

Contemporary Asian American Drama

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Introduction: The First Wave

In 1968, the East West Players in Los Angeles held its first playwriting competition to encourage Asian Americans to write for theater. Founded in 1965, the East West Players originally aimed to promote the careers of Asian American actors, but it became clear that without original plays by and about Asian Americans the company would not last.¹ In the 1960s, playwriting was not perceived as a possible profession for Asian American writers, and Asian American plays were virtually nonexistent. Plays, by definition, need to be produced and staged, and playwrights must work within an infrastructure and industry of theater. The East West Players' playwriting competition lasted three years during which playwrights such as Momoko Iko and Frank Chin made their debut in theater. In 1973, Frank Chin led the founding of the Asian American Theatre Workshop (later renamed Asian American Theatre Company) in San Francisco with the explicit agenda to create and produce Asian American plays. Although Chin left the company in a few years, his influence as a playwright has been lasting in Asian American theater. His two published plays, *Chickencoop Chinaman* (1972) and *The Year of the Dragon* (1974), are considered foundational in Asian American drama, and the Asian American Theatre Company has continued to support new Asian American playwrights.²

Frank Chin belongs to the first wave Asian American playwrights who pioneered Asian American drama. Also in the first wave are Jon Shirota, Momoko Iko, Dom Magwili, Wakako Yamauchi, Karen Tei Yamashita, Perry Miyake, Bill Shinkai, Paul Stephen Lim, Jeffery Paul Chan, Garrett Hongo, and Edward Sakamoto. These writers used the genre of drama to imagine new narratives about both the general history and the individual stories of Asian Americans. Many of their plays deal with important Asian American historical moments such as the internment of Japanese American during World War II and the creation of Chinatowns. Autobiography and realism were the dominant modes

of dramatizing their stories and characters. Wakako Yamuchi, for instance, wrote in her play *The Music Lessons* (1977) about her childhood in a Japanese American farming family during the Great Depression in California's Imperial Valley. The first-wave playwrights included in their plays details of their personal experience with racism, displacement, and what Karen Shimakawa calls "national abjection."³ The influence of the first-wave playwrights on contemporary Asian American drama has been substantial and enduring. Themes of history, autobiography, assimilation, and racism usually associated with first-wave playwrights would continue to be dramatized and investigated by second- and third-wave playwrights.

Going Mainstream: The Second Wave

In 1986, David Henry Hwang's play *Rich Relations* premiered at the Second Stage Theatre in New York City. By then, Hwang had written three plays – *FOB* (1979), *The Dance and the Railroad* (1981), and *Family Devotions* (1983) – all of which were received well and advanced Hwang's career as an Asian American playwright. The three plays have been described by Hwang as his Chinese American Trilogy, and they deal directly with issues of assimilation, identity, and racial politics. *Rich Relations* was Hwang's first attempt to write characters not defined by their race or ethnicity. The play is about his family's preoccupation with money and religion, and it is considered the most autobiographical of Hwang's oeuvre. However, the cast of the premiere was all white, and the play was staged as a story about an affluent WASP family in Los Angeles. The play was not received well by critics and audiences, and Hwang has called the play his first "flop." Soon after the failure of the play, Hwang went on to write *M. Butterfly* and win the Tony Award for Best Play in 1988. However, he has described *Rich Relations*, his least successful work, as the play he had to write.

Hwang's imperative to write the play raises a number of questions that affected second-wave Asian American playwrights. By *second wave*, I refer to Asian American playwrights who began their playwriting careers in the late 1970s and the 1980s. The wave indicates a particular generation in terms of the age of the writers, but it also marks a unique approach to playwriting. In general, the second-wave playwrights faced a new set of questions that had not affected the first wave. Does an Asian American play have to feature Asian American characters? Why do white male playwrights get to write about any topic while women and minority writers are expected to write only about

their personal experience? What happens when race is erased out of what is otherwise an autobiographical story? What requirements are imposed on minority playwrights, and for whom should they write? Since the 1980s, these questions stemmed from American theater's tendency to use the rhetoric of multiculturalism to pigeonhole minority and women writers. At the time, it was difficult for playwrights of color to have their plays produced at mainstream venues, which include Broadway, Off-Broadway, and regional theaters. The only way their plays could be staged was through multicultural programming, and Asian American playwrights slowly found opportunities to write for a wider audience, albeit in a limited way.

The question of what the word *wider* means in the phrase "wider audience" was a central question that vexed second-wave Asian American playwrights. For Velina Hasu Houston, "wider" and "whiter" were synonymous.⁴ Despite being advised by her teacher to write for a "wider" audience, Houston chose to write about her own specific experience of growing up with a Japanese mother and an American father of African American and Native American ancestry in Junction City, Kansas, at a segregated army base for multiracial families. Her play *Tea* is based on interviews she conducted with her mother and other Japanese wives of American GIs at the base. In the play, four friends gather to have tea and to commemorate a mutual friend who committed suicide. During their conversation, they share stories of suffering, joy, and hopes of living as Japanese women in the United States. Houston initially had difficulty finding interest in her plays at both Asian American theater and African American play companies. Within the construct of multicultural theater, her plays were not Asian American enough and not African American enough.⁵ Houston was, instead, welcomed by companies that promoted feminist and women issues, and *Tea* has become one of the most revived Asian American plays for both Asian American and "wider" audiences.

The Japanese American playwright Philip Kan Gotanda has described his playwriting process as a negotiation between the specific and the universal. He has stated in an interview, "I come from a specific place as a Japanese-American, but I want to make sure audiences can meet me halfway. When you want to reach a lot of people, your work should be inclusive enough for everyone to find its center."⁶ For Gotanda, his central place is the Japanese American experience that has been haunted by the trauma of the internment camps and the subsequent silence of the community. A Sansei growing up in Stockton, California, Gotanda had questions about the camps, but he found the Nisei generation unable and unwilling to disclose the past. All of his plays dramatize characters whose subconscious minds continue to be affected by the

unspeakable experience of racism and disenfranchisement exemplified most prominently by the internment of Japanese Americans.

In Gotanda's play *The Wind Cries Mary* (2004), the protagonist, Mary, finds herself unable to adapt to the fast changing culture of the 1960s. A daughter of an affluent Japanese American businessman, she vowed to become "American." She declares in the first scene, "I *am* American, goddamnit!"⁷⁷ She is married to a white man and rejects anything Japanese, but her desperate attempt to assimilate backfires when her former Japanese American lover emerges as a leader of the Asian American movement. The play ends tragically for both Mary and the lover. Gotanda's plays require audiences to confront the complex history of race and power in the United States while celebrating the tenacity of the human spirit. At its core, Gotanda's plays are about how characters live (or fail to live) with life's bitterness – whether it is the internment camp, the death of a child, or the betrayal of a lover. Gotanda's portrayal of broken and bitter characters is always sympathetic and nuanced. They may be quintessentially Japanese American characters with the deep trauma of the internment camps, but they are also familiar characters that represent the contemporary American experience.

Writing for a "wider audience" in theater has often meant writing plays featuring white male protagonists, and Asian American playwrights have had to ask whether they could write such a play and what that play would be like. Gotanda's answer to that question can be found in *Under the Rainbow* (2005), which includes two one-act plays, *Natalie Wood Is Dead* and *White Manifesto and Other Perfumed Tales of Self-Entitlement, or, Got Rice?* A white male character appears in the first piece as an imaginary person who lives in the minds of the Japanese American women, the main characters of the play. In the second piece, the white male is the protagonist who spews out his sexist and racist views of Asian women. By complementing the two plays, Gotanda has the female characters and the white male characters mirroring each other to reveal the complexities of their relationship.

David Henry Hwang's play *M. Butterfly* (1998) is the most famous Asian American play and Hwang's most commercially successful play. It should be underscored that the play features a white male protagonist. Loosely based on a true story, the play takes place in China during the 1960s at the height of the Vietnam War. Gallimard, the protagonist, is a French diplomat who has a long-term romantic relationship with a Chinese opera singer, Song, whom he believes to be a woman. The opera singer turns out to be a man and a spy working for the Chinese Communist Party. Song deceives Gallimard by playing the role of the perfect "Butterfly" or the submissive "Oriental"

woman dramatized in Puccini's opera *Madame Butterfly*. Hwang's *M. Butterfly* explores the intersections of race, gender, and imperialism, and dramatizes the East-West relationship through the two main characters.

For David Henry Hwang, the dramatic form of a play is as important as the story it tells. He has experimented extensively with how the form of the stage should be used to represent the world of the play. For his Chinese Trilogy, for instance, he emulates the style and form of Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior*, Frank Chin's *Gee Pop!*, and Sam Shepard's plays. From the three writers, Hwang has borrowed the style of magic realism in which mythic characters coexist with realistic characters in the diegetic world of the play. While he has looked to other writers for new forms of playwriting, Hwang has, in turn, been recognized for creating his own form of Chinese American theater. Early in his career, he worked with the actor John Lone, who is a professionally trained Chinese opera performer. Lone taught Hwang about Chinese theater, and the collaboration between the two has deeply affected Hwang's development as a playwright. Many of Hwang's plays feature Chinese opera as both a form and a theme: in *FOB* (1979), Grace and Steve who embody the mythic figures Fa Mulan and Gwan Gung, respectively, battle each other in Cantonese opera style, and in *Kung Fu* (2014), a biographical play based on Bruce Lee, Chinese opera is used to represent Lee's troubled relationship with his father. Hwang's style of Chinese American theater incorporates the physicality of Chinese opera with American realism.

The vast majority of plays by second-wave Asian American playwrights do not borrow from traditional Asian theater, and the wave is partly defined by the writers' ability to use a wide range of dramatic styles and forms. Such range can be observed in the plays produced and published in the 1990s, during which six collections of Asian American plays were published.⁸ Additionally, plays by Philip Kan Gotanda and David Henry Hwang were published both individually and as collections during the decade.⁹ There are a number of reasons for the sudden surge in publications of Asian American plays during the 1990s. For one, the international popularity of David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* generated interest in other Asian American plays, and Asian American theater companies such as the East West Players and Pan Asian Repertory Theatre grew noticeably both in size and in the range of plays they produced. Moreover, mainstream theaters increasingly included Asian American plays during their seasons. Indeed, the plays published during the 1990s accurately represent the creative output of second-wave Asian American playwrights.

Two of the six anthologies published during the 1990s are devoted to plays by women writers: Roberta Uno's *Unbroken Thread* and Velina Hasu

Houston's *Politics of Life*. Both anthologies feature plays written by first-wave and second-wave playwrights. Uno and Houston have been instrumental in supporting Asian American women playwrights, who have been overshadowed by the success of male playwrights such as Hwang and Gotanda. In 1993, Uno established the Roberta Uno Asian American Women Playwrights Scripts Collection, 1924–2002, which is archived at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. The collection includes original scripts, many of which have not been produced or published. The plays featured in the anthologies dramatize topics that are significant to the construction of both womanhood and Asian Americanness. For instance, Jeannie Barroga's *Walls* (1989), which is included in Uno's anthology, is about Maya Lin's design of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. Barroga explores Lin's position as a Chinese American architect caught in the controversy over her design. As an Asian American woman, Lin is not considered by the veterans to be qualified to represent their experience of the war. Barroga uses the metaphor of walls to dramatize how Americans are divided through racism, sexism, and politics. On a macrolevel, the play is about the lasting social impact of the Vietnam War, and on a microlevel, the play dramatizes the details of individual lives and relationships.

Genny Lim's *Paper Angels* (1978) also dramatizes an actual historical moment while exploring the toll it has on individuals. Set in 1915, the play is about Chinese detainees on Angel Island off the coast of San Francisco. Based on Lim's research of the poems carved on the walls of the detention center, the play showcases archetypal characters from Chinese immigration history. Lum is an ambitious young Chinese man eager to pursue his American dream while Chin Gung is an "old timer" who is only too familiar with racism in the United States. Together, the characters in the play portray the hopes and disappointments of Chinese immigrants and what they had to endure to arrive in the United States. The play shows what Roberta Uno calls "the impressionistic sensibility" of the playwright in dramatizing the history of Angel Island.¹⁰ The structure of the play is similar to that of Barroga's *Walls* in that the scenes move between time and space fluidly.

History continued to be an important topic for Asian American playwrights throughout the 1980s and 1990s, but, unlike the first-wave writers, the second-wave writers wrote about historical moments they had not directly experienced. As exemplified by Genny Lim and Jeannie Barroga, Asian American playwrights increasingly wrote about nonautobiographical yet personally relevant topics. Elizabeth Wong's play *China Doll* (1996), for instance, is about the Chinese American actress Anna May Wong and the stereotypes

of Asian women that have been pervasive throughout the twentieth century. Elizabeth Wong comments on such stereotypes by using Anna May Wong as an emblematic figure who succeeded in her career despite racism in the American film industry.

Whereas first-wave playwrights began playwriting without formal training in the craft, the majority of second-wave playwrights had opportunities to work with playwriting teachers and to develop their plays in workshops sponsored by theater companies. Such opportunities meant that the playwrights could revise their drafts during many phases of the scripts' development. Such detailed fine-tuning has also led the playwrights to focus more on the tone and the mood of the play. Gotanda articulates this approach in his description of his play *Ballad of Yachiyo*: "All pieces try to say something, do something, leave the audience with something. This one for me was different. It wasn't about politics, the tyranny of our cultural mores, the tragic death of my blood relation, or even about constructing the perfect play, though all were important considerations. Rather this one for me was all about tone."¹¹ The creation of tone and mood onstage is accomplished by many production elements, including setting, lighting, costume, music, and sound. For playwrights, the use of silence and movement also function as indispensable tools for creating emotional affects for the audience. Indeed, what is not said by a character is often more important than what he or she says out loud.

During the 1980s and 1990s, solo performance emerged as a major genre of Asian American drama. Solo performances are often written and performed by the individual performer, and it is rare to see them revived or reenacted by another performer. However, the written scripts of the solo performances have been included in published anthologies, and they have been a major influence on the development of contemporary Asian American drama. In *Asian American Drama* edited by Brian Nelson, Amy Hill's *Tokyo Bound* and Denise Uyehara's *Hiro* are included. Both pieces are solo performances that describe the performer's experience autobiographically. In a typical solo performance piece, the performer narrates her story in first-person voice and often embodies other characters for dramatic effect. Most solo performances are about self-discovery and negotiation with the outside world. Some of the major Asian American solo performers include Dan Kwong, Denise Uyehara, Sandra Tsign Loh, lê thi diem thúy, Shishir Kurup, and Brenda Wong Aoki. Dan Kwong, who is perhaps the most well-known Asian American solo performer, always writes and performs stories that are autobiographical. For example, he has performed stories about growing up as a Japanese-Chinese-American

with a Nisei mother and a Chinese American father. In *Secrets of Samurai Centerfield* (1989), he uses dance and storytelling to explore what it means to be an American of multiethnic and multicultural heritage. In the piece, the samurai sword and the baseball bat converge as a new metaphor for his life in the United States.

Multimedia performance was also instrumental in the development of Asian American drama in the 1980s and 1990s. In particular, Ping Chong and Jessica Hagedorn led prolific careers by creating numerous multimedia works that included projection, film, dance, music, art installation, and performance art. While language and dialogues are less significant in multimedia pieces than in straight plays, many of them have been published in script format. Notably, the first anthology of Asian American drama, *Between Worlds: Contemporary Asian-American Drama* (1990) edited by Misha Berson features Ping Chong's *Nuit Blanche: A Select View of Earthlings* and Jessica Hagedorn's *Tenement Lover: no palmtrees/in new york city*. Both are highly visual multimedia works, and the scripts do not do justice to the actual performance. However, the fact that they have been published as part of Asian American drama underscores the need to examine them as both poetry and dramatic literature.

Version 3.0: The Third Wave

Version 3.0: Contemporary Asian American Plays is the title of Chay Yew's edited anthology published in 2011.¹² In his foreword to the anthology, David Henry Hwang declares that third-wave playwrights "have expanded the world of Asian American theatre." He continues, "My generation, so close to the birth of Asian America, sometimes saw it as the key to the riddle of our identity: I am Asian American, therefore I am. Third wave writers, who grew up taking the idea for granted, regard ethnicity as simply one piece in a much more complicated mosaic of identity."¹³ Hwang's statement accurately describes the general characteristics of third-wave Asian American playwrights. As defined by Hwang and Yew, the third-wave writers are of a younger generation, and they did not directly experience the emergence of Asian American identity in the 1960s and 1970s. Some of them grew up learning about the Asian American movement and immigration history while others had no contact with an Asian American community.

Starting in the late 1990s, third-wave playwrights began to debut in theater in large numbers. Playwrights such as Sung Rno, Diana Son, Ralph Peña, Han Ong, Alice Tuan, Prince Gomovilla, Chay Yew, Julia Cho, and Lloyd Suh have had their plays produced at both Asian American and mainstream venues.

Their plays have been published as both individual plays and in anthologies. One significant trend during the time was the increase in the diversity of ethnicity among Asian American playwrights. First-wave and second-wave playwrights were mostly Chinese and Japanese Americans, but more writers of different ethnic backgrounds began to write for theater. Moreover, some playwrights also worked as directors and producers of ethnic-specific theater companies and workshops. Ralph Peña, who is Filipino American, cofounded the Ma-Yi Theater Company in New York City in 1989 with the purpose of promoting plays by Filipino Americans. He has been the artistic director and, in 1998, expanded the company's mission to include all Asian American plays. Its Ma-Yi Writers Lab, which was founded in 2004 by Sung Rno, has had great success in providing opportunities for emerging Asian American writers, and it has been the country's largest residency program for Asian American playwrights.

Ralph Peña's *Flipzoids* (1996) was a defining production for Ma-Yi Theater Company, and it exemplifies the approach and style of third-wave playwrights.¹⁴ The play is about the Filipino American experience, and Peña uses three characters to dramatize what he saw as the immigrant experience of Filipinos in the United States. The title is a wordplay of "flip," which is derogatory term to label Filipino Americans, and "schizoid," a term to describe those with personality disorder. In the play, Aying is the mother of Vangie, who emigrated from the Philippines to the United States to work as a nurse. While Aying longs to "touch" her homeland, Vangie does everything in her power to assimilate as an American. Aying spends her days on a beach of Southern California where she meets Redford, a confused young man who talks to strangers in public bathrooms. Aying and Redford form a bond as he learns about their ancestral home and as she is kept company during her dying days. Redford is characterized as gay, which worsens his confused state of existence. The way Peña approaches issues of Filipino American identity is not didactic or overly political; rather, he juxtaposes many different representations of home and belonging. On the surface, the play is about Filipino Americans and their diaspora history, but on a deeper level, it is about sin and salvation. By sharing stories of the Philippines and remembering home, Aying saves Redford from his dangerous way of living, and Redford helps Aying perform the ritual of purification before her life comes to an end.

For third-wave writers, issues of ethnic and racial identities converge with existential questions of the human condition. The questions of "who am I" and "why am I here" may be answered in terms of immigration history and hyphenated identities, but they are also addressed as broader philosophical

questions. The increase in globalization and transnationalism has also contributed to the expanded application of ethnic identities in exploring the human condition. In their plays, the diasporic condition of displacement and lost identity is the primary human condition of the late twentieth century and the early twenty-first century.

Cleveland Raining (1995) by the Korean American playwright Sung Rno best illustrates the diasporic condition frequently dramatized by third-wave Asian American playwrights. Rno wrote the play while he was a student of Paula Vogel at Brown University's creative writing program. It premiered at the East West Players in 1995 and was considered by many as one of the best representations of the third wave at the company. The play is set in the Midwest, which is not common in Asian American drama. Described by Rno as surreal tragicomedy, *Cleveland Raining* is about Jimmy "Rodin" Kim and Mari Kim who are siblings living in a countryside in Ohio. Their parents have left without explanation, but Mari is convinced that she could find her father if she drove endlessly on the interstate highway. Jimmy believes that the great flood is coming and prepares to escape the disaster on the Volkswagen bug, which he converts into an ark with the help of Mick, a white Ohioan mechanic. He tells Mick that the car engine should run on "emotional loss." Jimmy sleeps in the car and eats kimchi and drinks beer while waiting for rain. The play ends with Mari discovering in the backyard a painting by her mother, who was a painter. Jimmy puts the painting in the car engine, which then "roars to life, glowing with a surreal and bright light."¹⁵

Rno describes the setting as "fluid, ephemeral, barely real," and the only real object onstage is the Volkswagen. Similar descriptions of setting can be found in other plays by third-wave playwrights. The stage is used not as a metaphorical mirror to reflect reality, but rather it is a space to explore embodiment and presence of Asian Americans. Put in another way, the stage functions as a laboratory for both the performers and spectators to investigate the conditions of being humans and Asian Americans.

Instead of using realism as a dramatic style to represent a sense of authenticity or "real" Asian American experience, the third-wave writers have preferred nonrealistic forms to explore their characters and stories. In their plays, what is real or unreal do not get distinguished, and time does not move linearly. In Alice Tuan's *Last of the Suns* (1994), the grandfather character, Yeh Yeh, sees and hears characters from both Chinese mythology and his past. While one can guess that the Yeh Yeh's mind is overrun by his failing memory, Tuan does not make an explicit distinction between the figments of his mind and what actually happens onstage. In fact, Tuan deliberately integrates the two worlds

to enhance the dramatic conflict. Similarly, Sunil Kuruvilla's *Rice Boy* (2000) dramatizes two different worlds to coexist onstage. He describes the setting in detail to underscore the importance of such coexistence: "1975. Canada and India. Both places exist on stage simultaneously, with scene shifts indicated quickly by light and sound (not by set changes). At times, the sounds of the countries mix – we hear the Nut Seller's sad call in India blend with the winter gusts of Canada."¹⁶ In the play, the physical simultaneity of different scenes is central in depicting the diasporic experience of the main characters. The play is about Tommy, a twelve-year-old boy who grew up in a city in Ontario, Canada, with his father who could never fully adapt to the new country. Tommy's mother drowned ten years earlier when they were still in their native India. The play interweaves Tommy's memories of his recent trip to India and his efforts to find a "normal" Canadian family that might adopt him. In particular, he remembers his seventeen-year-old cousin Tina, who is paraplegic and spends her days making *kolam*, intricate and decorative patterns made on the floor with rice flour. Tommy's memories coexist with the bleak and cold reality of his life in Canada as he contemplates where he belongs and what he should do with his life.

Nonconventional use of language is another significant feature of third-wave playwrights. In Chay Yew's *A Language of Their Own* (1996), the characters, Oscar and Ming, are defined by how they speak English. They speak through a series of monologues and dialogues, and their conversations transcend time. The script can be interpreted as a collective stream of consciousness of the two Asian gay lovers who are caught in a fraught relationship. Oscar is HIV-positive and breaks up with Ming, and both struggle with being Asian and gay. They often speak directly to the audience, and how they speak to each other is as important as what they say. In the play, dialogues weave in and out of present and past moments, and words are more important than action. It is through language and poetry that Yew creates the intimate world of love, betrayal, and human connection.

In Han Ong's *Swoony Planet* (1997), characters speak in short sentences and phrases that often overlap with each other's lines. The lines in the play are written in verse form with minimal explanation of what the characters are thinking. This means that the intention of the characters must be interpreted by the actor and the director with detailed attention to the beat and flow of language. What is said becomes verbal choreography of thoughts that are not always continuous or logical. In one of the stage directions, Ong has two characters – Artie and a man he imagines to be his father – speak while moving their bodies in a choreographed manner. Ong writes, "Each line they speak is

punctuated by an arm being fitted into a sleeve, leg into pants, buttons being buttoned, etc. – gestural, like dance.”¹⁷ In the subsequent dialogue, rhythm and tone capture the nuance of the interaction between the two characters. The man is not the father Artie is seeking, and the ill-fitting clothing that results from the “dance” symbolizes the mismatch.

The plays by third-wave Asian American playwrights reflect the overall trend in contemporary American drama, which emphasizes experimentation in form and social issues in content. Many American plays since the 1990s have been about politics of race, gender, and sexuality. This trend has made it imperative for Asian American playwrights to add their voice to the debates of American culture. Moreover, with the controversy surrounding the musical *Miss Saigon* in the early 1990s, casting once again became a central issue in theater, and Asian American playwrights responded by writing plays that could function as a vehicle for Asian American actors.¹⁸ Some, like the Korean American playwright Diana Son, wrote plays with characters that could be played by actors of any racial background. Her play, *Stop Kiss* (1998), is about two women – Callie and Sara – who fall in love, but when they kiss for the first time on a street in New York City, one of them gets assaulted by a bystander. The sequence of the scenes is structured in a way that the story is told in reverse: the play begins with the assaulted woman in a hospital and ends with the first kiss. Although Son did not write the characters with racial specificity, she has insisted on casting them with minority actors. In the premiere at the Public Theatre in New York City, the role of Sara was played by the Korean Canadian actress Sandra Oh, and a male character was played by Kevin Carroll, an African American actor.

In an interview, Son asks rhetorically, “Was *Stop Kiss* the Asian American play of the season at the Public Theater? Is it an Asian American play because I wrote it? Is it an Asian American play because Sandra Oh was in it? The dominant theme of the play was sexuality, sexual identity and committing and not ethnic identity. So I don’t know or care if it fulfills that [Asian] slot. I would think that they chose to produce *Stop Kiss* because it was a good play.”¹⁹ She has resisted being labeled Asian American or Korean American and has insisted in writing about anyone and anything. Son’s view of the labels is the same as the one held by David Henry Hwang and others in the 1980, but the mainstream success of her plays that are not about Asian American topics epitomizes a significant shift in Asian American theater. She expresses this sense of liberation when she comments that previous generation of Asian American playwrights needed to say, “We are here,” but her generation is saying, “We are weird.”²⁰

While New York City has been a central location for third-wave playwrights, other cities such as Los Angeles, Chicago, and the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul have been major sites for new Asian American plays. Additionally, the geographical locales of the plays' settings vary noticeably. The Korean American playwright Julia Cho, for instance, was born in Los Angeles and spent part of her childhood in Arizona, and the West Coast and the Southwest desert function prominently as settings and themes in her plays. In Cho's *BFE* (2005), a teenaged Korean American girl living in a suburb of the Southwest desert feels isolated and ugly, and she tries desperately to fit in. In Lloyd Suh's *American Hwangap* (2009), Texas is the setting for a dysfunctional family with a father who imagines himself to be a hero in a western movie.²¹

Plays published in *Asian American Plays for a New Generation* edited by Josephine Lee, Donald Eitel, and Rick Shiomi represent plays developed and produced in the Twin Cities, which Josephine Lee describes as a "hospitable home for new theatrical writing and production."²² In her introduction to the anthology, Lee articulates the critical significance of examining Asian American drama in a wider geographical landscape. She writes, "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."²³ Moreover, the Twin Cities has a large Korean adoptee population, and the anthology features *Walleye Kid: The Musical*, which is about the adoptees' experience in the American Midwest.

The Next Wave: Into the Twenty-First Century

In the twenty-first century, Asian American playwrights have increasingly found inspiration in popular culture, avant-garde performance, social media, and the effects of globalization. The Vietnamese-American playwright Qui Nguyen describes himself as a "playwright, screenwriter, and geek," and he cofounded Vampire Cowboys, a theater company in New York City. He calls the company "geek theatre," and, according to its website, it is "the only professional theatre organization to be officially sponsored by NY Comic Con."²⁴ His play *The Inexplicable Redemption of Agent G* (2012) is a meta-theatrical comedy about a character named Playwright who is kidnapped by his main character to finish the story he has been avoiding for ten years. The play features David Henry Hwang as a character, and Nguyen and Ma-Yi Theater Company produced three YouTube video episodes to

promote the play. In the videos, Hwang makes a cameo appearance as a famous yet disgruntled playwright.²⁵

The Internet and social media have become an essential tool for Asian American playwrights to advertise and share their plays. In the case of Young Jean Lee, she has used social media to write her play. She would, for example, solicit ideas and examples on her Facebook page and include them in her new play. A Korean American, Young Jean Lee is a playwright and director who has recently emerged as one of the most exciting American theater artists of her generation. She is recognized as an experimental playwright who has written about various topics in ways that many consider subversive and avant-garde. Charles Isherwood of *The New York Times* has called her “hands down, the most adventurous downtown playwright of her generation.”²⁶ Lee, however, did not emerge from Asian American theater. Rather, she founded her own theater company, Young Jean Lee’s Theater Company, and has created works that defy convention and expectations of contemporary theater. *Songs of Dragons Flying to Heaven* (2006) is Lee’s only play about Asian American identity, and it is a deconstructive parody of identity plays. She deliberately makes the play fail at the end by sabotaging it with two boring white characters.²⁷

The future of Asian American drama will include more writers like Qui Nguyen and Young Jean Lee. It will also see a growing number of playwrights with multiracial identity. Playwrights such as Naomi Iizuka and Rajiv Joseph are award-winning writers with parents of Asian and non-Asian descent. While they do not identify themselves singularly as Asian American, their plays have dramatized issues of identity, race, and cultural belonging. For instance, Naomi Iizuka’s *36 Views* (2003) is about Orientalism and cultural authenticity, and Rajiv Joseph’s Pulitzer Prize–nominated *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* (2009) is about the U.S. involvement in the Middle East. Joseph’s *The North Pool* (2011) addresses the experiences of an Arab American student in an American high school. Almost fifty years have passed since the first playwriting competition sponsored by the East West Players. In those years, Asian American drama grew from virtually nonexistent to becoming established as a major part of American theater and literature. In the beginning decades of the twenty-first century, Asian American playwrights continue to explore both familiar and new issues of Asian American identity and history. At the same time, a number of them have written about topics that have nothing to do with Asian America. Asian American plays can be seen in multiple cities in the country, and the range of genres, styles, and topics varies as widely as the growing diversity of Asian Americans.

Whether a fourth wave has to be defined is yet to be seen, but the first-, second-, and third-wave playwrights continue to write and to exert their influence on American theater.

Notes

- 1 For a detailed history of the East West Players, see Yuko Kurahashi, *Asian American Culture on Stage: The History of the East West Players* (London: Routledge, 1999).
- 2 For a study on Chin's plays, see Josephine Lee, *Performing Asian America: Race and Ethnicity on the Contemporary Stage* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997).
- 3 Karen Shimakawa, *National Abjection: The Asian American Body Onstage* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).
- 4 Velina Hasu Houston, "Introduction," in *The Politics of Life: Four Plays by Asian American Women*, ed. Velina Hasu Houston (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 2.
- 5 For details of Houston's early career, see Esther Kim Lee, *A History of Asian American Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 146–54.
- 6 Misha Berson, "Role Model on a Role: Philip Kan Gotanda's Work Grabs Mainstream Attention and Inspires Younger Artists," *Seattle Times* (October 10, 1996): D1.
- 7 Philip Kan Gotanda, *The Wind Cries Mary in No More Cherry Blossoms: Sisters Matsumoto and Other Plays* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005), 96.
- 8 The six anthologies are Misha Berson, ed., *Between Worlds: Contemporary Asian-American Plays* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1990); Roberto Uno, ed., *Unbroken Thread: An Anthology of Plays by Asian American Women* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), Velina Hasu Houston, ed., *The Politics of Life and But Still, Like Air, I'll Rise* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997); Brian Nelson, ed., *Asian American Drama: Nine Plays from the Multiethnic Landscape* (New York: Applause, 1997); Alvin Eng, ed., *Tokens? The NYC Asian American Experience on Stage* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999).
- 9 Philip Kan Gotanda, *Fish Head Soup and Other Plays* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996) and David Henry Hwang, *FOB and Other Plays* (New York: Plume, 1990). For a more complete list, see the bibliography of Esther Kim Lee's *A History of Asian American Theatre*.
- 10 Uno, *Unbroken Thread*, 14.
- 11 Philip Kan Gotanda, *Ballad of Yachiyo* (New York City: Theatre Communications Group, 1997), 5.
- 12 Born in Singapore, Yew was the director of the Asian Theatre Workshop from ten years (1995–2005) at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles. He has been a prolific playwright and recognized for his directing and producing. In 2011, he became the Artistic Director of Victory Gardens Theater in Chicago, which was the first time an Asian American was appointed the leader of a mainstream theater company.
- 13 David Henry Hwang, "Foreword," in *Version 3.0: Contemporary Asian American Plays*, ed. Chay Yew (New York City: Theatre Communications Group, 2011), xi.
- 14 *Flipzoids* is published in Alvin Eng, *Tokens? and Savage Stage: Plays by Ma-Yi Theater Company*, ed. Joi Barrios-Leblanc (New York: Ma-Yi Theater Company, 2007).
- 15 Sung Rno, *Cleveland Raining*, in Houston, *But Still, Like Air, I'll Rise*, 260.

- 16 Sunil Kuruvilla, *Rice Boy*, in Yew, *Version 3.0*, 469. A Canadian of East Indian descent, Kuruvilla wrote the play as an MFA playwriting student at Yale School of Drama. *Rice Boy* is one of the most produced South Asian American plays in the United States and Canada.
- 17 Han Ong, *Swoony Planet*, in Yew, *Version 3.0*, 214.
- 18 Asian American actors protested the casting of a white actor in yellow-face makeup in the role of a Eurasian character. For details of the controversy, see chapter 7 of Esther Kim Lee's *A History of Asian American Theatre*.
- 19 Alvin Eng, *Tokens?*, 439.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 415. Diana Son has indeed broaden her writing opportunities in and out of theater, and she has also worked as a television producer and writer on shows such as "The West Wing," "Law and Order: Criminal Intent," and "Blue Bloods."
- 21 Lloyd Suh's American Hwangapis published in *Seven Contemporary Plays from the Korean Diaspora*, ed. Esther Kim Lee (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).
- 22 Josephine Lee, Donald Eitel, and Rick Shiomi, eds., *Asian American Plays for a New Generation: Plays for a New Generation* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 5.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 5–6.
- 24 Online resource: <http://quinguyen.com/bio.html> (accessed August 14, 2014).
- 25 Online resource: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ImsCxXBzHQ8> (accessed August 14, 2014).
- 26 Charles Isherwood, "Beneath Pink Parasols, Identity in Stark Form," *The New York Times* (January 16, 2012). Online resource: <http://theater.nytimes.com/2012/01/17/theater/reviews/young-jean-lees-untitled-feminist-show-review.html> (accessed July 14, 2012),
- 27 For studies on Young Jean Lee's play, see Karen Shimakawa, "Young Jean Lee's Ugly Feelings about Race and Gender," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 17.1 (March 2007): 89–102 and Esther Kim Lee, "Asian American Women Playwrights and the Dilemma of the Identity Play: Staging Heterotopic Subjectivities," in *Contemporary Women Playwrights: Into the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Penny Farfan and Lesley Ferris (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).