

Dramaturgy of Deprivation (??): An Invitation to Re-Imagine Ways We Depict Asian American and Adopted Narratives of Trauma

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The Journal of American Drama and Theatre
Volume 34, Number 2 (Spring 2022)
ISSN 2376-4236
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“I intended both to tell an impossible story and to amplify the impossibility of its telling.”

—Saidiya Hartman[1]

Using theatre to generate empathy for characters and narratives has been a longstanding goal in Eurocentric drama and a strong argument for this medium to be a tool for larger social change. In the wake of the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests, sparked largely by the unjust deaths of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and George Floyd, theatre makers are exploring alternative ways to represent Black, brown and other historically excluded narratives, which are too often exploited as trauma porn. In this essay, I offer dramaturgy of deprivation, or ??, as an alternative to dramaturgy of empathy. I contextualize this concept theoretically and practically, and use examples from my own practice to illustrate how ?? is potentially effective in dramatizing narratives from my own positionalities as an Asian American and as a transracially adopted person from South Korea.

Critique of trauma porn and sentimentalized narratives

While white representation is afforded abundance and complexity, “ethnic and racial others live in an economy of narrative scarcity.”[2] Theatre has long had the power to disrupt this scarcity but often only in the form of providing the previously invisibilized or marginalized narrative for an audience to elicit empathy. Performance studies scholar/ethnographic theatre maker Nikki Yeboah asks in our current moment, “is empathy enough, or does our work reify power more than disrupt it?”[3] Particularly in relation to Black and brown suffering, how can we dramatize characters’ experiences in ways that do not re-traumatize people of color or leave white audiences feeling passively satisfied for having empathy, therefore perpetuating the white and colonial gaze of surveillance, voyeurism, fetishism, and possession,[4] something Yeboah critiques as “not an inherently radical act”?[5]

Theorists from Black and decolonial studies indicate that highlighting the historiographical absence of people or obfuscation of narratives illustrates how forces such as white supremacy and colonialism have dehumanized or invisibilized them. Tapji Garba and Sara-Maria Sorentino argue that metaphoricality is a crucial part of Black enslaved identity and that its “political indecipherability ... exemplifies the violence of slavery itself.”[6] If “what slavery-as-metaphor offers is an opening to tarry with unknowing, to increase frustration,”[7] then what impacts can this type of depiction have on a theatre audience? Can frustration and unknowing provoke stronger actions that will result in social justice after the performance? Yeboah argues for dramaturgy that leaves the audience with the kind of frustration Garba

and Sorrentino refer to because “collective action requires agitation. Collective action is fueled by feelings of unrest, anger, and dissatisfaction so strong that they cannot be contained. It emerges out of turbulence. It draws strength from a people unsettled.”^[8] Saidiya Hartman seems to agree: “the loss of stories sharpens the hunger for them. So it is tempting to fill in the gaps and to provide closure where there is none. To create a space for mourning where it is prohibited.”^[9] Hartman’s idea of narrative restraint as a way to “respect the limits of what cannot be known”^[10] contrasts with the dramatic urge to present such narratives with explicit specificity and detail for contemporary white audiences as a way to compensate for their invisibilization. Although greater representation and embodiment of these stories and characters are still important, is there a dramaturgical alternative that complicates these depictions and denies audiences satisfaction?

These questions inspire me to think about the Korean verb *??*, which roughly translates to “there are none; (to be) lacking; (to be) nonexistent,”^[11] not dissimilar to *faltar* in Spanish.^[12] How do we create dramatic experiences of loss or absence for an audience so they feel the grief and rage needed to take action towards a more just world, instead of feeling passively good about themselves for empathizing with victims/survivors of oppression? Rather than working to perform and prove my humanity for the audience, how can I compel them to feel the irreconcilable loss of self and/or history so we can be inspired to make collective change? Jackie Sibblies Drury’s *Fairview* and Michael R. Jackson’s *A Strange Loop* are excellent recent examples that engage with more complex representations around racialized trauma. As an audience member, I felt the unrest, anger, and hunger that Yeboah and Hartman hope to evoke in their work; both shows created strong desire within me to experience their characters and narratives more fully, and I felt a renewed urgency to fight for them offstage. In the next section, I will argue that the uniqueness of transracially adopted Asian American identity is suited for *??* and provide examples from my own work.

Racist Love: Asian American and adopted Korean representation

This essay takes inspiration from a performative response on Zoom that I gave to Leslie Bow’s working introduction to her book, *Racist Love: Asian Abstraction and the Pleasures of Fantasy*.^[13] Bow argues that the US’s racialized relationship with Asian American identity can be illustrated through its abstracted affection or desire for nonhuman proxies (such as objects) and that this partly stems from a “deliberate absence of Asian people.”^[14] This resonated with me as both an Asian American and a person who was transracially adopted from South Korea. “Transracial” does not mean white women trying to pass as Black or brown. In this context, it means being adopted into a family whose race differs from theirs (often Black/brown folks being adopted by white folks), and it has been an established term in adoption studies for decades.^[15] Directly following the Korean War in the 1950s, a time when the US was strengthening its anti-Asian immigration policies,^[16] adoptions from countries like South Korea increased. I argue that this is because US society and its adoption industrial complex viewed adopted children as dehumanized objects that allowed them to project the same kind of abstracted affection and longing that Bow highlights. White US families often adopted South Korean children because they were deemed acceptable as a model minority^[17] in ways that are consistent with Bow’s assertions that the US looks “outward to Asia for its ‘bit’ of the other, for the object that makes satisfaction possible while imperfectly concealing racial anxiety.”^[18]

The larger AAPI (Asian American Pacific Islander) immigrant community often fails to be in solidarity with transracially adopted people from Korea^[19] (who make up 10% of the Korean-US diaspora) while

their white parents disregard their racial identity often with the intention to assimilate them.^[20] Because “adoption is a series of transactions—legal, social, and financial [and] ... those with the most power get to define the terms and create the policies and practices that most benefit them,”^[21] white parents as major actors in these transactions tend to further objectify adopted people as nonhumans. The Korean government and its counterparts in countries like the US that make up the adoption industrial complex commodify adopted people; they were a literal export, because “US adoptive laws were designed in the context of free market capitalism and based on children as property.”^[22] Agencies duplicated, interchanged, and manipulated our records to make us more marketable/adoptable. I was one of likely thousands of adopted people whose status was changed to orphan on my paperwork, a lie to appease the US government’s scant overseas adoption policies at the time.

Instead of wanting to prove my humanity as an Asian American and transracially adopted person, my impulse was to move in another direction: to depict myself as literal Asian objects. Utilizing the Zoom format, I used Snapchat filters that stir Western desire such as food, toys, and appropriative clothing/costume. I leaned into my own objectification and used filters that intentionally obscured most of my face in the hopes that the audience would strain to see more of my personhood and be present to this less comfortable sensation.



Fig. 1. Screenshots of Ginther (taken by the author) during her Zoom performance, using Snapchat filters. Clockwise from left to right: 1. As a dumpling, 2. As an old-fashioned Orientalist doll, 3. As a Geisha in full makeup, 4. As a boba tea.

As I presented using a boba tea filter, for example, I talked about how experts estimate that South Korea made somewhere between 15-20 million dollars a year at the height of Korean adoption.^[23] Using my own birth year, 1983, and adjusting for inflation and the pricing for my favorite bubble tea place in Santa

Cruz, I shared with the audience that I cost about 1,315 boba teas. I hoped that in highlighting the loss of my story and personhood through anti-Asian American racism and the international adoption industrial complex that I would generate hunger, agitation, and unrest in ways that Yeboah and Hartman imagined. Attendees described my performance as “playful,” “incisive,” and “disorienting.” Another reflected, “Mainstream representations of ‘Asian-ness,’ like dumplings, ‘Geisha’ makeup, and boba tea, seen all together in aggregate made for a compelling visual argument of how we consume and project, literally on our faces, cultural iconography and object.” These responses suggest that I effectively performed alienation and objectification.

My work: *between* and *No Danger of Winning*

My first solo show, *between*, explored Korean adopted identity through multiple characters that centered my search for my first family.^[24] Many adoption narratives use reunion as a form of climax,^[25] but I intentionally deprived the audience of this dramatic moment, telling them:

*There was no grand moment that led me to my family in Korea.
Perhaps that’s what you were hoping to find here.
Meeting my family in Korea did not complete me.
Reunions are not ends. They are middles.*^[26]

I did not consciously know it at the time, but I was exploring ways we can withhold representation from audiences for sociopolitical reasons. I remarked that I had intentionally resisted this type of resolution scene because “I think this dilutes the complexity and richness of the experience that the continuously progressing relationship demands and deserves.”^[27]

In addition to depriving my audience of a realistic depiction of my reunion, I realized that my inability to “authentically” portray a Korean woman also deprived Korean audience members in Seoul of the ethno-national identity that was taken from me through the trauma of my transnational adoption. This is particularly important because transracially adopted people “are seen as suspect in their communities of origin or seen as not authentic,”^[28] so a more supposedly “accurate” depiction potentially misses an opportunity to convey a more complex truth. I reflected:

I want the audience to fully believe that I am this Korean mother before them, but I have accepted the fact that, to a Korean-fluent audience, there really is no amount of voice work I can do to achieve this. ... you’re not the only one to intimate that part of what is moving about this performance of Ki-Bum is how hard and perhaps how imperfectly I, as an adoptee, am trying to portray this character to audiences here in South Korea.^[29]

Being unable to achieve this character’s accent with believable mimesis originally felt like a failure in my performance. With *between*, I am interested in the impact of my inability to fully embody Koreanness for Korean audience members. In feeling deprived of this more authentic portrayal, perhaps they will be moved to support policies such as family preservation so as to not perpetuate this discomfort they feel.

The theory I cite in this essay, my previous work like *between*, and pieces like *A Strange Loop* and

Fairview have inspired the ways I am writing and dramaturging my current project, the book for *No Danger of Winning*, a verbatim musical based on my interviews with ten former contestants of color who were eliminated on *The Bachelor/ette*. It is a meta-musical where a character, Joy, based on me as the playwright, navigates the complex ethics of trying to represent the people she interviews in ways that are more humanizing than the reality television depictions. In some ways, she is exploring the same questions as this essay through a more dramatic, embodied medium. Originally, one of our major dramaturgical goals was to humanize the contestants in ways that the reality TV did not and to illuminate the ways they suffered as a result. When one Black audience member commented at our first workshop reading, “I don’t need an entire musical to tell me that these reality shows are racist,”^[30] it became clear to me, the composer (Thomas Hodges), and our developmental director (Lisa Marie Rollins) that providing literal/mimetic depictions of the characters’ experiences simply to replace the racist televised versions was not sufficient representation. The musical needed to disrupt the conditioned white gaze of the audience.

After six Asian/Asian American women were killed in a mass shooting in Atlanta in March 2021, the stakes of representation and its deadly consequences resonated with me in a deeply personal way, adding to the heightened despair and fear so many of us in the AAPI community were feeling since the pandemic and its racist consequences emerged.^[31] I wanted to depict the way this event shifted my (Joy’s) making of our musical—but how? How can I represent the responses of my Asian American and transracially adopted Asian communities through my theatre making in ways that do not reify trauma or leave a white audience feeling sated with their empathy for us?

There is a moment where my character, Joy, seeks comfort after the tragic news by having an intimate and romantic moment with the presumed Asian male contestant she interviewed from *The Bachelorette*. I offer this staging as a possibility of something because the scenario of two Asian people experiencing romantic love does not happen often on *The Bachelor/ette*. However, it becomes increasingly apparent through his lines that this Asian actor is actually playing Joy’s white boyfriend; along with Joy, the audience experiences this possibility of romantic love dissolve. No matter how much agency Joy has as a playwright, she is unable to generate this narrative in her real life. Using this reveal, I aim for the audience to feel deprived of what a romantic love story between Joy and an Asian American partner may look like and the ways whiteness can feel insufficient in supporting partners of color during/after racist trauma.

Conclusion

Adopted writer Mary Kim Arnold reminds us: “being visible is not the same as being seen.”^[32] Too often, audiences leave shows “feeling good about feeling bad”^[33] for a character of color who experienced oppression or trauma as part of the dramatic narrative. While representation is important, and this may be arguably better than continuing to exclude these narratives from our canon, I believe there are ways we can reimagine dramaturgy that can move audiences beyond a passive experience of empathy that does little to change power dynamics and the world at large.

In my theatre making, I aspire to deprive the audience of my full personhood and its related narratives in an effort to generate feelings and experiences of irreconcilable loss: a traded commodity through cute Snapchat filters; a yearned-for reunion scene; an “authentic” Korean character; or a loving, healing, romantic relationship between two Asian Americans. I dream of emancipatory ways Korean adopted

people and other people of color will be seen onstage. Perhaps one of the ways to do this is to deprive an audience of what could have been, to compel them to experience our grief, our losses, our irreconcilability, so they rage with us, fight for us, and do something in the world that generates actual justice.

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[1] Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 11.

[2] Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 203.

[3] Nikki Owusu Yeboah, "'I know how it is when nobody sees you': Oral-History Performance Methods for Staging Trauma," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 40, no. 2 (2020): 132.

[4] Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 6.

[5] Yeboah, "Oral History Performance Methods," 149.

[6] Tapji Garba and Sara Maria Sorentino, "Slavery Is a Metaphor: A Critical Commentary on Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang's 'Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor,'" *Antipode* 52, no. 3 (2020): 776.

[7] Garba and Sorentino, 777.

[8] Yeboah, "Oral History Performance Methods," 46.

[9] Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 8. Hartman's essay is known for laying the foundations of critical fabulation, the praxis of filling in the gaps of historical data with creative, semi-fictive accounts, particularly in relation to Black trauma in the US. This is already being referenced in dramaturgical processes in productions. See Calley N. Anderson and Holly L. Derr, "Using Critical Fabulation for History-Based Playwriting," *Howlround*, 3 March 2021, <https://howlround.com/using-critical-fabulation-history-based-playwriting>.

[10] Hartman, 4.

[11] "Google Translate," Google, <https://translate.google.com/?sl=auto&tl=en&text=%EC%97%86%EB%8B%A4&op=translate>.

[12] “Google Translate,” Google, <https://translate.google.com/?sl=auto&tl=en&text=faltar%20&op=translate>.

[13] Bow’s remarks and my response to them were part of the Writing for Living: Helene Moglen Conference in Feminism and the Humanities, sponsored by University of California: Santa Cruz, 2021.

[14] Leslie Bow, *Racist Love: Asian Abstraction and the Pleasures of Fantasy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022), 10.

[15] For more on this, see: JaeRan Kim, “Race and Power in Transracial and Transnational Adoption: Historical Legacies, Current Issues, and Future Challenges,” in *The Complexities of Race: Identity, Power, and Justice in an Evolving America*, ed. Charmaine L. Wijeyesinghe (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 104-125; Eleana J. Kim, *Adopted Territory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); and Andy Marra, “An Open Letter: Why Co-opting ‘Transracial’ in the Case of Rachel Dolezal is Problematic,” Medium, 16 June 2015, https://medium.com/@Andy_Marra/an-open-letter-why-co-opting-transracial-in-the-case-of-rachel-dolezal-is-problematic-249f79f6d83c.

[16] Kim, “Race and Power in Transracial and Transnational Adoption,” 109.

[17] Kim, *Adopted Territory*, 28.

[18] Leslie Bow, “Racist Love: Asian Abstraction and the Pleasures of Fantasy” (presentation, Writing for Living: Helene Moglen Conference in Feminism and the Humanities, Santa Cruz, CA, 19-20 February 2021). Bow said this as part of the draft she presented at the conference. It was later deleted for the final version of her book’s introduction.

[19] Kim Park Nelson, *Invisible Asians: Korean American Adoptees, Asian American Experiences, and Racial Exceptionalism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 96.

[20] Kim, “Race and Power in Transracial and Transnational Adoption,” 110.

[21] *Ibid.*, 104.

[22] *Ibid.*, 112-113.

[23] Kim, *Adopted Territory*, 33.

[24] I wrote *between* as part of my undergraduate thesis at Hofstra University in 2005. Its World Premiere was at the Edinburgh Fringe (Gilded Balloon) in 2006. Because of its themes and production locations, audiences were predominantly white and/or had some personal/professional interest in adoption. There were more Korean attendees when the show premiered in Seoul in 2011, but still many white audience members because the show was co-produced by an expat theatre company.

[25] Family reunion is commonly used to resolve many media narratives in general that are not adoption related, spanning from *Finding Nemo* to *Avengers: Endgame*. One adoption-focused example of reunion being used as a resolution is the Netflix documentary, *Found* (2021).

[26] Amy Mihyang Ginther, *between* (unpublished script, Club After Mainstage, Seoul, 9-17 April 2011).

[27] tammy ko Robinson, "Korean Adoptee Explores Roots In One-Woman Show," Imperial Family Companies, October 2011, <https://charactermedia.com/october-issue-korean-adoptee-explores-roots-in-one-woman-show-2/>.

[28] Kim, "Race and Power in Transracial and Transnational Adoption," 115.

[29] Robinson, "Korean Adoptee."

[30] *No Danger of Winning* talkback, book by Amy Mihyang Ginther, music and lyrics by Thomas Hodges, Shetler Studios, New York, 11 July 2019.

[31] Anti-Asian racism, violence, and xenophobia has a long history in the US; this has intensified significantly since the beginning of the pandemic in 2020.

[32] Mary-Kim Arnold, *Litany for the Long Moment* (Buffalo, NY: Essay Press, 2018), 29.

[33] This phrases references Lisa Nakamura, "Feeling Good about Feeling Bad: Virtuous Virtual Reality and the Automation of Racial Empathy," *Journal of Visual Culture* 19, no. 1 (2020): 47-64. This piece critiques the goal of empathy in virtual reality (VR) documentary work specifically, and is impacting my current VR project, *Mountains after Mountains* (? ? ?), which is about my illegal abortion in South Korea. Details about this are beyond the scope of this essay, but I anticipate publication about it in the future, along with its VR release in exhibition space.

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