those for whom gender and "Chinese-ness"—a term I'll necessarily qualify in what follows—always precede our reception and set the stage for our performance, no matter what we might ultimately say or do. No matter how we choose to present—or not. No matter how much choice we have in the matter.

Chengdu is some six hundred miles from Wuhan, a fourteen-hour drive inclusive of punishing traffic. Total travel time from Wuhan to Newark clocks in at twenty-six hours, with at least two possible layovers: Guanzhou and/or Los Angeles. New Jersey Transit from Newark (Northeast Corridor) gets you into Penn Station in under an hour. Metro North 125th Street to New Haven is a slog. Which is another way of saying: The reader won't forget the time differences, nor the lag between what happens here and there, now and then. The reader won't forget where *your* here and *my* there is situated, and vice versa. We will insist upon the differential uptake of how this pathetic anecdote might land.

I need to ask the question now. What gestures will a face abide?

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These days, everyone is barking and no one needs a translation. Listen to the pandemic's grim and relentless audio. Warnings boom with the authority of science while autocrats spit their rabid patois. No dog whistles are necessary when the pundits come screaming, fomenting the hordes. Adult children bark at their elderly parents, **STAY INSIDE**; young parents admonish their kids, **WASH YOUR HANDS**. It's a strange type of barking, though, for most of it comes at a distance, muffled through screens large and small, from news media to social media to the inevitable roll call of chat apps and platforms: Zoom, Skype, FaceTime. Such verbal commands play parasite to visual mediation, where images give form to the soundtrack of emergency as so much bankable represen-

tation, even as—or especially because—contagion thrives on invisibility. Of course, options exist to turn down the sound with small icons in the corner of your desktop. That red line slashing through a mic boom on a Zoom conference (the mute function) is a welcome respite from the interpellations of media itself. I, for one, take it as a kind of small, dismal freedom, a hapless protest. (Then there's the kind of barking you can't turn off. As if erupting from a strangled dog, the echoes of rasping coughs and choked air rattle down the walls of elder homes, cruise ships, subway cars, bus depots, processing plants, housing projects, homeless shelters, prisons, ambulances, finally hospitals . . .)

From the early days of the crisis, one message clamored with particular force: *Don't touch your face*. I nominate this phrase as the de facto commandment of the moment, which I oppose to its affirmative complement, *Wash your hands*. *Wash your hands* sounds with an almost theological, because ritual, gravitas, chiming with the performance of religiosity across any number of faith traditions: spiritual ablutions, cleanliness, godliness, and the like. *Don't touch your face* instead implicates the gross materiality of bodies, dirt, and invisible things that stick. This injunction, I suggest, will both shadow and advance a viral confluence of illness, animality, gender, race, and power. To the larger interests of this exercise, it will also signal the confluence between racial violence accelerated by the pandemic and the forms of representation, both historical and contemporary, that inscribe and enforce it.

Don't touch your face is, after all, a demand of mortal consequence. Because, as we know too well, a banal if once intimate gesture like scratching your nose, stroking your chin, biting your nails, picking your teeth, or rubbing your eyes now amounts to a direct line of transmission.¹ To touch your face is to self-administer a vector of pathogen; the hand will violate the newly securitized zone of the face as it travels its own haptic road map to infection. The statistics on how many times we touch our face are dispatched with robotic frequency: twenty-three times an hour on average, once nearly every 2.5 minutes. Scientists disclose an interesting fact on this point, that humans are “one of the few species in the animal kingdom” to touch their faces. It's been theorized as an evolutionary tic that might either self-regulate feelings of stress—a kind of self-soothing—or encourage flirtation. On a nonverbal level, in other words, touching your face might amplify the expression of emotion, hence registering our affective communion with other human animals.²

Today one needs to ask: What kind of animals? And what constitutes anything like communion these days? Consider the rudimentary visuals. The brusque diktat that admonishes *Don't touch your face* is typically paired with one or two gen-

1. Scholarship on gesture, race, and contagion in the visual arts includes an important essay by Rizvana Bradley, “Black Cinematic Gesture and the Aesthetics of Contagion,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 62, no. 1 (Spring 2018), pp. 14–30.

2. See Fernando Duarte, “How to Stop Touching Your Face,” March 17, 2020, BBC, <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200317-how-to-stop-touching-your-face>.

res of stock images. First, there's that awful gray orb, ubiquitous in the media, impaled by a crown of red spikes: SARS-CoV-2. Then, there are pictures sourced from catalogs of online clip art featuring a languid hand cradling a chin or a finger tracing a delicate cheekbone, complete with glossy nails. Much of the time that person presents as female, white, and generically, or rather, normatively, "attractive." Such images, we can only guess, are born of an algorithmic logic trained on the data of whiteness by default.

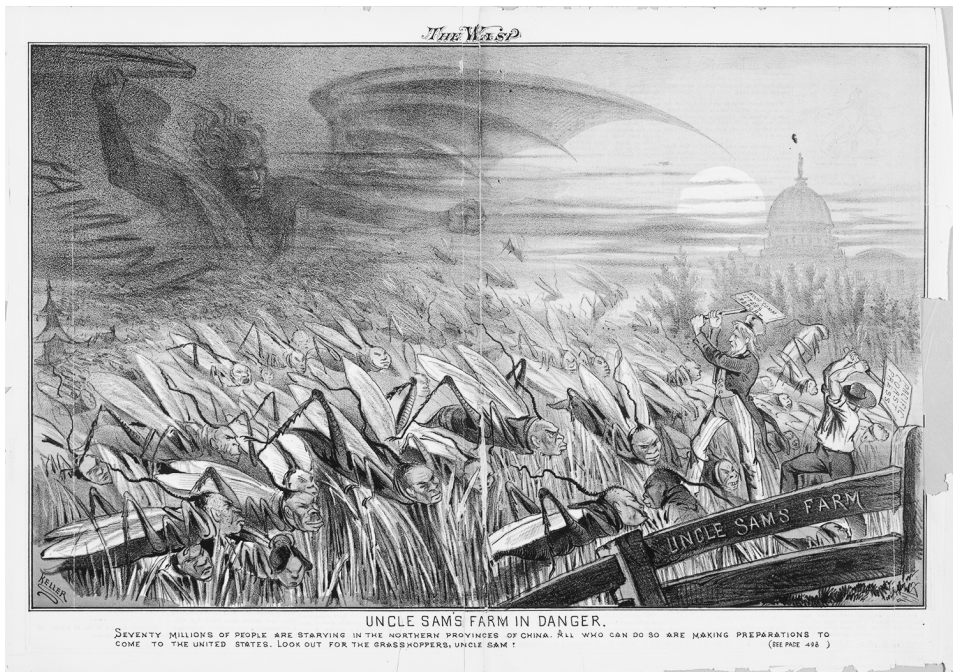
Which compels a return to my introductory anecdote about "Chinese-ness," on the one hand, and face-touching gendered as feminine, on the other. Today this conjugation frames the performance of those of us regarded as constitutional-sick. In the current climate, one kind of face is reduced to a metonym for the collective body as commons: The face is incorporated, hence it is rationalized, universalized, and digitized as a public body, now forcibly trained in the technics of both self-policing and mass surveillance.³ But when I hear or read the injunction *Don't touch your face* and nod, yes, this is the pith instruction of the catastrophe, an abject mantra for these endless, lugubrious days, I can only compare the circulation of these images online—a surplus of *mediated* transparency—to the *blocked* circulation of other faces offscreen. Faces that are invisible, masked, and, more pointedly—and polemically—"inscrutable."

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Perhaps no scholar has theorized what I've just called the "viral confluence of illness, animality, gender, race, and power" better than Mel Y. Chen, whose pathbreaking *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (2012) I've returned to several times in the past few weeks as a different kind of map for the times: a critical diagnosis that now reads as too prescient, terrible, urgent, and real. Throughout the book, "mattering" is that complex of processes that variously delimits, spatializes, ratifies, or shores up the divide between life and death; human and nonhuman animal; the sensate and the insensate; binary constructions of gender; and protocols of racialization that cleave to the terms of blackness and whiteness exclusively. "Mattering" renders thing-like and provisionally objective the animal, biological, chemical, metallic, and toxic. "Animacy," on the other hand, is like a solvent or actant transmuting such matter, loosening the borders imagined to separate such things as reified and autonomous; setting into motion what was once inert and discrete.

Critical race theory, Black studies, Asian-American studies, ethnic studies, animal studies, and queer-of-color scholarship have long charted the nexus

3. The politics and racialization of the face under the technics of the surveillance state have been theorized and historicized by, among others, Ruha Benjamin, Simone Browne, and Wendy Hui Kyong Chun. For an artist's account of queer faciality as resistant to these conditions, in part inspired by Edouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*, see Zach Blas, "Informatic Opacity," in *Posthuman Glossary*, ed. Rosi Braidotti and Maria Hlavajova (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).



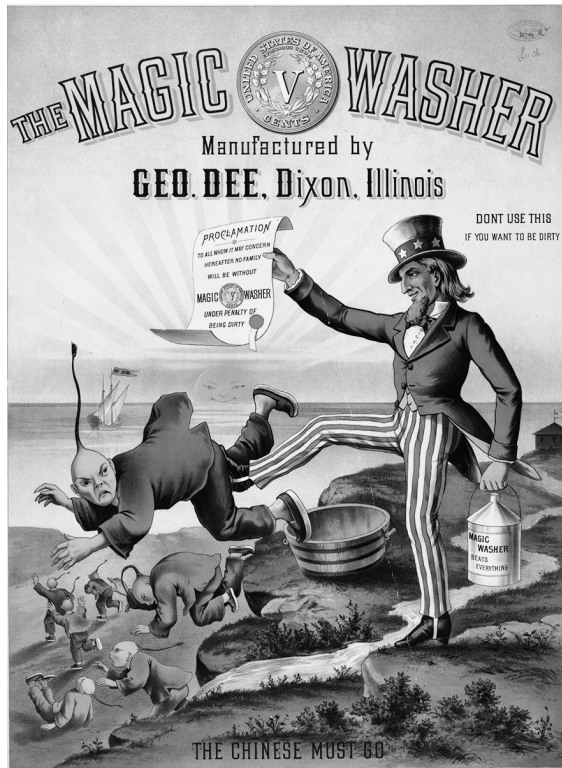
George Keller. "Uncle Sam's Farm in Danger."

between dehumanization, animality, and race: The anti-Black terrorism encoded in the visual rhetoric of simianization, for example; or the assignment of feral attributes to "primitive" peoples; or the epistemic and epidermalizing schemas classifying those as less-than-human, as so much reptilian or amphibious life. (As Frantz Fanon wrote of settler colonialism in 1963, "the terms the settler uses when he mentions the native are zoological terms. He speaks of the yellow man's reptilian motions, of the stink of the native quarter, of breeding swarms, of foulness, of spawn, of gesticulations."⁴) In the centuries-old chronicles of Sinophobia, the nineteenth-century San Francisco-based weekly *The Wasp* notoriously published cartoons and advertisements advancing its twinned economic and anti-immigration platforms against Chinese indentured labor.⁵ Represented as pigs and locusts, the Chinese populate a xenophobic menagerie.

But these virtual, propagandistic "species jumps" occur not only between human and nonhuman animals—the animals we see, consume, corral. Indeed,

4. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), p. 42.

5. For these and many more such images, an excellent online resource is Michelle Walford, "Illustrating Chinese Exclusion: Thomas Nast's Cartoons of Chinese Americans," <https://thomasnast-cartoons.com/2014/02/14/uncle-sams-farm-in-danger-9-march-1878/>.



*“The Chinese Must Go”
advertisement for laundry
detergent.*

they launch at the submicroscopic level of that which cannot be easily visualized, contained, or transparently represented as contagion: hence, as an aniconic, visual analogue to the actual species jumps enabling the transmission of novel disease. Viruses and bacteria do not have a face. They do not bear the weight of visual representation bound to the mythos of the individual subject, possessing an equally mythic interior life in turn. The iconography of the Yellow Peril swirling around the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, for example, draws a morbid equivalence between race, ethnicity, disease, and Chinatown, and visual media imagines this conjunction as phantom death, looming and immaterial.⁶ (Note that the spectral personifications of “malaria” and “leprosy” are especially animalistic: The figure of Leprosy appears wearing a braided queue worn by Chinese coolie labor.) As if

6. On the history giving rise to these images, see Joan B. Trauner, “The Chinese as Medical Scapegoats in San Francisco, 1870–1905,” *California History* 57, no. 1 (Spring 1978), pp. 70–87. Regarding the historical advertisement for laundry detergent, the pervasiveness of such racist motifs continues in the present, as in a notorious anti-Black commercial for a Chinese laundry detergent, Qjabei, from 2016. In this commercial, a Chinese woman inserts cleaning liquid into the mouth of a Black man, whom she proceeds to stuff into a washing machine. At the end of the cycle he emerges as Asian.

anticipating the technics of the contemporary wellness industry, the counterpoint to such imagery marries hygiene, whiteness, and gender as an emerging American market, as in an advertisement for “The Magic Washer” laundry detergent. As the copy for the product chirps, “We have no use for them since we got this Wonderful Washer: What a blessing to tired mothers: It costs so little and don’t injure the clothes.”

Updating these associations, Chen narrates their history of invisible disability triangulated by Asianness, chronic illness, and queerness. Inadvertently they forewarn a sense of the current crisis born of the dreadful contact zone between racial skins and protective masks, incipient violence, and gender, dirt, and Chinatown. Chen is hailed in public, ultimately, as a virus:

Let me get specific and narrate what my “toxic” and cognitive bodily state means, how it limits, delimits, frames and undoes. Today I am having a day of relative well-being and am eager to explore my neighborhood on foot. . . . Some passenger cars whiz by; instinctively my body retracts and my corporeal-sensory vocabulary starts to kick back in. . . .

I am accustomed to this; the glancing scans kick in from habit whenever I am witnessing proximate human movement, and I have learned to prepare to be disappointed. The preparation for disappointment is something like the preparation for the feeling I would get as a young



Keller. “San Francisco’s Three Graces.” 1882.

person when I looked, however glancingly, into the eyes of a racist passerby who expressed apparent disgust at my Asian off-gendered form. I imagined myself as the queer child who was simultaneously a walking piece of dirt from Chinatown. . . .

To my relief, the pedestrians pass, uneventfully for my body. I realize, then, that I should have taken my chemical respirator with me. When I used to walk maskless with unsuspecting acquaintances, they had no idea I was privately enacting my own bodily concert of breath-holding, speech and movement. . . .

I am, in fact, still seeking ways to effect a smile behind my mask. . . . Suited up in both racial skin and chemical mask, I am often met with some form of repulsion; indeed “sars!” is what has been used to interpellate me in the streets.⁷

Following Chen’s lead, I ask: How is it possible that there are far too few and far too many masks these days? No one is smiling behind them. Note that the protections a mask might afford are conditional—or rather, *positional*—depending on who happens to have access to them; who refuses them; and who, by dint of their status as “essential” worker, is forced to wear them. The question of who is conscripted to don the mask calls forth any number of projections, with pestilence and criminality ranking high on the racialized checklist. Asian-Americans represent just one part of this dismal ecology, that much is clear; for the mask figures a politics of intersubjectivity that exposes the virus’s catastrophically disproportionate impact on people of color: African-American, Latinx, Indigenous.⁸ “I have a sense of anxiety wearing the mask,” a Black man named Allen Hargrove was quoted as saying in the *New York Times*: “It makes me more aware of being perceived.” Another man tweeted, “I don’t feel safe wearing a handkerchief or something else that isn’t CLEARLY a protective mask covering my face to the store because I am a Black man living in this world. I want to stay alive but I also want to stay alive.”⁹

I want to stay alive but I also want to stay alive. This is the cruel double bind of the pandemic for too many wearing the mask.

7. Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering and Queer Affect* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

8. Indeed, the mask is a formative trope in the literature of racial performance and racialized psychic projection. The foundational philosophy to this end is (again) Frantz Fanon, *Black Skins White Masks* (1952) (New York: Grove Press, 2008). A recent volume indebted to Fanon’s canonical example is Glen Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

9. Derrick Bryson Taylor, “For Black Men, Fear That Masks Will Invite Racial Profiling,” *New York Times*, April 14, 2020.

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So, what, if any, “teachable moment” might be redeemed from the emergency, shot through with deflating personal anecdotes, gestures toward a facial politics, and minor histories of visual culture from centuries past to the digital age? This essay opened with a decades-old encounter from the global teaching archive: a confrontation between a native Chinese son and an Asian-American woman. It draws down with the fragment of an imaginary draft syllabus. Complete with a dispiriting and lengthening reading list, the syllabus is designed for a course that no one should ever have to take:

COURSE TITLE: Face Time, Pandemic Style

Requirements: Showing up onscreen. Zoom. Nothing.

Prerequisites: A human face. If you are not in possession of one, a mask.

Readings:

- “This Is What It’s Like to Be an Asian Woman in the Age of Coronavirus”
 - “Acid Attack on Brooklyn Woman in Apparent Coronavirus Hate Crime. NY Mayor De Blasio Calls Rise in Racist Attacks on Asians a ‘Crisis’”
 - “‘This Is Why There’s Coronavirus!’: Asian Woman Spat On, Assaulted in Manhattan Hate Crime”
 - “Where’s Your [Expletive] Mask?’: Asian Woman Attacked in Manhattan Hate Crime”
 - “Asian Woman Assaulted in Manhattan, Blamed for Coronavirus: Cops”
- And so on.

An Asian woman in Brooklyn is taking out the trash. A man sitting on her stoop, waiting, wearing a mask, sneaks up behind her. He douses her with a caustic liquid, runs away. The liquid is something like acid; the woman suffers second-degree chemical burns over her face, neck, back. She is sent to the hospital; she is in stable condition. The event is captured by surveillance cameras and is now circulated widely online. The survivor may not be ethnically Chinese (no article provides information as to her actual ethnic identification), but no matter. Her face—now corroded, effaced—will carry the scars of racist misrecognition. For “Chinese-ness” is the generic mask forcibly worn by people of Asian descent during the pandemic.¹⁰ Or, as the poet Cathy Park Hong writes, “Chinese is synecdoche for Asians the way Kleenex is for tissues.”¹¹

10. “Chinese-ness” represents this nominal, Asian Other in the current moment. The conflation of race and ethnicity is a structuring feature within histories of US immigration: Asians have long been subjected to this generalizing logic. During World War II, it was “Japanese-ness” (“Jap”); during the Vietnam War, it was “Vietnamese-ness” (“gook”). The economic recessions of the 1980s and early 1990s saw “Japanese-ness” assume this mantle once again, leading, for example, to the murder of Vincent Chin, a Chinese-American draftsman beaten to death by two Detroit autoworkers who mistook him for Japanese. Meanwhile, after 9/11, people of South Asian descent were frequently targeted and/or murdered due to rising Islamophobia and mistaken for Arab Muslims, including Balbir Singh Sodhi and Waqar Hassan, both victims of this violence.

11. Cathy Park Hong, *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning* (New York: One World, 2020), p. 19.

Hong could not have anticipated how the word “Kleenex” would resonate at this moment, when the banal symptoms and accessories of your average cold conjure racialized scenes of death. She is equally on point regarding the illegibility of this “Chinese-ness” in light of longer histories of Asian visibility, whether ornamented as the female embodiment of Chinese decadence (and by extension, toxicity and corruption) or rendered docile and subservient, the feminized keep of the “model minority” myth.¹² “Inscrutability” is the term that stereotypically names the (in)capacity of the Chinese subject to be “read” or analyzed (“scrutinized”), for the deviousness of their motivations and the backwardness of their ways. Hong speaks to the punishing logic of the mask for people of Asian descent:

The face mask seemed to implicate foreigners as agents of diseases. The masks depersonalized their faces, making the stereotypically “inscrutable” Asian face even more inscrutable, effacing even their age and gender, while also telegraphing that the Asian wearer was mute and therefore incapable of talking back if aggressed.¹³

The last notion finds inverse confirmation in a recent analysis that, in the age of COVID-19, Asian-American women are “more likely to experience” racist harassment than their male counterparts on account of their gender. Why this is so, one commentator observed, is “the sense that perhaps women are not going to fight back, are more vulnerable, less likely to respond, and so when people feel like they have a license to [harass them], they’re gonna go after people who may appear to be vulnerable even though that’s not the case.”¹⁴

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Long after writing *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler takes on Emmanuel Levinas’s theorization of the face. Her larger topic is precarious life, a life we’ll submit to an updated, performative logic. Butler’s paraphrase of the senior philosopher considers how the face of the Other makes a certain demand on us as subjects. It is a mode of address regarding moral authority and “an important obligation of our times.”¹⁵ “To expose myself to the vulnerability of the face is to put my ontological

12. As Anne Anlin Cheng writes of the “Yellow Woman”: “this figure is so suffused with representation that she is invisible, so encrusted by aesthetic expectations that she need not be present to generate affect, and so well known that she has vanished from the zone of contact.” Anne Anlin Cheng, “Preface: A Feminist Theory of the Yellow Woman,” *Ornamentation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. xi.

13. Cathy Park Hong, “The Slur I Never Expected to Hear in 2020,” *New York Times*, April 12, 2020.

14. Wendy Lu, “This Is What It’s Like to Be an Asian Woman in the Age of the Coronavirus,” *Huffington Post*, March 31, 2020, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/asian-women-racism-coronavirus_n_5e822d41c5b66ea70fda8051.

15. Judith Butler, “Precarious Life,” in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), pp. 132–38.

right to existence into question,” Levinas remarks. Critically, the face does *not* speak but presents an ethical injunction nonetheless: Thou shalt not kill. The face is that sphere of ethics incorporating the “extreme precariousness of the other.” It is also the “situation of discourse”: what is communicated, or commanded, through nonverbal gestures, appearances, cues.

And what of the “Other” in this encounter? The Other whose face, provisionally exposed, makes a certain demand on an imagined “us,” as the face that doesn’t speak? “To lose face,” following the Chinese idiomatic expression, will indict a different set of behaviors, if not quite an ethics, tied to the devaluation of the self in public, its appearance abused on the civic stage. Its performance, in other words. Here we behold the face as the fallen site of discourse, banked on ideologies of transparent social exchange as its own genre of performativity. Perhaps for many of us, a face offers no guarantee of such discourse, of social communicability, least of all during a crisis of communicable disease, insidiously called the “Wuhan virus” or the even more malign, because globalizing, generalization the “Chinese virus.”

It began in late February, the behavior in the subway. I came armed with my hand sanitizer, though that was nothing new; nor was the mask I wore regularly on public transportation during the height of flu season. Years of travel in Japan, Hong Kong, and China—melancholic recollections these days—had long since convinced me of the mask’s utility. I started to notice the increasingly wide berth I was given on the train, even during the crush of the evening commute. Odd, but there always seemed to be an available seat for me; stranger still, as the days wore on, were the always open seats flanking where I sat. I joked about it to friends as I lavished in those spaces, at first defiantly, ironically. Not too long after, I inhabited such spaces with increasing nervousness, head bowed, eyes refusing communion with others, shrinking. If enforced invisibility is the traditional lot of the Asian-American or “yellow” woman, “so suffused with representation that she is invisible,” as Anne Anlin Cheng notes, the conditions of the pandemic have exploited that lethal admixture of terror and shame as projected from the outside. The desire not to be seen.

On the train, I began to mute the symptoms of my perpetual allergies: the throat clearing, the dripping nose, the occasional cough.

Everywhere else I saw violence as partner to contagion, saw the two as continuous, from behind both the mask and the screen.

I began to lose face.