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Anna May Wong fans her time machine, and: Anna May Wong  
blows out sixteen candles, and: Anna May Wong meets  
Josephine Baker, and: Anna May Wong makes cameos, and: Anna  
May Wong rates the runway

Sally Wen Mao

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## Sally Wen Mao

### Anna May Wong fans her time machine

I've tried so hard to erase myself.  
That iconography—my face  
in Technicolor, the manta ray

eyelashes, the nacre and chignon.  
I'll bet four limbs I'd be cast as another  
Mongol slave. I will blow a hole

in the airwaves, duck lasers in my dugout.  
I'm done kidding them. Today I fly  
the hell out in my Thunderbolt.

To the future, where I'm forgotten.  
Where surely no one gives a puck  
who I kiss: man, woman, or goldfish.

In the blustering garden where I was fed  
compliments like *you are our golden*  
*apple* and *you are our yellow star*, I lost

my lust for luster. They'd smile, fuck  
me over for someone else: ringletted women  
with sloping eyelids played the Chinese

cynosure, every time. Ursa Minor, you never  
warned me: all my life I've been minor,  
played the strumpet, the starved one.

I was taproot and crook. How I've hunched  
down low, wicked girl, until this good earth  
swallowed me raw. Take me now, dear comet,

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to the future, where surely I'll play  
some girl from LA, the unlikely heroine  
who breaks up the brawl, saving everyone.

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**Anna May Wong blows out sixteen candles**

When I was sixteen, I modeled fur coats for a furrier.  
White men gazed down my neck like wolves

but my mink collar protected me. When I was sixteen,  
I was an extra in *A Tale of Two Worlds*. If I didn't pour

someone's tea, then I was someone's wife. Every brother,  
father, or husband of mine was nefarious. They held me

at knifepoint, my neck in a chokehold. If they didn't murder  
me, I died of an opium overdose. Now it's 1984

and another white girl awaits her sweet sixteen. It's 1984  
and another white girl angsts about a jock who kisses

her at the end of the film. Now it's 1984 and Long  
Duk Dong is the white girl's houseguest. He dances,

drunk, agog with gong sounds. All around the nation,  
teens still taunt us. Hallways bloat with sweaters, slurs.

When I was eight, the boy who sat behind me brought pins  
to class. "Do Asians feel pain the way we do?" he'd ask.

He'd stick the needles to the back of my neck until I winced.  
I wore six wool coats so I wouldn't feel the sting. It's 1984

so cast me in a new role already. Cast me as a pothead,  
an heiress, a gymnast, a queen. Cast me as a castaway in a city

without shores. Cast me as that girl who rivets center stage  
or cast me away, into the blue where my lips don't touch

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or say. If I take my time machine back to sixteen, or twenty,  
or eight, I'd blow out all my candles. Sixteen wishes

extinguish and burn. The boy will never kiss me at the end  
of the movie. The boy will only touch me with his needles.

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**Anna May Wong meets Josephine Baker**

Casino de Paris, seat in the back. It's 1932 and I'm in exile again. Paris makes the best kind of exile—the woman on stage agrees, riding in on her mane of sequined feathers. Horses like white phantoms galloping under her dress. What is it about the stage lights that casts our bodies both desirable and diabolical? She lifts her wings, and air rushes—lightning strikes the audience, the white feathers fall. I catch her eye at midnight and she invites me into her dressing room. Blood orange peels scattered on the ground, her cockatoos wailing in a cage, her pet cheetah spread-eagled on her alpaca furs. We toast to *Piccadilly*, Paris, drink brandy, chat about home—all the reasons we left, all the reasons we're homesick still.

*The first time I left, I watched the Statue of Liberty vanish into a bloodless mile of water. I didn't expect I would feel nothing,* Josephine says. *The arrival, by comparison, fueled this frenzy, this fire in me. There is no feeling like clenching a new country's soil in your fist, then washing it off with a new country's soaps.* The fall we were both in Berlin, the image Paul Colin painted of her graced all the rainy street signs:

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*La Revue Nègre Champs-Élysées, Le Tumulte noir 1929.*

I saw her at the German salons Marlene Dietrich took me.

Marlene watched her, as everyone watched her—the lick  
of hair, her arms moving like steam engines. Perhaps  
we even danced together, beaded skirts hiked to knees,  
the Charleston in the empty predawn hours, bowls shattering,  
chandeliers dropping their crystals, until security hurled  
us outside and we laughed in the face of this exile,  
the Indian summer warmth sloughing all the dead weight  
away. It was a life worth abandoning anything for.

*I left home because I dreaded how that screen disfigured me.*

*Though I don't completely escape it here, Josephine says.*

I want to tell her about my time machine. I want to say:

*We don't have to stay here, in this time and space,*  
*where we are carrion pecked at by flâneur and crows. Triple*  
leave-taking—body, birthplace, adopted home—Santa Monica  
and St. Louis, New York, Berlin, Paris—we were born  
to beg and bow in this country. So Josephine left, searching  
for another exit, one without Jim Crow's hoofprint  
on every cinema, restaurant, door. We had to prove

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ourselves *different*: our limbs, dancing, trained like racehorses,  
bred, polished, for what? In the end, we still pined for shelter.  
In the end, we still guarded our bones against the blaring thunder.



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## Anna May Wong makes cameos

*Romeo Must Die* (2000): I'm Aaliyah's sassy friend. I give her tough love and good advice. *Kiss Jet Li*, I tell her. The director cuts their kissing scene, replaces it with a hug, rendering my scene pointless, so they delete me from the film.

*Kill Bill* (2003): I'm Gogo Yubari's grieving twin sister. In my nightmares, Chiaki Kuriyama swings her iron balls over my futon. The noise maddens me. To avenge her, I lunge with a steak knife at Uma's white veil. I die as my bones crunch under her heels.

*The Last Samurai* (2003): I'm Tom Cruise's love interest's younger cousin. I cry at the sound of a twig falling down. In the end I am sacrificed so that they can shed tears—take comfort in each other as my spine goes limp.

“Hollaback Girl” (2004): I'm Gwen Stefani's archnemesiis: the cute Asian girl who disses her behind the school bleachers. Once I was her backup minion. Now no more—I've gone rogue. Pharrell is the other cameo. Together we conspire to take her down. There are claws. There is gore. In the end, the showdown's cut in favor of Gwen's cheerleading routine.

*Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005): I'm Gong Li's evil apprentice geisha. I trip young Sayuri with my silk sash. I set her kimono on fire.

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The rival okiya crackles, burns. As the beams  
fall down in ashes, lightning whips the howling  
door. Dew drips down my forehead, my jewels.  
In the confusion, I perish, of course.

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**Anna May Wong rates the runway**

Even the white models  
all wear their hair in straight bangs.  
The Asian models, too—like clones

they glide out, lush throats  
throttled by nephrite. The editors  
call the pieces “1920s chinoiserie.”

I call them glorified dog collars.  
One by one they strut, chameleons,  
fishnetted darlings with red lips

that imply: diablerie. These women  
slip into the diabolical roles  
I’ve played but don’t pay for it.

Now I am someone’s muse.  
Good. It’s February, Fashion Week.  
The coldest winter since weather

went live. Everywhere still—pale  
legs exposed to infernal snow.  
I want to trust the mohair

to keep me warm—I want to trust  
the cloth that holds me close.  
But in this room, the spotlight flatters

every flaw. When the show is over,  
the applause is meant for stars  
but my ovation is for the shadows.

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## Sally Wen Mao

Sally Wen Mao is the author of *Mad Honey Symposium* (Alice James Books, 2014), the winner of the 2012 Kinereth Gensler Award. Her work has been anthologized in *The Best American Poetry 2013* and is forthcoming or published in *Poetry*, *Black Warrior Review*, *Guernica*, *Kenyon Review Online* and *Washington Square*, among others. A Kundiman fellow, she currently lives in Brooklyn and teaches in the Asian American Studies department at Hunter College.