

Redefining 'Yellow':
Questioning the Asian American Identity in David Henry Hwang's *Yellow Face*

Taylor Michelle Wycoff

In David Henry Hwang's *Yellow Face*, the lead character, DHH, a Chinese-American playwright, agrees to an interview with a reporter amid the height of the 1996 Campaign Finance Controversy. He is asked whether his father sees himself as more American, or more Chinese. Trying to show the reporter the inappropriateness of his question, he turns it around on the reporter:

DHH: How about you? Do you see yourself as more American or more white?

NWOAOC: That's not the same thing.

DHH: No?

NWOAOC: Not in the least.

DHH: Why not?

NWOAOC: Because there's no conflict between being white and being American.
(Hwang 55)

I am interested in how this points to the historical construction of an Asian American collective, and to various responses to that construction in the Asian American community. Extending theoretical models developed by literary scholars David Palumbo-Liu and Lisa Lowe, I examine how Hwang's *Yellow Face* is a theatrical exploration of what it means to be Asian American, and how it calls for an understanding of Asian American identity as changeable, dynamic, and performative.

Asian Americans, as indicated by the qualifier, have historically been constructed in relation to the American national culture as different and as other than white Americans of European origin. Lisa Lowe argues that understanding the racialized economic and political foundations of the nation requires an understanding of Asian immigration to the United States. She describes Asian Americans as perpetual immigrants, or the "foreigner-within" due to the historical contradiction whereby Asians have been included in the workplaces and markets of the U.S. nation-state, but have remained socially, politically, culturally, and otherwise excluded from the national terrain. From the beginning of the modern introjection of Asia into the American imaginary (which Palumbo-Liu locates primarily in the 1930's, the period known as "Yellow Peril" due to the large increase in Asians immigrating to America and the subsequent immigration acts created in the United States in response), Asia presented to America a particular test of its self-conception, internationally and domestically. In this way, the othering of Asian Americans and further minority populations might be understood as a kind of survival strategy on the part of the American majority. Still, the new immigrant populations began to understand their placement in the modern U.S. nation as those conspicuously marked as other by race, those deemed inferior because of class and poverty, and those in what came to form a catch-all category. What remains problematic with this label, however, is the reduction of such a heterogeneous population with vastly different histories into a single rubric that collapses such distinctions, limiting

the Asian American identity to something that is static, outwardly defined and imposed upon them. Contradictory to this notion, the Asian-origin collectivity is unstable and changeable. Its cohesion is complicated by integrationality, various degrees of identification with a “homeland,” and by different extents of assimilation to and distinction from “majority culture” in the United States. (Lowe 66)

Strategic essentialism, as Lowe points out, suggests that,

“it is possible to utilize specific signifiers of racialized ethnic identity, such as “Asian American,” for the purpose of contesting and disrupting the discourses that exclude Asian Americans, while simultaneously revealing the internal contradictions and slippages of “Asian American” so as to insure that such essentialisms will not be reproduced and proliferated by the very apparatuses we seek to disempower.” (Lowe 82)

In his play *Yellow Face*, David Henry Hwang offers significant insight into the contradictions and tensions within the collective Asian American identity. In the play we meet MARCUS, a Caucasian actor, DHH, a Chinese-American playwright, and HYH his China-born Chinese-American father. Mixing fact with fiction, the play weaves together events spanning from the *Miss Saigon* casting controversy, to Hwang’s second crack at a Broadway production with *Face Value*, and the 1996 US Campaign Finance Controversy (sometimes referred to as “Chinagate”) and the allegations against Taiwanese American scientist, Wen Ho Lee. Throughout the piece, Hwang presents a number of images representative of the American-defined Asian American, the most prominent being what I will refer to as “the cultural foreigner.”

After defending his reputation as an Asian American activist to his ex-girlfriend, we get a glimpse of DHH during his time on the set of *All-American Girl*, starring Margaret Cho.

DHH: Margaret, hi! I've been hired to take the show in a new direction: more Asian. So-use chopsticks. Use chopsticks! And when you're done you can put them in your hair. (*Pause*) And Margaret- you're wearing shoes, which is something we don't do in the house. Take off your shoes. We don't wear shoes in the house. (*Pause*) Now, I am going to leave this abacus right here... (Hwang 46)

Though it is only for a very brief moment in the script, it exposes a key trend in how America has historically viewed and treated Asian Americans. Firstly, a *Chinese* American has been brought in to advise a show about a *Korean* American. The network's assumption that DHH is qualified for the job exemplifies the habit of lumping all Asian Americans together into one single “other” without acknowledging the multiplicities that exist within such a group. The other interesting thing to look at, then, is the actual construction of an Asian American that DHH is hired to try and get Margaret to embody. Rather than acknowledge that Margaret has assimilated, and has, incredibly, managed to bring an Asian American face to network television, the network brings in DHH to help make the show more “authentic” by teaching Margaret how to be more stereotypically Asian. Perhaps Margaret's ability to assimilate into mainstream media carries a similar threat to the “Yellow Peril” of the 1930's, though rather than remaining an outsider, Margaret has moved too close to the center—an American identity. So in order for Asian

Americans to be understood and accepted in mainstream culture, they must embrace and exaggerate their Otherness. The network, and in this particular instance DHH himself, illustrates the desire to impose upon Asian Americans an outwardly defined, static identity, and what's more, to *perform* that particular construction of identity. In line with Lowe's point about strategic essentialism, Hwang is utilizing certain signifiers of radicalized ethnic identity in order to reveal the internal contradictions and slippages of what it means to be Asian American.

Furthermore, while MARCUS and DHH are grappling with the issue of representation within the context of the play, we must also consider Hwang's craft as a playwright. His simple juxtaposition of a representation of an Asian American by Marcus Gee directly against an actual Asian American (found in DHH) further begs the consideration of what is a "real" and accurate representation of Asian America and what is false. What we gain in understanding from these passages and the whole of David Henry Hwang's *Yellow Face* is the continued desire for America to mark Asian Americans as Other. MARCUS, who for the majority of the production is successfully played off as Asian American but as HYH says "doesn't look Asian," is uncomfortably Americanized. Because his appearance is inconsistent with the historical construction of what Asian Americans are supposed to look like, he is faced with the constant pressure to present himself in a way that is more Asian and less American. This is most clear when casting director Miles NEWMAN interviews MARCUS for *Face Value*:

NEWMAN: ...my first thought when Marcus walked in was, "Well, it's obvious he's not one hundred percent Asian." Because of Equity rules, you can't just come out and ask an actor his race. That would be illegal-and racist. But over the years, I'd become pretty good at getting to the truth of an actor's ethnicity. (*To Marcus:*) So, Marcus, where are you from?

MARCUS: Actually I was born in Seattle.

NEWMAN: Seattle. Very...diverse town, isn't it? ... I'm so impressed by the vitality of the Asian community there. ... Cherry Blossom Festival, Chinese New Year's Parade- you know? ... you been?

MARCUS: Yea, as a kid.

NEWMAN: The Filipino community- they must have some big annual--of their own, right? I'm so ignorant, I wish I knew-- ... Or the Indians! Do they have any--? Or how 'bout the Vietnamese? Koreans? Hmong? (Hwang 20)

The mystery behind MARCUS's supposed ethnic heritage leaves the other characters in the play stumped. What Hwang does nicely with this scene between MARCUS and NEWMAN is call attention to and highlight the multitude of ethnicities that have come to be clumped together and known simply as "Asian." It asks the audience to note the difference between being Chinese, being Filipino, being Indian, Vietnamese, Korean, or Hmong, pointing to the heterogeneity within the Asian American collective. It also, though, suggests that the only way for Asian Americans to be understood and marginally accepted into the American collective is to be clearly identified as Other.

However, to suggest that the identity of the Asian American minority is strictly defined by the images developed and projected onto them by the American majority would render them powerless to define their own identity in any meaningful way, and would result in a static, unchanging cultural identity. Lisa Lowe points out that a complex

process takes place between the projection of those images onto Asian American bodies and the actual embodiment of those constructions of Asian American identity. Asian American artists have thus alternately and sometimes even simultaneously both rejected and embraced Asian American constructs.

In *Yellow Face*, Hwang does both in order to reveal the complex process of negotiating one's identity, further highlighting the fluidity and performativity of identity. We see acceptance via embracing the stereotype anytime DHH attempts to expose MARCUS as white, highlighting his own otherness and taking definitive ownership of his racially qualified national status. That being said, he also reflects later on how being an ambassador for Asian Americans turned into its own facade: "Years ago, I discovered a face- one I could live better and more fully than anything I'd ever tried. But as the years went by, my face became my mask. And I became just another actor-running around in yellow face." (Hwang 62) As his ex-girlfriend LEAH states, "You used to stand for something. Now, it's, it's like you've turned into some kind of fake Asian." (Hwang 45)

Alternatively, we see a rejection of the constructs when HYH reflects on his childhood dreams of being in America:

"...even then, I knew my real life wasn't the one I was living in China. Second son of a cheapskate father, who didn't even know how to talk to his children. I knew that was a fake life, and my real life was here. All those movie stars- Humphrey Bogart and Clark Gable and Frank Sinatra- they were the real me." (Hwang, 17)

Later, when talking to DHH about MARCUS, he recounts, "When I first saw him in your show, I thought, 'He's not Chinese.' But now that I read his words, who cares? Maybe, in my heart, if I can be Gary Cooper or Clark Gable, then maybe-in his?- he can be Marcus Gee." (Hwang 38) In both instances, we see HYH's desire to move closer to the center, a white American identity, and reject any historical construction that would otherwise prevent him from doing so.

Through this simultaneous acceptance and rejection of the stereotypical Asian American identity, Hwang has utilized theatre as a vehicle for the exploration of identity. Palumbo Liu has addressed this aspect of literary narratives where "both Asian Americans and non-Asian Americans attempted to invent within their specific discursive spaces images of Asian America that both delineate its boundaries and envision particular modes of crossing them." (Palumbo-Liu 43) Unlike most political, sociological, journalistic, and academic discourses, for Palumbo-Liu, literature and film both "strain to create a particular staging of realities that can only be anticipated in future time." (Palumbo-Liu 43) Hwang acknowledges this idea directly in the final scene of the play when DHH explains the reason for MARCUS's creation:

DHH: That's where you came in. To take words like "Asian" and "American," like "race" and "nation", and mess them up so bad no one has any idea what they even mean anymore. Cuz that was Dad's dream: A world where he could be Jimmy Stewart. And a white guy-can even be an Asian. (Hwang 62)

Through the vehicle of theater, Hwang both acknowledges the delineation of certain boundaries and also proposes potential opportunities for crossing those boundaries. His semi-autobiographical work grapples with the desire for acceptance at the expense of one's personal integrity. Though the presented strategies for the renegotiation of Asian American identities are quite often at odds with one another,

Hwang nonetheless contributes to the articulation of the Asian American experience through both the rejection of cultural fundamentalism and the formation of identity. Hwang's work seriously challenges notions of cultural purity and racial isolationism, and acknowledges the fluidity of culture. In this play, Hwang is staging a particular reality and therefore through performance, is creating a dynamic identity. *Yellow Face* reveals the tensions, contradictions, and possibilities of our multiracial society, thus actively participating in the process of shaping new forms of racial and ethnic identities.

Works Cited

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