

## Introduction to Asian American Dramaturgies

by Donatella Galella  
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“Look, this country’s a disaster in so many ways,” actor Raymond J. Lee belts with ferocity in David Henry Hwang and Jeanine Tesori’s 2019 musical *Soft Power*.<sup>[1]</sup> *Yes!* At the concert celebration of the Kennedy Center’s fiftieth anniversary in 2021, he softened, “Look, this country’s still hurting in so many ways.”<sup>[2]</sup> *Yes.* With increased public attention to rhetorical and physical attacks against Asians and Asian Americans, works like *Soft Power* have received more attention, and this very issue on “Asian American Dramaturgies” has felt more urgent. But does the price of admission to the stage and legibility to the public need to be a spectacularization of recent anti-Asian violence? As #StopAAPIHate trended on social media, it was exhilarating and exhausting to witness some colleagues come into consciousness and care about the existence of systemic anti-Asian racism, given how histories of colonization, incarceration, and assimilation haunt Asian Americans. Still, Lee delivers his next line in *Soft Power* with hope held over a long note, “But we have the power to change.”<sup>[3]</sup> Asian American theatre and Asian Americanist thinking offer criticality and possibility. As Dorinne Kondo writes in *Worldmaking: Race, Performance, and the Work of Creativity*, “Dramaturgical critique deploys research, theory, and scholarship for reparative ends.”<sup>[4]</sup> Ambivalence remains, because even as representation matters, visibility politics must go beyond the surface.

In this special issue, the first that the *Journal of American Drama and Theatre* has dedicated to Asian American theatre and performance, I asked, “What can Asian American dramaturgies do? What can we do with Asian American dramaturgies?” The following pieces offer a range of answers. Inspired by Nicole Hodges Persley and Heather Nathans’s co-edited 2021 special issue “Milestones in Black Theatre,” “Asian American Dramaturgies” consists of short pieces from interviews with artists to interventions in academia. To set the stage, the issue begins with a roundtable of Dorinne Kondo, Esther Kim Lee, Josephine Lee, Sean Metzger, Karen Shimakawa, and myself reflecting on the field of Asian American theatre and performance studies. The following dramaturgical readings give much-needed attention to the politics of whiteness and possibilities of music and history in Young Jean Lee’s and Lauren Yee’s plays (Christine Mok, Jennifer Goodlander, and Kristin Leahy with Joseph Ngo). A photo essay and interviews put the spotlight on major Asian American theatrical institutions and on Hawaiian artistic-political epistemologies (Roger Tang, Jenna Gerdson, and Baron Kelly). kt shorb, Al Evangelista, and Amy Mithyang Ginter consider their own artistry and writing as putting Asian American dramaturgies into practice from strategies of re-appropriation to refusal and deprivation. Bindi Kang and Daphne Lei provide inside looks into their crucial dramaturgical work on recent Asian American theatrical productions. In the final piece, Ariel Nereson brings readers back to Kondo and Yee and invites us all to teach Asian American dramaturgies.

Including this introduction, these fifteen contributions join the past fifteen articles that *JADT* has published with some engagement of Asian American theatre and performance, from analyses of US dramas performed in Asian countries to meta-critiques of canonical Asian American plays in the US theatre landscape. I share this bibliography in order of publication:

Brian Richardson, "Genre, Transgression, and the Struggle for (Self) Representation in U.S. Ethnic Drama," *JADT* 8, no. 3 (Fall 1996): 1-18.

Hsieh-Chen Lin, "Staging Orientalia: Dangerous 'Authenticity' in David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly*," *JADT* 9, no. 1 (Winter 1997): 26-35.

Robert Ji-Song Ku, "'Beware of Tourists if You Look Chinese' and Other Survival Tactics in the American Theatre: The Asian(cy) of Display in Frank Chin's *The Year of the Dragon*," *JADT* 11, no. 2 (Spring 1999): 78-92.

Byungho Han, "Korean Productions of *A Streetcar Named Desire*," *JADT* 13, no. 1 (Winter 2001): 36-51.

Kanta Kochhar-Lindgren, "Listening with the Third Ear: Kabuki, Bharata Natyam and the National Theatre of the Deaf," *JADT* 14, no. 2 (Spring 2002): 35-43.

Dan Kwong, "An American Asian in Thailand," *JADT* 14, no. 2 (Spring 2002): 44-54.

Dan Balcazo, "A Different Drum: David Henry Hwang's Musical 'Revisal' of *Flower Drum Song*," *JADT* 15, no. 2 (Spring 2003): 71-83.

Jon D. Rossini, "From *M. Butterfly* to *Bondage*: David Henry Hwang's Fantasies of Sexuality, Ethnicity, and Gender," *JADT* 18, no. 3 (Fall 2006): 55-76.

John S. Bak, "Long Dong and Other Phallic Tropes in Hwang's *M. Butterfly*," *JADT* 21, no. 3 (Fall 2009): 71-82.

Ashis Sengupta, "'Coming Out of the Closet': Re-reading *The Boys in the Band* and *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*," *JADT* 22, no. 1 (Winter 2010): 33-50.

Kee-Yoon Nahm, "Visibly White: Realism and Race in *Appropriate* and *Straight White Men*," *JADT* 27, no. 2 (Spring 2015), <https://jadtjournal.org/2015/04/24/visibly-white-realism-and-race-in-appropriate-and-straight-white-men/>.

Wu Wenquan, Chen Li, and Zhu Qinjuan, "Arthur Miller: Reception and Influence in China," *JADT* 27, no. 3 (Fall 2015), <https://jadtjournal.org/2015/11/20/arthur-miller/>.

Esther Kim Lee, "Strangers Onstage: Asia, America, Theatre, and Performance," *JADT* 28, no. 1 (Winter 2016), <https://jadtjournal.org/2016/03/23/strangers-onstage-asia-america-theatre-and-performance/>.

Stephen Hong Sohn, "Calculated Cacophonies: The Queer Asian American Family and the Nonmusical Musical in Chay Yew's *Wonderland*," *JADT* 29, no. 1 (Fall 2016/Winter 2017), <https://jadtjournal.org/2016/12/17/calculated-cacophonies-the-queer-asian-american-family-and-the-nonmusical-musical-in-chay-yews-wonderland/>.

Arnab Banerji, "Finding Home in the World Stage: Critical Creative Citizenship and the 13th South Asian Theatre Festival 2018," *JADT* 32, no. 2 (Spring 2020), <https://jadtjournal.org/2020/05/20/finding-home-in-the-world-stage-critical-creative-citizenship-and-the-13th-south-asian-theatre-festival-2018/>.

I offer warm thanks to my comrades who made this special issue possible. The guest editorial board members Arnab Banerji, Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns, Broderick Chow, Chris A. Eng, Esther Kim Lee, Sean Metzger, Christine Mok, and Stephen Sohn offered careful feedback to the authors and encouraging words, emojis, and punctuation marks to me. Managing Editors Dahye Lee and Emily Furlich communicated clearly and attended well to details. Co-Editors Jim Wilson and Naomi J. Stubbs patiently answered my questions. Book Review Editor Maya Roth thoughtfully reached out and curated her section to engage with our issue's theme. Finally, I appreciate the American Theatre and Drama Society membership that elected me, enabling me to propose and edit this special issue.

Asian American dramaturgies have unfinished work to do, not for mere inclusion but for radical shifts in telling stories, redistributing resources, and knowing differently. As the author-character DHH concludes in *Soft Power* with fragile optimism, "Good fortune will follow. If we somehow survive," the ensemble intones, "In America."<sup>[5]</sup>

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<sup>[1]</sup> Play and lyrics by David Henry Hwang, music and additional lyrics by Jeanine Tesori, "Soft Power," Public Theater Opening Night Draft, 11 October 2019, 92.

<sup>[2]</sup> Reynaldi Lindner Lolong, "Democracy," YouTube video, 2 October 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IKdj3jQTatc> (accessed 30 April 2022).

<sup>[3]</sup> Hwang and Tesori, 92.

<sup>[4]</sup> Dorinne Kondo, *Worldmaking: Race, Performance and the Work of Creativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 197.

[5] Hwang and Tesori, 93.

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