

# Behind the Scenes of Asian American Theatre and Performance Studies

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For this historic issue on “Asian American Dramaturgies,” guest editor Donatella Galella brought together Dorinne Kondo, Esther Kim Lee, Josephine Lee, Sean Metzger, and Karen Shimakawa to reflect on currents of Asian American Theatre and Performance Studies. They discussed how they created and entered this field, even as they critically questioned a foundations-based framework that reifies some lines of study and inevitably leaves out others, as they themselves made up a select group available for this meeting. They tracked scholarly trends and concluded by sharing their hopes for Asian American theatre and performance on stage and in academia. A joyful gathering with multi-vocal storytelling, this conversation was held over Zoom on November 12, 2021. We hope that this roundtable will stimulate more conversations, more artist-scholars, and more histories of Asian American Theatre and Performance Studies.

**Donatella Galella:** I’m so happy to see you today and to have this really important conversation on foundations of Asian American Theatre and Performance Studies. I see this as something that’s for us but also makes a major intervention in the larger field of Theatre and Performance Studies. I’m going to start with some questions that I circulated to you beforehand, and basically the trajectory is that I would like to invite you to reflect on the origins of this field, where you think it is now, and where you think it’s going. I’d love if we could start off hearing from everyone on how did you come into your research in Asian American Theatre and Performance Studies, and how would you articulate the foundations of this scholarly field?

**Esther Kim Lee:** I was doing my PhD work at Ohio State University. I started there in 1995 and graduated in 2000. I was an ABD, and I had already chosen the dissertation topic, which was going to be on Korean mask drama. It was all proposed and all that stuff. Then I remember walking around the library, looking at some books to read. I was TA-ing a course on ethnic theatre, and I noticed that there was really nothing on Asian American theatre. There were whole rows of books about African American theatre, maybe a couple on Chicano theatre, but really nothing on Asian American theatre. I had to go to the literature section to find Jo’s book, or anthropology just to find Dorinne’s book. But in the theatre section, there was nothing there. So, I actually got angry, and I thought: this is not right. I decided to change my dissertation topic, and I took a tape recorder—and it was an actual tape recorder back then—and I said, I’ll talk to a handful of playwrights and actors and find out what’s going on. I thought it would be an easy dissertation to write, but I ended up interviewing dozens, and by the time I was done, seventy people. That’s how it grew into a bigger project. In that process, I remember emailing Jo as a graduate student, “You don’t know me, but…” that kind of email. I had to introduce myself. That was the first time we actually connected, and ever since then, Jo has been my mentor. So, just really piggybacking on the works by Dorinne, Jo, and Karen. I think Sean and I are somewhat contemporary. I still have boxes of the

tapes, documenting the interviews, and my dissertation became my first book ([A History of Asian American Theatre](#)), so that's how I got started. I guess it's fitting that I'm speaking first because I'm kind of in the middle in many ways and benefited from my predecessors, and I work really well with Sean and continue to collaborate.

**Josephine Lee:** I've always been interested in theatre. I grew up in the New York area, and I used to, as a kid, check out volumes of plays from the library and just read them. I wasn't involved in theatre as a performer. I did take some acting classes, but I was always, like, terrified on stage. But I did actually do a bunch of playwriting classes when I was in college. One of my teachers was A. R. Gurney, Jr. He was a playwright, and I was at MIT at the time doing physics, but I took some classes with him, and he was the one who said—I think it was my third year there—“Hey, there's this guy who's in college, and he has a play going on at the Public Theater, and it's called *FOB*, and his name is David Henry Hwang, and you should get a hold of it or maybe even go down there and volunteer to work on it.” At the time, I couldn't do that, I mean, it was just not feasible. But I did get a hold of the script and looked at it, and I thought this was kind of cool, you know.

I had always been aware of the Asian American movement. I have a few older cousins who are maybe about a decade older than I am who were very much involved in that and did historical scholarship. They were really active, and they always looked at me and said, “You're part of the Me generation. You're never going to reach the heights of social justice that we have.” So, I've been aware of Asian American politics from a pretty young age.

But I didn't really take on the Asian American theatre thing in earnest until later. I was in graduate school at a time when there really wasn't anything available. I never took an Asian American lit class. I mean, I read a lot on my own, but no one talked about it. I basically did my thesis on Victorian and contemporary plays, Wilde and Shaw, and I did some work on Tom Stoppard. Then when I moved to LA for my first job, I was part of the LA Theatre Center's Women's Project, and I got connected with some folks. I got to meet with Wakako Yamauchi. I got to meet people from East West Players, which was super fun. Then around that time was when *M. Butterfly* won the Tony Award, and I was like whoa, you know? How come no one's writing about these plays, right? So, I think the germ of an idea got started. But of course, at the time, I was still very much, I guess, in the kind of canonical, traditional world, writing about Pinter and Beckett, none of which got published. Then I went to teach at Smith College, and I got involved in an Asian American Studies collaborative with Mitziko Sawada at Hampshire College and others in the Five Colleges (Smith, Hampshire, Mt. Holyoke, Amherst, and UMass-Amherst). At the time, they didn't have their Five College Asian American Studies Program going, but I was part of that group that was teaching classes. I taught a class on Asian American theatre because Roberta Uno was just so inspiring, and we had the beginnings of the archival collection at UMass there, and there was New WORLD Theater. It was just a great time for me in terms of shifting what I wanted my scholarly trajectory to be, you know, something that I wasn't educated in, so it took me some time to learn the ropes.

When I took the job at Minnesota, I decided I was done with the modern British stuff. I was going to take a different route, and my first book was [Performing Asian America](#). At that time, I just was so excited to have Dorinne and Karen as compatriots. We were never in the same locations, but we sort of knew each other because of all the work that was going on. It was so rewarding to do it at a time when I wasn't the only one, right? Because I do feel like that changed the nature of what I was able to do, and with my own work, I could go in a direction that was sort of different. I didn't have to cover everything. I knew when I

published *Performing Asian America*, it was at a time when there was going to be a new wave of stuff that wasn't going to make it into that book. But that was fine with me because I thought, wow, there's just so much out there that people ought to do, and trying to be comprehensive isn't where it's at for me right now. So, that was fun. I think that I've, since then, changed several times, and some of it is location-specific.

**Dorinne Kondo:** First of all, in terms of Asian American anything, I was like the last generation at Stanford, where I was an undergraduate, who was part of the protest generation: strikes, tear gas, helicopters on campus, "Free the Branner 15," students from our freshman dorm who were beat up and arrested. We also, at my graduation, walked out on Daniel Patrick Moynihan, our commencement speaker, because of his report on "The Negro Family." There were teach-ins about that, sponsored by the Anthropology department and St. Clair Drake, the renowned urban anthropologist (and co-author, with Horace R. Cayton, Jr., of the classic *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*). There's that part. But I'm an outlier, I feel, because I was trained as an anthropologist and as a Japan specialist. So, my first foray into performance, not theatre as such, was when I was a member of the Gender Seminar at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton where Judith Butler wrote *Gender Trouble*. So, I saw that in formation—very exciting—and all the controversy that it then caused. I mean, now it seems like a classic work, but believe me, there were plenty of arguments, and I got used to conflict as potentially generative. That (Butler, Foucault, and poststructuralist theories of the subject) profoundly influenced [my first book](#), which was based on field work in a Japanese factory, where I was a so-called part-time worker, investigating the performance of gendered work identities on the shop floor and the performativity of artisanal identities and the aesthetics of work. I was trying to take labor, which is often seen only in narrowly political economic terms—I mean, that's obviously important—but you know, what do people think they're doing? What are the cultural meanings of work? What about aesthetics, which were in fact very important.

I feel like in my latest book ([Worldmaking: Race, Performance, and the Work of Creativity](#)), I'm doing the opposite. It's like the realm of the aesthetic sublime, how can we bring it back to earth and look at it as cultural work, as making, as an industry within a very particular historical and political economic context? So, being with Butler was incredibly important. That was also the year that, similarly to Jo, I saw David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* on Broadway, and I had never ever in my life seen anything like that. I talk about that in [About Face](#), but it was life-changing. I mean I used to go back to the Asian American Theater Company in San Francisco just to see plays. That too had been a revelation, just to see people who looked like me, like in the same room doing theatre, was amazing, just to feel three-dimensional again after being [in Boston]. Frankly, Boston was horrible in terms of racism and overt racism. Anyway, David's play was extraordinary, and I felt like I had to write about it as though my life depended on it. I know it sounds melodramatic, but that's the way it felt. So, that started my exploration of theatre as an academic topic. Then it also was a fieldwork strategy. I took the very first David Henry Hwang Playwrights Institute classes. That was amazing—so amazing, I couldn't sleep. I never felt about anything the way I felt about that. So, I thought, well, I have to do something here, you know what I mean? When do you ever feel that in life? I can't not do it. I feel like it chose me. I pivoted. So, I was writing the book on transnational Japanese fashion, and then the Asian American theatre piece came in, and then I spent a number of years trying to learn the playwriting craft. In terms of academic scholarship, I'm trying to integrate the creative and critical. So, that's what's happening in my latest book, *Worldmaking*.

**Karen Shimakawa:** It's interesting that the three of us, the three kind of senior generation, none of us

started as Asian American scholars, right? Because there really wasn't a field there when we started it. It's interesting that we all came from these really different places. I had come from law school, going to English grad school thinking I was going to be a specialist in Flannery O'Connor. Then for some reason—I can't remember why—I pivoted to becoming a medievalist, and then finally I thought settled on becoming a Shakespearean. So, I was always kind of moving towards theatre and performance and kind of theatricality in some way. In retrospect, I think I could say that even my interest in Flannery O'Connor was something about theatricality. I just remember, it's kind of like Esther—although I didn't have quite the foresight—I remember going into the library and looking in the Shakespeare section, which was just aisles and aisles of things and thinking, I don't really think we need another Shakespeare book. I think it's been done. So, then I kind of was in this crisis, like what is there? I was pretty far into my graduate education at that point, and I met with some of my advisors, and they're like, what else do you know and like? And actually, I had gone to Asian American theatre since I was a kid because, like Jo, I had siblings who were older and more politically literate in this stuff. That was the church field trip that you always take, right? So, I didn't have quite the kind of sublime experience that Dorinne had. I envy that in some ways because I'm like, well of course I'm seeing myself on the stage. That's our stories. But it had never occurred to me because there wasn't really an academic field there, that that was at all connected to my sort of vocational training. That just felt personal and maybe nascently political. It felt very extracurricular at the time.

Then I took David Román's class on American theatre, and we read [Dorinne's piece on \*M. Butterfly\*](#). That was a real turning point for me, I think, like, to imagine that there could be this kind of rigorous, academic, legible-to-other-professors kind of work on the plays that I had grown up watching. That was a real revelation. When I think about it now, and I narrate it retroactively, I think I was always moving towards this because I was always kind of interested, you know—even in, like, medieval literature—the thing that I was sort of drawn to was liveness, the way bodies on stage sort of can perform and imagine what is, what could be, sort of imaginative possibilities, utopian or dystopian, and also kind of what the body that's talking has to do with that. I do think that that was always kind of the thing that I was chasing. So, it was just a real joy when I read Dorinne's piece to realize, like, yeah, there's a way to actually express that, and it's a legit thing to actually study, and that it's important and that it matters to people more than just, you know, me. I think that's really where I started.

**Sean Metzger:** I have the pleasure of coming after the other four speakers both now and also in the past. I think I'm the only one of us who came from practice into the field. I was in high school when *M. Butterfly* toured, and I remember there being an ad in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. At that time, it registered as Asian American but also as queer, as an Asian queer play. So, that combination kind of stuck with me for a long time. When I went to university, at some point I decided I was going to be in a college of music. I was doing musical theatre, and I wanted to enter into a more practical setting. I did an internship at the Denver Center Theatre Company, and it just happened they placed me on August Wilson's *Piano Lesson*. So, I was doing everything backstage. And that moment—I think this was 1992—coincided with my having emancipated myself from my parents. I was out of money, and the cast actually helped me pay for my schooling until I could pay them back. So, I thought, oh, this is theatre, like this kind of intra-ethnic solidarity. This is amazing! I learned otherwise as I moved forward.

I was an undergraduate, [and] I wanted to take Lesbian and Gay Studies classes at the time, but you couldn't do that at CU Boulder unless you were taking graduate courses because the university didn't allow it. So, I had to take graduate courses, and I found myself quickly overwhelmed with everything I

had to learn. Like, I didn't know the word "subjectivity." Boulder had a lot of early modernists, and the first course I took was Gay and Lesbian Literature to 1800, and it was taught by Bruce Smith, who's now at USC, and who's a Shakespearean. He was encouraging me to work on Shakespeare, and I also remember looking down the halls and being like, oh my god I have nothing else to say. Joel Fink, who was a professor and director at CU, said, "You should write about *M. Butterfly* because there's not a lot of work on it yet." He wasn't a scholar, so he didn't know by that time, 1994, Dorinne's, [Karen's](#), and [James's](#) work had been out already. But there was not a lot of material, so I started that project. Then I built my thesis on gay and lesbian Asian American drama, half as an activist piece and half as what I would consider scholarly work, but I had to train myself. I brought in an adjunct to be my Asian Americanist because there was no tenure-track Asian American lit or theatre person. That was Marilyn Alquizola.

Then I went to graduate school. I decided I wanted to work in Asian American and Sexuality Studies, so USC was one of the options. They gave me the most money, so I went there. They said, "Oh, we're hiring David Román," at that time. So, I went to work with David, and then they said, "Oh, we're hiring Dorinne," and I thought, oh, this is perfect. Then as time evolved, Karen came to give a job talk and then went to (UC) Davis. David Román said, "I think you should go to Davis." So, I did, and that changed lots of things in very good ways and not so good ways, as you can imagine without saying any names. That's really how I started in the field. Also, because I had been quite impoverished as an undergraduate student, I went to whatever grad program that would let me do the work I wanted to do, and I just figured I'd do whatever requirements; it was basically whoever paid me the most. So, that was my philosophy. I went to Comp Lit first, for that reason, and quickly learned I was to have mastery of these languages, which I still have yet to master. Switching to a Theatre and Performance Studies program sort of made me feel like, oh, I don't have to have the kind of linguistic expertise that Comp Lit would have required. I wouldn't have to be in grad school for another ten years. Then my career kind of went all over the place. I was in social services for a while. I came back to grad school, and I happened to get a job at Duke as an Asian American lit and culture specialist. So, once I got that job, it was really, like, okay this is what you're doing from then on. But I have benefited from all the great writing of all the people here. I would also say, I think for Esther and me, we both had the advantage of a group of people—quite a large group of people—who just happened to be in grad school at the same time: SanSan Kwan, Dan Bacalzo, Lucy Burns, Sel Hwahng, Yutian Wong, Priya Srinivasan, Eng-Beng Lim, Cathy Irwin, Theo Gonzalves, and the two of us. That sort of made me feel like we had a community, and it also made me able to sustain my work over a long time, even though we were located all over the country.

**DG:** Thanks so much for this. I feel like we're collectively writing this meta history of the field right now, and I really appreciate the names that you're offering. I also love hearing these personal stories, these origin stories for you as superheroes, but they also gesture toward the structural, toward the material conditions that made this field possible. You're gesturing toward not only scholarship but also Asian American theatre production. So, I'd invite us to think more about the origins of the field, but I also want to turn to the next question of how have the academic field and the field of production of Asian American theatre and performance changed since the 1980s?

**DK:** I agree with the collective storytelling, and I think that that's really important. But in some ways, I feel like we're facing a paradox because of course we want to narrate these stories, but in terms of Asian American Studies as insurgent knowledge, I've always been suspicious of origin stories and foundations. Aren't we about challenging the notion of foundations? Maybe gathering these multiple perspectives and

stories (is one way of mounting a challenge); on the other hand, people deserve their props. I realize that one of the functions of something like this is to narrate a history that's legible in a certain way and establishes that we're legitimate, we're rigorous, et cetera et cetera. So, I think it's paradoxical, and there's a kind of fundamental ambivalence in the move.

I would say, apparently, the field hasn't changed enough, since this is the first issue dedicated to Asian American issues, right? It reminds me of the interventions at the Claremonts, you know, as part of the mobilization around *The Mikado* and trying to get Asian American Studies established where Black Studies and Chicano Studies already existed. I think that Asian Americans were seen as the "little people, humble, and silent," (from *Madama Butterfly*) so we had to make some noise and do some organizing. *About Face*—it's an early work that does this—but you know look at Sean's work, for example, I mean all of the work of people in this room, the move toward the transnational and diasporic, I think is like a huge shift. There's no more Asian American Studies, really. It's all Asian diaspora work now and rightfully so. I totally understand that.

In terms of the profession, I think it's more professionalized. There's certainly more theatres, which is great, and more populations represented in the arts. We need more intersectional work, but that's also growing. There's still a ton of work to do on all these fronts. There are also more theatre critics of color: Diep Tran, Jose Solís, amongst others.

**JL:** I will just say that Esther and I actually have this six degrees of separation. So, when I was in my first year of college, I took a creative writing course with Tom Postlewait who was a great creative writing teacher, but I didn't really realize his field was actually theatre history. Then years later, I realized that Esther worked with him, so just shout out to Tom. The world works in really funny ways in terms of who we're in contact with.

The work has just deepened and gotten more interesting and more varied in its approach. I totally get the diasporic, the re-theorizing of what is Asian American. All these things that I think have impacted maybe Asian American Literary and Cultural Studies more generally has also impacted the Theatre Studies field. People have been really great about bringing those in, but there's a certain kind of depth to it now too. I'm thinking about some of the historical work that Esther brought in, creating this archive, documentation. How do you not just talk about what the theatre means but how it is actually made? I do feel like, you know, books like Esther's, [Yuko Kurahashi's book on East West Players](#), what that does is it provides a record for people to dig into. Sean, your book ([Chinese Looks: Fashion, Performance, Race](#)) was so expansive in terms of that history. In the period before, there wasn't "Asian American," like that wasn't a term that anyone used. There were people of Asian descent and representations of Asia in the Americas, and those really connect to us still. So, I do feel like what's been wonderful is the way in which Asian American Theatre, Drama, and Performance Studies are now rooted in these larger questions. There's been solid work everywhere you turn, even as new populations are coming in and new understandings of what this Asian American identity and experience is. It's so much a fractured category, right? It doesn't hold up. It's a category that deconstructs itself. So, every time you teach students Asian American Studies, you have to go back to, "This is a social construct. This is a racial formation." This is exactly how it was made, that we are all calling ourselves Asian American. So, I think there's no center. But that kind of frees us up quite a bit to sort of decide on what our points of unity or solidarity or coexistence will be.

I think in my own work, I've started doing two things: I've started looking more into productions that are not commercial, because one of the things I was brought into was this star power of David Henry Hwang. Then I moved to the middle of the country, which has a very active theatre scene. We've got more theatre seats per capita than anywhere in the nation. There are so many small theatres here and people doing non-profit theatre work, and that's not really recognized or written about, and some of it never gets recorded. So, that sort of regional focus has shifted maybe because of where I live. But I've also turned to what are some of the connections with older productions, and I've done a lot more work than I cared to on yellowface basically. Esther knows as well, right? You get stuck down the rabbit hole when you start looking at yellowface production as opposed to Asian American production. But one thing I regret, as much as I've benefited from doing that historical work, I think I do agree with Dorinne, that it's really telling that I got a lot of recognition for doing a book on *The Mikado* (*The Japan of Pure Invention*), the kind of recognition that I never got for doing work on Asian American theatre. So, people were like, oh this is so interesting that you're doing this work, and you want to say, hey, actually there are a lot of playwrights I've written about that have nothing to do with yellowface. But once you start writing about yellowface, it sort of perpetuates. Why is that interesting as opposed to all these playwrights who don't do television, who do a much better job of representing Asia?

**SM:** One of my early scene coaches was Lane Nishikawa, so I think that experience made me understand—oh, it was at the time when the Asian American Theater Company had fractured and was kind of on its last legs, so we had several actors from San Francisco who were Asian American women with me in this training thing—some of the history that Esther talks about in her book but through a different kind of lens: a gossip episteme, if you will. So, that made me realize whatever I thought this was, doing an Asian American theatre thing, is highly contested, because even in the theatre company itself, there were all kinds of narratives of what was happening at the theatre company that were sort of interrupting its progress, let's say. So, I think all the companies, they all have those kinds of stories embedded within them, and now some of them are more archived. But there are other stories in those companies that have not been told and some that Esther chose not to discuss, like Kumu Kahua, or you know some of the other companies around the country.

I think one of the things that's happened since that time is the founding of the Consortium of Asian American Theatres and Artists (CAATA) in 2003, and I think that has provided a national platform for people to have discussions about how artists themselves think about the formation of the field and their place within it. I think we all have realized that their version of that story is not our (a scholarly) version of that story necessarily. But I think it's productive, and one of the things that we can see is when they add in special sessions, it's often about the tensions they see in the field that they haven't identified before. I remember they had a Pacific Islander special session, and they had a MENA, Middle Eastern North Africa, special session; I think that suggests something about where the practitioners feel like the field is going in terms of Asian American theatre. At the same time, at UCLA, I have two colleagues, Lap Chi Chu and Myung Hee Cho, who are both Asian American artists in lighting design and scenic design, respectively, and they did a lot of work on Asian American productions in addition to regional theatre and other kinds of things, and I think they would also narrate this story differently. So, I think I agree that there's a lot of competing narratives, and many of those narratives have yet to come to the fore or be acknowledged.

I do think that the field as a whole is pivoting around certain issues right now, like Critical Refugee Studies, which is making big advances in Asian American Studies. So, I suspect that Theatre will then

follow suit. I think Jo's work in particular has done a lot to bring attention to Southeast Asian refugee communities, and that's of course partly location and probably the kind of theatre that you were talking about. It's not professionalized in the same way.

As for some of my own work, I do want to say that the historical part that I did was sort of at Karen's impetus because I was interested in racial fetishism, and she's like, you have to fetishize *something*. You can't just satisfy some amorphous idea. So, that led me to tracing objects and how they get racialized, costumes in particular, because of the work I did with Dorinne. So, I thought, those are, you know, physical items we could look at and think through more. It's really the combination of Karen's and Dorinne's work that helped me think through how to do an early historiographic approach because I'm not a good archivist, as many of you know. I find it very difficult to sit in a room and get the gloves and everything. I find that very trying. So, I do think that the field has moved a long way.

There are some trends that are happening. I mean, when I did (the *Theatre Journal* special issue) "[Minor Asias](#)," it was partly because the editor said, "Well if you do an Asian American issue, who's going to contribute?" So, I contacted many people, like do you have anything right now? Because there's not enough of us in the field. I figured if I can't get materials from people I know, which is the bulk of the field, then we're going to have trouble putting together an issue. Actually "Minor Asias" was a pivot on my part to try to broaden the rubric partly to get more submissions. So, it's great, Donatella, that you've gotten so many (for "Asian American Dramaturgies"). That's really good to hear.

**EKL:** That was great. What can I add to this already rich conversation? Because my training is in Theatre—I think I might be the only one who actually did graduate training in theatre history—I could just probably comment that when my book came out in 2006, it was my tenure book. It was based on my dissertation. It's very incomplete. I was very nervous about getting it out. Like Sean said, a lot of it is gossip based, and a lot of the gossip I couldn't add because they made me turn off the tape recorder and told me not to add things. There are so many things I could have added. When I go to the CAATA conference, people come up and say, oh you got that wrong. They still gossip about it. I really thought that by now there would be more theatre history books on Asian American theatre. So, in many ways, I feel like there hasn't been that much progress. I expected the book to be challenged and revised, that there would be a more enriched conversation. Maybe I could just ask back to Donatella: it's your generation's job to add to the work that's done before, so is that going to happen? Who is going to do that work? Personally, in my own research, like Jo, I've been really interested in going back historically. My first book starts in the 1960s, and I now want to figure out what happened before. That led me to my current book on yellowface ([Made-Up Asians: Yellowface During the Exclusion Era](#)), and my next one, I think, could be even further back. I find that going back to this kind of origin story—if yellowface was an origin story for, say, Asian American actors as they say, "We did acting because we wanted to protest"—is to revise yellowface history. It's one origin story of Asian American theatre. But I'm looking for other origin stories in Asian American theatre. Historiographically, I feel like I'm always in conversation with Tom Postlewait, my advisor that Jo mentioned, because I did take American theatre history with him, but my book is really a revision of the history, like looking at American theatre history through the lens of Asian American Studies. So, I think I'm going to continue to do that. But looking at the whole field, I thought we would have more younger scholars, junior scholars who would be doing both theoretical and historical archival work.

**DG:** Esther, I agree with your assessment, and I also hear what Dorinne was saying about the critique of

foundations. So, first I'm thinking that I might come up with a better word for titling this, but I specifically tried to have foundations with an *s*, just like how I really appreciate how Esther's first book is *a* history and not *the* history of Asian American theatre. I think in general there aren't that many critical histories of theatre institutions. [My first book](#) is an attempt to do this but of a traditionally white institution. In their definition of Americanness at Arena Stage, that is often not inclusive of Asian Americans, but that is reflective of how Asian Americanness is in that boundary of inclusion and exclusion. So, for my own work, I felt thrust into Asian American Theatre Studies mostly because of seeing all these gaps and also just dealing with anti-Asian microaggressions in graduate school and seeing so much yellowface on professional New York City stages. So, that's what drove me to then start researching why and how contemporary yellowface persists in musicals in the twenty-first century. I'm attentive to Jo's point though, because I invited her for a workshop of my research, and she pointed out that I need to make sure I'm not re-centering whiteness and white nonsense, and that Asian American theatre shouldn't just be an epilogue to that book. So, Jo, you've really reshaped the structure of my book so that there's always this Asian American counter-example to yellowface in every chapter, and there will be a full chapter at the end about the musical I'm obsessed with right now, which is *Soft Power*. So, I really appreciate that you said that.

**KS:** I agree with what's been said. I just have a few things to add. One is that I think the origins of Asian American theatre are interestingly complicated. In terms of the academic field of Asian American Studies or Asian American Theatre Studies, I would almost single-handedly credit that to Jo. I think you did those reading groups early on, you had a really prescient kind of sense that there's an academic field, like making a there there for an academic field, and people who could go on the market as that. I mean, we were all just kind of doing our own thing and doing it for ourselves, like, how do I get me my job? But you actually were thinking of a field, and I think it would not exist if it wasn't for you.

**JL:** I have to say this: in response to a taunt by a colleague of mine who works in Asian American Literature who made a crack at me, and I said something about Asian American Theatre and Performance Studies, and she said, "What? All three of you?" I mean, she made this crack early on, so maybe it was that there were only like three. It was pretty horrible. I would argue there were other people like [James Moy](#), and then there were historians who were doing work, like John Tchen's [New York before Chinatown](#). There are all these really great connections, and people come from, as Dorinne pointed out, different interdisciplines. It's not just Theatre Studies.

**KS:** [Angela Pao](#), for sure.

**JL:** Absolutely, Angela, and other people who were just not being seen. It was partly coincidence but partly because, at the time, we were working to establish a program in Asian American Studies at the University of Minnesota, which we finally did in 2004. So, that was part of my larger thing, that we were trying to become institutionalized. I became much more aware of the need for that as a form of support, acknowledgement, and recognition, that if we actually had a field, then people wouldn't have to keep reinventing what they do for other people or feel as though there wasn't a place for them. I honestly think some of it's that remark Donatella said, oh you came and said this about my work. It's probably on the order of what Sean said about Karen saying that I need to do that. You're making an observation and then you realize, oh my goodness, someone's taking me seriously. They're actually thinking that I have the answer to this. I think I've always been a crowd sourcing person, right? That if we do this together, it is so much more fun. Who wants to be the only person working on this? I really think that that for me was a

huge motivator, to get people together, because I really felt like I was limited in terms of my perspective. I mean, if you're going to work on theatre, which is so, so many characters, you need everybody there.

I do feel like, too—the point that was made earlier about listening to people who are practitioners—I do remember a note, one thing that really changed the way I write and one of the reasons why I stopped writing work that was more, in some ways, theoretically informed for academic audiences is actually because Roger Tang did a little thing on my first book, and he said something like, oh this is not bedtime reading. I was taken aback. Like, well, this wasn't written for you. Then I thought, well, why is that? Why is it that I felt that I had to write for a specific group of theatre scholars or literary scholars and prove myself? I think that kind of freed me up to do things like the anthology we put together ([Asian American Plays for a New Generation](#)), plays with Mu Performing Arts at the time. It was just really great to be at a stage, since I did have tenure, where I could let go of working so hard to establish ourselves as leaders in our field, at the university, because the academy, as anyone probably knows, will just suck you dry. I mean, it'll just sort of take the will to write anything out of you if you have to conform to that model. I don't know how it is at all your institutions, but it is hard.

**KS:** Jo, you're being very modest. You say, like, who wants to be the only one in the field? I think that really runs counter to a lot of the logic of higher education, that the whole game should be to have your turf and be the only one and defend it against other people. So, I think the character of the field of Asian American Theatre as an academic field really bears your imprint. But you know, when we started, the idea that there would be job postings for an Asian American theatre specialist—I mean, that just wasn't a thing, right? And it is now. So, I think that's a real contribution that you've made to not just the profession but to, like, thinking.

In terms of the field, the artistic output, how Asian American theatre and performance has changed parallels generations of scholars. Immigration has changed, and how we think about the circulation of people has changed. I think so many of us who were starting out were really formed by a particular kind of generation of Asian American, you know Sansei, or fourth or fifth generation Chinese Americans, who were doing that kind of thing that was self-marked as Asian American theatre. That's very specific to a post-'65 kind of immigration thing, right? The character of Asian America has changed so much from the '80s on and has changed the kinds of work that's being done in the theatre and the kind of sensibilities. It's sort of the idea that there's both out-migration and in-migration, like that kind of global character of things and the circulatory kind of sensibility. I think maybe it's my training in law, but I peg all of that to migration. I think just the kinds of people who are on the stage or at the table have been really dramatically changed. So, that's exciting to see.

**DG:** I have a major set of questions to help us wrap up and look ahead: Whose research and artistry have excited you most, and where do you see or hope to see the field going?

**SM:** I still think that there have been different trends in theatre practice that have not really gotten their due in terms of Asian American attention. One of the most exciting theatre makers for me is Ping Chong, actually. I know Karen has written on (Ping Chong and Company in [National Abjection: The Asian American Body Onstage](#)) and [others have written on that company as well](#). Ping Chong and Company is in a way tracking how communities are shifting over time. I find that work very generative, as opposed to the sort of the more commercial Broadway stuff, which has to appeal to such a wide audience (and it's a very white audience). I think even though we've seen shifts on Broadway, I don't expect massive change

to happen at that commercial level or scale.

**KS:** Sean, I'm so glad you mentioned Ping. When I was trying to come up with a list, I was thinking of people like Ping Chong and his company but also people like Ralph Peña and Ma-Yi, and Mia Katigbak. Actually, I would put Jorge Ortoll in this pile, too, even though he's not Asian American. But I really think that those are people who are doing this very unglamorous work of actually getting other people's voices onto the stage and making the road, even while they're doing their own artistic work, but they're doing a ton of work that is unglamorous, that is about making this sustainable for many more people. And that especially right now just feels like it's both urgent and kind of a long game, which I really appreciate. So, there's all kinds of artists that I'm into, but those guys doing the backstage work are the ones I really appreciate right now.

**JL:** I'll have to add my voice to all the people worshipping Ping Chong. He came and did a thing with our students two years ago, a collaboration with Talvin Wilks, one of the Collidescope projects, and I have to say, it was one of the best things I've seen by students, ever. I mean, it was just so moving and so wonderful. I have to have a soft spot for some of the artists who come out of our Twin Cities community. There's a number of younger artists who have been working here for some time, and we're putting together a collection for students. I mentioned May Lee-Yang's play to Sean, and [he was writing about that](#), and I really just loved her work. We also recently did a production at Penumbra Theatre of Prince Gomolvilas's *The Brothers Paranormal*, which I really, really enjoyed. It was a wonderful way to think about how different communities, Asian American and Black, might intersect on the stage. And Lloyd Suh!

**EKL:** Those are great names. I'm really excited by Qui Nguyen's plays, just so fresh and fun to teach. Also, Julia Cho. I saw *Aubergine* at Playwrights Horizons, and I thought it was one of the most moving Asian American plays I've seen. It was well cast, well designed, and to see that Off-Broadway—such a polished professional production—it was one of those plays I cried at from the beginning to the end. It was just really moving.

**DK:** I guess I'm wondering about people we've not heard of, so I'm sure that there are all kinds of people. Jo, you referenced some folks in Minneapolis and so on. So, that's who I'd be interested in hearing about and hearing from. I hope that we'll do more of that in the future. In terms of workers, it's not just Asian Americans, so I'm just wondering—having worked with Anna Deavere Smith, for example—like other stuff that inspires me would be Antoinette Nwandu and Jackie Siblies Drury. In terms of the scholarship—no one's talked about what we want to see—but I myself am really interested in integrating the creative and the critical in different ways, so I started this research cluster called Creativity, Theory, Politics in American Studies trying to look at the work of scholar-artists. I'm interested in people who are trying to do that. Sean, thank you for sponsoring a book forum on *Worldmaking* (in the February 2022 issue of *Cultural Dynamics* currently available through <https://journals.sagepub.com/toc/CDY/current>) that had two of the people whose work I'm interested in: Josh Chambers-Letson ([After the Party: A Manifesto for Queer of Color Life](#)), whom I'm sure everybody knows, with genre-bending, the intersectionality, queer of color critique, and how moving it is because I weep every time I read it actually. And then Aimee Cox ([Shapeshifters: Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship](#)), who's a former dancer for Ailey who integrates movement and scholarship in her work and in her lectures. For our cluster, she gave a "lecture" that incorporated academic analysis, a showing of short films, and a movement workshop. So, I want more integration of

the creative and the critical.

**DG:** Thanks for that. Is there anyone else that you want to lift up?

**KS:** Aya Ogaya's work is amazing. And Dorinne as a playwright-scholar!

**SM:** I would just want to say that, once when Esther gave a talk, and someone asked her, "What do you want to see? What are you going to do next?" she said, "I'll just do a history that goes earlier." But I take that seriously. It seems to me in terms of the pre-1945 stuff, there's a ton of material there that we have not addressed in great detail that I think will open up a field and will change the way that we narrativize Asian American Studies. I think in the actual work produced, there are a lot of turns that happen that we just don't account for. There's a lot of transnational things happening with early Asian migrants, and in that vein, people like Andrew Leong at Berkeley, who's an English scholar working on poetry but is also thinking through Sadakichi Hartmann, have been very inspiring for [my current line of work](#) in that regard. But I think there's a lot of people doing early nineteenth century stuff that has a lot of potential to reshape some of the field.

**DK:** In that sense, it's too bad Jim [Moy] couldn't be here. One thing I hope for the future is just to combat, you know, white American theatre on so many levels. I've just run into so much aggressive, soul-crushing white fragility this year in all kinds of ways, including being trolled. (The trolling was in response to an interview I did with the *LA Times*, following the murders of the women in Atlanta.)

**JL:** That's terrible, Dorinne. What happened?

**DK:** I've been silenced! I was in a playwriting group. "No, you can't talk about representation because I'm not racist. I had two black friends when I was a child." Seriously it's parodic, it's so bad. Do you know how white you sound? So, it's been that kind of year.

**JL:** If you write that person into a play, I'll read it.

**DK:** I have! I've got to get it out somehow.

**DG:** This has been such a fun conversation. I'm excited to be able to share it with other people, and I'm really excited that the next ATHE (Association for Theatre in Higher Education) conference is themed around Dorinne's *Worldmaking*, which I hope will be another point of intervention. Thanks so much for your generosity with your time today and sharing all of these reflections.

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**Donatella Galella** is an Associate Professor at the University of California, Riverside. She researches how systemic racism shapes contemporary American theatre from the ways white institutions capitalize on blackness to the persistence of yellowface in musicals. Her essays have been published in journals including *Theatre Journal*, *Theatre Survey*, and the *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* and books including *Reframing the Musical: Race, Culture, and Identity* and *Casting a Movement: The Welcome Table Initiative*. Her book *America in the Round: Capital, Race, and Nation at Washington DC's Arena Stage* (University of Iowa Press) was an Honorable Mention for the 2020 Barnard Hewitt Award from the

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