

# Introduction

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Tam (*as a Bible Belt preacher*): Born? No! Crashed! Not born.  
Stamped! Not born! Created! Not born. No more born than the  
heaven and earth. No more born than nylon or acrylic. For I am a  
Chinaman! A miracle synthetic!

Frank Chin, *The Chickencoop Chinaman*

One might well ask whether “Asian American plays” are more than a collection of works that just “happen” to be written by Asian Americans. What follows by way of introduction are some reflections that argue for more than just this casual connection. My argument is that “Asian American plays” first and foremost comment on the distinctive relationship between racial and theatrical performance. Thus, drama, while often thought of as a subset of literature more generally, really deserves its own space for discussion, as it references theatrical enactment—the live encounter of performers and audiences in a particular time and place and the perception of individual and collective bodies.

In May Lee-Yang’s *Sia(b)*, a young Hmong woman, her mouth and tongue undulating over each significant syllable, gives the audience a lesson on how to say her name. Sun Mee Chomet’s *Asiamnesia* opens with a re-creation of the 1834 display of a real “Chinese lady” (Afong Moy) at the American Museum in New York. Lauren Yee’s *Ching Chong Chinaman* features a spectacular tap-dancing sequence that sparks a furtive love affair in the laundry room. Through the staging of specific instances of human expression and encounter, these plays provide a focused way to examine more generally the cultural politics of racial perception and interaction. In this way, Asian American plays, such as the seven collected here, present a unique opportunity to think about how racial issues are engaged through physical contact, bodily labor, and fleshly desire, as well as through the more standard elements of plot, setting, characterization, staging, music, and action.

At the same time, we ought to be careful not to assume that plays simply *represent* Asian Americans, simply showing a re-creation of real-life experience. Rather, theater is both presentational and representational; it might “hold the mirror up to nature,” to use Hamlet’s famous expression, but it also creates experiences unique to the stage. Thus, the versions of racial behavior and interaction shown here are clearly *plays*, driven by theatrical devices as much as by social agendas. From the intimacy of the one-man show of *Indian Cowboy* to *Walleye Kid*’s nod to Broadway glitz to the history lessons given by *Happy Valley* and *Bahala Na*, these plays highlight both the possibilities of imaginative staging and the day-to-day workings of what Michael Omi and Howard Winant have called “racial etiquette” off the stage.<sup>1</sup>

Reading plays teaches important lessons about what it means to think about race. Carefully analyzing the work of theater production, rather than just enjoying the fruits of theatrical design, rehearsal, and production, exposes a certain kind of artifice that teaches us something about the construction of social performance more generally; just looking at acting reminds us how we labor to manufacture and sustain our own various social identities. This is particularly relevant in the case of Asian American identity, which is notoriously unstable. To quote Tam Lum, the protagonist of Frank Chin’s play *Chickencoop Chinaman*, “Chinamen are made, not born.”<sup>2</sup> Asian American theater highlights the work it takes to “make” an “Asian American”—to formulate this single racial category out of so many distinct ethnic, generational, class, gender, religious, cultural, and political attributes. But just as it exposes the fallacies of lumping so many different people together, theater presents the possibility of productive collaboration. While theater shows how people certainly do not act alike, being together in the theater does give opportunities for them to act together. Theater not only presents visions of offstage relationships and communities; it actually creates its own human bonds and interactions in both rehearsal and production. Thus, it has the potential to forge alliances, to rally individuals to collective action, or to create a more modest sense of connection.

This has long been the case with Asian American theaters and plays. From the collaborative work of such Asian American theater companies as East West Players in Los Angeles, Pan Asian Repertory Theatre and Ma-Yi Theatre in New York, and Mu Performing Arts in the Twin Cities to a host of less formal collectives, such as Slant, Peeling the Banana, and Here and Now, the making of theater has provided an important starting point for building relationships, raising political awareness, and creating active communities. Public performance has been of particular value for Asian Americans, who have been called the “invisible minority.” Asian American plays provide correctives to this invisibility.

1. See Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1986), 62.

2. Frank Chin, *The Chickencoop Chinaman and The Year of the Dragon* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1981), 6.

The 1990s saw a number of new anthologies of Asian American drama, beginning with Misha Berson's *Between Worlds: Contemporary Asian-American Plays* (1990). Collections edited by Roberto Uno (*Unbroken Thread: An Anthology of Plays by Asian American Women* [1993]), Velina Hasu Houston (*The Politics of Life: Four Plays by Asian American Women* [1993]) and *But Still, Like Air, I'll Rise: New Asian American Plays* [1997]), Brian Nelson (*Asian American Drama: Nine Plays from the Multiethnic Landscape* [1997]), and Alvin Eng (*Tokens? The NYC Asian American Experience on Stage* [1999]) were also published during that decade, signaling a boom in the production, as well as in the publication, of Asian American plays.

Asian American plays have won Tony and Obie awards, met with critical success, and perhaps most important, moved a generation of audiences to think, to feel, and to act. We now have easy access to multiple plays and theater pieces by individual playwrights such as Ping Chong, Edward Sakamoto, Dan Kwong, Young Jean Lee, and Chay Yew, to add to earlier volumes of works by Frank Chin, Philip Kan Gotanda, and David Henry Hwang. Some have chosen to jettison the capacious and in many ways unwieldy term "Asian American" in favor of a more specific ethnic designation, such as Filipino and Filipino American works produced by New York's Ma-Yi Theatre Company; *Savage Stage*, edited by Joi Barrios-Leblanc (2006); and Esther Kim Lee's *Seven Contemporary Plays from the Korean Diaspora in the Americas* (2011). Other playwrights eschew racial or ethnic labels entirely, fearing that these might limit or marginalize their work. Is marking drama as "Asian American" no longer necessary, or is it even detrimental in this so-called post-racial society? In what ways might the rubric "Asian American" still be viable, albeit in need of reformatting?

Several decades have passed since the first successes of Asian American playwrights and the appearance of these earlier anthologies, and it seems high time to address these questions anew. This collection includes seven plays that touch, entertain, and move us to think about the contemporary present of Asian Americans. These particular plays were not included in this anthology on the basis of their broad commercial success; though they have been warmly received by audiences and critics lucky enough to catch their runs, the plays in this collection for the most part have had limited circulation. Nor can we make claims for their radical aesthetics, although these works are certainly theatrically engaging, in turns funny, poignant, funky, clever, strange, and chilling. These works were chosen for their ability to pressure readers into questioning current assumptions about racial identities marked as Asian American. Their inclusion in this collection does not mean that they hold the mirror up to some quintessential experience. With their singular stories and distinctive characterizations, these plays defy the charge to represent homogenous identities even while they comment profoundly on cultural and national affiliation.

At first glance, what these works present as "Asian American" may not seem so surprising. One immediately finds in these plays some of those preoccupa-

tions familiar to Asian American literature, film, and plays written since the 1970s. They tackle issues of immigration and migration; problems of marginalization, racism, and stereotyping; and crises of identity. They eloquently stage generational tensions, angry parents, disaffected children, enigmatic grandmothers, and buried family histories. They tell stories of transnational ties and ethnic and pan-ethnic communities, and they express anxiety over adaptation, assimilation, and upward mobility.

Yet in major ways, these plays also depart for territory hitherto unexplored. Just looking at some of their settings—for instance, the Minnesota landscape of *Walleye Kid*—shows us that we are no longer in the locales that defined earlier versions of Asian America. Location is essential here, and this collection moves us away both from California as the central locus of Asian America and from New York as the mecca of American theater. One characteristic that may strike us most is that many of these plays feature characters who find themselves alone, whether by choice or by compunction. Whether the character is an actor seeking the perfect role, an adoptee looking for roots, a gay man examining his ambivalence about fatherhood, or a dying matriarch journeying into her past, he or she experiences a profound sense of isolation, undertakes voyages of reinvention, or is singled out for punishment.

The sense of singularity and disenfranchisement is intimately tied up with where these plays come from. If we compare this anthology with earlier collections of Asian American drama, we notice that the sites of writing and production for many plays previously published were either in California or New York. Skimming through these earlier volumes produces an intense sense of connection; actions take place in Chinatown, a South Asian restaurant, a Japanese American internment camp, referencing well-established Asian American communities and settings. In repeated references to older Asian American theater companies, such as East West Players or the theater scenes of New York, the sensation of connection and community is magnified. In contrast, these plays originated in the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul—metropolitan areas, to be sure, but still viewed as provincial, regional, or even, to borrow a phrase, a “vast banana wasteland” where Asian America is concerned.<sup>3</sup>

I first encountered these plays by attending productions and staged readings at Mu Performing Arts, Mixed Blood Theatre, and Dreamland Arts. Through the intimacy of these smaller theater spaces and communities, and the revelations that these plays presented to their relatively young audiences—many of them my own college students and first-time theatergoers—it became clear to me that what I was seeing was substantively different from my other experiences of Asian American theater in New York or on the West Coast. The Twin Cities area is home to an active and vibrant theater community, with reportedly more theater seats per capita than any other U.S. locale other than New York

3. William Wei, *The Asian American Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 11–12, 29.

City. With well-established regional arts venues such as the Guthrie Theater, the Playwright's Center, the Children's Theatre Company, and Penumbra Theatre, as well as a host of smaller companies and collectives, Minneapolis and St. Paul make a hospitable home for new theatrical writing and production. The racial climate, however, is somewhat more uncertain. The populations of the Twin Cities are diverse compared with those of outlying areas but remain mostly white. Concentrations of relatively new migration—Hmong families from refugee camps in Thailand, young adults and children adopted from Korea and China into white families—join with individual Asian Americans who have come to the Twin Cities for work, education, family, or less predictable reasons. While Asian American activists have been hard at work in the Twin Cities for decades, a sense of pan-ethnic community and solidarity still seems tentative at times, and Asian American studies, if the subject exists at all, is still fairly new at colleges and universities such as the University of Minnesota.

Asian American theater artists often find their foothold here through Mu Performing Arts, established in 1992 by R. A. (Rick) Shiomi, Dong-il Lee, Diane Espaldon, and Martha Johnson. Mu's productions have been as varied in content and form as their performers and audiences, including low-budget readings of new works, taiko drumming, stagings of Shakespeare and Sondheim, and partnerships with the Guthrie Theater on plays by the Tony Award-winning playwright David Henry Hwang. Mu makes eclectic choices, reflecting a dynamic and sometimes uncertain understanding of what "Asian American theater" is all about.

Asian American concerns may at times seem old hat in places such as California. The demographics of the West Coast point directly toward a future in which the United States has no single racial majority. There, well-established Chinese American, Japanese American, and Filipino communities are continually joined by sizable waves of immigrants from Southeast Asia, India, Korea, and Taiwan. Here in the Twin Cities, it means something quite different to perform Asian America. The prevailing sensibility that Minnesota is "white" is belied by the large concentrations of Hmong and Korean adoptees, both constituencies fairly new to claiming "Asian American" identity. What is produced by way of theater registers these distinctions. Mu's first production, *Mask Dance*, featured the stories of young Korean adoptees raised in Minnesota. This focus on adoptees, many of whom grew up as the only non-white individuals in their rural communities, departs radically from an understanding of Asian American stories as centered on immigrant families.

These differences in the imagining of "Asian America" cannot be dismissed as just a set of quaint regional distinctions. Titling a play *Walleye Kid* has relevance beyond associating transracial adoption with a notably Minnesotan fish; it emphasizes the prominence of the adoptee in refiguring what "Asian American" is. Racial isolation is an experience familiar to many in the Midwest, so much so that it should be thought of as a paradigmatic rather than a peripheral part of Asian American experience. Moving away from a bicoastal Asian

America suggests more broadly how Asian American experience never has had a real center. Instead, it is a mass of changing relationships among often quite disparate individuals and groups, whose sense of self, community, and home must be renegotiated time and again. Thus, far from being odd, the sense of dislocation and isolation experienced by Asian adoptees in the Midwest serves as a reminder that many experience their racial, ethnic, and cultural identities in ways that are far different from those in traditional ethnic enclaves and the larger urban centers of California and New York.

This set of plays more broadly confirms that “Asian America” must be imagined differently, and it does so sometimes seriously, sometimes irreverently. There is both humor and freshness in this writing, which may have to do with the focus of these characterizations on adolescents and young adults. This reminds us that Asian America has a conspicuously young face. Asian Americans not only are the fastest growing racial group in the United States but also, according to data from the 2004 U.S. Census, had a median age of thirty-five, about five years under that of non-Hispanic whites. The lines between “Asian” and “Asian American,” native-born and newcomer, citizen, permanent resident, and visitor are often blurred; about half of foreign-born Asians are relative newcomers, having arrived in the United States since 1990. Judging identity and affiliation through culture and language are also tricky; although about 77 percent of Asians speak a language other than English at home, about 63 percent of Asians age five and older speak only English or speak English fluently.<sup>4</sup> These changing demographics and attitudes force a constant reassessment of how categorizations of race, ethnicity, national affiliation, and culture work.

A number of other themes run through this volume and connect these works. An interest in reclaiming Asian and Asian American history remains a strong concern here, as it does in much of Asian American drama more generally. Whether whimsically presented, with characters led toward the past by a giant fish (*Walleye Kid*), or gathered for an evening of drunken celebration (*Asiarnnesia*) or more somberly brought to light through the family secrets and stories of *Bahala Na* and *Sia(b)*, the past intrudes on the present in unpredictable and sometimes violently disruptive ways. There are a number of reasons that, even after several decades of excavation, Asian American histories are still not more broadly known. Asian Americans go unnoticed in many conversations about race that are still centered on a black–white divide. The trauma of war, immigration, and dislocation creates rifts and lapses in the transmission of family stories, and life in the United States stresses reinvention and cultivates amnesia. These particular stories—of the Korean War, of Chinese plantation labor and Japanese military occupation in the Philippines, of Asian American female performers, of Hmong participation in the “Secret War” in

4. U.S. Census Bureau, “The American Community—Asians: 2004,” American Community Survey Report, February 2007.

Laos—are even less familiar to American audiences than those of Japanese internment or Chinese railroad workers. If plays such as *Indian Cowboy* and *Happy Valley* show characters subjected to the formative political and social events of the present, others stress that contemporary Asian American life is equally in thrall to the past. The significance of the past is paramount, and its revelation becomes a consistently forceful action within these plays. Nonetheless, their telling of history is by no means straightforward; historical facts are fragmented, contested, and misremembered, and the movements they trace are left unresolved.

These plays take for granted that the familial, experiential, and imaginative connections of Asia and the United States are multidirectional; no longer can “Asian American” be viewed as a one-way ticket from Asia to the United States and degrees of straight-line assimilation. Rather, it comprises multiple journeys from different sites. The plays’ characters draw on distinctive ethnic, cultural, and religious affiliations, identifying themselves first as Hmong, Zoroastrian, Korean adoptee—and only peripherally as “Asian American.” Their relationships provide a window into a much broader set of contemporary mappings of Asia to America. Through these plays we see the legacies of multiple imperialisms—European, Japanese, American—on Asian and Pacific peoples. Other moments register the global economies and new patterns of labor migration that have redefined Asian America. *Walleye Kid*’s little orphan Annie travels through the traumatic past of the Korean War and the politics of transnational adoption. The Hmong family in *Sia(b)* feels the effects of the Central Intelligence Agency’s “secret war” in Laos a generation later. *Bahala Na* traces a family history linking Chinese labor migration, Japanese colonialism, and gay sexuality in the United States and the Philippines. *Happy Valley* depicts relationships between Hong Kong Chinese, Mainland Chinese, and Filipina domestic servants as shaped by the larger upheavals during Hong Kong’s reversion to Chinese rule. In *Asiamnesia*, an Asian American actress becomes the new “it” girl for moviegoers in Korea as well as in the United States. In *Ching Chong Chinaman*, a Chinese American family indentures a servant from China, and videogames bring the world closer together.

These treatments of history, migration, transnationality, and colonialism point toward another prominent aspect of these plays: their probing of the uneasy racial positioning of Asian Americans and how the modern state manages and regulates visibility. We see a particular familiarity with the model-minority stereotype so often ascribed to Asian Americans since the 1960s and 1970s. The model minority presents an enhanced and colorized version of the quintessential American rags-to-riches story, simultaneously affirming the compliant docility of immigrant labor and managing anxieties about racism and colonialism. The success story of Vietnamese refugee children, for instance, not only marvels at the resilience of exceptional children but also alleviates guilt about U.S. military involvement and blames the poverty of the “non-model” minorities—African Americans and Latinos—on their presumed unwilling-

ness to work. Michael Omi has summarized and questioned the contradictory arguments that Asian Americans are far from being disadvantaged or under-represented and that selected social and economic indicators show them as having achieved parity with whites with respect to income and levels of education.<sup>5</sup> Omi addresses the split within Asian American communities between the poverty levels of certain groups (notably Southeast Asian, such as Hmong and Cambodian, refugee groups) and those who have moved into positions of relative affluence and influence (such as Chinese and Japanese communities). He also stresses the continued presence of stereotypes and racism in American life that continue to belie the status of Asian Americans as “honorary whites.” Yet progressive Asian American activists are nonetheless haunted by the fear of Asian Americans’ becoming the “racial bourgeoisie,” as Mari Matsuda puts it:

If white, as it has been historically, is the top of the racial hierarchy in America, and black, historically, is the bottom, will yellow assume the place of the racial middle? The role of the racial middle is a critical one. It can reinforce white supremacy if the middle deludes itself into thinking it can be just like white if it tries hard enough. Conversely, the middle can dismantle white supremacy if it refuses to be the middle, if it refuses to buy into racial hierarchy, and if it refuses to abandon communities of black and brown people, choosing instead to forge alliances with them.<sup>6</sup>

Omi and Matsuda articulate the need to redefine “Asian American” as a term that is more about consciousness and political solidarity than about biological or cultural similarity. Matsuda points out the extent to which “issues do define us,” emphasizing how “Asian American” encompasses a strong wish for a politics of affiliation and activism as well as a racial category being imposed by the state.

In many ways the characters in these plays express a longing, however guarded, for some form of racial or ethnic community. At the same time, these plays are distinctive in their wariness toward reproducing the clichés of minority oppression and a crisis of identity caught “between worlds.” In Lauren Yee’s *Ching Chong Chinaman*, the teenage Desdemona laments that she will not get into an Ivy League school: “I’m an Asian American female with a 2340 and a 4.42 GPA at an elite public high school. That’s like the worst thing in the world. Nobody’s gonna want me.” To counter this, she manufactures a past that includes a host of clichés of racial struggle and identity crisis, making note

5. Michael Omi, “Asian-Americans: The Unbearable Whiteness of Being?” *Chronicle of Higher Education* 55, no. 5 (September 26, 2008): B56.

6. Mari J. Matsuda, “We Will Not Be Used: Are Asian-Americans the Racial Bourgeoisie?” in *Where Is Your Body? And Other Essays on Race, Gender, and the Law*, ed. Mari J. Matsuda (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 149–159.



of the successful formulas of “teen marriage, drug abuse, adultery, concubine suicide, disfigurement, drowning” borrowed from *The Joy Luck Club*. Yee’s scathing parody sharply pinpoints a contradiction in seeing Asian Americans as racially oppressed and identifies how such ethnic identities are packaged and marketed, managed as performances of melodrama and victimization. Desdemona is not exceptional in claiming a certain image of otherness to make herself distinctive, to get ahead. At the same time, what happens to the real subjects of oppression, brutality, trauma, and violence if their pain is co-opted and transformed into cliché? Even more pointedly in *Sia(b)*, May Lee-Yang points out a porn site featuring “Hmong Hotties” that carries the caption “The Hmong in America: A Story of Tragedy and Hope,” echoing the humanitarian impulse of racial uplift: “We hope that Hmonghotties.com will help you better understand the Hmong people in the United States, and the tragic events that brought them here.” On this, she comments: “I just love how even an aspiring porn site has to provide some background education on the Hmong culture as though you can’t look at my boobs unless you know how my people came to the United States.”

*Ching Chong Chinaman* features a not-so-gentle parody of Asian American solidarity, pan-ethnicity, and ethnic “roots,” questioning both the commercialization of multiculturalism and the obsolescence of old-school racial pride. Much less funny are the violent hate crimes, detainment, and interrogation that affect South Asians depicted in the pre- and post-9/11 world of *Indian Cowboy*. In snide and more somber ways, these plays complicate any paradigmatic sense of who Asian Americans actually are, where they live, how they got there, and where they are going. These characters are complicated and conflicted beings whose responses and actions do not easily peg them as heroic social reformers or as tragic victims of racism. These plays are far from “post-racial”; instead, they make new uses of the ever more complicated vocabularies of racial behavior and identity. What we find are not characterizations of “authentic” Asian Americans that somehow can replace the tired clichés of the yellow peril and *Madame Butterfly* but, rather, multiple questionings of Asian Americans as they are imagined as moving into and between various roles—never simply oppressed subalterns, activists, victims, perpetrators, radical feminists, closet chauvinists but sometimes all of these and more.

In closing this Introduction, I return to the importance of looking at these works as plays rather than novels or memoirs, and I encourage even casual readers to imagine their production and, whenever possible, to read them aloud with others. Live performance gives these issues vitality, immediacy, and impact, emphasizing the material and visceral ways that we experience them. The small details of the everyday—conversations, food, clothing, gestures of love and loathing—bring the perceptions, effects, and consequences of being Asian American closer to home. These plays also affirm the collaborative and public nature of theater making; not only do the plays depict different kinds of Asian American communities, testing the notion of the “ethnic enclave,” but

they also gesture toward new interactions and relationships that are formed through the very act of performing plays. What is “Asian American” is actively relational—the forming of identity happens in contact with others, never in an isolated way. The different dimensions of theater practice—casting, development, directing, acting, production, marketing, reception—illustrate how these interconnections substantively matter. Audiences must confront live actors who may or may not affirm their expectations of racial, ethnic, or cultural identity. Performers must rehearse and perform together, working toward a unified artistic vision that often tests their own preconceptions of how others can or should perform. The messy facts of human contact—both displayed visibly and more covertly informing each production—are routinely part and parcel of theater practice. A sense of camaraderie and common mission can be created through theater, encouraging racial and ethnic solidarity, but theater is also the place of conflict, uneasy negotiation, and even violence. Thus, the significance of race, ethnicity, and culture is changed by how Asian Americans come together to make theater as writers, producers, performers, audience members. Ultimately, I hope that this volume provides multiple occasions for engaging directly and actively with Asian American issues through performance, for coming together rather than standing aloof.